

Prologue

'I *hate* you both and I'm not coming!'

Ten-year old Daniel Montgomery ran from the only house he'd ever called home, slamming the door behind him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slammed a door—his little brother couldn't handle loud, sudden noises—but the rage inside him right now warranted it.

How could his parents do this to him? How could they even contemplate selling the farm and moving to the city? Of all the ridiculous places. What did the city have to offer except stupidly tall buildings and more shops than anyone would ever need in their life?

He tried to tell himself it wasn't his brother's fault—Will would be quite happy spending the rest of his life on the farm catching spiders and aligning furniture around the house—but of course it *was* Will's fault: his parents wanted more for him. Yet no one asked Monty. No one cared what he thought or what happened to him.

He ran to find the only person he knew would understand. He ran next door to Forrester's Rock where Faith lived. But next door

in the country wasn't a mere leap over the fence like it would be in the city—he hated the thought of living so close to other people—it was a good few kilometres over paddocks and hills. He ran as the crow flies—that's what adults said, didn't they?—and he didn't see another soul until Faith's house appeared and he saw her swinging off the rope in the old gum tree. He'd miss that rope. On his few visits to Perth, he hadn't seen any ropes hanging from backyard trees. All the city kids had those bright-coloured plastic swing sets that you couldn't even make go high if you swung your legs as hard as ever.

Grimacing at that thought, Monty pushed his burning legs harder. He raced across the last bit of the paddock, leapt the wire fence and shouted, 'Faith!'

She glanced his way, smiled, let go of the rope and sailed through the air to meet him. When she got close, her face fell. 'What's the matter?' she asked.

He stopped, his breath ragged as he ran a hand over his sweaty face. He knew it would be as bright as a tomato. 'We're moving,' he panted, delivering the blow in two devastating words.

'What?' Faith screwed up her face as if she couldn't comprehend what he was saying.

He took another deep breath. 'Mum and Dad have sold the farm. We're moving to Perth. Next week.'

'What?' Faith said again. He wondered if it was suddenly the only word in her vocabulary. She sank down onto the lawn—about the only green grass in the region—and he sat down beside her. It was like a bad dream.

'They didn't tell me until now because they didn't want to worry me.' Monty scoffed and thumped his fist against the ground. 'That's what they said, anyway. Truth is, they didn't tell me because they don't give a damn what I think.' He'd never used such harsh language before and it made him feel grown-up, even while he was sulking.

‘Why?’ Faith asked, her voice quiet, as if she might be about to cry. Faith never cried—not like the girls at school who burst into tears at the tiniest thing, like if a mouse scuttled across the classroom floor. Her name and long brown hair in a messy ponytail were the only things girly about Faith. People called her a tomboy, but Monty didn’t care. She was his best mate. Leaving her behind would be as horrid as leaving the farm.

‘Because of Will. Mum’s tired of driving back and forth to Perth for all his therapy. And the high school up here might not be equipped for him. They said they’re thinking ahead.’ But as far as Monty was concerned, they weren’t thinking at all. How could selling the farm be a good thing? It had been in the family for generations.

‘Oh. Well that royally sucks.’

‘You can say that again. What am I gonna do in the city?’

‘Maybe you could join a chess club or the Boy Scouts.’ Faith tossed a grin his way, obviously trying to make him feel better.

He scowled and thumped her in the side. They both sighed and stared out across the garden to the paddocks of Forrester’s Rock. Big cylinder hay bales littered the ground. There were identical ones back at his place. Hay baling was one of his favourite parts of farming. Only a week ago he’d been working alongside his dad, who hadn’t mentioned even once that this would be his last chance to do it. Grown-ups were so unfair.

‘I was always gonna be a farmer.’ Monty felt tears welling up in the corners of his eyes. He fought them hard, trying to keep hold of his anger.

‘You still will be,’ Faith said with determination. ‘The best.’

‘But what good’s a farmer without a farm?’

‘Hmm...’ Faith mused for a few moments and then said, ‘Maybe you could marry me and live here.’

Monty snorted.

‘You’re right. It’s ridiculous.’

Faith laughed. She didn’t even know if she wanted to get married anyway. As far as she could see, the only reason to get married was to have babies, and she wasn’t very sure about them either. She’d never liked playing with dolls, sitting around toying with tea sets drove her berserk, and you didn’t want to get her started on make-up. Like Monty, she wanted to be a farmer—outside from dawn to dusk, ploughing the dirt, shearing, crutching, mustering stock. That’s why she played with the boys at school and steered clear of the girls.

‘Maybe your parents could adopt me,’ Monty said, interrupting her thoughts.

‘Now that would be fabulous.’ He already stayed with them often enough when his mum and Will went to Perth. She grinned at the idea as she wiped her eyes, not wanting to cry in front of Monty. Not wanting to cry full stop. Only sissies cried. But how was she ever going to get through each day without him? Who would catch frogs with her by the dam? Who would climb trees and do silly dares with her?

Ryan never wanted to play the same games. He was only three years older, but thought himself a man already. She couldn’t even interest him when mud pies and catapults were on the table.

