



ALMOST- MARRIED MONI

A SIMPLE OUTBACK WEDDING.
WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?



CHEYENNE BLUE



CHAPTER 1

MRS T WAS SINGING IN THE kitchen. It wasn't that she had a terrible voice—she was actually fairly good, especially when she was singing Amy Winehouse. But when she sang loudly, it meant she needed to talk to us but didn't want to interrupt. *Back to Black* wafted through the thin walls of our old weatherboard Queenslander as clearly as if Mrs T was in the same room.

I rolled my eyes at Sue, who was sitting at her desk trying to draft a letter of advice. “Shall I see what she wants, or do you want to ask her?”

Sue removed her specs and laid them on the messy pile of papers on her desk. “If we haven't heard the kettle whistle within five minutes, then you go.”

I put my book down and removed my feet from Sue's desk. “I'm hungry. I'll go now.”

Right on cue, the kettle's whistle sounded, and Mrs T's song stopped as if a switch had been thrown.

I grinned at Sue. “On second thought, I'll wait. She'll be in with a cuppa and some Tim Tams in under two minutes.”

“She will.” Sue abandoned her pretence of working and cleared a space on her desk. Mrs T hated setting mugs down on Sue's legal

papers and Sue hated the coffee rings that resulted. And we both wanted to keep our beloved housekeeper happy.

Sure enough, in less than two minutes, there was a cursory knock and Mrs T entered. She had a tray in her hands with thick sandwiches, three mugs of tea, and a plate of Tim Tams. I eyed her warily. Mrs T's interruptions were generally good, but occasionally she needed to get something off her chest—like when Ripper had buried something very dead and rotting in her veggie garden. But this time her grin stretched across her brown face like the sunrise.

She set the tray on Sue's desk and advanced upon my lover. "You darling, darling girl." She kissed Sue on the cheek then came over to me. "And you lovely, lovely girl." She hauled me into a hug.

When she released me, my gaze met Sue's across the cluttered desk. A tiny wrinkle in her forehead showed she was as clueless as I was.

"What have we done to deserve this, Mrs T?" Sue asked. "It's lovely, of course, but is there a particular reason?"

Mrs T shook her head. "You don't know? You two modern professionals, with your smart phones and emails and digital radios?" She pulled her own mobile from her pocket and held it up. "You're getting married!"

I exchanged a puzzled look with Sue. She had proposed to me, and I had accepted, nearly three years ago. I wouldn't forget the proposal in a hurry, taking place as it had in a busy corridor of the Royal Flying Doctor Base in Mount Isa where I was working at the time. We'd exchanged rings, but that was as far as it had gone due to Australia's lack of marriage equality.

"Oh!" I caught on in a rush. "The results of the marriage equality postal survey are out!"

“They are.” Mrs T thumped the desk in her enthusiasm and a file bounced off the top of the pile onto the floor. “I don’t need to tell you which way the vote went, do I?”

“We won!” Sue leapt from her chair. “Australians did the right thing!”

“Of course they did.” Mrs T sniffed. “Nearly sixty-two percent of them, anyway. Now that farce is out of the way, finally the government can allow the people what they want. You two better be ready; you’ve a wedding to plan!”

I looked over at Sue. My practical, straight-talking lawyer girlfriend was misty eyed, her face soft. “Moni,” she whispered. “Finally, we can get married.”

I moved around the desk and into her waiting arms. My heart jumped in my chest. It wasn’t a certainty yet, but it was one very large step closer. Sue’s arms closed around me, and her face rubbed in my hair. I closed my eyes and relaxed into her embrace, delighting in her closeness. “I love you,” she whispered, for my ears only.

“And I love you too.” I must have spoken louder than I realised, as Mrs T joined our embrace.

“And I love both of you,” she said in a gruff voice as emotion-filled as ours. “Now let’s plan your wedding.”



CHAPTER 2

WHEN YOU LIVE IN A tiny town in outback Queensland, an even more sparsely populated area in the already sparsely populated country of Australia, “planning” takes on a new meaning. When I’d lived in Texas, I’d been to huge designer weddings that cost more than some people’s mortgages. Sue and I didn’t want a large wedding like that, which was lucky, as it wasn’t an option. Living as we did in Mungabilly Creek, with the nearest town three hours’ drive away, by necessity our wedding would be simple. It would be community organised, filled with our families, friends, and many people from Mungabilly and surrounding outback stations.

Over Mrs T’s doorstep sandwiches and strong black tea, it didn’t take us long to decide on the basics. The only gay-friendly celebrant from the Isa. A casual outdoor ceremony in the wide brown landscape that both of us loved so much. And a community potluck reception, to which everyone was invited.

The venue, too, was a no-brainer.

Sue and I locked glances. “Jayboro Outstation,” we said simultaneously.

Our friends Felix and Josie ran an outback camping and trail riding place three hours away. Jayboro was beautiful, with wide landscape

views and a winding creek bed lined with drooping gum trees. Even better, Felix and Josie now had six cabins nestled in quiet corners of their campground, plus room for campers and motorhomes.

I took Sue's hand where it lay on the desk, and her strong fingers closed over mine. "Let's visit Jayboro on the weekend so we can tell Felix and Josie in person."

Sue eyed her desk with its toppling mass of files. "I can get away. Can you?"

"Yup. Ellen will cover the clinic. She owes me some time. Let's take the campervan and stop overnight on the way."

