

Chapter One

IT was only six a.m. and already the air was so thick you felt like you couldn't breathe. Sarah Clarke had been lying in bed for a good ten minutes, staring at the fan above her spinning madly out of control. It was squeaking and waving about like it was a missing person trying to attract attention from rescuers. She sometimes had visions of it spinning straight off its bearings and landing smack down on top of her in the middle of the night. Scary thought. The thick, humid air it was blowing downwards was not doing much good, but it was better than nothing. As soon as the air was still it was like standing in front of a hot oven with the door open, but after years of living with the heat of the tropics you got used to it.

She kept asking her dad to get her air conditioner fixed but the electrician, a family friend, had still not turned up. Sarah could fix most things herself, but going anywhere near something that threw out 240 volts of electricity was just not going to happen. She would rather sweat it out.

Summer in Mareeba was close to unbearable at times. Some days the sun tipped the gauges at well over forty degrees. Today

Sarah was already swatting at an endless stream of flies, annoyed that they were in her space so early in the day. It was a pretty good sign it was going to be stinking hot.

Oh well, Sarah thought, I better get up and start the day's work down the packing shed. She threw her tanned, slender legs over the edge of the bed and felt the cool timber floor creak underneath her feet as she stood up and stretched her arms. She let out a huge sigh. She was getting tired of the same work, day in, day out. She knew it was time to try something new.

As she walked to the window, Sarah's mind turned to Brad, her boyfriend, who was a chopper pilot. He worked a fair bit away mustering cattle out on stations in the chopper, and she missed him when he was gone. She knew from the stories he told her that the times out on the stations were tough, but she would give almost anything to give it a go. She'd always loved cattle and horses, and it would be amazing to experience mustering in the heart of the cattle country, amongst the dust and bellows of the cows, in the saddle of an Australian stock horse.

Sarah let out another drawn-out sigh, bringing her thoughts back to the reality of the day. It's okay to dream, I s'pose, she thought to herself as she flung open her heavy curtains, letting in the sunlight that had been playing peekaboo through the cracks. The sun thrust its rays into Sarah's room, hitting the crystal sun-catcher she had hanging off the curtain rod and bouncing a spectrum of colours across the walls and furniture. Sarah admired the beauty of it for a split second before her gaze turned back to the bay window, which had a perfect view of the fruit paddocks behind the house. Outside there were fruit trees as far as the eye could see, beneath netting that had been

expensively erected a few years back to stop the birds and the bats eating the crops. Mother Nature was already hard at work as bees buzzed industriously around the fruit flowers, doing their job of helping the fruit set, while sunshine kissed the flowers, helping produce the future mango and lychee crops. She smiled as she watched a kangaroo go bounding through the backyard with its joey in toe, relieved to not see Duke, her beloved dog, chasing them for a bit of fun.

Sarah dragged her gaze away from the window and pulled on her regular work gear of jeans and a Bonds singlet before tipping her head upside down and ruffling her fingers quickly through her mane of platinum-blond curls. People said they matched her personality: bouncy, free-spirited and full of life. Brushes were her worst nightmare – she just ended up looking like she had put her finger in an electrical socket. Maybe in the eighties it would have been a fashionable look, but not now.

Sarah had worked on the family fruit farm since she left school. The Clarkes had 800 hectares and employed over eighty staff in the fruit-picking season. The family business pumped out over 3000 tonnes of mangoes, lychees and Chinese longans every year.

It was a good life, all in all. Sarah worked really hard for six months during harvesting and then got to work at a calmer pace the rest of the year when the main jobs were just pruning, slashing, watering and fertilising the crops. She loved the time she spent in her John Deere tractor. It was a cruisy job, sitting in an air-conditioned cab with country tunes blaring from the stereo as she drove up and down each drill, feeding the crops to produce a massive harvest.

