

Mungabah: A Rural Romance Novel and Exegesis

Kristy Anne Taylor

BE-Jour, MLitt (CQU)

**Submitted in fulfilment of the
requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts (By Research)**

School of Education and the Arts

Central Queensland University

October 2017

Abstract

This Masters by research consists of a rural romance novel called *Mungabah*, and an accompanying exegesis. The novel is set in remote south western Queensland in the contemporary period and evolves through the life of Kylie, effectively a lost city girl from Brisbane who unsuspectingly inherits a large run-down farm and homestead in the country and who is also betrayed by her boyfriend boss in the city. Love develops between Kylie and a good looking farm hand called Jack, though this is not straight forward because they could be related. In the country Kylie flounders as she finds herself completely out of her depth in rural life, but gradually finds her feet and makes herself an integral part of the community, gaining a better understanding of herself and finding love along the way. The rural romance sub-genre has become very popular amongst both writers and readers in Australia yet the sub-genre and reasons for its popularity remain underrepresented in the scholarly literature (Flesch 2004; Fletcher 2013). Situating my study within this gap in the literature, my aim in the exegesis is to explain how I have created a novel that applies inventive ways to incorporate pair-bonding and social issues into the narrative and plot, while concurrently respecting the integrity of romance as a genre with its core set of conventions around the protagonists' quest for 'true love'. Mirmohamadi (2015) argues that 'the burgeoning genre of Australian rural romance novels...shares significant and defining generic features with romance fiction...it also reworks conventional forms to address current socio-historical conditions in rural Australia'. Advancing the innovation of the romance genre means challenging the established tacit 'rules' of the form as well as challenging the normative tendencies traditionally reinforced in the genre.

Using the practice-led research methodology and drawing on literary theory and the essential elements of published Australian rural romance novels, the exegesis explains how my artefact innovates on the form and content of the Australian rural romance by subverting some of the tropes used in rural romances. This Masters makes an original contribution to the existing scholarly knowledge of rural romance novels and the application of its generic attributes to a creative artefact.

Acknowledgements

Sincerest thanks go to my supervisors, Dr Michael Danaher and Dr Nicole Anae, for helping me to finish this dissertation. Their support, encouragement, and direction have proved invaluable, as without their assistance this dissertation would not have materialised. I would also like to thank A/Prof Wally Woods for his support early in my candidature, and Central Queensland University for awarding the University Postgraduate Research Award that made this project possible.

To the three anonymous examiners who examined my original submission, and who provided constructive feedback for improvement.

And to my two rocks, Geoffrey and Zachary, you are what kept my head out of the clouds, my feet on the ground, and my bum in my chair. Thank you both for everything you allow me to be.

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I, the undersigned author, declare that all of the research and discussion presented in this thesis is original work performed by the author. No content of this thesis has been submitted or considered either in whole or in part, at any tertiary institute or university for a degree or any other category of award. I also declare that any material presented in this thesis performed by another person or institute has been referenced and listed in the reference section.

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Mungabah

Chapter 1

Kylie Douglas forced the hired Toyota Land Cruiser to a halt in front of the derelict cottage, sending thick clouds of red dust up into the air. ‘What a piece of crap,’ she mumbled under her breath. She checked the address once more against the hand-drawn map the Tallora publican had given her. Not being able to find the property on the vehicle’s GPS system meant she had to call into the pub for directions. As the dust settled around the vehicle she stared through the windscreen at the tiny building.

‘This is the house?’ Kylie shook her head in disbelief then reached up to brush the long fringe of auburn hair out of her eyes. ‘They’ve got to be kidding!’ She opened the door and swung her legs over the door sill, remembering just in time to carefully slide out of the vehicle down to the ground. Feeling the solid earth under her feet she let go of the door’s armrest and the side of the driver’s seat. She stood up to her full height, smoothing her jeans down her thighs. With hands on hips she looked toward the cottage and sighed. She dropped her chin to her chest and closed her eyes, slowly shaking her head. *Well there goes the big bucks I was hoping for.* She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She looked back at the cottage and her shoulders drooped. Could it get any worse? She cupped her hands around her mouth. ‘Hello! Mr Caretaker?’ she called, looking around for signs of life. ‘Hello! Someone... anyone?’

She reached into the vehicle and grabbed her fake Gucci handbag, closing the door before checking her reflection in the side mirror. Patting her hair back into place she slowly walked toward the cottage, trying not to lose her balance in the two-inch heels she was wearing. She loved wearing her heels, they made her look nearly five foot four. She walked up the three steps onto the bare floorboards of the veranda and glared at the empty beer bottles lying on an up-turned milk crate. She knocked on the front door and watched as slivers of ancient cream-coloured paint flaked off the door and floated down to her feet. ‘The quicker I sell this dump and get back to the city the better,’ she mumbled.

She stepped away from the door and looked out over the surrounding landscape, taking in the dryness of the place. There was nothing but red dirt with a few clumps of dull green bushes here and there. Further in the distance she could see a spattering of

trees. There was little else. Definitely nothing at all like the hustle and bustle of Brisbane. She wrapped her arms around her middle as she took in the view before her. The tips of her fingers brushing the red dust from her pale skin. No, this was nothing at all like Brisbane.

She turned back toward the door and knocked again. There was still no answer. *Damn it, where is everyone?* She walked down the steps and heard dogs barking in the distance. *Thank goodness, there must be someone over there if dogs are barking.* She held her hand up to shield her eyes from the early afternoon sun as she tried to see where the barking was coming from. Spying a large shed off in the distance she dropped her hand to her side. *Damn that's a long walk, think I'll drive over instead.* She turned toward the vehicle but stopped when she heard a noise coming from around the back of the cottage. Maybe there is someone home after all.

The cottage was only tiny, wrapped in old flaking weather boards that were in dire need of a fresh coat of paint. The exposed grey of the boards under the missing paint gave the cottage an eerie appearance. There were only two windows down the side of the building. *How could people live in such a small house?*

As she neared the back corner she heard water running. *Aha, someone must have left the hose on, what a waste of water.* Shaking her head, she continued to the back of the building. Then stopped in her tracks.

'Hello, I, um... Oh!' Her pale hazel eyes widened as she quickly turned away from the guy standing under an outdoor shower. He was naked. In the buff. Not a stitch of clothing graced his body. She stole another quick look. His body was lean, very muscular, and very nice. He was still rinsing the suds out of his dark hair and hadn't heard her arrive. Tilting her head slightly to the side she watched the water run over the muscles on his shoulders, down his back and finally cascade over his buttocks. His very taut buttocks. She watched the muscles in his forearms tense as he reached over to turn off the water, the action turning his body sideways so she could see the flatness of his stomach and...

'Uh, can I help you?' He quickly turned his body away from her and reached up to grab his hat.

'Yes, you can!' she let slip out of her grinning mouth. 'Oh, sorry, I mean, I hope you can. I'm supposed to meet someone at this address.' She looked at her watch. 'But I'm a bit early.' What an idiot she was. He'd sprung her perving on him and now she was babbling on like some love-struck school girl. Her face was heating up and she knew she'd be blushing as bright as a tomato in a few seconds. She wasn't a teenager, she

wasn't even a twenty-something-er anymore. She was in her thirties for goodness sake. She was a mature woman who had everything under control. Well, almost.

'Ah, you must be the granddaughter then,' the naked man said as he walked toward her.

Not sure where to direct her eyes she turned to face him, and grinned. He was covering his privates with his Akubra hat. She started laughing. Laughing hard. This, she wasn't expecting. Especially out here in the back of who-knows-where. It almost made up for the run-down little dump of a house she'd apparently inherited. A tall, gorgeous guy showering naked outside and she was getting an eye full of, well, everything. That made her day. Even if she was embarrassed about getting sprung peering at him. As he got closer she glanced at the Akubra hat again and tried to stop laughing, but it was just too funny. She dragged her eyes away from the hat and looked up at him. He was now smiling himself and extended his hand to her.

'Hi, I'm Jack, Jack Lawson, you must be Kylie.' His smile exposed a small dimple in each cheek.

Did he have cute little dimples on his butt cheeks too? Maybe next time she'd get a little closer so she could see better... What was she thinking? 'Yes, that, would be... me,' she answered, losing herself in the depth of his deep blue eyes as she looked up at his face. 'I, I wasn't sure, if I had the right place. It wasn't easy to find.' She tore her eyes away from his as she searched through her handbag for the mud map she got from the publican. What had come over her? Yes, he was a good-looking guy, a good-looking naked guy, but that wasn't why she was here. 'These are the directions I was given at the pub.' She held the piece of paper out to him, blushing again as she realised that he would need both hands if he wanted to look at the map properly.

He grabbed the piece of folded paper and shook it out with one hand. She was almost disappointed. 'Ah, that looks like Old Tommo's scribble, he knows these parts like the back of his hand.' He passed the map back to Kylie. 'Think we should head inside and I should put some clothes on. After you,' he gestured with his free hand toward the back door of the cottage, not allowing her to walk behind him, disappointing her again.

Once inside she took in her surroundings. The place was shabby and ancient. It would need a lot of work to renovate it if she was going to sell it. But should she even bother? Surely whoever bought the place would just bulldoze it anyway? It was certainly too small to live in comfortably and would cost more to fix it up than to rebuild. She ran

her hand lightly over a rotting window frame and sighed. Yes, it would take a lot of work to fix it up.

‘Would you like a cuppa?’

Kylie turned away from the window when she heard Jack come back into the lounge room. He was dressed now, in a pair of tight Wrangler jeans that rode low on his hips and a black t-shirt that nicely outlined his well-defined chest muscles. She shook her head to clear it and tore her eyes away from his body. ‘Um, I’m sorry, what did you say?’ She looked back at him and just knew that she’d be bright red in the face again any minute now.

He grinned at her, making the dimples on each side of his mouth dance. ‘I said would you like a cuppa?’

‘Yeah sure, that would be great.’ She sat down on the ratty old lounge and turned her red face away from him, pretending to trace the outline of the patterns on the grotty lino floor with her foot. A strange urge to grab a mop came over her.

Jack poked his head out of the kitchen door. ‘So when is this solicitor guy supposed to be here, he’s running a bit late isn’t he?’

‘I’m sure the letter said 2pm. I’ll check it again.’ Kylie rummaged through her handbag and found the letter from the solicitor’s office in Toowoomba. Smoothing out the crumpled paper on the coffee table she quickly skimmed to the meeting time. ‘Yep, 2pm.’ She looked at her watch. ‘He’s late.’ She knew she didn’t really need to check the time. She’d read the letter so many times over the last few days she could recite it if necessary. The letter was now tattered and tear stained. Stained with the thousands of tears that she’d cried since reading the letter for the first time on that god-awful day. But she didn’t want to think about that now. She needed to concentrate on today, concentrate on getting this meeting over and done with so she could list the property on the market, sell it, and get back home to Brisbane. The sooner the better as far as she was concerned.

Jack returned to the lounge room with two cups of coffee just as a vehicle pulled up outside. ‘That must be him, I’ll let him in.’

Kylie took a sip from the chipped coffee mug Jack had placed closest to her and grimaced. She’d forgotten to tell him she only drank tea. She couldn’t stand the smell of coffee. It was too strong and reeked of an acidic smell that she just couldn’t put her finger on, so she’d always steered clear of the stuff.

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‘Well he certainly didn’t stick around long,’ Jack said as he came back into the lounge room after the solicitor left.

Kylie looked up from the will the solicitor had given her. She’d already read it four times while he was there. ‘No, he didn’t, did he? I suppose he’s pretty busy, has other clients to see,’ she said, waving her left hand in the air, distracted by the sentence of the will which read, ‘*I leave my entire estate to my granddaughter.*’

‘Do you want another cup of coff...’ Jack trailed off when he saw that she hadn’t touched the one he’d made her earlier.

‘What? Oh, no thanks.’ She looked at the short hallway of the cottage. ‘Can I use the bathroom, I’d like to freshen up a bit. It was a long trip out here.’ She stood up and headed down the hallway before Jack had answered.

‘Sure thing, it’s the door on the ri...’ Jack called after her. ‘You can’t miss it.’

She was relieved to find a toilet indoors, along with a bathtub, even if the shower was outside. But she still couldn’t believe this was happening. She leaned her hip on the hand basin for support and tried to clear her head. She looked down at what she was holding in her left hand. An old key. The solicitor had given her a key that opened some strange box that was up at the main house. *What main house?* She shook her head in confusion.

It had been enough of a shock to find out last week she was adopted, but then to hear that she had inherited a house and large property from her maternal grandmother. She just didn’t know what to think. And now there was some strange box she had the key to. What on earth could be in the box that it needed to be locked in the first place? The whole event was making her head spin.

Kylie looked at the key once more, running her finger over the ornate handle on the end, then put it back in her handbag. Whatever was in the box, she’d find out soon enough. She used the toilet and splashed some water onto her face after washing her hands. She needed to get a grip on the situation. She turned to open the bathroom door but stopped when she heard barking and growling from outside the bathroom window. She walked toward the window and saw dust and dirt being kicked up into the air as the sounds erupted into a full-blown dog fight. The barking lessened as the intensity of the growling and snarling increased. She flinched when one of the dogs yelped.

‘Water!’ she yelled out the window when she saw Jack running toward the dogs. ‘Hose them with water.’ She ran from the bathroom and got outside just as Jack was

turning the hose on the dogs. The fright and pressure of the water was enough to scare the attackers off the smaller dogs. Jack kept hosing as the larger dogs retreated and headed back toward the boundary fence to the neighbouring property.

Kylie ran to the dog closest to her. It was lying on the ground whimpering. Blood was oozing from a puncture to its neck. 'Hey boy, let me look at you.' She ran her hands over the dog's coat and found the puncture wound next to the collar. She looked over at Jack. 'Quick, grab some towels or sheets. I need to stop this bleeding and stabilise him.' She squatted in the dirt next to the dog and started to examine the rest of its body. 'You're a bit of a mess, aren't you boy. Don't worry, it looks worse than it is. I'll have you cleaned up in no time.'

Jack stared down at her. 'What are you doing? Wait till I call the vet.'

'Don't worry, I know what I'm doing.' She looked at him and saw the hesitation in his eyes. 'Go call the vet while I get them sorted. Trust me.' She raised her hand and shooed him back toward the house and moved on to the next dog. 'And grab those towels and sheets on your way back, there's a lot of bleeding here.'

The next dog whimpered at Kylie. 'I know it hurts, boy.' She patted the dog to reassure it. 'Let's see how bad you are, hey boy.' She found four puncture wounds on the dog's shoulder. 'Hmm, luckily these aren't too deep. But you will need quite a few stitches.' She picked up the hose and washed away most of the blood. She blushed when she saw Jack watching her talk to the dogs. He probably thought she was silly in the head the way she was being over-protective of them and talking to them like people. She didn't want Jack to think this way about her, even though they had just met, so she shooed him again. 'Don't mind me, I always talk to animals like this. Go! Call the vet.'

Jack raced back into the house and returned a few minutes later with a bundle of sheets and towels. 'The vet should be here in about 30 minutes. What do you want me to do with these?'

'Can you tear them into strips for me? I've cleaned all of the wounds but I need to pack and strap them as quickly as possible to stop the bleeding.'

'Um, sure thing,' he replied. 'How many are injured?'

'Just these two, the others seem fine, just shaken up. Let's carry these two up onto the veranda and get them out of the hot sun.' Using one of the sheets as a sling, they moved each of the injured dogs up to the cottage veranda. 'There you go, boys.' Kylie crouched down between the two injured dogs and stroked their backs. 'It shouldn't be

long now, the vet will be here soon. I'll get you both patched up til then, hey? Is that ok?' She smiled down at each dog and finished strapping the wounds.

'You did a good job with just strips of material. And just so you know, I talk to them too, but not in front of anyone.' Jack grinned and looked over the dogs' injuries.

'Thanks.' Kylie sat down on a milk crate and wiped her brow. 'Well, I hope that doesn't happen too often.'

Jack raised both of his eyebrows. 'This is actually the third dog attack since Buffy passed away. I don't ...'

'Wait, who's Buffy?'

'Who's ... oh, sorry, I forgot you just got here. Buffy is, was, your grandmother's nickname. Can't remember how she got it, Mum might know, but that's what we all called her.'

'Buffy,' Kylie said out loud. 'It must be short for Elizabeth. I like it,' she smiled. 'Sorry, you were saying?'

'Yeah, the dogs. I don't know how much more they can take. Damn that old man for letting his vicious dogs out. He'll pay for this if any of our dogs die.'

'What old man?'

'Our neighbour, old Mr Berrigan,' Jack gestured toward the boundary fence the vicious dogs had run to earlier. 'A bit strange really, the trouble's only started recently.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'I might have to go have a word with him.'

'Hmm, or maybe I should have a word with him, after all, it's my place now, my responsibility.'

'Ah, yeah, of course.' Jack looked away, his shoulders slumped.

Kylie grimaced. He was only trying to help, but here she was, trying to be assertive, for once in her life, and like usual she managed to pick the wrong time to do it. She reached over and put her hand on his arm. 'But maybe you should come with me, seeing as how you already know him and I don't.'

'Yeah, ok. I'll let you know when I'm free to run you over there.' The side of his mouth lifted in a half smile.

'Thanks, that'd be good,' she smiled back.

'Finally.' Jack stood up and shaded his eyes to watch the vehicle coming down the driveway. He went to greet the driver when the four wheel drive wagon pulled up at the cottage.

Ten minutes later the vet had finished checking the dogs. 'Well you did a good job here Jack, stopped the bleeding very fast.'

'No, it wasn't me, it was Kylie,' Jack replied.

The vet nodded at Kylie. 'Thanks Kylie. You did a good job stopping that bleeding.' He turned back toward Jack. 'I've treated the punctures and dressed them. Luckily they weren't too deep.' He gathered up his supplies and medical bag. 'Come over to my car and I'll give you some cream and new dressings to last a couple of days. Make sure you change the dressings each day until the punctures start to heal and close up.' He called out to Kylie as he walked away. 'Nice to meet you Kylie. See you later.'

Kylie waved goodbye then sat down to pat one of the dogs as she watched the two men walk toward the vet's car. It was interesting seeing Jack's butt now covered in denim. But if she was being truthful with herself she much preferred the way he'd presented it to her the first time she saw it. She only wished she'd seen a bit more. She grinned, then shook her head. What was she thinking thoughts like that for? She'd only just met the guy. She had more important things to be thinking about at the moment. Like how to tell Jack that she was planning on selling the place and that they'd all be losing their jobs. She would have to find the right moment to tell them.

Kylie watched Jack walk back toward the veranda. He smiled at her as he sat down beside her.

'How did you know what to do with the dogs?' he asked.

'I actually do it every day, I'm a vet nurse.'

'A vet nurse?' he asked again.

'Yes, that's right. Why, do you find that surprising?'

'Um, well it's just not what I was expecting you to be.' He looked down at her high heels. 'Not at all.'

She frowned and looked down at her now very dusty high heels. 'Well obviously I don't wear shoes like these every day,' she replied. 'They wouldn't be very practical now would they?' She stood up, leaving him to watch her dusty backside as she marched back into the cottage.

What was with this guy? He was nice to look at but he certainly didn't have much by way of manners. Or charm come to think of it. And who lets a girl get all dirty and dusty down on the ground trying to patch up someone else's dogs? He certainly wasn't much help. The quicker she sold this dump the better. Kylie went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water.

‘I guess your coffee’s cold now hey?’ Jack said, making her jump as he followed her into the kitchen. ‘Sorry about that.’ He gestured with his head to the door. ‘And the dogs, that doesn’t usually happen... not until recently anyway.’

‘Hmm, that’s ok. I hope the dogs will be alright.’

‘Yeah me too. Guess we’ll just have to wait and see, although the vet reckons they should be fine.’

Kylie looked out the kitchen window toward the property boundary. ‘This neighbour, has he been giving you much trouble?’

‘Not really, at least not until your grandmother passed away. He’d been pretty quiet till then.’

‘I see. Has something changed since then?’

‘Nothing much. Everything’s been pretty much the same. Except for you, I don’t think he knows about you.’ Jack scratched his head. ‘Well I don’t think anyone here has told him about you, we don’t see him or his son all that much.’

‘What type of trouble has there been?’ Kylie asked, intrigued.

‘Mostly just his dogs getting into our sheep and farm dogs. It wouldn’t be so bad if his dogs were just working dogs but his son has got hunting dogs. They’re a whole different type of dog, they can be very aggressive if they’re not trained properly.’

‘Yes, I saw that. They weren’t your usual farming dogs, were they? I’m pretty sure they were a sort of Bull Arab or Bull Mastiff cross.’

Jack shrugged his shoulders. ‘Something like that. They use them for hunting wild pigs so they’re very full-on if they get out of their cages.’

Kylie rinsed out the glass and put it upside down on the dish rack. ‘I see a lot of that at the surgery, usually little dogs that have been torn open by the larger aggressive ones. And the owners are always so distressed. I wish the councils would do more about what breeds are allowed and what shouldn’t be allowed, or at least make dog training compulsory.’

‘Yeah, I’m always worried one of my dogs won’t make it after an attack.’ Jack looked down at his feet. ‘It scares the crap out of me, actually.’

Kylie nodded her head. ‘I know what you mean. I see the grief that our pet owners go through if their pet passes, it’s heartbreaking to watch. That’s probably why I talk to the animals who are in my charge. I like to treat them like little humans. They’re always there for us big humans so they deserve that much at least.’ She stopped talking and saw Jack watching her. ‘And you probably think I’m an airhead for doing that, don’t you?’

‘What? Are you kidding.’ Jack shook his head from side to side. ‘No way would I think that, because... well, that’s what I do too, as I said before.’ He shrugged his shoulders as his cheeks reddened. ‘I always talk to my dogs. They’re my mates, just like you said, they’re always there for me.’ He reached up and scratched the back of his head. ‘Heck, I even talk to my ute. Guess I’m a bit of an airhead too then,’ he laughed.

They both stopped talking as the back door of the cottage opened and a man walked in.

‘Hey, Dad, you’re back from town early. You just missed another dog fight.’

‘Ah, thought that’s why those two are lying out there,’ he gestured to the veranda with his head.

‘This is Buffy’s granddaughter, Kylie.’ Jack turned toward her. ‘Kylie, this is my Dad, Frank.’

Kylie smiled at Frank and shook his outstretched weathered hand. ‘Nice to meet you, Frank.’

‘So, you’re Buffy’s long lost granddaughter, hey? I’ve heard a lot about you over the years, young lady.’

Kylie scrunched up her brow. ‘You have? What have you heard?’ She leaned in closer to Frank and watched the laugh lines around his eyes crinkle when he smiled. She was eager to hear more from this large, rosy-cheeked man who seemed to know more about her than she did. ‘I thought nobody knew about me?’

‘Hold up, lass, we’ve got plenty of time for that,’ Frank said, looking at his watch. ‘Let’s get up to the big house so you can see what Buffy left for you.’

‘The big house?’ Kylie looked around the cottage confused. ‘I thought this was the house I inherited? The solicitor said something about a main house. So this isn’t it?’

Frank grabbed his stomach and let out a large chuckle. ‘No lass, this is just the workers’ quarters. The big house is a fair way back from the road. Let’s go.’

Kylie followed the men along the driveway in her hired Toyota. She was grateful for the chunky tread on the tyres that seemed to be the only thing keeping her from sliding all over the rough track.

As they got closer she saw the sheds that she’d glimpsed earlier and realised they were kennels for the dogs. For many, many dogs. Even though she saw dogs all day long at the vet surgery she’d never seen so many dogs in the one place before. Each dog had its own caged-off section of a shed with a small yard attached to it. They were all barking madly and jumping around excitedly as the two vehicles approached. Kylie was anxious

to find out what the dogs did and why the farm needed so many. She knew they were usually used to help round up sheep and cattle but so far, she hadn't seen any livestock on the property.

She stopped her car behind Jack's ute and got out to help carry the injured dogs from the back of the ute to their kennels. 'I hope they recover quickly, I hate seeing animals in pain.'

'They should be right, the vet knows what he's doing,' Frank replied.

'Actually, Dad, it was Kylie who patched up the dogs,' Jack said as they headed back to the vehicles.

'Really?' Frank looked over at Kylie as she was getting into her car. 'Thanks for that, lass.'

'No worries,' she replied with a smile.

'Hmm, you might be just what this place needs,' Frank said as he opened the ute door.

Jack looked at Kylie and smiled. 'That's exactly what I was thinking.'

They rounded a bend on a section of the driveway that was lined with lush bushes on either side, and that's when she saw it. The house. Oh no. It wasn't just a house, it was a mansion. And it was magnificent. The most hauntingly beautiful house she had ever seen. Two stories of elegant fretwork lined the tops of the verandas. The lower veranda swept out to meet the front stairs, and the huge double doors leading into the house were bordered with glass panels inlaid with colourful stained glass.

As they got closer though Kylie gasped. Up close the house was a mess. Most of the timber was rotting away and many of the windows had fallen out of their frames. Some of the stained glass panels were smashed. Shrubs that should have been growing beside the house were now growing up and over the house, and were probably growing inside the house as well.

'This place is amazing,' Kylie said as they all gathered at the foot of the sandstone steps that lead up to the veranda. 'So I take it this is the big house that everyone keeps talking about?' She raised an eyebrow and glanced at the men.

Jack grinned at her. 'Yep, the one and only.'

'Thank goodness for that.' Kylie slapped her chest with the palm of her hand. 'I honestly thought it was that dump of a cottage earlier.' She sucked in a quick breath when she realised she'd said that out loud.

'Hey, it's not that bad,' Jack said, followed by a laugh.

Kylie cocked her head at him. 'It's not that great either.'

'Yeah, we were going to renovate it before ...'

'Ok, let's head inside and show you the house, Kylie,' Frank said, walking up the four steps that lead to the double front doors. He unlocked the doors and pushed them open with a flourish.

Directly in front of them in the foyer was a mahogany staircase that swept up to the second floor in an elegant curve to the left. The mahogany continued in the polished floorboards that led to a large dining room on their right and a huge sitting room on their left. Double French doors opened off each room onto the front veranda.

Kylie stepped further into the sitting room. 'Wow, that fireplace is divine.' She walked over to the hearth and ran her hand over the marble mantel surround. Her eyes followed the hearthstone stack up toward the ceiling. She gasped and took a step forward. 'Why is it like that?' She pointed toward the corner of the wall where the wallpaper and plaster had come away and exposed the wooden lath strips. She turned and looked at the other walls and gasped again. 'And over there too? Not just at the top but all along the bottom as well?' She turned to look at the men but only Jack was there.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'It's a bit rundown. Weather and old age I guess. This old girl's been around for a while,' he said, looking around the room. 'Dad went back to the ute to get something,' he nodded with his head toward the front of the house. 'Come and have a look at the dining room, the original old dining table is still in there, and it's huge.' They both walked back through the foyer and into the dining room.

Kylie started toward the large table but stopped. 'Who are these portraits of? There's so many of them.' Kylie looked up and down the length of the back wall of the room.

'They're Buffy's relatives... well, your relatives now I suppose,' Jack answered.

'Wow, they're all so old looking.' She ran her hand over the frame of one of the paintings.

'Yeah, your family goes back a few generations. Dad would know more if you want to ask him anything.'

'Thanks, I'll keep that in mind. But why are they all dirty only on the bottom half, it looks really strange.'

'That would be from the floods. Over a hundred years ago was the first one, then it happened again a few decades ago.' Jack coughed and looked away.

‘Wow, really? I’ll bet that would have been terrifying to go through. The poor paintings. The poor house! Is that why it looks like this now?’

‘Kind of, I don’t think your grandmother ever did say why the house wasn’t repaired better or why the paintings weren’t restored.’ Jack rubbed his chin. ‘Maybe Dad knows.’

Kylie walked along the length of the wall and looked at each painting up close. Her family certainly looked like an interesting bunch. When she got to the end of the wall she hesitated then looked back down at the row of paintings.

‘That’s strange,’ she said, taking a few steps backwards from the wall.

‘What’s strange?’ asked Jack looking from Kylie to the paintings.

‘Why are there two paintings missing? See?’ She pointed to the wall near the end. ‘There are dirt marks in the same shape and size of the other paintings but there’s no paintings in those spots.’

‘I don’t know, never really noticed that before.’ Jack looked up toward the ceiling. ‘There are some more paintings upstairs, maybe they’d just been moved,’ he suggested.

‘Maybe. I’ll have a look for them before I ... when I get a chance.’ She looked around the room again. ‘So, did my grandmother really live here, even with the house in this condition?’

‘She did. Didn’t seem to bother her too much though.’ He shrugged his shoulders again. ‘Maybe she liked it like this.’

‘I doubt it, how could anyone like it like this?’ Kylie said, sweeping her hand out toward the damaged walls. ‘Well it certainly looks like I have quite a few decisions to make about this place.’ She put her hands on her hips and sighed. ‘And there’s so much work to do, I really don’t know where to start.’

‘Well,’ Jack reached his hand up and scratched the back of his head. ‘You could crash at the cottage if you want. That’s if you don’t want to drive back to Brisbane tonight.’

‘Oh, no, that’s ok. I’ve... already booked a room back at the pub,’ Kylie said, without looking Jack in the eye. ‘Thanks anyway.’

‘Here you go, lass,’ Frank called out as he came back into the foyer of the homestead.

‘In here, Dad.’

‘Ah, so you are.’ Frank walked toward the dining table jingling something metal in his hand. He nodded toward Kylie. ‘Here, lass, these are for you.’ He put a set of old keys down.

‘What are they for?’ Kylie asked.

‘For the homestead, lass, and the outbuildings. This set was Buffy’s, so they’re yours now.’

She picked the keys up and ran her fingers over the old metal. She was holding the keys to the entire property. Her property.

‘But I suppose this one is probably the one you’re most interested in, hey.’ He pulled a single key on a long chain out of his shirt pocket and handed it to her. ‘Buffy asked me to hang on to this one for safe keeping.’

‘For safe keeping? Why for safe keeping?’

‘It’s the key to the attic door. Because of the floods she kept anything precious up there.’

Kylie turned the key over in her hand. It was an older style skeleton key with an ornate handle on the end, practically an exact copy of the key the solicitor had given her only much larger. She fingered the old silver chain before spreading it open and putting it over her head, then tucking the key into the top of her shirt.

Frank looked at her and frowned.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked.

‘Nothing, lass, it’s just that that’s exactly how your grandmother used to wear it too.’ He rubbed at his chin. ‘Hmm, never mind.’ He shook his head. ‘Let’s head up to the attic and get the box, it’s getting a bit long in the day for this old boy.’

They walked back into the foyer and up the curved flight of stairs, stopping on the landing. Double doors led out onto a large veranda that wrapped around both sides of the top story of the homestead.

‘This is the main bedroom, it’s a very large room.’ Frank pointed to their right. ‘And on this side we have some smaller bedrooms, the bathroom and the linen room.’

‘How do we get into the attic?’ Kylie asked.

‘Through here.’ Frank led them into a small room on his left. ‘This is the linen room, as you can see.’ He pointed to the built-in shelves that held an assortment of sheets, towels, toiletries, and other items. ‘And access to the attic is through that door at the back.’ He pointed to a short off-white door nestled into the wall at the end of the shelves.

The bottom of the door was over a foot higher than the floor with two very worn built-in timber steps leading up to it.

Kylie let out a gasp. 'Are you sure we're not about to step into Wonderland?'

'No, lass, this door was put in after the house was built. It was probably an old door that was damaged on the bottom so they cut it off. That's how they did things in those days. Made do with what they had.'

'Well that door does look peculiar. I'm getting curiouser and curiouser,' she grinned. She took the chain with the key from around her neck and handed it to Frank.

Frank unlocked the door and pulled it open, exposing a long narrow flight of timber steps leading up into the dark attic. He took a large square torch off one of the linen room shelves and switched it on, flashing the light beam up into the dark recess above them. 'After you, lass,' Frank grinned, flicking the torch light from Kylie to the stairs.

Kylie held her palms up. 'No way am I going up there first.'

'Relax. Dad's just mucking around, aren't you, Dad?' Jack said. 'He knows these stairs very well. He used to drag the heavy furniture and stuff up here for Buffy every time she thought it was going to flood.'

'Sorry, lass, just pulling your leg.' Frank winked at her. He started up the stairs with Jack close behind him. They were nearly halfway up when Jack stopped and turned around.

'Kylie, are you coming up?'

'Um ... well ... no,' she answered.

'Why not?' Jack took a step back down toward her.

'Um ...' She chewed on her thumb nail. 'I'm not too good with dark creepy spaces, and I get a bit claustrophobic.'

'What? So you're chicken?' Jack grinned at her, crossing his arms over his chest.

'Nooo, not chicken, just...'

'Just what?'

'Just dark-and-creepy-challenged, that's all.' Kylie shrugged her shoulders and turned the palms of her hands up.

'Ah right, kind of like how you're height-challenged?' Jack raised an eyebrow at her.

Kylie reached forward and slapped him in the arm, then pushed her shoulders back to stand up straighter. 'That's not fair.'

‘Come on then.’ He laughed and held out his hand.

She put out her hand and placed it in his. His skin was rough but warm against her palm. Not smooth and well-manicured like her boyfriend’s. Nothing like her boyfriend’s at all. She rubbed her palm over Jack’s again to enjoy the feel of his work-worn hands, to enjoy the heat of his palm pressing into hers. She looked down at what she was doing and snatched her hand away.

Jack’s mouth dropped into a frown. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing. I just don’t really want to go up there, it’s too creepy. I’ll wait here for you. I’ll be fine here.’

‘Ok, I’ll tell Dad to hurry up.’ Jack disappeared back up the dark stairway.

Kylie moved even further away from the attic door, feeling silly for being afraid of the dark. The men would think she was a child instead of a thirty-something year old woman. She could hear them banging around above her head, then she sighed when she heard their footfalls on the stairs. *Thank goodness.*

‘Here it is, lass.’ Frank stepped down out of the doorway holding a small wooden box in his large hand. ‘Sorry I took so long, had a bit of trouble finding it. Buffy had it hidden under the big tapestry with a couple of paintings. A bit hard to see up there with only this one torch.’

Kylie reached out and took the box from him, turning it over in her hands. ‘So this is the famous box, hey? I wonder what’s so special in here.’ She gave the box a gentle shake and heard something move inside. ‘Well there’s definitely something in there,’ she grinned.

‘That there is, lass. Now let’s get out of here. I’m starving and I know Penny put a roast on earlier. Will you be joining us for dinner?’

‘No. Sorry.’ Her eyes scanned the room trying to think of an excuse. ‘I’ve already made plans back at the pub.’

Chapter 2

Kylie unlocked the door of the motel room attached to the back of the pub and threw her stuff onto the sagging double bed. Luckily she was able to get a last minute booking when she got back to the pub, otherwise she'd be sleeping in the four wheel drive tonight. There was no way she was going to stay in that daggy little cottage with Jack and the other men. Though, looking around this room, she was starting to have second thoughts. The drab bedspread and matching curtains screamed 1970s while the ancient box television sitting on the brown laminated chest of drawers suggested even earlier. But at least she had her own bathroom, even if it was the size of a broom cupboard.

After a lukewarm shower Kylie filled the pale green ceramic kettle for a cup of tea. While she waited for the kettle to boil she retrieved the box and key from her bag. She ran her fingers along the top of the box, trying to guess its age. It was worn on the corners but more so on the front of the lid where it would have been grabbed to open and close it over the years. In the top left hand corner of the lid was a small metal horseshoe embedded into the timber. The horseshoe was now tarnished with age.

She jumped when the kettle shrilled out its whistling steam. Quickly turning it off she made her tea and sat down at the small mustard yellow Formica-covered table to have a closer look at the box. The key took a bit of jiggling but finally she was able to unlock the box and look inside. Under the lid was a poem, roughly carved in the soft timber. She ran her fingers over the words, words that perhaps her own grandmother had written and carved. Two words per line, words which didn't make much sense to her, but may have meant something to her grandmother. *Threads of, the earth, woven together, chart to, precious bounty.* Inside the box, taking up the entire width and breadth of the interior, was a book about the size of her mini iPad. Underneath the book was a small urn that looked like it was handmade from pottery. She took each item out and laid them on the table. She picked up the box and went to move it out of the way when she noticed something else inside. Reaching in she pulled out a bundle of brown folded cloth. She checked the bottom of the box with her fingers, making sure it was empty, before pushing it to the other side of the table. Unfolding the bundle of cloth, she was surprised to see a handful of photos, some coloured and some black and white. She glanced through the photos quickly but she didn't recognise anyone in them. She didn't expect to. She placed the photos in a stack on the table and put the cloth beside them.

She picked up the urn and saw the initials G.E.B. etched into the brown pottery on the front. She turned it over in her hand, looking for other markings, but there weren't any. Giving the urn a gentle shake she heard something moving inside. She wasn't game to remove the large cork to have a look, not until she knew what to expect. She put the urn next to the photos and took a sip of tea before picking up the book. She opened the worn leather cover. The cursive handwriting on the first page read 'Diary of Elizabeth Barton, Mungabah Station'. Her grandmother's diary.

Kylie's hand shook as she turned to the first entry and started reading: '6 April 1942 - Mother said I could start riding lessons today with Sunshine. He let me ride Princes' son. I was scared in the beginning but Sunshine said I was a natural rider.'

She skipped ahead to a random page: '18 September 1946 - Father let me muster today, and it was fabulous. I borrowed Billy's trousers though, of course, I wasn't going to muster side-saddle, how ridiculous. No sense in riding side-saddle anyway when I'm such a good rider astride.'

Kylie closed the diary and slid it over to the other items before finishing her cup of tea. So many bits of information and so many people she knew nothing about. She promised herself she'd read more later, though she wasn't really interested in horses or riding.

She had one last look at the photos then wrapped them back up in the cloth and put them and the urn and diary back in the box. She picked up the box and put it into her handbag. A family she never knew she had and now it was too late, she would never get to meet any of them.

After a cheap counter meal at the pub for dinner, Kylie returned to her room with a borrowed phone directory of the local Tallora area. Flipping to the real estate agent section she wasn't surprised to see that there was only one. Tomorrow she was going to call in and put the property on the market.

###

Leaving the pub in the morning, Kylie wandered along the footpath, gazing into the quaint shops that lined the main road. The real estate office was at the end of the street but she wanted to call in at the pharmacy first to pick up some headache tablets. She slid the glass front door of the pharmacy open, grimacing as the grimy old metal tracks grated against each other as the door slid to the right. Sliding the door closed behind her she

turned and squinted as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. Looking around the small shop she took in the state of the place. Though the pharmacy was tiny, it had every conceivable item crammed onto its shelves.

‘Hi love, can I help you?’

Kylie jumped as an elderly woman popped her head out from behind a doorway at the back of the store. ‘Yes thanks, I’m just after some Panadol.’

‘Would you like a big box or a small box?’ asked the woman as she tucked a coarse strand of grey hair behind her right ear.

‘Um, I might grab a big box, I have a feeling it might come in handy while I’m here.’

‘So you’re not just passing through then, love?’

‘No ... yes ... well, I’m not sure yet.’

The elderly woman walked toward Kylie with the box of tablets and pushed her eyeglasses back up her nose. She put the box on the counter and looked Kylie in the eye. ‘You must be Buffy’s granddaughter.’

Kylie took a step back from the counter. She didn’t know how to respond. She wasn’t used to being called Buffy’s granddaughter, or even having a grandmother with that name.

‘Well, I suppose I am,’ she replied. ‘How did you know?’

‘We don’t get many strangers through here these days,’ the woman said, looking closely at Kylie’s face. ‘And you’re the spitting image of your grandmother. Actually, you’re a spitting image of your mother too. You mustn’t be much older than she was when she passed away.’

Kylie’s heart rate increased as she took in the information. It was hard to get her head around the fact that she was adopted and that she’d had a mother and grandmother she’d never met. And now she was being told that her mother had died as well.

‘You knew my mother?’

‘Sure did. She was one of my daughter Tricia’s best friends, she was.’ The woman took her glasses off and sighed. She looked out over Kylie’s shoulder, tilted her head and smiled. ‘Those girls were always getting into some kind of trouble together.’ She pointed her glasses at Kylie. ‘And half their luck I say.’

‘Where is your daughter now, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘She’s still living here in town, married with adult kids of her own. Maybe you’d like to meet her? Now she’d have a lot of stories to tell you about your mother, she would.’

‘Thanks. That would be great. I don’t know much at all about my birth mother. Or my grandmother for that matter.’

‘Ah, yes, Buffy. Now Buffy was something else, let me tell you. All the boys were smitten with her back in the day. And you look so much like her, you must have lots of admirers, love,’ the woman smiled at Kylie.

‘Well, not really. I do have a boyfriend at the moment but things have been a bit shaky lately.’

‘Oh dear, that’s no good.’

Kylie shrugged her shoulders. ‘Yeah, it’s a bit complicated. We’ve been together for a while so I guess we should try and work through it when I get back to Brisbane.’

‘That’s good to hear. Oh, I’m Violet by the way, Violet Fairbanks. I own this store and my father owned it before that.’

‘Wow, a true-blue family owned business. There aren’t many of those left these days.’

‘That’s right. The big corporations are taking over the world,’ she chuckled.

Kylie looked up at Violet, slightly uncomfortable but needing to know. ‘Do you happen to know anything about my father?’

‘Your mother and grandmother never did talk much about that. Apparently it was something of a secret as to who he was. If I remember correctly, something about young Gemma not wanting to tell anyone who he was.’

‘Gemma? Gemma was my mother’s name?’

‘I’m sorry love, I keep forgetting you know none of this. Your Mum and now your Gran are buried on the property you know. That’s the one bit of land that Buffy refused to sell, she couldn’t bear to lose any more of her family. And yes, Gemma was your mother’s name. A real gem she was too. Most of the boys in town were smitten with her but she didn’t date much.’

‘Oh, ...’

‘Well, not any one boy anyway. She never seemed interested in settling down to start a family. That is, until Buffy found out Gemma was pregnant. She’d been trying to hide it but your Gran was too smart for that.’

‘So I wonder who my father is then, do you know anyone who would be able to tell me more?’

‘Hmm, I’m not sure but maybe Tricia knows something that she hasn’t told me.’

‘Yes, you would think that my mother would have told her best friend something about the father of her child,’ Kylie agreed. ‘Can you give Tricia my mobile number and ask her to ring me please?’

‘Well, sure thing love, except mobiles don’t work too well out here. How about I just tell her to ring you at Buffy’s place?’

‘Yes, ok.’ Buffy’s place? Well it was her place now, for the time being anyway.

Kylie left the pharmacy and walked up to the real estate office. She looked at the houses for sale in the window, reading the features of each property trying to find one that was similar to hers so she could get an idea of what it would sell for. But her mind kept wandering back to what Violet had said about her mother being buried at Mungabah. Did she really want the last connection she had to her mother sold to a stranger? But she didn’t even know her mother, so would it matter?

She stuck her hand into her handbag and felt around for the box. The diary, urn, and photos were the only things she had of her relatives, the only personal things apart from the property. Taking another look at the houses for sale in the window she couldn’t find any that looked similar to Mungabah, most of them were smaller houses closer in to town.

‘Can I help you miss?’ A middle-aged man was standing in the doorway of the real estate office watching her. ‘Are you interested in purchasing a house in our lovely town?’

Kylie looked at his rumpled 1970s suit and nearly laughed. The town was certainly stuck a few decades in the past.

‘Actually I’m after something that has a lot of room, a few hundred acres. Do you have anything like that on your books?’

‘Hmm, let me think,’ the estate agent scratched his balding head. ‘Big properties don’t come onto the market very often these days, it’s mostly local residential blocks with your standard 3 bedrooms on our books.’

‘Oh, well something like that would be too small.’

‘Our last listing for a large parcel of land was a hundred acres of the Mungabah property, they’ve been selling it off slowly over the years. But that was a couple of years ago now.’

Kylie's ears pricked up at this information. She had no idea why she'd lied to the agent about wanting to buy a property but she was glad she did otherwise she mightn't have gotten this tidbit. Why would her grandmother have been selling off bits of Mungabah? And how did Violet know that the piece of land with her mother's grave site on it hadn't been sold?

'Ok, thank you,' Kylie absently told the agent. 'Guess I'll just have to keep looking then. Thanks for your time.' There were so many questions that she didn't know the answers to. Maybe she should wait and find out a bit more about the property before she put it on the market.

She left the real estate office and walked back down the road to her motel room. She needed time to think things through and she wanted to have another look at the diary. As she got closer to her room she noticed that the door was ajar. She was pretty sure she'd closed it behind her when she'd left. Hopefully it was just Housekeeping, maybe they were still cleaning her room or maybe they were the ones who didn't close the door properly. She approached the door with caution just in case, making sure she made no noise as she got closer. Gently she pushed the door open further and quickly scanned the room with her eyes.

'Oh my god,' she yelled at the top of her voice. 'What the hell happened here?' Her shocked eyes took in the state of the room. The chest of drawers had been ransacked and the bed mattress flipped over. All of her clothing was scattered over the floor. They'd even gone through all of the drawers and cupboards in the bathroom.

She jumped when one of the barmaids came running over to her room from the back door of the pub.

'What on earth is going on here,' the barmaid asked. 'Did you have a wild party or something?' she said, looking through the door at the messy room.

'No, I did not!' Kylie spat at her. 'Someone has gone through my stuff and left this mess. I hope they didn't take anything.' She stepped into the room and started looking around.

'Well we don't usually have this type of thing happen here, someone must have wanted something of yours real bad.'

'Hmm, apparently so,' Kylie replied. 'Can you get someone to ring the police for me please, I don't want to touch anything in the room before they dust for fingerprints.'

'Haha, dust for fingerprints? I think you've been watching too much telly in the city, they don't really do stuff like that out here.'

Kylie rolled her eyes in frustration. ‘Well can you still ring the police, I’ll need to file a report at least.’

‘Ok, but Clem’s probably in the Bar having his lunch as we speak, so you could just go and get him.’ The barmaid strutted off back to the pub and left Kylie standing there on her own.

‘How bloody rude,’ Kylie mumbled under her breath.

###

‘What do you mean someone broke into your room and trashed it?’ Jack hollered down the phone line at her.

‘Just that,’ Kylie said. ‘They broke into my room and threw my stuff everywhere. The police officer said it looks like someone was looking for something in there.’

‘Looking for something? What on earth would they be looking for?’

‘I don’t know, maybe it was just someone who’d had too much to drink and they thought they were in their own room.’

‘No, that doesn’t sound right to me.’ Jack paused. ‘Maybe you should come and stay with us while you’re here, at least until we work out what’s going on.’

Now what was she going to do? She didn’t feel safe at the motel anymore but she certainly didn’t want to be sharing a very small house with men she didn’t know. But she didn’t really have any other choice.

‘Ok thanks, I guess that would be best, for the time being anyway,’ she replied.

Arriving at the cottage an hour later was like *deja vu*. The same four wheel drive with the same red dust floating in the air and the same ugly little cottage in front of her. But this time she knew what she was in for.

Grabbing her belongings out of the vehicle she was almost hoping to catch Jack in the shower again. A flush crept up her cheeks at the thought of seeing him naked but she knew she couldn’t go there. At least not until she sorted things out with what she was fast realising would be her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. And that was if Jack was even single. She had no idea and wasn’t game to ask. And anyway, she wouldn’t need to once this place was off her hands.

‘Hey, you made it in good time,’ Jack smiled at her as he greeted her at the front door of the cottage. He grabbed her bags and took them into the lounge room.

‘Yeah, it didn’t seem as long from the pub this time.’ She looked at the two bedroom doors that led off the lounge and wondered which one she would be using. Though she wasn’t sure she’d be able to sleep anyway, knowing that Jack would be sleeping in the next room.

‘Don’t worry, you won’t have to share,’ he said as a grin spread across his face. ‘You can have my room,’ he gestured to the left door. ‘I’ll bunk in with Gazza.’

‘Gazza? What about your Dad?’

‘Dad and Gazza are camping out at the northern boundary, I’ll be joining them tomorrow,’ he told her. ‘But only Gazza and I live here, Dad and Mum have their own cottage on the other side of the homestead.’

Kylie nodded and stepped toward the room he pointed at. She poked her head into the doorway and was relieved to see a fairly tidy room with a neatly made double bed. She picked up her bags from the lounge room floor and put them on the bed.

‘I emptied out some dresser drawers for you, the top three.’ Jack leaned his shoulder against the door jam and crossed his arms over his chest.

Kylie saw Jack watching her from the corner of her eye. She quickly finished her unpacking and put the empty bag on the floor next to the dresser. She took her time standing up straight, making sure he had a good long look at her backside. When she turned around to face him she noticed that he was now standing tall with his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. His face began to colour when he saw her looking at him.

‘Um, is there anything else you need,’ he mumbled, looking down at his shoes.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ she smiled at him, enjoying his discomfort at having been sprung peering at her. She looked him up and down, and suddenly remembered what she saw when she first arrived at the property. ‘Oh, um, well,’ she stammered as the heat started to rise up her cheeks. ‘It’s just the, um, shower. The one out the back, is it, um, is it the only one?’

He looked up at her face. Slowly his eyes wandered down her body to her feet, then even slower his eyes wandered back up to her face. He looked her square in the eye as he grinned, then he turned on his heel and left the room.

###

‘Morning sleepy head,’ Jack said as Kylie entered the kitchen. ‘Saved you some breakfast, it’s in the microwave.’ He gestured behind him as he finished the washing up.

‘Hmm, thanks.’ Kylie rubbed at her eyes and pushed her tousled hair back from her face. She slouched down at the table. ‘What time is it?’

‘Time to start work,’ he turned to glance at her. ‘I did call out and knock on your door but you didn’t answer so I thought I should let you sleep.’

‘Oh, thanks. I tossed and turned for most of the night. Must be why I was so tired this morning.’ She rubbed her eyes again and walked over to the microwave. She leaned against the kitchen bench to look inside. ‘So what’s for breakfast anyway?’

‘Just the usual bacon, eggs, sausages, grilled tomatoes, baked beans and toast. Oh, and coffee, must have coffee,’ he recited.

‘Yuck, how can you eat so much fat, especially first thing in the morning?’ She turned away from the bench and reached for the kettle. ‘Think I’ll just have a cup of tea.’

‘We always have a big breakfast. You should too, you’ll need the extra energy to help get you through to morning smoko.’

‘Morning smoko? What’s that?’ she asked, switching the kettle on. She began opening and closing cupboard doors.

‘Well I suppose in the city they’d call it morning tea,’ he answered, watching her backside as she reached up into the top cupboard to grab a mug.

‘Oh, yeah, morning tea.’ She scratched at the side of her neck and yawned. ‘I should be right. I don’t usually have breakfast, just a cup of tea.’

‘Hmm, we’ll see.’ He started to pack a small blue esky with things from the fridge, placing an ice brick on top before securing the lid. ‘I’ll give you a quick tour of the place before I join Dad and Gazza at the northern boundary fence. Meet me at the kennels when you’re dressed.’ He eyed her short pyjama bottoms and singlet before grabbing a coffee flask off the kitchen bench.

The back screen door slammed shut as he thumped down the stairs in his boots. Jack shook his head as he walked toward his ute. Damn, why does she have to look so good first thing in the morning? And no bra? How’s a guy supposed to handle that so early? Good thing there’s heaps to do today. Hopefully it would keep his mind occupied and get the image of her singlet stretched tight across her breasts out of his head. He threw the esky into the back of the ute and climbed inside. The short drive to the kennels did little to clear his mind. Everywhere he looked and everything he touched inside the ute reminded him of Kylie. The smooth leather on the steering wheel teased him with

thoughts of touching her skin. The round speedo and taco dials on the dash reminded him of her breasts under that tight singlet. The indented curves on the passenger seat had him thinking of how her butt would be a perfect fit in that seat. 'Ahh, stop it ute. You're supposed to be on my side.' He slapped the top of the dash. 'Help a guy out here by not being so.... Arg, I don't even know what. A four wheel drive is not supposed to be sleek and sexy like a sheila. Especially that sheila. I'm trying to get her out of my mind and you're being no help at all.' Jack pulled up next to the kennels and jumped out of the ute, slamming the door shut hard behind him. 'There, that'll teach you to betray a mate,' he laughed.

Chapter 3

Kylie stumbled out of the cottage not too long after Jack left. Her usual morning routine took her nearly two hours. But out here there wasn't really any need to hide herself behind a wall of makeup and over-styled hair. Out here there was no boss to impress and no co-workers to compete with for the boss' attention, even if her boss was also her boyfriend. *Especially* if her boss was also her boyfriend. She could just be herself for a change. She paused just before the kennels and took a deep breath, letting the fresh air relax her. She was looking forward to seeing the dogs again. In her line of work, she saw lots of different domestic animals, but dogs were her favourites.

'So, you know how to ride, hey?' Jack said, looking down at her boots.

'What?' She followed his gaze and quickly realised what he meant. 'Well, no actually, I don't.'

'Then why are you wearing riding boots?'

'Well, because they look good, don't you think?' She struck a pose with one of the boots pointing out to show him.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

'And this is what everyone in the country wears, isn't it? I thought I'd try to blend in.'

'Ha, believe me, you won't blend in.'

She pouted her lips at him. 'What do you mean by that?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Just that, you won't blend in, that's all.'

'And why not?'

'Well there aren't exactly hordes of cute women coming out of the woodwork in this town, if you hadn't noticed already. So trust me, you won't blend in.'

Her head snapped toward him in time to see his cheeks redden. Did he just say she was cute, in a roundabout sort of way? Now it was her turn to redden. She wasn't sure how to reply to that. 'Um, yeah, um, let's see the dogs before you have to leave for the fencing thingy,' she spluttered, waving her hand absently toward nothing in particular in the distance.

He lifted his arm and scratched at the back of his head. 'Yeah, sure thing. Come and meet Ace first, I need to let him out for some exercise anyway.'

She followed him to the first kennel door, and tried not to cover her ears to block out the loud barking. Jack opened the door and a huge bundle of multi-coloured fur ran

straight at her. She shrieked as the dog jumped up at her and put a paw on each shoulder as it licked her right on the mouth. But the weight of the dog sent them both backwards with Kylie planting her backside hard on the dirt. She turned her head and put her arms over her face to stop the dust from getting in her eyes.

‘Ace! Back up! Back up!’ Jack yelled, then he did a funny whistle that stopped the dog and sent it scurrying back a few steps before dropping itself to the ground. ‘Oh, god, Kylie, I’m so sorry. He doesn’t usually do that to visitors.’ He crouched down beside her and helped her sit up. ‘I really am sorry. Are you hurt?’

Her body shook as she wiped her face.

Jack leaned down and attempted to help her up. ‘I’m really, really, sorry. I didn’t know he would...’

‘Stop!’ Kylie held up her palms at him before lowering her hands to her sides.

Jack stepped back when she grinned at him. ‘What the...?’

She doubled over and continued laughing at him. ‘You should have seen your face,’ she gasped between breaths.

‘What? I thought you were hurt? Why are you laughing?’ he stood up and stared down at her.

She started to get her breathing under control. ‘Have you forgotten what I do for a living? I see dogs all day every day. They don’t scare me.’ She pushed herself up from the ground.

Jack reached out and helped her stand up. ‘Ah, yeah, I suppose you do.’ He scratched at the back of his head again. ‘But Ace’s such a big dog and you’re so, so... small, I thought he’d hurt you.’

She shook her head. ‘No, I wasn’t worried. I could see what his temperament was straight away. My guess is that he was just happy to see me,’ she laughed. ‘Very happy to see me.’

‘I’d say. He’s not usually like that with strangers.’

‘Maybe it’s my perfume,’ she grinned. ‘He’s an Australian Koolie isn’t he?’

‘Yep, that’s right, a purebred too, and one of my best studs. I also breed Kelpies.’

‘We don’t get many working dogs at the clinic, mostly little lapdogs and over-priced designer breeds. I can’t quite imagine a white Poodle staying white for very long out here,’ she laughed.

‘Well a Poodle definitely wouldn’t work out here, we’d lose the bloody thing among the sheep.’

Kylie laughed out loud at the vision he'd created. 'Well then, you'd just have to get a black Poodle instead,' she tried to keep a straight face.

He rolled his eyes at her and pursed his lips together, making the dimples on his cheeks appear. She decided it was actually fun mucking around with him when they weren't discussing something serious.

'Right,' he rubbed his hands together and looked toward the kennels. 'Let's get this tour finished otherwise I won't make it out to Dad and Gazza til dark at the rate we're going.' He clicked his tongue and Ace came and stood at Jack's side, waiting for his next command. Jack showed her the rest of the dogs, including the ones recovering from the dog fight. Next he took her around the side to the puppy kennels.

'Aw, why are puppies always so cute? Makes you want to take every single one of them home with you,' she squealed, hugging her arms around herself.

'I would have thought you'd get enough of dogs and puppies at your work?'

'Nah, it never gets boring for me. They're just the cutest little things.' She started making cooing noises at the pups.

He laughed and shook his head.

She looked up at him. 'But why are you breeding so many dogs? I thought farmers breed cattle and sheep, not dogs.'

'Yeah, normally they do, and we used to. But...'

'But what?'

He sighed and looked off into the distance then coughed. He kicked at the dirt with his boot and looked at her. 'We don't just sell the pups, we train them first. So the buyers are actually getting a fully trained working dog, not just a pup.'

'I see,' she nodded her head. 'So you'd get a lot more for them then too.'

'Yeah, a lot more, especially if they've placed in a trial show.'

'So you don't have any cattle or sheep then?'

'We do, they're just not our main focus at the moment.' His eyes searched the ground at his feet before he looked back at her. 'I can take you out to have a look at them, but you'd be pretty bored. And you didn't say how long you'd be here for, or if you'd be moving into the homestead or what.'

No, she hadn't said either way, because she still had some thinking to do. 'I need to get the four wheel drive back to Brisbane the day after tomorrow, so I'll be heading back home then.'

Jack sighed again. He scratched at the back of his head and walked toward the kennel gate. He reached into the kennel and picked up one of the pups. 'Here, this is Ace Jr, see he has the same white diamond shape on his forehead.' He passed the bundle of fluff to her.

'Look at you, gorgeous.' She cradled the pup against her chest and inhaled. 'Aw, puppy breath, I just love puppy breath.' She rubbed her cheek against the pup's multi-coloured coat and grinned back at Jack. 'He's such a little cutie. Are you going to sell him or keep him for yourself?'

Jack watched as she held the pup against her breasts. 'Lucky little fella. Um, I'd love to keep him, but I need to wait and see if he's as good as his father. Ace has great presence, the best I've ever seen in a working dog. So hopefully his son has inherited most of his abilities.'

