

# Outback Drama

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A William Sims Novella

Valentine House Publishing

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**PLEASE NOTE:**

**This book has been written in Australian English. Certain works, expressions and spellings may differ from your own.**

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# Chapter One

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## MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA, 1986

A n eerie silence enveloped the city as it began its Sunday re-incarnation, its streetlights surrendering to the misty winter dawn.

A silence shattered by a high-powered scream that echoed through the canyons of concrete, steel and glass.

A second noise.

Another motor joined the cacophony, its roar accompanied by a 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 to the steel floor's limits and 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.

*Bloody close!*

Missed by less than a metre.

Fury fired in the pedestrian's eyes, etes 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 the 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. A scream 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 had kept 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. Stunt driving his third career.

# Chapter Two

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## TOORAK, MELBOURNE

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

It was bad enough that the talent-less 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 drivell!" 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 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 beading 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, his face lighting at the sound. Clapping, clapping, more clapping.

*Clapping me!*

A smile stretched from ear to ear until the final curtain call.

He'd become a star, the greatest thrill of his life and lead roles in the company's three serious works followed: Harold Pinter, Ray Lawler and Oscar Wilde. 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.*

"If you want an acting career," advised the company's 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. After that, UK experience is essential"

During a year as a 'jackaroo', a roust-about on a cattle station in far-west Queensland, he revelled working with real, no-nonsense characters. Characters who would profoundly influence his stage, film and TV career.

*Next stop London*

"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.

In London he flaunted his handsome appearance to anyone who could smooth his passage. Male, female, or both. Amateur theatre, semi-professional theatre and finally, after two years of questionable relationships and a string of beds, he landed minor roles under the guiding hand of Laurence Olivier at his Old Vic Company.

Paving the way for a triumphant return to Australia.

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Assisted by 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. His 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!*

# Chapter Three

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## ST. KILDA, MELBOURNE

Five years earlier, Rob Stuart was an up-and-coming detective. 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 now 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. Short-term relationships only. The thought of 'happily-ever-afters' made him shiver.

Then a single bullet.

An armed robber's revolver shattering his leg.

The end of his thrill-seeking. His womanising.

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"How's lover boy?" Helen's hug verged on the platonic.

She was the last of Rob's girlfriends before his weeks in hospital and months of physiotherapy. The demanding exercise regime that after the shooting, the transformed him into a timid, shy, inward-looking gym junkie. No longer the same. Cowering at any sudden sound. Any loud sound except those of his rallying world, the only part of his past he retained.

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

"You're treating me like a baby," he'd grizzled at the empathetic young accountant's attention during his recovery. A mothering that became a part of his life. A safe, affectionate, reassuring part of his life. For unlike Helen's earlier words of greeting, they'd morphed from the true lovers of their early days to a comfortable fondness. Still sharing their trendy St. Kilda apartment and still sharing a bed when both in town. Otherwise living separate lives.

Helen was making a name for herself in her profession, frequently working interstate and overseas, and when he'd physically recovered, Rob threw himself into 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, the entertainment industry 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 had bullet shattered 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 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 was a refreshing change. Hope to use him a lot more."

The jobs kept coming and Rob was 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. Not just for the stunts, but for all aspects of their production. I 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 made the ideal candidate.

# Chapter Four

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## 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 halting 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 actually a photo of 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, 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. To find what his brother was up to now.

**EXCLUSIVE****LARRY DEVINE, AUSTRALIA'S FAVOURITE 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 and 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. Of 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, resented 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 brother's place as Aussie's favourite actor.

## Chapter Five

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# AGENT'S OFFICE, 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's eyes searched those of his agent, his ever-present confidence starting to wane.

"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 demeanor 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.

“It’s not always that simple.” Ted took a deep breath. “Bad news in fact. The producer rang this morning. They believe you’re too old and they’ve 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 and 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’s a better choice than.....”

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

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

“Now!”

# Chapter Six

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## RACECOURSE FILM SET

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

One last shot.

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

"Rob!" Her voice clearly upset. "Larry's been rushed to Epworth Hospital."

Shock froze Rob's body. Then, as reality struck, his body shook in panic as he raced to his car. Their strained relationship immediately forgotten, thoughts of Larry's ongoing derision abandoned.

He broke nearly every road-rule as he raced to 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 the thought of his brother's treatment over the years. His upper arm throbbed.

*Self-centered, egotistical bastard. Only thinks of himself. Always under his shadow. But with him being so critical, mustn't let the friction show.*

"Always here if needed." Rob searched his brother's face for clues. His normally vibrant blue eyes now washed out. Skin pallid white. The furrows gouged across his forehead emphasising 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 center 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.

"Well, what's this performance really about then?" Rob continued to keep the conversation light.

All pretense 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. I was 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, although you probably think that's impossible"

"Not wrong 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 must have been 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 regret to say. Desperately needed to play next to her."

"There'll 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 stealing his part 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 come that bloody producer abandon me? Never liked the bastard anyway. Bloody wanker. Wouldn't know a good 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 also visited.

"How the hell did you allow this to happen? You've made a fortune out of me over the years. You 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. It's not my film. They make their own decisions."

"But North's only a lightweight. Hasn't the slightest idea how to play opposite someone of Megan's calibre. Why the hell didn't you tell them that?"

"Of course I did. You think I'm a dickhead or something? It 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. That you let Northsneak 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* also visited on the pretense of a story about his health. But he could tell all she was interested in was to gloat 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 that role. I’ve 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 the role 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. Rob 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 apart in my life. Everyone’s jealous. A conspiracy to bring me down to their level of mediocrity.*

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.*

# Chapter Seven

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## SOUTH MELBOURNE

Five months later, Rob Stuart's stood amongst the campground's red sand, eyes scanning every square metre.

A hots-pot of tents of all shapes, sizes and colours were pitched between the clumps of spinifex and smattering of small desert oaks. Log fencing bordered the campsite foreground and to the rear were cars, caravans, camper vans and a shower/toilet block.

Satisfied, he turned and gave a small nod.

A glare of light flooded the site.

"Silence on set!"

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

"Scene 227, 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 center 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 centimeter of the flimsy shelter.

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

“A dingo’s got my baby!”

\*\*\*

The crew stood tall; pride evident to all. All masters of their unusual industry craft. All 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 and 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 center of Australia. Creating a media storm at the time, 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. It was 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 exuding a no-nonsense presence. Overhearing her speak 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 every hot-blooded male on set. A woman that was never his style, even in his philandering era. 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.

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

*Filming has only just 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 Melbourne was one of the country's largest cities, she dreaded what the hot, hostile Outback would be like. Alice Springs, Ayers Rock, Darwin.

After completing most 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. "It's such 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."

*Not too exciting 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.*

# Chapter Eight

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## EXCHANGE HOTEL, PORT MELBOURNE

After a long day and with a bigger program tomorrow, the production's 'talent' retired to their hotels to review their scripts.

Rob joined some of the crew wandering down Bay Street boulevard. Keen for a beer or three, they entered the arched doorway on the mitered corner of the Exchange Hotel. Into the its cosy atmosphere.

Absent minded, he rubbed his upper arm as he chatted to the barman pouring the first round. Carefully balancing four full glasses, Rob joined his mates sitting around a high, round table. Waiting their turn at the 8-ball table, their banter followed the day's highlights and hiccups.

Soon the pool table was free and the assistant cameraman loaded fifteen balls into the triangular rack. He rotated it into position.

"Me first?" He placed the cue ball on the designated spot.

"Might as well. You'll only lose," said one of the grips.



The cameraman gave a sharp whack, the white ball powering the triangle of colour in all directions.

“What about that horny blonde on the set?” He handed the cue to his opponent.

“Couldn’t miss. Certainly a stunner,” drooled the second man.

“Definitely giving Rob the eye. In no uncertain terms,” replied the Director of Photography. “You’re on a winner there, mate.”

“Don’t even think about it,” warned an assistant director. “She’s the money woman. Hard as nails. A real ball-breaker. Upset her and she could close the entire production. Try it on and she’ll have your guts for garters. Your balls for breakfast.”

Rob marshaled his thoughts as the game continued, the coloured balls gradually disappearing into the six pockets.

*Was he right about the American woman? Had she really glanced more than was healthy?*

Flattered at the thought but it was only supposition. Even if interested, which he certainly wasn’t, it was absurd that a lowly safety officer would draw such a high-flying woman’s attention.

Affairs were common on a film set. Understandable when working under extreme pressure, strangers were thrown together far from home. In his younger days before before the shooting, Rob had enthusiastically sought a string of such liaisons, but with self-confidence shattered he was terrified of almost any woman other than Helen. He’d certainly watched film-set romances with a degree of envy, but was determined to stay well clear.

Shuddered at the thought that the blonde might be serious.

*If she wants to give me the eye, then too bad. Too bloody dangerous for me.* The assistant director’s warning reinforced his desire for a quiet existence.

But Rob Stuart had faced danger before.

# Chapter Nine

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## MELBOURNE CBD

At the end of each day's filming, Megan Strong was whisked off to her opulent suite in the city's Windsor Hotel, Australia's most cherished grand hotel.

A stranger in a strange city, she was enjoying both Australia and her new role. The role of a survivor: a strong, independent woman who took on the legal system, the media and so many of the public. To Megan, the woman reflected the nature of the vast country that she was beginning to know and admire. A country she felt had a spirit of independence that indelibly stamped itself onto the character of its people. Much as her own homeland had stamped its character on the American psyche.

Despite the language similarities, she needed to perfect her accent. Not just an Australian accent but a hybrid of both Australian and New Zealand English.

At night she studied the script and rehearsed her lines, but whenever the opportunity arose she walked through the city alone. Down

its streets and lanes. Through its magnificent gardens. She breathed in its cosmopolitan buzz; observed the population going about their daily lives. Her keen ear analysing the voices in the streets, in the shops, in the cafes and in the pubs. She engaged people in conversation and practiced the locals' unique rhythm and intonation.

She also searched for a special keepsake of her time 'Down Under'. Something uniquely Australian but easily transportable.

By the time filming in Melbourne wrapped up, Megan was uneasy. Fears she raised with her bodyguard, Dan Burrows.

"You know I've never approved of you walking alone," he warned again.

Megan yet again explained her need to be incognito. To really breathe in the feel of a city, she needed to be alone. That it didn't work with her bodyguard hovering by.

"You know I'm not happy about what you do, but I respect your wishes," he again relinquished.

She then explained her concern. That during her walks over the last two days it felt as if she was being followed, her concern increasing to the point where on her final day, Dan accompanied her everywhere.

But with Melbourne filming now completed, it was no longer a problem. She had a short break between locations and flew to the Lizard Island resort on Queensland's Great Barrier Reef. There to recharge. To immerse herself in the privacy of the island's natural beauty, the coral splendor of its surrounding ocean and its powdery white beaches.

A relaxing break from her demanding schedule.

As Megan flew north, a Frenchman with deep brown eyes retraced her route through every city store the star had visited. Slim, metal-framed reading glasses sat low on his nose, a contrast to his flamboyant black beret and his plain, open-necked shirt under a suede, camel coloured jacket. "I believe film star Megan Strong shopped here the other day," he said to each shop assistant in his appealing accent. "What did she show interest in while she was in your store?"

And while the sales assistants had no reason to recognise the foreigner who furtively noted down the assistants' answers, all felt there was something familiar about him.

