

PROLOGUE

Little Heart, Far North Queensland

Twelve-year-old Joel Hunter listened as the wild wind lashed the branches of the towering Bowen mango tree he loved to climb against the side of the house. A distant curlew called out, the lone bird's song eerie, and Joel was grateful to be tucked up inside, safe and sound.

Making the sign of the cross, he tightly folded his hands, closed his eyes, and drew comfort from his hero – his father – kneeling close beside him. Soft lamplight cast shadows across the bottom bunk bed, and over Joel's cheeks, grazed in the attack. The Muller boys had started bullying him when he became an altar boy at Little Heart Church – a role he was extremely proud of. Trying to ignore the relentless sting in his knees, hands and arms from when they'd dragged him from his pushbike and across the gravel, along with the horrible ache in his heart caused by the

humiliation, he joined his dad in their usual nightly bedtime prayer. He watched as his father drew in a steady breath, his big chest rising, before sighing it away as his eyelids closed. Only then did Joel squeeze his eyes shut.

‘Lord, I pray for my son, and that you would comfort him in this hard time. Please grant him the strength to forgive the three boys who’ve bullied him for being a loyal child of yours and protect him from any further harm. I trust you’ll help the culprits to see the injustices of their ways, and hope that, in time, they and their parents will come to believe in the teachings of the Bible, so they can live a wholesome life devoted to you, as we do in this house that you have blessed us with. Amen.’

His father finished, Joel quickly added, ‘Yes, please, Lord, to everything Dad just said. Thank you for everything you do for me. Amen.’ Then, swallowing hard, he blinked back another onslaught of tears. He didn’t want to cry again. He wanted to be big and strong, like his dad.

A reassuring pat on Joel’s back brought his gaze to that of his father’s. ‘Proud of you, son.’

‘Thanks, Dad, and thanks for going and talking to Principal Edwards, and the Muller boys’ parents too. I just hope it doesn’t make things worse.’ Joel frowned. ‘You know how much of a grump their father can be when he gets mad.’ The time he’d watched Mr Muller yell at the lady who worked in the grocery store because she’d given him the wrong change flashed before his eyes.

‘It won’t, my boy. I promise.’ With a groan his father rose from his knees, as did Joel. ‘Their father needs to take a long hard look at himself, teaching his boys that violence is okay. Champion boxer or not, Michael Muller should know better than that.’

Shaking his head, his father heaved another gentle, weary sigh as he sat on the edge of the bed. 'I think after being suspended from school for a week, as well as having to attend the anti-bullying classes your mum is running down at the church with Mrs Kern, the three of them will've learnt their lesson, hopefully.'

Nodding, Joel sniffled, gruffly wiping the tears from his sore cheeks. He hated being a big sook, hated the fact he was all lanky arms and legs without an aggressive bone in his body. Hated the fact it was a girl – *the* girl, the one he'd had a crush on for the past year – the very pretty and very nice Juliette Kern, who had saved him from the bullies. He wanted nothing more than to impress her, to make her see he was big and tough, a match to her gutsy spirit and tomboy persona, but try as he might, he just couldn't fake it. 'I'm sorry I was too afraid to stand up to them and Juliette had to chase them off by throwing rocks at them. I feel silly, having a girl do that for me.'

'Don't you dare feel silly, my boy.' Patting Joel's arm, William half-chuckled, shaking his head. 'She's certainly a little firecracker, that girl. I think she'd scare most boys with how fiercely she can yell.'

Remembering Juliette's stern face as she'd protected him so fearlessly, hands on her hips while telling the three Muller brothers to rack off, Joel chuckled. 'She sure is a little firecracker.' And right then and there, he decided that would be her nickname – if she didn't mind it. 'I wish I was more like her.' His smile faded with the declaration.

Reaching out and pulling his son to him, his father ruffled his hair. 'Don't beat yourself up. You're a good boy, Joel, and you did the right thing by not stooping to their level. God wouldn't take kindly to you throwing punches just because they are.' He

unfolded his towering frame and stood. Then, with a warm smile, he peeled back the doona and patted the animal-printed flannel sheet. 'Now, come on, it's time for bed, so in you hop.' He glanced to the top bunk. 'Zoe's already fast asleep, the sweet child.'

