

*If you stay at the edge, you'll never know  
what lurks beneath the surface ...*



# CHAPTER 1

## **Riverstone Ridge, Huntingvale**

Seething after the horrible events of the day, Nina Jones stripped off her shirt and shorts, shoved her rollerskates out of the way, and quickly checked under her bed one last time before flopping onto it – not that she'd be remaining in it for long. She felt silly, checking for some menacing creature, and deep down knew she'd never find one, but she just couldn't help herself. Two months shy of turning seventeen, and she was still a little afraid of the dark, was wary of anything she couldn't see every nook and cranny of, and that included Riverstone Ridge's top dam. Hell, any dam, to be honest. Why? She hadn't a clue.

Nina found it strange because she could swim in creeks and rivers, and loved to dunk herself in the ocean, but try and drag her into a dam for a swim, and she'd lose her mind. So many times she'd begrudgingly sat on the bank and watched her mates having a blast in the water on their family farms. They'd

always have a crack at coaxing her in, but try as she might, going anywhere past dipping her toes into the shallows was unbearable. The irrational fear was just another thing in her unconventional life that she could toss in the 'too hard' basket. How was she meant to know the reasons behind some of her burdens when she didn't know where she'd come from to begin with? Although thankful for Bea taking her in as a baby, gifting her with her last name, being adopted had its challenges ...

A sob rose from her chest, but gathering every bit of wilfulness she was known for, she choked it back. She was *not* going to shed any more tears, especially over him, or her. Josh Harper didn't deserve her heartache, nor did Kimberley Lovell. They could have each other as far as she was concerned. It may hurt like hell now, but she'd get through it, she just had to. Thanks to the optimistic nature of her adoptive mum, Beatrice Grace Jones, she believed in a lot of good things. She'd be able to write a list a mile long if asked to, but the male species being virtuous and happily-ever-afters certainly wouldn't get a look-in, not after what she'd been through. Both her parents had given up on her before she'd even been able to string a sentence together, and she'd just lost her boyfriend *and* a girl she'd classed as a friend on the very same day, and none of this was through any fault of her own. Well, that's what Aunty Bea had told her when she'd arrived home in floods of tears from school this afternoon – easy to say, difficult to take on board.

Reliving the sight of Josh and Kimberley groping each other, her aching heart squeezed tighter. Her heart had split in two when she'd busted them behind the sports equipment shed, Kimberley with her blouse unbuttoned and Josh with his hands fondling her breasts and his tongue down her throat. Nina's best mate, Cassie,

had warned her not to date Josh and she should have listened, his reputation of being a player now confirmed – and only days after she'd been stupid enough to lose her virginity to him.

Sighing as though the weight of the world was upon her shoulders, Nina climbed from her tousled bed, dressed only in her bra and undies. Far North Queensland was known for the stifling weather this time of the year, but this was the hottest summer she could remember, the thick heat seeping into her and refusing to give up. Her bedroom feeling like a furnace, she stopped and stood in front of her air-conditioner, groaning in pleasure as the beads of sweat evaporated from her face and belly. Twirling around, she lifted her blonde, shoulder-length hair from her neck – the cool air absolute bliss against her bare skin. The vents rattled despairingly as the ancient appliance competed with the balmy temperature, and then, with a cough and a spit, blew puffs of hot air. She gave it a firm tap, but to no avail – if only they weren't so expensive to replace, but with everything else that needed tending to around here, Bea had enough to keep up with financially.

Exhausted, although determined to get to the paddock party, Nina looked to where silvery light spilled from between her parted curtains. The veil of night having arrived hours ago, it was possibly much cooler outside. She flicked the air-conditioner off at the wall and padded over. With a thrust of her hip she shoved her stubborn bedroom window open and sat on the ledge. The sweet scent of the surrounding mangos and lychee orchids carried upon the breeze, which, to her relief, was a few notches cooler than her bedroom.

