



OUTBACK DRAMA

Seven Chapter Sample

1

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

1986

An eerie silence enveloped the city as it began its Sunday re-incarnation, the streetlights finally surrendering to the crisp winter dawn. A silence shattered by the scream of a high-powered engine. A howl that echoed through the corridors of concrete, steel and glass.

A second noise.

Another motor joined the cacophony, its roar competing with its accompanying police siren. Tyres screeched in torment as the two vehicles fought corner after corner.

In the first car, Rob Stuart imposed his will on his mechanical mount, throwing his machine left, right, left, right. Again and again. Rubber screamed. Suspension stressed to its limits.

Yet the police crept closer and closer.

Finally a wider road. A possible escape. Thigh straining, Rob forced the accelerator beyond the steel floor's limits. His vehicle shot forward.

But the gap narrowed.

Sweat beaded his forehead as he lined his machine for yet another tortuous turn. Then, out of the periphery of his vision, a couple approached on foot.

Fuck! Be close!

Missed by less than a metre. Fury in the man's eyes palpable. Eyes the iridescent blue of his own.

Forced back by the vehicle's slipstream and in an instinctive retreat from danger, the man's heel tripped on uneven paving. Undignified, he landed on his bum on the unyielding concrete, rage exploding across his otherwise stunningly handsome face.

But Rob Stuart had no time to look as his vehicle screamed its own agony, fighting the corner. Agony magnified by the police car nudging its rear bumper.

Both cars lost control.

Losing traction, the police car spun 360 degrees. But to the relief of its occupants, remained upright.

Rob wasn't so lucky.

Fishtailing from side to side, his machine thrust his body up. Down. Thrust left. Right. The pressure on his every cell unbearable.

Then a roll! A second roll! G-forces pressing ever inwards. Pain screaming through every muscle. Limbs in impossible positions.

Finally upside-down, Rob's body hung by a webbing harness that ate into his groin and torso, its outline matched by painful bruising.

He blacked out.

Men in yellow fire suits rushed forward as clouds of retardant engulfed the car. Another team followed, mechanical jaws ripping open the mangled driver's door.

"Cut!" called the director.

The crew cheered the scene.

"Brilliant!"

Others supported Rob's limp torso as another cut each webbing strap securing his body, legs, helmet and chinstrap to the specially engineered seat frame, the custom webbing and uniquely moulded polystyrene cocoon keeping him firmly in place during the ordeal.

They lay him on a stretcher, mind foggy, pain engulfing every crevice.

With his blood pressure gradually returning, he regained consciousness, his right arm throbbing. Broken.

Must be an easier way to make a living! Getting too old for this game!

But he was only thirty-two. And stunt driving his third career.

2

TOORAK, MELBOURNE

The following day, Larry Devine constantly shuffled in his favourite chair as he skimmed over his agent's latest script. Still in a furious mood after his humiliating fall and the pain in his bum, he couldn't concentrate.

It was bad enough that the talentless strumpet who'd accompanied him in the scene laughed after he'd been knocked down by the speeding stuntman. Worse still that his indignity was caught on camera. Then that bloody director boasted he'd leave the shot in the finished production.

Dare ridicule me? Country's greatest star?

Unlike the rage that engulfed every corner of Larry's grand Victorian mansion, a light wind caressed the avenue of trees outside.

"More bloody drivel!" he screamed after a cursory glance of the first ten pages. The script flew through the air, landing in the waste bin. "Bastards know I only consider the cream of roles, yet send me this crap!"

Arguably the country's most famous face, Larry sunk back in his armchair. Eyes closed. Fists clenched. Bum sore.

Why so bloody hard? Harder every year. He yearned for the simplicity of earlier times, his mind wandering back to the small city of Hobart, capital of Australia's island state of Tasmania where he'd earned a university Commonwealth Scholarship. In first year Law, he'd been cajoled into joining the uni's Old Nick Company.

A smile finally replaced the deep lines spider-webbing his face at the memories of that irreverent group. Their logo a stylised Lucifer, complete with tail and trident.

"Just in time for our annual Uni. Revue" the show's producer welcomed, "lampooning State and National politicians and other prominent figures."

