

# *One*

Brooke cantered into the ring, heart pumping. The brightly coloured bunting separating the Ardellan Agricultural and Horticultural Society's showjumping rings flapped and whirred in the early autumn breeze. A brief squeal sounded over the tannoy as the announcer turned on his microphone. Brooke placed her hand on Poddy's dark bay neck and stroked his tense muscles, circling at the canter as she settled him.

'Next in the final round of our feature showjumping event, the Carlyle Transport Stakes, we have Brooke Kingston from Pitcorthie in the Upper Hunter Valley, riding K D Poseidon.'

A smattering of applause sounded from the showground's historic iron-laced grandstand. Brooke halted in front of the ground jury's box and saluted. Poddy shuffled with impatience, head shaking at the hold on his mouth. The bell rang, signalling the start of their forty-five-second countdown – the maximum time permitted before commencing their round. Acknowledgement complete, Brooke eased Poddy into another canter, shortening his stride until he bounced along like a rubber ball, power concentrated on his hocks, a coil of energy wound tight.

As they approached the start flags she leaned forward to whisper into his twirling, black-tipped ears. 'Let's blow 'em away, Pod.'

The words out, she released her hold.

Poddy exploded through the gates, sailing over the first fence, landing cleanly, hunting for the next. Brooke braced her legs, using

them to wheel his body into the sharp turn and racing him towards the second obstacle. He lined it up, calculating ahead, his muscles already stretching in anticipation of her aid to lengthen his stride. Bounding over, they hurtled to the next fence, a straight upright, and took it at an angle, cutting the corner and saving valuable time.

A multicoloured oxer followed, then a rustic gate. Poddy's hoof rattled the timber but Brooke barely heard it, her mind on the approaching combination – another upright succeeded two short strides later by a parallel bar. Poddy tossed his head, fighting as she reined him in. Stride set, she lowered her weight, driving him forward. Up they rose, then down, two compact strides and up again. Excitement trilling through her veins, she gave him his head and urged him home.

They took the final triple bar at a gallop, tearing through the finish flags and out of the ring, almost barrelling over a fat pony as Brooke fought to pull up. High on adrenaline and laughing from the sheer thrill of the jump-off, she cantered back to the ring edge, joyfully slapping Poddy's sweaty neck.

She pulled up alongside Andrew Chiang, who was lounging in his saddle with a deceptively sleepy look on his face. Tanned from a long Australian summer, his Chinese-Australian skin glowed golden and lustrous, the colour set off by a black bespoke riding coat cut to make the most of his lean figure. His long, slim but muscled legs, encased in pristine white breeches, dangled free of the stirrups, the buffed surface of his long, black, hand-crafted leather boots as glossy as Poddy's coat. Only his helmet, a bulbous monstrosity they were all forced to wear at events, spoiled the picture of privileged glamour.

Andrew's long-nosed dapple grey regarded them with equally sleepy eyes before returning to his doze. Like Poddy, Sir Barnaby – or Barney, as he was fondly known – had seen it all before.

Brooke poked her tongue out and grinned. 'Beat that, Chiang-man.'

He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head, the unsecured strap of his helmet swinging. ‘You call that fast?’

Poddy snorted and shook his mane as though insulted. He jiggled on the spot, nostrils flaring and wet neck shining like polished timber, still high on the fever of the jump-off.

She rolled her eyes. ‘You won’t do better.’

‘Want a bet?’

She eyed him, heart still pounding, breath still coming short. He had that look on his face, the mischievous one that had dragged her into trouble more times than she could remember.

Oh, well, nothing like living dangerously. ‘What’s the prize?’

He licked his lips, theatrically preparing them for a sloppy kiss. ‘You. Tonight. On top of the Ferris wheel.’

She shook her head, smothering her laughter, knowing the come-on was faked. They’d known each other since they were ten, when Pony Club and children’s games ruled their lives. Kissing Andrew would be like kissing one of her brothers. ‘How about dinner instead?’

‘Wuss.’ He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and fastened his helmet strap. ‘All right. Pub or takeaway?’

She screwed up her nose, thinking. The pub would make a nice change but leaving the horses made her anxious. If it was only Poddy she wouldn’t worry – nothing upset the old campaigner – but Sisyphus had a bad habit of living up to his Sod nickname, and her needy other mount, Odysseus – Oddy for short – fretted when left alone for too long.

