

FOR SALE

The Majestic, Gibson's Find, Western Australia

Loads of potential in this hospitality business situated on a busy national highway and surrounded by prosperous, well-established farming areas. The hotel services passing trade and loyal locals, including farmers and mining personnel.

Ideal for a husband and wife team looking for a tree change and to be their own boss. On the edge of farming land, where crops turn to pastoral stations and mining leases in the beautiful Goldfields of Western Australia, this is a unique place to live and do business.

Licensed hotel, comprising eight guest rooms, staff and manager's quarters. Great possibilities for expansion and making the most of travellers.

BE QUICK. This attractively priced business won't be on the market long!

Chapter One

‘Are you absolutely insane?’

‘Please tell me you haven’t signed the contract.’

‘No. And yes.’ Imogen grinned at her two closest friends and then gazed across at her brand new life. They’d travelled half the day to get here and she was feeling like the fizz in a can of soft drink, desperate to explode and share her excitement.

An early nineteenth-century colonial pub stood proudly in front of them – red brick and tin, verandahs along the front and sides – with the quaint charm you see on outback television dramas. The pub had definitely seen better days, and she knew not everyone would see it how she did when she closed her eyes, but just looking at the old place made her heart feel lighter than it had in years. Two years, five months and four days to be precise. But no more counting. No more dwelling on the past.

Her new life started today. Right here in the tiny precinct of Gibson’s Find, not far from where the West Australian Wheatbelt

met the Goldfields. Three and a half hours inland from Perth by car, far away from her memories and everything she'd shared with Jamie. It wasn't exactly the life she'd imagined, but if she didn't want to lose herself in a dark, dark hole, then she'd just have to make a go of it.

'I think I need a drink,' Jenna said with a dramatic sigh that was not at all unusual for her. Despite the heat and the fact that Amy's air conditioner had struggled on the long journey, Jenna looked like she'd stepped off the pages of a *Marie Claire* magazine.

'Me too,' Amy echoed, placing a hand on her bulging abdomen. Imogen and Jenna swung their heads to glare at her, eyebrows raised, both ready with a lecture about drinking while pregnant.

'Relax. I'm kidding.' Amy grinned and rubbed her tummy. Her face was flushed red and sweaty from the summer heat. 'As if I'd do anything to jeopardise this little bundle. But it's hot out here and my thirst needs quenching.'

Amy and her husband Ryan had been trying for a baby for the best part of five years. Her 'little bundle' was the result of a lengthy and expensive process of IVF. After supporting Amy through several failed attempts, Imogen and Jenna already felt fiercely protective of it.

'We'll get you lemonade in a champagne flute,' Jenna said, adjusting her Marc Jacobs handbag on her shoulder. 'If Imogen's really going to do this, then we may as well kill two birds with one bottle: have a stickybeak inside and toast to her insanity. What do you say?'

'I think that's a fine plan. Come on girls.' Imogen placed her hands on her hips and her two friends linked their arms in hers. Together they strode across the road and up onto the verandah, out of the hot January sun and into the building Imogen planned to make her home.

They paused in the doorway and Imogen waited as Amy and Jenna looked their fill. That unique pub aroma of beer-soaked

carpets, greasy food and cigarette smoke (even though no one had been allowed to smoke inside for years) wafted out to greet them. Although her friends faces were blank, she knew them well enough to guess their thoughts. They'd already lamented about how far away she was taking them and how flat and barren the land around the town was. She wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry as they took their time, silently swivelling their heads and glancing up at sagging roof beams, looking down to the scuffed floorboards, peering through the gloom at the few redneck faces staring back at them. Actually, *ogling* was probably a better description.

Jenna took the Lord's name in vain under her breath, and Amy's grip on Imogen's arm tightened. The few men holding up the bar didn't look like the type you'd want to meet in a deserted alley on a dark night.

'I'm not crazy,' Imogen said, loud enough for only her friends to hear. Before they could challenge her, she added, 'Let's get drinks and I'll fill you in. On everything.'

