

Chapter One

‘Now, you boys behave yourselves,’ Drew ordered as he dropped off the two teenage delinquents he’d been supervising doing community service that afternoon. ‘It’s my night off and I don’t want to be called out because of you two. Understood?’

The boys grinned back at him – they weren’t bad kids, just bored out of their bright brains in this back-of-beyond town. He didn’t blame them. In fact, arresting the two of them (whom the town had dubbed ‘dangerous thugs’) for building their own Molotov cocktails and testing them on cars at the local junkyard had been the most excitement he’d had since arriving. This West Aussie town of two thousand had a surprising amount of crime but none of it was the kind of stuff he could get his teeth into. Open and shut cases – mostly domestic violence (which he abhorred), a small amount of fertiliser theft and neighbours quarrelling over petty disagreements.

He could think of a number of places on earth he’d rather be, but like the boys still shackled to their parents, he had no choice about the matter. Moving to Bunyip Bay had been the best of the undesirable and limited choices offered to him. Lost in a reverie of regret at choices made, Drew almost didn’t hear their cheek.

‘Damn it. There go our plans for burning down the school.’ Jaxon and Brad high-fived each other and started in opposite directions heading towards their neighboring houses.

Half chuckling, Drew waited until he saw them enter their houses and the front doors shut before driving off. After he’d read the riot act to them, they wouldn’t dream of riding their bikes down the main street without a helmet. Ah well, that was something to worry about another day. They were their parents’ problem now, whereas he had an ice-cold beer waiting in his fridge. And Aussie Rules on the TV – he thought he almost understood the rules and definitely saw the appeal. Sport and beer – no better way to spend your birthday.

Pushing aside the thoughts of a time when his whole family would have celebrated, he turned the patrol car into the station, parked, beeped it shut and went inside. As usual he found his supposedly senior sergeant sitting in front of his computer playing an outdated game. O’Leary was on duty tonight and heaven help a criminal that interrupted the game. So many times Drew had had to bite his tongue when he thought about having it out with this idiot. Men like him should retire – do a favour to the general public who deserved cops who at least had some enthusiasm towards fighting crime. What Bunyip Bay needed was some fresh blood, a couple of youngsters who wanted to prove their worth. Instead this poor town was stuck with Sergeant Sloth, a newbie called Mike who’d only joined the force because his father and grandfather were in it, and Drew. At least he’d do his best for as long as he was here, although deep down he prayed like mad that wouldn’t be much longer.

He nodded to the sergeant and went to lock his gun in the cabinet for the night. He’d been amazed at the differences in policing between Australia and the United Kingdom when he’d first arrived. For one thing, back home frontline officers didn’t

carry guns on the beat and it seemed a bit like overkill to have coppers in a small country town armed to this extent. Luckily his unit had been armed and he knew how to use a gun if the need ever arose.

‘You’re expected at the hall for the meeting tonight.’

‘I’m what?’ Drew tried to recover from the shock of the older man actually speaking and then work out what the hell he was going on about.

O’Leary kept his eyes trained on the screen. ‘The Bunyip Festival’s on soon. They’ve been planning it for months. The Undies Run takes places on the same weekend and the ladies want a member of the police to sign up. I put your name down and there’s a meeting about it tonight.’

Drew raised his eyebrows. There were so many things wrong with those sentences. ‘What do you mean you put my name down?’ While he’d heard about the Undies Run – hard not to when it seemed to be the highlight of the ladies of the region’s year – he didn’t see what it had to do with him. Generally he tried to remain calm around this guy, but right now, he couldn’t keep the irritation out of his voice. ‘What about Mike?’

‘You heard me. The Run’s to raise money for the Hospital Auxiliary. They’re always desperate for a buck and I’ve been doing my bit in this town for years. Your turn.’ O’Leary finally turned away from the screen and narrowed his eyes at Drew. He totally ignored the question about the other constable. ‘And you’d do well to toe the line around here. You don’t want me reporting to headquarters that you’re a troublemaker, do you?’