‘Takeaway. I saw a Thai place on the way in to town.’

He gathered his reins. ‘You’re on.’

Like a machine switched into action, Sir Barnaby immediately perked up. His eyes widened and his ears twirled, alert for his master’s commands. Overconfident as always, Andrew threw her a cheeky wink. ‘Better get your purse out, Brooke, because when the Barnstormer and I hit the track, you won’t be able to see us for dust. You’re going down.’

‘Not a chance, Chiang-man. Not a chance,’ she called to his back as Andrew and Barney trotted off to the warm-up area. Grinning, she slid off Poddy and, chatting nonsense to the horse as she worked, ran the stirrups up the leathers and loosened the girth, before reaching for the lightweight fleece rug with navy-blue and gold trim she’d left near the bunting. The wind held too much of an edge to leave Poddy standing sweated up and without cover.

Show noise filtered across the grounds. The varying calls of livestock, screams from the stomach-tumbling rides, squeals and babbles of hyperexcited children. Lively sounds of people enjoying a sunny day, and very different to the previous year when it had rained so hard they’d practically had to bog-snorkel around the grounds. There’d been one plus that year, though: using her superior driving skills to extract a humiliated Andrew’s four-wheel drive from the mud had provided Brooke with crowing rights for months.

Task complete, she unfastened the brass buttons of her riding coat, a dark-navy, feather-light wool-blend jacket with a nipped-in waist that gave her slim, colt-legged and boyish figure flattering curves. The coat was a present from her fashion-conscious mother, who insisted Brooke look her best in the ring. ‘Even if you lose, you should still look like a winner’ was Ariel Kingston’s motto, and one she stuck to with preened perfection. But no amount of expensive tailoring or hairstyling could change Brooke’s casual attitude to her appearance. To her mother’s eternal frustration, Brooke remained at heart a scruff, albeit a well-dressed one.

She undid the straps of her helmet and tugged it from her head, dragging strands of golden-brown hair from the loose bun she’d hastily fixed that morning. She brushed them off her face, the sweat on her forehead turning cool in the breeze, and wished she’d remembered to bring a drink. Or, better still, asked her mother or her best friend Chloe to strap. But Chloe was stuck in Scone styling a bridal party’s hair and her mother was at Rosehill Gardens for Ladies Day, the opening event of the Sydney Carnival. Brooke’s racehorse-trainer

father and brothers needed her mother far more than she did. Ariel Kingston's owner-schmoozing ability was as legendary as her poise and elegance.

As Brooke observed the other competitors and waited for Andrew's round, she nattered to Poddy, the bay's ears twitching as she caressed his nose and blew adoring kisses, telling him what a champion he was. While she loved all her horses, Poddy remained her darling. Her father had given her the prestigiously pedigreed but achingly slow ex-racehorse as an eighteenth birthday present and at first she'd been dismayed. The animal was greener than spring grass, three years old and still maturing, but he possessed the temperament of a gentleman and she'd always relished a challenge. It had taken six years of hard work, frustration and joy to bring him to the standard he was now. And it'd been worth every second.

The steward called Andrew up. He cantered past, holding his big silvery mount beautifully collected, the horse's pace as easy as a rocking horse. He threw Brooke another wink and a cheeky grin before floating gracefully into the ring like Pegasus. The announcer called the combination, the last pairing in the jump-off. Brooke and Poddy still held the lead but only by three quarters of a second and Sir Barnaby was perfectly capable of beating their time. He had before. On multiple occasions.

Brooke tickled Poddy's chin, his black velvety muzzle silken against her fingertips. 'But he won't this time, will he, Pod-baby?'

Her body tensed as Andrew raised his whip hand to his helmet and saluted the ground jury. For comfort, she tangled her fingers in Poddy's mane, grip tightening as Andrew wound Barney up for the first fence. With a subtle leg aid and quiet slackening of his hold, Andrew sent Barney catapulting through the starting gate.

