

A Promise Kept

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Chapter 1

With a mild shriek of rubber, the Qantas Airline jet rolled to a smooth stop on the tarmac. It was the end to an exhausting flight filled with turbulence and the petulance of the curly dark haired toddler sitting beside Maggie Brady. The toddler had thankfully fallen asleep in the wee hours over the Pacific, silencing the barrage of constant questions. As soon as the seat belt sign blinked off, she unfastened her belt and gently shook the little girl's shoulder.

"Hey, chickee. Wake up, we're here darlin'." Maggie said in a soft Texan drawl. She was greeted with a sleepy smile, which she answered with one of her own as her daughter bounced with excitement. However, her stomach flip flopped and it wasn't just from excitement. The knot of dread in her stomach had been tightening ever since she had begun planning their trip to South Australia. Her editor had begged, pleaded, and threatened her to get the interview or else, but the interview was the least of her concerns; she had made a promise, and intended to keep it. With grim determination, she took her daughter's hand, and led them into the blazing hot afternoon sun.

After buckling her daughter in the backseat of the rental, she pulled a map out of her pocket and pointed the SUV towards the sheep station known as Muldowney.

"Mommy, when will we get there?" Amy asked with a child's anxiousness.

"Hopefully, not too long. We'll have lunch when we get to Grunt Creek."

"Is that where we're going to take Daddy's ashes?" She smiled sadly as she glanced at her daughter in the rearview mirror.

"No, baby doll, we're going to take them to Muldowney. We'll scatter them there." She glanced at the green digital clock on the dashboard of her rented crossover. The digital thermometer indicated that it was over forty degrees Celsius, over one hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and it was barely lunch. The pair had left Adelaide two hours ago and it had been over an hour since they had eaten a nice lunch at the last truck stop in Grunt Creek. The pimply teenage server had insisted that it was just down the road. A cloud of a fine, red dust followed her progress. Exasperated, she pulled over to the side of the road to read the map again and re-try her GPS system. The dry, emotionless computer voice insisted she turn left, she spared a glance to the back seat, the full day of travelling had proven too much for her daughter, who had fallen sound asleep. There was nothing to her left, but miles of almost barren land, and rows of woven wire fence. Frustrated, she tapped the top of the useless unit with her fist. They were definitely in the middle of BFE, bum freaking Egypt. A weary sigh escaped her lips as she directed her vehicle back to the road. Her mind returned to Tucker, and if he would welcome them, because she was more than a little afraid that he would turn them away. Tucker had become an overnight sensation in the art world, sculpting bronze cowboys that captured the moment so brilliantly, that his pieces were highly sought after, and were priced accordingly. Her editor had practically begged her to get an interview, but she was apprehensive. It was a

lie that could get her in the door, a means to an end. Distracted, Maggie caught only a glimpse of the other vehicle in the curve. She swerved to the left as she slammed on the brakes. It was too little, too late. A loud crunch was followed by the sound of a horn blaring, a child's scream, and everything fading into black.

Tucker Kilpatrick slammed the brakes on his beat-up ute, throwing dust as he came to a stop sideways in the road. Who in the hell drives like that? He had hit his brakes as soon as he noticed the red vehicle, driving on his side of the road. The woman, he at least thought it was a woman, had managed to steer away from him but had over corrected and hit a tree head on, and from what he could see, she wasn't moving. He unbuckled his seatbelt and ran to the vehicle. Its front end was mangled against the tree, and steam poured out from under its smashed up bonnet, making a loud hissing sound. The woman was lying against the door window against the deflated air bag that had protected her from the steering wheel.

"Bloody Hell." He muttered as he opened the left driver's side door, unfastening her seat belt, only to catch her in his strong arms. His heart stopped beating and he was no longer breathing. It wasn't a mistake; he would recognize the woman anywhere. Tucker was frozen as he convinced himself that it was really happening. Forcing himself into action, he gently he laid her in a patch of grass beside the road. He muttered another curse because that woman was the last person that he ever wanted to see.

"Maggie?" he said as he tried to rouse her. "Maggie, wake up." Her eyes fluttered. "Wake up. You've had a bit of an accident." He carefully brushed a lock of stray hair away from her face with his forefinger, lingering just a moment longer than necessary along her cheekbone.

Slowly, she managed to open her right eye and then the left, wondering if she was in Heaven as she stared into the deep blue eyes of her past. The drover's hat on his head, and a western cut plaid work shirt, complete with the pearl snaps assured her that she was not dead. Tucker's relief was evident as he rocked back on his heels, giving her a full glimpse of the man he had become.

"Amy..." she mumbled as the pounding in her head forced her to close her eyes with a groan. He heard a child cry from crunched up car and raced to the back seat, not bothering to question why Maggie had brought her daughter. He forced open the door to the back seat and was relieved to see the miniature of her mother, still fastened in the car seat, with tears streaming from her giant blue eyes down her little cheeks. With gentleness he didn't know he possessed, he unbuckled the restraints and pulled the toddler securely into his arms, cradling her against his shoulder while whispering calming words.

"Shh...I gottcha, kiddo. It's okay now. Let's go see about your mum." He placed a comforting kiss on her cheek, and patted her back until the child relaxed against him, her sobs softening. Tucker quickly carried her to where he had left her mother lying on the

side of the road. Kneeling beside the injured woman, he was careful not to let the child escape his grasp.

“Are you okay? That’s quite a lick you took to your head there.” Maggie slowly shook her head yes and began to sit up, automatically reaching for her daughter. Tucker kept Amy against his shoulder as he hurried to her aid.

“Whoa, not too fast there, you don’t want to flake out again.” He offered his free hand to help her up on unsteady feet. Even with a headache the size of Montana, she felt heat as soon his hand touched her. “Okay, let’s do a check for damage.” He held up his hand and asked her how many fingers he was holding up. Still stunned from the accident, and seeing Tucker Kilpatrick in the flesh, her expression was one of confusion.

