

*My Dearest Matt,*

*I'm so sorry to do this in a letter, but I've tried every other possible way to tell you how I'm feeling and we always end up in an argument. I honestly can't handle fighting with you anymore, so this is my last resort to try and get through to you. Please, babe, I need you to understand that I'm broken too, just as I understand you've been through hell and back. I'm doing my very best to help you through this, while at the same time trying to keep my own head above water. But truthfully, with the way things are between us, I feel like I'm drowning. I don't know how much longer I can stand by and watch you slowly killing yourself. I can't live like this any longer. I won't live like this any longer. Something needs to change. I wish you would go and talk to my psychologist about it all, and the fact you refuse to makes this even harder for me to comprehend and to be there for you when you won't even try and help yourself. It's like you don't want to get better. We're both in a world of pain, but we have to find a way to keep on living, and hopefully together. Please, I'm begging you to listen this time. You need to figure out what it is that will help you heal your heartache, once and for all, before it spells the end for us.*

*Sometimes*

*You are so withdrawn from me*

*I can't help but wonder*

*If I am still someone special to you.*

*Sometimes  
You act as though  
I am intruding in your world  
When all I really want  
Is to have you by my side.*

*Sometimes  
I feel as though  
I have asked you too many questions  
As though I have somehow loved you too much  
Maybe desired too much from you  
When all I want  
All I long for  
All I pray for  
Every single day  
Is to understand you better  
So I can love you better  
So we can be back to what we used to be*

*I love you so much, Matt, and I can't imagine my life without you by my side. Please, baby, please think about what you are doing to yourself, and our marriage, and get some help, before it's too late.*

*All my love,  
Sarah xoxo*

## PROLOGUE

### **Malanda, Far North Queensland Present day**

*Something needs to change ...* the ultimatum circled torturously in Matthew Walsh's mind.

As much as he hated to admit it to himself, he had to agree. Self-medicating with booze was doing neither him, nor Sarah, any good. Her words played over and over again in his head, every one of them so very true.

Shifting uneasily, he hung his dusty, wide-brimmed hat on his knee and tried to stop from shaking. Sitting still was no easy feat these days. Not when it felt as if the weight of the world was pressing down upon his chest, and every one of his nerve endings hummed. Like a moth to a flame, he couldn't help himself when the drink gave him some reprieve – but it was high time he found a way to control it. The heartbreaking letter Sarah had left him on the dining table felt as if it were burning a hole in his pocket. He choked back tears – he didn't deserve to cry. His

darling wife had reached her limit, and after the godawful year they'd had, he couldn't blame her one little bit.

Staring in a daze at the pile of magazines on the coffee table, and noticing that one of them was almost two years old – so much for fresh tabloid gossip – he tried to steady his breathing. The last patient of the day, he was thankful for the empty waiting room. Late afternoon sunshine poured through the glass front door and bathed the Malanda Medical Centre in golden light. What Matt would give to be lying in the sun in one of his paddocks instead of sitting in a doctor's surgery facing his fears. His leg bouncing anxiously, he watched the sixty-something secretary gather her things at the desk and then hurriedly shove them in her handbag before reapplying her already bright pink lipstick.

Rubbing her lips together, she bustled over to him. 'The doctor knows you're here, love. He's on a phone call and won't be much longer. I'd usually wait around with you but I need to run, have to pick the grandkids up from daycare for Marne.' She dashed past him, frazzled but smiling. 'Say hi to Sarah for me, won't you?' she called over her shoulder.

'Will do, Shirl. And say g'day to Bob for me too.' Matt tried to smile as he watched her wrestle the door open and then disappear outside.

The surgery door opened and Doctor Lawson stepped out. 'Sorry to keep you waiting ... come on in, Matt.'

His Akubra in hand, Matt stood up, wandered in and sat down awkwardly. He hung his hat back on his knee and drew in a slow, steadying breath. 'Thanks for seeing me at such short notice, Doc. I know you're staying back later than usual and I really appreciate it.'

The doctor followed Matt in and settled himself in his high-back leather chair, and crossed his legs. ‘Not a problem at all. I realise you’ve been having a hard time of late, which is to be expected after what you and Sarah have been through.’