He cleared the first, second and third obstacles with ease, cutting corners and jumping at an angle as Poddy had done. The bigger horse's stride was longer than Poddy's but that made his turns less tight. Brooke's breath caught as Barney gave the oxer a solid rap, only

for the pole to bounce back into the cup and stay put. Her fingers dug harder into Poddy's neck as Andrew and the horse easily cleared the gate and made a lightning-fast turn towards the combination.

Barney soared over the upright, a good four inches clear, but his speed carried him too far into the gap. Sensing the danger, Andrew tightened his grip, trying to rein the horse in and shorten his stride. Brooke held her breath, hope rising as Barney took off too close to the second element. Muscles bulging in his rump and as courageous as ever, the horse hauled himself up, his dark-grey forelegs tucked to his chest. His front hoofs cleared the front bar but a single trailing back hoof caught the rail and this time it didn't bounce back into the cup. With a rattle and thud it fell to the ground.

Though they galloped for the final triple bar, Andrew's wry smile showed he knew he'd lost.

'You can buy a bottle of wine with that dinner,' Brooke called as he cantered past.

He wheeled back, grinning despite his loss, and slobbered his tongue over his lips. 'Kiss for the loser then?'

She laughed, shaking her head, joining him in the walk back to the float area, Barney blowing hard, his grey coat charcoal from sweat. 'And what would your lovely Mel have to say about that?'

'Nothing. We broke up.'

Brooke stared at up Andrew. 'You didn't? When?'

'Last week.'

'How come you never said anything?'

He shrugged and she cast him a sympathetic look. Sometimes these things were hard to talk about. Brooke had only broken up with her boyfriend of nineteen months eight weeks before. She knew how it felt, how it *still* felt if she dwelt on it too hard. Yet Jackson was never going to last, not after he took that job at the mine and their interests began to diverge so much. It hurt at the time but she could appreciate now that the affection they'd shared in the past wasn't strong enough to keep them going into the future, whereas

Andrew and Mel had seemed perfect for each other. Both outwardly warm and laidback, but possessing cores of steely ambition. And they looked stunning together, too. Effortlessly graceful with their sinuous, athletic bodies and expensive clothes. Even their bluntly cut, glossy black hairstyles matched.

She reached up and placed a comforting hand on his knee. 'I'm sorry.'

He covered her hand with his own and squeezed. 'Don't be. It was never going to work out.'

'Why not? I thought you really liked her.'

'Nah, my heart belongs to you, remember?'

'And mine belongs to Poddy so you're wasting your time.' Brooke kissed Poddy's cheek for emphasis, laughing as Andrew clutched his hands over his heart and pretended deep hurt.

They parted ways, Andrew riding back to the stables and Brooke heading for her Ford truck and matching dark-blue gooseneck horse trailer, her transport and accommodation for the two days of the show. The gold Kingston Lodge Racing logo, with its fancy writing and streaming-maned horse's head, glittered brightly on the side.

Unlike most competitors, who housed their horses in the show-ground's ageing stalls and enjoyed raucous nights of bed-hopping and boozing in the town's hotels and motels, Brooke preferred to keep her horses in the gooseneck's custom-designed portable yards. Their night-time snorts, stamps and snuffles helped her sleep, and the gooseneck's facilities, while cramped, were more than adequate for her needs.

Oddy whickered in delight at her approach. She fondly caressed his ears while unhooking the gate to Poddy's yard and leading him inside. True to form, Sod ignored her, concentrating instead on tearing hunks of lucerne from his haynet. Having competed in two classes in the morning – for a second and a fourth placing – the horse was finished for the day and enjoying a well-earned rest.

‘Hey, cranky-pants,’ she said, ducking into his yard to pinch his bucket of water. Sod eyed her warily as she approached, relaxing and letting her rub his chin when she made no move to strip his rug.

Unlike his stablemates, who both possessed gorgeous natures, Sod had the temperament of a crotchety old man. He bit when upset, bucked when grumpy, shied at the slightest thing and farted loudly at inappropriate times, but he also jumped like a kangaroo, turned as fast as a polo pony and could be as affectionate as a puppy when the mood took him. Of the three horses, Sod would be the one to take Brooke places. Provided he augmented his prodigious talent with some manners.

