



CHAMELEON

Anne Rouen

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Anne Rouen

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“Brad is defeated” Digitally designed by Felicity Matthews of Web Etch Design and Editing

DEDICATION

To all who have suffered at the hands of narcissistic partners. This book demonstrates a worst-case scenario, but there are many variations, ranging from subtle emotional abuse—draining the victim’s emotions and self-esteem—to the extremes depicted in this story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[About the Author](#)

[More from Anne Rouen](#)

CHAPTER ONE

During the time of the Millenium Drought

“Good morning. Is that Wordsworth station? I would like to speak to the manager, if I may?”

The man’s voice on the telephone was pleasantly burry, the accent slightly foreign, yet markedly British. He spoke slowly, pausing between groups of words as if English was not his first language.

“Who is calling, please?” countered Abby, while she tried to place his accent.

Perhaps it is a scam, she thought. It sounded like the call was coming from a call centre with its telltale delay at the beginning.

“My name is David. David Izaacs. I take it you are the station manager?”

“Part owner,” she corrected. *And manager as well*. But she didn’t say so.

“Then, you are Mrs Abigail Ferris and your husband’s name is Bradley?”

“Yes, that’s right. If you don’t mind, may I ask where you got your information?”

“Of course, certainly. Our embassy in Australia has made contact with your National Farmers’ and Cattlemen’s Associations, asking for names of those who might be willing to participate. I am calling from Tel Aviv on behalf of a small group of Israeli farmers. We will be travelling around Australia studying large-range cattle operations. We have been told that Wordsworth is a notable operation and would like to visit, if it will not be too much of an inconvenience for you?”

“Not at all,” she replied but with a sinking heart. “Except, you do realise that we are in drought? You will not see Wordsworth at its best by any means.”

“That does not matter. I mean, of course, I am sorry you are in drought, and yes, we have heard of it. One of our objectives is to study your strategies for dealing with it, if it may be possible?” He hesitated. “We understand drought and will not judge you if by chance your cattle are not in the best of condition.”

“Well, it is very hard,” she acknowledged. “But they don’t look too bad for what we’ve been going through. I think the key is to start feeding before they lose condition, and they will hang on very well.”

“That is exactly the sort of thing we need to know: what you feed them, how much,

how often and so on. I do hope you can accommodate us?"

"Yes, of course. How many of you are there?"

"Possibly five or six. I will call you back with the exact numbers. We expect to arrive in Winton in two weeks' time. Will that be enough notice for you?"

"Certainly. Do you object to sharing a room? I only have three spare bedrooms."

"No, no, I would not put you to so much trouble! We are travelling convoy in our own campervans. The use of the ablutions block at your workers' accommodation, if possible, would be very much appreciated. Other than that, we will be totally independent." His voice deepened slightly. "But thank you for your very kind offer. Believe me, it is much appreciated."

"Oh, that will be no trouble." Abby hoped her relief did not show in her voice. "The shearers' quarters at our woolshed are vacant, but if you need anything else, do let us know."

"Thank you, Mrs Ferris. We are most grateful for your hospitality."

"Oh, it's nothing. But, please, call me Abby."

"Then, thank you, Abby. I am immensely in your debt. I will be in touch soon. Goodbye."

Abby put down the phone; the gentle timbre of his goodbye remaining in her memory. She glanced at her watch, saw that it was eight o'clock, and went to make her bed. *That is if Brad is up*, she thought. If not, she would leave him in peace. *How many years have I had to pussyfoot around him?* she wondered in despair. And she still had to tell him about the caller from Israel—how would he take that?

Her face softened. What a lovely voice! Would he be a lovely man as well? Could you fall in love with a voice? *Don't be ridiculous*, she told herself, beginning to strip the sheets from the bed. At least Brad was up, and she could get this done. *Be thankful for small mercies!*

The bed made, she picked up a favourite photo of her children, a boy and a girl, sitting smiling on their ponies. They'd come fairly quickly in the marriage: her son in the first year and her daughter in the third. She sighed. Now they were grown up and gone from home: Serena to follow her heart in an Olympic dressage-training establishment in the UK and Aidan to study veterinary science at Sydney University. He could have gone to Brisbane but told her that he wanted to get as far away as possible from his father. When she'd sarcastically suggested Melbourne, he'd replied that Sydney was far enough. Now, at

twenty-three, he was almost ready to graduate and presumably would still want to maintain his distance. Her face puckered. She couldn't help it if neither of her children got on with their father. And how could she blame her daughter for falling in love with a good-looking horseman when she had done the same thing at the same age, herself? It was just that Surrey was so far away, and she hadn't seen her twenty-one-year-old daughter since she'd left the country aged eighteen.

A slight sound made her look up. Brad was standing in the doorway glowering at her.

"What?" Her brows rose. "Is something wrong?"

"Something? *Something*? Everything is wrong. You know that!"

Oh, please! Do we need the drama? "I suppose it is nothing that a good fall of rain won't fix."

"Yeah, right!" He snorted. "Who was on the phone?"

When she told him, Abby braced herself for the storm, but it did not come. Instead, he looked thoughtful and put a hand in his pocket. "This came yesterday on the mail truck. I forgot to give it to you." He handed her an official-looking envelope. "I guess if the big boys think it is okay, who am I to quibble."

Abby glanced through the missive from the Israeli Embassy and breathed an inward sigh of relief. Apparently, Wordsworth being mentioned in the same paragraph as the famous Brunette Downs and iconic Victoria River Downs was enough to reconcile her husband to the idea of foreign visitors. *He'll never change*, she thought, but in this instance was grateful for his tendencies to aggrandisement. She eyed him speculatively: he did seem to be in a better mood than usual. "Will you come and help me feed out?"

"No."

"Well, will you at least help me load the ute?"

"I've mixed the supplements for you. Load the ute yourself."

Abby shrugged. So much for the better mood. "You mean, like I always do." Her voice resonated with bitter emphasis. "Thanks a lot."

"Look, it's your station; you look after it. I'm sick of watching everything I've worked for go down the plughole just because it won't rain!"

"It's *our* station." She put a placatory hand on his arm. "I know it's depressing, but —
—"

"What would you know? You've got no idea!" he ranted, shaking her off. "Don't be

surprised if I've done away with myself before you come back!"

This speech might have had more impact had she not heard it a million times, so she simply replied, "You'd better come with me, then."

"Piss off!" he shouted, slamming out of the house and making for his workshop. Soon, she heard his motorbike—the kind made famous by the 1970s movie *Easy Rider*—start up and roar off. As usual. She had no idea where he was going now, or where he went at these times, often not returning until late at night well after she was asleep in bed. If someone had told her he was being unfaithful, she might have wondered momentarily but would not have seriously entertained the idea. That was something she had always been thankful for—that in twenty-four years of marriage, she'd never had to deal with things like that. Brad had too much to lose. Or so he'd always said.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodically shovelling the supplements into feedbags and stacking them on the ute, Abby had her mind in the past. Back to when she'd first sighted Brad and fallen in love with him then and there. Up until her seventeenth birthday, there had just been Abby and her father—her mother having left them when Abby was a toddler. Her father had not married again. Tall and handsome, he had been a man of character and integrity, and she'd thought that Brad was just like him. How had she made such a mistake? Tall and handsome he was, but a man of character and integrity? Time had shown her things she had not wanted to see. Abby finished loading the bags and stepped into the vehicle to begin her lonely round of the watering points where hungry cattle would be waiting.

