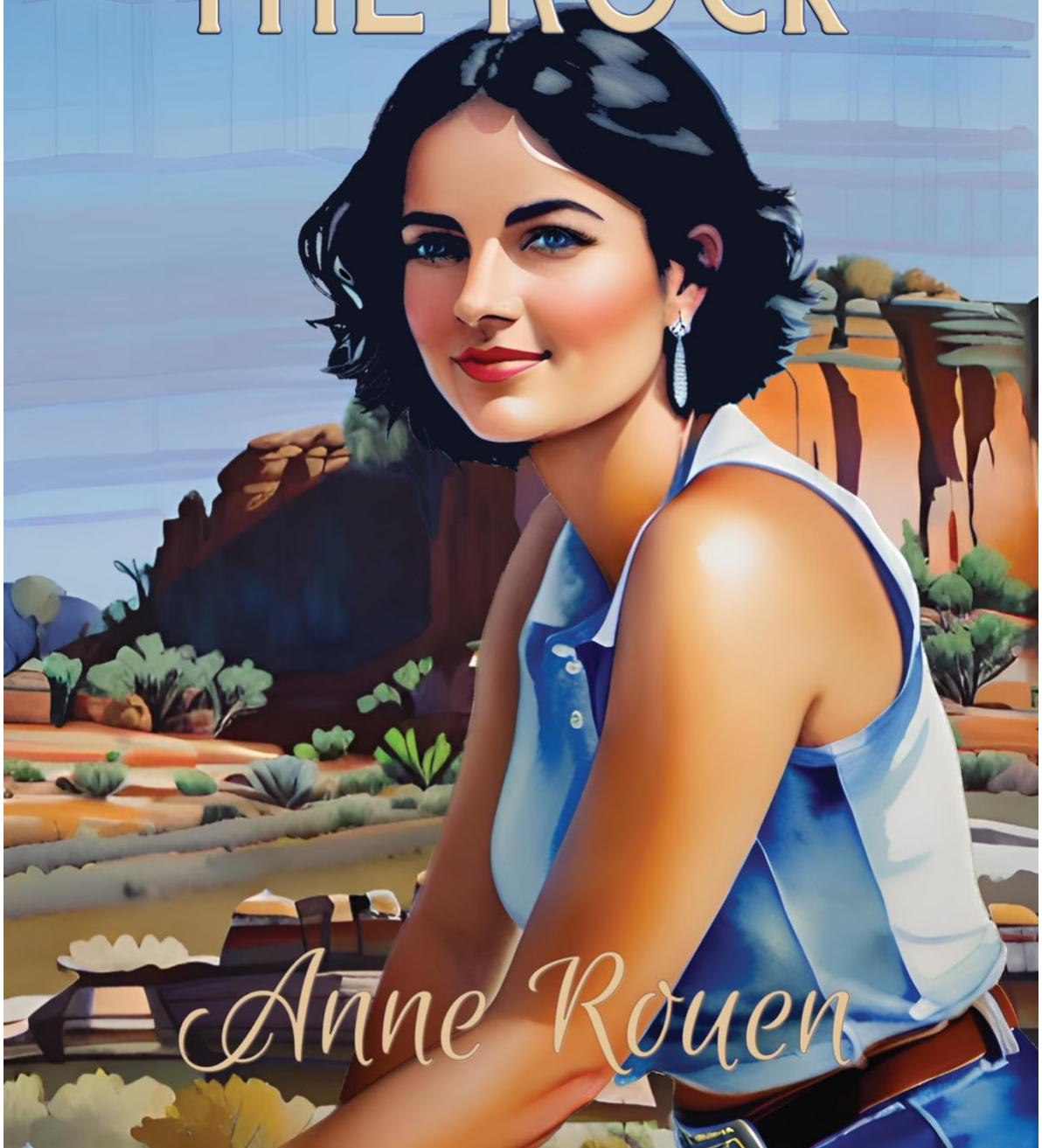


Award-Winning & Amazon Bestselling Author

SECRETS OF THE ROCK



SECRETS OF THE ROCK

Anne Rouen

Secrets of the Rock

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Dedication

To dear opal mining friends, past and present. May you find the treasure you seek.

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Chapter One

Easter Monday, 31 March 1997

Jo sat on the edge of her bed looking thoughtful, perhaps even nostalgic, but not apprehensive. The tall brunette didn't have a fearful bone in her body. She glanced around the bare room, remembering back to the days when she, Sarah and Wendy shared this flat, now owned by Wendy's parents. *Our salad days*, she thought. *Where has the time gone?*

Ten years ago, Sarah had been forced to flee a violent ex-fiancé, and she and Wendy had rallied round to protect her. Jo's lips curved as she remembered confronting him through the locked door of their flat when he was hurling abuse and threatening to break it down. Jo never actually initiated aggression, but she didn't mind standing up for herself and her friends in the face of it. In fact, she relished it. They'd sent Sarah to Western Queensland to a station, next door to Wendy's cousin Elisabeth, as a governess. Within the year, Sarah had married the owner and now had two beautiful children of her own. Jo and Wendy had attended the respective christenings and were godmothers: Jo to the eldest, James, and Wendy to Emily.

Jo and Wendy had both missed Sarah dreadfully when she'd first left. *We've been friends since we were six*, she thought. *That's a long haul*. And nothing, not even time and distance, would ever break that bond.

Wendy was a freelance designer and Jo a sportsmistress at a Sydney inner-city girls' school. For quite some time, she'd become disenchanted with her chosen career. Dealing with teenage girls unwilling to exercise had begun to pall, so it wasn't difficult to make her latest decision. A few months ago, she'd taken her long service leave and then put in her resignation. The resignation would take effect after her leave was used up.

Around five years ago, fascinated by Wendy's fabric designs, Jo had taken up painting as a hobby. When she wasn't playing or refereeing hockey, that was. Competitive hockey had once been her life, but she was winding down from that. She found it soothing to mix and match colours and try to reproduce the beauty of the landscapes around Sydney and the Blue Mountains. More than that, she had the satisfaction of knowing that she had a talent for it. She'd exhibited at a friend's gallery, won prizes for her artwork and sold some at, to

her, astonishing prices.

Jo thought about the magnificence of the Queensland Outback and knew what she was going to do with every bit of her spare time. Her easel and paints were packed in the car with her luggage. Maybe it would eventually become her new career?

It was Wendy's bombshell that had made her do it: reassess her life and make what she acknowledged to be a life-changing decision. Jo got up and strode around the room. She'd better get going if she were to make a start today.

There was just one more call ... Jo picked up her mobile and pressed in the numbers. The phone rang for just long enough for Jo to think no-one was home when a breathless voice answered.

“Medora Downs: Sarah speaking.”

“Hi, Sarah. Did I make you run?”

“Jo! How lovely to hear you.” Sarah laughed. “Yes, you did make me run. I was out in the garden. This *is* a surprise! But a good one.”

“I know. The connections are usually so bad that I'd rather write than phone. I can hear you well today, though.”

“That's because we have a new system—a satellite phone.”

“Well, there you go! Technology has reached the Outback—and not before time! How are the tiddlers?”

“Good, good. Keeping us all run off our legs.”

“Keeping you up to the mark, then? Well, good for them!”

Jo was being her old flippant self, but Sarah detected something in her voice. A sudden fear made her say, “I can tell you've got news. Is it good or bad?”

“A bit of both, really. Good for some and bad for others. It depends on how you look at it.”

“Go on, then. Don't keep me in suspenders!”

“Hey, that's my word you've pinched!”

“I know. Now, come on—tell!”

“It's Wendy. She's fallen in love, at last.”

“Great! That's wonderful ... isn't it?”

“And she's gone off to Italy with a man she'd only known for ten days—just like that!”

“Oh dear. It's not like Wen to be so ... precipitous.”

“You're telling me!”

“So, what's he got, Jo, this Italian? I presume he is an Italian?”

“Oh, yes.”

“He must be pretty special. For Wen to lose her head like that.”

“You've said it! He's warm, kind and generous—utterly charming—and it's a good thing they've gone because I was beginning to fall a little bit in love with him, myself.”

“I see. Well ...”

“She asked me to ring and explain to you. I'm sorry that it has taken me a while to get to it, but I've had a lot on my plate. Wen's promised to write and tell us all her news when she is settled. She doesn't plan on coming back, not unless ... Well, we won't think of that.”

“I know you're going to miss her, Jo, but we both have to be happy for her. It sounds like something that only happens once in a lifetime. Unless you've had one of your premonitions?”

“No, no, nothing like that. I agree; they will be fine. They are so beautiful together. Perfect, really.” Jo cleared her throat. “There's something else.”

“What? You haven't found the love of your life, too?”

“No, I told you: Wen got him. Now to change the subject. How would you like to have me as your neighbour?”

“Jo? You're kidding!” Sarah's voice rose an octave. “Aren't you?”

“No, I'm not. After Wen left with her Adonis ——”

“That's Greek, not Italian.”

“I know, I know, but you get the picture. Look, do you want to hear this or not?”

“Of course I do! I wasn't sure if you were serious, but if you are, you know I couldn't think of anything better. So, how come?”

“Well, I got to thinking. I'm in my thirties now ——”

“I know to a day how old you are—how old *we* are!”

“And I'm sick of the city and city guys, and I wondered if I could find my someone

like you did. And now, Wen! She had to look outside the country for hers. But isn't it my turn? Fat chance, I know.”

“Don't sell yourself short, darling. You're as deserving of happiness as anyone. So?”

“So, I quit my job ——”

“You what?” Sarah's voice rose again in disbelief. “*What* did you say?”

“I resigned from teaching.”

“Well, I never thought I'd hear you say that!”

“I never thought I'd say it, either. But everything seems to have changed since Wen left, although I'm not giving it up altogether.”

“You mean you're coming up here as a governess?”

“You've got it in one! I looked through the advertisement section in the *Queensland Country Life* and, blow me down, if I didn't find an ad for a governess up your way. And when I phoned, guess who answered?”

“Well, it can't be Elisabeth. Her kids are away at boarding school with Adam and Naomi. Oh my goodness! You can't mean Louella at Emerald Hills, for William?”

“I can and do.”

“Oh, wow! That's wonderful news!”

“Louella must have thought so, too, because when I said I would send my CV and they could apply to you for a character reference, she said there was no need and to please, please, *please* come at once.”

“Ah, I know Louella is having difficulty homeschooling William.” Sarah didn't add that Louella's temper had lost her a number of governesses—Jo would be able to cope.

“Why? What's wrong with him?”

“Nothing at all. On the contrary! But I'm not going to tell you any more because I don't want to give you any preconceived notions. You will be so good for him. In your own words: perfect!”

“Well, I hope so. I'll see you next week. I'm driving up. As a matter of fact, I'm leaving now.”

“But it's Easter Monday.”

“I know. I checked: the only day you can't get fuel anywhere is Good Friday. I didn't feel like celebrating Easter this year, so I used the time to pack.”

“Poor Jo. Well, it will be different when you get here.”

They chatted for a few more minutes and said their goodbyes. Jo picked up her bag and keys, took a last look around and stepped out into the unknown.

