

Award-Winning & Amazon Bestselling Author

WILD KINGDOM

Anne Rouen

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First published by Lynn Newberry, writing as Anne Rouen, 2022

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

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Ebook ISBN: 978-0-9924036-9-0
Print ISBN: 978-0-9924036-7-6

Cover Images

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Cover Design by Felicity Matthews of Web Etch Design and Editing

Editing by Felicity Matthews of Web Etch Design and Editing

Dedication

To all my friends in the Outback.

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Prologue

Mid-June 1990 – End of May 1992

Laura stood by her husband's grave, gazing blankly at the red rose she was about to lay on the casket, oblivious to the chilly wind that whipped around her ankles and tugged at her skirt. It was her second funeral in two days: the first had been that of her best friend, and she wondered how she was going to stay on her feet for the remainder of the service and then make it home, let alone survive for the rest of her life.

A pale, fragile figure in her black coatdress and cloche hat, she appeared bewildered, as if she could not believe that fate could deal her such a blow. Her shocked parents, who had flown over from England to support her, hovered about her helplessly. They would soon have to return to their tourist-management position at a castle in Somerset, and she would be completely alone, except for her great-uncle who lived in North Queensland, over two thousand kilometres away from her home here in Adelaide.

As if she didn't have enough to contend with, a week later, just after her parents had reluctantly returned to their commitments in England, she received word that her beloved great-uncle Jonas had also passed away. In a haze of misery, she learnt that he had left his property in the Gulf and all his interests to her. Too battered by grief to bother, she signed all the documents sent by the solicitors without reading them: a circumstance she would one day regret, although now she cared for nothing except how to get through each painful and guilt-ridden day.

Soon after, her friends Anne and Bill gave her a job in their busy delivery business, not because she needed the money, but to try and take her out of herself. Accepting with gratitude that they cared, she did her best to carry out their wishes. For two years, she struggled, forcing herself to get out of bed and dress every morning to present herself at work, instead of lying with her face to the wall, but things didn't get better. Only the fact that Anne had told her she wanted time away from their business to spend it with her children prevented Laura from giving her notice, however much she loved her friends. So, she forced herself to go on, getting up and going to work, despite the black despair that loomed over her every waking minute.

Then, one night, she had a dream: Uncle Jonas was at his front gate, beckoning her.

Standing beside him was another man, tall and athletic, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, an open-necked shirt and denim jeans—the uniform of the Outback. He stood relaxed, one hand resting on the gatepost, yet confident, as if he owned the world. Laura could not see who he was because he was turned side-on, a silhouette against the setting sun. Puzzled, she stared at the proud, ruthless profile; the untamed line of his jaw; the strong column of his neck; feeling that she should know him. But even though she didn't recognise him, she knew instinctively that he was a man who refused to submit to the shackles of civilisation: imperious, independent, indomitable, a master of his own wild kingdom. A man like her great-uncle Jonas.

He reminded her so vividly of Polaris that she felt her nails bite into her palms with the force of emotion sweeping over her. *Polaris!* The place of her dreams, of fabulous holidays with her great-uncle in the vast, magical world beyond the Divide: the world they called the Gulf.

And now she could think of Uncle Jonas without the pain—of all the wonderful times she had shared with him—and longed with all her being to be back there, safe and comfortable.

She wouldn't admit it, even to herself, but it was the dream that decided her—took her out of the dreadful apathy that had gripped her like a boa constrictor for two long, lonely years—rather than the disquieting letter she had from Uncle Jonas's solicitors: a sort of psychological catalyst.

Suddenly decisive, no longer paralysed, Laura resumed her maiden name of Neumann, wrote to Uncle Jonas's solicitors asking them to wind up their administration of the estate and pass it over to her, and gave her notice to Bill—all within the week. 'I will stay until you get someone, but I would like to go as soon as possible to have as much time as I can before The Wet.'

Bill had told her to go straightaway, as his wife could help him out until he found someone. 'And, Laura?' His eyes held a far-sighted gleam. 'I am not one for making predictions, and I hope you find the answers you're looking for, but I believe you will find your destiny at your, what is it called, Star in the North?'

'Polaris. One of the biggest stations in the Gulf. And all of a sudden, not making any money. I want to find out why.'

'Go for it!' He kissed her cheek. 'And good luck. Come round for dinner tonight. Anne will want to say goodbye.' He turned back. 'What about Oscar? Do you want us ——

?’

‘No.’ She smiled. ‘He can come with me. I wouldn’t know what to do without him, really. And he has lots of relations flying about up there that I am sure he would love to meet.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘Budgerigar heaven, eh? He’s a dear little fellow. We’re going to miss him.’

‘Oh, well ... I’ve had to do *something* to stop your drivers teaching him how to swear.’ A cheeky smile hovered on her lips. ‘A bit drastic, but ...’

He laughed. ‘Get out of here.’ Watching her walk away with new life in her step, he thought it had been the first time he had seen her smile in over two years. *And it feels good*, he told himself. *Real good!* He gave a little grunt of pleasure. *By Jove, Anne will be pleased when I tell her.*

Chapter One

Early June 1992

Midmorning on the fourth day of her journey, Laura turned off the road from Cloncurry to Burketown and pulled up before a sagging gate. She drew in her breath at the state of it. The top hinge hung rusting and useless beside a drunken signpost whose faded and peeling black lettering forlornly announced the name of the station. Never had she seen it in any condition but white and solid with crisp, bright lettering. Uncle Jonas always said that a front gate said a lot about its owner. He would never have allowed it to have fallen into disrepair while he lived.

She stepped out of her four-wheel drive, feeling tired and more than a little depressed, dragged open the gate and drove through, then, with difficulty, closed and latched it. A little zephyr played with her hair, but otherwise the day was warm and mild with a hint of dust and a very bright sun. *This is how I remember it*, she thought, breathing deeply of the dry, earth-scented air as she wrestled with the gate. *A typical dry-season day, far away from the cold rain of an Adelaide winter.* Her depression lifted momentarily and then resettled. Oscar seemed similarly affected. He hadn't spoken for quite a while. She sighed. It had been a long haul and it wasn't over yet. There were still many kilometres to cover between the front gate of Polaris and the smallish dwelling that passed for its homestead.

She drove on, seeing neither man nor beast. The land was eerie in its vast loneliness, but Laura knew that she had come home. The road was rutted and potholed, and of necessity, she drove slowly. When she passed the turn-off to Juliana, the neighbouring station about eighty kilometres away, she knew that she had not much farther to go.

Juliana was another huge enterprise, owned by the Jamiesons. She remembered Mr Jamieson. He had died, too, about five years ago. Uncle Jonas had told her once that only Polaris stood between Juliana and Mr Jamieson's wish to be the biggest landowner in the Gulf. Despite his repeated offers to buy him out being met by Uncle Jonas's constant refusal, they had remained staunch friends to his death, when his son had taken over the management.

Idly, she speculated on what the son, Rick, would be like. He would have to be about

thirty-four by now, she guessed, though she had never seen him. Her holidays in the Gulf had not coincided with his, and being eight years older than herself, he would not have had much in common with her, back then, anyway.

Would he be like his father? she wondered. *If so, he would certainly be a man to be reckoned with!* In her mind's eye, she saw Mr Jamieson as she remembered him from her childhood. He was not much above medium height with fine, neat features, yet he made any room he entered seem small. Although grey-haired with his skin weathered into folds like fine leather, he had a peculiar grace of movement and arresting bright blue eyes. Even as a little girl, Laura had been aware that he possessed his own special brand of magnetism.

Vaguely, she remembered lunching at the homestead—a gracious old two-storey building surrounded by trees and cool, green vines—when, long ago, Uncle Jonas had taken her to see the waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Mr Jamieson had welcomed them with Outback warmth and hospitality, and Mrs Mac, the housekeeper, had treated them with motherly kindness.

More than an hour after she had crossed her south-western boundary, Laura drew up before the garden gate of a dilapidated old house. Climbing out stiffly and taking her first proper look around, she could hardly believe her eyes.

It had been a matter of twelve years since she had spent her last holidays here, but surely it had not been like this, then? Her eyes travelled over what used to be the front lawn. It was now bare, dry ground with the occasional clump of long, brittle grass. An oleander hedge, straggly and half-dead, and a few hardy old shrubs in the same condition were all that was left of Uncle Jonas's cherished garden.

'If I had my way, Laurie,' he had told her once, long ago, 'I would have this garden and no house. I like to sleep under the stars. Trouble is, it gets a bit rough in the wet season.' And he had chuckled and ruffled her hair.

The memory brought back to her, with renewed intensity, the fact that he wasn't here, and for a moment, she was overwhelmed by shame that she had neglected his gift of love. 'Oh, Uncle Jonas, I've let you down,' she whispered. 'I should have come before.'

Far away in Adelaide, it had been hard to believe that the man who had built these lands into a vast and profitable business was no longer here. But now, faced with all this desolation and ruin, realisation hit her that he was indeed gone. She knew now that all the way from the boundary gate, she had subconsciously expected Uncle Jonas to be waiting for her as he had in years past. Her head bowed in her hands, she leant on the gate, blinded by

tears. Something touched her knee and she jumped. It was an old cattle dog feebly wagging her tail and gazing up at her with anxious, blue-filmed eyes: Uncle Jonas's dog, who'd hardly been more than a puppy when she'd last seen her. 'Oh, Bess ...' She sobbed. 'How *lonely* you must have been.' Kneeling to put her arms around her, she wept into the blue speckled coat.

Soon, Laura recovered herself and, giving the old dog a pat, dried her tears and turned back to her Land Cruiser to get Oscar.