'Great presence hey?' She held the pup up and looked into its eyes. 'Do you have great presence, little fella?' The pup replied by licking her on the tip of her nose. 'Aw, he's adorable.'

'Well this little fella needs to go back to his mum for a feed and we need to get going if we want to finish the tour before Christmas,' he grinned and took the pup from her, giving it a quick scratch behind the ears before putting it back in the kennel. 'Let's go visit the girls.'

She followed him around to the other side of the homestead, petting Ace as they walked along the dirt track. 'Who lives there?' She pointed to a small house partially hidden behind a hedge of shrubs a few hundred feet back behind the homestead.

'That's Mum and Dad's place... um, well I suppose it's your place now, seeing as how Mum and Dad are actually employees. Buffy liked to have her staff close by so she let them stay on the property. Mum and Dad's place and my cottage are getting a bit old now though.'

They walked up to a fenced yard and small shed. Kylie laughed when she realised who 'the girls' were. Inside the yard about twenty hens were scratching through the dirt searching for bugs. 'Chickens? I was wondering who these "girls" of yours were.'

He grinned at her. 'Well it wouldn't be much of a farm if it didn't have chickens now would it.' He unlatched the gate and walked into the yard. 'Come and help me collect the eggs. But look out for The Joker.'

Her brow furrowed into a frown as she followed him. 'The Joker? Boy, you guys must get really bored out here,' she laughed.

He turned back and grinned at her. 'Yeah, you're probably right.' He shrugged his shoulders before continuing on to the side of the shed. Lifting the lid of a long rectangular box sticking out of the side of the shed he started to retrieve the eggs. 'Here, catch!' he flicked his open hand into the air.

'Argh... damn you,' she hissed at him, embarrassed that she'd tried to catch an invisible egg.

Jack started laughing then stopped when he looked at her face. 'It was only a joke.'

'You nearly gave me a heart attack, I'm not exactly a spring chicken you know.'

'A heart attack from dropping an egg?' he laughed.

'Well, a mini heart attack then.' She poked her tongue out at him.

He smiled and quickly looked her up and down. 'Well you're not exactly an old chook either.'

She smiled. She liked that he seemed to not mind that she wasn't twenty-something.

He began passing her the real eggs. 'I forgot to grab the basket from the cottage this morning so we'll have to carry these carefully.'

Kylie had both hands full trying to balance nine eggs. She walked back toward the gate, trying not to step in the small piles of grey and white chicken poop. She got to the gate and was trying to unlatch it when she heard the chooks clucking change to loud squeals. She turned around and spied a huge rooster with its beak open and head stretched forward charging toward her. Spinning back around to the gate she frantically tugged at the latch with her only two free fingers.

'Joker, get out of it,' Jack yelled as he closed the lid of the nesting box and dashed toward Kylie.

The latch finally gave way but the gate opened too quickly, sending Kylie stumbling through as she dropped most of the eggs on the ground. She spun around at the approaching rooster and stamped her foot. 'Damn you Joker!' The rooster turned and fled in the other direction, away from her.

Jack laughed when he reached her. 'Bloody Joker.'

'What just happened? I thought I was about to get my throat ripped out by the biggest and meanest looking rooster I've ever seen but then he chickens out, excuse the pun, and runs off.'

‘Well, yes, exactly. So now you know why we call him The Joker, he’s all show and no go. A bit of a joke. I guess that’s what happens to a guy when he has to live with 20 females,’ he raised his eyebrows at her.

‘What?’ she reached out and tried to smack him in the arm but he jumped back. ‘Well serves himself right then if he won’t stand up for himself.’

‘Oh, he can stand up for himself all right, but only in the mating pen,’ he winked at her. ‘He’s actually the most productive rooster we’ve ever had.’

‘Sorry about the eggs, I only managed to save three.’ She opened her hands to show him the unbroken eggs.

‘Don’t worry about it, we’ve always got plenty of eggs. Mum likes to bake, that’s why we have so many chooks for only five people... four people.’ He looked away from her and took a deep breath. ‘Let’s go have some smoko at the Peak.’

‘The Peak? What’s that?’ she asked as they walked back to the kennels.

‘It’s one of the highest spots on this property, has a great view of most of Mungabah.’ He pointed to the west toward a rocky outcrop in the distance.

She shaded her eyes and looked in the direction he was pointing. ‘Wow! That looks great. How do we get up there?’

‘There’s a track that snakes up the back of the range. It’s not really as far as it looks, it only takes about 15 minutes to get to the top.’ He opened the driver side door of his ute. ‘Do you want to go for a drive up there? It’ll give you a good overview of the property and make it easier for you to get your bearings of the place.’

‘Yeah sure, what do I need to bring?’

‘Nothing, just yourself.’ He put the eggs into the esky then tapped the top of the sidewall of the ute tray and Ace jumped into the back, his nails click-clacking on the aluminium. ‘Let’s go.’

The ute hopped and bounced up the rough track, forcing Kylie to grab onto the door handle to her left and the handle that protruded from the dashboard directly in front of her. ‘It’s a good thing your ute is a four wheel drive. I didn’t think the track would be this rough.’

He feigned a cough into his hand. ‘That’s why they have grab-bars in fourbies,’ he said and looked at her right hand gripping the bar in front of her.

‘Fourbies? Oh, you mean four wheel drives.’

He looked at her again and winked. ‘We’re almost at the top.’

The ute started to level out so she relaxed her grip on the handles. The red dirt of the track made it difficult to see where the track was smooth and where it was rough and bumpy. Her fingers were sore from gripping the handles but she didn't want him to know that. And she wasn't looking forward to the ride back down.

Jack stopped the ute next to a huge tree. He grabbed his swag out of the back tray and unrolled it under the tree. 'Here, take a seat.' He returned to the ute and grabbed the esky and flask.

Kylie sat down on the thick canvas. She could feel the thin mattress inside and was grateful not to be sitting on the dirt-covered roots of the tree. 'Hey, I forgot to give you this.' She reached into her bag and pulled out a tennis ball. 'Here, it's a ball for Ace. Is he allowed to have a toy? I guess I should have asked first.'

'Yeah, sure. Ace, come and get the... Pink?' He looked from the ball to Kylie. 'You got Ace a *pink* tennis ball?' He shook his head and grinned. 'Kylie, what are the boys down at the kennel going to say when Ace rocks up to the trough for a coldie and he brings his *pink* tennis ball?'

She looked up at Jack and laughed. 'You dill, dogs can't see colour, only shades.'

'I know that.' He rolled his eyes and grinned again. 'But Ace didn't know that until now. Did you boy? But why on earth a pink ball?'

'They were selling them for breast cancer awareness at the store in town. I figured I'd support a good cause and give the dogs who were injured in the dog fight a treat to play with. But Ace has won my heart, I'm afraid.' She smiled at Ace. 'And pink will help him see the ball better against the grass.' She looked at Ace eyeing off the ball. 'And I wanted to give him something from me,' she beamed.

'Ok, fair enough.' Jack shrugged a shoulder and gave Ace the ball. 'Now don't chew it to bits, it's only for playing with when I give it to you.'

She watched as Jack began to take things out of the esky and put them on the esky lid, using the lid like a serving platter. She was surprised at the items he dished up. Lamingtons, scones, pikelets, with jam and cream. 'That's quite a spread you've got there,' she said, grabbing a lamington.

'Yeah, Mum goes overboard with the cooking sometimes. She forgets there's only a few of us now.' He poured them both a coffee and passed her a pale cream enamel tin mug.

She rubbed at the few bits of rust showing through the paint around the rim of the mug but it wouldn't come off. She sipped at the warm sweet coffee then grabbed another lamington.

Jack grinned at her. 'The lamingtons are good, aren't they? Mum used to enter them in the yearly show, and she'd win most years. Actually, I'm sure I remember her saying that Buffy taught her how to make them.'

'So my grandmother must have been a good cook too.' She looked over at him and laughed. 'Maybe I'm not really related, I have trouble boiling an egg.'

He chuckled at her. 'You couldn't be that bad, could you?'

'Why do you think I only have a cup of tea for breakfast,' she grinned. 'If it involves anything bigger than the kettle, look out.'

He smiled then looked over to where she'd put the mug. 'Oh.' He slapped himself lightly on the forehead. 'And here I am making you drink coffee again. I'm sorry, I didn't even think to ask yesterday if you'd prefer something else. I just assumed you were a coffee drinker too.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'That's ok, I'm happy to drink whatever's on hand. Tea's just my preference.' She leaned in closer to him. 'And I don't like to be rude.' She sat back and screwed up her nose. 'Well, sometimes I do, but usually I don't. But I don't like rude people.'

He laughed. 'Well your grandmother didn't like rude people either, so you must be related. And she always said what was on her mind, even when she slowed down. Did you know she was nearly 79 when she died? She always said that a swig of brandy before bed kept everything working. But not the cheap stuff, she always bought the best brandy.'

'79? I hope I can live that long, that's amazing.'

'Yeah, she was an amazing lady. Always helping everyone, never wanting anything for herself. Even on her death bed she was still giving commands to Mum and Dad, telling them to make sure they did this and that or to take care of whoever after she passed.'

'Was she in much pain when she died?'

'She was such a stubborn old bird that it was always hard to tell. She'd keep anything like that to herself and not ask for help or pain relief. Mum cared for Buffy toward the end, and before that, when she wasn't too bad, Sunshine kept an eye on her.'

'Sunshine? Who's that?'

‘Sunshine was our best stockman. Must have been because he was Aboriginal. Best bloody rider I’ve ever seen, and probably won’t see anyone better for a long time to come. Sunshine was like Buffy’s shadow. His parents were already working for the family when Buffy was born. As she got older they developed a special kind of friendship, always looked out for each other. He loved her like a little sister he did, even named her granddaughter. “Kylie”, he used to tell us, “because she would always come back, just like the boomerang”.’ Jack sighed. ‘And I guess he was right because here you are.’

‘The boomerang? What did he mean?’

‘When you throw a boomerang it always comes back to you, and “kylie” is a variation of the Aboriginal word for boomerang in Western Australia, where Sunshine’s family were originally from.’

‘Where’s Sunshine now?’

‘Yeah, Old Sunshine. He passed away a bit before Buffy did. She used to visit his grave nearly every day, when she was feeling up to it.’

She shook her head at him. ‘How do you know all of that stuff?’

‘Mum told me, and I’d hear things over the years, especially when I was a kid. You know what kids are like with eavesdropping on the oldies,’ he grinned.

‘Wow, that’s interesting.’ She smiled back at him. She didn’t know what else to say. That was a lot of information for one person to take in. She stood up and walked over to the edge of the ridge top. Spread out before her was her legacy. A vast land of red dirt and granite boulders, forests of wild shrubs, and steep gorges dropping hundreds of metres down to river beds. It was all hers now. But did she want it? She wasn’t sure.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it,’ Jack said, coming to stand next to her. ‘The only place in the world where I want to be.’

Her eyes watered when she heard the emotion in his voice. Could she really wipe this out from under him? From under his family? She didn’t know what it felt like to feel so connected to a place before, connected to the land. A small house in the suburbs with her adoptive parents, then an even smaller apartment in the inner city as an adult was all she’d ever had. Would she ever feel a connection? She didn’t know. Should she tell him now that she was going to sell the place? She didn’t know that either.

Jack moved closer to her and pointed toward the homestead. ‘This is the best spot to get a good view of most of the property. There’s the big house, and if you follow the driveway back toward the road you’ll just be able to make out the cottage. Then if you

head the other way you'll see all the outbuildings behind the big house, then a little further back is Mum and Dad's place. Towards us are the kennels and the shearing shed and the machinery shed and the Lucerne shed and..., well, you get the picture.'

'That's a lot of sheds all right,' she grinned as she tried to count the rusty tin roofs that dotted the grounds around the homestead. She felt Jack move a little closer to her and caught her breath when she felt his hand briefly brush against hers. What should she do? It was too soon to know if she liked him. And anyway, she already had a boyfriend. His hand brushed against her pinkie finger. She knew it was probably just an accident but she was hoping it would happen again. And it did. Ever so briefly she felt the heat from his hand come in contact with her little finger. Her hand tensed in anticipation. This time she felt his fingers press against hers, for far longer than just a moment. Was he trying to hold her hand or was still it just an accident? There, she felt it again. She opened her hand and pressed it back against his, and smiled as she felt him grip her hand in response. She stifled a giggle with her free hand and looked down at the ground. This was like high school all over again, but for some reason she liked it. Gentle and sweet, without any pressure or expectations. Just hope and excitement at being alone together. But she shouldn't be doing this, she had a boyfriend. She gently shook her hand free from his and moved a few inches away.

She raised a hand to shade her eyes and looked back down over the property and tried to distract herself by tracing some of the tracks below them. There were a lot of tracks between the buildings and some leading off into the distance. One in particular caught her attention. It snaked its way from the back of the homestead towards the east, going for ages before stopping at a clump of tall trees.

'Where does that track go, the one leading off the back of the homestead to the right of that tiny shed?'

He opened his mouth to speak but hesitated. 'That's the cemetery.' He paused again. 'Pretty much all of the family and anyone who ever worked or lived here are buried there. I'll take you there one day when we have more time.' He rubbed a hand at the back of his neck.

'Oh, ok, that'd be good, thanks.' She turned back toward the ute, surprised that Ace hadn't eaten what was left of the food. 'He didn't touch any of it,' she said, pointing to the esky lid.

'Well he'd better not have, he knows better than that. He will only eat when he's told to eat. Dogs out here need to be trained that way otherwise they could eat something

that's bad for them. And as you can see from his thumping tail he's waiting for the smoko leftovers.'

She laughed as Jack tossed the remaining bits of food up into the air for Ace to catch. 'Good catch, Ace,' she said when the dog finished eating and ran over to her for a pat. She gave his merle coat a good ruffle and scratched him behind the ears.

Jack looked at her and lifted one side of his mouth. 'Should I be jealous of a dog?'

'Don't be silly,' she answered. Heat began to colour her cheeks. Was he flirting with her? She had no make-up on and her hair was just pulled back into a ponytail. She never got attention from men if she wasn't all dolled up. She stopped petting Ace and started to pack up the rubbish and flask.

'Here, let me get that,' Jack reached out to grab the flask from her.

'That's ok, I've got it... oops!' The flask slipped out of her hand and landed on the ground just as Jack stepped forward to take it from her. His hand butted against hers as they both tried to grab the flask, and instead of letting her pick it up Jack grabbed her hand and held it in his large calloused hand.

Kylie pulled her hand away. 'We should probably head back, otherwise you might not have much time to get to the fencing thingy and back again before dark.'

'Actually, it's a bit of a drive so we'll be camping overnight. You'll have the cottage to yourself tonight.'

'Oh, ok.'

'Will you be alright? I can leave Ace with you for company if you want.'

She looked over at Ace laying on the ground with his ball watching them. His tail started to thump into the dirt when he saw her looking at him. 'Yes, that would be good, thanks.'

They headed back down the range to the cottage. Jack collected some gear and threw it into the back of the ute before refilling his esky.

'Do you want me to tell Mum to come and check on you later?'

'Oh no, I should be fine, I don't want to bother her.'

'It won't be a bother, she can keep you company too if you want.'

'No need, I have Ace.' At the sound of his name Ace rubbed his body against her legs so she reached down and gave him a pat. 'See. But if I need anything or have a problem I'll go straight over to her.' She didn't feel like having human company tonight, she had too many things to think about. And there was something she'd been dying to do all day but she needed no one here to see her do it.

Just on dusk Kylie secured the tie of the bathrobe around her waist. She'd never done something like this before so she wasn't surprised to see her hands shaking. But she was very glad that there was no one here to watch. She wasn't sure if she would be able to do it otherwise. She opened the back door of the cottage and scanned the area. She didn't want anybody to see what she was about to do. Walking down the steps to the ground she started to relax when she couldn't see or hear anyone. She walked over to the old timber outdoor setting and untied her bathrobe. Letting it drop off her shoulders she draped it over the back of a chair. Her skin was gritty with dust and her hair was frizzy from the humidity. She walked over to turn the taps on. She so needed a shower.

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'Good morning Ace, how did you sleep boy?' Kylie reached down and gave the dog a scratch behind the ear. She sat up, swung her legs over the side of the bed and stretched her arms above her head. 'Well Ace, that was the best sleep I've had in a long time. Like they say, it must be the fresh air, hey?' She tapped her toes on the bare timber floor and looked at Ace. 'There's so much I need to do today, I just don't know where to start.' Rubbing at the back of her neck she stood up and grabbed her bathrobe. 'I need a cup of tea and you probably need to go out for a pee.' She laughed as Ace ran to the back door.

Half an hour later Kylie parked the hired four wheel drive outside the homestead. She grabbed her handbag and slid off the driver's seat, her new boots landing in the red dirt. 'Come Ace,' she called, watching as the dog stepped over the centre console toward the open door before jumping down to the ground. 'Good boy, didn't want you walking all that way. Have to spoil you a bit while I'm here, hey,' she smiled and scratched him behind an ear.

She turned her attention to the house. The big house. Her house. She still couldn't believe it was all hers. And it wasn't just a house, it was a huge two-storey homestead, something she'd never imagined she'd ever own.

'It's pretty impressive, hey Ace.' She nodded at the dog. 'Yep, I'd have to agree with you there, it is a bit big for just one person.' Ace lay down in the dirt and rubbed his left paw over his snout, making her laugh. 'It's ok, I talk to myself all the time. The least you could do is humour me.' Smiling, she leaned down and gave his side a scratch. 'Why can't men be like dogs? A feed, a good scratch, somewhere to sleep, and they're happy.'

Sighing she stood up and took the homestead keys out of her bag. ‘Let’s get started, hey boy.’

Standing in the foyer she wasn’t sure where to start. The lounge room to her left, the dining room to her right, or up the curved staircase to the second floor. She took a notepad and pen out of her handbag, shrugged her shoulders, and turned to her left.

It didn’t take long to fill the first page of the notepad, or the next after she moved on to the next room. She sat down on one of the dining room chairs and looked over the long list. ‘Wow, there’s so much that needs to be done. Lots of repairs and replacements. This is going to cost heaps.’ Ace put his head on her lap and looked up at her. ‘I know, I know. I shouldn’t feel sorry for myself just because there’s a bit of hard work to be done. And the tradesmen will be doing most of it anyway. It’s just that there’s so much to do already and I haven’t even been upstairs yet.’ She turned to a new page and started to stand up when Ace ran toward the foyer wagging his tail.

‘Hello! There you are, Kylie,’ a woman said, poking her head into the dining room. ‘Am I disturbing you, I can come back later?’

‘Oh, hi, no don’t be silly, you’re not disturbing me at all,’ she smiled at the older women.

‘Jack did mention that he has a mother, didn’t he?’ she laughed, making the grey-streaked hair bun wobble on the top of her head. ‘Well I thought I’d introduce myself, I’m Penny, Frank’s wife.’ She lifted the wicker basket slightly that she was carrying, ‘And I brought you some smoko. You haven’t had any yet have you?’

‘Oh, no. I completely forgot actually.’ Kylie felt her stomach rumble at the thought of more of Penny’s homemade goodies.

‘Good. I had a feeling you might have. And I brought some tea too.’

Kylie smiled. She had a feeling she was going to like Jack’s mum very much. ‘Some tea would be great, thanks.’ She moved the notepad and pen out of the way so Penny could put the basket down.

‘Have you been taking notes, of what needs to be repaired?’ Penny asked as she took the smoko items out of the basket and started arranging them at the end of the long table.

‘Yes, but I’ve only managed to do downstairs so far, this house is so big.’

Penny nodded her head. ‘It’s huge, isn’t it. I’ve always loved this place, it’s so very grand.’

‘Have you lived here on the property long?’

‘Actually, I was born here.’

‘Born here, really?’

‘I take it Jack hasn’t told you much about the place then,’ she raised an eyebrow.

‘No, not much at all,’ she replied. ‘But he does seem very busy.’

‘Yes, as busy as he wants to be,’ Penny laughed. ‘Well, my mother Matilda and Buffy were best friends. They went to boarding school together in Toowoomba, and not long after, Mum moved to Mungabah. Apparently those two hated to be apart after boarding school.’

‘Wow, that sounds like it must have been a great friendship.’

‘Yes and no. Lots of things happened over the years. But they always seemed to forgive each other, especially as they got older.’

‘Where’s your Mum now?’

‘She passed away a few years ago.’ Penny poured the tea out of the flask. ‘But she had a very interesting life, just like Buffy. Have you read much of Buffy’s diary?’

‘No, not really. I haven’t had time to do much more than flick through it.’

‘Ok, well make sure you find some time to read it. If I know Buffy there’ll be a lot of information in there that she would have wanted you to know.’

Kylie looked at her handbag. The diary was still inside, she just kept forgetting to look at it, or maybe she didn’t really want to look at it. ‘Sure thing, I’ll have another look at it tonight.’

‘So, Kylie, if you don’t mind me asking, what are your plans for this place? Should we expect a husband and tribe of kids moving in, or maybe you were thinking of building a new house on the property?’

‘Well, I’m not sure yet.’ How could she tell Penny that she was going to sell the place, as soon as possible? ‘But there’s no husband or kids, just a boyfriend, but that’s not going so well.’ She looked off into the distance, she didn’t want to say too much when she wasn’t even sure herself. But she would find out for sure when she went back to Brisbane tomorrow.

‘Ah, that’s ok, I was just hoping for some kiddies to liven the place up. Can’t wait forever for Jack to get his act together.’

‘So Jack’s not married?’

‘No, he’s a widower.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yes, his wife died, a couple of years ago now. Sadly, the baby didn’t make it either. He was devastated.’

Kylie watched as Penny’s eyes glassed over. What a horrible thing to go through. And poor Jack, losing his wife and child at the same time. She reached over and touched Penny on the hand. ‘I’m sorry, that’s so sad.’

‘Yes, well, Jack hasn’t quite been himself since. He hasn’t been able to move on. I wish he would though, he’s been moping around far too much lately.’ She wiped at an eye with the back of her hand. ‘Yes, well, let’s finish up smoko otherwise it’ll be lunch time before we know it.’ She handed Kylie a lamington and smiled.

‘Thanks, your lamingtons are great. I had some yesterday with Jack.’

‘Ah, so that explains why he grabbed extra the previous night,’ she laughed. ‘And here I was thinking he was just being a guts. Did he take you out to the northern boundary to see Frank?’

‘No, we went up to the Peak. He wanted me to see the property from up there so I could get an idea of how big the place is.’

‘He took you up to the Peak?’

‘Yes, I’m sure that’s what he called it. Why?’

‘Well, it’s nothing really. It’s just that he only ever took Leanne up there, it was their special place, you see.’ Penny raised an eyebrow then looked away.

‘Oh, he didn’t mention any of that.’ Now it was her turn to look away. Why had Jack taken her up there if it was so special to him? She would have to ask him when she saw him next. But how do you just come straight out and ask about something like that? Especially when she didn’t really know the guy yet. *Yet?* What was she thinking. She was going to sell this place so there would be no ‘getting to know’ anyone.

‘That’s ok dear, I’m sure he’ll tell you in his own good time.’ She started to put the leftovers back into the basket. ‘Why don’t you come over to the house for dinner tonight? The boys will be back by then and they always love a home cooked meal after a day or two out in the paddocks. We’d love to have you.’

‘Ah, yeah, that would be great.’ Just what she didn’t need, a nice and cosy family dinner with the family that she was about to pull the rug out from under.

###

‘Here you are lass, we’d thought this is where you’d gotten to,’ Frank bellowed as he walked through his front door.

‘Hi Frank. Penny asked me over for dinner so I came a little early to give her a hand.’ Kylie smiled and looked over Frank’s shoulder for Jack. She began fiddling with the cutlery she was supposed to be laying out when she didn’t see him.

‘Well dinner certainly smells good, Penny,’ Frank said, putting his small esky on the kitchen bench. ‘Do I have time for a shower?’

‘I’ll make time for your shower, don’t you worry about that. Now get yourself under some clean water and be generous with the soap, you stink.’ Grinning, Penny pretended to flick a tea towel at him as Frank left the kitchen. ‘Don’t worry Kylie, I’m sure Jack will be along any minute now.’

‘What? Oh, I wasn’t watching out for him. I was just... watching the colours of the sun setting.’

‘Ok, dear,’ Penny smiled before picking up a spoon to stir the peas. ‘Knowing Jack, he will have wanted to go home and shower before coming over for dinner, especially after fencing for nearly two days straight.’

As if on cue Kylie heard Jack’s ute coming down the track toward the house. Ace barked at the ute from his spot on the veranda. She let a smile creep up her face before noticing Penny looking at her again.

‘Dear, can you unlock the screen door and let Jack in, my hands are covered in flour.’

‘Ok.’ Kylie walked toward the door, rubbing her sweaty hands down the sides of her dress. She reached up to unlock the door but there was no lock on the handle. ‘Um, Penny, it’s not locked...’

‘Ah, yes, silly me. I must be mixing that door up with the one at the CWA hall,’ Penny called out as she disappeared into the pantry.

Kylie turned back toward the screen door to see Jack already standing on the other side. He took off his Akubra and smiled at her through the flyscreen mesh. The bottom of her stomach twitched as his hand reached forward to open the door. She looked up at his face as the screen door disappeared and Jack stood in its place.

‘Hi Jack,’ she whispered, the sound leaving her mouth in a long sigh. Why was she feeling like a silly school girl again?

Jack nodded his head at her. 'Kylie.' His eyes locked with hers for a brief moment. 'You had me worried for a minute. When you weren't at the cottage I thought you'd left for Brisbane early.'

Kylie tilted her head to the side. 'Why were you worried?'

'Well, um, because... you shouldn't drive all that way at night. It's best to drive during daylight hours, don't want you hitting a roo.'

She watched his cheeks darken then felt her own cheeks heat up in reply. He didn't want her to leave?

'There you are son, took your time showering.' Frank pulled a chair out to sit down at the dining table.

Kylie sucked in a breath and stepped back from the doorway, letting Jack enter. He brushed past her, the timber frame of the screen door slapping against the door frame as he joined his father at the table. She smelt the lingering pine scent of his soap and had a flashback to their first encounter. She looked over to the coat rack where Jack had thrown his Akubra and smiled.

'Kylie, dinner's ready, come and sit down,' Penny called to her.

She took another deep breath to steady her breathing and sat down at the table. Even though it was a large table and she'd set out five sets of cutlery, one set had been removed and Penny had taken the spot next to Frank, leaving the only other vacant spot right next to Jack.

'So where's Gazza tonight, Jack?' Penny asked.

'He said something about going into town to have drinks at the pub with friends.'

'And you didn't go with him? You usually go with him,' Frank said.

'Hush Frank, Jack doesn't always go everywhere with Gazza. He can stay home if he wants to,' Penny smiled.

'What are you talking about Penny, those two are like peas in a...'

'Here Frank,' Penny picked up the large enamel bowl. 'Have some more mashed potatoes, put something in your mouth.' She ladled two big spoonfuls onto his already full plate. 'I hope you enjoy dinner Kylie, it's only lamb chops and mashies with veggies but it's one of Jack's favourites.' She looked over at Jack. 'Isn't it Jack?'

'Um, yeah Mum, one of my favourites,' Jack looked at Penny and raised his eyebrows before picking up the gravy jug and smothering his chops and potatoes.

Penny looked at Kylie's plate. 'And what about you Kylie, do you like lamb... oh no, don't tell me you're one of those vegans or vegetarians? You must be with that nice

figure of yours. I'm sorry, I completely forgot to ask.' She jumped up out of her chair and reached for Kylie's plate. 'Here, let me fix you something else. Surely I have something in the fridge that I can turn into a vegetarian meal.'

'No, no, Penny, it's alright. I actually love lamb, it's one of my favourites too.'

Kylie pulled her plate closer to her and reached for a piece of lamb.

Penny sighed and sat back down. 'Well that's a relief. Don't know what we'd do with a new-to-the-country girl if she didn't like lamb. It really is one of our staple meats around here.'

'It's delicious,' Kylie replied between mouthfuls. 'And very tender.'

Penny nodded her head. 'Ah, yes, that's because the boys here do our own fattening and killing of the lambs.'

Kylie stopped eating and looked up at Penny. 'Really?' Lamb chops from the butcher were fine, but lamb chops straight from the back paddock was not what she was expecting. She looked up to see Penny was beaming with pride. 'It does taste very... fresh.' Kylie smiled before looking back down at her plate.

Penny laughed. 'Oh, it's not like we chop them up ourselves. We get the butcher out to do it properly, then freeze what we don't need for that week.'

'Of course,' Kylie nodded, though she'd never look at a lamb the same way again.

Frank helped himself to more chops and gravy. 'Don't worry lass, you'll get used to it. We'll have to have a proper welcome home party when you come back from Brisbane, with a lamb on the spit, another one of our favourites.'

'Wow, that sounds great Frank, thanks.'

'Yes, we'll have it on the back veranda,' Penny said. 'And invite some of our neighbours so you can meet them. You know, this house was actually the original homestead before the big house was built, many decades ago now of course. And Jack was born here, in this house.' She nodded toward Jack then sighed. 'We have a lot of memories here. I love this place.'

'As long as Mum doesn't drag out the naked baby photos, I don't think Kylie wants to see those,' Jack grinned.

Kylie muffled a giggle behind her hand. Somehow she didn't think Penny needed to know that she'd already seen Jack naked. Or that she'd like to see him naked again. Her eyes darted sideways to see Jack grinning at her. And she just knew that he would know why her cheeks were starting to colour.

‘I’m sure Jack must have been a cute baby Penny, naked or not.’ She raised an eyebrow in Jack’s direction.

‘That he was dear. I think I even have some of him and the dogs when he was little. He’s loved working dogs since he was big enough to learn herding commands from Sunshine.’

Frank let out a grunt. ‘Bloody dogs, they’re the only things keeping us going now.’

Kylie looked at Frank, waiting for him to say more. But he didn’t.

‘Yes love, that’s right. Jack’s breeding program has produced some great dogs over the years,’ Penny said. ‘So much so that they’ve won a lot of awards. Isn’t that right Jack?’

‘Yep, especially Ace, he’s one of the best. He’s the current Queensland Dog of the Year.’ Jack mopped some gravy off his plate with a slice of bread. ‘One day soon Ace’ll win the Nationals, he’s that good.’

‘The nationals?’

‘The working dog national titles, they’re held each year.’

‘So not the dog shows where the handler walks them around the ring?’ Kylie asked.

‘No, these are working dogs, not prancing dogs,’ Jack’s brow pressed into a slight scowl. ‘And we don’t clip them into lions or put pink ribbons on them either. These are tough working dogs who dodge kicks from the cattle and sheep all day long, so they need to be well trained, not doused in perfume and fluffed up.’

Kylie pressed a finger to her lips to stop her smile. ‘I see a lot of those prancing dogs at the clinic. It’s amazing the amount of money the breeders will spend to make their dogs look perfect. Though you have to feel sorry for the dogs sometimes.’

Penny stood up and started gathering empty plates. ‘So who’s ready for dessert? It’s your favourite Jack, peach and apple crumble with custard.’

‘Er, thanks Mum.’ Jack watched Penny walk into the kitchen then turned toward Kylie. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know why Mum’s being so... I don’t know, so motherly tonight. She’s not usually like this.’

‘That’s ok, I don’t mind.’ Kylie hid her smile behind her napkin. She had a feeling that maybe Penny was trying to play match-maker, but she wasn’t sure. And if nothing else, at least she knew Penny liked her. She smiled as Penny returned to the table with the crumble.

‘Here we go. Help yourselves, I have to get the custard.’

Jack grabbed a bowl and scooped out a serving of the crumble and placed it in front of Kylie before getting his own.

‘Thanks,’ she smiled at him.

Penny returned and put a ceramic jug of hot custard down on the table. She looked at Jack and raised an eyebrow before a grin broke out across her face. ‘Who wants custard?’

Kylie looked up from her bowl and saw the steam rising from the custard jug. ‘Yum, real custard.’

‘Yes dear, none of that stuff that comes out of a carton in this house.’

Jack leaned his head toward Kylie again. ‘That’s why we have so many chooks, the poor things have to try and keep up with Mum’s cooking and baking.’

Penny waved the tea towel at Jack. ‘Shush you, I don’t see you complaining,’ her gentle smile radiated toward her son.

‘Yes son, your mother’s always been a great cook. That’s why I married her.’ Frank chuckled and helped himself to another serving of crumble.

Kylie looked around the table at everyone. She was actually enjoying herself and she liked all of them. But she was going home in the morning. And when she came back to Mungabah she was going to sell it. She couldn’t put it off any longer.

‘I have something that I need to tell you all.’ She put her spoon into her bowl and pushed the bowl away from her.

‘Do you, lass? I hope it’s about fixing up the shearing shed. And we need some new clipper blades, those electric ones don’t stay as sharp as the good old ones. Those were the days,’ Frank drifted off in his memories.

‘No Dad, first we should extend the kennels. If we had more kennels I would buy in some new bitches and spend more time training the pups. That’s where the money is for us.’

Penny stood up again and collected the empty dessert bowls. ‘What we really need is to have the main driveway and all of the station tracks graded and resurfaced. It’s hard to get around with them being so rough, and even worse when it rains.’ She put the dirty bowls on the bench behind her. ‘You would have noticed that yesterday Kylie, when Jack was showing you around.’

‘Well, it was pretty rough,’ Kylie replied. ‘But especially going up to the Peak, that was a bit scary for me.’

‘So, Jack was showing you around yesterday was he. I was wondering what was holding him up when we were waiting for fencing wire,’ Frank said, glaring at Jack.

‘Did he take you on all of the tracks, dear? Did you see how rough they are?’

‘Well I think we went on all of them. Except for that one that ran off to the east behind the homestead, we didn’t go down that one.’

‘Ah,’ Penny paused and nodded her head. ‘That track leads to the property cemetery. Most of your relatives are buried there, and some of the staff from over the years.’ She looked at Jack before continuing. ‘Jack will have to take you out there when you come back.’

Kylie looked at Jack but he wouldn’t look up at her.

‘Yeah, sure,’ Jack mumbled. Ace gave off a short bark outside, making Jack look out toward the front veranda. ‘But it would be good to expand the breeding program. And there’s another trial show on next month.’

‘So what were you going to tell us, dear?’ Penny asked, taking teacups and saucers from the side table and placing them in the middle of the dining table.

How could she tell them now? They were all counting on her to keep their dreams alive. But she had to, she couldn’t keep putting it off. ‘Um, I’m going to be selling.’

‘Selling what lass?’ Frank asked.

‘Selling the property.’

‘Selling Mungabah?’ Penny screeched.

‘Yes.’

Jack stood up, letting his chair crash to the floor behind him, and left the house.

‘Jack, wait!’ Kylie ran out the door and down the stairs as Jack got into his ute. Ace barked and ran towards her. She held her hand up to him. ‘Ace, stay!’ Ace backed away from her as she opened the passenger-side door and slid up into the seat.

Jack scowled at her. ‘Why are you following me?’

‘I just... I just wanted to make sure you were ok.’

‘Well I’m not,’ he spat at her.

‘I can see that,’ she replied. ‘I didn’t think my selling the place would upset you this much. It’s only a house you know, it’s not like it’s a living breathing thing.’

Jack shook his head. ‘You don’t understand.’ He turned the key in the ignition and started the engine. He looked at her. ‘Let me show you.’ He drove the ute toward the east of the property and followed the track that lead from the far corner of the homestead. They sat in silence for the few minutes it took to get to the slight rise of fenced off trees.

Kylie frowned when she realised where they were. ‘What are we doing here? Don’t think that I’ll change my mind if you show me a few old graves that are supposed to be my relatives.’

Jack stopped the ute and frowned at her. ‘It’s not always about you, you know.’ He got out and walked over to the gravestones.

Kylie watched him bend down and clear some fallen leaves away from one of the graves.

He turned and looked back at the ute, and frowned again. ‘Well?’ he called out. ‘Are you going to come over here and have a look or not?’

She huffed out a breath and opened the door. Just because some gravestones had the same names as the ones in the will the solicitor read out didn’t mean that they would have any meaning to her. They were just names to her, nothing more. She stepped through the short wrought iron gate into the enclosed cemetery area. There were at least twenty graves in front of her. Some dark grey and chipped, and some with newer, whiter concrete. Further back she saw a few that were only marked with wooden crosses that must have been older than the homestead itself.

‘Ok, I’m here. What do you want me to see?’ She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at him.

Jack crouched down again and brushed dirt and dust off the concrete slab of one of the graves. ‘Here, this is what I wanted to show you.’ His voice cracked as he continued. ‘This is where my wife and child are buried.’

A sob stuck in Kylie’s throat as she read the names on the headstone. She didn’t realise that they would also be buried on the property. She watched as Jack continued to brush the top of the slab clean. ‘Um, how often do you come out here?’

He shrugged his shoulder. ‘Every now and then. On birthdays, anniversaries, things like that. And sometimes when I’m feeling a little sad or lost.’

‘You must miss her a lot.’

He sat back on his heels and looked up to the sky. ‘Leanne was my world. She was my everything.’ The moonlight glistened off his damp eyes. ‘And when she told me she was pregnant, wow, I thought all my dreams had come true. We’d been trying for a while you see, but we’d decided to stop thinking about it, stop putting so much pressure on each other, and let it happen if it was going to happen. So we were over the moon when it finally did.’ He picked up a pebble and tossed it aside.

Kylie sat down on the side of the grave and gave him a soft smile. She didn't want him to stop talking, this was the first time he'd shared something so personal with her since she got here.

He sat down on the other side of the grave and they both stared at the headstone. 'Never in my wildest dreams did I think she would die giving birth. It's not like we live in the dark ages. It's the twenty-first century for god's sake, women don't die giving birth anymore. At least that's what I thought. But we were blocked off by the flood, couldn't get over the river to get to the hospital in time. I must be the unluckiest guy in the entire world, hey? I lose my wife and baby, and now I'm going to lose not only my home and job, but my wife and baby's graves as well.' He turned away from her and covered his face with his hands. Shudders jerked up and down his back.

Kylie didn't know what to do. Should she comfort him, but how? Would he want to be comforted? She wasn't sure. So she waited in silence, giving him time to compose himself. They'd only known each other for a few days and weren't very close so she didn't feel that she could offer much support for something so personal. She wished she could but it was too soon. She was relieved when she saw his sobbing start to subside.

He wiped at his eyes and cleared his throat, glancing back at her over his shoulder. 'Err, sorry about that, I usually keep all of that to myself.'

Kylie stood up and walked around to the other side of the grave, and crouched down in front of him. 'That's ok, I don't mind.' She reached up and touched his cheek, wiping away what was left of his tears.

'God, I hope that doesn't get back to the boys at the pub,' he grinned. 'That'll be the end of my macho image.'

Kylie laughed and sat down in front of him. 'Don't worry, I won't tell anyone.'

'Thanks. You know, I haven't even cried in front of Mum or Dad, so I don't know why I was able to in front of you.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Sometimes it's just easier to share things with a stranger. I suppose we hope that since they don't know us then maybe they won't judge us, or something like that anyway.'

'Ah, you are a wise one, Miss Kylie,' he grinned. 'Or you've just been watching too much day-time television?'

'Ha, I don't really have time to watch television these days, I always seem to be at work.'

‘Ah, yes, work. Well that’s another thing I wanted to talk to you about.’ He stood up and shook the stiffness out of his legs. ‘I have a proposition for you.’

Chapter 4

Kylie fumbled with the key, trying to insert it quietly into the lock so she could surprise Peter. There was only a side lamp on in the lounge room and the place was in a bit of a mess. She could see a flickering of light shining under the bedroom door and could hear muffled sounds. She smiled to herself. Peter liked to fall asleep with the television on but she knew he wouldn't mind being woken up with a few welcome home kisses. Or maybe even a little more if she wasn't too tired herself. She could make out some clothes strewn over the lounge but Peter was always busy at work, and he was her boss after all, so she didn't mind tidying up after him. She put her bags on the tiled floor in the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge. It had been a long three-hour drive back to Brisbane and she was thirsty. When she dropped the hired four wheel drive back at the yard it was already dark and she didn't want to hang around to buy a bottle from the drink machine outside their office.

The lid of the bottle cracked open before she guzzled some of the icy cold liquid. She wiped at the few droplets of water that had escaped her mouth before turning to the overhead cupboards to get a glass. Putting the glass down on the bench she noticed two empty wine glasses in the sink. Peter really was getting lazy. She rinsed out the wine glasses and put them upside down on the dish rack, but as she did she noticed something smudged on the rim of one of the glasses. Picking it up, she ran her finger over the smudge. It looked like dark pink lipstick. Maybe it was a glass she'd used before she left for Mungabah and it still hadn't been washed. But she didn't wear dark pink lipstick. She put the wine glass back into the sink so it could be washed properly with the next load of dishes.

She turned away from the sink and looked at the bedroom door. She'd been living with Peter for nearly two years, but there was always something at the back of her mind that bothered her. It was strange that although they both worked at the clinic, he would do a lot of afterhours work but not need her help. She used to wonder how he managed without a vet nurse during those times or even during call-outs.

She'd come home a day early with the intention of surprising Peter with her news about inheriting a property, and selling it. For some reason she hadn't told him yet, she'd just said that she had to visit a sick relative. It was funny that he didn't seem to care that she'd have to be gone for a few days.

Unbuttoning her blouse, she approached the bedroom door. She reached forward to grab the door handle then paused. She could hear more than just the television on the other side of the door. Her throat tightened and her heart pounded in her ears. She flung the door open, almost afraid of what she'd see. But she forced herself to look. To look at the bed. To see the two of them naked in the bed together. Her boyfriend and her friend. Her boss and the receptionist. Peter and Cindy.

'You animal!' Kylie shook her head. 'No, that's too good for you. You're a bastard!' Her piercing gaze moved to Cindy. 'And you! Of all people.' She spun on her heel and ran back to the kitchen. Once again, people had let her down. That's why she preferred animals, they loved you unconditionally. She leant on the kitchen bench to catch her breath. This can't be happening? Can it? She moved towards the front door and looked over her shoulder as voices and movement came from the bedroom. Her left foot connected with her bag, the strap trapping her ankle. The floor tiles were the last thing she saw.

###

Kylie stirred. Somebody was touching her wrist, and there was a funny smell. A yucky smell. A smell she always hated as a child. Her eyelids flew open at the realisation. What on earth was she doing in hospital?

'Welcome back Ms Douglas, you had us worried there for a while.' The young Asian nurse wrote something in the chart that hung on the end of the bed then smiled at Kylie. 'I'll let the doctor know you're awake.'

Kylie tried to smile back at the nurse but her head hurt. She reached up and felt a bandage wrapped around her forehead. What had happened? She had no idea.

'Nurse?' she called out in a muffled breath. Her throat was dry and scratchy. 'Nurse?' She looked around the room and saw three other beds but they were empty. Forcing herself to sit up she winced as pain tore at the back of her hand. Looking down she saw blood dripping from a hole in her skin where the cannula needle had torn free. The blood continued to pump out of her vein, running over the side of her hand and dripping onto the crisp white sheet, forming a puddle of deep red on the bed beside her.

'Nurse!' This time the sound ripped from her throat. She twisted around on the bed, frantically searching for the buzzer, pressing it hard. But still nobody come. She took

a deep breath to try and calm herself, then bunched up a corner of the bed sheet and pressed it onto the back of her hand, applying pressure to make the bleeding stop.

‘Oh, shit.’ A deep male voice made her look up. The doctor, at last. She held her blood-sodden hand up to him.

‘What have you done to yourself?’ He examined the mess and hollered for a nurse.

‘I tried calling for one, even buzzing, but nobody came.’

‘Yeah, I know. They’re pretty busy today, but they’ll come when they hear me hollering,’ he grinned at her.

Kylie watched the corner of his brown eyes crinkle with laugh lines and felt her shoulders relax as his skilled hands reworked the needle into her vein. He was very gentle but quick. She was surprised it didn’t hurt as much as she thought it would.

‘Sorry doctor, we’re a bit snowed under today,’ the same nurse returned.

‘There you go,’ the doctor smiled at Kylie. ‘All fixed. Nurse, clean the wound and change the sheet.’

‘Yes doctor.’

‘Now Ms...’ he glanced up at the name plate hanging on the wall above the bed. ‘Ms Douglas, no more trying to leave without doctor’s clearance. You had a nasty fall so you’re still under observation.’

Kylie reached up and touched the bandage on her head again. ‘Is that what happened?’ She looked up at the doctor. ‘I don’t remember falling?’

‘You had a fall. Tripped over something, if I remember right.’ The doctor helped her stand up so the nurse could change the bloodied sheet.

‘Last night? I’ve been here since last night?’ She looked out through the open door of the ward. ‘Peter, where’s Peter?’

The nurse looked at Kylie. ‘Sorry but there’s only a lady in the waiting room who came in with you. Do you want me to tell her you’re awake?’

‘A lady?’ Kylie shook her head to clear it. ‘Peter didn’t bring me in? Oh, I’m too tired to think of who it could be. I can’t even remember falling.’ She touched the bandage on her head again and looked up at the nurse. ‘Yes, please ask her to come in.’

The nurse patted the hospital bed. ‘There you go, all clean. I’ll let her know you’re awake now.’ She bundled up the dirty sheet and left the room.

‘Now Ms Douglas, no more getting out of bed without a nurse to help you,’ he smiled at her then picked up the chart at the end of the bed and flicked through the pages.

‘When your test results come back we’ll know more. But no excitement for you till then, only bed rest.’ He nodded at her. ‘I’ll be back in the afternoon to see how you’re doing.’

‘Thank you doctor, I’m sure it’s nothing really, just...’

‘Ky, you’re awake! Thank goodness you’re ok, you had me worried for a minute there!’

Kylie smiled and relaxed her shoulders. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw her best friend walk into the room.

‘Jennifer, what are you doing here? Where’s Peter?’

Jennifer brushed her blonde hair out of her eyes and sat down on the side of the hospital bed. She looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath.

‘Jennifer, what is it? Where’s Peter?’

Releasing the breath Jennifer turned her head. Her expertly made-up face creased into a sad frown as she looked at Kylie. ‘Ky... how do I tell you this?’ She stuck her thumb into her mouth and bit down on the thumbnail.

‘Tell me what? Tell me that Peter’s been sleeping around behind my back with Cindy? Well there’s no need, I already know. I saw them with my own eyes last night.’

‘Yes, well, and that’s why Peter’s not here, because, well because it’s not just Cindy that he’s been sleeping with.’ Jennifer closed her eyes and waited for Kylie to react, but there was only silence. She re-opened her eyes to look at Kylie and only saw tears. ‘Oh, Ky, I’m sorry. Peter finally confessed last night when he asked me to stay with you here.’

Kylie reached for a tissue and wiped at her tears. ‘Who else? Who else was he sleeping with?’

‘Pretty much every new receptionist who’s worked in the clinic.’

‘Even while I was living with him?’

‘Yes, it sure sounded like it.’

Kylie closed her eyes and dropped her head back onto the pillow.

Jennifer stood up and walked over to the window. Her inch-long French manicured finger nails drummed on the window sill. ‘So, what are you going to do now?’

‘I don’t know, I can’t go back to the apartment. I’ll have to find somewhere else to live I suppose.’

###

The pink tennis ball ricocheted off the toe of Jack's boot and landed in the empty water trough next to the outdoor shower. Ace reached in to grab the ball and raced back to the cottage steps. He dropped the ball at Jack's feet. Jack picked the ball up and bounced it across the ground so Ace could chase after it again.

'Hey, Son. What's with the long face?'

Jack turned to look up at Frank coming out of the cottage and shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know. Just feeling a little down today.' He shuffled his boots in the dirt. 'For some reason.'

Frank handed Jack a coffee mug then sat on the step next to him. He reached forward and tried to tug the ball out of Ace's mouth. 'You cheeky bugger. Drop.' Ace let go of the ball. Frank threw it out into the paddock, making Ace run off to look for it. 'Bet I know what's wrong, Son.'

'What?'

'I'll bet your missing someone, hey? Someone who's around 5 foot 2, with pretty hair, and an even prettier laugh.' Frank looked at Jack and nudged him in the arm. 'Am I right, Son?'

'I think I'm just a bit confused, Dad.' Jack rubbed his hand across his face. 'I don't know if Kylie is going to be sticking around for a while or selling up straight away and leaving. I asked her to give me some time to get up a deposit so I could buy this place from her. But she said she wasn't sure what she was going to do just yet.'

'Son, she won't sell up. I reckon she's got the hots for you. And you her. It's just that both of you don't know it yet.' Frank grinned and nodded his head.

'Don't be silly, Dad. She's got a boyfriend, remember?' Jack looked off into the distance. 'But I sure do feel less lonely when she's here.'

'Things change, Son. And always when you least expect them to.'

'Nah, I'll be right, Dad. With whatever she decides to do. My head's just a bit of a mess, that's all.'

Frank picked up the ball Ace dropped at his feet. 'I'm sorry Son, but if she's already buying toys for your dogs... she's a keeper in my book.' He threw the ball again and stood up to leave. 'Right. I'm heading off now. Reckon I can hear your mother calling me,' Frank chuckled as he walked off.

Jack looked over to the outdoor shower. It was a good thing he had his Akubra close by that day, otherwise that first meeting could have been far more embarrassing than it already was for him. But he remembered seeing Kylie checking him out. He only

hoped she liked what she saw, and so would maybe want to see more. Of him, not just his privates.

Ace brought the ball back to Jack. He picked it up and rubbed it between his hands. 'She bought you a toy, Ace. That might not mean much to anyone else, but to me, it means the world. To me it means she likes my world, so maybe she'll want to be part of it, too.' Jack stood up and smiled as he pitched the ball high up into the air.

###

Kylie stopped the small Suzuki four wheel drive out the front of the overseer's cottage. She smiled as the familiar cloud of red dust kicked up into the air around the vehicle. This was the right decision to make, she was sure of it. Getting out of the driver's seat she planted her boots into the red dirt and reached her hands up into the air to stretch out her legs and her back. It was a long and lonely drive from Brisbane. She spun around as the front door of the cottage opened. Her pulse firing far too quickly at the sight of Jack walking out onto the veranda. At least she hoped this was the right decision to make.

'Hi...,' her voice caught in her throat. She sucked in a long breath and watched him lean one shoulder against the veranda post. He crossed his arms over his chest and crossed one ankle over the other. And grinned at her. This was the right decision.

'You came back?' Jack's grin broadened.

'Of course. I said I would, didn't I,' she grinned back at him.

Jack skipped down the front steps and walked toward her. 'So... how long are you staying for this time?'

'Hmm, I'm not entirely sure just yet.' Kylie looked up into his eyes as he came closer and stood in front of her. 'It depends.'

'Depends? Depends on what?' Jack said, putting his hands on his hips.

'Depends on, well, you know, stuff,' she shrugged her shoulders and walked toward the back of the vehicle.

'Stuff? What stuff?'

'Boy you ask a lot of questions for a...,' Kylie paused before opening the tailgate.

'For a what?' he grinned again, this time letting her see his dimples deep within his cheeks. 'Go on, tell me. For a what exactly?'

'Well, I was only going to say, you ask a lot of questions for a country boy.' She winked at him before ducking her head into the back of the Suzuki.

‘Oh, I’m a boy now, am I?’ He leaned his hip against the side of the vehicle. ‘I suppose that’s a bit better than just a stranger,’ he scratched at his jaw.

‘A stranger?’

‘Ah, yeah, sorry, I was just thinking about our last conversation before you left.’

Kylie looked up at him and paused. ‘Oh, that’s right. I suppose we’ve kind of graduated a little from strangers, haven’t we?’

‘Yeah, kind of,’ Jack’s gaze travelled down her body and back up to her chest.

Kylie stopped what she was doing and glared at him. ‘Jack!’

‘What?’

‘You’re definitely not ready to be upgraded from boy yet, that’s for sure,’ she cocked an eyebrow at him.

‘What?’

Kylie shook her head. ‘Never mind.’ She reached back into the vehicle. ‘Can you give me a hand with this? It’s a bit heavy.’

‘Sure, what is it?’

‘Just an esky of food. Can I store everything in your fridge until I get the power re-connected to the homestead? Would that be ok?’

‘Power to the homestead? Why do you need to have the power on at the big house?’ He scrunched his brow at her as he reached in to grab the esky.

‘Well, I’m going to need the power connected if I’m going to live there, for the time being anyway.’

‘What? You’re going to live in the big house? In the state it’s in?’

‘Yep. I figure if my grandmother could live there with it that run down then I should be able to live there too.’ She brushed a strand of hair off her face. ‘And besides, I need somewhere to live.’

‘I thought you lived in Brisbane, in Too-Wong to be exact?’

‘Yes, well, I don’t live there anymore. I live here, at Mungabah. For now.’

‘Ok. So will the boyfriend also be joining you here?’

Kylie grabbed her handbag from the front seat and headed toward the cottage. ‘No, he won’t,’ she spat over her shoulder. ‘There is no more boyfriend.’ She stepped up onto the veranda and turned around. She saw Jack holding the esky, with a huge smile on his face.

###

‘Sorry, but there’s no more room.’

‘Yes there is, there’s plenty of room.’

‘Where?’

‘On the second shelf, there’s nearly the entire shelf.’

‘The second shelf? But...’

‘But what? Oh, I see. You don’t want to move your beer to make way for my fresh and nutritious food.’ Kylie exaggerated the nodding of her head. ‘That’s ok, I understand. The barley and hops must have a special place in your heart as well as in your fridge. My simple foodstuffs can sit out on the bench and soak up the heat and fly poop. I’m sure they’ll be fine.’ She batted her eyelids at Jack and placed the back of her left hand on her forehead.

‘Fine.’ Jack looked at her face and screwed up his nose. ‘I will move some beer, just for your precious food-stuffs.’ He stuck his arm into the fridge and swept the beers to one side of the shelf. ‘There you go madam, plenty of room for the rest of your food-stuffs.’

‘Thank you.’ She turned her head away from him. ‘Smart-arse.’

‘What was that? I didn’t quite hear you,’ he said, the right side of his mouth turned up in a smirk.

‘Oh, nothing, I was just thinking out loud to myself.’

‘Were you? I swear I heard you say ‘nice arse’?’

‘Uh? You... what? I did not!’ She turned her back on him and bent over to put the lid back on the esky, taking her time to stand back upright so he had to look at her backside. ‘Just taking this out to the car,’ she said walking toward the front door. She grinned as she caught Jack mumbling under his breath.

‘Nice arse.’

###

‘Are you just going to stand there?’ Jack asked, looking at Kylie standing in front of the homestead.

She tore her gaze away from the building and shrugged her shoulders. ‘I don’t know...the homestead looks different for some reason. I’ve only been gone for a few days but this wasn’t at all how I remember it from last week.’ She looked back at the

building and crossed her arms over her chest. ‘Last week it was run down and scruffy looking. Neglected by humans but loved by nature, the vines and tree shoots attempting to make the old building their new home. But today it doesn’t look run down and scruffy. Today it looks... well, I don’t really know how to describe it exactly.’ She shrugged her shoulders again and put her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. ‘It’s kind of... more like a feeling about the place than how it visually looks. But it’s definitely different somehow.’

He looked at her and smiled. ‘Ok, let’s get your stuff inside then.’ He picked up her heavier bags and walked up the front stairs. ‘I also want to check that the fridge is working properly, now that the power is back on.’

She laughed. ‘I’m sure you’re glad to have your beer space back.’

‘Actually,’ he lowered the bags to the floor of the entry. ‘I was just wanting to make sure it’s working after being turned off for a while, that’s all.’ He cocked his head and smirked in her direction then walked toward the kitchen.

Kylie watched through the bedroom window on the second floor of the homestead as Jack drove away. It was her bedroom window now. She fingered the frail lace of the cream curtain that bordered the window. Moths and mould had taken their toll on the old material. Yet another item she would need to fix or replace.

She turned away from the window and grabbed the brass knob on the corner of the old iron bed that had been her grandmother’s and sat down, the bed springs protesting at being disturbed. The bedroom was huge, it took up nearly half of the entire second floor, with French doors that opened out onto the veranda. Dust particles floated around in the streams of light shining in through the dirty glass of the doors.

She was here. Now what? She had no idea. But this bed needed clean sheets, these ones were covered in dust. She opened the French doors to let the dust out and stripped the bedding off the bed and threw it all into the corner of the room.

Kylie hesitated at the door to the linen room. She really didn’t want to go back in there. That door that led to the attic was creepy. But she needed clean sheets. She took a deep breath as she turned the door handle. The door creaked, making her jump. She ducked her head inside. ‘Thank goodness,’ she mumbled. Seeing that the attic door at the end of the room was closed she pushed the linen door fully open and walked inside. She scanned the shelves for anything that looked like bed sheets and spotted some down near the creepy door. Edging slowly forward she slid what she hoped were the right sized

sheets from the middle of a pile, avoiding the dusty top ones, and dashed back to the bedroom.

###

‘Good morning Ace Jr.’ Kylie opened the kennel door and reached down and scratched the pup behind the ears. ‘Behaving yourself, I hope.’ She picked him up and cradled him against her chest. ‘You’re such a cutie.’

‘Thanks, you’re not too bad yourself.’

Kylie spun around and saw Jack grinning as he walked towards her. ‘Ha, ha, very funny. I wasn’t talking to you, I was talking to Ace Jr here,’ she gestured to the pup in her arms.

‘And a very lucky pup he is too,’ Jack looked down at the pup resting against her chest and wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Kylie felt her cheeks redden yet again. What was it with this guy? Or maybe it was just her. She shook her head to clear the image of a naked Jack that was trying to appear, again. She turned her head away from him and looked back toward the homestead.

‘So, how did it go last night? Did you manage to get any sleep on your first night in the big house?’ Jack plucked a weed out of the planter near the kennel entry and stuck the end of it in his mouth.

‘Yeah, it was... fine.’

‘Fine?’

‘Yep, just fine,’ she shrugged her shoulders and looked away again.

‘Ok, that’s good then. If you need a hand with anything just let me know. Or even give Mum or Dad a yell if I’m out.’ He twirled the weed around in his mouth and looked her up and down. ‘So how are your new boots going, got any blisters yet?’

Kylie looked down at her new boots. The ones she’d done a double-take at when she saw the price in the shop. The ones that the shop assistant had informed her were not available in a cheaper model, not even a fake model. The ones she knew she’d have to shell out for if she wanted to fit in here. She looked up at Jack and smiled. ‘No blisters, thank goodness. These are actually great boots.’ She tipped her left foot forward onto its toe and pointed the small heel toward him. ‘And they even have a heel,’ she grinned.