Her older brother Daniel worked on the farm alongside her dad, Jack. Sarah had always worked as hard as the men in the family but she constantly felt like she had to try harder than her brother to get appreciation from her dad. She knew deep down that her father worshipped her like flowers worshipped sunlight but he had a tough exterior and didn't show his emotions too freely. Sarah blamed his time in prison for that. When Sarah was a baby, Jack had been caught growing marijuana. He'd been farming tobacco and had a bad crop for a few years running. With the naïve confidence of youth, he thought growing illegal drugs might get him through the hard times. He couldn't bear to lose the family farm that had been handed down through two generations. Jack had never even smoked pot but had used his skills as a farmer to grow a massive, thriving crop. But then he was caught red-handed, arrested and locked up in Townsville maximum security for five long years as an example to the community. Sarah knew it must have been a hard time for her mum, Maggie, especially with two young children, and Jack still lived with the guilt of not having been there for his family. Sarah didn't have time for anybody stupid enough to touch drugs, especially marijuana – she knew how much it could hurt people's lives.

'Sarah!' Maggie yelled from the bottom of the stairs. 'Lily's on the phone for you, love.'

Sarah raced down the stairs, tripping over Harry, the family cat of nine years, on the way down. 'Do you always have to sleep right in the middle of the stairs, Harry?' Sarah asked him once she had found her footing after sliding down three steps. Harry looked up at her, yawned, and went back to sleep. The

only thing that got him moving was the sound of his canned sardines being spooned into his dish.

Sarah grabbed the phone from her mum, kissing Maggie on the cheek. ‘Morning, Mum.’ She put the phone to her ear and scrunched her shoulder up to hold it there while she zipped up her jeans with her free hands. ‘Hey, Lily. How are ya, mate?’

Lily’s voice sang cheerfully into the receiver, ‘Great, Sarah. Almost your birthday! Hey, I just wanted to know what time we’re going to head down to the rodeo tomorrow?’

Sarah sat her bum on the bottom step of the stairs. ‘Daniel’s gonna be out in the arena about five-ish so I’d like to be there to watch him give those bulls a good go. Let’s just pray he doesn’t draw Devil’s Grin!’

‘Exactly! That sounds like a good plan to me. I’m so looking forward to watching Daniel ride. And we’ll have to party like there’s no tomorrow – it’s not every day you turn twenty-three. I’ll be at your place about four, okay?’ Lily said, bubbling with excitement.

‘Great! I’ll see you then. I gotta run, or I’ll be late down the shed and Dad’ll be in a right huff. He’s a pain in the arse to work with when he’s in a mood. Catch you tomorrow.’

‘Have a good day, Sarah. Catch you, matey!’ Lily said as she hung up.

Daniel rode bulls at the local rodeos, and Sarah always went and cheered him on, either in the crowd or at the back of the chutes. He was one of the top riders in the circuit, and had a few scars to show for it too. It was great timing he’d be riding on the day of Sarah’s birthday.

Sarah’s mate Greg supplied the bulls for most of the big

rodeos and she liked to catch up with him for a drink and a laugh whenever he had a minute spare. He had let her name one of the bulls last year. She had been honoured, and proudly named the bull Devil's Grin. He'd turned out to be one of the most feared bulls on the rodeo scene: a big, burly brute that didn't like any bugger on his back. Not one cowboy had been able to ride him past four seconds. Once free of the chutes he went off like a cracker on Chinese New Year.

Sarah strolled into the kitchen to the warm and welcoming smell of her mum's cooking. Maggie was a brilliant cook. Her friends were always madly scribbling down recipes after enjoying one of her home-cooked meals. There was only one recipe she refused to give out: her very own famous lemon meringue pie. All the neighbourhood women requested it every time they were invited to a barbecue and there was always a friendly debate amongst the men over the last piece of pie.

'Hey, Mum.' Sarah said as she sat down on the kitchen bar stool.

'Good morning, Sarah. Sleep well, darling?'

'As well as I could in this heat.'

'Sorry, hon. I'll call the electrician again for you today. You think he'd make more of an effort. Your dad is too bloody soft on him. I'll put the wind up him about being slack when I talk to him.' Maggie pointed her finger into the air as if poking the electrician then and there.

'Thanks, Mum. I better run or Dad'll get his knickers in a right knot. You know how he gets.'

'I know, love, but he doesn't mean it. He just gets really stressed out in the season. You know he loves you to bits,'

Maggie said, passing over some foil-wrapped parcels. ‘Here’s breakfast for you. Give these ones to Daniel and your dad, would you? I have to catch up with some of the housework and then I’ll be down the shed to help out.’