The budgie regarded her quizzically out of bright black eyes. 'Oscar's a good boy,' he ventured, tilting his head to one side and ruffling his sky-blue feathers.

'Of course, you are, darling.' She removed his cage from the vehicle and carried him to the house—the old dog limping at her heels. 'What do you think of your new home?'

There was a short silence. Then, 'Bloody hell!' swore Oscar, beginning to scold in a harsh little voice, interspersed with chirruping calls to the birds in the trees and sundry comments addressed to his mirror.

Laura laughed. 'I don't think I quite got you away from those drivers quickly enough, you bad boy.' But when she had hung his cage on a hook suspended from a rafter on the verandah, on which Uncle Jonas had always hung his waterbag, and tentatively pushed open the front door, all desire to laugh left her.

At first the door resisted her efforts, then suddenly swung inwards with a loud groan that made her skin prickle. She stepped over an accumulated pile of leaves and debris and into a room festooned with cobwebs and dust. Recoiling, she gasped, then sighed with relief when she realised that the ghostly figure standing in the gloom beside the door was only Uncle Jonas's hat and oilskin coat hanging on the hatstand in the corner. They, too, were covered in spider webs, their colour concealed by a thick film of dust. Gingerly, she removed them from the stand, ornately carved in the form of a tree, which she had much admired as a child, placed them over the end of the bed in his room, went out and closed the door.

Looking about her with horrified eyes, she was forced to admit that this silent, lonely ruin bore more resemblance to a ghost house than the welcoming home of her memories. For one craven moment, she was assailed by an overwhelming desire to turn and run—to get Oscar and Bess and drive away—anywhere, as long as it was away from the dereliction that faced her here.

Her lapse was only temporary. The steel that her great-uncle had long ago glimpsed

in her came to her rescue, and biting her lip, she went from room to room—the dog padding behind her.

The tour of inspection did nothing to raise her spirits. The whole house bore evidence of neglect and decay. Everything was thick with dust and grime, and their feet made tracks on the floorboards, which had once been kept polished. Windowpanes here and there were broken, and the gauze screens torn and loose.

Some of the rooms had fallen into such disrepair that it was evident that a carpenter must be employed before they could be used again. Water stains on walls and warped and rotting ceilings were testimony to the fact that, sometime in the last two years, sheets of iron must have come loose on the roof, allowing the torrential monsoon rains into the house.

I would like to know what that so-called manager has been doing all this time, she thought, frowning. *I can't wait to give him a piece of my mind!* This was something that must be seen to straightaway, although it was only June now and several months before the wet season was due to start.

It was certainly going to be a big job to make it home again, but it was characteristic of Laura that once decided on a course of action, she did not flinch from problems or difficulties, and she was determined that this house would be a home again, just as she remembered it.

Standing in the living room—a large, irregularly shaped room that ran the depth of the house that all the others opened off—she saw, not how it was now, but how it had been when she had come here for holidays. Modest, hardly more than a cottage; old and shabby, yet clean and welcoming; with two Aboriginal women, Lily and Mary, who had cooked and cleaned for Uncle Jonas since they were teenagers, welcoming her with wide, shy grins. ‘Little Missus’ they used to call her. They were good-natured and capable, and she wondered where they were now. Laura could certainly do with some help.

In the end, Laura decided that only two rooms were liveable: the living room, entered by the front door, and one bedroom—the one that had been hers when she had come for holidays. Somehow, she shrank from using Uncle Jonas’s room.

The state of the kitchen made her feel ill—and conscious of a rising anger against the unknown manager. It was obvious that, occasionally, someone had cooked here without bothering in the slightest with cleanliness. The gas stove was black and filthy with a combination of burnt grease and dust, and the sink contained a putrid mass that defied description.

Examining the large bathtub with its ball-and-claw feet and matching pedestal handbasin in the bathroom that had been constructed by enclosing one end of the back verandah, she noted thankfully that once she had removed the leaves and dust, this would certainly be the easiest room to clean. Her lips curved in wry amusement. Evidently, whoever had camped and cooked in the kitchen had not thought it necessary to bathe.

Laura's reflection in the fly-spotted mirror above the basin shocked her, and for a moment, she did not know who this pale stranger with the huge, shadowed eyes and hollow cheeks might be. She pushed back a strand of chestnut hair that had escaped from her ponytail. Then, she shrugged. It had been a long trip, that was all. Tomorrow, she would regain the enthusiasm that had driven her to come here.

She had come because of a dream, but what ought to have brought her was the dwindling income of an inheritance that should have made her a very rich woman. Now she needed to give some thought to who might be systematically robbing her.

Pensively, she returned to her Land Cruiser and took out her vacuum flask and a packet of sandwiches. Then, seated on the front steps with Bess at her feet, she shared her sandwiches while Oscar chattered gaily above her head. She ate her lunch in the bright sunshine with a vista of wide-open woodland stretched before her. This view, at least, was as she remembered it.

The problem of why her profits had dwindled to almost zero occupied her thoughts as she drank her coffee. The way she saw it, it could only be one of a few choices: gross mismanagement, neglect and/or systematic robbery by her so-called manager; cattle theft by professional thieves; or, God forbid, one of her neighbours. Not that she would like to think it of her neighbours, but it was a possibility, however remote. Laura needed to meet them and see how they struck her before she made any decisions about their honesty, one way or another.

She rose to her feet and, calling Bess, went to find the one person who may be able to help her—if he was still alive, that was.

Chapter Two

On her way, she remembered Uncle Jonas's horse. Would he still be here? Twelve years ago, he was a leggy three-year-old, and she had helped Uncle Jonas break him in. Turning back, she retrieved a crust of bread from her sandwich packet and made her way down past the stables to the paddock where she could see some horses drowsing in the shade of a tree. They stood head to tail, in pairs, protecting each other from the flies. She walked closer and called. One of them raised his head enquiringly and then trotted towards her. Yes, it was Ben, recognisable now, as he had been as a three-year-old, by the large, shield-shaped star on his forehead. He accepted the proffered crust and rubbed his head on her affectionately.

'We must go for a ride soon.' Laura determined, then and there, to start riding him again as soon as was humanly possible. *I hadn't realised*, she thought, stroking his silken neck, *how much I have missed having a horse*. When she walked away, he followed, hanging over the fence and whinnying after her before turning to gallop back to his companions.

Laura found the dry creek she wanted and walked along its bank for a short way towards a run-down tin shed built haphazardly of old kerosene tins and small pieces of roofing iron under the shelter of a large tree, which Jackson called his *gunyah*. She walked past, too afraid to call out in case she met only silence, afraid that she would find it abandoned because that could mean only one thing

A soft, burry voice spoke from the shadows behind her: 'G'day, Little Missus.'

Laura spun around to see an ancient, white-haired Aboriginal seated on the other side of his shack with his back against the tree trunk. In front of him was a tiny fire, which he stirred now and again with a stick.

'Jackson! How are you? Oh, I was *so* hoping to find you here!' There was a lilt of gladness in her voice that the old man did not miss.

'Pretty good, Missus.' The seamed mahogany face split into a wide grin, revealing one or two blackened stumps in wizened gums—the fault of white man's flour and sugar. Yet, despite this, Laura was struck by his air of wisdom and gentle dignity. Jackson was very old, but no-one, not even he, knew how old he was. He had been with Uncle Jonas since the beginning and had been his head stockman. He had been a wonderful horse breaker and a legendary horseman. It had been said that the horse had not been foaled that

could throw him. Uncle Jonas had often told her of how Jackson had been called to break in a wicked youngster that no-one had been able to tame, and in three weeks, the horse was so quiet that even a child could ride him.

He must have been good, reflected Laura, *to have commanded the respect of Uncle Jonas*. Jonas Neumann had been a great horseman—this Laura had seen for herself.

Jackson had been retired and living here in his *gunyah* down on the creek for as long as she remembered.

‘You come home, eh?’ he said gruffly, squinting up at her.

‘Yes, Jackson, I *have*. I’ve come home.’

‘About time, Missus. I bin waitin’ fer ya. That white fella, him no good. Told me, call him Boss. I no call him Boss. Call him nothin’. Him nothin’ to me.’ He spat in the dust and looked away.

Laura realised he must be referring to the manager. ‘You mean Ed Sykes?’

‘Yeah, him: that Sykes. No good, Missus.’ He shook his head. ‘Not like Boss Jamieson. Him pretty good fella. Call him Boss, orright.’

There did not seem to be anything to say to this, so she asked a question instead. ‘What happened to Lily and Mary, Jackson?’

‘After Boss go, they go to Doomadgee. Live there now. They come home soon, now Little Missus back.’

Laura knew that Doomadgee Shire was the Indigenous lands about three hundred kilometres away. ‘Can I get a message to them, Jackson?’

‘No need.’ He waved a gnarled hand. ‘They be back in a coupla days.’

‘Oh.’ Once again, Laura was left with nothing to say. After a short silence, she asked, ‘Where are the men today?’

‘Down finishin’ spear traps on Clovelly bore, Missus. They back soon. Them fellas don’ work too dam’ hard. All the hard workers gone now.’

‘What do you mean, Jackson? Where have they gone?’

‘Well ... Some too dam’ old, like me. But that nothin’ fella, he sack all the others except for Lou. Put his no-good mates on.’ He shook his head. ‘Good thing you back, Little Missus. But you watch out for him. Him no dam’ good.’

‘I will,’ she promised. ‘But why didn’t he sack Lou?’