With Poddy untacked, his coat rubbed dry and a fresh haynet hung, Brooke gave him a last kiss on his perfect white star and left him to prepare Oddy for his class. The cheery chestnut kept rubbing against her as she tacked him up, as though unable to believe she was paying him attention. For the thousandth time she marvelled at his sweetness. He was a lovely creature, although she sometimes wished he harboured a fraction more spirit. In the showjumping game, horses needed to be as competitive as their riders.

No matter their personality, she adored her three boys. Other horses waited at home – her father’s spelling racehorses and a couple of youngsters she was bringing on – but Poseidon, Odysseus and Sisyphus were her lights. They filled her heart. She couldn’t imagine life without them.

Once Brooke had Oddy groomed, tacked up and booted, she led him out to the warm-up area where Andrew waited with his second-string horse, Amazing Jake, for the designer to open the course for walking.

He squinted into the afternoon sun. ‘Looks tight.’

Brooke nodded, eyeing the designer who was measuring the third element of a treble with a tape measure. ‘But no problem for the Oddster.’

‘That sook.’ Andrew tugged on Jake’s ear. ‘Jake’ll walk all over him.’

‘You want another bet?’

‘Yeah, why not.’ Andrew rubbed his chin, espresso-coloured eyes narrowing wickedly. Recognising the look, Brooke braced herself. ‘How about this time, if I win, you kiss me.’

She made a face and then stopped, staring at him. A knot formed in her belly. He smiled but something in his expression – the crinkle of his eyes or the not-quite steadiness of his mouth – told her he was serious.

This wasn’t the first time she’d seen that look. Twice in the last month she’d noticed it. The first occurred on a sweltering evening at Willowgrove, Andrew’s luxurious property on the southern side of Scone, when he’d invited her up for a swim in his pool. Instead of her usual modest black one-piece, to help beat the heat she’d donned a white designer bikini, another of her mother’s gifts. As she hauled herself from the water, refreshed after the swim, Andrew’s face had stilled. For five squirming seconds he stared at her so intensely she was sure the bikini had become transparent. Embarrassed, she plunged back into the pool and swam to the opposite end only to find on emerging he had his head stuck in the bar fridge and was paying her no attention at all.

The second happened only last Thursday night in the pub car-park after their habitual post-work catch up with Chloe. On the way out, Brooke had spied Jackson with his new girlfriend and though she was over him, her heart had still ached at the happiness in his eyes. Happiness that had been sadly absent during their last weeks together. Noticing, Andrew had walked her to her car, not talking, just staying close, there in case she wanted to talk or cry or yell. They’d leaned against the car and stared up at a night sky cascading with stars. She’d felt his gaze and glanced across. That same intense, hungry expression had skittered across his face and then vanished, making her wonder if she’d seen it at all. But she had, and

then, as now, it made her insides tighten and nervous prickles race up her spine.

‘Look, Andrew, I —’

The announcer cut over Brooke’s words as he declared the course open for competitors.

Andrew handed her Jake’s reins, his uncertainty disappearing, replaced once more with his confident swagger. He fixed the buttons of his jacket and tightened his tie. ‘Go on. Live a little.’ And with that he sauntered into the ring.

Brooke couldn’t stop watching him as he walked the course. She and Andrew had been friends for years and other than an experimental kiss when they were twelve, not once had he made a pass at her – not one that she took seriously. He was an irrepressible flirt and made endless cracks about them getting together, but she’d always thought them jokes. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

She stroked the thin white streak at the tip of Oddy’s nose. She’d never been attracted to Andrew, despite his many qualities. He simply wasn’t her type. She liked tall, hardy men with wide shoulders and strong, solid arms that closed around you and kept you safe from the world. Men with sun-kissed hair, stubbly jaws, dirt under their nails and crow’s feet around their eyes, who made her insides jangle and her heart gallop with just one look. Not metrosexuals who’d make her feel like she was kissing a relative.

He returned, shaking his head. ‘Terrible course. Jake’ll be fine, but Oddy . . .’ He sucked in air between his teeth. ‘Going to be tough for him.’

Brooke threw him the horses’ reins. ‘We’ll see about that. Oh, and that bet? You’re on. But if you lose, you have to streak the length of the stables. Twice.’

As she knew he would, Andrew didn’t even blink. The man had no shame. ‘I always knew you wanted to see me naked.’