Heaving another heavy sigh, she blinked back the next round of gathering tears. She was so sick of crying, was so over feeling

like this, and all because of some stupid boy. They sucked. Big time. From now on, she wasn't interested in commitment, her dreams of travelling the world with nothing but a backpack and her love of adventures to guide her much more inviting.

Her gaze went beyond the moonlit backyard with a chook pen in one corner and the dog kennel in the other, and over the many horse agistment paddocks that stretched on and into the distant fence line of Willowbrook. The sweeping landscape that was Riverstone Ridge comforted her. The seventy-acre property was so serene, so very peaceful. Above it all, the velvet-black night was mesmerising, as were the billions of glimmering stars swathing the country night sky. Grateful to call this majestic place home, she breathed all of it in, smiling softly. Bea always told her there was a lot to be said for the sensation that came with being thankful. As usual, Bea was right. And although Nina had itchy feet to see beyond the small township of Huntingvale after she finished high school, she would always return here – with its wide open spaces and majestic views she couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Wild horses wouldn't be able to drag her away for too long. That, she knew, without a doubt.

Biting her already short fingernails, she looked to her dresser, where she'd hidden the cigarette Cassie had given her – apparently it would help. Never having smoked before, and not keen on the smell, she wasn't so sure about that. But, she had to do something to pass the time before she could sneak out to the party, so it was worth a try. Striding over, she grabbed it, along with the box of matches she used to light the candles she so loved to burn. Striking the match, she held it to the end and then dragging way too hard she grimaced and stifled a cough. Her eyes watered as she fought to draw in a breath while ushering

the spiralling smoke out of her window, terrified Bea would catch a whiff of it. Staring at the glowing end, she shook her head at her stupidity, the vile taste making her gag. Why Cassie thought this would help was beyond her. She stubbed the cigarette out on her windowsill and tossed the butt out the window. She'd pick it up later. Snatching her chewing gum from her backpack, she grabbed two pieces and flung them into her mouth. Mint exploded – ahh, that was better.

Looking back towards where she knew his family's tropical fruit farm was, Logan Steele's handsome face flashed through her mind. He was one of the reasons she'd always want to come back here – their friendship meant the world to her. Although she wasn't interested in starting *anything* with another guy, he was a nice distraction from her current heartache. Two years older than her, the wild boy who had taught her to be a tomboy – and the very first boy she'd ever kissed at fifteen (a stupid spur-of-the-moment slip-up on both their parts) – was home from university for the summer holidays, and she couldn't wait to lay her eyes on his six feet of gloriousness. Now more of a man than the pimply-faced boy she remembered, there was something about him that made her stomach fill with butterflies every single time she was near him. All he had to do was smile in that mischievous way he did, his dimples dancing on his cheeks, and she turned from the tomboy she usually was around him into a gushing girl – but only on the inside. Buddies since they were basically in nappies, there was no way she would ever let him know he could do that to her. How embarrassing would that be?

Allowing herself to float back in time, her toes curled with the memory of Logan pressing her up against the stable wall and kissing her like his life depended on it. Recalling the moment

with fierce clarity, she brought her fingertips to her lips. Her surrender to the initial shock of him grabbing her around the waist had given way to a flood of teenage endorphins. Not clumsy, or awkward, it had felt so right, so natural, so intensely addictive. For those few blissful moments, she'd felt suspended within his arms, in a world where there was only her and him. Sweet promise had been there, and they'd both felt it but hadn't known what to do with it. Then, her horse had stuck his head in and neighed for his bucket of feed, and their bubble had burst. Reality instantly kicked back in and they'd both pulled away, saying they were idiots as they laughed it off, reminding each other how they were more like brother and sister than boyfriend and girlfriend. Neither of them ever spoke of it again. But, thinking about it now, if she was being completely honest, she wanted another of his yummy kisses. She may not be interested in a relationship, but that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy a kiss or two with the dashing, and very single, Logan Steele at the paddock party tonight, did it?

Her stomach backflipped with the thought.

