

Award-Winning & Amazon Bestselling Author

BUSH ANGEL



Anne Rouen

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DEDICATION

To all the awesome nurses amongst my family and friends—this book is for you.

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CHAPTER ONE

Early May 1998

Rolling along the Landsborough Highway in her Land Cruiser, Angela felt a sense of lightness and freedom, anticipation that she was nearing the end of her journey, opening the door to new and exciting experiences. She'd never been this far north, never even made it out of New South Wales before yesterday, when she'd overnighted in Longreach in Western Queensland. It had been a long day. Too long, she acknowledged, but it meant that she would be at her destination around lunchtime today, as she'd informed the Wyrangi household when she'd phoned last night and left a message on their answering machine.

The country was open downs with a few trees clustered here and there: on ironstone ridges, lining dry creek beds and river channels, and marking the sites of station buildings and homesteads. Angela marvelled at the width of the horizons—the sense of being able to see huge distances all around. So different from Tamworth with its rolling hills and valleys, rich farmland, and horizons limited by the surrounding ranges. *No wonder they call this the big country*, she thought.

Having travelled for so many hours with at least five to go, Angela mused: *Why did I pick a Cloncurry address?* The answer was simple. She'd always been obsessed with stories of the Flying Doctor, and Cloncurry was its birthplace.

Angela stopped for a quick coffee at the Winton Roadhouse, passed through the changing scenery of the ancient, worn-down Ayrshire hills and was on her way to Kynuna, famous for its association with Banjo Paterson's *Waltzing Matilda* and the iconic Blue Heeler Hotel. *I don't have time to visit the Combo Waterhole, more's the pity, and I'd better not do a pub crawl.* Her lips curved upward as she passed the famous pub. The hotel in the next town was equally as famous, although not so historical. *I can't remember what year they made Crocodile Dundee ...*

Concentrating on the road, Angela settled down to some serious driving. Apart from the highways being long and straight, there was very little traffic. *Luckily, I have a good vehicle. It could be bad out here if you break down.* Dressed in shirt and jeans, sensible shoes for driving, having plenty of water on board, she experienced an unexpected stab of fear. *How vast and lonely it is out here!* For a second, her lip trembled before she pulled herself together.

My first test, she thought. I've been told about this reaction. I'm not a little kid, any more! Her blonde hair in a ponytail, large sunglasses balanced on her small nose, she looked much younger and far more delicate than she actually was.

Passing through McKinlay, she knew she was on the final stretch. *I have to look for the Wyrangi turn-off. If I get to the Flinders Highway, I've gone too far.* Safely negotiating the turn, Angela noticed the difference between the bitumen highway and the dirt road that would take her to where she needed to be. Engaging four-wheel drive, she settled down to a more sedate pace.

Angela hadn't gone far when she saw skid marks and a motorcycle lying on the side of the road. Braking as fast as possible, she dropped her sunglasses in the console and ran over to it, drawing back with a gasp when she saw the still figure lying a few metres away amongst some thick, straggly bushes. Then, her nurse's instinct kicked in, and she rushed to kneel by his side, noting with dismay that he wasn't wearing a helmet and the side of his head was covered in blood from a gash above his temple. Finding a strong pulse relieved her initial fear that he was dead. The man moved slightly, muttered something and lapsed back into unconsciousness. Observing that there was another wound on his left calf and that the ankle seemed to be resting at an odd angle, she sped back to her vehicle.

Her brow creased as she took in the scene, fully, for the first time. From the look of the skid and tyre marks, another vehicle had been involved. *A hit-and-run? Out here on a dirt road a hundred kays from nowhere?* Now, she came to think of it, hadn't she heard the sound of a vehicle in the distance? Dust still hung in the air. She must have come upon the accident just after it happened. *This man is lucky I came along so soon.*

Using her satellite car phone, she made a quick call. Then, retrieving her medical bag, a handtowel and a bottle of water, she returned to staunch the bleeding and dress the man's wounds. The head wound concerned her the most. It was a nasty gash and would need stitches, the welling blood matting his short blond hair, running down into his shirt collar and pooling on the ground beneath. At her touch, his eyes fluttered open, blinked twice and focused on her face. She saw that they were a warm brown, unusual for his colouring, and at the moment, filled with pain and confusion.

The man's bewildered mind tried to process a vision of angelic blue eyes with the sweetest caring expression, in the most adorable face, beneath a halo of golden hair. He closed his eyes and opened them again. The vision was still there. He sighed. *It must be true, then.*

"I didn't think I was dead, but I must be." His voice was so faint that she had to bend closer to hear him.

“No, you’ve cut your head and leg, and I think your ankle is broken. But you’re not dead. Not anywhere near it, in my view.”

“That’s a relief. I didn’t think there were angels on earth, but there must be. Thank you, Angel.”

“You’re welcome. I’m a nurse and my name’s Angela, so I’m used to people calling me that. What’s your name?”

“John.”

“Well, John, after I bandage your head, I want to shine my torch in your eyes. Can you tell me what happened? Do you know what day it is?”

He made no response, and she saw that he was white under his tan and that tiny drops of perspiration beaded his top lip and broad forehead. Stifling a momentary fear, she took his pulse again and wished for a blood pressure monitor. His pulse was still strong, reassuring her, and she worked swiftly to bandage a pad over his head wound to control the bleeding, then decided to see what she could do for the gash on his lower leg and the state of his ankle.

As she started to rise, he clasped her hand in a surprisingly firm grip. “Please, Angel.” The entreaty in his eyes made her heart contract. “Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t leave you.” She reassured him. “I’ve called the rescue helicopter, and we’ll both leave here when it comes: Me in my Cruiser, and you in the chopper. All right?”

He made an attempt to smile in acknowledgement, and she thought how attractive he must be if she’d met him under normal circumstances. Again, her heart contracted. She felt as if she had known this man forever, as if they were somehow linked in a way she couldn’t explain. The smile ended in a wince, and she returned his hand pressure. “Don’t move. It won’t be long now. I wish I could give you something for the pain, but I can’t. When I called for help, they told me CareFlight was in the area. So, we’ve been lucky in that respect. And now, I want to shine a light in your eyes, if you don’t mind? Just to set our minds at rest.”

“Sure.” He complied ... “Well? What’s the verdict?”

“Normal. It could be worse.”

“Could it? It feels worse.”

She caught the vestige of a cheeky grin and admired his courage and resilience. “Do you remember anything?”

He looked as if he were about to reply in the positive, then frowned slightly. “No, nothing. What happened?”

“You were riding your motorbike and crashed. With no helmet.”

“No, I was walking with some friends, Rick and Laura, in their garden.”

“I don’t know about that.” Angela shone her torch in his eyes again. “There’s your bike over there.”

“Must have been dreaming.” He looked confused. “All I know is that I have one hell of a headache. Too bad to think.”

“Well, it’s no wonder. You just lie quietly and try to rest. I promise I’ll stay with you.”

After what seemed like hours, but was only about forty-five minutes, the helicopter arrived, hovered briefly and came to rest in the middle of the road behind the Land Cruiser where there was a natural clearing in the patch of open forest merging into the grassy downs.

The CareFlight team were professional and thorough, complimenting Angela on the excellent job she had already done while making sure there were no injuries that would be compromised by moving the patient. Soon, John was given some pain relief, had his ankle stabilised and was stretchered, ready to be placed on board the helicopter. Angela walked beside him, holding his hand, thinking how close she felt to him, marvelling at how strong a bond could be formed between two strangers, one of whom needed the kind of help that she was able to give.

“Thank you, Angel.” His clasp on her hand tightened. “I won’t forget you. You saved my life.”

“No, I didn’t.” A stickler for the truth, she shook her head. “Thankfully, you weren’t that bad.”

“Oh, but I was—and you did save my life.” His assurance was positive. “If we meet again one day, I’ll tell you about it.”

“So, you’ve remembered something about what happened?”

“Have I? I don’t know.” His brow furrowed while he mulled it over. “I’m sure you saved my life, but I don’t know why I think that. Maybe it will take me a while to sort out the dream from the reality, if you know what I mean?”

“Well, you did get a fair old knock on the head. Try not to worry. That will only confuse you more. If you’re meant to remember, you will.”

“Does that mean you believe in fate?”

“Um ...”

“Angels and fate—a potent combination! We’ll meet again, for sure.”

Assuming he was affected by the pain relief, Angela smiled and murmured that she hoped they would meet again when he was well, said goodbye to him and the medics, and ran for her car before the rotors were switched on, to avoid the dust from their downdraft.

