

Winter
at
Medora Downs

Anne Rouen

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Anne Rouen
PO BOX 116
Manilla NSW 2346

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Dedication

For my sister, Jeanne.

Chapter One

March 1987

Sarah leant against the bathroom door, gazing blindly at the white, blotched face and anguished eyes that stared back at her from the mirror opposite. She was twenty-two and her world—her whole life, in fact—had just come crashing down around her to lay shattered at her feet. She flinched as the furious tirade and continued banging and thumping suddenly escalated. *Oh, God! Will he never stop?* ‘I can’t believe it!’ she whispered. ‘*I can’t* believe it!’ Yet, according to her friend Jo, just now bandying words through the closed door with gusto, the signs were all there and had been for some time.

Safely locked in the bathroom, Sarah moved to the basin. *Safe? Am I safe?* she wondered as a particularly savage blow battered the front door. Stifling another sob, she told herself fiercely, ‘I will not cry! I will *not* cry! He is just not worth it!’ Pushing back a curtain of pale gold hair, she leant over to splash cold water on her tear-drenched face. But a small voice within

her, which would not be silenced, cried incessantly. *What will I do? What can I do? How will I go on?*

Head bowed over the basin, Sarah pressed a cool washer to her eyes and began to relive the nightmare into which she had so suddenly and disastrously been plunged.

Embracing with joy an unexpected opportunity to go out shopping for a wedding gown, Sarah had spent most of her evening in various boutiques trying on creations that ranged from elegant simplicity to frothy confections of embroidered lace, dripping with pearls and crystals. With a train or without a train? Off the shoulder or sleeves? High or low neckline? Waist or princess line? Unable to make a decision, she went out onto the street.

And then it happened: As she passed the door of an opulent restaurant, it swung open, held by an invisible hand for departing guests. Sarah involuntarily glanced inside and, gasping with shock, stood transfixed on the pavement, all colour draining from her face, her eyes dark pools of misery. There before her sat David. *Her David!* And he was holding the hand of his beautiful dinner companion across the table.

In those few confused moments, Sarah received an impression of chic elegance: black hair, shining and immaculate, and a flawless complexion enhanced by skilfully applied make-up. She recognised her, too: It was Chantal, David's personal assistant. And she was wearing an orchid! *David always brought me an orchid*, thought Sarah. *Because he said he loved me so much.*

Sarah wanted to run, but she could not seem to move. She could only stand and watch the cruel tableau before her. And as she watched, David raised his glass in a silent toast and

passionately kissed the fingers he was holding; a waiter ushered out the departing guests, and the invisible hand closed the door.

Sarah chewed her lip and tried to find a reasonable explanation for what she had just witnessed. David had told her he was working on a new curriculum and that Chantal was staying back to help him. Maybe she should give him the benefit of the doubt? After all, they work together and may have snatched a quick bite. *What?* said a cynical inner voice. *In this cordon-bleu restaurant? Dressed like that? Don't be a fool!*

A woman murmured an apology as she brushed past. Sarah moved and began to turn away. Then, rocked by a fury completely foreign to her, she made a small exclamation, swung back to the door and swept inside.

Driven by the same impetus, she achieved an airy tone: 'David, *darling* ... Hello, Chantal. I was passing and I saw you, so I thought I may as well join you. Do you mind?'

'*Sarah!*' He so obviously *did* mind that it was laughable. Both of them looked as though they were sitting on an ants' nest. 'I thought you were tutoring ...'

Tell me something I don't know! 'Did you, really?' She smiled. By now she could see that his PA was not exactly dressed for work, in a low-cut, clinging lace evening gown that left little to the imagination: *From top to bottom and everything in between!* Sarah thought, glancing from one to the other with icy calm. *I'm doing this well. I can't believe it is me.* 'Well? Aren't you going to offer me a drink?' she asked, pulling out a chair and picking up David's wineglass. She met his eyes. 'What are we celebrating?'

A look passed between David and his assistant; a look that was as old as time itself. *I'm not that much of a fool,* thought Sarah. But

she listened politely while he said with his charming smile, ‘Look, sweetheart, we’re working. We just stopped for something to eat. I don’t have the time to explain now, but I will see you later.’

Once, she would have believed the oily insincerities that dropped so easily from his lips, but as she saw through him, a sudden, gale-force gust of anger smashed her frozen calm. ‘No, you won’t,’ she said, leaping up and ripping off her engagement ring. ‘You’ve made it more than clear, already.’ Without hesitation, she dropped the ring into the wine and dashed it down the décolletage of the PA. Then, hauling the bottle out of its silver ice bucket, proceeded to empty the exclusive *chablis* over her fiancé’s well-groomed head.

‘Sarah!’ he got out through gritted teeth, cruelly twisting her wrist to force her to drop the bottle. ‘You are making an *exhibition* of yourself!’

‘Oh, am I?’ she said, using her other hand to jerk the tablecloth so that all the expensive crystal and china—and the wine bottle—crashed to the floor. ‘What a shame!’ She threw the bundled-up tablecloth at the startled waiter who had arrived with all speed and an expression of ludicrous alarm. ‘A little accident, *Garçon*. I am so terribly sorry. Monsieur will pay for the damage.’ Then, she stalked out in a magnificent rage. Her fury sustained her all the way home where she collapsed just inside the door; her slender frame convulsed by great, racking sobs. Her flatmates, Jo and Wendy, found her on the hall floor when they came back from their session at the gym.

‘Sarah! My God! What is the matter?’ asked Jo, dropping down beside her.

‘Come on, love,’ said Wendy, tugging unavailingly. ‘Get up off the floor.’

‘Let me do that. You’re littler than she is,’ said the tall brunette, hauling Sarah to her feet and pushing her onto the couch. ‘She’s in shock. You get her a whisky.’

‘I ... You know I d-don’t drink,’ mumbled Sarah, watching her diminutive red-headed friend pour a measure into a tumbler.

‘Shut up and do as you’re told,’ said Jo, taking the glass from Wendy and holding it against Sarah’s chattering teeth.

Sarah took a gulp, choked, coughed and doubled over. ‘No ... more ...’ she gasped, waving her hand like a drowning swimmer.

‘Sip it, you fool,’ ordered Jo, unmoved. ‘*Now* tell us!’

Jo and Wendy had been her friends since she was six years old. There was nothing they did not know about each other. Sarah took a deep breath, told them that her tutoring had been cancelled because her pupil was ill and gave them a brief account of what she’d seen, adding that she’d confronted David in the restaurant and given back his ring.

‘Perhaps it *was* innocent,’ offered Wendy when she finished. ‘They *do* work together.’

‘*Innocent?*’ scoffed Sarah. ‘Don’t give me that! She had enough make-up on for a drag queen! And you know that Zampatti number we saw last week? The one we thought was a little too much, or rather, not enough? Well, she was wearing it.’

‘Doesn’t sound like a work outfit to me,’ said Jo, frowning at the glass. ‘I mean, even if there was a school do, you wouldn’t wear *that* in front of your principal, would you?’

‘Not unless you wanted the sack,’ agreed Sarah. ‘Not to

mention what the parents might say. I mean, I *did* wonder if they might have been grabbing a bite to eat, but they were in Bondi's classiest French restaurant drinking two-hundred-dollar-a-bottle wine!

'Were they?' said Jo. 'Well, when you put it like that, it looks pretty grim. Look, I didn't say anything, but I have seen him out to dinner with his PA. It was none of my business, and it may have been work related, but now, with the evidence stacking up ... What did he say to you when you walked in?'

'He said he could explain.'

'Oh, yeah? Go on.'

'And I said he couldn't and gave him back his ring.'

'And?'

'He said I was making an exhibition of myself, and I walked out.'

'Why?'

Sarah shrugged. 'I didn't think there was anything else to do.'

'Not that, you nit! Why did he say you were making an exhibition of yourself?'

'Oh, that!' Sarah looked vaguely ashamed: pink and defiant. 'Well, it was the way I gave back the ring.'

'Oh, yes?' Jo glanced at Wendy. 'Tell us more.'

'You *didn't!*' gasped Wendy, pummelling the chair arms with glee, when Sarah had told them just what she'd done with the ring.

'Well, good for you!' approved Jo, trying to keep a straight face.

‘I suppose it *was* a bit over the top. But something just snapped, you know.’

Her two friends looked at each other and fell about laughing. Sarah was so sweet and forgiving; she drove them mad with her saintliness. They’d even begun to think of her as a mouse. She was so meek that unconsciously, all their lives since boarding school, they had formed a protective cult around her. Both had deplored her awed obedience to David’s every decree.

‘I’d love to have seen their faces!’ Wendy got out, tears streaming down her cheeks. She shook her head. ‘Oh *my God!*’

‘Oh, Sarah, it is about time!’ said Jo, when she could speak. ‘Wow! I can’t believe it. Grrr! Sic him, girl!’ She gave Sarah a considering look. ‘And now: what’s the plan?’

‘I haven’t had time to think of one. I would give back the ring if I hadn’t already done it.’

‘Yeah, it’s a rock,’ sighed Wendy. ‘If it were me, giving it back would be the hardest part about the whole relationship.’

‘Well, I’ve already done it,’ said Sarah, still in her defiant mood, ‘and I didn’t think twice about it!’

‘Yes, and what a way to do it,’ laughed Jo. ‘I wonder what Chantal thought about having to fish it out of her cleavage? She might never find it,’ she added, waggling her eyebrows. A thought crossed her mind, and she turned to Sarah, suddenly serious. ‘I suppose you *do* know that David is going to be furious?’