A Tasmanian institution, Larry knew well of its annual two weeks season in Hobart and one in Launceston.

"But I've never been on stage before."

"Soon get the hang of it."

On opening night, he'd been petrified. Gut churning as the overture finished, perspiration beaded down his forehead. His pancake make-up in streams.

Then the lights came up. The curtain rose. He stood frozen like a rabbit caught in a shooter's spotlight as his fellow players moved to the music, forcing him to follow.

Then laughter. Roaring throughout the theatre.

The opening skit finished with a cacophony of applause. The audience cherishing his every word, his every move, every note he sang.

He'd never felt anything like it, face lighting at the sound. Clapping, clapping, more clapping.

They're clapping me! The smile that stretched from ear to ear remained to the final curtain call.

He'd become a star.

The cast and crew celebrated into the early hours of the morning at the Theatre Royal Hotel, the last of its barrels almost empty by the time the producer called a halt. "3.00 o'clock. First copies should be printed by now."

"Come on," shouted one of the old timers. In a merry state and keen to be the first to read the *Mercury* newspaper's review of the show, they joked and sang their way to the Argyle Street dispatch bay. The first edition was being loaded.

A printer handed out half a dozen copies to the inebriated cast. "Page Five."

They fought to read the paper's formal critique.

Uni Revue its Usual Triumph. Newcomer Steals the Show.

The greatest thrill of Larry's life, and after the excitement of 'treading the boards', the thought of a lifetime caged in a boring legal office quickly dimmed.

Acting must be in my blood. A future of adoring fans.

Lead roles in the company's three serious works followed: Harold Pinter, Ray Lawler and Oscar Wilde. He couldn't conceive continuing with Uni.

"If you want an acting career," advised his producer, "you need to work with real, down-to-earth people. If you don't understand how people tick, you'll never portray them convincingly."

Larry followed his advice with a year as a 'jackaroo', a roust-about on a cattle station in far-west Queensland where he revelled working with real, no-nonsense characters. Characters who would forever influence a life on stage, film and TV.

With television in Australia in its infancy, stage productions offering few openings and a viable Australian film industry years away, his best hope lay on the other side of the world.

"What? Swapping the warmth and adventure of Queensland for freezing London?" His cattle station boss had been incredulous. "Must have rocks in your head."

But it wasn't rocks that filled the head of the newly stage-named Larry Devine. It was ambition. It was excitement. It was fame.

But fame was as elusive in London as it was in Australia. With a squalid share-bedsit and the cheapest of food, Larry Devine sought roles wherever he could. Between audition after audition he flaunted his handsome appearance to anyone who could smooth his passage. Male, female, or both. Soon came minor performances in amateur theatre followed by walk-on appearances in semi-professional productions. Finally, after two frustrating years, questionable relationships and a string of beds, he landed minor roles under the guiding hand of Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic Company. Its theatre only a few miles from his birthplace then dominated by two towering chimneys of the Battersea power station.

Paving the way for his triumphant return to Australia four years later.

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With yet another slug of 16-year-old Balvenie, Larry's mood finally mellowed, his shoulders relaxing and the old blue sparkle returning. He picked up a copy of the latest *Entertainment Weekly*. Began to browse.

There it was!

Despair vanished. Mood suddenly buoyant. A new film was in production planning, the story of a baby killed by a dingo wild dog in remote Central Australia. Planned to be Australia's biggest budget movie ever.

Then the real gem. One of Hollywood's greatest stars was playing the lead.

Finally. A role worthy of my talents.

Playing opposite her. The pinnacle of my career!

3

ST KILDA, MELBOURNE

Five years earlier, Rob Stuart had been an up-and-coming detective. In his thrill-fixated era, his adrenalin junkie days. His days of his high-speed motor rallies at breakneck speed around country roads and forest trails. Of skiing, scuba diving and rock-climbing. All challenging but each planned and executed with the precision and skill instilled during his initial career as a furniture joiner and further refined as an investigating detective.

His era of prowling for attractive women, assisted by his handsome face, captivating blue eyes, effervescent character and ingrained charm. Chances boosted by being the much younger brother of Larry Devine, Australia's greatest entertainment heartthrob.