Drew seethed, but didn’t let it show. O’Leary might be older than him but in terms of experience Drew was light years ahead and kowtowing to this idiot gave him migraines. They’d butted heads over a number of matters and more than once Drew had wondered how much O’Leary actually knew about his situation.

As far as he understood, only a couple of very senior cops in Perth knew the score. Was O'Leary threatening him? It wasn't as if he had anything much planned tonight. It might be his birthday but no one was likely to bake him a cake and if he were honest, the social interaction would be welcome. For obvious reasons he'd avoided getting too involved with the locals, but it might be nice to talk to someone besides Jaxon, Brad, Mike, Sarge or someone he was writing up a speeding ticket for.

'Right. Whatever.' He sounded like a pissed-off woman but there was no way in hell he was letting O'Leary think he'd made a good suggestion.

Sarge turned to the screen. 'Good lad. There's usually a plate of scones or something provided by one of the ladies at these things. Details are on your desk.'

As Drew snatched the yellow post-it off his desk and shoved it into his pocket, he thought scones might be the closest he'd get to birthday cake. Like everything in his life at the moment he might as well just grin and make the most of it. That beer would still be waiting for him in a couple of hours.

Ruby Jones picked up her handbag, iPad and folder off the kitchen bench and went into the living room where her parents were eating their dinner on trays in front of the TV. She'd eaten hers, all alone at the kitchen table, wondering when or if one or both of them would jump in through the kitchen door, shout 'Happy Birthday,' and come at her with a chocolate birthday cake lit with sparkling candles. She sighed; it looked like that was merely a fantasy. Not that she cared too much about birthdays, but her parents had never in twenty-seven years forgotten hers. Even when she'd been living away from home, there'd been cards and presents sent and a number of phone calls.

She sighed and stopped in front of them, giving quick kisses on their cheeks. 'I'm off to the Undies Run photoshoot now, Mum and Dad. I won't be too late. Have a good night.'

'Don't rush, sweetheart,' said her father, Robert.

'Enjoy yourself,' added her mum, Lyn.

Ruby frowned as she left the house – neither of them had been acting themselves lately. Not remembering her birthday was the latest in a long line of strange behaviours. She wondered if something was bothering them and wished, not for the first time, that they shared more of their business issues with her. Since returning to Bunyip Bay earlier in the year, she'd tried to prove to them (and herself) that she was well on the way to recovery, but they still tip-toed around her like something they might say or do would upset her. While she felt as if she were emerging from the hell her life had been, they seemed intent on sheltering her. And it was getting worse. What they didn't understand was that she wanted to move on. She had been a naïve girl when she'd fallen in love with Jonas and the one positive thing he'd done for her was to help her grow up.

It amazed her that no one else in town had asked about her sudden return. Surely they'd known she'd been engaged, but no one had mentioned it and even though she'd made good friends with Faith, Monty, Adam and Ryan over the last few months, they hadn't pried or asked questions.

If Faith and Monty were still around they'd likely have taken her out to the pub for her birthday and celebrated long and hard, but it was no use getting all maudlin about the fact they were gone. Their romance had given her faith that such relationships were possible and she couldn't be happier for them.

Somehow, while turning all these thoughts over, she'd arrived at the town hall for the photoshoot, barely noticing getting in the car and driving. Ruby parked alongside the historic building,

which sat in the middle of the main street of the town. A few older women from the Bunyip Bay committee were already there – they wouldn't have much involvement with the Run, it was her baby now, but they didn't like to relinquish control completely. Ruby guessed the fact that the evening was all about taking shots of half-naked men for publicity had a lot to do with the extra faces as well.

As she headed inside and approached the women, she heard hurried footsteps behind her. 'Sorry I'm late. Kids.'

Ruby turned to smile at Simone, who entered the hall like a hurricane whirling through the door. She'd only recently become friends with Simone after helping their mutual friend Faith organise a Barking Ball to raise funds for Dogs for Autism. Frankie – Simone's sister, who also happened to own the local café – followed behind carrying a couple of trays of cupcakes. She rolled her eyes at Ruby and smiled.