'I'll buy them.' Jenna stood up straight, held her chin high as if she were about to approach a pack of wild dingoes, and disentangled her arm. 'You two get us a table.' She peered around and screwed up her otherwise perfect nose. 'If you can find a clean one.'

So The Majestic wasn't in the best shape. Yes, it would likely fail dismally in any city hygiene test – not to mention decor contest – but Imogen couldn't wait to share her vision.

While Jenna approached the old man serving behind the bar, Imogen led Amy to the table closest to an open window, furthest away from the other customers. She didn't want the locals to overhear her plans just yet. She'd asked the current owners not to blow her cover if they happened to see her here. Although she hadn't lived in a small town in donkey's years, she hadn't forgotten how fast gossip spread, and she wanted to make sure the sale went through before the bush telegraph cranked up.

‘Everyone’s staring at us,’ Amy whispered as they sat down on rickety wooden chairs.

‘There’s hardly anybody here to stare,’ Imogen retorted, already feeling protective of the old place.

‘True.’ Amy shifted around on the seat, trying to get comfortable. ‘Shouldn’t you be worried about that?’

Imogen tried to rein in her frustration. Explaining all this to her city friends was never going to be a walk in the park. ‘No. It’s two o’clock in the afternoon. I’ve seen the books, remember? This place isn’t doing too badly in the evenings and at weekends – and it’s got a lot of potential.’

Amy didn’t look convinced.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Imogen staring dreamily around and adding notes to her already massive mental project file. It included everything from the new interior paint colour to the vintage signs she planned to complement the new decoration. She’d always had an eye for design and had renovated two houses with Jamie. She could do this. She knew she could. More importantly, she wanted to. Needed to.

Soon, Jenna returned with two slightly tarnished champagne flutes and a bottle of cheap bubbly. Extremely cheap. And old, judging by the dust on the bottle and the frayed-at-the-edges label.

‘Where’s my lemonade?’ Amy put her hand against her sweaty brow. ‘I’m going to pass out if I don’t get some liquid.’

‘Granddad’s bringing it.’ Jenna nodded her head in the direction of the bar. The old bartender shuffled towards them, his wrinkled hands clasped around a glass. He stared down at the rim as if he were a small boy desperate not to spill his milk. Jenna put the champagne glasses and bottle on the table and slumped into her seat. ‘You might have it by sundown.’

The three friends watched as the old man ambled over. Imogen made to get up and help him but Jenna stopped her with a hand

on her forearm. 'He doesn't want help. I offered to go back but he was very insistent.'

'He probably wants to keep his independence,' Amy mused, smiling at the man.

While they waited, Jenna leaned forward and popped the cork on the bubbly. It barely made a sound and Imogen wondered how long it had been sitting in the fridge. Jenna screwed up her nose again and wiped her dusty hands on her designer jeans, then filled the two glasses.

'I thought you said you'd get me a champagne flute too?' Amy stared longingly at the bottle. 'At least that way I could pretend I was drinking the real thing.'

Jenna snorted. 'Trust me, honey, this ain't the real thing, and I did mention three glasses to granddad but he looked so confused I told him not to bother.'

'Shh.' Imogen jabbed Jenna with her elbow. The bartender had finally arrived with Amy's drink, and she didn't want him over-hearing Jenna's snide remarks.

Jenna pasted on her sweetest smile and looked up at him in much the same manner as she looked at every man over five. She batted her ludicrously long, black eyelashes and flirted. 'Thanks so much. My friend here's having a baby you see, so she can't touch the good stuff.'

The old man beamed at them, focusing on Amy and her bump. 'Fabulous news. Nothing more splendid than bringing a baby into the world. Charlie's the name. If I can get anything more for you ladies, just holler.' With that, he scratched his sideburns, turned around and began his slow totter back to the bar.

Despite the wobble in his walk, Imogen imagined he'd been a strapping, good-looking man in his day. Wisps of grey hair poked out from under a floppy hat and his ancient smile stretched from sideburn to sideburn.