Jack laughed. 'Why yes they do, but a much more sensible heel than those other shoes of yours. Though not nearly as sexy,' he winked at her.

'Are you flirting with me again, Mr Lawson?' she asked.

'Maybe I am ma'am, maybe I am,' he teased.

She laughed at him. 'Ma'am?'

Jack put his right hand over his heart. 'That was my best Bogart impersonation, didn't you like it?'

Kylie grinned and shook her head. 'I think you'd better stick to just being Jack Lawson.'

'Anything for you, ma'am, anything for you,' he grinned back.

'Oh, stop it,' she laughed. 'Anyway, I was just on my way over to see you but I got side-tracked by these little guys.' She snuggled Ace Jr tighter to her chest as she scratched behind his ears. 'He's so cute,' she sighed.

Jack leaned up against the gate post and put his right hand on his hip. 'Well?'

'Well what?' Kylie glanced up at him.

'What were you wanting to see me about?'

'Oh yeah, sorry.' She bent down and put the pup back into the whelping box. 'He's quite a distraction.' She shrugged her shoulders in apology.

He raised an eyebrow. 'So I see.'

She turned her head away from him and stifled a yawn. 'Um, sorry.'

Jack furrowed his brow. 'Didn't you get much sleep last night? Did something happen at the big house?'

'No, no, nothing happened.' She brushed her fingers through her hair. 'It's just that... well, I had a bit of trouble falling asleep, that's all.'

'Were you thinking about him, about your boyfriend?' Jack stood up straight and crossed his arms over his chest.

'Who, Peter?' She threw her head back and laughed. 'Actually, he was the last thing I was thinking about. No, it wasn't Peter. It was just... the house. I guess what with it being so big and dark, and all the noises during the night, it just kind of spooked me out a bit, that's all.'

Jack uncrossed his arms and leaned back up against the post. 'You can always leave a light on you know, the big house does have power now.'

‘I know, I know. Guess I was just trying to get myself settled in as soon as possible. But that doesn’t explain all of the noises I kept hearing. There was a lot of creaking and even some thumping coming from somewhere.’

‘Not much we can do about the noises I’m afraid, they’re kind of part of the house, and nature.’

‘Part of the house, what do you mean?’

‘Well the noises are just the house relaxing after the heat of the day. The house is pretty old remember. And the thumping is most likely possums. Nothing to worry about.’

‘Thanks, guess it’s just me then, freaking out over nothing.’

‘Well, not nothing. You’re just not used to country life. How about I leave Ace with you each night, at least for the next week or so, till you’re more used to everything here?’

‘Are you sure? That would be great,’ she smiled at him.

‘No worries. And anyway, I think he likes you.’ Jack gestured toward Ace’s kennel where the dog was pressed up against the wire door looking at Kylie.

She smiled again and walked up to Ace’s kennel. ‘Good morning boy. How about staying with me at the big house for a few nights?’ She scratched Ace through the wire.

‘And half his luck too,’ Jack replied, reaching down to unlock the wire door.

‘Why do you lock the kennels?’ Kylie asked.

‘Well, we never needed to before, but ever since these dog attacks started up I figured it would be a good idea.’ He opened the wire door and Ace ran straight to Kylie. ‘See, I told you he likes you.’

‘Hello boy,’ Kylie scratched Ace behind his ears. ‘Bet you want to go for a run hey, after being cooped up in there all night.’

‘Do you want to come and watch me train one of the other dogs?’ Jack started walking toward the other end of the kennels. ‘I want to start training Max today. He’s right on six months so I need to get him started on the next stage of training.’ He stopped and opened one of the other wire doors.

‘Oh, he’s cute too,’ Kylie cooed at the bundle of tan-coloured fur as it jumped up and down at Jack.

‘Sit.’ Jack pointed to the ground with one finger, and the pup sat.

‘Yay, he did what he was told.’

‘Yeah, he’s already been through some basic obedience training and was a quick learner. So hopefully he’ll take to the sheep just as well.’

Kylie looked up at Jack and cocked an eyebrow. ‘The sheep are going to train him? I’d like to see that.’

‘No, he’s going to be trained on the sheep, by me. Or more precisely, by Ace.’

She laughed. ‘I knew what you meant. But how can Ace train him?’

‘Well, first I take Ace through his paces, then I run both dogs together. So the younger dog can follow and copy the older dog. It usually works pretty well to get the younger dog started.’

‘Ok, it kind of makes sense actually. So I can come and watch you train him?’

‘Sure can. I have a small arena set up behind the shearing shed, we just need to round up a handful of sheep first. Are you up for it?’

‘Sure, I suppose.’ Kylie looked down at her jeans and dusty new boots. ‘Seeing as how I’m already dressed for it,’ she laughed.

‘You can bring Ace Jr if you want, he needs more socialising. I haven’t been letting him out as much as I should be. But you’ll need to keep him on a lead.’ Jack walked back over to the pup’s kennel and picked Ace Jr up from amongst the other small pups. ‘Here you go.’ He took the lead off the hook on the wire door and snapped it onto the pup’s collar then passed the handle and the pup to Kylie.

‘Hey cutie, let’s go round us up some sheep.’ She looked up at Jack and saw that he was about to say something. ‘I was talking to the dog, cheeky.’

‘Sure you were,’ he winked at her as he got into the ute.

###

‘Come around, come around,’ Jack called to Max and Ace as they herded the sheep between the markers that were placed around the arena. ‘Get back, Max, get back.’ He walked over to a small pen and opened the gate. ‘Push up, push up.’ Both dogs held the three sheep together as they forced them into the pen. ‘Well done boys,’ Jack said as he closed the gate behind the sheep.

He looked over to where Kylie was sitting on the back of the ute tray with Ace Jr lying across her lap. Lucky dog. He was rapt that she liked dogs, Leanne never really did. And even luckier she was a vet nurse. That would certainly come in handy around here. But was it time to move on with someone new after losing his wife and child? Would Kylie even want him or even want to stay here? Damn, too many questions that he

couldn't yet answer. She might still decide to sell up quickly and not give him enough time to save a decent deposit to buy this place. And that would kill him.

He looked over once more to see Kylie had hopped off the ute tray and was trying to take Ace Jr through some training. Ace Jr was sitting on command but not staying. It would be great to have an extra person around to help train the dogs. He'd be able to spend more time training for shows. And it helped that she was drop-dead gorgeous, though it was the one thing he'd been having trouble with, keeping his attraction to her under control. But she came back, with the boyfriend now out of the scene. And he wasn't sure what that meant.

'Ace, Max, here.' Both dogs followed him as he walked over to where Kylie was still trying to get Ace Jr to sit and stay. 'Don't worry, he'll get the hang of it soon enough.' He bent down and gave Ace Jr a pat behind the ears. 'It just takes a whole lot of patience and repetition.'

Kylie looked up at him and grinned. 'Ok, so I shouldn't tell you that at work I was also in charge of pup training school,' she winked.

He crossed his arms over his chest and pursed his lips. 'So you're more than happy to take over training for the arena too?'

'Um, well, no. I'll have to leave that to you, I'm afraid. I only know basic puppy training and dog obedience, not working dog training.' She smirked at him. 'Unless of course you want to train me to train the dogs?'

'Now that's a brilliant idea,' he pointed a finger at her then grabbed her around the waist to help lift her back up onto the ute tray. He sat beside her, close beside her. He wanted to feel her close to him. He relaxed when he felt her not move away. He'd been wanting to get close to her all day. Heck, every day since she'd been here. And every night if he was being truthful. He pulled back from her slightly and turned his head to look down at her. He wasn't sure if now was the right time to try and kiss her, but if he didn't he wouldn't get another chance to for a whole three days. He didn't know if he could bear that. But he didn't know if he could bear not kissing her right now either.

'What?' Kylie grinned up at him.

'What, what?' Jack shook his head.

She shook her head back at him and laughed. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Like what?'

'Like that!' She punched him lightly on the arm.

‘Like this?’ Jack leaned closer to her and wiggled his eyebrows at her.

She laughed again. ‘Yes, something like that.’

He reached up and brushed the back of his finger down her cheek and under her chin.

Kylie’s eyes widened. Then she sucked in a breath and lowered her eyelashes.

Jack moved his head closer to hers and exhaled. ‘Something like...this?’ He skimmed his thumb over her bottom lip and watched as her lip quivered under his touch. ‘Or this...’ He tilted her chin up toward him and lowered his mouth to hers.

‘ACE!’ Kylie shrieked as the dog tried to jump up onto her lap.

Jack reached his arm out and pushed Ace back down to the ground. ‘Ace, down! Stay!’ He shook his head at the dog and turned to Kylie. ‘Sorry, I don’t know why he did that. Something must have come over him.’

‘Um, that’s probably why,’ she nodded toward the homestead.

Jack looked up and saw a vehicle driving down the track toward them. ‘It’s Gazza.’ He hopped off the back of the ute tray and kicked at the dirt under his feet. ‘Bloody great timing, mate.’

The Toyota Hilux pulled up in front of them. ‘Your Dad’s been yelling for you,’ Gazza called out of the driver’s side window over the noise of the engine. ‘He’s been looking for the pipe cutter so he can fix the broken bore pump, but he can’t find the pipe cutter. He said you used it last, so you should know where “the bloody thing” is.’ Gazza rolled his eyes after imitating Frank.

‘Umm, yeah, I think I know where it is,’ Jack nodded his head. ‘Oh, and Gazza, this is Kylie. Kylie, this is Gazza. Though I’m pretty sure the two of you would have worked that one out by yourselves but you kept missing each other at the cottage.’ He grinned. ‘Give us a hand packing up the course markers, Gaz, and we’ll head back.’ Jack headed toward his ute.

‘Um, wait.’ Gazza held his hand up to Jack and looked Kylie up and down. ‘I can... I can stay here with Kylie while you go find the pipe cutter. If you want.’ He shrugged his right shoulder and looked down at the steering wheel.

‘Thanks Gazza, but there’s no need. We were about to head back shortly anyway.’

‘Oh, ok. Yeah, sure thing,’ Gazza got out of the vehicle and walked off toward the closest markers.

Jack tied Ace and Max to the ute’s tow bar and gestured with a tilt of his head for Kylie to follow him as he headed to the far corner of the arena. ‘You can give me a hand

getting the rest, if you want?’ He smiled when she jumped off the back of the ute and walked toward him with Ace Jr at her heels. He looked over at Gazza to see if he was out of earshot. Damn him for turning up when he did. He hadn’t expected to get close to Kylie today and was frustrated they’d been interrupted like that.

Kylie caught up to him as they walked along, picking up the round plastic markers as they went. They pick up the last one and turned to walk back. Jack saw Gazza heading back to the vehicles with his back toward them so he grabbed Kylie’s hand and held it in his. He wanted to be alone with her. He wanted to feel her next to him again. He wanted to...well, he knew what he wanted, but did she?

He slowed their walking pace down to a dawdle when they got closer to the ute. ‘You know, I nearly kissed you just before Gazza turned up.’

‘I know,’ she blushed.

‘I also wanted to kiss you when we were up at the Peak, too.’

She shaded her eyes with her hand and looked up at him. ‘So why didn’t you?’

‘Well, you weren’t exactly single when you first arrived here,’ he shrugged his shoulders and looked away from her. ‘And I’m not the type to step on some other bloke’s toes.’

‘No, you don’t seem the type to do that. Thank goodness.’

‘Thank goodness?’

She stopped walking and looked down and kicked the dirt on the ground with the toe of her boot. ‘Yeah. Back home. Why I left. Maybe I’ll tell you about it one day.’

One day? Did that mean she was thinking about sticking around? He could only hope. He smiled at her. ‘No worries. There’s no hurry. I’m not going anywhere.’ Well he hoped not anyway. She smiled at him again, that cute smile that seemed to make him go all goofy-like.

‘I suppose we should head back anyway,’ Kylie gestured toward the ute. ‘It must be nearly morning tea time, I mean smoko time.’

Jack looked at his watch. ‘So it is.’ Why did time always go so fast when he was with her? ‘I have to find the pipe cutter for Dad. And I need to start packing anyway.’

‘Packing?’

Was that a touch of panic he heard in her voice? ‘I’m off for a couple of days with Ace to a dog trial in New South Wales, just over the border.’ He watched the relief sweep over her face as her smile returned.

‘Just for a couple of days? So you won’t be gone long then?’

‘No, not long. Why, will you miss me?’ he teased.

‘Hmm, maybe I will, just maybe I will.’ She looked over her shoulder and batted her eyelashes at him as she walked toward the ute with Ace Jr in tow.

He watched her walk away from him. At least she was only walking away to the ute and not walking away from him permanently, not yet anyway. And not at all if he had anything to do about it.

‘Get out of it!’ Gazza yelled from behind his four wheel drive. ‘Get out of it, you mongrel!’

Jack heard a dog yelp and ran towards the vehicle. Ace and another dog were fighting. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Sorry Jack,’ Kylie yelled over the dogs growling. ‘I let him off his leash and the next minute this dog appeared out of nowhere and started attacking him.’

Jack glared at Gazza. ‘Whose dog is this?’

‘How do I know. It just turned up.’ Gazza shrugged his shoulders and stepped back from the dogs.

‘It looks like one of the dogs from the last attack. Ace, get here. Ace, come!’ Jack reached out to grab Ace. ‘Ace, get here now!’ The other dog turned its head toward Jack and growled. ‘Get out of it, you bastard. Gazza, grab this mongrel before I...’ The dog turned back toward Ace and lunged, latching its jaw around Ace’s neck. Kylie screamed. Jack grabbed the dog by the scruff of its neck and tried to pull it off Ace. It wouldn’t let go.

Gazza stepped forward. ‘Show him who’s boss, Jack. Go on, give it to him good.’

Jack closed his eyes for a split second then kicked the dog hard in its back thigh. ‘Get out of it!’ The dog yelped and released Ace, and ran off toward the boundary fence.

‘Oh my god, Jack, is Ace alright?’ Kylie ran toward them with Ace Jr still in her arms.

‘I don’t know. I hope so.’ He pulled Ace towards him and checked his neck. ‘No punctures. Thank goodness.’

‘Oh, Ace. What a relief.’ Kylie hugged Ace with her spare arm. ‘But that dog, where did it come from? It wasn’t here earlier. I didn’t see any other dogs out here.’

‘I don’t know.’ Jack scratched his head. He looked over at Gazza leaning against his four wheel drive. He didn’t want to kick the dog but he’d had no choice thanks to Gazza not doing anything to help him stop the fight. ‘Gazza, did you recognise that dog at all?’

Gazza licked his lips and stood up straight. 'Nah. No idea, hey.' He shrugged his shoulders and got into his four wheel drive and drove away.

Jack looked at Kylie. She turned away from him and walked over to the ute. 'Kylie, are you ok? What's wrong?'

'I can't believe you did that, Jack. I know the dog was attacking Ace but... how could you kick it like that?' She closed her eyes and sighed. 'Just take me back to the big house please.'

Jack watched her get into his ute. She had Ace Jr on her lap and Ace beside her. He could see her talking to Ace and hugging him. *Shit! What have I done? Damn you Gazza for not helping me out.* Of all the stupid things to do, he goes and kicks an animal in front of Kylie. And all because he didn't want to look weak in front of Gazza. He didn't want Gazza to think he was a wuss. Well, kicking an animal was not something he normally ever did. Now she'll probably never speak to him again. Jack's shoulders drooped as he walked towards his ute.

Chapter 5

Kylie glanced around Penny's lounge room. It reminded her of her Mum's place back in Brisbane. A bit outdated but homely. She put her teacup on the coffee table and picked up a Scotch Finger biscuit off the plate. She snapped the biscuit in half then dunked one of the halves in her tea before eating it. 'How do I access the property's funds? Is there a bank account or even an overdraft that I can access?'

Penny looked up from her sewing. 'Funds?'

'It's just that I've used nearly all of my severance pay and most of my savings, what there was of savings. And there's still so much to do to the big house, I was hoping to...'

'My dear girl, I think you'll find everything you need in Buffy's desk drawers.' Penny put her sewing down and walked over to the window. 'But, there are no funds.' She pulled the curtain across to block out the harsh afternoon sun. 'Well, there's no big fat bank account anyway. Probably only a few dollars in there really.'

'But what about staff wages, up-keep, feed, and all that other stuff? How do we pay for all that?'

Penny threw her head back and laughed. 'We don't.'

'What?'

'Well...'

Penny walked back over to her chair and sat down. 'We pay what we can and try to put off what we can't.'

Kylie scrunched up her face. 'But what about wages? You guys all need to get paid, right?'

'Yes, of course, but...'

'But what?'

'Well, you see, we do things a little differently out here. We always have, actually.' Penny picked her sewing up and placed it in her lap. 'Even though this is, was, Buffy's property, we always operated more like one big family than like a business with an employer and employees.'

'Ok...'

Kylie took another sip of her tea and put the cup on the coffee table before looking back at Penny. 'So, how exactly does that affect wages and stuff? I'm not sure I'm following you.'

'Well sometimes, well, too many times lately, there have been times when things haven't been going so well for the property financially.'

‘Like droughts and stuff?’ Kylie shrugged her shoulders.

Penny looked over toward the window, clenching the material she was sewing in her hands. ‘Yes, droughts and... stuff. I guess you could say that.’ She shook her head and refocused her eyes on Kylie. ‘So yes, there’ve been times when we’ve really had to tighten our belts and occasionally help Buffy out for a change. A few times now, over the years,’ she nodded her head. ‘But we haven’t minded, not really minded at all. After all, we do think of this place as our own too. We have, had, a very special relationship with Buffy, all of us have.’

‘Yes, I’m starting to get the feeling that you all did. I’m actually enjoying learning everything about my grandmother. She sounds like she was one hell of a lady.’

‘That’s for sure dear, she certainly was that.’

###

Penny looked into the bathroom. Her eyes followed the two tradesmen as they finished off the tiling in the small room. ‘Dear, are you sure you want the bathroom renovated professionally?’ She walked back over to the lounge and sat down opposite Kylie. ‘Maybe you should just get the boys to do it for you. Surely they’d be able to do just as good a job as these guys, but for much cheaper.’

‘Yes they probably could, but it would take them ages. And I want this finished as soon as possible. A new bathroom and kitchen are the main items people look for when buying a house, and it really adds to the value.’ She looked at Penny and saw her grimace. Damn, she’d done it again. She didn’t like hurting her new friend, but by selling the property that’s exactly what she’d be doing to Penny, to them all.

Penny drained her teacup and placed it back on the side table. ‘Well, I guess I’d better go get some baking started. The boys will be ravenous when they get back from the dog trials, but I know Frank will get stuck into the goodies first so I’ll have to make extra.’

Kylie stood up and went to Penny, putting a hand on Penny’s shoulder. ‘I’m really sorry Penny, but you know I need to sell this place. If there was some way of keeping it, I would. But with no job of my own and not much of my savings left, I’m dead broke.’

‘I know dear. I just wish there was some way to sort it so we could stay on, that’s all.’

The plumber stuck his head out of the bathroom. ‘We’re about done with this lot.’

‘Oh, ok,’ Kylie answered.

Penny nodded toward the bathroom. ‘I’ll leave you to it dear, I have to get back and finish the washing before I start baking.’

‘Thanks Penny, I’ll pop over later.’ She smiled at Penny then turned back to the bathroom. She checked over the new work, pleased with how the bathroom now looked. ‘Nice. How much do I owe you?’

‘Here’s the invoice Ms Douglas. I knocked a bit off the top seeing as how you’re Buffy’s granddaughter and all.’

‘Thanks for that. I’ll just grab my cheque book.’ She went into Buffy’s office and wrote out the cheque. ‘Here you go,’ Kylie handed the cheque to the plumber. ‘Great job, and much quicker than I expected, thanks.’

The plumber looked at the cheque and scratched the back of his head. ‘Hey missy, this cheque...’

Kylie turned away from admiring the new bathroom. ‘I just love those tiles. What about the cheque?’ She looked back into the bathroom.

‘Well, it’s just that it’s a...’ the man mumbled under his breath then sighed. ‘It’s a Mungabah cheque, drawn on the Mungabah account.’

Kylie glanced at him over her shoulder. ‘Yes, that’s right, I know, I wrote it myself.’

‘Well I’m sorry missy, but I would prefer cash.’

‘Cash? I don’t have cash like that just lying around. The cheque is for the correct amount isn’t it?’ She stepped into the bathroom and ran her hand over the ornate tiles that surrounded the hand basin. She turned the tap on, caressing the cold iron handle that matched the period of the house. She was slowly bringing this sleeping beauty back to life.

‘Missy, I refuse to accept a Mungabah cheque. You will have to pay in cash I’m afraid.’

Kylie’s hand froze above the new porcelain soap dish. She spun around and walked out of the room toward the plumber. ‘What are you talking about, why can’t you accept my cheque?’

‘Missy, it’s not that I can’t accept your cheque, it’s that I won’t,’ he glared at her.

She pulled herself up to her full height and put her hands on her hips. ‘And why not?’ she huffed back at him.

‘Because I will not have another Mungabah cheque bounce on me.’

She sucked in a quick breath. ‘Bounce? My cheques don’t bounce?’ She watched as the scowl on his face deepened. ‘Do they?’

‘I’m afraid they do missy. Mungabah ones at least.’

‘No, no, no! This can’t be right.’ She ran toward her grandmother’s office. ‘Surely there’s some money in the account? There would have to be, wouldn’t there?’ She walked behind the desk and flung open each drawer, emptying its contents onto the top of the desk. She found the ledger she was looking for and flicked it open to the last entry. ‘See, there.’ She pointed to the entry, showing the plumber the figure that was written there. ‘It’s a healthy amount, way more than enough to pay your bill. And the rest of the bills to run this place, for quite some time too I would imagine.’ She stood up and smirked at him.

‘Well missy, that would be well and good if it was 1988.’ He tipped his head at her. ‘I’ll give you 30 days to settle. And no longer.’ He dropped the invoice onto the desk, called for his assistant and left.

‘What?’ Kylie looked down at the entry again and ran her eyes over to the left of the row. Sure enough it showed 1988. As did the entry before it. And the entry before that. But there were no more entries after 1988. She slumped down into the chair and covered her face with her hands. What was going on? Where was all the money? Penny said there were money problems but surely not this bad. But what if there was no money, what was she going to do? Peter always took care of their finances so she had no idea. Kylie fell back into the chair behind her and shook her head. ‘House, what are you doing to me?’ She looked up at the ceiling and sighed. ‘Are you trying to teach me a lesson? Is that it, house? Everything keeps going wrong every time I try to do something with this place. Grr, but I will not be beaten. I will get you fixed up if it’s the last thing I do. And I’ll get this money situation sorted too, well as soon as I can.’ She slapped her right hand down on the desk top. ‘Buffy wouldn’t have quit and I won’t either. I just need to work out what to do from here.’ She grabbed her handbag and raced over to Penny’s.

‘Calm down dear, calm down.’ Penny guided Kylie over to the lounge and forced her to sit down. ‘I’ll put on a pot of tea so we can discuss this calmly.’ She turned to walk toward the kitchen. ‘I’m surprised Jack didn’t already tell you about the financial situation.’

Kylie stared up at the ceiling. ‘Could this really be happening? And how on earth was Mungabah still running if there was no money in the bank? It just didn’t make sense. And I have no idea what I’m going to be able to do about it.’

Penny put the tray of tea down onto the coffee table and began serving. 'Dear, it's going to be alright, don't stress.'

'But what about the bills? How will I pay for the rest of the renovations? How will I pay the plumber?'

'Don't worry about the plumber. Old Dave will wait for his money, he's not as mean as he seems.'

Kylie reached for the teacup Penny was holding out for her. She grasped the saucer with both hands and put it on her lap. So the invoice for the plumber could wait for a bit, but that didn't explain why there was no money in the bank. She brought the teacup up to her mouth and took a small sip of the hot tea. Chamomile. To help calm her down. Penny was getting to know her well. She almost smiled at the thought. After years of not fitting in and always trying to please everyone around her, she starts to find her true self out in the middle of whoop-whoop. And finds real people to surround herself with, people who pay attention to her and who actually want to know her without any expectations.

'Thanks,' she smiled at Penny. 'At least that's one less thing to worry about, for now anyway.'

Penny nodded her head up and down. 'Somehow we always managed. I don't really know how, but we did.' She put her cup down on the table. 'There were many a year when we were in drought, or even flood for that matter, and we somehow always managed to pull the place through. Usually only just, mind you, but we manage all the same.'

'But how, I don't understand?' Kylie put her cup down on the table and held her palms out to Penny. 'When you said there was probably a few dollars left in the account I thought you meant quite a few, as in enough to get by for a while, just not a substantial amount. Otherwise I wouldn't have gotten the plumber out to do the bathroom. I would have done it myself if I had too. It would have taken ages but at least it would have been cheaper.'

'Well, to tell you the truth dear, I don't really know exactly how. Just that Buffy always chopped and changed things, mixed things up a bit. You know, like negotiated around bills and stuff. Somehow she kept things going. She was very innovative, always managing and juggling the bills, but still getting them paid. Almost as though she was pulling money out of a hat at times even.'

Kylie stared off into the distance. What was she going to do? She had no idea. Or did she? Kylie picked her handbag up off the floor and looked it over. It was hard to tell if

it was a genuine Gucci or a fake unless you knew what you were looking at. That was it! She was good at faking it in fashion when she was broke, so why not fake it in the big house? Resurface instead of replace, and paint everything else. She smiled and turned to Penny. 'With a bit of help from the boys I just might be able to get the big house renovated after all. Well, at least get it looking like it's been renovated so someone will want to buy it. And fingers crossed, I'll have it all jazzed up and ready to list in no time.' She dropped her bag back onto the floor and looked up in time to see Penny frown.

###

Kylie shook the urn and heard something rattling around inside. Should she open it? Probably not, the initials G.E.B. were etched on the front so they must be her mother's ashes. She rubbed her index finger over the engraved initials. Gemma Elizabeth Barton, she guessed. The mother she never got to meet. She put the urn on the side table and took out the worn diary. The last thing she felt like doing tonight was reading old diary entries but there wasn't much more she could do to the house during the evenings. And she was far too tired after putting in nearly a whole day's work on the kitchen.

Flipping through the diary pages she saw huge gaps of missing time and missing entries. Months and even whole years weren't there. Buffy wasn't a very regular entry keeper. She appeared to mostly write diary entries only on the days when something significant happened to her.

Kylie flipped to a random page: '12 June 1952 - He came to visit again today. Mother had invited his parents over for afternoon tea and he came with them. He kept looking at me, then tried to talk to me. Still not sure if I like him. Jonathon said he can't stand him.'

She flipped to another page: '3 November 1953 - I spent the night with him again, when Jonathon was away at the cattle sales. I feel so guilty, yet I so dearly want to be with him.'

Who was this guy? Did her grandmother have an affair? She picked up the bundle of photos and began flicking through them. She recognised some of the people, some of them were in the paintings on the walls downstairs. But there were many that she didn't recognise. Were they family? Aunts, uncles, cousins? Family members she'd never met and might never get to meet? Maybe they were neighbours. She had no idea.

She turned the page to the next entry: ‘12 January 1954 - I think I’m going to burst if I don’t tell someone soon. I’m so excited. But I’m nervous too. I don’t know what Jonathon will say, or do, for that matter. One thing I do know for sure, he will be ropeable if I tell him the truth, so I must stay mum on the real date of this and tell him it must have happened before he left for that trip to Sydney. I just know he will say it’s about time seeing as we’ve been trying for so long, so hopefully I will be able to confuse him with the due date. But before I tell him I must tell Tilly. And she’d better not say “I told you to be careful” or I’ll throttle her I will.’

A secret baby? Kylie put the diary on the coffee table and went into the kitchen. This was starting to get juicy. But why couldn’t her grandmother tell her grandfather? She re-filled the kettle and switched it on, and went back into the lounge room. Flicking to another diary page she continued reading: ‘9 April 1955 - He wants me to leave Jonathon! He says he knows she must be his, not Jonathon’s. But I can’t do that, what would people say? I told him he was wrong, she is Jonathon’s, and now I think he hates me.’

She picked up her grandmother’s will. She’d read it enough times already but one thing in particular kept jumping out at her. Why did her grandmother insist on Frank’s family staying on the property? They weren’t family, only employees. Or were they? What if there was something else there that she just wasn’t seeing? Kylie began counting on her fingers. Jack, Frank, Frank’s father. Frank’s father would not have been much older than Buffy. And Buffy wanted his family to be treated like family. She gasped. That could only mean one thing.

She folded the will up and slid it inside a slit in the leather back cover of the diary. She closed the diary and patted the cover. ‘It should be safe in there.’ She tucked the diary under her arm and put the urn and photos back into the box, grabbed her teacup and walked into the kitchen. After putting the cup in the sink she reached over to open the lid of the breadbin that was sitting at the back on the bench. The box slid nicely in behind the loaf of bread that she kept forgetting to eat. ‘But this is staying with me.’ She took the diary upstairs and put it back in her handbag.

###

Kylie looked at the length of the walls in the lounge room and sighed. Of course such a big house would have really long walls. And here she was wanting to start stripping the wallpaper off. She placed the small stepladder she found in the laundry under the first

painting and climbed the two rungs. The stepladder wobbled a little as she adjusted her body so she could reach up and grab the first frame. She stepped back down off the stepladder and placed the painting on the side table. The canvas was stained about a third of the way up from the bottom of the frame, a dirty smudge that had turned the bottom of the image into a smear of browns and greens. She turned the frame over and saw the same dirty smudge on the backing board. The next painting had the same smear on the front but when she turned it over there was nothing on the back. It must have had its backing board replaced at some stage. Nearly twenty minutes later she had a pile of gilded framed paintings towering on the side table.

Kylie looked at the tower and clutched at her lower back. *Ah, I need a break.* She grabbed a cold drink from the fridge and sat down. Her handbag was sitting on the lounge with the zipper open from earlier in the day and she could see a corner of the diary poking out. Was it trying to get her attention? She couldn't resist and pulled it out.

'Let's see what Buffy is up to now.' She opened the diary to an entry from 1956: 'He won't stop writing. He keeps sending me letters all the time now, declaring his love, not just for me but for our baby as well. I dread the day Jonathon comes home early and accidentally opens a letter thinking it's for him. I have no idea what I'd do if that happened. He's also sending some of his father's treasure. I don't want them but he says to keep them for the baby, that we might need them some day. And he's right, I should keep them just in case. But I need to put them somewhere safe. I need to be careful as I am now the custodian of some of the bushranger's precious bounty.' Kylie shook her head and sighed. She thought her life was complicated but it was nothing compared to this. There was so much drama back in those days.

She needed to get back to work but the diary had her intrigued. She flipped to an entry from 1957: 'Finally! I think I've convinced him to stop writing to me. I can't leave Jonathon, I just can't. What would people say? He has demanded the precious bounty be returned to him if I don't leave Jonathon and go to him. He must think me a fool. I tried to burn all of his letters yesterday, but I couldn't do it, I cherish them too much. But nobody must see them. Ever! I must find a good hiding place to keep them. Somewhere where nobody would ever think to look.'

Who was this guy? Kylie had no idea, but she wanted to find out, and she now wanted to find those hidden letters.

###

Kylie finished her tea and picked up another biscuit before looking at Penny. 'I've been reading more of my grandmother's diary, and, um...' she coughed to clear her throat. 'There are some rather interesting entries in there.'

'I'm sure that there are dear, Buffy led a very full life ... that she did.'

Kylie finished the biscuit and looked at Penny. 'There was one in particular that I wanted to ask you about. It was about a man, a man she was seeing, I guess, intimately. Do you know anything about that? Or maybe who it was?'

'Buffy, seeing a man? Do you mean behind Jonathon's back? She'd never do that.' Penny picked her sewing up, then put it down again. 'At least I don't think so. No dear, I don't think so, not that I've heard anyway.'

'Are you sure? It was very clear in her diary that she was seeing someone and was wanting to be with him when she knew she shouldn't be.'

'Um, well I suppose it could be possible she was seeing someone. But you'd think that we would have noticed something if she was.'

'I think the entry is dated sometime in the 1950s. I can't remember the exact year, so it was quite a while ago.'

'Ah, I see. I would have been extremely young then, possibly not even born. So maybe I wouldn't have heard anything. You might need to speak to someone closer to Buffy's age then.'

'I don't suppose you remember your mother mentioning it at any time, do you?'

'No, not that I can recall. Why dear, why is it important to you at this stage?'

Kylie stood up and walked over to the window. She pushed the curtain aside and looked outside. She wrapped her arms around her middle and turned back toward Penny. 'Well, it's just that I've been trying to work out who this person may have been, and...' she paused and sucked in a breath. 'From what I've seen of the diary entries and of the photos that my grandmother left behind, and also the wording of her will, it could possibly be Frank's father that she had the affair with.'

'Well dear, that does make a bit of sense, I suppose. But why does it upset you so?'

Kylie walked toward Penny and dropped down onto the empty chair. 'Don't you see? That would mean that Jack is my half-cousin.' A small tear escaped from the corner of her right eye as she waited for Penny's reaction.

'No, no.' Penny waved a dismissive hand in the air. 'That couldn't be right.'

‘But it could. It all seems to make sense now. Why else would my grandmother’s will say that Frank and Jack must stay on at Mungabah after she dies?’ Kylie’s teacup rattled on its saucer as she went to have a sip but realised the cup was now empty. She wiped a second tear from her eye and looked at Penny. ‘She must have known Jack would be related to her daughter and granddaughter.’

‘Oh dear, oh dear.’ Penny’s sewing dropped to the floor as she stood up, she began to pace the lounge room. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to say.’

‘No Penny, I’m the one who should be sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned this all to you without first checking things out properly. But I honestly didn’t know who to ask.’

‘My Jack, my little Jack. And all this time I never knew.’ She wrung her hands as she walked back and forth past the coffee table. ‘And Frank. I wonder if he knows? I wonder who else knows? I wonder if anyone else knows? Or has this been Buffy’s little secret all these years?’

‘Well, maybe we shouldn’t say anything to anyone just yet. We don’t really know all the details. We don’t even know if it’s actually true. Maybe it’s not true? Maybe I’ve just put the wrong two-and-two together and somehow got a five?’ She flashed a meek smile at Penny and shrugged her shoulders.

‘No dear, now that I’ve thought about it it’s starting to all make sense to me too,’ she nodded her head. ‘It would explain a few things that have happened over the years, and some even now.’ She stopped pacing and pointed her upturned palm toward Kylie. ‘Like her will. I thought she was just being generous letting us stay here, but now I think otherwise.’ She sighed. ‘And at least now I know why. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I just don’t know yet. I think I’m going to need some time to process all of this. So yes, maybe we should just keep this between the two of us for the time being, at least until we get some sort of proof.’ Penny sat back down and retrieved her fallen sewing.

‘But that’s my problem, I don’t know how or where to get proof. That’s why I wanted to ask you first.’

‘Oh dear, I’m not sure. I’ll have to ask around, discreetly of course.’ Penny pinched and twisted the material in her lap. ‘Jack’s due back tomorrow.’

‘I know, I’ve missed him these last few days,’ Kylie sighed, surprised that she really had missed him.

Penny looked up and smiled at Kylie. ‘That’s good to hear. I was hoping you two would get your act together, sooner rather than later.’

‘Sooner?’ Kylie furrowed her brow as she looked at Penny.

‘Yes, well, after all, who would be the perfect match for my Jack? Why Buffy’s granddaughter of course!’ Penny looked up at Kylie and gasped. ‘But maybe not. We’ll have to wait and see now.’

###

‘Hey Kylie, I think we must have a thieving fox on the prowl.’

The bed sheet flapped against her face as Kylie pushed it to one side. She smiled when she saw Jack approach the clothesline. ‘You’re back early.’

‘Counting down the hours, were you?’ he cocked an eyebrow at her.

‘Well, maybe I was...’

Jack stopped in front of her. He leaned down and smiled at her.

Kylie looked up at his dusty lips and imagined them brushing against hers. She wanted to feel the grittiness of those dust-covered lips pressing down on hers. She lowered her eyelids and started to open her mouth. She tilted her chin up toward him just as the memory of her recent conversation with Penny resurfaced, making her jump back away from him.

‘What is it, what’s wrong?’ Jack asked.

Kylie brushed the back of her hand across her lips and turned toward the washing basket on the ground.

‘Kylie, what is it?’

She turned back toward him and covered her left eye with her hand. ‘Nothing, just some dust in my eye, that’s all.’ She pretended to brush the dust away and plastered a fake smile on her face before looking back at him. ‘So how was the trip?’ How could she tell him, it would break his heart, just like it’s broken hers? The moment wasn’t right.

‘Yeah, pretty good. We won some minor titles, so I’m pretty pleased with that.’

‘Wow, that’s great. When are the next trials?’

‘In about three months.’ He looked at her and smiled. ‘You should come with us, I reckon you’d love it.’

Kylie laughed. ‘Yes, I probably would.’ She looked out toward the kennels. She would love to go to a dog trial, that is, if she was still here. And if Jack still had the kennels to keep breeding and training dogs. If this place was still hers.

She shook her head clear. She didn't want to be thinking about that stuff right now. She wanted to see Jack. He'd been gone for a few days and she realised while he was away that she really did miss being with him. She wanted to forget all of the other stuff, for just a little while anyway.

She looked at him and smiled. 'So what was that you were saying about a fox just before?'

Jack's forehead dropped into a serious scowl. 'I think we have a fox or two prowling around the place.'

'How can you tell?'

Jack scratched at the back of his head. 'Well, I went to collect the eggs for Mum and there weren't any. None at all. That's not like our girls. I can't remember a day when they've never laid. So something or someone must be taking them.'

Kylie stifled a giggle behind her hand and raised an eyebrow at him. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure, I do know my own chooks.'

She turned in the direction of the chook pen and gestured for him to follow her. 'Ok, but just to be sure let's check again.' She walked off, knowing he would follow her.

'Wait up.' He caught up to her in a few strides. 'I just told you there are no eggs. What, don't you believe me?'

'Of course I believe you, but I thought we'd better check again to make sure.'

Jack threw his hands in the air and shook his head. 'If you say so.'

They approached the gate to the chook pen. Kylie grinned up at him as she opened the gate and walked straight in.

'Wait,' Jack called out. 'Look out for...'

A ruffling of feathers and Kylie had Joker in her arms. He sat calmly on her forearm, his legs secured in her hand as she stroked the back of his neck. She turned around and faced Jack. 'What did you say?'

'Um... ' Jack reached up and scratched the back of his head again. 'Huh? How did you...' he pointed his hand at Joker.

Kylie grinned again and gently flipped Joker onto his back and stroked his chest for the few moments it took for him to fall asleep in the nook of her arm.

Jack stared at her, his jaw dropping open. 'What the?'

Kylie winked at him and turned to walk toward the nesting boxes. She glanced into each one. 'No, you were right. There are no eggs today.' She smiled down at Joker.

‘Isn’t that right Joker, no eggs today because we’ve already collected them. Haven’t we Joker, just like we’ve been doing for the last few days. I can work things out on my own without the need of some big burly bloke. And you Mr Joker, just needed someone to understand you. Isn’t that right, Joker? You needed someone to cuddle you, not yell at you.’ She turned back toward Jack and put Joker on the ground, rolling him onto his stomach to wake up in his own time. Grinning, she walked past Jack back out the gate.

###

‘K, I’m sorry, J.’ Jack stood back and looked at the message he’d written on the dusty back window of his ute. He grinned at the thought of Kylie seeing the message on his mate the ute. He just hoped she’d forgive him for kicking that dog.

‘Hey, Jack.’ Gazza walked down the back steps of the cottage towards him. ‘I’m nearly finished fixing the blue quad bike, then I’ll...’ He stopped and looked at Jack’s scrawl on the window. ‘What the hell is that for?’ He laughed at Jack. ‘Got in trouble from the little woman, did ya?’

‘No, I didn’t. It’s nothing you need to worry yourself with, Gazza.’

‘Sure... Under the thumb already, hey mate?’ Gazza smirked. ‘Wait til I tell the guys down the pub.’

Jack shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Gazza was definitely not his mate. He wasn’t sure if he ever was. ‘Yeah, whatever floats your boat.’

‘Well we know what’s, or who’s, been floating your boat, don’t we Jacky boy?’ Gazza winked at Jack.

‘There’s nothing going on with me and Kylie.’

‘Sure. Well then you won’t be needing this then, will ya?’ Gazza reached over the side of the ute and went to wipe the message off.

‘No! Don’t, Gazza.’ Jack raised his arm to block Gazza’s downward swipe on the window.

‘Jack! Gazza! Stop it!’ Kylie appeared with one of the dogs she’d been walking. ‘What’s going on? Why are you two fighting?’

Jack spun around. ‘Um, we’re not fighting.’

‘Well it certainly looked like you were.’ Kylie looked at Jack then at Gazza.

‘Were you guys fighting, Gazza?’

Gazza grinned at her. ‘No... not really. Yeah, kind of. Maybe we were.’ He leant towards Jack and raised his eyebrows. ‘Haha. Suck shit.’

Jack watched Kylie turn on her heel and walk away. ‘Thanks for that, Gazza. Not what I need at the moment.’

‘Anything to help a mate,’ Gazza spat back.

Jack jogged after Kylie. ‘Hey, wait. It’s not what you think.’

‘I know what I saw, Jack.’

‘Can you stop, please? We weren’t fighting.’ Jack followed Kylie along the dirt driveway, heading back to the kennels. He heard Gazza’s four wheel drive start up and take off toward the road.

‘Gazza’s left. Let me tell you what happened? Please?’

Kylie stopped and turned towards him. ‘I’m not sure how I feel about all of this.’

‘All of this what?’

‘All of this... macho-ness? Is this how you usually are, Jack?’

Jack rubbed his face with his hand. ‘That’s what I was doing at my ute. I wanted to show you but then Gazza came outside and stuffed that up for me.’ He gestured back towards the ute. ‘Please, come and have a look.’

Kylie sighed and walked back to the ute. She looked at Jack as they approached. ‘Well Jack, this had better be good.’

Jack smiled and pointed to the back window. ‘See, right there.’

‘Where?’

‘There, on the glass. I left a message for you.’ Jack looked at the glass and moaned. ‘No. Bloody Gazza. He’s wiped it off.’

Kylie moved closer and tried to see what was there. ‘Wiped what off?’

‘The message I wrote for you. He must have wiped it off when he left.’

‘But what did it say? Why would he wipe it off?’

Jack put his hands on his hips and took a step back from the ute. ‘Gazza saw my message and was having a go at me about it. Then he tried to wipe it off, but I stopped him. That’s when you saw us. We weren’t having a fight, just a bit of a disagreement.’

Kylie furrowed her brow and crossed her arms over her chest. ‘So, what was the message then?’

Jack looked down and shuffled his feet in the dirt. ‘K, I’m sorry, J.’

‘Oh, I appreciate that Jack.’ A frown appeared on her face. ‘Even though you used your *ute* to tell me.’

Chapter 6

Jack pounded on the homestead door. 'Kylie!' He pounded the door again. 'Kylie, let me in, I need you!'

She opened the door and saw Jack slumped against the veranda post. 'What is it Jack? What's wrong?'

'It's Ace, I can't find him.' He ran his hand through his hair. 'I don't know where else to look,' he wailed.

'Oh, Jack. Come in,' she ushered him inside. She helped him sit down at the kitchen table and caught a whiff of beer. 'Have you been drinking, Jack?'

Jack waved his hand in the air then let it flop back down onto the table top. 'Yeah, but only a bit.' He rubbed his forehead and sighed. 'I just don't know where he is. I've looked everywhere.'

'Don't worry, we'll start looking again in the morning, when it's light. He's got to be somewhere nearby, it's not like he can just jump into the ute and drive off,' she smiled at him, trying to lighten the mood.

'Yeah, yeah, I know. He has to be somewhere, but where?' He wiped his eyes. 'I just hope he's not lying out there somewhere hurt... or worse.'

'No way. Ace is too smart to let anything like that happen to him.'

'I know, I know... Arrr, there's just too much going on. I don't know how much more I can handle.' He covered his face with his hands and let out a sob.

Kylie's heart broke. She couldn't even begin to know how he was feeling. He lost his family, might be losing his home, can't find his best mate, and now she had to tell him that he can't be with her. It would be too much for anyone. But she couldn't tell him now, he was too drunk. It would have to wait. She put her hand on his arm, trying to reassure him. But how could she reassure him about anything when she didn't even know herself if she would be staying or selling? She thought she was determined to sell but things kept changing. Her feelings kept changing. Things here at Mungabah kept making her change.

He looked at her and put his hand over her hand on his forearm. This was the closest they'd been since almost sharing that kiss at the arena. That almost-kiss that seemed so long ago now. She had to stop thinking about it. 'Let's get some fresh air, it'll help sober you up.' She pulled his arm over her shoulders and guided him to the door. 'Come on, we'll sit out in the garden for a bit.'

They walked toward the timber bench under the Jacaranda tree. The moon was peeking out from behind a cloud, sending shafts of fluttering light down through the tree canopy. The air was still crisp from the earlier rain. She lowered him onto the bench and he pulled her down to sit beside him, keeping an arm around her as they sat side by side.

He turned his face to look at her.

She opened her mouth to speak.

‘Shhh, don’t say a word... not yet.’ He brushed the inside of his pointer finger down the side of her face, bringing his hand down to cup her chin. Lifting her face up towards his he brushed his thumb over her lower lip.

Her lip quivered at his touch, forcing her to exhale the breath she’d been holding. He removed his thumb and she licked her lip, tasting a mix of salty red dust. His taste. And she liked it. Forgetting where she was and why she was there, she closed her eyes and leaned in toward him. She pressed her lips against his, hoping for a response, but not knowing how he would respond. She kept her eyes closed as she waited for the briefest of milliseconds that seemed like forever. Then she felt it, the softest of returned pressure from his lips. With their lips still together she reached up and cupped one side of his face with her hand, feeling the roughness of his afternoon stubble under her thumb. A sigh escaped her as he increased the force of his lips on hers.

Jack grunted and pressed her against the trunk of the tree behind them, his gentle pressure becoming more demanding of her lips. He broke the seal of their lips briefly. ‘I’ve been wanting to do this from the day you arrived.’

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him in closer to her, wanting to feel his body hard up against hers. ‘Well why didn’t you then?’

He grunted louder and began exploring her mouth with his tongue. She groaned in response, her pulse pounding in her ears, blocking out the rest of the world. There was only the two of them, the only two people left in this world, exploring each other, enjoying each other. But it was wrong. She pushed him away and sat up.

‘No, we shouldn’t be doing this,’ she covered her swollen lips with her hand, trying to hide her shame.

‘What?’ Jack shook his head and looked at her. ‘Why not?’

Kylie pushed herself up off the bench and took a few steps away from him. She needed to put some distance between them. She needed to clear her head of him, of his dusty lips. She spun on her heel back toward him. ‘Because...’ Because what? Because they might be related, but she wasn’t sure? She didn’t know herself anymore. Why did

she have to push him away when every fibre of her being wanted to be with him?
'Because... Just because, that's why!' She dusted herself off and ran back toward the homestead, leaving Jack sitting on the bench alone.

###

Kylie turned the shower taps off. The summer heat was driving her crazy and a cool shower was the only way to keep her body temperature down. Or was it Jack driving her crazy and keeping her body temperature up? She wasn't sure. She wrapped the large bath towel around her body and went back into her bedroom. She walked over to the French doors and opened them, letting the cool air brush over her damp skin. She stepped out onto the veranda and leaned her elbows on the balustrade. This was so nice. The cool air, the soft breeze, the fresh country air. *And Jack?* Her mouth dropped open when she saw Jack's ute still parked near the backdoor, with Jack fast asleep in the tray. She leaned over the balustrade to get a better look and sure enough it was Jack, flat on his back in the middle of the ute tray. She stifled a giggle with her hand and shook her head. Well at least she knew where he was and that he was safe. Though she didn't like his chances of staying dry in this weather.

She quickly changed into her nightie and threw on the old satin dressing gown of Buffy's that she'd been using and dashed downstairs. She snuck over to the ute and watched him sleep for just a moment before carefully opening the passenger-side door and grabbing the oil skin jacket from behind the seat. Jack stirred as she draped the jacket over him. He was mumbling something in his sleep but she couldn't quite catch it all. She heard him say 'Ace', 'my mate', 'never hurt you'. A tear threatened to escape from her eye when she saw Ace's pink tennis ball clutched in Jack's hand. 'Oh, Jack.' She wanted to stroke his prickly cheek but didn't want to wake him. Heck, she wanted to jump into the ute to snuggle with him. But she knew she couldn't, so she knew she shouldn't. But helping to find Ace was something she could do. 'Don't worry, we'll find Ace, I promise.' She tucked the jacket around him and went back inside.

With sleep being the last thing on her mind when there was a man just outside her door she put the kettle on and made herself a cup of chamomile tea. *Hopefully this will help me to relax. And this...* She pulled the diary out of her handbag. *This should keep me distracted from one Mr Lawson. A drunkish and sleepy Mr Lawson whom I could very easily take advantage of, but, I'm a good girl so I won't.* She sat down on the lounge and

nodded at the empty walls around her. *That's not to say that I don't want to, mind you. But I won't.* She sighed. *Just my luck to fall for the one guy I really want but can't have.* She shook her head.

Kylie opened the diary and started reading from 1957: 'I found the perfect place and I'm quite chuffed at my cleverness. Nobody will ever think to look there. And they will be safe under my family's eyes without anyone ever knowing. So, so clever. I love you Bill and Edith.' What on earth is Buffy talking about? Kylie tilted her head and reread the entry, but it still didn't make any sense to her. She drained her tea and took the cup into the kitchen. 'Buffy hid something, somewhere that no one knows about, yet, it, or whatever it is, is right under everyone's noses? Erg!' She threw her hands up. 'I have no idea. And I'm too tired now for strange riddles.'

She put the diary back into her handbag and turned the lights off as she walked toward the stairs. 'Maybe something will come to me tomorrow, after I've had a good sleep. Or maybe Penny will know something. I'll ask her when I see her next.' She walked into the bedroom and saw that she'd left the French doors open, the lace curtains floated around the opening in the breeze. She stepped out onto the veranda and looked down at Jack asleep in the ute tray. A smile crept onto her face. She was pretty sure this was the man that she wanted, so she was going to do everything in her power to see if they could be together. Well, she was going to try anyway.

###

Kylie pried her eyes open and looked at the clock on her bedside table. It was 6am. Who on earth was knocking on her door at this time of the morning? She threw the dressing gown on over her nightie and dashed out to the veranda. She saw Jack still asleep in the back of his ute. It must be one of the others. She hurried down the stairs, hoping there wasn't something wrong with anyone.

'Who is it?' she asked as she pulled the front door open.

'Hey, Kylie.' Gazza stood on the threshold, with his right hand on his hip and his left hand supporting his weight against the door frame. He grinned and nodded his head up and down as his eyes checked out what she was wearing. 'Oh, sorry. Were you still in bed?'

'Actually, yes I was.' Kylie pulled the dressing gown closed and tied the sash belt securely around her waist.

‘Ah, I noticed Jacko asleep in his ute out the back. Hope he didn’t keep you up all night, hey hey?’ Gazza raised his eyebrows at her. ‘Knowing him though, he probably kept it in his pants. Too polite for his own good,’ he chuckled at her.

‘Well, if you must know Gazza, Jack got a little drunk last night. That’s why he slept in the ute. He didn’t want to disturb *you*,’ she fibbed to him.

Gazza rubbed at his chin. ‘So why’s the silly bugger still asleep then, when he could be having this for breakfast?’ Gazza pointed his hand at her head then lowered it to her feet as he leered at her.

Kylie sucked in a breath and clutched at the lapels of her dressing gown. ‘Do you mind not doing tha...’ She stopped when she heard a bark coming from around the corner of the house. She tilted her head in the direction the sound was coming from. ‘Ace?’ She snapped her head back to Gazza. ‘Is that Ace barking?’

‘Yeah, maybe it is. What’s it to ya?’ he snarled.

‘You do know that Jack’s been looking for him, don’t you?’

‘Has he now? Well he mustn’t have been looking too bloody hard.’ He chuckled to himself. ‘Guess he’s been a bit distracted lately.’ He looked Kylie up and down again. ‘If you know what I mean.’

Kylie wasn’t sure what Gazza was going on about, but she was glad Ace was ok. ‘Where was Ace? Where did you find him?’ She started walking to the side of the house.

‘Oh, he was just... just hanging around down near the, near the dam.’ Gazza pointed a finger in the air. ‘That’s it, down near the dam.’

Kylie looked at him from the corner of her eye. ‘Which dam? Jack said there were a couple on the property,’ she challenged him.

‘Oh.’ Gazza scratched at his chin. ‘The one... down near the boundary fence that backs on to Old Man Berrigan’s. Yeah, that one.’

She smiled when she saw Ace chained up in the back tray of Gazza’s Hilux. He was covered in mud but at least he was home safe. Jack would be rapt when he found out. But she didn’t believe Gazza’s little story about finding Ace out there. It just didn’t sound right. It wasn’t like Ace to run off on his own when she knew how much he loved being with Jack.

She unclipped Ace’s chain from the rollbar and let him jump off the tray. ‘Come on boy, let’s get you all cleaned up and... poo, you stink, get rid of this putrid smell, before Jack wakes up.’ She saw Gazza watching her again. ‘Thanks Gazza, I’ll take it from here.’ She nodded her head at him and turned to walk back to the front of the house.

As she got closer to Gazza she heard Ace let out a low growl. *What was that about?* Her eyes widened in surprise. Somehow she didn't think Gazza had actually found Ace at all.

She locked the front door behind her and leaned back against the cool timber. She took a deep breath just as Gazza's Hilux started up. 'Thank goodness he's leaving, hey boy.' She reached down and unclipped the other end of the chain from Ace's collar and gave him a good scratch behind the ears. 'Hopefully that's the last we see of him for a while.' She watched the Hilux through the window as it disappeared up the track that led to the cottage. She had to wonder why Jack would even bother being friends with Gazza when Gazza was so obviously just a brute. Maybe that was why Jack was more aggressive when he was with Gazza, he didn't want Gazza to think he was a wimp. She shook her head clear, she didn't know what to think anymore.

'Now, Ace,' she said as they walked up the stairs. 'I need to take a shower, and seeing as how you need one too, we may as well share. Hey, what do you say boy? You wanna share the shower?' Ace wagged his tail and followed her to the bathroom. She couldn't wait to see Jack's face when he saw that Ace was home safe.

###

Jack shivered and pulled the sleeping bag tighter around his shoulders. He felt a warm breeze caressing his cheek and turned his head to smell the warm air. His jaw dropped open as he nearly gagged on the smell that was now right in front of him. Shaking the sleep out of his system he raised his head and opened his eyes to see where that awful smell was coming from. It reminded him of dead mice decomposing in the hay shed.

He forced his eyes open just as a sloppy roughness licked his cheek. 'Get out of it Ace, I know where else that tongue of yours has been,' he said looking at Ace's behind. He sat up and grabbed the sleeping bag as it slid down his chest, but it wasn't his sleeping bag. It was his oil skin jacket. He looked around and saw the misty rain hanging in the air all around him. He was in the back of his ute. 'Shit Ace, what are we doing in the back of the ute?' He scratched at the stubble on his chin and looked at Ace. 'ACE! Mate, you're here!' Jack stared at the dog for a few seconds. 'Holy shit, where have you been mate?' He reached out and wrapped his arms around Ace and pulled him into his chest. 'Mate, I thought I'd lost you.' Jack wiped at his eye as a tear formed. 'Don't you ever do that to me again, right?' Ace lowered his head. 'You hear me, don't ever leave me again.' Jack buried his head in Ace's fur as his shoulders wracked with a sob.

Jack let go of Ace and looked around again. ‘Why does your fur smell, well, kind of pretty, and why am I parked outside the big house?’ he asked. Ace tilted his head to the side and stared back at Jack. ‘Uh! And my poor head.’ Jack put his forehead into the palms of his hands. ‘What happened last night, Ace? Hope I didn’t make a fool of myself,’ he groaned. ‘That’s right, you weren’t there.’ He looked up at Ace and smiled. ‘Well guess what old buddy, I finally kissed her! Yep, I did. I finally kissed Kylie. Probably only though because I’d had a couple of coldies first, otherwise I reckon I wouldn’t have had the nerve to.’ He shuffled his body toward the open tailgate of the ute and let his legs hang over the edge. Ace followed and sat beside him, pressing up against Jack’s hip. ‘Ahh, so you missed me, hey Ace. Don’t worry, I missed you too.’ He put his arm around Ace and hugged him in closer to his side. ‘I just wish I knew where you were, you had me worried sick. Now I just have to work out how to make it up to Kylie. Don’t suppose you have any ideas, hey?’ he grinned.

Jack looked up and held his palm up to the sky. ‘It’s spitting again. Wish this weather would make up its mind, hey Ace.’ He rubbed Ace behind the ears then put his arm back around him and patted him on his side. ‘I had the strangest dream too. I’ll tell you all about it, when I can remember all the details myself.’

###

The telephone vibrated against the top of the side table then shrilled out a cranky ring, stirring Kylie from her daydream. She shook her head clear and picked up the ivory Bakelite handle. ‘Hello?’

‘Is this Kylie?’

‘Yes, this is Kylie.’

‘Hi, it’s Tricia here. You may not remember but you were talking to my mother the other day in the pharmacy, Violet Fairbanks.’

‘Oh, yes, that’s right, I remember.’

‘Mum was saying that you were wanting to ask some questions about your mother, so I was wondering if you would like to meet up for coffee in town.’

‘Yes, yes, that would be great. Where and when?’

‘Can you meet me at the pub bistro, tomorrow at 10. That’s the best we have in town for coffee I’m afraid,’ Tricia laughed.

‘Sure thing, at least I know where the pub is,’ Kylie laughed back. ‘See you then.’

‘Who was that?’ Jack walked through the backdoor and draped his oil skin jacket over the back of a chair, letting droplets of water fall onto the old linoleum-covered kitchen floor.

‘Is it raining?’

‘Oh, yeah, and it’s getting heavy. But that’s not why I’m here.’ His face broke out into a huge grin. ‘Guess what?’

Kylie tried not to give away that she already knew, but she couldn’t help herself. Seeing Jack this happy was making her giddy too. ‘Wait, let me guess.’ She pointed a finger at her temple and pretended to be thinking hard. ‘Could it be someone who’s dark, handsome, and has four legs and a wet nose?’ she grinned.

