

Blue
Skies

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*To Bev Due and Ned Woodward, friends who
suffered from breast cancer and both died before
this book was finished.*

*To Anthony, Rochelle and Hayden – my world.
Carolyn, without whom, Blue Skies wouldn't have
been started, let alone completed.*

Prologue

1940

The woman wept as if her heart would break, her long copper hair falling in curls over the side of her face and down her arms. She rocked backwards and forwards in her grief, her arms encircling her knees.

Their place had been here on the side of this stream. It was here they'd talked and laughed. In summer they had paddled in the cool water or swum in deep rock pools, and they'd spent many a sultry summer evening here lying next to each other, while the native bottlebrush trees swayed gently in the breeze.

During the winter months when good rains had fallen, turning the stream into a river, they had dreamed of their future, their lives together, the farm, and children. And it was at this place, in among the soft moss and wild orchids, that they had slipped away from their chaperone and he had finally claimed her as his own.

The woman had been grateful to have this handsome, vibrant younger man fall in love with her. She'd believed she would be left on the shelf; she was not particularly beautiful or interesting. But his love had made her shine.

She didn't understand his change of heart - surely he must be lying. But why? And what on earth did her future hold now?

Chapter 1

2000 - November

Brian took his eyes off the road for only a moment. But that was all it took. The steering wheel tilted towards the edge of the road, the gravel grabbed at the front tyres, and next thing he had completely lost control.

His wife's screams and his moan of terror stopped abruptly as the airborne car hit the ground and skidded. The sound of crunching metal and shattering glass echoed through the countryside, then everything was still, the only movement the spinning of a wheel and a broken aerial swinging from side to side. The occupants of the car were silent. Above them a crow cawed.

Amanda gazed down from a second storey classroom at the people milling around the graduation hall, trying

to spot her parents in the crowd. She could see her accounting professor and the dean of the university talking to her biology lecturer, amid beaming parents who were chatting to one another. She couldn't believe this day had come at last. After all the arguments trying to convince her father she needed to get an agribusiness degree, after three years of hard work and part-time jobs, enduring the separation from her mum - not to mention the family farm, Kyleena - she had finally done it.

The dean had let it slip before the ceremony that she'd topped her class. Would that make her father proud? she wondered.

She smiled as she spotted Katie and Jo talking to their parents with the seriousness of newly graduated adults, looking nothing like the drunken, loud yobbos they could be when they weren't studying.

Her eyes fell on Jonno with a familiar stab of longing. He looked so handsome in his suit and tie. She'd only ever seen him dressed so formally once before - at Cory McLeod's funeral. She felt a pang of sadness thinking of her friend who hadn't made it to graduation; he'd been killed in a car accident in the first year of their ag course. His death had been devastating to his friends.

Suddenly, the door in the room flew open, startling Amanda, who looked around to see Hannah coming into the room. Her friend looked so unlike her usual wild, straggly self as she rushed into the room, dressed in a black graduation robe and

blue sash, her fly-away blonde hair swept up under her mortar board. 'Why're you hiding?' she demanded, her eyes bright with excitement.

'I'm not. I'm just watching everyone,' said Amanda, turning back to the window.

Sensing Amanda's sombre mood, Hannah moved over to the window and put her arm around her friend's shoulder. 'Are your parents here?' she asked.

'Of course! You don't think Mum would miss it, do you? I haven't seen them yet, but they're always running late - they probably snuck in after the ceremony started and have run into one of Dad's old mates,' said Amanda smiling wryly to mask her concern.

'Well come on then. You can look for them later, Miss Dux! Right now you're needed for the class photos and drinks. That's actually why I came to find you.'

'And here I was thinking you cared,' said Amanda with a smile. She followed Hannah out of the room, switching the light off behind her.

Arranging themselves in front of the camera, the class of 2000 smiled and called out 'Bundy!', while their families looked on proudly. Between shots, Amanda searched for her parents.

Forcing a smile, she was hardly aware of the camera clicking and whirring as more photos were taken of the whole class, then a series of the dux of agribusiness with the recipients of the three agricultural awards and their teachers. As the final shot was taken of her with the high achievers from the university's other courses, Amanda caught sight of two policemen speaking with

the dean. The look of shock on his face as his eyes searched the crowd told Amanda the story, and without thinking her feet carried her to them.

Hannah followed, motioning for Jonno to come with her. They were by Amanda's side to hear the news and gather their weeping friend to them, the graduation celebrations forgotten.

Amanda sat next to her father in the church, her mother's coffin resting on a gurney in front of them, her uncle speaking at the pulpit. Although cheerful flowers matched her mother's vibrant personality, Amanda had to close her eyes against the pain she felt looking at them atop the coffin. She could hear her mother's laughter, see her flashing eyes and feel her arms around her.

It wasn't until she felt a touch on her arm that she realised the pallbearers were making their way out of the church and on to the cemetery. Consumed by her own thoughts, she hadn't heard a word of the service. She walked by herself to the hearse, tears clouding her vision.

Her father's rigid posture and continuing silence were unnerving. Struggling with his grief and guilt, he had locked himself away, leaving Amanda to cope with the funeral arrangements.

She felt like she had aged dramatically in the two weeks since the accident. She would never forget seeing her mother in the coffin, cold and unresponsive,

her scars from the accident cleverly hidden. The lady at the funeral home had helped do her mother's hair and makeup, but it was Amanda who had chosen her outfit and fastened the silver bracelet that had been a gift for her fortieth birthday on her lifeless wrist.

It was hard to believe that only two weeks before she had been so full of hope and optimism for the future.

Choking back a sob, she ran to her car and sped away.