'Yeah, I thought she was just trying to get out of eating her peas and carrots at dinner ...' Joel peeped up at his baby sister. '... but she must have been telling the truth about being super-duper tired.' His cotton pyjamas askew, he straightened them before climbing beneath the sheets.

A flood of reassurance filled him as his father tucked him in and kissed his forehead. 'I love you, son, and I want you to know how proud your mother and I are of you for always telling the truth, and not resorting to violence.'

'Thank you, Dad.' His tears and fears all but forgotten, Joel smiled. 'And I love you too, to the moon and back, and beyond.'

'Now that's a whole lot of love, my boy.' His father's smile widened as he chuckled. 'I'm one lucky father, having a wonderful, kind and very clever son like you.'

Joel grinned proudly as his dad's tender chuckle warmed him from the inside out. 'Night, Dad.'

'Night, Joel. Sweet dreams, son.' Leaving the lamp on, his dad padded to the doorway, paused momentarily as he offered a final reassuring smile and, leaving the door half-open, disappeared down the hallway.

Joel rolled onto his side, squeezing his eyes shut. He was even more tired than the days he'd help his dad train the horses. Hovering in between realms, it wasn't going to take him long to drift into dreamland, the shelter of his home and the

unconditional love of his family giving him all the comfort he needed to let the horror of the day go. As his mum had said while gently tending to his scrapes and bruises, her frown deep and her blue-green eyes filled with compassion, he would live to tell another tale. He just hoped it was going to be a good one.

CHAPTER 1

Six years later

Juliette Kern fought to keep her eyes from the door to the cupboard tucked in beneath the spiral staircase, her heart racing a million miles a minute. The little area terrified her, the enclosed space so velvety black she couldn't see anything once locked away in there – as she had been more times than she cared to remember. But the fear of that room wouldn't stop her now, although she had to be extremely careful. Being caught wasn't an option.

Stepping into the lounge room, she sucked in a shaky breath. 'I've finished my Bible study assignment, so I'm off to bed,' she said as casually as she could, then forced a yawn.

Brows furrowed, her stepfather barely acknowledged her, his steel-grey eyes glued to his weekly dose of the ABC's *Australian Story*. Juliette was glad for his distraction. She glanced to where

he'd hung his belt and tie over the back of a chair, and icy fingers travelled up her spine.

Leaning over the back of the lounge chair, she brushed a kiss over her mother's cheek. 'Night, Mum. I love you.'

'Night, love.' Cradling her cup of tea, her mum looked up, smiling. 'Don't forget to say your prayers before you go to sleep.'

'Of course I won't,' Juliette replied before turning and treading back down the hallway.

After shutting her bedroom door, she rearranged her pillows and doona to make it look like she was in the bed and, just in case, turned off her lamp. Satisfied she'd done all she could, she grabbed her torch and thongs and quietly slid her window open. Balmy air mingled with that of her air-conditioner, and the scent of her mother's frangipani and jasmine blossoms hung heavily. Cattle bellowed in the distance and from the paddock down the driveway, her horse whinnied. Holding her breath, she hitched up her dress and glided out, one long leg after the other, then slid her window shut and slipped on her favourite diamante-studded Havaianas. Sticking to the shadows while moving fast across the back lawn, she vanished into the night, waiting until she was safely surrounded by the scrublands of Crystal National Park before she flicked her torch on. She couldn't wait to see Joel, or for the day she didn't have to live beneath her parents' roof.

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Summer had arrived in Little Heart with typical Far North Queensland vengeance, with the balmy temperature still hovering in the high twenties hours after the fiery orb of the sun had slunk

behind the distant mountain ranges. Switching the outside light on, Joel Hunter watched hundreds of insects swarming towards the sudden brightness, like soldiers into battle. A loud ding from his back pocket almost made him jump. He grabbed his mobile phone, flipping it open.

I'm down by the river, hiding behind a clump of bushes. Video camera at the ready. I'll make sure I stay quiet. See you soon buddy.