‘Yes, I feel a little uneasy about that,’ she admitted. ‘You see, I’ve never made him angry before.’

‘No, because you always do as he says.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Wendy. ‘We’ll protect you.’

‘She’s right to be worried,’ said Jo. ‘The man’s a control freak. He won’t take it well.’

‘But, surely ...’

‘Have you ever crossed him?’

‘No, but ...’

‘Well, I have. Over the way he treats Sarah. You’d be surprised how he can turn: A real Jekyll and Hyde.’ She turned to Sarah. ‘You’re well out of it, you know, little though you may think it now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Violence, my child. Against women. He’s too cowardly to try it with someone his own size.’

Sarah had no time to question or challenge this accusation because the words were hardly out of Jo’s mouth when there was a frenzied banging on the door. ‘Sarah, you crazy *bitch!* I know you’re in there! Open the door!’

‘David,’ said Jo, raising her eyebrows. She leapt to her feet and snatched up a hockey stick out of the umbrella stand. ‘And he’s dead drunk, by the sound of him. Quick, lock yourself in the bathroom. Leave this to me.’ She looked back and mouthed, ‘I hope the door will stand it.’

‘Open the door, I said!’

This was followed by a string of epithets that made Sarah gasp. It was David’s voice, but she had never heard him say such words or speak in such fury. Shaken to her foundations, she allowed Wendy to propel her to the bathroom and leant against the locked door. When Jo had told her her assessment of David, she really hadn’t believed it. But she had to now! *What a way to be*

enlightened! She listened, in shocked disbelief, to the altercation between her friend and her ex-fiancé conducted through the locked door.

‘Go away, David. You’re drunk!’

‘I want to see Sarah. And I am staying until I do.’

‘Sarah’s not here.’ She chuckled. ‘What happened to your dinner?’

David ground his teeth at the provocation. ‘Chantal was so upset that she had to go home. She told me I should come round and see Sarah.’

‘Big of her.’

‘Well, it was, considering Sarah ruined her dress and humiliated both of us.’

‘Oh, boohoo,’ mocked Jo, her eyes alight. She caught Wendy’s disapproving glance and subsided: as a one-liner, even she had to admit that it was pretty crass. ‘Sarah doesn’t want to see you.’

‘I want an explanation!’

‘*You* want an explanation? Oh, that’s rich!’

‘She tipped wine all over me!’

‘We know. I can’t think of anyone who deserves it more. Now, *go away!*’

An even more frenzied assault on the front door brought Sarah to her senses. *What am I doing skulking in here like a coward?* she asked herself. *Leaving Jo and Wendy to fight my battles. I’ll have to go out and help them. Perhaps he’ll calm down if he sees me?*

At this rate, it was only a matter of time until the latch gave. Sarah unlocked the bathroom door and stepped out into the hall.

Wendy caught her arm to hold her back as David shouted in a blind fury: 'I'll break down this door if she doesn't come out!'

'You can try!' Jo beat a rat-a-tat-tat with her hockey stick. 'But I'd be a bit careful if I were you. You know what will be waiting for you, don't you? And, let me tell you, I'll be happy to break the shoulder rule! Along with your head! Now, buzz off, or I'll call the cops. In fact, they might already be on their way—if you've disturbed the neighbours enough.'

This gave him pause.

'You have until the count of ten,' warned Jo. 'One ... two ...'

'Okay, okay, I'm going. But I'll be back. I am going to come every day until I see her. She's not going to get away with treating me like that! Don't think it! Do you hear me, Sarah?' he shouted. 'You will pay for this! I'll make you pay—if it's the last thing I do!'

Chapter Two

‘Come on, love,’ said Jo, waiting until she heard the last of the retreating footsteps before tossing her hockey stick back into its repository and shepherding Sarah into the kitchen. ‘We all stand in need of a bit of refreshment after *that!* Let’s get some coffee and toast.’

‘You and Sarah sit down. I’ll get it,’ said Wendy, reaching for the kettle and the bread packet. ‘Sarah looks done in. And if you aren’t, *you* should be, after all that shouting.’

‘You were enjoying yourself!’ Sarah accused Jo, when she’d recovered a little and all three were seated around the kitchen table eating toast and drinking coffee. ‘Going at him like a fishwife!’

‘No, I wasn’t!’ Jo protested, a reminiscent sparkle in her eye. ‘Well ... just a little bit. I enjoyed that the mongrel has shown his true colours before you found yourself tied up in marriage to him.’

‘What did he do to you, Jo? To make you hate him the way you do?’

‘Do you remember when he started choosing all your clothes? And threw out your beautiful designer jeans?’

Sarah nodded—a look of pain in her eyes.

‘Well, I tackled him about it one day when you and Wendy were grocery shopping. He twisted my arm up behind my back and told me to mind my own business or I’d be sorry. I knew then.’

Wendy choked on her toast. ‘Do you mean to say you let him get away with *that*?’

‘No,’ said Jo. ‘When he let me go, I showed him out with my hockey stick.’ She sipped her coffee with a complacent smile. ‘I didn’t hear any more about it.’

‘I didn’t think you would. You’re a tough cookie,’ said Wendy, eyeing her friend with affection. ‘You don’t take any prisoners.’

‘Got to be if you’re a sportsmistress,’ said Jo, who was also member of the state hockey team. She wasn’t masculine, but she was tall, athletic and very, very capable: discomfiting men who were not sure of their masculinity *and* teenage girls who didn’t want to exercise. She did have quite a few male friends and admirers, but no-one she took seriously.

‘But, Jo ...’ Sarah put a hand on her arm. ‘Why didn’t you tell me about David doing a thing like that to you?’

Jo turned to her; the sparkle quenched. ‘Would you have believed me if I had?’

Sarah ducked her head. ‘No,’ she said, at last.

‘Would you have *even* listened?’

Sarah thought of how much under David’s influence she’d been; how she’d believed him implicitly when he gave even the most glib and improbable explanation for his actions. ‘Probably not, no,’ she concurred.

‘No. Out of loyalty to the prat, I suppose.’ Jo snorted. ‘Or one of his oily explanations might have got to you.’

Sarah said nothing.

Jo looked at Wendy. ‘We can’t let her stay here. I have a feeling the worm has turned with him: he will hurt or even kill her if we give him the chance.’

‘No, Jo!’ objected Sarah. ‘He’s never laid a finger on me. *Never!* I think you’re overreacting ...’

‘No, I’m not. You fool, didn’t you *hear* him?’

‘Yes, but you said yourself that he was drunk.’

‘And you think that he wouldn’t be again? No, Sarah, we have to get you out of here. Right away, somewhere. I’ve got a bad feeling about this. I think we’ve had our warning.’

There was a strained silence, unbroken for several minutes, while both girls looked at Jo. Her words had all the more effect because Jo was no doomsayer. Full of commonsense, she was more likely to say, ‘Pull yourself together, you fool!’ than to make a dramatic pronouncement like this.

‘I have some kind of second cousin in the Queensland Outback,’ said Wendy, after a while. ‘Mum was saying the other day that she was looking for a governess.’

‘Perfect,’ said Jo. ‘Go and ring her and find out if she still

wants one. That will be *perfect*.'

Wendy glanced at her watch. 'It's a bit late now. I'll ring her tomorrow.'

Sarah sat, heartbroken, trying not to think of David. But it was no use: memories crowded, jostling for space. Into her mind jumped a vision of their first meeting at a college dance: she a raw fresher, and he a sophisticated third-year student. He had walked over to where she had been standing with some other equally overawed first-year students, smiled his dazzling smile, looking so handsome that she had caught her breath.

'Hey, fresher,' he'd said, a teasing light in his eye. 'Like to dance?'

'Lucky you!' an envious voice had breathed behind her as he led her onto the dancefloor. Their relationship had blossomed from there.

The romance lasted through her three years at college. After the first year, David had been appointed to an exclusive private college in another suburb but had always found time to take her out once or twice a week.

Tall, fair David: handsome; well-dressed; a first-rate sportsman; the most popular man in college, and now, at his school, being noticed by his superiors as a man who was going places. Already, he was master of a large department with his own personal assistant. Sarah's lips twisted wryly. She had been so proud that he had chosen her instead of one of the many beautiful girls that had thrown themselves at him. Sarah stirred, trying to hold back tears as she thought of the night, only last month, when David had produced the magnificent diamond ring (she'd so furiously flung back) and placed it reverently on her

finger. She had been speechless with joy. What happiness was hers! What bliss! And now it was all finished. All ruined. *Somehow, I must find a way to get over it*, she thought in despair.

Finally, with a little hiccough, she spoke: 'Is anyone going to ask me what I think?'

Both girls looked at Sarah. 'All right, I'll buy it,' said Jo, leaning back. 'What do you think?'

Sarah sat for a minute looking into her cup. 'Perfect or not, I will go if I'm given the chance, because I don't want to have any more to do with David, whether he's just a cheat or ——'

'He's a psychopath!'

'You may be right, Jo, although it seems a bit over the top.' Sarah sounded forlorn. 'I will miss you girls, but I think I do want to start a new life away from ...' she burst into tears.

Jo and Wendy hedged her about, supporting her, making plans, extracting promises to write.

The next day, Jo rang her school and took a sick day. Wendy—a freelance designer and her own boss, who could do as she pleased—went to work on the telephone. She was able to report that, although her cousin Elisabeth Andrews had already found a governess, the neighbouring station was in desperate need of one. Two recently orphaned children needed loving care and attention. 'I told them you would be just the person they should have and why,' said Wendy. 'They'll be sending your tickets by express and want you to leave as soon as possible.'