She was glad that they didn't have sheep. In her view, the conditions—climatic as well as wild dog, pig and fox predation—were too harsh for them. The woolshed was a relic of the 1950s, from that heady, unbelievable time when wool was a pound a pound. They kept the shed and quarters maintained as an ideal entertainment venue for tourists, field days, dances and parties.

When Abby pulled up at the first bore, the Brahman cattle greeted her with low rumbles, and she smiled at their sweet, mournful faces and long floppy ears. Amigo, her favourite bull, was waiting for her, and she gave him a scratch behind the poll as he licked at the supplements she'd begun to empty into the feeder. She thought how clever and well-adapted to Outback Australian conditions Brahmans were. Their ears were ideally positioned to flick the flies out of their eyes, and there were never any orphaned babies because the cows would happily feed each other's calves. They went in pairs to calve—one protecting the other from wild animal attack on the calf being born. It was heartbreaking to find a newborn calf with its tongue torn out because that meant it had to be euthanased before it had even lived. It always made her so angry when she saw something like that: a perfect young animal, yet it had to be destroyed because a fox wanted an easy meal, and no animal can live without its tongue. Thankfully, it did not happen at Wordsworth because the Brahmans were so protective of each other. Abby had even seen them chasing wild pigs and bunting them unmercifully to eject them from their territory. They were also better adapted to dry conditions than European cattle because they could thrive on feed with lower protein. *Winners on all counts*, she thought. Brahman cattle were well known for flightiness in large-range situations, but years of selecting them for temperament and conformation, as well as

training them as weaners to move calmly when mustered, had paid off in the form of quiet, easy-to-handle stock, much sought after by buyers. “Brahman cattle are like horses,” her father used to say. “They’re more sensitive than most other cattle and have to be handled correctly to keep them quiet.”

How she missed her father now! It was an ache in her heart that never went away. As she went from bore to bore, checking the water and filling the feeders, she again thought back to that fateful day when her father had introduced her to Brad.

Abby had noticed her father standing in the stable yard with a tall, handsome young man. To her eyes, they had looked remarkably similar, and when she’d come up to them and the young man had turned to her with such a glowing look in his grey eyes, she’d drawn in her breath, smitten, right there.

“Ah, here’s my daughter,” her father had said, following his gaze. “Abby, this is Brad. He has just finished at Longreach Pastoral College and is looking for a job. Should we give him one?”

Abby smiled. “I’ve been saying for ages, Dad, that we need someone stronger than me to help us.”

“Well, that sounds like a yes.” Her father held out his hand. “Welcome to Wordsworth, young man. Show him his quarters, Abby.”

Abby did so, taking him to a separate wing of the house. “You should be comfortable here,” she said, showing him around a neat annexe with a bedroom, sitting room, kitchenette and bathroom.

“I should darn well think I would be.” He looked around appreciatively. “This is nice ... like you.”

“Oh!” She laughed in confusion. “Well, thanks ... I think.”

“And your dad, he’s great, too.”

“Yes, he is.” After a short silence, she offered, “You will have your meals with us, of course. Unless you want to get your own?”

“Well, I’m not much use in the kitchen.” He laughed. “So, I’d be very grateful for any scraps you can throw my way.”

“Don’t worry, I think we can do better than that! Well, I’ll leave you to unpack. Come over to the kitchen when you’ve finished, and we’ll have smoko,” she added, giving directions.

“Great, thanks! I could do with some. My belt buckle’s rubbing on my backbone.”

“Oh dear! Well, if that’s the case, I’d better make some extra scones. I’ll go get started.” Beginning to walk away, she turned at the door with a shy smile. “It’s my birthday. You must come to my party—meet the locals.”

“Your birthday? Today’s your birthday? You’re kidding me! What are you, sweet sixteen?”

“Seventeen.”

“Well, happy birthday, Sweet Seventeen. Let’s make it a memorable one.”

And they had.

Abby arrived back at the homestead to snatch a quick lunch and a much-needed cup of tea before going out to water the garden. The homestead, built by her great grandparents, was of mudbrick construction with wide, shady verandahs, supporting a profusion of bougainvilleas. It was a beautiful old house: cool and welcoming in the hotter months, warm in the few weeks that passed for winter.

She remembered the day Brad had come to her, dejected: “I asked your father for your hand in marriage, and he says you’re too young.”

“Well, of course he’s going to say that. I’m his only child. I thought we agreed to let me ask him?”

“Yes, but it is the man’s place to ask. I don’t want him to think I’m a gutless coward.”

“He would never think that!” she assured him with supreme confidence.

“I’m not so sure,” he growled, biting his knuckles.

She remembered wishing he wouldn’t bite his knuckles. It was the one thing that didn’t sit with his otherwise confident and capable aspect. When she approached her father, she encountered the same implacable opposition.

“But he loves me! And I love him,” she’d shot back.

“Yes, but what you need to ask yourself is: How much does he love you, and how much does he love the million-or-so acres that go with you?”

“Dad! I can’t believe you’re saying that! He says he loves me, and I believe him! Why wouldn’t I? And why shouldn’t he love me? Am I so unlovable?”

“No, of course not, darling, that isn’t what I meant.”

“Well, then, what do you mean?”

"I mean, you need to be sure of his and your feelings, and you need time for that."

"I'm sure he loves me! But more importantly, I'm sure that I love him."

"Well, that's obvious, at any rate. But believe me, Abby, it is *not* more important. Look, you're both very young: he's only twenty, you're seventeen. What if you have second thoughts?"

"No, Dad. No way!" She'd hung onto her father's arm, looking up into his face in a way he couldn't resist. "Dad, I love him so much; I would want to die if anything happened to him. We might be young, but we know our own minds. If you don't let us get married, the second I turn eighteen, I'm going to do it—with or without you."

"Now, hang on, Abby. There's no need to get carried away. Let's be reasonable here."

"I'm sorry, Dad, but that's how I feel."

"All right, all right." He capitulated, just as she had known he would. "In the interests of peace, I will agree. But understand this: if you have second thoughts, thirty seconds before the ceremony is time enough, but one second after, too late."

"I get what you're saying, Dad, and I'm sure we won't have second thoughts. Brad and I, we're soulmates. We want to spend our lives together."

Her father shrugged but was as good as his word, accepting Brad as the son he never had and relying on him more and more over the years as his health so suddenly deteriorated.

Abby sighed, transferring hoses and moving sprinklers. Even in drought, artesian bores allowed water for the garden without killing the plants, thanks to a knacky little invention by the Israelis that neutralised the ions in salty bore water. It had played a big part in the greening of the desert and had saved the Wordsworth garden. She would be able to thank them when they arrived.

Speaking of arrivals, she thought, as a motorbike roared into the shed, and Brad came striding out. Abby braced herself. *How is he now?* She kept watering and didn't look up.

"Abby! Abs? Make me a cuppa, will you? I didn't get any lunch."

A variety of retorts crossed her mind, such as: "Well, whose fault is that?" and "Go and get your own!" or "How about a please?" Instead, she said, "All right. If you hold the hose on this tree for the next five minutes, I'll go now."

He came and took it from her.

When he sauntered into the kitchen and threw himself down into a chair, Abby had made the tea and was cutting some cold beef and tomatoes for sandwiches. He reached over,

grabbed a handful of sliced meat, slapped it between two chunks of bread and began to tear at it, chewing noisily like an animal. Then he poured himself a cup of tea, slurping it in gulps between gargantuan bites, moaning as he chewed.