‘You’re forgetting I’ve already seen your dangly bits. At Pony

Club camp, remember? You lost a bet with Darren Spalding and had to jump the grade five showjumping course in the buff.'

He grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. 'Must have impressed if you can still recall that.'

Feigning disgust, she tossed up her arms in an 'I give up' gesture and headed off to walk the course, laughing when he called after her, 'I've grown a whole lot bigger since then.'

Andrew hadn't been joking about the course. It was tight, and although a lower grade with smaller jumps, it was much twistier than the morning's track and would take careful riding. No room for any slips in concentration or she and Oddy would have a rail down, and in this event, with so many other experienced riders competing, a single rail would see them out of the jump-off.

Brooke took her time warming up Oddy, keeping him settled and well collected, cantering small figure eights and flying changes of his leading leg in the dusty warm-up arena. Satisfied with his responsiveness, she cantered him over the practice jumps, patting his neck and praising him when he cleared them without a rattle.

In a fluke of timing, she'd drawn the slot before Andrew, which meant no opportunity to see how Jake performed. Oddy and Jake were of a comparable type, both quivery thoroughbreds with similar-length strides. If Jake struggled around any of the turns, or experienced difficulty with the fence spacings, Oddy was likely to fare the same. This time, however, with Oddy going first, Andrew had the advantage.

As Brooke headed for the ring, butterflies launched in her stomach. She didn't normally suffer from nerves, not in these lower classes, but Andrew's bet put her on edge. Stupid, really, when she had every faith she and Oddy could win.

The steward called her number and she cantered through the gate, one hand stroking Oddy's neck. She bent forward to whisper to him, the horse's ears twitching back to listen. 'Come on, Odd-job, let's show them what you're made of.'

With a salute to the judges, she cantered another tight circle and directed Oddy through the start.

Seventy seconds later she cantered through the finish flags with her head lowered. The horse had motored round the course as smoothly as a Lamborghini, clearing each fence as though it were a thirty-centimetre-high cavaletti. All except for the last. Eager for the line, Oddy took off too early and dragged the top rail. Not his fault. He was an inexperienced horse and she should have kept him reined in. Although inside she cringed at the error, she made a show of slapping his neck and telling him how well he'd done.

'Get ready to pucker up,' teased Andrew as he rode past.

Brooke trotted back to the edge of the ring, butterflies still rampant in her stomach. She'd never reneged on one of Andrew's bets and she wasn't about to start, but the thought of kissing him made her feel flushed and strange. Not excited strange. More weird, fearful strange, as if this one bet could change everything between them.

He went clear, expression exultant when he halted Jake alongside her. 'So, I'll see you at the gooseneck about seven then?'

She pointed a finger at him. 'Don't forget you're buying dinner. And wine.'

He leaned over to nudge her. 'Sexy bloke like me, you shouldn't need any Dutch courage.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Despite what you might think, Chiang-man, you're not God's gift to women.'

'You'll think differently later.'

Making a grossed-out noise, Brooke whirled Oddy around and rode off.

Brooke leaned against the sink, winding and unwinding a long strand of her freshly washed hair around her finger, gnawing her lip as she stared at the gooseneck's door. Instead of tying her hair back in a ponytail as she usually did, she'd left it out, its natural soft waves curling locks around her face and shoulders, a curtain she

could hide behind should the need arise. Steam from the trailer's tiny shower thickened the air, kinking her hair further and making the cramped kitchenette seem more claustrophobic than ever. She glanced at her watch again. She still had ten minutes to kill before Andrew's arrival, and if they were anything like the last sixty, they'd be long ones.

Forcing herself to relax, she sat at the corner banquette and, with her chin resting on one hand, picked up one of the knives she'd laid out earlier and dangled the blade like a pendulum from her fingertips. The thick stainless-steel hilt flickered in the light, reflecting the pale faux-timber panelling of the gooseneck's living area.

Many of the best times of Brooke's life had been spent in this small space. Fun nights with Andrew and Chloe gathered around the table after long days competing, drinking wine, playing poker or Monopoly, laughing at stupid jokes and making even stupider bets with one another. Even in the days when she'd been driven everywhere by her grandparents the gooseneck rattled with laughter. This was also the space where at sixteen she'd first fallen in love, when Thomas Edwards ignored Chloe's dazzling looks and impressive cleavage, leaned against the shower door, thrust his hands deep into his pockets and smiled crookedly at her with eyes so summer-sky azure they'd made her float right out of her seat.