'Oh, the *poor* little darlings!' said Sarah. And from then on, her own troubles took a back seat, her tender heart rent by the plight of poor little children left without the love and direction

of their parents.

‘I hate to interrupt your very proper sentiments,’ said Jo, eyeing her thoughtfully, ‘but we’ll have to be out of here by four thirty. Otherwise, all hell will break loose.’

‘Won’t it be all right if *I* just go somewhere else?’

‘No, you fool, it will not.’ Jo was nothing, if not forthright. ‘Neither Wendy nor I want to be subjected to your ex’s bullyboy tactics to prise your whereabouts out of us.’

‘Would he ...?’ But Sarah said no more. The answer was written in the other girls’ faces and her own heart.

After a little discussion and another hurried telephone call, the girls packed all Sarah’s things, a few of their own and went to stay with Wendy’s parents in their gated mansion in Wollstonecraft until the day of Sarah’s departure.

§

Wendy came running in, waving an express envelope. ‘It’s here, Sarah. It’s here!’

‘You open it,’ said Sarah. ‘I feel all jelly legged.’

‘I’ll make the coffee,’ said Jo, bounding up the stairs and into the hall behind her. ‘Sarah needs something to brace her.’ She smiled at her. ‘Have you made arrangements?’

‘Yes,’ said Sarah, indicating the rose-patterned white china telephone, reposing elegantly on a polished cedar table. ‘Diane, from our old boarding school, will take over my share of the flat, and Shelley, a first-year-out teacher, will take over my tutoring.’

‘Perfect,’ said Jo. ‘What’s in the package?’

Wendy slit the envelope and emptied its contents onto the table while Jo handed round the coffee. ‘Two airline tickets,’ she announced. ‘An accommodation voucher—ooh, for a posh hotel in Brisbane!—and a train ticket. Oh, and a letter for you, Sarah.’

‘What does it say?’ muttered Sarah, holding her coffee mug in both hands and sipping as if her life depended on it.

‘It says: “You appear to be exactly the person we have been looking for.” Then there’s a bunch of instructions of how to get there. Then he says: “We look forward to making your acquaintance. Sincerely, Devin Mainwaring.” Devin Mainwaring!’ repeated Wendy, in awed tones. ‘As far as I can gather, he’s rather a big shot out there.’

‘What does your cousin say about him?’ asked Jo.

‘Oh, you know: Decent bloke, blighted in love. Confirmed bachelor after being jilted by the girl next door, years ago. Bit of a looker, too, apparently.’

‘Oh, that’s all right, then,’ said Jo, at her most flippant. ‘He should be just right for Sarah. They can console each other.’

‘Hey! *You two* ...’ protested their victim.

‘Come on,’ said Jo, putting down her cup. ‘Get your skates on.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘To Charltons Saddlery in St. Leonards to buy you some jeans and jodhs, love. Now, that I *will* enjoy!’ Jo’s eyes were bright with laughter. ‘No fear of meeting David in a place like that! *But*, I’ll take my hockey stick, just in case ...’

WINTER AT MEDORA DOWNS

Chapter Three

Sarah was in the air, on her way, still suffering from the emotional farewell with Jo and Wendy at the airport. *No-one could have better friends*, she thought, dabbing at red-rimmed eyes. She had an uneventful flight to Brisbane, made her way to the luxury hotel named on her voucher and presented herself in the plush reception office where she received her key from a chatty and admiring young man at the desk, who summoned a bellboy to carry up her luggage.

Early next morning, at the busy airport, she boarded the plane for Longreach in western Queensland. According to the travel brochures she had obtained, Longreach was a gateway to the Outback and the home of the Stockman's Hall of Fame—a monumental tribute to the pioneers of the largest part of Australia known as the Outback. Consulting her timetable, she realised, with a pang, that she would not have time to visit it, since there was less than an hour between the arrival of the plane and the departure of the Midlander for Winton.

As the plane winged its way from Brisbane, Sarah noted the changes in the landscape as they flew farther west. Once over the Great Dividing Range, covered in thick, green forest, there was the emerald-green, brown, black and yellow patchwork quilt of the Darling Downs. *Oh*, thought Sarah, *Wendy would love these beautiful colours!* Then there was some poorer, scrubby country as they penetrated farther inland; some hills and mountains, old and eroded as they passed the Central Highlands; followed by a glimpse of grey-green mulga scrub with red, sandy soil as the plane touched down at Charleville. The plane serviced the west and landed at many of the western towns en route to Longreach, so it took much longer than Sarah had expected. She understood that on the return trip to Brisbane the plane landed at the towns it had missed on the way out.

Sarah looked out over the dry, red, dusty paddocks and the thick mulga scrub and wondered, for the first time, how she would react to the landscape when she arrived at her destination. She had read somewhere that at first sight of the real Outback one either thrilled to its vast magnificence and fell instantly under its spell or—afraid of its challenges—ran back to the smaller country where the horizons were closer and gave a feeling of security. She had read, also, that Outback people, accustomed to the far horizons, felt claustrophobic when surrounded by the hills and forests of the softer country. She felt a stab of excitement and apprehension as she wondered which sensation would be hers. Somehow, she felt that the former would be true for her: she loved the freedom of the wide-open spaces, and she would wear jeans again—fast becoming her own personal symbol of freedom now that she'd escaped from David and his domination of every aspect of her life. Why had she never thought to resent

it? It had taken a shocking occurrence to awaken her to what he was. And even now, she only half believed it, though she had seen and heard for herself.

Sarah tried to close her mind to thoughts of David and his controlling nature. *He took advantage of my love*, she thought, tears squeezing between her lashes, *and used it to his own ends*. It was all too painful. She must relegate him to the past, and he must stay there; she was determined on that.

The roar of the plane's engines startled Sarah out of her reverie as it rose in the air for the last time before landing at Longreach. The red soil and the mulga gradually gave way to open, rolling downs, sectioned at intervals by tortuously winding, tree-lined channels. A shiver of apprehension seized her as the plane banked and descended at last to the airport at Longreach. There could be no going back from here. She was past the point of no return.

As Sarah stepped down from the plane, the heat rising from the tarmac hit her with an impact that pulled her up short. So hot, and it was April! Momentarily, she wished she'd opted for a shorter skirt than the comfortable maxi she was wearing. However, after she had walked across to the tin shed where she would be able to collect her luggage and obtain a taxi, she noted with relief that she had begun to adjust to the heat. *It's always a shock to step out of air-conditioned comfort into the open air*, she thought, trying to be positive.

While she waited for the trolley with her luggage to come over from the plane, Sarah looked around at the small patch of lawn adorned with palm trees and bougainvillea that bordered the entrance to the airport and farther out to the flat, brown

paddocks that surrounded the town.

Having obtained her luggage, she went to a waiting taxi, where she was greeted by a cheerful, middle-aged woman. ‘Where are you going, luv?’

‘The railway station, please. I am catching the Midlander.’

‘Okay, we’ll have to hurry, then. Hop in.’

§

Seated on the train, Sarah was beginning to wonder if her journey would ever end. Another four hours or so to Winton. And then, how far? She didn’t know, but it must be a long way. She had looked up a map of Queensland after she had received Devin Mainwaring’s letter, and the distances had indeed seemed vast. She knew from the letter that Medora Downs was on the Diamantina River, but really, that was just a wriggly line on a map. *Until tomorrow*, she thought. *Then I’ll know*.

As the train rocked and clattered over the downs, Sarah caught her breath at the vast emptiness of the land. Miles and miles of tall, waving grasses, dotted here and there with an occasional mimosa bush or whitewood tree; interspersed at intervals with wandering lines of coolibah growing in channels. From time to time and very far apart, Sarah saw a windmill or a clump of unusually luxuriant trees—denoting a homestead.

The morning wore on into the afternoon with no visible change in the landscape, except for some unusually coloured low hills in the distance, and Sarah began to think that she would never stop travelling: there was nothing in her whole world but the rhythmic clickety-clack and rocking motion of the train on

its shining, silver tracks.

Eventually, the train pulled in to a small, tidy railway station. Sarah was here, at last! Soon, she would meet someone from Medora Downs. Devin Mainwaring had mentioned in his letter that he would try to come himself to collect her from the station, but if that were not possible, she could expect his overseer. *Who will it be?* she wondered as she prepared to leave the train. *And what will my employer be like?*

Sarah stepped down and looked around her. The street was empty, and the handful of other passengers had gone their separate ways. Hot, tired and dusty, she was left alone on a deserted Outback railway station. For a moment, she almost panicked until her commonsense reasserted itself. Medora Downs was a long way from Winton, and they may have been delayed. She sat down on a seat in the shade and schooled herself to wait patiently.

Finally, Sarah heard the sound of a vehicle and looked around as a battered old utility pulled up in a swirl of dust. She gave a gasp of disbelief—her eyes widening. Surely, they had not come to collect her in that old thing! It looked as though it could hardly get around the town, let alone the miles of Outback she still had to cover.

A spry old man climbed out of the utility, his hat as battered and ancient as his vehicle. His seamed face was burnt to a walnut hue and had the appearance of fine leather. From between the weather-beaten folds of skin, he surveyed the world through a pair of twinkling eyes, the bluest of blue. He strode rapidly into the station—his small, wiry frame containing hidden reserves of energy—and halted before Sarah, his expression thoughtful.

‘Day, Miss,’ he said, lifting his hat. ‘You be Miss Sarah Johnston?’

‘Yes, that’s right. Are you from Medora Downs?’