‘He’s kinda sweet,’ Amy said, picking up her glass. It wasn’t hard to impress Amy – she was one of those constantly smiling, glass-always-half-full kind of people. Sometimes her chirpiness aggravated Jenna – who had a much sharper, cynical edge – but Imogen liked it. Before the accident, Imogen had been that kind of person too, and while she now found it much harder to summon such enthusiasm, she was thankful to have a friend who didn’t let her get too pessimistic.

She smiled at her pregnant friend and picked up her drink. ‘Shall we?’

Jenna and Amy raised their glasses.

‘To the best friends a gal could have. If it weren’t for you two, I don’t know how I’d have coped these last few years. Hell, who knows if I’d have coped at all?’

‘Oh, you are too sweet,’ Jenna said. ‘You know we’d do anything for you. And that includes toasting this crazy, harebrained scheme of yours. To you, Imogen.’

‘And to this adventure being the beginning of many joyous things,’ Amy added.

At their toast, Imogen lifted her glass higher. ‘Thanks girls.’

They chinked the flutes and the tumbler together and took a much-needed sip.

Imogen let the bubbles dance on her tongue and savoured the taste, pretending it was better than it was and silently vowing to change the sparkling wine selection as soon as she took over.

Jenna made another face, then shrugged and downed the rest of her glass.

Amy frowned as well, then sniffed her drink. ‘Ugh! This isn’t lemonade. It’s soda water.’

‘Yuk.’ The three of them had a thing about soda water. None of them could see the appeal.

‘It can’t be much worse than this,’ Jenna announced, starting to stand, ‘but I’ll get you a replacement anyway.’

‘No, I’ll go.’

Imogen stood, not trusting Jenna not to rip into the old barman. She wasn’t sure whether Charlie knew who she was yet, but she certainly didn’t want to get off on his wrong side. As she approached, she smiled at the two men who sat along the bar and didn’t miss the slow assessment as they looked her up and down.

They could look all they liked, but none of them stood a chance with her. No one did. Not anymore.

‘Hi.’ She positively beamed at Charlie. ‘Hate to be a pain, but I think my friend ordered the wrong drink for my other friend. Can we have lemonade instead of soda water?’ She pushed the offending drink across the counter.

Charlie blinked a couple of times and shook his head. ‘Ah, maybe she did say lemonade. Sorry love.’ He grabbed another glass and turned to the soft drink taps. Imogen’s heart squeezed when she saw the embarrassment on Charlie’s face. His smile lines drooped and the light left his eyes.

‘It’s fine, really. Easy mistake to make.’

‘Except Charlie’s been making lots of them lately,’ said one of the men.

‘Leave him alone,’ retorted the other. ‘You can’t talk. You forgot where you parked your car when we went into Kalgoorlie the other day.’

While they bickered and Charlie took his sweet time filling a glass, Imogen looked around again. The bar itself wasn’t in bad condition compared to the rest of the furniture, but it could do with a good spit and polish. The stools, on the other hand, belonged at the tip. She’d have to replace the furniture and lighten up the interior if she wanted to widen the clientele. And then there was the menu...

‘Here you are, love.’ Charlie interrupted her thoughts as he placed the glass of (what was hopefully) lemonade on the bar between them. ‘Anything else I can get you? A few packets of chips maybe?’

‘No thanks. Typical women, we’re always watching our weight.’

That was a lie. Jenna, with her fair skin, white-gold hair and Barbie-doll curves, had never needed to watch her weight. Amy, tanned where Jenna was light, dark where Jenna was gold, always struggled with her figure – flitting from one fad diet to the next – but had given herself permission to eat whatever she felt like (within healthy reason) while pregnant. Imogen herself fell somewhere in between. She had light skin that didn’t tan but freckled easily, hair her mother called strawberry but she thought more tomato, and was smack bang in the middle of her healthy weight range. Ryan and Jamie always said the trio were like neapolitan ice-cream.