The leap of heat in Sue's gaze sent an answering twist of desire into my own belly. Nights in the campervan—alone in the outback, door open to the hot desert night—was our very favourite type of lovemaking.

"Why Miss Moni, you just want to have your wicked way with me." Sue fluttered her eyelashes like a southern belle. "I do declare my heart is all aflutter!"

"Very wicked way." I tightened my grip on Sue's hand. "Involving these strong fingers and—"

Mrs T cleared her throat ostentatiously. "I know you haven't forgotten I'm here. You two are terrible."

I shot her a grin. "And you love it. Will we reserve one of the cabins for you and Rosalie?"

"Nah. Keep them for those who've come a long way. Rosalie's got a tent. We'll pitch it somewhere in the campground." She stood, collecting the empty plates and sweeping the crumbs onto the tray. "Now, I'm in charge of organising the food. The Commercial in Worrindi will run a portable bar if you give them enough notice. Youse might want to do that."

“Perfect,” Sue said. “The bar tab for all our friends and most of Mungabilly and Worrindi will take our profits for the year, but it’ll be worth it.”

“That it is.” Mrs T turned to the door. “You two are loved in this little town. I don’t know if you know how much.” She cleared her throat. “But don’t let it go to your heads. I know, and most of the Country Women’s Association knows, what bad housekeepers you are. I still haven’t forgotten the green frogs in the bathroom. They must have been there for days and you two didn’t even notice.”

“Thelma and Louise?” I gave Mrs T my most innocent look. “I was quite fond of them.”

“Not so fond of their little footprints all up the wall.”



We drove away from Mungabilly Creek in Sue’s elderly campervan on Thursday. Our little terrier, Ripper, perched in his usual spot between us, ears pricked for the adventure. Sue drove slowly, avoiding the main bitumen road to travel the small dirt station tracks. Occasionally we’d see a jackaroo in a ute, and Sue would return his laconic salute with a nod of her own, but mainly we saw no one.

Ripper climbed onto my knee so that he could stick his head out the window and feel the wind in his ears. I gazed out over dry land. It was still hot in the late afternoon, and even the mobs of kangaroos hung around under the sparse shade of the gum trees. An emu bounced along beside us, keeping pace with the camper for a couple hundred metres before veering away.

Sue slowed to drive around a snake coiled on the road, then accelerated again. I looked across at her. She’d left her efficient lawyer persona back in Mungabilly Creek, along with her business attire

of black polo shirts and khaki shorts. Her short hair was spiky with sweat at the nape of her neck, and her tanned shoulders shifted as she changed gears to go through a dry creek bed.

I fidgeted in my seat, thinking longingly of a cold beer and a wide view, and the peace of an outback evening. Sue must have read my mind, because she slowed.

“How about along there?” She pointed at wheel tracks leading along the line of trees. “This is Bill and Sandra’s land; they’d have no problem with us camping.”

I nodded. “If Bill objects, he may find his next prostate exam to be a lot more uncomfortable than the last.”

Sue flashed me a grin. “You wouldn’t.”

“Of course not. That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be tempted.”

She turned to follow the wheel tracks, easing the camper over the rough ground until we were away from the road.

Ripper jumped down as soon as we opened the doors and scampered off to do his business and patrol the perimeter of our camp. Sue and I were quick at setting up and, in under ten minutes, we were set. Sue pulled two beers from the camper’s fridge, and we settled into our chairs. The sun was low in the sky, and the air was filled with a screeching flock of galahs, their pink and grey feathers flashing in the dying sun.

I was silent, soaking in the sounds and smells of the bush. I’d only been in Australia four years, but it was now my home, and I loved it. Which was lucky for us, as I think it would have taken a backhoe to dig Sue out of Mungabilly Creek.

Ripper returned from his explorations and flopped, panting, at Sue’s feet. She bent to tug on his ears and he rewarded her with a lazy lick on her hand.

“There’s one thing about the wedding we haven’t talked about.” Sue’s words were directed at Ripper, and there was an uncharacteristic hesitancy in her voice.

I frowned. “The first waltz? I think if we did that, we’d both end up on our butts in the dust. Your big feet always end up underneath my petite ones.”

Sue snorted. “It wasn’t me who tripped over the vacuum cleaner and ended up in Ripper’s water dish.”

“True.”

“Nor me who dropped Mrs T’s ginger cake and smashed it to smithereens.”

“Also true. But in my defence, the pan was hot.”

“If you hadn’t been trying to steal a piece you’d never have known that.”

I threw up my hands. “Okay, I admit it. I’m nearly as clumsy as you. Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

Sue sobered, and her hands found Ripper again. “No. The wedding. The guest list. Specifically, guests coming from far away.”

I bit my lip. I knew what she was talking about, and it wasn’t our friends Nora and Geraldine from England, whom we hoped would make the trip.

“My family.” I took a swig of beer.

“Yup.”

“I hope Mom and Dad will come. They’re nervous about the long flight.”

“I was wondering more about your brother...and Em.”

I took a deep draught of beer to avoid answering, emptying the bottle, then rose to get another. “Want one?”

“Yes, please.” Sue waited while I got the beers. “Moni, it’s your wedding. If you don’t want to invite Paul and Em, you don’t have to.”

I shrugged. “I have no problem with them coming—although I’m not sure they will. They didn’t seem keen to see us when we visited Texas last year.”

“They’d moved to Vermont. And in fairness, we didn’t make the trip up there either.”