His shoulders dropped. ‘What? How did you know?’

‘Gazza brought him around earlier.’ She raised her eyebrows and waited to see what Jack’s response would be.

‘Gazza? What was Gazza doing with Ace?’

Kylie leaned a hip against the bench and folded her arms across her chest. ‘Well, he said he found Ace down at the dam near the neighbour, Mr Berrigan’s, property. And Ace was filthy too, I had to give him a bath. Well, a shower actually. We had one together.’

Jack shook his head. ‘What? You had a shower together? You and Ace, showered together?’

She grinned at him. ‘Yes, we had one together.’

He slapped his thigh and laughed. ‘Of all the things I don’t get to see.’

‘Ha, ha. Though I’m pretty sure you’ve seen Ace naked plenty of times before.’ She stuck her tongue out at him.

‘Very funny.’ Jack put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. ‘Speaking of the nudist,’ he opened the back door and let Ace inside.

Kylie smiled when she saw the pink tennis ball in Ace’s mouth. Jack really did love his dog and that made her happy. They had that in common, and she realised you needed a strong bond between man and animal to survive on the land. Just as you needed a strong bond between man and woman to survive a relationship.

‘Ah, so that would explain the funny smell in Ace’s fur. Thought I was hallucinating for a minute. Especially after the weird dream I had during the night.’

‘Weird dream?’

‘Yeah, it was really strange.’ He looked around the kitchen, then at her. ‘Don’t suppose you have any headache tablets, do you? My head is killing me.’ He rubbed at his forehead.

‘Sure do.’ She pulled a chair out. ‘Here, sit down and relax. You too Ace. I think I left them in my handbag.’ She patted Ace as he lowered his body to the cool floor, then walked into the lounge room to retrieve her bag. ‘What was the dream about?’

‘It was, well, strange. And almost spooky.’

‘Strange and spooky?’

Jack nodded his head. ‘Maybe it was just because I was still a bit drunk, but I swear it felt real. But it couldn’t have been. I woke up and saw a naked sheila on the veranda. It had to have been a dream if she was naked, right.’ He chuckled to himself. ‘But then she disappeared and suddenly there was Buffy, right next to me. She came to me last night, while I was in the ute.’

‘Buffy visited you while you were passed out in the ute?’

‘Yeah, weird hey. She kind of floated over to the ute and just stood there watching me.’ Jack stroked his chin for a moment. ‘But the strange thing is, she was younger, and she looked like an angel. Shit, I thought I must have died at that point and I was already ‘upstairs’.’ He nodded with his head toward the sky. ‘But I could still feel the ute tray under me, so I was confused. And she just stood there, looking at me. She was so beautiful, like a beautiful white angel, just floating beside me. Strange, hey?’

Kylie covered her mouth and coughed. She knew exactly what Jack’s angel was, but she didn’t want to spoil his dream. ‘Buffy must have been looking out for you. Making sure you were ok.’

Jack nodded his head at her. ‘Yes, you could be right. Maybe that’s what it was.’ He rubbed at his forehead. ‘So, who was on the phone earlier?’

Kylie rummaged around in the bottom of her handbag and slid the packet of headache tablets across the table to Jack. She leaned her hip against the sink and filled a glass with water. She raised an eyebrow as she placed the glass down in front of him. ‘What’s it to you, Mr Sticky-beak?’

Jack put two tablets into his mouth and washed them down with the water. ‘Um, nothing... It wasn’t your ex, was it?’

‘My ex? Who Peter?’ She turned the kettle on and got the milk out of the fridge. ‘No, it wasn’t Peter. Don’t worry, that is one person I definitely don’t want to ever see again.’

‘That’s a relief. I thought for a minute then that he had come to town and you were going to meet him at the pub, to maybe work things out or something.’ Jack picked the glass up and drank the rest of the water. ‘I thought maybe you were leaving already, going back to Brisbane.’ He stared into the empty glass.

‘No silly, I told you it’s over between me and Peter. I never want to see him again.’

Jack let out a sigh and looked at her. ‘Well, that’s good to know. But we still haven’t sorted out what happened last night. I thought you wanted what I wanted. At least that’s the impression I got, until you stopped and left.’

‘I know.’ She sat down on a chair and flicked her finger through the ends of the serviettes hanging out of the serviette holder. ‘It’s not how I expected things to happen last night either, that’s for sure.’

Jack nodded his head. ‘Same here. And just when I thought things were starting to turn a corner for me.’

Kylie reached over and put her hand on Jack’s arm. ‘I know, I’m sorry.’ Was now the right time to tell him? She wasn’t sure. But if she didn’t, if she kept putting it off, it would only be worse when she did finally tell him. But how? How do you tell someone that the things that he thought were starting to turn a corner were in fact stuck in a cul-de-sac? Everything was going round and round while they try to find a solution. And knowing her luck with men, the cul-de-sac would turn into a dead end. Just like her love life always did.

The kettle boiled and she stood up and started to make the tea and coffee at the bench. Her hands shook as she reached for the cups in the top cupboard. The small stepladder was in the lounge room so she stood on her toes to reach up, but one of the cups slipped through her fingers and hit the edge of the benchtop. It smashed into two pieces before landing on the floor. She looked down at the cup and burst into tears. It wasn’t the broken cup that made her cry, it was how the cup broke. When it hit the benchtop it split into two pieces, right down the middle. Just like how her heart was feeling right at this moment. But she knew once she told Jack, his heart wouldn’t be split down the middle, it would be shattered. And there was nothing she could do to stop it. She covered her face with her hands as the sobs wracked through her.

‘Shit!’ Jack jumped out of his chair and grabbed her. ‘What happened? Did you cut yourself?’

‘No, no. Go away.’ She pushed at his chest. She needed some time to think about how she was going to tell him.

‘I’m not going anyway until you tell me what’s wrong! Kylie?’ He pulled her hands away from her face and looked at her.

‘Stop looking at me,’ she yelled at him. She covered her face with her hands again and turned her head away from him.

‘What is it, what’s the matter?’ He reached forward and put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her back around toward him.

She brushed at the new tears that were threatening to spill out of her eyes and looked up at him. ‘I... I have something I need to tell you.’ She sucked in a long breath. ‘And I don’t think you’re going to like it any more than I do.’

Kylie wrapped her arms around her middle and squeezed. The ache in her heart wracked through her. ‘Jack, I found something in my grandmother’s diary.’ She took a breath and turned her face toward him. ‘Jack, something about us. I think we’re...’ She paused as a fresh tear rolled down her left cheek.

Jack nodded his head at her. ‘Spit it out, what is it?’

Her chest tightened as she rehearsed in her head the hurtful words she needed to say to him. ‘Your Mum and I were talking about the diary the other day, and, well, we both came to the same conclusion.’ She paused again, and closed her eyes for a moment. She looked up at him, stared into his blue eyes, stared passed his eyes and into his soul. Could she do this to him? Maybe she should just lie and tell him something else, anything else. Maybe just tell him that she had to leave, she was going back to Peter? Tell him anything to stop the pain she knew she would see in his eyes as soon as she told him. But she couldn’t. He deserved the truth.

Jack stepped forward again and put his hands on her shoulders. ‘Please tell me what it is? I can see it’s hurting you and I don’t like that. I want to know if I can fix it or stop it or find it, or whatever it is I can do to stop it hurting you.’

‘No Jack,’ she answered, shaking her head slowly back and forth. ‘I’m afraid there is nothing either of us can do to fix this.’ She reached her hand out toward him. ‘Come into the lounge room, I will show you what I found.’

Kylie sat him down on the lounge and took the diary out of her handbag. She’d bookmarked the entries that she knew Jack should read. ‘Here, it’s all in Buffy’s diary.’

Jack read the entries in quick succession. ‘This can’t be true!’ Jack slapped the diary back down onto the table. He picked up the copy of Buffy’s will. ‘This just doesn’t

make sense. Of course Buffy would want us to stay here and be looked after, we were like family to her. Surely that's the only reason why, not because of who my grandfather might be?' Jack sank down into the lounge cushions and leaned his elbows on his knees, and covered his face with his hands.

'I'm sorry, Jack,' she placed her hand on his arm. 'I don't like it any more than you. It's the last thing I would have expected. But it must be true, it all just makes sense somehow. And why would my grandmother keep photos of her and your grandfather? There are a couple of people in these photos that even your mother wasn't sure of, but she definitely knows who your grandfather is.'

Jack picked up the photo and stared at it. 'Yes, that's Grandad alright. The others are friends and neighbours.' He pointed to a man in the photo standing next to Buffy. 'And this is Mr Berrigan, from the property next door.'

'Ah, that's who that is, your mother wasn't sure, it's such an old photo.'

'But what are we supposed to do now? I can't believe how much bad luck I've been having. My wife and child... and now when I think I've finally found someone, but I can't...' Jack smacked the palm of his hand on his thigh. He stood up and stormed out of the room, out of the house. And maybe out of her life forever.

###

Kylie pushed open the swinging doors of the pub. She was running late. The driveway had turned to mush with all the rain they'd been having and she nearly got bogged. She scanned the room, looking for someone around her mother's age.

'Kylie?'

She turned and saw someone waving from one of the tables. She approached the table and extended her hand. 'Hi, I'm Kyl...'

'I know who you are. I'd be able to pick you out of a hall full of people.' The woman stood up and hugged Kylie. 'Oh my god, I can't believe it's you.' She stepped back and wiped tears from her eyes. 'You look exactly like your Mum.'

'Um, thanks.' Kylie shrugged a shoulder.

'Sit down, I'll order a pot of tea.' She picked up her purse. 'Oh, unless you would prefer something else?'

‘No, tea is great, thanks.’ Kylie watched Tricia walk over to the counter to place the order. So this was her mother’s best friend. The one person who could tell her so much about her mother, but she didn’t really know what to ask her.

Tricia returned to the table and sat down. ‘Britt said she’ll bring it over in a minute,’ she nodded her head toward the bistro. ‘I still can’t believe how much you look like Gemma,’ she smiled. ‘Oh, do you have any kids?’

Kylie shook her head. ‘No. One day soon hopefully.’

‘Are you married then?’

‘No.’ Kylie shook her head again. ‘I was living with my boyfriend back in Brisbane but... things didn’t work out.’

‘I see, that’s no good.’

Kylie looked up as the waitress approached with their tea. ‘Oh, it’s her.’

‘Her who?’ Tricia turned to see who Kylie was referring to. ‘The waitress?’ she asked.

Kylie nodded as the tea was placed on the table.

‘Thanks Britt.’

‘No worries Tricia.’

Tricia waited until the waitress was out of earshot. ‘Do you know Britt?’

Kylie shook her head. ‘Not really, but she was quite rude when I was staying out the back in one of the motel rooms.’

‘Yeah, Britt can be a bit moody at times. I guess most of the young ones can get like that out here. They have their moments, probably a bit bored too.’

‘Yeah, I suppose.’ Kylie watched Tricia pour the tea. ‘Tricia, so how long did you know my mother for?’

‘For ages, Gem and I met at primary school then went to boarding school together.’ She passed a teacup to Kylie. ‘And we were best mates ever since, really.’ She stirred a teaspoon of sugar into her cup. ‘We had the best time growing up together. We were always getting into some sort of mischief or such, and had a ball to boot. Those were great times.’ Her eyes glazed over as a smile settled on her face. She sighed. ‘Yep, those were probably the best times of our lives.’

‘That all sounds wonderful. You must miss her terribly?’ Kylie asked.

Tricia nodded. ‘I do, a lot.’

‘I wish I’d known her. It feels like I missed out on heaps.’

‘Sometimes things happen that you have no control over,’ Tricia replied, waving a dismissive hand in the air. ‘When that happens you have to make do with what you do have. But surely you must have had a good life living in the big smoke? That would have been much more exciting than being stuck out here in the boonies,’ she smiled.

‘I guess I did have a pretty good upbringing. Brisbane’s a nice place to live and my parents, um, my adoptive parents, are great, I love them to bits.’ Kylie picked up her teacup and took a sip. ‘Though I always felt like something was missing somehow, but I could never put my finger on it.’

‘Maybe you have a sort of intuition that lets you know these things?’

‘Um, maybe. I’ve never really thought about that.’

‘Your mother did. And your gran for that matter. They always just knew when something wasn’t right.’

‘That must be where I get it from then,’ Kylie nodded her head. She took another sip of her tea and sucked in a breath. ‘I don’t suppose you happen to know who my father is, do you?’

Tricia sighed. ‘I thought you might ask that.’ She shook her head. ‘I’m afraid I don’t. I knew she was seeing someone, secretly, but she wouldn’t tell me anything. She would just pretend everything was normal and that I must be imagining things. She would swear black and blue that she wasn’t seeing anyone. But I knew she was lying. There was definitely something different about her just before I found out she was pregnant with you.’

‘Wow, I wonder why she didn’t tell you? I thought she would have told you everything if you were best friends.’

‘Yes, my thoughts exactly. I was pretty peeved with her and I kept nagging her but that only made her mad at me, so I stopped asking.’ Tricia shrugged her shoulders and drained her cup. ‘There were a few contenders though, but I couldn’t be sure. Sorry.’

‘Thanks. I guess if she didn’t want anyone to know who he was then she must have had a good reason for keeping it a secret.’ Kylie picked up a napkin and began to twist a corner. ‘Um, I don’t suppose you know who my mother’s father was then?’

Tricia raised an eyebrow at her. ‘What? How did you know about that?’

‘So it’s true? Jonathon wasn’t her real father, so he’s not my real grandfather?’ Kylie’s heart sank. This was not the news she wanted to hear.

‘I do remember Gemma freaking out about it when she found out. There was a lot of tension at Mungabah whenever there was a medical issue with Gemma, but Gemma

always just said that her mother was taking care of it. Whatever 'it' was, I don't know though.'

'Do you know who her father was?'

'No, Gemma never wanted to talk about it. More secrets, I know,' Tricia nodded her head. 'It must be frustrating for you.'

Kylie frowned. 'More like too many secrets. I really need to find out who my mother's father was. It's important that I piece my family tree together properly and I can't do that if I can't find out who he was.' She picked up the twisted napkin and scrunched it into a ball. 'And my father as well. I'm trying to fill in as many blanks as possible.'

'I know. It must be hard for you with all of this new information about your family.' Tricia reached across the table and patted Kylie on the back of the hand.

'I feel like I've missed out on so much. It's like I'm grasping at straws trying to feel like I'm a part of my real family. If I could find all of those missing pieces I'd feel more grounded.' Kylie sighed. 'I don't suppose you have even the slightest idea of who my real grandfather might be?'

'I'm not sure. Jonathon was probably away a lot around that time so that could be when Buffy met up with whoever it was.' Tricia touched her on the arm. 'I'm really sorry Kylie, I wish I could tell you more.'

'That's ok, it's not your fault. I just wish my 'real' family had of been better documented, that would make this so much easier,' she grinned at Tricia.

'Oh, hang on a minute.' Tricia's eyes widened. 'Gemma and I used to write to each other a lot whenever we weren't together back then. And sometimes she'd rave on about all sorts of things that I didn't always pay attention to.' She pointed a finger at Kylie. 'And I've kept most of those letters as keepsakes. So maybe, just maybe there's something in them that I may have missed. Now I can't remember anything in particular, but you never know, something in her letters might just jog my memory.'

Kylie's stomach fluttered. 'I hope so, that would be great.'

'I'll see what I can find and give you a ring if there's anything.'

'Yes, please do. Ring me even if you're not sure it's relevant, because it just might be and I really need to know.' She smiled at Tricia. 'Thank you for helping me with this, I do appreciate it.'

'That's ok Kylie, I would do anything for Gemma's little girl. I'll ring you as soon as I find anything,' Tricia smiled.

Kylie caught a glimmer of a tear in the corner of Tricia's eye. She reached across the table and grabbed Tricia's hand. 'Thank you, that means a lot to me.'

Tricia's smile widened. 'No, it's my pleasure.' She looked down at the now empty teapot. 'Well, I guess we'd better finish up here, I'm sure you have heaps to do back at the homestead.'

Kylie picked up her handbag and pushed her chair back. 'Oh my goodness, do I ever.' She grinned and exaggerated slumping her shoulders as she stood up. 'It's a massive job and now I find out the Mungabah bank balance is pretty much zilch. Zilch as in nix, nil, nada, none, nothing!' She slapped the palm of her hand against her forehead. 'And I have no idea how I'm going to finish the renovations so I can think about selling it, but I'll have to come up with a solution soon.'

Tricia jumped up and grabbed Kylie's arm. 'Wait. What? You're going to sell up? But why?'

'Well, I need the money and this could be a really nice windfall if it sells.'

'But you can't. There are too many memories there for everyone. They will be devastated to lose Mungabah.'

'I know, but I've already been to the estate agent and he said...'

Tricia put her hand over her mouth and stifled a moan. 'You couldn't do that to everyone. Some mining company will buy it and start tearing up the earth. It will be gone forever. Don't you like the place?'

'Well, it's nice, but in the end it's really just a piece of land with a few rundown buildings on it.'

Tricia gasped. 'Why can't you love it as much as they do? As much as I do? As much as Buffy and your mother did?'

'It's not the same for me. I didn't get to live there. I didn't get to have all of those experiences like the rest of you.' Kylie could see the shock in Tricia's eyes. What was she supposed to do, keep a failing property and watch it become even more worthless, then not be able to get anything at all for it? And what were they all expecting her to do, become the new Buffy and make everything alright? Pull non-existent money out of thin air to keep the place running? It just couldn't be done. She was better off cutting her losses now. Why couldn't anyone else see that it was the best thing to do?

'I'm sorry Tricia, but there's not much else I can do.'

Tricia wiped a tear from her eye and shrugged her shoulders. 'Your mother would be so disappointed in you.' She picked her purse up off the table. 'And Buffy, well, she'd

kick your butt and tell you to sort yourself out and find a way to make it work. Buffy always made it work. But I don't think you're anything like Buffy.' She walked toward the door and left Kylie standing there.

###

'Keep your foot on the brake.' Jack placed his hand over Kylie's hand and pushed the smaller gear lever up. 'See, now it's in four low. That's all four wheels working but at low torque.' He kept his hand on hers and ran his thumb along the side of her hand. He liked the feel of her soft skin under his calloused hand. It was smooth and delicate, making him wonder what other parts of her felt like.

Kylie looked at the larger gear lever next to her left knee. 'Ok, so what gear does this one need to be in then?'

'Just put it in Drive and go slow.'

'So I don't need to do anything else?'

'No. Um, did you lock the hubs in first?'

Kylie looked up at Jack and shook her head. 'Lock the whats in where first?'

Jack tipped his head back and laughed. 'The hubs, on the front wheels. If this was a newer model there'd be a button on the dash, but you have to get out to do it with this model.'

'I know it's a bit old, but it's all I could afford,' she pouted.

'Its age isn't a problem. As long as all the running gear is still working well, it's a good buy.'

'I really wasn't sure if it was worth the price but I knew I'd need some type of four wheel drive for out here.'

'And this one is in pretty good nick, you did good with this old girl.' He slapped the dash and got out of the Suzuki. He walked around to the driver side door and opened it. 'Hop out and I'll show you how to lock the whats in where.' He grinned and held his hand out to her. He was wrapped she bought her own fourbie. He was hoping that meant she was going to need it for a while, that she was going to be here, at Mungabah, for a while.

Jack crouched down next to the front tyre and pointed at the wheel. 'See this small dial right in the centre?'

Kylie crouched down next to him and put a hand on his knee to steady herself.

‘Yes, I see it.’

‘If you look closely you will see it says Lock and Free. Turn the dial to Free and you’re in two wheel drive, so only the back wheels have torque. But if you turn it to Lock, you lock the hubs to the front axle so they are forced to spin when you put the fourbie into high or low four.’ He looked at her. ‘Does that make sense?’

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘Kind of. But what happens when you lock the back ones in?’

‘You don’t. They are permanently locked to the back axle, so you only need to do the front ones.’

‘Oh, ok. Yeah, that makes sense then.’ She looked out toward the front of the property. ‘So that’s probably why I nearly got stuck in the mud yesterday, because I was only in two wheel drive?’

Jack nodded his head at her. ‘Pretty much. It’s much easier to drive through mud if you have all four wheels pushing the vehicle. In two wheel drive it’s like dragging the front end through the mud, and the back wheels and diff have to do all the work on their own.’ He turned the dial to Lock and stood up. ‘I’ll lock the other side and let’s see how you go in the mud today.’

She held her hand out to catch the small droplets of rain that started to fall from the overcast sky. ‘Ok, but if we get stuck I’m blaming you.’

Jack stood up from behind the left front wheel and looked up at the sky. ‘Nah, we should be right. If the mud gets worse we can always air down a little.’ He opened the door and sat back on the passenger seat.

Kylie got back into the vehicle and looked at Jack. ‘Air down? What the heck is that? Are you toying with me, Jack Lawson?’ She laughed. ‘First you’re telling me to go high four and then low four, and now you’re raving on about some air down thingy. Does my car turn into a helicopter or something? I hope that’s not like man down?’

Jack laughed then grinned at her. ‘No, nothing like that. Let’s just see how you go in low range first.’

Kylie threw her hands in the air. ‘Low range? What the?’

‘Sorry.’ He pointed at the small gear lever. ‘It’s the same as four low.’

She glared at him. ‘Stop confusing me. And we’re going to look like dills driving up and down the driveway.’

Jack shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, it's the best place for you to learn, as you're already familiar with it. And it's nice and long so you can practise in the mud without needing to go anywhere else.'

'Ok, so what do I do first?'

'Start the motor, check it's still in four low, it should be from before. Put the normal gear lever into Drive, take your foot off the Brake and just drive like normal, but not too fast.'

Kylie nodded at each instruction. She put the Suzuki into Drive and lifted her foot off the brake pedal. 'It's not moving?' She tapped the accelerator pedal then swung her head in Jack's direction. 'What's wrong with it?'

'Handbrake.'

'What?'

'Handbrake!'

'Oh, yeah.' Kylie grabbed the handbrake lever and pushed it down. 'Forgot about that one.' She bit her lip and put her hand back on the steering wheel as the vehicle rolled forward. 'Hmm, and we're off.'

Jack grinned. He was pleased she was keen to learn, and he was enjoying this, just the two of them doing something together. He looked at Kylie and saw her smiling as she steered the vehicle through the mud.

Kylie glanced back at him. 'This is fun. I think I'm getting the hang of it.'

'That's good. Just watch out ahead, there're a few bumpy sections coming up and they'll also be a bit deep.' Jack saw Kylie tighten her hands on the steering wheel and furrow her brow. She was concentrating on her driving. That was good. But then Jack felt the back end of the vehicle slide out a little as Kylie steered around a bend in the driveway.

Kylie looked at Jack. 'Did you feel that? What was it?'

'You need to slow down a bit around the bends. You're only running all-terrains that are low on tread so you're not getting much traction.' He saw her eyes widen as he spoke. 'Sorry, what I mean is your tyres aren't the best for driving through mud, they're more suited to dirt and gravel. Well they would be if they had some decent tread on them.'

Kylie nodded her head and slowed down. 'Ok. So what type of tyres would I need for mud?'

'Mud tyres.'

‘Yes, mud tyres. But what are they called?’

Jack grinned at her. ‘Mud tyres.’

‘Mud tyres are called mud tyres?’ She glanced at him.

‘Yep.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Well, that’s original.’

‘Yep.’ Jack laughed. He pointed at the driveway up ahead of them. ‘Here’s a rough section. Slow down a bit and let the tyres find their own line, don’t fight the steering wheel, just guide it.’ He watched her concentrate on her driving, she was going to be a quick learner. He liked that about her, and it would make it easier for her around the property if she picked things up quickly. The Suzuki bounced between the ruts until it found the base and gained traction before the driveway smoothed out again.

Kylie smiled at him. ‘I’m getting good at this.’

‘Yes, you are. You’re a quick learner.’ He nodded his head at her. ‘Now let’s see how you go in deep mud. There’s some coming up just before we get to the front gate.’

She looked up and smiled. ‘Just you watch me.’ The Suzuki got closer to the mud hole and Kylie started to slow down. ‘Do I drive the same way as before?’

‘Kind of, but you’ll need some more speed to get through the deeper mud.’

‘How deep is it exactly?’

Jack laughed. ‘Well I don’t really know. But it was pretty deep yesterday morning and we’ve had more rain since then. So I’d say it’s deeper than yesterday.’ He cocked an eyebrow at her.

‘Very funny. You know what I mean. Should I go fast or fast fast?’

Jack started laughing again. ‘Just fast should do it. And don’t back off, keep the power to the wheels until you’re out of the mud.’

Kylie nodded her head at him and concentrated on the big puddle of mud in front of her. She pressed a bit harder on the accelerator and held the steering wheel steady.

‘How’s this? Fast enough?’

‘Yep, keep going.’ Jack reached down and wound up his window.

‘Why are you doing that?’

He crossed his arms over his chest and grinned. ‘You’ll see.’

Kylie looked back at the driveway and drove the Suzuki straight into the mud. The front end of the vehicle dropped into the soft earth and spun up the muddy water. The vehicle slowed as the front wheels spat mud up all over the driver-side and passenger-side doors. Then the back wheels dropped into the hole and the vehicle lurched forward and

spat itself out of the mud at the other end. Kylie pulled up just near the letterbox at the front gate and threw her hands in the air. She turned her head and glared at Jack.

Jack covered his mouth and smothered a laugh. He pretended to cough and tried to compose himself. 'Sorry, I didn't think it would spin up that much mud.'

'You think!' She looked at herself in the rear vision mirror. 'Gross! And it stinks.' She glanced around for a rag to wipe the mud off her face.

'Here.' Jack untucked his t-shirt from the waist of his jeans and pulled it over his head. He leaned in towards her and wiped at the blobs of mud on her right arm. 'That's a lot of mud. There's some in your hair too.' She turned her head further toward him to let him reach it.

'Good thing your shirt's black.' She smirked at him. 'Will be easier for Penny to wash and no one will see the stains.'

'What? I do my own washing, thank you.'

'Sure you do!'

'But I do...' He saw the grin on her face. 'I'm more than capable of doing my own washing. I've been doing it myself for a while now, since...' His voice drifted off. Memories of his married life surfaced at the back of his mind. It was funny how something as silly as washing clothes could bring back memories. He shook his mind clear and looked back down at Kylie. Right in front of him was a new start. She was everything he could have hoped for. But the obstacles were building, fate was fighting against him, against them. He wished he could hold her in his arms and somehow make everything work out.

'Jack, what's wrong?'

'Um, nothing. I was just... seeing where the rest of the mud was.' He looked at her face. 'You have some on your cheek.' He patted at the mud on her cheek with his shirt, trying not to rub the smelly mud into her skin.

'Thanks.'

'And some on your chin.' He leaned in closer and blotted at the tiny dot of mud on her chin. The mud was smelly but now all he could smell was her. He sniffed at the scent of conditioner coming from her hair. 'And some on your neck.' He lowered his head and drank in the smell of her. He saw her lips quiver. 'Are you cold?'

'Um, no,' her voice weakened. 'Definitely not cold.'

'Good.' He dipped his face toward her neck and heard her suck in a sharp breath. His lips could feel the heat radiating from her skin as he hovered his mouth over the side

of her neck. He reached a hand up to cup the other side of her face. He knew he shouldn't but he couldn't help himself. His lips had a mind of their own and started caressing her skin. Softly at first, just fluttering along her neck line, back and forth. He thought he heard her moan but it sounded like he was underwater. Drowning in the feel of her.

'Jack.'

'Hmm.'

'Jack!'

He pulled himself away from her. 'What?'

'Look.' Kylie nodded toward the road.

Jack sat up and looked out through the dusty windscreen. 'Damn it. If it's not bloody Gazza it's the damn mail truck.'

'No damn it. We shouldn't be doing this anyway.'

Jack threw his hands in the air. 'I know, I know. But I just couldn't help myself, seeing you sitting there, all dirty from the mud.'

'So a bit of mud turns you on, hey Jack.' She winked at him. 'I'll have to remember that for next time.'

Jack's eyes widened. Next time? He liked the sound of that.

###

Kylie put the invoice from the vet under her empty teacup and opened the next letter. 'Rates? Why am I getting...?' She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. 'Of course, rates. Yes, I own the property now. I forgot about the rates.' Damn the mailman for bringing her more bills. They were the last thing she needed right now.

'Knock, knock,' Penny called from the back door. 'Anyone home?'

'Oh, hi Penny. Come in.' She slapped her palm against her forehead and sighed.

Penny opened the screen door and walked into the kitchen. 'Dear, whatever is the matter?'

Kylie shook her head to clear it and smiled up at Penny. 'It's nothing. Just a few letters arrived in the mail, that's all.' She patted at the kitchen table in front of an empty chair. 'Here, sit down and I'll put a pot of tea on.' She pushed the rest of the mail aside and walked over to the sink.

‘That would be lovely.’ Penny pulled the chair out and sat down. ‘I was just out at the kennels and I tried to talk to Jack but he was in a bit of a bad mood.’ She coughed to clear her throat. ‘Do you happen to know why, dear?’

Kylie chortled. ‘Um, I’m not really sure. Maybe because of...’ How could she tell Jack’s mother that he was probably in a bad mood because they were about to make out in the Suzuki, when they really shouldn’t even be going there. And they got interrupted, again. Which was probably a good thing because not long after Jack took his shirt off she wanted to rip his jeans off too. Definitely not the type of thing you share with your boyfriend’s mother. *Boyfriend?* Kylie looked out the window in the direction of Jack’s cottage and smiled. *Boyfriend.* She liked the sound of that. Then she frowned. But would it be possible?

‘What is it dear? You look sad. Just like Jack.’ Penny tilted her head to the side as she watched Kylie.

‘Oh, it’s nothing.’ She waved a dismissive hand in the air and turned back toward the sink. She filled the kettle and put it on the stove. ‘Jack’s probably just trying to work out how Ace got out the other day, that’s all.’

‘Yes, that could be it. Ace is usually better behaved though. Any time I’ve seen him out of his kennel he’s never too far away from Jack’s side, so it is a bit strange for him to go wondering off like that.’

Kylie lit the gas hob under the kettle and took a teapot and cup down from the shelf. ‘That’s what Jack said too, so something must have gotten Ace’s attention for him to follow it away from the property.’ She looked toward the window again. They shouldn’t have been doing that in the Suzuki. And yet she didn’t want him to stop either.

‘What is it dear? You seem so preoccupied with something.’

Kylie shrugged her shoulders and sighed. She couldn’t tell Penny any of that. She frowned and nodded at the table. ‘More bills arrived in the mail today.’ She pushed the small pile of letters into the centre of the table. ‘I was expecting the one from the vet,’ she tapped the letter lying open on the table. ‘But not the rest of these.’ She picked up the rates notice from the top of the pile. ‘Why are the rates so high? That’s extortion!’

Penny laughed. ‘That’s exactly what Buffy used to say every time the rates went up.’

‘But this is more than what I paid for my Suzuki! How can they justify this charge?’ Kylie threw the letter back on the table. She poured the boiled water into the

teapot and dropped the mesh tea infuser in. ‘No wonder so many farms are going under in this country.’

Penny nodded her head. ‘Yes, I agree dear. It is a ridiculous amount of money for so little in return.’ She accepted the teacup Kylie slid over to her. ‘Buffy used to pay in instalments, so you should be able to as well, I would think.’

‘I hope so.’ Kylie put the small jug of cream on the table and sat down.

Penny poured some cream into her tea. ‘So dear, tell me about the driving lesson you had today with Jack. He said it went well. He said you had his full attention.’

Kylie spluttered into her teacup. ‘I’m sure I did.’

Chapter 7

Kylie watched out of the pub window, checking each car that pulled into the carpark. She finished off the Diet Coke she'd been nursing for the last 30 minutes, the ice long gone, leaving the last mouthful tasting like lolly-water.

Finally! She pushed her chair back and stood up, and waved to the occupant of the Mercedes that pulled into one of the parking spots. *About time.* She ran outside and threw her arms around Jennifer. 'It's so good to see you, it feels like it's been ages.'

'I know, I know,' Jennifer stood back and looked at Kylie. 'And don't you look good. This country air must be doing you some good, or at least something is doing you good. It's not that sexy cowboy, is it?'

Kylie sucked in a quick breath as her eyes widened.

'It is?' Jennifer yelled at her. 'It is, isn't it,' she nodded her head at Kylie.

'No..., it's not.'

'Yes it is Ky, you can't hide that look from me.'

'Not here,' Kylie started to push Jennifer back into her car. 'Follow me out to the property. I'll fill you in there.'

'Ok, ok,' Jennifer threw both hands into the air and slid back into the driver's seat of the Mercedes.

'This house is huge... and old... and creepy.' Jennifer dropped her bag on the floor of the entry foyer and wrapped both arms around herself. She looked to the left and to the right, then her eyes followed the staircase as it wound itself up to the second floor. 'How can you stay here on your own?'

'Gee, thanks for that Jennifer, just what I wanted to hear.' Kylie picked up Jennifer's bag and started up the stairs. 'You'll have to share with me while you're here, none of the other rooms are liveable at the moment.'

'Eh, somehow that's not hard to believe.'

'So how long are you staying?' Kylie asked as they walked into the main bedroom.

Jennifer threw herself onto the bed and laughed. 'However long it takes to find out all about your sexy cowboy, of course.'

'Ha, ha, not funny. He is not my sexy cowboy.'

'Come on Ky, you can't keep a secret from me, I know you too well.'

Kylie slumped down into the chair near the window and looked out across the property. She sighed then looked back at her best friend who was grinning at her. 'I never could keep anything from you, could I?'

'Nope.' Jennifer sat up and threw a small bed cushion at Kylie. 'So cough up, give me all the goss on the hot sexy cowboy before I smother you in bed cushions,' she threatened, grinning again.

Kylie tossed her head back and laughed. 'So now he's hot and sexy?'

'You bet, and once I clap my eyes on him I'll let you know what other words come to mind,' she winked.

'Jennifer, you're incorrigible.'

'Ha, you're just lucky I'm already married otherwise I'd be staying here until I found myself a hot and sexy cowboy to get all down and dirty with.'

Kylie laughed again and stood up. 'That reminds me, you'd better change before I show you around the place. Something comfy that you don't mind getting dirty.'

'What's wrong with this?' Jennifer gestured to her outfit.

'Nothing, if you're happy to slide those heels into chicken poo.'

'Eww!'

'And get dust and puppy slobber all over that silk blouse.'

'Puppies!' Jennifer stood up. 'You didn't say anything about puppies. You know I love puppies. That's the only reason why I call in to see you at work, to see the puppies, not you.' Jennifer stuck her tongue out at Kylie and started rummaging through her overnight bag.

'I'll put the kettle on and wait for you downstairs.' Kylie closed the bedroom door behind her and leaned up against it. She closed her eyes and exhaled a deep breath. She loved spending time with Jennifer but she wasn't sure if it would help her any with deciding whether or not to sell or keep the place. But at least she'd have someone else here to bounce her thoughts off, for the next couple of days anyway.

'So, what's on the agenda for the weekend?' Jennifer asked as she walked into the kitchen tying her hair back in a ponytail. 'Other than stepping in chook poo and getting smothered in dog slobber, of course.'

Kylie looked up at Jennifer. 'That outfit is definitely better for chook poo sliding and dog slobber wiping.' She grabbed another mug off the dish rack. 'Coffee?'

'Yes please, a coffee would be fab.' Jennifer slid into a chair and rested her elbows on the table.

‘I only have the nasty instant stuff I’m afraid, will that do?’

‘Holy crap, kill me now. What is this, are we in the back of whoop-whoop or somewhere?’ Jennifer pulled a face at Kylie.

‘Ha, ha, very funny. And yes, we are pretty much in whoop-whoop out here. The closest cafe that makes a not-quite decent coffee is the bistro at the pub.’

Jennifer slapped the palm of her hand on her forehead. ‘Why didn’t you tell me that before we left the pub?’

‘Because we were in a bit of a hurry. After we check out the rest of the property we have a barn dance to go to tonight.’

‘A barn dance?’

‘Well, a birthday party actually, that just happens to be in a barn. It’s all the rage out here in whoop-whoop, it’s the latest thing.’ Kylie jiggled her eyebrows at her.

‘Oh, I’m sure it is.’ Jennifer took the mug that Kylie was holding out to her. She sniffed the coffee and pulled a face. ‘Eww.’

Kylie stuck her tongue out. ‘Well, you’ll just have to put up with it while you’re here. Don’t worry, it won’t kill you.’

‘Are you sure about that? It looks like dishwater and smells like bitter dirt.’

‘Nah, pretty sure it tastes like bitter red dirt.’ Kylie laughed.

‘Huh?’ Jennifer looked at her.

Kylie rolled her eyes at Jennifer. ‘You know, red dirt,’ she gestured out the window.

‘Oh, derr, silly me, I get it.’ Jennifer threw her head back and laughed. ‘So I guess everyone at the party tonight will spot me as a city gal straight away then.’

‘Ah, yup! That they will.’

###

Jennifer held her hands over her ears and tapped Kylie with her foot. ‘It’s so loud!’

‘Let’s go outside for a break!’ Kylie yelled back at her.

Jennifer grabbed two fresh drinks from the bar and followed Kylie outside.

‘Oh Jennifer, you know I don’t like beer.’

Jennifer took a sip from one of the drinks. ‘And who said the other one is for you?’ She took another sip of her drink and spilt a little on the ground, making her giggle.

‘Maybe it’s time we headed back home, the party seems to be winding down a bit now anyway,’ she suggested to Jennifer.

‘Aww, but it’s just starting to get fun. And where is your sexy cowboy? I haven’t even met him yet. Is he coming to the party? I hope he gets here soon, I’m getting a little sleepy...’ Jennifer covered her yawn with her hand, spilling more of her drink.

‘Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll get to meet him tomorrow.’ Kylie grabbed Jennifer’s arm and started to pull her toward the car. ‘Come on Jennifer, let’s get you to bed.’

‘Oh, to bed, I like the sound of that. But with who? Ky, who am I going to bed with? Not your sexy cowboy, he’s yours. I wouldn’t take him off you, would I... no, I wouldn’t. Hey Ky, I know who. I think I’m married. Ky, am I married? Can I go to bed with whoever I married? That would be nice, hey Ky.’ Jennifer slumped against the car, spilling the remainder of both drinks on the ground.

‘Oh Jennifer, what am I going to do with you?’

‘Ha, ha, you can just love me Ky. You do love me don’t you Ky? I love you...’

Kylie sighed. ‘Yes, I love you.’ She turned when she heard footfalls on the gravel behind her.

‘Were you talking to me, Kylie?’ Jack said as he stepped into the light coming from the open barn door.

Kylie felt her face heat up. Her, love Jack? Well... ‘Oh, hi Jack. Sorry, I was talking to Jennifer.’ She gestured toward Jennifer who was now slung partly over the bonnet of the car.

Jack tipped his hat. ‘Good evening Jennifer, nice to meet you.’

Jennifer looked up at Jack and lurched forward. ‘The sexy cowboy, you’re here!’ She wrapped her arms around Jack’s waist and groaned. ‘I love you, Jack. Are you going to have sex with my Ky?’

‘Jennifer!’ Kylie sucked in a sharp breath.

‘It’s all right,’ Jennifer waved an arm in the air, letting go of Jack for a moment. ‘I’ll sleep with him if you don’t. Am I still married, Ky?’

‘I’m sorry Jack, she doesn’t usually get this drunk.’ Kylie grabbed hold of Jennifer’s arm and tried to pull her off him. ‘Come on Jennifer, time to head home.’

‘Hang on, I think I need to tell the sexy cowboy something.’ Jennifer swayed back and forth, then looked down at Jack’s boots. ‘What lovely boots you have. Oh no, I feel a

little...’ Jennifer clutched at her stomach just as her mouth opened to vomit all over Jack’s boots and up both of his denim clad legs.

‘Oh my god, Jennifer?’ Kylie pushed her back away from Jack. ‘I’m so sorry Jack, I didn’t realise she’d had that much to drink tonight.’

Jack took a few steps away from the girls and shook what he could of the vomit off his jeans and boots. ‘That’s ok, don’t worry about it. I’ve had worse things spewed on me, I think,’ he laughed.

‘That may be so but Jennifer should know better than to drink like that, she’s not a teenager.’ She gave Jennifer the evil eye as she bundled her into the backseat of the car and wound down the window for her. ‘If you need to spew again please stick your head outside the window. Let’s get you home so you can get cleaned up.’

Jennifer leaned her head on the window sill and stuck her thumb out of the open window, giving Kylie the thumbs up. ‘Ok mum, whatever you say.’

Jack leaned his hip up against the car and put a hand on his other hip. ‘Will you be right getting her home on your own? Do you want a hand?’

‘No, no, we should be right. Thanks.’ She walked around to the driver’s side and opened the door.

Jack looked at her over the top of the car. ‘Are you sure? You will probably need a hand getting her up the stairs. I can’t really picture you getting her up there on your own.’

Kylie looked into the backseat at Jennifer, who now had her head tilted back against the headrest and was fast asleep. The interior light highlighting some vomit still on her chin. Kylie looked back at Jack and shrugged her shoulders. ‘Maybe you’re right.’

‘I’ll follow you back. Just give me a sec, have to tell Gazza I’ll be back for him later.’ Jack walked back toward the barn, still trying to flick his boots clean.

Kylie slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine. She heard a snort come from Jennifer in the backseat. ‘Great job tonight Jennifer, and just when I’ve been trying to keep my distance from Jack too and now I have him coming over to my place late at night. Lucky it’s not the city otherwise the neighbours sure would be gossiping.’

Jennifer offered up another snort followed by a grunt, and slumped over onto her side.

Kylie turned the interior light on to check. ‘No worries Jennifer, I’ll take it from here, you just... sleep.’

###

Kylie reached forward to put her key into the door lock and gasped. ‘Jack, the door is open.’

Jack put Jennifer down on the step. ‘Hold her up, I’ll check inside.’

Kylie sat down beside Jennifer and let her lean against her. She pulled a tissue out of her handbag and tried to wipe the now-dried vomit off Jennifer’s chin. She could hear Jack inside, opening and closing doors, but no loud noises or commotion, so hopefully she’d just been absent-minded and had left the door open herself.

‘Damn those bastards!’ Jack reappeared at the door, scowling.

Kylie jumped up, letting Jennifer fall onto her side. ‘What is it?’

‘Someone’s broken in and trashed the place. They’ve gone through all your stuff, thrown things all over the floor. Not sure what they took though, you’ll have to have a look for yourself.’ He picked Jennifer up and carried her inside, and placed her on the lounge.

Kylie walked in behind him and looked around her. The place was a mess. Drawers had been upturned and their contents strewn all over the floor. Cupboards had been emptied. She ran up the stairs to check the bedrooms. It was even worse in her room. The mattress was flipped up against a wall and the wardrobe had been turned inside-out. Even her underwear had been rifled through. She shivered at the thought. Was someone after her? Were they stalking her? Did they have some sort of sexual interest in her? Were they planning on hurting her? She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered again.

‘Are you ok?’

She jumped out of her skin when Jack walked up behind her.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.’

‘No need to scare me, I’m already shit scared.’ She turned to face him, trying to stay strong, but the tears started as soon as she saw the concern in his eyes. She fell into his arms and sobbed into his shirt. He tightened his arms around her but she only sobbed harder so she forced herself to pull away from him. She shouldn’t let him hold her, she couldn’t. It wasn’t right. But why, oh, why can’t it be right. This half-cousin business was doing her head in.

Jack released her and looked around her room. ‘They sure did a number in here. Is anything missing?’

She shook her head. 'I don't think so, but I'll get a better idea in the morning.'

He sucked in a breath. 'Maybe they were looking for something?'

Kylie shrugged her shoulders. 'But what? Everything in this house is old and daggy.'

Jack cracked a small grin. 'Well that's true.'

She smiled back at him, glad that the earlier moment had passed. 'Should I ring the police? Do you think it's serious enough?'

Jack scratched at the back of his head. 'I don't know. Probably not if nothing was nicked. Old Clem gets a bit annoyed if his drinking time gets wasted on criminal matters,' he grinned at her again.

She rolled her eyes at him. 'Yes, I know exactly what you mean. Maybe we'll just keep it to ourselves for the time being then.'

'Something strange is definitely going on though, maybe it was the same people who trashed your motel room?'

'Oh, I hadn't thought of that. Yes, it does seem too much of a coincidence now.'

'I'll check with Mum and Dad in the morning. Maybe they saw or heard something tonight while we were out.'

'Oh, Jennifer! I forgot about Jennifer.' Kylie raced back down the stairs with Jack following. She stopped just short of the lounge and looked at Jack. They both laughed when they saw Jennifer flat on her back snoring.

'Somehow I don't think she'll be up to guard duty tonight. How about I go get Ace and leave him here with you for the night?'

Kylie put a hand on his arm. 'Oh, could you? That would be great, I'd really appreciate that Jack. I'd feel much safer with him in the house.'

'No worries, be back in a tick.'

Kylie bolted the back door after Jack left. She returned to the lounge and tried to wake Jennifer to get her to bed but she wasn't budging. Kylie covered her with the lounge throw instead and let her sleep it off on the lounge. 'A night on the lounge won't kill you, hey Jennifer.' She planted a kiss on her forehead. 'Especially after your little upchuck tonight, I'll be sure to tease you about it tomorrow, mark my words,' she grinned. She looked up and saw headlights sweep the window. 'See you in the morning, and yes Jennifer, you are married.' She walked over to the backdoor to let Jack and Ace in.

'Why did you open the door? How did you know it was me?' Jack demanded when she opened the door.

‘Robbers don’t usually announce their arrival by flashing their headlights through the house window.’ She placed a hand on her hip as she looked up at him. ‘And anyway, I knew you’d be back soon, so you would be able to save me from the big bad meanies,’ she battered her eyelids at him.

‘I see you’re in a better mood now, Ms Cheeky.’

Kylie smiled at him. ‘I just remembered something Jennifer was asking earlier in the night and it made me smile, that’s all.’

‘Well, it’s good to see you smile again Kylie.’ Jack touched her chin with the tips of his fingers, he ran his thumb up her cheek, and tilted her mouth toward him. He lowered his head slowly.

‘No!’ Kylie jumped back, startling Ace, who came and sat next to her feet. ‘You know we can’t do this, it’s not right.’

Jack bowed his head and stepped back onto the door sill. ‘I know, I know, I’m sorry. I keep forgetting, or at least I keep wanting to forget.’

Kylie patted Ace behind his ear before looking up at Jack. ‘That’s ok, me too.’

‘Ace, stay,’ Jack gave Ace a hand signal. ‘Well, I’ll see you in the morning then.’ He tipped his head and left.

Kylie bolted the door again and sighed. ‘Why does life have to be so unfair, hey Ace.’ Ace twitched his ears and followed her up the stairs to her room.

###

Kylie bolted upright. A loud scream was coming from downstairs. The sun was streaming in through the thin curtains so it must be a bit passed her usual wake up time. She threw the bedclothes back and ran down the stairs as quickly as she could in her half-asleep state. She stumbled into the lounge room and skidded to a stop in front of the lounge. And burst out laughing.

‘Stop laughing, it’s not funny!’ Jennifer yelled at her. ‘I’ve had the most god-awful fright. Get this beast off me!’

Kylie grinned at her. ‘Aw, but he looks like he really loves you.’

‘Like hell he does. He just spent the last two minutes pinning me to the lounge while he licked my entire face clean. It was gross!’

‘Oh Jennifer, he was probably just giving you kisses,’ she pouted.

‘Like hell he was. He was practically tearing my skin off with that tongue of his and then I swear he started nibbling at my lips with his teeth.’

Kylie cocked an eyebrow at her. ‘Actually Jennifer, I think I know what he may have been doing to your face.’

‘What?’ Jennifer shrieked.

‘Well I think he may have been licking the vomit off.’

‘Vomit off my face? Ky, what on earth are you taking about?’

‘Oh, I guess you don’t remember.’

‘Kylie Douglas, you better tell me right now exactly what you’re going on about or I’ll...’

Kylie looked at Ace turning his head to each side as Jennifer got more aggravated. ‘Or you’ll what?’

‘For Christ’s sake, just tell me what happened last night,’ Jennifer hissed at her through clenched teeth.

‘Well, do you remember drinking at the barn dance last night?’

Jennifer nodded her head.

‘And do you remember meeting the sexy cowboy?’

Jennifer shook her head.

‘That’s probably because you vomited all over him.’

Jennifer’s jaw dropped open.

‘Which is probably what Ace is cleaning off your face, the dried vomit from last night.’

Jennifer shrieked again and jumped off the lounge, sending Ace into hysterics right along with her. He jumped up at her and tried to grab her arm and pull her back to the lounge.

‘Ky, make him stop.’

‘Ace, sit!’ Kylie pointed a finger at the floor and the dog sat.

‘Oh, thank goodness, I thought he was going to kill me.’

‘Don’t be so dramatic Jennifer, he was actually trying to put you back on the lounge, he thought something was wrong with you.’

‘Oh, did he?’ Jennifer looked at Ace and sucked in a few calming breaths. ‘Well, yes, I suppose he was.’

Kylie stood next to Jennifer and looked at Ace. ‘Ace, come.’ She pointed to the floor directly in front of her. Ace walked over and sat in front of her feet. ‘See, he’s very

well trained. He wouldn't hurt you unless you were attacking someone he knew.' She reached down and petted him behind both ears. 'You're a good boy Ace, aren't you? He was our guard dog last night.'

'Guard dog? What did we need a guard dog for?'

Kylie swept her hand around the room. 'Because of this.'

Jennifer's eyes widened as she took in the condition of the room. 'Oh, right. Boy I must have had a lot to drink because I don't remember anything.' Jennifer looked back at Kylie. 'Did I really spew all over your sexy cowboy?'

'Yes, you did.' Kylie nodded at her. 'And he's not my sexy cowboy, please remember that.'

'Why not?'

'Well, he can't be. Let's just leave it at that. Now we need to get this place cleaned up so I can see if anything is missing.'

'Yes ma'am,' Jennifer saluted at Kylie. 'But seriously, I need a really hot shower first.' She darted up the stairs.

'That was a long shower,' Kylie said when Jennifer came back down stairs.

'Yeah, well, it took a while to get all of the vomit out of my hair.'

'You must have vomited some more when you were laying on the back seat of your car.'

Jennifer's head snapped up. 'Back seat of my car?'

'Yes,' Kylie swept some broken crockery into the dust pan. 'Your car.'

'That's right, we took my car last night. And I vomited in it, I vomited in my car. Gross!' Jennifer grabbed the sponge from the sink and filled a bowl with hot soapy water.

'What are you doing?'

'I vomited in my car, in my MERC! Gross!' She rushed outside with the bowl and sponge, spilling the water with each step. Ace charged after her, nipping at her heels.

Kylie threw her head back and laughed. It felt good to laugh, especially after all the turmoil with the half-cousin issue. Of all the dumb luck she'd been having with men, trust her next love interest to be *maybe* related to her. She sighed and went back to cleaning up the lounge room. She took the full dustpan into the kitchen and emptied it in the bin. The damage in the kitchen was worse. All the cupboards had been searched and every drawer had its contents dumped on the floor. Broken glass and crockery littered the floor. Kylie tip-toed through the mess toward the fridge and checked to see what cold items needed to be replaced. She closed the fridge and turned toward the bench.

No! The breadbin was upside-down and was laying on top of the loaf of bread. The urn. The photos. Where were they? Kylie picked the breadbin up and shook it. Nothing. She turned it the right way up and sat it back on the bench. She grabbed the loaf of bread and slid the metal door up to put the bread back inside. *Yes!* The box was still in the breadbin. It was wedged inside, probably from being thrown by whoever broke in. She let out a sigh and sat down at the kitchen table. *Thank goodness for small miracles.* Her hands shook. What was going on? Why was someone breaking in? Not just here but at the motel too. Was it actually the box that they wanted and they couldn't find it because it got stuck in the breadbin, or was it something else that they were after? They were definitely after something, she knew that much at least. But what?

She wasn't going to take any chances though. *Maybe I should hide the box somewhere else. Somewhere that's not actually in the house, but close by.* She tapped a finger on the edge of the table top. *I know.* She jumped up and took the box out of the breadbin and ran upstairs. In her bedroom she slid the box in amongst the dirty clothes in her laundry basket and took the basket downstairs. She threw a few other things into the basket from the kitchen then walked out the back to the lean-to that housed the laundry.

Just in case someone is watching, I'll pretend I'm just putting a load of washing on. But while I'm in here I'll slip the box out of the basket and hide it right... here. Kylie looked up at the timber shelf that ran from one side to the other side across the back wall of the small room. On the shelf were an assortment of rusty old tins. She grabbed the stepladder and climbed up with the box under her arm. *Ok, so should I put it in a Lux tin or a Rinso tin? No wait. A Sunlight tin, of course, that one looks a lot more cheerful.* She grinned and reached over the other tins, and let the box drop into the Sunlight tin. *I don't think anyone will look in there.*

She stepped down off the stepladder and looked around. Just in case anyone was watching her she spoke out loud. 'Guess I should probably put that load of washing on.' She opened the lid of the washing machine and started putting some items in. 'Thank goodness this place has a modern washing machine. I don't think I could stand it if I had to use one of those old wringer ones.'

'Ringer what?'

Kylie jumped. 'Oh, Jennifer. You scared the you-know-what out of me.' She thumped her chest with her hand.

'Sorry about that, I thought you would have heard me calling out.'

'No, I was a bit distracted.'

‘I see. Thinking about anyone in particular?’ Jennifer leaned against the doorframe and folded her arms over her chest. ‘Someone tall, dark, and sexy perhaps?’

Kylie turned away from the machine and threw a tea towel at her. ‘Jennifer, you’re incorrigible.’

###

‘Jennifer, I said stop gawking!’ Kylie hissed at her again.

‘It’s not my fault he’s so gorgeous, and anyway, he can’t see my face clearly from over there.’

‘I’m pretty sure he can see your gaping mouth from a few miles away.’ Kylie rolled her eyes at Jennifer and looked over at Jack. He was training the dogs again, something she loved to watch. She leaned forward on the bench, placed her elbows on her knees and cradled her face in her upturned hands.

‘I’m sorry Ky, but you can’t tell me you don’t have the hots for your sexy cowboy. It’s written all over your face every time you look at him, or speak about him, or even just think about him for that matter.’

Kylie sighed. Should she tell Jennifer what was going on? But how could she when she didn’t really know herself. She still hadn’t heard anything back from Tricia and she didn’t know who else to ask. And how do you ask someone about your grandmother possibly having an affair? And who would even remember all those years ago?

‘Oh no.’ Jennifer sat up straight and adjusted her top. ‘He’s coming over here.’

Kylie looked at Jennifer and rolled her eyes again. ‘Jennifer, you are married, remember?’

‘I know, I know, but he is sexy,’ she winked.

Kylie shook her head. ‘What am I going to do with you?’

‘Don’t worry about what you’re going to do with me. Worry about what you’re going to do with him, naked,’ Jennifer laughed.

‘You’re not funny.’

Jennifer poked her tongue out at Kylie.

‘What have you girls been up to this morning?’ Jack asked as he arrived at the bench with one of the dogs he was training.

Jennifer grinned up at him. ‘Nothing much, just doing a little pervy.’

Kylie slapped her on the forearm. 'The dogs, we were just watching the dogs go through their paces.' She turned to Jennifer and gave her the evil eye.

Jack bent down and patted the dog that was sitting at his feet. 'Yeah, I'm really pleased with this one's progress. It's going to be hard to choose who to take to the Nationals.'

'Why don't you take Kylie?' Jennifer said.

Jack laughed. 'Well I can't really see Kylie herding sheep, but she's welcome to try.' He looked at Jennifer and grinned. 'I meant which dog to take, I've been working a couple of them lately and they've all been pretty good.'

'Oh, silly me,' Jennifer slapped her forehead with the palm of her hand. 'Well, you could still take Kylie, you know, for company, or something,' she winked at him.

Kylie raised a hand to slap her again but Jennifer moved out of reach.

Jennifer laughed and held up the palms of both of her hands. 'Sorry, sorry, I was only joking.'

'But what about Ace?' Kylie asked Jack. 'I thought he was your best?'

'I'm still taking Ace, he's my best chance at winning the Open. But I want to have a go at the Maiden too.'

'What about Ace Jr?' Kylie suggested, nodding her head.

'He's still a bit young, and not quite ready. But next year for sure.'

'And who is this you have today?' Kylie patted the dog in front of her.

'This young lady is Bella, and she's getting pretty good, so she may be a contender.'

'Aren't you a pretty girl, hey Bella,' Jennifer knelt down and rubbed Bella behind the ears. Bella nudged Jennifer's hand then licked her on the cheek. 'And a licky girl too,' she laughed as Bella licked her face again. 'She's such a cutie.'

'Hey, what are you girls doing tonight?' Jack asked.

Kylie looked at Jennifer and shrugged her shoulders. 'We haven't thought that far ahead, so probably not much, why.'

'Mum wanted you both to come over to the house for a barbecue, so she can meet Jennifer properly.'

'Aw, that would be great, I'd love to meet your mum Jack,' Jennifer smiled at him.

'Cool, ok. So say around 5ish, then?' The girls nodded at him.

###

‘Hi girls. Hi Jennifer, it’s so nice to meet you.’ Penny gave Jennifer a quick hug before sitting down at the table. ‘I’m so glad you could all come over for a barbecue, it’s been a while since we’ve had a meal together.’

‘It hasn’t been that long Mum,’ Jack said.

‘Well, you know what I mean son.’ Penny looked back at the girls. ‘And what have you girls been up to this weekend?’

Jennifer smiled. ‘Well, last night I went to my first ever barn dance, got drunk, vomited on Jack’s boots, passed out on the lounge, cleaned the rest of the vomit out of my car, watched some dogs being trained, and am now about to sink my teeth into the most delicious smelling lamb. A pretty good weekend by any standards.’ Jennifer threw her head back and laughed.

‘My gosh, you have been busy. It sounds like you certainly have been having a good time Jennifer.’

‘Yes, it’s been great catching up with Kylie, and meeting all of you guys of course. I can see why Kylie loves it here.’

Everybody turned and looked at Kylie. She felt herself blush. Yes, she did love it here, and was starting to love everyone who lived here too. But there were still things left up in the air that she had no control over. She didn’t know what to say, so she smiled.

‘Can I have some more lamb please Frank?’

‘Of course, lass,’ Frank sliced more lamb off the barbecue spit.