'Hi Frankie. Hi Simone. Can I help you carry anything?'

'No, no, I'm fine.' A large camera swung like chunky jewellery around Simone's neck and she carried a tripod and some sort of backdrop as well. 'I swear, I don't know why I had them sometimes. Nothing but trouble. No matter how many times I tell Harriet she can't go out on a school night, she keeps on at me, hoping I'll give in.'

Ruby guessed Simone was referring to her daughters. She'd been widowed long before Ruby met her and although she was a great mum, doing it on her own often took its toll. Frankie took the cupcakes into the kitchen and Ruby followed Simone across to the front of the hall, where she started unloading equipment onto the stage. 'Are you sure there's nothing I can help with?'

Simone sighed. 'You could run down to the Bottle'O and get me a drink.'

'I appreciate you doing this,' Ruby said, hoping she didn't have to rush off and buy Simone alcohol. She wanted to be here when

her poster subjects arrived. 'Promise I'll shout you a drink at the pub after. Deal?'

'Deal.' Simone grinned, rested her hands on her hips and turned to survey the hall. 'I think we'll set up on the stage.'

'Okay, then, let me know if you need anything.'

'Will do.'

Ruby went into the kitchen to check that the older ladies and Frankie had supper under control. When she'd come up with the idea to photograph a number of local guys in their undies to use as promotion across the state – hopefully garnering more attention for the event – they'd been more enthusiastic than she could have imagined. She soon learned that's because they expected to be fed after parading about in their undies and she'd had no shortage of volunteers for that job either.

'So, who are we getting to perve on tonight?' Frankie asked, while plating up her cupcakes.

The three older ladies moved closer to Ruby, their eyes sparkling with excitement. 'Yes, do tell,' one of them asked.

'Well,' Ruby didn't need to consult her list. 'There's Adam and Ryan covering the farming contingent, Liam from the pub and Sergeant O'Leary for the services.'

The smiling faces dropped at the mention of Sergeant O'Leary. No one wanted to see his beer gut wobbling over the top of Y-fronts, but he'd been helping out with the Undies Run for years and Ruby felt it would be wrong not to ask him. She shrugged a shoulder. 'He represents the older generation.'

One of the committee ladies snorted. 'We've got enough floppy penises at home; we want eye candy for the poster.'

'Amen,' Frankie muttered. 'Seeing O'Leary bare-chested will be enough to put people off my cakes.'

Ruby fought back a smile. These women were only speaking the truth, but she hadn't wanted to hurt the old policeman and

had expected him to turn her down. 'Just focus on the others,' she told them. No one could deny Adam and Ryan, her friend Faith's brother, would paint a pretty picture in boxer briefs and although a little older, Liam wasn't too bad to look at either.

'Speaking of which,' Frankie pointed through the serving hatch out into the hall, 'I think our first suckers have arrived.'

Ruby's head ticked with the beginnings of a headache. She'd taken plenty of photos of horses when she worked at Vanderbrek's but this was the first time she'd had to wrangle half-naked men into submission like this. Taking a deep breath, she went out to greet them.

'Hey Rubes.' Adam grinned the smile that had apparently once upon a time made him a finalist in *Cleo* magazine's Bachelor of the Year and gave her a quick hug. He didn't seem nervous at all.

Ryan, who was perhaps even better looking than Adam but acted more aloof, nodded his greeting. 'Are you taking the shots?'

She shook her head and gestured behind to where Simone was taking practice shots with a tatty teddy bear. 'She is. And thanks for doing this. I hope you don't feel too exposed.'

Ryan raised an eyebrow. 'Ruby, you're asking us to pose in our jocks. You don't get much more exposed than that.'

'Oh, I don't know.' Frankie appeared beside them. 'We could ask you to go the full Monty.'

Ruby shot her a warning glare. The last thing she needed was to scare off the models. Publicity had been hard to come by for the event until she'd come up with this scheme. Now she had newspapers all across the state promising to run an article. Subject to the photos, of course.