“Tuck,” was the only word that escaped her lips. She heard what he had asked her, but couldn’t comprehend over the sound of blood rushing in her ears. She pursed her lips as she tried to respond to his more persistent tone.

“Three. I see three fingers,” She stammered, her throat having gone suddenly dry.

“Great. I didn’t feel any broken bones and other than a nasty headache, I think you’ll be all right. Just to make sure though, I’ll give you two a lift to Muldowney and we’ll call the doctor.” She was suddenly uncomfortable with the idea of being alone with him.

“Isn’t there someone you can call to take us to the nearest hospital? What if something’s wrong with Amy?” He nearly smiled as he listened to her silky smooth voice, the voice that still haunted his dreams, but the hospital wasn’t really an option. He lifted his hat to wipe the sweat from his brow with his forearm. He replaced his hat, considering the options. Meanwhile, Maggie took inventory of her daughter’s health against the wiggling protestations of her miniature. A small chuckle escaped Tucker’s lips.

“She’s fine, I reckon, aren’t you cutie?” He touched the little girl’s cheek with his forefinger, twirling a curl playfully and was rewarded with a brilliant smile as she buried her head against her mother’s shoulder, causing Maggie’s heart to speed into overdrive. Trying to remain cool, she patted her daughter’s head.

Remembering that she hadn’t introduced the cowboy to her daughter, Maggie’s voice wavered as she gave the introductions. “Amy, this is Tucker Kilpatrick. Do you remember talking about him?” Amy nodded her head yes and squirmed in her mother’s arms as she turned her head away, suddenly bashful. The man scratched the two day stubble on his cheek as he studied the pair.

“What about an ambulance?”

"I could call, but it would take them forever to arrive." Tucker removed his hat to knock the dust off of it before taking a closer look at the toddler.

"Besides, I don't think it's necessary. You took a hard knock to your noggin, but I think you'll be fine and this angel was tucked in real tight. There is Country Services in Grunt Creek..." it dawned on Maggie just how far away from civilization they were. Grunt Creek was a long way away, "and we're at least 150 k's from the nearest, full service hospital," Tucker explained with reluctance.

"No worries, I'll take you both back to Muldowney and have one of the hands fetch what's left of your fancy ride." She nodded grimly, seeing no other alternative.

"Let me give you two a lift, and then you can tell me why you are here." Maggie studied the man for a moment. Muldowney had been in Tucker's family for generations. Flashes of memories washed over her, things that she hadn't allowed herself to think of for years, like the way his cheeks dimpled when he smiled, or the way his hands had felt on her body. She gave him a shy glance and his eyes briefly held hers, letting her know that he remembered too.

He was the first to look away, but not before she saw the shadow of regret in his eyes. Not giving anything else away, he turned to survey the damage of the wrecked vehicle, giving her a full view of his backside. Gone was the lanky kid she had known, he had been replaced by a man who had filled out in all of the right places, particularly in the well worn work jeans. Sculpted was a word that came to her mind. But he wasn't all body and sculpted perfection, he was the man who had turned her world upside down, and she still hadn't recovered. As if he sensed the pattern of her thoughts, Tucker's lips curled into a sheepish smile as he wiped his hand on his jeans before extending it to Maggie, steadying her step as he led the pair to his ute.

Tucker balanced her with his hand as she tried to put distance between them. The natural comfort of his touch was yet another shock. She was torn between needing his assistance and wanting to break contact as soon as possible. It had always been that way between them; just a touch was all it had taken. She wrapped her arms around her daughter like a protective armor, preferring to think of an ice cold drink and an ice pack, not at all prepared for the onslaught of conflicting emotions. She couldn't help but wonder what in the world had she been thinking as he leaned against the side of his beat up old truck.

"So...you do know that you were driving on the wrong side of the road, don't you?" She smiled guiltily. "They should give you Yanks a driving exam before they let you behind the wheel." He noticed her smile when he risked a glance. She had just had a horrible crash and she was smiling. "What are you doing in this part of the Never Never?" He asked casually as his eyes appraised her like an artist. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, something that time had only enhanced. She was curvier than he remembered, her hips ripe and full. He cleared his throat.

“I came to find you.”

Tucker kicked the red dirt with the toe of his boot as he wondered why she had sought him out after all of this time. Maggie had been very clear when she had rejected him years ago, and they had both moved on. She had married another and had a kid. The last thing that he needed or wanted was to bring up ancient history.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t know you were a globe trotter.” The last part came out a little more accusing than curious, making her wince.

“I’ve been asked to do an article on you. It’s fairly common knowledge, in certain circles, that we...um... knew each other and my editor has been chomping at the bit. Everyone wants to know what happened to the rodeo star, why he left the arena to become a reclusive artist.” She wasn’t lying, per se; it was a means to an end. Her editor had been after her for a very long time to get an exclusive but she had been perfectly content to never have anything to do with him again. That was, until she had made a promise.

“I don’t give interviews to any journos, regardless of who they are,” he answered snidely.

“I’m hoping that I can change your mind.”

Maggie flashed him a cautious smile as Amy fidgeted in her arms. She let her daughter down and grabbed her hand, always aware of the danger surrounding them while standing on the side of the road.

“You’re wasting your time. I won’t give you or any other journo an interview.” She winced at the bitterness in his tone. She had expected him to be unfriendly, but she hadn’t expected him to react so coldly. She had doubted the wisdom of her decision to come to him, but she was determined. She would use her time wisely and make him understand.

“My editor was adamant,” she managed flatly. “I’m supposed to see what I can do to get the story.” She looked around at anything but him, not wanting him to question the truth of her words.

“Why are you really here?” Her stomach dropped. The truth wasn’t a conversation that she wanted to have in front of her daughter.

“There is something else, but this isn’t the time for that conversation.” She motioned towards Amy. He could have kicked himself, having forgotten all about the toddler. He nodded and helped the pair into his ute. Thankful that his old beat up vehicle didn’t have bucket seats, she placed her daughter in the middle and turned to face the cold blast of the air conditioning.

