

MANDY MAGRO

Country at Heart

A timeless tale of love and war brought to vivid life from war torn Afghanistan to country Australia — TONY PARK Author of *The Delta and Ivory*

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CHAPTER

1

‘You sound a little edgy today, Dean, are you okay? Do you still feel safe there?’

‘Yep, I’m right as rain, sis. Just a little tired, that’s all.’ Dean swallowed hard. He hated lying, it was a practice he tried his very best to avoid, but in this instance he felt it was justified. His sister didn’t need to be worrying about him too. ‘How’s Dad going, any improvement on last week?’

Kim sighed. ‘Nope, he’s still the same. If anything, I reckon he’s been a little worse this past week. He’s so bloody angry at the world all the time. He snapped his physiotherapist’s head off yesterday, the poor woman. Even Max can’t seem to cheer him up any more, and this is the grandson who used to brighten Dad’s every waking day before the . . .’ She paused and Dean thought he heard her sniffle. It sucked knowing she was hurting and he couldn’t be there to wrap his arms around her. ‘Dad’s accident, his injuries . . . it scares me to death, Dean. What if he never heals, you know, on the

inside? The stubborn bugger bluntly refuses to go to the psychiatrist and I can't drag him there. I've told him he can't stay living on his own like this, but he refuses to listen. I'm at my wits' end with him, to be honest.'

Dean couldn't admit that what was happening to his usually tough-as-nails dad scared the hell out of him too, even more than this damn war he was fighting. But he had to stay strong for his family, no matter what – giving in to his emotions was not an option right now; Kim, Max and his dad needed him. He was all they had.

He shook his head, feeling utterly helpless. 'Shit, sis. Let's not give up hope yet, though, okay? I reckon Dad will pull through. He's a tough old bugger. You'll see.' Dean squeezed his eyes shut, willing his voice to stay even, hoping he sounded somewhat convincing. 'I wish I could be there to take some of the pressure off you, Kimmy. But only another couple of weeks and I'll be home for fourteen days' relief leave. I know it's been a lot for you to handle, I mean, you know, since Mum—'

Kim cut him off: 'I don't want you worrying about me, Dean. I've got my big girl boots on and can handle things here at home. Anyway, work's helping – I love doing the trail rides. The horses are like my therapy: just being around them seems to heal the heartache, if only for a few hours. You stay safe and look after yourself over there, you hear me?' Her voice was strong, but Dean knew his iron-willed sister was beginning to crumble.

Heavy footsteps pulled Dean's gaze from the wall he'd been lightly kicking with the scuffed toe of his tan army boot. He turned to see his childhood mate, Tommy Walters, trademark Joker-esque smile creasing his round, freckled face.

'Hey Lockwood, the briefing starts in two minutes and I wouldn't be late, the sergeant's been in a shocker of a mood today, if you haven't already noticed.'

Dean nodded, giving Tommy the thumbs up. ‘I gotta go, Kimmy. Say hi to Dad and Max for me.’

‘Will do, hopefully I’ll catch Dad on a good day tomorrow. And Max really misses you . . . he can’t wait to see you – *I can’t wait to see you.* It’ll be good to be able to spend Christmas together.’

Dean cleared the lump from his throat, blinking his wet eyes. ‘I know, I really miss you and the little fella too. Give Max a kiss and cuddle from me, will you? Love you, Kim.’

‘Love you, too, little brother. Talk again soon.’

The PowerPoint briefing included aerial shots of the village and maps showing the route the patrol would be taking – including the likely enemy positions in rocky hillsides perfect for a Taliban ambush on the convoy.

Sergeant Harrison’s bushy black eyebrows furrowed as he firmly tapped the large drop-down screen with a ruler. ‘The area we’re entering is heavily populated and as you can all see, well built up around the village. The chance of contact is highly likely. We will have US air support, but watch each other’s backs like hawks, fellas.’

This was met with nods, the half-dozen men of the engineer detachment concentrating on Harrison’s every word; their lives and the lives of their comrades depended on a complete understanding of the mission and its risks.

Harrison turned to face his team, stroking his neatly trimmed moustache as he paused for a few seconds. ‘The heads from the mentoring team and the Afghan National Army want to show the Taliban they can’t have freedom of movement here any more. As usual, our job is to search choke points on the way and likely sites for IEDs and weapons and ammo caches in the village.’ Harrison removed his reading glasses and leant on the desk, unsmiling. ‘Any questions?’

The room remained quiet. Missions such as this were common and everyone knew the drill; they had already cleared many villages of dozens of IEDs, and the operation today would be no different.