Abby held her peace. *It's as if he wants to disgust me*, she thought, troubled for both of them. In between bites of his sandwich and slurping mouthfuls of tea, he began to tell her a long, rambling story of who he had seen and what had been happening that day. Abby still said nothing. She knew from experience that there would not be a word of truth in it. Years ago, when he had told her a story of some people he'd passed on the road and some strange thing they were doing, she had exclaimed, "Were they? That's odd."

And Brad had replied, his voice loaded with contempt, "No, of course they weren't! I can say anything I want, and you're all so stupid that you believe me!"

"But ——" began Abby. She had wanted to say: "Well, why shouldn't we believe you? If you're a normal person, why should you lie? What is the point?" But she knew it was no use to bother. It was the first time, too, that she had seen "the look" enter his eyes—an expression compounded of contempt, defiance and triumph—a look with which she was now all too gut-wrenchingly familiar.

Who is he? she wondered. *Where is the Brad I fell in love with?* A familiar feeling of frustration washed over her. Her brow furrowed even more. Clearly, there was something very wrong with the man.

Once, when he'd first begun to change, Abby had suggested he see a psychiatrist—and it had not gone well.

"What? So, you think I'm a nut job, do you?" Face contorted with fury; he leapt up from the table to fling a chair through the French window. "Am I enough of a lunatic for you now?" He snatched up the carving knife out of the block. "What if I slit your throat?" For an instant, he looked so demonic that she held her breath. "How would that be, eh? Would I be a nut job, then?" Or maybe I should do you first and then myself? What about that? Eh? Eh?" he shouted, brandishing the knife in her face—his eyes black and venomous.

"Brad!" she pleaded. "*Please ...*"

"What? Do you think I'm that mad?" He laughed and threw down the knife. "Yeah, right. Thanks a lot!"

She'd never dared broach the subject again. The nightmare had begun.

CHAPTER THREE

The second call came when Abby was about to go out and feed the cattle. Her heart lurched when she heard the velvet voice with its attractive accent: “Hello, Abby. How are you today? It has not rained for you?”

“No, not yet and nothing expected for months, I’m afraid. Your group will not be impressed with our country, I feel.”

“I am sure that we will. Don’t worry about that in the slightest. I am only sorry that your weather has not decided to make life a little easier.”

They chatted for several minutes, exchanging pleasantries, with Abby giving precise directions and noting down the exact time and date of the visitors’ proposed arrival, before saying their goodbyes.

Abby sighed as she put down the phone. *I wonder if he’s as nice as he sounds. Perhaps it’s not possible.* What a contrast between the warmth and courtesy in his voice and that of her husband. She thought about it as she went about her usual routine. This time Brad had not mixed the supplements, in fact, he hadn’t even surfaced yet, so she had extra to do before she could get away. Abby felt put upon, aggrieved. If only Brad would pull his weight. She’d tried to hire a jackaroo to help her, but Brad wouldn’t hear of it, and his aspect became so dangerous at the suggestion that she was afraid to press the issue. *He could stay in bed all day, and I wouldn’t care*, she thought as she started the mixer. *If only I had someone to help me!*

She thought again about the kind, gentle voice on the phone. The first call had unsettled her for some strange reason, made her reassess her marriage, and this one was doing the same.

When the children were little, time sped by. Brad had seemed so proud of his family. When, exactly, had it all begun to change? Was it only Brad who had changed, or had they both changed? Had she begun to fall out of love with him? Abby mulled it over. If she thought back to the man she’d loved enough to want to spend her life with, then, yes, she still loved *him*. But the embittered stranger she lived with today? No, there was nothing about that man she could love.

It was certainly Brad who had changed, she was sure of it, and out of all recognition, too. Her grief was increased by the knowledge that the man she had fallen in love with no

longer existed. Had he ever existed? Had she fallen in love with an image she'd simply projected onto someone who wasn't what he seemed? A man who had seen what she wanted in a life's partner and, chameleon-like, made himself into that person she could love? That was the question that gave her agony of mind night after night.

Troubled, she remembered that their children had not wanted to spend time with him, and as they grew older, he had come down on them like the proverbial ton of bricks, continually correcting, nagging and playing the heavy Victorian father. To be truthful, it had been a relief for all concerned when they had gone off to boarding school.

But the real change had come after her father died. At first, she'd thought Brad's depression was genuine grief, and to be fair, she still felt that it had started out that way. But how to explain the lying, the instability in temperament, the embittered outbursts? Could it be that he had relied on her father as his moral compass? They had gone everywhere together, done everything together, had seemed the best of mates. She'd been only too glad that they had gotten on so well.

When she got to the third-last feeding point for the day, she noticed that her favourite bull, Amigo, was lying under a tree and did not get up when he saw her come. This rang alarm bells, and she went over to him. He was a very quiet bull, and she had bought him out of a show team for more money than she cared to think about. He was halter trained, so she had no qualms about getting close to him.

"What is it, boy? Are you sick?" And then she saw his front leg sitting at an odd angle. "Oh no, you've broken your leg! Have you boys been fighting again?"

With relief, she saw that it was a simple fracture of the cannon bone and, stroking his neck, told him that they would soon have him out of his pain and on the way to recovery. Hurrying to the vehicle, she grabbed the radio and called the local vet, Vince McCoy. Fortunately, he was a neighbour, knew the district and told her he would meet her at the bore in question in an hour.

"Don't worry, Abby. If it is a simple fracture, like you're saying, we should be able to set it and put a cast on. Since it's Amigo, I don't envisage any problems with handling. I'll bring a halter, and we can give him a quick sedative. You'll just have to keep him in the yard and quiet for the next six weeks or so. I'll be there in an hour."

"Thanks, Vince. All right; I'll just finish the feeding and meet you back here. Poor old Amigo, my best bull, but I'm sure he won't mind being pampered for the next six weeks."

“I’m sure he won’t, either, once we’ve stabilised the leg with a cast.”

Abby put a small container of supplements in front of the bull and brought him a bucket of water from the trough. He drank the water and began to lick at the supplements.

“Don’t worry, Amigo, I’ll be back soon. And don’t go trying to get up until we’ve got a cast on that leg.” She gave him a last pat and went on her rounds.

Later, when Abby returned to the bore, she saw that the vet was already there, standing over the bull who was oddly still. Amigo was no longer sitting up but lying out flat on his side. She hurried over, her heart in her mouth. “What ...?”

“I’m sorry, Abby, he’s dead.” The vet’s face and voice were grave. “He’s been shot. Within the last half-hour, I would say. See here.”

Her incredulous gaze followed his pointing finger to a round dark-red hole in the middle of the bull’s forehead. “No! ... Oh no! But who would ...? Who could it have been?”

“I didn’t see anybody.”

“Neither did I.”

“You didn’t hear a shot?”

“No.”

“He wouldn’t have suffered, if it is any consolation. Whoever it was knew what they were doing.” Vince checked the bull’s leg. “It is a pity they didn’t wait for me, though. It was just a simple fracture, like you said. We could have set it and made him comfortable. I’m sorry, Abby, I know how much you paid for him and how much he meant to you.”

“He was such a lovely bull.” Abby tried to hold back her tears. “A wonderful temperament, beautiful calves ... Such a senseless waste! But I don’t understand: Who would have come here and done this? It is not as if we are on a main road to anywhere.”