As the helicopter lifted off, she resumed her journey, suddenly remembering she had some place she needed to be. Glancing at the clock on the dash, she saw that she was only an hour-and-a-half late. *An hour and a half?* It felt like a lifetime. Somehow, she could not shake off the feeling of déjà vu with this man—a man she had known for a full ninety minutes! The depth of feeling in his warm brown eyes; the comfort of her hand in his; his good-looking face with its neat masculine features; his strong, well-built body. Not too tall, just right, as far as she was concerned. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, again, just right. *What’s wrong with me?* She wondered, annoyed with herself. *I’ve nursed plenty of good-looking men, and they’ve never had this effect on me before.*

Angela tried to stop thinking about her compelling patient to concentrate on the road ahead and what may be awaiting her at the homestead.

CHAPTER TWO

Finally arriving at her destination, Angela parked in the designated space outside the house yard and sat for a little while wondering how her day would end. What would she find here at Wyrangi? Was it the most colossal mistake to leave the NSW public hospital system and become a private nurse to a disabled father and daughter way out here between McKinlay and Cloncurry?

Angela already knew part of their story. Andrew Brooke had become a paraplegic two years ago when a wild bull had charged, upending his horse and crushing him beneath it. His six-year-old daughter, Petrina, born with a mild form of spina bifida that had not required surgery, had been recently diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Their medical histories had been forwarded to her by Sonia Brooke, the wife and mother who had stated categorically that she couldn't deal with illness or disability and had elected to run the station herself and staff the household. *I'm not heartless*, she wrote. *Just can't bear to see them like that. Please come, I really can't take any more!*

No, not heartless. Selfish? Maybe. Or worn out with stress? Most likely. And will I regret my response to her plea? I guess I'll find out, she thought as she got out from behind the wheel and entered the house yard through a wrought-iron gate under a bignonia-covered archway.

Well, here goes!

Glancing at the long, low bungalow surrounded by verandahs and trellises rampant with various coloured bougainvillea, she thought: *Oh, this is my sort of house!* The yard, paved with flat rocks, also elicited her admiration, as did several large tropical flowering trees, each surrounded by a rock-edged garden filled with colourful ground-cover plants. *I'm sure that tree's a bauhinia*, she decided, observing its bilobed leaves.

Maybe I should go around the back? Angela experienced a moment of indecision before knocking on the ornate wrought-iron and gauze front door that matched the gate and gave her a view into a short hallway with wide, polished wooden floorboards.

She started as a tall, slim woman with silver-blond hair in a neat bun seemed to materialise from nowhere to open the door with a welcoming smile. She wore an apron over a polo shirt and slim-fitting jeans, appearing younger than her years. For a tiny moment, it seemed to Angela that the woman's glassy green-gold eyes pierced right into her soul. But

maybe that was a trick of the light because the next instant they were warmly reflecting her smile.

If she wasn't smiling, she could be tough, intimidating. What was that look? Angela almost stepped back from its power. Who is she?

"Please, come in. You must be Angela, our nurse."

"Yes, that's right." Angela smiled back. "So, I've come to the right place, then?"

"Oh, yes! We got your message, even though no-one was close enough to answer the phone. I'm the housekeeper, Esther Samson, but everyone calls me Sammi." She slanted her an amused glance from those incredible eyes. "Mainly because I refuse to be called Essie."

"Well, thank you, Mrs Samson ——"

"Sammi."

"Sammi. I'm sorry I'm late, but ——"

"Don't give it another thought. You're here, now. You've missed lunch, but I put aside some sandwiches for you. And you must be in dire need of a cuppa."

"Thank you, yes. I really could do with one."

"We've been quite worried about you." After pointing her to the bathroom, Mrs Samson led the way into a large, light kitchen, indicating for Angela to take a seat at the big scrubbed-pine table. "The boss has been waiting for our head stockman to get back from the water run, so he could send him out to look for you."

"Was he on a motorbike?"

"Yes." Mrs Samson looked at her closely as she put a plate of sandwiches on the table. "Oh no, don't tell me ...". She sighed. "What's happened?"

"It's why I'm late." Angela told her story while Mrs Samson made the tea, set out two mugs and sat down opposite, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Solid man, mid-thirties, blond hair?"

"Yes. He said his name was John."

"That's him. Oh dear! It never rains but it pours. I imagine they would've taken him to Mount Isa?"

"Yes, that's what they said."

"I'll give them a couple of hours, then I'll call the hospital to see how he is."

A thin little voice wailed, "Sammi! I need you!"

"Just a minute, Pet. I'm coming." Mrs Samson rose from the table. "Your patient. Or, one of them. The other one will be awake soon from his after-lunch nap. No, don't get up. Finish your tea and sandwiches. It might be the last bit of peace you get. I can manage."

Angela sat, sipping her tea, while she thought about her situation. So far, the day seemed unreal: coming upon an accident; meeting a man she would never forget; being ushered into the house by a woman who appeared to have a hidden power in her strange, bulbous eyes. Angela couldn't shake her conviction that Sammi was not what she seemed. Her thoughts went back to the man she had tended by the roadside. *So, he's the head stockman here?* Why should she be surprised that he was connected with Wyrangi, when he was on the private road that turned off the highway to service the cattle station? That meant, all things being equal, that she would meet him again. Her heart jumped a little at the thought.

A hushing noise made her turn her head to see a man with a pain-ravaged face enter the room in an electric wheelchair. A once big man, he was very thin, with prematurely grey hair and deep-set blue eyes that seemed to view the world with cynicism under arched black eyebrows. Angela knew his date of birth and thought he seemed much older than his forty-two years. *He might have looked distinguished, if not so emaciated.*

"You must be Angela. I'm Drew. I'm pleased you came. It's very brave of you."

"Is it? Why? Not because I've made the big move from the city to the Outback?" Her lips curved upward. "I'm sure I'll cope."

The man's gaunt face was a study in perturbation and incredulity. "You mean you weren't told?"

"I'm sorry, told what?"

"My wife didn't tell you? Well, that beats everything! The one thing I've left her to do ... Sammi!" he roared.

"Coming, Mr B." Mrs Samson appeared, carrying a beautiful child with large hazel eyes in a heart-shaped face, topped with a riot of dusky curls. Her short little body and legs were encased in overalls over a t-shirt. As the housekeeper put the little girl down, Angela thought she looked much more like a four-year-old than her true age of six.

"Daddy." His daughter went to him, her gait ungainly and awkward. Angela's heart went out to her.

"Hello, sweetheart." He stroked her curls and indicated their visitor. "This is Nurse

Angela.”

“Hello.” Candid, friendly eyes met hers. “I’m Pet. Are you going to be my new nurse?”

“That’s a *might be*, Pet. We’ll have to wait and see.” Her father’s forbidding gaze travelled to the housekeeper. “Sonia didn’t tell her! Didn’t we agree, she must be told?”

Mrs Samson glanced at the child. “Yes, we agreed there should be transparency, certainly. Just wait while I find something to occupy Pet.”

“Take her to Mum. She’s in her sitting room, watching a movie.”

“All right.” She bent down to the little girl. “You’d like to watch a movie with Nanna, wouldn’t you, dear?”

“Yes please, Sammi.”

“Come on, then.”

“Bye-bye, Nurse Ang’la. I really, *really* hope you will be my new nurse.”

“Bye-bye, Pet and thank you.” Angela smiled, finding the child’s sweet naivety endearing. She waited until they left the room before turning to her prospective patient and employer. “Transparency about what?”

Drew put up a hand. “Sonia’s going to answer for this! Is that her?” He wheeled over to the back door and bellowed, “Sonia! Get in here!”

A small, thin, harassed-looking woman of about forty tore into the room. She wore a western shirt, jeans and riding boots. Her fine, grey-streaked brown hair was tied up in a ponytail, her tanned complexion free of make-up. “What’s up? What do you want? I haven’t watered the veggies yet.”

“Bugger the veggies! Where’s Ryan? Why can’t he do it?”

“He’s trimming the horses’ hooves. It’s overdue, and they can’t wait any longer.”

Angela was waiting for Drew to blast his wife for this explanation after his previous explosion, but to her surprise, he seemed to accept it amicably.

“Fair enough.” He gestured. “This is Angela. Sonia—my wife.”

“Oh, good.” The woman rushed over to shake hands. “Pleased to meet you. How do you do? Did you have a good trip?”

Angela’s attempted reply was ruthlessly interrupted. “She says you didn’t tell her!”

“No, that’s right, I didn’t.” Sonia glared defiantly at her husband, hands on hips.

“Why not?”