And now she was going to kiss Andrew here.

She dropped the knife and stared at the table top, tracing a finger over one of the many scratches on its dark-blue surface, resurrecting the memory of that other time they'd kissed. She could still recall the sweet innocence of it, the strange feeling of reaching some momentous point in her young life. How the touch of their mouths signalled the end of childhood and the onset of adolescence.

She closed her eyes and remembered the look on Andrew's face, the delight it held, and the way, when they'd parted, he'd entwined his fingers in hers and asked if that meant they were now boyfriend and girlfriend. Unsure if he was being serious, and rattled by the

feelings his kiss had evoked, she'd blushed and said no. Andrew had pulled away, his expression full of hurt, and for a few days she'd thought that one kiss had killed all that was special between them. Then he'd bounced back as though it had never happened, and their friendship had carried on as it always had, filled with jokes, bets, rivalry and laughter. Until now.

She glanced at her watch again. The hands had barely moved. Even the second hand strained to make its way past the numbers. She wiped her fingers across her forehead, cursing the moisture there, then slumped back with her arms crossed and her mouth pursed. Two seconds later her knee began to jig.

Unable to stand the wait any longer, she slid from the banquette, yanked open the door and clomped down the step to seek the comfort of her boys, each rugged up and bedded down in his portable yard for the night. She fussed over them, straightening rugs, checking water buckets, examining legs for signs of soreness. Tired after his day, Sod let her play with his ears and velvety muzzle without trying to nip. Not to be left out, Oddy leaned over the rail and nudged her arm and she scratched him affectionately between his ears, smiling when the horse lowered his head and revelled in the attention.

She smelled Andrew before she saw him, delicious curry aromas sweeping into her nostrils and making her stomach rumble despite her tension. Giving each of the horses a kiss and a pat, she ducked under the rail to meet him.

'Is that the delivery boy I detect?'

He held up two bags. 'Curry puffs and spring rolls followed by Massaman and jungle curries with steamed rice, and all washed down with a bottle of New Zealand sauvignon blanc. Happy?'

She held the gooseneck's door open and waved him inside. 'Sounds good.'

They settled either side of the banquette and began piling food onto plates. Andrew cracked the seal on the wine and poured her an

oversized glass, pushing it towards her with a glint in his eye that only made her anxiety swell.

She leant back with her arms crossed. ‘Will you stop looking at me like that? You’re putting me off my dinner.’

‘Like what?’

‘That “you just wait” look.’

He leaned forward, laughter in his expression. ‘You mean like this.’ He tilted his head and gave her a sultry pout, moistening his lips as he did so. He dropped his voice to sex-dripping huskiness and followed it with an even more exaggerated pout. ‘Come on, baby. You know you want me.’

The sight was so comical Brooke couldn’t help but laugh. Smiling, Andrew picked up his fork and pointed it at her. ‘The trouble with you, Brooke, is you take things far too seriously.’

She opened her mouth to argue and quickly shut it again, conceding that, in this instance, the accusation was probably well founded. She’d taken one of his jokes and contrived it into something fateful, yet she couldn’t wipe the impression that he’d been serious when he made the bet. No matter how she tried to dismiss it, she hadn’t imagined that look, or the disquiet it instilled.

He waved at the food. ‘Come on, tuck in before it gets cold.’

It took a full glass of wine, half a curry and a great deal of horse talk and competitor gossip before she relaxed. Andrew ordered her to sit and let him sort out the dishes. Content to relinquish responsibility, she watched him idly as he dumped the leftovers in the bin and collected plates for washing.

He was wearing clean jeans and a dark-red, fine wool jumper that hung loose on his lean frame. An image appeared in her mind, of Andrew gambolling naked around the showjumping ring, arms held curled in front, tossing his head and snorting as he pranced and hurdled the low fences. They were both only seventeen, young, over-hormoned and still growing into their skins, yet she felt no desire then, and she felt none now. No spark existed. It never would.