“I don’t know ...” The vet’s brow furrowed. “Come on, I’ll see you home safe. I don’t like the idea of a trigger-happy gunman hanging around here. You’d better ring Bert and report it when you get home. I’ve heard a rumour that a notorious international terrorist might be hiding out in the district. It could be just a rumour, but ——”

“You’re joking!” She stared at him in horror. “Aren’t you?”

He shook his head. “Afraid not. You make sure you ring Bert.”

“I’ll do it as soon as I get home. Will you come in for a cuppa?”

“Thanks, but no. I have a dog and a horse waiting for me at the surgery.” He grinned.

“You know how it is.”

The vet followed her home, tooting his horn as he went past.

The first thing Abby did when she got inside was pick up the phone to put in a call to the local police sergeant.

“Don’t bother ringing Bert.”

Abby turned her head to see Brad standing behind her. “Someone shot Amigo, and we don’t know who it was, so Vince told me to call Bert as soon as I got in.”

“And I’m telling you not to.”

“Why?”

“Because it was me. I did it.”

“What?” Abby dropped the phone and spun around. “*You* did it?” She stared, incredulous. “But, why?”

He shrugged.

“But, why?” she persisted. “You must have heard me on the radio, known that I had already called the vet, what we were going to do. Why would you do that?”

“To put him out of his misery.” Brad took a righteous stand. “The poor animal was suffering.” He looked down at his hands and then up again. “Thought about shooting myself while I was at it.”

Something snapped in her. “Well, then, why the hell didn’t you?”

“Because I would’ve had to shoot you first, and you weren’t there.”

Sick to the pit of her stomach, Abby saw the malicious triumph in his eyes and knew deep down that Brad had shot the bull to hurt her because Amigo was important to her. He had heard her radio conversation with the vet and deliberately gone out with his gun to shoot the bull.

Sobs crowded in her throat. Abby spun on her heel and ran out of the house.

CHAPTER FOUR

Abby was up at dawn, feeding the horses as she had done every morning of her life since she'd been old enough to ride. She always went straight out to feed them the minute she got up, came back in for breakfast and, since the drought had started to bite, went out to feed the cattle around eight, instead of going back to ride.

They had twelve horses between them: Brad's four handy stockhorses, the children's two old Welsh mountain ponies and her six retired racehorses. Brad's interest lay in campdrafting; he had won and placed in the prestigious Cloncurry Stockman's Challenge several times and was a formidable and respected horseman—at least, that was the old Brad—the new one hadn't been near a horse in years. Abby loved thoroughbreds and gave them homes when they retired off the track. She retrained the sound ones as show hacks and dressage horses but never sold any of them on. A home with Abby was a home for life.

Abby hated the thought of horses being trucked to knackereries and had raised her voice many times against the cruelty of transporting horses long distances in double-deck cattle trucks. *How could you do that to your horse after he had worked all his life for you?* she wondered, choking up. *And how anyone could eat them?* The thought made her sick.

Had she been a different kind of person, she could have had a room full of ribbons and trophies on display. She enjoyed the thrill of getting a ribbon, but the only thing it meant to Abby was that her training was successful. The joy of working so closely with an intelligent animal so that two beings acted as one. That the horse seemed to feel what you were thinking even before you gave the aid was mind-blowing. Not only that, but the fact that he was willing to put all his energy and ability at your disposal was a gift too precious for words.

Her years of retraining these beautiful creatures had taught Abby that there were no bad horses, only horses confused by bad training and expectations beyond their capabilities. Horses were capable of incredible feats, but they had to be trained slowly, in small incremental steps, to achieve such things, gradually building one achievement on top of another. Hurrying, ego and just plain ignorance had given more horses a bad name than anybody knew. But for now, her riding was put on hold in a desperate bid to keep everything alive until after it rained.

While she measured rations, put hay in feeders, stroked each horse's neck as she fed them, her thoughts turned to Brad and her stomach churned. She'd slept in their daughter's

room last night after his shocking revelation. What would she find today when she encountered him? Abby had no idea what she was going to do next, but she was sure of one thing: nothing could ever be the same again. Brad had crossed a line.

Would he be one of those who murdered their partner if she tried to leave? He'd certainly made enough threats. Threats she hadn't taken seriously until he'd killed her bull, and she'd seen the look in his eyes when he'd mentioned her. And how could she leave anyway, with so many hungry mouths depending on her? He would have to be the one to leave. And she could just imagine what he would have to say to that! *He must be insane*, she thought, close to despair. *And he's getting worse. I can't keep my head in the sand any longer.* Something would have to be done. But, what?

As Abby crossed the paved courtyard and wide verandah, she thought she could smell bacon cooking and hurried into the kitchen where she stopped in the doorway to stare in disbelief. Brad was standing over a frying pan sizzling on the range. Through her shocked surprise, she noticed that he had shaved, done his hair, and was dressed neatly in a clean blue shirt and jeans. For years, she had been used to him unshaven with messy hair, dressed in the filthiest, most crumpled clothes he could find, despite her putting out clean ones every day and confiscating the dirty ones to the laundry basket. And now? He looked wholesome and handsome, just like he used to before things had gone wrong with him. Abby swallowed, got it down the wrong way and began to cough.

Brad looked up at the sound. "Oh, there you are, Abs," he greeted her in a friendly tone. "How many eggs do you want with your bacon?"

"Um ... one, please." She still had trouble believing her eyes and ears but went to put the kettle on and set the table for breakfast. While she popped slices of bread into the toaster, Brad drained the bacon on kitchen paper, put it in the oven to keep warm and broke three eggs into the pan. Over breakfast, he maintained his courtesy, passing the butter, salt and pepper, and pouring her a cup of tea, just as she liked it. How long had it been since he'd performed such caring, nurturing services for her? Too many years to remember.

When they finished, he put his hand over hers, looking at her with the guileless, earnest expression in his eyes that she had fallen in love with so long ago—that she had not seen for years—that she could never resist. "Abby, I'm truly sorry I shot Amigo. I had no idea that you'd called the vet, even that it was possible to save him. All I wanted was to put him out of his pain and for you not to have to see him like that."

"You must have heard the radio." She stood her ground, not buying it.

“Abby, I swear I didn’t. My radio’s shot. I need to go to town later to buy a new one.” He took her hand in a firm hold. “You know I wouldn’t have done it if I’d thought he could be saved. You know it!” His voice deepened. “Abs, you know I love you. Can’t we be mates again?”

Abby looked at him, troubled. He seemed so sincere, so honest—the Brad that she had loved all these years before he had gone and an unstable, embittered stranger had taken his place. Why did her gut tell her he wasn’t being truthful? That all this was just a sham? But she had to accept him at face value. What other choice did she have?

“All right.” She rose abruptly. “I’d better go and feed the cattle.”

“Don’t rush. I’ll mix the feed and load the ute for you. Then I have to go to town and pick up my new radio. You come down when you’re ready.”

By the time Abby had tidied up the kitchen, put the washing on and arrived at the shed, she saw that, although he was nowhere to be seen, Brad had been as good as his word: the ute was fuelled up and the supplements stacked on the back ready to go.

About halfway through her feeding run, Abby met Jason, her neighbour to the west, on the road, and they pulled up under a tree to chat.

“Good morning, Jase.”

“G’day, Abs. How yer goin’?”

“Oh, you know, one leg after the other.” She grinned. “How about you?”