Chapter Two

The day was dull with a fine drizzle; the kind of day Jo hated. *Well*, she mused, unlocking her new car, *there won't be much of that where I'm going. At least, not until the wet season.* She'd bought a four-wheel-drive SUV for her new venture—a diesel Nissan Patrol—and was still getting used to driving it. That's why she decided to leave the city through Windsor and take the Putty Road rather than the busy freeway. Although steep and winding in places, it was quiet and picturesque and would give her time to become accustomed to her new vehicle. She discovered that diesels were a whole other story to petrol vehicles in the city, but this one did seem to have plenty of muscle at both high and low speed—just a little slower to get going at traffic lights than the zippier smaller cars.

By the time she crossed the Hawkesbury, Jo was feeling relaxed about driving her new vehicle, finding it both powerful and responsive. It didn't take her long to reach Colo Heights after she drove down into the valley to cross the Colo River—a place she'd come several times to paint the magnificent trees on the heights. She cheered up because the drizzle cleared, and the day became bright and sunny.

It wasn't until Jo reached the worst bend close to the end of the Putty Road that anything untoward happened. About halfway round the bend, with limited visibility to both front and rear, a large greyish-brown bird, with the longest tail she'd ever seen on anything other than a peacock, rushed up the side of the hill and tore across the road in front of her. Jo braked as well as she could on a bend, and the bird disappeared unharmed into the shrubbery on the high side. *Did I just see what I thought I saw?* she wondered, as she moved off again. *I've only ever seen them in books.* Her heart lifted. How wonderful to see a lyrebird! It just made her day.

After a long day's travel, Jo was thankful to pull into the motel where she'd booked a room in the border town of Goondiwindi, famous for the great racehorse Gunsynd, the “Goondiwindi Grey”.

In the morning, Jo made an early start because she wanted to get to Longreach and then have a less exhausting drive from there to Emerald Hills the next day. She lunched and refuelled at the little town of Mitchell. *This has got to be getting close to being called the Outback*, she thought. *There's a lot of history out here.* She passed through Augathella,

Tambo and Blackall but stopped at Barcaldine to visit the Tree of Knowledge, the historic site where the first known Queensland union had been formed by mistreated shearers in 1891. *This poor old tree is looking a bit sick*, she thought, as she pondered its history, before going back to her car. The rest of her trip was uneventful, and she cruised into Longreach on dusk to find her motel, a shower and a satisfying dinner.

Tomorrow will be the day I discover whether this has been the greatest mistake of my life, thought Jo, uncharacteristically, as she was about to drift off to sleep. She shrugged and put her negative thought down to exhaustion and the increasingly barren landscape. Not that it wasn't beautiful in its way, it was just that she'd had to concentrate on the road for so many hours and couldn't appreciate what it offered. Not yet, anyway.

Jo rose early enough to see the sunrise and skipped breakfast, thinking that she would feel more like it when she got to Winton after a couple of hours on the road. At Winton, she fuelled up, enjoyed a cup of coffee and a sandwich, and headed out towards Medora Downs. She knew the way there, and Emerald Hills was a matter of another eighty kilometres farther along, even though the two stations shared a boundary. Unfortunately, she wouldn't be able to see Sarah today because it was important to arrive at her new place of employment at a reasonable hour.

Her Nissan Patrol came into its own on the dirt roads, and she was able to make better time than she had thought. As she passed the Medora Downs' signpost and turn-off, Jo felt a pang, but it was best to leave her reunion with Sarah until her first day off, to be able to spend some quality time together. A few years of separation needed far more than the half-hour she could spare if she called in today, besides adding an extra couple of hours travelling to an already long and tiring journey.

During the last eighty kilometres, Jo began thinking about what she might find at Emerald Hills. She'd never met Louella, since her visits had been brief and had not coincided with Louella being in the country. She didn't know the woman, but she'd heard plenty about her: how she was tall, beautiful and temperamental; and had once been engaged to Sarah's partner, Dev; how she'd jilted him for a rich American oil baron, whom she divorced; how she'd returned and been framed for Sarah's attempted murder; how she'd married one of her French cousins and had one child, William, who was eight.

Being down-to-earth and level-headed, Jo didn't worry too much about reports of her employer's temperament. *I've been dealing with temperamental females for more than ten years*, she thought. *One more isn't going to faze me. It's the child I'll be responsible for. He's the important one.*

Just then, a mob of kangaroos bounded out in front of her, and she turned all her attention back to the road. She hadn't hurt anything, yet, on this journey, and she didn't want to start now. Having safely negotiated the kangaroos without incident, Jo turned off at the Emerald Hills' signpost and was soon viewing the shimmering outline of a homestead in the distance.

As she drew closer, Jo saw that it was a magnificent two-storey Edwardian building with a neoclassical-style porch, making a dramatic front entrance. There were no shady verandahs like the Medora Downs' homestead had, but two long trellises either side of the porch supporting various-coloured bougainvillea, which made pleasantly cool walkways in a park-like garden. A gravel drive curved past the porch and continued around the side of the house.

As Jo drove up to the front entrance, a young woman in a blue uniform came out and motioned her to drive around the back. She was waiting outside the gauze back door as Jo parked her vehicle and got out.

“Hello, you must be the new governess, Miss Paxton? I'm the housemaid, Sally.”

Jo looked into her open, friendly face and felt welcomed. “How do you do, Sally? But, please, call me Jo.”

“Thanks, Jo. Leave the keys in your Patrol and Ronnie, the gardener, will park it in the garage for you and bring up your luggage. I'll take you to Mrs Maddison, our housekeeper. I don't know where the Missus is. Went riding, I think.” Sally opened the door, leaping back as a large black cat—golden eyes wide and luminous—came flying out, fur on end and tail fluffed to three times its normal diameter. The cat was followed by an assortment of missiles that crashed against the door Sally had the presence of mind to slam shut after a torrent of abuse in a language Jo recognised as French.

“*Sacre mille diables!* This cat!”

Sally waited until the shouting stopped. “Our new cook. I don't know what Sebastian's been doing, but that's the third time she's gone off today. I think she just hates cats. She's only been here a few months, and she's a bit of a pain, but it's worth it. Just wait till you taste her cooking! It's out of this world.”

“They say a good French cook is usually temperamental. It's the artistic streak. Do you think it's safe to go in now?”

“I think so.” Sally pulled open the door and retrieved a saucepan, lid and basin from the floor. “Come and meet her, it might take her mind off Sebastian. She fires up pretty

quick and lets fly with a lot of sacre-something-or-others, but it's all over in a flash. You just have to keep out of her way while it's going on. Come on.”

“Well ... If you're sure it's safe?”

“Tell you what ...” Sally gave her a grin. “I'll go in first, and if nothing happens, you follow. Okay?”

Jo laughed and followed Sally down the hall and into a large, well-equipped kitchen.

“G'day, Celeste. How goes it?”

“Allo, Sallee. 'ow are you?”

“Good, good. Brought your stuff back for you.” Sally dumped the utensils into the sink on the island bench and eyed the cook with a limpid glance. “Looks like they migrated out of the kitchen somehow. Grew legs, maybe? Or wings?”

Jo held her breath, but the cook was apparently unmoved.

“Thank you, Sallee. I think they will stay put for now.”

“This is Jo—our new governess.”

“'ow do you do, Jo? This is a pleasure, no?”

Jo's first impression of Celeste was one of disappointment; her mental image of a chic Frenchwoman ruined forever. Celeste had short light-brown hair cut in a bob. Where was the black, or at least dark, chignon? Her eyes were a pale green-gold, accentuated and enlarged by the gold-framed glasses she wore. She had wide, high cheekbones, a small retroussé nose, large teeth, a tiny cleft chin and appeared to be in her mid-twenties. Her complexion was unnaturally white, almost a shade of grey. Instead of a uniform, she wore a baggy tracksuit and, over it, a pinafore apron that disguised her figure, but Jo could see that she was small and slim—thin, even. At least that adhered to the clichéd image, if nothing else in her appearance did.

“How do you do, Celeste?” Jo greeted her in a relaxed, friendly manner. “I understand that your cooking is heavenly.”

Smiling, Celeste was about to reply when they heard an impetuous step, and a tall, elegant woman, dressed in riding clothes, swept into the room, eyes flashing. Her honey-blond hair was confined in a bun at her nape, and the whole effect was stunning. Her fiery gaze levelled on the cook; she didn't mince her words. “What was all that brouhaha, Celeste? I could hear you from the stables!” The woman stemmed the flow this elicited by putting up both hands. “Yes, I know, but Sebastian is William's cat, and I am *not* having you kill him!

You'll just have to put up with him. Understand? *Tu comprends?* Yes?"

"Yes, *madame*." Celeste kept her eyes fixed on the well-stocked knife block. "e 'as 'ad the cheesecake I made for dessert. What do you want me to do?"

"What do think?' Her employer ignored the slight inflection of sarcasm. "Make some more, of course. All right?"

"Okay," agreed the cook. Reluctantly, Jo thought.

"Right. Well, now we've got that settled ..." Louella's impersonal glance fell on Sally. "You can go back to work. I will look after ..." She directed a questioning glance.

"Jo. How do you do, Mrs Lemaitre?"

"Ah, thank goodness! I was hoping it was you and not a sales representative or something. Louella. Call me Louella. Do you mind waiting in the hall? I will be with you in a minute."

Jo heard her giving low-voiced instructions to the cook before Louella emerged from the kitchen, expelling a breath. "She's a wonderful cook. Otherwise, I wouldn't put up with her for a second! Do what I may, I cannot get her to wear a uniform! She lives in that disgusting tracksuit. Ugh! Actually, she's a distant relative, and my husband is very close to her parents. Come to think of it, she'd have to do something unconscionable for him to agree to let her go." She sent Jo a wry smile. "So, it's just as well she can cook. Come this way, and I'll take you to the housekeeper. She will settle you in. William's not here at the moment." Louella glanced at her, as they began to climb a gracious staircase. "He has gone with his father to Townsville to give me a break. Honestly, I don't know how you governesses cope with the little monsters! I thought they'd be back before you arrived, but they're staying another few days. Something about the aquarium and perhaps some snorkelling." They reached the top of the stairs where Jo noticed a chairlift.

"So, your time is your own for the moment. Have a little holiday to get over your trip. Go visit Sarah. Whatever you like. I'll just get Maddy to show you to your room. Maddy is our housekeeper and Daddy's nurse, so anything you want, apply to her." Her eyes went to a plump little woman in a blue uniform coming towards them and sharpened. "What are you doing here, Shoni? It's not your day."

"I just brought back the curtains and bedspread you wanted me to wash for William while he is away, Louie."

"Oh, yes. I forgot about that. This is Jo, our new governess. Shonelle, our laundress, among other talents."

The motherly-looking woman smiled. “Lovely to meet you, Jo. But call me Shoni. Monday is washday, so put anything you want washed outside your door, first thing.”

“Thank you.” Jo found herself looking into large, soft, dark eyes in an oval face framed by wispy home-bleached hair, bundled up into an alligator clip.

Their employer watched her navigate the stairs and disappear into the kitchen before saying with a wry twist and a little snort of laughter, “Rent-a-mother! Shoni looks after the jackaroos as well as our and their washing. I fell on my feet the day she drove up in her campervan looking for a job.”