Smiling, Joel punched back, *Thanks Ben, I owe you one.*

He couldn't believe this day had finally come. It was the day after his eighteenth birthday, he was officially an adult, and this was the first day of the rest of his life. Now his high-school years were done and dusted, he had moved from beneath his parents' roof into the renovated ex-tobacco barn and become his father's right-hand man on the farm. It was an absolute dream come true. Now, all he needed was for her to say yes and his life would be perfect.

He heard her hurried footsteps just before she appeared from the trail that led to her place. Right on time, she had a torch in hand, and her long, dark hair was loose and swaying around her back.

'Hey there, beautiful,' he said, his heart careening at the mere sight of her. 'I've missed you.'

'Hey there, handsome.' Juliette ran into his open arms and wrapped hers around him. 'We only saw each other seven hours ago. But I missed you too,' she said, a smile playing on her glossy lips as she pulled back a little, rose up on her toes and kissed him.

'So, did you tell your parents you were meeting me tonight?' he asked cheekily.

'Yeah, right.' Her radiant smile faded as she shook her head. 'I wish I could tell them the truth, but Dad would kill me if he knew I was sneaking out, meeting some boy ... doing god-only-knows

what.' She mimicked her stepfather's booming voice while rolling her eyes. She tried to force a smile – he could tell she was faking it because her lips trembled.

'I'm not just "some boy", Jules.' Her words cut, but he shook it off. Malcolm Kern, Juliette's stepfather and the town's pastor, was very strict about Juliette doing anything outside of school or church. Joel had high regard for the man, who'd always proven himself to be a devout Christian, and he always felt a little guilty breaking Malcolm's rules, even if he didn't know about it. 'I'm your boyfriend. We've been together for almost a year now, even if it's on the quiet, and our families know each other so well. Surely your parents would be happy about our love when you find the right time to tell them?'

'All in good time, my gorgeous man.' She gently touched his cheek and studied him with her dark eyes. 'I know you think you know my dad. Heck, the whole town thinks they know him because they see him up on his pulpit every Sunday, giving his sermons. But trust me – I know him the most, and he won't like me being with *any* guy, especially before I've turned eighteen.'

'You're only five days off it, though.' Not that Joel needed to remind her of her birthday, a date easy for him to remember when they were only a week apart.

'Yeah, I know.' She sighed with a half-shrug. 'Stupid, but I live beneath his roof, and I have to abide by his rules. Or at least do my very best to make sure he doesn't find out I'm breaking them.' She grimaced. 'Because if he did, I'd be in big trouble.'

'He's only so strict because he loves you and wants the best for you, I'm sure,' he said, gently tucking stray hair from her face and over her ears, which were donned with the dangly heart-shaped earrings he'd bought her for Valentine's Day.

Sadness splashed across her face as she cuddled into him, slicing at his heart – he hated seeing her upset. Ignoring his burning urge to do what he so longed to do and go around to ask Malcolm Kern for his stepdaughter’s hand in marriage – not something easily done when Malcolm thought he and Juliette were just friends – he did his best to focus on Juliette.

He turned his face into her ear, whispering, ‘I love you.’

‘I love you too, Joel. So much.’ She pulled back a little and smiled now. ‘So, tell me, what was so important that I needed to sneak out to meet you?’

Feeling on top of the world, though a little nervous, he unravelled his arms from around her and grabbed her hand, savouring the sensation of his fingers interlaced with hers. ‘Come on and I’ll show you.’ She allowed him to lead her, their footfalls softened by the blanket of leaves along the path leading from Hunter Farmstead to the burbles of Little Heart River.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked, her sweet voice hushed.

‘To our special place.’ He fleetingly remembered their very first kiss by the river and his heart quickened.

‘I only have an hour or so before I have to be back, Joel.’ She hesitated a little. ‘The longer I’m gone, the more chance of Mum or Dad sticking their head in to check on me.’

‘All good, Firecracker.’ He flashed her a grin. ‘This won’t take too long, I promise.’