“Much the same, ’cept I’m draggin’ my feet.” He returned her grin. “Dust’s gettin’ too thick.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “It *so* is!” Abby had known Jason all his life. At one point they had shared a governess for School of the Air. It had been her last year of school and his first, after which the governess had moved to Pandora full-time. So why did his friendly ease seem to mask a slight nervousness? “Shelley didn’t come with you this morning?”

“No, she’s decorating the nursery. Nesting impulse or whatever they call it. She sent a flask of coffee and some of her slice, though.” He picked up a basket from the seat beside him and got out. “Want to help me with it?”

“Sure. Thanks, Jase.” Abby followed suit, sitting on the tailgate he’d pulled down for them, taking the proffered cup with a piece of raspberry-and-coconut slice. “Mmm, this is lovely! So, she’s well?”

“Too right, she’s well. Too bloody fit if you ask me. I’ve done my shoulder movin’

furniture for her ...” He laughed. “Had to go out feedin’ the cattle to get a rest.”

“No morning sickness?”

“Nah, none o’ that.”

“That’s good.” *So, what’s wrong, then?*

Jason nodded, turning his coffee mug between restless hands. He seemed preoccupied, and Abby sipped her coffee while she waited for him to say what was so obviously on his mind.

“Actually, Abs, she didn’t come because ... well, because I wouldn’t let her.”

“Wouldn’t let her? But, Jase, why not? If she’s well?”

“Been hearin’ rumours about a terrorist comin’ out this way. Ibn Bin Ali something-or-other or vice versa. He’s got some aka I can’t remember, like somethin’ out of a storybook. Whatever he’s done, he’s got Interpol, Mossad and the Feds all out after him with their knickers in a twist. And then,” he added slowly, “I heard someone shot your bull—your best bull. What’s goin’ on, Abs? It’s not like this is a main drag to anywhere, where you might get trigger happy morons doin’ a drive-by! I didn’t give the rumours much credit before—you know what it’s like out here!—but I do now. By jeez, I do!”

“Jase, don’t worry ——”

“But I am worried, Abs! I’m worried sick! Don’t you see? I have to be worried!”

“Yes, I do see.” Abby’s expression grew resolute. There was nothing else for it. She must tell Jason the truth. “But you don’t have to worry because it wasn’t some stranger who shot Amigo; it was Brad.”

“What? *Brad*? Brad did it?” Jason slewed around to look at her. “You’re kidding me!”

“No, I’m sorry to say I’m not. Amigo broke his leg. Brad thought ——”

“I know that! I heard you on the radio to the vet. And if I could hear you, Brad had to have heard you, as well!”

“He says not. He told me this morning that his radio had broken down, and he thought that Amigo needed putting out of his pain.”

“So, why didn’t he call the vet first to make sure? Especially after what you paid for that bull. And I know how much he means to you. And Brad does, too!” Jason made a sound of frustration. “Why don’t you leave him, Abs? He’s as mad as a cut snake! He’ll do you

some harm one of these days ...”

“I think it is the drought, preying on his mind ...”

“We’re all in the same boat there! But that’s not it—he’s been like it for years. And you know it, too, Abs.”

“I know. But he seems better today, more like his old self. He actually mixed up and loaded the supplements and cooked breakfast for me this morning.”

“Well ... whoopy-do!”

“Jase ...” she remonstrated.

“Sorry, Abs. But, if that’s the case, why isn’t he here with you doin’ his share of the work?”

“He’s gone into Winton to get a new radio.”

“Well, that’s funny.” Jason stroked his chin.

“What is?”

“I passed him earlier goin’ the other way.” He glanced at her sideways. “He hasn’t gone to Winton.”

“Oh ...” So, Brad had lied. Why was she surprised? Hadn’t her gut feeling told her he was shamming?

Her companion studied her face. “It isn’t funny, is it? Want to tell me about it, Abs.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Suit yourself. I can only help you if you want me to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you goin’ to tell me you don’t know where he goes all those days when he rides off on that big chopper of his and doesn’t come back till all hours?”

“No.” Abby felt winded. How did Jase know this? She’d never told anybody. “Do you?”

“I could take a pretty good guess because he roars right past my house. And he doesn’t give a rat’s about how much noise he makes in the early hours, either! *Now*, do you know where he goes?”

Abby drew in a painful breath. There was only one possible destination. “Bevis!” she gasped, leaping up. “Bevis?”

“Hang on, Abs.” Jason put a hand on her shoulder. “There’s somethin’ else you need to know.”

CHAPTER FIVE

On the way home, Abby mulled over her conversation with her neighbour. She'd been shocked by his disclosures. If it wasn't so heartbreaking, it would have been interesting to hear that Jason had come to the same conclusion as herself as to why Brad had shot her bull, and his warning only increased her unease. What did he know—or think he knew—that she didn't? Quite frankly, she was afraid to find out.

Bevis was a huge aggregation to the north-west of Pandora. It was rambling and wild, and Jason had been right: the only way to get to its homestead was right past his front door. It was owned by Sir Arthur Wellesley, an ex-British Army Colonel who was knighted many years ago for services to the cattle industry. He always swore the Queen had joked that she wished she could elevate him to the ranks of his noble namesake and enquired whether he was an ancestor. Sir Arthur had replied with a discreet chuckle that he wished he could think so, but it was probably some impostor, altogether disreputable.

A tall, spare, upright man of impeccable manners and an air of command, he was also gentle and courteous, and a great favourite with the women of the district who counted it a triumph if he accepted an invitation to one of their parties or dinners. He'd stubbornly remained a bachelor until fifteen years ago when he'd amazed everybody by coming home from his annual trip to Sydney with a wife young enough to be his granddaughter.

Christina, Lady Wellesley, was a statuesque blonde beauty in the style of the 1950s movie queen Marilyn Monroe. She called her husband Arfie, and to Abby's surprise, he seemed to love it. No-one else would have dared; he had such dignity. Just turned twenty-one, she wore heavy make-up and scanty figure-hugging clothing that left few of her attributes to the imagination, fuelling the gossip of Outback tongues. Tart, tramp, cheap, trollop had been just a few of the labels bandied about, and "no fool like an old fool" said of Sir Arthur.

Abby remembered that Brad had been one of Tina's greatest critics: "Strewth, look at the make-up she wears! Does she shovel the stuff on with a trowel?"

"She's from the city," Abby had replied. "They always wear a lot more make-up than we do."

"And what about the tarty way she dresses? What do you say to that?"

"Brad, it's the latest fashion. She's young. They all dress like that. Anyway ..."

shrugged. “You know the old saying: if you’ve got it, flaunt it.”

Brad had laughed with ribald vigour, a little too much for Abby’s taste, before prophesying that trying to keep up with his new wife was likely to be the death of their elderly neighbour. But Sir Arthur had thrived, going from strength to strength. There was no question that he was happy.

When Abby made a courtesy call to meet and welcome the new arrival to the district, she found Tina to be warm, kind and generous. Maybe she hadn’t been blessed with an excess of intellect, but her heart was certainly in the right place. She confided to Abby that she was about to become a man-hater before she met Sir Arthur. “Honestly, Abby, men just want to use you! Oh, I don’t mean good men like yours, but all the ones I meet in the city. And then Sir Arthur came along, just as I was about to go into a nunnery or something, just to get away from them, you know. And he was so kind and considerate and caring ... not wanting to use me like the others. Look, I know what everybody thinks—must think!—but it isn’t like that.” She leant closer. “I love Sir Arthur. He saved me from a life I hated but couldn’t get out of, and I will always be grateful to him for that. I promise you and all his friends that I will love and care for him for the rest of his life.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me or anyone else, Tina. All that is between you and Sir Arthur, and if you’re happy, it is none of anyone else’s business.”