“You’re right,” Tucker said as he climbed behind the wheel, “but we will talk.” His tone was firm as his blue eyes bored into hers. Maggie blinked back her fear and nodded.

“Okay. We will talk, later.” She closed her eyes and laid her head against the seat, grateful for the air conditioning blowing from the vents in the dash.

“Mommy, he sounded like Daddy.” She smiled and pulled her daughter close to her.

“That’s right, baby. Remember, this is where your daddy grew up.”

“That’s right, kiddo. Your dad and me, we were best mates, since kindy.” Amy smiled; she loved anyone who reminded her of Mick, even the doorman at their apartment in Dallas, who always had a kind smile.

“Mommy, I’m thirsty.” Maggie laughed and rubbed her daughter’s head playfully.

“I left the water in the rental, babe. We’ll be there shortly.” Tucker reached under his seat for a canteen and offered it to the American woman.

“Never come here unprepared. I always keep a couple of these around.” Maggie opened it and held it for Amy to get a long drink of water.

“Thanks.”

“No worries,” he delivered with a slight smile. “We need to see about that bump on your noggin.” She grabbed a tissue from her purse and attempted to wipe the air bag powder from her hairline.

“Thank you,” she turned to face him, “for helping us. I’m sorry I was on the wrong side of the road.” She offered a meek apology as her head began to throb.

“Yeah, sure, no drama. Let’s get you two to the house and get you cleaned up.” Maggie sat back in the seat and let the air conditioner continue to blow in her face. She was aware of how awful she must look, with her hair all messed up, she seldom wore make up, but what she did put on that morning, had long since sweated off. She was covered in powdery grime from the air bag and she had a nasty bump on her forehead that was beginning to swell, gingerly she touched it. It was just a small goose egg, but it hurt plenty. She was in desperate need of something cold to drink, aspirin, and a shower.

Tucker drove silently as he drifted to the past. The last time he had seen Maggie was at Mick’s memorial service. He had stayed in the shadows, not wanting to confront her, when the brief service was over; he had disappeared as silently as he had appeared, certain no one had seen him. He didn’t want to think of the past. Specifically, he didn’t want to think of their past. Most certainly, he didn’t want to think of the way she was making him feel right now in the present.

“So, tell me, how far was I away from your place when you ran me off of the road?” He caught the cute accusation, but he let it slide for now.

“You were pretty close. The house is just over that hill there.” He pointed over to the right. All she could see was lots of wide open brown spaces with nothing more than patches of scrub grass and trees. “This is the northern tip of my property here. We’ll be at the turn off in a few minutes. It’s only about 15k or so down the road.” She did the math in her head, a little over nine miles. They were driving on his property and it was nearly nine miles to his house? Talk about wide open spaces. It was the most isolated place she ever been, dry and barren, the dirt a reddish mixture of clay and sand. The grass in the pastures had turned brown from the long drought. Parts of Australia were experiencing a record drought, and other areas had been experiencing record amounts of rain fall. The news channels blamed global warming.

“So, tell me about your ranch. You have become quite the recluse.” Tucker glanced over at her. She gave him a sweet smile and shrugged, unable to turn off her journalistic need for answers.

“Well, Muldowney,” he corrected, “has been in my family for generations. Now it’s me and my two brothers who work it. We graze cattle and sheep. My oldest brother dabbles in horses, but we all live on the place and work it every day. Well, us and a few hands.”

His even timbered voice was captivating and his accent was as devastating as she remembered. She studied his profile. He was so very well built. She knew that his body had gotten that way from years of working outdoors and sculpting in his clay. Well, that and the rodeo, she mused. He was absolutely perfect. Her memory of him was nothing compared to the living breathing cowboy. She was on his turf and felt like an invasive species. Maggie would rather be anywhere else in the world, but she had made a promise and she intended to do whatever it took to make it happen. She glanced over her right shoulder and studied her former lover over Amy’s dark curls. She knew she was in serious trouble, and it wouldn’t be easy. But then, nothing worth it ever was. She surrendered her thoughts to the past as Tucker drove the last few miles to Muldowney.

They had been so young. She had just been twenty-two when she had met the dynamic duo at a Dallas honky-tonk. She had been covering the National Finals Rodeo Championship for her college newspaper. Mick’s quick wit and impish smile had won her over in a second, but then she had met Tucker. Both of them were part of the rodeo and outside of the article she had written, she had wanted nothing to do with it. The rodeo was dangerous and had caused more failed relationships and injuries than even she could imagine, but a rodeo cowboy had to ride, just like she had to write, and the two cowboys had lured her in, despite her fears. Over the next several minutes, she remembered everything.

She opened her eyes just as Tucker pointed to a small hand painted sign that told her the turn off for his sheep station was just ahead.

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Chapter 2

The homestead was rustic, beautiful, and it appealed to Maggie's need for simplicity. It was a practical two story made from stone that Tucker's grandfather harvested locally. It had a tin roof, and a covered porch, held up with huge columns of rough sawn wood, that went all the way around the house to a screened in porch in the back. There were a few flowers growing in pots and a veggie garden off to the side. She felt a sense of home and immediately fell in love with it.

They were met at the door by Tucker's sister-in-law, Toni, who was a small woman, barely standing five feet, with wise hazel eyes, and short brown hair. She appraised the American from head to toe before turning her gaze to Amy. Maggie noticed the woman's sudden rise of eyebrows and willed her face to be expressionless before the woman could catch her reaction. Smiling tenderly at the small child, Toni offered her hand to the toddler and led her to a waiting platter of cookies. Tucker had phoned ahead to let her know about their guests and to see if she could locate the doctor. Maggie's first impression of the petite woman was that she was very shrewd. Any subterfuge would be a waste of energy. She smiled as Toni returned from the kitchen to show her the guest room upstairs.

"So, you're Mick's Maggie. I always wondered..." Toni dropped her line of thought and quickly changed the subject, sensing that Maggie was not ready for that particular discussion. "The doctor will be here later this arvo. Take a cool shower; I'll mind Amy for you. By the way, she's a sweetheart."

