

## *Prologue*

SIX-YEAR-OLD Molly Jones nervously gripped her grandfather's weathered hand as she looked into the skies above her. It looked so serene and peaceful up there, like it was part of a totally different world; a world in which she hoped heaven existed. White fluffy clouds drifted in an infinite sea of blue, and for a moment she felt like she was back in a magical place full of safety and happiness. Standing under her favourite jacaranda tree, she stared up at the canopy of beautiful purple flowers and remembered picnics with her mum and dad on the lush grass beneath the tree. They would eat the treats her grandma baked for them and then she would snuggle into her dad as her mum read out loud from her favourite books. But those days were gone forever now, all because the bad man had driven his car drunk.

When Molly climbed into her grandfather's lap she could feel his body shaking. She had never seen her granddad cry before. Tears poured down her own cheeks and dripped onto the pretty dress her mum had made her only a week ago for her birthday. She buried her face into his chest as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her tenderly on the cheek, the faint scent of tobacco on his shirt a familiar comfort.

'We'll make it through this, little one,' he whispered in her ear.

Her grandma reached out and stroked her hair and Molly tried to imagine it was all going to be okay. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping that when she opened them she'd find this was just a terrifying nightmare and her mum would be there to soothe her back to sleep as she always was. But her ears could not block out the priest's solemn voice as he read the words no six-year-old girl should hear.

'Why did you have to die?' Molly whispered as she began sobbing uncontrollably, the thought of never seeing her parents again making her tremble with fear. How would she ever live without them?

## *Chapter 1*

THE blistering sun shone unrelentingly on Molly Jones. The sheer heat of it felt like it had the power to burn right through her long-sleeved button-up shirt and sear her already olive skin to a crisp. She took a swig from her water bottle and tied her long, wavy, jet-black hair back into a ponytail, pulling the broad brim of her hat down to shade her petite features from the unforgiving rays. It was a typical summer's day in Dimbulah, Tropical North Queensland – hot enough to fry an egg on the bonnet of her Land Cruiser.

Molly stepped into the second round yard, the one that was home to her newest horsy recruit, and double-checked that the gate was securely shut behind her. She knew there was no hope of ever getting the wild horse back if he made a sudden break for it. Outside the confines of the round yard there was nothing but farmland for miles, Jacaranda Farm making up a thousand hectares of it. Beyond that was untamed countryside in which a wayward horse would easily be concealed if it wanted to be. And Buck most certainly would want to. He was the most challenging horse Molly had ever worked with but she wasn't going to give up on him. How could she? Her daughter had her heart set on the gelding being her very own one day.

It was only a few months ago that they'd had to put down Rose's beloved old bombproof horse, Jimmy, due to cancer. It had broken Rose's heart, and Molly's. That was why Buck was here, to be Rose's new horse, and Molly was going to make sure he was the best horse he could be before Rose sat in the saddle. Safety was her number-one priority, especially for her precious little girl.

Molly smiled as she remembered Rose, her six-year-old, begging her to bring Buck home with them from Silverspur Station. The station owner had been about to send the horse to the meatworks because it had kicked him viciously in the back, leaving a purple bruise the size of a football. Mind you, the station owner wasn't the nicest of blokes either – he'd probably done something to deserve it. Molly found herself unable to deny Rose her wish, admiring her little daughter's passion for horses – a passion that matched her own. And she felt there was something special about the horse too, underneath its rebellious bravado. Molly truly believed that the horse had just been mistreated, misunderstood, and harshly trained by the hard hand of the station owner's son. Rose had aptly named the horse Buck, as that was all he seemed to want to do. That is, when he wasn't trying to bite you.

Ignoring the beads of sweat rolling down her cheeks, Molly kept her gaze soft but steady, being careful not to look directly into Buck's big brown eyes as he stood warily in front of her. She knew direct eye contact was very unsettling to a nervous horse, arousing its powerful fight-or-flight instincts. Not the ideal way to make a horse feel at ease.

Molly kept her distance and squatted so Buck could see she was nothing to be afraid of, stealing a few moments to admire his striking features. Buck was a beautiful boy, his chestnut coat

closer to red than brown, with four white socks and an adorable white star on his forehead that was slightly hidden by his unruly forelock. She was looking forward to being able to get close enough to groom him. His mane and tail were in need of a decent brush.

