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MANDY
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Along Country Roads



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ALONG COUNTRY ROADS

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*To my beautiful nieces and nephews, Korbyn, Isla,
Monique, Kalum and Noah ... thank you for making
the world a magical place.*

*'When two damaged souls collide,
is their love going to be enough to heal them?'*

Don't look back; you're not going that way...

CHAPTER

1

What the hell have I done?

Matilda Denver looked down at the tiny splatters of blood on her shirt as she tried to shake the terrifying images from her mind. She needed to get rid of anything that could trace her for she knew, if he were still alive, he'd be out to kill her. Checking there was no one in sight she tossed her mobile phone out the window of the four-wheel drive. Watching it fall as if in slow motion, she breathed a small sigh of relief when it dropped into the river beneath the Gunnado Bridge. Driving over that famous landmark, she was now heading into much greener pastures and leaving the forty-five degree heat, the indomitable flies that clung to her lashes, the dusty dirt roads of the five-thousand square kilometre Shadow Creek Station and, most importantly of all, a vicious, abusive boyfriend behind her.

Although she had loved aspects of being camp cook for the staff of twelve men—cooking and food were her absolute passion—she certainly wasn't sorry to see the back of it. The heartlands of Central

Australia were not a place for the faint-hearted. It was dry, dusty, often dangerous and extremely isolated. The stark red and orange of the barren land and the jaw-droppingly beautiful sunsets, along with the promise of a new job and a new start by her boyfriend Troy, may have been what lured her there from her hometown of Longreach in the first place. But his ever-worsening short temper had turned her life into a living hell. Her mum had warned her not to go, begged her even, but she'd gone anyway, hopeful it would improve her relationship with Troy. Hindsight was an absolute bitch. She should have listened, but Troy's promise that a change of scenery would make all the difference to his behaviour had lulled her into a false sense of security. Within a few months it had only gone from bad to worse, and like most women suffering at the hand of domestic violence, she blamed it all on herself and hung around, believing his every apology, believing every time he said he'd never do it again, for three long, heartbreaking years.

With the 3pm ABC news report starting, she turned the radio up for what felt like the hundredth time that day then tucked her flyaway tresses behind her ears with shaky hands. She held her breath as she listened to the newsreader's distinctive voice, gulping in a lungful of air when nothing was mentioned about her situation. So far, so good—maybe she was right in trusting she hadn't accidentally killed him. Even though she despised the man, she didn't wish death upon him, especially by her own hands. The thought sickened her to the very core—she was a far cry from a murderer. But there was nothing she could do now to change what had happened. Her mother's favourite saying was 'Don't look back, you're not going that way', and she was trying to follow that advice now. If only she could pretend the last three years hadn't happened. If only she'd had enough courage to leave way back when. If only her mum hadn't got cancer. Too many *if onlys* ...

Glancing at the massive travel backpack she'd flung onto the passenger seat, she wiped her welling tears away. It pained her to know her entire existence was in that bag along with her life savings of \$921.55, which had been all she'd been able to hide from Troy. Even the junk heap she was driving wasn't hers—the 1983 model Toyota Landcruiser had seen better days. But Troy had wanted it that way, so he could control every aspect of what had become a lonely, miserable existence. Looking back on it she realised she'd basically been his slave, terrified to leave in case he caught her fleeing. But not anymore. She had finally broken free; never again would she allow a man to possess her like he had. After what he'd put her through, she couldn't care less if she was never with a man again if that meant there was no possibility of ever being hurt in the future.

So much for *happily ever afters*.

She choked back a sob, refusing to cry over what he had done to her any longer. As a teenager she had envisioned her life would be well on track by the time she was twenty-four, hopefully married with two kids and a home she could call her own. But time and time again she'd realised that wasn't going to be the case. She wondered if it were hereditary, this down-and-out life she'd been living. But she would try her hardest to break the pattern, just as she'd promised her dying mother.

Still coming to grips with what had gone down almost eight hours ago she looked at the seemingly endless stretch of road before her. Did fighting for her life make her a bad person? Would it catch up with her and define who she was? Her body trembled with the recollection of Troy pinning her to the ground—usually he was so careful with where he beat her, so no one would see the bruises, this time he'd really lost his mind. Had she killed him when she'd fought back and knocked him over the head with the cast-iron frypan? She

hadn't been game to feel his pulse to find out for fear of him coming to and grabbing her again. She suspected she'd just rendered him unconscious, but if she had struck a fatal blow, did that make her a murderer, a victim or a survivor of domestic abuse?