She really wished she could be there right now, with Cassie and all her mates, dancing beneath the stars to some Cold Chisel tune, but Bea hadn't liked the idea of her being around drunken boys, and had told her she wasn't allowed to go. Nina didn't think it was fair of her overly protective aunt so, in another hour or so, she'd be doing what she shouldn't and sneaking out. But time felt as if it was crawling by. She couldn't tell whether the nerves twirling in her belly were from the excitement of going, or because she was terrified Bea was going to catch her slipping out her bedroom window. She'd be in deep trouble then – Bea was not one to take kindly to disobedience. Either way, Nina wasn't

changing her mind – this was going to be the party to end all parties. Wandering over to her bedroom door, she quietly locked it. It was time to get dressed and she didn't want Bea to catch her in the act. How would she explain her way out of that?

Twenty minutes later and with her much-loved Wrangler jeans and paisley top on, she unlocked her door, flicked the aircon back on, jumped back into her bed and pulled the sheet up to her chin, just in case Bea snuck her head in to say goodnight, like she sometimes did. *The Wonder Years* would be almost over now and, like clockwork, Bea would be making her way upstairs and to bed. Nina made a mental note to put her favourite feather earrings on, brush some blush on her cheeks, and slip a bit of gloss on her lips before she absconded into the night.

Right on cue, footfalls came up the stairs, and then the timber floorboards outside Nina's bedroom creaked. She held her breath as the doorhandle turned and Bea stuck her head in, her short hair in rollers. 'Are you still awake, Nina-Jane?' she whispered.

'Yeah, sort of, it's so hot it's hard to drift off ...' Nina said, as softly as she could, as if sleepy. 'You off to bed now?'

Folding her arms, Bea leant against the doorframe. 'Yes, love, I'm absolutely beat after working out in that ruthless sun today – and Frank didn't help none when the cantankerous old brute didn't want to let me shoe him.'

Nina chuckled. 'Yeah, he can be a bit of a turdburger, huh.'

'He most certainly can, but then again he is only four, and we got there in the end.' Bea made her way over to the bed and tenderly brushed a lock of hair from Nina's cheek. 'Are you doing okay now?'

'Yes and no; a good sleep will help me feel a bit better, I hope.' Nina felt awful – lying to Bea didn't sit well with her.

‘The gift of tomorrow is a blessing from God, Nina, so use it well, won’t you?’ Bea smiled with the tender love of a mother. ‘I know it’s been a tough day, with Josh showing his true colours, but the heartache will pass, just like everything does. You’ll see, my love.’

‘Yeah, I know it will. It just hurts that it was with Kimberley of all people.’

‘Breaking up is hard to do, with boyfriends and with friends, but it’s for the best where Josh and Kimberley are concerned.’ Bea rolled her eyes and tutted. ‘You deserve much better than the likes of him, Nina-Jane, and you also deserve friends who respect you, like Cassie does.’ Bea smiled broadly. ‘She’s a good girl, Cassie.’

‘Yeah, she’s tops.’ Nina smiled. ‘Thanks, Aunty Bea, for being here for me.’

‘Of course, love, that’s my job.’ She leant in and gave Nina a kiss on the cheek. ‘Night now, and dream sweet.’

‘I will. You too. Love you lots.’

‘I love you too, Nina-Jane, always and forever, from the bottom of my heart.’ Making her way towards the doorway, she paused and sniffed the air. ‘Why does it smell like smoke in here?’

Nina’s heart skidded to an almighty stop. ‘I have no idea.’

*Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap ...*

‘Hmmm, you aren’t silly enough to start such a disgusting habit, are you?’

‘Noooooo way.’ Nina’s held breath came out in a whoosh.

‘Good.’ Bea sniffed again, and shrugged. ‘Okay, I’ll catch you in the morning, bright and early – we have to muck out the horses and fix the fence down at the bottom paddock before it gets too hot.’

‘Yup, no worries.’ Nina groaned inwardly as she watched Bea disappear, followed by the click of the door closing.