Juliette regarded him and then nodded. ‘Then let’s get there, quick smart.’

The weight of the ring in his back pocket only added to Joel’s nervousness. He couldn’t get to the bank of the river quick enough. He’d been waiting for this day to arrive ever since he’d locked eyes with her across the packed Sunday church seven

years ago. Tonight was the night he'd make an honest woman of her – if she said yes.

Juliette's soft voice broke his satisfying train of thought. 'Joel, there's something I have to tell you.' She seemed apprehensive to speak what was on her mind, so much so his heart skidded to an almighty stop.

Trying to act nonchalant, he looked at her. 'Sure, Jules. Shoot.'

She bit her lip and then released a sigh. 'Remember I told you I'd applied to James Cook University to do my Bachelor of Education?'

'Yeah ...' He held his breath.

'Well, I got a letter back from them this afternoon,' she said in a rush. 'I've been accepted.' She gave his hand a squeeze.

'Holy heck.' His thoughts took off like spooked wild horses, and his heart sank to his boots like lead. She'd have to move. The university was in Cairns, only two hours away but still too far. With the course going for four years, they wouldn't be living together anytime soon. He couldn't move with her. It meant too much to his father that Joel had taken the job by his side, and Joel was proud and keen to follow in his footsteps.

Her pained expression pulled him to a stop. 'Joel, please say something.'

He swallowed down his bitter disappointment – this meant a lot to her. 'Sorry. Wow, that's wonderful news! I'm so happy for you.' And he genuinely was – just not so much for himself. Not wanting her to glimpse his deep sorrow, he picked her up and spun her around until she laughed, just long enough to pull himself together.

She pulled back a little, her smile wide, warm and relieved. 'So, you're okay with it?'

‘Of course, Firecracker,’ he lied. ‘You’ve always wanted to be a teacher, so who am I to stop you from reaching your dream?’ He placed a lingering kiss on her lips as he eased her back to the ground. ‘We’ll be right. Long distance won’t matter a bit.’

Her hands slipped from his shoulders. ‘It’s not really long distance,’ she offered with a little shrug. ‘I can drive here, and you can come visit me. Any time, day or night.’

‘When we’re not studying, or working, or ...’ At the hurt flashing in her eyes, he stopped himself from going further into the negative, a habit that frustrated her at times. ‘But yeah, of course we can, all the time. What’s four years anyway? We’ve got this.’

‘You’re the best boyfriend ever, Joel Hunter. Thank you for being so awesome.’

‘I do my best.’ He puffed out his chest and forced a gallant grin. ‘And you are the most awesome girlfriend ever.’ He wrapped his arms around her tiny waist, imagining her as his wife and himself as her husband.

‘Naw. I love you, so much.’

‘I love you, too, Jules, always and forever.’ It hit him that he didn’t need to curb his plans, just tweak them a little. Their love would get them through the next few years. God was just testing them. The new awareness buoyed him.

Juliette pushed up on her tippy toes and pressed another strawberry-glossed kiss upon his lips. When she sank back down to the earth, she flashed him a familiar challenging grin. ‘How about the first one to our secret spot scores a foot rub?’

‘Even though I’m always giving you foot rubs.’ His swooning heart skipping beats, Joel matched her grin. ‘You’re on like Donkey Kong, Jules.’

‘On like Donkey Kong?’ She chuckled. ‘My goodness, Joel Hunter, you’re so darn *groovy*, I can’t handle it.’ With a wide smile, she lingered for a moment before clapping her hands. ‘Right then, race ya to the finishing line!’ Competitiveness flashed in her eyes as she spun in her thongs and took off, long black hair swishing around her waist, her turquoise boho-style dress floating at her ankles.

‘Oi, no fair! You got a head start,’ Joel called after her playfully.

‘Come on and catch up, you slow coach,’ she teased, her laughter hanging heavily on the air.