‘Wouldn’t go. Said he’s been livin’ down there on the outstation for fifty years, and nothin’ short of a bomb’s gunna move him.’

‘Well, good for him! Has Sykes been stealing my cattle, Jackson?’

The old man shifted uneasily. ‘Dam’ bad man, Missus,’ he said at last. ‘But I don’t think it’s him.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Comin’ from up that way.’ Jackson waved a hand, looking even more uncomfortable.

Laura drew an incredulous breath. ‘Are you saying it’s Juliana?’

He shook his head again. ‘Up that way, Little Missus. But it’s not Boss Jamieson.’ He raised troubled eyes. ‘*Can’t* be Boss Jamieson.’

‘I hope you’re right ...’ Laura noted his worried expression. ‘But that remains to be seen, don’t you think?’

Jackson looked down into his fire and poked at the embers with his stick. ‘Won’t be Boss Jamieson.’

‘All right.’ Laura heard the note of finality in his voice and knew no more was to be got out of him. ‘Thanks, Jackson. I’d better get back now and start cleaning the house.’

‘Good-o, Missus. Don’t work too hard. Lily and Mary’ll do it for ya.’

She left him—a wizened figure, yet to her mind, the embodiment of the nobility of his race—and made her way back to the house.

Laura knew now that it could never be the same again—now that Uncle Jonas was gone. But wandering up to the homestead through his beloved trees, she felt his presence like a softly comforting touch, and it was as if she heard him say, ‘Chin up, Laurie. It’ll come good.’ An image of his dear face sprang into her mind, and she saw again the twinkling blue eyes beneath shaggy eyebrows, the snowy hair above the noble forehead.

‘I’ll be all right, Uncle Jonas,’ she whispered. ‘I’m home now.’

When Laura arrived at the homestead, pondering some of Jackson’s more cryptic utterances, she heard a fast-driven vehicle with an over-revving engine. Her eyes narrowed as the four-wheel-drive utility squealed to a protesting halt, and she turned as the driver, momentarily obscured by dust, flung himself out and slouched towards her, leaving the door open. His hat was pulled well down, hiding his eyes, but there was a taut, angry set to his jaw as he approached her.

‘Who the hell are you?’ he demanded. ‘And what do you think you’re doing here?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Laura raised haughty brows.

‘You heard me!’

‘I don’t know that it is any concern of yours who I am. Nor do I appreciate being spoken to like that.’

‘Listen, I’m the manager here ——’

‘Then, if that’s the case, I’d like to know what *you’ve* been doing to allow the front gate to be falling off its hinges and this house to get into such an *appalling* state of filth and disrepair!’

‘Listen, Lady, no woman’s gunna tell me what to do! I manage this place, see. And I don’t have to answer to no woman that moves in and thinks she owns the place!’ He jutted an aggressive chin. ‘Who are you, anyway?’

‘Just who you said.’ Laura’s eyes were sparkling dangerously, but her words were soft and deliberate. ‘Only—I don’t just think I own the place—I *do* own it. The name is Neumann. I take it you are Ed Sykes?’

He nodded, studying his boots in silence.

‘And since you’re not too keen on taking orders from a woman,’ she continued, ‘you can finish up today. Come back in an hour or so, and I’ll have your cheque ready for you.’

The man stood for a moment, nodded once and turned to go.

‘Just a second.’ Laura’s voice stopped him in his tracks. ‘Is that a station vehicle?’

‘Yeah. What about it?’

‘Leave it here. You can walk down to the quarters.’ Laura was dealing him an insult and she knew it, but she was unprepared for the naked hatred she saw in his eyes as he tilted back his hat and stared at her. She sustained his regard for what seemed an eternity, even though her flesh was creeping at the venom she saw there. Then, slowly, the man’s eyes dropped before hers, and he turned and walked away.

The tension seeped out of her, but she found she was trembling with the effort of holding those dark, rather frightening eyes. Giving herself a mental shake, she went to get the station books and her cheque book.

Engrossed in her calculations, Laura did not, at first, notice anything outside her books, but the unmistakable buzz of angry voices interrupted her concentration, and she

dropped her pen and went to the door.

Assembled in the front yard were a group of men who subsided into an uneasy silence when they saw her. She walked out onto the verandah and let her eyes travel over them, and each one looked away or down at his boots as her glance fell on him.

‘Yes?’ she queried. ‘Can I help you?’

There was a general shuffle before one man reluctantly allowed himself to be pushed forward by his mates. The spokesman cleared his throat and looked desperately about him, as if for an avenue of escape or, perhaps, to gain inspiration for his speech. Eventually, it came tumbling out, staccato-like: ‘We came ter tell yer that if yer sack Ed, we’re goin’ too. He goes, we go! Yeah.’ He briefly raised his eyes to Laura’s, and she saw a triumphant gleam in their depths before he lowered them and stepped back into the group.

There was a period of expectant silence while Laura considered them.

Her expression suddenly hardened. ‘Well, go then!’ She lifted her chin. ‘Come back with Sykes, and I’ll have your cheques ready.’

The quality of the silence changed. The men’s faces registered shock and then, incongruously, dawning respect. Without another word, they turned and headed back towards their quarters.

A little over an hour later, Laura was back on her verandah, watching all the hands needed to run a large property depart in a convoy of assorted utilities and four-wheel drives, piled high with swags and dogs.

Chapter Three

With a fluttering feeling in the pit of her stomach, overlain by one of impending doom, Laura sank down on the step, hands clenched in her lap. *Now what do I do?* she asked herself. The muster had to be started, bores and watering places kept in operation, spear traps had to be checked and emptied of cattle, as well as the hundred-and-one-other repair and maintenance jobs required to keep a concern of this size and nature operating smoothly.

I'll have to hire a new team of men. But where do I start? While she thought about it, Laura began the difficult task of restoring the living room to a state approaching cleanliness and order.

By the time another hour had passed, she had managed to remove the worst of the dust and grime from the floor and thoroughly cleaned the table and chairs. She'd taken the old carpet square and hung it over the fence, but she doubted its ability to survive the beating that would be necessary to remove its accumulation of dust. Tomorrow, she must see if the electricity generator in the lighting shed could be brought into operation. It would be handy to be able to use the vacuum cleaner and other electrical appliances she had brought with her, and it would provide lights at night. Meanwhile, she had her gas camping stove and light.

The physical actions of cleaning soothed her taut nerves and allowed her to view her plight philosophically. *The manager's not much loss, anyway, she thought. And according to Jackson, his men aren't a lot of use, either. And even if it isn't Sykes stealing stock, and it is just the dry seasons, why didn't he say something to the lawyers administering the estate? I can't give up just because everything is not the way I wanted it.*

After all, if it had been mentioned to the lawyers, she might not have listened to her dream and come here to make a new life. She would still have been in that dark maze, beating on the walls in frustration, haunted by her memories.

She drew the curtain on her thoughts and wielded her broom even more energetically. *By the time I'm finished, this room shouldn't look too bad, she mused. At least it will be clean, even if it's not exactly the type of home to feature in House and Garden.*

Laura was industriously knocking down cobwebs with a dust mop she'd found in the broom cupboard when she felt her spine tingle and spun around to find herself being gravely watched by a tall, well-built man. Their eyes met, and for a few seconds, there was an

electric silence.

Then, the man removed his wide-brimmed felt hat. 'May I?' He gestured, indicating that he wished to come in.

Now that his hat was off, she saw that his hair was a glossy black and sprang from a broad brow to thickly cover his well-shaped head. His eyes were light—striking, under winged eyebrows—and his lean, sun-browned face, although too rugged to be classically handsome, appeared all the more attractive for its slight cragginess. It was a face that haunted her. Surely, she'd seen him somewhere before? The memory eluded her. *Perhaps he's one of the Polaris ringers come in late?* Whoever he was, she was made blindingly aware of something else: this man possessed a latent sexuality far more potent than mere physical good looks. Arrested, she didn't realise that she had not answered.

He seemed to take her silence for assent because he came into the room, looking at her quizzically.

'I suppose you've come to be paid off, too?' Laura, uncomfortably aware of her grimy clothes and dishevelled appearance, took an aggressive stand.

'No.' The man's lips quirked as he observed her defiant attitude. 'I am quite happy in my job.' His voice was low and pleasant, not quite a drawl. Then, as if he had considered keeping up the pretence as a joke but suddenly thought better of it, he thrust out his hand and smiled, teeth very white against his tan. 'By the way, my name is Jamieson. Rick Jamieson. And you must be Jonas's great-niece. I've heard quite a bit about you over the years. How do you do?'

Laura shook his hand and mumbled a response, feeling remarkably foolish. 'Yes, I am Laura Neumann. I'm sorry, I didn't hear you drive up. Please, won't you sit down.'

He threw his hat on the table, lounged in a chair at its head and looked around, his eyes travelling to the water-stained walls and upward to the gaping hole in the ceiling. 'Oh, hey! I can see you've got your work cut out here. Why didn't you let someone know you were coming? You could have stayed with us at Juliana while this was repaired, and the cleaning done for you. In fact, why don't you come and stay at Juliana, anyway? Mrs Mac will be pleased to have the company.'

'Mrs Mac? Is Mrs Mac still there? I remember her: She was your housekeeper when I used to come for holidays. I would have thought she'd have ...'

'Retired? No way!' He grinned. 'Still ruling the roost: as spry and bossy as ever. What do you say? Will you come?'