He startled her out of her reverie. ‘What are you thinking about?’  
She blinked and shifted uncomfortably, alarmed she’d somehow made her thoughts obvious. ‘Just Oddy. I shouldn’t have let him have his head like that.’

He rinsed another plate and left it on the drainer. ‘Is that really what you were thinking about?’

She swallowed, not knowing how to answer, and fingered the stem of her plastic wine glass. ‘No.’

He wiped his hands on a tea towel and turned to her, leaning his hip against the bench. ‘Care to share?’

She shook her head. ‘Not really.’

‘You were thinking about kissing me, weren’t you?’

‘Not exactly.’ She raised the glass and took a long slug, her nerves ringing.

He tossed the tea towel aside and held out his hand. ‘Come here.’

‘Andrew, I don’t think this is a good idea.’

His expression narrowed, congealing the already thick atmosphere. ‘A bet’s a bet, Brooke.’

‘I know but —’

He grabbed her hand and hauled her up. ‘No buts.’

His grip held firm, as if he feared her escape. Heat pulsed from his palm, as intense as the yearning in his eyes. The wine evaporated from Brooke’s bloodstream, leaving her coldly sober and desperately unsure.

‘Andrew . . .’

He scraped the hair away from her face and cupped her jaw. ‘Shh. Don’t spoil it.’

She closed her eyes. How could this be happening? This was Andrew, her friend. They weren’t meant to be doing this.

His breath grazed her lips, delicately spiced. ‘I can’t wait any more. I’ve waited too long already.’

He traced a finger down her cheek and her eyes fluttered open. Andrew’s gaze hung on hers. His mouth parted in expectation, and

she realised he wore the same blissful expression he'd had when they were children, kissing for the first time.

Carefully, he lowered his head.

His mouth caressed hers sweetly, with care and tenderness, exploring the soft flesh of her lips. As he deepened the kiss, his hands drifted to her neck and shoulders, dragging her closer, squeezing her against him until his erection pressed into her groin. Alarm clanged through her brain, urging her to pull away, but Andrew clutched her tight, a moan rumbling in his throat.

Panicked, she braced her arms against his chest and pushed hard.

He stumbled backwards into the bench, wincing as he connected with its rigid edge.

She shook her head, trembling. 'This isn't right.'

Expression pleading, he held out a hand, a gesture out of character for the overconfident Andrew she knew. When she didn't respond he let it drop. Blinking, he stared at the cupboard above her head.

The curry-tainted air condensed further. Brooke wanted to throw open the door and race into the night, but the look on Andrew's face shod her feet in lead.

'Do you have any idea how long I've wanted to do that for?' he asked eventually.

Her heart spasmed. How could she not have seen this? How could she not have realised his jokes hid truths? Her throat was so choked she could barely whisper. 'I'm sorry.'

He let out a harsh breath. 'Yeah. Me too.'

She hung her head, overwhelmed with guilt that she'd hurt him. 'I don't —'

He cut off her words with a hand over her mouth. Eyes huge, he shook his head. 'Don't say it, Brooke.' Their gazes met, his full of hurt, hers overflowing with sympathy. He dropped his palm and leaned forward to plant a gentle kiss on her forehead. 'I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow.'

As soon as he departed she slipped out into the night to cry into Poddy's mane, mourning a friendship she knew would never be the same again.

With three mounts, Brooke had a full schedule the following day, and though their paths crossed frequently, she never seemed to find time to stop and talk to Andrew. She felt his scrutiny, but whenever she looked his way he turned aside as if the very sight of her hurt him.

Sensing something was up, the other competitors cast meaningful glances at one another and murmured behind their hands. Brooke ignored them, concentrating instead on the horses, but her mind refused to settle. Poddy and Oddy behaved impeccably, neither putting a foot wrong in their classes, but Sod, ever alert for inattention, put on a bucking display in the warm-up area so vigorous and inventive it would have made a bronco blush. Brooke ended up on her backside with a mouthful of dust, her white breeches streaked with dirt and humiliation flushing her face, while Sod careered gleefully around the ground kicking up his heels like a naughty teenager, refusing to be caught.

By the time she'd packed the gooseneck for home her movements were sluggish with exhaustion and despondency. In all the years she'd competed, this was the worst show she'd experienced. All she wanted was Kingston Downs, a hot bath to ease her aches and red wine to help her forget.

