

Chapter One



One Sunday. Couldn't she have just *one* Sunday that didn't involve lying in the dirt searching for kittens?

'And you're sure they're under here?' Sera called over her shoulder as she wriggled beneath the house. The beam from her torch bounced off a cluster of old paint tins.

'Definitely,' the woman said. 'At least, I think so.'

From where Sera was lying, all she could see was the woman's feet, and the hot pink nail polish adorning her perfectly pedicured toes.

She sighed. *I should get a pedi.* Though what would be the point? She was always wearing boots.

Turning back to the jumble of bric-a-brac cluttering the home's foundations, Sera pushed aside a cobweb and wiggled forward commando-style, all elbows and knees.

Her torch caught a glint of something in the gloom. A jet-black ball of fluff was pressed against the wall, its eyes wide and its back arched.

Sera edged closer, hand slowly extending towards the terrified kitten. It swatted at her then hissed, so bold and fierce that she quietly laughed.

'It's okay, little one,' she whispered. With a swift grab, she had the spitting creature by the scruff of the neck. 'Come on, tough guy. Let's get you safe.'

She cradled the kitten in the crook of her arm, stuffed her torch into her bra and wormed backwards across the rough ground, reversing butt-first into the daylight.

'One,' she said.

Her dog, Buffy, bounded forward and licked her face.

'Ew. Buff!' She shooed away the excited Staffordshire Terrier-cross, pushed herself up with a low groan, and handed the kitten to the woman with the pink pedi. 'Take this for me for a sec?'

Buffy continued to bounce about eagerly. 'Is your dog okay?' the woman asked, holding the kitten aloft like Simba in the opening scene of *The Lion King*.

Sera arranged the pet crate on the shaded part of the woman's deck. 'She's fine. She loves kittens.'

The woman nodded and tentatively showed her tiny charge to the wagging dog, who slurped the kitten with her enormous pink tongue.

Sera took the soggy kitten and popped it into the crate. It scurried to the back, cowering on a red tartan blanket and hissing furiously. Buffy lay beside the crate, her head between her paws and her tail thumping on the wooden deck.

'Do you think there's more?' the woman asked, frowning at the excited dog.

'Where there's one, there's usually more.'

An hour later, filthy, sweaty and with a smear of dead rat goo on her hand, Sera had the last of them. 'That's seems to be it. Four. I'll take them to the vet for a once-over and then they'll come back to the shelter until they're ready for adoption.'

'Thanks so much,' the woman said. 'I heard them meowing, but wasn't sure what to do.'

'Thanks for caring, and for reaching out to Rose's Rescue.'



'Siri. Call Toby.'

'Petside Vet Clinic.' Toby's deep voice boomed through Sera's speakers.

'Hey, Herriot,' she said. The nickname was Grandma Rose's fault. She'd had a crush on the famous British vet surgeon, James Herriot, and had made Sera watch the old TV series based on his life at least ten times. They'd sit on the couch on a Saturday afternoon, eating cake, watching the show, laughing and crying. Then Sera had read the books, and when they made a new series a few years ago, she'd watched that too. That's how Herriot stuck. The famous vet held a special place in her heart. Just like Toby did. 'Guess what? I have a bunch of fluff balls needing your attention.'

'Of course you do, it's Sunday. Feline or canine?'

'Four felines.'

'How far away are you?'

'I should be there in about fifteen minutes.'

'I'm ordering pizza. Are you in?'

Her stomach rumbled on cue. It was late afternoon, and a long time since her morning cup of tea and biscuit. That Buffy had eaten half of. 'God, yes. Pizza sounds great.'

'I'll fire up the surgery,' he said. 'We can order when you get here.' Sera didn't know what she'd do without Toby. Dr Toby McManus, veterinary surgeon, took care of the animals she saved, and he did it all for free, which had saved Rose's Rescue, the struggling animal shelter Sera owned and ran.

When Grandma Rose left her cherished property in Oxford Falls on Sydney's Northern Beaches to Sera, her first thought had been to sell. A charming Federation-style home with a small paddock set against the bush and only minutes from the ocean, the place would no doubt fetch a sensational price and set Sera up nicely to travel, or to start that Masters of Creative Writing she was always threatening to do.