‘Oh, thank you, that is very kind, but I want to stay here. As to why I ...’ Laura stopped. How much could she trust him? Jackson had seemed hesitant even while he reiterated his belief in the man’s innocence. *Does Rick know what has been going on here? He hasn’t shown much surprise about the state of this place. How can I tell him that I wanted to find out what is really going on and not some cover-up designed to placate me when he might be the one?* She shrugged. ‘I just decided to come. Spur of the moment, you know.’

He raised a sceptical eyebrow. ‘I see.’

To cover the awkward silence, she said, ‘You don’t look like your father.’ Silently cursing herself for uttering such an inanity.

He shrugged. ‘I take after my mother’s people.’

‘I never knew your mother.’

‘No. She died of cancer when I was eight. But it just seemed to me that she wilted in this climate, like a delicate plant.’

‘Oh, I *am* sorry.’ Laura felt even more crass.

‘Don’t be.’ He rose to his feet. ‘I have had a lot of years to become accustomed to being without her.’

Laura felt a surge of tenderness so shocking in its intensity that it startled her—although his tone precluded sympathy—and heralded another awkward silence. She glanced at her watch. ‘I’ll put the kettle on.’

‘Good-o,’ he said, stepping out onto the verandah. ‘Hullo, a budgie! How do you do, young fellow? What’s his name?’

‘Oscar. How do you like your tea?’

‘Black, no sugar, thanks.’ He continued to talk to the bird for a few minutes, then strolled back inside as the kettle screamed. He sat at his ease: big, kind, faintly amused, filling the room with his presence. Laura was acutely conscious of him as she made the tea and set the table.

‘How did you know I was here?’ she asked, putting a mug and plate from her picnic set in front of him.

‘I didn’t.’ He nodded his thanks for the tea, a little tremor touching the corners of his mouth. ‘*Until* I saw your entire station staff passing my front door.’

‘Oh ...’

‘I went down to the gate to see where they were going in such a hurry. And they informed me ...’ He paused. ‘That the new lady boss had sacked the whole lot of them not five minutes after she had arrived. So ...’ A little thread of suppressed laughter vibrated his voice, ‘I decided to come and see this new lady boss for myself.’

‘I’m glad you think it’s funny.’ Laura’s tone negated the words. ‘It was a shade longer than five minutes, but it didn’t take me long to see what kind of men I had to deal with.’ Her brows knit, and she gave him a straight glance. ‘Besides which, it doesn’t seem like much of a reason for you to come all the way from Juliana. I mean, it isn’t exactly your business, is it?’

‘Don’t be silly.’ He disarmed her attempted snub, the twinkle in his eyes more pronounced. ‘As a matter of fact, I’d say it will be hot gossip all the way from here to Camooweal by now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just that what anyone does up here is everyone else’s business. Haven’t you heard of the galah session?’

‘Of course I have! I’m not that green. It’s the time of day when everyone can call each other for a chat on their radios unless the Flying Doctor has an emergency.’

‘That’s right. And just what big news, my dear girl, do you think they’ll be talking about?’

‘I’m not your “dear girl”.’ Laura bit her lip, bristling at his lazy amusement. *Patronising*, she thought, but her next words were defensive. ‘I suppose you think I shouldn’t have done it?’

‘It’s not that I think your judgement is at fault. On the contrary, it was spot-on. It’s just your timing that’s a little out. The trouble is ...’ He wrinkled his brow. ‘I don’t know how we are going to replace them this late in the season. Everyone is mustering now, you know.’

‘We?’ she challenged. ‘Who’s we?’

‘Well, naturally, I will do what I can for you. That’s just being a good neighbour, even if there were no other reason. I’m saying it will be difficult.’

Reason? What other reason? Feeling even more at a disadvantage, Laura said, ‘I know it sounds stupid when you put it like that, but I didn’t sack them *all*. I sacked one. And the others said that if I sacked him, they would go, too. So, I told them to go. I mean, what

else could I do?’

‘What, indeed?’

‘Are you *laughing* at me?’

‘Of course not! I wouldn’t dream of it. Which one did you sack?’

‘The manager: Sykes.’

‘I said your judgement was spot-on.’ He took a slice of the brownie she offered.

‘Mmm, thanks.’

They drank their tea in a silence that was now more companionable since Laura’s wary discomfort had begun to subside in the warmth of his personality and his undoubted approval of her estimation of the manager.

‘Tell me: what made you come here alone, like this?’

‘I didn’t have anyone to come with me,’ she parried.

‘Yes, but: why now?’

She knew she ought to resent the question. In the light of the letter from her trustees, it was a dangerous one, but it was said in such a warm tone of interest that she couldn’t. But what kind of answer could she give? *I came because of a dream? No, never.*

‘I don’t know. I wanted to see it again, I suppose. I was so happy at Polaris as a child on my holidays, and it’s been a long time since I was here. And I’ve always loved it up in this country. There’s something about it, you know?’

‘I know. No half-measures out here. You either love it or you hate it.’ He regarded her steadily, a hint of warning in his eyes. ‘Nor is it for the faint-hearted.’

‘Oh, no,’ agreed Laura, adding, to avoid being questioned further, ‘I met your father often when I was here; he and Uncle Jonas were such good friends. I wonder why I didn’t ever meet you?’

‘Probably because I was away at boarding school, then at Ag College. After that I spent a year backpacking around Europe. It was interesting but, eventually, I pined for the big country. I came home just after your last holidays here, I think, because I remember Jonas telling us that your family had moved to Adelaide, and it was a pity I hadn’t come home a week or two earlier. He thought the world of you.’

‘The feeling was mutual. That’s probably why I didn’t come ... before. I couldn’t bear to think of it without him.’ She raised eyes sparkling with unshed tears to his. ‘Did you

see him before he ...?’

‘Before he died? Yes, I was over here that day. He said he felt tired. He died in his sleep, so I don’t think he would have suffered. He had his supper, as usual, and the two women found him unconscious in his bed early the next morning when they came to get his breakfast. I called the Flying Doctor but there was nothing he could do. Jonas didn’t recover consciousness and died in the plane before it even got off the ground. I think that’s why the women left. They came back a couple of months later but only stayed a few days and then cleared out again.’ He looked at her kindly. ‘Don’t grieve too much for him, will you? He lived the kind of life he wanted and enjoyed good health up until the last few weeks. And I think he was ready to go.’

His voice had a gentle, velvet edge, and Laura felt comforted. ‘Yes, you’re right. Uncle Jonas was a man whose philosophy of life embraced a profound wisdom. I only wish I had the half of it.’ She smiled a little tremulously.

‘Yes, he was a wise and clever man,’ agreed Rick. ‘You’re not the only one who misses him. He was very good to me when my father passed away.’

‘I was truly sorry to hear about your father, Rick.’

‘Thanks, Laura. It was very sudden, unexpected. One minute he was there, sitting at the table, the next he was gone—bit of a shock. Jonas helped me a lot. I spent quite a bit of time with him.’ He hesitated, fiddling with the crumbs on his plate, then drastically changed the subject. ‘Your coming here: it wouldn’t, by any chance, have to do with missing stock, would it?’

The question caught her at a loss. She stared at him, shocked and troubled. ‘What do you know about my missing stock?’

‘As little as you do, I hope,’ he assured her. ‘We will have to get to the bottom of it.’ His expression hardened; he raised his level gaze to hers. ‘How long will you be staying?’

Laura began to feel upset. The questioning was no longer friendly and neighbourly but appeared to have a purpose. She sensed that under that easygoing attitude, unbelievable as it seemed, she had got in this man’s way. ‘Why do you want to know?’

He shrugged. ‘Just curious, I suppose. I mean, it is over two years since ——’

‘I plan to live here and run Polaris, just as Uncle Jonas did.’

‘You *can*’t be serious!’

‘I have never been more serious in my life!’

‘But you haven’t thought! You can’t have!’ He leapt up to pace about the room.

Laura could see that he was really horrified. She was not to know that he saw her as too fragile to take on the huge job she was so obviously unprepared for; that in his mind’s eye, he saw another beautiful, delicate woman slowly dying in this harsh environment.

‘Yes, I have,’ she told him, pushing back her chair to follow him. ‘Oh, yes, I *have*.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, woman, see reason!’ He made a quick gesture. ‘You only have to look around you to see that the place is practically falling down.’

‘It was good enough for Uncle Jonas!’

‘Jonas was a man who had lived all his life in the Outback. His preference was to sleep in a swag under a tree. His staff quarters were of a much higher standard than his own home. When he got those rebuilt, even *he* said that it wasn’t worth it to do this one—that it only had to see him out.’

‘It has a lot of memories for me. Besides, I can renovate it.’

‘Renovate it!’ he exploded. ‘*Renovate* it? The whole thing wants *bulldozing*!’

‘There’s nothing that a carpenter can’t fix,’ she shot back.

‘Laura, listen to me.’ Restored to his usual calm, he moved to take her hands. ‘This is a harsh, dangerous land, even for those with experience of it. It gives no quarter and allows fewer mistakes. You came here for a few holidays as a youngster and went home with a rosy dream of it. You’ve never lived through a wet season where mould grows on the walls, and you can’t go anywhere—completely isolated!—for weeks on end. There are no shops for hundreds of kilometres, so you live out of the station store for months. You’ve never seen a crocodile take a full-grown bullock—and they’ve got no diet preferences, let me tell you! All living things, including humans, are just food to them. And that’s not the *half* of it! Whichever way you look at it, the Gulf isn’t any place for a woman. Can’t you see that?’

‘No!’ She snatched away her hands, tilting her chin. ‘I *can*’t! I used to help my father on the property at Mount Isa before we moved to Adelaide, so I do know something about running a station. All this talk about it being no place for a woman! Other women have managed to live here—and in the days when it really *was* isolated—without phones or fast transport. Do you think that I am any less of a woman than they were?’