The hand that held the hat scratched his head; the blue eyes twinkled more than ever. ‘Nar, Miss,’ he said with a chuckle. ‘Don’t think Bessie ’ud get us that far. I’m from The Gregory.’

‘Gregory?’

‘Yair. North Gregory Hotel—the only one we’ve got left in town. Useter be three or four. But that’s progress, fer ya.’ He spoke out of the corner of his mouth in staccato, like a machinegun firing short bursts. ‘Mary sent me to pick you up. Good sort, Mary. Do anythin’ for ya. Been a radio message from Medora Downs: Can’t get here today. Says you’re to stay at The Gregory an’ they’ll pick you up, termorra. Mary’ll tell ya all about it.’

‘Oh,’ said Sarah, slowly. ‘I see.’ So, she still wouldn’t meet her new boss and the children. ‘Oh, well ...’ she shrugged fatalistically and followed the old man, who had picked up her cases and was walking to his vehicle.

Safely stowed in Bessie, they lurched off down the street to draw up with various squeals and rattles in front of an imposing hotel.

‘I’ll take yer bags up ter yer room fer yer, Miss. Me name’s Bert. I’m the yardman here. Mary said ter tell yer she’d have a nice cuppa waiting fer ya in the dining room. Through there, Missy,’ he added, gesturing to his right.

Sarah thanked him and stepped into the cool atmosphere of the hotel with its gracious proportions and huge glass doors etched with Outback scenes and the *Waltzing Matilda* swagman.

At the far end of the room was a moulded staircase leading to the guestrooms upstairs. The whole effect was that of having stepped onto the set of a 1950s movie.

Just then the dining room doors swung open, and a motherly, middle-aged woman appeared. At sight of Sarah, her face creased into a welcoming smile. ‘Hullo, dear. I thought I heard someone. Come on in to the dining room and have a cuppa,’ she said, leading the way. ‘You got the message? Good. Something about a bore breaking down. They can’t leave the stock without water, you know. Ah well, these things do happen. Dev said to tell you that he is very sorry, and Jim, the overseer, will be here first thing in the morning to pick you up. Jim Barnes, that is. About seven, he said, so I’ll get you an early breakfast. He’ll leave about four: that way, it won’t be too hot for you. You’ll like Jim, he’s a bit of a character, has everyone in stitches with the things he says, has the whole bar laughing sometimes. But he’s a good man and knows his job. Else he wouldn’t be where he is. I’m Mary, by the way.’

Mary did not seem to require a reply to any of this, so Sarah smiled politely and let the motherly clucking flow over her while she drank her tea and ate the delicious sandwiches her hostess had provided.

‘I suppose you’d like to freshen up a bit, dear? Those trains are horrible things! And you’ve come such a long way, too. You go along to your room and rest. Dinner’s at six, dear. In the dining room. And now I’ll show you to your room.’

Mary shepherded Sarah up the stairs to a large, airy room with double doors opening onto a balcony; pointed out the bathroom; smiled her warm, friendly smile and bustled away.

After a refreshing shower, Sarah went out to explore the town. She found a street of quaint, old-fashioned stores of the type that had long ago vanished from the city. Enchanted, she went into one and was greeted with old-world courtesy by an elderly shopkeeper. *Just wait until I write to tell Jo and Wendy about this*, she thought. *This is a bit better than a chrome-and-plastic supermarket with its overworked check-out girls!* She spent a few minutes chatting to the shopkeeper before resuming her exploration.

Sarah dined in solitary state and retired early to her room. Tired as she was, she still found it impossible to sleep. A quiver of excitement ran through her as she thought of what tomorrow might bring. Endless questions raced through her mind. If she'd given it even a passing consideration, perhaps it may have surprised her that not one of her many thoughts was concerned with the past—only the future.

Finally, all the tensions and exertions of the last few days caught up with her and she slept deeply.

Chapter Four

When Sarah, dressed in well-fitting jeans and a fresh pink-and-white checked shirt, came downstairs at seven to the sounds of convivial banter and much laughter, there was already a man seated at the table. He had a pleasant, round face; a thatch of reddish-fair hair and blue eyes alight with mischief. He rose, shook Sarah's hand as Mary introduced them and told Sarah to help herself to an array of dishes, containing a mountain of grilled sausages, lamb chops, steak; tomatoes and other vegetables; fried and scrambled eggs; toast; and two steaming pots, one containing coffee and the other tea.

He helped Sarah to a plate, asked what he could pass her, then resumed his badinage, gazing worshipfully from his own loaded plate to his hostess. 'Mary, you sweet, beautiful darling! How did you know I was starving?'

'*I wonder ...*' she said with a wry smile.

'This is the *best* meal I've seen since I was here last,' he announced with boyish enthusiasm. 'When are you going to

marry me?’

Mary chuckled and swiped him with her tea towel. ‘When you show me that you’re more in love with me than my cooking, you wicked young devil! Besides, aren’t you forgetting someone?’

‘If you mean Ernie, he can come, too. I’ll find a back shed somewhere.’

‘I am sure he will be thrilled about that—*no end*. And what about Mattie? You’d have to be a brave man to cross her. Braver than you—*or me!*’ Her eyes twinkled. ‘But thanks for the offer, Jim. I appreciate it.’ She flicked her tea towel again. ‘At its true value.’

‘By the Lord Harry, you’re right!’ said Jim, making a grab at the end of the tea towel and grinning at the latter part of her speech. He heaved a comical sigh. ‘The path of true love is ever fraught with obstacles.’

‘Yes: like *my* husband and *your* cook!’ Mary turned to Sarah and shrugged. ‘We go through this every time he comes here.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t feed me so well,’ he countered.

‘Go on, *cheeky!*’ Mary deployed her tea towel to good purpose, making him yelp. ‘You’d better eat up and get out of here, before Sarah decides the Outback is peopled by a bunch of lunatics and takes the first available train out of town.’

Sarah, who had been consumed by laughter throughout the whole exchange, could only make a negating gesture between paroxysms and wondered if she would even be able to eat at all if they didn’t let up. But finally, Jim applied his energy and amazing appetite to his meal, giving Sarah the respite she needed to tackle hers; though, she could only handle toast and coffee at that hour.

Then they said a fond goodbye to their jovial hostess and climbed into the Range Rover parked outside—Bert having thoughtfully loaded Sarah’s luggage.

‘And what’s your story, Sarah?’ asked Jim with easy camaraderie, just after they turned off the highway and headed west on a dirt road. ‘What made *you* run away to the Outback, eh?’

Sarah went red, then white and looked out her window. She hadn’t expected a question as direct as that and was struck dumb. She moistened suddenly dry lips, wondering what she could say.

‘Oh, have I hit a nerve? I’m sorry,’ said her tormentor, with an apologetic smile. ‘It was just my way of asking what brought you here. I’m a bit of a blunderer, not known for my tact.’ He flicked her a serious glance. ‘We’re all running away from something, you know.’

‘Are we?’ Sarah finally found her voice and her wits. ‘Well, then, what are *you* running away from?’

‘Ah ...’ he said with an exaggerated sigh. ‘I thought you’d *never* ask.’

That made her giggle, and he gave an answering smile. ‘Actually, it was more that I was running *to* something.’

‘Well, so am I. If you want to put it that way.’

‘Oh, yes? What?’

‘No,’ said Sarah. ‘You first.’

‘All right.’ He settled his shoulders against the backrest as if to set in for a yarn. ‘I’ve always been mad keen to run an Outback station, and there is no room for two bosses at home, so my old man sent me to jackaroo for a friend of his: old Jonas Neumann,

up in the gulf. That's what jackaroos are, you know, managers in training. Learning the trade, so to speak. And there was no better teacher than old Jonas ... And no place like the gulf, really,' he added thoughtfully.

'What made you leave him?' Sarah was seeing a different side to this man—the *serious* overseer—though she had no doubt that his endearing sense of humour was all part of his ability to get the best out of his men.

'I would've liked to stay, but the word went out that Dev was looking for an overseer. Jonas thought I was ready to make the step up and recommended me. Yes, I got lucky,' he reminisced. 'I learnt a lot from Jonas, and Dev's a great boss.' He slanted a glance at her. 'Now it's your turn.'

Sarah had decided to tell a partial truth. 'I was orphaned quite young,' she began, adding, at his sympathetic murmur, 'I don't remember my parents. So, when I heard about this job, I decided to try and help some other orphaned children.'

'By Jove, yes, that was a sad business. Dreadful, really. Well, young Sarah, I think you're a godsend, after what's been ——' He reacted suddenly. 'Hold on to your hat!'

Before Sarah could take in what he meant, he jammed on the brakes, controlling the resultant effects with effortless command. She grabbed the panic rail, staring in amazement at the flock of emus racing across the road in front of them, as the Range Rover, with a protesting scream, almost stood on its nose to avoid a collision.

Jim looked over at Sarah with a rueful grin. 'Whew! That was lucky: no casualties. Are you okay?'

'Yes, fine. You did a good job. You know, I've never seen emus

in the wild before.’

‘Haven’t you? There are plenty of them out here, so I’d better stop gasbagging and watch the road. We’re getting closer to the channels, so the next few Ks could have a few surprises for us. Shout out if you see anything.’

Sarah agreed and glanced at her watch. They had been travelling for just over an hour and a half. Obedient to his wish for silence, she covertly studied his profile as he concentrated on guiding the vehicle over the rough and dusty road. His cheerful, happy-go-lucky disposition was at variance with his firm chin and stubborn jawline. He was a fast driver. He had proven himself to be a capable one, not only by avoiding unexpected carnage with his lightning reflexes, but by the dexterity with which he avoided the larger potholes and deep tracks without slackening speed.