Liam arrived next. Ruby welcomed him and then left Frankie to chat while she went to check if Simone was ready. Her palms were already clammy and she wasn't the one having to undress, so she didn't want to prolong this in case any of her boys backed out.

She'd almost reached Simone when the door to the hall clanged shut and all eyes turned to the latecomer. Ruby tripped over her own feet and her body temperature skyrocketed.

Drew Noble. The newest cop in town.

What was he doing here? Not that she was complaining. No woman in her right mind would.

With his sexy British accent, dark curly hair and sparkling eyes of the same colour, he'd caused quite a stir on arriving in the town. He was tall, well-built and had the kind of grin that gave the impression he could charm the pants off anyone if he put his mind to it. Despite his unruly hair and the motorbike which was his preferred form of transport, he didn't seem as rough around the edges as many of the local lads, but he wore his masculinity as well as, if not better than, any local farmer. Ruby wasn't ashamed to admit she was one of the more seriously affected. This was weird, all things considering. She'd been guilty of lying in bed plotting ways to attract his attention – speeding, shoplifting, littering on the main street were high contenders on the list but the truth was she'd never so much as had a parking fine. She should probably harbour some guilt over the thoughts she'd had about him, but that was hard when she was pleased to be finally feeling *something* towards a man again. Still, she'd never expected to see him here tonight.

Suddenly her birthday had got a whole lot more exciting.

She hung back while Frankie and the older women rushed over to fuss over their new recruit. He smiled at them but Ruby noted the look of bemusement in his dark eyes.

'You didn't tell me he was one of the models,' Simone whispered.

'I...I'm...I don't know if he is. I was expecting O'Leary.' She licked her lips, her mouth parched. Her gaze lingered on the way his jeans hung low on his hips and an intense awareness tingled down her spine in a way it hadn't done in a long, long time.

‘The gods are smiling on us. This one will take much better photos. Come on, I can’t wait to get started.’ Simone started towards the group of men.

Ruby, remembering she was supposed to be in charge here, followed. Although now Simone had put the thought of Drew in undies into her head she’d be lucky to be able to concoct another sensible sentence all night.

‘Where’s O’Leary?’ she asked, the moment she arrived next to Drew. It wasn’t the most polite of greetings but it beat fawning all over him.

He shrugged – and when he shrugged, his T-shirt lifted as all his muscles clenched. *Oh yeah.* The gods were definitely smiling on them if they were going to get a peek at what was underneath his clothing. ‘I think he thought this would be a good opportunity for me to get involved in the community. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘Hell no,’ Simone wiped her hand across her brow. ‘Welcome.’ She tossed Ruby a look as if to ask what the hell she was playing at. Truth was no one would rather the lazy old sergeant over this guy.

‘Of course, we don’t mind.’ Ruby tucked her hair behind her ears, adjusted her flower clip, and smiled, all the while telling her body to get a grip. ‘We’re happy to have you. And now that you’re here, we might as well get started. Simone, over to you.’

Simone wiggled her eyebrows at the row of men, half of whom stood with their arms folded across their chest as if nerves had suddenly descended on them. A few Adam’s apples swallowed as the men stood rigid under Simone’s gaze. ‘Right. I’m hoping to get individual shots tonight and we might do them first to get you all accustomed to the camera. And then we’ll go for the group shots. Time to get your gear off, guys.’

While the men began to shrug out of their winter jackets, Drew

spoke. 'Hang on a sec!' He looked sideways to where Ryan was already tugging down his jeans. 'What the hell kind of meeting is this?'

'Meeting?' Simone's brow furrowed.

Ruby stepped forward. 'Didn't Sergeant O'Leary tell you? Tonight we're taking publicity photos for the Undies Run. We want this year to be bigger and better than ever, with more entrants from outside the town. So, we're making a poster of five local entrants – you lot,' she gestured to the men in front of her, in various states of undress, 'in your undies for publicity.'