# Chapter Ten

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## ALICE SPRINGS, NORTHERN TERRITORY

With Melbourne filming finished, Rob supervised the dismantling and loading of the entire campground set onto the back of semi-trailers, double and triple checking a balanced load and that all tie-downs were secure for the long journey.

“See you at the unloading,” he shouted as he waved the first truck away on its 2,300-kilometre trek to Alice Springs. The trucks left Melbourne as single-trailer rigs and consolidated into massive three-trailer road trains north of Adelaide. On reaching Central Australia, the campground set would be re-assembled another two times.

Unlike Megan Strong, Rob had no time for a Great Barrier Reef break. Or any break for that matter. Too busy preparing for filming in Alice Springs where key elements of the story would be shot. A hectic time in the remote Central Australian town.

Rob scanned the terrain as his two-and-a-half hour, DC9 flight traversed half a continent, staggered that over ninety percent comprised an almost endless, apparently water-less plain. Its only interruption scattered salt pans and the occasional jagged mountain range. Sand and rocky hills stretched from horizon to horizon, all with minimal vegetation. A web of dry riverbeds wound their way through the arid landscape with virtually no hamlets, villages or towns in sight.

He gasped on disembarkation, as if stepping into an oven. A relentless sun beat down from a cloudless sky as his taxi passed the rugged ochre ranges dominating the road, until a wide gap in the range enabled entry to a pleasant township. Avenues of gum trees and native vegetation welcomed visitors, not the deep, lush green of suburban Melbourne, but more of a grey-green.

*Perhaps things won't be so bad after all.*

Rising early from his modest room at the Elkira Motel the next day, he was keen to oversee the unloading and re-assembly of the campground set which had been driven for two full days on its mammoth road-trains. Although the dingo had taken the baby from Ayers Rock, some five hundred kilometres away, the campground set would first be re-assembled on Undoolya cattle station on the outskirts of Alice Springs. The countryside had a similar feel to that of Ayers Rock, but as only night scenes would be filmed there, there was no need for a view of the great monolith itself. More importantly, it was close to town and the hundred and fifty 'extras' the film required.

For the camp site's daytime scenes, the set would again be re-assembled in the foreground of Ayers Rock, the sacred monolith of Uluru.

The eighty-two tires of each road train crawled onto the red, sandy site, a large all-terrain forklift waiting to raise the toilet blocks, motor vehicles and the caravans off the trailers and place them in position. Hundreds of metres of round, treated pine fencing, stacked on another

er trailer, would make the 'campsite' fencing and artificial trees would supplement the scarce native vegetation. Each operation a potential safety hazard.

All went well as the vehicles, buildings and caravans were unloaded.

"Wait," Rob shouted as the large forklift began to lift a bundle of fencing logs. He climbed onto the pile, then around either side, carefully inspecting for damage to the load's woven webbing.

"All OK."

A definite creak echoed through the site as the forklift took up its weight, the logs compressing together as they lifted off the trailer deck. The operator reversed slowly and began to swing his machine through 90 degrees.

Crack!

Like a gunshot, the sound of a breaking strap reverberated across the set. Constant chafing on the long trip to Alice Springs had partially worn through the fabric below the bottom logs. An area hidden from Rob's earlier inspection.

Everybody froze as for a millisecond they processed the sound. Processing their options.

Then a deep rumble.

No longer secured, the logs tumbled from a height of three metres. Steamrolling in all directions as a giant game of 'pick-up-sticks' played out before their eyes.

A scream!

Six logs lurched directly at a crew member. Bouncing, Rolling. Knocking him to the ground, rolling over his prone body as if a small ant mound.

Rob felt bile surge up his throat, helpless to halt the errant logs.

"Nurse!" He screamed as the logs slowed. Five guys raced to remove the finally stationary logs.

Pam Forbes charged forward with her first aid gear as Rob radioed for an ambulance. The production's last minute replacement nurse, Pam examined the injured man, injected a painkiller and began treating his broken leg.

Siren's blared after she'd finished her work. Arriving paramedics double-checked her patient then set off to hospital.

"Whew!" Pam wiped her brow as she smiled at the handsome safety officer. "Only on job for half an hour and you give me this."

"Sorry about that," Rob replied, rubbing his upper arm as colour returned to his face. "Should've inspected the tie-down straps as soon as they cleared the trailer deck. Lucky you were available as our replacement nurse. Certainly earned your pay today."

"I spent years with the Flying Doctor service and similar injuries were common."

"Name's Rob Stuart, by the way."

"Pam Forbes." Her reply friendly, she subconsciously curled a lock of hair around her finger. "He's got a broken tibia. Otherwise not serious."

"Thanks again. But if you'll excuse me, I'm a busy boy. Catch you again on set."

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With the campsite fully assembled, the road trains, trucks and forklifts drove off set, their tracks raked and smoothed. A massive catering marquee materialised, tables and chairs were set out and a mobile kitchen backed into position. A sea of caravans followed. Offices, make-up rooms, costume stores, private spaces for the actors. A network of chords and cables ran from generators to serve the new desert



mini village. As all scenes would be filmed in the dark, Rob ensured all hazards were mitigated with trip-proof protection.

*One down, three to go, Now the town work.* Rob mumbled to himself as he drove into town, satisfied the camp-site set was safe for filming.

After the campground scenes, filming would switch to the first coronial inquiry into the baby's death, to be filmed in and around the Alice Springs courthouse.

Ignoring the pain of his mild limp, he made a walk-by inspection of the courthouse and its surrounds. A modern, imposing building for such a small town, it sat on the corner of Hartley and Parsons Streets. Now repurposed, the original homestead-style courthouse stood diagonally opposite, and on another corner, the grassy David Smith Park.

The adjacent Ford Plaza's multi-storey car park overshadowed the old courthouse and beyond the park, and directly opposite, stood the Greatorex Building, a three-storey office building. Cameras would be mounted on both rooftops and both were potential hazards. He considered the inside courtroom scenes straight forward but there would be crowd control and safety issues at the courthouse entry steps.

"Rooftops next," he instructed his team. "Safety fencing on both."

With the long day's work completed, Rob collapsed in his motel room, his old leg and arm injuries throbbing. Tomorrow night, filming on the Undoolya campground set would be even more draining.

But at least all was now set for the big event.

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As Rob's team completed the rooftop safety fencing, a fifty-year-old man disembarked at Alice Springs airport and made his way to the rent-a-car desk.

The rental operator noted an Irish accent, lightly tinted sunglasses with deep eyes beyond, a touristy attire and short grey hair protruding from a floppy hat. Concentrating on the paperwork, she didn't have time to study the man's face, but the name on the driver's licence and credit card meant nothing to her.

"White car, third on the left," she said as she gave him the keys.

He was on his way within minutes.

# Chapter Eleven

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## ELKIRA MOTEL, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

The receptionist gave Rob a note when he came down for breakfast.

*The production is considering additional scenes at a place called Redbank Gorge and before I approve additional expenditure, I need a personal assessment. I require your input from a safety point of view.*

*I'll arrange a vehicle and food. You're to buy an air mattress to enable exploration of the waterhole running through the gorge. Bring your swimming gear.*

*Be at the Lasseter's Casino Resort at 1.30 pm. Meet me there.*

*Sarah-Jones Dupre*

Rob hadn't heard of Redbank Gorge and there certainly was no reference to it in the shooting schedule.

*What on earth's she after? There were glances during the Melbourne filming but surely they meant nothing.* Then the assistant director's warning. Certainly a stunning, sexy woman but the production's most powerful person.

*Genuine survey or some ulterior motive? Surely someone so high powered wouldn't be interested in a lowly safety officer? Must be overreacting. Just business. But need to tread carefully.*

Despite Sarah-Jane Dupre's commanding presence, there was an apparent air of humility about her. Eyes ever-piercing when she flipped blonde, shoulder-length hair from her shoulders. Yet aloof as she toyed with the large pearl hanging from the gold chain around an always regal neck. During school years in Charleston, South Carolina, friends, family, neighbours and teachers constantly complimented her looks. Initially cute. Cute becoming angelic, angelic becoming truly lovely and from lovely to totally adorable. The descriptions continued as she aged: totally exquisite, calculatingly beautiful, positively stunning.

By the time she'd finished her business degree at the University of South Carolina in nearby Columbia, stunning became drop-dead gorgeous. "With looks like yours, you should be in Hollywood," everyone insisted. "You'll be a big star."

Sarah-Jane took the compliments in her stride. Externally always unpretentious, down-to-earth, accepting her appearance in the same way others accepted they had two arms and two legs. While outwardly reserved, few saw through the façade. To the determined, strong-willed woman beneath, her smiles masking her intolerance of those who crossed her. Her sparkling eyes hiding definite views and an iron-clad determination.

But Hollywood was flooded with equally stunning, sexy young women seeking stardom. All working demeaning, underpaid jobs and

living in squalor as they kept their starlet dreams alive. Sarah-Jane was luckier than most, her great uncle having moved to Hollywood decades before and was now a major film financing player. “Treat my home as yours and whenever you need it, there’s always advice on the realities of Tinsel Town”.

It was the perfect launch pad.

“You’ve got the looks and the talent so you’ve got to give it your best shot. I can help with introductions, but more importantly, give a periodic reality check. See how you go. If nothing eventuates, there’s always a place in my firm. While your face won’t be well known, you’d be far more important in this industry than most of the stars.”

Many tried to persuade Sarah-Jane that their particular casting couch would guarantee stardom. Each time she declined. Disillusionment came quick and hard and her uncle’s offer became an attractive one. She’d already proven her worth when her uncle became suddenly ill.

“Doctors won’t let me leave the States, so you’ll have to look after the *A Dingo’s Lair* project. Your first Executive Producer assignment.”

# Chapter Twelve

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## LASSETERS CASINO RESORT

Rob crossed the concrete causeway linking the CBD side of the dry, sandy riverbed to the Casino Resort. Stark, white-trunked river gums lined its banks. As instructed, he'd purchased an air mattress, pump, beach towels and swimming trunks from the local Kmart store.

He pulled up exactly on the designated time.

Sarah-Jane's rented Toyota Land Cruiser glistened in the rays of an almost permanent sun. With its high clearance, protective bull-bar and snorkel for driving through water, it was a hard-core bush-bashing machine.

*Seems an overkill.*

Rob had read the tourist guides and while basic 4WD capability was necessary for the Redbank Gorge road, her vehicle seemed somewhat over-the-top.

"You drive." Her only remark until well out of town. The sky was a cobalt blue as they followed Larapinta Drive, ranges soaring up on

either side of the highway. Lightly vegetated on their lower slopes, sculptured rock on the upper levels.

“Reminds me of an erratic, overblown version of the Great Wall of China,” said Rob, desperate to break an awkward silence.

There was no reply.

The range to their left, directly in the sun, radiated the Centre’s deep trademark red while the shaded one to the right kaleidoscoped with subtle purples, pinks and blues.

Rob continued to shuffle uncomfortably, the vehicle engulfed in silence.

*What do I say to a bloody high-flyer from Hollywood?*

Stressed, Rob automatically stroked his upper arm.

*Nothing in common!*

He finally broke his concentration from the white line leading ever west. To her profile. The slightly upturned nose, long, natural lashes, curving lips framing an enticing, slightly open mouth. Impossibly white teeth. Gazing at the sky, she seemed entranced by the view.