She was going to be absolutely knackered after staying out half the night, but she wasn’t about to try and get out of helping Bea. It was the least she could do, lending a hand in her spare time, after everything Bea so selflessly did for her. Bea was such a good motherly figure, Nina often wondered why Bea had never married, or had children of her own. She’d asked once, and Bea had told her, quite sternly, that life just turned out that way, and she didn’t want to talk about it. Grateful for having Bea in her life, Nina had never pushed the subject again. It was very possible that Bea was never able to have children of her own, which was why she chose to adopt her in the first place.

Slipper-clad footsteps faded off down the hallway, followed by the click of Bea’s bedroom door. After waiting another ten agonising minutes, Nina slipped from her bed, being as quiet as she possibly could, grabbed her torch, eased her window up, and, one leg after the other, climbed out and onto the roof. She took one last look over her shoulder, feeling awfully guilty for defying Bea, before sliding the window shut. Desperate to go and dance so she could let her hair down and forget about the day, she did her very best to swallow the shame.

Scooting her butt over the wooden shingles, she eased her legs over the side, grabbed onto the branch of the big old Bowen mango tree that always scraped against the house in storms, stirring flying foxes from their upside-down perches, and scaled down it just like the skilled climber she was – Logan had taught her well. As soon as her thong-clad feet hit the sodden earth, Bea’s bedroom light went on, and a surge of panic and urgency gripped Nina. Being grounded would be a walk in the park

compared to what Bea would dish out as punishment for defying her – horse-poo pick-up duties for a month straight, cleaning the attic out, no friends over. She half thought of climbing back up and staying put – but it was a fleeting thought when the light went out and she felt as if she could breathe again.

As she bent to pick up the cigarette butt she'd tossed out the window, Roo, her crazy six-year-old Kelpie, scooted over to meet her. *Crap*, she'd forgotten to lock the kennel door again. The clever bugger knew how to open it with his paw when she hadn't. Tongue hanging out to the side, his tail eagerly slapped her leg. He was panting as if he'd just bolted across the paddock. Knowing him like she did, and the mischief he got up to on a regular basis, that was probably what happened. She just prayed to god he hadn't been chasing Logan's mum's cat again. It might just be a bit of harmless fun for Roo, but the poor moggie didn't feel the same.

'What are you doing out of your kennel, mister?' Squatting down, she put her nose to his muzzle, now red with mud, and, catching a whiff of something very unsavoury, screwed hers up in disgust. 'Cor, buddy, you've been rolling in something again, haven't you?'

Roo gave her a slobbery lick up the cheek. She didn't dare think about the fact he might have had a bit of a chew of whatever he'd rolled in before he kissed her face.

'I love you, Rooster, but seriously, that's just plain gross.' Grimacing, she wiped the slobber off with the back of her hand and onto her jeans. 'Now come on, you, back to your bed before you and I both get busted sneaking about by Aunty Bea, and then we're in a world of bloody trouble.'

Light on his feet, Roo stuck to Nina's side and obediently slipped into his kennel. Flopping down on his hammock bed, he eyed Nina from beneath sleepy brows. Nina made sure to firmly lock the door this time. Smiling lovingly towards her loyal mate, she bid him farewell before making a break for it. Creeping across the backyard, she shushed the two horses Bea had left in the round yard before slinking into the shadows of the bushlands surrounding Riverstone Ridge, and hurriedly turned on her torch – you could never know what the shadows might be hiding. Then, following the timeworn path through the scrub that hummed with insects, she headed straight for the long dirt road that would lead her into the moonlight, to her friends, and hopefully, to him.

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A few hundred metres along the main road, the crunch of tyres dragged Nina's gaze over her shoulder. It must be one of her mates, she thought, heading to the party. Pausing, she raised a hand to help shield her eyes as she squinted into the bright headlights. Keen for a lift, she stuck her thumb out, along with her leg, and playfully wriggled both. But, to her surprise and embarrassment, when the grubby car pulled to a stop beside her and the driver rolled his window down, it was a face she wasn't familiar with. She didn't bat an eyelid, though – it wasn't an uncommon thing around these parts at this time of the year, when people would blow in from all corners of Australia, and sometimes overseas, for the fruit harvesting season – annually Huntingvale would almost double with inhabitants.