‘I’m gonna be bored out of my brains without you,’ she said, staring glumly at the ground.

Monty grabbed her hand and squeezed hard. ‘You won’t forget me though, will ya?’

‘Never. We’ll be friends forever.’ Although she squeezed back, Faith didn’t look at Monty. If she did, she’d definitely cry.

Chapter One

What in God's name am I doing here?

Faith Forrester didn't get her underarms or bikini line waxed, she didn't drink skim milk when there was perfectly good full cream stuff available from the cow, and she didn't run marathons, so why on earth had she agreed to come to a school reunion? She'd hated boarding school and hadn't stayed in touch with any of the girls in her year.

Taking a sip of expensive champagne, she glanced around the room—the one difference between here and Hell being that here they served good grog—and imagined Monty laughing as she described it. Overlooking the Swan River in all its sparkling night-time glory, the décor and atmosphere at the yacht club were about as far from The Palace in Bunyip Bay as you could get. But it wasn't just her surroundings that were top of the wazza; everything from the background music to the guests' outfits screamed glamour and class. She should have listened to him when he told her not to bother coming, that nothing and no one from school would have changed.

Trying not to look too awkward standing on her lonesome by the bar, she sipped another mouthful of the almost sickly-sweet

bubbly and nearly didn't notice a tall, thin, peroxide blonde sidle up beside her.

'Oh my. If it isn't Faith Forrester.'

Faith tried not to flinch as the woman air-kissed her and scraped long, hugely impractical, bright red fingernails over her arms as she hugged her. She was surprised that Kat—Head Girl of Perth Ladies College a decade ago—even remembered her name. They'd not spoken more than two words in high school.

'What are you doing hiding all the way over here in the corner?'

Faith bit her tongue on a sarcastic reply. The better question was why she'd come in the first place. Lord knew she'd never had any inclination before—not since that first time, almost ten years ago, when she'd spent all evening alone.

Where many boarding schools were full of farmers' kids, hers had catered to the Perth elite, and she had never fit in with these posh ladies. Nothing had changed; she was still just a country girl, and now her school pals were married to lawyers and doctors, just like their mothers had been. Not that she'd ever called any of them pals. She'd got through private school hell with her head down, her nose in books (mostly novels about country kids) and her focus on the weekend when she could escape the prison and catch up with Monty.

But when the invitation to this year's old girls' function had landed in her post office box, something had twitched inside her. She'd forgotten the downside of these events and pounced on the opportunity to do something different for a change. Something to liven up her otherwise depressingly dull existence.

Mulling these thoughts over, Faith suddenly realised Katarina Lamberusco-whatever-her-married-name-was expected an answer. She was standing there smiling like plastic and looking Faith up and down like some sort of exhibit in the museum.

'Well? What's your excuse for hiding in the corner?'

‘Just taking a breather,’ Faith said eventually.

Kat giggled in a manner that grated on Faith’s nerves. ‘It is a bit overwhelming, isn’t it? Catching up with all these old friends. So, what have you been up to lately?’

And there it was, a slight variation on the dreaded question, which was really just a polite way to ask if anyone had seen fit to marry Faith and let her breed.

The answer was no.

It didn’t make an inch of difference that this was supposed to be a modern world. Things like husbands and babies still mattered, and if you fell short in that department, you’d better have a jolly good reason—such as becoming the youngest partner in a law firm or making it big-time on a catwalk in Paris. Unfortunately, Faith couldn’t tick either of those boxes.

When she didn’t reply, Kat leaned a little closer and wiggled her immaculate eyebrows. Her gaze glued on the unadorned finger wrapped around Faith’s glass, she asked, ‘Is there a lucky man?’

Faith swallowed and the words fell from her lips without her thinking them through.

‘Yes. There is, actually.’

Good Lord. Have I just invented a boyfriend?

While she lamented this disturbing fact, Kat’s eyes literally glistened with excitement as she beckoned to someone across the room. Faith downed half her glass of bubbly as a whole horde of women formed a circle around her. Just like something out of a horror movie.

‘Faith’s just about to tell us about her ma-an,’ Kat sang, informing her little posse (the girls who’d hung on her every word at school apparently still did).

‘Ooh,’ came the replies. ‘Do tell.’

Faith’s throat went dry. She wanted another drink, but somehow her glass had emptied. ‘Well...’ she said, aware ten eyes were trained on her, ‘His name’s Monty.’

Eyebrows rose in unison.

‘That’s a nickname, obviously,’ she rushed, wondering why she cared what any of them thought. She never used to. ‘His full name is Daniel Montgomery.’

‘Mont-gom-ery.’ Kat tried the surname on for size. ‘Sounds hot.’ Her posse laughed.

Faith thought about her best friend. ‘Oh, he is,’ she said, stifling a laugh because she’d never thought about Monty in that way at all. Ever. They’d grown up together, he was the brother she’d wished she could swap her own with. That said, half the women in Bunyip Bay had swooned after him at some stage or other.

‘What’s he look like then?’ asked another former student as she raised her glass. ‘Is he tall, dark and delicious?’