*Not just attractive. Bloody magnificent. But powerful. Smart. Overbearing. Dangerous.*

“Bloody magnificent,” he blurted out referring to the scenery; his choice of words sub-consciously following his previous thoughts.

*Will she realise what inspired the wording?*

“Certainly is. Dramatic vista for any film.” Sarah-Jane nonchalantly flipped hair from her shoulder.

The silence returned.

“Been to Central Australia before?” she finally asked, her face softened by a stray lock that crept back over one of her deep green eyes.

“Grew up in Tasmania but now live in Melbourne. While I’ve never been here before, filming has taken me to most parts of Australia.”

“Like film work then?”

"Sure. Started life as a carpenter and then years as a policeman. Beats them both hands down."

"I know. Always something new. Somewhere new. New people. But like all jobs it's never plain sailing. Like you I love it, but the stress gets me down. How do you handle stress?"

Rob coughed to buy time.

"Well first, I'd never be as stressed as I'm sure you must be." His face reddened.

*What happened to superficial talk of scenery?*

"I'm far from your league but things can still get hectic. Fortunately there's always a time frame for each production. When it's over, I return to a great little pad opposite St Kilda beach. Great views, swimming, gym and runs along the beach."

"Sounds idyllic."

Rob breathed a sigh of relief, the ice finally broken. "May I ask a question?"

"Of course," Sarah-Jane replied, an off-hand sweep of hair as she turned.

"What exactly is this survey about? I checked the shooting schedule when I got your message, but there's no mention of Redbank Gorge."

"Yes. At the moment you're right."

*Was there a hesitancy in her answer? Did her eyes really harden?*

"When filming in a region like this you've got to maximise the grandeur, and I was speaking to the film's police liaison officer, an Aboriginal man, and this is his country. He believes Redbank's such a stunning feature we should weave it into the story. A narrow water-course meandering through a spectacular, narrow rock passage."

Rob turned to reply but her eyes swept back to the road ahead.

"My job's mainly financial but at the end of the day, it's about the success of the film. While locations aren't my role, I still need to see if



this Redbank is as good as it sounds. And if it is, I need to know the logistics of trekking cameras and sound gear to the site. I need your advice on how it can be done in a safe and cost-effective manner.”

“What I’m paid for.”

“Like Melbourne then?”

“Especially where I live. Close to both beach and the city center.”

“Live alone?”

Oh! Oh! Rob automatically caressed his arm.

*Here we go. What’s she angling for?*

“Interested in my private life?” his reply a reflex one, his heart sinking at his inappropriate reply. Perhaps a lighter vein, he thought, forcing a grin despite his fear of where the conversation was heading.

“A question like that could get me into trouble.”

“Sorry. They often say I’m far too blunt.”

“No. That’s fine.”

“You’re a private person then?”

“Not really. A bit of an open book.” His shoulders relaxed as her face softened at his words.

“Then what are you hiding?”

“Hiding? Not much, but it’s not clear cut. In the police I had a girlfriend who wanted the ‘forever after thing’, but then I was shot in the leg. Six months in hospital and rehab. Everything changed and the ‘forever after thing’ was off the agenda. She’s now a high-flying accountant with projects all over the world and I come and go with my film work. But we still share our apartment when we’re in town. More like flatmates. Good friends.”

“Friends with benefits?”

Rob’s neck reddened as he concentrated on the road. “Sort of.” He felt he had no option but to reply.

“Someone you trust? To share your problems?”

“Bit like that.”

“You’re lucky to have such a good friend. Someone you trust.”

“But you must have lots of friends in Hollywood. They say there’s parties all the time, lots of socialising.”

“Certainly lots of socialising but all very superficial. Everyone on the make. Pushy. Always wanting something. And on top of that, I travel a lot, work crazy hours. Not an easy way to make friends. Not like the good old days back in South Carolina.”

“It’s not so hard to make friends really. Just need to meet the right people.”

Sarah-Jane’s pupils instantly narrowed, lips tightened. “We’re on a professional excursion. While I might be a bit nosy, my personal life is none of your business.”

Rob smarted at the return of the woman’s icy glare.

“And exactly how much longer before we’re there?”

Despite her brave front, Rob could see a lonely woman.

They’d passed signposts to popular Simpson’s Gap and Standley Chasm and taken the turn-off to Namatjira Drive. “We’ve passed Ellery Big Hole and those buildings to the left at the base of the cliff face must be Glen Helen Gorge. Redbank turnoff’s only a few kilometres away.”

“Why don’t they use proper language?” There was irritation in her voice. “What’s wrong with using miles?”

Rob bit his tongue. *Don’t take the bait.*

“Here’s the turnoff,” he said, pleased to break the blancmange of tension that swamped the vehicle. “Track looks a bit bumpy so things might get rough.”

Rob shivered at the possible implications of his words.

*What kind of rough?*

# Chapter Thirteen

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## ALICE SPRINGS POLICE STATION

As Rob and Sarah-Jane drove west, retired US Army Ranger Dan Burrows fidgeted as he sat in the conference room of the Alice Springs police station. Eyebrows brooding.

*A lot's happened since Des Moines, Iowa.*

The film's line producer and Ted Johnston, its security officer sat to Dan's right. Worry etched all three faces.

At the head of the table, Assistant Commissioner Ross McPherson faced the visitors. To his right sat Sergeant Mike Thompson whose features reflected his local Arrernte, Scottish and Afghan origins, half his face and both hands showing recently baked and blistered skin. The police sergeant placed his notepad and pen onto the table, both lined up at a precise right-angle with the table edge. Satisfied with the impeccable placement of his stationery, he looked up.

McPherson opened. "Welcome to Central Australia. I hope you're coping with our mild weather." While the senior police officer's face lit with a welcoming smile, his visitors showed no amusement at his

weather description. "We're honoured you're filming here and that Megan Strong is the star. It'll reinforce the town's image around the world. And while our police station has limited resources, my staff are at your disposal if required."

The line producer opened his mouth to respond but McPherson continued. "I've appointed Sergeant Thompson here as our official liaison officer," he said, waving his hand in Mike's direction. "A capable man with contacts throughout both the town and the Aboriginal bush communities. Currently on light duties after a recent traumatic incident but he's fit enough for all that you may require. Now, how can we help?"

The line producer handed over a detailed list of operational issues: required road closures, general security arrangements and a full crew contact list.

McPherson glanced through the document. "Seems all straight forward but by the look on your faces, it appears there's another problem."

"There is." Ted gave a cough. "When filming in Melbourne both Miss Strong and Dan, her personal bodyguard here, felt they were being followed. Not just the usual onlookers but something more sinister. We need assistance in case the same happens here."

"While I'm Miss Strong's personal bodyguard," said Dan Burrows, "my duties are close protection, always needing to be within three yards of her to react quickly. It was difficult in Melbourne, keeping an eye out to the rear while scanning for more immediate threats. Unfortunately we have no description of the stalker."

McPherson drummed his fingers on the table despite concentrating on Dan's story.

“Miss Strong requests that you appoint a plain clothes officer as a tail, keeping well back to observe from a distance. I can always handle anyone who gets too close.”

“What about the film’s security team?”

“We’re a bit like Dan,” said Ted. “We’ve got a small team but our focus is the production’s on-set cast, crew and equipment. There’s millions of dollars of gear to be protected. We can’t do that if the guys are deployed on tailing and surveillance.”

“Understood.” McPherson, turned to his sergeant. “Sounds like you’d better dust off your civvies Mike. You’ve now got surveillance to add to your liaison duties.”

As Mike Thompson walked to his car he reflected on how he’d approach this new role. His mind elsewhere, he paid no attention to the well-dressed man wandering through the park opposite the nearby courthouse, his face in full shade under a wide-brimmed Akubra hat. A hat like those worn by many locals and the sea of grey nomads who poured through the town.

# Chapter Fourteen

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## REDBANK GORGE CAR PARK

**T**he Land Cruiser navigated the rough track with ease and at the car park, Rob threw on his day pack holding the air mattress, towels and swimming trunks. Sarah-Jane hauled out her own insulated backpack with its food and drink. As she lent forward to hoist it onto her back, the collar of her T-shirt opened. Bra less breasts exposed.

Rob fought to ignore the view. Fought to keep his expression neutral. Fought his body's automatic reaction.

*The nearest thing to God on this production. Can't have done it deliberately. Be professional. Don't even think about it!*

He set off with a determined stride, desperate to take his mind off the sight, and followed the narrow track running beside the dry riverbed. While past the worst heat of the day, the sun still scorched down from a clear sky, radiating off the red boulders, the sand-filled

dry river floor and the massive range on either side. Stark white ghost gums grew on both sides and within the riverbed. Rock wallabies scuffled away as they approached, and in the distance, a grazing red kangaroo. Bird chatter reverberated through the narrow valley.

Sweat soaked their T-shirts.

Unlike most mountain ranges, the rivers that flow through the Macdonnell Ranges don't have their source in the ranges themselves, but in the wide expanses of flat, elevated country stretching far to the north. In times of flood, over thousands of years, the water had surged south, gouging narrow chasms through the range. Redbank was one such chasm.

When the track petered out they scrambled over huge boulders cast down by past floods, like massive childrens' marbles. Pain surged up Rob's leg from the old bullet wound each time he clambered over boulder after boulder. Massive cliffs rose in front of them, taller and taller as they approached the narrow gorge entrance.

Being the furthest of the region's many gorges, Red Bank was the Western Macdonnell Range's least visited attraction and they only passed a few families and couples, tourists returning to the comforts of The Alice.

Finally arriving, the area was deserted. Between the boulder-strewn riverbed and the gorge itself lay a large waterhole, its mirrored surface reflecting the soaring cliffs above. After crossing a sandy beach, Sarah-Jane dumped her backpack on a rocky shelf, her T-shirt glued to her skin by sweat streaming from every pore.

A disturbing sight.

*Ignore it.* Rob turned away, placing his own bag nearby.

"Bloody hot!"

Rob grunted agreement, unsure whether he was referring to his temperature or the sight before him.

“Spectacular, isn’t it?”

Rob’s reply was not about the view of the soaring cliff face.



# Chapter Fifteen

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## REDBANK GORGE BEACH

“Looks great from here,” said Sarah-Jane. “An incredible spectacle for any movie, but evidently it’s only when you get deep inside the narrow gorge that it can be seen at its best. It’s why we need the air bed, so go ahead and blow it up.” Her request came with relaxed authority. “I’ll open a couple of beers.”

A stubby of VB beer in a neoprene stubby cooler was thrust into Rob’s hand as he pumped the mattress up by foot. When finished, he launched it into the water. The refreshing cold fluid had disappeared in seconds and Sarah-Jane handed him another.

“Well then, what are the possibilities for getting cameras and other gear here?”

“You saw it. Won’t be easy. Not enough clearance for a chopper so it’ll all have to be man-handled. Along the track and over all those boulders”

“Man-handled?”

“You know, carried by hand.”

“Oh. That’s your meaning.” Sarah-Jane’s reply held a hint of a smile. “I was thinking of a different connotation.”

“Anyway,” replied Rob, attempting to divert the discussion. “You’re right about carting in the gear. It’d take forever. Cost a fortune.”

“Yes. Must agree.”