Jennifer looked at Frank. ‘More for me too thanks. That lamb tastes so good, it’s the best I’ve ever tasted.’

‘I’ll bet it’s the freshest you’ve ever tasted too,’ Kylie winked at her.

‘Freshest? Why would it be the freshest I’ve ever tasted...’ Jennifer dropped her fork. ‘Do you mean to tell me that I’m munching on one of those cute fluffy guys that I saw on my way up the driveway when I first arrived?’

Kylie nodded her head. ‘Ah ha, yep.’

Jennifer looked around the table and over to what was left of the small lamb hanging on the spit on the barbecue. She gulped, then shrugged her shoulders. ‘Oh well, it sure does taste great.’ She picked up her fork and started eating again, making everyone laugh.

‘We’ll make a country girl of you too lassie,’ Frank chuckled. ‘We’ve nearly converted Kylie here,’ he nodded his head in Kylie’s direction. ‘Just need to get her out on a muster with us and I reckon the dust under her skin will have her yee-hawing before we know it,’ he grinned.

###

‘Yuck, I can still smell it.’ Jennifer waved her hand in front of her nose and slammed the door of her Mercedes shut. ‘It’s so gross.’

‘Well, it’s your own fault.’ Kylie grinned at her.

Jennifer walked around to the rear of the car and opened the trunk. She put her bags in and pulled something out of her jean’s pocket. ‘Can you give this to Jack for me please? I forgot to give it to him when I saw him last time.’ She handed Kylie two fifty dollar notes.

‘What’s this for?’

‘To get his jeans and boots dry cleaned, after I, you know, spewed all over him at the barn dance.’ Jennifer’s cheeks darkened as she ducked her head behind the lid of the trunk and re-arranged her bags.

‘Yeah, sure. But that’s a lot of money.’ Kylie unfolded the notes and smoothed them out on her palm. ‘He probably won’t accept it. And knowing him he would have just hosed the vomit off his boots and thrown his jeans into the washing machine.’

‘I know, but it’s the least I can do.’ She closed the trunk and looked at Kylie. ‘I’ll give you a call once I hear back from my cousin.’

‘Thanks.’ Kylie put the money in her pocket. ‘Saves me paying for birth certificates if she can check them for me instead.’

‘Yes, it’s nice to have relatives working in government departments,’ Jennifer grinned.

‘Though I have a feeling there won’t be anyone listed as the father, for me or my mother.’ Kylie’s eyes glazed over. ‘Another empty space in my pathetic life.’

‘KY! Stop it.’ Jennifer walked over to her and put her hands on Kylie’s shoulders. ‘You listen to me missy. You are a great person and you have a great life. Look around you.’ She stepped back and swept a hand over the surrounding landscape. ‘You have all of this.’ She gestured toward Penny and Frank’s house. ‘You have them.’ Jennifer then wiggled her eyebrows at Kylie and gestured toward Jack’s cottage. ‘And you have your

sexy cowboy. What more could a girl want?’ She looked back at Kylie. ‘Oh, and me. You have me of course. See, your life really is perfect.’

Kylie grinned. ‘Yes Jennifer. You do have a point. It is pretty fab out here.’

‘It’s fab all right. Beats the city any day.’ Jennifer lowered her voice and spoke out of the side of her mouth. ‘And speaking of sexy cowboys, here he comes now.’ She nodded at the ute that was coming toward them. ‘He must have known we were talking about him,’ she laughed.

Kylie watched Jack’s ute approach. He pulled up in front of them and wound down the window. His eyes searched out Kylie’s and they held each other’s gaze for the briefest of moments.

‘Kylie.’ He mouthed her name, drawing her attention to his dusty lips. The same lips that were, not too long ago, brushing against her neck and driving her insane. She tore her gaze away and kicked at the dirt under her feet.

Jennifer coughed. ‘Hi Jack. I’m heading off today.’

‘Lucky I caught you then.’ He picked something up from the seat next to him and held it out the window. ‘Here. I thought you could use it. Found it on the shelf in the back of the shed.’

‘Oh, thanks Jack. Exactly what I need.’ Jennifer shook the large can and opened the back door of her car. She held the seat belt to the side and sprayed the upholstery cleaner over the back seat and over the floor carpet. She closed the door and laughed. ‘I’d prefer to smell that all the way home than the stinky...’ She stopped talking and nudged Kylie with her arm.

‘What?’

Jennifer nodded toward the ute. ‘That.’

Kylie looked over the saw Jack still sitting in the ute. He was looking off into the distance.

‘Ky, I hope he’s not mad at me still.’

Kylie patted Jennifer on the arm. ‘Don’t worry Jennifer, I’m pretty sure he’s not mad at you.’ She walked over to the ute. ‘Hey, Jack.’ She put her hands in the back pockets of her jeans and smiled at him. ‘Is anything wrong?’

‘Nah.’ Jack shook his head. ‘Just thinking. You know, about stuff.’

Kylie nodded her head at him. ‘Yep, I know about stuff.’

He turned and looked at her. ‘Yeah, I suppose we both have a lot of stuff to think about.’

‘That we do.’ She reached into the front pocket of her jeans and held the money out to him. ‘Um, here. It’s from Jennifer, to get your stuff cleaned that she vomited on.’

Jack waved his hand in the air. ‘No need. I took care of them.’

‘Yes, I assumed you would have, but... just take it please. Or you’ll make her feel bad. Ok?’

‘Kylie, I really don’t want to. And it looks like it’s far too much anyway.’

‘I know, but just take it please. She feels really bad about what happened.’

Jack shook his head. ‘No, it’s not right...’ He grunted at her when she dropped the money into his lap.

‘Good,’ she grinned at him and leaned her arm on the window sill. ‘She’ll be happy now that you’ve taken it.’

Jack screwed his nose up at her. ‘Very funny, Miss Smarty Pants.’

Kylie leaned in and lowered her voice. ‘So I’ll bet you just hosed off your boots and threw your jeans into the washing machine to get the vomit off. Right?’

Jack ran his finger along the length of her forearm. He looked up at her and grinned. ‘Um, yep.’

Kylie rolled her eyes at him. ‘How did I guess that.’

He chuckled. ‘See. Told you I do my own washing.’ He ducked his head when she lifted her hand to slap him. ‘I’m getting out of here before I get more money thrown at me by cheeky women who just want me to take my clothes off so they can wash them.’

‘Why you...’ Kylie pouted at him as the ute pulled away.

‘See you Jennifer. Hope you make it back for another visit sometime soon, but please, BYO bucket.’ Jack grinned and waved from the ute before disappearing around the corner of the homestead.

‘Now who’s the cheeky one!’ Kylie called after him. She shook her head and walked back over to Jennifer’s car. ‘He’s just mucking around.’

‘Don’t worry, I know that.’ Jennifer tilted her head and looked at Kylie. ‘So, did you give him the money?’

Kylie nodded her head. ‘Eventually. He wouldn’t take it, just like I said, so I dropped it into his lap.’

‘Ah, good thinking.’ Jennifer put her hands on her hips. ‘And he already washed his vomit jeans, didn’t he?’

‘Yep.’ Kylie looked off in the direction the ute went and smiled. She was already thinking about what the future could hold. What it could mean for them all. If only she could piece everything together and find out the truth.

‘That certainly is a very big smile on your face missy. Is there something you’re not telling me?’

‘Oh, it’s nothing.’ Kylie waved a hand in the air. ‘And you have a long drive ahead of you. I want you to get back to Brissy in one piece.’

‘Hm!’ Jennifer stomped over to the stairs and plonked herself down. ‘I’m not going anywhere until you spill your guts, Kylie Douglas.’ She patted the space on the step beside her. ‘So you better get your gut-spilling-butt over here right now.’ She pursed her lips and pointed a finger at her. ‘I knew there was something going on with you from the moment I got here. And I’ll just bet it has something to do with why you haven’t yet hooked up with your sexy cowboy. Am I right?’

Kylie sat down on the step beside her and rubbed her face with her hands.

‘Well am I right? Because if it was me out here, I’d have dragged his sexy arse straight to the Registry office as soon as I clapped eyes on him. So what’s going on?’

‘It’s all a bit... complicated.’

‘Complicated? Men are always complicating things, it’s what they’re best at, I reckon,’ Jennifer snorted.

‘Oh, it’s not Jack’s fault. It’s my grandmother’s fault, I suppose.’ Kylie paused. Was it really all Buffy’s fault? She knew she shouldn’t blame her. It wasn’t really her fault she fell in love with two men. If anything, Buffy was lucky to have had two great loves during her lifetime. But it sure as hell made things complicated for those who came after her. ‘You see...’ Kylie sighed. ‘Wait here, I need to get something to show you.’ She went inside and grabbed the diary. ‘Here, have a quick read through this. I’ve marked most of the interesting entries.’ She passed the book to Jennifer and leaned back on her elbows. It felt good to tell someone else what was going on. She could feel some of the tension from the last few days start to ease.

‘Ahh.’ Jennifer turned the page. ‘Interesting indeed.’ She flipped to another page. ‘Oh, my, god! Kylie, what the hell. Your grandmother had an affair?’ She turned and gave the book back to Kylie. ‘Who was it with? Do you know yet? Was it some rich business man, or, a prince?’ She clapped her hands together. ‘This is so exciting. But... why didn’t you want to tell me?’

‘Ah, Jennifer.’ Kylie rubbed her forehead. ‘I’m afraid it’s nothing at all like that. You see, from a few other clues and things that we’ve been able to piece together, we think she may have had the affair with... Jack’s grandfather.’ Kylie sat back and watched as the realisation dawned on Jennifer’s face. She nodded at her. ‘Yep, just a little complication, hey?’

‘OH EM GEE! What the hell?’ Jennifer stood up and paced back and forth in front of the stairs. ‘That is so cruel. No wonder you blame this on her.’

Kylie shrugged her a shoulder. ‘It’s not really her fault. She wasn’t to know about how it would affect us later on.’

Jennifer stopped pacing. ‘Oh, yeah. I guess you’re right.’ She sat back down next to Kylie. ‘So what are you and Jack going to do?’

Kylie sighed. ‘We don’t know for sure if it was his grandfather. Jack’s Mum and an old friend of my mothers are trying to find out as much as they can for us. So at the moment it’s just a waiting game.’

‘That just sucks. And it’s not fair.’ Jennifer rubbed Kylie on the shoulder. ‘Have you read every page in the diary?’

Kylie shook her head. ‘Most of them, but not all yet. There’s also some old photos and a small urn that I think hold my mother’s ashes. They were all together in a box that used to be my grandmother’s.’

‘Well I’d be reading that damn diary from cover to cover. And then read it from back to front. If she’s left clues in there, there’s bound to be more.’

‘That’s what we’re hoping for, so we can work this mess out. But if Jack and I are related I...’ Kylie covered her eyes with her hand and sucked in a breath. ‘I just don’t know what I’ll do.’

Jennifer put her arm around Kylie and hugged her. ‘Oh, dang. Now I don’t want to leave. I want to stay and help you two solve this little mystery of yours. Argh. But I have work tomorrow.’

‘That’s ok.’ Kylie wiped a stray tear from her eye. ‘I’m going to miss you, Jennifer.’

‘I’m gonna miss you too.’ Jennifer wrapped Kylie in a bear hug and squeezed her tight. They rocked back and forth embracing each other for a few moments.

Kylie stood up. ‘Thanks for that, Jennifer. It’s nice to know I’ve got some support.’

‘Any time, you know that.’ They walked toward the car.

‘Just make sure you do come back soon. It does get a bit lonely out here in woop woop.’ Kylie grinned. ‘And I need some regular girl-time with my bestie.’

Jennifer smiled. She hugged her again and opened the car door. ‘Phew! That stuff is a bit strong. Still much better than smelling spew all the way home.’ She got in and wound the window down.

Kylie reached in and grabbed Jennifer’s hand and cradled it in both of hers. ‘Thanks for coming out Jennifer, your support means a lot.’

Jennifer squeezed her hands in return then started the engine. ‘Oh, and Ky. You better find a way to make you and him work. There aren’t many Jacks left in this lifetime.’ She winked and gunned the engine.

Kylie watched the trail of dust as her best friend drove away, leaving her alone with her dreams of the future and her ghosts of the past.

Chapter 8

‘Ace! Ace, come!’

Kylie heard yelling and stepped out onto the front veranda to see what the commotion was. ‘He’s not here. Maybe he’s with your Mum?’

‘No, I’ve already checked there, and he’s not with Dad or Gazza either. It’s not like him to run off again.’

‘Maybe he followed a rabbit or something and is having a good romp in the scrub. He’ll be back home as soon as he gets hungry won’t he?’

‘I hope so.’ Jack wiped the sweat off his forehead with the sleeve of his work shirt. ‘I only went inside for a few minutes. He usually just hangs around outside.’

‘Don’t worry, we’ll find him.’ She put her hand on his arm but quickly snatched it back. Their relationship was stressful enough without the added anxiety of a missing dog, again. ‘God I hate this,’ Kylie kicked the veranda post.

‘Hate what? That Ace is missing?’

‘No, well yes, that too. I mean I hate us. Well at least what’s happened to us, or hasn’t happened. Except we don’t even know yet if it has happened now do we?’ She looked up at Jack and brushed the moisture out of her eye.

‘Whoa, hold on. What has happened, or is going to happen? Has something happened to Ace that you’re not telling me?’

‘No silly, not Ace. Us. Me and you, maybe related remember?’

‘Oh, yeah, that.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Guess I’ve been trying to block it out, hoping it wasn’t true.’

Kylie sighed. ‘Yes, that. What else would I be talking about?’ She wrapped her arms around her middle and rocked back and forth on her heels. ‘I’m hoping Tricia will ring me today. And hopefully with some good news, for a change.’

‘Yes, some good news would be good right now. We’ve had nothing but bad luck lately.’

‘I know. But what if it’s bad news. What if it’s something neither of us want to hear?’

Jack shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t know. I just don’t know.’ He rubbed his forehead with his hand. ‘But once we do know we’ll be able to decide the best course of action.’

‘Well that’s true. So let’s just hope for a good outcome.’ Kylie looked across to the track that led to the graveyard. If they were related, would she sell up? Would she be prepared to leave this place, leave her ancestors behind, leave Jack behind? What would her mother have done or her grandmother have done? Would they have left it all behind? No, she didn’t think they would have, especially not Buffy. But she didn’t know herself any more. The old shy not-good-enough Kylie was slowly disappearing, and she was starting to like the new independent go-for-it Kylie. She was starting to like her a lot. But a new dent in her new-and-improved armour was not what she needed right now.

Jack sighed. ‘Guess I’m just getting frustrated with the whole thing and now Ace has done another runner on me.’ Jack nodded out toward the kennels. ‘Maybe Ace has sensed my bad mood so he’s protesting?’ He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Maybe. I just wish everything could fix itself, but I know it can’t. There’s pretty much nothing we can do until we hear back from Tricia. And that’s if she even has anything to tell us.’

‘Damn.’ Jack slapped his hand on the veranda post and slumped down onto the top step. ‘I guess we will have to just wait then.’ He rubbed his hand over the three-day growth on his chin.

Kylie shaded her eyes with her hand and looked at him. ‘And really it’s neither of our faults. We haven’t done anything wrong either, we weren’t to know the two of us could be related.’

‘But I should have known. Or I should have at least thought there was more to it when we heard that Buffy had left the place to you. I should have insisted on finding out what the real reason was for why she was including us staying on in her will. I didn’t even think much of it at the time, I just assumed Buffy was being her usual generous self.’

‘Well let’s not jump to any conclusions just yet. Your Mum is still looking into it for us and I have Tricia looking through some of my mother’s old letters from back when they were younger, so hopefully there’s something there that’ll be helpful to us. Hopefully we come up with some proper evidence soon so we know which way to go with it.’

‘With it?’

‘Well, with us. But for now though, we will have to keep some distance between us. At least until we know more.’

‘Damn.’

Kylie looked out around them. 'I think we need something to distract us, to keep our minds off this whole half-cousin thing. I was going to start renovating the dining room.' She turned toward Jack and saw him looking out toward the Peak. 'What do you think about pink and purple polka dots on the walls and we could use cactus plants as chairs. What do you think?'

Jack half-turned his head toward her before looking back. 'Yeah, sure, that sounds great.'

She laughed. 'Oh Jack, don't worry, we'll find Ace. And we'll work out the half-cousin thing too.' She knew they both needed something to keep their minds occupied. 'Why don't you take a break for an hour at least, then we'll start looking for Ace after that.'

Jack nodded his head.

'Come inside and help me measure the windows in the dining room. Then I'll make you something for lunch.'

Jack grunted at her and went inside.

She followed him in, relieved that he was willing to listen to her and have a rest before setting out after Ace again.

'Did you take all of these down yourself?' Jack asked her. He had one of the paintings from the stack on the side table in his hands.

Kylie nodded. 'Yep, I sure did, all by myself too.'

Jack looked up at the hooks hanging off the picture rail that ran along the walls of the room. 'How on earth did you reach up that high?'

She put her hands on her hips and puckered her lips at him. 'I used the stepladder, how else do you think I reached up there. I flew perhaps?' she joked.

'Somehow you flying wouldn't surprise me.' He winked at her.

'You cheeky bugger!' She wanted to throw something at him but there was nothing close enough to grab.

Jack put the painting down on the floor and picked up the next one. 'Well, well. Hello there Mary Barton, you sour old puss.'

Kylie looked at the painting he was holding. 'Sour old puss? That's not very nice. She looks lovely.'

Jack raised an eyebrow at her. 'Trust me, she was a sour old puss. Dad used to tell us stories about her when we were little. He said all of the kids were always scared of her.'

‘So who was this Mary Barton?’

‘She was Buffy’s mother-in-law if I remember correctly. She was very strict, didn’t like to hear kids having fun.’

Kylie counted on her fingers. ‘So I guess that makes her one of my great-grandmothers then?’

‘Yeah, something like that. I was very young when she finally died so I don’t remember much about her, other than her being an old sour puss.’ He grinned at her.

He put the painting down and picked up the next one. ‘Ah, and this is Uncle Bill, Buffy’s younger brother.’

‘Uncle Bill?’ Kylie’s ears pricked up at the name.

‘Yes, we used to call him Uncle Bill. He never had any kids of his own so he liked it when we called him that. Poor guy never made it back from the Vietnam war though. The whole family was devastated. Especially his wife. She couldn’t take it and took her own life.’ Jack nodded his head. ‘I remember Buffy saying that at least they were together now. Though I never really knew what she meant until I got older.’

Kylie stepped closer to Jack and looked at the handsome young man in the painting. This was her great-uncle. She coughed to clear her throat. ‘What was his wife’s name, do you remember?’

‘Of course I remember. Uncle Bill and Aunt Edith, they used to spoil us kids rotten. I guess they did that because they didn’t have any of their own.’ Jack ran his finger over the water stain on the painting. ‘It’s a shame these got damaged in the last big flood.’ He turned the frame over and looked at the backing board. He pressed his thumb over a bent-up edge of the board. ‘It looks like someone tried to take the backing board off to repair it.’

Kylie’s jaw dropped. ‘Oh my god. Wait a minute!’ She ran into the kitchen and got a knife out of the cutlery drawer.

‘What? What is it?’

She tried to wedge the blade of the knife under the bent-up edge but Jack pulled the painting away from her.

‘Hey! What are you doing? You’ll wreck it.’

‘No I won’t.’ She pleaded with him. ‘Ah, wait.’ She grabbed her handbag and took the diary out. ‘Here, read this entry, then tell me what you think it means.’ She passed the book to Jack and sat down on the lounge to catch her breath. She was sure this must be what Buffy meant.

Jack closed the diary and looked at Kylie. ‘You know, it does kind of sound like it, doesn’t it? I mean, what else could she be talking about, right?’

Kylie nodded her head. ‘My thoughts exactly.’ She stood up and walked back over to the painting. ‘So should we do it?’

Jack shrugged his shoulders. ‘It’s not like we have anything to lose.’ He smiled at her and grabbed the knife. The backing board came away easily from the frame, exposing more water stains on the back of the canvas painting. Sitting against the bottom of the frame was five envelopes tied with a red ribbon.

Kylie’s eyes widened. ‘Oh my god, I was right.’

Jack passed the letters to her and put the frame back together. ‘Typical Buffy, leaving clues. Why doesn’t that surprise me.’

Kylie took the letters and sat down on the lounge. She patted the seat cushion next to her, gesturing for Jack to join her. Her hands shook as she untied the ribbon. ‘Look Jack, they all have water damage.’ She put the bundle on the coffee table and picked the first envelope off the top. She took out the folded piece of paper and opened it flat, smoothing it out on the coffee table so they both could see it.

Jack squinted his eyes. ‘Bugger, the ink has run.’

‘No! Damn, that’s a shame. Oh look, here are a few lines that I can make out.’ She leaned closer to the paper. ‘I think it says ‘need you’, something, something, then ‘stay with me’. Argh, that’s not much help is it?’ She shook her head. ‘And it’s signed ‘Love, G.’ G? That could be anybody.’

‘Let’s try another one.’ Jack grabbed the next envelope and removed the paper. He spread the two pages out flat. ‘Hmm, this one isn’t that much better though.’ He picked the first page up and skimmed the second page, then put the first page down again. ‘Hang on, this one is for G. Look,’ he pointed at the greeting at the top. ‘My darling G.’ He looked at Kylie. ‘Wait...’ he flipped the first page off again and looked at the closing line. ‘All my love, E.’ He frowned. ‘Who the hell is E?’

Kylie checked the rest of the letters. ‘Sorry, but they’re all pretty illegible thanks to the flood water. But they all do have the same E and G greeting and sign-off on each one.’

‘Seems a bit silly to put old paper in the back of a painting too. Buffy could have put them somewhere that was safer than here, and dryer than here.’

‘Yes, it does seem to be a strange place to hide something like this.’ Kylie sat back and frowned. ‘Let’s see... I’m guessing G is the male and E is the female, based on

the greetings, etc... So we have E and G sending secret letters to each other.' She shook her head and threw her hands into the air. 'But who the hell are E and G? Especially when we were expecting a B and...' Kylie sucked in a short breath. 'Damn it Jack, I don't even know what your grandfather's name was. Sorry.'

He looked at her and raised an eyebrow. 'Why, Jack, of course.' He grinned. 'Who do you think I'm named after? Only the greatest stockman Mungabah has ever seen.'

'But I thought you said Sunshine was the best stockman back then?'

'Oh, yeah, well, my grandfather was the second greatest then.' He stuck his tongue out at her.

Kylie laughed. It felt good to laugh for a moment, but she still needed to know who E and G were. 'So, who the hell are E and G?'

Jack stood up and walked over to the window. He leaned his hip against the window sill and rested his chin in the nook of his thumb and fist. He looked toward the ceiling then rolled his eyes. 'That's it!' he pointed a finger at her.

Kylie sat up straight. 'What's it? Did you work out who they are?'

Jack looked at her and paused. 'No... but I can do the next best thing.'

Kylie's shoulders dropped. 'What's that?'

He grinned. 'Follow me.'

She got up and followed him into the kitchen. Jack picked up the phone and started dialling. 'Um, just what are you doing?'

Jack pulled out a chair and sat down. 'I'm ringing Mum, of course. She knows everything.' He shrugged a shoulder. 'Well, nearly everything.'

Kylie nodded her head. Jack was right, mums do usually know everything, but she couldn't see how Penny would be able to help them with this one. She went to the fridge and took out some ingredients to make a few sandwiches for the two of them. She didn't realise how hungry she was with all of this going on around her.

'That's it!' Jack yelled again. 'Thanks Mum, you're the best.' He put down the phone and turned to face her.

'Well?' She put the butter knife down and waited.

'We kind of had it right. We just weren't using our noggins properly.'

'Noggins? Our heads? What are you going on about Jack?'

‘You see, we were expecting a B for Buffy, naturally. But what we weren’t expecting, was an E... for Elizabeth!’ He nodded his head slowly in her direction until her face registered the connection.

‘Of course! E for Elizabeth. He was calling her by her proper name instead of her nickname. Jack, your Mum’s a genius, I never would have thought of that.’ Kylie paused then looked up at him. ‘Did she say who she thought the G could be?’ She mentally crossed her fingers, hoping it wasn’t some strange nickname for Jack’s grandfather.

‘Well, the only person she could think of whose name starts with a G is, wait for it... Gregory Berrigan.’ He nodded his head slowly at her again.

‘Berrigan? Ohh, you mean Mr Berrigan, from next door?’

‘Yep, the one and only.’

Kylie’s jaw dropped as blood rushed through her body. ‘If that’s true, you know what that means don’t you?’

‘I know, I know.’ He slapped his palm on the table three times. ‘It’s what I’m hoping for too, but Mum said she couldn’t be absolutely sure so we shouldn’t get our hopes up yet.’

Kylie didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the absurdity of it all. ‘Alright. I guess that’s the best we can hope for at the moment.’ Her stomach was doing flips though. Was it too good to be true? If Mr Berrigan was her grandfather then she and Jack weren’t related, and they could be together. But if Mr Berrigan wasn’t her grandfather, who was? Was it Jack’s grandfather, or somebody else entirely? She sat down at the table and rested her forehead against the palm of her hand. If only Buffy could give her a clue of some kind to point her in the right direction.

‘You ok?’ Jack finished making the plate of sandwiches that she’d left on the kitchen bench and sat down opposite her. ‘You look a bit pale.’ He picked up one of the sandwiches and bit into it.

Kylie sighed and waved her hand in the air. ‘I’ll be alright. It’s just a lot to take in. First I thought it was your grandfather but now it could be Mr Berrigan. Or someone else for all we know.’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘I just wish we knew who it was so we could get on with things.’

Jack dropped his sandwich onto the plate and sprung out of his chair. ‘Did you hear that?’

Kylie shook her head. ‘What?’

‘That!’ Jack kicked his chair further back behind him. ‘A car. And a dog barking. Sounds like Ace.’ He cocked his head toward the open window and nodded. ‘That’s Ace!’

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Jack flew out of the kitchen and down the back stairs. He stopped and looked over his shoulder. ‘Kylie. Hurry. It’s Ace. I’m sure it is.’ It sure sounded like Ace, he’d know that bark anywhere. He knew how excited Ace got when he was allowed to ride in the back of the ute and how Ace’s bark sounded through the ute window. ‘Kylie!’

‘I’m coming, I’m coming.’ The screen door slammed shut behind her.

Jack nodded at her and looked up. ‘Dust.’ He pointed toward the sky. ‘I can still see the dust from the car. It went this way.’ He took off down the driveway to his mother’s house. It had to be Ace. Please let it be Ace. His boots were skittering across the top of the loose gravel, flicking dirt and gravel sideways with each step. He slowed as he rounded the last bend, and tried to catch his breath. Dust still floated around Frank’s parked ute but there was no sign of Frank, or the dog.

‘Dad!’ Jack ran up to the front door and tore it open. ‘Dad! Is that...’ He fell onto his backside as Ace knocked him to the floor. ‘Ace mate, you’re back!’ He hugged Ace to his chest and rocked back and forth with Ace in his lap. ‘Mate, where have you been?’

‘Son, I found him out on the road.’ Frank sat down at the table and accepted the coffee mug Penny handed him. ‘About half way between our front gate and Berrigan’s.’ He took a sip of his too-hot coffee and put the mug on the table. ‘But he was definitely headed this way, so I’d say he was on his way home, from wherever it was he’d been.’

Jack stood up and held Ace against his legs, rubbing his hand up and down Ace’s side. ‘Mate, if only you could talk, hey.’

‘Knock, knock,’ Kylie called from outside.

Ace ran for the door and jumped at the screen, impatient for Kylie to come inside. Jack smiled. He was rapt that Ace was so taken with Kylie. He loved watching the two of them interacting. She was definitely the best thing to ever happen to him and Ace. It almost felt like they were their own little family.

‘Come in, dear. Jack, stop gawking at her and open that door.’ Penny flicked her tea towel at him.

‘Ace, you’re here.’ Kylie scratched Ace behind the ears then looked up at the others. ‘But where was he?’

‘Hmm, not sure, lass. Spotted him walking along the side of the road, not far from Berrigan’s. But he was on his way home, that’s for sure.’ Frank drained his coffee mug and plonked it down on the table. ‘Penny love, would you mind putting the kettle on again, I’m a mite parched.’

Penny nodded at Frank and turned to Kylie. ‘Dear, seeing as how you’re already here, why don’t you stay for a cuppa?’ Penny walked toward the sink. ‘I’ll put a pot of tea on for us and the boys can have their coffee.’ She smiled at Kylie and refilled the kettle.

‘Thanks Penny. That would be great.’ Kylie sat down at the table. Ace followed her and sat at her feet. ‘Oh, Ace. Did you miss me, hey?’ She rubbed him on his side. ‘I missed you too.’

Jack sat opposite Kylie at the table and watched her rub Ace. He grinned. Ace was one lucky dog. But where did he keep disappearing too, and more importantly, why? He wracked his brain trying to think of how Ace kept getting out of his kennel but couldn’t think of anything. He watched Ace lay down and roll onto his back, hoping Kylie would rub his belly. Maybe if he laid down on his back Kylie would rub his belly too. He chuckled at the thought.

Frank smacked his hand on the table. ‘What are you laughing at, son?’

‘Oh, nothing Dad. I was just watching Ace enjoy a belly rub.’ Jack tilted his head in the dog’s direction. ‘He’s loving... What’s that?’ Jack jumped up and walked over to Ace. He put his hand on Ace’s chest to keep him still.

Kylie watched Jack grab Ace’s collar. ‘What is it?’

‘That’s really strange.’ Jack untied a strip of leather from Ace’s collar. ‘Why would there be a piece of whip leather tied to his collar?’ He looked around the room at everyone. ‘Did any of you tie this to his collar?’ Jack held the piece of leather out as he stood up. He watched as they all shook their heads. ‘Very strange.’

‘Looks like it might have come from one of our whips, son.’ Frank offered.

Jack rubbed at his chin then looked closer at the strip. ‘Maybe. But it’s not roo, it’s cow. We only use roo for our whips.’

Frank put his hand out to Jack. ‘Give me a look.’ He took the leather from Jack and pulled on both ends. ‘Yep, only cow. It stretches too easy to be roo.’ Frank dropped the piece in the middle of the table.

Jack nodded his head. 'If it was only cow that would explain why Ace was able to break free. So definitely not one of mine, or yours then, Dad.' He picked it up and turned it over. 'I know Gazza's whips are all cow, cos he's a tight-arse,' Jack chortled. 'But it wouldn't have been him. No way. And he's the one who found Ace last time.' Jack sat back down and rolled the leather strip back and forth between his fingers. 'You haven't seen any strangers hanging around the place while any of us blokes haven't been here, have you Mum?'

'No. I haven't. Not counting Jennifer, of course.' Penny shook her head as she poured the tea. 'The last time I saw anyone here, or had any visitors for that matter, was probably the vet. But I suppose he doesn't really count because he was seeing you.'

'That's right, after the big dog fight,' Jack nodded his head. 'So nobody else? Dad, what about you? Seen anyone sneaking around that shouldn't be here?'

Frank stared into his mug of fresh coffee. 'No, no one. Oh, except for Gazza's girlfriend.' He nodded and looked at Penny. 'Remember Penny, just the other night. Friday night I think it was, when they had the barn dance.'

'That's right. You lot went off to the dance but later on Gazza and his girlfriend turned up and were standing at her car having an argument.' Penny nodded her head.

Frank picked up his mug. 'Yes, they were having a right go at each other too. We didn't want to interfere so we just stayed inside.'

'Friday night? Are you sure?' Jack sat up straight.

Penny looked at the calendar hanging the wall above the kitchen bench. 'Yes, it was Friday night.'

Jack looked at Kylie. 'I wonder?'

Kylie looked back at him and shrugged her shoulders. 'Maybe. You know him better than me, would he do something like that?'

Frank slapped his mug down on the table. 'Do what? What in blazes are you two talking about?'

'Yes. This is getting strange, Jack.' Penny sat down. 'I though you and Gazza went to the dance together? But then Gazza and Britt came back early without you?'

Kylie's teacup rattled as she put it down in its saucer. 'Britt? Gazza's girlfriend is Britt? The same Britt who works at the pub?'

'Yes, dear.' Penny looked at Kylie. 'Do you know her?'

'Well, no. But, she would have known what motel room I was in.'

Jack nodded and slapped his palm on the table. 'That's right. And then your motel room got trashed. I thought it was a bit strange that someone would break in but not take anything. And then you came and stayed at the cottage but Gazza steered well clear of you, didn't he? Now I remember.'

'Yes, he was always gone already when I got up.'

'Hmm, I never really took much notice, but he was never around when you were there.' Jack drained his now cold coffee and took the mug over to the sink. What the hell was going on? What was Gazza up to?

Kylie watched him walk back to the table. 'I thought, on Friday night, you said you had to go back to the party to pick Gazza up?'

Jack sat down and threw his hands in the air. 'I did go back and get him.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'We got into my ute and he never said a word all the way home. I just thought he must have been tired or something.'

Frank grunted. 'Bloody "or something" alright. Bloody knocking places over, that's what it sounds like to me. Is he that desperate for cash?'

'Well, maybe. Even at the pub he's more than happy to let anyone buy him drinks. He never offers a shout, even on pay day.' Jack drummed his fingers on the table top. 'Something's going on here, and we're just not getting it yet.'

Penny walked over to the kettle and filled it up again. 'I wonder if all of this has anything to do with Gazza coming to work here after he got fired from Mr Berrigans?'

Frank slapped the table. 'You might be on to something there, woman.'

Penny scowled at Frank and flicked the tea towel at him. 'Don't you "woman" me, Frank Lawson.' She turned to the others and smiled. 'I remember when Gazza got fired. He came over to see Buffy and asked her for a job.' She waved a hand in the air. 'It was a few years ago now, but I remember. Buffy told me she wasn't sure about him at first, but that everyone deserves a second chance. I was never sure what she meant by that though.'

Jack stroked his chin. 'Some of this is starting to add up now.' He looked around the table. 'If it is Gazza, we have to work out what he's looking for and why. And try to stay one step ahead of him.'

'So where's Gazza now?' Penny asked.

'He told me he was spending the day with his girlfriend, at her place.' Jack shrugged his shoulders. 'But I doubt that's true. Not now that we know... that we think he's the one behind all the trouble we've been having.'

Frank nodded. 'I think you're right, son. I'll bet he's lurking around here somewhere, looking for whatever the hell he's been looking for.'

Penny sighed. 'I really hope we're wrong about him, but it is starting to look like he's the culprit.'

Jack rubbed the back of his neck. He didn't want his parents to have to worry about things like this. Or Kylie either. But at this stage, there wasn't much he could do until he had more proof. 'Maybe Gazza's been trying to get us away from the big house so he can search for whatever it is he's looking for? Taking Ace because he knows I'll go searching for him, and that would give him time to keep looking.'

'Maybe, son.' Penny sat down at the table next to Jack and patted him on the hand. 'Maybe you should go over to Mr Berrigan's place and ask him about Gazza. He might be able to tell you something about why he fired him, or what he thinks Gazza could be up to.'

'That's a good idea, Penny.' Frank nodded. 'Yes, Jack. Go see Berrigan. He will be able to clear some of this nonsense up for us.' Frank shifted in his chair. 'I'd offer to go with you, Jack, but you know Berrigan and I don't exactly see eye to eye these days.'

'Yes, Dad. I know. It's ok, I'll go myself.' He glanced at Kylie. 'Though I think it's a bit strange that Gazza, if it is him, is only going through stuff of Kylie's, or where Kylie is staying. Nowhere else and nobody else's stuff has been touched.' Jack looked down at Ace. 'And he didn't even help break up the last dog fight either. I had to kick that dog to get it to let go of Ace, and kicking dogs, any dog, is not something I would ever do. But I had no choice.' He turned to look at Kylie. 'You know I'd never hurt an animal on purpose?'

Kylie touched Jack's hand. 'I know, Jack. You were just trying to protect Ace. I understand that now.'

Jack sighed and smiled at her. 'Thanks.'

'But I wonder...' Kylie paused and looked at everyone. 'I don't know for sure, but I wonder if it's got anything to do with the box Buffy left me.' She reached down and picked her handbag up off the floor at her feet. 'I always keep the diary with me.' She opened the bag and put the diary on the table. 'And after the last break-in, I put the photos and urn back into the box and hid it.'

'Of course!' Jack pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. 'That has to be it. Both times nothing was taken, but both times you had the box either hidden or with you. So that means he still hasn't found what he's looking for, if it is the box.' He walked

over to the window and looked out. 'And that means he'll keep trashing the place until he finds it.' Jack turned back toward the table. 'So we all have to be extra careful around him. We need to keep an eye on him but not let him know we suspect anything.'

'Oh, Jack. Do you think he could be dangerous?' Penny asked.

'I'm not sure, Mum. But I hope not.'

Frank brought his fist down onto the table. 'That sneaky bastard. I'll give him what for when I see him next.'

'No, Dad. Don't say anything. At least not yet, not until we know it was him for sure.'

'Hmm, son, that will test my patience to no end.' Frank rubbed his chin. 'Guess I'll have to hold my tongue then. But I won't be happy about it.'

'Don't worry, Dad. I'll get this sorted as soon as I can.'

Penny grimaced at Jack. 'Please be careful.'

'I will, Mum.' Jack turned and looked at Kylie. 'I want to have a look around and see if he's still here hiding somewhere and not at Britt's like he said he would be. But you'll have to come with me because I don't want you out of my sight until we find out what he's up to.' He didn't want her anywhere near Gazza.

'Dear, that's a good idea.' Penny reached across the table and patted Kylie on the back of the hand. 'You should stay with Jack at all times. Or with one of us. Just in case.'

Frank grunted. 'Yes, stay away from that dipshit.'

Kylie grinned and threw her hands in the air. 'Ok, ok. It looks like I don't have a choice anyway.' She put the diary back into her handbag and stood up. 'Let's go play detective.'

Jack walked toward the door. 'I want to check the kennels first so we'll have to walk back to the big house and get my ute.'

Kylie tilted her head at the door and pulled a set of keys out of her handbag. 'Or, we could just take my car.'

'So that's what took you so long to get here.' Jack smirked.

Kylie poked her tongue at him. 'Well I wasn't going to run along a dirt track chasing a cloud of dust like some madman, now was I?'

Penny laughed and waved her hand at Jack and Kylie. 'You two sound like an old married couple. Would you just get going already, and make sure you keep the big house locked up, even when you're not there.'

'Yes Mum!'

‘Yes Penny!’

Jack held the screen door open for Kylie and Ace. ‘There’s something I want to show you at the kennels as well.’ He walked over to the Kylie’s car and slid into the passenger seat, and called Ace up onto his lap. Ace settled himself half on Jack and half on the centre console, then reached up and licked Kylie on the cheek. Jack laughed and pulled Ace back. ‘You might have to get a bigger fourbie or maybe even a ute.’ Kylie smiled at him and started the engine. Would she like what he was about to do? He wasn’t sure. He really hoped she would and now seemed like the right time to do it. It would give them both something to look forward to after they work out this mess with Gazza. Small rain drops splattered against the windscreen as grey clouds formed overhead. But the gloomy weather couldn’t dampen his spirit at this moment in time. He had Ace back, and he was with Kylie. And he was about to give her something that just might make her want to stay at Mungabah forever. And, hopefully, stay with him forever.

Kylie stopped the vehicle in front of the dog kennels. She switched the engine off and turned to face Jack. ‘I’ve been wracking my brain about Gazza, trying to work out what on earth he would want with the box and the things that were inside. But the only thing I can think of is that there must be something written in the diary that he wants to see.’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘But I don’t know what. I’ve read nearly every entry and even I’m having trouble trying to work out what Buffy means sometimes, so I just don’t know what it could be that he thinks is in there.’ She reached behind the passenger seat and grabbed her handbag, and patted her hand at the side of the bag. ‘I’ll have to go through it again when I get back to the big house.’ She let the bag drop back onto the floor.

‘You know, first I thought maybe it had something to do with the paintings.’ Jack opened the car door and ushered Ace out. ‘But now I’m not so sure. They wouldn’t be worth much, well not to Gazza, so it must be something else. Something else that we’re just not seeing.’ He got out and walked over to Ace’s pen and checked the lock.

Kylie got out of the car and followed Jack. ‘Is it broken?’ She looked up at him and shielded her eyes from the rain drops with her hand, then stepped under the overhang of the tin roof to get out of the rain.

Jack scratched his head and looked at her. ‘Well, that settles it then. It must be Gazza. The lock isn’t broken. It’s not even bent.’ He scanned the floor and wire walls. ‘And there’s no other damage. So it had to be someone with a key.’

She nodded her head at him. ‘And besides your parents, Gazza would be the only other person with a key?’

‘Yep.’

‘I guess that pretty much proves it then.’

Jack walked passed the pens and went into the storage shed that was attached at the end. He came back with a second padlock. ‘This might slow him down a bit.’ He swapped the two locks. ‘They take different keys, and Gazza doesn’t have a key for this old one.’ He tapped his finger at the lock he’d just attached to the pen gate. ‘Hopefully if he tries it again, he’ll just think there’s something wrong with the lock and give up trying to open it. That might slow him down a bit.’

‘Hopefully that does the trick.’

‘Yes, fingers crossed.’ Jack put the other padlock in the storage shed and watched Kylie pat the pups through the wire door of the puppy pen. The last lot of pups had just been weaned off their mother and were ready to start basic training. He’d already picked out the perfect one and couldn’t wait to see her face. He walked over to the pen and unlocked the gate.

‘Um, Kylie. Remember what I said earlier, about wanting to show you something?’

Kylie nodded her head. ‘Yes. What is it?’

Jack reached into the pen and grabbed the pup with the darkest coat. ‘This is a purebred Kelpie pup.’ He turned toward Kylie and held the pup out to her. ‘Here.’

‘Oh, Jack. It’s so cute.’ Kylie cradled the pup against her chest. It looked up at her and licked her chin. ‘It’s such a sweetie. Are we taking it out for some training?’

Jack put his hands on his hips. ‘No. It’s for... He. It’s a he. He’s for you.’

‘For me?’ She rubbed at the soft fur along the pup’s side. ‘What, for me to train?’

‘Yes. Um, no. Not to train. To keep.’

‘To keep?’

Jack grunted and stamped his foot into the dirt. ‘Yes woman. He’s for you, from me. To keep.’

‘Really? Wow, thank you Jack.’ Kylie grinned and cocked an eyebrow at him. ‘But don’t you “woman” me, Jack Lawson.’

Jack shook his head clear and tried not to laugh. ‘Bloody hell.’ He put his hands back on his hips. ‘Stop trying to sound like my mother.’

‘Then stop trying to sound like your father.’ Kylie pouted her lips at him.

Jack smiled and stared at her lips. He so wanted to kiss those pouting lips of hers again. And he so wanted her in his arms again. The pup was squirming in her embrace, trying to lick her face. He sucked in a breath. This was the perfect image, exactly what he wanted to be able to look at for the rest of his life. He could feel it deep in his soul that she was the one. His soulmate, his animal soulmate. But did she want the same now too? Things had certainly changed since she arrived. But he didn't know if she had changed enough to want what he wanted.

'Jack, what's wrong?'

He reached toward her and patted the pup behind the ear. 'Nothing.' He shrugged a shoulder and looked over to the rest of the pups in the pen. 'You haven't given him a name yet. It'll have to be something pretty awesome, seeing as how he's the cream of the crop. Not that I'm bragging or anything, but he'll be one of our best show dogs if you want to train him up to be one.' Jack glanced down at his feet. 'That is, if you do want to train him to be a show dog.'

Kylie smiled at Jack. 'He'd make a great show dog.'

Jack's heart lifted with relief. He was hoping to hear those words. This could be the start of something. The start of everything he's ever wanted. 'He'll need a great name then.'

Kylie held the pup up in front of her. 'He has gorgeous aqua-blue eyes. How about Bluey?'

Jack shook his head. 'Nah. Sorry, but his eye colour will change soon. They'll most likely darken to a soft amber.'

'Ok then. His coat. What colour is that?'

'Chocolate brown.' Jack laughed. 'Somehow I don't think Choco or even Brownie would make a good ring name.' He smiled and slapped his thigh. 'I know. What about Cadbury?'

Kylie rolled her eyes at him. 'No way. I'd get chocolate cravings every time I called him.' She cradled the pup back in against her chest and rubbed behind his ears. 'His coat is a really dark reddish chocolate. I can almost see tinges of purple through it.' The pup licked her chin again. She looked up at Jack. 'That's it!'

'Yep, Cadbury packets are purple so we'll just have to call him that.'

'No! That still sounds silly. Purple is also associated with royalty. And he's going to be shown in the ring.' She gestured to Jack with her free hand. 'Royalty, and something that rhymes with ring...?'

Jack held his palms up and shook his head. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘Argh! I’ll call him... King!’

Jack slapped the top of his head. ‘Yes. That’s perfect. He’ll be our next King of the Ring.’

Kylie laughed and snuggled the pup closer to her chest. ‘Our next King of the Ring. Do you like that, King? Our little King of the Ring.’ The pup licked her cheek and tucked his head in under her chin to nuzzle her neck. ‘He’s such a sweetie, my little King.’

Jack wanted to nuzzle her neck too, but he knew that wasn’t going to happen if they didn’t get the Gazza situation sorted, and sorted soon. Then they only had to figure out the whole “might be related” issue. But at least it was starting to look like Kylie was going to be sticking around for a while now. And he was going to do his darned best to make sure of it.

‘Do I have to leave him here, or can I take him home with me?’

‘Take him home. He still needs lots of socialising. And make sure you do a heap of basic training with him, so he’s ready for ring work in a few weeks.’ Jack went back into the storage shed and grabbed a spare feed bowl, lead, and a hessian sack. He showed them to Kylie when they got back into the car. ‘You’ll need these for the time being.’ He took King from her and held him in his lap. ‘Just don’t go buying him too much fancy stuff from the pet store. It won’t go down too well if he’s in the ring wearing a tiara and studded belt.’ He grinned at her.

‘Oh, I was thinking more along the lines of a top hat and tutu.’ Kylie poked her tongue out at Jack and started the engine.

‘Ace, come.’ Jack shuffled over in his seat to give Ace a bit of room to sit down then closed the door. ‘Back to the big house.’

‘You mean, back to the palace.’ Kylie threw her head back and laughed. ‘We have a king in residence now.’ She winked at Jack and gave King a quick pat on the head.

Jack groaned. ‘Very funny.’ He’d never been so jealous of a dog before. Ace, Ace Jr, and now King have all been cuddled and patted and squished up against Kylie’s chest. He chuckled to himself. Maybe it was time he started barking. He looked around the inside of the cab. Him, Kylie, and the two dogs. This is how it should be. It felt like a little family already. This is how he wanted it to be. He sighed when he saw his ute up ahead. The drive was over too soon.

‘Why don’t you come over in the morning?’ Kylie switched the engine off and looked at Jack. ‘For breakfast. Then we can go through the diary again. And, you can help me take King through his paces.’ She grabbed her handbag and got out of the car. ‘I want to make sure I’m teaching him the right commands.’

Jack closed the door and leaned his forearms on the roof of the car. ‘Sure. But it will have to be early. I have a couple of appointments in town tomorrow and can’t be late.’ A couple of appointments that could make or break him. Yet he still didn’t know if he would prefer to be made or broken.

Chapter 9

Kylie threw the sheet back and swung her legs over the side of the bed to sit up. The sun was just starting to rise and she loved sitting out on the veranda to watch it come up. But not today. She stretched her arms up above her head and heard a couple of her joints crack. *Ouch*. She hadn't slept well. How could she when she kept dreaming about Jack. Some good dreams, some bad dreams, and some a little naughty. She would have to do something about this soon otherwise she'd go crazy. A cold shower, that's what she needed.

'Argh! No!' Her foot touched something wet on the rug next to her bed. 'King!' The pup looked up at her from its temporary bed in the open bottom drawer of the tallboy. He sniffed the air then tucked his head back under the old towels. She couldn't rouse at him though. It wasn't really his fault. He was just as new to all this as she was. Even though she used to work with dogs at the vet clinic, she never owned a dog of her own. But now she did, and he was the cutest thing ever. How could she be mad at him?

She put her dressing gown on and bent down and clapped her hands together just above the floor. 'King. Come, boy. Come.' The bundle of deep chocolate fur jumped out of the drawer and padded its way over to her. She scooped him up in her arms and cuddled him close. 'Good morning, King. Let's take you outside to see if there's anything left in that big bladder of yours.'

Kylie walked downstairs and opened the backdoor and stopped short. 'You're here? Already?'

'Yeah.' Jack was sitting in the back of his ute chewing on a piece of straw. 'I figured you'd be up extra early thanks to this little fella needing to pee.'

'Yes, well. This little fella has already peed. In my room. On my rug.' She looked down at King. 'He's just lucky he's so cute otherwise he'd be sleeping in the laundry every night.' She lowered King to the ground. 'Now go finish your business and be quick about it.' Kylie scanned the sky and grimaced at the grey clouds approaching. 'Looks like even more rain coming and I have a heap of washing to do.' She held her hand out and felt the first small drops of moisture. 'Yep, it's coming alright. You'd better get inside before you get wet.'

Jack hopped out of the ute tray and grabbed his esky. 'I brought some bacon and eggs with me, seeing as how you only have a cup of tea for breakfast, and I didn't want to starve.' He winked at her as he walked passed into the kitchen.

Kylie glanced over her shoulder at him. 'I do have actual food in my fridge. I don't survive on tea leaves alone, you know.' She turned back toward the ute. 'King! Come.' She stepped further out into the yard and looked around. 'Where has he gotten to? King! Come!' Rain drops plopped onto the ground as the clouds overhead darkened. The morning breeze whipped through the treetops and chilled the air below. 'King!'

'What's up?' Jack stuck his head out of the back door. 'Is something wrong?'

'No. It's fine. Just waiting for King to finish his business but it looks like he went for a wander.' She waved her hand at Jack. 'Can you pop the kettle on. I'll be back in a minute.'

'Sure thing.'

Kylie scanned the yard for the bundle of dark fur but couldn't see him. She walked toward the side of the house and stopped outside the laundry door. 'I'll bet you're in here, hey King?' She pushed the ajar door open further and stepped inside. 'King?' She felt along the door jamb for the light switch and turned the light on. 'There you are boy. Nice and cosy I see. Luckily for you that washing is still dirty and hasn't been washed yet.' Kylie bent down and scratched King behind the ears. 'Otherwise you'd be in big trouble boy.'

She stood up and looked around the small room. The box with the photos and urn were hidden on the top shelf. Was there something in them or on them that would help with this silly puzzle that they were trying to solve? She was going to read through the diary again with Jack today so she may as well bring the other stuff inside too so they can look them over again. She grabbed the stepladder and placed it under the shelves and climbed up. The box was still there hidden in the tin. She pulled the box out and opened the lid. The photos may not be much help to them, there were no names or writing of any sort on the backs. She pushed the photos to the side and picked up the urn. Seeing the initials still made her wonder at all that she missed by not knowing her mother. They were precious memories that she would never have.

Jack walked into the laundry. 'Hey, what's taking so...'

'Argh! No! Jack!' Kylie yelled but it was too late. The urn slipped from her fingers and dropped to the floor, smashing open and spilling its contents onto the concrete. 'Jack! You scared the crap out of me.'

'Ah, sorry. I thought something was wrong when you didn't come back inside.'

Kylie climbed off the stepladder and crouched down on the floor. The urn was in pieces and her mother's ashes were now just a clump of dirt and small rocks spread over

the concrete floor. ‘No! This was all I had of her.’ Kylie sat back on her behind and sobbed into her balled fists. ‘This was all I had of my mother.’ Her body wracked with sobs. Why was this upsetting her so much? She didn’t even know the woman. But maybe that was it. Maybe that was why she was so upset. She was upset because she never got the chance to know her, or to know her as her mother. The pain tore at her soul. How could you miss someone so much when you didn’t even know them? Kylie felt a wet nose press against her arm. She wiped her eyes and hugged King tight. ‘I’m ok, boy. Everything will be ok.’

‘You’re not cut, are you?’ Jack grabbed each of her arms and looked them over. ‘I thought you might have cut yourself.’

‘No. No cuts.’ She sucked in a breath and sniffed her nose. ‘I’m fine.’

Jack put his hand on her knee and squeezed. ‘Are you sure?’

She nodded. ‘Yep. I’ll be fine. I’m a big girl.’ She tried to smile at him but only managed to quiver her bottom lip. ‘Let’s get this cleaned up. I’ll have to find a container to put the ashes in for now. I’ll buy a new urn tomorrow.’

Jack started picking through the mess on the floor. ‘Why are there little rocks in with her ashes? I thought everything broke down into smaller pieces when someone gets cremated?’

Kylie shrugged her shoulders. ‘Sorry, I wouldn’t know. I’ve never actually seen cremation ashes before.’ She stood up and looked on the shelves for a suitable container. ‘I feel really bad for breaking the urn.’

‘It’s not your fault. Probably more my fault. I shouldn’t have scared you like that.’

‘No, it’s not your fault at all. I should have been more careful. I should have gotten down first before I opened the box.’

‘Kylie?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Kylie!’

‘What?’

‘You’re not going to believe this! Look!’ Jack rubbed his thumb over one of the small rocks to get the dirt off. The rock was a bright golden yellow.

‘Whoa! Is that what I think it is?’ Kylie bent down and took a closer look.

‘I reckon so. This would certainly help to explain a few things that have been going on around here.’

She nodded her head. 'That it would.' She pointed at the pile on the floor. 'And there's more. A lot more. Oh my goodness!' She sat back down on the floor and took a deep breath. 'This must be what Gazza has been looking for.'

Jack picked up more pieces and rubbed them clean. 'Yep. I think we've hit the jackpot. And he won't be too pleased if he knows we found it first.'

'Hmm, yes, that could be an issue. Do you think he'll get aggressive if he finds out?'

'Possibly. I wouldn't put it past him.' Jack laid the pieces out on the floor. 'There's quite a few chunks here. And some smaller ones too.' He pointed to the rest of the pile. 'It looks like someone put them in with your Mum's ashes, hoping no one would find them.' He grinned and looked at her. 'No one that wasn't supposed to find them, that is. That Buffy was one smart woman.'

'Why? What do you mean?'

'Well, who would be getting Gemma's ashes after Buffy died? Who would the urn be going to?'

'Umm, me?'

'Exactly. She knew you'd end up with the box and get the urn.'

Kylie nodded her head. 'Yes. I see what you mean. No one else would be getting the urn, only me. So she hid the gold in there on purpose?'

Jack grabbed a tea towel from the dirty washing pile and spread it out on the floor. 'Yep. That's Buffy for you. Always a step ahead of everyone else.' He separated the last of the pieces of gold from the ashes and put them on the tea towel. 'Let's see what we've got here.' He rubbed each piece clean with the corner of the tea towel and lined them up in a row. 'That's four big nuggets and eight small ones. Quite a little haul we've got here.' He looked up and grinned at Kylie. 'These should be worth a bit too. Not a heap, but some decent change, that's for sure.'

'So, what are we talking here. A few hundred dollars? A few thousand? What?'

'Well I'm no gold expert, but I'd say a couple of thousand. Hopefully.'

'Hopefully?' Kylie picked up the largest nugget. 'If only there were a bucket full of these hiding somewhere close by. That would take care of the money problems for Mungabah. And we wouldn't need to sell up.'

Jack laughed. 'That really is wishful thinking. I guess we can only dream.'

Kylie sighed and put the nugget back down on the tea towel. ‘Where on earth am I going to hide these? If Gazza hears about them he’ll likely tear the place apart looking for them.’

‘He might too. We’ll have to stash them somewhere really good. Somewhere that he’ll never think to look.’ Jack scratched at the back of his head. ‘So that probably means that we shouldn’t leave them anywhere here, on Mungabah.’

‘True. The further away from here, the better at the moment. At least until we find out how much they’re worth.’

Jack clicked his fingers and pointed at the nuggets. ‘That’s it. The Bank. I’ll leave them at the bank when I’m in town today. I’ll ask Harry to put them in the safe for now.’

Kylie smiled. ‘That’s a good idea. You can’t get much safer than a safe in a bank.’

‘And I won’t even tell Harry what it is, just in case a staff member overhears.

Harry will watch it for us, I’ve known him since I was a kid.’

‘Sounds good. When are you leaving?’

Jack pushed the nuggets into a pile and rolled them up in the tea towel. ‘Are you trying to get rid of me, Ms Douglas?’ He cocked an eyebrow at her.

‘No silly. I was just wondering if you still had time for brekky before you need to leave for your appointments.’

Jack looked at his watch and wiggled his eyebrows at her. ‘There’s always time for...bacon and eggs. But it will have to be quick, I’ll be leaving for town soon.’

‘Jack, you’re only getting bacon and eggs. So take it or leave it.’

‘Hey, didn’t I bring the bacon and eggs?’ He pointed to his chest. ‘So shouldn’t I get to decide if I take it or leave it?’

Kylie threw her hands in the air. ‘Argh, I give up. Get your butt inside so we can get this brekky started.’ She tucked the box under her arm and picked King up from the basket and followed Jack into the kitchen.

Jack took the bacon and eggs out of his esky and placed the rolled up tea towel inside. ‘There. Just in case Gazza’s watching the house. He’ll think I’m just taking my empty esky back home with me.’

‘Good.’ Kylie lit one of the stove hobs and placed a large frying pan on top. ‘Ok, bacon in first.’

‘Yes, mam.’

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Kylie waved goodbye to Jack and closed the door on the rain. 'Looks like it's just you and me now, King. If this rain gets any heavier, we'll have to batten down the hatches.' She was relieved that Jack had the nuggets. They would be much safer with him than here in the house. She was only hoping that Gazza wouldn't make an appearance, especially now that Jack would be away for the rest of the day. She wasn't sure if she should still hide the box though, even if it was empty except for the photos. If Gazza didn't know they'd just found the nuggets he would still be looking for them. And she didn't want to take any chances. She looked around the kitchen and eyed the breadbin. It worked last time so why not use it again. She slid the lid up and put the box inside, jamming it up against the top so it wouldn't move. 'That should do it. He's already looked in there so maybe he won't bother next time. If there is a next time.'