As she finished speaking, Louella opened a door to a bright, airy room, where a woman wearing a similar uniform to the others was sitting reading to a handsome elderly man in a wheelchair. She stopped as Louella said, “Hello, Daddy. This is Jo, our new governess.”

The man greeted her with a genial smile. “How do you do?” He held out his hand. “Bill, Bill Richmond. Please forgive me for not rising—arthritis, you know—and a heart condition. It's a beggar.” He turned to his companion. “This is Maddy. I don't know what I'd do without her.”

The woman smiled and touched his shoulder, put down the book and stood up. “I'll leave you with your father, Louie, while I show Jo to her room and how best to navigate the house.”

“Yes, do that. Don't hurry back. Daddy and I need a good chinwag. Don't we, Daddy?”

“Yes, indeed, we do, darling. Indeed, we do.” Bill Richmond looked up into his daughter's softened face and patted the chair beside him.

Following the housekeeper out of the room, Jo reflected that it was the first time in their short acquaintance that she'd seen Louella look human.

Mrs Maddison was a slender woman of medium height with short, dark hair. She had an aura of kindness and capability, and Jo could easily understand why the others so obviously relied on her. “I don't know if anyone's told you, but I wear two hats here. I am Bill's nurse and I look after the household for Louie, who has her hands full managing the station. But, of course, Bill's needs must take precedence.” She stopped at a door farther down the hall. “You've come a long way, Jo. How are you finding us, so far?”

“It's very short notice to make any comment, Mrs Maddison.” Jo was unfazed by her directness. In fact, it just reinforced her appraisal of the woman. *She's a straight shooter, and*

that's a good thing.

“Maddy. Call me Maddy. Mrs Maddison is such a mouthful.”

“Thanks, Maddy.”

The housekeeper observed her with a twinkle. “Well?”

“Hmm.” Jo screwed up her eyes while she gave herself time to find a diplomatic answer. “Let’s just say that I don't think I'll be bored.”

“Oh, no, you won't be bored.” Maddy gave a little chuckle. “I can guarantee that to be the least of your worries.” She turned the handle and stood back. “Now, this is your schoolroom. Go on in.”

Chapter Three

Jo entered another bright, airy room. Looking around, she could see that no expense had been spared to provide her pupil with all the necessities for his education. A radio transceiver for School of the Air stood on a shelf above a desk big enough to accommodate two chairs. A second specialised desk supported a top brand computer, printer and scanner. Three impressive bookcases contained adult and children's encyclopedias, scientific texts and a vast number of children's classics. Two comfortable armchairs for reading completed what Jo acknowledged to be an excellent educational resource.

Maddy watched her reaction. "You like?"

"Oh, yes. I like!"

"And here, through this door, is your suite."

"Suite?" Jo swivelled around just in time to see the housekeeper open a door she hadn't noticed in the opposite wall to the transceiver.

"Yes: sitting room, bedroom with ensuite, kitchenette."

"Good grief! Who'd have thought it? Governesses must be something special out here in this neck of the woods."

Again, her comment seemed to amuse the housekeeper. "And yet, it hasn't been enough."

Jo sensed that her companion wanted her to ask why, but how could she? *Better to keep my own counsel and find out for myself*, she thought, looking around the elegantly decorated sitting room and bedroom and into the neat and shining kitchenette. "Well, it will be enough for me. Well and truly."

"I hope so. I do, indeed. But we'll see."

"Yes, we will!" Jo noted that Maddy seemed pleased with the vigour of her reply.

"William's room is opposite the schoolroom and his bathroom next door. You won't need to help him with anything except his schoolwork. He is quite independent at dressing and choosing his clothes, as you might expect from an eight-year-old. Sally takes care of his room, and he spends the time after dinner and before bed with his parents, so your evenings will be free." She smiled. "On another note, I understand you are Sarah Mainwaring's

friend?”

“Yes, we've been friends practically all our lives. It will be good to be able to spend some time with her.”

“Mmm. It's nice that you have a friend out here. It can be lonely sometimes.”

“I suppose so.” Jo thought that the other sounded wistful. “How long have you been here, Maddy?”

“I came when William was expected, so it must be about nine years, now. I heard about what went on over at Medora, but it was old news by the time I got here. Were you ...?”

“Yes, we—another friend and I—came up for Sarah and Dev's wedding.”

“How lovely! I'm sure she was a beautiful bride.” The housekeeper glanced at her watch. “Oh, goodness, look at the time! I'm guessing you missed lunch? I'll send up a pot of tea and some sandwiches for you, and if there's anything you need, you tell Sally when she brings it. Or would you prefer coffee?”

“Tea will be fine, thank you. Perfect.”

“Good. The kitchenette will be stocked for you and William tomorrow when we find out your culinary preferences. It's only for any snacks you might need. You will both have your meals at the dining table with the family. All right, then? I'll leave you to unpack. I'd better go and talk turkey to Celeste.” She smiled. “Literally.”

Jo kicked off her shoes and trod across the luxurious carpet to her queen-sized four-poster bed where her cases waited. *Everything here screams luxury*, she thought as she unzipped her bags and methodically emptied them into a spacious wardrobe. *These big stations must make more money than anybody can guess.*

“Jo?” Sally interrupted her musing. “Open the door. I've got both hands full.”

Jo went into the sitting room. “Which door? The hall door? Or the schoolroom door?”

“The hall door. The schoolroom's shut, too.”

“Phew!” Sally put down the tray on the coffee table when Jo let her in. “Either I'm getting weak, or Celeste has put something heavy in your sandwiches!”

“I'll check them, will I? Before I try them?”

“No need.” Sally arranged the teapot, milk jug and sugar pot on the table with a cup,

saucer and covered plate. “Even her sandwiches taste better than anyone else’s. You’ll see. Want anything else before I go?”

“No. But thank you. I’m wallowing in luxury here.”

“I know.” Sally grinned. “Ain’t it just? That’s why I stay. Makes everything we put up with worthwhile. Especially Celeste’s cooking. Enjoy!” She gave another friendly grin and left.

I like Sally, thought Jo, and I love her sense of humour: subtle and funny. It’s not so much what she says, but the way she says it. Suddenly hungry, Jo didn’t give much consideration to Sally’s words as she polished off the plate of delicious and delicately flavoured sandwiches and two cups of tea. It was only later that the import of those words sank in.

After her late lunch, Jo’s travels caught up with her, and she lay down and went to sleep—something she almost never did in the daytime—but she hadn’t factored in the effect of two-and-a-half days’ constant travel and the concentration that long distance driving demanded.

When Jo awoke, it was dark, and for a moment, she didn’t know where she was. *Oh, Lord,* she thought, when she remembered and checked her watch. *I’ve missed dinner. How rude of me!* She hurried into the sitting room to access the hall and apologise to whomever she could find when she saw a tray with covered dishes on the coffee table with a folded note:

I knocked and when you didn’t answer, came in. You were sleeping so peacefully; I didn’t have the heart to wake you. Enjoy your dinner and don’t worry about another thing. We’ll talk tomorrow, Maddy.

Jo breathed a sigh of relief. So, she hadn’t committed a felony against etiquette, after all, thanks to the kindness of the housekeeper.

It was with real gratitude that Jo tucked in to the tempting meal and went off to have a shower. Maddy had left her some teabags, a jar of coffee and some extra milk for Jo to make her own, and after her shower, she relaxed with her tea in a comfortable armchair in front of the television until weariness sent her off to bed once more.

Just before she dozed off, Jo decided to get up early and try to capture a sunrise from somewhere picturesque. *I know I’ll find it here—the perfect place,* was her final thought before she slept.

Chapter Four

Again, it was dark when Jo awoke, but this time it was early morning. Quickly, she dressed in jeans, a pink short-sleeved polo and a pair of sturdy walking boots, slung her satchel over her shoulder and torch in hand, slipped out into the dark hall.

The housekeeper was just exiting a room farther down in her dressing-gown. “Good morning, Jo. You're up with the sparrows, aren't you?”

“Good morning, Maddy.” Jo patted her satchel. “I'm going to try and capture an Outback sunrise.”

“Well, you'll have to be quick.”

“I know! That's why I'm up so early, hoping to get set up in time.”

“Come with me.” Maddy led her to a window facing east. “Can you see that track down there? Follow that for a few hundred metres, and you'll find a place perfect for what you want to do.”

Thanking her, Jo followed the instructions and was soon enjoying the freshness of the air in the pale early morning light as she strode along the track. She, like her friend Sarah, had been instantly enchanted with the Outback, though not for the same reasons. Sarah loved the vastness, the far horizons, the timelessness of it, whereas Jo had responded with all her artistic soul to the vibrant Outback colours—the fierce clarity of the light.

It's pleasant now, she thought. But wait until after sunrise! Everything's really too much out here: too hot, too windy, the light too bright, the shadows too black, the rocks too glittering, the colours too beautiful. But not for me. For me, they're perfect!

The last time Jo had visited Sarah, she'd thought, *I must come back one day and capture that light and these colours: rocks; earth; sunset; red-and-purple mountains; the rich hues of the red kangaroo and the muted, delicate shades of the blue flyer.*

Good Lord, she mused, I hadn't thought, but I am realising my dream! And then, just as Maddy had said, Jo found the perfect place to sit and prepare to paint her first Outback sunrise.

The track dipped down to follow the winding, tree-lined channel of a dry creek, and just as Jo was admiring the silvery, grey-green leaves brushing her arm, she looked up at the

surrounding low hills and caught her breath. Rising above her was a great pile of rocks, and there in the middle, flanked by rounded boulders of varying sizes that formed a natural stairway, was a massive platform, commanding views over the surrounding countryside.

Jo made her agile way to the top, seated herself on a perfect, natural bench seat made by subsidence at a fault line in the rock, unclipped her satchel and looked around with satisfaction. Maddy had not been wrong: This would become her base for every spare moment. From here she could reproduce the toning greens of the vegetation, the remarkable way the hills changed their colours throughout the day and the magical splendour of the Outback sunsets. But all that was for another time because the glow in the east suddenly flared, and she couldn't afford to miss a second of it. So engrossed was she in her work, that until a voice spoke from below, Jo had no idea that she was not alone.

“Hullo, a Rock Maiden! Well, I'll be ... I've been told about such creatures, but I didn't believe a word of it—until now!”

Startled, Jo looked around and down into a pair of laughing blue eyes.

The tall, fair man who had been regarding her from bottom of the rock pile spoke again: “Well, Maiden?” He grinned engagingly up at her. “Aren't you coming down from your rock to introduce yourself?”

Why don't I just tell him to go take a running jump? wondered Jo, studying him for several moments before she realised she'd been sitting for too long on a hard surface. Resolving to bring a cushion next time, she climbed gracefully down from her perch to find herself looking up into a ruggedly handsome face.

It was a new experience for Jo to look up at a man. Being so tall, she usually met them eye to eye or had to bend a little. Somewhere, deep down, she was conscious of the feeling that, at last, she had seen a man who made her heart beat a little faster. It wasn't that he was so good-looking—Jo had known some incredibly handsome men who had bored her to tears and some conventionally ugly men who had been utterly charming—there was just something about him. Was it the reckless gleam and engaging twinkle in his eyes? Or was it the hint of courage and power she sensed in his aura? Jo would never know. She only knew, as she stood looking up at him, that whatever the spark or chemistry was that drew one person to another, it was here now in good measure, pressed down and running over!