But with her grandmother's home came three ancient cats, and until they passed on, Sera saw it as her responsibility to take care of them. Rose had loved those cats even more than she'd loved James Herriot, and Sera had loved Rose. So she put her plans to sell on hold, and instead moved in.

Then one day while she was out for a run, she spotted a wiggling hessian sack on a bush track off the side of the road, which she was horrified to discover contained four newborn puppies. Then and there, she decided to take them in and when they were old enough, find them the good homes they deserved. She hadn't known her commitment to those puppies would completely alter the course of her life.

Toby's was the closest vet surgery to her on that day, and she would forever be grateful for that, because without him, his encouragement and steadfast friendship, she may never have had the courage to use her inheritance to build an animal rescue and boarding facility on Rose's land.

Two years later, Rose's Rescue was a small but passionate shelter dedicated to saving lost and abandoned dogs, cats, guinea pigs, rabbits – if there was an animal in need, Sera took them in and found a family to love them. She was even housing a malnourished horse and eternally cranky sheep in the barn at the bottom of her paddock, both of which Toby was helping to care for. He looked after all creatures great and small. Including her.

Buffy bounded out of the car and dashed towards Toby, her tail wagging furiously.

'Hello, Stink,' he said as he bent down to scratch the dog's ear. 'You're getting fat.'

Sera lugged the kittens from her van and handed the crate to Toby.

'She's muscular.' He hummed in disapproval and took the crate into his surgery. Placing them on the examination table, he peered in at the terrified kittens huddled together, staring back at him wide-eyed. 'No mother?'

Sera leaned against his desk. 'I didn't see a mum, but I left food out just in case, and the woman whose house this lot were hiding under said she'd call if she sees a cat hanging around.'

'Under the house, huh? That explains . . .' He raised his eyebrows and nodded towards her t-shirt.

She glanced down and grimaced. She was smothered in dirt, and that rat goo she thought only ended up on her hand. 'Ew. I think that's dead rat gunk on me.'

He fake gagged. 'Gross. Why don't you go wash up? I'll give these ratbags a once-over.'

Toby's surgery adjoined his small house, where Sera spent so much time it was practically her second home. She hurried up the hall towards the bathroom, being careful not to touch anything. Looking in the mirror, she gasped; she was a mess. Her auburn hair was damp and plastered to her forehead, and she had a shadow of dirt under her chin and splatters of mud mingling with her freckles. She really could have done with a shower, but getting naked in Toby's house was a line she didn't feel comfortable crossing, even though she knew that made absolutely no sense (something he'd told her on more than one occasion).

She peeled off her grubby t-shirt and placed it into a plastic bag, then washed her face and neck, swept her hair into a ponytail with a scrunchie she found in her pocket and wiped down her jeans with a washcloth. Finally, she helped herself to Toby's deodorant and one of his Petside Vet Clinic promotional sweatshirts, which was four sizes too big and swamped her petite frame.

She checked the mirror again. Definitely a little dishevelled, but at least she was clean. Ish.

Venturing back to the clinic, she smiled as she watched Toby coo to each kitten he examined. Toby was everything most women go crazy for. Tall, with caramel coloured hair that hung in soft, unruly curls around his face, and gentle eyes that were the perfect shade of milk chocolate. He was handsome in that people-can't-help-but-stare way, and he was smart and kind and funny and, to top it off, he loved animals. She teased Toby constantly about how all his female clients, and the occasional male one, swooned in his presence.

Leaving him to his work, Sera scuffed to the lounge room, flopped onto the couch with a relieved groan and closed her eyes. She and Toby had never been anything more than friends. The best of friends. They'd clicked from the moment they met and spent endless hours together, watching movies and eating food they knew they shouldn't. He was her confidant and

trusted adviser on everything from how to care for a pregnant bunny to how to handle her mother, and she was always there to cheer him up on the days his work left him a little heartbroken. She loved Toby like crazy, but not like *that* and she knew he felt the same.

‘Oi,’ she heard, and fluttered opened her lids. ‘Am I keeping you awake?’ Toby pushed back his freshly showered hair.

‘I think I dozed off.’ Her head rolled to the side as her gaze followed him across the room. ‘How are the kittens? Also, I stole one of your sweatshirts.’

‘The kittens are fine. Also, that’ll be twenty bucks.’