“Expedition’s been a waste of time then?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” The lilt of her light-hearted reply sent a shiver down Rob’s spine. “We’ve had a scenic drive. A lovely bush walk through the river valley. Seen some wildlife. Found a great waterhole.”

“True, I suppose.”

“Besides, I don’t know about you, but I’m damn hot and sweaty. Water looks inviting.”

She stood, placed her beer on the rock, flicked off her sneakers and grabbing her T-shirt, hauled it over her head. Wriggling out of her shorts and knickers in one move, she stood momentarily on the water’s edge.

*My God! Really is a work of art.* Lungs frozen in panic, Rob was unable to drag his gaze from her breasts, the curve of her butt, her long, inviting legs. Couldn’t breathe.

*But she’s the Executive Producer. The major financier. Closest thing to God and here she is naked. What in Hell do I do?*

Naked except the large pearl suspended by a gold chain around her neck, she waded further into the invitingly cool water. Waist deep, she turned.

“Well?”

# Chapter Sixteen

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## REDBANK GORGE WATER HOLE

**I**n his younger days you couldn't have held Rob back, and his thundering heart told him he'd been far too timid since the shooting. Life with Helen just drifting.

He tried to swallow but his mouth was like leather. Helen hadn't been back in Melbourne for two months and he was horny as hell. But the assistant director's warning continued to toll. 'She'll have your guts for garters, your balls for breakfast'. Despite the warning, his erection had a mind of its own.

"Aren't you hot and sweaty too?" Sarah-Jane sired.

*What the heck to do? Look a clown changing into bathers in front of her with my cock straining like this. With her brazenly standing there I can hardly change behind a rock. But I can't just wade out in the raw, in front of someone who could crush my career.*

But the urges powering his body took control. Uncertainty swept aside. Lust savaged every cell.

*Their eyes met. Locked. While there was no doubt what Rob's body was telling him, what were Sarah-Jane's eyes really saying?*

He stripped off his shirt, boots and shorts, his erection broadcasting its message loud and clear through the fabric of his jocks.

Sarah-Jane gave a seductive grin.

*Chosen well. Deep, well-defined chest. Ridges and valleys spanning a taught, flat gut. Then the face, the blazing eyes. An eager cock turned on as much as he's made me. But let him stew.*

For the final act he placed his thumbs into his jock's elastic band and began to push them down.

"Just a minute!" Her face showed anger.

"What?"

"What do you think you're doing?"

Rob froze in his tracks. Panic eyes.

"I told you to bring swimming gear. What makes you think you can take off your underwear in front of me?"

"You want me to change into my swimming trunks?" Confidence shaken. "With you standing like that."

"Why else would I have told you to bring them?" She tried to hide her glee at Rob's discomfort. "You know I control everyone on this production. Hold their career in my hands?"

She could see Rob's mind in turmoil. In desperation. Pondering his career.

"Terribly sorry if I've offended you ma'am. I'll hide behind a rock and change into my swimming trunks after all."

"A bit late for that after parading around in your jocks."

"So sorry Ma'am." Rob instantly subservient.

“So you bloody well should be! Just what did you think you were up to?”

“I apologise ma’am. Do whatever you ask.”

“Are you that unimaginative? No thoughts of your own?”

“Certainly got thoughts ma’am.”

Sarah-Jane could hardly contain herself, steeling herself from crushing her arms around the fine specimen standing so tantalisingly close.

*Let him sweat a little longer.*

“And precisely what thoughts would they be?”

She saw Rob take a deep breath, his mind racing, desperately looking for an unambiguous response. Finally, his eyes lit, panic gone.

*What’ll he come up with I wonder?*

“You said back in the car how important it is to have good friends. Appears to me you’re lonely. Very lonely. Desperately in need of comfort. Of support. Of companionship. Of desire.”

His words cut like a knife.

*That bloody obvious?*

“How dare you!” Her hand swung viciously at his cheek.

He ignored her words. Her swipe. Her defensive eyes. Her flashing anger.

“Seems to me that your work is your life and your life is your work, leaving just a cancerous loneliness.” Rob desperately hoped his words wouldn’t be the end of his career. “A loneliness you ignore. Pretend doesn’t exist. Pretend that it doesn’t affect you.”

“And just how in the hell would you know?”

“After having been shot, I know fear. Uncertainty. Emptiness. Know what it’s like.”

Sarah’s face went blank, swallowed hard.

*Damn him. Who the hell does he think he is, finding the chink in my armour?*

Seeing his confidence growing, she was desperate to halt the man's scheming.

"And exactly what kind of comfort could you possibly offer?"

"I know how loneliness bites deep. Thought maybe I could help fill a little of that emptiness."

She could see he was pleased with his line as he pressed his point.

"Help fill that void. Become a close friend?"

"And exactly how close did you have in mind?" While Rob's words had zeroed in on her inner torment, she tried to command her mind's raging battle. Not admit his truth. The man's insight into her personal life.

*A bloody nobody, for God's sake.*

She'd considered him purely a distraction. Picked him out as a good body but a superficial mind.

*But the bastard's seen right through me.*

Tables turned.

Before she had time to assemble her thoughts, Rob stepped forward. Opened his arms. Ready to sweep her into his chest.

Sarah-Jane's eyes screamed panic. Fear of losing control. *Nothing like planned.* He'd seized the initiative and she needed time. Time to hold back from either launching across the divide.

"Don't you dare!" She stepped back, pleased as confusion returned to Rob's face. "We've come a long way to fully explore this gorge. It's what we came for, isn't it?"

"Not really sure why we're here."

Her battle continued. *Regain control. Regain the initiative. Block out the reality that to Rob seems so obvious.*

"We mustn't waste more time."

“And then?”

Reality struck.

*The bastard’s bloody right. Only Uncle Jack to share my ambitions with. My problems with. My successes with.*

As the realisation squirreled its way through her body, the sparkle finally returned to her eyes.

*Same goal I suppose. Just an unexpected approach.*

“Perhaps some exploring of the personal kind?”

Rob reluctantly backed away and floated the mattress into position. Side by side they began their voyage, Sarah-Jane helping the instability of the improvised raft with her hand stretched over Rob’s back, her hand gripping his bum cheek below his underdacks. Rob did the same to her naked backside. They paddled with their other arm, lips grinning, eyes dancing as they reached **the cool, secret places rent by nature so long ago. Hidden from the rest of the world.** The gorge narrowed, less than a metre in places with vertical cliffs raising either side. Both deep red, their surface rough at the higher points and a glass-smooth finish closer to the base where rushing water had polished the surface to marble. Boulders had lodged in a few places, creating natural weirs and they laughed like teenagers as Rob climbed up each set of slippery rocks, his powerful body hauling Sarah-Jane to join him on the next level.

Their speed increased on the return, the urgency of their bodies’ beckoning.

“Enjoy your exploration?” Sarah-Jane’s face now fully alive.

“Bloody good. But nowhere near as enjoyable as the other exploring you suggested.”

Her eyes narrowed, savouring the oceanic depths sparkling within his vibrant blue eyes. “You said this spot needs some manhandling. Perhaps a demonstration.”

“Anything to oblige such an important lady. But it won’t be so comfortable while still in my jocks. You commanded me not to remove them.”

“I commanded you not to remove them. I didn’t say that I wouldn’t do so.”

She squatted, her face level with the offending garment as she gently pulled them down to his ankles, her lips exploring his erection.

“There. Wasn’t it better that I did the deed?” Her eyes glazed in lust.

Rob pulled her up, wrapped his arms around her, pressed himself against her welcoming flesh.

She sighed, relishing the pleasure. Relishing their bodies moulding together. Relishing her rapidly disappearing loneliness.

*Feels so right. Arms wrapped tight.*

Rob groaned as he grabbed her bum and pulled her closer.

Her own gasp unmistakable.

He ground his groin against hers, mouths devouring towards their imminent pleasure.

Then she pushed him away.

“What? More bloody games?”

“Things will be more comfortable on the air mattress.”

...

They made love on the bouncy air bed at the edge of the sandy beach.

“Condoms weren’t the only thing I brought,” said Sarah-Jane as they lay on their backs, the last rays of the setting sun drying their sweat-soaked bodies. She rummaged through her backpack, producing a bottle of Dom Perignon, glasses, cheeses, pâté and biscuits. “I thought you might need a little energy after all your exertions.”



With the food all gone and the champagne half drunk, Rob lent over, running the tip of his tongue around her ear. Her body squirmed. She discovered him hard again.

“You’re kidding!”

“About what?” He grinned as he moved his body over hers.

Sarah-Jane relished he hadn’t been kidding at all.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## CAMPGROUND FILM SET, ALICE SPRINGS

Well-placed advertising led to a large crowd assembling on ANZAC oval where staff, a marquee and tables processed the would-be actors. The brooding red grandeur of ANZAC Hill stood to the north. To the south, the sun reflected off the white bark of the majestic river gums lining the water-less Todd River. Hundreds of willing ‘extras’ shuffled to the edge of the grassy oval where the assistant director spoke through a megaphone.

“We need extras for two different days. Those for tomorrow night will be bussed out to the set on Undoolya Station where you’ll receive a meal and work into the early hours. We’ll be filming the discovery of the baby missing and the search that followed. Then on Saturday, we need extras to act as court officers, news reporters and the general public.” He went on to advise timings, sign-up arrangements, payment and associated matters. Soon a line of excited locals stretched onto the

oval. HR staff processed applications and signed all up as short-term members of the Actors Equity, the industry union.

Such was the excited energy radiating through the crowd that no one paid attention to the man in shorts, T Shirt, sandals and a peaked baseball cap during the assistant director's briefing. The man who chose not to sign up as an 'extra', but crossed the road and walked down Todd Street.

...

On the following evening Sergeant Mike Thompson's name was ticked off by the HR girl. In civilian clothes, he settled into a seat in the middle of one of the three buses that took extras out to the camping ground set. Everyone jabbered in excitement, discussing their movie debut.

On de-bussing, Ted Johnston, the film's security officer, stood by the first aid tent with three others.

"Hi Ted. Ready for a busy night?"

"There are people everywhere and we'll need to be on our toes. But first my colleagues." He introduced Mike to Rob wearing his Safety cap, and to Dan Burrows, Megan Strong's bodyguard.

"And this is Pam Griffiths, our production nurse. She stepped in at the last minute."

"No need to introduce Pam," said Mike, his face lighting up as Pam's and his own eyes met. "Been very good friends from the first minute she arrived in town."

Mike's friendship words were unnecessary, Rob could see the pair were very close.

They chatted for a further few minutes.

"As you all wander over the set, keep your eye out for anything suspicious. It'll broaden our surveillance."

"We'll keep our eyes peeled."

As the cast, crew and extras lined up for their evening meal, the group went their separate ways. Mike and Ted began their formal patrol of the crew car-park, the electrical generator and technical area, the caravans, the film equipment trucks and well beyond the brightly lit filming area.

They scrutinised everyone lined up for the evening meal. Studied faces. Studied body language. Looked for any irregularity.

Nothing.

With the meal over, filming started in earnest and was Mike fascinated as the process unfolded before his eyes. In addition to Megan Strong and Stan North, there were many faces he recognised from past films and TV series. Bustling activity. One crew member even flicked finely cut pieces of feather into the air, each speck lit by the floodlights to simulate flying insects.

Despite their search for anything out of place, none of the group noticed the man mingling in the darkness amongst the extras. Greying goatee beard and a dark woollen beanie to ward off the late night chill.