As she dipped her head to try and peer inside the rattly old Commodore, the unmistakable melody of Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' greeted her. 'Hey, there, great tune,' she said with a friendly smile. 'Sorry for making you stop, but I thought you were someone else.'

'Hey, no worries at all.' The middle-aged bloke ran stubby fingers through thinning salt-and-pepper hair as he flashed her a gappy smile. 'And yes, the Zep rocks, don't they?'

'They sure do,' she replied as he turned the music down. A short silence settled, and she felt the air around her shift a little, but she shrugged it off. 'Are you working around here?' She rested both hands on the windowsill.

'Oh, yeah, I'm picking fruit down yonder.' He thumbed over his shoulder, in the general direction of Logan's family's fruit farm, Willowbrook.

'At the Steeles' place?'

'Yeah.' He took a swig from a beer, and then jammed it back between his legs.

Something told Nina he was lying through his yellowing teeth – there was no way Logan's dad would hire such an unsavoury-looking bloke.

'So what are you up to, out roaming the dusty trails this time of the night, girly?'

The air around her went icy cold. She stepped back and shoved her hands in her jeans pockets, wishing to god that she'd let Roo come with her on her trek. 'I'm heading to a mate's place for a paddock party. Just over there,' she stammered, pointing to where light faintly glowed above the towering treetops.

He laughed and then wriggled his brows suggestively. 'You meeting your boyfriend there?'

Hope shot through Nina. This was her out. Maybe this strange bloke would leave her alone if she lied. 'Yes, yes I am. He's waiting for me.'

With beady eyes, he looked her up and down. 'A gal's gotta get it too, so good for you.' He took another swig of beer, his weathered lips smirking ever so slightly. 'When I was your age, I made the best of it, with the girls.' He nodded deliberately and chuckled. 'Not that you might believe it, but I was a stud back then, and they all chased after me.' He momentarily closed his eyes and smiled grossly, as if travelling back to those times, and when he came to look at her again, there was a wildness in his gaze that wasn't there before. 'But there was this one girl, she won me over good and proper. She told me I was her everything, but then went and broke my heart. The nasty bitch.'

'I'm so sorry to hear that.' The stale stench of alcohol coming from inside the car was making Nina want to cover her nose.

'Oh, don't you worry, girly, I had my day, and made her feel the heartache like I did.' He glanced around. 'Come to think of it, why isn't your boyfriend walking with you to make sure you get there safe and sound?'

Nina's gut shouted a dark, twisted warning as panic quickly set in. 'Ahh, he's just ducked off into the bushes to take a leak.' She prayed to god she sounded convincing.

'I thought you just said you were meeting him there.' He pointed at her with his beer. 'Gotcha, didn't I?'

'Oh, yeah, nah, sorry ... he's just ...' Nina scrambled to come up with another lie to cover up her last one. Things were going from bad to worse, very quickly.

The bloke held his hands up, gesturing for her to stop. 'No need to explain.' He chuckled and shook his head. 'Don't worry,

I'm no serial killer, or axe murderer.' He laughed again, rolling his eyes. 'You want a lift to your paddock party?'

'Oh, thanks but no thanks.' She gestured up the road with a tilt of her head, assessing if she could safely make a run for it. 'It's not that far.' Wrapping her arms around herself, she took another step back as the icy fingers of a chill skated up her spine and beads of cold sweat inched across her neck.

The bloke smiled from ear to ear, but it was far from friendly. 'Oh, come on, get in, it's not like I bite.' He swigged the last of his beer, tossed the empty bottle to the floor and then belched. 'I can get you to your friend's way faster than two feet and a heartbeat.' He was still smiling, but his tone of voice and the glint in his eye was by no means lighthearted.

Nina took a few more measured steps back until a puddle of water replaced the gravel that had been underfoot. She felt the mud squish between her toes as a million scenarios raced through her mind, none of them pleasant. 'I'm all good, but cheers, hey.' Offering him a wobbly smile, she wondered if he could hear the frenzied beat of her heart. 'I better be off, so I'll catch you later.'