“Isn’t it obvious? She would never have come if we’d told her. Six—*six!*—had already backed out. I just can’t cope without a nurse. You know that! Sorry, I have to go.”

“Told me *what?*” Angela almost shouted, frustrated beyond belief as Sonia ran out and the housekeeper trod silently into the room.

Mrs Samson gave the nurse a level glance and spoke gently, “Your predecessor was murdered, dear.” Her bald statement fell into a deep silence. Angela could not have said a word to save her life. “And I’m relatively new here, too, because the previous housekeeper is officially a missing person. So, you see ...?”

“Where ...? How ...?” Angela didn’t know how to formulate the question.

“Just a moment while I bring Mr B up to speed with John’s situation.” Mrs Samson’s penetrating gaze went from the nurse to her employer while she told him what had happened, and settled, once more, on Angela. “Now, where were we? The housekeeper? Or the nurse?” Interpreting Angela’s silence, she spoke quietly, without emotion. “Right, we’ll start with the nurse: on the fifth of January this year, Julia Freedman was on her way back from Cloncurry when she came upon an accident victim and did what any caring nurse would do—stopped her car and went to help.” The housekeeper paused, her luminous eyes still holding the nurse’s. Angela felt the hair rise, ever so slightly, on her scalp, but stayed silent as the other continued: “We know all this from skid marks and other evidence left at the scene.” Mrs Samson studied her fingernails. “It would seem to have been a staged motorbike accident.”

The hair really did rise on Angela’s scalp this time. “Where did it happen?”

“Not far along from where the Wyrangi road turns off the Landsborough Highway. There’s a natural clearing before a patch of bushes.” She stopped. “Ringing some bells, is it?”

“It’s where a vehicle hit John’s motorbike. I found him in the bushes. The same bushes?”

“Possibly. What do you think, Mr B?”

“I’d say, almost certainly.” He made a gesture of loathing. “The whole thing makes me sick to my stomach! To think of something like that happening here on Wyrangi. Nearly twice! I’m going out on the verandah for some air, Sammi. I’ll leave you to pass on all the gory details.” His sombre, pain-filled eyes held Angela’s momentarily before he wheeled towards the gauze security door the housekeeper was holding open for him. “I hope you don’t, but if you want to leave, I won’t blame you.”

Angela nodded. “Thank you.” *Do I? I don’t know. Maybe I should get out of here as fast as I can?* Her head was reeling. She couldn’t process the information that was whirling around in her brain.

“It was very hard for Mr B. Not only was he dependent on Julia and fond of her, but he feels somehow responsible because it’s his property. Poor little Pet misses her, too.” The housekeeper closed the door and picked up the kettle, accurately assessing her companion’s state of mind. “I’ll recharge the pot, and we can sit down and have a good talk about it over a cuppa. You look as if you could do with another one.”

“Yes—or something stronger.” Angela tried to smile. “Medicinal only, of course.”

“Of course. It’s too early in the day for the other, but I can’t help you because we’re a dry camp here.”

“Only joking. I don’t drink, as a rule. Although there’s nothing funny about what you’ve told me so far.”

“No, indeed.” Mrs Samson poured the tea and sat down opposite. “It’s extremely frightening. All the more so because we really have no clue who it is, whether they are still here, or whether they were passing through and saw an opportunity. The fact that it happened on this road points to someone local, who, perhaps, knew the station personnel and their routines. That’s why, if you stay, you’re going to have to be extremely careful.”

“What do you think I should do?”

Mrs Samson shook her head. “I can’t make that kind of decision for you. You’ve come a long way, presumably for good reason, and there are people here who need you. Why don’t you hear me out? Then you can make an informed decision for yourself.”

“Yes, good idea. It freaked me out when you said that about the staged motorbike accident, and I stopped thinking.”

“Completely understandable, dear. It’s difficult to assimilate something like that. Most people would feel the same way.”

Angela found the housekeeper’s calm, capable presence and down-to-earth words comforting enough to enable her to continue: “So, when this poor Julia, when she went to see what she could do to help him ...” She shivered.

“It seems he overpowered her, took her into the bushes, where he raped and strangled her. Her car was found burnt out with her body in the boot, on the side of the Barkly Highway, near the old, abandoned mining town of Mary Kathleen—between, Cloncurry and Mount

Isa—so no forensic evidence, unfortunately.”

“Oh, how awful! I can’t find words ... Was there anything on the motorbike to say who?”

“The motorbike had been stolen from Polaris, a cattle station up in the Gulf. The owners had reported it at the end of the dry season the year before. Nothing useful was found on it, and there was nothing to say who had stolen it, so that was a dead end, too. Mr B—Drew—and I have tried to formulate a way to keep everyone safe until the killer is caught.” The far-seeing eyes studied Angela’s expression. “Are you wondering why I haven’t included Sonia in this?”

“No, I can see she is on the edge.”

“And very close to tipping over.”

Angela nodded. She had thought the same. “You don’t call Sonia, Mrs B?”

“Ah, there’s a reason for that. Well, two reasons, really.” The housekeeper gave her an amused glance. “What do you think she would say if I did?”

“I don’t know her well enough ...”

“That’s a fair comment at this point. One day that might change, depending on your decision. So, if you do decide to stay, you won’t go walking anywhere beyond the house yard on your own. If you want to go to town on your day off, two of the men will follow you to the highway in a station vehicle and meet you at the turn-off when you come back.”

“But they won’t ... I mean, how will they ...?”

“No, they won’t have to wait there for you. We have handheld two-way radios, and you will take one with you. When you’re half an hour away from the turn-off on your return, you will radio and tell us you’re coming.”

“It sounds like a lot of trouble.”

“It is, but need I say it?”

“No, I get it.”

“While you’re on the highway, you will not stop for anyone on the side of the road but call it in to the closest police on a channel I will give you. However much you feel you should stop, you must not do it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but it will be difficult.”

“The killer knows that. In fact, he is depending on it.”

Angela's hair rose again. "I get that, but ..."

"But, what?"

"What's to stop him coming here at night, if he's so determined?"

"Sonia breeds cattle dogs. You don't see them because they're in their kennels of a day. At night, they're given the run of the house yard. There's a pack of them, so it would be a brave crim." Mrs Samson rose to her feet. "Why don't you bring in your overnight bag, and I'll show you to your room because you'll need to stay the night, whatever your decision. I can introduce you to Mrs B—Drew's mother, have a talk about what's needed for Pet and Drew, and give you an idea about what your duties will be here. Then, I'll have to get afternoon tea ready. I don't do the main meals—fortunately, for all of us."

Angela appreciated the dry humour as the other continued: "Sonia runs horse treks for tourists in the dry, and we have an inspired camp-oven cook who also doubles as a cordon bleu chef when he's not out impressing the tourists. He's promised to prepare and freeze our meals for when he's out on the camp. A cook, I am not!"

Back out at her Land Cruiser, Angela took a minute to regroup, feeling that she'd just stepped on to the set of a fantasy horror movie. Her initial instinct to drive off, then and there, was countered by a myriad of feelings: a wish to not upset the unusual housekeeper; sympathy for an obviously frazzled woman, a pain-ridden man and a brave little girl; curiosity about this odd, dysfunctional household that, if not for the housekeeper, would fall apart; and overriding it all, the heart-tugging memory of a man she would never see again if she drove away now.

Somehow, she couldn't do it. Taking out her bag and a gift-wrapped parcel, she returned to the house.

CHAPTER THREE

Angela's first glance around her room found it light and welcoming with a walk-in wardrobe and ensuite, soft carpet, luxurious bed and a comfortable chair for reading. That was until she saw that the double doors opening, colonial style, onto the wide verandah were solidly locked with a wooden bar that dropped into brackets mounted on the wall, either side of them. Both this feature and the open windows, gauzed and heavily barred, made her feel slightly claustrophobic.

"Oh, wow! It's like Fort Knox in here!" Angela exchanged glances with her companion. "So, this is because of ...?"

The housekeeper nodded confirmation. "No-one out here locked their doors before this murder, but now all the rooms have been done like this. There are also alarms on all external doors and windows, plus we have Sonia's dogs at night. Mr B, having lost one employee, possibly two, is determined to keep the rest of us safe."

"I'll say! Well, he's obviously a caring man."

"Indeed." She was silent a minute. "I suppose I'd better warn you about the wildlife."

"Wildlife?"

"Frogs in the bathroom. Can you deal?"

"Oh, yes. I don't mind frogs. We have them out of town where I come from, too."

"Oh good. You'd be surprised at how many people find them terrifying."

"It's supposed to be the sign of a healthy environment if you have frogs."