All short-term only. The thought of 'happily-ever-afters' made him shiver.

Then a single bullet.

An armed robber's revolver shattering his leg.

His end to thrill-seeking. Womanising.

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Helen was the last of Rob's girlfriends before his weeks in hospital. His months of physiotherapy. The demanding exercise regime that transformed him into a timid, shy, inward-looking gym junkie. Never the same. Cowering at any sudden sound. Any loud sound except those of his continuing rallying world, the only part of his past he retained.

Over the months, Helen changed from short-term party girl to his only support. His philandering days over.

"You're treating me like a baby," he'd grizzled at the empathetic young accountant's attention during his recovery. Mothering that became a part of his life as if by osmosis. A safe, comfortable, affectionate part of his life.

Unlike her earlier words of greeting, they'd morphed from true lovers of early days to just a fondness. Still shared their trendy St. Kilda apartment, shared their bed when both in town, but otherwise lived separate lives.

Helen was making a name for herself in her profession, frequently working interstate and overseas. Rob trying to embrace a new police force role. Desperate to take his mind off the bullet that had seared into his flesh. Mangled his bone. Destroyed his confidence.

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For older brother Larry Devine, everything started thirty years earlier. For Rob, just five years ago.

With a phone call.

Or was that really the start?

Always strained, their relationship was only linked by the tenuous bonds of blood. A relationship changed by that phone call. That famous voice booming down the receiver. A voice immediately recognisable to 95% of Australians.

"Fit to drive yet?"

"In what way?"

"You know. After that shooting thing."

Rob flinched. Two years had passed since the jewellery theft, the bullet shattering his leg. He'd been awarded the Queen's Police Medal and promoted to head the new police driving unit. It had been in all the papers but Larry had never made a comment.

Typical. No hello. No how are you. No congratulations. No how are you recovering.

"Yes, Larry." Rob shrugged his shoulders, accepting the one-way nature of their relationship. "Fit enough to head the new police driving unit and fit enough to win our division at the State Rally Championship."

"Still rallying then?"

Rob grunted in reply.

"Then you can drive for us tomorrow."

"Why? What's the problem?" Rob's blood pressure surged at Larry's expectation that he'd immediately jump to his brother's whim.

"The stunt driver for tomorrow's shoot has been hospitalised. You can fill in for him. They'll make it worth your while."

Just like the old bugger. Only rings when he's after something. But what the heck?

"Tell me more."

It was the beginning of Rob's stunt driving career. And despite his initial apprehension, he loved his first film job. So did the film's director.

"Your brother did a great job," he'd said to Larry at the end of the shoot. "Seen far too many cowboys over the years. Rob's skill and attention to detail's a refreshing change. Hope to use him a lot more."

The jobs kept coming, Rob in great demand. Especially being the brother of the famous Larry Devine. Soon he was forced to make a choice. The police force or the film and TV industry?

Like his brother, he chose the entertainment industry. But it was a nerve-wracking career, every stunt possibly his last. And after five years in the game his reactions were slowing. Made worse by the lingering pains from his old leg break, and now his arm.

The Melbourne CBD crash the last straw.

"Getting too old," he advised his agent. "Losing my edge. Need to call it quits."

"Interesting timing," replied his agent. "Industry's had some high-profile accidents and insurance premiums are going through the roof. Producers desperately need reliable, capable safety officers. Think you should be their man."

As a safety officer he could apply the fine attention to detail drilled into him in his tradesman and detective days.

He was the ideal candidate.

4

FLINDERS STREET, MELBOURNE

Rob Stuart strolled along Flinders Street eighteen months later; his bullet-limp noticeable to only the most observant.

Swept along by rush-hour commuters, he headed for his St. Kilda tram and as the Bourke Street corner approached, a kerb-side news-seller's stand took his eye. Above the pile of newspapers stood a hinged display covered in popular magazines. The cover of one halted him in his tracks. The latest edition of *Entertainment Week*.

He stepped out from the surging throng to investigate, hand rubbing his upper arm.

While a visitor to Australia would assume it was Rob's photo on the front cover of the popular show-business gossip magazine, it was his famous brother. Arguably the country's best-known face.