“Thank you.” Tina flashed her lovely smile. “Thank you so much.” Then she looked up. “Oh, there you are, Arfie darling! Abby has just come to welcome me to the district. Isn’t she a sweetie?”

Sir Arthur had shaken Abby’s hand and told her that he was very much obliged to her in a way that she knew was heartfelt.

Abby reflected that, as far as anyone could tell, Tina had kept her promise to love and care for Sir Arthur; her tenderness of heart could not be questioned. A picture of health, Sir Arthur had travelled the world with her every year until recently. Their cessation coincided with the current drought, but Abby now knew that was not the reason.

Despite all the prophecies, Tina had never been unfaithful to Sir Arthur. She had given libidinous males short shrift, and Abby knew that she was fastidious. That’s why she couldn’t believe Jason’s inferences about Brad. He was so dirty and dishevelled, so uncouth in his behaviour, that she couldn’t see Tina touching him with the proverbial forty-foot pole—even if she could see Brad reversing his opinion of her.

On impulse, she decided to pay Tina a visit. Brad still wasn’t home, so she pulled a

slice she'd been saving out of the freezer and drove out to Bevis. Jason would see her if he was at home, but she couldn't help that. If she had time on the way back, she would call in to speak to Shelley, whom she hadn't seen since the latter had announced her pregnancy.

Abby found Sir Arthur alone in a wheelchair on his front verandah. He greeted her with apparent pleasure. "Well, hullo. You're dear little Abigail's mother, aren't you? Now, what is your name again, dear? Angela. Angela, that's it. How do you do?"

"Sir Arthur, I'm Abigail."

"Are you? Are you really? Well, good for you. Of course, you're not the Abigail I know. She's just a little girl."

"I've come to see Tina, Sir Arthur. Is she about?"

"You mean, Lady Wellesley?"

"Yes, Sir Arthur, Lady Wellesley."

"Oh, it's *Abigail*! Hello, dear, I didn't recognise you there for a minute. No need to stand on ceremony. Call me Arthur. How's your dear father? Haven't seen him in quite a while."

"Um ..."

"Oh, what am I thinking! I saw him just the other day. Last week, I think. Give him my best, won't you?"

"Of course."

"Tina should be out in her shadehouse. Loves her plants, she does, my little Tina. You go on through, my dear, go on through. Have a nice natter with her."

Abby failed to find Tina anywhere, and there was no sign of Brad's vehicle either. She left the slice on the kitchen table and went back out to the verandah where she found a nurse attending to Sir Arthur. Once again, forgetting who Abby was, he introduced her to the nurse as Angela.

The nurse called her out of earshot. "Never mind, dear. I know who you are. Poor man. Unfortunately, I am afraid this is just the thin edge of the wedge. Tina's gone for a drive to clear her head. Won't be back until who knows when. Still, a carer has to have some time off. We nurses are very aware of that."

"Of course." Abby made her goodbyes with relief. Poor old Sir Arthur, so it was true, then. Her heart bled for him and Tina and what they were going through, in the knowledge that worse was to come.

Shelley and Jason were not in when she drove past on her way home, but Brad was. He sat at the kitchen table, eyeing her up and down, looking faintly amused about something. “So,” he drawled. “Where have you been?”

Abby’s hackles rose but she responded evenly enough: “I went over to Bevis to see Tina.”

“So, why did you want to see Tina?” He flicked a crumb off the table with a careless forefinger.

“Jase told me something.”

“Oh yeah?” His whole demeanour changed in an instant. “Why would you listen to that bloody moron?” he shouted, working himself up into a state. It was as if the name had set off a volcano. “He couldn’t tell the truth if it jumped up and bit him on the arse! He’s such a dickhead; he couldn’t lie straight in bed! I don’t know why you would even listen to him. You know he’s no friend of mine, the things he’s done. Bloody sod! Wanker!” He continued his rant with a few more epithets and then fell silent, studying his bitten knuckles.

“He’s our neighbour,” Abby reminded him when he’d run out of words. “And I’ve known him all his life.” She forbore to mention that, up until a few years ago, he and Jason had been the best of mates. Another inexplicable change in Brad.

“Yeah, well ... What did he tell you, anyway?”

“That Sir Arthur is in a wheelchair, and the poor old fellow has dementia.”

“Yeah, I heard the old geezer had lost his marbles.”

“Did you? When?”

He shrugged. “Dunno. Can’t remember.”

“You didn’t think to tell me? That I might be interested in what was happening to my father’s old friend?”

“Strewth! Do I have to tell you everything? What are you? An inquisitor or something?” He moderated his tone. “So, you went over there. Why? To satisfy your curiosity. See if the rumours were true. It’s not like you to be a busybody.” He turned up his eyes. “And you dare to criticise me!”

“I’m not criticising you, Brad. Not at all. Actually, I’m quite worried about Tina having to deal with ——”

“Why are you worrying about that silly bitch?” He snorted. “If she didn’t want something like this to happen, she shouldn’t have married a man old enough to be her

grandfather!”

“Go easy on her, Brad,” soothed Abby, thinking that his attitude didn’t seem very lover-like. “We’re all wise in hindsight. And to give Tina her due, I think she has proven that she truly does love him.”

“Yeah, right, whatever ... Well, haven’t you got enough to worry about here without running around after the neighbours at the drop of a hat?”

“Probably. But I went to see Tina to find out if she needs some support.”

“And does she?”

“I don’t know. She wasn’t home.” She eyed him, deciding to risk it. “Did you get your new radio?”

“Nah, nothing wrong with the old one. Just a loose connection in the antenna.” He shoved on his hat and got up to go out. Their conversation was over.

In a little while, she heard him fire up his motorbike and open the throttle, skidding across the gravel drive. No helmet. As ever. Not saying where he was going. As ever.

CHAPTER SIX

The third call came at eight thirty, the night before the projected visit by the Israeli farmers, just as Abby was about to go and have a leisurely soak in the bath. Brad had come in earlier, but he wouldn't deign to answer the phone if Abby was in the house.

"Hello, Abby. We are here." The attractive voice held a charming hint of amusement. "In your little Winton. Very nice. Most welcoming."

"I'm glad to hear it. Did you have a good trip?"

"Yes, indeed. Uneventful once we got started, thankfully. But there will only be five of us after all. Poor Michael, one of our older farmers, had the misfortune to fall ill on the plane."

"Oh no, did he? Oh, I am so sorry to hear that. Is he going to be all right?"

"Yes, it is not life-threatening, fortunately. He will spend a few days in the hospital and will be staying with friends in Brisbane until he recovers."

When Abby put down the phone, she noticed that Brad, hunched in an armchair, was looking wild-eyed and morose, chewing at already bleeding knuckles. Unconsciously, she braced herself.

"Who was that on the phone?" he demanded. "Who were you talking to?"

"That was David, the organiser of the Israeli farmers' tour."

"Huh! You seemed to enjoy talking to him."

"They will be here tomorrow at eight o'clock, ready to go out on the feed run."

"I *said*: you seemed to enjoy talking to him."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. He was polite and gentlemanly." *Unlike you!*

"You sounded like you were all over him."

"Rubbish!" Abby lost patience. "He rang to say they had arrived in Winton and will be here tomorrow. As I just told you."

