

## PROLOGUE

With Emma Kensington cradled in his arms, Zane Wolfe stared in shock and horror at the blood pooling by his bare feet. He'd been sleeping soundly until he'd heard Emma's screams, and now there was a dead man on the kitchen floor. He just thanked god she'd been able to defend herself – he couldn't stand to think of anything terrible happening to her. Ever.

He looked to where Peter and Michael were huddled, whispering between themselves. *What in the hell was going on?* 'What are you two doing? We have to call the police,' he growled, as he snatched the phone off the kitchen bench. 'Right now!'

'No, Zane, you don't want to go and do that,' Peter boomed, waving his hands about, trying to stop him from dialling 000.

Incredulously, Zane shook his head. 'Why?' Emma was shaking like a leaf, and he pulled her in tighter, wishing he could ease her anguish.

'Because, if you do ...' Peter rubbed his face, huffed, stepped over the crumpled body, and came to rest his hands on Zane's

shoulder and Emma's back. 'Emma might find herself on the Mafia's hit list.'

Zane dropped the phone as if it were fiery hot. It crashed to the floor. 'What in the hell are you on about?'

Emma stood back from him and lifted her cheek from his chest, her face ghostly pale. 'I only came out to get a drink of water. I didn't mean to hurt him, it's just, he came for me and I reacted to save myself.' She shuddered and her sobs rose harder.

Michael stepped in beside her, and after flashing Zane a stern look, took his girlfriend into his arms. 'It'll be okay, Em, we just have to do this right or, like Dad said, you might get hurt.' He tucked wayward strands of hair behind her ears. 'I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you, baby.'

Peter nodded as he heaved a sigh. 'Yes, you were undoubtedly defending yourself, Emma, I believe you, but Mario Zaffaro isn't going to give a shit about that. All he'll want is revenge for whoever took his cousin's life.'

'Why the hell would the Mafia want to break into our home?' His instincts telling him it would have something to do with Peter's work, Zane looked down at the tattooed thug. He'd never seen a dead body before, and nausea swirled in his stomach at the gruesome sight.

Strangely unperturbed, Peter followed his gaze. 'I'm building a case against one of Mario's boys at the moment, and I suppose he thought he might find something in the house to discredit me, or ... maybe, god forbid, he sent this thug to threaten me, or possibly even to kill me.' He cleared his throat and seemed to ponder this for a few moments. 'Whatever the case, thank goodness Emma stopped him.'

Zane found himself lost for words. Emma, too distraught to take anything more in, huddled against Michael. Zane felt a pang of jealousy that he wasn't the one soothing her, but he swallowed it down. Now wasn't the time for his hidden feelings to come into play. Hands laced behind his head, he paced, and finally found his voice. 'So what do you suggest we do, Peter?'

'I don't want you and Emma to do anything. The less you know now, the better. I'll take care of it. Okay?'

Wide eyed, Zane turned to him. 'How do you intend to do that?'

'Like I said, the less you know, the better.' He gestured to Emma. 'Take her and calm her down, will you? Michael and I will clean up this mess. And then tomorrow, for the sake of Emma's life, and ours, I want us all to get on with our routine like this never happened. You're not to speak of it, to anyone. Ever. Do you understand?' His face was a picture of caution.

Zane was reluctant but because he cared more about Emma than some thug he didn't know, he did as Peter had demanded. If only this were a nightmare they'd all wake up from tomorrow. But it was terrifyingly real, and something told him, as horrifying as it was, there was a hell of a lot more to the story.

# CHAPTER 1

## **Silvergum, North Queensland**

Shattered after two weeks with virtually no sleep, Zane dared a glance in Emma's direction and then heaved a weary sigh. Although the classic Cold Chisel tune playing from the radio was a welcome distraction, what remained silent between them was resounding off every inch of the sun-speckled windscreen. He and Emma had talked about it all until they were blue in the face, and there was nothing to be gained from going over it with her for the hundredth time. As much as they both wanted to go to the cops, risking her safety just wasn't an option. There was no way in hell he was going to endanger her life, or Michael and Peter's, all because of his yearning to do the right thing.