“We travelled for over twenty-four hours to get to Dallas, including thirteen hours of turbulence over the Pacific. We suffered airline food on three different flights. Each way. It wasn’t that big an ask for them to fly from Burlington to Dallas.”

Sue was silent.

“I get that it may be awkward for them. After all, how many women end up married to their girlfriend’s brother?” I gripped my beer and heaved a deep breath. “I don’t have a problem with them being together, though. I thought I made that clear to them when we planned our Texas trip. They got together five years ago.” I frowned. “More actually. Six. I wish them the best. I’m well and truly over Em.”

“Good. I’d hate to be your rebound girl.” Sue’s deadpan delivery made me smile, but when I peeped at her, she looked serious.

“Hey, you know that...don’t you?” Irrationally, a leap of panic surged. Sue and I had been together for four years, and I loved her utterly and completely. Surely, she didn’t think I still carried a torch for Em?

Sue’s mouth twisted into a smile. “You silly chook. I know that. I’m not worried you’ll take one look at Em after all this time and gallop off with her into the sunset.”

“Unlikely. She’s too high maintenance to survive out here for long.”

“Then she probably doesn’t ride either?”

“Only a bicycle. On dry days with no wind.”

“Then I’m safe from you eloping with her on one of Felix’s horses. That’s good. I’d hate to have to hunt you down and kidnap you.”

“You’d do that for me? Aw shucks, honey, I never knew you cared.” I fluttered my eyelashes at her.

“I knew *Gone with the Wind* was a bad choice for movie night at the Country Women’s Association. Your Scarlett O’Hara impersonations are getting worse.”

“Maybe the next CWA movie night will be *Terminator*. Then you’ll know exactly how bad my impersonations can be.”

“As long as it’s nothing involving axe murders.” Sue turned in her chair to face me. “Seriously, Moni. If you don’t want Paul and Em along, then don’t invite them. Simple.”

I refastened my ponytail, which had worked loose. “Paul’s still my brother. The awkwardness is all on their side, not mine. And I’d really like Paul to be at our wedding.”

Maybe my voice sounded as lost as I suddenly felt, because Sue slid out of her chair, knelt in the dust, and put her head on my lap. “You are my everything. If you want your family to come, then I will move heaven and earth to persuade them.”

Ripper, probably worried by the intensity of her voice, whined, and Sue reached out a hand to comfort him.

My fingers pushed into Sue’s hair and stroked it from the side of her face. “I know you will.”

Sue sat back on her heels. I studied her blunt, familiar face, then sank to my knees in the dirt in front of her. My arms wrapped around her waist and my lips sought hers. Her kiss was as warm and beloved as an old sweater, as fresh as spring grass.

My stomach gurgled, and I broke the kiss. “Before you have your wicked way with me, I think we need to eat.”

“Prosaic but true.” Sue rose to her feet.

My gaze followed her as she prepared our meal. It didn't take long, and we balanced the plates on our knees to eat, facing the expanse of the land. Sue had brought one of our better bottles of red wine, and we ate and sipped, content in each other's company.

Later, when dinner was over, we made the bed up in the camper and, leaving all the doors wide open, made long, slow love in the warm night.



“It’s finally happening.” Felix stretched her hands across the kitchen table to clasp mine and Sue’s. “I couldn’t be happier for you. And we’re honoured that you want to get hitched at Jayboro.”

Josie returned to the table bearing four beers. Condensation beaded on the bottles in the warm room. “Have you set the date?” She grinned at us from under her mop of curls.

“No. That rather depends on Jayboro. We’ll need to book the whole place.”

Felix yanked over the diary, and a minute later we had a date in April, when it would hopefully be cooler and dry.

Then, with the business of our visit over, the four of us moved out to the couch on the wide veranda overlooking Jayboro’s parched land and, resting our feet on the railing, caught up on each other’s lives.

“The second shower block is up and running,” Josie said. “Mainly thanks to woman-power and my magnificent muscles. The bloke we hired to do it tripped over his wheelbarrow on his second day and broke his arm.”

“Josie reckoned it couldn’t be that hard,” Felix said. “She took over and built the whole thing.”

“Which is why it’s got a definite lean to the west.” Josie took a swig of her beer. “Jetta escaped from the paddock and roamed the

campground looking for handouts. She backed into it. You can see a pony bum-sized dent in the back, but it's still standing.”

“Good to know some things never change,” Sue said. “Cold beer in your fridge, goannas in the toilet, and Jetta Greedy Guts bludging food.”

“She’s getting fat despite the drought.” Felix drained her own bottle. “She’s the only one that is. Well...apart from Flame.” A wide smile illuminated her face. “You two remember when Flame came to us?”

I nodded. “We can hardly forget. Having a stolen racehorse here was the most exciting thing to happen in outback Queensland in months.”

“It even knocked the CWA fruitcake competition results off the front page of our local paper,” Josie said.

“No one ever came forward to claim Flame,” Felix continued. “So she’s still with us. She’s not much good for trail rides, given that she can’t go faster than a trot, but we would never part with her.”

“She brought us together.” Josie reached out a hand and took Felix’s.

“Flame’s in foal. Right now, we don’t know how or when—”

A snort from Sue. “You don’t know *how*? I thought you’d figured out the birds and the bees years ago.”

“Smarty pants,” Felix said without rancour. “What I mean is, we don’t know who the sire is. It wasn’t deliberate. The only stallion around is Archimedes, a rather fine-looking stockhorse from the main Jayboro Station. But Flame’s been nowhere near there.”

