

Prologue

Henrietta Forward could already taste the ice-cold beer that was waiting for her back at Anna Downs station. A drink, dinner, shower and bed, in that order, was on her agenda because she was absolutely knackered. She was nearing the end of a busy few weeks aerial mustering in the East Kimberleys—one of the most remote and beautiful parts of Western Australia—and was looking forward to a few days off to catch her breath before driving across the country to the Riverina region of New South Wales.

It wasn't that she didn't adore her job; Henri only felt truly alive when she was above the earth, looking down at the varied landscapes she was lucky enough to experience, but the hours were long and by the end of a stint like this one, she was in dire need of a little R&R. Smiling down at the deep red ground below, she knew she'd never tire of the scenery or the thrill of chasing cattle. Stunning gorges and waterholes were scattered throughout the enormous Anna Downs property, not to mention boabs and eucalypts that would soon be a vibrant shade of green due to the wet. She even loved the weirdly shaped termite mounds that poked up from the earth and looked like little cities of mud-built

skyscrapers. This work wasn't her bread and butter because a lot of stations up here used choppers—they made it easier to navigate the trees, although weren't nearly as kind on the cattle in her opinion—but there were still a few station owners who preferred fixed-wings and for that she was grateful.

The mobs were in decent sizes now and the ringers were starting to move them towards the yards. There was just one last bit of bush still to inspect. Henri headed over, feeling adrenaline buzz through her as she spied a couple of cattle in a clearing. If there was one thing certain about mustering, it was that where there were some animals, there'd be others close by. The hardest part was encouraging them out of the trees; once they got going it was easy enough to keep them moving, especially if she nudged them in the direction of the nearest waterhole.

Training her gaze on the destination, she angled the Cessna towards the trees—the goal to startle the cattle with the loud noise of the aircraft, which would encourage them to head in the opposite direction. She needed to get close enough to get them moving but not so fast as to cause trouble. It was better if the beasts walked rather than ran. If they moved too fast, occasionally the old girls would leave their calves behind without a backward glance, which did not make for happy station owners.

But it soon became apparent this was the least of Henri's problems. Her heart hammered at the sound of an almighty bang as she descended towards the trees.

Fuck! The engine! The prop had stopped dead.

No. This could *not* be happening, but even as she prayed to a God she hadn't thought of since Sunday School that this was all in her vivid imagination, Henri knew that was not the case. Hadn't she felt something wasn't quite right with the old Continental engine?

Earlier in the day there'd been a slight, almost imperceptible miss now and again. The engine was nearing time for a rebuild and

was scheduled to be pulled and overhauled as soon as mustering season was finished, but when she'd stopped to refuel, she'd examined around the cowling, checked the oil, and everything had looked fine.

Cold fear sliced through her as she realised this was anything but fine, but she didn't have time to panic.

Her training took over and instinct set in. Using the speed she still had, Henri gained height again and set up for a forced landing, all the while scanning the area below for a suitable location. A long way from the station's airstrip, she'd need to improvise and hope like hell that fate was on her side. Her hands grew clammy on the controls, and just when she was losing hope of finding anywhere close to suitable, a small clearing presented itself.

Determined, she maintained an approach speed as she brought the Cessna lower, then switched everything off after the last flap had been applied. She couldn't breathe, her head completely consumed with the most terrifying, most important landing she'd ever made.

'Oh my God! I did it,' she shrieked as the wheels hit the ground and her heart started beating wildly.

But the danger wasn't over yet; she needed to keep her wits about her a little longer in order to brake heavily and avoid the trees that were rapidly approaching on the other side of the clearing. The small wheels, not made for such rough terrain, bounced along, the noise so horrendous Henri could barely hear herself think.

But she had to. She had to fight to keep control.

Finally, just when it looked like both she and the aircraft had survived the ordeal unscathed, she jolted in her seat, swearing again as a wheel hit something hard. She didn't have time to wonder what it was—although later she'd identify the culprit as one of the termite mounds she'd been admiring—as the leg dislodged and the aircraft slewed around madly.

It was over in a heartbeat. Her final stop anything but graceful.

It could have been a lot worse, she told herself as she sat there, dazed and trying to catch her breath. After a long day sitting in the high-decibel environment of the cockpit, the sound of silence was almost deafening. All she could hear was the ringing in her own ears.

The red dust that had been disturbed on impact settled around her and Henri stared out of the cockpit, almost unable to believe what had just happened. Although there'd been some close encounters with powerlines in her many years flying, that was the nearest she'd ever come to true calamity, possibly even death.