‘Add it to my bill.’ She gave him a wry smile. God help her if he ever did give her a bill for what she owed. It’d probably cost more than her soul was worth. ‘How long before I can home them?’

‘I’d say they’re four to five weeks old, so they’re good to be weaned. We’ll start their vaccinations in the next week.’

‘Thanks, Herriot. What would I do without you?’

He huffed. ‘Do you want a drink?’

‘Are we talking your client’s home-brew?’

‘Yep.’

‘Then nope. That stuff packs a punch and I have to drive sometime this century. Plus, I have a deadline tomorrow. Water’s fine.’

He nodded and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with an unlabelled brown bottle in one hand and a glass of water in the other. He handed her the glass. ‘Is the deadline for that funeral place?’

Sera wrote copy for anyone who would let her. She’d learned not to be fussy early into running the rescue, when she realised her small cash inheritance was being quickly eaten up by her assortment of animals. When she was younger, her writing dreams had involved being a journalist like her dad, or penning a bestselling novel and touring the world on a glamorous all-expenses paid book tour. Now, her reality was writing about the pros and cons of various coffin styles and how to honour a loved one’s last wishes. It wasn’t what she’d planned – nothing in her life was what she’d planned – but with money in short supply, she didn’t have a choice. Every month

seemed to bring more lost and unwanted animals than the last, pushing costs up and up. Her house was old, and the roof needed repairs, and she'd just spent more cash than she had to spare on ensuring that the barn at the end of the paddock didn't fall down in the next storm. Money went out three times faster than it came in. But she had to keep Rose's Rescue going; the alternative kept her awake at night.

'Sure is,' she said, adding a dramatic sigh. 'I'm still surprised they gave me the job after I laughed when they said they wanted their website to be "livelier". Honestly, how could that not have been a joke?'

Toby chuckled as he dropped onto the couch beside her, stretched out his long legs and put his sock-clad feet on the coffee table. 'I hope they pay well.'

'They do, and they're super nice, so I want to get it right.'

'Dead-on, one might say.'

'Don't want to bury the lede.'

'Be your funeral if you did.'

'There'd be grave repercussions.'

They burst out laughing.

Buffy barked, charged from the room and down the hall towards the backdoor just as the front doorbell rang. 'That dog's an idiot,' Toby said as he put his beer on the table. He slapped Sera's thigh and pushed off the couch. 'I ordered for you. I'll get the food, you get the plates.' He offered her his hand and hauled her up with an exaggerated grunt.

Sera's stomach grumbled as she rummaged through Toby's kitchen cupboards. She was starving, but still sleepy after her short nap. Chances were high that with a tummy full of pizza she'd pass out on the couch watching whatever movie they picked for the night. Half the time they *both* crashed out before the movie ended. She'd woken up drooling on Toby's shoulder more times than she could count. It was lucky they were only friends because she'd be way too tired for romance anyway.

She headed back to the lounge room with a roll of paper towel, and the plates and cutlery they wouldn't use. 'You better have ordered extra . . .'

She trailed off, freezing as her gaze fell on the man standing beside Toby.

The absolutely drop-dead, stop-you-in-your-tracks, gorgeous man who *definitely* wasn't the pizza guy.

He was Hemsworth-level tall and built, with biceps that overfilled his sleeves, artfully messy sandy brown hair and eyes so blue, their brilliance popped from across the room. His square jaw was covered in exactly the right amount of stubble and his mouth was a rosy pout that she instantly wanted to kiss.

Her breath hitched. Twice.

Toby cleared his throat, and she blinked.

'It wasn't the pizza,' he said. 'It was Ethan.'

She blinked again, her brain in a fog of Holy Hotness, Batman.

Toby nodded at her, as if prompting her to recognise the Adonis standing there casually glowing. 'Ethan . . . James? You know. The actor. The movies with the dragons?'

Ethan sauntered towards her, a smile slowly spreading across his delectable lips. 'Don't worry. No one recognises me without the sword and bearskins.' A pair of deep dimples popped in his cheeks as he grinned.

Sera sighed before she could stop herself.

'Let me help you with those,' he said, his blue eyes twinkling.

He gathered the plates from her arms, his large, warm hands brushing against her fingers, sending a tingle shooting across her skin.