“You’re having a baby! Sue and I can be aunties to a horse.” Inside I was mush. My life as a rural GP meant I often delivered babies. And those were some of the most special and happy times. But a *foal*. That was a double dose of cute.

“Lots of room for aunties in this foal’s life.” Felix gazed out from the veranda to where Flame grazed. “You can muck out stalls, groom, and come and await the birth, which will doubtless be at some inconvenient time in the middle of the night.”

“I was thinking more of sitting in a shady stall of sweet-smelling hay, wearing a floral dress and plaiting daisy chains into its mane,” I quipped.

Sue snorted a laugh and her beer sprayed the veranda railing. “This from the woman who is more often covered in dust and bodily fluids than anyone I know. Present company possibly excepted.”

“Good point.” Josie tilted her head on one side. “Maybe Sue should be the one to get covered in horse poo and afterbirth this time. Seeing as it will obviously have novelty value.”

“My skills lie in other directions,” Sue said. “Just remember that the next time you want something written in legalese.”

I tipped my head back and rested it on the back of the couch. Some things never changed and the warmth and banter between the four of us was one of them. Birth, death, taxes, marriage. *Marriage*. I took a quick breath. The idea still had to settle itself fully in my head. Sure, Sue had proposed, and I had accepted, three years ago, but since marriage wasn’t legal then, it was always going to happen sometime, somewhere. Not in my immediate future. That was taken up by my life with Sue, Mrs T, Ripper, and the myriad of people that made up the small town I called home. And the GP clinic I ran. Anyone who said there was nothing to do in the outback was nuts.

My musing was cut short by the patter of paws and a couple of joyous barks. Ripper and Tess, Felix and Josie’s dog, leapt onto the veranda, both covered in dust and panting hard. Rip took a flying leap onto the couch, landing neatly between me and Sue. Tess sprawled on the floor.

“If these two are back, it must be nearly dinnertime.” Josie stood. “I’m your chef tonight, but it’s nothing fancy. Chicken curry.”

“Early to bed if we’re riding at first light tomorrow,” Sue said.

“We’ll have you in bed by nine,” Josie responded. “But we’re not responsible for what you do after that.”



I grew up riding western-style in Texas: long stirrups, a more relaxed position, going straight from a walk to a lope to avoid a bone-jarring trot that would force you to post. Things weren’t so different in Australia. Felix’s horses were mainly ex-stockhorses, and used to shifts in bodyweight and a neck-rein.

I loved riding at Jayboro. Often, Sue and I would go by ourselves. Felix and Josie gave us the run of the place—indeed, we had often looked after the horses and campground when they wanted a break. We would ride side-by-side, without speaking, caught in that silent togetherness of couples—an easy accord, taking in the sounds and smells of the bush.

I’d lost the toss with Josie, which meant I was riding Budgie, who was a smaller pony normally ridden by kids. Budgie was built for comfort, not speed, but it wouldn’t matter this time, as we planned a long meander around Jayboro rather than a fast ride.

Felix led the way out of the yard on Ben, nicknamed the Mount Isa Express because he pulled harder than any train. Sue followed on Patch, leaving Josie and I to bring up the rear on Jetta and Budgie. The bigger horses soon drew ahead, as Josie and I ambled along on the smaller ponies. I looked over at Josie. Her riotous curls were pulled back into a ponytail, barely subdued under her hat.

She and Felix had been together for a couple of years, and I wondered if they too intended to marry, now that they could. In the excitement of our news, we’d neglected to ask them.

I was wondering how to bring up the subject, when Josie beat me to it. “I’m really happy for you and Sue. Marriage. Mrs and Mrs. That’s amazing.”

“Thank you. It all seems a little surreal right now. I’m sure when we’re standing up in front of our friends, dressed in our finery, and the celebrant is saying the words, it will be a lot more real.”

She nodded and steered Jetta around a stand of mulga. When she returned she said, “Felix and I talked about it too, of course. But it’s just not that important for either of us. The official part, that is. We’re together forever, or we hope we will be anyway, and we have the commitment. That’s enough for us. Plus, I think Felix would curl up and die if she had to speak about love in front of a crowd.”

I grinned. “Yes, I can see she wouldn’t be comfortable.”

“You two, though...” Josie pushed Budgie’s nose away from her foot. “It’s obviously right for you.”

“I hope so.” I sighed, thinking of all the planning, and all the complications that could possibly occur, starting with my brother and his wife and ending with the possibility of floods cutting off access, a dust storm turning our finery a becoming shade of terracotta, or city guests hurt by a rampaging bull or bitten by a snake. I nudged Budgie faster. “Let’s catch up with the others.”



CHAPTER 3

ONCE WE HAD THE DATE, we contacted family and friends who lived far away in the hope that they would be able to attend. My folks were delighted, and a few tears were shed—of happiness, I hoped. Mom and Dad had never been further than Hawaii before, and were a little nervous at travelling so far, but as Mom said, “Nothing will keep us away.”

I also emailed Paul, and said that I very much hoped he and Em would attend. The rest was up to them.

We’d also Skyped Nora and Geraldine, our friends in England, and before the call had even finished, Geraldine was looking up flights.

“Wild horses couldn’t keep us away,” Nora had said. “And the fact that it’s at Jayboro is perfect. We can go trail riding again. Felix and Josie won’t believe how much better we are now.”

“You couldn’t be much worse.” Their first time ever on horseback had been at Jayboro, a couple of years ago.