Suddenly her whole body started to tremble. She forced herself to unbuckle her seatbelt, remove her headset, climb out and examine just how bad the damage was. One undercarriage leg had been bent backwards and right up, lowering the fuselage closer to the ground. Bingo, she thought as she noticed oil smeared back from the engine cowl, telling her exactly why the engine had stopped.

Despite her heart still pounding, some of the shock started to abate and she actually felt slightly proud that she'd known something wasn't quite right. Disaster had threatened and she'd lived to tell the tale. Next time she'd simply have to pay more attention to her gut.

It was a good thing mustering was all but finished, because there was no way that aircraft was going up again any time soon.

Suddenly parched and knowing there was nothing more she could do here, Henri grabbed her water bottle from the baggage compartment, shut the cockpit door and started walking in the direction of the yards. It was a good distance away, but the ringers would have seen her aircraft go down and she knew it wouldn't be long before they came to her rescue.

Chapter One

Six weeks later

‘Well, Cecil, we’re home sweet home,’ Henri said, her grip tightening on the steering wheel as she drove past the welcome sign on the outskirts of Bunyip Bay, almost four weeks earlier than planned. She’d nearly come home a few weeks ago but hadn’t wanted to raise suspicion, and besides, she wasn’t sure she could stand any longer than a month living with her mother.

It was years since she’d officially been a resident of this town, but her mum’s family were founding members, having farmed in the district since the mid 1800s when they’d immigrated from a tiny town in Cornwall. Bunyip Bay was where Henri had spent her childhood until heading to Perth to boarding school at age thirteen. This was where her siblings and most of her friends still resided, and her answer when anyone asked where she came from. She’d adored growing up here, chasing her dad and brothers around the farm until she was old enough to muck in and help, and she’d hated her years at boarding school in the city. Not just because a lot of the girls only cared about make-up and fashion—two things Henri had no interest in whatsoever—but because she missed her dad, the aromas

of the farm and the feel of the sand between her toes. Bunyip Bay was in her blood and, as she unwound her window and smelled the fresh salty scents of the nearby ocean, she felt some of the tension she'd been carrying the last few weeks start to ease.

Maybe her boss was right ... maybe she did simply need a break, some time back home before she started her next contract. Some quality time in the ocean. Aside from flying, there was nothing quite as therapeutic for Henri as swimming and surfing. Of course she'd stopped at other beaches on her journey west, but she couldn't wait to take a dip in her favourite bit of the ocean.

There was just one even more important stop first.

Driving on through the main street lined with dusty four-wheel drives and even dirtier dual-cab utes, Henri smiled at the familiar sights. The IGA, the Community Resource Centre, the medical centre, primary school, the old Memorial Hall, the bowling club, her best friend Frankie's café and the iconic pub at the top of the hill where she'd spent many an errant night in her late teens, were all almost exactly the same as they'd always been. It was only The Ag Store that was new and shiny. Henri's sister Tilley and her husband owned Bunyip Bay's ag and hardware supplies, a business they'd literally built from the ground up after the old owners lost everything in an arson attack.

Even though it was only the very beginning of December, the festive spirit was already well and truly on display in the main street. There were Christmas decorations strung across the road, and koalas, kangaroos and, of course, bunyips wearing Christmas hats sat at the top of almost every lamp post. The shops had gone all out as well. Outside the front of The Ag Store stood a massive blow-up Santa Claus wearing red and green board shorts and an Akubra with corks hanging off it.

The Palace was the only building not decked out to the nines, but if Henri recalled correctly, the publican never bothered

with such frippery, much to the frustration of certain people in town.

She continued on and then turned right, driving only another hundred metres or so before she came upon the local cemetery. It was barely ten o'clock but already the December sun had a bite, so Henri parked Cecil under an old gum tree, grabbed her cap off the passenger seat and started towards the entrance.

As a kid, she'd loved playing here with her siblings and friends while her parents had business in town. They'd spent many an hour making up stories about the bodies under the ground, scaring each other senseless, but back then she hadn't actually been close to anyone buried here.

Now she felt differently as she walked over the uneven ground to her father's resting place. *Now*, the cemetery felt sacred, much more so than anywhere else—even church—had ever felt.

'Hey, Dad. How's tricks?' she said, pausing in front of his grave and using the saying that had always been his.

The black marble headstone was shiny and polished, much newer than many of the others, and there were fresh grevilleas and Geraldton wax from Bungara Springs in the ceramic vase at the base, indicating that her mother had been here very recently. Henri wondered how often she came. There were also a couple of Matchbox cars that she guessed had been left—accidentally or on purpose, she wasn't sure—by one of her nieces or nephews.