A hard time? More like the worst time of his thirty-four years on this earth. Matt nodded, knowing full well the entire town would know of his situation at home, including the doctor, so it was no surprise to hear him say so. ‘Yeah, it’s been a damn tough year, that’s for sure.’

‘I have no doubt.’ His lips set in a grim line, the doctor clicked and unclicked a pen – the sound grating on Matt’s already frazzled nerves. ‘So tell me, what can I do for you today?’ His kind eyes moved over Matt as if already assessing him.

His heart in his throat and his stomach churning with nerves, Matt dug deep and found the nerve to open his heart just enough to get what advice he needed from the doctor. Each and every word was a struggle, an admission he needed help – and that made him feel even less of a man, and even more like the drunken fool he was. He was ashamed it had come to this, abashed he’d denied it for so long – but there was no more hiding from it, or from himself for that matter. Sarah was right. Enough was enough. If he wanted their marriage to have any kind of hope for a happily ever after, he needed to stand up and be the man he once was. The stench of stale alcohol was his shadow, as too was the past that haunted him every waking hour, even reaching into his nightmarish dreams that held him hostage every single night. He needed to find a way to climb out of the dark hole he’d fallen into.

The words tumbling from him, he finished his last sentence with a self-conscious smile, and then waited for a response he was almost too scared to hear.

‘Well, you’ve come to the right place, Matt. I can most certainly help you through this.’ The doctor’s compassionate smile almost brought Matt undone.

‘Great. Excellent.’ Matt could hear the strain in his voice, and he coughed to try to cover it up. He wished he could get rid of the horrific images and the bloodcurdling screams from his head without the aid of alcohol, but he’d learnt all too well over this past year it was impossible. His only option had been to drink himself into a stupor to silence it all, if only for a little while. ‘Sarah’s right, I’m slowly killing myself, and ruining the hope of there ever being any chance of our marriage working.’ He choked back a sob. If he allowed himself to cry, he was afraid he’d never be able to stop. And men weren’t supposed to break down – it was his job to try to keep it together, to hold the fort, to make sure all the special women in his life were looked after. And he’d failed with that, miserably.

‘Matt, you’ve taken the first step in asking for help.’ His brows furrowed, Doctor Lawson adjusted his thick glasses and then folded his hands on his desk. ‘So how many drinks, per day, would you say you’re having?’

Ashamed, Matt’s initial reaction was to lie, but he knew that wasn’t going to get him anywhere. ‘Probably eight or nine, maybe more on the really bad days.’ He decided to leave out the fact he could devour an entire bottle if the moment called for it.

‘I see, and what’s your drink of choice.’

‘Whiskey, sometimes rum.’

The doctor drew in a slow breath. ‘Although the initial stages of alcohol withdrawal are over in a few weeks, your dependence may take anywhere from six months to a year to totally overcome, and even then you’ll have to be mindful of falling back into the

trap of thinking alcohol will solve all your problems for a few years after that.'

'I know it's going to be a tough journey, Doc, but I'm willing to give it my best shot.' Turning his gaze to the family photo of the doctor, his wife, and their two children in their twenties, Matt had to fight from feeling resentful. So, looking anywhere but, he tried to remain calm, steady, focused – a hard thing to do when he was craving his next drink like a parched person craved water.

'Righto, well, let's get this show on the road. Are you open to taking some medication, to help with the side effects of withdrawal that you're most certainly going to experience?'

Drugs to get him off the drink? It didn't make an ounce of bloody sense. 'Nope, I'm not open to that. I just want you to let me know what I'm in for, and how to handle it, without making me addicted to another kind of drug in the process.' It was said a little too harshly, and Matt regretted his tone instantly. This is what he always did to people who tried to help – took his frustration out on them. Poor Sarah. He bit his lip shut to stop from saying any more.

'I see.' The doctor's gaze narrowed.

Silence hung heavy. Matt hankered to escape the confines of the little room, but he planted himself firmly in the seat and gritted his teeth. It had taken him a long time to gather the courage to come here, too long in the grand scheme of things, and he wasn't about to chicken out now.

The doctor readjusted a few already straightened papers on his desk. 'I *really* do think you need to reconsider my suggestion for medication, Matt.' His tone was serious and authoritative. 'It's no easy feat, getting off the drink. And I would suggest you also think about going to counselling.'