‘Good. Ready to move at oh-four-hundred tomorrow.’ Harrison turned to leave.

Dean knew his work was going to be cut out for him as the nearby village was renowned for buried and cunningly concealed improvised explosive devices – IEDs. Bombs were planted everywhere in Afghanistan, like seedlings; children, the elderly and families were not exempt from the disfiguring or deadly consequences of stepping on one. Locals living in the affected villages were like prisoners in mud-walled compounds, and venturing out to meet neighbours or to collect food was fraught with danger. It was Dean’s job – with his beloved dog, Indy – to make sure the Aussie diggers and the fledgling soldiers of the Afghan National Army weren’t killed or maimed by an IED. At the same time, the work he and Indy were doing was helping make the country that little bit safer for the people who lived here.

In the pre-dawn gloom, Dean and Indy and the other army engineers climbed aboard their vehicles. At the same time, the Australian infantrymen of the mentoring teams and their Afghan charges were doing last-minute radio checks and loading and cocking their weapons. As per routine, the vehicles were armour-hulled Bushmasters, the tough-as-guts trucks built to protect ten passengers from roadside bombs, land mines and rocket-propelled grenades. Some of the weaponry the Taliban was using dated back thirty years or more to the Russian invasion; it seemed like this bloody place had been at war since time began. Dean and Indy were in the lead vehicle, which was always the one at highest risk as it would be the first vehicle to drive over a mine if there was one

planted in the road. It was first in the sights of Taliban combatants hiding in the distance, waiting to press a button to trigger a bomb on the roadside.

As the convoy rolled out of the gates, Dean glanced behind him at Camp Baker Military Base and the dirt-filled hesco walls topped with razor wire that protected his dusty home away from home. On a pole above the camp the high-powered rocket and mortar sensor rotated, giving them 360-degree, 24-hour-a-day coverage. This high-tech device was essential to their survival, since the military base was a regular target of the insurgents. Only last week they had all dropped to the ground as the distinctive alarm had rung out, and a 107 rocket landed in a hesco barrier, only metres from a soldier enjoying a midnight cigarette. In Afghanistan, living life on the edge took on a whole new meaning.

With stinking hot dry summers and freezing cold winters, Afghanistan was one of the most trying places in the world to live but within the confines of Camp Baker, the Australian government endeavoured to make their soldiers feel at home, as much as was possible. The Aussie diggers had even planted lawn in their small courtyard, each and every one of them very proud of the fact it was the only patch of grass, albeit a bit brown, in the entire Kandahar Province. Dean often strolled around on it shoeless, enjoying the sensation of grass crunching underfoot; in times of war, the simple things could give so much pleasure. Afghanistan had taught him a lot, especially not to take anything, or anyone, for granted.

At Camp Baker – named after Trooper Baker, who lost his life in a Black Hawk crash in 1996 – Dean could surf the net behind walls thick enough to stop a Taliban rocket while lying on his bed in air-conditioned comfort; watch telly or DVDs in the communal TV room; play touch footy with his fellow diggers out in what they liked to call the CBD of Camp Baker; hang out with Tommy in the

mess over a coffee or a soft drink – there was no booze allowed – or spend a few hours in the well-equipped gym, something he did often. Here, exercise, particularly lifting weights, was the only time he found he could shut off from everything, especially from this war, giving him time to think. Dean's strong physique was solid proof of the many countless hours he'd spent thinking. His dad had nicknamed him Sage when he was a kid because of his habit and the nickname had stuck into adulthood. Back home, his Ducati Streetfighter motorbike was his escape, his time to contemplate, and the freedom he felt as he cruised the open roads was unsurpassable.

Sitting beside Tommy, Dean ruffled Indy's coat and the Blue Heeler nestled her head in his lap. He couldn't imagine being in this hellish shithole without her by his side. The bond between them was unparalleled; man and dog had a complete dependence on each other: Dean relied on Indy's ability to sniff out bombs and Indy relied on Dean for everything a dog needs to survive: food, water, a safe place to sleep and, of course, love. As an explosive detection dog, Indy was an essential addition to the military effort in Afghanistan. In a place that had no neutral ground, dogs, with their keen sense of smell, were the frontline weapons in the war against IEDs. Their presence on the ground also had other benefits, such as helping to control antsy or panicked villagers during searches, hunting for hidden weapons and ammunition, and even boosting morale – Dean hadn't met a digger yet who didn't want to ruffle Indy's coat when he passed her. Indy always gave him hope, never judged him, kept the many secrets he told her and made him smile when he was down, which was quite often out here. And she was loyal, with nerves of steel, willing to protect him at any given moment, as he would her. Indy's work was play to her and all she expected when she found an IED was her favourite toy, a squishy ball.