"Is it? Well, I can't say I'm fussed on them, but I'm glad you can see the bigger picture. Now, we'd better find Pet and Mrs B. In case you haven't guessed, she's the other reason I don't call Sonia that."

On the way, the housekeeper showed Angela the layout of the house and the different rooms, ending up in a granny flat at the eastern end. Mrs Brooke and Petrina were still watching the movie, but the older woman rose with difficulty and came towards them. Angela saw that she walked stiffly and felt a pang of sympathy, which must have shown on her face because Mrs Brooke drew her brows together.

"Arthritis. Osteo. It is what it is. I don't like to make a fuss, and I don't want anyone else to, either." The woman replaced her frown with a smile. "You must be Angela. Lovely to

meet you, dear. I do hope you had a good trip, and you're not too tired?"

"Yes, it was good for the most part, thank you, and no, I'm not too tired." Angela sat her parcel on a table near the door. "How do you do, Mrs Brooke?"

"Apart from the obvious, fine. I hope Sammi's been looking after you?"

"Oh, yes, thank you. Perfectly."

"Excellent."

"Angela has tested out her nursing skills today, already." Mrs Samson's eyes held the other's. "John had the misfortune to come off his motorbike, and she found him."

"Did she?" Mrs Brooke spoke slowly, looking as if she were trying to read their message. "How ... disturbing. Will he be all right?"

"It seems so, but I'll leave Angela to tell you while I make your smoko."

Mrs Brooke listened intently while Angela told her story. At the end, she made a gesture. "All I can say is that he is extremely lucky you came along when you did. I do hope his ankle isn't broken. John is a very reliable man, and we depend on him." She made a rapid change of subject. "While you're here, can you take a look at Pet? She's got some kind of a rash. Sammi put some calamine on it, but it hasn't seemed to do any good." Mrs Brooke looked around and raised her voice. "Pet, darling, put the video on pause and come over here. I want you to show Nurse Angela your tummy."

"kay, Nanna." The little girl obeyed and waddled over. "It's not very interesting."

"What isn't, Pet? Your tummy or the movie?"

"The movie, a course, Nanna."

"Never mind. We'll find a better one after smoko." Mrs Brooke shared an indulgent smile with her guest as she wrestled with her granddaughter's buttons. "Overalls are awful things for looking at tummies, aren't they?"

"Yes, but they help my pants stay on. Nurse Ang'la are you going to give me 'jections when it's time?"

"I think so. Do you want me to?"

"Depends. Sammi gives them to me now. Can you do it without hurting me?"

"Does Sammi hurt you?"

"Not much. She's pretty good. She said she used to be a nurse a long time ago."

"If I can do as well as Sammi, will that be all right?"

“Sure. Mummy can’t do it. She says she can only give needles to horses. Nanna says it’s not in her remit because she used to be a schoolteacher and chalk’s her thing. Nanna’s *my* teacher, too. Poor Daddy, he’s frightened of needles and can’t even watch. So, it’s either you or Sammi.”

“That’s a big conversation for a little girl.”

“Daddy!” Petrina greeted her father’s appearance with acclaim. “Have you come for smoko? Sammi’s just gone to get it.” Her smile was apologetic. “But we’re not ready, yet. You have to go out while Nurse Ang’la looks at my tummy.”

“Oh, do I?” A grin lightened his sombre expression as he turned to wheel onto the verandah. “Call me when you’re ready, then.”

“‘kay, Daddy.” Petrina’s eyes went from him to the package on the table and widened. “Nurse Ang’la, did you bring me a present?”

“I did.” Angela retrieved the parcel and handed it over. “Would you like to open it?”

The two adults watched the little girl carefully take off the wrapping paper without tearing it and meticulously fold it before picking up the doll to cuddle it.

“It’s a dolly! Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Have you noticed she’s a special dolly?”

“She’s a di’betic, like me!” Petrina held up the accessories that Angela had packed with the doll. “What’s her name?”

“What would you like to call her?”

“Um ... Matilda, like the little girl in the movie Nanna and I watched yesterday. Do you want to see my tummy? It’s starting to itch again.”

“Is it? You’d better show it to me, then. Okay, Matilda, let’s see your tummy, too.”

After the tummy inspections, where Angela applied some more calamine and advised the use of a suitable oral antihistamine provided by Mrs Brooke, Mrs Samson returned with afternoon tea on a trolley, followed by Drew in his wheelchair.

“All good in here, now? It better be! I’m dying for a jar.”

“All good, Daddy. This is Matilda.” Petrina put the doll in his lap. “Nurse Ang’la gave her to me. Isn’t she beautiful?”

“She is, indeed, sweetheart.” He addressed the housekeeper. “Is Sonia coming in?”

Mrs Samson poured his tea and put a plate of biscuits and buttered fruit loaf within

reach. “No, she’s still watering, and then she’s going back to the horses. I took her a coffee and, she says she’ll talk to Angela at dinner.”

Mrs Brooke creased her brow. “Sonia works too hard.”

“You mean, because I’m not pulling my weight?” Her son gave her a challenging look that she had no trouble returning.

“I don’t mean anything of the kind, and you know it.”

Drew gave a reluctant grin. “I know, Mum, I know. Now, take that schoolteacher expression off your face. We don’t want to drive our nurse away before she’s even stayed a night.”

Drew appeared to take his own advice seriously, changing before her eyes from the angry, frustrated man Angela had found on her arrival, to an amicable, good-humoured host, chatting and laughing with them and encouraging his daughter’s opinions—obviously enjoying her fresh view of the world.

Mrs Brooke and Mrs Samson glanced around the table, meeting each other’s eyes in amazement. Mrs Brooke nodded once and turned impulsively to Angela. “Oh, I do hope you’ll stay, dear! Look how happy you’ve made us.”

Should I stay? Shouldn’t I weigh it up overnight before deciding? In the deepening silence, Angela found four pairs of eyes fixed on her: two pairs showing anxiety, one pair inscrutable, one pair so compelling that she couldn’t resist. She heard her own voice as if it belonged to someone else. “Of course I’ll stay. With a welcome like this, how could I not?” As she smiled into them, she saw that three pairs of eyes held the same expression—relief.

Joy shone from the fourth. “Nurse Ang’la, I’m so-o-o happy! Matilda really wants you to stay, too.”

When Petrina had taken her father to the schoolroom to look at her latest paintings, the others lingered over their tea. Mrs Brooke leant forward and patted the nurse’s hand. “I’m thrilled, too, dear. Do you know that I haven’t seen Drew laugh like that since before his accident? It truly is a miracle. You—are a miracle.”

“I, well, thank you.”

“And we promise to keep you safe. Don’t we, Sammi?”

“We’ll do our level best, certainly.”

“About the missing housekeeper ...” Angela looked from one to the other.

“Ah, my predecessor, Erica Phillips. She hadn’t been here long, had she, Mrs B?”

“No, she’d just replaced our beloved Molly who retired to the coast after twenty years with us. So, we didn’t know her well.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing from the family’s point of view, but not knowing her makes it difficult to predict her movements.” Mrs Samson paused. “She went to Cloncurry for groceries and never came back. Normally, they come on the mail truck, but she wanted some extras this day, or so she said.”

“When did she go missing?”

“The same day Julia was murdered: the fifth of January. They both went off in the morning. Julia was murdered on her way back, but no trace of Erica Phillips or her car has ever been found, and her children haven’t heard from her since.”

“The thing is,” contributed Mrs Brooke, “Erica’s not a pretty little young thing like you and Julia. She’s a big woman of fifty-two ... I guess that’s not PC to say that, but it’s a terrible worry that she went missing on the same day.”

“Could’ve been collateral damage if she came along at the wrong moment.” The housekeeper rubbed the bridge of her nose. “On the other hand, her disappearance may be completely unconnected, and she may still be alive. People disappear for all kinds of reasons.”

“So many questions ...” The older lady looked troubled.

“And so far, no answers.” Mrs Samson rose and began to stack the tea things on the trolley. “Why don’t you bring Angela up to speed with her patients while I wash up and prepare the vegetables for Bernard? I believe it’s osso bucco tonight.”

§

Over at the quarters, the men were sprawled around under a shady tree near an outdoor fireplace. Leo, the station mechanic, glanced at Ryan, the stable manager. “Where’s the Dragon Lady?”

“Up at the homestead.”

“What? Playing nurse to the cripples? Don’t give me that!”

“Fat chance! She’s watering the veggie garden. Anyway, they’ve got a new nurse now.”

“I heard. Wonder how long she’ll last before someone tops her?”

“Ryan, Leo.” The cook glared at both men. “That’s enough of that sort of talk.”