“I'm Jo.” She offered her hand. “And you are?”

“The luckiest man in the world; I would say.”

“Oh, yes?” Jo raised a sceptical eyebrow. “Why?”

“Well, it's not every day a man meets a Rock Maiden, is it? And such a gorgeous one, too.” He tucked her hand through his arm and held it there.

Jo had a whole raft of effective deterrents for men who took liberties like that and couldn't think why she wasn't motivated to use at least one of them. She felt helpless, totally unlike her usual capable self. “Hey!” She tried unsuccessfully to pull her hand away. “I don't even know you!”

“There's only one way to change that, isn't there?”

“But ——”

“No buts. I've found a Rock Maiden, and now I'm taking her home. Finders keepers, you know. And if you find one, you have to keep a good hold of her; otherwise, she'll disappear.”

Jo gave a little snort of laughter. Did anyone really behave like this? The audacity of the man! *Why am I going along with it?* she wondered. *He could be a serial killer for all I know. They say Ted Bundy was a charmer.*

Her captor glanced down at her. “I'm not.”

“Not what?”

“A serial killer.”

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

“Don't you think it means we have a connection?”

“How could we?”

He shrugged. “But, apart from that, I think it might cross any girl's mind.”

“That's more like it.” Jo came to a halt, so that he stopped, too. “You're a bit too over the top, whoever you are! And before we go any further, you'd better introduce yourself. Got it?”

“Got it. Why don't you come and help me boil the billy? And I'll tell you all about myself.”

“What kind of an offer is that?”

“A genuine one.” He looked hurt. “Do you doubt me?”

“No, but maybe I should.”

“No, no. Believe me,” he told her, earnestly, “that's the one thing you should not do.”

Jo looked again into those dancing blue eyes and still couldn't believe she had not done anything to free herself. "Okay, then. You win. But it had better be a good story."

A little smile just tugged at the corners of his lips. "Oh, it will be. I can promise you that."

"Modest, too, I see."

"Of course. What else did you expect?"

It was too much for Jo. She couldn't help laughing. As she did so, she looked out towards the horizon and did not see the laughter die in his eyes, to be replaced by a fleeting sombre expression, almost a sadness, before the light sprang back into them.

They walked along the edge of the creek, and he still held her hand tucked through his arm, as though he were truly afraid that she would vanish if he let her go. It was not until they reached his camp that he released her, and when he did, Jo missed the warmth of his body against her arm and his hand covering hers. And that was another thing she couldn't believe of herself!

The camp was tucked away in a bend of the creek, shaded by some massive coolibahs. A short distance away was an outcrop of rock, not so large as the one Jo had found, but big enough to provide some cover and shelter from the wind. A fireplace of flat rocks sat in front of a roomy tent, behind which was a rugged-looking Land Rover with a row of spotlights attached to the roof, equipped with large water tanks, a camping refrigerator/freezer and other gear, all packed neatly.

The whole camp was tidy, as if this strange, mercurial man were disciplined beneath his carefree exterior. Inside the opened flaps of the tent, Jo glimpsed a folding table with matching camp chairs stacked against one wall, a sturdy workbench and a camp bed supporting a neatly rolled swag, which he brought out and unrolled in one quick movement.

"Be seated, *madame*." He bowed and gestured, before gathering together some leaves and twigs. In no time at all, he had a good fire going, and the billy sitting over it. Jo admired his deft movements, thinking how lithe and active he was—like a coiled spring—his controlled energy a foil for her own laidback nature, although she had plenty of controlled energy herself.

"Now." He swung himself down beside her on the swag. "Tell me all about yourself. What do you do? Apart from being an elusive Rock Maiden, of course! Did I see you painting up there?"

"Now, just hang on a minute." Jo gave him a level glance. "I thought that you were

going to tell me all about yourself!”

“Oh, I will. But I'm being a gentleman. Ladies first, you know.”

“I don't think you intend telling me about yourself at all!”

“Why should you think that?” He looked hurt, but Jo wasn't fooled.

“I wonder.”

“You do know what they say about sarcasm?” His eyes questioned, then focused on her hair. “Do you know that your hair is the most beautiful blue-black? Is it real?”

“What do you mean, ‘Is it real?’”

“You know what I mean.”

“If you're asking, ‘Does it come out of a bottle?’ the answer is no. Not that it's any of your business!”

“No, I meant as a Rock Maiden, of course. How could you think I would be so rude?”

“Easily! By the way, I think the billy is boiling.”

“So it is.” He leapt to his feet and disappeared into the tent. “Won't be a sec.”

Jo watched him bring out the camping table on which he had placed several tins and two mugs. He took a handful of leaves from the tea caddy and threw them into the bubbling water. After a few seconds, he lifted the billy onto one of the rocks with a stick, banged the side a few times to make it settle and poured it into the enamelled mugs.

“There we are, *madame*, real billy tea. I must apologise for the lack of damper, but the truth is, I'm not much of a cook. So, it will have to be biscuits instead.” He indicated the largest container and opened a smaller tin. “Sugar?”

“One, thanks.” Jo, watching him sugar and stir hers, noticed that he took his straight. Accepting the proffered cup and a biscuit, she sat in silence, thinking what a lovely spot it was and enjoying the music of the early morning bird calls.

“Can you cook?” The question came out of the blue.

“Me? No, nothing fancy.”

“It wouldn't have to be fancy.”

“Cut it out!” Jo laughed. “The tea is delicious, and you don't look as if you're starving. So, I imagine you're managing quite well.”

“Out of tins,” he admitted in mournful tones. “But if you can't cook, you can't. What do you do. Are you an artist?”

Jo shook her head. “A governess. And I haven't met my pupil, yet.”

“Ah, young William.”

She turned her head to look at him in surprise. “Do you know him?”

“I'm afraid I can't tell you that. It's classified information.” He met her eyes. “I've been sworn to secrecy, you see.”

“By whom?”

“I'm sorry. That's classified information, too.”

“I see.”

“I thought you would.”

“I haven't got time for all this fencing. I'd better get back.”

To her surprise, he didn't object. “I'll walk you to your rock.” He rose, holding out a hand, which she refused.

“Thanks, but I'm not a cripple.”

“All right, then. I admire independent women.”

“So, why do you think I need you to walk me back?”

“I just want to see if Rock Maidens vanish after full daylight comes. Do they?”

“Not this one. But you're the one who knows all about them! And don't you think you're overdoing it a bit? All this Rock Maiden stuff; I don't know where you got it from, but it sounds just like believing in fairies.”

“Don't you believe in fairies?”

“No.”

By this time, they'd reached the rock pile and stopped. “I don't either.” He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. “But I do believe in Rock Maidens ... now.”

Jo saw that all the merriment had vanished from his face, and he seemed, for once, quite serious.

“As to where I got it from: it was an old bushman in the mountains who told me about them. According to his legend, they are to prospectors and bushmen what the sirens

and mermaids are to sailors.”

“So, you're a prospector?”

“You could say that. I started out as a geologist for a mining company, then got the bug, myself. Now, where was I? Oh, yes: Any country that has large outcrops of rock may be haunted by Rock Maidens. You may pass a certain rock a hundred times, and then, one day, there she is, sitting on top of it, beckoning and smiling and combing her tresses ... What?”

“Nothing. Go on.”

“Or painting. And then, just as you reach her, she vanishes, only to appear on a further rock and so on, until she disappears completely, leaving you like a man dying of thirst in the desert, vainly following a mirage. Of course, if you catch one ...” his voice deepened and seemed to take on a mesmeric quality, “that is a very different story. But they are very difficult, almost impossible, to catch.

“They only appear to men; women never see them, and although they vary in appearance, they always appear, to whoever looks upon them, as the woman of his desires. So, if a man preferred a curvaceous blonde, that is how the Rock Maiden would appear to him, or if he is fascinated by leggy brunettes—well, then ...”

He paused a moment, waiting for Jo to speak, but when she didn't, went on: “The old bushman warned me about them when I first went prospecting. ‘You want to watch out for them Rock Maidens, son,’ was what he said. ‘They can ruin a good man, and don't you forget it. If you see one, you want to be able to run: either fast enough to catch it or fast enough to get away from it. Them Rock Maidens is dangerous, believe me!’ He said he was afraid of them because, once you stopped and looked at one, she wove a spell around you, and you could never forget her, and unless you could catch her and keep her with you, you would be haunted by her, hopelessly in love, until the day you die.” Again, his voice deepened and softened, “And now, I know that it is true, and the old bushman was right.”

Involuntarily, Jo glanced up, to be held captive by the expression in those bright blue eyes. It seemed so natural that he should kiss her, and that her body should melt into his.

“Now ...” He raised his head to look down at her with darkened eyes. “The bushman told me that the only way to make sure a Rock Maiden would not vanish forever was to kiss her. Then she must come back to her rock. And I'm not taking any chances!” He kissed her again, gently at first, and then passionately, as if he couldn't bear to let her go. At last, he released her and stepped back. “Come back soon, my Rock Maiden.” He turned and strode away, back along the channel.

Did that really happen? Jo asked herself, transfixed by her soul-shattering encounter with the most unusual, brazenly forward, devastatingly attractive man she had ever met. Then, she shrugged, climbed the rock, packed up her painting gear and set off for the house, still castigating herself: *You fool! How could you let him kiss you like that? How could you?*

Jo could find no answers, but the trouble was, she knew in her heart that she would do it all over again if she had the chance. She was just entering the house yard when she realised that she didn't even know his name.

Then, as frantic screams hit the air, Jo looked up and sprinted for the house.

Chapter Five

Dropping her satchel in the hall, Jo rushed into the kitchen, where she stopped short to stare in amazement. Celeste was standing on the island bench, screaming and pointing at an enormous goanna. The reptile, maintaining an aggressive stance in front of the refrigerator, head down, body arched and puffed out, held its huge tail straight out behind and was ominously still. Its body was mainly a mottled brown with rows of tiny white spots along each side, and its short, sturdy legs ended in strong clawed toes. Jo noticed that the tail had a small nick out of the top about twenty centimetres from its lighter-coloured tapered end. It wasn't striped like the tree goannas she had seen in New South Wales.

“Hang on a minute, Jo,” said a quiet voice behind her. “Just ease yourself around the walls and go and stand over the other side of the room.” The voice rose momentarily. “For God's sake, shut up, Celeste! You're only making things worse. You'll have the Missus down on us in a moment. And you know what that means! How did he get in, anyway?”

“I don't know, Sallee,” said the cook, obeying her command. “'e was waiting there, in front of the fridge, and when I came in 'e ran at me.”

“Strike me pink, Celeste! I told you not to feed him.” Sally went out to prop open the back door with Jo's satchel and returned with a straw broom. “What the hell did you expect? That he would wait at the back door like a pussycat? They're not stupid, you know. He knows the food you give him comes from the fridge.”

“That's why I fed 'im, 'oping 'e would chase away that ... cat.”