Bold letters screamed across the cover.

EXCLUSIVE.

LARRY DEVINE AND MEGAN STRONG

Rob bought a copy.

His tram pulled up as he reached the intersection and seizing the steel handle, he pulled himself into the carriage. With all seats taken, he elbowed his way down the aisle and grabbed a vacant leather ceiling strap. As the tram swayed on its rattling route to St Kilda. he battled to fold back the cover and read Page 2. Find what his brother was up to now.

EXCLUSIVE

LARRY DEVINE, AUSTRALIA'S BEST LOVED ACTOR.

In this exclusive interview, Larry Devine announced his forthcoming role playing opposite Hollywood mega-star Megan Strong. The new film follows the well-known story of the mother of the young baby seized by a wild dingo at Ayers Rock.

"I'm doubly honoured," he explained. "It's not only an important Australian story, but it's the part of a lifetime. I couldn't let a role co-starring with Megan Strong slip by. Your readers will remember that in my short time in Hollywood I sought to play opposite a big international star but was needed for productions back in Australia. Now the actress I most admire is coming to Australia. Playing opposite Megan will be the pinnacle of my career."

Rob shrugged his shoulders, his usual mix of derision and admiration whenever he read of his brother's latest exploits. Of his latest publicity stunt. His never-ending moves to remain in the public eye. That bizarre love/hate relationship that had dominated their lives since childhood.

He resented Larry's cockiness, that he diminished Rob's every achievement, but had to admit that his own modest accomplishments never came close to the country's biggest star. Despite their tense relationship, Rob covertly basked in his brother's screen and stage success.

Good on you, you old bugger! Landing such a bloody good part.

He grinned to himself until realising that after this film, Larry would be even more swollen-headed. Even more unbearable.

Even more dismissive of my few accomplishments.

But it would certainly cement his place as Aussie's favourite actor.

SOUTH MELBOURNE

A month later, Larry Devine stormed into his agent's office, the front door swinging back with a bang.

Larry gave the receptionist his usual sparkling smile and breezed past.

"Larry, he can't see you now!"

"No-one's too busy for me." As the agency's most prominent client, Larry treated the agency as if he was their only client.

"What's so bloody important that I had to drop everything?" Larry demanded of his agent, his ever-present confidence beginning to unsettle.

"You stupid bloody fuckwit!" Jack Burrow's face flushed red. "What in the hell did you think you were doing when you gave that interview to *Entertainment Weekly*?"

"Interview?"

"About playing opposite Megan Strong?"

Larry's pompous frame deflated slightly; his self-assured demeanour challenged. "I've auditioned to play opposite her."

"Auditioned. Yes." Ted's face set hard. "Doesn't mean you've got the role."

"But I always get the role. Me! Larry Devine! Frequently refuse parts but I've never been knocked back in decades."

"You can't bloody well assume you'll get every part."

"But I'm in a class of my own for this one! And I adore Megan's work. Co-starring with her will cement my place in the hearts and minds of Australians forever."

So passionate about the role, Larry hadn't bothered sitting.

"Not always that simple." Ted took a deep breath. "Bad news in fact. The producer rang this morning. Believes you're too old. Given the role to Stan North."

"Dropped me?" Larry's frame ballooned again, his jaw set square. "Australia's greatest icon. Anyway, Stan North's not even a bloody Australian."

"I understand your obsession to play opposite Strong, but be fair. The baby's father grew up in New Zealand before moving to Australia. So did Stan North. He's a good fit." Ted picked up a glass of water.

“A good fit?” Larry’s face turned crimson, his blood pressure surging. “No one could be a better choice than.....”

Ted dropped the glass as Larry collapsed on the floor. His best client breathing shallow. Clammy skin. Razors slicing into his heart.

Ted jumped out of his seat, screaming to his receptionist. “Doctor! Ambulance!

“Now!”

6

FLEMINGTON RACECOURSE FILM SET, MELBOURNE

Rob Stuart gave a satisfied sigh. He’d enjoyed his two years as a Safety Officer and yet another incident-free day almost finished.

One last shot.

Floodlights lit the two leads as Rob felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned. A crewmember beckoned, drawing him well away from the action.