"Thank you so much. I would love to get a shower." Maggie noticed the house was large and airy inside. Even though it was incredibly hot outside, there was no need for air conditioning. There were large gum trees surrounding the house, offering shade and a constant breeze. Maggie remembered that all of her clothes were still in her bag in the back of the rental and once again asked for the other woman's assistance.

"I have something you can borrow until your bags get here." Toni stepped into her bedroom and stepped out a moment later with a cotton sundress and a pair of leather sandals dangling from her fingertips. Maggie stopped herself just short of hugging the woman. The clothes wouldn't be a perfect fit, but they were definitely better than the sweaty, gritty clothes that were currently sticking to her curvy body.

"You have no idea how much I appreciate this," she said as she took the clothes from Toni. "Are you sure you're okay with Amy? She has a gift for gab I'm afraid." Toni laughed and patted her arm amicably.

"Tucker is babysitting for the moment. Just relax and take your shower. You'll be right as rain in a jiff." Maggie nodded, but cringed inwardly at the thought of her daughter spending time alone with Tucker. What if he looked too closely? Toni patted

her arm again, soothing her worries, and stepped out of the guest room, leaving Maggie to take her shower.

Naked, she examined herself in the bathroom mirror. Fifteen years ago, there was no way that she could have imagined that she would be standing in a strange country with her daughter. During that time, Maggie had transformed herself. She had lost nearly one hundred pounds, and worked out every single day for at least an hour, which had continued throughout her pregnancy, and long after. She critiqued every flaw in the mirror. Her hips were too wide; the stretch marks on her tummy resembled a road map, there was still slight evidence of what she considered a double chin, and of course, she had a nasty bump to add to the list. Still, after years of training and discipline, she hadn't learned to fully love her body. She chastised herself for examining her flaws and took the quick, cool shower she had been craving since the accident.

Fresh from her first shower "Down Under," she carefully made her way down the wooden stairs feeling revived, and much more human. She didn't see anyone about, but could hear her daughter's non-stop chatter coming from the back of the house, where she could only assume was the heart of the house, the kitchen. Content that her child was safe and happy Maggie gave her surroundings a curious once over, learning much about Tucker and his family. There were so many things that she didn't know about him. The foyer opened to a large and airy living room, where a small TV and DVD player sat on display beneath a very tall and rectangular window. White painted wood shelves lined the empty spaces along the back wall, filled with rodeo memorabilia, which consisted of hundreds of ribbons, belt buckles and photos. Drawn to the photos, she picked up a small framed memento to examine it more closely. It was of Tucker on a horse holding a lariat. He had been a gawky teenager with a toothy grin, but you could already see the man beginning to emerge. When another picture caught her eye, she traded it with the one in her hand, and sought a closer look. It was of a smiling young Tucker with his arm around another young man, best friends, as close as brothers. She was suddenly hit with a wave of sadness and loss.

She knew all about the rodeo. She had lived it as a child. Her father had died while travelling the circuit. He had stayed on the road most of the time as she grew up, sometimes spending months away before he graced their door in between shows. Her mom had turned to alcohol to cope with the heartache and the loneliness. She missed those moments when her father would home for a few weeks before the next event. They would be a real family for a week or two, until he got restless and hit the road again, eventually he never returned. The rodeo had cost her most of her childhood, and all of her innocence. She had hated the rodeo and anything associated with it, but Mick had taught her that not every man was like her father, and that she certainly was not like her mother. She had learned to love that part of her life, in part, thanks to Mick. He had taught her to love herself and to come to terms with her past, not hide from it.

"That's Mick and me at the Junior National Rodeo. He placed second, and I placed third that year. It was the last time he beat me." The deep voice caused Maggie to start. He stood behind her, smelling of earth, clay, and a scent that defined him, looking at the

photo over her shoulder, and grinned at her reactive shiver. He caught the faint scent of eucalyptus in her hair. As he inhaled, she nearly dropped the photo. His breath felt hot against her nape. She gave him a quick glance before she returned the picture back where it belonged, not quite able to hide the sadness in her eyes.

“Yeah, we had the same picture, and kept it on the mantel. Mick had several pictures of you two.” Warding off memories, she quickly tried to change the subject. “I’m sorry, I...um... didn’t mean to snoop. There was no one around when I came down the stairs.” She avoided his eyes and studied a large map on display in the room.

Tucker was blown away by the effect of Maggie in the sundress and sandals. Its hem fell just above her knees revealing the shapely curve of her calf muscles. He felt a quickening of his pulse and swallowed hard.

“There’s tea on the porch.” He managed to say over the lump in his throat as he abruptly turned and walked out of the room, expecting her to follow. She trailed behind at a safe distance, resisting the magnetism that still had the ability to draw her in.

Tucker stood waiting with his hands on the back of the worn, white, wrought iron chair as he held it for her, and she couldn’t help but blush when she noticed his eyes lingering a little longer than necessary on her chest as he helped her into her seat. She nervously cleared her throat as she reached for a glass of iced tea.

“This is more than I could have ever asked for. This tea is delicious. Tastes just like home.” She rattled nervously.

“I remembered that you loved iced tea, so I asked Toni to make a pitcher for us.” His remembrance of her love of the southern staple caught her by surprise.

“Thanks, it’s very much appreciated.” Maggie took a long, cool drink of the southern Manna.

“Would you like a biscuit?” Her eyes fell to the platter of cookies, truly tempted. Years of regimented dieting held her back. She wouldn’t give in, no matter how delicious they appeared.

“Thank you, but no. Any idea when I can get our bags? I need to call the rental company too.”

Tucker had watched her look at the cookies but refrained from comment, something for which she was grateful. She almost never allowed herself sweets and she worked out religiously every day. Memories of her painful teenage years made resisting much easier.

“I sent a couple of the hands to fetch it. They’ll be round before too long.” He stretched his long, lean legs out in front of him. “So, what’s with your impromptu visit?”

This is a long way just to show up unannounced.” Knowing that he would see through her attempts at a lie, she took another sip from her tea while she gathered her thoughts.