They had both been silent for some time while the vehicle bounced across a brown, rolling plain of ironstone ridges, dotted here and there with flat, paler-brown claypans. Occasionally they passed reddish, flat-topped hills, worn down and ancient.

The overseer met her eyes briefly before transferring his gaze back to the road. ‘How are you travelling?’ he asked. ‘All right, after your scare?’

‘Oh, yes, thank you: Fine. I wasn’t scared. You’re a good driver.’

‘Just lucky,’ he said, giving her his friendly smile. ‘It’s not far to The Crossing. You’ll be able to get out and stretch your legs if you like.’

‘The Crossing?’

‘Yes. Properly speaking, it’s called Adeline Crossing, but

everyone here calls it “The Crossing”. On the Diamantina,’ he explained.

‘Is it a town?’

He shook his head. ‘Couldn’t call it a town. Just a pub, fuel bowsers and a store with a few essential supplies. The publican owns the lot, and the store’s a room on the side of the pub. Tom Wills, his name is. We have to stop there because I have a parcel for Jenny, his wife. What do you say to a cool drink, eh? You can see the pub now.’

Sarah looked ahead to where, shimmering in the heat haze, a silvery-white object was coming into view. Everything looked so strangely distorted at a distance that it was not until they had come fairly close that the outlines of the buildings became distinct.

Close up, the pub was an unprepossessing building, rather like a shed of corrugated iron construction, covered in traces of peeling white paint. It stood on an uninviting patch of dusty, bare ground. A couple of straggly trees overhung the petrol and diesel bowsers, otherwise there appeared to be no living plants whatsoever. About five hundred yards away were some half-dozen winding, tree-filled channels. The larger one in the middle was flanked by smaller channels that weaved their way around it. *The Diamantina?* wondered Sarah. *Surely not!*

As she stepped out of the air-conditioned vehicle, Sarah was once again conscious of the almost physically overpowering force of the heat. Jim ushered her in to the relatively cool darkness of the bar and set up a shout for the publican. ‘Hey, Tom! Where are you? Hurry up, man. Before we die of thirst!’

‘Okay! Okay!’ yelled a gravelly voice from the dark recesses of

the building. 'I'm coming, Jim. Don't get yer knickers in a knot.'

'Watch it, Tom! Ladies present,' protested Jim in a shocked voice, winking cheekily at Sarah.

A short, stout man in a Hawaiian-print shirt and bermuda shorts suddenly appeared behind the bar. He grinned bashfully at Sarah and apologised, 'Sorry, Miss.'

'This is Sarah,' said Jim, introducing them. 'Medora's new governess.'

'Pleased to meet yer, Sarah. What can I do yers for, Jim?'

'I'll have a Four X and ...?' He cocked an expressive eyebrow at Sarah.

'A squash, please.'

'And a squash, thanks, Tom.'

Tom disappeared into the depths of the coldroom and returned with two cans, a straw and two glasses, which he placed on the counter. The squash was cold and delicious, and Sarah thought she had never felt so thirsty. *I'm absolutely parched*, she thought. *I suppose it is the hot, dry air.*

Jim nodded towards the Range Rover. 'Got a parcel for Jenny, out there. Picked it up in Winton. Came in on the Midlander,' he said, getting up and going out.

'Gee, thanks, Jim. Jenny's been breakin' her neck to get that parcel. Dunno what's in it, but she seems to want it awful bad. She'll be real pleased.' He raised his voice: 'Jen! Hey, Jen! Come and see what we've got here!'

Jim returned with the parcel, which he placed on the counter in front of the thin, dark woman with enormous, solemn eyes

who had entered the bar in his absence. ‘G’day, Jen,’ he said. ‘I hope this is what you’ve been looking for?’

Her eyes lit with pleasure, and she hugged the parcel reverently to her chest; her low, cultured voice vibrating with joy as she replied, ‘Oh, it will be, Jim. It will be!’ Then, to Sarah’s amazement, she turned without another word and vanished through a door at the back of the bar.

The publican gazed apologetically at Sarah and spoke in a soft, comforting drawl. ‘Jenny’s a bit shy. Doesn’t see too many strangers: scared of people, really. But she’ll come good once she’s seen ya a couple more times, aye.’

Sarah smiled understandingly and finished her drink. Jim looked at her and said, ‘Well, we’d better get going, Sarah. Won’t get very far sitting here, driving the bar. The Boss’ll be on the radio thinking we’ve broken down somewhere. See ya, Tom.’

As they crossed the channels Sarah had seen in the distance, Jim grinned at her. ‘That’s the Diamantina. We’ve just crossed it.’

‘Truly? The Diamantina River? Those little channels? But which one ...? Oh, you’re joking!’

‘Not this time.’

‘But there’s no water!’

The grin broadened. ‘Not many of the Outback rivers have, most of the time; there are waterholes in places, but this one only runs in the wet season. And we didn’t get one this year.’

‘But what about the sheep and cattle? How do they survive without a wet season?’

‘Well, Medora Downs has been lucky,’ he replied. ‘There has been enough water from storms to grow feed, but not enough to

run the channels. Some haven't been so lucky, though. They've had to either sell their stock or send them away on agistment.'

Sarah looked out the window at the golden, waving grass. She had noticed many areas with no grass cover at all, only bare brown earth and red gibbers: the unlucky places that had missed the storm rain.

After another half an hour, they crossed a white-painted grid. 'The front gate. Welcome to Medora Downs, Miss Johnston,' intoned Jim, mock-solemn, his eyes dancing.

'Thank you, Mr Barnes,' replied Sarah, in the same tone.

They looked at each other and laughed.

Sarah suddenly felt lighthearted. *What good company Jim is*, she thought as she began to take particular note of the countryside. 'I suppose it won't be long before we see the homestead?' she ventured.

He threw her a teasing glance, brimful of mischief.

He looks just like a leprechaun, she thought and giggled like a schoolgirl. *I am as bad as he is.*

Today was the first day she had felt like laughing in a long time, and the closer they came to Medora Downs, the more a burden seemed to lift from her shoulders, and the dark cloud of misery that was never far away began to recede into the distance. Suddenly, she felt a rush of gratitude for this man's innate kindness and cheerful good nature.

Grinning from ear to ear, he said, 'It is forty Ks to the homestead from the boundary grid.'

'You're joking!' gasped Sarah. 'Aren't you?'

‘You’ll see,’ he replied. And with that she had to be content.

It did, indeed, seem a long time before the ephemeral outlines of the homestead and outbuildings mysteriously loomed on the horizon. *Every bit of forty kilometres*, she thought. For what had seemed like hours, there was nothing but open downs, waving grasses and ridges clad in reddish pebbles. Then, like magic, the buildings appeared: strange silvery ships on a shimmering ocean.

Sarah felt a quiver of excitement as they passed a group of raw, red mesa-topped hills, rising starkly out of the plain. *What a magnificent land this is*, she thought. *Such far horizons; such unexpected features rising eerily out of the vast sameness!* She loved it already—this harsh, often cruel, yet extraordinarily beautiful land. Something within her rose to meet its challenge, and curiously, she felt as if she were coming home. She shook off the impression and sat up to get a better view of the homestead, which was growing steadily nearer.

Eventually, Sarah could see a clear outline of the homestead and the verdant garden surrounding it. *How lovely it must look from the air: an exquisite, brightly coloured jewel in a setting of grey, brown and ochre. Oh, how much Wendy would appreciate it!*

The Range Rover crackled to a halt on the gravelled circular drive, in front of an imposing entrance as a bent and bowed figure rose from one of the luxuriant garden beds and turned towards them.

‘That’s Reuben, the gardener,’ said Jim as they alighted. ‘He created this garden—carved it out of an ironstone ridge—tends it on his own and loves it like a baby. He may look blind, but they say there’s never a weed that escapes his eye. Doesn’t miss much else around the station, either, come to think of it! Well? What

do you reckon?’

‘Oh, it’s *gorgeous*’, breathed Sarah as her eyes drank in the orderly riot of colour before her. ‘A feast of colour!’

Bougainvillea of all shapes, sizes and colours waved brilliant masses of petals in the autumn breeze. They tumbled over the stone walls of the garden; climbed lovingly up the verandah posts; stood alone and proud, trained magnificently into weeping standards; or clipped into thick bushes. Almost without exception, their leaves were hidden by the massed petals of red, white, apricot, orange, pink and purple. Flowering trees and shrubs, hibiscus, frangipanni, plumbago, bird of paradise, oleander and others Sarah did not know were set out to show to best advantage, each surrounded by a small bed of profusely blooming succulents, petunias and other groundcover plants.

As if this wasn’t enough, bordering the circular drive, the house and the stone walls, were formal flowerbeds similarly filled with the hardy flowering plants—vinca, marigolds, zinnias, petunias, nasturtiums and many others—all vying colourfully for attention. And setting all these off to perfection: a dazzling green lawn, rolled and clipped to within an inch of its life; Reuben’s pride and joy, and the envy of all who set eyes on it. Larger, hardy trees and shrubs surrounded the entire garden wall, an effective barrier from the worst of wind and sun.

In the centre of the circular drive, Sarah was surprised to see a small fountain playing into a lily pond: an oasis, indeed, and rarely to be seen in an area where water was valued much more highly than gold. Sarah later found that a large permanent hole in the river with a well sunk beside it allowed this extravagance.

Over the years, Reuben had received many tempting offers

from envious station owners, Jim had told her. But he had remained true to his first love: his masterpiece—his own gem of creation—the Medora Downs' garden.

Jim called him over, 'Hey, Reub, come here. Got someone you'd like to meet.'