“Huh, some chance!” scoffed Sally. “They keep out of each other's way once they reach a certain size. Respect the distance, you know.”

“Well, then, why doesn't 'e respect mine?”

“Because you fed him, you idiot! You have to think like a goanna—actually, he's a Gould's monitor, according to William.”

“What do you mean, Sallee? 'ow do you think like an ugly creature like that?” Celeste showed a flash of her former spirit. “And I don't care what 'is name is! 'e looks like a giant lizard to me.”

“You watch them, and you see that the weaker one gives up its food to the stronger

one. Get it?"

"You mean that 'e thinks 'e is my, um, boss?"

"Exactly! You got it in one."

"Well, I don't care!" Celeste returned, momentarily, to normal. "Just get 'im out of 'ere!"

"That might be easier said than done." Sally stepped towards the reptile, and it swung its tail at her. She blocked the attempt with her broom. "They fight with their tails and it's a case of endurance. The one that can go on the longest wins. You have to be careful, you know. A big goanna like this can break your leg." All the while she was chatting, Sally blocked each mighty swing of the reptile's tail with the heavy straw broom, keeping herself out of the way. After a tense few minutes, it gave up and ran out the back door.

"There you go, Colonel. Good boy!" Sally waved the broom. "Now, keep the back door shut, Celeste, and don't feed him any more."

Jo, opening her mouth for the first time to compliment Sally, shut it again as hasty footsteps sounded in the hall.

"Now, what's going on?" Louella glared at each of them from the doorway. "I was on the phone upstairs, or I would have come sooner. What the hell are you doing up on the counter, Celeste? There had better not be any mice in here!"

"It was just the goanna, Missus. No problem: I got him out, all right. Celeste's not used to them yet."

"That bloody goanna! Coming into the house? That's the living end! I'll get Ronnie to shoot it."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Missus."

"Go on ..." Louella's eyes flashed green fire. "So, now you think you can give *me* advice, do you?"

"Only because it's important, Missus." Sally, red-faced, stood her ground. "Something you may not know."

"Such as?"

"Big ones like the Colonel—Ronnie's named him after Colonel Gaddafi—well, they keep the snakes away. Remember what happened when they shot all the goannas over at Ilona Downs because the children were afraid of them? Overrun with brown snakes! I don't know about you, Missus, but I'd rather face a goanna than a snake, any day."

“Of course! You're right; I'd forgotten about that. Ugh!” Louella shuddered. “I hate snakes! All right, the damn thing's safe, for now. Unless he comes in the house again.”

“He won't,” Sally assured her. “He knows when he's beaten.”

“And *if* you can come down to earth, Celeste ...” Louella's voice resonated with heavy sarcasm. “Daddy needs his morning coffee, *right now*.”

There was a small silence after their employer turned on her heel and swung out of the room.

“Oh, I hate it when she does that!” Sally grimaced, as she and Jo helped the cook down from the bench. “Come on, Celeste, we'll give you a hand. I think we all need a coffee after that!”

“Did someone say coffee?” A well-knit, athletic-looking youth with dark-blond hair and sparkling hazel eyes strode in with an armful of folded and ironed tea towels and tablecloths, which he dumped on the counter. “Shoni sent these.” He put his arm around Celeste. “There's a lot of cackling been going on in here. What's up, old girl? The wildlife around here too much for you?”

The cook batted him away. “Get out, Dylan. You are too much for me, today. You are completely, er ...” She struggled for a word, finally adding, “*De trop*.”

“What's that mean?”

“Surplus to requirements,” supplied Jo.

He looked her over in a way that made her hand itch. “You're Jo, the new governess.”

“And you are?”

He held out his hand. “Dylan, head jackaroo.” He eyed the housemaid. “Hey, Sal, how about a coffee as a reward for services rendered?”

“Dylan!” Sally jerked her head towards the door. “You picked the wrong day. Better get going.”

“Okay. I know when I'm not wanted, but it's your loss.”

Nothing's going to dent his ego, thought Jo, watching him swagger to the door.

When he'd gone, the housemaid shrugged. “Dylan's okay. Just needs slapping down, occasionally.”

While she spoke, Sally collected a silver tray, three cups, saucers and plates, and deftly sliced and buttered a banana loaf, arranging the slices on a pretty tiered plate with

biscuits—melting moments and macaroons.

Jo noticed that Celeste was standing—white and trembling and looking lost. “What can I do?”

“See that pot over there? Can you fill it up out of the big percolator? Thanks.” Sally filled a milk jug and collected a matching sugar pot while Jo placed the coffeepot on the tray with all the rest.

Jo watched Sally pick up the loaded tray. “Do you want some help with that?”

“No thanks. You stay here and make ours.” Sally cocked an eyebrow towards the cook. “I doubt if Celeste will be good for much for a while, and I *really* need a coffee. I'll have a mug—a cup won't be big enough for me today!”

“Done.” Jo waited until she carried the heavy tray out of the room. Sally wasn't all that big, but she seemed remarkably strong. Moving to the cupboard to collect the coffee mugs, Jo tended to agree with Sally—a cup wouldn't cut it for her today, either, and by the look of Celeste, Jo assumed she'd feel the same. The cook was still looking jittery, white and shaking, and Jo put it down to the fright she'd had. *I don't know that I'd feel too good, either, with a goanna that size after me!*

Sally came back and sat down, with a sigh, at the breakfast bar. “Whew! Talk about into the lion's den! Missus is in good form today. Luckily, Maddy was there to deflect fire, or I would have been well and truly scorched.”

Jo passed her a mug of coffee.

“Thanks.” Sally noticed the cook was still shaking. “Hey, Celeste. What's up, old girl?”

“Nothing.” Celeste was hunched over the counter, holding her mug in both hands, tiny beads of perspiration springing up on her top lip.

“You're not still worrying about the Colonel? Because there's no need. Like I told you, he won't be back. They know when they're beaten.”

“No, no, just low blood sugar, maybe. I'll be okay after I drink this.”

“Then, put some sugar in it. You've got to get your act together and soon. Trust me, you don't want the Missus down on you, again, today. She's spewing pure venom.”

Jo, sipping her coffee, began to have an understanding of the situation here at Emerald Hills. She'd already seen a few examples of her employer's temper—been aware of the undercurrents and hints from Sarah and the housekeeper. Sally wasn't holding back,

either, and Jo began to sense another truth: Maddy was the bridge between Louella's explosive lack of empathy and the rest of the household. *Louella hasn't worried me, so far. Maybe I don't know just how bad she can get?*

After coffee, Jo didn't want to return to her suite with time to think, so she decided to go and visit Sarah for the rest of the day. Her mobile didn't have service this side of Longreach, and she asked Sally if she could use the phone to check whether it would be a convenient time for Sarah.

“Missus is bad about that.” Sally made a wry face. “Doesn't want the help on it if she wants to make a call. There's a UHF radio in the breakfast room. Do you know how to use it? Come on, I'll show you. The thing with the radio: everyone within range will hear you, so you've got to be brief—don't tell any secrets. Just give your message, get your answer and get off.

“So, it's simple: you press this button on the transmitter and say, ‘Emerald Hills calling Medora Downs, over.’ When they answer, you give your message and say ‘over’, and when you've both finished talking, say ‘over and out’, so everyone knows you're finished. Are you right, or do you want me to do it for you?”

“Would you mind, just this once? I will watch and be able to do it next time.”

“No problem.” Sally demonstrated how easy it was. When she asked Sarah if she could handle a visitor today, the answer was a resounding “yes!” and to come straightaway as lunch would be waiting.

“There you go.” Sally hung up the transmitter. “At least, you'll have lunch. I don't know whether we'll get Celeste back on track for anything decent here. And then Missus really will go off! You'll be better out of it.” She grinned. “Half your luck! Have a good visit with your friend. Sarah's a sweetie.”

It wasn't until Jo got into her Patrol and was on her way to Medora Downs that the thoughts she'd been trying to avoid all morning popped back into her head, and she discovered that an hour's drive along the shorter back road that Sally had given her directions for wasn't enough to keep a tall, blond stranger with laughing blue eyes out of her mind.

How could I do it? she asked herself, mortified. *How could I let him kiss me like that?*

Chapter Six

“Wow! What a great welcoming party!” Jo stepped out of her vehicle to be greeted with hugs from Sarah, Dev and their two children. “How's my godson? Goodness me, James! What a big boy you've grown into since I was last here!”

“Fine, thanks, Aunty Jo. I'm six now, you know.”

“I know.”

“And what about me, Aunty Jo,” said a little voice. “Have I grown a lot, too?”

“You sure have, chicken.” Jo lifted her up. “You were just a little baby when I was last here. And how old are you now, Emily?”

“I'm four.”

“Four! Is that how long it is since my last visit?” Jo put down the little girl and opened the back door of her Patrol. “Come and see what I have for you and James.” She handed out two brightly wrapped parcels, smiling as she watched them excitedly tear at the wrapping paper.

“What do you say?” asked Sarah.

Both obediently chorused: “Thank you, Aunty Jo.”

“You give the best presents, Aunty Jo.” James beamed and held up his remote-controlled model racing car.

“You sure do, Aunty Jo!” Emily clutched her rainbow pony.

“Go and play with them on the verandah.” Dev smiled and looked beyond his guest. “I think someone else wants to say g'day to you, Jo.”

Jo turned to follow his gaze to a wizened old man in a wheelchair on the verandah. She ran to clasp his hand. “Reuben! How are you?”

“Too bloody old, girl! He cackled. “Too bloody old.”

Jo looked into faded, twinkling eyes. “You? Never!”

“It's true. Young Colin's the gardener now. He's doing a good job. How do you like living over at the Hills?”

“Oh, great! Very interesting.”

“Hmm. Well, you're one that I reckon will thrive out here. Like a good tough desert plant, you are.”

“Well, um, thank you, I think.” Jo looked up to see another face she knew. “Hello, Johnnie.”

“G'day, Jo. Good to see you. Hear you're a neighbour now—good one! Mattie wants Reub in the kitchen. She's got the idea he won't eat unless she's watching over him.” Johnnie gave a grin. “Ready, Reub? Good-o.” He nodded to Jo and wheeled his charge along the verandah into the hall.

“Come into the dining room, Jo.” Dev stepped aside in invitation. “The children should be well occupied while we have lunch, thanks to you.”

“Won't they want lunch?”

“They've already had theirs. Sue will come and get them in a while to take them for their nap, once they've worn themselves out playing.”

“So, you're continuing the tradition? Good idea.”

“If it ain't broke, don't fix it.” Dev shepherded them into the dining room where a handsome spread awaited them.

“I see Mattie hasn't lost any of her talents.” Jo admired the array of delicious salads, quiche and roast chicken. “Oh!” She drew a hand across her forehead, pretending to faint into a chair. “This is making me so hungry!”

“Tuck in,” advised Sarah. “We can talk when you've recovered. What do you want me to pass you first?”

“That delicious-looking caesar salad and the quiche will do me for a start.”

“Speaking of quiche.” Sarah glanced up. “I hear the new cook over at the Hills is a Frenchwoman.”

“Mmm, she is. And cordon bleu, as well.” Jo dabbed her lips with a napkin. “But, oh my heavens, is she volatile! Between her and Louella, there's hardly been a minute's peace in the house since I arrived. Louella said she was a relative, so maybe they inherited their tempers from the same source. It's an interesting household, to say the least.”