‘Those women had men to take care of them. They weren’t fool enough to come here alone with no experience and think they could run the world. They had pretty hard

lives, too—far harder than you might imagine. And, for some strange reason, you choose to deny that I have some say in this matter.’ A gleam came into his eyes. ‘As to how much of a woman you are, I have my suspicions. Unfortunately, I haven’t the time just now to stay and test them out.’

‘Oh!’ gasped Laura. ‘You *arrogant* ——’

He laughed, enraging her even more. ‘Sorry, but you did ask for that ... Look, have your holiday.’ He spoke as if to a wilful, fractious child. ‘I’ll try to find you a mustering team to get you out of trouble. Then, I want you to think about selling out to me. I’ll give you a good price, and you can buy yourself a nice little easy-to-run place in the softer country and invest the rest. You’ll have a good income for life.’

Galled by his attitude, frustrated that he wouldn’t even try to understand her, she was dismayed to feel a fury rising out of her control. *Well, here’s one way he’s like his father*, she thought in disgust. *He wants Polaris.*

There was another trait they had in common, but she wasn’t prepared to admit, even to herself, that he, too, possessed magnetism in abundance. ‘No. I won’t sell you Polaris.’ She drew herself up. ‘It is my home, and I will be staying.’

He gave her a long, hard look, then shrugged. ‘Suit yourself. I don’t think it will be long before you change your mind. When you do, let me know.’ This seeming carelessness was succeeded by something approaching exasperation as he took her by the shoulders. ‘*Think*, Laura! Do you really believe you can handle this place? Do you know how big it is? How long it takes to drive around the boundaries? Or even where the boundaries are? Half of them aren’t even fenced!’

Laura shrugged out of his grip. ‘I can find all that out from the maps in the office. I might not be a man, but I *can* read a map!’

‘Infuriating, contrary, *wilful* ...’ Without any warning, he pulled her to him and kissed her, let fall his arms and stepped back, looking as stunned and bewildered as Laura felt.

Laura stared at him. Only the fact that she was pretty sure that he had shocked himself as much as he had her, choked her fury. ‘Why did you do that?’

His recovery was instant. ‘Love thy neighbour ...’ he murmured.

‘Oh! *Outrageous!*’ She almost stamped her foot. ‘*That* is the worst misquoting of the bible that I have ever heard! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!’

‘Not necessarily.’

‘What do you mean? You’re not going to tell me that this is the normal way you behave when you meet your neighbours?’

‘Not in the general way, no. But then,’ he reflected, ‘there are not many of my neighbours that I would *want* to kiss. Old Conroy, for instance?’ He shook his head.

Laura almost dissolved into giggles, but instead said, ‘That is not the way to show your appreciation, or whatever it may be, for your neighbour.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I was just making a point. If I could get it into your silly little head that you are really not safe here, I think I will have done you a favour. Jonas was a pretty good mate to me, you know.’

Ooh, that is so arrogant! After he kissed me, too! Her breath whistled in indignation. ‘Was he? Well to my mind that does *not* give you the right to take liberties with his great-niece!’

‘Very true. On the contrary! I must keep it in mind.’

‘Oh you...’ Laura had to bite her lip. ‘You dreadful man! When will you start to take me seriously?’

‘When you start talking like a sensible woman.’ He grinned. ‘You look like a kitten with its fur rubbed the wrong way.’

‘Don’t push me too far,’ she warned—her eyes beginning to smoulder. ‘I have claws.’

‘Thanks for the warning. I’ll remember it.’

But she didn’t think he cared, one way or the other. He looked as if he should be easygoing, tolerant, the kind of man you could twist around your little finger. But he wasn’t.

‘It’s impossible to talk to you!’ she informed him. ‘It isn’t just that we’re not on the same page: we’re not even in the same book!’

‘Or even in the same genre,’ he agreed. ‘You seem to think that life up here is some kind of fairytale.’

Laura ground her teeth. ‘Of course I don’t! You ... Oh! Fairytales are not all sweetness and light. They abound with ogres and witches.’ She looked directly into his eyes. ‘And *wolves*.’

To her chagrin, he laughed. ‘Well ... That’s something you’d do well to remember,

Little Red Riding Hood. And run away from the big bad Gulf as fast as you can.'

'So, I can take it from your attitude that you're not married, then?'

'Do you suppose that I would kiss other women if I were?'

Her lip curled. 'You wouldn't be the first!' She searched around in her mind for the worst insult she could think of in the most cutting tone she could deliver. 'But you're such an arrogant, overbearing brute that I can't imagine any ...' Laura stopped because she saw that he had grown pale around the mouth. So, her random gibe had hit home! *I wonder what I said to make him look like that?*

'Your lurid imagination can be of no possible interest to me,' he snapped—his eyes granite chips. 'Listen, I've offered you my help, and you've thrown it in my face. I've also offered to buy you out and that offer still stands. Let me know when you change your mind.'

Laura watched him stride away with turmoil in her heart. Whatever his effect on her, or hers on him, the room seemed empty without his larger-than-life presence.

What have I done? she wondered, miserably. *I've only been here six hours, and I've quarrelled with everyone I've met—except Jackson.*

And now, here she was, a vast property on her hands, the cattle muster about to go into full swing and no-one to do it. And not only that—she'd completely alienated the one person who had it in his power to help her.

Chapter Four

Laura woke very early and, for a moment, did not know where she was. She sat up—her heart racing—then sank back on to her pillows as she remembered that she was in Uncle Jonas’s living room. The room was very dark. Through the uncurtained window that only yesterday she had cleaned, she could see a thin red line on the horizon, growing broader by the minute.

Yawning, Laura shifted her feet from under Bess and slipped out of her sleeping bag to stand at the window. At twenty-six, she was tall and slender with an air of fragility that was deceptive. Her face was finely drawn and, in repose, held a grave, thoughtful expression. Her eyes large and thickly lashed of a green-gold hazel; finely modelled cheekbones; classically straight, small nose and softly curving lips all combined to make her hauntingly lovely. Rich chestnut-brown hair, curling softly about her forehead and ears, fell in thick waves to her shoulders. Often, she swept it up into a knot or chignon, which emphasised the delicate planes of her face and the shadowed eyes that told of suffering, past and present.

Breathing deeply and stretching, Laura turned away from the window and went to her luggage. A short while later, dressed in shirt and jeans and sipping a morning cup of coffee, she sat on the verandah steps and watched the sun come up: a molten, glowing orb that almost literally sprang above the earth before her eyes.

How peaceful it was here, away from the bustle of the city. Birds had begun to sing in the trees, and Oscar answered sleepily. Laura uncovered his cage and brought him out onto the verandah. Immediately, he began a long and involved conversation with his mirror friend (or enemy, as the whim took him), and when he tired of this, began to answer the calls of the wild birds.

With a jerk, all Laura’s problems leapt to mind. Here she had been soaking up the peace and beauty of early morning without thinking of anything in particular. Now her mind rushed over all the events of yesterday: her encounter with the manager and the station hands; her puzzling and infuriating neighbour; his amused, not unkindly expression; his soft, slow voice; the warmth and understanding in his eyes; the hardness and power of him; his suddenly whitened face ...

It had been a long time before Laura had slept last night, and when she did, his face

and the feel of his arms and lips had haunted her dreams. She wondered what had happened to make him look as he had when she had fired that random shot at him. *How could I have been so stupid as to lose my temper with him when he was only trying to help?*

But was he? Her brow creased as she tried to remember. He had put barriers in her way at every turn, had tried to talk her out of staying, had even become half-annoyed with her when he saw that she was determined. Almost as if she had got in the way of something. *That was what made me angry,* she thought. *That and his arrogant assumption that because I am a woman, I am some sort of lesser being, unable to cope with hardship.* Of the snatched kiss and his physical effect on her, she dare not think. But, even so, she regretted her hurtful words.

He'd told her that it wouldn't be long before she changed her mind. Laura's expression hardened, and she tilted her chin. *I'll show him whether or not a woman can handle living out here!* she vowed. He would learn, as had others, that when she set her mind to something, she would do it. That was why she had persevered with her marriage when most sensible people would have long ago given up. She frowned at her painful thoughts and hurriedly pushed them away. Somehow, Laura felt vaguely guilty, as though, perhaps, there were things she could have done to prevent what had happened. But that was ridiculous: how could she have prevented something that she had not been aware of until too late? *But you should have been aware,* said an unwelcome inner voice. *Why weren't you aware?*

Laura shrugged. There wasn't much point in going over all that again. She'd come here to gain a new dimension to her life. *Well, I've certainly done that!* she thought cynically and jumped up to go inside and make herself some breakfast—her mind now fully occupied with the problem of finding a new team of ringers. Uncle Jonas had a radio telephone installed in the office, but he refused to have one in the house, disturbing the peace. He did have a two-way radio set up in the homestead, but until such time as she could start the generator, it would remain silent.

Mid-morning found her in the office, making herself some coffee on the camp stove and beset by frustrations. Two hours on the radio phone had produced no ringers, only the repetition of 'I'm sorry, I can't help you' so that she was almost ready to scream. 'Advertise in the major country newspapers,' she was told. That would mean even more delay. *How long would it take? One week? Two?* Laura just didn't have that much time.

Some things, such as checking bores and fences, Laura could do herself, but if something went wrong with them, she knew she would be useless. And as far as trucking

cattle out of the spear traps? Well, she supposed she could drive a truck. But nobody, not even men like Uncle Jonas, tried to load wild cattle on their own.