The old gardener arched his back, rubbed his lumbar region with gnarled old hands and shuffled over to greet them. The corded sinews of his arms and neck stood out like pieces of rope beneath the burnt, leathery skin. 'G'day, Jim,' he said in a tired voice.

'Reub, I'd like you to meet Sarah: our new governess.'

Sarah looked into the wizened, walnut face; the faded, rheumy eyes; and saw past them to the beauty-loving, artistic soul beneath; because, in his own way, Reuben was as much an artist as Michelangelo or da Vinci.

He removed his battered old felt hat and spoke politely, 'How do you do, Missy. Glad to have you here.'

'Your garden,' said Sarah, 'it's so beautiful! Jim says you do it all yourself. How wonderful!'

Reuben was not proof against the admiration in the shining blue eyes or the angelic fairness of the slight, graceful figure. He darkened under his tan and said gruffly, 'Thanks, Missy. You remind me of a flower yourself. Well, I gotta finish this bed. Take her inside, Jim, out of the heat.' He turned and shuffled away.

'Yes, and that'll be enough of your flirting, too, you old devil,' said Jim, grinning after him.

'Jim! That's outrageous!' protested Sarah, but as Reuben, with great dignity, had pretended not to hear, she said no more. The

last she saw of him was his bent old back as he continued to plant out his seedlings. Sarah felt a surge of fondness for this dear old man, who could not only create, but maintain such magnificent beauty in the teeth of the harsh, unyielding climate of the Outback.

‘Do you know,’ said Sarah, surprised, ‘it isn’t as hot here.’

‘No, it’s not,’ agreed Jim. ‘It’s the effect of the garden. It creates a microclimate.’

They turned to enter the house. It, too, was magnificent in its own way. Built in colonial style; surrounded by wide, cool verandahs; trimmed with wrought-iron lace onto which double doors from every room opened. The house was a T shape with a wide hall down the centre of each part. It was very large; the main part being constructed of wood with an iron roof. The walls of the kitchen and four other rooms, forming a large part of the stem of the T, were built of interlocking stonework, two feet thick. Sarah was later told that the stone part of the house had been built by the first Mainwaring to settle here, over one hundred years ago. The rest had been added by succeeding generations; the last about thirty years ago, if one didn’t count the bathrooms that had been recently modernised and the air-conditioning ducted to all rooms.

Sarah followed Jim into the cool dimness of the main hall. As her eyes adjusted from the bright sunlight, she was conscious of polished wood floors; thick-piled rugs; a carved antique hallstand; chest and chairs; light, panelled walls with an old-fashioned picture rail and carved layer-glass light fittings.

‘Yoo-hoo, Aunty! Mrs Brennan,’ called Jim.

‘Coming, Jim,’ answered a woman’s voice—high-pitched and

youthful—as a tiny, silver-haired lady with bright, expressive eyes entered the hall through one of its many doors. She smiled warmly as she came towards them, holding out her hands. Sarah did not think it could have been she who had answered Jim’s call. The voice seemed to belong to a much younger woman. ‘You must be Sarah,’ she said in the same high, girlish voice. ‘Welcome to Medora Downs, my dear. I hope the trip hasn’t tired you too much? Jim, you naughty boy! I hope you have been looking after Sarah?’ she added, with mock severity.

‘Of course I have, Aunty,’ he assured her, grinning broadly. ‘You know me!’

‘I do! That’s why I asked,’ she said, twinkling, and turned to Sarah. ‘Has he?’

‘Oh, yes, Mrs Brennan. He has been very kind.’ Sarah almost stammered in surprise.

‘Well, I’m glad to hear it. And you can call me Aunty or Aunt Fay, if you prefer it, like everyone else does. I hate being called Mrs Brennan because I’m a Mainwaring—first, last and always.’

‘Amen,’ said Jim. ‘Back up a little, Aunty. You’re frightening Sarah.’

‘Am I?’ She looked at Sarah, the twinkle more pronounced.

Sarah shook her head.

‘Mattie has some tea and sandwiches for you.’

‘Now, that’s someone who *will* frighten you ...’ muttered Jim under his breath.

‘Not at all,’ said Aunt Fay, straight-faced. ‘Just because your palaver cuts no ice with her.’ She mouthed behind her hand to Sarah: ‘She hates men,’ adding in a normal voice as she led the

way to a spacious sitting room, ‘Mattie regards tea and sandwiches as a cure for all types of fatigue and stress.’

‘I’ll be off then, Aunty,’ said Jim. ‘Where’s the Boss?’

‘Out at number fourteen bore. Mattie has packed a smoko for you boys. You might pick it up in the kitchen as you go.’

‘Will do, Aunty. See you later. See you later, Sarah. I’ll catch up with you soon. I’ll leave your bags on the verandah, outside your room.’ A cheery wave, a carefree grin and he was gone.

Sarah felt a little strange and lonely at his leaving, although she could not but respond to the warm friendliness of the woman beside her.

‘Won’t you sit down, my dear? When we’ve had our tea, I’ll show you your room and the bathroom where you can freshen up and rest until lunch. And then, this afternoon, you can meet the children and explore your domain. How does that sound?’

‘Wonderful!’ said Sarah, who was about to speak again when a door at the far side of the sitting room opened to reveal a massive woman with a loaded tray, which she set down on the coffee table.

‘Mattie, I’d like you to meet Sarah Johnston. Sarah, this is Mattie: our wonderful cook.’

The big woman straightened, and Sarah found herself looking into a pair of brilliant dark eyes, full of character and expression. Mattie carefully scrutinised Sarah for a nerve-racking moment, then apparently satisfied with what she saw, held out her hand, speaking in a rich, mellow voice: ‘Glad to meet you, Sarah. Thanks for the compliment, Mrs Fay.’ She smiled at Sarah. ‘The kettle’s always on in the kitchen, Sarah, any time you want to pop

in for a cuppa.’

Sarah thanked her and thought what a remarkably pretty face she had, especially when she smiled.

Mattie turned and surged out of the room, unusually light on her feet for one so large.

‘She likes you,’ whispered Aunt Fay, beginning to pour the tea. ‘Not everyone gets an invitation like that, let me tell you.’ She passed Sarah her cup, indicating milk and sugar, then stirred her own, saying, half to herself, ‘We only have two staff here now. It was different, once.’ Recollecting herself she added, ‘Sue, our housemaid, is the other one. I try to help them where I can, but this house is a lot of work.’

Sarah glanced around at the gleaming wood floors; the carved, antique furniture and agreed that it must be so. ‘I’ll look after my room and the schoolroom and help where I can,’ she offered.

‘Thank you, my dear. It may be necessary from time to time, but mostly we get it done.’

‘I’d like to do my own room, anyway,’ said Sarah, firmly.

‘Oh, you *do* sound like a governess!’ The older woman’s eyes twinkled, surprisingly blue and youthful and always ready to appreciate a joke. ‘Very well, my dear,’ she said, proffering a plate. ‘Do have a sandwich. They are quite delicious. And we shall forget about such mundane topics as housekeeping.’

Sarah took one and bit into it, suddenly realising how hungry she was, since excitement had prevented her from swallowing more than a cup of coffee and a slice of toast at breakfast.

Aunt Fay was speaking again: ‘I have arranged for us to lunch

together privately, Sarah, so that I can tell you a little of the children's background. The men are lunching at the bore, today. Mattie and Sue are looking after the children this morning and will give them lunch in the kitchen.' She was silent for a moment, then continued, 'The children did have a nanny ...' Her face puckered in distaste. 'Let us just say that the arrangement ... was not a success. So, you may have some extra problems to overcome ...' Her voice trailed off. Suddenly, she was brisk again. 'Well, if you're ready, my dear, I will show you to your room. We will talk later.'

Sarah followed her down a passage that led off the main hall between the sitting room and the formal dining room that gave access to all the rooms on the eastern wing. On the other side of the main hall were the breakfast room and a lounge large enough to double as a ballroom. A similar breezeway to the one in which Sarah found herself ran the length of the western arm of the T.

Aunt Fay stopped at one of the doors, threw it open and gestured to Sarah to enter. Sarah looked around the charming room and gave a gasp of pure happiness. Lacy curtains hung at the windows and decorated the high canopied four-poster bed. The bedspread matched the curtains, sheepskin rugs were scattered on the highly polished floor and the carved furniture gleamed in the light from the window and double doors that led onto the verandah. 'What a *lovely* room! Thank you.'

'Well, I hope you'll be happy here. Sue spent quite a while yesterday doing out the room for you. She unearthed the bed hangings from somewhere and washed and ironed them, so they'd be fresh. I'll leave you now, dear. Lunch will be served at one o'clock in the breakfast room. Someone will show you the way.'

Twenty minutes later, Sarah, refreshed from a shower, sat in the padded bedroom chair, considering all that had transpired during the morning. She loved her room. It gave her a feeling of peace, and the idea that she had come home washed over her again. In fact, the whole house had the same effect, as though it were a house that had known much love and laughter over the years, as well as its tragedies. She still had not met the elusive Mr Devin Mainwaring, her employer, and wondered, for the umpteenth time, what he would be like. If he were as easy to get on with as Aunt Fay seemed to be, it would be all right.

Sarah gave a sudden start. Was that someone scratching at the door? Checking her watch, she saw that it was nowhere near one o'clock. She relaxed once more. No, there it was again! A hesitant scratching. Crossing to the door, she flung it open.

Two children, who had jumped back like startled fawns, stood, looking up at her, round-eyed with apprehension. The little girl, who had scratched at the door, was about six years old, and a smaller boy, clutching a large, battered teddy bear, stood behind her.