“Oh, do tell!” Sarah looked like a little girl about to be entertained.

Jo related the story of her arrival being complicated by the altercation between the cook and the cat, and this morning's experience with the goanna. She was just finishing, amidst gales of laughter, when Mattie brought in the coffee.

Since Mattie approved of Jo, she greeted her as an old friend, smiled when Jo thanked her for her culinary efforts and asked Dev if he wanted dessert.

“No thanks, Mattie, I’ve had elegant sufficiency, as they say. Coffee will round it off nicely.”

Jo waited until Mattie had cleared the table and gone back to the kitchen. “She’s just as good a cook. Without being temperamental.”

“She can be.” Dev gave a little grin. “But only if a strange man comes into her kitchen.”

“Oh, I remember! I never laughed so much in my life when I heard that! But this is different, somehow, and it’s compounded by Louella’s explosive reaction. I hope it’s not going to be like that every day.” Jo frowned. “You know, I thought this morning that Louella seemed upset that her husband and son were still away.”

“It’s not that.” Sarah put a hand on her arm. “That’s what she’s like. It’s just that Jean-Luc has a calming effect on her; doesn’t he, Dev?”

“He does that! I have to take my hat off to the man. He’s the only one who can handle her when she gets in a mood.” He rose from the table. “Now, if you girls will excuse me, I have work to do. Enjoy your afternoon together. I’m sure you have a lot to catch up on.” He dropped a kiss on Sarah’s hair and went out.

“Do you think you can handle it, Jo? Because poor William ...” Sarah’s eyes filled with distress.

“Now, buck up, old girl! You know I don’t give up that easily. Besides, it’s a pretty comfortable nest, if you discount all the female hormones rampaging around.”

They talked for a while about Wendy and how she’d met Marco—the love of her life—at an art exhibition. Sarah, asking eager questions, and Jo replying positively.

Sarah thought a while. “It sounds like love at first sight.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt of that. It definitely was!”

“So, Wendy has finally found her man! Remember how she was always saying she thought it would never happen?”

“I remember.”

“And what about you?” Sarah’s voice held an impish lilt. “Do you think you will find him?”

“What? Find who?”

“The man of your dreams. You're the only one of us that hasn't ... yet. Don't you remember what you said to me on the phone?”

“Oh, that? I was only joking.” *Best friends since we were six. Never any secrets, so why now? Why can't I talk about what happened when I went to paint the sunrise?*

Sarah let it be, and they wandered around the garden, chatting and reminiscing. At Jo's request, Sarah showed her how the radio for School of the Air worked until Mattie called them for afternoon tea.

“Where has the time gone?” Jo glanced at her watch. “I should get back.”

“Drink a cuppa with me, first.” Sarah didn't want her to leave. “We'll have it on the verandah.”

Dev came back to share their afternoon tea. “There's something I didn't tell you at lunch because I wanted you two to enjoy your reunion without worrying.” He took a deep breath. “The police have been in touch. There have been two murders over at Nairobi. They think it is drug related.”

“Oh, no!” Sarah's eyes widened. “Who has been murdered? Not the Rowans?”

“No, no, they're fine.”

“Thank goodness for that. Who, then?”

“A couple of their station hands, as far as I know.”

“That's still a worry! Will we be safe?”

“The police seem to think so. They think it is some kind of drug war between rival dealers. I don't think any of my men can be involved. Put it this way: they'd better not be.”

“Drug dealers up here?” Jo stared in astonishment. “So, let me get this straight: has the entire Top End turned into a bunch of crackheads? Or what?”

“It's simpler than that.” Dev gave her a significant look. “What's the longest stretch of unpopulated coastline in north-eastern Australia?”

“Oh, I get it! And what's the best way to get it down south to the cities? Bring it through the sparsely populated Outback.”

“Exactly! So, somebody started doing it and somebody else wants a piece of the action.” He looked at both of them. “But that's not all: they've identified Nairobi as a possible depot and headquarters of a gang, thanks to the murders, but no-one knows who the

murderous rival gang are or where they are based.”

Sarah made a little distressed sound, and her husband put his arm around her.

“I see ...” Jo wrinkled her brow. “Well, that does complicate matters. We haven't heard of drugs or any murders at Emerald Hills. At least, nobody has said anything.”

“They will have by the time you get home.”

“Where is it anyway? Nairobi? And don't say Africa!”

“I won't.” Dev smiled. “It is north-west of Ilona Downs—I know you've been there.”

“Yes, Elisabeth's property, I know.”

“What about Jo?” Sarah turned apprehensive eyes to her partner. “Will she be safe on the road?”

“Nairobi's a good distance away and even further from Emerald Hills, but I'll send Johnnie and one of the men to follow her.” He rose to put this into effect. “Make sure she gets home.”

“There's no need ——”

“Yes, there is need!” Sarah made a pleading gesture. “Please, Jo?”

Noticing her friend's anxiety, Jo agreed. Upsetting Sarah was not on her agenda, however unnecessary she thought the precaution. As she stepped into her vehicle, Jo noticed a four-wheel-drive utility pull up and Johnnie climb into the passenger seat, carrying a rifle. *Talk about the wild west!* she thought, moving off. The utility waited until she'd gone far enough to stay out of her dust before it pulled out and followed.

All the way home, Jo frowned over Dev's news and what it might mean. *Drugs always mean trouble*, she thought. *That's one reason I was pleased to leave the city. Don't tell me it's out of the frying pan and into the fire!*

Jo knew of people who reasoned that they might deal drugs for just long enough to raise a deposit on a house or pay off their mortgage and then get out of it. *Wrong! Once you get involved with people like that, the only way out is in a box!* She gasped and almost slammed on the brake as she thought about the luxury of the Emerald Hills' house. Was that where the obvious wealth came from? Then, she remembered Johnnie was behind her, trying to stay out of her dust and kept going. *What if I'm right in the middle of a drug den? That really will be out of the fat and into the fire!*

The thought almost made her head spin. It also stopped her wondering why she couldn't tell Sarah about her encounter with the man at the rock. By this time, she was in

sight of her destination, so she pulled up and put her arm out the window to wave her thanks to Johnnie. He waved back, the utility turned around and Jo continued on to the house.

She exchanged greetings with Shonelle, who was taking in some washing from the rotary clothesline adjacent to the modern jackaroos' quarters. Her laundry was beside their dining room, and the campervan she lived in parked permanently under a skillion roof on the end of the building.

I take my hat off to Shoni, thought Jo. A very private, yet motherly person, she manages to keep her own counsel and still be well-regarded by the rest of us. The jackaroos love her because she gives advice without judgement—calls them to order without giving offence—a big call when it comes to teenage boys! She has my vote!

Passing the stables, Jo entered the house yard. *Now, what am I going to find?* she wondered, as she parked her Patrol in the garage and let herself into the house.

Chapter Seven

Sally came out of the dining room to greet Jo in the hall. “Hello, how was your visit?”

“Perfect! I had a lovely time.”

“That's good. Did you hear the news? About the murders over at Nairobi?”

“I did. It was a bit of a shock to the system.”

“You're telling me! Who'd a thought it, eh? Drugs in the Outback! Missus has been knocked sideways by it, and everyone else is gobsmacked. Except for Celeste: she's revving.”

Jo raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean, ‘revving’?”

“Take a look at her. Remember what she was like this morning? Couldn't be happier now. Maybe she's bipolar or something.”

“Or maybe she's just gotten over the shock of facing off a huge goanna.” Jo put her head around the kitchen door. “Hi, Celeste. All recovered from this morning?”

The cook, who'd been humming the *Marseillaise* while she was preparing dinner, broke off to direct a beaming smile at her. “Thank you, Jo, yes. All better now. Did you 'ave a good time with your friends?”

“I sure did.” Jo nodded and left her to get on with her work.

“Well?” Sally looked at her expectantly. “What do you think?”

“She certainly seems a different person from this morning. But you know what? I'd just be thankful for small mercies!”

“You're right!” The housemaid laughed and disappeared back into the dining room while Jo went on up to her suite.

At the top of the stairs, as she passed the sitting room, Jo heard Louella issue a stream of plaintive words. Realising her employer was on the phone, and unwilling to eavesdrop, she moved on quickly but still managed to hear Louella pleading: “Just come home, darling. I *need* you.”

Hmm, thought Jo, as she went into her bathroom. *Louella isn't nearly as tough and competent as she makes out. Maybe my holiday is coming to an end, and I'm about to meet*

my pupil, at last.

When Jo came down to dinner, she didn't expect to be the only one at the vast mahogany dining table. She was just eyeing the single place setting when Sally came in with a message from Maddy. "Missus has gone to bed with a migraine, and Maddy says she's sorry but poor old Boss isn't well enough to come downstairs, so she's eating up there with him. Are you happy to eat in here by yourself? Or would you like to have your dinner with us? Ronnie and I always have ours in the kitchen with Celeste."

"Yes, thanks. I would much prefer the company to all this ... solitary splendour."

Ronnie stood up to greet Jo as she and Sally entered the kitchen.

"I don't think you two have met so far, have you?" Sally made the introductions while setting a place for Jo at the big scrubbed-pine table. "Sit back down, Ronnie, and we'll see what magical thing Celeste has done with your vegetables, tonight."

Celeste laughed. "All I did was cook them, Sallee."

"As only you know how!" The housemaid passed Jo a warmed plate and a dish of sliced roast leg of lamb, followed by bowls containing various vegetables, sauces and a jug of gravy.

The chatter, while the dishes went round the table, died away into appreciative silence as they began to eat. Jo realised with her first mouthful that this wasn't any ordinary leg of lamb. Subtle touches of rosemary and other herbs, with the tiniest hint of garlic, flavoured the succulent, perfectly roasted meat, complemented by a rich, delicious gravy. Similarly, the status of ordinary vegetables changed to gourmet when served with Celeste's delicately flavoured sauces.

"So, Celeste, what do you think about the murders over at Nairobi?" Sally met the cook's eyes.

"There were murders at Nairobi? Oh, yes, yes, I forgot."

"Well, you must be the only one!" Sally's eyes widened in disbelief. "It's the biggest news since the attempted murders at Medora, and that must be ... how long ago?"

Jo glanced up. "Ten years."

"Oh, that's right, you're best buddies with Sarah. You must know more than anybody."

"Only what everybody around here knows." Jo made a moue. "But I know one thing—there were no drugs involved."

Ronnie gave a little secret grin. “Except for the poison.”

“True.” Jo smiled at him. “What do you think about the Nairobi murders, Ronnie?”

He shrugged. “Maybe someone got greedy. Or they strayed onto another dealer's patch. It could end up being a drug war. Once organised crime gets involved ——”

“I am sick of hearing about these murders.” Celeste gave Ronnie a scathing glance. “Jean-Luc is coming back home tonight, and he will give us all the right perspective on the situation, I think.”

“Jean-Luc is a good bloke, Jo,” Sally assured her. “Isn't he Celeste?”

“Yes, he is my favourite cousin.”

“Tell Jo why you don't speak French to each other.”