Still, Imogen didn’t tell Charlie any of this. She didn’t want to give him the opportunity to mess up again. Picking up the drink, she turned and took a surreptitious sip. Lemonade all right. Satisfied, she headed back to her friends, putting the worry of how she’d handle her resident barman out of her mind.

‘Right. Let’s try again, shall we?’

Jenna lifted her glass as Imogen put Amy’s drink on the table and collapsed into the rickety chair. ‘To Imogen.’

Amy echoed her and took a sip. She smiled this time and took another longer one.

‘To me.’ Imogen took another sip of her bubbly and sighed.

Maybe they were right. Maybe this was the craziest thing she’d ever done. But dammit, she was determined to make it a success.

★★★

Three hours later, the sparkling wine didn’t taste quite as bad as when they’d first assessed it. In fact, another bottle sat empty between them, as did a few empty packets of chips they’d finally risked ordering from Charlie. Even Amy, who hadn’t consumed a drop of alcohol, was jovial and relaxed. The country air and atmosphere did it, Imogen was certain.

Four weeks ago, she'd driven through Gibson's Find on her way to visit her parents in Kalgoorlie. As soon as she saw the For Sale sign out the front of The Majestic, something clicked inside her. She made a few phone calls, and on the way home to Perth she'd stopped again to look through the old hotel. Before she'd taken two steps inside, she'd made up her mind. If Jamie's insurance money covered the sale, she'd buy it. She wanted to do something productive with the money – she'd come to despise it sitting there every time she checked her back account, reminding her of just how much she'd lost.

'So,' Jenna said, leaning across the table to top up Imogen's glass and then her own, 'what are you going to do with your house?'

Imogen's heart constricted a little. Her friend hadn't mentioned Jamie but they all knew the house had belonged to him as well. In fact, the last house they'd renovated – an early settler's stone cottage in Guildford – had been more about him than her. From the moment he'd seen it advertised on the net, he'd been envisaging having kids and growing old there. And she'd quickly bought into the dream. Jamie had taken leave from his job as a firefighter to do it up, while Imogen had worked extra shifts at the wine bar to pay the bills.

'I'm putting it on the market.'

'Are you sure it's the right thing to do?' Amy's caring tone conveyed her reservations.

Imogen swallowed. She didn't want to cry here. Not today, the day that marked her fresh start. 'Yes.' She paused, garnering the courage to continue. 'Even in today's property market, it's in a good location, not far from the train line. There's nothing anyone would need to do to it and it has lots of charm and style. I think it'll sell quickly, and then I can put the extra money into doing up this place.'

'No arguments here,' Jenna said, 'but I think Amy meant your emotional wellbeing.'

Amy nodded. 'Your house is the last bit of Jamie you've got.'

Imogen chuckled and shook her head at her friends. 'You two have spent the last couple of years telling me it's time to move on, and now that I'm trying to, you're worried?'

'We're your best friends. It's our job to be worried.' Amy grabbed Imogen's hand across the table and gave it a squeeze. 'It's 'cos we love you. You know that, right?'

Jenna took another sip of champagne, then added, 'You know I'm not one for warm fuzzies, but she's right. We're just looking out for you.'

'I love you guys too. And if we weren't surrounded by blokes, I'd pull you both into a group hug.' She took a deep breath, then spoke seriously. 'I am sad to sell the house, but living there isn't good for me anymore. Everywhere I look, every room I go into, he's there. And while I never ever want to forget him—'

'You won't,' interrupted the others in unison.

'I know.' Imogen smiled and placed her hand on her chest. 'He'll always be in here, but I'm only thirty. I need to get my life back. I need to find something new to live for.'

'Well, if you're sure.' Jenna turned and took another good look around the pub. 'I think your ideas are fantastic and I'll gladly offer my services on weekends. I'm always up for a good challenge, and besides, I'll need my Imogen fix every couple of weeks.'

Imogen couldn't help snorting. 'I never thought I'd hear you offer to leave the city.'

'Me neither,' laughed Amy, rubbing her tummy.