She filled the kettle and made another cup of tea. 'Here you go, boy. You can finish this off.' She scrapped the bacon rind off Jack's plate into King's bowl. 'Looks like I have my own garbage disposal. A walking furry one.' She smiled as King licked his bowl clean. She picked up her teacup and walked into the lounge. The diary was sitting on the coffee table. She'd started going through it with Jack earlier before he had to leave. 'Let's see where we were up to, hey King.' She sat down and King tried to jump up onto the lounge with her. 'No, King. No dogs allowed on the furniture.' She looked down at him. His chin rested on his paws with his sad eyes looking at her. 'Ok, ok. But don't make a habit of this.' She reached down and lifted him up onto the seat next to her. 'Happy now?' King's tail thumped against the arm of the lounge. She grinned. 'I'll take that as a "yes" then.'

She took a sip of her tea and flipped to the next page of the diary. 'No, I've already read this page too. King, why didn't I mark off the entries as I read them the first time? That would have made this so much easier.' King tilted his head to the side as she spoke. 'Don't mind me boy, I'm just raving on to myself.' She reached over and patted him behind the ear.

She flipped to a random page. 'Oh. Here's a new one.' She picked the diary up and sat back in her seat. '27 January 1974 - How stupid of me! Stupid, stupid, stupid. I can't believe what I did with my beloved's letters, and I nearly drowned trying to save them. Everyone knows History always repeats itself and I for one should have remembered that. Just stupid on my part. But they're safe now, that's all that matters.'

Kylie looked over to the paintings that were sitting on the floor. ‘Hey King, do you think those might be the letters Buffy is talking about?’ She nodded at the dog. ‘Yes, I think they might be.’ The entry straight after that one was the last one in the diary. The remainder of the pages were blank. She read the last entry. ‘28 January 1974 - I’ve lost what was truly most precious to me. I can’t look at their faces ever again. My world has ended.’

Kylie put the diary on the coffee table and slumped back into the seat. She sat still for a moment, the impact of Buffy’s last words bouncing around inside her head. What did Buffy mean? What happened? The last two entries were straight after each other. One on the 27th then one on the very next day. Most other entries were spread over various dates, years even. Something dreadful must have happened on those days. Kylie’s heart ached at the sadness in Buffy’s words.

King moved closer to her and pressed up against her thigh. ‘Oh King. You seem to know when I’m upset.’ She rubbed the side of his stomach. ‘And a good belly rub fixes everything, doesn’t it?’ She smiled at him. ‘I just wish it worked as well for me as it does for you.’

She tried to piece together what she’d just read but it didn’t mean anything to her. The diary entries were of Buffy’s life, not hers. She still felt a bit distant from it all, from what life was like on Mungabah. Yet she now didn’t want to feel distant. She wanted to live it, to feel that she was part of this place. If only she could work out what Buffy’s diary entries meant. Maybe then she’d be able to work out the whole half-cousin thing with Jack.

King started squirming on the lounge and looked toward the back door. ‘Do you want to go out for a wee, King?’ She picked him up and put him on the floor. ‘Let’s go then. Out for wees. But I’m going to keep a better eye on you this time, King. No more sneaking off for a doggy nap in my washing.’ She smiled and opened the back door. ‘There you go.’ Kylie leaned against the door frame and watched King relieve himself on the front tyre of her car. ‘Thanks for that, King.’ She laughed. ‘Maybe one day I can return the favour.’ King trotted back inside, leaving muddy footprints on the floor. She shook her head and sighed. ‘Never mind. I’ll clean it up.’ She looked at King. ‘And you’re not getting back on the lounge with those feet. Sit!’ King sat and Kylie went to kitchen bench and grabbed the roll of paper towels. She cleaned the floor and cleaned most of the mud off King’s feet. ‘That will have to do for now. No sense in cleaning you properly if it’s still muddy outside.’ King lurched forward and licked Kylie on the face,

rubbing his feet over her shirt. ‘King!’ She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. But she knew one thing. This was going to be a long day.

She put the kettle back on the stove and walked into the lounge room to get her cup. The side table still held the water-logged letters that they found in the back of the paintings. Kylie went over to the wall and ran her hand over the spot where the two missing paintings should have been hanging. ‘Didn’t Frank say something about more paintings being up in the attic?’ She looked at King and laughed. ‘Why do I keep expecting you to answer me, hey boy?’ King walked toward her and sat on top of her slippers that she’d left next to the lounge. She laughed again and shook her head. ‘Oh to be a dog in my next life, and be spoiled like you.’ King stretched his legs out in front and rested his chin on them.

Kylie stood back from the wall and counted the empty spots. She then counted the paintings that were piled on the floor. ‘Yep, there are definitely two missing.’ She went into the kitchen and grabbed the torch and the key for the attic door from the bottom drawer. She walked into the entry way and looked up at the stairs. ‘I have to do this. There might be something in the paintings. Maybe some more letters. Maybe something else.’ She took a deep breath and headed up the stairs. ‘King, come! I’m not doing this alone.’ She half laughed and half choked on her words.

The landing creaked in protest at each step she took. ‘Why have I never noticed this creaking floor until now?’ She looked down at King. ‘I hope you’re not laughing at me, King?’ She tried to lighten the mood but it wasn’t helping. The linen room door was just to her left and her hands began to shake. ‘Holy moly! I’m freaked out and I’m not even in the room yet.’ She turned the handle and pushed the door open. The door’s hinges creaked as it swung back against the inside wall. Kylie gulped and reached in to flick the light switch on. Her eyes zoomed to the back of the room to the attic door. ‘Yep. It’s still creepy.’ She bent down and patted King. ‘You should wait here, boy. I’m going to try and be as quick as I can and I don’t want to trip over you.’ She darted to the back of the room and stopped in front of the attic door. And froze. Something brushed up against her leg. Her heart tried to jump out of her chest. She stood still and slowly looked down. ‘KING! You scared the crap out of me.’ King looked up at her and wagged his tail. ‘No boy, I’m not happy to see you. I told you to stay put at the other door.’ Who was she kidding. King was still just a pup. He wasn’t ready to follow commands like that at his age. ‘Never mind.’ She reached down and patted him again. She shouldn’t be rousing at him just because she was scared.

She took the key out of her pocket and turned the torch on. 'It's now or never.' The lock clunked open. She sucked in a deep breath and turned the door knob and pulled the little door toward her. It was so dark. Even with the torch light shining on the stairs, it was still eerily dark. 'Yep, King. It's creepy and eerie. Just what I was expecting.' She started walking up the steep steps and raised her voice. 'That's right, isn't it, King. If I rave on to myself in a loud voice, it will seem less creepy. That's what they do in the movies, don't they?' She flashed the light around as she got near the top of the stairs. 'Yep, I'll just keep talking loudly, to myself, as I look around this freakily scary room, while I try to find the paintings. Which I can't see anywhere. So I'm starting to freak out even more.' The flash light beam penetrated through the thick dust, sending the streaks of light all directions. The light bounced off the various objects in the roof cavity, giving the whole area a vivid glow.

'Ahh!' Kylie screamed at the figure standing in the corner. 'Shit. It's just a coat stand.' She thumped her palm against her chest. 'That scared the crap out of me.' She sucked in some short breaths to try and calm her nerves. 'Just keep talking to myself, out loud. Try and keep my voice steady. Hopefully that will help to keep my nerves steady too.' She flashed the light around on the other side of the attic. 'There's something that could be it.' On top of a large chest of drawers was a big bundle of folded material. She made her way over to it and felt it with her hand. 'Yes. This could be it. I can feel something hard inside.' She balanced the torch on top of another chest of drawers, pointing the beam at the bundle of material. She felt around the canvas-type material and could feel the hard timber frames inside. 'Yes. This has to be the paintings. But I'm going to keep talking to myself out loud, cause it's still friggin' creepy up here.' Her eyes did a quick sweep of the room. Nothing moved. Nothing jumped out at her. She grabbed the bundle and the torch and dashed back down the steps. She slammed the door shut and turned the key. 'Phew. I've never wanted to get out of a room that fast before.' Shivers ran down her spine, making her body shake. 'See, King. That wasn't so bad. Ha! Who am I kidding? I think I'm going to be sick.'

Kylie carried the bundle down to the lounge room and placed it on the floor next to the coffee table. 'Eww. So much dust. And so smelly.' She waved a hand in the air. 'It must have been up in the attic for years.' King sniffed at the bundle and walked away. 'Yep. Definitely must be stinky if the dog won't even go near it.' She grabbed at the material and started to unfold it. Her stomach rumbled. 'Hmm, it's nearly lunch time. Don't think I can eat though until I look at these.'

The material folded out into a large rectangle, with some sort of stitching all over it. The paintings were sitting in the middle. Two frames with water stains across the paint. The top image was of a distinguished looking gentleman. 'He looks familiar. I think I remember him from one of the photos in the box.' Kylie put that frame to the side and looked at the one below. She sucked in a breath. 'It looks like me. Just a bit younger.' The big pointed collar on the shirt the woman was wearing screamed 1970s. Kylie ran her fingers down the cheek of the woman as tears filled her eyes. 'This must be my mother.' She stared at the woman, transfixed at the similarities between them. A tear dripped onto the timber frame. She wiped it away with her thumb. 'It's already water damaged. One more drop won't hurt.'

Kylie propped the painting up against the side of the coffee table and sat back into the seat. So this was her mother. Her birth mother. She didn't recall seeing her in any of the photos from the box. So this was the first time Kylie had ever seen her. And it ripped at her heart to know that she would never see her alive. King pushed against her leg so she picked him up and put him on her lap. She hugged him and cried into his coat. Her body wracked with sobs as King's coat became soaked with her tears. She grabbed a cushion and stretched out on the lounge, burying her face in the cushion and hugging King to her chest. The sobs began to subside and her breathing slowed as she fell asleep.

###

Kylie stirred and rubbed her sore head. There was a jackhammer digging into her skull. She jumped up when she realised it was the phone ringing. 'No. Go away.' She rolled over and closed her eyes. The phone kept ringing. 'Argh. This better be important.' She stood up and walked into the kitchen. 'No. King. Why couldn't you wait?' She looked at the puddle next to the back door then looked out the window. 'Oh, sorry King. My fault. I didn't know it was this late.' She picked up the phone and yawned. 'Hello.'

'Kylie, it's Jack.'

She smiled. 'Oh, hi Jack.'

'Is everything ok there?'

'Yes, everything is fine. Are you still in town?'

'I'm afraid I won't be able to make it home tonight. The roads are cut off and the flood levels are still rising.'

'Oh no. That's terrible.'

‘I’ve already rung Mum. And she’s going to feed the dogs tonight. But how are you? Gazza hasn’t turned up at the big house, has he?’

Kylie swapped the phone handle to her other hand. ‘No. I haven’t seen him at all. It’s been very quiet.’

‘Ok. That’s good. Maybe he really is at his girlfriends’. Or maybe he knows that we’re onto him, so has taken off?’

She heard the concern in his voice and was touched. Jack truly did care about her. Her stomach flipped at the thought of seeing him again. ‘So... when will you be back then?’

Jack sighed. ‘Hopefully in the morning some time. It depends on when the water starts to recede so traffic can get through.’

‘Ok. I’ll see you tomorrow then.’ She didn’t want him to hear how disappointed she was. It wasn’t his fault he couldn’t get home sooner. Should she tell him about finding the two missing paintings? No. He would probably get mad at her for not telling him though. But she didn’t want him to worry even more about trying to solve their little problem.

‘How’s King going? Not getting into any more mischief I hope?’

Kylie chortled. ‘King has been re-named The Puddle Maker! I’m sure you can guess why?’

Jack laughed. ‘Oh, no. So I bet you have the bucket and mop on stand-by?’

‘More like, the mop has been surgically attached to my hand.’

Jack laughed again. ‘Poor King.’

‘Poor King? What about poor Kylie? I’m the one having to clean up after him.’

‘Don’t worry, he’ll grow out of it with a bit more training.’

‘The sooner, the better, as far as I’m concerned.’

‘I’d better go, there are other people wanting to use the phone.’

Kylie’s shoulders sagged. ‘Oh, ok. See you tomorrow then.’

‘Yep. Bye.’

‘Bye.’ She hung up the phone. Tomorrow suddenly seemed so far away. She sighed and cleaned up King’s latest contribution then went back into the lounge room.

‘No more puddles in the house, King. Do you hear me?’ King tilted his head and looked at her. ‘And stop looking so darn cute when I’m trying to rouse at you.’ She grabbed a screwdriver and sat down on the lounge. ‘Let’s crack these paintings open and see if there are any goodies hidden inside.’ She pried the backing board out of the first

frame with the screwdriver. Inside was a yellowed envelope. It had 'Jonathon' scrawled across the front. Kylie flipped the frame over and took another look at the man in the painting. 'Yes, this is my grandfather. Well, on paper, I suppose, hey King. But is he by blood?' She studied his features, trying to see any resemblance to herself. 'Ah, I can't really tell if I look like him.' She put the painting down and picked up the envelope. The envelope was sealed and there was something inside. 'Should I open it, King? Not yet.'

She picked up the painting of her mother. 'So this is Gemma Barton. This would have to be the surrealist moment I've ever had in my life. Here I am, sitting here, looking at a painting of my dead mother.' She caressed her mother's cheek with her finger tips as tears welled up in her eyes again. 'No. Stop crying.' She wiped the tears away. 'I have to stop being a sooky-cry-baby. I'm an adult, not a child.' She turned the painting over and removed the back. 'Another envelope. This one has... my name on it.'

Kylie ran into the kitchen and put the kettle on the stove. Her stomach was rumbling but she was too anxious to eat anything solid. 'My name? But how did Buffy know? How did she know that I'd be the one finding that envelope? What if someone else found it instead?' She sat down at the table and rested her head in her hand. This was becoming too much. She needed to open the envelope and read whatever was inside. But would she be prepared for what she was about to discover? The kettle shrieked, jolting her back to reality. She made a fresh cup of tea and went back into the lounge room.

Both envelopes were sitting on the coffee table. Which one should she open first? 'King, help me out here. Which one should I open first?' King looked up at her from his spot on the rug, then put his head back down on his front paws. 'Thanks for that.' She smirked at him and put a hand on each envelope. 'I think I'll open the one with my grandfather's name on it first.'

She picked the envelope up and turned it over and stuck the end of her fingernail under the edge of the flap and tore the paper. The envelope tore open easily due to its age. She slid the letter out and unfolded it.

'My dearest Jonathon. I know you are no longer here on earth with us but I need to tell you something. I need to clear my conscience for once and for all. At long last I am able to tell you the truth, the truth that you've always wanted to hear. I know I told you who Gemma's father was on the day she drowned. And I know you still tried to save her that day, even though you knew the truth. For that act of boundless love for her, I will always truly love you. For years you doubted my love for you, but let me tell you now that for the husband and for the father you were to Gemma, and for the great man that you

were, I always truly did love you. Yes, I strayed briefly during your absence, and have never been able to forgive myself. But please forgive me in heaven as I know you finally did on earth. I shall soon be joining you up there, I can feel it in my bones. Till we met again. Love, Buffy.'

Kylie felt a warm tear roll down her cheek. 'That was so beautiful, King. I wish I had of known them both.' She wiped the tear away and reached for the other envelope. Inside she found a letter and a second envelope. The envelope had the name Gregory on it. 'Whoa. This is getting interesting now, King.' She pushed the second envelope aside and unfolded the letter.

'To my granddaughter. This is addressed to you because I knew you would find it before anyone else. And I know you will want to get rid of this god-forsaken rundown farm, but you won't. If you have the balls that I hope you do, you will find what I have been keeping for you, and you will find what your mother died trying to find. When four generations of Barton women put their heads together, even if it is over generations, they always find a way to make things work. And you, girl, are a Barton, don't you ever forget that. Yes, I did have to give you to someone else after your mother died as I was not fit to care for you, and it was just what was done in the day. I know you were well cared for by your adoptive parents because, yes here is another secret for you, your parents were in fact friends of mine. I am penning this letter now as I am not long for this earth and need to get everything down before that time ends. You will be wanting to know how your mother died so I will tell you. She was looking for the precious thing that would let us keep Mungabah. But she lost her life trying to find it when she drowned in the flooded gorge. Your grandfather, bless his soul, tried to save her, but drowned also. I will always love that man as even though he knew he was not Gemma's real father he still loved her like a father and tried to save her. Yes, Jonathon is not your real grandfather. You may have worked that out by now, which has probably led you to these letters. I can only pray that the big house and paintings have not been destroyed by flood or fire before you get there. Jack is a good man. I know because I helped mould him just for you. Go together and find what all are seeking, but take care. Make things right again at Mungabah. Love, your grandmother, Buffy. P.S. Please go see Gregory and give him the letter I have enclosed. He really is a good man and I know he will very much want to meet his granddaughter after all this time.'

Kylie dropped the letter onto the coffee table. Her eyes stared around the room. At the walls, the ceiling, the floor. Her mind raced. Her mind stalled. She didn't know what

to think. She almost forgot to breathe. The room began to spin. Tilting one way, then back the other. Her world, being pushed and pulled. Spinning out of control. So much to take in. Too much to take in. She had to get out of here. She had to leave. She needed some time to herself. Some time to think. Some time to breathe. She threw her car keys into her handbag and ran for the back door. She grabbed the door knob. The phone rang. She turned and looked at the phone vibrating on the side table. What if it was Jack? How was she going to tell him?

She let go of the door knob and rushed over to the phone. ‘Jack, I found some more...’

‘Hi Kylie, it’s Tricia.’

Kylie paused, her mind went blank. It wasn’t Jack.

‘Kylie, are you there?’

She coughed and pretended to clear her throat. ‘Oh, yes, sorry. I’m here. Hi Tricia.’

‘I just came across something that I thought might be of interest to you. Do you have a minute to chat?’

Did she? She couldn’t leave now, not until she heard what Tricia had to say. She already had the proof that she needed about who her grandfather was, but she also didn’t want to be rude. She wanted to mend her relationship with Tricia after their last encounter. ‘Sure thing. Now is good.’

‘Great. I’ve been looking through some of my old stuff and found some info that might be helpful. I don’t remember too much of what she wrote from back then, but I did keep most of the letters Gemma sent me when we were apart. Mostly from the early years after boarding school, when I was at university doing my pharmacy degree.’

Kylie’s ears pricked up at this, maybe Tricia had something that would explain why the gold nuggets were in the urn. ‘Oh, that does sound interesting. What did you find?’

‘Well, there are just a few bits and pieces from her letters that I really didn’t take much notice of back then. And to tell you the truth, they really don’t make much sense to me now either. But here goes. I wrote them down onto a piece of paper so I could put the letters back in storage.’ Tricia coughed to clear her throat. ‘The first one: “I’m still trying to find out where mother hides her secret box. Father must never know about it though”. The second one: “That was a bit strange, I saw mother carving something into the lid of her secret box today”. And the last one: “I finally found mother’s secret box, after looking

for its hiding place for so long. And how funny, mother is trying to be a poet, but she's not very good. She's carved a poem into the lid of her box. I have no idea what it's supposed to mean. It just sounds silly to me". Tricia paused to take a breath. 'That's it. That's all that stood out to me in the letters. Oh, and I'm sorry, but most of Gemma's letters are undated, so I wouldn't be able to pinpoint an exact date of each for you.'

'That's ok, Tricia. I'll check the box again. Maybe there's something that I overlooked.'

'Hang on, wait a sec. Sorry, I missed one. Here it is: "I worked out what the poem means and I'm going to get the precious thing that's been hidden away for so long – I finally solved the riddle". Sorry, I wrote that one on the back and forgot about it.'

'That's excellent, Tricia. I have a feeling that I might know what this is all about now.'

'Really? I hope you do. Good luck with it. Let me know if you need anything else.'

'I will, Tricia. And thanks again. Bye.' Kylie hung up the phone and sat down at the table. Well, this was certainly more than she bargained for. Tricia may not have been able to help with the half-cousin issue, but she definitely just opened another can of worms. And this can of worms had something to do with Buffy's special box.

Kylie went back into the lounge room and put her handbag on the coffee table next to her now-cold cup of tea. She was a bit calmer now, and things were starting to make sense. She sat down and looked at the letters again. Should she open the one for Gregory? She had a fair idea of what would be inside, of what Buffy needed to tell him. But somehow it felt like she should give them their privacy. The letter was between Buffy and Gregory, nobody else. She pushed the letters to the side and took the diary out of her handbag and placed it next to the letters. She had the letters and the diary. Now she just needed the box. And a fresh cup of tea. She hadn't eaten since breakfast but her stomach was doing flips with this next piece of information from Tricia. She wished Jack would ring so she could tell him.

She grabbed her cold tea and went back to the kitchen and poured the tea down the sink. 'King, do you want some dinner?' She put the kettle on and picked up King's food bowl. King came running into the kitchen. 'Seriously, why do I even bother to ask if you're hungry? You're always hungry. Aren't you, boy?' She filled King's bowl with dry dog food and put it on the floor. 'There. That should keep you busy for about... oh, I'd say, a minute.' She smiled at King as he gobbled down his food.

The kettle shrieked at her. She finished making her tea then waited for King to go out for a pee before she retrieved the box from inside the breadbin. She placed the tea and the box on the coffee table and sat back on the lounge. ‘Well King, I think I have everything. Now let’s see if I can work out what Tricia was talking about.’ She took a sip of tea and picked up the box. She smiled when she saw King making himself comfortable on the bundle of material that was still on the floor. She rubbed her finger back and forth over the small metal horseshoe in the corner of the box lid. ‘How many more secrets are you hiding inside?’

Kylie closed her eyes for a moment and willed the phone to ring. She wished Jack would call. She was dying to tell him. But at this stage it looked like he definitely wouldn’t be back until morning. She opened the box and looked at the carving under the lid. She’d seen the poem every time she’d opened the box, but hadn’t taken much notice of it. She re-read it out loud. ‘Threads of, the earth, woven together, chart to, precious bounty. Hmm, King, help me out here. What do you think it means?’ She looked down at King but he didn’t budge. He was far too comfortable and was ready for bed. She shook her head. ‘Never mind, I’ll work it out myself.’ She took the photos out of the box and felt around inside. Maybe there was something she missed. Then she turned the box over and felt all underneath and around the sides. She couldn’t feel anything. ‘Nope. Nothing strange and I can’t see any way of hiding anything in it.’

She looked through the photos again but still nothing stood out. ‘Well, that only leaves the diary and the will.’ She took the will out from the cover of the diary and read over it again. ‘Lots of legal jargon, but nothing else, nothing about anything precious.’ She slipped the will back inside the diary cover and opened the diary to the first page. ‘Looks like I’ll have to read this thing all over again. There must be something in here that links to the poem. There just has to be.’ She drank some more tea and started reading. Page after page, Kylie re-read the entries, until she neared the end of the diary. She yawned. King was already fast asleep on the floor. ‘I’m buggered. I’ll just rest my eyes for a minute so I can finish reading the diary.’ She grabbed the cushion and stretched out on the lounge. And fell asleep.

###

Kylie pushed the warm thing away from her face and wiped her cheek. ‘Five more minutes.’ She tried to roll over but she was already pressed up against something. The

warm thing came back and wet her cheek again. ‘No. Let me sleep.’ She tried to push it away again but felt fur under her hand. ‘What?’ She opened her eyes and looked around. ‘King? What am I doing...’ She sat up and looked at King. ‘I fell asleep, didn’t I? Argh.’ She rubbed at the back of her neck. ‘And what a crappy sleep, too.’ King nudged her leg and looked up at her. ‘What is it, boy? Oh, you want to go out for a wee.’ King wagged his tail and trotted over to the door.

Kylie stretched her arms above her head and stood up. ‘I am so stiff. Don’t let me fall asleep on that lounge even again, King.’ She opened the door and King dashed out. She left King outside and went back into the lounge room and looked around. ‘What a mess. I must have been exhausted last night.’ She put the cushions back on the armchairs and straightened the rug. The bundle of material that King had slept on was now covered in dog hair. ‘Yuck. King?’ Hearing his name, King came running back into the house. ‘No more sleeping on things that aren’t your actual bed, mister. I’ll have to hang this on the line now and try to brush all of your hair off.’

She picked up a corner of the material and dragged it toward the door. The bundle started to unfold and spread itself out on the floor as she moved it. She glanced back and stopped. ‘That’s a strange pattern.’ She grabbed the other corner and pulled the material out flat. ‘What is that? Lines, squiggles, writing?’ Kylie tilted her head to see it from a different angle. ‘I’m not sure what it is, yet it kind of looks familiar.’ King walked over to her and stepped onto the material and sat down. She laughed. ‘No, boy. It’s not time for a nap. Hop off please. Move, King.’ He moved off and sat near the lounge. ‘I think I need to work out what this is. Maybe because Buffy used it to wrap the paintings, it might mean something.’

‘Anyone home, lass?’ Frank called from the back door.

‘In here, Frank. I’m in the lounge room.’

‘There you are, lass. I just stopped in to tell you to take care as it looks like we might be getting some flooding on the property.’

‘Oh, no. That’s no good.’

‘Ay, be careful on the tracks. They be all mud at the present, so are bound to get even worse if this rain doesn’t back off soon.’

‘I will, don’t worry.’

‘What are you doing there, lass?’

‘I’m trying to work out what this is. I think it’s a diagram of some sort.’

Frank chuckled. ‘No, lass. Not quite a diagram. It’s a map.’

Kylie's eyes widened. 'A map? A map of what exactly?' She looked down at it and shook her head.

'Why, of here, of course. This tapestry is a map of the property.' Frank swept his arm out toward the back door. 'It's a map of Mungabah.'

Kylie stumbled backwards and nearly tripped over King. She sat down on the lounge and opened the box and looked at the poem again. Threads, woven, chart. There must be some connection here. She looked up at Frank. 'A map of Mungabah, you say?'

'Yes, lass. There's another map in Buffy's office. Sorry. Your office.'

Kylie's eyes turned toward the office. 'In the office?'

'Yes, lass. On the wall. A big one, too. Though not as big as this one on the tapestry. This one is mostly Buffy's handy work. She was always adding to it and doing stitch repairs.'

She needed more time to work this out. She also needed more clues. But she didn't know where to look next. Maybe the other map was a good place to start? She nodded at Frank. 'Thanks for that, Frank. Have you heard from Jack?'

'No, not since yesterday arvo. The road out of town must still be under.' Frank smiled at her. 'Don't worry, lass. He'll be home soon.'

Kylie felt her face heat up. How embarrassing that everyone knew she'd be missing Jack. But she was missing him. She couldn't deny that. She grinned at Frank. 'Thanks.'

'Well, I better be off. Have heaps to do if this rain keeps up. And don't head off anywhere in this weather, lass. It's far too risky.'

'Thanks, Frank. I won't.' She waved as Frank walked out the door. Now she knew what the tapestry was, and had a second map to compare it to. She went into the office and looked at the map on the wall. She grabbed the bottom of the thin metal frame and lifted it off the hook. Placing the frame on the floor, she dragged it into the lounge room and laid it on the floor next to the tapestry.

'Now, let's have a good look at them side by side.' She tilted her head left and right and compared the two layouts. 'Frank was right. They're the same. But why on earth would someone spend all that time stitching something like this onto a large tapestry?' She stepped over to the coffee table and read the poem again. 'Threads and woven could be the tapestry. Earth, the land. Chart can also mean map. And precious bounty. Buffy kept referring to something precious, and so did my mother. But what is it?'

Kylie paced the room and tried to recall all of the phone conversation with Tricia. So her mother was also looking for something precious. Something precious that needed a riddle solved first. 'That's it!' Kylie picked up the box and opened the lid. 'The poem is the riddle. It must lead to whatever the precious thing is.' She put the box down and turned and looked down at the tapestry. 'And the map charts how to get to it.' She threw her hands in the air. 'Oh my goodness. It's all coming together now.' She kneeled down between the two maps. Both maps showed the roads and tracks, and had outlines of the buildings. They also showed the creeks and ridgelines, as well as the gorges and fence lines. There was a lot to look at. Her eyes darted back and forth between the two. Comparing the markings. Looking for anything that didn't match the other.

And then she saw it. On the ridgeline of the main gorge. A horseshoe shape that wasn't on the office map. She looked at the tapestry again, then back at the office map. There was no horseshoe on the office map. 'A horseshoe!' She looked over to the coffee table. The small horseshoe on the lid of the box. 'Of course. That bloody box had the clues I needed all this time. Buffy!' She looked back at the maps and saw a track that led up to the ridge from behind the cemetery. 'It's called Ridgeline track.' She ran her fingers along both of the dotted lines. 'They match perfectly, King.' She stood up and clasped her hands together. 'I can't believe I worked it out. I'm just not sure what it is exactly that is hidden there, but it must be something quite valuable if it can save Mungabah. Though...'

She pointed a finger toward the ceiling then rubbed her chin. 'I think I have a feeling I might know what it is. Seeing as how I'm now the great granddaughter of a bushranger.' She cocked an eyebrow at King. 'Are you even paying attention, King?' King sat up and sniffed his butt. 'Typical.' She laughed and grabbed a notepad from the kitchen drawer.

'Jack, I solved the riddle and have gone to find the precious item that everyone has been looking for. Please give this envelope to Mr Berrigan, it's very important. I'll fill you in when I get back. I have some great news to tell you. Kylie.' She tore the page off and put it on the kitchen table with the envelope. She grabbed her car keys and picked King up and headed out the door.

'Sorry, boy. But I have to leave you here with your brothers and sisters while I do this.' She stopped the car and put King in the puppy pen at the kennels. 'I'll be back soon. I promise.' She pulled in at the work shed and looked around. 'I have no idea what I'm going to need. Guess I'll just take a bit of everything and see how I go.' She opened the tailgate of her Suzuki and threw in some rope and straps, then a shovel and bucket. She saw an abseiling harness hanging on a hook, so she grabbed that as well. She shrugged

her shoulders. 'That'll do.' Before she got back into the driver's seat she locked in the front hubs. 'Lucky I remembered about that. If the tracks are as muddy as Frank says they are, I'm in for a slippery drive.' The Suzuki took off toward the cemetery. Mud spewed out behind it as Kylie dodged kangaroos and wallabies, pot holes and rocks. It had to be there, it just had to. This was her last hope to save the property.

Chapter 10

Jack walked through the open back door of the big house. ‘Kylie, I made it back in one piece.’ He drummed his fingers along the kitchen bench as he walked past into the lounge room. ‘Kylie!’ He was so glad to be back. He hardly slept a wink at the motel last night when he got stuck in town. ‘Whoa. What’s going on here?’ Jack stopped in front of the two maps that were still on the floor, then spied all of the items on the coffee table. ‘It looks like someone has been busy.’ He went upstairs and check each room. ‘Where the hell are you?’ He went back to the kitchen and grabbed a drink out of the fridge. ‘What’s this?’

Jack read the note from Kylie and picked up the envelope. ‘Well this is interesting. Now I really do wish I’d just driven through that bloody flooded road.’ He looked back toward the lounge. ‘Should I try and find her or wait until she comes back? Argh. I have no idea.’ He held the envelope up toward the light coming in through the window and tried to see through the thin paper. ‘Damn. Can’t see a thing. I feel silly just sitting here, so I may as well drop this in to Mr Berrigan.’

He pulled the door closed behind him and got into his ute. ‘Kylie must have been in a real hurry if she forgot to close the door. She better not be doing something stupid.’ He gunned the engine and tore down the muddy driveway.

Jack handed Mr Berrigan the envelope and waited. He clasped his hands behind his back as he stood there. It had been years since he’d been inside the Berrigan house and being in the presence of Mr Berrigan felt like being in the principal’s office.

Mr Berrigan slit the envelope open and began reading the letter. ‘My darling G. This letter has been a long time in coming, I’m sure you’ll agree...’ Mr Berrigan went silent as he continued to read. A few moments of silence passed before he looked up at Jack. ‘Where did you get this from?’ He took a step toward him and shook the letter at him. ‘Tell me. Now!’

Jack gulped. ‘Kylie found it. But I don’t know where. She left it on the kitchen table with a note. She told me to give the envelope to you.’ He grimaced when Mr Berrigan raised the letter into the air.

‘Where is she now? I must see her.’

‘I... I don’t know. She wasn’t at the big house when I got back from town. I’m not sure. But she left me this.’ Jack felt around in his pocket for the note. ‘Here. This is all I know.’ He handed the note over and took a step back.

Mr Berrigan unfolded the note and read the message Kylie left for Jack. 'NO! I won't let this happen! Not again!' He threw the note and envelope onto the hall table and grabbed his oil skin jacket and Akubra. 'Now! We must find her. NOW!'

Jack scurried back toward the door. He raised his palms up to Mr Berrigan. 'Ok. Ok. She left some things at the big house. Some tapestry thingy and a map and stuff.'

'Show them to me. I must see them.'

'Of course. I'll take you in my ute.'

'Good.'

They arrived at the big house and Jack took Mr Berrigan inside. 'Here. There's the tapestry and the map. And on the coffee table are a few things. I'm sorry, but I don't know what any of it means.'

Mr Berrigan picked up the box and smiled. He ran his finger over the horseshoe. 'I made this for her. Did you know that?'

Jack shook his head.

'Probably nobody knew. She told me she used to keep our letters in here. For a little while, anyway.' He opened the lid. His eyes widened when he saw the poem.

'That's some sort of poem we think Buffy wrote.'

Mr Berrigan huffed. 'That's not a poem, son. That's the riddle. The riddle that everyone has been trying to find. The riddle that leads to my father's stash.' He put the box down and turned and looked at Jack. 'You did know that my father was a bushranger back in the day, didn't you, son?'

Jack shrugged his shoulders. 'I think I may have heard something about it.'

'Pfft! Heard something about it? He was the most notorious bushranger on this side of the Range. The police never did find him. Or his stash.' He cocked an eyebrow at Jack. 'But he only ever stole from the rich. He had morals, you see.' Mr Berrigan shook his head. 'Enough about Father. What's that book?'

'It's Buffy's diary.'

Mr Berrigan's mouth opened. And closed. 'Ok. I'll leave that be for the moment.' He turned to the tapestry and map. 'There must be something here, otherwise she wouldn't have left them out like this.'

Jack nodded his head. 'Yes, I agree. She must have seen something on them to take off like that.'

Mr Berrigan picked the box up again and opened the lid. 'I've seen this before. But I'll be darned if I know how Buffy got it though. Dad always said he'd never tell a soul what it meant. But I knew what it was for. I just didn't know where.'

'We also found a few small nuggets of gold. But I took them to the bank, for safe keeping.'

'Why for safe keeping?'

Jack shuffled his feet on the floor. 'Well, we think Gazza may have been looking for the nuggets. Or the riddle. Or both. We had a few... incidents with him.'

Mr Berrigan rubbed his chin. 'Why doesn't that surprise me? Nothing but trouble, that kid.' He crouched down and studied the tapestry and the map. 'These are the same.' He waved a hand back and forth between the two maps. 'Now let me see. I've been trying to buy Mungabah off Buffy for years now. Not for me, though. It was so she could keep it, and keep running it however she liked. But she would never sell it. Not even to me. I thought that after Jonathon and Gemma died she might have. But no, not even then.' Mr Berrigan stared at the maps again.

Jack looked at Mr Berrigan. He had a feeling there was more to this guy than just a friendly neighbour. He was hearing things today that he'd thought were only stories from when he was a kid. He always thought they were just rumours, these stories of bushrangers and hideouts. But not now. And Kylie had worked it all out before him. She was out there now, trying to find what he now guessed was the bushranger's hideout. But because of the floods she could be in danger. He wanted to slap himself up the side of the head for being slow to work this out today.

Mr Berrigan pointed to the tapestry. 'I wonder.' He checked the other map, then looked at the tapestry again. 'It has to be it. It just has to.' He beckoned for Jack to come closer. 'Can you see it, son. Right there. On the ridgeline.'

Jack squinted his eyes and peered at the spot on the ridgeline. 'Shit. Think you're right. Oh, um. Yes, that looks like something, Mr Berrigan.'

'Son, stop with the Mr Berrigan already. Gregory is fine.' He tapped the spot with his finger. 'It's a horseshoe and it's not on the other map. It's been added later. And it's also on the box. Buffy was one smart broad.' He put his hat on and started for the door. 'Come on Jack. That gorge will be flooded now and she could be in trouble. I will not stand by and let history repeat itself.' He rushed toward the ute.

Jack followed and got in. What did he mean, repeat itself? One day I'm going to sit down with Mr... Gregory and ask him all about the rumours and things he heard as a kid living at Mungabah. He started the engine. But first he had to find Kylie. And fast.

The ute bounced around on the muddy track. Luckily Jack knew this track well, he'd been along it many times to check on cattle. That is, when they ran cattle.

The two-way radio crackled and blared to life. 'Jack, do you have a copy?'

Jack picked up the handpiece. 'Copy, Mum.'

'Oh, Jack. Where are you? Toowoomba just got wiped out by flood waters from the massive storm. Nearly the whole town. Gone. And the water is heading our way. Get back home as soon as you can.'

'Copy that, Mum. I will.' He hung up the handpiece. He couldn't tell Penny where he was. Or what he was doing. She would freak out. But he had to do this. He had to find Kylie.

The rain had let up a bit but the track was gluggy with the ute tyres spinning up mud and making it worse. 'We should be close now. We're up pretty high so the top should be coming up any minute now.' The track followed parallel to the ridge line then stopped near an outcrop of trees.

'There!' Jack pointed to the Suzuki parked on the other side of the trees. He parked the ute next to the Suzuki and got out. 'She must be close by.'

Gregory nodded his head. 'Hopefully. I need to see her, before it's too late. I'm not spritely anymore, son. If I don't see her very soon, I may never.'

Jack wasn't sure what Gregory meant. But he didn't have time to find out. He walked to the edge of the ridge and looked down. The gorge was filling with water. Fast. He sensed Gregory beside him. They both stood still and scanned the water below.

Gregory shook his head. 'I don't see her anywhere!'

'Kylie!' Jack shouted her name. His eyes skimmed the shear rock wall and followed it down to the water line. The water was now higher than before. 'Shit, it's getting higher!'

He ran toward the clump of trees and signalled for Gregory to follow. 'Look. A rope. She's tied a rope to the trees. Shit! That means she's climbed down.'

Gregory sank to his knees. 'No! No, not again.'

Jack was confused for a moment. What not again? He ran over to the ute and got in. He started the engine and drove straight for the edge of the ridge. And stopped. He jumped out and grabbed some straps out of his toolbox and attached them together.

‘Gregory. I need you to use this.’ He attached the cord and hand controller to the winch mounted on the bull bar of the ute. ‘I’m going to climb down to get her. But I’ll need you to use the winch to pull us both back up. The winch cable isn’t very long but with these straps attached it just might reach.’ He handed Gregory the hand controller and pointed to the retraction button.

Gregory gave Jack the thumbs up and looked over the edge.

Jack fashioned a harness out of the tree protector strap and rigged himself up to the winch clip. ‘I’ll raise my hand when we need to be pulled up.’ He walked to the edge and grabbed onto the rope attached to the trees to steady himself.

‘Wait! There she is!’

Jack turned toward the edge and looked over. Kylie appeared from behind a small ledge. She had his old abseiling gear on. But it was really old. He should have binned it years ago. The water raged below, pushing itself through the tight gorge. It was getting higher with each passing minute. His heart was trying to burst through his chest. This was going to be harder than he thought. He tightened the strap around him and grabbed the rope. He took a deep breath and slid his right foot off the edge.

‘NO! Jack! Quick!’

Jack swung around and looked at Gregory. ‘What happened?’

‘Her harness broke. She fell in. Quick. You have to save my granddaughter!’

Jack turned back toward the edge. And froze. Granddaughter? His heart nearly jumped out of his throat. Did that mean what he hoped it did? He glanced back at Gregory. He had his face in his hands. Crying. Granddaughter! Jack threw himself over the edge. His adrenalin kicked in. Full steam ahead. Nothing was going to stop him. He clawed his way down the rock wall. Skin scraped off his fingertips. He kept going. Nearly halfway down he glanced below him. He could see her. She was hanging onto a tree root growing on a ledge. But she was losing her grip. He could see the panic in her eyes. He pushed back from the wall and dropped the rest of the way down. He tried to muffle the scream that tore out of his throat. He knew his ankle was cactus. But it didn’t matter. He reached out and grabbed her. Dragged her up onto the ledge. They both fell back. Exhausted.

‘Jack!’ Kylie wrapped her arms around him. ‘You did it.’

Jack looked at her and shook his head. ‘No. We have to get out of here. The water is still rising.’ He sat up and looked round. He was still attached to the straps but he

couldn't see Gregory. They were too far under the ledge. They had to climb up to the next ledge so Gregory could see them.

'Good thing the rain has stopped. But I'm going to need your help.'

Kylie's eyes widened. 'Of course. Anything.'

'My ankle is busted. We need to get up higher. I'll have to lean on you.'

She nodded her head and stood up. She helped Jack stand and draped his arm over her shoulders.

'Good. We need to get up there. So Gregory can see us.'

'Mr Berrigan is here?'

'Yes. It's ok. I know everything now.' He grabbed her head with his free hand and kissed her hard on the lips and grinned.

She grinned back. 'Now get us out of here, Jack Lawson.'

He hobbled over to the side of the ledge above and searched for footholds.

'Lucky. There's a few. We should be fine to get up there.' He pushed Kylie forward and helped her up first. She reached down and steadied Jack so he could climb up. His fingertips were still bleeding, but he had to keep going. 'We're further from the water now. Let's see if Gregory...' He stopped talking and pointed. 'Look.'

Kylie turned and looked at the rock wall behind them. 'Wow. Is that a cave?'

Jack leaned on her again. 'There's only one way to find out.' He stuck his head inside the small cave and tried to look around. 'It's a bit dark in there. I can't see much. I'll have to use my hands and feel around instead.'

Kylie looked at Jack's fingers. 'No you don't mister. Not with those fingers. I'll do it.' She reached as far as she could into the cave and felt around. 'There's not much room in here. Only enough for one person. Good though, if you were hiding out.' She pulled back from the cave and turned toward Jack with a big smile on her face. 'Jack. Look!' She was holding a large tin can. 'An old, rusty, Bushells tea tin. Hidden in a cave. And it's heavy. You know what that means, Jack?'

Jack nodded his head. 'You found it.'

'No, Jack. We found it.' She tried to shake the heavy tin. 'And it feels like more than enough to save Mungabah.' She put the tin down and grinned at him.

Jack watched her grin burst into a huge smile. She was happy to be saving the place. He was happy she was safe. Was she happy to be with him, now they knew the truth? 'Kylie, I lov...'

‘Shh.’ She pressed a finger to his lips. ‘No, Jack. I love you more.’ She replaced her finger with her lips and caressed his lips with hers. ‘Jack. Let’s get out of here.’

Now it was his turn to smile. He nodded and looked down at his ankle. ‘This is going to hurt. Jump onto my back and hook your arms around me. I’ll hold the tin in front.’ Jack grimaced as his ankle bore Kylie’s weight. He raised his hand to signal Gregory.

The winch rope creaked as it braced against the weight of them. It slowly inched its way up the cliff face. Jack grimaced with each knock of his busted ankle against the protruding rocks. He had one hand behind him around Kylie and one hand holding the tin in front of him. If the tin slipped, it would be lost forever in the raging waters below. If Kylie slipped... he didn’t want to think about that. He tightened his arm around the back of her thighs to keep her attached to him for as long as possible. Her grip around his neck was almost painful, but at least with that pain he could feel that she was still with him. Jack glanced up and saw that they were almost at the top, he could see Mr Berrigan peering over the edge at them. They were almost there. Thank goodness.

‘Grab her!’ Jack yelled. He pushed Kylie up from behind him while Mr Berrigan helped her up onto the cliff top. Jack threw the tin over the top of the cliff and hauled himself to safety. ‘We made it.’ He held his hand out to Mr Berrigan. ‘Thanks for your help Mr Berr, um, Gregory, I couldn’t have done it without you.’

‘No, thank you, Jack.’ Gregory turned back toward Kylie and helped her up. ‘Thanks for saving my granddaughter.’ He kept hold of Kylie’s hand and smiled at her.

Kylie looked up at Gregory. ‘So you knew? All this time?’

‘No, I guessed. Well, I hoped, actually.’ Gregory answered.

‘You hoped?’

‘Yes. I thought that if Elizabeth was carrying my baby she would want to be with me.’ Gregory lowered his head. ‘But I was mistaken. I was a few years younger than her so I always thought it was an age thing that bothered her. I didn’t bother me.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Jonathan was one lucky man. How I envied him.’ He shook his head and sighed. ‘But none of that matters now. You know the truth, that’s what matters. And I finally have my granddaughter. That’s if you’ll have me, this worn out old man with wishful thinking?’ Gregory held out his arms to her.

Kylie stifled a sob as she walked into his embrace. ‘Of course I’ll have you, granddad!’

Jack turned away and rubbed at his eyes. Was he turning into a sook? No way. He was just relieved that everything worked out. He walked over to his ute and started reeling the winch in. He tapped the top of the bull bar. 'Thanks mate, I knew you wouldn't let me down.'

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Kylie sat on the bench and watched Jack take the new dog through its paces. She tilted her Akubra up and wiped the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand. King put his head on her knee, hoping for a pat. 'Oh, King. Don't tell me you're jealous of the new guy.' She scratched King behind his ears. 'Don't worry. You're much cuter than him.' She picked up Buffy's diary again and re-read the last entry, '28 January 1974 - I've lost what was truly most precious to me. I can't look at their faces ever again. My world has ended.' She closed the book and smiled. She picked up the new diary she'd bought that morning and rested it on her thighs. Opening it to the first blank page she grabbed her pen and wrote 'Diary of Kylie Douglas, Mungabah Station'. King nudged her leg and looked up at her. 'What is it, boy?' She glanced at her handwriting on the crisp white page and smiled. 'Yes, of course, silly me.' She drew a line through 'Douglas' and above it wrote 'Lawson'. She then turned to a new page and wrote, '15 July 2011 – I found *all* of Buffy's "precious" things. My world has just begun.' The sun flickered off the gold band on her ring finger as she closed the book and stroked the new leather cover.

She pushed herself up off the bench and walked over to her ute. She tapped the tray with her hand and King jumped up. 'Good boy.' She turned and looked over at Jack and waved to get his attention. She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted. 'I have to pee. Again.' Jack nodded his head as she turned sideways and rubbed her bulging belly. She smiled and took a deep breath of the fresh country air. The sun felt deliciously warm on her skin, but she really needed to pee. She climbed up into the ute cab and started the engine. The track back to the big house was a smooth ride now that it had been levelled and compacted. But she knew where there was a nice muddy side track. She felt the baby kick and smiled. 'Yes, Jack Jnr. Let's go have some fun.' Her heart sang as she looked around at her property. She nodded her head. She'd kicked butt and made it work. Her mother and Buffy would be so proud.

The End

Creating *Mungabah*: The Critical Exegesis

Introduction

This exegesis provides a critical examination of my novel *Mungabah* in the context of rural romances being under-studied in Australian literary culture. My intention is to explore opportunities for innovation in formal literary qualities concerning the rural romance. Specifically, I explore how I have innovated on the form and content of the rural romance. In terms of innovation to the rural romance novel form, I demonstrate how I have broadened the scholarship around the important romantic concept of pair-bonding as a literary technique. Specifically, I use animals and four wheel drives as minor characters in a way that provide moments of tension, bonding and romance between the two protagonists, Kylie and Jack. According to the scholarship on the rural romance, this kind of innovation has not been done before, therefore will represent my main contribution to knowledge of the rural romance and creative practice. In terms of content, I explain how the artefact incorporates additional rural elements that have previously been underutilised by other authors, elements such as working dogs, chickens, four wheel drives, gold nuggets, and Australian character names. I explain how I use these seemingly symbolic and functional elements more expansively and for different purposes, which go beyond their existing application in the rural romance genre.

Using a methodology of practice-led and qualitative research (Milech & Schilo 2004; Vella 2005; Candy 2006; Haseman 2007), practice-led through the creative work and qualitative through the exegesis, the research explains how I have innovated on rural elements in the form and content of the rural romance beyond their existing application in the sub-genre for different purposes. Practice-led research (PLR) provides the opportunity to engage broadly and deeply with theory in the field. This theory can be envisioned as a set of potential tools that can be applied in the creation of the artefact. A number of romance theory works are taken up in Chapter 1, which explain the creation of my novel. Arguably, I have created a novel that discovers and applies inventive ways to incorporate explicit examples of pair-bonding and social issues into the narrative and plot, while concurrently respecting the integrity of romance as a genre with its core set of conventions around the protagonists' quest for 'true love' and a happy ever after ending. Advancing the innovation of the romance genre means challenging the established tacit 'rules' of the form as well as challenging the normative tendencies traditionally reinforced by the genre.

PLR has an expressed set of goals and:

is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice. The primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about the practice as an integrated part of its method and often falls within the general area of action research. (Candy 2006, p. 3)

There is increasing evidence that rural romance fiction is becoming the most popular sub-genre of romance fiction, with readers and publishers wanting more (O'Mahony 2014; Mirmohamadi 2015). The recent resurgence of rural romance fiction being published in Australia has caught the attention of writers and publishers alike. Therefore, it is timely to focus on contributing to knowledge around the crafting of rural romances that might innovate them further.

The exegesis explores how I have innovated the rural romance novel form to address the concept of pair-bonding, and social issues about identity and achieving a sense of belonging in rural Australia. I am particularly interested in how my novel's heroine (a city girl) transitions towards fulfilling a strong relationship with her hero (a country boy), as well as towards achieving a sense of belonging and participation in a small rural community. I also examine what makes a successful Australian rural romance novel. Is it the setting and its redeployment of aspects of Australian history; is it the characters and storyline; is it meeting a set of generic expectations that have been cultivated in the reader and privileged by publishers? Or is it a combination of all these elements? According to Flesch (2004), 'The Australianness of Australian writing depends as much on the characters, the relations between them and the situations described, as on aspects of language, locale and subject' (p. 263). The exegesis examines the essential elements of the Australian rural romance sub-genre and how I have represented these elements to craft my own original and innovative rural romance novel and observes how my novel offers an original contribution to understanding the rural romance in terms of how I have made these innovations and represented these elements. Through close engagement with the work of a number of rural romance writers and the critical reception of their work, I seek to uncover just what combination of elements are needed to make an effective Australian rural romance novel, and demonstrate how I have used these elements and others in my novel.

Flesch (2004) suggests, 'We will see that, rather than forming part of a homogenous body of popular writing, Australian romance novels are distinctively

Australian in both style and ethos, that they have changed with changing times and finally that the diversity in Australian fiction in general is mirrored by diversity in Australian romance novels' (p. 12). The portrayal of a stronger heroine is an example of change within changing times, and is something I wanted to address in my artefact.

A study of the publishers who publish this sub-genre and their requirements helps shed some light on how this sub-genre is made sustainable in today's highly competitive publishing context. 'Australians are devouring romance fiction in greater numbers than ever, with figures from local publishers showing sales jumping from \$18 million in 2011 to an astonishing \$52 million in 2012' (Bochenski 2013, p. 1). The exegesis aims to contextualise and analyse some of the current discussion about rural romance fiction, and to examine the continuing debate regarding the necessity of authenticity.

I explain how my novel *Mungabah* contains many of the same elements and characteristics evident in the rural romance novels examined, and how I worked some of these elements in such a way to innovate the form. The artefact attempts to interrogatively locate itself within popular contemporary Australian rural romance fiction with an Australian outback setting that embodies elements of Australian history and within academic commentary upon that body of fiction.

Inspiration to write this novel came from my love of exploring the countryside and rural towns, and in particular, old outback buildings and homesteads. We moved house continuously during my childhood and never stayed for more than six months in the same house or suburb in Brisbane so I have always yearned to feel the sense of belonging to one particular place and having that home base for the family to be nurtured and grow. Rural properties and their legacy of generational ownership has always intrigued me due to this unsettled childhood.

When I stumbled upon the Glengallan Homestead in Warwick, Queensland, I instantly fell in love with it. The grandness and atmosphere of the building and the barren sparseness of the surrounding countryside conjured up all sorts of characters and events that I would have loved to have been witness to over the decades when the property was occupied. I have also enjoyed many Australian novels over the years and obviously fell in love with anything set in the outback. Throw in some romance and a big homestead and I found the perfect combination: rural romance novels. After devouring as many rural romance novels as I could find, I set myself the task of writing my own in a more innovative way to allow me the freedom to live out my rural romance lifestyle fantasies through my novels, and that just maybe others would enjoy reading them.

Chapter outline and methodology

Chapter 1, the Literature Review explores the scholarship around romance and rural romance theory in a way that relates them to what I am doing in my novel. I also examine the literature on pair-bonding (why human beings are attracted to one another), since that is the concept that I have used to innovate on the form of the rural romance. I define pair-bonding and examine the origins of it in psychological studies in human sexuality. Then I explain how some scholars have applied the term pair-bonding into the language of romance as a way of human beings being attracted to one another. My aim is to take pair-bonding one step further however, by showing how it can be used to innovate on the form of the rural romance and strengthen the connection between two people beyond an initial attraction, to something much stronger. This is taken up in Chapter 2. The scholarship around the way pair-bonding is used to innovate on the rural romance form is almost non-existent.

Chapter 2 sets out to defend my use of the term pair-bonding in a variety of literary techniques which innovate on the form of the rural romance. Specifically, the chapter explains how I have used dialogue between the two protagonists and minor characters, such as working dogs and four wheel drives, which raises moments of tension between the protagonists but which also strengthen the bond and romance between them as those tensions are resolved. In this chapter I also explore how Kylie, as an outsider figure, transitions towards fulfilling a strong relationship with her hero, as well as towards achieving a sense of belonging and participation in a small rural community, using the concept of “retreatism” (Negra 2009).

Chapter 3 examines some of the key rural elements, as well as representations of the rural, that form the writing of rural romances, and explains how I have represented the rural in my novel to make it work. This chapter showcases my inclusion of some rural elements that are currently underutilised in other authors’ novels, or not being utilised to their fullest potential, pushing my novel beyond the ordinary by its originality and assiduity to the sub-genre. For example, the representation of four wheel drives reinforces the rural setting, shows the heroine’s character development and provides moments of romance between the couple. Incorporation of the chickens and rooster add humour as well as provide lessons for Jack and Kylie in terms of their pair-bonding.

Chapter 4 discusses the importance of authentic historical elements in Australian rural romance novels, and then explains how I have incorporated these elements in my creative piece.

Chapter 5 explores what makes rural romance novels romantic and what are readers of this sub-genre expecting in terms of romance and how these ideas are applied to my novel. It also looks at the writers' who write rural romance novels and what they think is the appeal of this sub-genre. Finally, I explain how I have created romance between my hero and heroine.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

This chapter begins with a critical engagement of romance theory scholarship and literary criticism. This assists in understanding how existing theory and criticism relating to the romance novel form can be applied to the creation of my artefact, providing an opportunity for me to later show where the form can be innovated. The chapter also explores the concept of pair-bonding in the romance literature as a point of entry for innovating on the form. It provides a closer examination of the sub-genre of rural romance and reviews the limited scholarship in order to provide insights on which conventions are expected in a rural romance novel.

1.1. Romance theory and pair-bonding

The perception of being sentimental, emotional, written and read by women, and being embraced by the mass-culture marketplace, has led to the slow maturation of scholarship of romance fiction (Frantz & Selinger 2012, p. 3). Popular fiction will always be defined by generic identities and those identities are announced loudly and unambiguously, with romance being only one of eight primary genres of popular fiction (Gelder 2004, p. 42). All popular fiction genres are defined by constraints and conventions that help to identify them. Regis (2003) calls these ‘essential narrative elements’ (p. 27), Bloom (2002) claims they are ‘artistic restraints’ (p. 14), but whatever they are called or referred to as, they are needed to differentiate the genres and to meet reader expectations.

Romance novels are generally defined as fiction focused on a central love story that culminates in an optimistic and emotionally satisfying or just ending (Romance Writers of America, 2011). While there are a mix of sub-genre codes and conventions and some latitude in how writers employ, reject or subvert them, there are two major conventions that are strictly defined and which are expected from readers. Firstly, the courtship of two protagonists is the main narrative. There is a balance in the expected sub-genre relationship between the protagonists. Secondly, the narrative concludes with an emotionally satisfying ending where the love between the heroine and hero is fulfilled. The ‘happily ever after’ ending is an old and traditional romantic convention, and Modleski (1991) argues that ‘convention of romance holds powerful sway’.

Radway (1983) suggests that women are nurture-deprived; readers derive satisfaction from the hero’s caring, nurturing traits that are commonly considered

feminine. Typically, the heroine yearns for the hero's love. Women are thus not interested only in the romance's happy ending. They want to involve themselves in a story that will permit them to 'enjoy the hero's tenderness and to reinterpret his momentary blind cool indifference as to a mark of a love so intense that he is wary of admitting it' (Radway 1983, pp. 67-68), in other words they want to involve themselves in all the elements of romantic love. Radway goes on to suggest that the narrative technique would enable readers to reinterpret the behaviour of their partners in light of the stories they read, and hope to envision a warm and loving person beneath their partner's defensive exterior.

Romance Writers of Australia (2014) states:

A 'romance' is defined by the presence of two basic elements: a love-story that is central to the story, and an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending. Most novels, whatever the genre, have some sort of romantic encounter/relationship in them somewhere, as do most films. Pair-bonding is such an integral part of human life and without it, the human race would become extinct. Perhaps that's why over half the mass market paperbacks sold every year are romances of one sort or another.

I use this concept of pair-bonding, raised in the above quote, as a point of entry for innovating on the form of the rural romance because there is little explanation on how pair-bonding can be achieved or extended using some of the rural elements that characterise rural romances.

The Australian Romance Readers Association (n.d.) states:

Romance fiction is a literary genre that covers a broad range of sub-genres - from historical, paranormal and suspense to comedy, urban fantasy and contemporary. Romance fiction caters to a variety of personal tastes. Romance fiction is written with any tone or style, can be set in any place and time, with any level of sensuality, from sweet to piping hot! There are two common elements in romance fiction: a central love story; and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.

With the theoretical scholarship stating that romance novels require a central love story and an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending, it is essential that pair-bonding plays a large part in these stories in order to achieve the required outcome. Frantz and Selinger (2012) define literary pair-bonding as a declaration of monogamy that brings narrative closure with the essential happy-ever-after (p. 116), with Fletcher, Simpson,

Campbell, and Overall (2015) adding that long-term pair-bonding is the major underlying motivational force of romantic love in humans (p. 21). Young and Wang (2004) define pair-bonding as an intense social attachment to a mate with sexual attraction and selective social attachments being 'powerful driving forces of human behaviour' due to humans having a biological architecture (p. 1048). Without pair-bonding, it would be difficult for the romantic elements in any romance novel to conform to normal conventions. Many psychological studies have been undertaken on human pair-bonding, yet it has been difficult to find any scholarship on the use of pair-bonding in romance novels. Therefore, this is an area of study that should be further explored due to its importance in achieving the central love story and happy ending in romance novels.