Staring out the passenger window, he tried to pretend it had never happened, tried not to imagine the dead man, who he'd last seen slumped on the kitchen floor, now at the bottom of

Campfire River, with bricks tied to his feet, or buried somewhere deep in the middle of Silvergum's national park. Not that he knew what had transpired once he'd dragged a very distraught Emma back to his bedroom and locked the door. Nor did he know what it had to do with the Mafia, and he didn't want to know. All that mattered was that Emma was alive, and unharmed. He wouldn't put it past Peter to do whatever it took to cover up the evidence – the lengths his adoptive father would go to preserve his reputation as a cutthroat criminal defence lawyer were beyond Zane's comprehension. It came with the territory of representing the bad guys, the delinquents who deserved to be locked away for life that the state felt deserved a fair trial – that's where Peter came in to save the day. In Zane's opinion, Peter manipulated the justice system so criminals could walk free while their victims and their families suffered. The under-the-table payoffs and the who-knew-who in the land of the Law was a goddamn joke.

A smashing headache behind his eyes, he closed them and squeezed the bridge of his nose. No matter how hard he tried, and regardless of whether the thug was a part of a cartel that harmed and hurt for money, the dead man's face continued to haunt him. He just hoped that by leaving Aussie shores, he could put it all behind him. He craved a distraction from his relentless thoughts, wanting to think of anything but that shocking night. If only it were that easy.

After an hour of driving in virtual silence, thankfully, they were almost at Cairns International Airport. Other than the odd comment here and there as they'd wound down the Kuranda Range at a snail's pace, the evasiveness between them was killing him. But what was he meant to say to fill the agonising gaps?

*Don't worry about killing a man, she'll be right? Or, I'm sorry about making such sweet love to you when you're already dating Michael?* There was nothing he could say that would make their situation any better or less painful.

Grabbing his wide-brimmed hat from the dash, he did his best to keep his turbulent emotions at bay. A true-blue cowboy never broke down. He'd never done it to this day, and he wasn't about to do it now, even though he felt as if his entire world was crumbling around him. The most frustrating thing was that he was helpless to stop it. As he caught her eye, the exquisite brunette behind the wheel offered him a brusque smile before focusing again on the long line of traffic in front of them. The tremble in her soft, sweet, kissable lips was ever so slight and the quickened pulse in her chest was obvious to him only because he knew her so well. Angry for giving in to the desires he'd kept under lock and key for years, he wanted to give himself a good slap around the ears. Emma Kensington deserved so much better, better than him, better than Michael, better than *this*.

Michael had wooed her from the get-go, pulled the wool over her eyes in his most charming of ways, but soon enough, he'd go and hurt her. It wasn't in Michael's nature to remain committed, to anyone. But try as Zane might to warn Emma of this, she refused to see it. Her dream of the whole white picket fence lifestyle, to be happily married with three kids by the time she was twenty-five, seemed to overshadow her voice of reason. It was an idea that terrified Zane, but it was the life Emma was looking for.

Worried out of his mind and nervous as all hell about what lay in front of him with the American professional bull-riding circuit, and also the dark past that incessantly shadowed him,

and Emma, his stomach twisted into an even tighter knot. He hated leaving her to deal with all this on her own, but not wanting to make a scene at the airport, he had to pull himself together. Squeezing the bridge of his nose again, he heaved another weary sigh, adjusted his sunnies and then gave a few short, sharp tugs on his seatbelt to loosen it, wishing he could unbuckle the damn thing altogether. He hated feeling confined, constricted, loathed anything to do with rules and regulations. Telling him he couldn't do something was like waving a red cape at a charging bull.

He was a self-confessed wild child, although his wayward acts had all been quite harmless. He'd lived seventeen long years without getting into too much trouble with the law. Having a renowned defence lawyer for an adoptive father might have had something to do with that. But this, being a witness to homicide, as accidental as it was, was immeasurably worse than the times he'd driven a car unlicensed, dashed down the main street of Silvergum butt naked for a dare, and failed to pay a couple of speeding fines. No amount of prayer would ever get them out of this mess – not that he'd ever drop to his knees to try. Even though he'd been raised by his god-fearing adoptive mother, Kay, since he was three months old, he was no longer a religious man. He had all but turned his back on the Church the day she'd died of cancer almost a year ago. What kind of god took such a kind and loving soul in such a horrendous way, especially after all the years of verbal and emotional abuse she'd endured from Peter's acid tongue?