'I have ulterior motives.' Jenna leaned in towards the table and lowered her voice. The smile on her face told Imogen those motives even before her friend spoke. 'I've been watching, and some of the men I've noticed in here aren't too bad-looking.'

In the last few hours, the pub had all but filled with men as they'd knocked off work. From their outfits, Imogen guessed that

most of them worked on local farms. Loud, happy men, muscular and sweaty from hard manual labour. So different to the crew that came into the Subiaco wine bar she currently worked in. Most of them wore shirts and ties even on the weekends, and thought lifting a flat pack from Ikea constituted hard manual labour.

‘Ten o’clock, at the bar,’ Jenna continued. ‘I’ve had my eyes on him since he walked in the door.’

They all turned to follow Jenna’s directions.

‘Oh Mary, mother of Jesus.’ Amy smiled and fanned her face. ‘I may be happily married but I can appreciate good eye candy. And that there is *quality* candy.’

Yep, Imogen couldn’t deny she’d noticed that man too. A tiny, unwanted bubble of lust had erupted low in her belly when she’d first laid eyes on him. But that hadn’t been tonight. He’d been in the pub when she’d first come to see it with the real estate agent.

The man in question leaned sideways against the bar now. He was tall with liquorice-dark hair and a two-day growth along his jawline. He wore faded jeans and a flannelette shirt rolled up at the elbows. She didn’t know how he could bear it in the heat, but on him flannelette looked incredibly sexy. He wasn’t in a group like most of the others; rather, he nursed a lone schooner of beer and talked to Charlie whenever he wasn’t busy. The current owners of the pub also attended the bar and meals were starting to be served, but Charlie made plenty of time to chat with this guy.

‘Good Lord, I think we’ve been sprung,’ said Jenna with a slight giggle.

Imogen refocused her attentions to see Charlie and the man staring at their table. The man said something to Charlie, he responded, and the man scowled and then turned back to his drink. He downed the last half in two seconds flat, then barely flicked her a glance as he stalked out of the pub.

Imogen got the distinct impression his quick departure had

something to do with them. Unease washed over her. Although she didn't care what one particular man thought of her – the only man whose opinion ever mattered was dead – she didn't like being judged without a trial. And she had a feeling that's exactly what had just happened.

'What I want to know,' Amy asked, once again jolting Imogen from her reverie, 'is where are all the women?'

So, they'd finally noticed. And finally asked a question she could answer without having to rein in her emotions. 'There hardly are any. The town's population is ninety percent male.'

'Hmm.' Jenna took a sip of her drink, leaned back in her chair and smiled. 'I'm liking this idea of yours more and more.'

Gibson had noticed the three women sitting at the table by the window the moment he entered the pub. They stood out like a mirage on a dry road. Women were few and far between in Gibson's Find and that was the way he liked it. What had been a reasonably good day spent cleaning and servicing machinery now took a nosedive.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled at his shirt collar as he wove through the dinner crowd, nodding at a few locals, his mates Guy and Wazza, and a couple of contractors who'd been out at Roseglen before. He was one of the lucky ones who lived close enough to town to be able to come down to the pub almost every night for a cold one, not that distance seemed to keep many away. Travellers might not think The Majestic had much to offer but aside from work and sport, there wasn't much else to keep a guy occupied around here. While he'd never be such a frequent patron if it weren't for Charlie, Gibson generally enjoyed the camaraderie he found at The Majestic. As in most country towns, the pub was an icon, perhaps more vital for morale than any other business.

Today, he headed straight for the bar, not pausing to engage in small talk with anyone.

‘Gibby!’ Charlie beamed when he saw him. No one else in the world called him Gibby, but he didn’t mind Charlie doing so. ‘Your usual?’

‘Yes please.’ He trained his eyes on his grandfather as Charlie grabbed a glass. He refused to give in to the temptation to turn around and take a better look at the three ladies, but his mind wouldn’t stop with the questions about what they were doing here. Gibson’s Find wasn’t exactly a holiday destination, and it was hardly the type of place three city women – and they were definitely city women – would choose.