"Oh yeah? Bloody wogs! Coming here. Interfering in our lives. What makes them think we can find time to waste on them? Showing them around, giving them meals, answering their stupid questions and God knows what!"

"We did, remember? Both of us. I said they could come and you agreed."

Remember?”

“Yeah, now you come to mention it, I do. But I wish I hadn’t. I’ve got too much to do to put up with crap from strangers!” Brad was well away, but silently despairing, Abby had stopped listening.

She barely noticed when he slammed out of the house after his tantrum. How would she ever hold her head up again if he treated their visitors to a display like that? Sick at heart and miserable, she trailed off to have her much anticipated bath and wash her hair. Needless to say, all her expected enjoyment had gone, and she didn’t linger over either.

Combing out long, dark silky strands before the mirror, she acknowledged the appearance of a touch of silver at her temples, not enough to opt for a rinse like some of her friends, but it wouldn’t be long. Abby moisturised her face and appraised her appearance critically, wondering what her visitors would see. *Not much*, she thought disparagingly of the face that looked back at her. But Abby had something that couldn’t be seen in a mirror: a vibrancy about her personality, an inner glow in her dark eyes, a smile that lit up her whole being and made people draw in their breath with the intensity of it. Some people thought her a beauty, but Abby would have been incredulous to hear this. She saw only a slim, small woman with a boyish figure and an oval tired-looking face framed by fine, straight hair that she always kept tied back in a ponytail.

Well, thought Abby, resigned, *what will be, will be*. She was so tired of trying to second guess Brad to gauge what his mood might be like at any given time, to anticipate the lightning changes of his Jekyll-and-Hyde behaviour, to try and smooth him down before it escalated too far. It kept her on edge, nervy and, little though she knew it, right where Brad wanted her.

§

The next morning, as she went out to meet her visitors, she felt unreal, fatalistic. The man getting out of the passenger door of the first campervan and coming towards her with a warm smile must be David, she thought, holding out her hand in welcome. She was right.

He seemed to be about her age, medium height and build, although he looked very fit with fine, neat features, short white-blond hair and expressive blue eyes. Close up, he was very good-looking; from a distance, he had the ability to appear insignificant so that he did not stand out as recognisable in a crowd. The other four were two father-and-son duos, all slender, tall, dark and remarkably alike. David introduced them as Abel and his son Joel, and

Joseph and his son Samuel.

“Don’t worry if you can’t tell us apart.” Abel’s eyes twinkled as he shook Abby’s hand. “Nobody can. We’re used to it. Joe and I are brothers.”

“Well, I don’t think I will be able to.” Abby was candid as always. “You’re so alike; you could be twins.” She turned to shake hands with Joel and Samuel. “And your boys, too.”

“Like peas in a pod,” agreed David, smiling. “Aren’t you, Sammy?”

Samuel grinned in acknowledgement but said nothing.

Just as David finished making the introductions, Brad emerged from the house and Abby suffered another shock. Brad, the epitome of the well-groomed country squire—dressed in his best white moleskins, mirror-polished riding boots, a blue countryman shirt and blue wool tie—strode forward. “You must be David.” He held out his hand with a broad smile on his face and a warm, ingenuous expression in his light-grey eyes. “Welcome to Wordsworth.”

From then on, Brad took over as host, leaving Abby to trail along behind while he coopted the two youngest members of the group to help him weigh out the ingredients, explaining the reason for including each particular supplement and the special qualities of his chosen mix. Abby had not seen him so animated and genial in years. Out with the cattle it was the same: while he and his two helpers fed out, he extolled the superiority of Brahmans over European cattle when it came to drought survival, expanding on breeding and management techniques, and the points to look for when selecting good breeding types with an enthusiasm that did not abate.

A slight hiccup occurred when they came to the watering point where the body of Amigo still lay decomposing under its tree.

“Oh, you have a dead one here.” Abel showed his concern. “A bull, I see. Was it ...?”

“Broken leg,” replied Brad before Abby could say anything. “I had to put him out of his misery. Of course, it upset Abby no end; I can tell you. He was her favourite bull, wasn’t he, Abs?”

“Yes.” Abby inwardly seethed at his effrontery. “He was a very good bull with excellent bloodlines. I was extremely sorry to lose him.”

“You do not bury your dead livestock?” asked Joseph. “I only ask because ——”

Again, Brad jumped in: “Usually, yes, but my excavator’s broken down.” He shrugged. “What, with the drought and all the extra work, I haven’t had time to fix it.”

Abby was almost surprised into a retort but caught herself just in time. Engulfed by a rising tide of bitter frustration at Brad's perfidy—the ease and plausibility with which he lied—she clenched her hands and lowered her eyes to the ground.

David, who had been looking from one to the other, moved unobtrusively to Abby's side. "Hey," he murmured. "I know ... and I am very sorry for your loss. It is hard to lose the good young ones. I hope he has left some lovely calves for you to remember him by?"

"Yes. Yes, he has." Abby looked up and smiled. "Thank you; I must think of it that way."

He returned her smile and touched her arm before moving away again. It was a gesture of sympathy, nothing more, but Abby was amazingly comforted by it. Her rage and frustration abated, and she was able to carry on with her former calm.

At the halfway point, Abby took out the basket and vacuum flask she had brought, and they had a picnic lunch under a tree at a picturesque rocky outcrop, after which they continued the tour with Brad keeping up his informative discourse.

"He's good." David walked behind with Abby. "He's impressing the group no end. Very interesting and informative: exactly what we were looking for."

Abby thanked him in what she hoped was not a hollow voice. She could only pray that Brad would keep up his superior-manager act until after their visitors had departed. "You will all come to dinner with us tonight, I hope?"

"Thank you, but we are used to fending for ourselves. You provided us with a lovely picnic lunch, which was much appreciated. We don't want to put you to any more trouble than we already have."

"We're having roast leg of lamb and vegetables. It's kosher," she assured him. "Our butchers ——"

He smiled. "That is very thoughtful of you, but I don't want to burden you with cooking after the day we've had."

Abby wanted to say that it was an easy day compared to usual, but she temporised. "It isn't any trouble because I put it all in the slow cooker this morning, and all I will have to do is take it out and serve it."

"Well prepared, I see." He glanced at her admiringly.

"And I took an apple pie out of the freezer while I was at it."

"Well, what can I say?" He smiled down at her. "Thank you. It sounds delicious."

At dinner that night, while they were lingering over apple pie and ice-cream, Brad, playing the genial host to the hilt, asked about farming in Israel and what life on a kibbutz was like.

“We don’t live on a kibbutz,” Abel told him. “Ours is a different kind of settlement entirely. It is called a moshav.”

“Is it, by gee?” Brad’s interest intensified. “What’s the difference, then?”

“At its simplest, a kibbutz is a unique kind of community-owned farm, run by the workers, whereas a moshav is a settlement or service cooperative where the members are individual farmers.”

“I see.” Brad was laying on the charm. “A subtle difference, then. Can I persuade anyone into a second helping of my wife’s excellent apple pie?”

Sammy and Joel accepted with alacrity; the others declined regretfully, saying they had already eaten much more than usual because it was all so delicious.

Abby, quietly listening, was amazed at how easily Brad slipped into the role of good-natured gentleman farmer. *Butter wouldn’t melt*, she thought. Then again, how quickly he could go the other way! It begged the question: who was the real Brad? Did she even know him? Had she ever known him? It was still a thought she couldn’t bear.