Looking out the window at the rows of seemingly identical houses becoming claustrophobically closer together – a country-blooded man through and through, suburban living wasn't for

him – he tried to rid himself of his disturbing thoughts. They had kept him pacing the darkened hallway of the Kensingtons' old workers' cottage these past two weeks. Staying at Wattle Acres just hadn't been an option after what had happened. Peter and Michael's increasing animosity towards him, combined with the eeriness of the kitchen had him packing his bags and taking up Emma's offer to stay at her family's property, Serendipity, until he left for America. And it let him keep an eye out for her, just in case she had a mark on her back. How Peter and Michael could keep going as if nothing had happened, how they could go to sleep at night and wake refreshed and ready for the day ahead at their prestigious law firm was beyond him. He'd told them so, and they hadn't liked it, reminding him to keep his mouth shut or Emma might end up dead. Their words were as harsh and as blunt as that.

Branded as the black sheep of the family by many Silvergum locals, unlike Michael – who was his father's blood and bone – Zane had proved time and time again he wasn't Peter's progeny. Professional bull riding was a far cry from the world of Law Peter and Michael immersed themselves in. But Zane was proud that his passion lay in something so completely different. He didn't care that he was a disappointment to Peter; he'd never wanted to be anything like the arrogant, ruthless, selfish bastard. Growing up feeling as if he were nothing but a thorn in their sides, and even more so now Kay was gone, he was relieved to be leaving this life behind, and hopefully, for good. Apart from this captivatingly spirited woman beside him, who he'd known since kindergarten, there was no one he'd miss. Fighting to divert his thoughts from the heartache he was going to feel saying goodbye to her, he watched a flock of seagulls soar through the sky, the

seemingly endless blue a sharp contrast to the darkness he was feeling deep down in his soul.

Nearing the airport, he stole another glance at the only woman he'd ever truly made love to, not just slept with for the fun of it. The tension in her glossy lips and the whites of her knuckles as she gripped the steering wheel unnecessarily tight told him her mind was tormented by the same images and thoughts as his. While his pounding concern for her safety was almost too much to cope with, he knew for sure that she was carrying so much on her petite shoulders. He couldn't even begin to imagine how she was feeling, knowing she'd been the cause of the intruder's death, despite the fact she was only defending herself. Zane knew that Emma desperately wanted to go to the police, but she feared for her life if she did. It was almost too much for one person to handle, he thought, glancing at her. He ached to reach out and soothe her worries away, but that wasn't his place. He'd tried to do just that last night, to comfort her when she'd come to him in tears, and look where that had led them ... even deeper into unbearable secrecy. If only Michael was there more for her, it might never have happened.

Slowing, Emma indicated and pulled into the drop-off zone out the front of International Departures. Without allowing himself time for any hesitation, Zane jumped out and shut the ute's door behind him. Grabbing his suitcase from the back while avoiding slobbery licks from her Great Dane, Bo, he paused to drink Emma in one more time. He knew not to let her innocent appearance fool him – she was like him, as wild as they came.

Resting his forearm on the open passenger window, he feigned a nonchalance he was far from feeling. 'You sure you're going to be okay, Em?' Man, his heart was aching.

Tucking wisps of wind-tousled hair from her lightly freckled cheeks, she offered a sad smile and shrugged. 'If I say no, are you going to stay?'

Wishing he could say yes, he found himself at a loss for words.

'Thought as much.' She blinked her dazzling, gold-speckled green eyes, wet with tears. 'Then I suppose I'm just going to have to be, aren't I, Casanova?'

He flinched at hearing his nickname. 'Yeah, I suppose. I'm so sorry, Em, about everything.' He didn't feel the need to elaborate.

She laughed softly as she picked at the grease beneath her short fingernails – she'd been under the bonnet when he'd found her this morning. 'Even though I should be, I'm not sorry about what happened last night, Zane. It felt so right, and sooo good.' She looked at him. 'I know you felt whatever it was, too. I could see it in your eyes.'

So many emotion-fuelled words tumbled to his lips, but he fought them back. Now wasn't the time to tell her how he really felt about her – not when he was leaving for good. Unable to hold her intense gaze any longer, for fear of jumping back into the ute and throwing his dreams away, he looked down at his boots. Drawing in a breath, he shook his head. 'I don't know what to say, Em, but if I don't go now—'

She cut him off. 'I know, Zane, it's okay. If I were in your shoes, after everything that's happened, I'd be running like a bat out of hell and never looking back.' She sighed. 'I'm so happy for you, finally getting the break you deserve.'

He dared a glance back at her and his heart tumbled. 'I wish you could come with me.'

'Me too ... but then I'd probably cramp your style, Casanova.' She tried to flash her knee-buckling smile, but failed, miserably.