‘Righto, Mum. Thanks for the brekkie. You’re the greatest! This is probably going to be the only thing I’ll have time to eat today – there’s so much fruit to pack.’ Sarah took the parcels and stood up. ‘The pickers have been working their nuts off to get the fruit off the trees before the rain sets in. We’re gonna be as busy as blowflies at a barbie, us lot!’ She gave Maggie another kiss and headed towards the back door.

Sarah was proud of the way her mum and dad loved each other with an intensity that not many marriages had left after twenty-nine years. She hoped that one day she would have a marriage as loving as her parents. She cared deeply for Brad, but she hadn’t really thought about the future. Or was it that she avoided thinking about it? Sarah had seen too many of her friends and neighbours go through divorce, and the pain it put the children through was heartbreaking to watch. Farming could be financially and emotionally challenging and it broke families into pieces when they weren’t strong enough to cope. Despite the hard times, Maggie and Jack had survived, loving each other more and more with every hurdle they jumped through life together.

Duke, Sarah’s dog, was at the back door waiting for her as he did every morning. She had saved him from the local RSPCA six years ago. He was a border collie cross kelpie, which naturally made him as mad as a cut snake, but Sarah adored everything about him. She could not imagine her life without him. He was her best mate.

He was always as happy as a worm in a tin can on the way home from a fishing trip when he saw her, especially when he got the crusts off her breakfast sandwich like he knew he would – he did every morning. Sarah hated crusts. The old wives' tale didn't work for her – her hair was full of chaotic curls without the aid of one single crust.

Sarah crammed her weatherworn Akubra on her head and pulled on her tattered R M Williams boots before heading off in the direction of the shed, Duke blissfully trotting beside her. She said hello to Cookie the kookaburra in passing. He was perched on the timber fence around the house, feasting on a bowl of mince that Maggie must have put out earlier this morning. Cookie had been visiting Sarah and the family for five years now, so he was like a family pet. She sniffed the morning air as she walked; the faintly sweet smell of mango flowers floated up her nostrils, making her smile. A congregation of rosellas was perched happily on the branches of the star fruit tree, gorging themselves, their chirping filling the morning with beautiful song. A flock of galahs flew overhead, their loud conversation capturing Sarah's attention. She looked up to the azure-blue skies, squinting from the harsh rays of the sun, and watched them fly out of sight. Sarah's boots crunched on the thick green grass underfoot, which was aglow with early morning dew, the sunlight making it glimmer like webs made of diamonds. Maggie used to tell Sarah that the dew was angels dancing in the sunlight. She had made the world such a magically enchanting place when Sarah was growing up.

Despite the beauty of the morning, it was already hot, and Sarah breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped into the shade of

the vast packing shed. There was farm machinery everywhere, parked haphazardly around mountains of packing boxes and pallets of fertilisers and chemicals.

Sarah caught a glimpse of Johnny Marsh, the paddock manager, approaching in the old farm ute that was already stacked high with fruit ready to be packed. She gave him a quick wave. Johnny beamed out the ute's window as he skidded to a halt beside her. Sarah watched as the crates of fruit wobbled dangerously about, but surprisingly they all stayed put.

'Mornin', Sarah. How's it goin', mate?' Johnny asked, a smouldering cigarette hanging from his lips as he slid himself across the ripped vinyl seat, dodging cans and old chip packets, before escaping out of the passenger side door.

'I'm great, Johnny. Door's still jammed, then, I see!'

Johnny rolled his eyes for effect. 'Yeah, the darn thing. I haven't had time to fix it yet, so the only way in or out is through the bloody window or the passenger door, and I ain't even gonna try the window. Knowing my bloody luck, I'll get stuck!' Johnny laughed, pointing to his large, rotund belly. It had more corrugations in it than a rainwater tank.

'I dunno, Johnny. Maybe if you just sucked it in you could get through.' Molly patted Johnny on the belly. 'Anyway, I better get in there and get my hands dirty, mate. Catch you later, hey?'

The first person Sarah saw as she opened the massive doors was Daniel on the forklift. She smiled and gave him a friendly wave.