Continuing on with the training and keeping her voice soft and low, she talked to him soothingly. She could see the tension in his body gradually easing. He moved his mouth and his ears flickered more slowly.

Molly stood carefully and took a few steps towards Buck, a little off to one side, to make sure she didn't walk into the blind spot in his vision and startle him. Buck gently raised his muzzle twice. That, together with a light stamp of his front hoof, indicated his pleasure at Molly's kind approach to him.

Molly was overjoyed. In the two gruelling months she had been working with Buck, a few hours almost every day, this was the closest he had allowed her to get. She reminded herself to remain calm. Horses could feel your emotions, and she needed to stay relaxed. 'Baby steps, take it slow,' she whispered to herself, a mantra she repeated over and over in her mind as she weighed up what to do next.

She moved even closer to Buck, slowly easing her way into his space. She could now reach out and rub her hand over his neck. Should she? Or would that be pushing the boundaries too far, too soon? She hesitated, her hand raised softly at her side, seconds ticking by like minutes. Buck stepped back from her, uneasy again. She shook her head gently. Not today, but maybe next time. She might even be able to get a bridle on him by the end of the month. Or was that just wishful thinking? Only time and hard work would tell.

Like her father and her grandfather before her, Molly was

known around the small Dimbulah community as a ‘horse whisperer’. She didn’t like the name much. Her work wasn’t some black magic she performed on the horses that came to her for their last chance before the meatworks. Molly just knew how to watch a horse and read its body language. She was patient when trying to gain a horse’s trust, letting it approach her in its own time. Too many people went at it like a bull at a gate when they tried to befriend a horse, and that baffled Molly. How would they like it if some stranger came storming up to them, trying to wrap a rope around their throat, demanding they do what they were told for no good reason? Humans confused Molly at times, but horses were another matter entirely. Understanding horses was second nature to her, as natural as breathing.

Molly began to run out of daylight and decided to head back to the homestead. She was starving, and dying for a nice long shower. A quick glance around the shelter in the round yard confirmed Buck had sufficient food and water for the night. Tomorrow she would give him a treat of molasses, if he behaved. But only a small one – she didn’t want him too full of beans. She whistled up her dog, Skip, and he raced to her side, his tail wagging madly as he barked his hello. She gave him a loving scratch on the chops, giggling as he licked her hand enthusiastically.

Skip had been resting in the shade of a massive wattle tree for most of the day, watching his mistress at work with her clientele of horses, in between doggy naps and chasing the chooks. Molly knew he’d never intentionally hurt the chooks, the chasing was just a bit of excitement for him, to release any pent-up energy. He had been born and bred to round up the cattle on Molly’s property, and he saw the chickens as something that needed rounding up too. The poor buggers would run off in a flurry of feathers, clucking like mad, with Skip in tow. The dog was a

purebred border collie and a purebred pain in the butt when he wanted to be, but Molly loved him to bits. He had been her companion for nine years, and she could not ask for a better mate.

On her way back to the homestead, a flock of red-tail black cockatoos soared noisily overhead. Molly turned to watch them, admiring their beauty as they flew towards the setting sun through a sky turning beautiful shades of orange and pink. The last of the sun's rays sent speckles of golden light skipping over the shimmering water of the dam. Molly had spent so many happy hours at the dam while she was growing up. It was a wonderful place to laze away a hot summer's day with a good group of mates.

Skip barked insistently as a rabbit bounded across the grass. Molly quickly grabbed him by the collar – it was too close to nightfall, when the dingoes made themselves known. Skip would never stand a chance against a pack of them.

Molly gazed out at the endless views of fruit trees that lay in front of her. She could just make out the boundaries of Jacaranda Farm and could hear her neighbour, Fred, out in his tractor, spraying his crops. Up here in the tropics it was a constant battle to keep the crop from being covered in scale, attacked by insects or stung by bugs.

As she passed the workers' cottage Molly waved cheerfully to three men who were sitting around the rickety old timber table on the front patio, playing a game of cards. The jackaroos were swigging on icy-cold beers and swatting at the constant stream of flies with their soiled hats.