'*Throne of Kings*,' she blurted. 'You're Lord Jasper. You're right, without the sword and fur and stuff, you do . . . uhh . . .' She flapped a hand in his direction. 'I mean you don't . . . um . . . uhh . . .' She could feel her cheeks burst into flames.

Toby shot her a *what the hell is wrong with you?* expression. 'Ethan has a bit of a problem,' he said.

Ethan set down the plates and nodded. 'There's a dog in my backyard. I've been up on the Gold Coast for work, and I just got home and there's this huge, angry dog stalking around on my lawn. My neighbour said it's been there since yesterday. He thought it must have been mine. God knows how it got over the fence.' He shook his head. 'Anyway, I didn't know who to

call, what with it being a Sunday night. My neighbour suggested I call you, Dr McManus. Said you might be able to help.'

Toby pulled his phone from his pocket and checked it. 'Sorry, did I miss your call?'

Ethan scratched his head, causing the hem of his t-shirt to lift just enough to flash a hint of taut waist and smooth, tanned skin. 'Ah. No. I'm just down the hill near Turimetta Beach, so I thought I'd come straight here and . . . Look, I'm going to be honest with you. Dogs freak me out, and this one's angry. It's snarling and barking and frothing at the mouth.'

'What do you mean *frothing*?' Toby asked, alarm in his voice.

Ethan looked a little sheepish. 'Okay, it might not have been frothing. But it was definitely angry. Really, really angry. And I didn't want to be there, in case it came at me.'

Sera took a deep breath, shook off her hot guy-induced stupor and purposefully placed the roll of paper towel on the table. 'You could have gone inside and shut the door.' *Whoa*. Why did her voice sound unnaturally high?

'What if it broke through the window?' Ethan asked. 'I don't know what it's capable of.'

She laughed, then abruptly stopped when she realised he was serious. 'I think you've seen too many movies, Mr James.'

'Call me Ethan. And haven't you seen *Cujo*? With the killer dog?'

'I read the book. You know that's fiction, right?'

'Doesn't mean it couldn't happen.'

'I seriously doubt it.'

'How do you know?'

'Cujo was rabid. We don't have rabies in Australia.'

'What if it was really, really pissed-off?' His lips quirked, one side of his mouth lifting into a grin.

Sera laughed again. This time she knew he wasn't serious. 'I'm sure the dog in your backyard is no Cujo.'

'It was a good movie, though. You've at least gotta give me that.'

'The book was better.'

Toby coughed. 'Okay. Enough with the *Cujo* talk. Ethan, *Cujo* was a Saint Bernard, and I can guarantee you a Saint Bernard is too lazy to kill anything other than its dinner. Do you know what kind of dog it is?'

'A brown one,' Ethan said. 'Brown. Big. Angry. Possibly rabid.' He grinned at Sera.

Her tummy fluttered, and she grinned back.

Toby turned to Sera and gave a drawn-out sigh. 'Do you need backup, or am I keeping the pizza warm for you?'

She scrunched up her nose and nodded. 'Warm pizza, please. Can you hang onto Buffy too?'

At the sound of her name, the dog came tearing down the hall and bounded into the room.

Toby rolled his eyes. 'Better late than never.'

Ethan took three hasty steps backwards, colliding with the wall. 'Is that a Pitbull?'

Buffy jumped up at him, wagging furiously as her paws made a direct hit with his crotch. An *oof* exploded from his lungs.

'Buffy! Down!' Sera grabbed the dog by the collar. 'I'm so sorry. She's a Staffy-cross. An overly friendly one with perfect aim.'

Ethan eyed the excited dog. 'Is that Buffy like the vampire slayer?'

Sera handed the dog off to Toby. 'Except I promise you the only thing she'll slay is your heart.'

'And possibly your balls,' Toby added. He nodded towards Sera. 'This is Sera Madden, by the way.'

'I run Rose's Rescue, a local animal shelter. If you give me your address, I can meet you at your place and we can go from there.'

Ethan puffed out a breath, his hand still cupping his crotch. 'Seriously? That's brilliant.'

She turned to Toby. 'If it's getting too late, I'll let you know and I can pick up Buff in the morning.'

'You're not coming back tonight?' His eyes flicked between her and Ethan.