Since Bernard had the power to make them extremely uncomfortable, they mumbled an almost inaudible apology. The three jackaroos, Jason, Will and Tim, looked at them and then each other, knowing better than to comment.

Leo broke the awkward silence. "When's the next bunch of terrorists due to arrive?"

The men turned to Bernard in expectant silence.

"Friday."

"When's the missus taking them out?"

"Friday."

"Hmph." Leo snorted. "Suckers. How the hell do we put up with them?"

Ryan grinned. "Look on the bright side, we've got till ——"

"Friday!" chorused the men. "Yeah, we got it."

"Make the most of it." Leo seemed struck. "Gotta hand it to the missus, though. She keeps the money coming in with her silly ideas. Thought the station would go under when the boss went down for the count."

"You're like a bunch of old women." The cook showed his impatience. "Cut out the gossiping and get back to work!"

"Get ready for the onslaught." The mechanic uncoiled his lithe frame. "No rest for the wicked."

"You're right there." Once Jason started, he couldn't seem to stop. "It was like Brisbane Central here this morning, everybody coming and going. Leo nearly hit me going one way and Bernie the other. Before that, Joe nearly knocked me off my bike on the track to number one bore. Talk about dangerous driving! No wonder poor old John copped it. Anyone hear how he is? Where is Joe?" He looked around. "Anybody seen him? No?" The jackaroo, apparently gaining confidence, looked an accusation at the cook and the station mechanic. "And where were you two going like bats out of hell, eh? Bernie?"

The rest of the men held their breath, but the cook answered more amiably than they would have believed. "I had a couple of hours off this morning to paint. I wanted to catch the light, and I forgot my brushes, not that it's any of your business, Jase. You should watch where you're going when you're crossing the road."

"You were looking very cranky!"

"Well, you did a stupid thing."

“What about you, Leo? Where were you going at hell’s own pace?”

“Back to the workshop to get a wrench that some dipstick left out of the toolkit. Why?”

“You had the filthiest look on your face.”

“So would you if you had to strip down a pump without the right tool, then make a round trip of fifty kays to find it. What were you doing out there, anyway?”

“The water run.”

“I thought John was doing that.”

“He told me to do it.”

An arrested expression crossed Leo’s face. “What was he doing, then?”

The jackaroo shrugged. “Dunno.”

“Mine of information, aren’t you?” Leo grabbed Jason by the shoulders and gave him a shake. “Now, get back to work, you little whippersnapper. Like Bernie said, you did a stupid thing. No wonder we nearly cleaned you up. Enough to make a saint look cranky.” He called after the cook. “You got a minute, Bernie?”

“Only a little one; I’ve got to make dinner.” He looked closely at the other. “What’s up?”

“What if it’s John?” Leo spoke in a hushed voice after the rest of the men were out of earshot. “What if he’s the one?”

“Come again?”

“What if John’s the murderer?”

“Nah, mate!” Bernard laughed. “You’ve got the bull by the tail with that one.”

“That’s what I thought, too, when I first heard it.”

“Where’d you hear it?”

“Can’t tell you. It was told to me in confidence.”

“Well, there you go! If they’re not prepared to give their name ...?”

“No, but listen, it’s not as silly as it sounds.”

“How so?”

“You know how the cops said it was a staged motorbike accident the day the other little nurse bought it? Well, what if this one was meant to be the same and something went

wrong?”

“What do you mean? What could’ve gone wrong?”

“I dunno, do I? It just struck me. Too similar. What with the new nurse turning up and all. Too much of a coincidence.”

“Are you kidding me?” Bernard gazed at him with narrowed eyes. “John wasn’t even here the day Julia was murdered.”

“Yeah, he was. He came when the boss had his accident, remember?”

“I know that, but he was away at Mount Isa when it happened, I seem to recall.”

“How do you know? You’ve only got his word for it.”

“Well ...” The cook expelled a breath. “Nah, not John. Like I said, you’re barking up the wrong tree. I’d sooner believe it of Joe. There’s something about him I don’t like.”

“Yeah, loves himself a bit too much, thinks he’s God’s gift, but otherwise harmless, I reckon. Where is he, by the way?”

“The missus sent him over to the neighbour’s to try out some horses she’s thinking of buying for her tourist operation. He’s been gone most of the day. Won’t be back before nightfall, I’d say.”

“Probably going to need a cushion to sit on to eat his dinner tonight, poor bugger.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not going to get one from me. Sorry, have to go.”

§

Angela spent the rest of the afternoon with Mrs Brooke, getting acquainted with her duties as nurse to Drew and Petrina, after the little girl had been settled in front of a riveting movie with her new doll.

The older woman stood back and looked her over with a smile. “You know, dear, you look so young. Hardly old enough to be a qualified nurse.”

“I can assure you that I am.”

“Oh, I know, I know, Drew showed me the resume you sent—most impressive! Please don’t take it amiss. It was a compliment, really.” She laughed. “The older I get, the younger people look.”

“Well, I am twenty-seven, but I do still have to show my licence if I go to a club, so I understand where you’re coming from.”

Mrs Brooke shook her head. “I’m afraid there won’t be much chance for clubbing out here, dear. You do understand that, don’t you?”

“Of course.” Angela smiled. “Don’t worry, I won’t miss it.” She wasn’t going to say how boring and predictable the club scene had become. How she’d got sick of fending off amorous drunks. How she’d longed for a change of scenery, both in her work and her restricted social life—shift work had taken care of that. Somehow, she was always tired, never able to catch up on sleep and feel truly rested, except in her holidays.

“This is your clinic.” Mrs Brooke led the way into a large room, more like a gym than a clinic, with parallel bars, weights, a massage table and various pieces of equipment designed for upper-body work. She stopped at a computer desk and reached into a drawer. “Here are Julia’s notes for her patients’ exercise regimes and physiotherapy treatments.”

Angela took the books almost reverently, amazed at the range of emotions that washed over her as she touched them. Opening the one with Petrina’s name on the cover, she began to read the neat handwriting, realising, at once, that her predecessor had been thorough and meticulous; absorbed in her patient’s needs; recording each tiny step forward with a joy that Angela could sense, even though the wording remained professional. Reading Drew’s notes, she felt the same. *I would’ve liked this girl. You were some nurse, Julia.* Regret that they would never meet in this life flooded her mind, almost choking her.

“What’s the matter, dear?”

“I don’t know, I ...”

The woman nodded. “You feel her presence, don’t you? I know I do. I think you must be psychic, like me.”

“I think it’s just that ... handling her notebooks and reading her words has brought it home to me about why I’m here.”

“If you say so, dear. But keep an open mind, won’t you? Just in case she wants to tell you something. It could be important.” Mrs Brooke changed the subject and took her to see the schoolroom. “This is where Pet and I spend our mornings after her physio session. We have lessons with School of the Air and some of our own. It’s good for Pet to talk with the teacher and other children. She has a talent for painting. I try to foster that.”

Angela studied the paintings and drawings pinned on a large noticeboard, frankly amazed at the talent on display. The subjects were what she would expect from a six-year-old, but Petrina’s eye for design, use of colour and her ability to keep each one separate within the lines was well above her age level. The drawings, mainly depicting horses and dogs, were

incredibly well executed. “She’s very good. Amazing for her age, I think.”

“Oh, yes. And not just her age, either. Few people, at any age, have the ability to use colour to the effect that she does. Bernard, our cook, has given her lessons. He’s a talented artist, and even he’s impressed. Have you unpacked, dear?”

“No, not yet.”

“Of course, you were waiting to see ... Well, you go and do that. Dinner is at six o’clock, but I’d like you to meet us in the dining room at a quarter to six, so you can give Pet her injection.” The woman smiled. “Actually, it’s an insulin pen. We keep one in the right-hand drawer of the sideboard in the dining room, along with the test kit, and the unopened ones in the little fridge in the clinic. Now, you go along. And thank you so much for having the courage to stay.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Angela was feeling hungry by the time she entered the dining room, just before a quarter to six. It was spacious; painted in light colours, like all the rooms in the house; and furnished with a solid dark-oak dining table and chairs. An imposing matching sideboard took up most of one wall with a bain-marie on wheels opposite, next to the door. The double doors and windows opening onto the verandah were barred in the same manner as the ones in Angela's room.

"Come in, grab some tucker and sit down." Drew, at the head of the table, gestured first to the bain-marie, then to a chair on his right.

Angela felt a bit taken aback when she saw that he was already eating.

Mrs Brooke, sitting next to her granddaughter, looked up from her plate and smiled. "You found your way then, dear?"