While heat flared in her cheeks at the thought of Drew near naked, his eyebrows shot up to ram into his hairline. 'In our what?'

Frankie, who sounded like she was fighting giggles, joined the discussion. 'Your underwear, Constable Noble. That's why it's called an *Undies Run*.'

'Is there a problem, officer?' Dammit, Ruby hadn't meant to call him that.

'I'm sorry Ruby, but while I'm happy to help with the event, I draw the line at publicity.'

'You're not scared us Aussies will show you up?' Ryan asked, obviously amused.

Drew glared at him. 'It's got nothing to do with that.'

'Oh come on, Drew, it's for charity.' Simone held up her camera. 'And I promise I'll be very gentle.'

He smiled cynically. 'I'm sure you would be, but the answer is still no.'

While Ruby couldn't understand why Drew could be self-conscious about getting his gear off, she hated confrontation and didn't want him to feel uneasy or pushed into anything. 'It's fine, Drew. We appreciate you coming along, but it sounds like you were lured here without full knowledge. I'm sorry we wasted your time.'

'I'm sorry too,' he said, nodding once as he looked only at her. His dark gaze made her bones go weak. 'I'll do anything else I can to help with the organisation of the run, I promise. It sounds like a great event for a great cause.'

Before anything else could be said on the matter, Simone's mobile phone started blaring. Groaning, she dragged it out of her pocket, looked at the screen and then cursed 'kids' before answering. She turned and walked a few steps towards the stage. Everyone waited, eavesdropping on her heated conversation. Finally, she clicked off, sighed loudly and turned around.

'Sorry folks, looks like I'll have to pop out for a moment.' She shoved her phone in her pocket. 'Harriet has gone AWOL and Grace is stressing that some psycho will break into the house and murder her if she's alone.'

Drew raised his eyebrows and Simone rushed to placate him. 'It's okay, they're both old enough to be left alone. Although when I find Harriet I'll skin her alive. I didn't give her permission to go out. I promise I won't be more than five minutes.'

'I can go and check on your daughter,' Drew offered.

'Ya sure? I only live two streets away and I'm sure Grace will feel much better if you have a quick look around and tell her the house is safe.'

Drew chuckled. 'Give me your address and then call Grace and let her know I'm on my way. I don't want my arrival to freak her out even more.'

'Thanks. You're a lifesaver.' Simone gave Drew her address and he escaped quickly, as if happy to have some legitimate way to help. While Simone gathered the other men to the front near the stage, Ruby frowned and stared at the door Drew had left through.

Why had he been so adamantly against posing for the poster? Surely if Sergeant O'Leary had put him forward there was no

legal problem with his involvement. And she'd already ruled out the idea of him being self-conscious about *that* body. Unless he had scars he didn't want anyone to see.

Shaking her head clear of such thoughts – she had other things to focus on – Ruby walked over to the stage. Ryan was already standing against the white backdrop, his dark tanned muscles dripping with desirability in simple black boxers. She swallowed at the bulge in his underwear and contemplated for a moment what it would be like to get close to him. There'd been no such bulges in her life for a while now and sometimes she wondered if there ever would be again.

Ryan posed as if he'd done this a zillion times before and Simone was well pleased with the shots. Adam, who had done a number of photoshoots, was equally at ease. Liam took a little encouraging but caught on quickly. Together they made a pretty sight and Ruby couldn't wait to see the finished product. If this didn't get more interest in the event, she didn't know what would.

As if he'd timed his return on purpose, Drew showed up again just as Simone was finishing up. He had a sulky looking twelve-year-old girl by his side. Thankfully the guys had just covered up.

Ruby went over to him. 'Hi Drew. Hey Grace.' She smiled at Simone's daughter who she'd met a couple of times when helping out with the junior netball team. 'Would you guys like a cupcake?'

Grace's eyes lit up. 'Sure. Might as well have one last meal before Mum kills me.'

Drew looked down at her. 'Your mum is not going to kill you. And I for one was happy to have some company this evening.'