She didn't have anything to leave, but she knew her dad wouldn't care. He'd always said her presence at Christmas was far more important than any presents.

Until his heart attack four years ago, coming home for Christmas had always been the highlight of her year, but although the farm ticked on with her mother and brothers at the helm, the place didn't feel the same now that he was gone. Henri and her dad had

been two peas in a pod, sharing a love of aircraft, vintage cars and the ocean. They just got each other, whereas she and her mum only ever seemed to get *at* each other.

This was the first time in four years she'd be back for more than a few days, but at least it would give her a chance to properly catch up with her family and Frankie.

A lone crow perched atop a slanting headstone a few metres away squawked as if Henri was interrupting his peace. But aside from the bird and the rustling leaves of trees that were almost as slanted as the headstone—thanks to the famous local wind—the cemetery was deserted, and for that she was grateful.

Dropping down to the ground beside her father's grave, she crossed her legs and poured out her heart as if he were actually sitting here beside her. She told him everything. From her brush with death up in the Kimberleys to what had happened when she'd first climbed back in an aircraft almost two weeks later.

'I feel so stupid, so frustrated,' she confessed, picking up a nearby rock and ditching it hard. Many times over the last six weeks she'd felt like throwing or even punching something!

Henri had this weird feeling that if her dad were still alive, she wouldn't be in this predicament because she'd have called him the minute she realised there was a problem and he'd have calmed her, talked her round. She hadn't called her mother because she knew exactly what she'd have said. She'd never wanted Henri to become an agricultural pilot in the first place.

'What do you think I should do, Dad?'

Of course, there wasn't a reply, but she sat there listening to the wind and the occasional squawk from the crow until finally her sobs subsided. Then, she pushed to her feet, dusted the dirt, leaves

and little gum-seeds from her shorts and started back towards Cecil.

‘Oh my God!’ shrieked her best friend when Henri stepped into Frankie’s Café over an hour later, her ponytail still wet from what she’d intended to be only a five-minute swim, tops.

Heads looked up from all the tables and Henri recognised most of them.

Seated right beside the door was sweet old Dolce Abbott, who’d owned the newsagency when Henri was little and always gave her lollies when her dad popped in for the paper. Henri had thought she looked like one of the Golden Girls and that she was ancient back then, but she still looked exactly the same. Also at her table was the not-so-sweet Eileen Brady, her hair purple-rinsed and her expression pinched. Eileen had taught her Sunday School until Henri told her parents she’d run away from home if they made her go even one more time. It wasn’t that she had anything against the content—some bible stories were ripe with blood and gore—it was the delivery that made her want to set the church on fire. Eileen not only had a talent for making anything mind-numbingly boring but also spent at least half of every lesson telling the children they were full of sin.

‘What the hell are you doing here?!’ Frankie dashed around the counter and enveloped Henri in a massive hug. ‘Karen thought she saw Cecil pass through town an hour ago, but I said it must be another bright orange Kombi because I thought you weren’t coming home until just before Christmas.’

That was the one problem with having such a distinctive vehicle—it was hard to fade into the background. But Henri wouldn’t change her faithful Kombi van for anything, even if he did have a terrible

habit of breaking down in the middle of nowhere. Luckily, she usually had the skills to fix him.

‘Change of plans,’ she said, willing fresh tears to take a hike. Hard-nosed Henrietta Forward didn’t cry—well, not in public anyway—and doing so here would be like putting a massive neon sign on her head alerting everyone to the fact that something was wrong.

Of course, she’d tell Frankie about her problem at some stage, but not now with the likes of Eileen Brady sipping her tea and eating scones and cream, just waiting for something she could turn into gossip.

‘Why are you wet?’ Frankie asked.

As she pulled back to take a proper look at Henri, it was hard not to miss the sparkly diamond on her ring finger. After years of being single like Henri, a journalist-slash-farmer from Mingenew had walked into her café and swept Frankie off her feet. Although he worked at the radio station in Geraldton, he now lived in Bunyip Bay and had apparently taken over the running of the *Bunyip News* from Susan O’Neil. Henri had only met Logan twice but he seemed like a good bloke and she was happy for her friend.

‘I’ve been at the beach,’ she said, surprised Frankie couldn’t smell the salt on her.

‘You went for a swim before you came and saw me?’

Henri shrugged. ‘Priorities. But I’m seeing you before Mum, Tilley and the boys.’

Frankie nodded her approval. ‘Do they know you’re coming?’