'Hey, Molly, want to play a round?' Heath called, smiling in a way that momentarily stopped Molly in her tracks as she admired the intensity of his deep-blue eyes. She instantly reprimanded herself for doing so. How could she even look at him

in that way? Jenny wouldn't be too impressed with her perving on her man *and* she wouldn't blame her, Molly thought kindly. Friends weren't meant to cross that boundary. It was an unspoken vow between women, and one Molly believed in very strongly. It had been just over a year now, but Molly's heart still ached each and every time she recalled the horrific day she lost Jenny – her workmate and dear friend – when one of the horses tragically kicked her in the head. Molly had seen the entire thing. Jenny had died in her arms, her unborn baby dying along with her. Telling Heath he had lost his childhood sweetheart, *and* his unborn child, was the second hardest thing Molly had ever had to do. Coping with the loss of her parents was the first.

'Yeah, come on, Molly!' Kenny added, his cheeky grin shining out from his dust-covered face.

'Nah, not tonight, guys. I'm buggered. But thanks anyway. I'll catch you all in the morning,' said Molly. 'You even get to sleep in, seeing it's Christmas day! Oh, and don't forget to leave some milk and biscuits out for Santa!'

'Bugger! I don't have any milk *or* biscuits so he'll have to be happy with a glass of beer and a vegemite sanga!' Trev replied.

Molly chuckled. 'I'm sure Santa will love your Aussie hospitality, Trev. After all, we know he wears stubbies and a pair of pluggers, and delivers the presents out the back of his dusty old ute.'

Trev grinned. 'Sounds like my kind of Santa!'

Molly shook her head, smiling. The three jackaroos were a permanent fixture of Jacaranda Farm, assisting with the mustering and animal husbandry and also tending to the maintenance and picking of the fruit. There was always plenty to do and the three prided themselves on working hard. As well as breeding top-quality Santa Gertrudis cattle and Australian stock horses,

Molly's family grew two different varieties of mangoes on the Farm, mainly for the markets down in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. Even though the men's specialty was stock work, Heath, Kenny and Trev were more than happy to pick the mangoes when needed. This meant Molly didn't have to get in many casual workers for the mango harvest and the men had work all year round on the property rather than just in the mustering season.

The blokes always gave her a laugh and she had become good mates with them over the years they had worked together. Heath, Kenny and Trev were totally different characters, but they all shared the qualities she loved: honesty, loyalty and a down-to-earth way of looking at life. She knew they would all support her in a flash if she ever needed it. Especially Heath, who had been working on Jacaranda Farm since Rose was only a couple of months old. He had arrived along with his long-time girlfriend, Jenny, and Molly had become very good friends with both of them almost instantly, feeling like she had known them forever. Jenny quickly became the sister she'd never had.

Molly was so grateful to have Heath around; he had seen her through her worst, as she had with him, and he'd always been there for her and Rose. He was the perfect example of what a real mate was.

Molly kicked her boots free at the bottom of the steps to the homestead, grimacing as she peeled off her sweaty socks. Delicious cooking smells wafted out to the verandah and Molly hoped dessert would be her grandma's famous apple pie. She could hear Rose laughing inside the house and felt a sudden urge to pick her little girl up and kiss her a hundred times over.

She knelt down and gave Skip a friendly scratch behind the ears. 'I'll bring the leftovers out for you, buddy.'

Skip let out a quick, short bark and wagged his tail in anticipation. Molly loved the fact he always answered her.

‘Now go and lay down on your bed and I’ll catch you after dinner.’

Skip promptly followed her orders, walking around in circles on his rug before lying down and resting his head on his paws, his big, brown eyes watching Molly as she disappeared into the house in search of her precious daughter.

As Molly sat down at the kitchen table Rose jumped into her lap to give her a cuddle. Rose had been out feeding the cattle with her GG, Great Granddad David. Molly smiled as her daughter explained how she had seen a bull climbing over the back of a cow and that GG had said it was trying to play leapfrog. It was so cool that the cows played games like she did at school.

Molly laughed. For all the challenges of being a single mother, she could not begin to imagine her life without Rose.

At nineteen Molly had thought she knew everything, but boy, had she been wrong. She had fallen for a cowboy one drunken night at the Mount Garnett rodeo, and nine months later Rose had entered her world. Molly’s life had changed forever, but she had never laid eyes on the cowboy again. The morning after their night together she had woken alone in her swag. She never even knew the cowboy’s name. It was almost like he’d been a figment of her imagination and Rose an immaculate conception. If only it had been that simple.

‘Dinner’s ready!’ called Elizabeth, Molly’s grandmother. ‘It’s time to go and wash your hands, Rose.’