Joel chuckled at her exuberance. She always made him feel acutely alive, and so very loved. She was beautiful, ethereal – his very own gift from the heavens. With beads of sweat trickling down his back, he trailed her swiftly, weaving through the thicket of trees and scrub towards the gurgles of Little Heart River. The river bordered and divided three properties – Hunter Farmstead, all of two hundred acres, the opulent Davis Horse Stud, close to nine hundred acres with a sprawling homestead and classy stables to boot, and Juliette’s parents’ house on a humble five acres. Juliette and her parents had moved there six years ago, when she was almost twelve, from a cramped flat behind the church. Word was the property had been a bribe from Ron and Margery Davis, but for what, Joel had never bothered to ask. He didn’t believe the tale. Gossip was the devil’s tongue, his mother always said. He just thanked his lucky stars that they were virtually neighbours and they got to see each other a lot more than when she lived in town.

A full moon shimmered against the velvet black of night, spilling silvery light over the worn path they’d taken many times before. Clearing a fallen tree trunk just in the nick of time, he

patted his back pockets, making sure the ring and the key were still safe and secure. He was still going to offer both to her – it was her choice what happened after that. His heart flip-flopped at the thought of her walking down the aisle to him, and then afterwards, to the very first time he and Juliette would make love, both waiting until fully committed.

Juliette's squeals of laughter carried from up ahead, bringing him back to the present. In the thick of the shadows, the path turned sharply, and he cornered it perfectly, the thicket of native trees finally giving way to a small clearing that was home to their small part of Little Heart River – their special spot. It always would be. One day, they'd bring their children here, to share it as a family. Just up ahead, Juliette was kneeling at the edge of the river, scooping up handfuls of the water lazily travelling over the rocky riverbed. She and the stream were lit up, dreamlike, by the silvery moonlight.

Hearing him approach, she looked over her shoulder, grinning. 'About time you showed up. I thought you'd gone and got yourself lost.'

'Oh, hardy-ha-ha, Little Miss Comedian.' Beaming from ear to ear, Joel fought to catch his breath as he looked to where Ben would most probably be hiding, ready to film the special moment with his video camera. A quick thumbs up from the shadows let him know they were good to go. 'You're lucky to have a boyfriend like me, who gives you a head start and then lets you win,' he said a little less breathlessly.

'Pull the other one, Hunter. I beat you, fair and square.' She gave him the forks and he grinned wickedly. 'Now you owe me an even longer foot rub than I usually get.'

‘Talk about a bloody slave driver.’ Joel playfully groaned. ‘But if I have to ...’ He loved being able to touch her soft skin, so it was no chore to rub her feet.

Somewhere in the line-up of the huge paperbark trees that hugged the river’s banks, a barn owl screeched. Seconds later, its mate replied.

Joel glanced upwards. ‘Man, oh man, they sound eerie.’

‘They do, huh.’ Standing, Juliette joined him in trying to spot the birds. ‘But I love how they mate for life.’ She looked back at him. ‘So romantic, don’t you think?’

‘Damn straight it’s romantic.’ His passion stirred by the privacy granted by the bushlands surrounding them, he grabbed the perfect moment to do what he came here for.

Offering him a delicate smile filled with love, Juliette regarded the trees once more.

Lightheaded with anticipation, Joel dropped to his knees.

Turning her attention back to him, Juliette tilted her head, bewildered. ‘What are you doing?’ She looked to the ground. ‘Did you drop something?’ She fell to her knees, ready to help him.

Unable to get a word out for the lump of emotion stuck in his throat, Joel just shook his head. He’d practised a huge speech at length, one filled with sentiment, but now, in the heat of the moment, he was finding it hard to string a sentence together.

Come on, pull it together, Hunter.

Juliette took his hand, her gaze deeply concerned. ‘Joel, is everything okay?’

‘Uh-huh.’ He fleetingly glanced to the blanket of stars, glittering like millions of crystals, before bringing his teary gaze

back to the love of his life. Then, with a deep inhalation, he went to his back pocket, plucked out his grandmother's ring, and flicked the box open. 'Juliette Kern, will you do me the absolute honour of marrying me?' He held his breath.

'Oh my goodness! Joel ...' Juliette's lips quivered into a happy smile, but before she could answer, heavy footfalls sounded.

They appeared out of nowhere.