In theory, Laura knew what went on at mustering time—had even helped Uncle Jonas with some of the quieter cattle. It was quite simple, really: Where water could be controlled in difficult country, special yards were constructed with narrow openings that allowed the cattle to enter and obtain water, but when they turned to leave, the funnel-shaped entrance through which they had pushed their way became a bewildering array of poles. Or spears, as they were called. So, there they stayed until trucked away or taken to nearby yards for branding and drafting.

The country watered by rivers was mustered by a combination of helicopters and men in four-wheel drives or on horses, depending on the roughness of the terrain. Uncle Jonas had always used horses, as he believed that cattle moved more quietly with them and, thus, were more easily handled.

Laura sat sipping her coffee, deep in thought. She could do nothing without a team of ringers and a man to oversee them. Quickly, she composed an advertisement to be placed in the newspapers and rang it through. That done, she collected some groceries from the store and went back to tackle another room in the house. She knew it had to be the kitchen: she couldn't last for much longer on tinned food heated on her gas burner.

On her way back to the homestead, Laura noticed a billowing dust cloud. Several vehicles were coming along the road. Unconsciously, she braced herself, her hand on the garden gate while she waited for the convoy to reach her. And the thickset, fair man driving the Land Rover in front was struck by the pathos of that slight, lonely figure.

The assorted four-wheel drives rolled to a halt behind the Land Rover, and the fair man stepped out of his vehicle and strode towards her. He was dressed, as most stockmen, in an open-necked shirt, denim jeans and elastic-sided boots.

'Good day, Miss Neumann.' He removed his hat. 'I'm John Riley. Heard you were looking for an overseer and a team of ringers.'

'How do you do?' Laura shook hands with him. 'May I ask where you heard that?'

'Rick Jamieson rang me up. Said you needed a team pretty quick. So, here we are.' His smile and gesture encompassed his men who were still sitting in their vehicles.

If Laura had been noticing, she would have seen that he was a good-looking man of about thirty, with the healthy, outdoor appearance that characterises so many men of the Outback. She would also have seen that he had an attractive smile and friendly, curiously

perceptive brown eyes that often saw much more than they were meant to.

But Laura was grappling with a strange reaction to her neighbour: partly resentment at the thought of all the fruitless hours she had spent trying to find a team, when he, apparently with the minimum of effort, had seemed to conjure one out of nowhere; partly a sensation of half-remorse and half-joy that he had cared enough to help her after all that had been said; and, on top of all this, an insane, desperate wish that she could have sent these men back to him, so that he could see that she could indeed manage for herself.

Ashamed of her feelings, Laura knew that she had no choice but to swallow her pride. 'Yes, I do need help,' she admitted. 'I'm so glad you've come.'

'Good. Rick told me to bring some gas cylinders for your stove and water heater and that you'd probably need your generator fixed.'

A phrase popped into Laura's mind: something about heaping coals of fire. Why had Rick been so thoughtful? Was it genuine concern? Or was he motivated by a desire to show her that she needed his help? Whatever it was, thinking about it only served to make her tangled emotions even more confused. 'Yes, the gas has run out. I haven't looked at the generator yet, so I don't know whether it goes or not. Even if there is nothing wrong with it, I expect it may need a general clean up.'

'It's right: Mick will fix it. He's good with engines.' He turned and raised his voice. 'Hey, Mick! Come over here.'

A slight, dark man materialised at his side and was introduced to Laura as Mick Edson.

'Day, Miss Neumann.' He grinned shyly, hat in hand. 'I used to work for your great-uncle.'

'Oh, did you? Welcome back.' Laura returned his smile.

'Thanks. Yeah, worked for him for ten years, I did, before that jumped-up ... Sorry.'

'No apology necessary.' Laura gestured. 'In fact, I might just agree with you.'

'You won't be on your own, there.' Her new overseer smiled. 'Mick, hop on over to the lighting shed and get that generator going, will you? And make sure those gas cylinders are hooked up properly for Miss Neumann before you come down.'

'Rightio, John. She'll be jake.' The man, in the same quicksilver fashion, went back to the Land Rover, took out a toolbox, spoke to two of the men and vanished into the lighting shed. The two he had spoken to hauled the gas cylinders over to the side of the

house.

‘Well, Miss Neumann,’ said John Riley, ‘we’ll go down to the quarters now. It’s a bit late to start today, so I’ll just send a couple of men out to check the spear traps. I have maps of the area, and I know this station pretty well, so I think we’ll get along all right. We’ll start in the morning, eh?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Laura. ‘That suits me. But, please, call me Laura.’

‘Thank you, Laura.’ He smiled. There was a short silence, then he said, awkwardly, ‘If you need any help with anything up in the homestead, you know you only have to ask.’ That was as far as he could go in offering to help her, even though something about her touched him. Perhaps it was her air of fragility, or his discerning eye had glimpsed something of her tragedy. Whatever it was, he felt an urge to protect her.

‘That’s very kind of you. But once the generator is working and the gas is hooked up, I think everything will be right.’

‘Rightio, then. We’ll get along and settle in. See you tomorrow.’

Laura watched them drive down to the quarters with a sense of a great weight having been lifted from her shoulders. Now, at least, the muster would get under way.

That evening Laura enjoyed the luxury of a leisurely hot bath (instead of a hurried cold one) and a meal cooked to perfection on a now shining gas cooker. The only drawback to her evening was the presence of large numbers of insects that flocked to the lights. However, once the screens were fixed, this problem would become negligible. At least until the wet season, when no amount of screens sufficed to keep out the hordes of tiny invaders. The next thing to do, then, was to find a carpenter or handyman—no easy task out here.

The following morning found Laura deep in conversation with her overseer in her office as they planned the muster. They decided to do the closest paddocks first, which should, by the records, contain the most saleable cattle, and then move on to the outer mustering camps.

There was also the problem, John Riley told her, of an unfenced boundary between Juliana and Polaris. Rick, he said, must be consulted before they started, since it was usual for a team from each station to muster the area jointly and draft out the respective cattle that belonged to each station.

‘All right.’ Laura rose, ending the meeting. ‘Start where we agreed, and I’ll speak to Rick about mustering that particular area.’

Apart from the reference to her neighbour, which niggled her conscience, as well as arousing a host of carefully buried emotions, Laura was well pleased with her morning. She knew she should call Rick and thank him for sending the men, but she felt a strange reluctance to contact him again. *I know I'll have to talk to him about the muster, but I'll do it later*, she told herself.

Walking back to the house, Laura called a greeting to Jackson, who responded with a wave of his hand. As she approached it, she thought she heard the hum of a polisher or vacuum cleaner, and her nose very definitely detected a delicious cooking aroma. A presentiment came to her, and she began to hurry, so that Bess, at her heels, broke into a shambling trot to keep up. 'Who is there?' called Laura, rushing into the living room.

A greying curly head appeared around the kitchen door; dark, liquid eyes and shining white teeth in a black-velvet face. 'G'day, Little Missus. I bin got your dinner ready. And by cripes ...' She eyed Laura up and down. 'You look as if you need it, too.'

'Oh, Lily!' Laura laughed with happiness. 'I am *so* pleased to see you. Where's Mary?'

'Oh, she bin polishin' floors. I tell her, get rid of dust and cobwebs on walls first, but she don' listen. Them floors was her pride and joy an' she dam' upset when she see them.' Lily shrugged tolerantly. 'Too bad she only gotta do them again after she do the walls.'

Laura laughed again. 'I had the same problem, myself, with the living room. But Lily! How did you get here?'

'Heard you was back, Missus. So, we hitched a lift with a fella from Doomadgee, going south. Then we walked from the front gate.'

'You walked all the way from the front gate? *No*, Lily!'

'Too right, Missus. Dam' long way, too. Took us a coupla days.'

Laura knew that there was a much shorter way to the homestead by foot or on horseback than going around the road. But it was still a long way. 'Oh, Lily! You should have sent me a message from Doomadgee. I would have come and picked you up.'

'No matter.' Lily dismissed the whole thing with a matter-of-fact wave of her hand. 'We here now. You get washed up, Missus, and I get dinner.'

'But ...when did you find out I was here?'

'Oh ...' Lily shrugged. 'Coupla days ago, in the mornin'. Got a lift straight away.'

How strange, thought Laura. *I was hardly here myself*. The appearance of Mary,

bobbing her head and grinning with delight, disrupted her train of thought, and she greeted her and duly admired the shining floor of her bedroom.

When Laura protested that they should rest after their long walk and start tomorrow, they laughed heartily, and Mary found her voice enough to say, ‘Aw cripes, Missus, walkin’ don’t hurt cha. We got plenty of time to rest tonight.’

With the return of Uncle Jonas’s cook and housekeeper, Laura was able to turn her full attention to the running of the station. She knew how lucky she was to have two such jewels of efficiency to help her, reared in habits of cleanliness and domesticity by the nuns on a North Queensland mission. Sisters—adopted as a tiny baby and a young toddler after the death of their mother from typhoid—they had been given names reflecting purity, as was usual at the time, and trained specifically for the two positions they held so proudly. Lily, the elder and more outgoing, was the spokesperson; Mary, the shy one with an elusive sense of humour, followed her lead.

Laura knew something of the difficulties besetting the original inhabitants of the land, with successive government policies that were as short-sighted as they were inept. But these two women had seemed to embrace with alacrity the very different roles in life that were forced upon them by circumstance. *And, thought Laura, when they’d heard, by some mysterious means, that the evil manager had gone and I was back, they returned, full of enthusiasm, as ever. That tells something, surely?* They had the same simple, carefree outlook on life that they’d always had, that Laura had always found endearing and was suddenly beginning to envy.