Struggling to divert her attention from the images taunting her, she tried to visualise what it would be like to smell the salty scent of the ocean, sink her feet into the sand and her body into the waves of Moonstone Valley's pristine coastline at Sapphire Bay for the very first time in her life. Would it give her the cleansing her soul so desperately needed? She hoped her beautiful mum's dream destination would be somewhere she, too, would feel safe and happy. She needed a fresh start, a second chance, and what better place to go than the one her mum had spoken of so often and so fondly, the place her mother had promised to take her for years, yet had never had the chance. It made Matilda feel as though a piece of her was already at the bay, waiting for her, which would finally make her feel whole. She wished she could drive there faster. The accelerator was flat to the floor, but still the old banger was only doing ninety-eight kilometres. She had fuelled up a few hours ago but yet again the fuel gauge was showing less than a quarter of a tank and God only knew where the next servo would be. The endless scrub surrounding her on both sides of the road wasn't giving her much hope of coming across anything soon.

But that was the least of her problems.

After flirting with danger for the last fifteen kilometres, the Toyota's temperature gauge had finally reached boiling point. Her knuckles white and her stomach in knots, she clung to the steering wheel and prayed for a miracle. A useless act as miracles were a rarity in her life, but at a moment like this, that was all she had to hold on to. She looked in the rear-vision mirror for the hundredth time to confirm nobody was following her, before briefly focusing

on the dark purple bruise circling her left eye and the one on her right cheek. She refused to lift her chin to see her mouth or throat. She could feel the swelling had gone down on her lip, although she could still taste the blood inside from the gash, and as for her throat, the sight of the cut the one time had been enough to send her into a full-blown panic attack. The thought of how close she'd come to death terrified her. Troy had certainly got her good this time. She knew the cuts and bruises would heal—it was the emotional wounds that were so deep she was sure she would carry them for the rest of her life.

An almighty bang sent her heart racing even faster and, losing speed, she quickly brought the shuddering four-wheel drive to a halt at the side of the road. Steam poured out from under the bonnet. Slamming her hands down on the steering wheel she shoved the door open and climbed out. Tears threatened to fall but she blinked them away. She had to harden up if she was going to make it through this. Stumbling over the rocky ground, she stormed to the front of the car as she cursed out loud. Lifting the bonnet, she barely avoided the thick steam pouring from the radiator with an angry hiss. The boiling water spilled out of the closed cap and trickled down under the engine bay and onto her favourite pair of cowgirl boots, as timeworn as they were. Droplets also splashed onto her bare legs and she cried out in pain and frustration.

Overwhelmed with turbulent emotions, Matilda kicked the already buckled bumper bar, and one of the headlight covers dropped to the ground. *Raaaaaa!* There was no way she could drive it any further. Then it struck her. What were the police going to do when they discovered it here? They would undoubtedly tie the registration back to Troy. Would they come looking for her with a warrant for her arrest for murder? Or if he were alive, would Troy cotton on to where she was headed and hunt her down? The latter

thought possibly terrified her even more than the first. Maybe the four-wheel drive breaking down was a blessing in disguise because it probably wouldn't be too smart driving it all the way to Moonstone Valley. In her rush and panic to leave she hadn't stopped to think of that. If alive, she had an inkling Troy might report the car as stolen, so leaving it here wasn't too bad after all, apart from the fact she now had to find another way to go from here to there.

A wave of fear flooded her as she looked back down the stretch of road she'd just driven. On cue, her overactive fight-or-flight instincts kicked in. With these familiar sensations creeping up on her Matilda crouched down on jelly legs and tried to ease her tight chest and wheezy breath. All the while she reminded herself not to be afraid of a panic attack. She'd been through them countless times and survived, so this one wouldn't be any different. Although it would be uncomfortable, and horrible, she knew she could withstand it. Gathering as much courage and strength as she could, she mentally encouraged the panic attack to come and get her, to give her all it had, for she knew that the way to disengage from one was to welcome it like an old friend. The mind was a complex thing and she'd come to understand this after years of battling anxiety.

After a little meditation the shaky sensations started to dissipate and her cloudy mind cleared. Matilda stood still, trying to decide what to do. One thing was for certain, she needed to keep moving, to keep creating distance between her past and her future. With no houses in sight and with night quickly approaching, she came to the only conclusion she could. She would have to walk in the hope of someone coming along and giving her a lift.

A few hours later Matilda looked to where the last rays of the crimson sun were disappearing behind the distant mountains, its unrelenting heat that had been blaring down upon her now

thankfully fading. Her chequered shirt clung to her back, sweat trickled down her face and between her breasts, and her mouth felt drier than the Simpson Desert but she soldiered on regardless. Finding herself at a crossroad not long after leaving the four-wheel drive she had decided to venture off the main thoroughfare, to lessen the opportunity of being caught. She was still heading east, in the direction of the coast, and that's all that mattered right now. But only two cars had passed and neither had had the decency to stop. Knowing her luck, the one to eventually pick her up would probably be a serial killer.