Celeste's eyes met Jo's across the table. “Jean-Luc does not permit it. He says we must speak the language of our host country because it breeds distrust if others do not know what you are saying.”

“He's quite right,” approved Ronnie. “A very thoughtful man. I like him.”

Everyone seemed to agree with this assessment of Louella's husband, but Jo didn't know what to think about Ronnie. Observing him at the table, he seemed amiable and laidback and, as a gardener, was obviously superb, if his vegetables and the rest of the Emerald Hills' garden were anything to go by. He was young with wavy brown hair, worn a little long like a musician, but his hands were stained and work-worn, testimony to his profession. His table manners were excellent, and his conversation pointed to a wide knowledge of current affairs. A slight English accent added to an impression that he was both educated and cultured.

The only problem Jo had was that she thought she detected a faint aroma of marijuana on him when they'd shaken hands. *Maybe vegetables aren't all he grows in his kitchen garden*, she mused. But it wasn't a crime, as far as Jo was concerned, to grow your own and smoke a bit of pot. Plenty of people she knew smoked a little in their leisure time to unwind, and it didn't seem to affect them adversely. *Each to their own*, she thought, *but I can't stand the smell of it, let alone anything else*. That was why she'd noticed it when others wouldn't. She hoped he wasn't growing enough to deal in it because that *would* be a crime.

§

Hearing what sounded like a cat sneezing, Jo looked into the schoolroom on her way

down to breakfast. Curled up in an armchair was a thin little boy with a mop of silky blond hair that flopped endearingly onto his forehead. Dressed in shorts and tee-shirt, he seemed to be totally immersed in the book he was reading. Sebastian, draped over his shoulder, raised a sleepy head as she entered.

“You must be William. You're early!”

“I like to get some reading in while it's quiet.” He closed the book, meeting her gaze with a serious glance from green eyes, like his mother's. “And I suppose you are Miss Paxton, my new governess?”

Jo found this strangely adult little boy touching and immediately understood Sarah's protective attitude towards him. As she moved forward, she saw what he was reading and stopped in shock. *Good Heavens! This kid is seriously brilliant! Will I be able to do him justice?* she wondered, looking at a geology text more suited to a senior high school student than an eight-year-old. *Eight going on eighteen!* “Yes, but you can call me Jo, if you want.”

“Okay. Thanks. Do you know anything about dinosaurs?”

“Not much.” She sat down in the other armchair. “Geology wasn't my strong point.”

“Have you seen the dinosaur tracks near Winton?”

“No, have you?”

“Yes, that's why I wanted to learn about them—to find out what kind of dinosaurs made those tracks. It looks like a bigger predator was chasing smaller ones for food.”

“And did you find out?”

“Yes, I think so, but there are so many more different kinds. That's why I was hoping you could help me.”

“About the only thing I know about dinosaurs is that they became extinct about sixty-five million years ago. But that doesn't mean we can't ——”

“Yes, they did.” He turned an eager face to her. “Why do you think that happened?”

Jo suddenly wished she'd studied geology instead of biology. “I don't know.”

“Do you think it could be because a comet or asteroid hit the earth, knocked it off its axis and caused a great flood and a change in climate?”

“Sounds reasonable. We can make it a research project, if you like?”

“Okay, that'll be good. And did you know that they lived on Earth for one hundred and sixty-five million years before that?”

“No, I did not!” Jo shook her head. “Woefully uneducated, aren't I?”

He disregarded her question. “Have you heard of muttaburrasaurus? It's our own dinosaur found near Muttaburra over to the east, and it's displayed in Hughenden. It's huge, Jo! Its thigh bone is as high as a man! Daddy took me to see it on our way to Townsville. It didn't make the tracks near Winton because it was a vegetarian. They can tell because of the teeth.” He sat back in disbelief. “You mean, you don't know about that, either? Our own Queensland dinosaur?”

“I hate to have to admit it, but ...”

William regarded her with misgiving. “If I know more than you, how are you going to teach me?”

“That's a good question. How's your maths?”

“Good.”

“What about English?”

“Hmm, could be better. Reading's okay.”

I'll say it is, thought Jo. “You're reading way above your age level.”

“I know. I just don't like grammar.”

“Perhaps we can teach each other? You can get me up to speed on geology, and I can teach you the subjects I'm good at.”

“Okay. Deal.”

Jo asked a few more questions and was amazed at the extent of William's knowledge.

They were interrupted by Louella, opening the door to look into the room. She was dressed for riding and made a small, frustrated sound. “You're not being a pain, are you, darling?”

“If you don't mind, Mummy ...” said her son with great dignity. “Jo and I are having a serious conversation.”

“Are you?” Louella raised an eyebrow. She turned to Jo. “It's *so* mortifying to have a child that sounds as if he's swallowed an encyclopedia, don't you think?”

“No, I don't.” Jo was famous for her bluntness. “I think any parent should be proud of his achievements and intelligence. I know I would be.”

“I just cannot fathom how I produced a child like William. It is beyond my understanding.” Louella made a moue and turned back to her son. “By the way, shouldn't

you be calling your governess ‘Miss Paxton’?”

He showed patience beyond his years. “She said I could call her Jo. So, if she is okay with it ...?”

“Why should I mind, eh? I do see your point, darling. Well, carry on. Don't let me stop you. But don't forget to have breakfast, will you?”

“No, Mummy.” William waited until his mother had left the room and then turned his eyes to Jo. Her heart went out to him at the misery she saw there. “Mummy's all right, Jo. She just sounds ...”

“I know. Don't worry, I understand. Now, why don't we go down to breakfast? And when we come back, you can show me where you're up to in your schoolwork.”

William agreed, picked up his cat and bounced down the stairs. Before her eyes, Jo saw him turn from a young adult scholar back into a little boy.

A tall, brown-haired man rose from the table as they entered the breakfast room—smaller and less elaborately furnished than the dining room. “*Bonjour*, my son.” He put an arm around the boy's shoulders and dropped a kiss on his hair. “And how are you, this morning, eh?” He straightened up to smile at Jo. “You must be Miss Paxton?”

“Please, call me Jo.”

“Good morning, Jo. I am Jean-Luc. Do, please, sit where you like.”

Jo took the seat beside her pupil, thinking that she must have just met one of the most empathetic, charming men she had ever seen, as he indicated the array of dishes on the table, told Jo to please help herself and busied himself arranging scrambled eggs and wedges of buttered toast on a plate for William. He then placed some of the same on a saucer, cut it into small portions and set it on the floor for Sebastian.

“My wife had an early breakfast and has gone out riding. She has a passion for horses. Unfortunately, not shared by either William or me, but I like everybody to be able to do what makes them happy. Do you ride, Jo?”

“Well, I learnt to ride, but I haven't done so for years, although, I do love horses. I think they are the most beautiful animals. My particular passion is painting.”

“So, you would rather paint them than ride them?”

“If I have to admit it. Sarah would be ashamed of me!”

“Oh, Sarah!” The Frenchman laughed. “She is just as passionate about them as my wife. They are great rivals, you know, at the Medora Downs Picnic Races. I'm not sure who

has the edge, at the moment.”

“Aunty Sarah. If Mummy wins this year, they will be breaking even.” William looked at Jo. “I love Aunty Sarah, but I hope Mummy wins this time.”

“Well, that's only natural. I admire loyalty. I haven't known you very long, but I think I know what your passion is.”

“Mmm. And Daddy's is photography. He's a famous photographer, aren't you, Daddy?”

“Well, I wouldn't say that ...” His father gave a modest smile. “But I have had some of my photographs of this amazing land and its animals published in the *National Geographic* magazine.”

“Oh, good one!” applauded Jo. “My ambition is to paint every aspect of this country.”

“Then, perhaps you can combine it with William's passion for geology? And teach him to paint the specimens he collects.”

“Will you, Jo?”

“Of course. We can start today, if you like?”

“Cool.” William glanced at her briefly before turning his attention back to his, so far, forgotten breakfast.

“So ...” Jean-Luc looked at Jo. “The household has been knocked sideways and my wife prostrated by yesterday's news. How do you feel about it?”

“I suppose I am as shocked as anybody else that drugs have reached the Outback and people have been killed because of them.”

“Mmm.” Jean-Luc nodded agreement. “And how about you, my son?”

“It's like that murder mystery we watched on TV the other night in Townsville, isn't it, Daddy? Maybe Miss Marple will come to Nairobi to solve it?”

“Perhaps, she will.” Jean-Luc seemed satisfied that his son did not appear to have been frightened or overly disturbed by the reactions of the other members of the household and was apparently divorced from the reality of the whole thing.

“Do you think we need to take precautions? I mean, do you feel it will be safe to go for nature walks, for example?”

“Nairobi is quite a long way from here, Jo. If you stay within, say, half an hour's

walk from the house, I don't envisage any danger. Not unless the situation changes. No, just go on as normal. That is the advice I have given to the others. We must try not to panic or be frightened about something that may not affect us directly, at all." He smiled reassuringly. "Okay?"

"Okay." Jo thought how eminently sensible was his point of view.

Overall, Jo was impressed by Jean-Luc and could see how such a kind, capable presence might have a calming effect on his wife, although that remained to be seen.

§

After School of the Air, William showed Jo his rock collection, and Jo gave him his first painting lesson.

"We'll use watercolour." She squeezed tubes of colour into separate wells in a tray and set out brushes and a jar of water. "It will be the easiest to mix and match the shades we want on this bigger recess in the tray. See?" She demonstrated the technique.

He proved an apt pupil, and Jo helped him set up a computer database to identify and catalogue each rock specimen, realising that she would probably be learning more than her pupil. Once each one was painted, they could scan the image into the file. Lunchtime came around before they knew it, and afterwards, William settled down with his text on dinosaurs; Sebastian stretched out on the arm of the chair.

§

Over the next few days, Jo noticed that Jean-Luc could indeed stem Louella's volatility with a few well-chosen words, always spoken quietly. Not only that, his daily visit to the kitchen seemed to exert a beneficial effect on Celeste, and Jo heard no more outbursts from the cook's domain. Possibly, it helped that Sebastian spent all his time with William, now that he was home. Jean-Luc's commonsense attitude to the Nairobi murders had resulted in nobody mentioning them again after the first few days, and Jo was happy to make sure that her pupil did not have time to think about either them or their possible consequences.

Jo also found that William would open up to her, touchingly endearing in his confidences, then without warning, withdraw into himself, clam-like. Jo thought she understood: William was afraid to get too fond of her in case she left.

A brilliant child, a psychologically impaired mother, a father Jo knew little about—although, he did seem to have the warmth and empathy lacking in his wife. How much had this poor child relied on his past governesses, only to have them leave him because of Louella's acid tongue and volatile temper?

Poor little mite, thought Jo, he tried to explain it to me on that first morning, and now it's time for me to reassure him.

The next time William started to open up to her and fell silent, Jo was ready. “William, do you feel that you can trust me? What are you feeling, deep down in your heart?”

William was silent, head down, his lower lip trembling. If anything could remind Jo that he was just a little boy and not the mini-adult he seemed, it was this reaction.

Jo waited, praying for a response she could use.

Eventually, he lifted his head, and Jo drew in a breath at the pain in his eyes. “Yes, I do feel deep down that I can trust you, but ...”

