



KATE LOVEDAY

Inheritance

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Chapter 1

Outside the sun blazed down on Cairns, but inside the chapel it was cold. Or was it just her? Cassie Taylor shivered as she sat in the front pew of the chapel, with the drone of the minister's voice in her ears, conscious only of the coffins of her aunt and uncle, thinking of how she would miss them.

A nudge from her friend Rosie made her turn. Cassie nodded and, rising, went to stand by the coffins. Relinquishing the two white roses she had been clutching, she placed one on each coffin before returning to her seat to sit numbly through the rest of the service.

Rosie's hand clasped hers as the coffins finally descended. Cassie took a deep, shuddering breath and the tears came then, hot and scalding. They stayed in their seats until Cassie, giving a final sniff, took the handkerchief Rosie offered her and blew her nose.

'Do you think you can face the crowd yet?' her friend asked.

'I think so.' Using both hands, she smoothed her short fair hair and then ran them over her face, wanting to wipe away all traces of tears. 'Just give me a minute, I'll be all right.' She stood, breathing deeply for a moment or two.

'Thanks. I'm okay now.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' she nodded.

They moved into the room next to the chapel and stood together, sipping tea. A few people Cassie recognised came up and offered their condolences. Then a voice at her side made her turn, to see a bright little sparrow of a man, with greying hair and dark eyes, offering her his hand.

'We have met, Cassie, but you may not remember me. It was a long time ago, when you were only a little girl. I'm Graham Walsh, your uncle's solicitor. The accident was a terrible tragedy, for them both to be killed like that. I can't tell you how sorry I am.'

'Thank you, Mr Walsh. It's been a terrible shock.'

'I know, and I am sorry to intrude at a time like this, but could you come to my office before you return to Sydney?'

'I'm sorry, but I'm booked on a flight back this afternoon. I won't have time. Is it important?'

'Well, yes, it is. Very important, actually...hmm...let me see.' He looked at his watch. 'There's a small private room here. I'll arrange to use that. I'll come and get you in a minute. Is that all right?'

'Yes, of course.' Watching him go, Cassie frowned and turned to Rosie. 'I wonder what he wants with me. Perhaps there's some formality with the police. I suppose...in a road accident...' Her voice trailed off.

'Must be something like that, I guess. Sounds important, if he needs to see you alone.'

'Yes, it does.' Cassie was puzzled.

In a few moments, Graham Walsh returned and led Cassie to a small room. He ushered her to a seat, fussing over her. 'Can I get you something, a cup of tea perhaps?'

'No thank you.' She gave him a wan smile. 'What was it you wanted to see me about?'

'There are matters we must discuss, now that Yallandoo is your responsibility,' he told her, seating himself.

'What do you mean?' she asked, startled. 'How can it be my responsibility?'

'It's in your Uncle Len's will, Cassie,' Graham Walsh explained. 'Don't you have any idea how he left his estate?'

She shook her head, frowning. 'No. I haven't thought about it.' She paused. 'To Aunt Isobel's brothers I suppose, seeing he had no children. My father was his only other relative and he's dead.'

'No. Her brothers don't feature in the will at all. There are a few bequests, but the bulk of his estate, including Yallandoo Station, goes to you.'

Cassie drew in a sharp breath. 'To me? Surely not.'

'Yes, Cassie, to you.'

'But... but...why me? What am I going to do with a cattle station, way up here near Cairns? I live in Sydney.' She moved restlessly on her chair. 'Surely he couldn't mean for me to try and run it? I couldn't possibly. I wouldn't know where to start.'

'You've spent a lot of holidays up here, so you do know something about it, but I know you're very young for such a responsibility. How old are you? Twenty-one?'

'Twenty-three.'

'Ah.' He pursed his lips. 'Any chance of marriage plans, then? Someone who could help you with running Yallandoo?'

'No.'

He relaxed his professional manner for a moment. 'A pretty girl like you, I'm surprised. I remember you sitting in my office with Len when you were a little girl, so cute, with your big green eyes and mop of blonde hair. Len told me then you'd be a beauty when you grew up and he was right.' He sighed. 'He thought the world of you, you know, you were like the daughter he never had.' He shook his head. 'Oh dear, it's all so sad.'

Cassie blinked away the tears. 'He was like a father to me after Dad died.'

The lawyer took a deep breath and reverted to formality. 'Now, no prospects for marriage in the future then?'

Cassie frowned as she shook her head. 'No.' Normally she would respond fiercely to such chauvinism but today she let it pass.

'What you must remember is that if it hadn't been for the car accident that killed them both, this wouldn't have happened for many years yet.' He spoke gently. 'It's a measure of his love for you. You understand that, don't you?'

Her chest tightened. Swallowing the lump in her throat she took a deep breath. 'Yes.'

'And,' he spoke firmly now, 'his belief that, being a Taylor, you're capable of shouldering big loads.'

Cassie straightened her shoulders. Of course, the Taylors came from pioneering stock.

'However, if you feel it's too much for you, you can always sell. But you don't have to make a decision right now. Probate is slow; it could take up to twelve months. Until then,

nothing will change. Len appointed me as executor of his estate and I'll take care of everything for you.'

'But what will happen to Yallandoo in the meantime?'

'I've already spoken to Tom Hanson, the manager. He'll stay on and everything will run the same as usual. Len regarded him as an excellent manager, capable and trustworthy. I don't believe you need have any worries on that score.'

'Yes, I know Uncle Len thought highly of Tom and Lorna. They've been on Yallandoo for as long as I can remember. And Rosie, their daughter, is my closest friend. I know they're reliable.' Standing, she moved to the window. Outside the sun still shone, its fiery kiss sending the holiday makers scurrying to cool off in the pools, but here, in this little room, Cassie was oblivious to it all.