Angela's well-tuned ear picked up what she thought was slight sarcasm—delivered very gently. Before she could ponder on its significance, Petrina took her attention.

"It's a nice dinner, Nurse Ang'la. But you didn't give me my 'jection."

"Oh!" Angela looked at her wrist. "My watch must have stopped. I thought it was only a quarter to six. I'm sorry."

"It's 'kay. Sammi gave it to me."

"And it's now ten *past* six." Mrs Brooke smiled again and spoke very kindly. "I'm sure you understand how important it is for a diabetic to be *on time* with meals?" She eyed Angela's mortification with gentle malice, addressing her son before the nurse could reply. "Where is Sammi? Isn't she eating with us tonight?"

"In my office. She's waiting on a call and has to make some others, so I told her to take a tray and eat in there."

"Do we know how John is?" The older woman seemed genuinely concerned.

"Yeah, I rang the hospital earlier: slight concussion and whiplash, three stitches in his head and a severely sprained ankle. He's gotten off lightly, considering."

"Did he say what happened?"

Petrina entered the conversation: "He fell off his mo'bike, Nanna."

“Motorbike.”

“Motabike.”

Mrs Brooke accepted her granddaughter’s effort. “Yes, darling. I am wondering why it happened at all?”

Drew shook his head. “He doesn’t remember.”

“Why not, Daddy? I always r’member when I fall down, ’specially if I hurt myself.”

Angela’s appetite had vanished at the shock revelation of a hidden side to the other woman’s character, but the mouth-watering aromas wafting from the bain-marie revived it enough to make her feel able to eat. Mastering her discomfort, she picked up a plate, served herself and sat down at the table, grateful for Petrina’s artless chatter and Drew’s indulgent replies to cover her own silence. *Have I made a mistake in agreeing to stay, after all? I didn’t bargain for a dynamic like that. She fooled me, properly.* Angela didn’t waste time wondering if she’d been mistaken in what she’d heard. *One thing about being a nurse, you meet and have to deal with all kinds of people. The sooner you work out how they operate, the better time you have.*

§

Closing the office door behind her, Detective Briggs sat her tray on the big oak desk and dropped into its comfortable swivel chair with a sigh. She glanced around the huge room, approving the way it was furnished with two antique desks—one set up for her employer’s wheelchair with an expensive-looking computer, scanner and printer. Aerial photos and station maps covered the walls above deep wooden filing cabinets, a display case with fossilised fish, polished stones and petrified wood. A similar display case held ribbons and trophies won for campdrafting by her employers in years past, with a smallish round table and chairs in front of it.

The wall-mounted UHF radio crackled into life with static, and she got up to adjust the knob. *I’m getting too old for this*, she thought, not for the first time. *Every time I try to retire, it doesn’t work out. Last year we had the drug murders and the Ice Maiden. Now we’ve got the Nurse Killer. Where’s it all going to end? Catching the murderer, I hope!* The uncertainty in the last thought was the only one out of character for the brilliant undercover detective who had never failed to catch her crim.

Now waiting on a call from her husband to bring her up to speed on the latest details

of the search for both the killer and the missing woman, she knew in her heart that he would have nothing new or helpful to report. *Such a worrying case: a cunning killer, no leads. And he's here! I know, in my bones, he's here somewhere. Just waiting for an opportunity ...* Concentrating on what little she knew of the murderer, she tried to picture him, get into his mind, find out where he was, what he would do next ——

The phone rang, jerking her out of her reverie to snatch up the receiver. “Hello, Riles. What have you got for me?”

“Well, that’s a nice greeting, I must say!”

“I know. You’ll have to take a raincheck on the niceties. It’s a worrying case.”

“You’re telling me!”

“So, that means you’ve got nothing new? I thought that would be the story.”

“Well, it’s not for the want of trying—I can tell you that.”

“I know.” She listened while he enumerated the measures that had been taken, the research that was being done, interrupting: “I’ve just had a thought! What if we’re approaching this from the wrong angle?”

“Go on. I’m listening.”

“We’ve been searching for other murders with similar MOs and haven’t found one, making us think he’s a first-time killer or came from another state and moved on, but after what’s happened to John ... And we’ve still got the missing housekeeper to worry about.”

“What do you have in mind, Briggsy?”

“What if he *is* a local? What if he’s only killed outside of this state before?”

“Not wanting to dirty his nest, you mean? You might be onto something there.”

“Look, can you check any similar murders in other states? Particularly the southern ones? If it’s a station worker, they would’ve happened ——”

“In the wet when they don’t do stockwork. I get it. Well, summer down south. Not that we’ve had too many wet seasons in the last few years, either.”

“And listen, I really need some help in the house to keep an eye on the inmates. Can you send a good strong policewoman? The housemaid gave her notice after the murder and hasn’t been replaced for fear that ——”

“Hang on a minute while I look at who’s available ... Can’t do a policewoman, sorry. Only got one, and she’s needed here.”

“Well, send a man, then. We have to have someone! Surely, you know one that can do the washing and wield a vacuum cleaner?”

“Yep, I do. I know just the man! I’ll send him out first thing in the morning.”

“That’s great. How’s my garden?”

“I thought you’d never ask!”

After a few more minutes of conversation, Detective Briggs ended the call and began to eat her dinner, deep in thought.

§

Sonia rushed into the dining room a short while after Mrs Brooke had taken Petrina off for her bath and bed. “Sorry I’m late.” She glanced at her husband as she picked up a plate and went to serve herself from the bain-marie. “It’s been a difficult day, what with one thing and another.”

“Try and forget about it, Sonia. It’s over now. When don’t you have a difficult day?”

“Good point. Everything’s difficult at the moment.”

“Tell me about it!”

“Sorry,” she said, shooting him another glance before sitting down beside Angela. “Shop talk. And how about you? I know you had a bad start; how has your day ended?”

“Much better, thanks, Mrs Brooke.”

“Uh-uh.” Sonia’s eyes flashed. “Drew’s mother is Mrs Brooke, and we only need *one* of them!”

Angela had a lot more understanding of this outburst than she might have done before her own experience at the dinner table but, of necessity, remained silent.

“Sonia, please!” Drew slammed down his cup and wheeled towards the door. “I’ll be in the lounge room watching TV. Try not to let your dislike of my mother colour your conversation too much.”

Sonia watched her husband leave the room, a defensive expression on her face, before turning to Angela. “She’s a good woman—has been amazing with Pet. We just don’t get on. She makes me feel as if I’m not good enough. Sorry, my problem, not yours.” Her expression changed to eager interest. “Now, tell me: are you going to stay with us?”

“I am.”

“Oh, thank you! My day just got a lot better! Actually, it got a lot better just before I came in, or I wouldn’t be here now.”

“Oh?”

“One of the horses had a touch of colic, and I had to walk him, not let him lie down, that sort of thing. It’s really hard out here with the vet so far away, but thankfully, he got over it and is now eating happily in his stable.”

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear that!”

“I love horses. They’re the only part of my world that keeps me sane. Do you like horses? Can you ride?”

“I love horses, too. We couldn’t keep one, but I learnt at a riding school and used to ride regularly until I started work. I’ve only had a few rides since.”

“You’ll have to come with us on one of our treks. I’ll arrange it. Have you finished? Let’s take our tea into the lounge.”

Drew welcomed them with a smile, seeming to have regretted his impatience at dinner and ready to take an interest in his wife’s day. He expressed sympathy over the horse’s illness, asked which one it was and generally behaved a whole lot better than he had earlier.

By the end of the evening, Angela learnt that Petrina had two older brothers, Ben and Sam, aged fifteen and seventeen, away at boarding school, both healthy and working hard.

Drew took over the story. “They’re good boys. Sonia and I are making them get an education and some sort of profession before they decide whether or not they want to come back here and run Wyrangi. It’s a big station—plenty of room for two.” He looked at Angela. “Ready to start your job?”

“Of course. You need help to go to bed?”

“Normally, we can manage that part between us, Sonia and I. But I have some pressure sores that Sammi says need more expertise than she’s capable of. I’d be grateful if you’d take a look.”

“Sure. I’ll just get my bag. Won’t be long.”

As Angela had seen earlier, Drew’s room was equipped with a hospital bed and a lift-chair running on rails around the ceiling to a raised bath in an alcove. Everything that was needed to make life easier for him and his carers was provided here.

“I have a separate bedroom.” Sonia, defensive again, was watching her survey the room. “Drew has nightmares, and I can’t function without enough sleep.”

The pressure sores were a worry, and by the time Angela finished treating them and had made her patient as comfortable as she could, she was ready for bed, herself.