The ride was rocky and slow; the convoy section commander had taken them off-road to confuse the Taliban, who would logically place mines and IEDs there. With dust enveloping the vehicles, Dean closed his eyes and allowed his thoughts to go back over the phone conversation he'd had with his sister last night. He couldn't tell her the truth – that, no, he didn't feel safe. That something didn't feel right. But did *anything* in this war-ravaged hellhole of a country ever feel right? And after suddenly losing his mum, Patricia, earlier this year, how was he meant to cope with the deterioration of his dad? He prayed Tony Lockwood would make a full recovery from the horrific accident that had killed Patty on Valentine's Day, but if he were honest, Dean doubted he would. How could a man *ever* get over being the one responsible for the love of his life's death?

He and Kim had forgiven their dad a long time ago, but Tony doggedly refused to forgive himself, his resentment and fury never allowing him to fully mourn the loss of his loving wife. Come to think of it, Dean hadn't seen his dad shed a tear to this day. Even when sitting in his wheelchair beside the freshly dug grave, staring into his wife's final resting place, Tony had remained dry eyed and stony faced, but there wasn't a doubt in Dean's mind that the loss of Patricia to such a terrible death was tearing his father apart.

Tony Lockwood had been bred tough, a true-blue, old-fashioned, morally upright country bloke, and a Vietnam veteran. He was certainly not the type of man to freely show his emotions, although Dean never doubted his father's deep love for him and Kim. Tony was the reason why Dean had happily joined the Royal Australian Engineers corps seven years ago – he wanted to make his father proud. He believed he had.

Tony had endured clearing Vietcong tunnels, an extremely dangerous job, for years in the Vietnam War, and he'd survived with all limbs intact. But now, after losing his beloved wife and part

of his right leg in the accident, it seemed Tony Lockwood had also lost his will to live. And that broke Dean's heart. Dean wasn't sure his dad would ever be able to forgive himself, but if he did, it was going to be a bloody miracle.

Releasing a long, drawn-out breath, Dean focussed on the familiar surroundings as the rising sun lightened the far-reaching land to shades of fiery red and then dazzling gold. It looked like it was going to be a textbook autumn day – perfect for the job at hand. On the horizon, jagged mountain ranges knifed their way into the empty blue sky, the distant mountain tops revealing a hint of snow on their peaks. The mountains of Afghanistan were scenic from a distance, but up close, the land where most of the combat took place was always brutal, unforgiving and inhospitable. Men fought and died on barren dirt and rock, in medieval mud compounds, or in the menacing, claustrophobic fields of poppies and marijuana that choked the narrow strips of arable land along the rivers. It was such different countryside to Whispering Meadows, his family's lush green acreage in Australia, where rolling pastoral land met in an almost seductive embrace with the golden shores of Majestic Beach. What Dean wouldn't give to feel the sand between his toes and smell the glorious scent of the ocean right now.

Although many were warm-hearted, the Afghans were certainly tough people and disputes over land, animals and women – in that order – were often sorted out with AK-47s or Dooshka heavy machine guns. Women were at the bottom of society's chain and young girls were even forbidden to attend school under Taliban rule. It was a common occurrence for firebombs to be chucked into any school the government tried to open for both boys and girls, killing most of the children within. It always shattered Dean to have to help sort through the aftermath. He was a tough bloke

when he had to be, but children and animals – especially dogs and horses – were his weak spots.

The convoy had returned to the road as it was the only way to the village now, and they slowed as they hit a choke point. The dusty ochre hills were rapidly closing in on either side as the radio crackled to life, Sergeant Harrison's commanding voice loud and clear.

'Canine team, you're up. The ANA engineers are already up front searching the road.'

Dean and Tommy stood. Dean's mouth was dry and his heart bashed against his chest. He had laughed in the face of danger many times before, but nothing could have prepared him for what he'd faced in Afghanistan. Being a dog handler and constantly searching for bombs, there was always one question at the back of his mind, taunting him: Would he be killed today? Swallowing down his fear, he attached the leash on his belt to Indy.

'Righto, my girl, let's get to it.'

Tommy jumped down first and Dean waited patiently for his mate to get himself and his German Shepherd, Rebel, sorted. He couldn't risk Indy and Rebel getting playful together out here, even though the dogs were the best of mates. With Rebel attached to his leash, Tommy gave Dean the thumbs up and Dean jumped out of the back of the Land Rover with Indy right behind him.