After lunch Laura returned to the office to pore over the station books. She found them neat and meticulously kept, and try as she might, she could find no discrepancies in them. It would seem that the drop in production was indeed the result of poor seasons.

Giving up the officework in frustration, Laura went back to the homestead.

‘You ready for smoko, Missus?’

‘Yes, thank you, Lily.’ Laura sat in the chair opposite the one Rick had lounged in when he had come the day before yesterday. She could still see him there, his light eyes full of lazy amusement, his lips just lifting at the corners, his hands ... Laura tried to push the thought away, but his image persisted. ‘Get out of my life!’ she muttered under her breath, causing Lily to jump as she put down the coffee in front of her.

‘What’s that, Missus?’

‘Oh, nothing, Lily. I was just talking to myself.’ Laura took a deep breath. ‘This

coffee smells beautiful. Thank you.'

Peace reigned while Laura sipped her coffee. At the sound of Rick's voice reverberating around the silent room, she gulped, almost scalding her mouth. Finally realising that it was just the two-way radio and not some kind of sorcery, Laura seemed unable to make any kind of move until he said for the second time, 'Juliana calling Polaris. Are you on channel, Laura?'

'Answer it, Lily.' Laura jumped up from the table in an unreasoning panic. 'I don't want to talk to him just now. Tell him I'm not here.' She snatched up her coffee and went into her room.

'Where will I say you are, Missus?' Lily poked her head around the door. 'If he asks?'

'Oh ... anywhere. Out on the station.' Laura waved a hand. 'Go on.'

Lily padded obediently to the radio. 'G'day, Boss. Lily here.'

'Hello, Lily. Nice to have you back again. Is your Missus there?'

'No, Boss. She decided to work outside today.'

'Did she? Was that before or after I called?'

Lily rolled her eyes. 'Dunno what time she went out, Boss,' she said with perfect truth. 'Didn't see her go.'

'Okay, Lily.' There was a definite ripple of amusement in his voice. 'Just tell her when she comes in that I'll be over to have a word with her sometime in the next few days. Oh, and by the way, I've sent a carpenter. He's on his way.'

'Rightio, Boss. Good thing.'

'I hope your Missus thinks so, Lily.' Giving what seemed to Laura to be a fiendish chuckle, he signed off.

'What's up with you, Little Missus?' Lily came to the bedroom door to look askance at Laura. 'Boss Jamieson bin a good neighbour to Boss Neumann. Talked on the radio every day. Always came over when Boss was sick. Bin very close, all the time. Even went with him on his last trip to hospital.'

Laura couldn't meet the frank gaze. 'I'm sorry, Lily. I don't know what came over me. I'll talk to him later. But not on the two-way.'

'Good-o, Missus.' Lily's face cleared. 'Phone's better. Two-way's nothing to worry

about, though. Unless you want to say something you don't want everyone to hear?'

Laura left it at that, but she was smarting at her own stupidity, appalled by her lack of control. *I'm going straight to the office to phone him*, she thought. *I can't fall apart like this at the sound of his voice*. Like Lily, she began to wonder what was up with her. *I can't believe I'm behaving so ridiculously!*

Chapter Five

Laura dialled the number for Juliana hoping that either the housekeeper would answer or no-one would. But she was out of luck.

‘Rick Jamieson,’ said the well-remembered, deep, slow voice.

Laura hesitated, almost too long. ‘Hello, Rick, it’s Laura. I’m sorry I was out when you called on the radio earlier.’

‘That’s all right. Did the new mustering team find their way?’

‘Yes, they did. I am ringing to thank you and say how much I appreciate you sending them. *And* the carpenter: desperately needed.’ She took a deep breath as he made a deprecating murmur. ‘John said I must ask you about a shared boundary?’

‘Yes, we need to have a word about the muster. I’ll come over in the morning. Eight o’clock, all right?’ At her assent, he added, over a sudden babble of voices in the background, ‘Look, someone’s just arrived. I’ll have to go. Talk to you tomorrow.’

Laura put the receiver in its cradle, feeling as if she’d been cut off. She knew it was ridiculous to suppose that he’d made an excuse because he didn’t want to talk to her when she’d, herself, heard the sounds of arrival over the phone. She tried to shake it off. *I should be pleased*, she thought. *Knowing how little I wanted to talk to him*. Inspired by a surge of nervous energy, Laura spring-cleaned the office and checked the supplies in the store before going back to the house.

A little later, the promised carpenter turned up. He was a small, bird-like man with a jaunty air, greeting every project shown him with a cheerful ‘No worries, Miss Neumann.’. Then, announcing his intention of starting on the broken windowpanes and screens, he went out to his battered utility to return directly with the necessary tools.

Presently, Laura heard him banging away, alternately whistling happily or making bantering, apologetic remarks to Mary, whose housekeeping he had interrupted. She was astonished to hear Mary reply, ‘No matter, Mr Jenkins. It’d have to be better than them insects I sweep up of a morning.’ Just as if she’d been back for weeks and not just hours.

Remembering that she had not cancelled her advertisement in the newspapers, Laura hurried back to the office to repair her omission. Then, overwhelmed by the enormity of what she’d taken on, she stayed sitting at the desk, lost in thought, and the time passed

unheeded.

Laura did not sleep well that night, and she knew it was worry about her lack of control where her neighbour was concerned. *I must not allow myself to react to his attitude. In the morning, I will be cool and in charge of my emotions*, she vowed. *However angry he makes me, I must not show it. Even if he does laugh at me!* She was determined that there would not be any more childish lashing out with hurtful comments. For her own sake, as much as his.

§

A little before eight, Laura, dressed in her working uniform of shirt and jeans, sat at the table in the living room. She had tied her hair back with a scarf into a ponytail and, not satisfied with her pale cheeks and smudged eyes, had applied a little make-up. She heard Rick's Land Cruiser draw up but sat on at the table, holding her cup before her in both hands, almost as if it were a shield. Aware of her heart thudding heavily when he filled the doorway, Laura thought fleetingly how ruggedly handsome he was as he wished her good morning, and she invited him to come in and sit down.

'Coffee?' she asked, as he stood for a moment, holding his hat.

'Please.' He looked as if he wanted to say something, but Laura was before him.

She stood up and gripped the table, words rushing out: 'Look, Rick, I'm sorry I lost my temper with you the other day. I didn't mean what I said. I was just ——'

One stride and he stood beside her, his hand coming down to cover hers. 'No, don't apologise. I'm sorry I let you get under my skin when I knew you were just hitting out. But we'll cope.' He smiled. 'I know what to expect now.'

'Oh!' Laura snatched away her hand. Then she saw amused understanding in his eyes, knew that he was teasing and subsided. For a moment, she felt overpowered by his presence and, panicking, escaped to the kitchen to make his coffee, very nearly colliding with Lily, who had already made a fresh pot and was bringing it out on a tray with his cup.

'Watch out, Little Missus! You burn yourself! Mornin', Boss.'

'Good morning, Lily. Mmm, the coffee smells good. I see you haven't lost any of your old skills. When are you going to come and work for me at Juliana? Good wages. Good quarters. Mary can come, too. What do you say?' He gave a wink and a devastating little smile that both flustered and flattered her as she poured his coffee.

‘Get away with you, Boss! We couldn’t leave our Missus on her own. What you thinkin’ of, eh?’ Lily grinned broadly at his joke.

‘You can bring your Missus, too, Lily. How about that?’

‘Too right, Boss! Good idea. Mrs Mac might need a hand, eh?’

Rick’s brow suddenly furrowed. ‘You’re right, there, she does. But get her to admit it ...’

Lily, about to reply, caught sight of Laura’s face, mumbled something about biscuits burning and shuffled away.

Humour lightened Rick’s expression. He laughed, calling after her, ‘Don’t you burn them, Lily! I wouldn’t want you to spoil your reputation.’ Then he surveyed Laura over his coffee cup, eyes gleaming wickedly. ‘The men going well, are they?’ he enquired in a gentle voice.

Laura wasn’t fooled by the tone. She knew that voice now: in fact, she was beginning to think of it as an iron hand in a velvet glove kind of voice. *Rubbing it in*, she thought. ‘Oh, yes, very well,’ she returned, as coolly as she could.

‘Good. I think you will find they are a good team. Some of them have worked here in the past. I’ll have a word with John later, to see how he is getting on.’

Laura felt her hackles rise. There it was again: the not-so-subtle hint that they needed his hand on the rein, that she couldn’t handle them herself.

Rick continued, ‘While I’m here, we should discuss some of the business of the estate, and I must point out some boundaries to you. Jonas bought two or three blocks since you were here last, which you probably haven’t seen.’

Laura took a deep breath. *I will not—No, I will not!—lose my temper!* ‘Look, Rick ...’ She was careful to modulate her voice: ‘It is very good of you to be concerned, but I don’t need you to point out my boundaries or discuss my property. I do *not* need your help, and I can manage on my own. And it is really *not* your business.’ She stopped, miserably aware that she sounded unbearably churlish, rather than coldly dignified as she had hoped. Also, she knew that it was a lie. Where would she be now without the help he had already given?

Their eyes clashed across the table: Two strong-willed people, each a prisoner of the forces that had shaped their separate lives, brought together by destiny and the unwritten law of the Outback—help thy neighbour. Laura noticed with a little thrill of dismay that the

warm devilry had quite vanished from his, though he still smiled, rather grimly, she thought, as he withdrew a long, slender envelope from his shirt pocket and tapped it against his other hand.