By 11.30 they were ready for the search scenes, reproducing the search for the baby after being taken by the dingo. Over a hundred extras lined up, each acting as one of the tourists who'd camped at Ayers Rock that night. Torches were issued and instructions given. Rob's nerves were on edge as the ranks of extras strode in the pitch dark, traversing the irregular surface and weaving between the burrows, rocks and clumps of spinifex.

The line of torches shone through the dark as the cameras rolled, searchers seeking the imaginary baby.

"Help!"

A sudden cry from the darkness.

Cameras stopped.

Pam Griffiths grabbed her first aid kit and raced forward, Rob and Mike close behind. A burrow had collapsed under a searching woman's leg. Her cry piercing the still night air.

"Hold the light please Mike," Pam asked. "Looks like a broken ankle."

She splinted the leg under the light of both Mike and Rob's torches.

"Long way back to the first aid station," she said to Mike. "Help me lift her up and then put one of her arms over each of your shoulders."

Despite their careful progress, the woman screamed in agony until reaching the first aid tent, an ambulance eventually taking her to hospital.

The director settled the cast and crew and the search was re-shot two further times. The last scenes of the night. Buses returned the extras to town and cast and crew wandered to the car park full of rental vehicles of all shapes and sizes.

Again, no one paid attention to the beanie-headed man walking to his own vehicle. Neither crew nor extra, he'd watched from the periphery, observing every move.

It was 3.30 in the morning before Rob and Mike finally left the set.

...

Rob crept into Sarah-Jane's spacious suite, her laptop screen still glowing and the green light on her printer penetrating the semi-darkness. Documents covered every flat surface. Itemised budgets, shooting schedule, a much-thumbed script and the production accountant's itemised reports.

*Not the only one who worked well into the night.*

Sarah-Jane stirred as he opened one of the bedroom's double sliding doors.

"Filming over?" Voice croaky with sleep.

"Long night. But looks like you burned the midnight oil too."

“Had to phone a report back to my uncle in LA and worked into the late hours. Call went till three. 9.30 yesterday morning their time.”

“Both buggered then. I’ll just take a quick shower.”

Clothes quickly piled in the corner of the luxurious bathroom and penetrating jets swept Rob’s lethargy away. Feeling more alive, he adjusted the taps to a more welcoming temperature.

Two buds pressed into the flesh of his back, provocatively hard. Encircling his torso, Sarah-Jane’s hands caressed his chest, lowered to stroke the ridges below before continuing their ministrations downwards. Reaching their destination, she nuzzled her cheek against the broad of his back.

Minutes ago Rob had been exhausted, but his body surged as Sarah-Jane’s massaging continued.

“How’s this for a little man handling?” she purred.

He turned, grabbing her soft, eager body and ground his groin forward.

“Exhausted a minute ago, but for some strange reason that suddenly all changed,” he said. Any suggestions why?”

“No idea,” she whispered in his ear as she turned. “But somehow I also know the feeling.”

Filming and book-work had gone well into the morning.

But Rob and Sarah-Jane’s night was considerably longer.

# Chapter Eighteen

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## LASSETERS CASINO RESORT

**B**uzz! Buzz! Buzz!

Stark rays beamed through the chinks around the curtains, searing into Rob's nocturnal fog as his fingers groped for the alarm clock, hoping it hadn't woken Sarah-Jane. Orange digits morphed from the darkness as his eyes came into focus.

7.00 a.m.

She stirred as Rob slipped out of bed to order room service breakfast.

"Up already?"

"Only just."

"What for?" Her words a dreamy mumble. "Come back to bed."

"Sounds great. But not just now I'm afraid."

Her pupils widened as they sought Rob's.

"No! I said come back to bed." Her initial purr now a harsher tone.

"We've got a lot more exploring to do."

"Tempting," Rob crooned as he bent over, kissing her bare shoulder. "Things I must do."

"Things to do? We deliberately scheduled a lay day from shooting. Everyone's tired after the last night's filming and anyway, there needs to be a ten-hour break between each day's shooting. My reports are up to date so we've got the whole day in bed together."

"Wish I could. Hate leaving you looking so sexy like that but unfortunately haven't the time to share a bed all day. Tempting as it sounds."

"But you've completed everything for tomorrow's shoot."

"For filming, true. But there's another thing."

"What's so urgent?"

"Private, I'm afraid."

"Something private here in the middle of nowhere? Must be joking." Now wide awake, Sarah-Jane's anger was building. "After our last two days, I thought I'd be the only private thing in your mind."

"Sorry. But I made a solemn commitment well before we ever met. A promise that'll take most of the day. We can have a romantic dinner here in the suite tonight if you're still interested. Then really continue where we left off."

"You bastard! Think you can root me one minute and just walk away when you feel like it? I said stay and I dam well mean it. Don't you dare leave!"

"What? You think you own me?"

"Don't I?"

"I don't know what your bloody problem is. Before Redbank, my life was comfortable but just drifting. A job I love. A nice apartment. A nice friend in Helen."

"You think I've been acting like a 'nice friend' over the last two days?"



“Far from it. Blown away that you virtually raped me, paraded yourself until I took the bait. Bloody incredible. Finally feel alive again, shaken out of my complacency. Finally pulled my head out of my bloody arse. But it’s not only me. It’s the same for you, your emptiness far greater than mine. But I’m a man, not a manipulated puppet. Don’t pour shit on someone who really cares for you for a change.”

“How dare you! I run this show and with one word from me, your career will be in tatters.”

“You’ve already turned my life upside down and much to my amazement, after the last two days I care more about you than any career. Anyway, you might have influence with the industry big boys in the States, but things are different here in Australia. Mainly TV and small budget films. I’m bloody good at my job and people appreciate my work. If you do interfere, it’ll be a struggle. But I’ll still survive.”

While Sara-Jane’s eyes lost their certainty, they demanded obedience.

“But more importantly, how long will you survive? How long since you last shared a problem with someone in love with you. And when were you last really in love for that matter? How long before you end up a lonely, bitter, twisted bitch.”

“You bastard!” Dipping her shoulder for maximum power, she swung her hand and slapped Rob’s cheek.

Rob grabbed her arm, forcing it back to her body.

“Everyone warned me you’d be trouble but you managed to get under my skin. Don’t know if this’ll be the last we ever see of each other, but unless you change your bloody attitude, I’m off. And with all the extras signed up for tomorrow, it’s the production’s most expensive day. Without a safety officer your insurance will void and you won’t get a replacement in a hurry. It’ll blow your precious budgets to bits. Just think before you threaten.”

Rob let go her hand, fury in his eyes as he stared into hers.

“I don’t know why, but my dinner offer still stands if you can get off your bloody high horse. And while I’m away I suggest you take a long hard look at yourself. At what you’ve become. At that cancerous loneliness. Think of someone else’s feelings for a change.”

Sarah-Jane’s face remained a mask of loathing.

“And on the remote chance you come to your senses; you won’t regret continuing where we left off I can assure you. But it’s all in your court.”

As Rob stormed out the door he recalled the Melbourne pub warning. ‘She’ll have your balls for breakfast, guts for garters’.

*Well, she hasn’t acquired any garters yet and my balls weren’t on the menu. It’s her balls under threat.*

“Bastard!” shouted Sarah-Jane, attempting to slam the door behind him. But with its gradual self-closing mechanism, she couldn’t even take her frustrations out on the slowly shutting door.

Rob’s breakfast arrived ten minutes later. In a fury, Sarah-Jane ordered the waiter and his fare out of the room.

*Takes all kinds*, the waiter thought as he returned the meal to the kitchen. Now cold, untouched.

\*\*\*

As Sarah-Jane pondered Rob’s invective back in her suite; most cast and crew were out exploring the town, its surrounding waterholes, hills and gorges, or doing a little souvenir shopping.

Rob’s heart shrank at the way their relationship had nose-dived.

*But bugger her. I made a commitment and there’s no way I’ll renege. Her problem. Not mine.*

Back in his Elkira Motel room he changed into his most touristy attire and drove to the Sheraton Hotel car park, scrutinizing every vehicle.

*So far so good.*

Selecting a spot at the furthest end, he settled as low in his seat as possible, only eyes and forehead visible. With binoculars, he scanned the remaining cars. A man sat in a white 4WD, apparently without purpose. He re-focused the lenses.

*No surprise. Mike Thompson, the policeman. But why not in uniform?*

As Mike knew him from the campground set last night, he'd need to take extra care.

During his car park vigil, Rob had plenty of time to stew over his morning argument.

*What is it with that woman?*

He'd been warned and should have run a mile but was sucked in by her provocative antics. But it was her vulnerability that really got to him.

*I'll miss the bitch but there's no way she'll own me.*

Rob had his pride. His independence. His need to be in control his destiny.

But the words he'd spat out in haste came back to bite him. *'When did you last share a problem with someone in love with you? When were you last really in love? How long before you become a lonely, bitter, twisted bitch.'* Words he suddenly realised applied equally to himself. He'd had fun playing the field in his younger days. But never a commitment. Then drifted into a comfortable relationship with Helen. A good friend, but she'd never claimed his heart.

*Perhaps Sarah-Jane and I are too similar. Never really been in love. Will I also end up lonely, bitter and twisted?*

Megan Strong and Dan Burrows finally exited their hotel at 11.00 am, got into their vehicle and drove over the concrete causeway, the plain clothes policeman following closely. Across the river and into town. His wait over, Rob followed from a safe distance.

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Unlike Sarah-Jane, Megan Strong's face lit in anticipation for the day ahead. Keen to use her shooting schedule break to explore the town and find one or two special keepsakes.

"Agenda unchanged?" asked Dan.

Megan explained her interest in the artwork produced in the various Aboriginal communities and that she was keen to learn more. "And as Australian opal is so prized, I'm interested in acquiring a striking piece. But the touristy things first."

Dan drove her to the Royal Flying Doctor Service base where she observed staff planning medical clinics and emergency flights covering thousands of square kilometres. Then to the School of the Air where Fred Hockley, the school's gregarious principal, introduced her to students and parents listening from isolated cattle stations, roadhouses, mines and hamlets over a similar area.

All became even greater fans.

At both venues, Dan stood close, analysing every move. Mike, now in plain clothes, keep a watch from further afield.

On returning to town, Dan parked in Stott Terrace and he and Megan walked to Todd Street. Mike parked in the council chambers car park and Rob continued, parking at the nearby Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Hopefully far enough away not to be recognised.

# Chapter Nineteen

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## TODD STREET, ALICE SPRINGS

Tim Jennings owned a nearby Aboriginal art gallery and as he and Mike Thompson had once been policemen together, Mike had suggested to Megan's bodyguard that *Mbantua Gallery* would be a good place for Megan to start her art search. After a thorough security inspection, Dan waited outside, keeping his client in close view through the gallery window.

Mike Thompson smiled as Megan entered the gallery, pleased they'd taken his suggestion. He then took up his back-up security station on the far corner of Todd Street and Gregory Terrace, giving him a clear view up four streets.

Wearing a wide, floppy-brimmed bush hat and dark sunglasses, Rob Stuart took shelter in the dimly lit foyer of the council chamber. His observation was not for Megan's safety, but to simply monitor and take notes.

*Can clearly see when Megan leaves the gallery.*

Pre-warned, Tim Jennings was waiting to greet the famous actress as she entered the inviting coolness of his showroom. "Welcome Miss Strong."

