

## Chapter One

Megan McCormick froze at the sound of a car door slamming outside. She'd been there five days already and hadn't seen or heard anyone, which was exactly how she wanted it.

Thankful she always kept her door locked, she cocked her head to one side and listened to the distant mumble of conversation. The part of her that wanted to know who was out there pushed to her feet, but she'd not even taken one step before she fell back onto the seen-better-days sofa. She clutched her needle and the half-made black and white tea-cosy against her chest as if she were some kind of granny, not merely twenty-five years old. Her heart racing, she looked down into her lap to see her hands trembling.

*You're being ridiculous!*

Did she really think whoever was out there had come because of her? The media might have been interested in her in Melbourne, but it was highly unlikely they'd track her down all the way out in rural Western Australia. She laughed nervously at her paranoia and forced herself to stand again. This time she dumped her crocheting on the sofa and strode across to the front window. Her fingers still shaking, she peeled back the curtain only enough to peek outside.

On the normally deserted road right out the front of the run-down, early 1900s shop she'd just moved into, she saw a once-white ute. Not far from the ute stood a tall, tanned man scratching his head and a little boy tearing around madly with a football. There'd been the occasional vehicle pass through the deserted town site since she'd arrived, but only two or three a day, and every time they did, she held her breath, praying they wouldn't stop.

None ever had, until now.

The man and boy looked out of place on the main street of Rose Hill, a tiny town, stuck somewhere in the late 1970s when most of its residents had abandoned ship for one reason or another, or so said the estate agent.

'Dad!'

Meg startled, the curtain jolting in her hands, when the little boy shrieked and then she watched as he kicked the ball. He'd been aiming for his father but the oval-shaped ball veered in the other direction and landed in one of her tiny, weed-ridden garden beds. She let go of the curtain as if it were on fire, her heart stammering as the voices came closer to her hiding spot.

'Not bad, mate,' said the man.

She heard the patter of small feet and then the few thuds of bigger-sized shoes scrambling in the undergrowth right outside her house.

'There it is,' shouted the boy. And Megan started breathing again. Maybe now they'd get back in their car and stop intruding on her solitude.

'Awesome,' said the dad. 'Let me change the tyre and then we'll have a few more kicks.'

*What? No!* Her heart jumped back up into her throat; at the same time the little boy shouted, 'Yes!'

She could almost hear him punch the air in excitement but the prospect made her palms sweat. What if the kid fell and scraped his

knee? The thought of having to go outside and offer first aid made her feel physically ill. Silently, she prayed the summer sun would mean they didn't hang around too long. As she forced breath in and out of her lungs, she told herself to be thankful it looked like a farmer who'd got a flat rather than someone from the city, who might have needed her assistance.

As she stood there, still clutching the curtain, she thought of the whole array of things she'd learned these past few years—some useful, some most-definitely not, and one of them ... how to change a tyre. She'd surprised herself by how much she'd enjoyed the car maintenance course but perhaps it had been because it reminded her of her father and brother. They'd both been car mad and when she'd been reading the textbooks or tinkering with the test cars she'd felt close to them. Then again, if she were honest, eventually she'd enjoyed almost all her courses—anything and everything that had kept her busy and stopped her *thinking* had been a blessing.

Shaking her head clear of those thoughts, Megan cocked an ear towards the window and listened. Although she hadn't heard the ute drive away yet, the chatter outside her window had ceased. Thinking the man had gone off to attend to the tyre and the boy to get up to who knew what kind of mischief, she risked peeling back the curtain again.

And when she did, her heart leaped up into her throat. Standing on the half-rotten windowsill outside, clinging to the glass like some kind of spider-man, was the boy. He took one look at her and he started screaming.

She screamed too as he jumped down onto the verandah.

'Ned?' the man shouted from his ute, startling her into action.

She yanked the curtain closed and stood, frozen, her heart pounding as she listened to the conversation unravel outside the window. The boy was crying now.

‘What is it? Did something bite you?’ The man sounded both frustrated and concerned. ‘*Ned*, you need to talk to me! Are you hurt?’

‘I ... saw ... a ... ghost.’

*Oh!* Megan stifled an amused gasp. Not that she found the boy’s terror funny, but she’d never imagined he’d mistake her for a poltergeist.

‘Don’t be silly, son, there’s nothing there.’ Although she couldn’t see through the curtains, the warmth in the man’s voice made her imagine him ruffling the boy’s hair. ‘Maybe we should stop reading those *Goosebumps* books at night, hey?’