She jumped up from the table. “I’ll make the coffee.”

“No, let me.” David rose more leisurely.

“It’s all right; you won’t be able to find everything, but thanks anyway.”

“I will help.” He wasn’t to be deterred. “You just tell me what to do.”

As they worked together, Abby was aware of an intimacy and comradeship that she found delightful yet disturbing. It was both a relief and a penance to carry trays loaded with the coffeepot, cups, chocolate biscuits and other necessities to the table and sit down while David poured.

When Brad was seeing their visitors back to their camp at the woolshed, Abby heard him invite them to breakfast next morning before they went on their way to their next stop, the Winton vet. Vince had promised them a run-down of the main problems and diseases faced by cattle in the area and a visit to the dinosaur tracks before they set off again on their journey.

Abby was tidying up the kitchen when Brad returned. “Bloody hell, Abs. Those campervans are state of the art. Did you notice?”

“Not really. I thought they looked new. Oh, and, yes, four-wheel drive.”

“And not just any old four-wheel drive, either: the go-anywhere kind. Enough to make the Leyland Brothers jealous!”

“Yes, they looked like quality.”

“And that’s not the half of it. You should see them inside: everything that opens and shuts and more!”

“Really? Well, I’ll have a look in the morning. Now, tell me, Brad: did I hear you invite our visitors to breakfast tomorrow?”

“You might have done if you were listening.” He helped her load the dishwasher, which, in itself, was unbelievable.

“I’ll have to get up early, then,” she mused, thinking aloud. “Or maybe I can set the table and prepare a few things now, before I go to bed.”

“No need to upset yourself. I invited them: *I* will make breakfast. You just do whatever you usually do of a morning.”

“Oh ...” She was taken aback, not quite believing it. “Well, thanks, Brad. That’s nice. Very nice.” A thought occurred. “Brad, you do know ——”

“Uh!” He held up a warning hand, brows suddenly drawn together in a way that precluded another lightning transformation. “I *told you*: leave it all to me.”

Abby dared say no more.

§

When Abby came in for breakfast after feeding the horses, she could smell bacon cooking. *Oh no!* she thought. Rushing into the kitchen, she was horrified to see serving platters filled with rashers of fried bacon and ham steaks topped with pineapple and tomato on the range, ready to serve to the guests waiting at the dining room table. “Brad, you can’t!” she wailed. “You *can’t*! Don’t you know ...”

“What?” Brad was the picture of guileless innocence. “What don’t I know?”

Almost sobbing, Abby began clattering pots, grabbing a carton of eggs from the fridge with the intention of making scrambled eggs before the visitors realised what had been

made ready. "They don't eat pork. It isn't kosher," she informed him, breaking eggs separately into a cup before placing them in a bowl.

"It is all right." A gentle voice came from the doorway. "Please do not go to any more trouble for such awkward guests. Toast will be fine for us. Really." David smiled at Abby and then turned to Brad. "I do apologise for not thinking to tell you what we can and cannot eat. And you have gone to such lengths for us, too."

"Please ..." Abby was mortified. "Brad did not realise ... Please, let me make these scrambled eggs for you. It will only take a moment." She glanced at Brad as she reached for the whisk and, with a sinking heart, realised his expression was one of thwarted triumph. He had wanted to place the food he'd cooked in front of them just to watch their embarrassment when they had to refuse his feast. She turned beseeching eyes back to their guest. "Please ..."

David, looking from one to the other, seemed to come to some conclusion. "Very well then, thank you." He reached for the bread packet. "And I will make the toast."

Brad shrugged. "Sorry, mate. No offence meant."

"None taken."

"That's good then. Jeez, Abs, looks like we've got a big breakfast to get down between us."

Abby gritted her teeth. Surely, Brad was not going to be crass enough to sit up in front of their Jewish guests and stuff himself with pork? "Well, maybe you have, but I'm having scrambled eggs ... on toast!"

She felt a hand on her arm, looked up into eyes filled with warmth and understanding. "If you wish to eat what your good man has taken the trouble to cook for you, I assure you that it will not worry us. We make our own choices as to what we eat. We do not presume to decide for others." David smiled. "Please, I beg of you, join us at table with whatever your appetite dictates. We will only be delighted with the company, certainly not offended."

His words and demeanour putting her at ease, Abby thanked him, immensely relieved, as between them, they prepared the plates of scrambled egg on toast. Soon the fluffy golden eggs were spooned on to buttered toast and carried to appreciative guests, while Brad loaded his plate from his own cuisine. So soothing was David's quiet presence and warm understanding that not even the sight of Brad wolfing down a mound of bacon and ham steaks at the head of the table was enough to ruffle Abby's new-found serenity.

Glancing at David across the table, Abby was grateful for his kindness, struck anew by his unassuming dignity and calm that could set her at ease and minimise an awkward situation into a mere nothing. There could be no greater contrast to Brad: the master of escalation.

After breakfast, they accompanied their guests to their campervans to see them off. David shook hands with Brad and exchanged pleasantries while the four others said their goodbyes to Abby with a profusion of thanks and good wishes before moving on to her partner. Brad was in deep conversation with Abel at the second campervan when David came to take his leave of Abby. As their eyes met, the warmth in his made her heart turn over. Had she ever seen eyes with so much expression—that could say so much without a word being spoken? She didn't think so.

"I cannot thank you enough, Abby, you and your good man, for your hospitality. We had heard that about the people of the Australian Outback, and it is even better than we thought. This trip will live in all our memories as the best ever."

"I ... well, thank you." Abby was lost for words.

"You are a woman of courage, and I salute you."

"Oh, no, I am very ordinary. Not the slightest bit brave."

"Oh, yes you are! What you do, where you live, that alone takes courage of the highest order. I haven't known you very long, but I have seen that about you. I am sorry we have to go so soon. I would like to know you better."

"Yes, same here."

"Well, who knows? It is a very small world." He held out his hand. "Perhaps we may meet again some day?"

"Yes." Abby placed her hand in his, feeling the warmth as it closed about hers. "I would like that."

It seemed to Abby that they stood like that for a long time, eyes and hands clinging together, before he moved away. Abby could feel his regret as he released her hand, saying, "Goodbye now, you take care of yourself, won't you?"

"Yes," she murmured. "You, too." Calling, on impulse, as he got into the driver's seat of the lead van: "Safe trip!"

With a smile and a salute, he drove away, the other van following. In a minute they were obscured by dust, leaving Abby feeling suddenly bereft. How could someone you'd

known for not much more than twenty-four hours have such an impact on your life?

“Cheer up,” sneered Brad as he went past her on his way into the house. “Nobody died.”

Abby didn’t know why Brad’s snide remark increased her feeling of loss. Yes, she did, though it only reinforced the contrast between him and the man she had just farewelled, whom she, most likely, would never meet again. The thought made her gulp back a sob and walk quickly into the garden to hide her reaction from Brad.

Everything about David was comforting, she thought. The aura of strength and purpose she sensed in his presence; the warmth and integrity radiating from him; the calmness that he could instil with a few gentle, wisely chosen words. He was quiet, did nothing to attract attention to himself, yet there was something about him that told her he wasn’t just an ordinary man. From a distance, he appeared anonymous, as if he could blend into a crowd and no-one would give him a second look or even recognise him. It was only when you were close that you saw the strength and refinement of his features, the depth of expression in his eyes, heard the evocative voice that pulled at your heartstrings, sensed the power of the man.

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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