If his ears served him correctly, the piercing giggles told him they’d already imbibed quite a lot of alcohol, which meant they had to be staying in town. He itched to ask Charlie if they’d booked a room, but that would alert him to his interest. And he wasn’t interested. Well, not in the way his granddad would think, or hope.

Charlie put a glass of Carlton Dry down on the bar between them and nodded to the specials blackboard behind him. ‘We’ve got that pasta you like tonight. Can I tempt you?’

Gibson took a sip of his drink and then wiped some foam off his upper lip with the back of his hand. He’d been ravenous when he’d parked his ute, but seeing strange women in the pub had distracted him from his hunger. He wasn’t a misogynist, not at all. He liked women and sex as much as the next bloke, but his days of wanting either in Gibson’s Find were over.

‘What’s the deal with those three?’ He didn’t nod his head in their direction or turn to look. Aside from Cathy, who owned the pub with her husband Trevor, the trio by the window were the only people with XX chromosomes in the joint. There were some other women in town – a couple married to middle-aged

farmers, a few who worked in the shire offices, and then the few widows who tried to keep the local CWA alive – but they rarely ventured into the pub.

‘You noticed them, hey?’

Gibson glared at Charlie’s upturned lips. ‘Of course I noticed them. I can’t remember the last time there were new women round here.’

‘Interested?’

‘Nope. Just curious.’

Charlie’s propped his elbows against the bar. ‘You can’t blame an old man for trying.’

Actually, he could, but he didn’t see the point. Gibson had made it more than clear on a number of occasions that he wasn’t interested in finding another woman to settle down with, but it seemed that the more he protested, the more Charlie ignored his wishes. Luckily, despite Charlie’s fervent intentions, the lack of single women in the area hindered his efforts. Gibson wasn’t complaining.

Charlie sighed, seemingly disappointed that he couldn’t rouse Gibson’s interest. ‘One of them, I think the redhead with the big kahoona—’

‘Granddad!’

‘Sorry, breasts.’ He chuckled and continued. ‘She’s buying the pub.’

‘She’s what?’ Gibson racked his brain, trying to think if he’d noticed a Sold sticker on the For Sale sign that had hung outside The Majestic for the last two years. One of the things about a small town with next to no women was the lack of gossip. Usually it wasn’t a problem, but in situations like this...

‘Buying the pub. She signed the papers last week. Handover is in a month.’

Gibson gulped and gave in to the urge he’d been fighting since he walked in the door. He turned and unashamedly stared at the

female trio, zooming in on the beauty with red hair and a rather large ... bust. Not too large, but big enough to cup in his hands – *shit*, what was he thinking?

He shook his head and turned back to Charlie. ‘Her and her husband?’

‘No. She came a few weeks ago to have a look, and I asked Cathy and Trev about her later. Only her name on the contract.’

‘That’s insane.’ He looked around the pub at the rowdy mob of blue-collar workers. They were generally in good spirits, but if a brawl kicked off, how was she supposed to handle it? She couldn’t be much over twenty-five and she couldn’t rely on Charlie. At eighty-two, he wouldn’t stand a chance against an irate patron, although he’d give it his best shot. ‘What about you? Will she want an old bloke hanging around still?’

‘Nuff of the “old”, thanks. But don’t worry your pretty little head about me, Gibby. Cathy and Trev wrote me into the contract. The old girl and I,’ he waved his arms around, gesturing to his surroundings, ‘we’re a package deal.’

Gibson tapped his fingers on the bar top, resisting the urge to ball his fingers into fists. ‘She’ll never last. A pub’s no place for a woman on her own. This town’s no place for a woman.’

‘We’ll see.’ Gibson detected a hint of amusement in his grandfather’s voice. The man was mocking him. ‘So, can I interest you in the pasta?’

Gibson took one more look at the girls then shook his head. ‘No thanks, I’m not hungry. See you tomorrow.’

Before Charlie could say more, Gibson downed the rest of his beer, turned and walked out of the pub.