The little girl, whose huge, dark eyes wore an expression of anxiety mixed with determination, spoke in a high, nervous voice. 'Are you a nanny?' she asked breathlessly.

The little boy clutched his teddy tightly and kept his large, solemn eyes fixed on Sarah's face as he waited with bated breath for her reply.

'No, I'm a governess,' she answered. 'Would you like to come in, and we'll talk about it?'

The little boy breathed a tiny sigh of relief and slightly loosened his grip on the teddy. He advanced a little way into the

room and peered up at Sarah. ‘Do you smack kids who cry?’ he asked, in a gruff little voice.

‘No,’ said Sarah. ‘I usually cuddle them.’

He turned away. ‘Don’t like cuddles,’ he muttered, almost inaudibly.

‘I only cuddle people if they want me to,’ Sarah assured him gravely, her lips twitching.

He gave another tiny sigh and allowed his teddy to trail on the floor, holding him by the arm, his eyes once more fixed on Sarah.

‘Is your name Miss Johnston?’ asked the little girl, braver now.

‘Yes, but you can call me Sarah. What are your names?’

‘I’m Naomi and he’s Adam.’

Adam spoke suddenly, ‘This is Sam.’ He held out his teddy.

Sarah walked forward and, kneeling down near Adam, shook the teddy’s moth-eaten paw. ‘How do you do, Sam?’ she said, and then held out her hand to Adam. ‘How do you do, Adam?’

The little boy gravely shook her hand.

‘How do you do, Naomi?’

The little girl replied politely, then returned to another pressing matter. ‘Are you going to teach us to read? In the schoolroom?’ she breathed, in awe.

Sarah nodded.

‘Yes, that’s what Uncle Dev said.’ Naomi looked at her brother. ‘What about Adam?’

Sarah nodded again.

Then Adam spoke up: 'What about Sam?'

'Yes, Sam, too,' said Sarah, straight-faced.

'And are we going to do School of the Air?'

They were suddenly interrupted by a raised voice, 'Naomi! Adam! Where *are* you two? Mattie's got your lunch ready. Come *on!*'

Naomi looked a little guilty. 'That's Sue,' she said. 'We're supposed to be in the rumpus room.'

Sarah put her head around the door into the hall. 'The children are here with me,' she said, smiling.

Sue, a slim woman of about thirty, similar in build and colouring to Sarah, wore an expression of anxiety on her thin, sallow face. She smiled in return. 'Thank Goodness! You must be Sarah. How do you do? I'm Sue.'

'We said that, too,' said Naomi. 'And told her our names.'

'Did you, darling?' asked Sue, stroking her hair. 'That's good.'

'Thank you for the lovely job you did on my room,' said Sarah, smiling warmly.

'That's all right. A pretty room makes all the difference, I reckon. Come on, you two,' she added, holding out her hands to the children.

'Goodbye, Sarah,' they chorused. Then, each taking a hand, they skipped away with Sue.

Sarah stood for a moment, looking after them—a thoughtful expression on her face—before going in search of the breakfast room.

Chapter Five

Aunt Fay and Sarah were chatting over their coffee, having finished a light lunch of cold meats, delicious salads, and fruit and cheese.

Aunt Fay took a deep breath and became serious. ‘I have a lot to tell you, my dear,’ she said. ‘And I don’t know where to start. As you know, the children are orphans. Their parents, Devin’s brother and his wife, were killed last December in a light-plane crash.’ Her eyes clouded with pain, and she swallowed before continuing, ‘They were going on a second honeymoon, which is why the children weren’t with them. One learns to be thankful for such mercies,’ she added. ‘It was our own plane, and Darcy was flying it himself. He was a very good pilot. They were over some rough country to the east of here and sent out a mayday call that the engine was on fire: That was the last anyone heard from them. They crashed into the side of a mountain.

‘The children were devastated; we all were. Devin, in particular, idolised his brother. They got on so well. He was an

older version of Dev, very tall and handsome. Jane, his wife, was small and dark, very vital: a warm, loving wife and mother.’ Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. ‘I am afraid nothing has been quite the same since then.’

Sarah made a sympathetic sound, but Aunt Fay put up her hand.

‘The children cried themselves to sleep every night, missing their parents dreadfully.’ Aunt Fay took another deep breath. ‘So, we got a nanny. She was an older woman and had been recommended by the people over at Nairobi.’ Her normally soft expression hardened. ‘The children became more and more tense and nervy: Naomi in tears all the time; Adam in uncontrollable tantrums. We thought it was reaction to the loss of their parents. Finally, we discovered that, far from giving them the love and attention they needed, the woman was smacking them for crying and locked them in their rooms, while she sat, reading, in hers.’

‘Naturally, Dev packed her off as soon as he found out what was going on. But, I am afraid, the damage had been done. The children could not bear the sound of the word “nanny”, and the mention of another one produced such fear! Which was why we decided on a governess.’ She smiled. ‘A very special one. The only thing is ...’ Her brows knit with worry. ‘I don’t know how they will accept you, just at first, after the trauma of the nanny.’

‘I think I can set your mind at rest there,’ said Sarah, a little quiver in her voice. ‘I have already met the children, and once we’d established beyond doubt that I was not a nanny, but a governess who did not smack children for crying, we got on very well.’

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake!’ exclaimed Aunt Fay. ‘And how did

this come about?’

Sarah told her of the morning’s events, laughing a little as she did so.

‘The enterprising little devils!’ said the older woman, her eyes dancing. She leant across the table to press Sarah’s hand warmly. ‘I knew the instant I saw you that you were right for them.’

Sarah blushed bright pink. ‘Oh, I do hope so,’ she said.

‘By the way, you may have noticed how attached Adam is to his teddy? That has only come about since he lost his parents. For about six months before that, the teddy had been relegated to the toy cupboard.’

‘Yes, I did notice. And I thought as much. Poor little things!’ she added, impulsively.

‘Indeed.’ The older woman started. ‘Oh! There is one more thing I must tell you: Since being locked in his room by that dreadful woman, Adam has developed a phobia of sleeping alone. Naomi has a twin room, so he sleeps in the second bed. We have been trying to encourage him back to his own room, but with little success, I am afraid.’

Sarah thought for a moment. ‘Would it be possible to rearrange or redecorate his room?’

‘Yes, of course. Both his and Naomi’s could do with a refurbish. What are you thinking?’

‘Just that if we could involve him in redecorating his room according to his own ideas and taste, it really will become his. Then, in the long term, as he gains more confidence, he will want to sleep there.’

‘What an excellent idea!’ Aunt Fay sat back and smiled at her.

‘Well? Shall we go and resume your acquaintance with the children?’

Sarah agreed with alacrity and rose to follow Aunt Fay to the rumpus room.

‘Hello, Sarah. Hello, Aunty,’ yelled the children, jumping up from the model farmyard they’d been playing with.

‘Hello, children,’ said Aunt Fay, smiling. ‘Why don’t you take Sarah and show her the schoolroom?’

‘Can we?’ Two eager little faces peeped up at Sarah; two little hands crept into hers.

‘Come on, Sarah,’ said Naomi. ‘We won’t let you get lost.’

Adam suddenly pulled his hand away and ran to where his teddy lay beside the farmyard. Scooping him up by the paw, he raced back to Sarah and took her hand again. ‘Sam wants to show Sarah the schoolroom,’ he explained with great solemnity.

Aunt Fay, watching the trust with which the children chattered to Sarah as they proceeded down the hall, suddenly made a wry face and whipped out her hanky.

§

It was not until later that evening, long after dinner, that Sarah finally met her employer. She was relaxing in a comfortable chair in the sitting room, reading a glossy magazine. Aunt Fay, close by, was occupied with her exquisite embroidery, when they heard the sound of voices—one deep and soft, the other, unmistakably Sue’s—outside the door.

‘Ah ...’ said Aunt Fay, raising her eyes from her work. ‘Devin, at last. And the tea trolley,’ she added, laying aside the doily she

had been working on.

The door opened, and Sue pushed the tea trolley into the room. A tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired man stood framed in the doorway behind her, and Sarah caught her breath at the penetrating grey eyes set under strongly marked, arched brows; the sun-browned, finely modelled planes of his face; strong chin and well-built lines.

In those first few confused moments, Sarah received an impression of quiet strength, controlled power and an aura of vitality. Instinctively, she knew that this was a man who would always be in charge—could always be relied upon.

He moved forward into the room and greeted his aunt.

‘Dev, what happened to you?’ asked Aunt Fay, a little querulously. ‘I have been very worried.’

‘A problem with number twelve bore, Aunty,’ he said, easily. ‘We were just checking it on our way home from number fourteen, when we noticed a leak in one of the outlets from the tank, so we thought we’d better fix it straightaway. There was no need to worry,’ he assured her and turned cool grey eyes on Sarah.

‘Devin, this is Sarah Johnston.’

‘How do you do?’ he asked with chilly reserve. Then reversed the effect by adding, with a twinkle, ‘Call me Dev. Aunty only uses my full name when I’m in trouble.’

Aunt Fay made a tut-tutting noise while she poured the tea, and Sarah almost lost her voice, such a strange effect he had on her when she met his eyes. She murmured a conventional reply and thankfully received the cup that Aunt Fay was holding out to her.

Her employer was speaking again: 'I am sorry I was unable to meet you in Winton. I trust that Jim looked after you?'

'Oh, yes. Very well ... Thank you.'