Closing her door, Angela found the tension seeping out of her. *Funny*, she thought. *I didn't realise how tense I was until just now when I felt I could unwind.* Under a good warm shower, she relaxed even more and went to sleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Angela's sleep was restless. In the early hours, she awoke from a nightmare in which she stopped her car near a fallen motorbike and got out to help an accident victim. It was John, but when she went to staunch the bleeding from his head wound, he turned into someone else and reached up to grip his hands around her throat. She was choking and jerked out of sleep, knowing she was dead, but instead of dying, had woken up. Angela sat up, breathing as if she'd run a marathon, and it took some time for her to settle down. She'd heard that if you dream that you die and don't wake up, then you *do* die. *That's silly*, she thought. *How would anyone know? No-one comes back to tell us.*

After a while, she went back to sleep, only to dream of a beautiful young woman. The young woman had long red-gold hair put up in two neat braids and large green eyes under delicate eyebrows. She was small and slim, looking both beautiful and professional in her uniform. She seemed to be calling to Angela, trying to tell her something. Angela just felt that she was about to find out what it was when she leapt up to the sound of her alarm. *Damn! I forgot I set it an hour early yesterday to get a head start.* Since it was still dark, Angela tried to go back to sleep, but the girl she'd been dreaming of haunted her mind to the extent that she rose, dressed and went out into the hall.

There was a light in the kitchen, so she made her way along the dimly lit passage and looked in. A tall dark-haired man in his late thirties with intense ebony eyes was about to sit down at the table. His face creased into a smile. "Hullo, Nurse. Just having a cuppa. Would you like one?"

"Thanks, I'd love one."

"Bernard. May I call you Angela?"

"Of course, please do."

He poured her tea, offered buttered toast, gesturing to the milk and sugar, before he sat down opposite. "I'm the station cook. Used to be a chef in a big restaurant in Townsville, but after ten years, the stress got too much for me—and the humidity. I like it dry but not too cold. I've been at Wyrangi for about six years now, going on seven. Gets a bit dodgy in the wet, but otherwise, much more laidback this side of the divide. And I've got a good setup here."

“You have!” Angela had been impressed by the professionally equipped kitchen and huge walk-in pantry with its coldroom and massive freezer.

“Makes the cooking easier. *And* we get a bit of entertainment with the tourists or ‘terrorists’ as we like to call them. You’ve heard about them?”

“Yes. Sonia mentioned them last night.”

“Now, that’s a lady with a big heart. She’s only little but a spitfire. Got all the men terrified.” He grinned. “Not really, but she keeps them all up to the mark.”

“It’s not like you to gossip, Bernard.” Mrs Samson came in silently and smiled at Angela as she poured herself a cup of tea. “Not like you, at all.”

“Hullo, Sammi. No, it isn’t, is it? Just explaining to the little nurse here what’s what.”

“I’m sure she’ll find out soon enough. Comfortable night, dear?”

“Yes, yes, thank you.” There was just enough hesitation in Angela’s reply for two pairs of piercing eyes to focus on her, momentarily. A sudden buzz of conversation distracted her. “I can hear voices?”

Mrs Samson nodded. “The men’s dining room. Just off the verandah.”

The cook leapt up, opened the back door and roared. “Can it, you lot.” He sat back down in the ensuing silence.

“What’s on the agenda this morning, Bernard?” Mrs Samson took a sip of her tea, accepting the toast Angela passed her with a word of thanks.

“I’ll clear up after the men when they’ve finished their breakfast. The family’s breakfast is all set up in the dining room. The missus has had hers and gone, as per usual. I’m baking bread today, so I’ll get you to clear up after them, if you will? Other than that, the morning’s yours ...”

“Okay. That sounds doable.” The housekeeper turned to Angela. “I’d like to accompany you when you work with Pet this morning, if that suits you? And Drew, too. Just for today. I’ve been trying to manage them as best I can, but it’s many years since I did my training.” The glassy eyes were apologetic, dismissing any kind of worry on Angela’s part that Mrs Samson might be checking up on her.

“That’s fine by me. In fact, it might help for Pet to have someone familiar with her until she gets used to me.”

“My thoughts exactly, dear. Mrs Brooke may be a wonderful teacher, but she is *not* a nurse.”

Angela read the message in the green-gold orbs and was grateful. Mrs Samson might not have been here very long, but she seemed to have everybody sussed.

The strange eyes began to twinkle. “We should go to the dining room. Pet will be along soon, and you can give her insulin injection. Mrs B told you where we keep it?”

“Yes. Um ... you heard about me being late to dinner, I suppose?”

The housekeeper looked amused. “I hear everything, dear.”

“Oh, of course, you know all about it! You gave Pet her injection.”

“That’s right, but I wouldn’t worry. Look at it this way, you know something you didn’t know before, and that information could be valuable. Forewarned is definitely forearmed.”

“Yes, I see. Thank you.” Angela hesitated. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course. You can say anything to me.”

“Why doesn’t Sonia obey the rule about going around alone?”

“You would have to ask her that, but I wouldn’t advise it. I think when you get to know her a little better, you’ll be able to draw your own conclusions.”

“Do you think she could be in danger?”

“I do. She’s quite amenable to the rules for everyone else but not for herself. Drew has tried to make her see reason, without success. I’ve also tried, to no avail. Most of the day, she has at least some of the men with her, but she goes out before daylight, her movements are predictable and there are times when she could be easily isolated, even though she does have her dogs with her, walking to and from the house. If the killer is around, we can only hope she doesn’t excite his interest.”

§

Over at the horse complex, Sonia was raking out a stable while Joe stood leaning against the wall, chewing on a straw and watching her work. He’d given her his verdict on the neighbour’s horses, received her short response, but elected to stay where he was.

“What are you still hanging around for?” Sonia’s hazel eyes glittered between narrowed lids. “Haven’t you got something to do?”

“Done it. Want me to do that for you?”

“No thanks. I’m nearly finished.”

“You’re a good-looking woman, you know.”

Sonia stiffened.

“Pity about the boss being a cripple. If you ever want a real man, you know who to come to.”

“Listen, you!” Sonia moved with the speed of lightning, thrust the rake handle across his throat to hold him against the wall and brought up her knee, hard. “If I wanted a real man, you’re the last one I’d choose! Even like he is, my husband is ten times the man you’ll ever be. Understand?” She gave one last shove on the handle and stepped back as he dropped to the ground, writhing and gagging. “What’s the matter, lover boy? Lost your mojo?” For a moment, she watched him with merciless eyes. “Ry-an!”

“Yeah, Missus?”

“Get this creep out of my sight and tell him to stay out of it because if I see him again, I’ll sack him. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yeah, Missus. Crystal.” Respectfully waiting until she walked away, the horseman bent down to help the other to his feet. “Come on, you. Don’t you know better than to make a pass at our missus? Why the hell do you think we call her the Dragon Lady behind her back?”

§

“I can dress myself if I don’t wear overalls.” Petrina came into the dining room with her father. “So, I’m not wearing them any more.”

“That’s a very forceful statement, Pet.” Drew acknowledged Angela and the housekeeper with a smile and a nod. “What are you going to do with them? Throw them out?”

“No, Nanna said I can give them to the poor.” She greeted Angela and Mrs Samson. “But I don’t know where they live, do you, Sammi?”

“Hmm, we might find someone in Cloncurry who would be glad of them. What was done with the clothes you’ve grown out of?”

“Nothing, they’re still in my wardrobe.”

“Well, I know what we’re going to do after breakfast on our way to the clinic.” The housekeeper’s expressive eyes were filled with empathy. “Then we might make another little girl very happy. Would you like that?”

Petrina nodded, went to the drawer in the sideboard to hand Angela the test kit and the

pen. With the insulin safely delivered and the required time elapsed, the little girl sat up at the table and announced she was starving. Sammi brought her breakfast, exchanged a few words with her father and served herself some scrambled eggs from the bain-marie.

Angela poured a cup of coffee and sat next to Drew. “How is Mrs Brooke this morning? I notice she’s not here.”

“Mum never comes to breakfast. She has a kitchenette in her unit. Makes herself tea and toast to have with her meds, then goes back to bed until they kick in. She gets up while Pet’s having her physio, to be ready for her in the schoolroom.”

Angela hoped her relief wasn’t noticeable. It looked like the morning meal would be peaceful and free from scrutiny, unlike the others.

In the clinic, Petrina was showing off her prowess with her exercises. When she started on the small handheld weights, she accompanied the varied routine with a little song.

“What is that song? It’s lovely.”

“It’s called *Frère Jacques*. Nurse Julia taught it to me. She said it’s a French children’s song that makes it easier to do the weights.”