Tommy squinted into the sun as he gave his mate the once over, watching intently as Dean shifted nervously from one foot to the other. 'Shit, you're keyed up today, Dean. It's not like you to be anxious – you're normally the one telling me to chill out.'

Dean shrugged as he pulled a coin from his pocket. 'Dunno, just one of them days, mate.' He held the coin up. 'Heads or tails?'

'Heads.'

The coin flipped three times before Dean caught it, revealing the outcome straight faced. 'Looks like you're up first today, buddy.'

‘Shit it! I thought my luck was gonna run out soon. Three missions since I’ve had to go first, so about time I s’pose.’ Tommy shuddered as he turned around and stepped forward, calling over his shoulder while Rebel pulled at the leash like a freight train. ‘But keep your nerves to yourself, buddy, they’re bloody contagious.’

Dean watched Tommy and Rebel walk down the rutted dirt road that had the occasional bit of plucky scrub poking through. He ignored the beads of sweat dripping into his eyes. The forty-degree heat was suffocating. Fear once again threatened to overcome him, but he chose not to feed its predatory hunger. *Pull yourself together, man!* With about twenty metres between him and Tommy, Dean set off. The baked dirt crunched beneath his boots as he walked into the danger zone, well aware all eyes were on him from the stationary line of vehicles.

‘Fuck, girl, I hope we don’t miss anything today.’

Indy gave him a look that said, ‘As if!’ and Dean couldn’t help but smile.

Up front, the Afghan minesweepers the Australian Army engineers had helped train were busy checking for booby traps along the hot, shadeless road. The poor buggers constantly feared for their lives, if not from an explosion then at the hands of their own people: if the Taliban captured them, they would either be tortured with knives then burnt to death, or have their eyes cut out before they were beheaded or hanged. The Taliban didn’t take traitors to their beliefs lightly, especially those who aided their ultimate enemies, the soldiers.

After a few metres, Dean unclipped the leash and Indy quivered with anticipation, waiting for her command to begin searching. The mind of a soldier and the nose of a trained sniffer dog was a formidable bomb-finding force and Dean was confident they were going to have plenty of work today.

‘Seek!’ Dean ordered. With her tail up and her nose to the ground, Indy obeyed her master, bustling along as she quartered the road in an organised zigzag fashion. Dean kept up with her, his F88 Steyr rifle at the ready, the forty kilos of body armour, ammunition and other combat gear attached to him not slowing him down one bit. He anticipated Indy’s every move, reading her body language, perfectly attuned after a year of working with her; understanding, respect and friendship bonding them on a unique level. Ahead of them, Rebel and Tommy were doing the same. Indy, like other Australian Army dogs, was trained to work off lead and she responded to Dean’s voice commands and hand signals as she roamed ahead. She had more freedom of movement that way and, in the tragic event she accidentally tripped a booby trap or IED, there was some distance between her and Dean.

Coming to a sudden stop, Indy indicated something of great interest by sniffing and wagging her tail enthusiastically, never taking her eyes from the patch of dirt. She lay down, still staring at the spot, ears pricked. Dean stopped walking, his breath held, watching her; rightly assuming that every man in the vehicles behind had their breaths held too. Indy’s wagging tail kicked up a cloud of dust as she panted heavily from the heat and excitement, unaware that her life was in danger. For Dean, everything was silent and moving in slow motion. Hair and uniform stiff with dust and sweat, he called her back, short and quick, his voice hushed yet enthusiastic. ‘Come back, girl, come back!’

Indy rushed to his side and he proudly rubbed her head. ‘Good girl, my good girl.’ Pulling a green and gold squishy ball from his pocket, he passed it to her and she sank her teeth into it, the ball squeaking with every bite.

With Indy content and by his side again, Dean turned to check on Tommy. At the same time, Indy dropped the ball and whimpered.

Boom!

Sixty metres ahead, a black fountain of dirt and rock erupted, followed by the pungent smell of gutted earth, as though the ground was bleeding after having the life ripped out of it. Screams of pain and trepidation filled the turbulent air as dirt, grit, sand and chunks of rock rained down upon Dean, and a thick spiral of smoke twisted into the blue sky. Was that Tommy he could hear screaming? Dean blindly reached for Indy and gathered her to his side, swiftly clipping the leash on his belt to her collar.

Boom! Boom!