Wearily, she led the horses into the gooseneck and secured their gates, before lifting the tailgate and locking it in place.

'Brooke?'

She let out a breath, preparing herself, before turning and leaning against the cold door with her hands held tight behind lest she be tempted to touch him. 'Hey.'

As though suffering the same fear, Andrew kept his fists thrust into his jeans pockets. His gold complexion seemed paler than

normal, its sheen dull. Tiredness shadowed the skin under his eyes. 'I saw your fall. You okay?'

'Yeah. Just a lovely purple bum cheek to match the bite marks on my arms.'

He smiled a little. 'You need to watch him. He knows when you're upset.'

'I'm not upset, I'm just . . .' She waved a useless hand. She didn't know what she was.

'Upset. Yeah, I know.' He sucked in a breath, vulnerability etched on his face. 'I'm really sorry.'

Her heart squeezed. Tears began to form and sting. This was all so wrong. 'You're my friend. I don't want things to change.'

'But I do. Surely you knew that?' When she didn't answer he shook his head. 'Don't you get it? I love you. I didn't mean for it to happen but it did.'

She closed her eyes and sagged against the float. He loved her. He'd come out and said it and made it even worse.

'Brooke, honey. Don't.' In a stride he had her wrapped in his arms, her face pressed against his chest as his heartbeat raced in her ear. He stroked her hair, soothing. 'It'll be all right. We'll work it out. I promise.'

She sniffed, feeling pathetic but comforted. 'Are you sure?'

'Yeah. I'm the Chiang-man. The best, remember?'

She laughed and he let her go. Sniffing, she wiped his jumper where she'd left tiny teardrops. 'Yeah, you're the best.'

'Just not the best for you.' From inside the float came the rattle of restless horses. Placing warm hands on her shoulders, he twirled her around and pushed her toward the truck cabin. 'Time for you to get going.' He stood by the door while she organised herself, no mischievous glint in his brown eyes, just sorrow. When the diesel engine cranked to life he rested his fingers on the window edge. 'Drive carefully, and if you need me, call. I only have a few things to sort out here and I'll be on the road behind you.'

She covered his hand with hers. ‘We’ll talk later in the week, okay?’

He smiled and winked, almost back to normal. ‘You can bet on it.’

But his humour was a facade. As she manoeuvred onto the exit road, she checked the side mirror. Andrew stood watching her, hands thrust into pockets, shoulders slumped. A washed-out replica of the vibrant man she knew and loved. Hollowness lodged in her heart and stayed.

Every kilometre she covered on the three-hour journey home seemed paved with guilt. It hung in her chest and anchored her bones, gritted her eyes and sweated her palms. By the time she reached the turnoff to Pitcorthie, eight kilometres from Kingston Downs, she felt shredded with exhaustion.

But home approached, and soon she’d be free to wallow in its comfort. No matter what went on in her life, she could always rely on Kingston Downs to make her happy. Home, her boys and the constancy of the Hunter Valley’s magnificent landscape. A girl didn’t need much more.

She smiled to herself. It’d be all right. They’d make it all right. Relaxed for the first time since she left the showgrounds, she glanced down for the radio volume knob, hoping for some cheery music, before returning her focus to the road.

The stray bullock burst into her vision like a creature from a nightmare. It stood in the middle of the road, dumb face turned toward her headlights, thick grey body as huge and unmoving as a granite boulder.

She didn’t have time to think. She simply acted. She hauled on the wheel, jerking it to the left, her foot slamming the brake. Too late, the truck’s headlights illuminated the concrete culvert and deep dips of the dry creek. Tyres locked, she pulled the opposite way but momentum hurtled her forward. The left tyre hit the concrete and exploded. The front listed, skidding the truck over the edge. Panicking, she yanked the wheel, released the brake and stomped on the

accelerator, but the truck only kept tipping, forced forward by speed and the weight of the trailer behind. A terrifying screech pierced her ears.

‘No. No. No!’

But she’d lost control of the vehicle. The wheel spun crazily in her hand, wrenching muscles. The truck pitched, crashing into the deep drain and dragging the trailer with it. Airbags exploded around Brooke’s head and side, trapping her in place.

Somewhere in the darkness, an animal began to scream.