“Rob!” Her voice clearly upset. “Larry’s been rushed to Epworth Hospital.”

Shock seized Rob’s body. Then reality struck. Shaking in near panic, Rob raced to his car, their strained relationship immediately forgotten. Thoughts of Larry’s ongoing derision abandoned.

Broke nearly every road-rule as he raced to in inner suburban Richmond. His speed faster than any of his rally championships. Racing. Weaving. Overtaking. Fear gripped his own heart as he rushed to the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit.

Larry lay in a spider-web of wires and tubes.

God. Must be serious.

Dragging himself up onto one elbow, Larry’s stark-white face gave a forced smile. “Thanks for coming Robert. After the way I treat you, I don’t deserve how you jump when I’m in need.”

“Don’t be bloody stupid. You’re my brother.” Despite the words he spat out without thinking, Rob re-tensed at his brother’s treatment over the years. His upper arm itch intensified.

Self-centred, egotistical bastard. Only thinks of himself. Always under his shadow. But being so critical, mustn’t let the friction show.

“Always here if needed.” Rob searched his brother’s face for clues. Normally vibrant blue eyes now washed out. Skin pallid white. Furrows gouged across his forehead emphasised the grey roots emerging from his brown-dyed hair.

“Anyway. What’s the problem?” Rob forced a flippant tone, masking his concern. “Up to your usual tricks again, you old ham? If you’re not on a stage or a screen you’ve still got to be the centre of attention. I bet there’s a sea of admiring nurses and doctors dancing to your every whim.”

Despite the weak smile Larry used to mask his condition, Rob could see his fear. While the very best of actors, Larry couldn’t hide the panic invading his eyes, gripping his body. Rob knew his brother too well. There was a sadness in his voice, water in the corner of those panicking eyes. Shoulders slumped.

It was as if Larry’s pain was his own.

“What’s this performance really about then?” Rob continued to keep the conversation light.

All pretence abandoned; Larry collapsed back onto his pillow. “Everyone expects me to play opposite Megan Strong in the Ayers Rock dingo story.”

“Congratulations. Read all about it in *Entertainment Weekly*. But what’s that to do with you lying here on your back?”

“That’s the point. So convinced I’d get the role, I had to boast. Partly because I was made for the part. Partly to wedge the producers into rejecting anybody else.”

“No one plays a part better than you. You know that Larry.”

“Grew my ego even bigger. Though you probably think that’s impossible”

“Right there!” Rob laughed. “An ego even greater than the one you’ve strutted over the last three decades?”

“Don’t be so cruel.” There was pain behind Larry’s forced smile as he inwardly acknowledged Rob’s not-so-subtle arrow. Pride his biggest downfall.

“Just get on with the story.”

“My agent called this morning. ‘You’re too old,’ he insulted. They’ve given the part to that bloody Stan North. My part! Dropped me like a sack of hot potatoes. Me! Larry Devine!”

Rob grew even more concerned at the growing anger in Larry’s eyes. The sudden crimsoning of his previously pallid face.

“Poor thing.” Worried that Larry was about to have another heart attack, Rob reached between the maze of tubes and rested his hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I know how much you were looking forward to that part.”

“You don’t sound too sympathetic.”

“Always behind you Larry, even though you don’t always deserve it.” A mix of love and admiration glowed from Rob’s deep blue eyes.

Why was it never returned?

“Anyway, what’s this to do with hospital?”

“Haven’t been looking after myself. Eating too much. The wrong food. Too much grog. Not enough exercise.”

“God you love to draw out a story!”

“Desperate to play opposite Megan, the let-down was too much for the old ticker. Collapsed on my agent’s floor. Straight here in an ambulance. About to go in for an open-heart bypass.”

“You’ll be OK?”

“Good as gold in a few weeks.”

“Shouldn’t have upset yourself,” Rob replied. “Your fans couldn’t care less if you act with Strong or not. You won their hearts years ago.”

“It’s more than that.” Tears returned to his eyes. “She’s superb. A movie icon. The greatest star ever. A level even higher than me I have to admit. Desperately needed to play next to her.”

“Always be another time.”

“Afraid not. Never another chance.”