“We’ve been trekking in Scotland since. Ridden Percherons in France, and even got pushed up to ride in Hyde Park in the centre of London.”

“Only once.” Geraldine’s face appeared at the edge of the screen. She flicked back her long red hair and continued, “It was for my

birthday last year. But Nora forgot to ask how much it cost. It nearly put us in the poorhouse for a month.”

“Let us know if you want us to do anything,” Nora said. “We’re brilliant organisers, and Ger’s fantastic at design. If you want a butterfly-unicorn wedding, she’s your woman.”

I gaped at her. “Have you been talking to Sue’s mum?”

“No. I just thought of the things you two would like the least.” She grinned. “Was I right?”

“More than you know.” Sue thumped her head down on the keyboard and the video call flicked over to her email. She got the call back. “My mum’s dropping hints about getting organised. If any of the minor royals in England are getting married anytime soon, they can hire Mum as their wedding planner.”

“That bad, huh?” Geraldine said. “In that case, we’ll just arrive, give you the biggest congratulatory hug, drink all your wine, and party all night.”

“That sounds perfect.”



I was between patients at the clinic when my phone rang. I usually took calls from patients on remote stations between consultations, so this wasn’t unusual.

“Dr Kratzmann speaking.”

There was a hitch in breath down the line, then an American voice said, “Moni? Is that you?”

I knew that voice. I hadn’t heard it for many years, not since I left Texas to come to Australia. But voices never really change. They age, they take on an overlay of a different accent, but at their core, they’re still the same.

“Hello, Em,” I said. “It’s been a while.”

She hesitated. "It has. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing great. Fantastic." I paused, waiting to hear what she had to say.

"Paul and I are good too. Vermont is a pleasant place to live. We love the fall colours and cooler climate."

"So I hear. It's a shame we couldn't make it up to see you last year." I wondered when she'd get to the point. She hadn't called to sell me Vermont as a vacation destination.

"We could have come down to Texas, but I wasn't sure if you would want to see us. See me."

With my free hand, I lined up my prescription pads into a neat square. "Why wouldn't I? You're my brother's wife."

"Moni, don't be obtuse, please. The last time we saw each other, I told you I was leaving you for Paul. And you didn't come to our wedding."

"I had a prac exam that week at the hospital. I couldn't get away."

"So you say." Her voice made it obvious she recognised it for the excuse it was. "Listen, I'm calling you because Paul asked me to. He would like to come to your wedding. But not if it will be difficult for you."

The phone line was crackly, but I felt her sincerity.

"Em, Sue and I would be delighted if you both came, if that's what you want."

"Thank you." Relief tinged her voice. "I didn't want you to be worried I'd be the trouble-making ex, turning up out of the blue to spoil the wedding."

"I didn't think that for a minute. What we had was a long time ago." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the receptionist gesticulating fiercely at the door.

"My next patient is here. I have to go. I'll see you at the wedding, Em."

“Thanks, Moni.” She was gone.



When Sue and I were in bed later that night, I told her about the call.

“It looks like Paul and Em will be coming.” I settled my head more firmly on Sue’s shoulder and let my fingers trail across her flat belly. “You’ll finally get to meet Paul.”

“And the woman who broke your heart.” Sue pressed a kiss to the top of my head and her words were muffled in my hair.

“That too. It was a long time ago. There will be no drama. It might be a bit awkward, but it needs to happen.”

“Good.” Sue sighed. “I know what your brother means to you. If our wedding is a way to mend the breach with him, then that’s a good thing.” She pushed my hair away so that she could see my face. “Are you okay with Em coming?”

“You mean have I got over my ex-girlfriend leaving me for my brother years ago? Of course. The time for grudges has long past. I just want my brother back.”

“I know that’s what you’ve said, but things could be different when you see her in the flesh. I’d hate for her to end up locked in the shower block or something.”

“Won’t happen. Unless it’s your sneaky plan?”

Sue laughed, which trailed into a sigh. “Is it bad of me to wish that it was all over already? I just want to be married to you, with all that it means. Informal though our wedding will be, it’s already feeling too big, too conventional.”

I raised my head to look at her. Sue was a fantastic lawyer, calm and assertive, well able to argue the merits of a claim or pacify a difficult client. But away from her profession, she was just Sue, who

preferred the company of good, close friends over a large gathering. There was a small wrinkle between her eyes, and her fingers beat a tattoo on my shoulder.

“If you’re not happy, we don’t have to go ahead with it. We can have a tiny guest list. We can elope. Run off to Las Vegas.”

“No way.” The smile in her voice shone through. “Maybe we could elope to Birdsville,”—a tiny town on the Northern Territory border that was even smaller than Mungabilly Creek—“but not Vegas.”

“If that’s what you want, I’m up for it. This is for us, Sue, not anyone else. We don’t have to do *anything* we don’t want to.”

“I want to marry you. More than anything, Moni. Ever since I proposed to you in the corridor at the Royal Flying Doctor Base. I want to be your wife.”

“Good.” I laid my head back down again. “But I mean it. We can still call the whole thing off and sneak away to the celebrant in our own time.”

“Part of me would love to do that. But a bigger part says no, we have this big gathering. After all, it’s not just our marriage we’re celebrating; it’s also standing for the acceptance of marriage equality around Australia. I think, too, that it’s important to do it for our friends here. They accepted us without question. It would be good to give back to them.”