‘He’s tall,’ Faith nodded, thinking about how she had to jog to keep up with Monty’s big strides, ‘but not dark. He’s got golden blonde hair.’ She smiled. ‘But he’s very tanned from being outdoors lots.’

‘I feel faint.’ Kat placed a hand theatrically against her chest. The rest of them giggled. ‘What does he do?’

Faith opened her mouth to say jack-of-all-trades but caught herself. This was supposed to be a fantasy. ‘Monty’s a farmer.’

‘Ooh, so he’s landed gentry.’ One of the women actually clapped.

Faith summoned a smile, nodded and then pretended to take another sip from her now empty glass. This was why she’d hated boarding school. Even though her family were lucky enough to be fairly well-to-do—one of the farming families who could afford not to stress over the odd bad season—she’d never felt comfortable with the class system her prestigious boarding school classmates clung to. Quite frankly, she didn’t give a damn how much money a person had, whether six generations had owned their property, what suburb they lived in, whether their father was a judge and their mother a charity queen, yadda yadda yadda.

She cared about what was inside—whether a person could make her laugh when she wanted to cry, was there for her in times of need and didn't judge her by her outfit.

Yes, she'd noticed the looks her fellow old girls had given her when she'd first entered the yacht club. So, she wasn't wearing a cocktail dress or heels that would give a ruler a run for its money, and maybe her mousy-brown mid-length hair wasn't shiny and straight, but she was comfy in her look.

While the women around her nattered on about her imaginary boyfriend, Faith giggled inwardly at the fact that this was her best going-out outfit. Knee-high boots, leggings and a chiffon tunic were far removed from her normal uniform of shorts or jeans (depending on the season), tee or flannelette shirt and her Blundstones. Tonight she was even wearing make-up.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' boomed a microphoned voice from a raised platform at the front of the room. 'Welcome to our annual alumnae cocktail party and the presentation of Ms Alumna of the Year.'

The women around Faith scattered to find their business-suited husbands and Faith stood alone at the edge of the room, nursing her empty champagne flute.

'As you know,' continued the principal, 'tonight we celebrate our former students' successes in fundraising for charities in need. Perth Ladies College is proud of our Ms Alumna award, and the continued support by our students and old girls is admirable. It's hard to believe the award is now in its twenty-fifth year. I'm going to hand over to Mrs Priscilla Morgan-Brookes, organiser of this outstanding initiative, to announce this year's finalists.'

Faith scanned the faces all around her. Amongst these women, being crowned Ms Alumna of the Year was akin to winning a Miss World title. To enter, you had to organise a fundraising event for a charity near to your heart, garner the support and attention of the

media (thus giving the school good publicity) and raise the most money of all the entrants. Faith had never thought too highly of the award, which in the old girls' magazine always seemed like yet another way for some women to draw attention to themselves, but as she listened to the list of finalists and their achievements, she wondered if she'd been too quick to judge.

How could you be anything but positive about a woman who rode a tricycle all the way around Australia to raise money for sufferers of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, and did the books of her family's business online at night?

And this wasn't an act in isolation. Most of the entrants had worked hard to achieve fulfilling careers, all the while starting families and giving back to the community. What the hell had *she* done?

She made a mental inventory of her achievements.

Complete half a degree in agricultural sciences.

Coach Bunyip Bay's junior netball team.

Um... This was a lot harder than she liked.

Look after Dad and Ryan, help them on the farm when they let me.

Nup, nothing else was jumping out at her.

Sad, seriously sad. Faith focused back on Priscilla Morgan-Brookes as she spoke about a woman who'd been a few years ahead of her at school.

'Lara Leeds has taken time off from the law firm where she met her husband Michael to home-school their three children. Somehow, whilst doing this and supporting Michael's demanding career, Lara managed to raise forty-five thousand dollars last year for research into childhood cancers.'

Faith joined in the applause while images flashed across a big screen—photos of Lara's fundraiser in which children with leukaemia had illustrated greeting cards, which had then been sold for big bucks across the country.

Another finalist had organised an art show for victims of post-traumatic stress. One woman raised almost thirty thousand dollars for homeless people by getting Western Australian actors to donate their time and put on a theatre production. Faith recalled reading something about it in *The West Australian*.

And the list went on.

Yes, Faith was guilty of serious judgement. If she'd been sitting, she'd have slunk low in her chair in shame. As it was, all she could do was smile and applaud along with the rest of the crowd as Lara Leeds took to the podium to be crowned Ms Alumna of the Year. While Priscilla Morgan-Brookes whisked Lara away to have photos taken with the other finalists, the principal took the microphone once again.

'It is with great pleasure,' he made elaborate hand gestures, 'that I declare our next Ms Alumna of the Year competition open.' He paused for a moment as more applause assaulted Faith's ears, then added, 'All old girls who'd like to participate are invited to come forward and pledge this evening.'

When Faith had arrived that evening, she'd never in her wildest imaginings have envisioned doing what she did next. As she handed her empty glass to a passing waiter, took a deep breath and went forward to join the other women lining up at the pledge table, she suddenly felt like this was a turning point in her life.

This was her year to make a difference.