He then beckoned, his face a mask of determination. “Closer! Something I need to ask. Something I need to give you.”

Mouth to ear, the two brothers spoke for some time, the discussion occasionally heated.

“Swear you will.”

“Of course.”

“Swear!”

“You have my word.” Rob kissed Larry on the forehead, accepting the note pushed into his hand. “Just get better soon. Things could improve you know. Stan North might break a leg.”

“Some luck!”

As Rob turned to leave, the thought of Stan North stabbed like a blade into Larry’s already traumatised heart.

The cunt. Pinching my part.

With the operation successful, Larry suffered weeks of recovery. Weeks of rehabilitation. Weeks for the betrayal to smoulder, to ferment, to eat into his ego, to poison his mind. To turn to fury.

How come my agent abandoned me?

How could that bloody producer abandon me? Never liked the bastard anyway. Bloody wanker. Wouldn't know a good lead actor if he tripped over one.

Everyone in the industry's jealous. No one's near my standing. The petty little pricks must have laughed as they dragged me down.

And why bloody North? Just a back-stabbing bastard. Plotting behind my back.

His agent visited.

“How the hell did you allow this to happen? You’ve made a fortune out of me over the years. Knew I was desperate for that part. The part I wanted the most in the world. And you just let it slip through your fingers. My part! Not North’s. You’re as bad as the bloody rest of them!”

“I pushed and pushed and pushed. Never normally an issue. Everyone normally grasps you with both hands. But I can only do so much. Not my film. They make their own decisions.”

“But North’s only a lightweight. No idea how to play opposite someone of Megan’s calibre. Why the hell didn’t you tell them that?”

“Course I did. You think I’m a dickhead or something? Made no bloody difference.”

“Just get out. You make me sick. Just a useless blood-sucking bastard.”

“Larry. I’ve got you hundreds of parts over the years.”

“You didn’t get them. They flocked to me! All you ever did was shuffle bloody papers.”

“Not fair Larry.”

“Not fair? It’s not bloody fair that you didn’t do your job. Let North sneak in. Let him take my part. You make me puke!”

“But Larry...”

“Just get out of my bloody sight. And don’t come back!”

The treachery festered deeper and deeper.

A reporter from *Entertainment Weekly* visited on the pretence of a story about his health. But he could tell all she was interested in was gloating over his missing out on the role. His reaction to Stan North getting the part.

It gave him the shits. Pretending, he answered, “Oh, I really don’t care about not getting the role. Played so many roles, missing on just one hardly matters.” His stomach churned at his words, desperate to keep his bile from rising. Mealy mouthing how he thought it fitted so well into Stan’s career. “Yes, Stan North will play the part well.”

His heart raced as she turned to leave, his blood boiling.

Get hold of yourself. You’ll have another bloody heart attack.

But the insult never went away. The treachery, the bitterness, the despair increasing day by day. Week by week.

Why? Why? Why?

Rob often visited, noticing a significant decline in Larry’s temperament each visit. His emotional disposition. His physical condition. He began to get worried.

“Don’t worry about it Larry. It’s just another bloody part and you’ve had thousands of them.”

“You don’t understand. No one understands.”

“Just forget it. Concentrate on your health. No one could care less whether you play opposite Strong or not.”

“Mightn’t matter to others but it bloody well matters to me. Was to be the pinnacle of my career.”

“Ignore it,” said Rob as he refilled Larry’s water glass before turning to leave. “And just go easy on the Scotch. Won’t help your attitude or your health.”

But Larry ignored Rob’s warning. Every sip of the golden elixir brought marginal relief, conspiracy theories escalating by the glass. Friends and colleagues laughing behind his back. Previously adoring fans treating him with pity.

His delusions grew larger and larger.

Bastard! My role! No one else’s! Never been refused a part in my life. Everyone’s jealous. A conspiracy to bring me down to their level of mediocracy.

His mania pushing deeper and deeper.

They won’t get away with it.

Despite his growing insanity, his creative mind exploded. Options. Choices. Options changed to decisions. Decisions changed to plans.

Larry always needed a challenge. A new part. The commitment to a new project. But now he’d never been so committed. Every hour spent thinking, researching, planning.