‘Nope. Thought I’d surprise them, although no doubt they’ll hear about it before I get back to Bungara.’ She glanced in the direction of Eileen Brady, who was definitely listening to their conversation. ‘Anyway, what’s been going on around here?’

‘Oh my God, so much. You got time for a drink and we’ll fill you in?’

‘We?’

Frankie gestured to a table in the corner where two women were sitting. ‘You remember Ruby, and you’ve met Stella before too, haven’t you?’

Henri barely had time to reply before her friend deposited her in a seat alongside them. More greetings were exchanged, and Henri asked Frankie after her older sister Simone, who’d remarried and moved to Mingenew a year or so ago.

‘Oh, she’s fab—loving living on a farm, and the girls are doing well too.’

‘That’s great. Hopefully I’ll actually get a chance to catch up with her now I’m home for a while.’ Henri nodded to the paperwork on the table that included various drawings of some kind of creature. ‘What’s all this about?’

‘We’re looking at submissions from sculptors to try and decide who to commission for the Big Bunyip.’

‘The Big what?’ It sounded vaguely familiar. Her mum had probably mentioned it during one of their obligatory Sunday check-ins, but the truth was Henri usually switched off after the first couple of minutes.

‘We’re organising the creation and installation of a Big Bunyip when you come into town from the south,’ Stella explained, rubbing her hand over her enormous pregnant bump. Henri probably should have asked when she was due, but the moment had passed.

‘What about the Bunyip statue in the park?’ She remembered when it was erected—her whole primary school had trekked down to the park for the unveiling and there’d even been a TV person from Geraldton. It had been very exciting for her eight-year-old self.

Ruby laughed. ‘We’re planning something much bigger than that. You know, like Wagin has the giant ram and Wyndham a big croc?’

Henri nodded; having travelled all around Australia for work, she was well aware of the many big things their country was famous for.

‘We want something that will really put Bunyip Bay on the map,’ Stella explained.

‘Aren’t we already on the map?’ The caravan park had looked pretty full when Henri passed it coming into town, and the beach was already busy, even though school holidays hadn’t started yet.

‘The truth is,’ Stella began with a sheepish smile, ‘my daughter read a library book about Australia’s Big Things and decided the bunyip in the park isn’t big enough.’

‘And,’ Frankie said, ‘when Heidi wants something—especially something as crazy and wonderful as a ridiculously massive bunyip—Heidi gets it.’

Stella beamed. ‘These two really do spoil her. I keep telling them they need to have their own babies to overindulge.’

‘Don’t you worry,’ Ruby said with a wink, ‘Drew and I are working very hard on doing just that. In fact, I’m hoping he isn’t home too late tonight so we can work some more.’

Oh God. The last thing Henri wanted to talk about was making babies. ‘Sounds like this project is going to be pretty pricey. Are you guys organising a fundraiser?’

Such events were frequent around here—cake stalls, sausage sizzles, quiz and bingo nights, the annual Undies Run, locally published cookbooks ... there was always something happening. If there was one thing the residents of Bunyip Bay excelled at it was raising money.

Ruby shook her head as she reached for her mug. ‘No need. We received an anonymous donation just last week.’

Before anyone could say any more, the door of the café opened and a loud voice pierced the air.

‘I don’t believe it. Rosemary said Cecil was outside the café, but I had to come see with my own eyes.’ Henri’s sister, Tilley,

dressed in her Ag Store uniform of black shorts and a bright red polo shirt, yanked her out of her seat and pulled her into a hug. 'What are you doing here?'

'Surprise!' Henri faux-smiled as she disentangled herself from Tilley's arms.

'Mum is going to lose her mind when she sees you. Are you home till Christmas or ...' She shook her head and glared at Henri. 'This better not be a quick trip to tell us you're working for Christmas. You know how hard Mum finds the festive season without Dad, if you're not going to be here—'

Henri held up a hand. 'Relax. I'm here till the day after Boxing Day.' Hopefully by then she'd have her head straight again, because if not ... *No*, that wasn't worth thinking about. 'I thought I might be able to lend Andrew and Callum a hand on the farm. They're still harvesting, aren't they?'

Tilley nodded. 'Yeah, but they're almost done. Don't worry, I'm sure Mum will find plenty of jobs for you to do, and failing that, you can always come hang out at the shop.'

By 'hang out', Henri was pretty sure her sister meant free labour.

'Speaking of Mum, I should probably head out to the farm before the bush telegraph alerts her of my arrival.' She turned back to Ruby and Stella. 'Lovely to see you both again. Good luck with the bunyip.'