Two more colossal explosions followed off to the left. The Taliban certainly hadn't wasted a minute in welcoming the convoy. The bastards! Bullets started coming in like a swarm of angry wasps, landing behind him, zinging and pinging off rocks and boulders, puffs of dust and vegetation flying around his running feet. Indy stuck close to him, growling as if to protect him. He had to get her to safety; she was an easy target out here. Ducking and weaving, he ran as bullets continued to crack into the hillside behind. Dust spiralled around him like spinning devils, filling his eyes with grit and making it impossible for him to see clearly.

There was a distant thump and more black smoke billowed upwards as a body slammed down beside him. Cries of pure agony filled Dean's ears as he rushed to the person's side, ignoring the fact he was still in the line of fire. *Oh dear God, please don't be Tommy.* Down on all fours and with the dust clearing, the sight before him made him heave: the Afghan minesweeper had had his legs and half an arm blown clean off. The man reached for him with his good hand, but as Dean fumbled for a first-aid dressing taped to his harness, the Afghan cried out and his body shook violently as death stole his last breath.

Gathering Indy to his side protectively, Dean tried to stand, still avoiding bullets. Two Afghan minesweepers ran past him, crying

out in pain, one with blood pouring from his ears and nose, and the other with his arm missing from the elbow down. The intercom radio was squawking with urgent conversation, the joint terminals' attack controller calling in the Apaches for much needed air support. At the same time, Dean could hear the *crump crump* of mortar rounds leaving their tubes in the rocky hills.

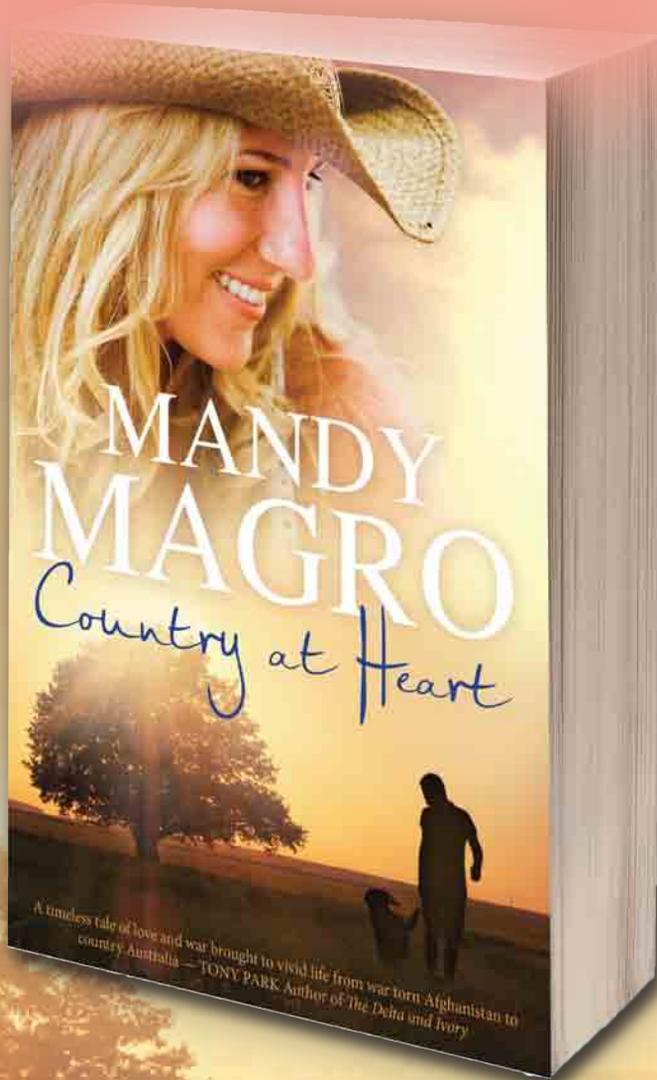
'Incoming mortars!' someone yelled from the Bushmaster parked in front of him.

The chaos of enclosing gunfire, mortars, grenade bursts and panicked shouting assaulted Dean's senses. His pounding heart matched his strides as he ran for the safety of the Bushmaster, diving in with Indy in his arms. She whimpered and Dean buried her head in his embrace.

'It's okay, girl, it's all going to be okay.' Tucking Indy into a safe corner of the Bushmaster, he joined his comrades in a battle to defend their lives, wishing every second that he could believe his words to her. Tommy, his best mate of twenty years, was out in this bedlam somewhere. And because of the Taliban's gunfire, Dean couldn't get to him to see if he needed medical assistance. *Please, God, don't let him be dead.*

No, things weren't okay, and by the looks of it, they were only going to get worse.

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