“And does it?”

“Yes.” The little girl thought a minute. “She was pretty, wasn’t she, Sammi?”

“She was. Quite beautiful.”

“I thought you didn’t ... weren’t ...”

“I wasn’t. Pet has a photo of them together. Where is it, dear?”

“In the drawer. I’ll get it.”

Angela was silent with shock as she took in the neatly braided red-gold hair and the face she’d dreamt of last night beside the sweet, trusting one of the little girl, holding up the photo.

“What’s the matter, dear? Have you seen her before?”

“No, no. How could I?” Embarrassed about the lie, Angela tried to excuse it to herself. *How could I say I saw her in a dream? I just can’t.* “She was beautiful, wasn’t she?”

“She was.” Mrs Samson spoke dryly. Angela couldn’t shake the feeling that the housekeeper knew she hadn’t answered truthfully.

“Nurse Julia looked a lot like you, Nurse Ang’la, except she had red hair ’stead of blonde and green eyes ’stead of blue.” Petrina glanced from the photo to Angela before

handing it to the housekeeper. “Don’t you think so, Sammi?”

“Very much so, dear. Now, why don’t we show Nurse Angela how well you can march in the bars?”

After Petrina’s session, the housekeeper took her to the schoolroom while Angela tidied up.

A tall, thin man, in his early thirties, poked his head around the door. “Hullo, I’m the new housemaid. Bernard said I’d find Sammi here?”

“Oh, she’s in the schoolroom. I’ll show you.”

Mrs Samson came out into the hall as they arrived. Her bulbous eyes lit up. “Smithy! You’re just the man I need.” She introduced him to Angela and told her she’d be right back with Drew. “Come with me, Smithy. What do you fancy first? A spot of washing? Or a waltz with the Hoover?”

Angela didn’t hear the answer but assumed that Drew’s policy of taking care of those in his employ included not exposing another young female to possible attack. *I wonder why they didn’t get a male nurse, considering the situation? Maybe, I’ll get a chance to ask him when he comes for his massage.*

Mrs Samson came back to the clinic with Drew, whom she’d found in his office in front of the computer. He acknowledged Angela, including her in his conversation with the housekeeper: “That was a good idea of yours to get a houseman instead of a maid, Sammi. Good thinking, wasn’t it, Nurse?”

Angela nodded. “Yes, it was. Thank you, Sammi.”

“I can’t take the credit. It was a case of who was available. But I think it works to our advantage. Fortunately, Smithy is house-trained.”

Angela thought it an odd comment, but Drew looked relieved. “Another one, is he? That’s a comfort.”

“One less young female to worry about.”

Now’s my chance, Angela thought. “I don’t understand. You could have got a male nurse instead of me, you know.”

“Well ...” He glanced at the housekeeper. “For me, yes, it would have been fine, but Pet’s just a little girl. She was very attached to Julia, and I feel that she needs a woman’s touch.” He made a moue. “Her mother is rarely in the house. I know Mum’s there for her, which is great ...”

“But you think she’ll benefit from having someone younger here, as well?” prompted the housekeeper.

“Yeah. That’s it, in a nutshell.”

“I think so, too.” Mrs Samson pulled down the grab handle for him to hoist himself onto the massage table. “I think she’s already benefiting.”

“That’s nice of you to say so.” Angela looked mystified. “But I don’t know how.”

“Less anxious,” said the housekeeper. “Wouldn’t you say so, Mr B?”

“Now you come to mention it, I did notice at breakfast that Pet was much more laidback than she’s been since ...”

Drew chatted while they massaged his legs and did his flexion exercises. Angela found that he spent a lot of time at his computer doing the station books, organising the tourists’ itinerary, authorising the necessary purchases.

“We have our own fuel tanks here. Make sure you fill up from either the diesel or the petrol pump whenever you need fuel.”

He stopped talking while he did his upper-body workouts, and Angela was quick to realise that he took them extremely seriously, working himself almost to the point of exhaustion. “It helps me forget I’m useless.”

§

At lunch, Sonia surprised her family by joining them when they were almost finished. She rushed into the dining room, in what Angela soon began to realise was her usual style, but instead of looking worried, she seemed agitated, angry.

“You never come to lunch, Mummy. Are you cross?”

“No, darling. Well, yes, but not at you.” Sonia strode across to hug her daughter and drop a kiss on her curls. “Never at you.”

Drew eyed his wife. “What’s up, Sonia? Spit it out.”

“Drew, really! How am I supposed to teach ——”

“Not now, Mum. Please!”

Mrs Brooke began to rise, her face rigid. “Come on, Pet. I think it’s time we left.”

“But, Nanna, I haven’t finished my san’wiches yet.”

“Save yourself the problem!” Sonia stormed out, ran into the office and slammed the door.

“Mum!” Her son sighed. “Now look what you’ve done. Don’t trouble yourself to get up. Let Pet finish her lunch. I’ll go.”

As he wheeled out the door, his mother glanced at Angela. “You’d better go with him. Surely, you’ve got something in your medical bag to combat hysterical turns?” Unwinking eyes held hers.

“I, um, I don’t think ...” Angela made a silent appeal to the housekeeper.

“Mrs B ...” The green-gold orbs compelled. “There’s only one thing Sonia needs, and you won’t find it in any medical bag.”

“What, Sammi?” The sweet little face was upturned, expectant. “What does Mummy need?”

“Understanding, Pet.”

“Nurse Ang’la, do you have un’standing?”

“I hope so, Pet.”

“Then, Mummy needs you.”

Mrs Samson took the situation in hand. “We’ll let Daddy talk to her first. Then, Nurse Angela can take in a tray with Mummy’s lunch and some coffee for both. How does that sound?”

In the office, Drew was listening to his wife’s woes, letting her talk herself out without commenting, until she mentioned Joe. “What about him?”

“He’s disappeared, walked off and gone. Right when we need every hand we’ve got, with John away.”

“What happened?” He sat back and sighed.

“I had words with him this morning.”

“You mean, he tried to make a pass at you?”

She nodded.

“Then, it wasn’t just words, was it?” He accurately read her expression. “Say no more! I expect his ego couldn’t take being thrown on the ground by a five-foot-nothing whirlwind. What did you expect?”

“I told Ryan to keep him out of my way or I’d sack him, but I didn’t expect him to

leave his team. Now I haven't got enough men to do the mustering *and* take the tourists on the horse trek."

"Well, why don't you ——?" He stopped as he heard a gentle knock. "Enter. Oh, come in, Angela. Is Sammi out there? Oh, good, you've brought Sonia some lunch and the coffeepot. Help yourselves and take a seat. There's plenty of room in here." He watched approvingly as Sammi wheeled in a loaded trolley. "Now, let's have a powwow." He brought them up to speed on Sonia's problem.

"How many are coming this time?" Mrs Samson handed out the coffee she was pouring. "Tourists, I mean?"

"Only five. It's early in the season. There'll be more later."

"Hmm. Why don't you take them mustering? Kill two birds with one stone? I'm sure they'd enjoy it. It'd be an experience of a lifetime, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose ..." Sonia frowned. "But what if they get in the way? Or if some wild cattle come in with the mob?" She appealed to Drew. "You know what greenhorns they are!"

"Yeah, well, if you keep them out of the road at the back of the mob to bring up the tail, instead of showing the ringers how to do it ..."

"All right. I guess I haven't got too many other choices, have I?"

"Only yours and Buckley's."

"That's chances, not choices."

"Splitting hairs—same thing." Drew pointed to the sandwiches. "Now, you'd better eat something. Or the next ringer you try to put on the ground will be too much for you. I don't know why I worry about the murderer coming after you. You might just make him sorry he was ever born."

"If he does, I'll do my best, don't you worry about that." Sonia finished her sandwich, drank her coffee and rose, miraculously calmed. "Thanks for the TLC."

ABOUT ANNE ROUEN



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.

More recently, Lynn 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*.

Lynn has seen continued success with the *Global Ebook Awards* with her Australian Outback romance novels. In 2022, *Winter at Medora Downs* 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*. *Wild Kingdom* scooped the pool in the 2023 Global Ebook Awards with four gold medals (*Best Ebook Cover*, *Best Historical Literature Fiction—Contemporary*, *Best Romance Fiction Historical*, *Best Western Fiction*) and the prestigious *Dan Poynter Legacy Award* for *Best of Fiction*. Again, in 2024, *Secrets of the Rock* followed in the footsteps of its predecessor *Wild Kingdom* and achieved the same four gold medals across the same categories.

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 and through Facebook: [Anne Rouen on Facebook](#).

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