Rose screwed up her face but obeyed all the same.

‘Wow, Granddad, that was a ripper of a story to tell Rose. I’d

never have come up with that one myself,' Molly said admiringly.

'Well, I had to think of something quick smart when she asked me what the bull was doing. I don't think she's old enough for the birds and bees chat just yet!' David scratched his bald head with stubby fingers and grinned. 'How'd you go with Buck today, sweetheart? Rose keeps going on about riding him one day. It's hard to see that happening for a long time yet though.'

'He finally let me get closer to him today. And he didn't even try to bite me, which is a change from last week!' Molly rubbed her sore thigh muscles, wincing. 'I reckon with enough time and patience he'll turn into a fine horse for Rose, as far away as that seems at the moment.'

'That's great to hear you're making progress, love. It takes a certain kind of person to understand horses and you really do have the gift. I'll die a happy man knowing you'll be taking over from where I've left off. And if your dad could see you now, well, I know he'd be so very proud of you.'

Molly watched the familiar twitch beneath David's eye at the mention of her father. That twitch was testament to the pain of his son's loss, a pain he and Elizabeth had always done their best to hide for Molly's sake. 'I'd hope he would be, Granddad, *and* I don't want to hear any talk of you kicking the bucket! You've got a lot of life left in you. Anyways, you and Grandma have to be here the day I tie the knot with my knight in shining armour – that's if he ever rides in on his white horse.'

'Well, love, you aren't getting any younger. At the rate you're going, you'll end up with some clown riding in on a donkey.'

Molly laughed. At twenty-six she was still young – she knew David was only teasing. But she also knew he yearned for her to meet a guy who would love her and Rose as he felt they deserved to be loved. She could understand his concerns; she felt the same.

She just hadn't been lucky enough to meet the right bloke yet, the one she would marry and live happily ever after with. The only place *he* seemed to exist was in her dreams.

Molly had grown up in this old timber Queenslander, warmed by the love of her grandparents. The house had been built on the highest point of the property, with verandahs on all sides and huge casement windows, so the views over the paddocks were incredible. Molly often stood and gazed out the windows, captivated by the beauty she was surrounded by. Watching the horses and cattle grounded her and made her feel as though she was in touch with the earth she farmed on.

Everywhere you looked there were horses – in photos and paintings and sculptures that capture the essence and beauty of the magnificent creatures – and you'd find akubras, whips, spurs and saddles throughout the homestead. Cowhide rugs dressed the worn timber floors. To Molly, the whole house felt alive with stories of the past and hopes for the future.

The family had lived for four generations on Jacaranda Farm and Molly was very proud of the fact. There had been tough years with not much money coming in, but the family had stuck it out. Now they were one of the wealthiest families in Dimbulah. It was thanks to her granddad, who had figured out a way to make the fruit flower out of season, making Jacaranda the only farm in Australia with mangoes twice a year. Many other farmers around the area had tried to discover their secret – everything from buying Molly's granddad too many beers down the pub to offering him large amounts of money – but David kept the information close to his heart. Only Molly knew what the secret was, and she was not about to tell another living soul. It was their key to success, and helped them through the bad times with the livestock market – which was a lot of the time these days.

## JACARANDA

Molly knew some men would love to get their hands on such a profitable farm, so she was wary of potential suitors. She was determined not to fall for someone who only saw Jacaranda in terms of financial gain, or even worse, could not understand her connection to the place. Her mother and father were buried here, under the beautiful jacaranda tree outside. Living here made her feel close to them in a way that perhaps only her grandparents could truly understand.

‘Do you need a hand with anything else for tomorrow?’ Molly asked Elizabeth.

‘Should be right, thanks, love. I’ve just got to finish the mango chutney and we’re all set.’

It was the Jones’ turn to hold the community’s Christmas bash this year, and Elizabeth and Molly had been preparing for weeks, making everything from rum balls to Christmas pudding and their famous mango chutney for the baked ham. They had enough food to feed an army, so no one would go home hungry. Rose was beside herself with excitement. Tonight Molly would help her leave the traditional biscuits and milk on the dining table for Santa. She smiled as she recalled Rose saying with concern that Santa would be so busy tomorrow, he probably wouldn’t have time to eat, so it was very important to remember to leave out his treats. Rose was always so very thoughtful. Molly sighed contentedly. Tomorrow was going to be a wonderful day.