With her heart trying to bash its way out of her chest, Nina turned to walk away, as fast as she could without looking as though she was fleeing. The monster she'd been looking for beneath her bed all these years *was* real – and she'd walked right to him. This. Was. Terrifying. She felt so alone, so vulnerable – Bea's satellite phone would be great right about now. To her horror, there was a heavy sigh, and a door creaked open behind her. Nina dared not look over her shoulder, but instead picked up the pace. But before she could make a decent run for it, the bloke raced up beside her and grabbed her by her wrist.

'Hey, where's the damn fire, girly?' His grip tightened.

Fear lodged in her throat, so much so Nina found it impossible to answer him.

‘Like I said, I’m not here to hurt you.’ He belched again, the stench nauseating. ‘I just don’t want to have it on my conscience if I drive off and something happens to you.’ He swayed a little, his eyes intent, yet eerily vacant. ‘That’s all, easy as.’

‘Please let go of me.’ She tried to jerk free of his grip, but he tightened it even more until it was vicelike.

‘I will, if you stop being so stupid and get in the bloody car.’

‘Please, you’re hurting me.’ Her voice was choked with fear and hot tears stung her eyes.

‘Don’t do this, Nina.’ He huffed impatiently and shook his head. ‘Because I really don’t want to have to drag you kicking and screaming.’

Her heart pounding like galloping horses’ hooves, Nina swallowed down hard. ‘How do you know my name?’

The greasy-looking bloke was momentarily blindsided, but recovered quickly. ‘It’s a small town, everyone knows everyone’s name.’

‘I don’t know yours, and I would if you were from here,’ she said, hoping he’d tell her what it was so she could ask around, see if any of the locals knew him, if she lived to do so.

‘Oh, I’ve been away for a while, working overseas, only just got back into town a few days ago, for the, um, fruit picking.’ He turned and his attention locked onto the sound of an oncoming four-wheel drive.

Nina felt a rush of relief as headlights bounced off the row of mango trees behind her and fluttered over the barbwire fencing. The drone of music had him wide-eyed as he glanced towards the approaching rumble of a diesel engine. His grip loosened and

she freed herself from him. Her held breath released in a whoosh when she spotted Logan Steele at the wheel, driving straight for them – her knight in his dusty old LandCruiser, coming to her rescue, and not a second too late. Thank god.

She felt a rush of courage and folded her arms defensively. ‘Here’s my boyfriend now, looking for me. I told you he was waiting for me.’

Teeth bared in a snarl, the man pointed at her. ‘You mention a word of this to anyone and I’ll come after you, and Bea, and you don’t want that, you understand?’

A new wave of fear overwhelming her, Nina nodded.

‘Good.’ He spun and walked away from her, and was back in his Commodore as Logan pulled into a skid beside her.

Shivering to her very core, despite the balmy temperature, she watched as the creepy bloke took off down the road, gravel flying out from his tyres.

‘You okay, Neens?’ Looking out the driver’s window, Logan’s voice was thick with worry.

Nina used every bit of strength she could to turn and offer Logan a smile. ‘Yeah, thanks, he just needed directions.’ She bit her bottom lip to stop from crying.

‘Really? Then why do you look as white as a ghost?’ Concern written all over his handsome face, Logan jumped out and wrapped a protective arm around her shoulder. ‘You sure he wasn’t hassling you?’ He looked to where taillights disappeared around the corner. ‘Because if he was ...’

Nina cut him off. ‘Yeah, I’m sure.’ She sucked in a deep breath and met his eyes. She couldn’t help but be touched by the way he was regarding her, so anxiously, so protectively. She needed to

change the direction of the conversation, fast. 'It's so good to see you, Logan.' And by god, it was, in so many ways.

'Ditto; three months is a long time between visits from uni.' Logan's concern lightened somewhat as his tight lips gave way to a charming smile. 'You look real pretty tonight, Nina-Jane.'