Just when she was about to give up any and all hope the sound of a four-wheel drive caught her attention and she spun around, thumb out. The mud-splattered Landcruiser slowed, the three young blokes in the front seat making sure to get a good look at her as they passed. It stopped ten metres ahead. With renewed hope she jogged towards it. There was a God. A metre from the passenger door, the driver took off with a spray of dirt from the tyres, tooting his horn while a shaggy haired twenty-something guy hung out the window, wolf whistled, then yelled, 'Better luck next time, sexy.'

She flipped them the bird, only to be countered by more raucous cheers. The bastards! Now she really wanted to give up, to fall in a heap and sleep for an eternity, but something inside of her kept driving her on. She needed to do this, if not for herself then for her mum. An old road sign up ahead stated she was only eight hundred metres from a roadhouse. Allelujah! She heard her mother's voice in her head, saying don't ever give up. Every muscle in Matilda's legs was burning but she picked up the pace and pushed harder. At the very least she'd be able to have something to eat and drink soon, and she could possibly have a wash off in the sinks in the ladies' toilets too. A small reprieve, but a much needed one.

Ten minutes later and with ravenous hunger stirring in her stomach, Matilda came to a stop as she looked at the deserted roadhouse plunked in the middle of nowhere. Yellow police tape surrounded the perimeter of the burnt-out building. You had to be bloody well kidding. A wave of nausea overcame her. Hands on hips, she bent over at the waist and drew in a lungful of air, willing herself not to throw up—she needed whatever was left of her toast from this morning. Violent flashbacks tried to claim her thoughts once again but she mentally slapped them away. Straightening, she paced in circles as she raked her hands through her fiery red hair, swearing out loud when it tangled around her fingers. What she'd give for a drink of water, a shower and some food to quell her aching stomach. Dropping her heavy backpack to the ground she looked to the diamond-speckled night canopy beginning to emerge above her, and begged her mother to help, to somehow show her a way out of this goddamn mess.

'Why did you have to die, Mum? I need you and I miss you so much it hurts...' she cried out in frustration, her voice echoing off the hilly landscape as though mocking her. Completely exhausted and finally overcome with a myriad of emotions, she fell to her knees, ignoring the gravel digging into her flesh, and for the first time since this morning realised there was nobody to witness her breakdown and sobbed and sobbed until she felt she had no tears left.

By the time she had pulled herself back together the night had closed in on her—black and still and so beautifully quiet, enveloping her like a protective embrace. Matilda loved the dark because it gave her places to hide. And thinking of hiding, Troy's final words rang over and over in her mind as she pushed herself back to standing.

If you try and leave, I'll catch you and I'll fucking kill you ... and don't think I won't come and find you and do just that, if you somehow

get away from me. You're mine, Matilda, forever; so don't let yourself think otherwise.'

Matilda closed her eyes and tried to exhale the utter fear those words instilled deep inside her. She knew it would take a lot more than that to try to let the fear go, but at least it was a start. Grabbing her bag from the ground, she heaved it on, squared her shoulders and took determined steps forwards once more, until the high-pitched whine of a dog in pain stopped her in her tracks.

Her heart squeezed tight. She loved animals, especially dogs. Listening intently, she tried to make out which direction the pitiful sound was coming from. Thinking she had it and with the howling getting louder and more urgent, she took off in a sprint. If only she had her mobile phone now, she would be able to use the torch app. Damn it. Squinting into the darkness she skidded to a stop at a high wire fence, her eyes finally meeting the gaze of a grungy looking canine that was firmly wedged between the ground and the fence. Squatting down, she spoke softly and reassuringly, hoping to God her hand wasn't going to get ripped off when she reached out to help it.

'Hi, buddy, it's okay, I'm here to help you ...'

Slowly, carefully, she stretched her arm out. Relief flooded her when the dog allowed her to place her hands on its dirty coat. Then its tail began to thump the ground in acknowledgement. For the first time in as long as she could remember, Matilda felt a swell in her heart as she smiled from ear to ear.

'I'm going to get this out of the way,' she said as she tugged the fence upwards with a grunt. 'So you can get out. Okay?'

The dog wriggled for a few seconds and then freed itself. Getting to its paws it stood there staring at her, its tail wagging tentatively as though working out what to do next.