“You're afraid that I will leave, like the other governesses.” Jo made a flat statement of it.

“Mmm.’ He ducked his head again.

“Look at me, William.” Jo waited for him to meet her eyes. “Read my lips: I won't leave you like the other governesses, okay?”

“Okay.”

“In fact, they'd have to dig me out and drag me away with chains, like they did with that old parkinsonia tree the other day! Got it?”

William chuckled. “Got it.”

The conversation was never mentioned again, but Jo had the satisfaction of knowing that at least one of her pupil's fears had been laid to rest. William no longer pushed her away, and soon showed how much confidence he now reposed in her.

§

A week later, after signing off from their School of the Air session, William looked up: “Jo?”

“Yes?”

“Have you heard of the Rainbow Serpent?”

“Now, that's one thing I have heard of! I'm up on my Dreamtime stories.”

“If I let you in on a secret, will you promise not to tell?”

“Cross my heart!” She did so.

“And hope to die?”

“Absolutely!”

“I know where there are some Rainbow Serpent's eggs?”

“Do you? Do you really?”

“Uh-huh. Do you want to come and see?”

“I sure do!” Jo felt honoured and incredibly touched by his confidences. “Will we wait till after lunch, or do you want to take some sandwiches?”

“We'll take sandwiches. I'll ask Celeste.”

Jo watched him skip down the stairs ahead of her and couldn't help but smile. Here was the little boy again, full of joy and enthusiasm. *No wonder he's touched Sarah's heart. I'm the tough cookie, and he's got his whole hand around mine!*

Celeste was obviously in a good mood because William didn't have any trouble getting what he wanted and soon came out of the kitchen with a backpack full of lunch boxes and drink containers. Jo could only assume that either William was feeling extra hungry, or Celeste had overestimated their needs.

“Ready, Jo?” He gave her the full blast of his sunny smile. “It's this way. Come on.”

They strode out along the track to the east, William leading the way, his backpack bouncing with every movement. Jo offered to take it, but he refused, telling her it was the man's job to carry things. “It's just along here. Not far.”

Jo thought about the rock she'd never dared visit again—spending her free time painting sunsets, trees and landforms to the west—and suddenly had an inkling about where they were going. She stifled an urge to stop and turn back. She'd promised William, no matter what, that he could trust her. What if she went back on her word now? It couldn't be done. Besides, the man would hardly be there at this time. *Prospectors moved around, didn't they?*

“Did you know this area was under the sea, once, Jo? Well ... could have been a freshwater lake. But it was definitely under water.”

“Was it? How do you know that?”

“Up the river a bit, there are some rocks lying around, and I've heard that if you break them open, you can find fossilised fish in them. Quite large ones, too.”

“Really? That's interesting. How do you think it got to be dry land?”

She listened in awe as William explained the upthrust of the land due to movement of the tectonic plates that made up the earth's crust, and the lowering of sea levels because of the amount of water stored in the polar icecaps.

Whew! thought Jo. *Is all this coming out of the mouth of an eight-year-old? And will I ever get used to his amazing intelligence?*

“We're nearly there.” William pointed to the right. “What do you think, Jo?”

Jo found herself looking up at ‘her’ rock. “Magnificent!” Then, as her gaze travelled down the rock stairway, she saw a man in khaki work clothes, crouched to one side at the bottom, digging with a small pick.

“Oh, good. Ben's here.” William sounded pleased. “Hey, Ben! How goes it, man?”

The man lay down his pick, stood up, took off his hat and smiled at them both. Jo watched him share a complicated handshake with her pupil and stood transfixed. The secret handshake and the easy camaraderie between them pointed to a strong and enduring friendship. One that hadn't been formed overnight!

“This is Jo. I've let her in on our secret.”

“Good man!” Ben turned laughing blue eyes and a welcoming grin towards Jo. “I was hoping you would.”

“Do you know her, then?”

“We have met. Sort of. I mistook her for a Rock Maiden.”

“Did you? How come?”

“She was sitting on top of Rainbow Rock.”

“Was she? Oh, cool! Do you know about Rock Maidens, Jo?”

“Yes, I have been told about the, um, legend.”

“That's all right, then.” William seemed oblivious to Jo's embarrassment. “Look here, Jo, this main formation is Rainbow Rock and see all these little ones? These are the Rainbow Serpent's eggs. Show her, Ben.”

Ben picked up a small, rounded rock, sat it on a large one and began to tap one of its

edges with the hammer on top of his pick. In a few moments, it fell apart, or would have done had he not held both sections together in his hands. "Are we ready?"

"Ready. Watch this, Jo." William was almost bursting with excitement as Ben, with the air of a conjurer, displayed the interior of both parts of the rock. "See, it's a rainbow! A tiny rainbow! Isn't it beautiful?"

"Exquisite!" Jo admired the delicate opalescent shades of purple, blue, green, yellow and red in the centre of each half.

William made one of his lightning changes from child to adult. "Of course, now I'm older, I know it is a legend from the Dreamtime. Ben and I both know it's boulder opal, but the Rainbow Serpent's egg is a much better story, don't you think?"

"Absolutely! Much, much better!"

"I knew you'd like it, Jo. You are pleased I brought you here, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world!" Jo assured him, knowing that he could probably sense her inner turmoil and misinterpret it as disapproval or disappointment in the treasure he was sharing with her.

"Cool!" He turned to the man beside him. "I got Celeste to make a sandwich for you, Ben. Want to have lunch with us?"

"Sure. But only if Jo agrees."

"Why wouldn't she? You do agree, don't you, Jo?"

"Of course." *What else can I say? Even if I would rather be anywhere than here, right now!*

"See? Can we go to your camp and boil the billy?"

"May we?" Ben waited for Jo's affirmation. "All right then, Will. You can help me gather some sticks for the fire on the way."

Watching them go on ahead, William darting here and there to pick up twigs and leaves and bring them back to Ben, Jo felt a lump rising in her throat. Never, in the time she had known him, had she seen William so carefree and happy.

"I'll go ahead and fill the billy and stuff." He took the sticks from Ben. "Okay?"

"Okay. You know where everything is." Ben slowed his pace to walk with Jo. "He's an incredible child, isn't he? A true prodigy! I've never seen another like him."

"He continues to amaze me. I don't know that I can do him justice."

“You will. I believe you're just what he needs. He has a very difficult life, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You never came back to your rock.” His tone was one Jo had not heard from him before. Startled at the sudden change in the conversation, she looked into eyes from which every vestige of humour had disappeared. She saw hurt, disappointment and something else. Could that *something* be the longing that she herself felt and pushed away every time it surfaced?

“How could I?” She was mortified. “After ...”

“Why not?” He looked down at her—his eyes intense. In them, she read truth and honesty and all the things she wouldn't admit to herself. “I could have sworn you felt the same way I did.”

The tender note in his voice almost broke her down. “Please ... We can't talk about this now.”

“No, you're right.” His tone became brisk. “We will have to arrange a meeting. Will you come to the rock on your day off?”

“I'll think about it,” managed Jo, as they reached Ben's camp.

“Oh, there you are!” William looked up. “What took you so long? I've filled the billy, set the table and got the fire ready for you to put a match to it.”

“Good man.” Ben did his part, while Jo sat down on one end of the unrolled swag. “You can blow on it now, to make sure it doesn't go out.”

When he had the fire going to his satisfaction, William looked at Jo. “Do you know what Rainbow Rock is made of, Jo?”

“Um ... So, if I say rock, will I be wrong?”

William chuckled. “Yes, because it is ironstone. That's why it is that reddish-brown colour. Ironstone is a sedimentary rock, laid down in the Cretaceous period, and Rainbow Rock is raised up by a fault. It's part of the Winton Formation, isn't it, Ben?”

“Right on, old chap.” Ben cocked an eyebrow at Jo while he made the tea.

“The serpent's eggs are concretions,” continued William, “in which the silicate formations combined to make opal in cracks in the rock.”

“Wow! That's wonderful! I've heard of thunder eggs. Are they the same?”

“No.” William shook his head. “Thunder eggs are volcanic. You find them closer to

Rockhampton. But Ben has one, don't you, Ben?"

"Go and get it. Show it to Jo. And the polished opal, too, so she can see how they turn out."

Excitedly, her pupil ran into the tent and returned to put into her hand half a small grey round rock, the size of an orange, cut and polished to show crystal formations growing inwards towards a hollow centre. The crystals in this one were clear like quartz, surrounded by circular bands of colour from light grey to black, but William assured her that some crystals were pretty colours, including bright pink. Then, reverently, he handed her a polished boulder opal that she knew must be worth many thousands of dollars. "This came from Rainbow Rock, Jo. Isn't it something?"

Jo turned the oval-shaped piece over and over in her hand. From its dark-brown, shiny backing with specks of brilliant opal colour, to the incredible array of gorgeous rainbow colours in the domed front, it was perfection itself. "It *so* is! To be truthful, I've never seen anything so completely gorgeous!"

"That's the thing about Rainbow Rock. Most boulder opal has only white or blues and greens, but the serpent's eggs have all the colours of the rainbow, and that's what makes them special. Doesn't it, Ben?"

"My word, it does, mate! Super special."

"Translate that as valuable." Jo was suitably impressed. "I guess it goes without saying."

"That, too." Ben gave a little crooked grin. "Rarity brings its own value."

So, over lunch, with William seated cross-legged between them, munching sandwiches, Jo got her lesson on the difference between Rainbow Serpent's eggs and thunder eggs. She had no trouble to admit, under William's cross-questioning, that, although beautiful, thunder eggs were not in anywhere near the same league as the serpent's eggs.

When Jo decided that they'd better go home and rose, William showed disappointment but went to put back the gem specimens and help Ben tidy up. Watching him run around, busying himself, Ben took the chance to make his appeal:

"Will you come back here, soon? Please? I need to talk to you."

"Why should I? Why can't you come to the house like a normal person?"

"Because I can't, that's why. I've been told to keep away." He grinned. "*Persona non grata.*"

“Why? And by whom?”

“Can't you guess? Because a certain volatile lady decided out of the blue that she doesn't like prospectors and backflipped on her decision.”

“So, if that's the case, why do you hang around?” Jo sent him a measuring glance. “I mean, it *is* her station.”

“Because I hold a mining lease on Rainbow Rock, and as you've already observed, it is producing valuable opal. A circumstance that exacerbates the lady's temper—considerably.”

“I see ...” She was about to say more, but at that moment, William came back, and they made their goodbyes and left.

As they reached Rainbow Rock, William stopped, gazing up at its mighty presence. “Ronnie says plants and rocks have spirits like us and the animals. Do you think Rainbow Rock has a spirit, Jo?”

“I sure do. I think it has a spirit of belonging and protectiveness, wisdom and endurance.”

“Yeah, I feel that.” His voice was awed. “And it has Rock Maidens. They're spirits, too.” He turned back to his governess, the solemn moment over. “Ben's a good bloke, isn't he, Jo?” William looked up at her. “Isn't it cool that you'd already met him? It's so funny that he mistook you for a Rock Maiden. And right here, too, in our special place. That's *really* cool!”

END OF SAMPLE

About the Author



Anne Rouen

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

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

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*.

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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