“You’re right. You hear so many sad stories of lesbians in small towns. Mungabilly Creek has been nothing but welcoming. Well, apart from Wayne Carter.”

Sue snorted. “He’s an idiot. Because he won’t see a ‘perverted doctor’, he now has to drive two hours for his GP care.”

I turned so that I lay on my back and stared up at the fan, turning slowly in the warm room. A pale gecko clung to the ceiling next to it. How did it even stay up there? The next minute there was a soft

plop as the gecko fell, landing on the sheet. It lay there stunned for a moment, then Sue surged up and brushed it to the floor, where it landed inches from Ripper's nose. He must have been as startled as we were, as the gecko scurried away under the bed before he could react.

"You didn't even flinch." Sue turned to me, the sheet around her waist, her small breasts pale against the darker tan of her arms and shoulders. "Three years ago, you would have been on top of the wardrobe calling for rescue."

"Nope. That would have got me closer to the remaining wildlife." I pointed to three geckos still motionless on the ceiling.

"Still. You wouldn't have just laid there."

"I've gotten used to a lot of things since I moved to Australia." I folded my arms behind my head. "Snakes in the roof space. Spiders the size of my hand. Bloody big cockatoos that can reduce a veranda rail to matchsticks in under an hour. Some of the most incomprehensible slang on the planet."

"Sunsets that stretch forever. Chicken parmigiana at the Royal Hotel. Weekends away in the campervan."

"You're right. I guess I'll stay after all."

"Good-oh! Then I guess we're still getting married."

"We are."



The weeks flew by, and summer arrived at full blast. Most days, the temperatures soared into the mid-forties, and the sky remained the brightest of blues, with not a smudge of cloud anywhere in the sky. Mrs T's veggie garden wilted and died, and the air conditioning in our old house struggled to cope. It was so hot that Ripper tried to climb into the fridge when Mrs T opened it.

My parents rang one day to say they had booked their flights from Texas, and had planned a vacation after the wedding that would take them around the whole continent in seven days.

The following week, Sue's parents, Derek and Maisie, came for a visit from their small town seven hours away. Maisie waited until we were all sitting around the breakfast table before launching her plans on us.

"So," she said, as she opened a spiral-bound notebook that was bursting with bits of paper tucked into the pages. "I've had some ideas for the wedding."

I glanced at Sue. It seemed the more people wanted to talk plans, the more she backed off. She had a wary look in her eye, the sort that Ripper had when he knew he was about to be scolded for thieving bacon.

"I don't know if I've got time for this right now," she said. "I have a client coming in shortly. Can we talk about it later?" She half-rose from her chair.

Mrs T bustled up and slapped down a couple of pieces of toast in front of Sue. "You haven't had your brekky yet. And your client isn't for another couple of hours."

I suspected Maisie had a willing accomplice in Mrs T.

"I have to prepare—" Sue stood.

Derek snatched a piece of toast from Sue's plate. "It will only take a few minutes, love. Then you can go and get ready for your client."

Sue shot me a look that could only mean "save me", but Maisie already had her notebook open. Drawings and leaflets shot out as she flicked the pages. Sue fell back into her chair like a sunken soufflé.

"Firstly, who will be in your wedding party?" Maisie asked. "Jim says you haven't asked him yet. Your dad can walk you to the celebrant; Moni, will your father do the honours for you?"

I glanced at Sue. These were things we simply hadn't considered. And, if I was honest, I wasn't sure we wanted to consider them.

Sue crumbled her remaining piece of toast. "Moni and I haven't talked about details yet." She shot me an anguished look.

Tempting as it was to let my confident, professional girlfriend suffer a little longer at the hands of her parents—I knew we would laugh about it later—I had to support her on this.

"We were thinking more informal than that," I said. "But as Sue said, we haven't talked about the details. That's why no one has been asked to do anything yet."

"You can't dilly-dally for too long," Maisie said. "Moni, would you mind giving me your parents' email addresses? We'll need to coordinate with them."

"Sure." It was a logical thing to do, but sirens were sounding in my head that were louder than the Mungabilly Volunteer Firefighters' call to man the truck.

"What about dresses?" Maisie consulted her list.

I squinted at it. It seemed a very long list, and this was only point two.

"Have you picked them out? What colour do you want for the wedding party?"

We obviously were the most unorganised soon-to-be-married people in Australia. I gaped at Sue. A dress? Sue didn't even own a dress. I had a couple, but Sue... I frowned as I tried to picture her in a long white wedding dress. I couldn't. And even if I could, a white dress on the red dirt of Jayboro Outstation didn't sound like a good idea.

"Mum, I love that you want to get involved." Sue reached out a hand and clasped Maisie's arm. "And Moni and I appreciate it."

I nodded in agreement. Sue's parents were absolute rippers—to use the local lingo—and they had included me in their family

without hesitation. I'd known Maisie was an organiser. What I'd underestimated was how much she'd take our wedding under her wing.

"But Moni and I have been busy, and we haven't talked about any of this at all. We really need to figure it out between us before we involve other people."

Maisie's face fell, and Derek fidgeted in his chair. "Your mother's been so looking forward to this," he began. "And if you both are busy, it would save a lot of effort on your part to let her arrange things."

Sue swallowed. "We're not cutting you out, Mum, but we would like to figure out some details ourselves first."

"We'll talk about it today," I said. "And then we'll have time to plan with you later."

Maisie sighed. "Okay. But don't take too long to decide." She levelled a glance at Sue. "I know you too well, darl. You'll take forever to figure out what you want."