“It is. I wasn’t sure you would welcome us, and I couldn’t take that chance. Mick wanted his ashes scattered here.” Nervous fingers traced the sweat from her glass with her finger.

“Is that why you brought your daughter along with you?” A long sigh escaped her lips.

“Yeah, I always try to take her with me when I can. I don’t like to leave her with the nanny any longer than necessary.”

“Why did Mick want to scatter his ashes on Muldowney? The last time we spoke, he blacked my eye and told me to rack off.” His challenging stare caused her to wince. Choosing to ignore his statement, Maggie pressed on.

“You were his best friend, and his only real family. This is where he grew up, and where his heart was.” Tucker nodded grimly, recognizing that even after being betrayed by his best friend, Mick was still the better man. At one time, the pair had been inseparable, even travelling to the States together, until Mick had introduced him to the woman sipping iced tea on his porch. He swallowed a guilty lump in his throat.

“Did he say where he wanted them scattered?”

“No, but I hoped that between the two of us, we would find the right spot.”

“We can have a look about later.” His gaze turned toward the distant horizon, hiding his agony from Maggie.

“I know that would please him. You know, he loved you like a brother.”

“Yeah, that’d be right, and I betrayed him. Both of us did.” She winced at his bitter tone.

“I never wanted to hurt you, or him.” She nervously took a sip of her tea.

“Then tell me, why?” he challenged. She searched for a way to redirect the path this conversation was taking.

“We’ll talk about it, but not while I’m jetlagged and have this headache. Truce for now?” she asked simply. He studied her for a moment and she held his gaze, hoping that he would let the subject drop. Something in her eyes must have satisfied him because he gave her a brief nod.

“Truce.” She rewarded him with a smile; the one that had always been just for him.

Maggie didn't reply, choosing instead to refill her glass, her hand reached for the pitcher at the same time as his, causing his fingers to brush against the back of her hand. She snapped it back as if it was on fire, knocking over her glass and spilling ice everywhere. Tucker laughed, and for the first time in several years, she was treated to his dimples.

"Here you go." He handed her a towel and cleared the ice from the table with his strong, tan hands. "So, what do you say? Do you want a little tour around the homestead while we wait for the doc?" She voiced her protest, truly terrified to be alone with him. She could still feel the heat from his fingers on her skin. She stood and shook her head, thumbing towards the door.

"I...uh... think that I should be getting back to Amy."

"Don't worry about the little rug rat, Toni is in her element with that child." Hearing her daughter's laughter waft through the air, Maggie had no choice but to jump at the chance to get away from their awkward conversation. She hated being so clumsy, and she was embarrassed, but it hadn't seemed to bother Tucker. She accepted his extended hand and mentally steeled herself against the warmth that surged through her veins as he pulled her up. In spite of her best efforts, she stumbled a bit, landing close enough to fill her senses with the heady scent of all that was the cowboy. Her pulse hummed as his eyes bored into hers, holding her against him for a breath longer than he should have. For a moment, their eyes conveyed the messages that their lips refused to say, until the intensity of his gaze made her look away. There was so much that she wanted to tell him, needed to tell him, but it wasn't the time. She took a deep breath to steady herself before she stepped back and gave him a quick smile.

"How about that tour?" Distracting herself, she motioned toward the paddocks.

The homestead reminded her of some of the good childhood memories she possessed, she couldn't help but be drawn to it. Tucker looked down at her sandals and shook his head.

"We'll have to see about getting you some proper gear if you're gonna stick around for a while. There are too many things out here to bite, or sting you, if you're wearing sandals." His eyes drifted towards her exposed toes. "Most of them are deadly." Maggie had done her homework and was very well aware of Australia's unique collection of spiders and snakes, but there was a lot that he didn't know about her. When she had started seeing Mick, she had been living in the city, taking advantage of everything that a big city offered, including clothes. She had seldom dressed in anything other than what she used to call girl clothes. Both had assumed that she was just another city girl.

"No problem, I've got some things in my bag, if it arrives. Are you inviting us to stick around for a few days?" She felt a skip in her heartbeat as she waited for an answer, but he ignored her question and started the tour.

Tucker gave her apparel with a skeptical look. The sundress and sandals were inadequate for a tour of the station, but typical of strangers to country life. Most people were woefully unprepared for the realities of the Outback, and dressing the part was only a small portion of it. The area was desolate, at times barren, often unkind, and in the summer, it was hot, dirty and gritty. There was no place like it on earth. The land became a part of you and you loved it wholly, or it rejected you completely. He brushed a fly away from his face and forced a grin.

“Okay, then. Let’s get to it.”

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Chapter 3

Maggie fell in step beside the confusing man as he showed her around the station. The grounds of the homestead contained several barns, stables, a new shearing shed, and a bunk house. While the setting was rustic, the machinery and interiors of the buildings were new. As they made their way from the shearing sheds to the paddock, portable corrals where several head of sheep caught her eye. Knowing plenty about cows and horses, she was eager to learn more about the beasts bleating in the late afternoon sun.

“So, tell me why these guys are penned up.” Tucker stopped by one of the corrals and studied her as if trying to decide if her interest was genuine.

“Well, this mob is in line to be drenched. That means that it’s time for them to be wormed, etcetera, we have a few hundred head. We’ve had to drop our numbers because of the drought, but hopefully, it will rain soon.” She nodded as his gaze drifted towards the sky with his hopeful declaration. She was well aware of the plight of every farmer, too much rain, or not enough.

“I bet it’s beautiful here after the rain.” Before he could reply, a noisy white miniature truck wound its way around the drive throwing up a cloud of dust behind it. He motioned towards the patio with his hand, indicating that they should greet the visitor.

“That will be the doctor.” She followed him back to the house, her attention returning to the bump on her head. She grimaced as the doctor threw up his hand in greeting.

“Doc, thanks for coming out.” Doctor Adams was easily in his sixties and had been Tucker’s doctor most of his life. He had a twinkle in his eye even as his pale blue dress shirt clung to him from the heat, and on his head rested an Akrubu hat which kept the sun from his obviously balding head.