‘Go to a counsellor? No, thanks.’ Matt shifted uncomfortably beneath the doctor’s unyielding stare. ‘And I *really* don’t want to do this with pills, either.’ Acknowledging the doctor’s disapproving expression, Matt shrugged. ‘Sorry, but taking something to get off something is just jumping from the frying pan and into the fire, in my opinion.’

‘As you said, that’s your opinion, Matt, and with all due respect, I totally disagree with you. The medication is offered for a very good reason ... especially if you’re thinking about doing this in the middle of the outback where help isn’t at your beck and call, as you mentioned when we spoke on the phone.’

‘I’ll have plenty of help there, if I need it – my mum and dad, my sister, my best mate.’

‘That’s all well and good, but they can’t do what medication will do.’ Doctor Lawson breathed a weary sigh. ‘Look, I totally understand your concerns, but the Valium will help in the short term, and then the Naltrexone will guide you through until you feel strong enough to do it on your own.’

‘Thanks, but no thanks ... it’ll be another thing I need to wean myself off.’ Determined to stand fast with his decision to go cold turkey, Matt cleared his throat and feigned a confidence he was far from feeling. ‘If it makes you happier, though, I’ll take a script for both, just in case of an emergency.’

Doctor Lawson held up his hands in defeat. ‘Okay, but for the record, I really don’t like the idea of you going it alone out there, Matt.’ He reached for his prescription pad. ‘Can you do me a favour and fill the scripts, so you have the tablets on hand if you get to the stage where you feel you need them? There’s not many chemists out near your parents’ station, I’m gathering.’

‘Correct.’ Happy to meet on middle ground, Matt nodded. ‘Yup, it’s a done deal, Doc. I’ll make sure I have the tablets with me before I head out to Rosalee ... but that doesn’t mean I’m going to take them.’ Matt’s word was genuine – he would get the script filled at the very least.

‘That’s a good start ...’ Doctor Lawson stopped writing and looked up. ‘So thank you.’ He tipped his head a little to the side. ‘May I ask, on more of a personal level seeing you and Sarah are like family to Marg and me, how is she feeling about you heading out there and doing this without her around?’

Matt swallowed. Hard. ‘I haven’t told her yet.’

‘Oh, right, okay. That’s probably something she should know sooner rather than later, don’t you think?’

‘I know, I’ll tell her.’ Unable to look him in the eye any longer, Matt stared down at his weather-beaten boots. ‘I just want to stop. Now. Before it’s too late.’

The pen still poised, Doctor Lawson raised his eyebrows. ‘Too late for you and Sarah? Or too late for you?’

Matt suddenly realised what the doctor was asking him. His throat so tight with emotion he couldn’t speak, he quickly shook his head, and then stole a few moments to recover. ‘I’m not suicidal, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘Are you one hundred and ten percent sure of that?’ The look in the doctor’s eyes suggested he was unconvinced.

Even though he’d contemplated it many times, and come very close to following through with it, Matt rolled his eyes and forcefully made himself appear completely shocked by the accusation. ‘Of course I’m sure.’

The doctor regarded him over the rim of his glasses, to the point that Matt squirmed in his seat, and then looked back down

at his prescription pad. 'Be sure to talk to someone if you do feel suicidal at any time, okay?'

'Yup, of course.'

Ripping the sheet of paper off, he passed it to Matt. 'Like I explained, after drinking so heavily for the past year, you're going to experience the height of the withdrawal symptoms in the first few days. Irritability, poor concentration, feeling shaky, irregular heartbeat, difficulty sleeping and nightmares, just to name a few.' He smiled sadly. 'And then there's the physical symptoms ... trembling hands, sweating, headaches, nausea, vomiting, lack of appetite, and possibly even hallucinations. So please, don't try to be a hero – use the tablets if it gets too bad.'

'You have my word, Doc, thanks.' Matt took the script, folded it, and then shoved it in his pocket along with Sarah's letter. He was terrified of what lay ahead, both for him and his marriage. How in the hell were they ever going to get through this, and out the other side, if he didn't rediscover the man he once was, the man that Sarah had fallen head over heels in love with?