*Goosebumps?* She’d loved those books as a kid.

‘No, Dad.’ Ned’s voice was vehement. ‘I *definitely* saw something. The curtain moved and then a woman’s face was there. She looked white and a little sick. *Exactly* like a ghost.’

Megan frowned, her hands rushing to her face to palm her cheeks as she made a mental note to get outside in the sun a bit more.

‘And then,’ the boy continued, his tone becoming more and more agitated ‘when I screamed, she screamed too. What if she’s angry with me? What if she comes after us? What if she ...’

Megan had heard enough. Putting her crocheting down on the tarnished coffee table, she pinched her cheeks in the hope of adding obviously necessary colour and then marched across to the front door. After slipping her feet into a pair of boots, she took a deep breath and opened it.

The bright light of the midday sun almost blinded her but she stepped outside and shut the door behind her. Shielding the glare with her hand, she cleared her throat. ‘Um, excuse me?’

The boy stopped rambling as he and the man turned to look at her.

*Wow.* Her gaze skipped from the kid to his father. Wearing dusty boots, khaki shorts and a blue chambray shirt pushed up

to the elbows, he looked even better close up than he had from a distance. Her insides flickered a little, catching her by surprise. *No*. She'd moved here to get away from people—and, even if her situation were different, this man, with his cute little sidekick, was obviously off the shelf.

'I *told* you I saw someone.' The boy stepped closer to his dad as if he still believed she was a ghost. He had blond hair almost as light as his dad's was dark, and it was curly—so much that he looked like an honest-to-God cherub.

The man put his hand on his son's shoulder and drew him back against his body. Quite rude considering he didn't know anything about her and technically, they were the ones trespassing. *Unless ...*

He recognised her!

Her heart hitched a beat and she braced herself but his expression relaxed a little.

'Hi,' he said, sounding *just* as good as he looked.

'Hi,' she managed, swallowing.

'Are you a ghost?' asked the boy; Ned, she remembered. Now he could see her in the flesh, he sounded more intrigued than terrified.

She looked down and forced a smile. 'Not last time I checked,' she said, pretending to pinch her hand.

Ned laughed. 'Well, what are you doing here then?'

'Um ...' That question was far too complicated to answer, but she hadn't expected visitors so she hadn't come up with a plausible story. Rookie mistake.

'Sorry,' the man apologised, letting go of Ned and stepping forwards. He held out his hand but he didn't quite smile. 'I'm Lawson, Lawson Cooper-Jones, and this is my son, Ned. He doesn't mean to be rude—it's just we've been driving through Rose Hill for years and rarely seen any sign of life. You surprised us.'

'I'm ... I'm Meg ... Meg Donald.' Her new name almost caught in her throat, and her hand trembled as she reached out to accept his greeting. She couldn't recall the last time she'd voluntarily touched anyone. A pleasant spark shot up her arm at the connection and she hoped he didn't notice her cheeks flare.

'Pleased to meet you, Meg. Have you been here long?'

'Five days.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Wow, I didn't even know it was for sale. Or are you renting?'

When she didn't immediately reply, he added, 'Sorry. None of my business.'

'I bought it.' She almost told him that the whole tiny town was pretty much on the market, and you could buy any one of the dilapidated properties on the once-main-street for not much more than you'd spend on a new car. But she bit her tongue, because although she had no reason to believe this man might be interested in such property when no one else had been for years, she didn't want to risk him telling someone who might be. One could never be too careful.

'Anyway,' she said quickly, 'I just wanted to check your son was okay. Nice meeting you.'

Megan turned to head back into the house, but before she closed the door behind her, Ned asked, 'Have you got anything to drink? It's *real* hot and I'm *real* thirsty.'

She froze, torn between pretending she hadn't heard him and offering him a glass of the orange juice she'd squeezed that morning. The garden might be overrun with weeds, but the old fruit trees out the back were strong and healthy. She had so many oranges and lemons she'd already used every baking, bottling and squeezing trick she had.

'Ned!' Lawson admonished. 'You've got water in your bottle in the car.'

The child groaned. 'But it's hot and yuck and tastes dirty.'

Even when he whined, he was somehow still adorable. Megan remembered how long and hot summer car journeys had felt when she was young.

She took a deep breath and turned around. 'Do you like orange juice?'

The little boy's eyes lit up and he nodded eagerly. 'Do I ever! Although I'm not allowed to drink it much.' He shot an accusing look at his father.