“Cheers, Tucker. You must be Maggie?” The doctor smiled as the American woman nodded. He turned his attention towards Tucker and winked in approval. “So, I hear you had a bit of an accident?”

“I’m afraid I caused the accident. I nearly ran Tucker off of the road and then hit a tree.” Doctor Adams led her to the wrought iron patio seat where he could more easily attend to her. Hearing the doctor pull up, Toni had escorted a very content toddler to the porch, tearing the doctor’s attention away from Maggie’s head bump. The doctor gave Amy a piece of candy while he examined her for damage from the accident. Satisfied with the toddler’s health, he returned his focus to her mother.

“That’s quite a nasty lump there.” He gave her a knowing glance not missing the resemblance of the toddler to Tucker, but didn’t say anything, much to her mother’s relief.

“So, I think you and your daughter are as fit as fiddles, but you will most likely be sore for a day or two. We’ll need to keep our eye on you because you have a slight concussion. We’ll need someone to check on you a couple of times during the night. Tucker, will you take care of that?”

The two men exchanged long glances. Not finding any fault with the doctor’s logic, he silently agreed, all the while suspicious of a set up. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that he didn’t want the responsibility of caring for Maggie, if only for the night. The doctor grinned at the younger man’s obvious discomfort.

“Sure, Doc.” He said through tight lips.

The doctor returned his smile and turned to make his way to his well-used vehicle, needing to see other patients. It was a sparsely populated area, and towns were far and few in between, hospitals even more so. People in the area were very self-sufficient, but occasionally, even they needed a doctor to help them out. He tooted his horn and gave a wave as he turned down the drive.

“Well, looks like you’ll be all right.” Tucker turned and gave her a reproving glance. “Since you are going to be here for a while longer, you might as well fill me in about the past few years.”

She took a long drink of her tea knowing that he wanted to discuss Mick. In an effort to ignore that part of her life, she stuck to the bullet points.

“I eventually graduated with my degree in journalism. It was tough, and it took a little longer than I had planned, but I pulled it off. I freelance covering the rodeo, of course, but I also write travel articles as well as others.” Knowing she had pushed when he was already irritated, she watched his eyes carefully, looking for any sign of animosity. She was not disappointed. Tucker rose to his feet and drank the last of his tea before replying.

“I’m not giving you interview, so stop fishing. As soon as we’re sure you’re okay, we will scatter Mick’s ashes, and then you and Amy can go back O.S., to the States. This is a working farm, excuse me, I have work to do. Call the rental company to pick up your vehicle. One of the hands can give you a lift back to town tomorrow.”

He spun around hard on his heel and left her sitting alone on the patio relieved that she had diverted his attention away from her late husband. She had known that it was going to be the most difficult conversation that she would ever have and she knew him well enough to know that their conversation was far from over. There would be a time when she would have to confess all of her sins. She wasn’t sure when that would be, but she did know that it would arrive sooner rather than later. She had missed him and she wanted Amy to get to know his family, and then, well, then whatever would happen, would happen. She winced and rolled her tight shoulders, between the jet lag, and the accident, she was sore, and exhausted, but she wasn’t ready to surrender.

After a few moments, a large vehicle approached with her banged up vehicle on its bed. She pushed her wayward thoughts away and greeted the two young men delivering her wreck.

In the guest room, she quickly changed into her old work boots, old jeans, and favorite chamois shirt, eager to climb on the back of a horse. It had been far too long since she had last sat in the saddle and ridden against the wind. The time she had spent on her grandparents ranch seemed like a lifetime ago. Her grandmother had fallen ill and soon after, her grandfather had been forced to sell his ancestral home to pay for his wife of fifty years care. After her grandmother died, it wasn't long before her grandfather had passed away too, leaving Maggie alone. When she had met Mick, there had been an instant connection, a true kindred, but then she had met Tucker. He had blown her away with his rugged good looks, easy smile, and eyes that held the wisdom of the world within their deep, blue depths. One night had changed her life forever, and try as she might, she had never regretted the stolen moments between them. Yes, she had betrayed Mick, the man who loved her in spite of everything, and she had destroyed the friendship between the two cowboys. After, when she had time to consider what had happened, Maggie had wanted to forget about it, to pretend it hadn't happened, but her daughter had put a kibosh on that, only then it was too late and Tucker had been long gone. Mick had listened, held her close, and stepped up, the rest was history. Her face was determined as she placed the old, weathered, straw cowboy hat on her head and left her room in search of the source of squeals echoing from the first floor.

She found her daughter in the kitchen with Toni; the pair had become fast friends. The Australian woman's approval of her farm wear came in the form of an arched brow and grin. Her shoulder's shrugged. The work clothes showed there was much more to the alleged city girl than met the eye.

"What have you been into, sweet cheeks?" Amy laughed at her mother's latest nickname while her Maggie brushed a streak of flour from the toddler's cheek.

"Makin' cookies," Amy looked quickly at Toni. "I mean biscuits." Maggie laughed and placed a kiss on her daughter's forehead before lowering her little feet to the floor.

"Well, I thought I might go take a look at the horses if you would like to come with me?" Amy had already resumed her place on the footstool beside Toni.

"I don't mind looking after the munchkin. She's a real natural." She didn't need a second invitation and worded a silent thank you to her new friend, taking only the time to drop a kiss on Amy's flour covered cheek before making her way to the front porch. She was deliberating on which direction she should go when she turned into a solid wall of male muscle.

"Oy, there. You must be Maggie. What are you doing Back o'Brouke?" Years with her Australian husband had taught her how to interpret Aussie slang, most of it anyway. She knew he meant the Outback. Sensing a kindred spirit, she smiled in greeting.

"I'm Copper. Nice to meet you." Maggie couldn't help but like him right away. He flirted unabashedly as he took her hand and brushed his lips against the back of it.

"Hi, Copper. Nice to finally meet you." She took a step back and took in his larger than life size. He was Jethro Bodine and Hugh Jackman rolled into one, with startling blue eyes that twinkled with mischief.