Once he could cop it, but not twice in a matter of minutes. 'Please, Em, don't call me that, not after last night ...' He shook his head, his heart feeling like a lead weight.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and slid across the seat, her fierce gaze daring the mean-looking parking inspector heading towards them to try to tell her to move on. 'I'm going to miss you, Zane Wolfe.' She brushed a kiss over his lips, igniting the blazing fire in his heart all over again. 'Take care, won't you?'

'I will, you too.' He cleared his throat. Damn this was even harder than he'd expected.

Ever so gently, she placed a trembling hand against his cheek. 'Please don't ever forget me.'

'How could I ever forget you?' Desperate to lighten the mood, he tried to laugh it off. 'I'm not going away forever, you know. I'll be back sometime.'

She offered him a smile that showed how much she doubted that. She knew him all too well. 'Remember to keep our secrets under lock and key, okay?' She eyed him carefully.

He shrugged and forced a smile he was far from feeling. 'What are these secrets you speak of, Miss Kensington?'

'That's the way.' Nodding, she sniffled and wiped at her eyes. 'Bye, Zane.'

'Yup, catch ya round like a rissole, Em.'

'Gravy and all,' she said. Then buckling herself back in, she revved the Holden V8 to life and pulled out and away, taking a huge piece of Zane's heart with her.

It was a fight not to look back when he stepped through the sliding doors, the coolness of the air-conditioning like a sharp slap to the face. Finally taking his sunnies off, he groaned and cursed beneath his breath. The airport was jam-packed with

travellers, the line to the check-in counter a mile long. He joined the queue, and the nerves and doubts multiplied. Checking his phone almost every five seconds, just in case Emma texted or rang him, he had to fight the urge to look over his shoulder, as he had done for the past two weeks. Having witnessed the unthinkable, and knowing it had something to do with the Mafia, he found it incredibly hard to stand still. He wanted to stay and play Emma's bodyguard, to make sure no harm came to her, but they had to get on with their lives. Besides, she had Michael there to do that for her.

Finally, he was standing at the check-in counter. The impeccably dressed woman with lips painted bright red offered a smile, revealing lipstick-smudged teeth, as she handed back his passport. Zane shoved it in his top pocket, wished her a good day, and then made his way down the corridor leading to airport security. Emptying his pockets, cursing when he pulled out his favourite pocketknife that would be confiscated for sure, he tried to shake the unease from the pit of his stomach. The terror of that night had a grip on him so damn tight he was powerless to be free of it. It had all happened so fast – Emma's panicked cries, him running from his bedroom still half asleep, the thug tumbling backwards and smashing his head on the granite bench, the pool of blood beneath his motionless body spreading further by the second. He'd never forget the strange expression shared between Peter and Michael as they raced into the kitchen to find the intruder on the floor. Peter's explanation of exactly who the dead man was was believable, but it hadn't excused the way he and Michael had reacted.

Through the metal detector, and with his pocketknife frustratingly taken from him, Zane slung his backpack over his

shoulder. Every step he took towards the waiting plane was a step away from the life he loathed, and the family he despised. As he stood a head above the rest, and with shoulders as wide as a professional footy player, gazes followed him down the aisle of the Boeing 747 – some subtle, some not so much. His country get-up of cowboy boots, faded jeans and his trusty Akubra (there was no way he was risking it getting squashed in his luggage), and the tattoos that were visible, drew all sorts of attention. A few passengers looked cautious, others were curious. Zane took it all in his stride, offering a courteous smile whenever his eyes met those of a gushing woman. In his line of work, female admiration came with the territory, and like his mum had always said – God rest her soul – it cost nothing to be a gentleman. Opening a door for a woman, young or old, was a given in his world, as too was standing whenever a lady walked into a room.

Hopeful the seat beside him was going to remain unoccupied, so he could unravel his six-foot-three frame, he sat down and latched his damn seatbelt. He couldn't get away from constraints today. The only place he truly felt free was on the back of a one-tonne bucking bull – at least then he could get off whenever he wanted. At last, right where he needed to be, and with the dreaded goodbye with Emma done and dusted, he released a pent-up breath. This journey was going to bring a whole new meaning to a long-haul flight – an entire eighteen or so hours, to think about the horror of the last two weeks and the mind-blowing pleasures of last night. Damn his lack of willpower. And even though he'd gone and stuffed everything up, just as he always did when it came to women, not that Emma was just *any* woman, she'd still insisted on dropping him off as planned. In the throes of passion, she'd also promised not to hold it against him,

because it took two to tango. Her determination to shoulder her share of the blame made him fall for her even harder. The tears that had been building in her hazel eyes, and the quiver in her lips as she'd unravelled from his arms and crawled from his bed at some ungodly hour, so she could sneak home before her parents got up, had almost broken him.