She tried to think ahead. She couldn't imagine strangers owning Yallandoo. She loved everything about it. The graceful old homestead, surrounded by lawns and trees, and the home paddock beyond. Its sprawling acres, with the spread of cattle that were Uncle Len's passion. But best of all, the great green tangle of rainforest where she and Rosie roamed, and the rock pool, secluded and mystical, where they went to swim.

How could she bear never to see it again if she sold it? But how could she ever manage to run it? Although she had spent all her holidays there, she knew little about the actual workings of the place.

Turning back into the room, she spoke slowly. 'It's all such a shock. Coming right on top of losing them. I...I just don't know what to think...what to do.'

'Don't worry about it now. It's all been a big shock for you, give yourself time to get used to it. If you hadn't been booked on the plane back to Sydney today, I would have waited longer to tell you, but I'll take care of everything that needs to be done now. I'll write to you and send you a copy of the will, and explain everything else you need to know. Are you still living with your mother in Sydney?'

'Yes.'

'Then I have your address. You'll hear from me soon. Now, don't worry. It'll be all right. I'll have a word with Tom on my way out and let him know what's happening. I'll be in touch soon. Now don't worry,' he repeated.

Graham Walsh held the door open for her and they returned to the room where tea and biscuits had been served after they left the chapel. The lawyer went to talk to Tom and his wife Lorna. Cassie started to go with him but she saw Rosie waiting for her and walked over to her instead.

'Well, what did he want?' her friend asked.

'You're never going to believe this. I can hardly believe it myself. Uncle Len left Yallandoo to me.'

'To you?' Rosie's voice rose. She threw her arms around Cassie in a wild hug. 'How wonderful! How abso-bloody-lutely fantastic!'

Cassie found her excitement catching and laughed as she returned the hug. 'It's just incredible; it never entered my head to imagine such a thing.'

As they drew apart, Rosie's blue eyes sparkled. 'Does this mean you'll be coming up here to live permanently now?'

Cassie sobered. 'I don't really know. It's such a shock I haven't thought about what will happen. I'll have to give it a lot of thought. And talk to Mum, too, of course.'

'Oh, yes, your mother.' Rosie grimaced. 'Gwen won't want you to live up here. She'd hate it if you left Sydney.'

'Hmm. Yes. I suppose she might.'

'I'm sure of it. After all, you do help her run her catering business.'

Cassie sighed. 'Yes, I know.'

Looking around, she saw Graham Walsh had left, along with the rest of the mourners. She caught hold of Rosie's arm. 'Oh, look. Your parents are all on their own. Come on. Let's go and talk to them. They're waiting for us. They'll have heard the news by now.'

They crossed the room. The waiting pair looked stiff and uncomfortable. Was it because of the formal clothes they weren't used to wearing? Tom, a lean, wiry man, with pushed back hair bleached almost white by the sun, would plainly be more at home in stockman's garb than a suit. In spite of the air-conditioning, he looked hot and bothered. Lorna, a little roly-poly of a woman, with brown hair pulled back in a bun, wore a black dress just a little too tight for her. They were watching the two girls approach.

Rosie raced ahead, all excited. 'Isn't it great news? Len's left Yallandoo to Cassie.'

'Yes. We've just heard,' Tom replied in a heavy voice.

He doesn't sound as if he thinks it's great news, Cassie thought, as she reached them.

'Well, aren't you happy she owns it now?' Rosie persisted.

Tom responded stiffly. 'Of course we are.'

Cassie couldn't understand his cold response, but perhaps he was worried about his job. She tried to put him at his ease. 'I'm so happy you're going to stay on Yallandoo, both of you. I just couldn't manage without you. In spite of all the time I've spent there, I know very little about the actual working of the station. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't staying.'

They both relaxed at her words.

'Of course we'll stay, love.' Lorna smiled at her.

'Just as long as you want us to, Cassie,' Tom added. 'Graham Walsh told us everything will be put on hold till after probate. But what then, Cassie? What will you do with Yallandoo?' he asked bluntly.

'I honestly don't know, Tom. It was so unexpected; I'm still trying to come to terms with everything. As soon as I work it out, you'll be the first to know, I promise you.'

But what was she going to do?

Cassie had mixed emotions as she sat in the plane on her way back to Sydney. Sadness at the loss of her uncle and aunt was foremost. However, skittering alongside the pain, and she felt guilty to admit it to herself, excitement jerkily pushed its way up. Yallandoo was hers! The thought of it set her mind whirling like autumn leaves in a storm. But what should she do? Her knowledge of running a cattle station was pretty close to zilch. Should she sell Yallandoo?

Cassie thought of her uncle and how much the station had meant to him. She remembered the family stories of previous generations who had lived there, going right back to her great-great-grandfather Charles. Fresh out from England with his brother Robert, they had settled Yallandoo a hundred and thirty years ago, facing hardships and loneliness.

Charles' eldest son John had inherited the property, and so it had been through the succeeding generations, down to her father and uncle. And now, herself.

Sighing, she leant forward and took the in-flight magazine from the seat-pocket in front of her. Idly she turned the pages, her mind still on Yallandoo. Suddenly her attention was caught by an article, 'Tropical Far North Queensland.' Perusing it with interest, she read that tourism in the area was growing at an unprecedented rate. She sat back thoughtfully, the magazine on her lap.

Far North Queensland, reaching as far north as you could go in Australia. A land of towering mountains and lush, fertile plains. Dense green rainforests. Rivers and waterfalls. Golden beaches and coral reefs. And cattle stations. Some so big you could drive for days before you reached the boundary.

Tourism — now that was an area she would like to be involved in.

But what could you do with a cattle station?