"I heard that you were a real beaut. Where have you been all my life?"

Maggie's lips curled up at the corners, his good humor contagious. "I was waiting for you, of course. When you didn't find me, I had to come find you." Copper laughed out loud, thoroughly charmed by her thick Texan accent.

On a more serious note, Copper softened his tone. "I just want you to know, it's a real shame about all of that business with Mick."

"Thanks. It's been hard, but I think me and Amy are finally okay." She gave him a sad smile and looked beyond him into the distance, shrugging off old memories. She nodded her head curtly and moved in the direction of the stables. Copper picked up his step to catch up, his grin devilish and looked around expectantly.

"Where's that little girl of yours? I hear she looks just like you." She grinned at the mention of her baby girl.

"Amy is my mini me, but she deserted me for Toni. She has taken quite a shine to her; usually she's pretty wary around strangers." Copper chuckled and dusted his black cowboy hat off on his denim clad, muscular thigh.

"I don't think Toni has ever been a stranger to any kid." His head made a motion towards the yards. "Looks like your tour guide has left you. I think that your little visit has thrown him for a loop. What are you up to?"

"Well, really, I'd love to go for a ride. It's been far too long and I'm a little out of practice." His sarcastic smile let Maggie know that he had no confidence in her ability to master a horse.

"Okay, love, we'll go, but riding here is a bit different than riding ponies in careful circles." Maggie gave him a winning smile of her own as she breezed past him.

"I haven't ridden a pony since I was four." Her eyes held a challenge and Tucker's brother laughed again, his eyes sizing her up from her dusty boots to the straw hat on her head. He nodded his head in acceptance.

"Okay then. My brother will not be pleased. You just banged the Hell out of your head. He said you needed to take it easy." She shrugged her shoulders indicating that she couldn't care less what Tucker thought.

“Believe me, I am taking it easy. So, what do you say? Wanna go for a ride?” Copper wrapped his arm around her shoulders and gave them a friendly squeeze.

“Well then, I reckon we should head for the barn.” Copper said as he guided her. An easy friendship had been born.

Maggie had been at Muldowney barely an afternoon and already it pulled her under its spell. She was anxious to get her jeans dirty. Tucker’s youngest brother had chosen a nice roan mare for her and was already in the process of saddling it when she stopped him. She knew she may be rusty, but she could still saddle her own horse, it was a matter of pride and necessity of any rancher. Impressed by Maggie’s familiarity with the process, Copper let her have at it.

“The saddle is a little different from your western saddle. It sits a little deeper.” He explained. The Australian saddle was a blend somewhere in between an English riding saddle and an American Western saddle. Maggie looked at it dubiously for a second before deciding that there would be nothing to it.

Making quick work with the cinch she easily finished and swung herself up on its back. With a click of her heels, they were on their way. Maggie was a little stiff at first, but she was riding like a pro after a few practice turns, blushing from the smirk of approval on Copper’s face.

Muldowney was as open as it was vast. Maggie thought it was beautiful even though it was dry and dusty. She imagined how it would look after the rains came and knew it would be breathtaking with green grass and wildflowers. Copper was a pleasant companion; he was thorough and patient with his explanation of their operation. He explained that running the sheep station was, more often than not, a money losing operation. There was always something threatening their way of life, whether it was the drought, the wet, or the bank. Tucker had invested all of his winnings from the rodeo into Muldowney, and after that, he had kept the operation running with his art sales, until they had finally managed to turn a profit again. She was fascinated and touched by Tucker’s obvious love of this dry land. Every aspect of this way of life appealed to her, and filled her mind of memories of her grandparents. She was an Earth child at heart. Living in the city for the past few years had done little to dampen that innate desire she possessed about living free, riding under a big sky. She wanted her daughter to feel the connection to the land and the sky, and not to be too spoiled by modern convention. Copper had led them to the south east paddock where she caught a glimpse of someone working on the fences. As they made their way to the ranch hand, she could see that it was Tucker, wearing a white tank top covered with dirt and grime, and those tight work jeans. He was all male; his sinewy muscles glistening from the sweat of an honest day’s work. She studied him closely as they approached. He was possibly the most beautiful specimen of male she had ever seen and her pulse kicked into overdrive.

Tucker turned to greet the riders as he heard the horses’ rhythmic approach. His surprised expression of seeing her so sure in the saddle was worth conspiring with

Copper, filling her with a rush of pleasure. In the brief time that they had known each other, she had never mentioned the fact that she was farm raised. Instead, she had led both Mick and Tucker into thinking that she was just another city girl.

“What are you doing out here? You should have stayed at the house.” He gave his brother a hard look. “It figures that you would have something to do with this. Take her back. She shouldn’t be out riding after the accident.” Copper’s eyes crinkled and he shook his head at his brother.

“Ease up there, bro. Maggie just wanted a little ride. Now, I have somewhere to be, so I guess you can take care of guiding her back to the house?” Copper’s expression challenged his brother. He smiled wickedly when his older brother indicated that he would with a curt nod. Part of her wanted to cringe from the former rodeo star’s obvious disapproval, the other part was thrilled that she had proved herself in the saddle. She stiffened her spine, indicating that she wouldn’t be intimidated, hardly sparing a glance at Copper as he turned his horse, leaving her alone with the man she had travelled so far to see. Meanwhile, her stomach turned somersaults and her heart thudded inside her chest.

She knew that Tucker was annoyed, but that didn’t change her plan. As obvious as it was that he didn’t want her and Amy at Muldowney, she had a mission to accomplish and being alone with him was the first step.

“So, don’t be mad at Copper. I ran into him at the house and made him bring me out here. I hope you don’t mind.” She swung off the roan mare and walked over to him, just a little unsteady on her feet. Tucker took a step and placed his hand on her shoulder to steady her. She grabbed his wrist for a moment and then quickly let go as a bolt of electricity shot through her. “Thanks. I’m okay. It’s just been a while since I’ve ridden.”