'Good. Tomorrow, in my office, after breakfast, we will discuss the terms of your employment and the children's education.' He turned to his aunt. 'I'm sorry I can't stay. I have some invoices to attend to. Mattie has sent a tray to my office.' He bade them goodnight, his light eyes unreadable as they rested briefly on Sarah.

For some reason, Sarah hardly knew why, the room seemed to lose some of its brightness with his exit.

§

It was the week before Easter, and Sarah and the children were in the schoolroom, fully absorbed in making Easter cards for Aunt Fay, Devin, Mattie, Jim, Sue and Reuben. Sarah had drawn some Easter bunnies, eggs and chickens, and the children were busy colouring them in, before cutting them out and pasting them on folded pieces of thick drawing paper.

A soft knock fell on the door, and there was a scuffle as the children hurriedly tried to hide their work before Sarah called, 'Come in!'

Devin appeared in the doorway. Sarah wondered why a room seemed to suddenly become smaller the minute he entered it. It wasn't really his size—he was tall and well-built, but not excessively so. She decided it must be a sort of presence.

'Go away, Uncle Dev! We're making a surprise,' commanded Naomi, trying to cover her work with her hands.

‘Yes, a surprise,’ echoed Adam, solemn as ever.

‘Naomi, please don’t be rude. We will still have time to make it after we talk to Uncle Dev,’ reproved Sarah.

Naomi flushed but looked Devin fearlessly in the eye. ‘I am sorry, Uncle Dev,’ she said.

‘That’s all right, my pet. I could sense something momentous was going on when I came in, and I’ll leave you to it.’ He turned to Sarah. ‘I really wanted to speak to you privately for a minute, if I may?’

‘Of course,’ said Sarah, her heart beating unevenly. *What can it be?* ‘I’m going out for a few minutes, children. I want you to carry on with your colouring, and then I’ll help with the cutting out when I return. Is that okay?’

The children nodded but kept their work well hidden until Devin had followed Sarah out of the room.

‘Let’s go into my office, shall we?’ he said, indicating a door just a few steps farther down the hall. ‘I don’t think we need worry about the children losing concentration for a little while yet.’ He ushered Sarah into the room and shut the door, gesturing for her to sit down in one of the padded leather armchairs and followed suit. ‘Sarah, I should have spoken to you before this, but I’ve just realised that this weekend will be Easter. Would you like to take the holiday and spend it somewhere else? There would still be time to arrange air transport for you, if you wish.’

Sarah hesitated for only a second. She wanted to see her friends, tell them what a wonderful place she’d found, but she knew it would be madness to put herself back within David’s reach. ‘If you don’t mind, Dev, I think I’d like to stay here. My friends are in Sydney, and I feel that it is just too far to go for such

a short time.'

'That's all right, then.' Devin appeared to be satisfied with her answer and seemed about to close the interview.

'Um, there is just one thing ...' Sarah hesitated again.

'Go on,' he said, giving her all his attention.

'The children would like to have a party on Easter Sunday. Is that okay?'

Devin smiled. A heart-stopping, beautiful smile that left her feeling slightly breathless. 'That would be lovely,' he said warmly, suddenly abandoning his cool reserve, the way he had unexpectedly done once or twice before. 'By the way, Auntie has some chocolate Easter eggs for the Easter bunny to leave in the night. Get her to give them to you.' He rose and held the door open for her. 'See you at the party, then,' he said, smiling, and walked rapidly away.

Sarah was left feeling stunned. Irritable with herself for her inexplicable reaction to her employer's presence, she mentally shook herself and retraced her steps to the schoolroom to give her pupils the good news. *Jo and Wendy would giggle and tell me it's because it is the first time I've met a real man, she thought. And maybe it's true.*

The next few days were fully occupied with preparations for Easter. The children spent the better part of their time in the kitchen under the guidance of Mattie, and helped by Sarah, in making chocolate eggs; marzipan sweets in the shapes of bunnies, chickens and eggs; and homemade chocolates filled with glacé cherries, caramel and marshmallow.

At other times, Sarah read them the story of Easter from a

huge old book of illustrated children's bible stories that she found in the schoolroom bookcase. They learnt why Good Friday was a time of sad remembrance and Easter Sunday was a day of celebration to Christian people the world over.

On Good Friday morning, they all went to Ilona Downs for an Easter Mass. The priest, who was a pilot and visited his flock in his vast parish in a light plane, landed at the airstrip just as they arrived. Denominations did not count out here: everyone went to worship whenever there was a visiting cleric, no matter to what church they nominally belonged.

After mass, morning tea was served on the wide verandah. And while the adults chatted, all the children played in the garden on the swings and trampoline.

Back at Medora Downs, lunch was a quiet affair. Mattie served delicious salmon quiche and delectable salads. Devin seemed preoccupied, saying little, and soon left the table to check on one of the young horses that had hurt itself earlier in the day.

The children were impatient for Sunday to arrive, and most of Saturday was spent painting designs on hard-boiled eggs and making decorations and party hats for the Easter party. Naomi had spoken shyly to Reuben, and he had promised her as many flowers from the garden as was necessary to decorate the room and table.

On Saturday night, as Sarah tucked them into bed, they sighed happily at the thought of tomorrow. Sarah read again the story of Easter from *The Book of Children's Bible Stories*. Then, as their eyelids drooped, she crept away to her own room. She waited another hour before arranging a little basket of chocolate Easter eggs beside each bed and tiptoeing away.

Easter Sunday dawned bright and clear. Shrieks of discovery issued from the children's room as each found their mysterious basket of eggs with fluffy chickens perched on the handle. They came tumbling into Sarah's room.

'Look, Sarah! Look!' squeaked Naomi.

'Goodness! Where did they come from?' asked Sarah, a smile tugging her lips.

'Here's the card.'

'Happy Easter Day from the Easter bunny,' read Sarah.

'Ooh!' breathed Naomi.

But Adam looked suddenly sad. 'He forgot Sam,' he said.

'Perhaps he thought that you might like to share yours with Sam,' suggested Sarah. And Adam's gloomy expression brightened.

After breakfast the children ceremoniously handed out their Easter cards to everyone amid much admiring exclamation over their handiwork. Then began the all-important task of decorating the dining table for the party. After that there was just enough time to change into their party clothes before helping Mattie carry in the lunch dishes.

Mattie had excelled herself. There was a creatively decorated ham, roast chickens and, of course, an array of her famous salads. The sideboard was creaking under the weight of assorted tarts, gateaux, cheesecakes, sweets, fruit salads and trifles. And her *pièce de résistance*—a magnificent pavlova.

The guests had arrived and were being entertained by Aunt Fay and Devin in the lounge. Bill Richmond had come over, together with John and Elisabeth Andrews from Ilona Downs,

their three children and their governess, Jacqui. Naomi had specially requested Jim to come—since he was a prime favourite with her—and he was busy making the punch.

When lunch was ready, Adam went to the door of the lounge and rang a tiny silver and crystal bell. In a well-rehearsed tone, he announced importantly, ‘Lunch is served, Ladies and Gen’lemen!’ Only stumbling over the last word and looking so anxious and solemn that most of the guests could not help a fond smile or two as they moved obediently to the door.

Naomi was waiting in the dining room to hand out paper baskets of homemade chocolates and marzipan sweets and a party hat to the guests as they filed in. When everyone was seated, a short Easter prayer was recited by Naomi, and the party began.

After lunch the two governesses took the children into the rumpus room to play party games. Some of the adults, who had come to watch, soon joined in, and a hilarious time was had for the next few hours.

Later that evening, long after the last guest had departed and the children had gone, exhausted, to bed, happily declaring it to have been the best party in the world, Sarah was having coffee in the lounge with Aunt Fay and Devin, listening to one of Aunt Fay’s soothing records and generally relaxing. She was startled to see the door swing slowly open, apparently of its own accord. Then, two small, dressing-gowned figures appeared in the aperture: Naomi carrying a large, brightly wrapped parcel; and Adam clutching a long, white envelope.

‘For you,’ he said breathlessly, thrusting it at Sarah.

She took out a beautiful Easter card and opened it to read the message: “Happy Easter, Sarah. From Adam, Naomi, Aunt Fay

and Devin.” Oh, *thank* you. How lovely!’ She took the parcel Naomi was holding out to her and undid the wrapping to reveal a rich array of chocolate Easter eggs, presided over by a gorgeous pink, fluffy rabbit.

Sarah felt a lump rise in her throat. She hugged the children and glanced towards Aunt Fay, surprising a knowing and slightly wavering smile. Looking up, she met Devin’s eyes and almost flinched at their hard, brooding expression, before he turned away and went to the record player to select another song. *Does he dislike me?* she wondered. *To look at me like that?* A chill rippled down her back. Sarah felt exactly as though someone had just thrown cold water over her. When a moment before, she had been so warm and happy—so fulfilled. She managed to smile and say in a slightly shaky voice, ‘Thank you so much, everyone. I will cherish my Easter bunny.’ Then, excusing herself, she took her two lovable charges back to bed and retired to her room.

It was long before Sarah slept. She was haunted by that hard, daunting expression in Devin’s grey eyes each time she closed her own, wondering what she had possibly done to deserve it.

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, starting with *Winter at Medora Downs*.

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

Lynn has recently exchanged her farm for a delightful small acreage on the edge of a village, where she writes full time. As horses and writing are her greatest passions, Lynn now embraces an idyllic lifestyle, since she has time to delve into the historical research she so loves.

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

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.

Other Books by Anne Rouen

Master of Illusion—Book One

Master of Illusion—Book Two

Angel of Song (Master of Illusion—Book Three)

Guardian Angel (Master of Illusion—Book Four)