Megan's eyes devoured the spectacular artwork on every wall.

"Take your time and look around," said the owner. "Please ask if you have any questions."

Mesmerised, she'd never anticipated either the striking nature or variety of the canvasses parading so vividly from the gallery's walls. Fine-worked dot paintings, vibrant coloured patterns, unique icons.

"Every image represents some part of the artist's dreamtime story," Tim explained. "Their connection to the land."

A dramatic, large painting took her eye.

"Stunning, isn't it?" Tim was impressed at Megan's eye, knowing she'd chosen the gallery's best piece. "By Gloria Petyarre, an award winning artist from an area known as Utopia. Three hundred kilometres north." He explained that Utopia is a small outstation community and that the Sandover River ran through their country.

Megan nodded her approval.

"Like most of Gloria's works it features a particular shrub from her bush medicine dreaming. See here? How she's used differing brush strokes to represent the plant's growth over the various seasons."

An hour later, Megan completed her purchase. "We'll pack it into a shipping tube for freighting and send it directly to your Hollywood address."

Megan continued her search of the gallery, stopping to pick up two carved birds, fine white hatching covering much of their bodies. "They're not local but from Arnhem Land to the east of Darwin. Our Darwin gallery has a larger selection if you're interested."

Confirming she would definitely visit their northern gallery, Megan then wandered up Todd Street. Now a pedestrian mall, only a few

decades ago had been just dust, horses and camels. Visiting several other art galleries and souvenir shops en-route, Rob observed that she came out of each empty-handed. He noted each store she visited and her length of time in each premise.

The Opal Cave, another of Mike's suggestions was her last port of call where her bodyguard did his usual internal inspection and waited outside.

Mike leaned against the trunk of a large gum tree near Adelaide House, the original stone hospital; pleased that its wide, leafy canopy provided both shade and camouflage as he studied the passers-by. Searching for any potential threat.

Rob Stuart noticed Megan entering the opal store and ordered a coffee from an inside table in the cosy gloom of the Lone Dingo café. It gave him a good view of the specialist opal retailer.

An hour later Megan re-appeared empty-handed and Rob breathed a sigh of relief when Megan finally re-entered the Sheraton Hotel.

*Thank goodness no one noticed.*

\*\*\*

As Rob methodically carried out his day's observations, back in her suite, Sarah Jane's hormones pulled in all directions.

*Who does he think he is? Questioning me?*

She was used to being in control and with her striking appearance and engaging smile, everyone fell over backwards to please her. Humour her. Accustomed to an endless sea of admirers, she'd always been selective with her choice of short-term bed mates. Always physically attractive but always superficial pawns. Birdbrains whose ego ballooned at being seen in her presence. Egos flattered by their

relationship with such a powerful woman. And like everyone in her life, always on the make. Thinking she'd be their fast-track to industry success.

All purely physical affairs, never emotional. Simple distractions from a stressful life. Cretins quickly tired of, jettisoned like an unfashionable T Shirt.

*So what makes bloody Rob Stuart think he's so different?*

Her well practiced routine had begun easily enough. A physically attractive choice. Not too far up the pecking order to be threatening. Easily manipulated with a display of bare flesh. But somehow from a different mould.

*Saw right through me. My insecurity. My loneliness.*

*Need to retain control.*

*Bastard!*

But for some stupid, childish reason, she was desperate not to lose him. He actually cared about her as a person. Not as someone to exploit for his own benefit.

*Even scornful of my power.*

*Bastard!*

Both seemed inevitably drawn to each other. But neither would give ground.

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While pleased with his day's work, Rob wasn't so confident of Sarah-Jane's likely reception. Whether he'd still have a job.

But he'd made a commitment. A commitment he wouldn't abandon, even for even Sarah-Jane.



Hoping she'd had a long, hard think, he returned to the Elkira Motel, showered, shaved and changed. Steeling himself, he swallowed deep, gut churning as he rang her bell.

Her face unreadable on answering the door.

"Any chance of that romantic dinner?"

"Haven't completely deserted me then?" she said, indecision in her eyes. "So still a possibility."

"Going to invite me in?"

"Don't know if you deserve it after this morning's behaviour. But as you can see, there's no one else to share the dinner with."

"I only followed your lead," he said, tentatively stepping inside.

"But perhaps you're right. I know I can be difficult at times. Demanding. Possessive. I should have respected your decision."

"You know deep down that I hated leaving. But it had to be done."

"Perhaps we should just sit. See if we can repair the damage."

They sat opposite, their conversation stilted as they commenced the first course. Flutes of Bollinger helped settle their nerves until Sarah-Jane built up the courage to ask the question on her lips all day.

"Tell me. What was so important that you had to leave for a whole day?"

A question he hoped she'd never ask but understood her doing so. He took a deep breath, told of his promise, of how it had consumed his time.

"Oh Rob," she cried, her hand sweeping across the table to grip his. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't give me much of a chance. Anyway, it's something I didn't want to get out."

"That's so sad." Heart opening, she dropped his hand, stood and moved to lean over his shoulders. Whispered into his ear. "So, so sorry. I know I can be a bitch at times."

“And I over-reacted too. Like a bulldozer.”

She closed further to his ear. “What can I do to make you forgive me?” Her tongue replaced her words.

Rob seized her arm, twisted her in the opposite direction and playfully pushed her into the bedroom. Onto her bed.

“Perhaps something like this might be a good start,” he said as he forced his lips to hers. His body on top of hers.

# Chapter Twenty

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## ANZAC OVAL, ALICE SPRINGS

**A**n enticing spread of cakes, pastries, water, juices and hot drinks diverted the extras attention from the long processing queue. Those who'd worked on the Undoolya campground scenes were sent on their way while newcomers completed application and union membership forms, excited to join the world of movie make-believe.

From ANZAC oval they trailed up Hartley Street and assembled at the grassy park opposite the courthouse, ready for the scenes relating to the first coronial inquest into the baby's death. Some were to pretend to be part of the courtroom process. Others part of an aggressive paparazzi crowding the courthouse steps with artificial TV cameras and microphones. Others joined an angry spectator mob, jostling and shouting behind the media scrum. The remainder played the less-interested members of the public, viewing events from the park opposite.

Those involved in the courtroom process followed the baby's parents to the inquest, forcing their way through the rabid media pack

and a swarm of resentful bystanders. Their departure from the courtroom would be filmed numerous times.

Dan remained inside the courthouse providing close protection within a five-metre range of his client, while Mike Thompson conducted wide-angle surveillance from the street corner, analysing everyone approaching the scene, scrutinising every move. Not an easy chore given the throng of actors, crew and extras. He wore a pair of jeans and a short-sleeved shirt hanging outside his belt, his handcuffs hidden under the shirt tail.

Rob Stuart's focus was back on safety, constantly searching for potential hazards. Always the danger of an amateur crowd becoming too boisterous or someone tripping over a camera, the lighting cables or missing their footing and falling down the courtroom steps.

Pam Forbes stood by with her first aid gear.

But neither Mike nor Rob took any interest in the man with a bushy beard, scruffy grey hair and brown eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses who stood among the many extras in the park opposite. The shade of his wide-brimmed hat obscured the face beneath. Equally, no one noticed the canvas parcel he'd hidden the previous night in the garden adjacent to the entrance to the Greatorex office building.

While they'd filmed some studio courtroom scenes in Melbourne, the coroner's findings were filmed in the real Alice Springs courtroom.

*"Not only have you suffered the loss of your beloved child in the most tragic of circumstances, but you've been subjected to months of innuendoes, suspicion, and probably the most malicious gossip ever witnessed in this country,"* said the actor portraying the coroner. *"I find that the subject died when attacked by a wild dingo dog whilst asleep in her family's tent at Ayers Rock. Shortly after eight p.m. on 17 August 1980."*

Filming the courtroom departure then commenced. The baby's parents, the court officers, the lawyers and the courtroom onlookers.

A key scene, the sequence would appear briefly in the final movie, but filming of this small segment would take all afternoon.

With precious stars, crowds of people, floodlights, power cords, steps and the restricted movement of the steady-cam operator, it was a hectic time for Rob. Easy if there'd been a single take but it required eight. The Steadicam operator filmed Megan and Stan from the rear, the rear left and the rear right. Directly from one side and then the other. Then static cameras on the footpath, looking directly up at Megan, then from front left and right.

The gaggle of pretend lawyers, court officers, media and onlookers swept through the foyer and down the steps to the footpath below. All running the gauntlet of a frenzied paparazzi of would-be journalists, news cameramen, sound recordists and angry public

Mike Thompson felt grateful he wasn't one of the real parents. Although it was all make-believe and he recognised many of the bit-part actors and town residents shouting angrily at the couple, it was still a frightening experience. Frightening even for him standing in the park opposite. He shuddered at what it must have been like for the real baby's parents at the time.

Ignoring the onslaught, on each take Megan and Stan stopped on the top step, the reactions of the 'general public' mirroring those of the actual event.

"You're a bloody murderer."

"Baby killer."

"Stay brave. We know you're innocent."

"Someone should blow you away, you bitch."

"The dingo's innocent."

"I'm with you. You'll be proved innocent in the end."

"You just cut the baby into pieces and fed them to the dingo."

"We know where you're staying. We'll plant a bomb there."

“Evil really happens.”

The media pack thrust their simulated microphones at the couple, the reporters clamouring over each other. The cacophony gradually died as the couple smiled serenely from the top of the steps. Megan unrolled a large photo of her nursing the baby.

*“This is a picture of my beautiful daughter as she really was. A very special baby.”*

The child’s glossy cheeks and deep, serious eyes glowed beside her mother’s proud yet tender face. A moment of incredulity descended on the crowd. But soon, the media wolves recommenced their snarling.

Twice during the filming, eats and drinks were circulated amongst the cast, crew and extras.

The bearded, grey-haired man in the park opposite always declined the food offering.

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## FORD PLAZA CAR PARK, ALICE SPRINGS

The courthouse exit scene also had to be filmed from two high points.

The first from the top of the Ford Plaza multi-story car park, almost diagonally opposite the courthouse. During the ground-level takes, Rob preceded the camera crews, his light truck ascending each floor until reaching the roof. There he re-checked the safety rails and markings installed two days before.

*All in order.*

There'd be at least two takes from the car park roof before the gear and camera crew would move to the roof of the Greatorex office building beside the park.

With the last of the ground-level shots finished, the camera crews loaded their gear into the back of two utes and drove up to meet Rob.

“That’s the shot we want,” instructed the director. “The footpath, the roads, the grassy corner park, the courthouse opposite, the police station next to that and the office block on the other side. As you guys will be concentrating on getting the best possible shots, make sure you pay attention to Rob’s safety briefing.”

“What happens when we finish filming here?” the best boy grip asked after the briefing.

“Next shots are from the three-storey Greatorrex office building over there” Rob pointed north. “The individual offices on each floor are locked but you’ll have full access to the stairwell and up onto the roof. When you’ve finished here, take your gear down in the utes, unload at the unlocked entry doors and then park behind the building.”

“Man-handle the gear up the stairs?”

“Only practical way.” Rob grinned to himself, his body stirring at the memory of Sarah-Jane’s interpretation of the word. “But take care. Stairs are steep and the roof surface is uneven.”