North's treachery wasn't his only concern. There was Megan. With all chances of playing opposite his revered superstar dashed, Larry's fertile mind devoted as much time to Megan as to North.

How can I ingratiate myself with my idol?

But the scars of North's underhanded theft were the deepest.

He'll regret the day he stole a part from the mighty Larry Devine.

7

SOUTH MELBOURNE

Five months later, Rob Stuart's eyes scanned every square metre of the campground.

A hotch-potch of tents of all shapes, sizes and colours covered the fine red sand between clumps of spinifex and a smattering of small desert oaks. Log fencing bordered the campsite foreground and further back were cars, caravans, campervans and a shower/toilet block.

Satisfied, he turned and gave a small nod of approval.

A glare of light flooded the site.

"Silence on set!"

A hush enveloped the vast indoor space converted to a sparse red desert.

"Scene 127, Take 2,"

"Action!"

Rob stepped further out of shot.

The cameraman's wide-angle view caught Hollywood's Megan Strong as she raced towards a tent in centre view. Zooming in, the lens captured the famous actress as she turned and pushed the tent flap aside. Her face frozen in anguish.

With just her profile in focus, her eyes searched every square centimetre of the flimsy shelter.

The camera zoomed in further. She turned, her face in full frame.

"A dingo's got my baby!"

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The crew stood tall; pride evident to all. All masters of their craft in their unusual industry. Hand-picked as a foil to Megan Strong's brilliance.

Arguably the industry's most respected safety officer, Rob had become a vital link for those producing film and TV projects around the country. Critical to the completion of Australia's biggest

budget film. A story he and the Australian population knew well. A *Dingo's Lair* would be the story of a mother whose baby was taken by a dingo wild dog at Ayers Rock, in the harsh centre of Australia. Creating a media storm, many sympathised with the grieving mother, but most of the most public, influenced by the media moguls, suspected she had murdered her daughter.

Despite his pride on being selected for the production, Rob couldn't hide his unease. A film so dear to his famous brother's heart.

As the cameras stopped rolling, Rob noticed a newcomer slip into the studio. A stunning woman who exuded a no-nonsense presence. Overhearing her speaking to the director, he picked an intriguing mix of Deep South and US West Coast.

A formidable woman. Aloof. Intimidating. Commanding.

A woman that drew the eyes of nearly every hot-blooded male on set. A woman that was never his style, even in his philandering era before the shooting. Yet he couldn't help taking fleeting glances between every take. Glances fleetingly returned.

Pushing a lock of hair behind one ear, a corner of her mouth formed a querying smile.

At each of her glances, Rob forced his gaze elsewhere. Stared at anywhere but the woman with the deep green eyes who dominated the set.

*

Sarah-Jane Dupre's eyes sparkled at Rob's predicament. All only a game. Bored, she sub-consciously rubbed the back of her neck.

Filming's only begun and I already hate this God-forsaken place. A shiver ran down her spine despite the heat from the sea of flood lights.

Oh, Beverly Hills. Never missed you so much. Knowing that Melbourne was one of the country's largest cities, she dreaded even more what the hot, hostile Outback would be like. Alice Springs, Ayers Rock, Darwin.

After completing a major part of the production's financing negotiations, Sarah-Jane's uncle had suffered a sudden illness and appointed her Executive Producer. Now the major financier's sole representative, her new role was to protect the investors' interests.

"Are you sure?" she'd questioned her uncle. "A big project."

"Big by Australian standards but peanuts compared with our normal productions," her uncle replied. "But an exciting project and damned good experience."

No excitement so far. Only endless hours of scrutinising budgets, timelines and cost over-runs. A little like warfare, she thought: short periods of severe, high stress action sandwiched between endless hours and endless days of boring account acquittals.

Desperately need a distraction. And that safety officer might just fit the bill. She liked what she saw. Despite a hint of sadness in those deep blue eyes, the smile lines at their corners gave hope. Thick brown hair. Not too short, not too long. A strong chin below a sensual, if troubled smile. Loose, practical clothes couldn't hide a body that obviously spends many hours in the gym.

Yes. Perhaps things won't be so boring after all.

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CONTINUE