Lawson raised an eyebrow. 'If Meg's offering, you can have a treat. It *is* hot.' Then, he lifted his arm and wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

Ned started towards her as if about to come inside but she held her hand up to halt him. She'd spent the first three days cleaning so the place wasn't a total bomb, but that didn't mean she was about to invite strangers inside. No matter how hot the day, how endearing the boy or how good-looking the man. 'I'll bring your drinks out,' she promised, retreating inside and closing the door before man or boy could protest.

'Okay. Thanks,' Ned called as Megan leaned against the back of the door and sucked in quick gasps of air to catch her breath.

When she'd woken that morning, she'd lazed in bed, listening to the kookaburras laughing in the trees outside her bedroom window, relishing the freedom to do as she pleased and the sounds of nature that had been absent from her life for so long. The novelty of living alone in her own place hadn't worn off, but she knew that being alone and idle would drive her to insanity, or worse. She needed to keep busy, and so, determined to make the most of her time, she made a mental list of things to do to while away the long hours ahead. The house needed renovations and, although she had enough left over from her grandparents' inheritance to survive on for a while, she also needed to come up with a way to earn in the future.

Both these things had been on her to-do list. Entertaining a cute little kid and his even cuter father had not.

Again her heart shuddered at the thought of the two guys waiting outside and her stomach twisted as if someone were giving it a Chinese burn. She couldn't leave them waiting forever but what the hell had she been thinking, offering the kid a drink?

Ungluing herself from the back of the door, Megan forced her feet to move her across the house to the kitchen, where her shaking hands took a few attempts to open the damn fridge. The blast of cool air from inside helped clear her head. Why was she so jumpy? They didn't know who she was, so if she acted normal, they'd go on their way without another thought.

She took the jug of juice out of the fridge, grabbed three glasses—then put one back—and filled them to the brim. Leaving the jug on the bench, she carried two full glasses outside, kicking the door shut behind her as she handed Ned and Lawson their drinks.

The little boy gulped his down immediately, but his father thanked her first and then lifted the drink to his mouth and took a sip. Megan watched his Adam's apple move slowly in and out as he drank. Heat washed through her that had zilch to do with the outside temperature and everything to do with how pleasing he was on the eye.

At that thought her eyes snapped to his left hand in search of a ring and her heart sank. Of course there was a gold band glinting in the sunlight that streaked onto the verandah. What had she been expecting? That he got the child on eBay? And even if there hadn't been a Mrs Cooper-Jones, it wasn't like she'd want to interview for the position. Her last boyfriend had soured her on men.

'What brought you to Rose Hill?' Lawson asked eventually.

She swallowed. 'Oh, this and that.'

'I see.' He nodded once. 'You live here alone?'

‘Yep.’ Perhaps she should have made up a partner. Two people living out there might have seemed less peculiar.

‘Well, thanks for the drink.’ A slight frown creased his brow. ‘Guess I’d better go change this tyre.’

He held the glass out and she took it, careful not to let her hand brush his in the exchange. She nodded and again tried to smile, her face aching from the sudden and frequent use of muscles that had barely moved in years.

‘Wanna kick the football with me while Dad fixes the car?’ Ned asked.

Megan blinked. She couldn’t recall the last time she’d kicked a football, although her brother had been footy-mad and made her play with him lots as a kid. If Ned were entertained, Lawson might finish faster, right?

‘Sure. That sounds like fun.’ Her chirpy, enthusiastic tone sounded alien to her ears, but she took Ned’s now empty glass and placed both glasses down by the front door. ‘Lead the way.’

Ned looked up at her and frowned. ‘It’s hot out there. Maybe you should get a hat or something? And sun-cream. You don’t wanna get burned.’

She looked to Lawson with amusement. ‘That’s one smart kid you have there.’

Lawson’s smile stretched to bursting across his face as he reached over and tweaked Ned’s cap. ‘Yeah, he’s not too bad.’

‘Ned,’ Megan said as she looked back to him, ‘you’re absolutely right, it is hot and I do need a hat and sun-cream, but I’ve only just moved in and I haven’t unpacked them yet.’

Part of her welcomed the excuse not to go kick a ball, but the other half sagged in surprising disappointment. She might not have wanted company, but it felt surprisingly good to talk to someone besides her own reflection in the mirror. Maybe she should consider getting a pet.