Rob gave a final look at the scene below. The extras were at the food tables again as the camera crew prepared for the first shots looking down onto the courthouse steps. The director and his director of photography finalised their camera angles as Rob drove down to street level, confident that crew and equipment were protected from falling four floors to the concrete footpath below.

*Almost over.*

Despite his mind drifting to Sarah-Jane rather than the job in hand, he drove cautiously to the Greatorrex Building and parked at the rear of the structure, well out of camera sight. He returned to the entry foyer and puffing slightly, climbed the dimly lit internal stairwell.



The sun blazed from the cloudless sky as he stepped onto the roof, as if walking onto a hot steel BBQ plate. Blinded by reflections from its shiny surface, his eyes were a-blur as they fought to penetrate the dazzle.

The image of a body emerged through the glare.

A man leaning against the safety barrier.

He rubbed his eyes, the shape finally coming into focus. A man facing the crowd below, steadying himself on the safety fence.

Steadying a telescopic rifle.

A wide brimmed hat, horn-rimmed glasses and a scruffy grey wig lay at his feet.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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## GREATOREX OFFICE BUILDING, ALICE SPRINGS

Rob raced forward, the clang of boots pounding the thin steel.

The gunman turned, rifle now pointing at Rob. Its ominous black eye stared directly at his own, rifling grooves swirling deep into its sinister heart.

For the second time in his life he was being threatened by a weapon.

Welded to the spot, the sweat that had been droplets all day gushed from his armpits, poured from his brow, stung his eyes. Eyes that like a magnet, were pulled to the small, dark circle. Fighting the terror that gripped his body, he focused every ounce of willpower to drag them away from the weapon.

Rich brown hair now contrasted with the grey whiskers of the man's false beard; half pulled away by the rifle resting against his cheek. Fire burned from brown eyes.

Coloured contact lenses, Rob realised. But despite the colour change, they were eyes he'd never forget. Normally a vibrant blue, eyes he knew as well as his own.

The eyes of his older brother, the famous Larry Devine.

"You!"

"Yes, me!" Larry's laugh verged on maniacal. "Everyone wrote me off. Even you, the biggest betrayal of all. That part playing opposite Megan was mine and bloody North will get what he deserves."

"Don't be so bloody stupid."

"What would you know? Just a nobody. Always have been. Always will be."

"But you're throwing your legacy away!"

"My fans will honour me forever after this."

Larry turned, again lining the telescopic sight up on the man who had stolen his part. The man standing next to Megan Strong.

"Don't be a fool!" cried Rob. "It'll destroy your reputation forever."

"Get fucked!"

Larry took a deep breath, his finger whitening as it closed over the trigger.

Rob lurched across the roof and seized his brother's shoulder.

As Larry turned, Rob grabbed the end of the rifle. Back and forth the two men fought and while Rob was the fitter and stronger, his brother was heavier, fighting with fanatical strength. Older, flabbier and breathing laboriously.

The weapon twisted higher and higher to an angle where both lost their grip.

Clang! Crashed onto the metal roof.

Below, everyone turned to the sound in unison. At the desperate grunts and swearing.

The camera crew on the opposite car park panned across to the office block. Zoomed in on the skirmish.

While Rob knew his brother was no match for an extended rooftop struggle, Larry could still use his heavier weight to advantage. He strained to pull them both away from the precipice but his brother was a dead weight.

They lost their balance.

Both began to topple.

Only one option.

Release his brother before they both fell.

He let go.

Chest on fire, he staggered from the edge.

Larry Devine would have been pleased that his final swansong was filmed for posterity. He'd never done his own stunts, making this an even greater triumph. He laughed hysterically as he opened his arms into a graceful swallow dive.

A dive that ended with a distinct, unmistakable thud.

A thud so loud it sickened the crowd congregated near the courthouse.

# Chapter

## Twenty-Three

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# DAVID SMITH PARK, ALICE SPRINGS

**D**an Burrow's instincts surged into play at the sound of the struggle, gathering Megan into his wide, solid shoulders and heaving her into the safety of the courthouse foyer. If a bullet were to come, his body would shield his precious client.

Stan North, the other cast, crew and extras followed. They bolted the doors.

Chaos reigned outside as people ran in all directions.

From his post in the middle of the park, Mike Thompson saw both the fall and Pam Griffiths lugging her first aid gear as she raced to the body.

*No need to hurry Pam. He's well beyond help.* . He sprinted past the body, his focus elsewhere as he charged up the stairs, three at a

time. Reaching the roof he found the safety officer. Bent over. Chest heaving. A telescopic rifle at his feet.

“Don’t move!” Mike ordered.

“Me?” Rob looked confused. “Why are you looking like that? I’ve just stopped Stan North from being murdered.”

“Do as you’re told! I’ll make the decisions.”

Mike stepped forward and with his handkerchief, picked up the weapon. Using his shirt tail to prevent his own fingerprints overlaying those existing, he pocketed the magazine and emptied the chamber.

“Hands behind your back,” he ordered, flicking handcuffs onto the offered wrists. “Walk slowly down the stairs and head straight for the police station. I’m following.”

“But I didn’t do anything wrong. It was me who stopped the shooting.”

“Do as you’re told.”

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As Mike predicted, Pam Griffiths found Larry Devine beyond revival. His famous face now a pulpy mush.

Assistant Commissioner McPherson had periodically wandered out of his office to observe the filming, something he was unlikely to witness again. On Larry’s fall during his third viewing, he gave an urgent order to the constable on desk duty, then raced to the mystery body. Despite two additional policemen arriving, accompanied by the police photographer, McPherson’s shoulders sank as he took control of the crime scene.

“Christ, what a mess.” There were hundreds of witnesses and he’d need statements from them all. But did anyone really see what happened on the roof?

While Rob was the only one who knew the gunman’s identity, many recognised the man being marched to the police station. One of the two men who had desperately fought on the edge of the roof.

He was bundled into an interview room.

Arriving by ambulance, the doctor declared the fallen man dead. Sickened at the sight of her patient, Pam re-packed her gear as they whisked Larry to the morgue. Away from the macabre stares of the now returning onlookers.

Then a shout rang out. A shout echoing between the buildings.

“Shit!”

Everyone turned to its source, a woman yelling from the courthouse corner.

Sarah-Jane!

Hands hiding the fury n her face, she continued her shouts.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!”

# Chapter

## Twenty-Four

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# ALICE SPRINGS POLICE STATION

**T**he interrogation took hours.

Mike sat across the table from the two interrogating detectives who refused to accept that Rob had nothing to do with the incident. He was either the culprit or an accomplice. Step by step they explored Rob's movements for the previous weeks, including the times Megan Strong had reported a stalker in Melbourne. Then every moment of his time in The Alice. Every second of the rooftop fight.

He told them everything. Everything except shadowing Megan through her Todd Street shopping expedition and the name of the body.

"Where did you get the rifle?"

"Where did I get it? It's not mine. He had it when I reached the roof."



“That’s what you say,” replied the detective. “We put it to you that it was you preparing for the shot. The dead man tried to stop you but you overpowered him, threw him off the roof. You were seen stopping your ute near the foyer door and could have easily smuggled the rifle out of the cab and up the stairs.”

“For God’s sake, I was the one who stopped the killing,” pleaded Rob as he rubbed his left upper arm. “The man mumbled something about wanting to shoot Stan North.”

“Who was your accomplice?”

“No accomplice. I was on the roof readying for the next film shots. I’ve never met the man.” He lied.

“We’re certain to find you fingerprints on the rifle. We will, won’t we?”

And so it continued.

“We found the deceased was wearing a false beard, secured with spirit gum, theatre-style.”

“I didn’t realise it was false,” Rob replied.

“Who was the other person?”

“I couldn’t see him clearly because of the struggle. I didn’t recognise him.”

They repeated the question over and over, each time in a different way. Persevering, they attempted to trip up Rob’s story.

But Rob was determined to conceal his brother’s identity.

“I’ve no idea. He had a beard and a wig so I couldn’t recognise the face, even if I knew it.”

“But his wig was on the rooftop.”

“It fell off at the start of the struggle. I was so desperate to wrestle the rifle out of his hands that I didn’t have time to see his real hair.”

The questions. The probing. The accusations continued. As a past detective, Rob predicted the techniques but now it was all so different. It was him on the other side of the desk. Him being interrogated.

Finally, a knock on the interview room door. McPherson came in and whispered to the two interrogators. All three left the room.

*Why won't the bastards believe me?*

They returned.

"We've just viewed images from the video-split filmed from the car park roof. They appear to confirm your version of the fight."

"You should have believed me!" said Rob, relieved the incident had been filmed.

"Don't get smart," replied the detective, disappointed his main suspect was now in the clear.

With the interrogation finished, Rob signed a formal statement. Released from custody, he walked back to the Elkira motel in a daze. His loss bombarding his mind.

*Larry! Dead! My brother!*

*I killed him!*

*Me!*

He collapsed onto the motel bed, tears streaming down his cheeks, spasms gripping his chest.

*My own brother! My hero! My ever so egotistical, ever so stupid, but oh so loveable brother! So confident, so dashing on the outside, yet so insecure beneath.*

*Gone!*

They hadn't been close but they were kin. A shared life. The bonds of brotherhood. A montage of shared experiences cascaded through his throbbing brain.

Gone! Never again that cheeky smile, those inviting blue eyes.

*Mum and Dad will be beside themselves.*

He was dreading the phone call he'd have to make. A dread interrupted by a tentative knock on his door. Despite the tears streaming down his face he struggled off the bed to open the door. The motel receptionist waited respectfully.

"I'm sorry at what has happened."

*News travels fast in a small town.*

"I've got a note for you sir."

Rob mumbled thanks, seized the note and slunk back to the sanctuary of the claustrophobic room.

*Robert*

*I need to speak with you urgently.*

*Come to my suite. Now!*

*Sarah-Jane*

God! What now?

After all that's gone on, what the bloody hell is she after now?

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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## LASSETERS CASINO RESORT

The phone call to their parents came first. Devastated, they sobbed, they accused, they reminisced. They asked why.

Why their son?

“Why was he in Alice Springs, for heaven’s sake,” asked his father. “He had nothing to do with that film after they gave his part to someone else.”

Rob evaded the question and his brother’s motive.

Gently, he moved the conversation to the need to hide his brother’s identity. They needed a plan, one that would ensure Larry’s God-like reputation remained untarnished. While agreeing with Rob’s thinking, his hiding of the truth worsened their pain.

Tears cascaded down all three faces throughout the call.

Placing the receiver onto its handset, Rob stood mute for many minutes.

*What do I do?*

\*\*\*

After everything that had occurred, Rob dreaded facing his lover.

*What's so bloody urgent?*

He drove to the casino resort, unsure how he would take Sarah-Jane's sympathetic words. But on entering her suite there was no sympathy. Only fury in her eyes.

"You bloody idiot! Just why in the hell were you up on that roof? Trying to bankrupt this bloody film? Christ only knows what will happen when the truth gets out."

Rob's temper flared. "Just a bloody minute. I saved Stan North's life and that's the thanks I get?"

"Megan Strong's petrified. Thinks she was the target. Her agent's demanding she fly home on the next flight."

The tension in Rob's gut was overpowering. He couldn't constrain himself.

"Get a bloody handle on yourself. You should thank God I was there. That it was me who prevented her from being in the firing line. While she wasn't the target, she still could have been injured or killed."