Regis (2003) defines romances as 'a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines' (p. 19). She maintains, to further define romance fiction, there are eight narrative events that romance novels share: 'the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal' (pp. 30-38). An optional romantic element is the wedding, dance or fete (Regis 2003, p. 38). Fletcher (2008) also emphasises the importance of the romantic speech act, I love you, as a key element in defining the romance genre. My artefact utilises a number of these narrative events or theoretical elements, including: state of their society - the heroine and hero meet and court in a declining rural social structure and a diminished farming community; the barrier to union - their barrier is the confusion of whether they are related; and the point of ritual death - when they almost give up on finding evidence that they are not related. I also include a metaphorical betrothal.

In terms of the first of these, representation of the society defined, I have Kylie and Jack meeting and courting at an old dilapidated homestead in a depressed rural community, not a romantic backdrop at first glance. For the two protagonists this society is flawed because Kylie is only going to be there for a short while until she is able to sell the homestead – she has no initial intention of living permanently at Mungabah, so it would seem the initial attraction between she and Jack won't be capitalized upon. As well, the family histories of both Kylie and Jack that later emerge and cause complications for their romance, are connected to the social context in which they meet. Moreover, the farm is struggling; Jack, who is still in mourning, has given up on sheep to

focus on breeding and training his kelpies, which he tries to sell as a way of etching out a living. Unemployment is high, shops are closing and drought is biting. Likewise, Kylie seems to be at a crossroads in her life, while widower Jack is lonely after the death of his wife and unborn child. These events and figures, and this imagery, is an allegory for a space for new beginnings. The meeting of Kylie and Jack in this situation and space represents how fertile that social context is for something new to start, and for rebuilding to occur. The pair-bonding of Jack and Kylie challenge the depressive nature of the actual flawed context of the society as it is defined because their coming together creates the potential of renewal. Kylie's presence in this rural community has a chain reaction, which leads to their romance and bonding. She takes over the property and develops other relationships with Jack's family. So it is a fairly desperate state of society that the protagonists initially find themselves in and where they must court, and that in itself can motivate an element of romance and shared experience to be strong and endure.

Mussell (2014) claims assumptions and criticisms about popular romance fiction have been a problem for a long time due to pervasive and often simplistic views held by scholars, critics, and the literary community in general. She asserts that some of the more common assumptions about romance novels are 'romances are all alike, that they are a form of debased literature, that they are bad (or good) for readers, that they border on soft porn, that romance heroines lack agency, that they promote male hegemony,' and that these assumptions are limited and have shaped the types of questions and conclusions scholars posed and drew because romance novels have been labelled monolithically formulaic which has resulted in a cultural context analysis instead of an aesthetic analysis (p. 1). My exegesis attempts to show that, yes, there are a required set of expected elements that make up the romance novel, but that they can be used in such a way as to differentiate themselves from how they are used in other romance novels to create a story that is unique and that can make important social comments about self-identity and achieving a sense of belonging. My focus on pair-bonding through innovative literary techniques is an example of how this can be achieved.

Bly (2012) affirms, '...the machinations of hegemonic culture are far more complicated and time-responsive than can be described by wide-ranging statements about a genre's effect' (p. 62) and argues that 'the key to understanding genre novels, then, is to be found in study of the parts, not the framework' (p. 64). Gelder (2004) asserts romance fiction is 'more convention-bound' than other genres, and that it is tied to a formula (p. 43), with Regis (2003) stating that 'the term implies hackwork, sub-literature and

imagination reduced to a mechanism for creating “product” (p. 23). My artefact is innovating on what is conventionally a very formula-driven sub-genre and using the artefact to show new signs of re-emergence as a more generally interesting and ‘novel’ form of literary expression. Cawelti (1976) calls romance ‘formula literature’ and suggests that ‘the trouble with this sort of approach is that it tends to make us perceive and evaluate formula literature simply as an inferior or perverted form of something better, instead of seeing its “escapist” characteristics as aspects of an artistic type with its own purposes and justification’ (p. 13). He states that he ‘characterizes formulaic romance as the “feminine equivalent of the adventure story”’ (p. 41) and concludes with, ‘No doubt the coming age of women’s liberation will invent significantly new formulas for romance, if it does not lead to a total rejection of the moral fantasy of love triumphant’ (p. 42). Yet earlier he claims that formula literature is ‘a kind of literary art’ and that ‘it can be analyzed and evaluated like any other kind of literature’ (p. 8). I am interested in inventing slightly new formulas for romance, evidenced by my use of innovation in the artefact around established romance concepts such as pair-bonding.

Fletcher (2013) concurs that popular romance is not a clearly defined area of scholarship, confirming that its identity within academia is still too recent. She maintains it is an emergent field that needs to be studied in order to map out its parameters and identity, and to define its key concepts ‘for determining theoretical frameworks and methodologies’ (p. 4). Flesch (2004) agrees with the state of romance novel scholarship, ‘Surely, whatever its literary merit, a class of literature which is enjoyed the world over, and the people who enjoy it, warrant scholarly examination?’ (p. 12). So the literature does point to opportunities to provide greater scholarship on how romances might be written, suggesting there is a place for further innovation of the form.

The plot and sub-plots of romances must serve up problems or conflicts that the hero and heroine have to overcome, and the strongest romances provide conflicts or hardships that seem like the protagonists may not be able to overcome, but they ultimately do (York, 2011). York (2011, p. 2) writes ‘conflict is essential to a romance and their internal problems will make the heroine afraid to reach out for love. The strong romance also has a black moment, or the moment of ritual death.’ York (2011, p. 3) speaks of the “black moment” as being another element of the romance. This is when the character truly gives up on working out her relationship. York then adds that the black moment makes the ending more poignant or triumphant. Bly (2012) suggests ‘scholars refocus their attention, looking to the originality, and in particular, to the engagements

with ideology and history, that can be found in romance novels' parts' (p. 64). My artefact goes deeper than the norm and uses a literary technique, animals and machinery as minor characters, that is underutilised at present by other authors, resulting in a story that is more original than what is expected of the sub-genre.

In her essay, Crusie (1998) argues that 'you can't critique a fiction by its form any more than you can by its subject matter' and goes on to say 'there's the perception, running amok throughout the industry (and outside it, too), that category fiction is a form all writers should try to break out of' (p. 42). She asks who is to blame for this perception and suggests there are three industry participants she calls the main 'culprits'. She lists the category publishers as the first culprit, saying they 'treat the form as if they were selling soup, and it's hard to get respect for soup.' The second culprit are the category editors, and that they 'should edit' and they 'should not dictate content and they should never, ever rewrite words.' Crusie suggests the final culprit are the category writers, 'we can only blame ourselves for selling ourselves short, for not taking our writing seriously enough to demand respectable contracts. If we don't honor ourselves, why should our publishers?' (p. 42). While category romance has been around for many decades now, more contemporary single title romance novels are still stuck with the same stigma, with Frantz & Selinger (2012) confirming that popular romance fiction is still the most despised and rejected genre (p. 1). Yet interestingly, author Fiona McIntosh has said that it is difficult to get commercial fiction published if it does not have a romantic interest thread (True Romance Podcast 2014).

1.2. Scholarship on the rural romance novel

Romance novels have been around since the advent of the love story, but the sub-genre rural romance has only recently been defined. The purpose of this exegesis is to examine the conventions of the sub-genre rural romance and how my artefact *Mungabah* frames itself within these conventions, and how these conventions are implemented in order to meet reader expectations. The term rural romance was coined in 2002 when Rachael Treasure's first book *Jillaroo* was published, though the popularity of the term did not really take off until more recently when other authors started writing in this genre. Genre has been defined as 'specific organisation of texts with thematic, rhetorical and formal dimensions' with sub-genre defined as 'the further specification of genre by a particular thematic content' (Frow 2008, p. 67), with rural romance obviously needing a

rural element or theme to qualify and an Australian rural element or theme to qualify as Australian.

Funnily, Flesch (2004) compares Australianness to beetroot, saying it is the beetroot that is added to a McDonalds burger that McDonalds then claims is an Australian burger, the McOz(TM), so that in the same vein it is the Australian idioms in Australian novels that make the novels Australian. She suggests that ‘a particular view of human relations and the human spirit’ are the result of the Australian voice and that Australian characters are identifiable because they ‘move within carefully evoked rural, urban and outback settings’. The comparison is concluded with Flesch suggesting that ‘idiom is distinctly, almost defiantly, Australian’, and Australian romance writers are only adding some Australianness, or beetroot, to their novels to make them rural, but like beetroot, it is the idioms that colour their novels with Australianness, akin to beetroot being ‘a particularly pervasive ingredient, colouring and essentially altering anything it touches’ (p. 286). Many Australian love stories have also had the Australianness of the outback as an important backdrop, with Australian women transforming the bushman into a romantic hero, which has continued through to the contemporary novels of today (Teo, 2017). My artefact contains many of these similar idioms to assist in creating the Australianness that is necessary to firmly place the story in the outback. These are discussed further in Chapter 5.

There exists a dearth in academic research on the rural romance, with the majority of discussion being a handful of peer reviewed articles, feature articles published by newspapers and magazines, though more recently, websites and social media have also given readers and writers of this genre a platform for discussion and review, such as: Dear Author (<http://dearauthor.com/>), Smart Bitches Trashy Books (<http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/>); All About Romance (<http://www.likesbooks.com/>); as well as numerous Facebook Groups and Pages. Additionally, individual author websites and their social media pages give readers and writers yet another form of interaction.

Tilsen and Nylund (2009) write that ‘popular and media culture has gained hegemonic status, becoming perhaps the most powerful cultural force shaping cultural identity today’ (p. 4). Popular social media platforms such as Facebook have given the readers a voice, allowing them to contact and interact with authors, and also giving them the ability to share their reading preferences with others. With discussion framing rural

romance scholarship becoming an emerging field by academics, authors, readers, websites, and social media, we will soon have a more rounded inquiry into this sub-genre.

Bly (2012) points out, ‘there is no one representative romance novel’ (p. 61), yet interestingly one of the most popular, still to this day, is *The Thorn Birds* by Colleen McCullough (Better Reading 2015). First published in 1977, this romantic saga is set on a sheep station in outback Australia and spans over four decades. Though set mostly on a rural property and only categorised as a romance at the time, perhaps it is the recent interest in rural romance that is keeping this novel popular, with regular appearances over the last few years in the top 50 or 100 best sellers’ lists in Australia (Better Reading 2015; Booktopia 2015). ‘Not since 1977 when Colleen McCullough’s novel *The Thorn Birds* became a global bestseller has so much shelf space been devoted to Australian bush romance’ (Courtney 2013, p. 1).

Mirmohamadi (2015) describes rural romances as ‘popular novels, set in Australian small town or farming environments, which follow a female protagonist’s transition towards full belonging and participation in a local community, and romantic fulfilment’ (p. 205). She asserts that rural romance novels are ‘burgeoning’ and that they share ‘significant and defining generic features with romance fiction and other popular literary forms such as the Western and the colonial romance and adventure story, but also reworks conventional forms to address current socio-historical conditions in rural Australia. It does so in the cultural and political contexts of Australia’s position as a post-colonial nation, grappling with ongoing issues of inheritance, belonging and authenticity’ (p. 204). In chapters 2 and 3, using Negra’s (2009) work on “retreatism”, I address how my heroine transitions towards full belonging and participation in a depressed rural community, and achieves romantic fulfilment. There is a sense of belonging missing in Kylie’s life (no connection to the city), but when she encounters the old homestead (her homestead), and admires its former homely qualities and long-term generational ownership (her family), she gradually discovers a sense of belonging, stability and responsibility for Buffy’s extended family. She also admires the endurance of the land to provide a living, despite droughts and floods, and how Jack holds on to this belief despite hard times and a lonely existence. The predominant socio-historical issues faced by those living in rural and remote Australia which are represented in my novel include the issues of unemployment and the challenge of making a farm work in spite of drought and rural downturn, as well as what might happen to long term community residents who rely on the good will of landowners to provide them a job when that owner is forced to sell the

farm. However, my intention was not to touch on these issues in any deep way in the novel, rather focus on extending the use of rural motifs beyond their existing application in the rural romance genre.

O'Mahony (2014) states that, 'The contemporary rural romance is a publishing phenomenon of the new millennium' (p. 2), with Mirmohamadi (2015) confirming 'rural romance novels command a large and growing market share, among an urban, regional and international readership' (p. 204). With 'ru-ro' being the first informal term used for rural romance, a handful of others have emerged: 'chook lit', 'outback romance' (Mirmohamadi 2015, p. 204), 'country lit', 'outback lit', 'rural lit', 'farm lit', and 'red dirt romance' are some terms currently being used. Nomenclatures like these, as well as recognisable book covers containing identifying images such as windmills, cowboy style hats, horses, farm houses, and of course an attractive model depicting the main character, help to 'encourage readerly identification and loyalty' and for the readers to feel that they are 'partaking of an identifiable and concatenate genre, and part of a discrete literary community'. This 'literary community' is aided by the authors and publishers having a very active online presence which helps to maintain a connection with their readers (Mirmohamadi 2015, p. 205).

Mirmohamadi (2015) gives a thorough definition of what she sees as being the protagonist's journey: 'The idea of the insider/outsider figure, embodied in the returning protagonist, is a unifying and recurring motif of the genre' (p. 205). The majority of contemporary rural romance novels meet this definition with the protagonist either returning to or running away to the small town or farm in order to fit in or to find themselves, with a love interest helping, or even hindering initially, along the way. She continues with, 'the progression of the hero and heroine's meeting, often upon the woman's return "home" after a stint in the city or overseas, to their subsequent attraction and declaration are played out amongst readily identifiable natural or naturalised agricultural landscape settings' (p. 206). These 'readily identifiable natural or naturalised agricultural landscape settings' are what help to make rural romance novels instantly recognisable to readers as readers are expecting these elements, some of which will be covered in more detail in subsequent chapters. In terms of the protagonist's journey that Mirmohamadi speaks about, I show in Chapters 2 and 3 that my novel has innovated the form and content by subverting the tropes of animals and four wheel drives in order to provide insight around how the heroine progresses on her transition towards full belonging and participation in a local community, which she has run away to.

Earlier Australian writers who write in closely related genres include Colleen McCullough – *The Thorn Birds* (1977), *Morgan’s Run* (2001); Kate Grenville – *The Secret River* (2005), *Sarah Thornhill* (2011); Patricia Shaw – *Valley of Lagoons* (1989), *Mango Hill* (2007); and Nancy Cato – *All the Rivers Run* (1978) trilogy. The term ‘closely related genres’ is used here as the sub-genre of ‘Rural Romance’ had not yet been clearly defined when most of these books were published.

More recent Australian writers who write in this sub-genre or who have books categorised as this sub-genre are Nicole Alexander – *The Bark Cutters* (2010), *A Changing Land* (2011); Kimberley Freeman (Dr Kim Wilkins) – *Duets* (2007), *Gold Dust* (2008), *Wildflower Hill* (2010); Bronwyn Parry – *As Darkness Falls* (2008), *Dark Country* (2009); Fiona Palmer – *The Family Farm* (2009), *Heart of Gold* (2011); and Fleur McDonald – *Red Dust* (2009), *Blue Skies* (2010); Karly Lane – *North Star* (2011), *Morgan’s Law* (2012); Mandy Magro – *Rosalee Station* (2011), *Jacaranda* (2012); and Margareta Osborn – *Bella’s Run* (2012), *Hope’s Road* (2013), to name but a few.

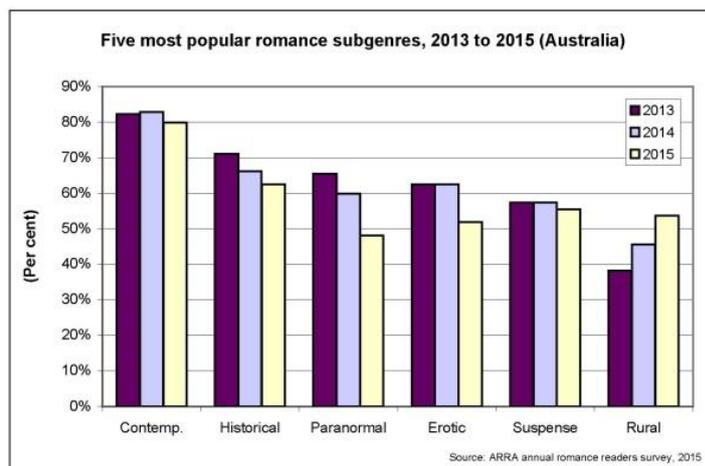
Mirmohamadi (2015, p 204) claims author Rachael Treasure’s 2012 *Fifty Bales of Hay* ‘heralded the consolidation of an emerging genre’, yet I would argue that this emergence commenced much earlier with her first book *Jillaroo* in 2002, which she followed with subsequent rural romance books. Treasure’s earlier works are now considered rural romance, though she herself has said that she does not think they are and that she never intended for them to be (Wright 2013, p. 1). Some other rural romance novels since Treasure’s by other authors include the likes of:

- 2008 - Bronwyn Parry - *As Darkness Falls* (Hachette)
- 2009 - Fiona Palmer - *The Family Farm* (Penguin Books Australia)
- 2009 - Fleur McDonald - *Red Dust* (Allen & Unwin)
- 2010 - Nicole Alexander - *The Bark Cutters* (Random House)
- 2011 - Karly Lane - *North Star* (Allen & Unwin)
- 2011 - Mandy Magro - *Rosalee Station* (Penguin Books Australia)
- 2012 - Rachael Johns - *Jilted* (Harlequin)

The above examples show a continuation in the publication of rural romance novels since Treasure’s first novel, with many more being sort after by publishers. Whilst romance novels deal mostly with the developing relationship between the heroine and hero, rural romance novels usually include ‘material aspects of community life’. Some of these aspects include ‘closure of hospitals, lack of veterinary services, irresponsible land

clearance, and other impediments to the community life' (Flesch 2004, p. 291). These novels also cover a broad range of rural topics, including: rural crime, mystery, historical/colonial elements, property inheritance, drought, flooding, as well as having their characters dealing with more suburban/city issues whilst living in the country. My artefact includes the topics of property inheritance, mystery, and resilience through flooding, as well as learning to fit into a rural community. These topics give the story some common elements to explore whilst also adding realism of the outback.

The graph below provides some data collected by the Australian Romance Readers Association over the last three years, 2013-2015 (Australian Romance Readers Association 2015). Though contemporary romance is leading, it clearly shows that out of the six sub-genres shown, five are declining in popularity whilst rural romance is climbing. This data confirms my findings that rural romance is experiencing a resurgence in Australia.



Author Bronwyn Parry claims that rural romance is not a new sub-genre, but that current authors are simply 'following in the footsteps of many Australian women writers from the past 150 years, such as Rosa Praed, Marie Bjelke Petersen, Lucy Walker and Joyce Dingwall' (in Mirmohamadi 2015, p. 212). I would agree with Parry and add that today's authors are producing contemporary versions inspired by these earlier works, and have kept the romanticism of the outback at their core.

The lack of recent scholarship specifically examining the sub-genre of rural romance fiction points to a lack of academic awareness unlike other genres and even other sub-genres in the study of romance fiction and romance scholarship. However, I

will argue that as interest continues to increase in this sub-genre, scholarship will also increase and should do so. My interest in extending this scholarship is around innovation of the form and content around pair-bonding.

This chapter explored the current scholarship discourse on the popular romance genre with a closer examination of the rural romance sub-genre. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the sparseness of scholarship covering the rural romance sub-genre, especially on innovation on form and content, and on pair-bonding, suggesting that rural romances can be opened up to greater interpretations and adaptations by authors, thereby contributing to scholarship on the identifying features of rural romances. Taking into consideration the salient points of this literature review, the following chapter explains how I have used the concept of pair-bonding in my artefact in such a way that innovates on the form of the rural romance.

Chapter 2. Pair-bonding as Literary Technique

The previous chapter reviewed theoretical scholarship on romance novels and the sub-genre of rural romance and found that there was a lack of scholarship around innovation of the form of rural romance fiction. In this chapter I will be examining the use of pair-bonding as a literary technique and how I applied this technique to my artefact to innovate on the form. I also consider the notion of a ‘sense of belonging’ and how Kylie transitions towards full belonging and participation in a rural community with romantic fulfilment. My heroine is at a crossroads in her life, a common motif in romance novels where heroines experience moments of transition between different life circumstances. The postfeminist narrative of “retreatism” evident in popular culture, which operates as a powerful device for shepherding women out of the public sphere (Negra 2009, p. 5) is useful in discussing Kylie’s transition from urban vet nurse to rural land owner. Kylie, in searching for a social ideal, becomes a “retreatist” woman when she leaves her qualified position in Brisbane, a city where she doesn’t feel she belongs, to move to an idealised hometown in the country, and there she rediscovers her identity as a future wife and mother. This is what Negra (2009) refers to as the postfeminist narrative of a woman losing herself but re-achieving stability through romance or by ‘coming home’. I also have Kylie retreating back to a default kind of emotional response when something causes her anxiety. For example, when Kylie discovers her boyfriend boss in bed with another woman, rather than confront him, she “retreats” back to her homestead and decides to make a go of it there, something she wasn’t sure about before. In my artefact, I use this theme of “retreatism” and pair-bonding together to strengthen the bond between my two protagonists, as well as to provide Kylie with a sense of emotional and physical belonging. In a romance novel, pair-bonding occurs throughout the development of the relationship with a final commitment of the two main characters by the end of the novel (Frantz & Selinger, 2012). This is the expected outcome of most romance novels. By utilising and expanding on this concept of pair-bonding in my artefact, I have innovated on the form of the rural romance novel.

My artefact uses the concept of pair-bonding through literary techniques to not only show the initial and mutual attraction between the main characters, Jack and Kylie, but to also strengthen their bond throughout the story. The main literary technique I have used is to incorporate the use of animals and machinery, such as four wheel drives, as secondary characters, which the main characters use as a way of indirectly

communicating and connecting with one another, either via dialogue or actions. Using this technique strengthens their bond by exposing tensions or complications between them and then shows how these tensions, that at first threaten their bond, are resolved, but not before Kylie retreats physically and emotionally from Jack. Kylie also retreats from Jack when she discovers that they could be related. However, in all these complicated situations and testing times for Jack, he always proves himself to Kylie, is always there for her, and this helps her to overcome her default emotional response mechanism of retreating.

The first use of this literary technique occurs early in the artefact to establish the initial connection between the main characters through their love of animals, especially dogs. This shared love of animals needed to be shown early in order to set the precedence for the events that were to follow. The dogs too are something that Kylie does not retreat from, and in fact, they help to anchor her emotionally. The dogs give Kylie a sense of belonging even though it is not attached to a particular place. When Kylie is sad or lonely, she retreats into the relationship she has with animals (her tribe) and the fact that they provide her with unconditional love. The extract from the novel below shows the characters using communication with the animals, which introduces their shared passion. With Kylie being a vet nurse, she would have a preference for a partner who is compassionate toward animals like she was, and this becomes established in the novel through this literary technique. Both Kylie and Jack feel they might lose the respect and admiration of the other if they show their true feelings of love for the dogs too overtly, but I structure this literary device so that their similar feelings are exposed, which in turns strengthens the bond between them.

‘Hey boy, let me look at you.’ She ran her hands over the dog’s coat and found the puncture wound next to the collar. She looked over at Jack. ‘Quick, grab some towels or sheets. I need to stop this bleeding and stabilise him.’ She squatted in the dirt next to the dog and started to examine the rest of its body. ‘You’re a bit of a mess, aren’t you boy. Don’t worry, it looks worse than it is. I’ll have you cleaned up in no time.’ (p. 6)

He probably thought she was silly in the head the way she was being over-protective of them and talking to them like people. She didn’t want Jack to think this way about her, even though they had just met, so she shooed him again. (p. 6)

‘You did a good job with just strips of material. And just so you know, I talk to them too, but not in front of anyone.’ Jack grinned and looked over the dogs’ injuries. (p. 7)

The shared act of talking to their animals, links Jack and Kylie together emotionally, with Jack also experiencing this connection in other ways as well. An object is then used alongside communicating with an animal to further explore the concept of pair-bonding, with Jack having his emotions triggered when he and Ace play with a toy that Kylie bought for Ace. She is away in Brisbane and Jack, after seeing the pink tennis ball, realises that he misses her and that she is indirectly helping him to overcome his loneliness after losing his wife and unborn child. Jack feels something special inside that he hasn’t felt for a long time, and this moment indirectly helps him to finally move on from his deceased wife.

The pink tennis ball ricocheted off the toe of Jack’s boot and landed in the empty water trough next to the outdoor shower. Ace reached in to grab the ball and raced back to the cottage steps. He dropped the ball at Jack’s feet. Jack picked the ball up and bounced it across the ground so Ace could chase after it again.

‘Hey, Son. What’s with the long face?’

Jack turned to look up at Frank coming out of the cottage and shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t know. Just feeling a little down today.’ He shuffled his boots in the dirt. ‘For some reason.’

Frank handed Jack a coffee mug then sat on the step next to him. He reached forward and tried to tug the ball out of Ace’s mouth. ‘You cheeky bugger. Drop.’ Ace let go of the ball. Frank threw it out into the paddock, making Ace run off to look for it. ‘Bet I know what’s wrong, Son.’

‘What?’

‘I’ll bet your missing someone, hey? Someone who’s around 5 foot 2, with pretty hair, and an even prettier laugh.’ Frank looked at Jack and nudged him in the arm. ‘Am I right, Son?’

‘I think I’m just a bit confused, Dad.’ Jack rubbed his hand across his face. ‘I don’t know if Kylie is going to be sticking around for a while or selling up straight away and leaving. I asked her to give me some time to get up a deposit so I could buy this place from her. But she said she wasn’t sure what she was going to do just yet.’

‘Son, she won’t sell up. I reckon she’s got the hots for you. And you her. It’s just that both of you don’t know it yet.’ Frank grinned and nodded his head.

‘Don’t be silly, Dad. She’s got a boyfriend, remember?’ Jack looked off into the distance. ‘But I sure do feel less lonely when she’s here.’

‘Things change, Son. And always when you least expect them to.’

‘Nah, I’ll be right, Dad. With whatever she decides to do. My head’s just a bit of a mess, that’s all.’

Frank picked up the ball Ace dropped at his feet. ‘I’m sorry Son, but if she’s already buying toys for your dogs... she’s a keeper in my book.’ He threw the ball again and stood up to leave. ‘Right. I’m heading off now. Reckon I can hear your mother calling me,’ Frank chuckled as he walked off.

Jack looked over to the outdoor shower. It was a good thing he had his Akubra close by that day, otherwise that first meeting could have been far more embarrassing than it already was for him. But he remembered seeing Kylie checking him out. He only hoped she liked what she saw, and so would maybe want to see more. Of him, not just his privates.

Ace brought the ball back to Jack. He picked it up and rubbed it between his hands. ‘She bought you a toy, Ace. That might not mean much to anyone else, but to me, it means the world. To me it means she likes my world, so maybe she’ll want to be part of it, too.’ Jack stood up and smiled as he pitched the ball high up into the air. (pp. 55-56)

Seeing the tennis ball gives Jack hope that he and Kylie can be together, but this hope is then tested by a different kind of challenge for Jack. A little later in the artefact there are instances where Jack is faced with situations that test his masculinity and the culture of mateship. This was a dilemma for Jack because he had a macho image to uphold in front of his mates, but he also realised that such an image was not going to impress Kylie, and that he risked alienating her. I reveal this tension between Jack and Kylie, again using the dogs as minor characters and also bringing in Gazza. I wanted the reader to see that Jack was able to hold his own and appear to be the tough guy when he was with Gazza and be able to handle working on the land, yet also have a sensitive side with his love of animals, which he shares with Kylie. Unfortunately for Jack, Kylie feels betrayed by these displays of macho-ness, not realising Jack is only doing these things in front of Gazza to appear tough in Gazza's eyes. She wants Jack to be strong and able to do the physical work that is required on the land, but she also wants him to be sensitive towards her and the dogs. I continue strengthening their pair-bonding through this dialogue involving the animals so that Jack later redeems himself in Kylie’s eyes, and this challenges the concept of masculinity and stabilises that flaw in the society defined

because they both come to an understanding about this behavioural issue. In this example, I am also questioning the entrenched tough male motif in the rural romance and to show that underneath tough exteriors there can exist softer sides. What I am also doing here in the novel is showing how the harsh, and sometimes cruel, conditions of the outback force romantic protagonists to work with each other on their flaws, which creates bonds of cooperation and affection between them (Teo 2017). The following extracts from the novel demonstrate this innovation of the form:

Gazza stepped forward. ‘Show him who’s boss, Jack. Go on, give it to him good.’

Jack closed his eyes for a split second then kicked the dog hard in its back thigh. ‘Get out of it!’ The dog yelped and released Ace, and ran off toward the boundary fence.

‘Oh my god, Jack, is Ace alright?’ Kylie ran toward them with Ace Jr still in her arms.

‘I don’t know. I hope so.’ He pulled Ace towards him and checked his neck. ‘No punctures. Thank goodness.’

‘Oh, Ace. What a relief.’ Kylie hugged Ace with her spare arm. ‘But that dog, where did it come from? It wasn’t here earlier. I didn’t see any other dogs out here.’

‘I don’t know.’ Jack scratched his head. He looked over at Gazza leaning against his four wheel drive. He didn’t want to kick the dog but he’d had no choice thanks to Gazza not doing anything to help him stop the fight. ‘Gazza, did you recognise that dog at all?’

Gazza licked his lips and stood up straight. ‘Nah. No idea, hey.’ He shrugged his shoulders and got into his four wheel drive and drove away.

Jack looked at Kylie. She turned away from him and walked over to the ute. ‘Kylie, are you ok? What’s wrong?’

‘I can’t believe you did that, Jack. I know the dog was attacking Ace but... how could you kick it like that?’ She closed her eyes and sighed. ‘Just take me back to the big house please.’

Jack watched her get into his ute. She had Ace Jr on her lap and Ace beside her. He could see her talking to Ace and hugging him. ‘Shit! What have I done? Damn you Gazza for not helping me out.’ Of all the stupid things to do, he goes and kicks an animal in front of Kylie. And all because he didn’t want to look weak in front of Gazza, he didn’t want Gazza to think he was a wuss. Well, kicking an animal was not something he normally ever did. Now she’ll probably never speak to him again. Jack’s shoulders drooped as he walked towards his ute. (pp. 67-68)

‘Sure. Well then you won’t be needing this then, will ya?’ Gazza reached over the side of the ute and went to wipe the message off.

‘No! Don’t, Gazza.’ Jack raised his arm to block Gazza’s downward swipe on the window.

‘Jack! Gazza! Stop it!’ Kylie appeared with one of the dogs she’d been walking. ‘What’s going on?’ Why are you two fighting?’

Jack spun around. ‘Um, we’re not fighting.’

‘Well it certainly looked like you were.’ Kylie looked at Jack then at Gazza.

‘Were you guys fighting, Gazza?’

Gazza grinned at her. ‘No... not really. Yeah, kind of. Maybe we were.’ He leant towards Jack and raised his eyebrows. ‘Haha. Suck shit.’ (pp. 81-82)

Jack stirred as she draped the jacket over him. He was mumbling something in his sleep but she couldn’t quite catch it all. She heard him say ‘Ace’, ‘my mate’, ‘never hurt you’. A tear threatened to escape from her eye when she saw Ace’s pink tennis ball clutched in Jack’s hand. ‘Oh, Jack.’ She wanted to stroke his prickly cheek but didn’t want to wake him. (p. 85)

Kylie smiled when she saw the pink tennis ball in Ace’s mouth. Jack really did love his dog and that made her happy. They had that in common, and she realised you needed a strong bond between man and animal to survive on the land. (p. 90)

Jack looked down at Ace. ‘And he didn’t even help break up the last dog fight either. I had to kick that dog to get it to let go of Ace, and kicking dogs, any dog, is not something I would ever do. But I had no choice.’ He turned to look at Kylie. ‘You know I’d never hurt an animal on purpose?’

Kylie touched Jack’s hand. ‘I know, Jack. You were just trying to protect Ace. I understand that now.’

Jack sighed and smiled at her. ‘Thanks.’ (p. 138)

Being forced by Gazza to express his macho-ness when he doesn't want to also makes Jack turn towards a different type of mate. One who he knows is reliable and will stand by him, his ute. The vehicles play an important part in the story as they are used not only for transportation but also as minor characters to assist with pair-bonding. There are instances where Jack is using his vehicle to express his feelings as well as using his vehicle to communicate to Kylie. In this way, he is using his vehicle as a 'mate' who he

can rely on. His four wheel drive is strong and reliable, which he fantasizes as a mirror image of himself. To show an insight into Jack's attraction to Kylie, Jack used his vehicle as a tool to highlight his thoughts and feelings:

Everywhere he looked and everything he touched inside the ute reminded him of Kylie. The smooth leather on the steering wheel teased him with thoughts of touching her skin. The round speedo and taco dials on the dash reminded him of her breasts under that tight singlet. The indented curves on the passenger seat had him thinking of how her butt would be a perfect fit in that seat. 'Ahh, stop it ute. You're supposed to be on my side.' He slapped the top of the dash. 'Help a guy out here by not being so.... Arg, I don't even know what. A four wheel drive is not supposed to be sleek and sexy like a sheila. Especially that sheila. I'm trying to get her out of my mind and you're being no help at all.' Jack pulled up next to the kennels and jumped out of the ute, slamming the door shut hard behind him. 'There, that'll teach you to betray a mate,' he laughed. (pp. 25-26)

Jack also used his vehicle to communicate with Kylie when he wanted to apologise to her. Though his apology did not go to plan as Kylie was left wondering why he did not just say it to her face so she feels a bit betrayed once again. This particular innovation confronts the issue of rural men not talking to people about their emotions. Even a simple verbal apology to Kylie seems beyond Jack, so he uses the vehicle to apologise for him.

'K, I'm sorry, J.' Jack stood back and looked at the message he'd written on the dusty back window of his ute. He grinned at the thought of Kylie seeing the message on his mate the ute. He just hoped she'd forgive him for kicking that dog. (p. 81)

'Oh, I appreciate that Jack, even though you used your *ute* to tell me.' (p. 82)

Jack also thanks his ute after saving Kylie from the gorge.

Jack turned away and rubbed at his eyes. Was he turning into a sook? No way. He was just relieved that everything worked out. He walked over to his ute and started reeling the winch in. He tapped the top of the bull bar. 'Thanks mate, I knew you wouldn't let me down.' (p. 172)

Just as the ute can be seen as a minor character so too does the rooster in the novel represent a minor character. The rooster is used as a minor character beyond what has been traditionally done in rural romances, and again is an example of how I have innovated on the form by making a theoretical point on it. I use the rooster to show how Kylie has grown and discovered more of herself throughout the story. I wanted to show her working things out for herself and not needing to rely on a man all the time like she had done previously in her city life. Here she is being scared of the rooster due to Jack's build-up of 'The Joker', then later we see how she has tamed the rooster without Jack's help. So their bond is further strengthened when Jack realises that Kylie does not want him to be over-protective of her, instead allowing her to work these things out for herself.

'Joker, get out of it,' Jack yelled as he closed the lid of the nesting box and dashed toward Kylie.

The latch finally gave way but the gate opened too quickly, sending Kylie stumbling through as she dropped most of the eggs on the ground. She spun around at the approaching rooster and stamped her foot. 'Damn you Joker!' The rooster turned and fled in the other direction, away from her.

Jack laughed when he reached her. 'Bloody Joker.' (p. 31)

'Wait,' Jack called out. 'Look out for...'

A ruffling of feathers and Kylie had Joker in her arms. He sat calmly on her forearm, his legs secured in her hand as she stroked the back of his neck. She turned around and faced Jack. 'What did you say?'

'Um...,' Jack reached up and scratched the back of his head again. 'Huh? How did you...,' he pointed his hand at Joker.

Kylie grinned again and gently flipped Joker onto his back and stroked his chest for the few moments it took for him to fall asleep in the nook of her arm.

Jack stared at her, his jaw dropping open. 'What the?'

Kylie winked at him and turned to walk toward the nesting boxes. She glanced into each one. 'No, you were right, there are no eggs today.' She smiled down at Joker. 'Isn't that right Joker, no eggs today because we've already collected them. Haven't we Joker, just like we've been doing for the last few days. I can work things out on my own without the need of some big burly bloke. And you Mr Joker, just needed someone to understand you. Isn't that right, Joker? You needed someone to cuddle you, not yell at you.' (pp. 80-81)

These extracts have shown how my artefact has used the concept of pair-bonding, a requirement in romance novels, as a literary technique that is innovative in its use in a rural romance novel. The techniques used with the ‘minor characters’ have made the connections between the protagonists deeper and the bonds stronger than is typical for a rural romance novel. Tensions between Kylie and Jack have been revealed and have then been resolved, which helps them to go on and eventually find true happiness with each other. The following chapter examines some of the conventions and elements that are expected in a rural romance novel, and how I have adapted them and represented them in my novel, as evidence of innovation on the rural romance content.

Chapter 3. Researching Rural Elements

In the previous chapter I explored how I innovated on the form of the rural romance. This chapter explores how I have innovated on the content of the rural romance by showing how I have utilised rural elements or symbols beyond their existing application in the rural romance genre. This chapter contains critically reflective comments on a number of rural elements. I begin the chapter by exploring the rural elements that are needed to create a rural romance novel and how I went about researching some of these elements in the approximate area where I set my novel. Living in suburbia I needed to physically visit places similar to those I wanted to write about in order to experience and capture the essence of their rurality to enable me to transpose them into fictional accounts for my artefact *Mungabah*.

While most rural places are typically characterised as, ‘Low population density, abundance of farmland, and remoteness from urban’ (Waldorf 2006, p. 1), a ‘lack of conceptual clarity’ has caused confusion about what is defined as rural in this country and attempts to define rural and remote non-metropolitan areas of Australia is misplaced (Hugo 2000, p. 2), with a thorough definition of rurality remaining elusive (Waldorf 2006, p. 1). Johnson & Ragusa (2016) claim it is also ‘a social variable largely absent in historical research and, where identified in some contemporary studies, is often minimally addressed’ (p. 214). Is rurality simply anything that is rural (Connell & McManus 2011, p. 18) or is it ‘recognized as a set of both material spaces and symbolic imaginaries that converse with each other’ (Gorman-Murray, Pini & Bryant 2013, p. 1)? We know that Australian romance novels cover a very diverse range of topics and themes, but in order to create a rural romance novel there is an expectation of rural elements to be present in the story, within the broad definition of rurality. The rural elements in my artefact situate themselves within this broad definition yet also help to present the story in a more defined rural way by including activities and events that mostly only occur in areas away from cities.

O’Mahony (2014) declares, ‘While romance generally may not need animals, rural romance, with its focus on agriculture and farm life, cannot escape the presence of animals, especially those who toil for our food and wares’ (p. 18). And these animals are just the start of an exclusive list of elements that writers should include in their novels if they want readers of rural romance to pick up their books. This is a random sample in no particular order of the most common everyday rural elements found in rural romance

novels: shearing, mustering, harvesting, agricultural shows, field days, wool-classing, dog trials, utes, B&S Balls, kelpies, cattle, sheep, chickens, horses, rodeos, food preserving, big rigs, boots, Akubra hats, denim jeans, and oilskin jackets (Oxford University Press 2013). For a romance novel to be classed as a rural romance it must also be set in a rural or outback location.

‘The outback represents the ability to get lost’ (Kinsella, 2008, p. 35).

Interestingly this quote from Kinsella sums up the theme of many rural romance novels, with many of these novels having their protagonist going to or arriving in the outback to get away from jobs, partners, family, cities, and other situations, essentially to escape from their troubles by getting lost in the outback, in order to find themselves. Kinsella (2008) continues, ‘The bush brings legitimacy of hardship ... but it is also the place of outcasts’ (p. 38). The rural romance novels’ protagonists could be seen as these outcasts, going to the outback to get lost and to endure some type of hardship, before finding themselves by the end of the novel. ‘The exotic nature of the “outback”’, claims Little & Panelli (2007), ‘represents, for some, adventure and excitement, offering an alternative to their hitherto predictable and comfortable lives’ (p. 179). My artefact has the heroine running away from the city after she finds her boyfriend has cheated on her. By going to the country she is about to find herself through learning how to be resilient and more self-sufficient than she was previously. It is the hero Jack, who provides Kylie with some of the confidence and stability necessary for Kylie to be happy and contented in this rural community.

The term ‘outback’ or ‘rural’ generally refers to locations that are remote, far removed from suburbia. Bosworth & Somerville (2014) suggests there are different interpretations of rurality due to imagery, recreational pursuits, and travel, and that ‘everyone develops their own personal views’ of it (p. 2) due to its ‘cultural and environmental significance’ (p. 3). They continue, saying an identity and boundaries are needed to define a place and that this identity may be impermanent and the boundaries may be blurred, ‘but the term “place” is nevertheless significant as an indicator of socio-cultural and environmental values that can be assigned to that place’ (p. 3). Little and Panelli (2007) say ‘the “outback” is a highly specific notion of rurality with i[t]s own particular social and cultural characteristics’ (p. 174). It is these social and cultural characteristics that are needed to contribute to the rural-ness of a romance novel in order to qualify it as a rural romance novel. They continue with, ‘it is a form of rurality that which has been represented, imagined and consumed in unique (and frequently

stereotypical) ways' (p. 174). These 'stereotypical' ways are what makes rural romance novels recognisable, which I will cover shortly.

Having rural elements in my creative work meant I had to leave the suburbs and head to the bush on a regular basis while writing in order to experience as many of the things possible that my characters would be experiencing throughout the story. Interestingly, my mother's side of my family have a circus background. My grandfather was a 5th generation Lipizzan horse performer before emigrating from Czechoslovakia to Australia in the 1950s, but unfortunately I missed out on being involved in these experiences. Though perhaps that explains my fondness for rural fiction; trying to replace a lost element of my own life by creating my own fictional versions?

Many different locations and buildings were visited with as many experiences as possible performed or at least attempted by me. The majority of these research trips took place in the greater Darling Downs region of Queensland, within a few hours driving distance from my home in Brisbane. Luckily I already had possession of a four wheel drive and camper trailer so was able to make each trip as authentic as possible by taking old highways and back roads and going off-road.

This chapter will explore these rural locations and buildings, and will detail some of the activities that were undertaken and their outcomes. It will also examine ten specific rural elements and characteristics, and explain how I incorporated these into my artefact, sometimes in an innovative way. The chapter also examines some extracts from some of today's rural romance authors and compares the use of their rural elements with my own and how I used them in my artefact. Finally, this chapter will discuss some of my prior knowledge and experience that I was able to also utilise for my artefact.

3.1. Rural locations

Finding locations similar to what I wanted to write about proved to be relatively straight forward. I needed an area where flooding occurred on a semi-regular basis, with houses or homesteads from the mid to late 1800s, with a large gorge or canyon of some kind. Luckily, in the greater Darling Downs area of Queensland, these types of rural landscapes are in abundance. And even luckier, many old houses and homesteads are still standing. Being a work of fiction I decided not to use any one particular area, but instead to make up my own town and place it loosely in the general area, taking local elements to add depth and authenticity. I did not want readers to be concerned if something did not quite match the real item, place, or building of their local town, and I did not want to make any

one town too identifiable. Using a fictional town, which I have named Tallora and is loosely based on Allora situated approximately halfway between Toowoomba and Warwick, also allowed me more freedom to use a combination of elements to better enhance the rural experience. From the greater Warwick region, through Toowoomba, and up to Esk, many different elements, as detailed below, were combined to create a fictional town that covered most things that I wanted to include in my story.

Warwick is the earliest pastoral settlement in Queensland, with many sandstone buildings and houses dating back to the 1840s. Toowoomba boasts elite boarding schools dating back to the early 1900s. Esk is home to Wivenhoe Dam, my needed flood area. Combining these areas and their elements gave me *Mungabah*, my fictional property and homestead.

‘Having not grown up on the land, Ms Johns said she drew on the knowledge and experience of friends who had a farm background’ (Cavanagh 2015, p. 2). It was interesting to note that quite a few rural romance authors do not actually live on the land, and I was especially surprised to find out that authors like Rachael Johns do not. This, I suppose, gave me hope that as long as I did enough research and was thorough, I would possibly be able to write a rural romance story that was believable enough for readers.

Knorr & Schell (2001) say that a beginning writer sometimes forgets to create a setting that is not just credible, but also believable, and that by ‘painting in’ the setting more thoroughly, the setting is able to represent a credible world, for the characters as well as the readers. ‘The reader needs to be grounded in a believable world’ (p. 176). So for this reason, I had my heroine come straight from the city, with no farming knowledge at all, so that she would need to learn to do things on the property. This also helped to give the heroine and hero things to do together as he showed her the ins and outs of running the property, so they had reasons to be together as much as possible. I felt it also provided additional material for the story, showing her questioning things and doing things that she would not normally do in town, thereby taking her out of her comfort zone. This also gave me the opportunity to reinforce the masculine stereotype of a male helping a so called helpless female.

Burroway (2003) states ‘you want setting to convey mood and propel the action’ (p. 281) and that ‘scene is always necessary’ (p. 277) as it allows the reader to experience the story with the characters. If the reader can imagine themselves in the same place or setting as the character, they will be able to identify better with the character. Kinross-Smith (1992) asserts that a writer should ‘write for an intelligent and imaginative reader,

then allow that reader's imagination room to work as the story progresses' (p. 94). Though not many city people have lived or worked on an outback property, generally people are able to assume what life would be like from media reports, books and movies. Further describing the setting through the eyes of the characters helps to place the readers with the characters, allowing them to visualise the atmosphere of the place along with the characters, whether this is the hustle and bustle of the city or the dust and dryness of the country.

In the extract below I have the protagonist giving a description of the surrounding area, highlighting the climate and dryness, and briefly comparing it to her home town in suburbia. This description is essentially how I saw and felt the landscape when visiting the Glengallan Homestead, which I have detailed further below. Though the location of the homestead is now more developed than what it would have been many decades before, it is still stark and dry, with vast expanses of empty fields surrounding the main buildings. There are no other buildings or houses close by, with the exception of a few of the old outbuildings from the original property still being used back behind the main section of Glengallan, but they are mostly out of view for visitors and are now privately owned so are not accessible to the public. The homestead itself now has a lovely formal garden surrounding the main courtyard, mostly for the visitors to see how the property would have looked back in the late 1800s, but this greenery does not extend past the immediate fencing and gates, beyond which the vastness promptly begins. Extract from *Mungabah*:

She stepped away from the door and looked out over the surrounding landscape, taking in the dryness of the place. There was nothing but red dirt with a few clumps of dull green bushes here and there. Further in the distance she could see a spattering of trees. There was little else. (*Mungabah*, pp. 1-2)

Glengallan Homestead:

The first property I visited was Glengallan Homestead located at 18515 New England Highway, Warwick, Queensland. This is a two-story sandstone building with verandas on three sides and wrought ironwork. This property was the main inspiration for my creative work. I had previously seen updates on the progress of the building's restoration via the historical society's Facebook page, and upon viewing the homestead's dedicated website I was able to delve into the history of the building and the property. I was intrigued by the

accounts of previous owners leaving the building to the elements, allowing it to deteriorate with each downpour as rain invaded the ceiling. The land was slowly sold off over the years, with only a small parcel left. Viewing the photographs of the property and of the people who lived there over the years gave a good insight into what life must have been like before, and how glorious it must have been in its heyday to how desolate it became. This allowed me to place my modern-day protagonist in the building whilst also imagining the protagonist's grandmother living in the building over many decades.

The homestead is now run as a tourist attraction, with a separate coffee shop and small museum in a front building where they sell entry and tours to the main homestead. The homestead was extensively renovated in the 1980s after being left to decay by the previous owners. This information is what inspired me to write about an old rundown homestead with the protagonist needing to renovate it. Viewing the building helped me see the extent of the work that would be required for this type of renovation and the types of materials that would be needed. Though obviously I did not want the creative work to read like a house renovation manual so tedious details were skimmed over to help keep the story flowing.

The coffee shop at the homestead also had historical photos of the first and subsequent owners, and sketches and building plans of the main homestead as well as the outbuildings. There was also a lot of farming and household items which helped me to see how things were done in the 19th century. The layout of the homestead is similar to what I based my creative work homestead on, though I did add an additional room as well as access to the attic, which was not evident at Glengallan.

Below is an extract from my artefact showing the protagonist's first impressions of the house. I wanted it to have the appearance of grandness from afar, as it would have appeared many years ago so as to make a good initial impression on the protagonist so that she would question her decision to sell, but to then shock her as she got closer and saw the extent of the damage and neglect. Extract from *Mungabah*:

They rounded a bend on a section of the driveway that was lined with lush bushes on either side, and that's when she saw it. The house. Oh no. It wasn't just a house, it was a mansion. And it was magnificent. The most hauntingly beautiful house she had ever seen. Two stories of elegant fretwork lined the tops of the verandas. The lower veranda swept out to meet the front stairs, and the huge double doors leading into the house were bordered with glass panels inlaid with colourful stained glass.

As they got closer though Kylie gasped. Up close the house was a mess. Most of the timber was rotting away and many of the windows had fallen out of their frames. Some of the stained glass panels were smashed. Shrubs that should have been growing beside the house were now growing up and over the house, and were probably growing inside the house as well. (*Mungabah*, p. 11)

The Glengallan Homestead website says of the property:

Glengallan is not just any old house. Uninhabited for more than half its lifetime, it remains frozen in time. The 1867 two-storey sandstone Glengallan is an iconic heritage place, a rare example of a substantial 19th century country house in Queensland. Glengallan today is a tribute not only to its visionary builder and to 19th Century craftsmen, but also to the 21st Century team that brought it back to life with a delicately balanced restoration that enables the visitor to experience the best and worst of its times. (Glengallan Homestead n.d.)

The history of the building is what initially grabbed my attention, with my mind throwing around a lot of different scenarios for this beautiful building and grounds. How could I place this huge house into a story that would have romance, adventure, and maybe even a bit of mystery? There were so many different storylines running through my mind just based on the information and history provided on the website, so much so that I actually ended up with a few different ideas which have turned into additional rural romance novel ideas based at Glengallan. Some of the information provided below gives a good starting point for any number of rural romance novels to spring from:

The Glengallan story is one of boom and gloom: early years of wealth and standing; the successful pastoralist erecting a suitable edifice for his station. But before even the homestead was completed, drought and rural downturn would take their toll. The visionary John Deuchar would die, bankrupt, a broken man. Under later owners, the Slades and Gillespies, Glengallan did again experience good years but never saw its grand plan realised nor even known. Only one wing was completed. The plans have never been found. The homestead, incomplete and inadequate, eventually became derelict, seemingly beyond repair and certainly beyond the means of subsequent owners of an ever decreasing acreage. (Glengallan Homestead n.d.)

The once-great Glengallan went into a decline lasting more than 70 years during which furniture and fittings were sold or removed from the building. The house survived even the post-war threat of demolition but the ravages of time and neglect took a dreadful toll. Glengallan's past is encapsulated in history. Its future, as a significant heritage attraction, carries the promise of return to glory. As history unfolds, and more evidence and information come to light, the restoration can continue. (Glengallan Homestead n.d.)

To add to my intrigue for this property, my research uncovered an old track that ran from the rear of the property up to the neighbouring town of Goomburra. This dirt track is now a gazetted road: Ghost Gate Road. Legend has it that at night when riders approached, the gate would mysteriously open then silently close after they had ridden through. Though others have said they had seen a large white owl perched on top of the gate and that as this action of the gate opening by itself only happens at night it must simply be the owl taking flight as the riders' approached with the owl returning to perch that closes the gate. Nobody knew for sure how the gate was opening though many years later a sculpture was erected at the site of the now-gone gate of a large white owl (Glengallan Homestead n.d.). I was wanting to include a legend like this or similar in my artefact but was not sure how to incorporate it, so I will look at perhaps using it in a future novel. Or at least something in the same vein.

Glengallan Homestead, Queensland, after the renovation, 2012:



© Kristy Taylor, 2012, original photograph

Woodlands of Marburg:

Another property that provided inspiration for my creative work was Woodlands of Marburg, located at 174 Seminary Rd, Marburg, Queensland. Though Woodlands was built later than Glengallan, it has a similar look with its double-story beautiful ornate lace ironwork verandas. The property has had a vast history, beginning life in 1870 as a sawmill and sugar plantation, housing a family with 11 children in 1890 after the main house was completed, becoming a missionary in 1944, purchased by Ipswich Grammar School in 1986, and finally purchased and restored in 2002 by a local family who also open the property to the public. ‘The mansion and its grounds are rich with history and tales of its owners and visitors alike, which are told through the remarkable architecture and furnishings that have been preserved and restored’ (Woodlands of Marburg 2015).

Again, with properties having quirks like this helps give the writer inspiration for their own stories; ideas for plot twists and/or quirky characters to use in novels:

During the last century, the property has developed a diverse and significant local history with unique characteristics from each period including a hand dug swimming pool, a Grotto (open-aired chapel) and even a small cemetery from its days as a seminary in World War II. (Woodlands of Marburg 2015)

Trackson’s Electrical and Lighting Company were commissioned by Thomas to erect a telephone line from the estate into the Marburg township. Woodlands was the first estate of its kind to install electricity in 1885 in the mill, office, stables and mansion. In fact, Woodlands was lit even before Parliament House in Brisbane. (Woodlands of Marburg 2015)

Woodlands of Marburg, Queensland, 2009:



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Wanting to use a property similar to both Glengallan and Woodlands in my artefact initially caused a dilemma for me: which one should I base my ‘Mungabah’ house on? With not being able to make up my mind I decided to simply combine the two. I would use a location closer to and more like Glengallan, as Woodlands was a little too close to Ipswich to be ‘rural’, and effectively merge the two buildings into one, essentially taking what features I would need to create the type of homestead I wanted to include in my artefact. I did not need the grand gardens of Woodlands as my property needed to be almost barren, but I did need a cemetery. I also did not need the larger size of Woodlands as I wanted to avoid steering too far away from a ‘large family homestead’ as opposed to a huge accommodation style building. I love the lace ironwork on the verandas of Woodlands, whereas Glengallan has only straight ironwork, so I swapped the two around as I prefer the prettier lace ironwork, plus it pays homage to a more Queenslander house style. Importantly too, I wanted a homestead that Kylie could accept as her new home, one that in all its permutations, would give her a sense of belonging.

3.2. Floods

I also needed a place where previous floods had gone through, not once but a few times over the last century or so in order to join my storyline together. So where did my fascination, or should that be paranoia, for floods come from? Most likely from the fact that as a 2-year-old child I could have drowned in the 1974 floods if my mother's plans had not changed at the last minute. To this day I get a little anxious if we get heavy rain after hearing stories over the years from family members about that day.

The 1893, 1974, and 2011 floods play a large part in the story line of *Mungabah*. The floods are what tie the life and death moments together for the characters. The protagonist's great-grandmother was born during the 1893 floods, her mother loses her life at the gorge during the 1974 floods, and finally she almost loses her own life at the gorge during the 2011 floods. Additionally, the hero loses his first wife and child due to floods.

The inclusion of floods in rural romance novels is one of the elements used by authors to show the strength of mother nature; the strength of something which we as humans are not able to control. Author Nicole Alexander makes good use of a flood in her third book *Absolution Creek* (2012) to show the power of nature and how this element can be used as a tool for storytelling. Her main character is swept away from her family by the flood after falling off the back of a dray and is washed up and found by another character which leads to a massive change in the direction of the life of the main character. An extract from Alexander's *Absolution Creek* showing the initial flood scene:

When the surge of water came Squib was lifted up in a torrent of froth and sticks. Grappling uselessly for something to hang onto, her slight body hit floating timber and tree trunks. Murky water engulfed her nose and mouth, and she was barely able to keep her chin above the water. The water kept sucking and swirling, flinging Squib continually from one obstacle to another. Eventually her good leg gave way and the air she so desperately gasped at didn't seem to want to come to her any more. She thought of her father and closed her eyes.

The tree Squib struck held her firm in its dense arms, and had she not opened her eyes and seen a glossy brown snake curled only feet away on another branch, she happily would have remained in its clutches. Instead she searched frantically for an escape, launching her body at a large piece of wood as it sailed past. She clung fiercely to the board and twirled through waterlogged trees. Then the board was knocked from underneath her and the world became dark. (2012, p. 200)

In my artefact I use the floods to tie together a chain of events that occur over the course of the story. Most of the actions and reactions that occur to the family and to the property and house have been caused by the floods over the years. In this scene I have the hero unable to return to the property due to flood waters so he is delayed in his attempt to save the heroine and when he realises where she is he wishes that he had shown greater courage and driven through the flood waters to get to her sooner. Extract from *Mungabah*:

Jack read the note from Kylie and picked up the envelope. 'Well this is interesting. Now I really do wish I'd just driven through that bloody flooded road.' He looked back toward the lounge. 'Should I try and find her or wait until she comes back? Argh. I have no idea.' He held the envelope up toward the light coming in through the window and tried to see through the thin paper. 'Damn. Can't see a thing. I feel silly just sitting here, so I may as well drop this in to Mr Berrigan.'

(*Mungabah*, p. 165)

This next scene is where the hero is climbing down the cliff face toward the flooding gorge to save the heroine. The scene is from the hero's point of view, so we see the action from above the flood waters as he descends. Extract from *Mungabah*:

Jack threw himself over the edge. His adrenalin kicked in. Full steam ahead. Nothing was going to stop him. He clawed his way down the rock wall. Skin scraped off his fingertips. He kept going. Nearly halfway down he glanced below him. He could see her. She was hanging onto a tree root growing on a ledge. But she was losing her grip. He could see the panic in her eyes. He pushed back from the wall and dropped the rest of the way down. He tried to muffle the scream that tore out of his throat. He knew his ankle was cactus. But it didn't matter. He reached out and grabbed her. Dragged her up onto the ledge. They both fell back. Exhausted. (*Mungabah*, p. 169)

3.3. Gold panning

The Queensland gold rush boom of the 1850s began in many coastal and inland towns, though after the boom ended in 1891 some towns did not survive and those that did have dwindled to ‘ghost’ towns (Cilento & Lack 1959, p. 200; Connell & McManus 2011, p. 4). It is these smaller rural towns that rural romance novels are often set in, and without these towns and without the bust of the gold rushes, there would not be the rural-based novels. So gold panning becomes an element of the sub-genre. The incorporation of gold nuggets into my plot also provides narrative complication and mystery. Long-buried family secrets is a common narrative formula in the rural romance.