Sue grinned. "This isn't coming out all over again."

Derek laughed. "I hope *not*. We don't have that much time."

"Well, when the two of you talk, make sure the conversation includes the wedding theme, photographers, décor, music, flowers, your vows, presents—"

"I'm sorry, but I really do have to get to work." Sue fled.

I shot Maisie an apologetic glance. "She's a little worried about this client. But we will talk about it before this evening, I promise."

I had a morning clinic, so I had to go too, but Sue and I met for lunch. Rather than return home, where we were bound to be ambushed by well-meaning parents, or even Mrs T, Sue brought sandwiches to the clinic. We went into my consulting room and closed the door.

Sue climbed onto the examination bed and lay flat, legs crossed at the ankle, arms folded across her chest. She closed her eyes. “Are we that naïve? I thought we’d just wear something a bit dressier than work clothes, invite all our friends, book a celebrant, and head out to Jayboro for a big party. A theme? What does that even mean in this context? Surely ‘outback wedding’ is theme enough? Does it have to be 1920s theme, or do we let Ger loose with the butterflies and unicorns?”

“Definitely not the latter. Not the former either, come to that.” I settled in my padded chair. It was the most comfortable one in the room, and I swivelled around to look at Sue. “No theme.”

“No flowers either,” she said from behind her closed eyelids. “Not unless you want to carry some. But having hothouse flowers driven halfway across the country doesn’t seem right. We’ll be at Jayboro. There’ll be dust and drooping gum trees, and horseshit and dogs. Having, I don’t know, roses or something, seems very out of place.” Her eyes opened. “Unless it’s what you want. If you do, then I take back everything I just said. Because this is *our* wedding; not just mine.”

“No flowers. If the gum trees happen to be in blossom that’s all I need.” I divided the sandwiches into two and took Sue’s across to her. “When I was a kid, we’d sometimes play weddings. Here comes the bride and all that. We’d write the most elaborate vows, and pretend to marry each other. Just the girls; the boys were off trying to dam the river or something. Maybe the other girls were dreaming of their future husbands and a big elaborate wedding, but I wasn’t.” I grinned. “I certainly wasn’t dreaming of a husband, and marriage equality was a pipedream. So playing weddings was like playing space explorers; something that was fun, but had no bearing

on reality. Come to think of it, space explorers was the better game.” I sat on the exam bed next to her feet and gripped her ankle. “I want the public declaration, I want the commitment, I want the equal rights that being married to you will bring. I want that seal on our love.” I heaved a breath. “But I don’t need an elaborate ceremony.” I flapped a hand around the room, encompassing more than my very basic GP clinic. I meant our old weatherboard house, our lives here, the entire backwater of Mungabilly Creek. “We’re not elaborate people. We don’t *need* a glamour wedding.”

“Yes.” Sue hummed in agreement. “But are we depriving others of the pleasure of it? Not just my parents—who I had no idea would want to be that involved—but yours, our friends, our community. Maybe they would like the excuse for some ritz and glitz.”

“They’ll get a massive event—Mungabilly style. Food, an open bar, a band. We can do that.”

Sue’s eyes opened. “And there we have it. Why I love you in a nutshell. You fit in so well.”

“Is that all? I thought you loved my professional skills, and the physical examinations I perform on you.”

“Those too. You do a particularly thorough breast examination. Very diligent.”

“I use all the available tools at my disposal.” I stuck my tongue out and wagged it.

Sue’s eyes went dark. “Is there a lock on this door?”

“You know there is. And you also know that if we return this evening without having sorted out enough to keep Maisie happy, that we’ll be railroaded into having a wooden dance floor laid between the shower block and the barn, and a twenty-piece orchestra playing Strauss waltzes.”

Sue swung her legs over the side of the exam table and picked up a sandwich. “So talk. Let’s get this sorted. But later tonight, I think it’s your turn for a breast examination, Dr Kratzmann.”



Mrs T stayed for dinner, something she often did, and she’d invited her friend Rosalie too. Rosalie had been Mrs T’s girlfriend, back when they were teenagers living out in a remote community, but now they were just good, close friends. Both seemed very happy with that arrangement.

Rosalie helped Sue out in the law practice three days a week, and she was highly efficient and organised. Before, when Sue asked me to pass a file, she’d say something like “the Fletcher file. It’s somewhere in the middle pile under the window, and there’s a Tim Tam wrapper separating it from the Perez file.” Now I knew to look under F on the shelves and I’d find Fletcher between Falluga and Friels.

Maisie was obviously bursting to raise the subject of the wedding again, but she held her quiet all the way through Mrs T’s lasagne. It wasn’t until the ice-cream and frozen mango that she mentioned it. “So, did the two of you talk?”

“We did. Name the item on your list and we’ll tell you what we’ve decided.” Sue took a sip of red wine. Probably for courage.

Maisie opened the notebook beside her plate. “Theme?”

I glanced at Sue. “Outback wedding.”

Maisie looked at each of us in turn. “But it *is* an outback wedding. That’s not a theme, it’s a fact.”

“It’s what we want. Simple.” Sue met her mother’s eyes. “I hope you understand.”

“Flowers?”

“None,” I said.

A beat. Maisie returned to her list. “Photographer?”

“None. We’ll just ask people to take photos and send them to us.”

Maisie blinked, and her finger moved down her list. “Music?”

“As the Commercial in Worrindi will be doing the bar, we thought we’d ask them for details of the band that plays in the pub once a month. They’re pretty good. They get people dancing.”