'Thanks,' they said in unison.

'I'll call you,' Henri told Frankie, giving her another hug. 'I want to hear all your wedding plans.'

Frankie grinned. 'Excellent. Chat soon.'

Tilley saw Henri out to Cecil, nattering the whole way about what was going on with the business, James, and their daughter Macy. She didn't once ask if there was a reason Henri was home early, and Henri didn't know if she was happy or annoyed about that. Weren't big sisters supposed to be confidantes? Although

they'd shared a bedroom growing up, the ten-year age gap meant they had never been close—not in the way Frankie and Simone were anyway.

'I wish I could come out and see Mum's face when you arrive,' Tilley said as Henri climbed into the van. 'But I'm bringing Macy out after school to ride her horse, so we'll catch up then.'

'Bye.' Henri pulled Cecil's door shut, snapped on her seatbelt and started towards home.

Ten minute you arrive later, she slowed the van as the sign for Bungara Springs loomed on the side of the road and felt a familiar rush of love as she turned down their long gravel driveway. She jumped out and collected the mail from the mailbox her granddad had made from an old Esky, then smiled as she bumped over the cattle grid and scanned the flat, dry earth on either side. Leftover canola stalks poked forlornly out of the ground, indicating that these front paddocks had already been harvested. Although she spent most of her time in rural areas, there was nothing quite like *this* area. This farm. The place where she'd grown up. Tilley said their brothers were almost finished harvesting, but at least Henri would be able to help with the clean-up and machinery servicing.

Further on, she saw a harvester in the distance and some cattle in one of the home paddocks. She passed the sheds, where she'd spent many a freezing cold winter and sweltering summer day helping her parents, and then finally came upon the homestead, where her mum now lived alone. Callum, Andrew and their young families lived on other houses on the property, far enough away that Fiona couldn't live in their pockets but close enough that she was available for babysitting at short notice.

A couple of brown kangaroos were grazing under an old gum tree just outside the fence that surrounded the house garden, but they bounded away as Cecil noisily approached.

Henri had barely emerged from the van, when she heard her mum's voice and looked up to see her hurrying towards her.

'Good golly, is that really you, Henrietta?'

'Hey, Mum. Hope you don't mind an early visitor.'

'Are you crazy?' She threw her arms around Henri, almost knocking her off balance. 'This is the best surprise I've had all year. You're still staying for Christmas, aren't you?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'Well, then, let's get you inside and settled.'

Henri grabbed her luggage and followed her mother inside, swallowing at the sight of her dad's boots still sitting by the front door, his beloved dogs Max and Muriel resting on either side. She bent to pat the old girls, who once would have run out to greet her when they'd heard the van but were now tired and content to laze around.

'So, what's brought you home so early?' her mum asked as they sat down in the big country kitchen with a cup of tea a few minutes later. The dining table felt enormous with only the two of them. 'I thought you were working in the Riverina till mid-December?'

A lump formed in Henri's throat and she took a sip of her drink before replying. Should she tell her mother the truth?

'I ... *They* ... they overbooked pilots and I wasn't needed, so I thought I'd come home and see if I could be any help here.'

'Well, there's always plenty of things to do on the farm—I can definitely use you in the garden—but we'll make sure you'll get some time for some fun too. And you're not the only one who's just come home.' She grinned over the top of her teacup, clearly wanting Henri to bite.

When she didn't, she added, 'Mark Morgan has finally retired and is home to take over the family farm.'

Mark had been in Henri's year at school and unable to hold down a conversation if it wasn't about football; he had been snapped up by Essendon at eighteen.

‘Apparently, he’s nursing a broken heart because his WAM decided not to come with him.’

‘WAM?’

Her mother nodded knowingly. ‘It’s what the partners of footballers are called.’

Henri snorted and covered her mouth so as not to spit tea all over the tablecloth. ‘I think you mean WAGS.’

‘Whatever.’ She shrugged. ‘The important thing is that he’s single again and so are you.’

Oh my God. Henri hadn’t been home five minutes and it had started already. She took a deep breath.

‘Mum, I wouldn’t date Mark Morgan if he was the last man on earth. He was arrogant at school and from what I hear he’s only got worse.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t listen to everything you hear,’ her mother said snootily and took another sip of her tea. ‘But never mind, there are plenty more eligible bachelors in town. Wait till you meet the new pastor!’

Not wanting to start an argument with her mother this early in her stay, Henri forced a smile, downed the dregs of her tea and then headed outside to find her brothers.