‘That’s okay,’ Ned said brightly. ‘We’ve got a spare hat and sun-cream in the ute, don’t we, Dad?’

Lawson nodded and that was that. She found herself voluntarily stepping off her front verandah and walking alongside them to the vehicle, where Lawson reached in to retrieve the hat and Ned conjured up a bottle of sun-cream. Lawson plopped the Akubra hat onto her head and then grinned down at her. She wondered if it was his wife’s, although it didn’t seem very feminine.

‘It suits you,’ he said, once again looking at her in a way that sparked goose bumps on the back of her neck. She couldn’t quite tell if they were good or *bad* goose bumps.

Thankfully, Ned thrust the sun-cream at her, giving her an excuse to look away.

‘You need any help with that?’ Lawson asked as her fingers wrapped around the bottle.

‘No!’ She almost shrieked her reply, then quickly squeezed a dollop out onto her palm and rubbed it up and down her exposed arms.

‘All right. Sorry.’ Lawson shrugged one shoulder and backed away, sounding half-amused, half-offended.

As he went back to the tyre, Megan tried to regulate her breathing.

Beside her, Ned bounced the football in his hands. ‘Ready yet?’

‘Sure.’ She followed him along the road to a spot out of the way of the ute.

‘You stay there,’ Ned ordered. ‘I’ll kick first.’ He sprinted about twenty metres and then, with an intense look on his face, positioned himself to kick.

As the football sailed through the air towards her, Megan tried not to worry about the fact they were playing in the middle of a road. Where she grew up in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, playing on the street was a dangerous pastime. But Rose Hill was hardly a metropolis and she reminded herself that she’d seen more

native animals on her daily runs in the forest that surrounded the town than she had cars on the road. With this thought, she threw herself into the game and tried to ignore the impulse to glance back towards the ute.

‘Won’t your mum be wondering where you are?’ she asked when Ned ran close to her.

‘Nope. She’s dead,’ he said matter-of-factly.

Her heart turned over at the thought that this cool little kid didn’t have a mum. She’d lost hers in her teens—bad enough. ‘Oh. I’m sorry.’

He shrugged one shoulder in exactly the manner as his dad. ‘She died when I was little. I don’t remember her.’

That piqued Megan’s curiosity big time. *How’d she die? Do you have a step-mum? Or does your dad wear a wedding ring because he’s still mourning the loss of the love of his life?*

Without meaning to, Megan found her head twisting to look back at the ute. Or rather to look back at *him*. The tanned skin of Lawson’s lovely forearms glistened as he lifted the spare tyre onto the axle, and the back of his shirt was soaked in sweat.

‘Come *on*, Meg,’ Ned called again, forcing her to look away.

‘Sorry.’ She turned around to see the football hurling through the air towards her and reached out to catch it just in time.

‘Nice one,’ he cried and Megan smiled—*really* smiled—for the first time in a long while. They kicked the ball back and forth a few more times, all while more and more questions formed in her head about Ned and his dad. But with Lawson only a few feet away, she couldn’t risk asking them.

When he finally swaggered over to join them, Megan couldn’t help but wish he’d taken a little longer. Ned was such a cool kid and it had been fun to do something so normal for a change.

‘Thanks for entertaining him,’ Lawson said. ‘We’ll get out of your hair now.’

Megan resisted the urge to ask them in for afternoon tea good and proper. She'd succumbed to the desire to bake that morning and made far more scones than she could ever eat; the act of baking made her feel good though. 'No worries,' she said as she handed the borrowed hat back to Lawson.

Ned handballed the footy to his dad. 'Yeah, thanks Meg, see ya round.'

'It was fun.' She lifted her hand to wave.

Lawson hesitated a moment as if he wanted to say something, but then he shook his head slightly and turned to follow his son to the ute. Megan watched as Ned climbed into the vehicle. Lawson threw the football in after him and then got in the driver's side. A strange feeling washed over her as he started the ute. She hadn't wanted visitors, but now that they were leaving, her chest tightened at the prospect of being all alone again.

'Hey,' Ned leaned out of the window and called to her. 'Did you know your house is haunted?'

'What?' She stifled a chuckle.

'Your house,' he shouted, jabbing his finger towards it, 'is haunted. The whole town is.'

'Ned, there's no need to shout,' Lawson warned.

'Is that right?' Megan rubbed her lips together in amused contemplation as she lifted her hand to wave goodbye. She had enough skeletons in her closet: she could deal with a few ghosts!