Matilda noticed that although its ribs showed through a dull brindle coat, the dog's eyes were bright and soulful. It might

have been loved once, but there was no doubt in her mind it was homeless now. Knowing how that felt she immediately wanted to love all the loneliness out of it, and love it she most certainly would because there was no way on earth she'd be leaving the animal here. She gave its stocky head a loving ruffle, unable to make out what kind of breed it was. It looked like a staffy but was a bit smaller, and with its floppy ears this dog definitely wasn't a purebred. Whatever he, or she, was, Matilda couldn't deny its adorability.

She sat back on her heels. 'So, my newfound friend, what will I name you, huh?' She looked around the back of it, to decide on whether it needed a girl's or boy's name. Dangly bits confirmed the latter. She nodded confidently as a suitable name flashed through her mind. 'I think I'm going to call you Huckleberry, or Huck for short, after the very famous vagabond Huckleberry Finn. It was a story my mum used to read to me as a little girl, and I loved it. You like?'

Placing his front paws on her thigh, Huckleberry gave her a big slobbery kiss up the left cheek, his tail now wagging out of control.

'I gather that's a big fat yes.' Matilda laughed as she fruitlessly tried to avoid more doggy kisses, and then screwed her nose up. She waved her hand in front of her face to ward off the stench. 'Man, your breath stinks like a garbage tip.' Her amusement fading, she looked at the way his stomach was tucked up and had to stop herself from crying. 'Probably because that's where you've been finding your food. You're in desperate need of a good wholesome feed, aren't you, buddy?'

Huckleberry sat back, holding up his front paws as though begging for a meal.

'Oh my goodness, you poor little bugger ... and here I am feeling sorry for myself because I haven't eaten since breakfast. You look like you haven't eaten for a week.'

Huckleberry barked a short sharp reply, spun round in a circle and then sat in front of her again, looking at her as though eager to please.

‘Aw, you’re so sweet.’ Matilda wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a squeeze, not caring that he stunk to high heaven. ‘Looks like it’s just you and me then, buddy ... what do you reckon about that, hey?’

Wriggling free, Huckleberry gave her a confused look then bolted off into the shadows at a hundred miles an hour. Sadness filled Matilda as she watched him vanish. So much for what she’d thought was friendship. She slumped down to the ground, wounded by the thought he didn’t want her company because she sure as hell could use his right now. But then, as speedily as he’d disappeared, Huckleberry returned with the remnants of what appeared to be a tennis ball in his mouth. Gone was the bright yellow fur from the outside, leaving just the shell and only half of it at that. He dropped it in her lap and then nudged her arm with his cool wet nose.

Grimacing, Matilda picked the ball up with the tips of her fingers. Slobber dripped from every inch of it. ‘You want me to throw it for you?’

An excited tap dance was the reply, Huckleberry’s tail resembling a chopper blade he was so excited.

So she did as he so desperately wanted, and for the next twenty minutes she played the game until she could take no more drool. ‘I think that’s enough now, Huck. How about me and you hit the road in search of grand adventures?’ Her stomach growled loudly. Huckleberry tipped his head to the side as he eyed her belly. ‘Some food for both of us wouldn’t go astray either. I hope it’s not too far to the next town or I reckon I’m going to pass out from starvation.’

The distant drone of a heavy diesel engine followed by the flash of bright headlights sent Matilda scabbling to her feet. ‘You stay

here, Huck, I don't want you getting run over.' She gave his head a quick pat. 'I promise I'll be back for you.'

But Huck clearly wasn't taking any chances as he followed her to the road. Without enough time to reprimand him, and knowing that probably wouldn't do any good anyway, Matilda made sure to keep him out of harm's way. Holding one arm up to shield her eyes from the blinding glare of a truck's spotlights, she stuck her thumb out, praying that whoever was behind the wheel would pick her up and that they were going to allow a dog in their cab. Otherwise she wouldn't be accepting a ride no matter how much she wanted to. The truck was heading in the opposite direction, back from where she had come, but at the moment, as long as she didn't have to walk any further and the driver could get her to somewhere with food and a room that she could sneak Huck into, she didn't give two hoots. But as it got closer the truck didn't appear to be slowing, and if anything, it seemed to be speeding up now it was over the rise. Matilda wondered if it was because she was on the wrong side of the highway. But she didn't want to risk running across the road now, for fear of Huck getting hit. In a blink of an eye the truck sped past her, the strong gush of wind carrying with it the stench of the cattle on board.

Blinking away grit and dust, she threw her hands up in the air in defeat, as another set of headlights made her turn. Squinting, she gazed down the highway. There was another truck coming and this time it was going in the direction she was heading. Thumb out, she prayed she'd be blessed with a lift. Surely her run of bad luck had to end sometime.