Sarah's eldest brother, Peter, lived in his own place on the farm with his family, but Daniel still lived with Sarah in their parents' home. Sarah called Dan the piggy-in-the-middle – not only was

he the middle child, but he had an unbelievable appetite. You would never pick it, though, as he had a body that girls drooled over and they swarmed to him like ants to sugar. He was what most would call tall, dark and handsome, with mesmerising green eyes. Yes, Daniel Clarke had appeal – maybe too much for his own good. He worked hard and played even harder. But he had always been very protective of Sarah. No guys had dared go near her while she was growing up. They were all too afraid of what Daniel might do to them if they were to break her heart. Sarah secretly liked it – she was a bit of a tomboy and liked to be mates with the boys, so Daniel’s protectiveness worked in her favour. None of them ever tried anything on with her. That was until Brad came along.

Daniel was loading yesterday’s pallets of fruit onto the waiting truck parked up in the loading bay. The fruit would be transported to the markets down south and most of the time, stupidly enough, would then be transported all the way back up north again for sale. Sarah could never understand the concept. It was time-consuming and expensive, but that was the way the farmers had to do it because all the markets were down south.

‘Morning, sis. I’m that hungry I could bite the balls off a low-flying pigeon! Got some food there for me?’ Daniel said as he drove so close to her on the forklift he nearly ran over her toes.

‘Nope, I ate it all,’ Sarah said, rubbing her stomach teasingly.

Daniel looked like a kid who had lost his lollipop.

‘Of course I do! Don’t I always?’ Sarah said, laughing as she passed him his bacon and egg sandwich. Daniel grinned widely as he unwrapped the foil in seconds, practically inhaling the contents.

Sarah headed over to her dad, who was sitting at his desk doing the daily paperwork.

‘Morning, Dad. Here’s your breakfast.’

‘Thanks, love. We’ve got a big day ahead. Have to get all the work done so we can have the weekend off for your birthday and the rodeo.’

‘No rest for the wicked, as they say,’ Sarah said as she headed for the checking and stacking station in the middle of the massive shed floor. Her job was to make sure all the boxes of fruit were packed to the highest of standards so they got the best price at the Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne markets. Once she was happy the boxes were perfectly packed, they were stacked onto pallets, then wrapped and stamped ready for their long journey south.

Sarah loved the buzz in the shed of a morning. All the packers were fresh and geared up for a full day’s packing, and the forklift and trolley jack were moving things this way and that. By the afternoons it was a different story. Everybody was tired and aching from all the lifting and packing and all everyone wanted to do was get the heck out of the shed and into the last few rays of sunlight. They had a saying around the Tablelands to describe what happened during the harvest – mango madness. It hit them all at some stage. By the end of the season Sarah would be dreaming about fruit. Thank God the picking season only lasted for six months. They’d all be a bit batty otherwise.

‘Hey, love. Brad’s on the phone for you!’ Jack bellowed over the noise of the shed.

Sarah tried not to run to the phone. Daniel would really give her gip then. But she hadn’t seen Brad in three whole weeks. He

was out on Rosalee Station, just near the Northern Territory border, preparing for the mustering season.

She grabbed the portable off the desk and walked outside. 'Hey, babe! I miss you. When are you home?' she asked affectionately.

'Hey to you, too, gorgeous. I'm flying home early tomorrow morning so I can be there for your birthday and the rodeo. I can't miss my lady's special day, now, can I?' Brad replied.

'Oh, Brad, that's wonderful! I can't wait! That has absolutely made my day,' Sarah said, smiling.

'I have some really exciting news for you, but I'll wait until I see you to tell you about it. You're gonna be over the moon. Also I have a surprise for your birthday. I hope you like it.'

'Tell me now, Brad, you devil. I *cannot* wait another day. You know what I'm like with secrets! I'll make it worth your while if you tell me now!' she said in her most seductive voice.

'You're not going to sweet-talk me into telling you now! I'll see you tomorrow morning, okay?' Brad answered, laughing.

'Okay. See you in the morning then. Have a safe flight back, honey.'

Sarah walked back into the shed in a daze – excited that Brad was going to be there for her birthday, but also burning with curiosity as to what he had to tell her. She knew it was going to play on her mind all day. The phone line had been bad, though – Brad's voice had sounded different, almost as though he'd had a few beers. Sarah shrugged it off – connections from the outback could be dodgy sometimes – and smiled to herself at the thought of seeing Brad again.