'It depends how long this takes,' she said. 'Okay?'

Toby chewed his cheek for a moment. 'I guess.'

She patted Buffy's head. 'And don't give her too much pizza. Remember, *you* think she's fat.'

'Muscular,' Toby said.



The dog's hackles were raised, and it growled as it reversed across the lawn until it was hard up against the pool fence.

Sera carefully approached the brown, big, angry and absolutely not rabid German Shepherd-cross. 'Come on, buddy. You can't stay here.'

It barked.

'Is everything okay?' Ethan called from the safety of his deck.

'I think he's all noise,' she replied over her shoulder. She reached into the pouch on her belt. 'Come on, pups. I've got a treat with your name on it.'

The dog's posture instantly changed and it inched forward, sniffed at the treat, then snatched it from Sera's outstretched hand, gobbling it down in two seconds flat.

'Hungry, huh? You want more?' She pulled out another treat. 'You've got to come closer this time.'

Sera cooed to the nervous animal and, when it was in reach, nimbly looped a leash around its neck. The dog thrashed briefly, twisting from side to side, before sitting down with a whimper and gazing up at Sera with soulful brown eyes.

'Here you go,' she said, handing over the promised treat. She tentatively scratched the dog's ear. 'Aw, buddy. You're okay, aren't you? What was all that grumbling about?'

'That's impressive,' Ethan called out.

'He's just scared, Mr James. Would you mind getting some water for him?'

'Only if you promise to call me Ethan.' He grinned and disappeared into the house, returning with a plastic takeaway container, which he placed on the wooden deck before backing away again.

Sera led the dog to the water, and it gulped thirstily. 'I wonder how it got into your yard?' She looked around at the high fences.

'Beats me. My guess is he was dumped here.' Ethan reached into his back pocket and drew out his wallet. 'What do I owe you?'

'You don't have to pay me. Rose's Rescue is a registered charity. We do have a donation link on our website if you really want to help. Just Google us.' She smiled at him, and he smiled back, dimples popping. She blew out a soft breath. *Oh boy, no wonder he's in the movies.* He was beyond handsome.

'I guess I better let you get back to pizza night with your boyfriend.' He held out an arm to guide her down the side of the house and back to the street, his eyes never leaving the dog.

'Toby and I aren't together. We're just friends. He does the vet work for the shelter. He was helping me with some kittens I rescued from under a house today.'

'Oh. Right.' He pulled back the gate with an outstretched arm. 'What if you can't find this dog's owner? I wouldn't want anything to happen to him.'

'Then we'll find him a new home. Or he'll stay with us. We have one long-term resident, a scruffy Jack Russell named Harry. No one has ever adopted him because he can be a little shy, and for some reason, people can't see past that. They expect every dog to love them straight away. But some dogs need time and patience, and Harry's one of those. We call him our mascot. I hope one day someone comes to take him to his forever home, but until then, he'll be well-loved and taken care of, and so will this guy.'

'It's pretty amazing work you're doing.' He flashed her another bright smile, and the glow from the streetlight illuminated his skin as if he was lit from within. 'You're obviously a good person, Sera.'

Her cheeks flushed.



'Siri, call Toby.' Sera yawned as she waited for Toby to pick up.

'Petside Vet Clinic.'

'Why do you always answer like that when you can see my number?'

'Because I'm professional. How did you go with the movie star? Does he live in a mansion?'

'Not at all. An old beach cottage. Though, it's right up on the headland, so it'd be worth a fortune.'

'What about the dog?'

'A nervous German Shepherd-cross with a love of liver treats.'

'So, not Cujo.'

'Definitely not Cujo,' she said through another yawn. 'Anyway, I'm exhausted and I need a shower.'

'You know you could have showered at my place.'

'I know.'

'Weirdo.'

'Takes one to know one.'

He chuckled.

She pulled her seatbelt over her shoulder and clicked it into place. 'I'll swing by in the morning to collect everyone.'

'Cold pizza for breakfast, then?'

She laughed. 'Look at us, Herriot. Living the dream.' She hung up, imagining a hot shower and her soft mattress.

She glanced towards Ethan's house, and the lights glowing on his front verandah, and smiled to herself. 'Buddy,' she said to the dog in the back of her van, 'you sure picked a good place to get lost.'