At Thane, approximately 40km west of Warwick, there is a camping and four wheel drive park with the Thanos Creek running through the middle of it, Glendon Camping Grounds. Gold was first discovered in Thane in 1868 (Queensland Government 2014: Glendon Camping 2013) and visitors to the park are able to go gold panning in the creek, on their own or with a guide. Even though we were not successful in finding any gold in the creek, it was still a very interesting experience to be crouching down on the banks of the creek, or partially in the creek, and using a pan to sift through sediment from the bottom and sides of the creek bed. Though it was difficult to imagine doing this for hours at a time, as would have been done in the 1800s in the area. After only a short period of time our backs and thigh muscles were starting to ache, and not seeing any glimmers of colour amongst the dirt was disheartening.

Thane also had many gold mines throughout the area but most had been closed years ago (Glendon Camping 2013). I would have liked to have visited an active gold mine but my claustrophobia would most likely prevent me from entering. Further north along the Thanos Creek is a small area of land that has been designated by the Queensland Government for public gold fossicking, though a permit is needed to fossick there and camping is not allowed (Queensland Government 2014). But as the fossicking area is part of the same creek that runs through Glendon, many visitors, like us, choose to fossick and camp at the Glendon Camping Grounds instead.

Below is an extract from my artefact showing the two main characters finding the first lot of gold. They find the remainder of the bushranger’s gold in the cave at the gorge while trying to save themselves from the flood waters. I do not actually tell readers where this gold came from, other than that it did once belong to the bushranger and his son from the neighbouring property, which allows for this absent detail to be included in future novels set at the same property as my artefact. Extract from *Mungabah*:

He separated the last of the pieces of gold from the ashes and put them on the tea towel. 'Let's see what we've got here.' He rubbed each piece clean with the corner of the tea towel and lined them up in a row. 'That's four big nuggets and eight small ones. Quite a little haul we've got here.' He looked up and grinned at Kylie. 'These should be worth a bit too. Not a heap, but some decent change, that's for sure.'

'So, what are we talking here. A few hundred dollars? A few thousand? What?'

'Well I'm no gold expert, but I'd say a couple of thousand. Hopefully.'

'Hopefully?' Kylie picked up the largest nugget. 'If only there were a bucket full of these hiding somewhere close by. That would take care of the money problems for Mungabah. And we wouldn't need to sell up.' (*Mungabah*, p. 148)

3.4. Working dogs

Working dogs play a large part in my artefact, with three of them becoming characters in their own right. O'Mahony (2014) affirms 'relationships between humans and dogs unlock the novel's ethics plot' and that 'this plot emphasises certain behaviours and attitudes between humans and non-humans and aligns readers' sympathies with particular characters while encouraging disidentification with others' (p. 1). This is evident with how my characters respond and interact with the dogs in my artefact, and strengthen their bond as they do so. The following is an extract showing the dislike from one of the dogs towards the antagonist. Extract from *Mungabah*:

She unclipped Ace's chain from the rollbar and let him jump off the tray. 'Come on boy, let's get you all cleaned up and... poo, you stink, get rid of this putrid smell, before Jack wakes up.' She saw Gazza watching her again. 'Thanks Gazza, I'll take it from here.' She nodded her head at him and turned to walk back to the front of the house. As she got closer to Gazza she heard Ace let out a low growl. What was that about? Her eyes widened in surprise. Somehow she didn't think Gazza had actually found Ace at all. (*Mungabah*, pp. 87-88)

Why did I make the protagonist a vet nurse? Mainly because I wanted her to have a skill that would contribute in some way to the running of the property. Not knowing much personally about cattle or sheep, and even though I have never studied to be a vet nurse, I knew I would have enough basic knowledge to work the vet nurse angle into the

story. Having previously been a dog trainer and breeder with council approval (many years ago now though), I felt that I had enough canine knowledge to use in the story.

Unfortunately, during my childhood and teen years, I witnessed many dog attacks caused by a Bull Terrier that we owned. This was a beautiful dog who was treated like one of the family (so much so he would try and sit at the dinner table with us for meals) and who had also won numerous titles at dog shows. We had a wall full of his ribbons and many trophies from his show days. Taurus (aptly named) was a gentle giant with people, as long as at least one of us was there at home with the dog, otherwise he would be difficult to control and would become aggressive toward the visitor. Obviously this worked to a degree in guarding our yard and house, but is not the ideal solution as no person should be attacked just for trying to knock on your front door. He would also attack any dog or cat that came near him.

Though an unpleasant re-occurring event, I did learn a lot from these experiences, especially after many visits to the vet. And in later years I, as one would expect, refused to own any dog that was too large to control or handle. But having had these experiences has afforded me the knowledge to be able to include a similar incident in my artefact. Hopefully I have managed to achieve a believable scene when the dog attack occurred. Firstly, I show the protagonist using her instincts when she first hears the dogs fighting. Extract from *Mungabah*:

‘Water!’ she yelled out the window when she saw Jack running toward the dogs. ‘Hose them with water.’ She ran from the bathroom and got outside just as Jack was turning the hose on the dogs. The fright and pressure of the water was enough to scare the attackers off the smaller dogs. Jack kept hosing as the larger dogs retreated and headed back toward the boundary fence to the neighbouring property. (*Mungabah*, pp. 5-6)

Next I show how the protagonist uses her veterinary nursing skills to attend to the wounds on the dogs. Extract from *Mungabah*:

Kylie ran to the dog closest to her. It was lying on the ground whimpering. Blood was oozing from a puncture to its neck. ‘Hey boy, let me look at you.’ She ran her hands over the dog’s coat and found the puncture wound next to the collar. She looked over at Jack. ‘Quick, grab some towels or sheets. I need to stop this bleeding and stabilise him.’ She squatted in the dirt next to the dog and started to examine the rest of its body. ‘You’re

a bit of a mess, aren't you boy. Don't worry, it looks worse than it is. I'll have you cleaned up in no time.'

Jack stared down at her. 'What are you doing? Wait till I call the vet.'
'Don't worry, I know what I'm doing.' She looked at him and saw the hesitation in his eyes. 'Go call the vet while I get them sorted. Trust me.' She raised her hand and shoed him back toward the house and moved on to the next dog. 'And grab those towels and sheets on your way back, there's a lot of bleeding here.'

(*Mungabah*, p. 6)

3.5. Book covers

Book covers are the first visual indication of what a book is about and rural romance books have a distinct advantage in that they have very particular elements that need to be shown on the covers which makes them instantly recognisable for readers. Mirmohamadi (2015) suggests that rural romance 'shares a packaging aesthetic and marketing and distribution strategy with general romance fiction' and that 'their display at point of sale is designed to appeal to the ideas of the collective and the collectable'. These 'encoded messages' on the rural romance book covers have been repeated by publishers for many years and signify to the readers that these are indeed rural romance novels (p. 207).

The 'encoded messages' are usually a combination of rural elements, designed in such a way as to be consistent with previous issues or series in the same genre, so that readers can see at a glance what genre or sub-genre a particular book is and they also get a hint at what the story will be about. 'The blending of a background of landscape photography with a foregrounded human figure (usually female, and often wearing a hat) is a powerful visual referent for the consumer' (Mirmohamadi 2015, p. 207). Some other often-used images include: attractive model usually wearing a hat, horses, windmills, old homesteads, trees, gates or fences, mountains, dirt roads, fields of crops, open sky, sheds, and utility vehicles (utes). Interestingly, none of Rachael Treasure's rural romance novels feature dogs on their covers even though they feature in her stories, and only a re-issue of her first book *Jillaroo* in later years now has a dog silhouette on it (Treasure 2002). Mandy Magro's *Country at Heart* is the only other rural romance novel I could find that has a dog on the cover when a dog features in the story (Magro 2015). Author Nicole Alexander claims 'publishers love those more visual covers...the readers come to expect that that's the look of your work' (cited in Mirmohamadi 2015, p. 215), but unfortunately, as we have seen, the publishers do not always get it right.

Knowing that the publisher designs the book cover did not stop me from trying to visualise a cover for my artefact. If I was able to offer input into my cover's design I would want it to include a dog, or dogs, as they do play a large part in the story. The dogs are minor characters who my protagonists speak and relate to. I would also like to see a four wheel drive shown since I have also innovated on it as a minor character, though not being a professional designer I would not know how to place or blend these elements to make an attractive cover.

The image below would make a good starting point, as it depicts a female model of an appropriate age, a dog (the dog would need to be digitally edited into a dark brown colour to match the dog in the story), and a four wheel drive. This fits with what Mirmohamadi (2015) concluded about covers of rural romances; a broad skyscape in the upper section and landscape photography with a female figure in the lower section. Perhaps she should be wearing a hat. Some other rural elements could be incorporated into a similar image if appropriate ones could not be found. An extra effort to match the heroine's hair colour to the cover image model's hair colour would be necessary as I see many covers, rural or otherwise, with the model sporting the wrong hair colour and I find it annoying as I expect the book cover to better reflect the story inside.



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3.6. Book titles

Book titles are another area that allow the publisher to market rural romance novels to readers. By including certain words or phrases in the title readers know instantly what type of book it is, or what genre the book is, and usually the title will also give an indication of what rural element or elements appear in the story. Readers also like to read series of books, and using titles that link together is another way of showing readers what books are in what series.

A good example of this is Rachael Johns' 'Outback' series. Johns has only been published since 2011 but is now an international bestseller, due mainly to her rural romance novels (Johns 2011-2016, p. 2). John's four-book series, *Outback Dreams* (October 2013), *Outback Blaze* (May 2014), *Outback Ghost* (October 2014), and *Outback Sisters* (March 2016), all contain the word 'Outback' in their title, telling the reader that these novels are rural novels because they are set in the Outback, with the second word giving the reader a hint at what the story is going to be about. This has worked very well for Johns and her publisher Harlequin Mira as she is currently Australia's number one selling rural romance writer (Cavanagh 2015, p. 1) and has appeared to have knocked Rachael Treasure down a spot.

I chose a title for my artefact that I thought would convey a good sense of 'Australianness' with it having an Aboriginal sounding place name but with an Aussie 'h' added to the end. I also felt that it could have a bit of a play on the name, perhaps with a character referring to it as 'Mungabah is a m[u]ngrel of a place', or even, the 'place of m[u]ngrels', the mongrels being the dogs on the property. I did not add either of these but most likely would have added something similar if the artefact was longer in length allowing more scope for additional characters. However, it is quite difficult deciding on a title to use, especially when the author knows that the publisher will most likely change it if they feel it does not suit their target audience enough.

3.7. Character names

Rachael Treasure's *The Rouseabout* (2007), Karly Lane's *North Star* (2011), Nicole Alexander's *Wild Lands* (2015), Nicki Edwards' *Intensive Care* (2015), and Suzanne Brandyn's *The Farm Sitter* (2016) have all named their main character in their rural romance novels 'Kate'. There are of course many other rural romance novels with a main character using that name, these are just a sample. The name 'Kate' is English and is usually short for Katherine or Catherine (Campbell 2016, p. 1). Marble (2003) suggests

using a name that is not overused (p. 3) and that fits the period of the novel (p. 2). As Kate is a name that has been used since the Middle Ages (Campbell 2016, p. 1), I felt that a more modern, and definitely more Australian, name was needed for my main character. I have not seen many names in rural romance novels that are uniquely Australian, so for this reason alone I questioned, why not? Especially when the novels were Australian novels and the main characters were usually Australian, so I wanted my characters' names to clearly reflect that. I felt that if I was writing an Australian story about Australian characters, their names should also be Australian, and doing this allows my artefact to be framed by a genuine Australian uniqueness when compared to other Australian rural romance novels that are using overused names from the old country.

Fowler (2012) asks, 'Does each genre have a list of first names available only for that sort of writing?' (p. 1). There are websites with suggestions of how to make up names suitable for genres like Fantasy and Science Fiction, but there is no defining list of character names per genre. Colby (2013) affirms that writers do give their characters names that are 'interesting and meaningful', and that these names are sometimes used 'to represent character traits and to create paths for characters' (p. 1). Fowler (2012) gives a good example of this, saying, 'Many associate "Oliver Twist" with asking for more, without perhaps reflecting that "twist" is Cockney slang for "appetite" – and already was so in Dickens's time' (p. 3). He continues, saying that 'names are often doors to meaning' (p. 3). Marble (2003) suggests that your world building in a novel can affect the names you choose for your characters, and gives the example of 'if your characters live in a pastoral world, they are more likely to have names that reflect their closeness to nature. Depending on your society, characters could be named after ancestors, gods, animals, places, or even their occupations' (p. 5).

The names Kylie and Jack were chosen for my two main characters because they are very 'Aussie' and are contemporary, and I felt that they suit each character well. I was able to find some information on the names which does show that both names are very Australian. 'Kylie is not just the name of one of the most famous Aussie pop singers of all time, and which has given it currency – it is also a distortion of the word for boomerang (kirli) in the Nyungar and Walpiri Aboriginal languages' (Rogers-Anderson 2015, p. 2). I also used this information to add some more character depth to my artefact, using the boomerang reference for the heroine coming back to where she belongs, naming her, as Marble (2003) infers 'after ancestors', though in this case it was the Aborigine Sunshine who named her after an item that his ancestors used.

Jack is a ‘classic Aussie name [that] has been popular since the First Fleet landed on our shores. Although it originated as a nickname for John, Jack has left its more serious form in the dust and has been hovering near the top of the most popular baby names list for many years now’ (Rogers-Anderson 2015, p. 3). I also mentally use the name Jack as a nickname for Hugh Jackman as I have based the hero on Hugh, which ties the name Jack in perfectly for me the writer.

3.8. Chickens

I love chickens, they are one of my favourite pets. Yes, pets. I see chooks as pets, almost on par with dogs. Keeping chooks also gives back four-fold: quirky pets, food producers, bug eaters, and live composting fertiliser makers. White Leghorns are my favourite as I have found them to be one of the more intelligent of the breeds. So why did I include chooks in my artefact? In terms of this theorization dealing with characterization, I realised that you do not find many chooks in rural romance novels other than the occasional mention of a character ‘feeding the chooks’. With chooks being so quintessentially rural, why are we not seeing more of them? This was something that I wanted to address by making chooks a character, though be it a very minor character, and using the chook scenes to bring my main characters closer together. The incorporation of chickens and the rooster also added humour to my novel, an example of using these animals beyond their existing application.

Chickens do appear in rural romance novels but are mostly only ‘as part of the scenery’ (Oxford University Press 2013, p. 1). Two examples are shown below of the way chickens are represented in current rural romance novels (though this is uncommon), Jennifer Scoullar’s *Currawong Creek* (2013) and Ann B Harrison’s *Taming the Outback* (2012):

For her it had been Grandma’s chickens. Collecting eggs one morning, she’d found a hen lying quite still in the nest box. It took some time for Grandma to convince her that it wasn’t just asleep. For the first time she’d seen what *dead* looked like. (Scoullar 2013, p. 85)

Old Harry used them as decoy eggs in the hen house. To encourage the new pullets to lay in their nest boxes. Those chickens weren’t the only ones fooled. (Scoullar 2013, p. 87)

She opened the door and surveyed the yard. Dogs were loose and running around, chickens scratched in the dirt out by the open shed. She could see a tractor parked on one side and other machinery amongst the hay bales. (Harrison 2012, Loc 464)

She was going to see if there were some jobs involving the animals; even feeding the chickens might appeal to her. (Harrison 2012, Loc 477)

She pulled up at the house and looked for signs of life. It was quiet down at the shed, the only movement a couple of chickens scratching for breakfast. The back door was open, and the smell of coffee hit her nostrils as she walked on shaking legs to the door. (Harrison 2012, Loc 1936)

Many people today are opting to keep chickens in suburban backyards as a way to ‘reconnect with our vanishing rural heritage’ (Lawler 2015, p. 9), which encouraged me to include chickens in a more active way in my artefact, essentially allowing chickens, or rather, a rooster, to become not only a minor character but as a sounding board for Kylie as she floundered in her new and unfamiliar environment. As this has not been done before in any of the rural romance novels I researched, my artefact may be one of the first to utilise chickens in this way. So let me introduce Joker the rooster:

He unlatched the gate and walked into the yard. ‘Come and help me collect the eggs. But look out for The Joker.’

Her brow furrowed into a frown as she followed him. ‘The Joker? Boy, you guys must get really bored out here,’ she laughed.... She got to the gate and was trying to unlatch it when she heard the chooks clucking change to loud squeals. She turned around and spied a huge rooster with its beak open and head stretched forward charging toward her. Spinning back around to the gate she frantically tugged at the latch with her only two free fingers.

‘Joker, get out of it,’ Jack yelled as he closed the lid of the nesting box and dashed toward Kylie.

The latch finally gave way but the gate opened too quickly, sending Kylie stumbling through as she dropped most of the eggs on the ground. She spun around at the approaching rooster and stamped her foot. ‘Damn you Joker!’ The rooster turned and fled in the other direction, away from her.

Jack laughed when he reached her. ‘Bloody Joker.’

‘What just happened? I thought I was about to get my throat ripped out by the biggest and meanest looking rooster I’ve ever seen but then he chickens out, excuse the pun, and runs off.’

‘Well, yes, exactly. So now you know why we call him The Joker, he’s all show and no go. A bit of a joke. I guess that’s what happens to a guy when he has to live with 20 females,’ he raised his eyebrows at her. (*Mungabah*, p. 30-32)

3.9. Bachelor and spinster balls

B&S Balls (bachelor and spinster) are a popular rural pastime that feature in many rural romance novels (*Jillaroo* 2002; *The Rouseabout* 2007; *Bella’s Run* 2012; *The Wildwood Sisters* 2015; *The Bachelor and Spinster Ball* 2011), usually ones that are targeting the 18 to 30-year-old age bracket. Previously they were a formal matchmaking event for the young adults in rural areas, but have become more of a social gathering over the years (Huntly 2014, p. 1). I would say it is the equivalent of a city nightclub but without the glitz and glamour. They still involve drinking and hooking up, but in a campout context. In Rachael Treasure’s novel *The Rouseabout* (2007) she gives this interesting description of a B&S Ball:

Rural youth, defiant and proud, who had turned their backs on the consumerism and political correctness that had infiltrated through Australia’s cities. ... Here, in this paddock on this weekend, there’d be no designer drugs. No doof-doof music. No baggy skate pants revealing bumcracks. ... Instead, Kate knew there’d be booze and boots and ‘bloody-oath, mates’ and good, old-fashioned piss-wrecked fun. (Treasure 2007, p. 138)

The 1970s were the heyday era of Australian B&S Balls, with the purpose of the balls being ‘letting young people from isolated and rural areas come together, get loose, and meet new people’ (Terzon 2015, p. 1). And though these ‘bush events are mostly about having fun’, there is ‘also an undercurrent of courtship’ that is ‘sometimes...for love’, and occasionally results in ‘a mate who just got married to a girl he met at a B&S’ (Wilson in Terzon 2015, p. 3). The ‘bringing together’ of ‘unmarried males and females in the hope of romance and more’ offers young farmers and other people from rural communities ‘one of the few opportunities for socializing with the opposite sex’ (Pearce 2015, p. 173). The B&S Ball is effectively a meeting place of single rural people, with the

hope of finding love. This is an element often used in rural romance novels to give the characters a place to attempt to find this ‘romance and more’.

Though the characters in my artefact are a bit older than the usual B&S crowd I still wanted to include an event that they could attend that would be similar to a B&S Ball so I went with a birthday party in a barn, akin to the old barn dance. The context is similar but on a much smaller scale. I wanted to have a setting where the characters could drink and mingle, and include a ‘drunk’ scene, which is a common recurring theme by rural romance authors like Rachael Treasure, Margareta Osborn, Mandy Magro, and Janet Gover, to name a few. Below is an extract from my artefact to show how I incorporated this into my story:

Jennifer held her hands over her ears and tapped Kylie with her foot. ‘It’s so loud!’

‘Let’s go outside for a break!’ Kylie yelled back at her.

Jennifer grabbed two fresh drinks from the bar and followed Kylie outside.

‘Oh Jennifer, you know I don’t like beer.’

Jennifer took a sip from one of the drinks. ‘And who said the other one is for you?’ She took another sip of her drink and spilt a little on the ground, making her giggle.

‘Maybe it’s time we headed back home, the party seems to be winding down a bit now anyway,’ she suggested to Jennifer.

‘Aww, but it’s just starting to get fun. And where is your sexy cowboy? I haven’t even met him yet. Is he coming to the party? I hope he gets here soon, I’m getting a little sleepy...’ Jennifer covered her yawn with her hand, spilling more of her drink.

(Mungabah, p. 109-110)

A B&S Ball or barn dance always seems to have an obligatory vomit scene, of which I have obliged (though as I do not drink alcohol, I had to guess what an alcohol induced vomit would be like as most people I asked did not seem to remember, obviously because they were too drunk at the time):

‘I’m sorry Jack, she doesn’t usually get this drunk.’ Kylie grabbed hold of Jennifer’s arm and tried to pull her off him. ‘Come on Jennifer, time to head home.’

‘Hang on, I think I need to tell the sexy cowboy something.’ Jennifer swayed back and forth, then looked down at Jack’s boots. ‘What lovely boots you have. Oh no, I

feel a little...’ Jennifer clutched at her stomach just as her mouth opened to vomit all over Jack’s boots and up both of his denim clad legs.

‘Oh my god, Jennifer?’ Kylie pushed her back away from Jack. ‘I’m so sorry Jack, I didn’t realise she’d had that much to drink tonight.’ (*Mungabah*, p. 110-111)

B&S Balls are also notorious for sex, with B&S registration packs containing condoms and personal lubricant for the attendees (Huntly 2014, p. 9). Though many of today’s rural romance novels have sex scenes, from mild to explicit, either at a B&S Ball or at other times throughout their storyline, I have chosen instead to allude to sex with the use of sexual tension and desire in my artefact. I have not shown my characters having sex, instead choosing to use the ‘closed door’ method of keeping the sex behind the closed bedroom door. I have applied this technique in the final scene of my artefact. Sunita (2013) suggests that the ‘closed door’ romances are vanishing and over the last ten years erotic romance novels with their ‘open door’ policy showcasing their explicit sexual content have taken over. What is interesting however is her comment about some readers stating that they ‘now skip sex scenes’, which indicates that there is still an audience seeking romance novels with their bedroom door well and truly closed, or perhaps readers are getting bored with too much eroticism. Sunita also states it is getting more difficult to find ‘sex-light romance’ novels when it used to be the other way around (p. 2). Romance novels are not always read just for the sex scenes (Flesch 2004, p. 29), with Craig & Hughes (2008) claiming that the foreplay prior to sex is akin to sexual tension in romance novels for female readers (p. 193), which re-confirms Sunita’s comment about some readers not needing or wanting sex in their romance novels. Author Vonda Sinclair (2013) describes sexual tension as ‘the anticipation, the chemistry, the excitement, the wanting, and the waiting that may eventually lead to sex’, but she implies that sex is not always necessary for a romance novel to be satisfying to the reader, and because the outcome of this sexual tension is unknown, the tension and suspense of the possibility of the characters having sex is increased. This emotional and physical tension for both the female and the male character ties together and builds to create ‘something powerful’, and once this tension reaches its peak, the characters fall in love, which ‘is what romance is all about’ (p. 1). For readers who prefer a ‘closed door’ romance Sunita suggests that they follow her example; ‘I use my imagination and construct a scene in my head that fits with the characters as I have interpreted them’ (p. 3). By taking a step back from the over-saturation of erotica in current rural romance novels, my artefact aligns itself with, and

appeals to, those readers wanting to read the ‘sex-light romance’ novels which have their bedroom ‘door closed’. In this way, my literary approach to the representation of sex agrees with Sunita, who argues that on the level of sexuality in romance novels ‘there should be space in the genre for all of us’ (p. 3).

3.10. Four wheel drives

Many of those attending the B&S Balls also drive utility vehicles, or ‘utes’ as they are more commonly called, and some of these utes are four wheel drive vehicles, which are also much-needed farming vehicles. During my research I noticed that a lot of rural romance authors include horses in their stories, whether the horses are used for farming or just for riding, and only read of the occasional four wheel drive, usually just a brief mention as a means of transport around town, not so much of being used on an actual farm. So as I do personally have a lot of experience with four wheel drives, and less so of horses, I wanted to highlight the four wheel drive as a rural romance novel element, especially seeing that it is an essential piece of equipment for a farm and yet has not had much coverage by authors. Possibly this is seen more as a male domain so authors are perhaps not versed on the vehicles capabilities so are less inclined to write about them. I feel though that it is important to include them as they are vital to farming life and are essentially our modern day work horse. In my novel, four wheel drives also reinforce the rural setting, shows the heroine and hero’s character development, and provides moments of romance between the couple.

Four wheel drive vehicles are common on farms and in rural communities, with their popularity in the suburbs not taking off until the early 1970s (Bishop 1995, p. 258). They are an iconic image usually seen ‘traversing a deserted outback road, leaving a plume of red desert dust to settle in its wake’ (Taylor & Carson 2010, p. 224). Bishop (1995) declares that when a four wheel drive arrives at a destination, it ‘creates an outback location and transforms it momentarily into a place’ (p. 269). He claims that the suburban four wheel drive is considered inauthentic (the urban cowboy) by many people, which would suggest a preference by most for the four wheel drive to only be used outside of suburbia (p. 259).

Below are just two of the many rural romance novels I examined and found to be good examples of how some authors are underutilising four wheel drives in their stories, certainly in terms of innovating the form of the sub-genre. The first three are from

Cathryn Hein's *Rocking Horse Hill* (2014) and the last two are from Ann B Harrison's *Outback Gold* (2013):

Rain was sleeted the windscreen of Em's four-wheel drive as she turned into Camrick's drive. (Hein 2014, p. 1)

She drove with her fists clenched around the Patrol's steering wheel and her attention deliberately fixed on the road. (Hein 2014, p. 183)

Sleek cars were parked in paved driveways, many European-brand SUVs that made Em's old Patrol look shabby and out of place. (Hein 2014, p. 186)

He led the way to his four wheel drive and opened the door, climbing in. 'I'll take you over to the main shaft first and then we can go out to the processing plant.' (Harrison 2013, Loc 250)

Seeing the crossing ahead, she changed down a gear and turned onto the small dirt track. Bumping along they drove for about five minutes before she pulled the car over to a clearing and killed the engine. (Harrison 2013, Loc 574)

The snippets above either give a brief mention of a four wheel drive or show the vehicle only being used as a means of transport, there is no further involvement with the vehicles. This is typical of many rural romance novels that I examined. With each scene of my artefact that included a four wheel drive, I was able to use the vehicle in some way to either show a character's features or to bring the main characters together. The very first scene with the heroine arriving at the property uses the type of vehicle she is in to show her height (in this scene she is in a large four wheel drive):

'This is the house?' Kylie shook her head in disbelief then reached up to brush the long fringe of auburn hair out of her eyes. 'They've got to be kidding!' She opened the door and swung her legs over the door sill, remembering just in time to carefully slide out of the vehicle down to the ground. Feeling the solid earth under her feet she let go of the door's armrest and the side of the driver's seat. She stood up to her full height, smoothing her jeans down her thighs. (*Mungabah*, p. 1)

When she returns to the property with her own four wheel drive, one she has just purchased, she is able to exit the vehicle differently. She is now able to ‘plant’ her feet on the ground as opposed to sliding down to the ground:

Kylie stopped the small Suzuki four wheel drive out the front of the overseer’s cottage. She smiled as the familiar cloud of red dust kicked up into the air around the vehicle. This was the right decision to make, she was sure of it. Getting out of the driver’s seat she planted her boots into the red dirt and reached her hands up into the air to stretch out her legs and her back. (*Mungabah*, p. 56)

At the end of the story the heroine has embraced the rural lifestyle and now has her own four wheel drive ute, instead of the little Suzuki, and her kelpie jumps up onto the back tray, just like Ace does on Jack’s ute:

She pushed herself up off the bench and walked over to her ute. She tapped the tray with her hand and King jumped up. ‘Good boy.’ (*Mungabah*, p. 172)

By including four wheel drive vehicles in my artefact I was able to impart some of my own knowledge in this area as well as use the vehicles to bring the characters together on a regular basis. The four wheel drive is not often included in the rural romance novels offered today, so by not only including this vehicle type in my artefact but also utilising the vehicles to highlight or showcase features about my characters and as an aid in bringing my characters closer together, I am able to produce a new rural element as an original feature in my rural romance story.

This chapter has unpacked some of the rural elements that make up a rural romance novel. I examined other authors’ rural romance novels and how they applied rural elements to their work. I also analysed how I represented these elements in my artefact so as to create an original story that was true to its rural romance genre while also offering an original contribution to the sub-genre. The next chapter examines authenticity through historical accuracy in rural romance novels.

Chapter 4. Constructing Authenticity through Historical Elements

This chapter briefly explores how interweaving spatial and personal histories can add authenticity to rural romance novels. Van Luyn (2013) describes a novel's authenticity as 'its relationship to verifiable sources', with Brown stating authenticity 'conveys the "truth" about a particular period' (1998, p. 2). This chapter will firstly explore how writers of rural romances can use historical elements in their work to help create authenticity for the reader. There is general agreement amongst authors, critics and readers that successful romance novels achieve verisimilitude to the degree that readers are able to trust in the version offered to them. The depictions of actions, places and people also need to be believable. Major errors in facts will disrupt the reading experience, therefore should be avoided. So important questions related to the creative process include how do you write the novel that provides a semblance of truth and believability? How do you ensure the novel's time frame is mapped against authentic events? The chapter then examines ways to construct this authenticity before briefly analysing authentic history scholarship and the way authenticity contributes to creative work. Finally, I detail my research into historical authenticity and explain the reasoning behind the inclusion of historical events and artefacts in my novel while considering how readers may be positioned as a result. How can fact and fiction work together to weave an authentic narrative? This chapter looks at the use of historical elements and how they help authenticate and shape a narrative to assist in the narrative's believability.

The accuracy of historical elements used in a novel is important because it establishes the conventions of authorial engagement with the past, and it is these conventions that help the reader connect with the story being told. Kinsella (2008) noted that investing the outback with memories and events helps to form a history which allows a person to identify and become one with the land, and that it is then that a place starts to exist because the person has claimed that space by tying their experiences to it (pp. 34-39). When the reader recognises an event or occasion from history they are better able to place themselves into the story, resulting in a better reading experience. 'Readers of even the most imaginative work will soon identify that work as flawed if the writing is unintentionally misspelt, illogical, anachronistic, or historically or factually incorrect' (Brien 2006, p. 54). Brown (1998) states, 'However an author chooses to balance her material between history and fiction and accuracy remains a primary obligation of all historical fiction' (p. 1).

Authentic historical elements could be seen as a literary device that could be applied to many aspects of the rural romance novel, with readers being able to ground themselves in the story with a sense of familiarity due to their own knowledge of these events. To be seen to be an authentic portrayal of the past, the historical details have to be accurate. In the Acknowledgements of Bryce Courtenay's book *Solomon's Song* (1999) he suggests, 'It has always been my contention that the historical facts in a work of fiction must be accurate and that readers should be able to rely on them to obtain a knowledge of the times in which the narrative takes place' (p. vii).

Brown (1998) claims '...authors of historical fiction have no first-hand knowledge of their characters' experiences, but they can roam widely in their imaginations, setting their stories in distant times and places accessible only through research' and that no author should be restricted to only 'autobiographical material' (p. 4). She concludes with, 'Any writer who tells a story set in the past must negotiate the fine line between history and fiction, between readers' contemporary sensibilities and historical accuracy' and that the 'issues of the past are inscribed on our own lives, that yesterday continues to impinge upon today' (p. 5).

Mallon (1992) affirms, 'Only through tiny, literal accuracies can the historical novelist achieve the larger truth to which he aspires, namely, an overall feeling of authenticity' (p. 605). The author can use their imagination to create characters and story lines, and authenticity can be achieved through detailed description of eras, and include elements like setting, buildings, clothing, and speech (Brown 1998, p. 3). If the author is to meet readers' expectations of the genre, authenticity of details must be maintained. So the author is required to do a certain amount of historical research for the novel in order to meet this expectation.

McGucken (2016) states that in order to tell the story, history is drawn on and manipulated (p. 12), and that constructed authenticity and fictionalized history bring history to life for its audience and that these scenes are not supposed to be historical reenactments but instead should be a backdrop to the story (p. 18). The aim of the author is to create a sense of nostalgia so that the reader will wish they could visit the locations or settings and make an emotional connection with the characters (Ackerman & Puglisi 2016, p. 1). Author Nicole Alexander confirms 'there is always the appeal of rural romance' and she likes historical details in her novels 'to be well researched and accurate' because rural literature that 'is grounded in realism' and 'very authentic' is what appeals to readers today (in Somes 2012, p. 2).

Why and how did I situate historical elements in my artefact? In considering the above scholarship around achieving authenticity with historical elements in fiction writing, I will now discuss my own research that was undertaken in order to provide authenticity in my novel. Though my artefact is a contemporary rural romance novel and not an historical romance novel, I still needed to include some historical information and items in order to show the property and homestead's heritage, as well as to align the timeline of events that take place, primarily the tragedies and near tragedies caused by the floods. 'Fictionalized accounts of history...seek to show a familiarity with the past through universal themes (love, hate, triumph, tragedy)' (McGucken 2016, p. 13).

Inside the main homestead that features in my artefact, furniture was kept true to the era as I wanted to give the impression that nothing had been updated or replaced for many decades to showcase the resilience and thriftiness of the property owner, Buffy. But I also wanted to show her ongoing anguish at having lost those that she loved and how she no longer saw the house around her falling into disrepair as it was no longer a priority for her. When I visited the Glengallan property one very helpful addition done, though technically left undone, during the restoration of the property was leaving some small sections of the walls and floors un-restored to show visitors just how rundown and neglected the building was. This was significant to my creative work as it allowed me to see inside the old walls to understand what type of materials were used in those days so I could replicate how some of my characters would react to seeing this type of damage, thus adding some authentication.

A passage from my artefact highlights the protagonist's reaction to seeing the inside of the house. Extract from *Mungabah*:

Kylie stepped further into the sitting room. 'Wow, that fireplace is divine.' She walked over to the hearth and ran her hand over the marble mantel surround. Her eyes followed the hearthstone stack up toward the ceiling. She gasped and took a step forward. 'Why is it like that?' She pointed toward the corner of the wall where the wallpaper and plaster had come away and exposed the wooden lath strips. She turned and looked at the other walls and gasped again. 'And over there too? Not just at the top but all along the bottom as well?' She turned to look at the men but only Jack was there.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'It's a bit rundown. Weather and old age I guess. This old girl's been around for a while,' he said, looking around the room. (*Mungabah*, p. 12)

Smaller aspects were also included to age the homestead, with a lot of everyday household items that would have been used back in the late 1800s through to the 1960s. Here are three extracts from *Mungabah*:

The telephone vibrated against the top of the side table then shrilled out a cranky ring, stirring Kylie from her daydream. She shook her head clear and picked up the ivory Bakelite handle. ‘Hello?’ (*Mungabah*, p. 89)

She grabbed the stepladder and climbed up with the box under her arm. *Ok, so should I put it in a Lux tin or a Rinso tin? No wait. A Sunlight tin, of course, that one looks a lot more cheerful.* She grinned and reached over the other tins, and let the box drop into the Sunlight tin. *I don’t think anyone will look in there.* (*Mungabah*, p. 117)

She turned away from the window and grabbed the brass knob on the corner of the old iron bed that had been her grandmother’s and sat down, the bed springs protesting at being disturbed. (*Mungabah*, p. 59)

The Great Floods of 1890s are what first piqued my interest in including the floods as a feature in my artefact when I saw there was a bit of a pattern occurring with the subsequent 1908, 1974 and 2011 floods (Bureau of Meteorology 2011, p. 1). With most towns and cities in Queensland having been built on floodplains (Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry 2012, p. 162) one would assume that people would be aware of the potential of floods and that measures would be taken to plan housing and infrastructure to avoid the flood-prone areas. However, this type of information would not have been available a hundred or so years ago and most sites chosen to build upon would not have had any prior knowledge of the area being flood-prone. This information also triggered an idea for further novels set at the same property and town as my artefact *Mungabah*.

When including details about the floods in my artefact I created the characters’ ages to match the flood events to ensure the storyline was believable. In order for the heroine’s mother to have drowned in the 1974 floods the heroine needed to be a bit older than the average age of 24-26 found in US romance novels (Dear Author 2009, p. 1). Ages of heroines in Australian rural romance novels vary greatly, but are usually under the age of 30 (Palmer 2009; Magro 2011; Osborn 2012).

Using the floods in my artefact served more than one purpose. The flooded gorge and cliff face along the ridgeline act as an organic hurdle or naturally occurring roadblock in the storyline, and tying the previous floods into the storyline with the current flood and having all of the floods accurately portraying the real Queensland floods creates authentic conflict that readers are able to relate to (Ackerman & Puglisi 2016, p. 3). Valdinger insists ‘rural romance writers must know their catching pens from their shearing sheds’ so authenticity is crucial (in Neill 2015, p. 4).

This chapter explored authenticity through historical accuracy in novels and how it is important for readers to feel that what they were reading contained correct information in order to create believability. I also showed how I dealt with aspects of authenticity in my artefact. The next chapter examines the romance of the Australian outback or bush and how the rural elements of romanticism situate themselves within the rural romance novel.

Chapter 5. Putting Rural into Romance or Romance into Rural

So what makes rural romance novels romantic? What do rural romance readers want, and what do they expect when they pick up a rural romance novel? This chapter explores reoccurring motifs and symbols found in the rural romance genre including bushranger mythology, the depiction of cowboy-like heroes and ways to romanticise the bush setting, and how I have related these to creating my artefact. This chapter also looks briefly at the readers and authors who write rural romance novels: what appeals to them and what they think makes a rural romance novel. The rural romance continues and develops a longer literary tradition of defining ‘Australianness’ in terms of the bush or the outback (see for example Russell Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958); Tanya Dalziell’s *Settler Romances and the Australian Girl* (2004); and Kay Shaffer’s *Women and the Bush* (1988)). The outback and white Australians’ relationship with it have always been an important backdrop to Australian love stories, and romantic love succeeds because of the redemptive power of the Australian bush (Teo 2017). In my novel, rather than focusing on the redemptive power of the bush to strengthen and unify the bond between Kylie and Jack, although I do this a little with the flood rescue scene at the end, I largely focus on the innovation of the animal minor characters to help their love to succeed. The romance succeeds also because the city heroine, Kylie, comes to accept the outback when she becomes emotionally attached to the grand old house. So by the end of the novel, Kylie’s place in the community is validated.

When we think of Australian bush stories most people immediately think of bushrangers, but not as criminals, more as folk-heroes (Webb 2003, p. 1). Australian folklore also includes ‘convicts, the bush, tales of pioneering, family sagas, floods, droughts, bushfires, battlers, Aboriginal people, Irishmen, and lost children’, (Australian Story 2008, p. 1). Contemporary rural romance novels include a lot of these elements alongside current issues. Mirmohamadi (2015) asserts today’s rural romances embrace a number of literary themes of the nineteenth-century Australian society and literature (p. 212) and that ‘the Australian bush is appropriate to and generative of romance’ (p. 213).

Bushrangers have been a topic of many books over the years, with as many as 150 books being published up to 2008. Romanticising the bushranger began as far back as 1888 with Boldrewood’s novel *Robbery Under Arms* (Australian Story 2008, p. 1). This notion of a ‘bad guy’ being a romantic figure is further cemented by the inclusion of bushrangers in many Australian romance novels over the years. Author Mandy Magro has

a bushranger in her rural romance novel *Driftwood* (2013). Using a dual timeline, she tells the story of a contemporary heroine whose life is interwoven with the legacy of the bushranger's, which began in 1861. Magro romanticises her bushranger from the very beginning of her novel:

Relishing the wisp of a cool evening breeze as it refreshed her still flushed skin, Anne gently chewed her bottom lip and watched William Campbell pull on his moleskins then run his hands through his sandy brown hair, his muscular body making her want to ravish him yet again. Whatever was she thinking, falling for the likes of him? It was just asking for trouble. Though she had to silently admit that his wayward image made it even more thrilling for her to be consorting with him. (Magro 2013, p. 10)

Magro also has her heroine further romanticising the bushranger by mentally defending him. In the same vein as a folk-hero, Magro is presenting her bushranger to the reader as a 'defender of the oppressed' just like the legend of Ned Kelly. The lore of Ned Kelly has been inspirational to artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians for more than 120 years (Webb 2003, p. 1). Magro has embraced this philosophy and worked it into her storyline for *Driftwood*, an extract of which is below:

She huffed. Damn the traps! they had no right hunting him down in the first place. In her eyes, William Campbell was no criminal; he was a decent, generous soul who had been dealt a low blow and was now driven to steal from the rich in order to survive. To make matters worse, it was all because of her. Will only stole from those who made their fortune at the peril of others and shared his gains among the less fortunate. His kind spirit was never greedy, and his greatest satisfaction came from seeing the unlucky with food on the tables. Anne couldn't help but admire him. William had somehow succeeded in living by a moral code in a world that didn't have many moral codes at all. (Magro 2013, p. 12)

My artefact does not include a bushranger as a character but it does reference the father of the neighbour from the property next door, who was a bushranger. My heroine first learns of this bushranger from her grandmother's diary and shrugs off the relevance with disinterest. It is not until later in the story, when she works out that she is indeed the granddaughter of the neighbour that she takes an interest in her 'bushranger heritage'. An extract is below:

She stood up and clasped her hands together. ‘I can’t believe I worked it out. I’m just not sure what it is exactly that is hidden there, but it must be something quite valuable if it can save Mungabah. Though...’ She pointed a finger toward the ceiling then rubbed her chin. ‘I think I have a feeling I might know what it is. Seeing as how I’m now the great granddaughter of a bushranger.’ She cocked an eyebrow at King. ‘Are you even paying attention, King?’ King sat up and sniffed his butt. ‘Typical.’ She laughed and grabbed a notepad from the kitchen drawer. (*Mungabah*, p. 163)

In another scene I have, like Magro has done, romanticised the notion of the bushranger by having a character defend the bushranger’s actions:

Mr Berrigan huffed. ‘That’s not a poem, son. That’s the riddle. The riddle that everyone has been trying to find. The riddle that leads to my father’s stash.’ He put the box down and turned and looked at Jack. ‘You did know that my father was a bushranger back in the day, didn’t you, son?’

Jack shrugged his shoulders. ‘I think I may have heard something about it.’

‘Pfft! Heard something about it? He was the most notorious bushranger on this side of the Range. The police never did find him. Or his stash.’ He cocked an eyebrow at Jack. ‘But he only ever stole from the rich. He had morals, you see.’ Mr Berrigan shook his head. (*Mungabah*, p. 166)

Along with ‘romanticised bushrangers’, other elements aid in the notion that the bush is romantic. The setting of the novel needs to be conducive to romance. The managing editor of Escape Publishing (a division of Harlequin Australia) Kate Cuthbert offers ‘whether it’s the rich red of the soil, the big sky, the sheer stubbornness of the trees that survive. To live in that setting is to lend yourself to a romantic mind-set’ (cited in Jaffe 2013, p. 3). Jaffe (2013) confirms it is the outback’s harshness, beauty, riches, and challenges that capture readers’ imaginations and that Australians have loved stories about the outback since white settlement (p. 1). And it is also the sense of having a tree change, says Jaffe, with city dwellers craving the ‘rural idyll, imagining a slower pace of life, room to move, exchanging the pressure cooker of city life for a bucolic pastoral life’ (p. 4).

McAlister (2014) suggests it is the ‘strong cowboy’ that attracts readers to rural romance novels, as readers are finding less appeal with urban romance stories, so in a

sense we are romanticising the cowboy. She maintains that the rise of rural romance is due to the appeal of the strong cowboy battling the unforgiving harshness of the Australian landscape. She concedes, 'The cowboy is the toughest of tough dudes, often bound [by] a strict code of honour of his own making, shaped by the harshness of his environment. Hard land makes hard men. And romance has always loved a hard man.' Rural romance is also earthy and is 'set in a world with rough edges...There is something untamed and untameable about this world'. She offers the suggestion that some of the appeal of rural romance is the thought of proving that if you can survive in this harsh environment you can make claim to being strong, just like our romanticised strong cowboy. And that this strength serves as a 'powerful fantasy', equally powerful for women as men (p. 2).

I have romanticised the character of Jack for Kylie by making him the complete opposite to her old boyfriend, Peter. I have created Jack as a tough outback bloke with a soft centre. He is shown battling the land and the climate, instead of battling a decision of which secretary to sleep with next. Jack opens up to Kylie about his heartbreak of losing his wife and child, instead of knowingly cheating, continuously, on a partner. I have attempted to make Jack a better man than Peter, with a clearer choice for Kylie to make about her future, with Kylie wanting to become part of this 'powerful fantasy' that is the romance of the outback. For Jack, the love from and for Kylie transforms his feelings of loneliness and isolation, after his recent tragic losses, to one of hope and happiness.

Random House Australia describes rural romances as, 'Set in the outback and sleepy towns, these rural romance books will take you on an adventure of passion and life on the land (Random House Australia n.d.).' O'Mahony (2014) highlighted that rural romance novels 'reflect on what it means to live, act and love in a context where synergistic relationships between humans, animals and the environment are vital to financial success, survival and contentment' (p. 2). Walmsley (2014) confers romance is still alive in the bush as is indicated by the 'recent rise in bush romance novels' and that this 'popular culture' hints at a romantic country landscape of 'soft sunsets and star-filled nights', suggesting that the 'bush itself is a conjurer of romance' (p. 1). While Tamworth Library recognises the way that 'rural romance novels capture the miracle of love and the way it transforms loneliness and isolation into hope and happiness' (Better Reading 2016, p. 1). The Australian landscape has also become a central character in rural romance novels (Jaffe 2013, p. 3), further establishing the romanticisation ideal of the bush, having

been pushed to the foreground by media and in publicity material (Mirmohamadi 2015, p. 211).

I romanticised rural Australia in my artefact by including and showcasing different elements and issues of the bush: the hot, steamy evenings and trying to catch a cool breeze; the isolation and vastness of the surrounds; the dependence on one another; characters spending time together with no one else around, either in a vehicle or at a special place; the haunting beauty of the old homestead with its essence of forbearers still lingering; and the love showcased in the old diary and hidden letters. I found that Burroway (2007) summed it up nicely when she explained why it is difficult for us to precisely describe the romanticism of the bush. She declares that ‘mood is a state of mind or emotion, and when we speak of setting as mood we are speaking of an external manifestation of the inner, the concrete expressing the abstract, the contingent standing for the essential’ (p. 139).

5.1. Readers’ expectations

O’Mahony (2014) stipulates, ‘The rural romance’s appeal to readers must be partly attributed to the complex representation of rural life, one that is at times gritty and others romanticised’ (p. 2). Johns (cited in Scott 2016) agrees and suggests the Australian outback has been romanticised by movies like *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and *The Thorn Birds* (1983) television miniseries, and that rural romance novels are ‘all about community and the wonderful dynamics that grow from living in a small town’. Johns claims it is the ‘strong, independent heroine’ that appeals to readers and that these ‘rural heroines can put on a dress and wear heels if need be, but they can also change a tire and fight a bushfire if need be’ (p. 4). Janice Radway (1983, 1984) in *Reading the Romance* argued that female readers of romance were highly active in demanding that the heroine should not be submissive, preferring their heroines to be intelligent, spunky, independent and unique.

HarperCollins’s commercial fiction publisher, Anna Valdinger, answers Neill’s (2015) question of ‘what is fuelling the popularity of these distinctively anti-podean stories?’ with readers now having an appetite for ‘stories set on the land’, and readers being able to relate to people living in the outback in an aspirational or escapist way due to the romantic fantasy of ‘getting closer to nature and living on the land’ that is distinct from the rural romance novel’s central love story (p. 2). Valdinger goes on to say that rural romance readers are a ‘gift to publishers because they read a lot; they’re extremely

engaged; they're voracious readers, they're willing to try new writers', and declares that, 'The robustness of the genre can no longer be ignored' (p. 3).

Courtney's (2013) 'Bush Tales' broadcast on ABC's Landline listed some comments from readers, telling her what appealed most to them about rural romance novels. Fan 1: 'I think it's just the rural element and being able to relate to harvest and stressful times and the toughness of the land. I live on a farm, so you just relate to what the story's about and it's always nice to read a romance one as well'. And from Fan 2: 'The ups and downs in daily life. You can sort of compare it to your own life. It really can be like that sometimes. You just want to give up and, yeah, you just keep going' (p. 2).

Crusie (1997) suggests that one of the reasons women read romance is to identify with situations and characters, and also to validate their lives in some way (p. 84). This rings true with rural romance readers wanting to read about real issues and experiences that they themselves have or could go through. As Kinsale (1992) claims 'the reader rides along with the character, having the same experiences, but accepting or rejecting the character's actions, words and emotions on the basis of her personal yardstick', and suggests that the heroine is essentially a placeholder for the reader (p. 32). Barlow (1992) declares, 'The romance heroine is the primary aspect of feminine consciousness, the character with whom the reader is most likely to identify' (p. 47) and proposes that romance novels act as 'psychological maps—insights into the emotional landscape of women' (p. 46).

Are they trying to validate their own lives? Writers are often told by publishers and other writers to create heroines that readers can relate to as this will help readers make a connection with the heroine, which will also help readers feel like they are part of the story. Crusie (1997) does suggest that women read romance to 'recognize the truth and validity of their own lives' (p. 92) and asserts that the romance genre has significantly evolved to reflect current and recurring issues such as deaths, divorce, finances, parenting, showing that the struggles of many modern romance heroines are grounded in the everyday and reflect the perceptions women have of themselves and the world around them. Penguin Australia's Ali Watts confirms readers have shifted away from 'chick lit' and turned to rural romance because they have found 'independent, tough-minded women battling the land more appealing than the self-absorbed shopaholics who dominate chick-lit' (Mirmohamadi 2015, p. 209).

5.2. Romance authors as readers

We must remember that authors are also readers, and here we look at responses from some prominent Australian rural romance authors when asked by Veronica Scott of HEA USA Today Life - 'What do you feel is the universal appeal of rural or outback romance':

Rachael Johns: Two words — the heroes. Give me a man who spends most of his time outdoors, has a good body from hard manual labo[u]r rather than hours at the gym, looks good in dirty jeans, boots and a cowboy hat, a man who can fix things and is good with his hands, over a guy who wears a suit 9-to-5 and gets his body from putting long hours in at the gym. (Scott 2016, p. 3)

Mandy Magro: I feel rural romance appeals to all walks of life, all age groups and both men and women for the core reason of the land being something that pulses with life, and can therefore be a character unto its own. The characters are strong and gutsy, but at the same time flawed, and the men are hot as hell. Country folk can relate, and city folk romanticize about a life away from the hustle and bustle of urban living. It's a lifestyle that can be both rewarding and challenging, love-fuelled and heartache-filled. (Scott 2016, p. 5)

Cathryn Hein: I suspect the universal appeal of ru-ro (Aussies can't help shortening and nicknaming everything — it's a national pastime) is for exactly the same reason why people adore cowboy or Western stories — there is something inherently sexy about living in a tough environment. It takes strength of body and heart, and the embrace of community. Plus, who can go past a rugged rural type, the sort of bloke who has muscles built from honest hard work? (Scott 2016, p. 6)

Rachael Treasure was Australia's biggest-selling rural romance author, having sold more than 500,000 books since the release of *Jillaroo* (Neill 2015, p. 2). Though surprisingly, she has a different view on the sub-genre of rural romance. Treasure claims she started writing her first book *Jillaroo* because she 'was really hungry for rural-based, contemporary stories. And there was very little to be found.' Though she maintains she did not start out to write a rural romance, she has been tagged over recent years as the originator of the sub-genre. She also stipulates that she does not mind if people want to label her books as romance, but would prefer if they looked at the 'multi-layered plotlines that are about humanity and even soil science' (Wright 2013, p. 1).

Interestingly though, there are quite a few reviews for one of her later novels not liking Treasure's heavy-handedness with her personal farming views: '...very didactic farming practices (Susiekenzie 2014)'; 'It appears Treasure intended to use the book as a medium for conveying her farming ideals. Very disappointing (Maxine 2013)'; '...it spent much of the story on sprucing sustainable cropping and farm management. If I wanted to learn that much about direct-drill seeding, I'd be studying agriculture (Natalie 2015)'. Treasure contends that her main group of readers are people who live and breathe agriculture, which is evident when seeing reviews with comments like these, and perhaps just not expected by those not interested in the agriculture, being mostly city dwellers (Wright 2013, p. 1).

The closest Treasure admits to writing romance is her more recent erotic works, *50 Bales of Hay* (2012) and *50 More Bales of Hay* (2013), which she claims has catapulted her to a whole new genre of 'agricsmut' or 'agriculture erotica' (Wright 2013, p. 1). Yet all of her fictional works carry the same or similar rural elements as works by other rural romance authors, with many of these same authors saying that it was Treasure's books that influenced them to write rural romance in the first place, namely Mandy Magro (Cook 2013), Fiona Palmer (Wardle 2011), and Whitney K-E (K-E 2012). Treasure was recently quoted by Neill (2015) as bluntly saying, 'I was so tired of being labelled an outback romance novelist that I've written about human crap in *Cleanskins*...Human waste is a resource that's not being utilised' (p. 3). Her apparent dislike of romance is puzzling and I would question then, why is she writing more 'agriculture erotica' if she does not want to be called a rural romance writer?

This chapter defined 'Australianness' and examined its impact on romance novels and its appeal of the Australian bush or outback. The chapter also looked at three different areas of rural romance. Firstly, I examined some of the elements that readers and writers felt romanticised the Australian outback or bush and how these related to rural romance novels, then I examined what readers of rural romance expect when they pick up a rural romance novel, and then the chapter concluded with some thoughts from rural romance authors on what makes rural romance appealing to readers and a brief insight into author Rachael Treasure's response to the rural romance author tag.

Conclusion

In the exegesis I have analysed and interpreted what is now a known genre in Literature and a sub-genre in romance, and have contributed to knowledge about the process of researching and writing a rural romance novel based in Australia. My creative work *Mungabah* makes an original contribution to knowledge through its representation of an Australian rural romance novel, a novel that has innovated on the form by injecting a new kind of meaning into how dialogue functions in order to explore the concept of pair bonding, and incorporated additional rural elements into the story that have previously been underutilised by other authors, elements such as chickens, four wheel drives, gold nuggets, an original book title, and Australian character names.

By reading and analysing rural romance authors (see Appendix A) I was better able to analyse my own techniques for creating a rural romance. My novel *Mungabah* developed alongside the material I researched for the topic and explored throughout the exegesis. The exegesis has undertaken the preliminary work of locating my artefact within this emerging sub-genre of romance fiction. I applied what I learnt through my research and from the theoretical scholarship on romances to the creative work and fabricated a plausible narrative, which is based on the expectations of readers and publishers alike. My rural elements matched rural elements in other rural romance novels currently being published today. However, I also took the opportunity to exploit the point that because the parameters of rural romance novels are still being debated, I could be original by innovating the form and adding variations of some rural elements in order to enrich the genre and push the boundaries.

Conceptualising this story was achieved by reviewing the novels listed in the Appendix, along with viewing Australian movies and television series like *McLeod's Daughters* (1996). Grenville (1990) claims 'getting a string of things happening is the basic raw material of a piece of writing' (p. 142). Putting this raw material together in a believable way results in a plot that can be worked with, extended, and moulded, to tell the story that the author wants to tell. The plot used in my artefact flows well throughout the story with a happy and satisfying ending for the reader, and fits within the framework readers expect to find in rural romance, particularly in terms of the rural elements that qualify a romance novel as a rural romance. The study indicates that there is increasing demand for rural romance stories by readers and publishers alike. But, 'They have to be good. Just because something's set in the country, ...and you could put a blonde woman

with a hat on the cover doesn't mean that it's a book that you would automatically publish' (Martyn cited in Courtney 2013, p. 3).

Author Pamela Cook (2015) contends it is not surprising that the popularity of rural romance has continued to grow, and is due partly to our cultural history. She says we 'have always had a love affair with the bush' and that our literary heritage comes from a long list of writers, like Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson, who set their stories in country or outback locations. The narratives by these, and similar writers of their time, often included 'tough men and hardy women who braved the dangers of the land'. Cook claims the contemporary rural romance stories of today still ring true to our forbearers, and that 'they appeal to our desire to see the underdog triumphing over adversity and to our love affair with open spaces where even those of us who live in the city find a sense of escape and freedom'. She maintains the heroines of today's novels are 'independent, feisty, smart' and are much more interesting in the romance side of things as there is a lot more going on in the heroines' lives than what you would have found back in early Mills and Boons novels (p. 3).

Bookshop owner Kim Hatherly concedes of rural romance novels, 'They're on the bestseller shelves pretty much once they're released. Rachael Treasure, always, and then Fleur [McDonald], her first novel back in 2009; *Red Dust* was the best new fiction for that whole year. So, consistently every time they're released, they're always in the top 10' (quoted in Courtney 2013, p. 2). The website Better Reading (2016) agrees, 'The rural romance genre has blossomed over the last five years, focusing on small communities in regional Australia and the characters and romance that occur within the small towns. The genre is going from strength to strength and is now hugely popular' (p. 1).

Ali Watts from Penguin Books Australia claims its authenticity and the Australianness that are part of the rural romance novel's success. She adds that Penguin has had heroines only interested in shopping and eating out in international chick-lit novels dominating the market for ages and that Australian readers are wanting something different, something Australian, with Penguin having the largest number of rural romance authors on their lists (in Northover 2012, p. 1). International media are also taking notice of the popularity of our Australian rural romance novels, with The Atlantic including it in an article on the death of chick-lit. 'Down Under, chook lit is publishing's latest phenomenon, with rural romances outselling other fiction' (Matchar 2013, p. 2).

I would like to finish with a quote from Meredith Jaffe (2013) which I feel sums up rural romance novels perfectly: 'Australia has always had a love affair with the

outback. Writing about that passion will always be at the heart of what makes us who we are' (p. 5). *Mungabah* reflects not only my own love affair with the outback, but how through the sub-genre of the Australian rural romance, I am able to express my passion for writing and storytelling with authenticity and originality.

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Appendix A

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