While the plane taxied and lifted off, his eyes darted around as he familiarised himself with his surroundings. Staring at the seatbelt sign, keen for it to be switched off, he clenched his clammy hands together and cursed himself for the hundredth time that day. He wasn't afraid of flying, but having never passed over the oceans, this was all new to him. He trusted in the pilot to get him to Dallas safe and sound, but if it were possible, he'd prefer the feel of a well-worn saddle beneath him, and the sound of pounding hooves as he voyaged to his new home.

He fought to focus on the here and now. This was meant to be a magical moment – leaving Australia to chase his bull-riding dreams. It was one he'd counted down to for what felt like forever and worked damn hard to achieve. He should be elated he'd made the cut, but he was finding it near impossible to be anything but anxious. As the plane rose higher and higher, the sun shone from behind the cottony clouds and sparkled on the turquoise water far below – it was a sight to behold. After years of his mother encouraging him to become a world-champion bull rider, as fearful as she was for his safety, he'd finally taken the first step in making his lifelong dream a reality. It broke his heart she wasn't around any longer to witness it.

His face pressed up against the window, he watched the scenic coastline of Far North Queensland fade away. His heart ached as it reached back for Emma's. Memories of last night came thick

and fast – the fresh scent of her hair, the silkiness of her skin, the sharp intake of her breath as he'd become one with her, the feeling of her fingernails scraping down his back, and the look in her eyes as she'd tumbled over the edge with him. When her lips had first touched his, while they'd ripped at each other's clothes, as if trying to tear away the layers that were stopping their hearts caressing one another's, something deep inside his soul had slipped into place. In that lust-filled moment, they'd been stripped of pretence, and all their worries had faded away in an instant. It was as if they'd been skin on skin a thousand times over, a thousand years ago. Emma was spot on when she'd said it had felt so right, so damn good, even though it had been so very wrong of them. As difficult as it had been in the heat of the moment, he'd made sure to not make promises to her he couldn't keep – he didn't have the nickname of 'Casanova' around Silvergum for no good reason. Commitment terrified him, and Emma knew that so well.

The *what ifs* slogged him – what if he stayed instead of chasing his dreams? What if he gave in to how he really felt about her, what if they ran away together, what if she wasn't so tied to her family property, with a dream to make it her own one day, what if she wasn't in a relationship with Michael? Trust his luck, he'd gone and found the girl of his dreams, but only realised it when it was way too late. But if given the freedom, would he have jumped at the chance to make her his? If he thought about it rationally, Emma's dreams of picket fences and having an army of children had never been his thing, and if he were being honest with himself, he wasn't sure it ever would be.

Shaken from his deep thoughts by a wave of bone-shuddering turbulence, his hands clenched the armrests. If this giant tin

can dived and crashed, he'd have no hope of survival. It was completely out of his control – and he didn't like that. One. Little. Bit. He squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to block out images of Emma as the sounds of rattling bags and nervous passengers heightened his panic. His mind tumbled and twisted, filled with thoughts of surviving a plane crash and not seeing her again. Flashes of them skin on skin came into his head – the desperate crash of their lips, the scent of whisky on her breath, and her whispers, her sweet rasping voice telling him how she wished he wasn't so scared of commitment, squeezed his already pain-filled heart tighter. Goddamn it, this was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do, other than watching his mum wasting away from cancer.

Knowing he needed to get a grip, Zane fought off the memories. Even though he worshipped the ground Emma Kensington walked on in her sexy cowgirl boots, in his soul he knew he could never have her without the big possibility of letting her down, of somehow breaking her beautiful heart because he was so scared of tying himself down, of laying down roots. That meant they were never possible. They could never be. Would never be. He had to keep telling himself that, and he needed to let the thought go of there ever being a *them*. He just had to. He wasn't good for her. He wasn't the one for her. He was doing her a favour, leaving her behind. And one day, she would thank him for it.

As the turbulence cleared and the nervous excitement of the crowded plane settled, he allowed his heart to calm too. When he stepped from this plane and strode into Dallas International Airport, there was going to be no looking back, no longing for what could never be with her. Ever.