“Yeah, I was surprised to see you out here on a horse. Back in the day, you wouldn’t even go near one. I just assumed that you had never ridden.” She could hear the approving surprise in his voice. It filled her with pride.

“I never said that I couldn’t ride. I just said that I didn’t ride.” Her tone was a little more facetious than she had intended.

“Stretch your legs for a bit while I finish up here and we’ll head back to the house for a cuppa.”

“A cuppa what?” she couldn’t resist asking. He shook his head from side to side before he bent to pick up the post-hole diggers.

“A cuppa tea.” Maggie sighed wearily as she sensed his impatience returning. She needed to find a bridge with him, before he decided she had been here long enough.

“Sure. That sounds nice. Maybe then we can discuss the interview?” She had moved to pet her horse, not really caring about his answer. After all, her editor would be over the

moon if she got him to agree, but there was something much more important at stake than a few words under her byline.

“Maggie, I’m not going to give you the interview, so just do us all a favor and turn off the journo mode. Tomorrow you and your little girl will be on your way, and this will soon be a distant memory.” Her eyes flashed with hurt at his dismissal and she turned to hide it from him. She knew that he was going to be difficult, but she had hoped. Nothing left to say, she gave him a nod, accepting his no for the moment he pointed to her saddle, letting her know that the subject was indeed closed.

“Let’s head back to the house. Do you need help saddling up?”

“No, I’ve got it.” She swung herself up onto the horse with practiced ease and was more than a little satisfied by the fact that the man’s eyes got a full glimpse of her bottom. Once mounted and ready, she gave him a smug smile and steered her horse toward the homestead with a bemused Tucker following right behind.

As they made their way back, he tried to unravel the mystery that was Maggie. She was obviously an accomplished rider not, someone who had taken a few lessons as a child. Apparently, there was more to the woman than he had ever known, and damn it all, he couldn’t help but want to find out, but the guilt he felt over betraying his best friend was more than enough to make him wary.

The afternoon under the open sky had left her invigorated. It had been way too long since she hadn’t had to do anything except enjoy the sunshine. She could see why Tucker had retreated to the sheep station. It was wild and untamed, but wormed its way into the heart and soul. It had only taken her five minutes to know that he belonged to the land, totally at peace riding the long rows of fences. It made her think of the strong, silent type of cowboy from the black and white Westerns she had watched with her grandfather. The man she had known had always been on the serious side, but there had been a kindness in his eyes that she had been drawn to, despite her best efforts. Now, there was an understandable wariness about him. He was on guard around her and she had yet to see a glimpse of the young man he had been. She knew it was all her fault. Now, there was a bitter edge to him that contradicted the young man she had known and it was up to her to repair the damage that she had caused. One night with too much alcohol had caused her to give in to the inevitable attraction between them, and she had been the aggressor. She had caused the rift between her late husband and his best friend. The knowledge that she was the one who had made that hard shell around him was enough to wish the past few years away, but if she changed things, then she wouldn’t have her daughter. No, she couldn’t wish the last few years away, but she could do everything in her power to keep her promise to Mick. She would just have to hold on to the hope that it would all be worth it in the end. She watched as his whole face lit up as he told her the story of the original Kilpatrick’s who had settled at the station more than one hundred and fifty years before, and his smile nearly took her breath away. There was no mistaking that the blood of the land flowed through his veins. His smile had taken away from the brevity of her thoughts and was the most fun that she had had in an incredibly

long time. Toni had mentioned in passing that Muldowney was the kind of place that could heal a heart and Maggie was inclined to believe her. So focused on her thoughts, she had to ask Tucker to repeat his question.

“What happened that night? You had to know how I felt about you.” She didn’t have a ready answer and gathered her thoughts before she spoke. It was too soon to reveal everything. She wasn’t even sure at this point that could find the courage. Instead, she shrugged her shoulders and gave him half-truths. Unfortunately, she didn’t have a poker face, allowing Tucker to see right through her attempt placate him. Irritation rolled off of him in waves and she knew that he didn’t believe her.

“It was a mistake. I was attracted to you and drank too much. It shouldn’t have happened.” She willed him to make eye contact with her. “I’m sorry.” She said sincerely as she reached out to touch his arm, making her fingers burn. He jerked his arm back and reined his horse away with a click of his heels against the horse’s sides, taking off in a trot. Maggie followed suit and caught up with him, grabbing his horse’s halter, forcing both of them to stop.

“Were you happy with him?” he asked. Her eyes darted south for a moment before she put her mask back into place.

“I really don’t want to discuss my marriage, not now anyway.” Despite her façade, her voice was edged with sadness and resignation. “I made a promise to him, that’s all you need to know.” Maggie let that comment linger in the air for a few moments with her confession on the tip of her tongue. Catching herself in the nick of time, she let her hand fall from the halter, turning her horse away. She could hear his horse follow behind while she fought to control her emotions. By the time he reached the barn, she had already unfastened the cinch. Hearing him approach, she turned with her chin in challenge. Tucker slid off his horse and began to work the cinch.

“You’re here for more than the ashes.” She stared at him hard for a second, her heart pounding as she grabbed a brush and began to work on her horse. She ignored his statement and had no intention of replying. His annoyance was clear as he swung his saddle on the adjacent rung.

“Fine, ignore me if you want, but there is more to your story and you will tell me.” Her heart fluttered a moment as she fought the deluge of words that almost formed on her lips. Instead, she nodded meekly.

“Thanks for the ride.” She handed him the brush and left the barn.

Stiffly, she walked back to the house in search of a hot bath. She could already feel the soreness of her rump from the saddle as well as the accident, but it was worth it. She was still at Muldowney and she would tell Tucker everything, eventually. It sounded so simple and her heart pounded just thinking about it. The words had been on the tip of her tongue but she had forced herself to swallow them, a true chicken, feathers and all.

Judging by the way Tucker set her blood on fire; time was not on her side. She had to tell him soon, before she lost all self- control. A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she lowered her body into the steamy bath, a lost effort to let her troubles soak away.