‘There’s no doing anything with you, is there?’ He shook his head. ‘You’re a stubborn woman. And I don’t know why you keep on insisting that the Polaris estate is not my business, when you must know quite well that it is.’ He handed her the envelope. ‘Before we go any further with this conversation, you had better read this.’

She glanced at him in puzzlement, before turning her attention to the contents of the envelope: a folded letter and what appeared to be a legal document of some sort. Opening out the document and beginning to read, Laura received an unpleasant jolt. The document stated that a large holding named Miranda, situated so that it partly adjoined Polaris and Juliana and held in the names of Jonas Daniel Neumann and Richard James Jamieson, was now transferred to the tenure of the aforementioned Richard James Jamieson and Laura Jane Neumann.

The letter to Rick, unmistakably written in Uncle Jonas’s copperplate hand, was a real facer. It requested Rick to keep an eye on the manager of Polaris because *I don’t like the cut of his jib or his reputation but had no choice when Col got sick. You know the story, Rick: a case of the not-very-good best of a bad bunch.* It also informed him that Jonas had taken the liberty of making him an executor of his will and *a trustee until Laura arrives to take control of her inheritance.*

As to the matter we discussed before, I’ll leave it up to Laura. She can sell out to you if she likes. But I’ll bet my last quid she won’t! I know a filly with spirit when I see one, and I reckon she’s got what it takes to make a go of it. It’s a pity I won’t be around to see the outcome. All the same, my boy, it’s a hard life for a woman, and I’ll rest easy knowing you’ll be around to look after my little Laurie. God bless her. God bless you both.

Laura bowed her head, surreptitiously wiping away tears. Then she raised brilliant eyes to Rick’s. She was very pale. This letter confirmed the closeness Rick had claimed with the old man and raised some complications that Laura would need time to think about, not the least of which was that Rick was so set against her doing what her great-uncle had made clear that he wished. There was also a more subtle, perhaps even sinister aspect to all this that her confused mind was unable to grasp.

‘But ... but ...’ Laura’s voice failed. She gestured helplessly towards the papers.

Rick’s glance held hers. He said in his velvet voice: ‘Now, just a minute, Laura. Are

you going to tell me that you didn't know anything at all about this?'

Laura nodded, still too stunned to speak.

'Why the hell not? Didn't the solicitors send you all the information?'

'I suppose so. I didn't ... I didn't ...' Her voice failed once more. She couldn't tell him that she had been just too devastated to care. And the knowledge that he was her partner, at least in some degree, shocked her beyond words.

He got up and strode around the room, his lithe frame eloquent with restless energy and controlled anger. 'I don't believe this!' Exasperation was evident in the quiet tones. 'Do you mean to say that you didn't read the letters the solicitors sent you?'

'N-no. No, I didn't.'

'Not one?' He raised incredulous eyebrows.

'No.' Laura felt incredibly stupid.

He relaxed and sat down again to drop his head into his hands. 'Oh, Laura, *Laura* ... What am I going to do with you? You need a keeper.' He raised his head to regard her quizzically. 'Don't you know better than to sign an unread document? Anyone could have bled you dry! And you wouldn't have known a thing about it until the bank account was empty!'

Since this was more or less what had happened, Laura didn't have any answers for him and sat gazing miserably into her half-empty cup, unable to meet his eyes. *I feel such a fool*, she thought. *I can't bear it if he is laughing at me. And if he's angry, as he has every right to be, what can I say?*

But there was no sign of either laughter or anger in his voice when he rose and scooped up his hat. 'This has been a shock to you; I can see that. I'll leave you now to think it over and get used to the idea. Give me a call when you're ready to discuss it.' He cast her a worried glance, looked as if he would say more, but when she didn't respond, raised his voice as he walked out. 'Thanks for the coffee, Lily. Take care of your Missus, won't you?'

'Yeah, Boss. No trouble.'

Five minutes later, he was back, stepping onto the verandah, a blue-speckled bundle cradled in his arms.

Still traumatised from the revelations of their last encounter, Laura stared for long seconds, unable to take in the significance of what she saw. 'Oh, *Bess!*' She rose shakily to her feet. 'What happened?' She looked at him in accusation. 'You've run over her!'

‘No, no,’ he soothed. ‘Of course I haven’t run over her. I didn’t even get as far as my vehicle. I found her in the garden. Now, get me a blanket or something to lay her on, will you?’

Laura returned with a quilt she folded on the sofa. ‘Is she still alive?’

‘Yes, but I don’t know for how much longer.’ He lay the dog down carefully and examined her eyes.

‘I can’t believe it. She was okay early this morning when I let her out. Perhaps it’s her age?’

Rick shook his head. ‘No. See the pinpoint pupils and the way she’s breathing? It’s a poison of some sort.’

‘Poison?’ Laura was horrified. ‘But, who ...?’

‘It may have been accidental. In fact, I feel certain of it. Get Lily, will you?’

Lily arrived, visibly distressed and twisting her hands in her apron.

‘Has anybody been using any poison around here, Lily? For mice? Or anything like that?’

‘Not mouse bait, Boss. But Mr Jenkins, he told me about white powder to poison ants. Meat ants bin terrible bad lately. Then I remember some of that powder in the shed. So, I sprinkle it on a bit of mince, like Mr Jenkins told me and put it on the ants’ nest.’

‘Have you still got some of the powder?’

‘Yeah, Boss. I jus’ get it.’ Lily returned with an unlabelled bottle, and Rick took it and sniffed the contents.

‘Neguvon!’ He turned to Laura. ‘Quickly, in your first-aid cabinet: atropine tablets! Bring them with some water. We might save her, yet.’

Laura rushed to find the tablets, and Lily went for the water, while Rick carried the old dog onto the verandah. They watched anxiously as he coaxed Bess to swallow two of the tablets with water and laid her head back on the quilt. He knelt there, stroking her—an expression on his face that brought a lump to Laura’s throat.

As if aware of eyes upon him, Rick suddenly looked up. ‘You’d better get rid of all unlabelled bottles in the sheds, Laura. Storing old poisons that way can be a dangerous habit. And you, Lily, next time you poison ants, you get an empty milk tin, punch holes in it big enough for ants to walk through, put your poisoned meat in there and stamp on the lid to shut it. That way, you’ll be sure you only poison the ants.’

‘Yeah, Boss. Sorry, Missus.’

‘Don’t worry, Lily. You weren’t to know. Oh, look! She’s coming round.’

All eyes turned to Bess, who sat up, swaying groggily.

‘Gently, girl.’ Rick moved to steady her, and the tip of her tail waved slightly in acknowledgement. In a while, she settled down and appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

‘I think she’s over the worst of it. Quiet and rest is what she needs now.’ Rick stood up, flexing broad shoulders.

‘Thank you.’ Laura’s voice was low. She knew that Bess would have died if Rick had not been here. And she never would have thought of Lily’s ant bait, nor known what to do if she had.

Rick surveyed her keenly. ‘What are you going to do for the rest of today?’

‘I’ll have to stay here and keep an eye on Bess, don’t you think?’

‘I think you should come with me to look at our boundaries. There’s nothing more anyone can do for Bess. We just have to wait for the atropine to take full effect. I think you’re better off out of the house, rather than moping about here worrying about her. I’ll tell Lily to get Jenky to take a look at her when he comes. He’s as good as a vet when it comes to dogs. Come on.’

Regarding him warily, Laura could detect nothing in his sun-browned face other than kindness and understanding. Then, knowing he was right, she agreed. As he said, a morning moping around worrying about Bess would achieve nothing. After all, as she was beginning to acknowledge to herself, there existed no-one more able than Rick to take her mind off things. Whether or not it would be an improvement was another matter.

About the Author



Anne Rouen

Anne Rouen—the nom de plume of Lynn Newberry—is the award-winning author behind the successful historical fiction series, *Master of Illusion* and, more recently, a set of standalone contemporary historical fiction romance and suspense novels set in the Australian Outback.

Lynn is a retired Australian country woman, currently living in the North-West region of New South Wales. A graduate of the University of New England, she is a former teacher, dressage rider and cattle breeder. A life on the land, including eleven years in Outback Queensland, has mixed nicely with her penchant for writing romantic suspense in historical settings.

Lynn has recently exchanged her farm for a delightful small acreage on the edge of a village, where she writes full time. As horses and writing are her greatest passions, Lynn

now embraces an idyllic lifestyle, since she has time to delve into the historical research she so loves.

Writing as Anne Rouen, Lynn self-published her historical romance/mystery series *Master of Illusion* with great success, winning four literary awards across the entire set. Book I (*Master of Illusion Bk I*) and Book III (*Angel of Song*) achieved Silver (2014) and Bronze (2016) respectively in the *Global Ebook Awards for Modern Historical Literature Fiction*. Book IV (*Guardian Angel*), the final in the series, was awarded Silver (2018) in the same category and Bronze (2018) for the *Global Ebook Awards Best Ebook Cover*.

Anne has seen continued success with the *Global Ebook Awards* in 2022 with her Australian Outback cosy romance, *Winter at Medora Downs*, where she achieved a Gold Medal for the *Best Ebook Cover*, Silver for *Best Suspense Fiction* and Bronze for *Best Modern Historical Literature Fiction in a contemporary setting*.

Lynn also achieved a Highly Commended in the 2011 Rolf Boldrewood Literary Awards for her short story *The Scent of a Criminal* and a Commended in the 2018 *Thunderbolt Prize for Crime Fiction* for *The Min Min Light*.

You can find more information about Anne Rouen and read her blog at www.annerouen.com.

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