Ruby tried to tame her smile. Drew was sweet with the girl, as he was with old ladies and speeding drivers alike. She got the feeling he could be real tough when the need arose and wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of him, but this cop was certainly one of the good guys.

As the three of them headed towards the kitchen, Grace walked a little ahead and Ruby said, 'Thanks for checking on her. It would have held things up if Simone had to go.'

'Not a problem.' Drew smiled. 'I just hope her older daughter is okay. It's quite late to be out.'

'I'm sure she'll be fine. Those girls have done it tough; their dad died when they were little, but they know how to look after themselves. Simone's made sure of it.' As they arrived at the serving hatch, Ruby gestured to the cupcakes. 'Take your pick,' she told Drew.

With a reserved smile, he leant forward and picked up a cake. 'You made these?'

She shook her head. 'Baking isn't my thing. I'm much better at main courses. They are Frankie's art work.'

Appearing at the mention of her name, Frankie grinned. 'And it's Ruby's birthday so I used my special birthday cake recipe.'

Having already taken a bite, Drew finished his mouthful, nodded approvingly and said, 'Happy birthday. It's mine too.'

'Really?' A strange warmth flooded through Ruby at the discovery of this small connection. 'Well in that case, happy birthday to you, too.'

Drew took another bite of the deadly chocolate cupcake. He'd surprised himself divulging such information but he'd never before met another person who shared his birth date. And there was something about Ruby that made him want to chat. She wasn't like the other girls he'd met in town – most of them were loud and outgoing, but there was something reserved about her. And where Frankie and Simone seemed like they'd go all night trying to cajole him into posing semi-naked, Ruby had accepted his apology gracefully and stuck up for him. In fact, her support had nearly made him reconsider.

But common sense prevailed. While it was highly unlikely anyone who saw the photo would recognise him or even care, he couldn't take chances.

'Thanks,' he said as he swallowed the last mouthful. 'Doesn't mean much.' Well, not anymore it didn't. 'You just have to remember to add another year when filling in futile online surveys.'

Ruby laughed as the rest of the group joined them. Simone laid eyes on her daughter and glared, reminding Drew why he'd returned. 'Scuse me a moment,' he said, going over to talk to Grace's mother.

He was halfway through explaining that he'd sat with Grace for a couple of hours because the poor girl was petrified and he didn't want to bring her to the hall too soon, when one of the other blokes spoke loudly. 'Is that smoke?'

The conversations going on around Drew ceased as everyone sniffed the air. The older ladies who seemed to be hanging around for the sole purpose of making tea began checking the mammoth warming oven. 'Nothing in here,' one of them said.

Adam, who'd noticed the smell first, dropped his cupcake and jogged towards the exit. As Drew followed, the town's fire siren started screaming. He counted the rise and fall of the piercing sounds, but it didn't shut down after the usual three rings. Having been in Bunyip Bay six weeks now, he'd heard the alarm system being tested on the first Monday of each month when the volunteer firefighters got together for their training meetings, but tonight was Tuesday and the smell of smoke in the open air was so strong that Drew knew this was no practice drill. They looked up and saw smoke licking the sky a couple of streets back, but not far enough away to be a bushfire.

The blood moved faster in his veins and he got that awful twisting feeling in his gut. Something bad was in progress. Drew

was already on his way to his car, Adam shouting to the others, when his phone began to vibrate against his hip. He yanked it from his pocket, saw 'O'Leary' on the screen and knew what his sergeant was going to say before he even answered.

'There's a fire at The Ag Store. Get yourself there now.' O'Leary disconnected before Drew could reply.

'What's going on?' Ruby spoke for the crowd of women who'd gathered just outside the hall. Drew noticed the other blokes had already gone.

'There's a fire,' he told her. He hated being the bearer of bad news. Although he was much practised in it, this part of the job never got any easier. He only hoped the late hour of the evening and the fact the fire was in a business, not a house, meant that no one would be inside. He swallowed, before delivering the final blow, 'It's at your mum and dad's shop, Ruby. It's The Ag Store.'