“Okay.” Doubt threaded Maisie’s voice, but she didn’t say more. “Who will be in your wedding party?”

This was a difficult one. “To be honest, Mum,” Sue said, “we would rather not have one. We both feel we’re not possessions to be given away, and we have so many wonderful family and good friends that to pick some over others to stand up with us doesn’t seem fair. It will just be us, standing together, getting married.”

Maisie bit her lip. “I always hoped I’d see your father give you away.”

Sue’s voice was gentle. “I know you’ve had your dreams for my wedding, and I’m sorry we’re not following that, but it’s *our* wedding, and this is what we want.”

Maisie nodded, but there was a glint of moisture in her eyes. “Sure, darl. If it’s what you want, then that’s how it will be.”

Sue was wavering. I could see it in the way her hand hovered over her mum’s before settling to clasp it. It was there in the way she met her dad’s steady gaze. There, too, in the way she leant into Mrs T’s brief hug.

Maisie straightened, and the back of her hand passed over her eyes. “What would you like us to wear?”

“That’s easy.” I smiled at Maisie. “Whatever you want. Whatever makes you feel good. Dress up as formal as you want, wear a hat or a fascinator. Or wear your denim shorts if you prefer.”

“They do make your legs look amazing,” Sue said.

Maisie gave a watery grin and flapped a hand at Sue. "C'mon, darl, you can't get around me that easily. But seriously, what if we clash with what Moni's folks are wearing?"

"It really doesn't matter. Mrs T can wear her yellow shorts with 'outback bum' printed on the rear if she wants."

"I just might." Mrs T got up to put the kettle on.

Rosalie had been silent up to this point. Now she asked, "What are you two wearing? Something tells me it won't be long white dresses."

"Oh!" Maisie suppressed her gasp when Derek put a hand over hers.

"It's not very practical to wear white at Jayboro. One willy-willy and we'd end up covered in dust." I spoke gently.

Maisie looked fragile. It seemed we were dismantling all of her wedding dreams.

"But it's traditional for a bride to wear white."

"We're not traditional brides." I took a deep breath.

When Sue and I had talked, we'd realised that the one thing in our unconventional planning that might upset Maisie the most, was this. No long dress, no veil, no posy of flowers. I'd seen her wedding photos. She and Derek had had all of that, and had gotten married in a church.

"I'm going to look for something loose and bright," I said. "Maybe turquoise. That will show up well against the red dirt. Knee length. And a big hat, as I don't want sunburn."

Derek nodded. "You'll look beautiful, Moni. I can't see either of you in white."

I loved him a little bit more at that moment.

"I'm not going to wear a dress." Sue spoke steadily, as if she expected opposition. "I'm not sure what I'll wear yet, but it will be something colourful and casual. I haven't worn a dress in over twenty years. I'm not going to start now."

Mrs T nodded. "You'll look good, whatever you pick. Tall, lean people look good in a sack. Not like me." She slapped her backside.

"And we don't want presents." Sue reached an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. "We honestly have everything we need. What we'd really love is for people to give us cards with their wishes for us written inside."

"The department store at the Isa takes wedding lists." Maisie made a last-ditch attempt. "Nice stuff. Doesn't have to be expensive."

"That's a lovely thought, but no. There really is nothing we want. Well, Moni wants a puppy, but we're both too busy to care for one. Any puppy we got would love Mrs T more than us," Sue said.

"Ripper already does." Mrs T returned to the table with mugs of black tea.

"That's to do with the treats you have in your pockets."

Ripper, who'd been sitting out on the veranda keeping watch over the street, came bounding in when he heard his name. He sat in front of Mrs T, ears pricked expectantly.

"Tried and convicted." I grinned at Mrs T.

Mrs T slipped Ripper a treat. "Rip and I get along just fine."

Maisie closed her notebook with finality. "It looks like you two are managing just fine with the planning then. You don't need us."

Sue shot me a panicked look.

"We do need you, Maisie," I said. "We really appreciate the thoughts, but mainly, we want you to enjoy yourself on the day and not be worried that things won't run smoothly."

Maisie nodded. "After all, who knows when Jim and Alexis will ever tie the knot." Her smile was a bit wonky, but at least she didn't look on the edge of tears. "This could be the only wedding I go to of one of my children. I'd like it to be memorable."

Mrs T stirred her tea. “No worries about that. With these two, I’m sure it will be.”



Later, in bed, after the lovemaking was finished, after Ripper had, once again, been relocated from the bed to the floor, Sue and I lay together under the ceiling fan.

“I think Mum was okay in the end.” Sue sighed and pressed a kiss to my hair. “I know it’s our wedding, but I can’t help feeling a bit guilty.”

I had the same stirrings, but I didn’t think it would help Sue to mention them.

I settled more firmly on the pillow facing Sue, and my fingers curved around her breast. “It’s a good thing I love you. Otherwise, I’d throw you to the wolves and before you knew it, you’d be shovelled into a white lace dress and given a bouquet of baby’s breath.”

“That would be the perfect wedding for some people. Your nurse friend in the Isa, for example. She looked beautiful, and that was exactly how it was for her.”

“She did, and it was a wonderful day. But she was in the Civic Hall, not in a dirt paddock. Different strokes for different folks.”

And then we talked about Ripper and whether we should get a new puppy, and the wedding was pushed aside, at least for the moment.

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ALMOST-MARRIED
MONI

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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