His words bounced off her like water from a duck's back, her face crimson, eyebrows arched in fury. "And since when have you been the one to decide what's good for this film? And as if I'd ever listen to you anyway. You and your bloody saboteur co-conspirator. Fuck the film and play out your family arguments in front of hundreds of onlookers. Putting the fear of death into our two stars. If it was only a minor actor or bit-part player it would be containable. But no! You had to target North and Strong."

"I didn't target anyone. I had nothing to do with it. I had no warning."

Rob's jaw muscles tensed, his teeth grinding, the artery in his temple throbbing. "What are you really trying to say? That it was all my fault?"

"I'm saying it's a disaster. We need a scapegoat."

"A scapegoat?"

"Yes, a scapegoat. And bloody congratulations. You've buggered up this film so badly that you've been given the prize."

"But what about us?"

"Us? You've got to be joking. After this debacle there is no 'us'. You're the ideal candidate."

"Well, thanks very much! Thanks for ignoring the fact that it was me who stopped North or Strong being killed. And thanks for the way you've manipulated me as a mere plaything. You should congratulate yourself, the way you paraded yourself around until I took the bait. And now that it suits you, you're just throwing me back into the mire. I hope you're bloody proud of yourself."

"It's nothing personal Rob." Sarah-Jane's words softened as she took Rob's hand. "Much to my surprise I was enjoying your company. We were beginning to make a good team. But unfortunately, you've now become collateral damage."

"Collateral damage?"

"Just make sure you leave town." There was a momentary fondness in her gaze. A gaze which quickly steeled. "Fortunately we've finished filming here and have a few days to recruit another safety officer before filming starts at Ayers Rock. That is if we can convince Strong and Neil to stay."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you? Bitch!"

"You're booked on tomorrow afternoon's plane."

"What?"

"Tomorrow! No argument!"

# Chapter Twenty-Six

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## ELKIRA MOTEL, ALICE SPRINGS

Rob bought a bottle of Bundy Rum on his way to his own motel room, its contents quickly disappearing.

*Larry's utter stupidity. Accused of murder. Contempt of my roof struggle. Career in tatters. Humiliated by that callous bitch! Luring me to bed. Acting like she enjoyed my body, loved my company.*

*Then thrown away like rotting meat. Slut! Only after a few good fucks.*

Great cracks rent his body; a body ready to erupt. A body too traumatised for sleep. Body shaking, the dam finally burst, tears soaking his pillow.

He tossed and turned all night.

\*\*\*

Rob dragged himself out of bed next morning. Just in time for check-out.

Bags sagged under his eyes, his throat like a marathon runner's jockstrap.

But there was one more duty. Another solemn oath he'd made to Larry all those months ago. And despite the bastard almost killing him and ruining his life, he was equally determined to keep his promise.

He left his bags at reception, ready for his airport taxi. With legs in mutiny, he struggled to Todd Street.

He knew his destinations.

What he must do.

Returning, he returned carrying two parcels. One small, the other the size of a shoe box.

*You stupid bugger. You've well and truly fucked up my life but I'll make sure the same doesn't happen to your memory. Your legacy.*

*Soon be all over.*

\*\*\*

Mike Thompson and Pam Griffiths travelled to the airport for Dan's farewell, the shooting incident further intensifying their friendship.

Satisfied Megan was safe in the VIP section of the Qantas Club lounge, Dan chatted with the two locals as he awaited their plane. Mike scanned the waiting passengers as they spoke.

"Look who's sitting over there to the left." He made a hardly discernible nod in the direction of Rob Stuart who sat nursing a package.

"That safety officer guy." Dan's face showed confusion. "Didn't you arrest him after the rooftop fight?"

"No," replied Mike. "While the-powers-that-be are sure there's something fishy about his story, they're satisfied he's innocent. Fortu-



nately for him, a cameraman filmed the fight, showed he tried to stop the shooting.”

“They’re sure?” drawled the American.

“Not completely, but they think he poses no danger.”

“Looks shift to me,” Dan continued. “Look at the way he’s watching us so carefully.”

“Just your imagination,” replied the policeman.

Pam interrupted. “What’s happening with the film now? Are you and Megan really going back to the States?”

“Luckily, no. Megan’s agent demanded she return home immediately but Megan, the producers and director had a long, somewhat heated meeting last night. They offered to drastically increase security if she’d complete the film. She’s off to unwind at Silky Oak Lodge for a week, a remote North Queensland rain forest retreat. Then it’s filming at Ayers Rock, Darwin and the project’s finished.”

“The film’s important to The Alice,” said Mike, “a major economic boost, and the publicity will be a shot in the arm for our tourist industry. It’s why McPherson has hushed-up yesterday’s events.”

A boarding call reverberated through the terminal and economy class passengers lined up, boarding passes at the ready. Members of the exclusive Qantas Club wandered their way to priority loading.

Rob Stuart remained in his seat but his eyes never left the Qantas Club door.

Dan excused himself to join Megan, both soon returning from the sanctuary of the exclusive retreat. He sensed movement from the left as they approached the departure gate.

Rob Stuart leapt from his seat and acid pumping, sprinted towards the pair.

“Miss Strong,” he called.

Mike lunged at the running man, his rugby tackle bringing Rob to the floor. His parcel skidded across the shiny tiled surface.

“Run,” shouted a passenger. “It’s a bomb!”

# Chapter

## Twenty-Seven

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# ALICE SPRINGS AIRPORT

Dan lifted Megan, turned from the danger and carried his client to the protection of the Qantas lounge.

“It was you after all!” Pam glared at the man Mike held prone on the floor, sitting squarely on his torso as he flicked on handcuffs.

“I mean no harm!” Rob forced the words as he gasped for air.

“The bomb!” Pam cried, looking for someone to seize the package. But Mike was holding Rob down on the floor while Dan and Megan had fled into the Qantas Lounge.

“Everyone down!” shouted Mike, still on Rob’s back.

Passengers and airline staff took to the floor, desperate to survive the explosion.

As the only person free, Pam scooped up the parcel and ran past the startled air attendants near the departure gate. Racing twenty metres

from the building, she threw the parcel with all her strength, the box landing in the garden bed beside the tarmac pathway.

“What are you doing?” cried Rob. “There’s no danger.”

“Shut up!” commanded Mike.

“It’s not a bomb. It’s a present!”

Mike thrust a hand over Rob’s mouth to ensure the passengers weren’t further alarmed by the man’s ravings.

A hundred people flattened themselves even tighter to the floor.

A minute passed.

No explosion.

Two minutes passed.

Still no explosion.

Everywhere faces showed fear and confusion. One traveller ran for the front entrance, away from danger. Most followed, but others remained glued to the floor in fear of their lives.

The minutes crept by.

Rob finally turned his head. Forced Mike’s hand from his mouth. “You’ve got it all wrong! It’s a present. Not a bomb.”

“Just shut up.”

“You’re making a mistake. A present, I tell you.”

With still no explosion, Mike began to question the danger. But despite his doubts he ordered the remaining passengers to the front of the terminal. Protected by a row of toilets, shops and offices.

“Get up.” Mike grabbed Rob by the collar and pulled him to his feet.

“It’s just a present.”

“If there’s no danger, we’ll talk standing next to that parcel. If it blows, it’ll take you first.”

“It’s not a bomb!”

“We’ll see.”

Mike frog-marched Rob out to the garden bed. To the parcel.

“Prove it’s not a bomb. I’ll unlock your handcuffs and stand behind. Bend down slowly and pick up the box. You will give me some protection if it explodes.”

“Don’t be absurd. It won’t explode. It’s not a bomb.”

“Just open the parcel.”

Rob ripped off the wrapping paper.

“Open the rest!”

“I tell you, it’s only a gift.”

“Open it!”

Rob removed the lid.

Mike looked over Rob’s shoulder to see tissue paper wrapped around two cylindrical objects. Sitting on top, a black, suede jewellery case.

Mike’s worst fears. Two sticks of gelignite or C4 explosive wrapped in tissue paper and an ignition switch or timer in the jewellery case. He tentatively lifted the small case, careful not to disturb the wires linked to the explosive.

No wires.

*A radio device?*

He pushed the small box into his back pocket.

*Hopefully two bodies will absorb the radio signal trigger.*

“I keep telling you. It’s a present.”

“Unwrap the tissue paper.”

Hands shaking, Rob unwrapped each object.

“See!”

Again looking over Rob’s shoulder, Mike saw two intricately carved wooden birds, their bodies crisis-crossed with white, finely painted lines.”

“What the hell?”

“Told you. Presents for Miss Strong. I discovered she loved them when visiting Mbantua Gallery.”

Mike’s face darkened further, embarrassed at his over reaction.

“What about this then?” He withdrew the jewellery box timer from his rear pocket.

“Another present.”

Mike lifted the spring-loaded lid, exposing a white silk lining. Nestling at its base was a pendant, far more spectacular than he’d ever seen. The sun’s rays reflected fire, light and the brilliance of constantly changing colours. An understated gold filigree setting surrounded the enormous black opal. Despite its superficially dark appearance, the pendant was iridescent, a myriad blaze of colours. And below the pendant and its curled gold chain lay a folded note.

“What the bloody hell?”

“Tried to tell you. A present for Miss Strong.”

“Must have cost a fortune.”

“Certainly did. But it’s a long story. I’ll tell you if we go inside.”

Dan Burrows came out of the Qantas Club Lounge to reconnoitre the situation. He looked at the pendant.

“Where did you get that?” Eyes demanding. “Megan specifically ordered that pendant, agreed to make phone payment once the chain was altered. They were to ship it to her in Darwin.”

“I know. Watched her go into the Opal Cave a few days ago so returned this morning. Pretended to act on Megan’s behalf. The owner confirmed he’d fitted the new chain and it was ready for freighting. I personally paid the invoice and told him I’d deliver it in person.”

Bewildered, Mike studied Rob’s face. “Why do that?”

Rob began the story.

“My brother, the famous actor Larry Devine, was in awe of Megan and desperate to play opposite her in the *A Dingo’s Lair* film. But the part went to Stan North.”

Mike, Dan and Pam stared in confusion.

“He was so shattered he suffered a heart attack. Hospitalised for weeks.”

“What’s that got to do with this pendant?”

“Knowing he’d never meet Megan, he asked me a special favour. I swore I’d follow his request.”

“But what’s that to do with this opal?”

“He was determined to find a special present for Megan, a token of his admiration. He followed her around Melbourne, hoping to buy her something she’d shown particular interest in. But evidently nothing appealed.”

Mike placed the items on the seat adjacent.

“As promised, I took over his search here in The Alice, tailing her around Todd Street. Found her Aboriginal painting was already on its way to the States, but that she’d hesitated over the carved birds. Then discovered her pendant selection at the Opal Cave. Knew they’d both make an ideal gift from my brother.”

As Dan picked up the pendant for a further inspection, the folded note fluttering to the floor. He picked it up.

*My Dear Megan*

*I’ve been a constant admirer of your craft from the very beginnings of your career. As the screen’s greatest actress, I was determined to show my admiration by playing opposite you. The only actor able to give a performance that would come close to equalling yours.*

*But despite being Australia’s greatest ever star, unfortunately that wasn’t to be.*

*Please treasure these gifts as a reflection of my adoration.*

*I remain your greatest fan.*

*Larry Devine*



# Chapter Twenty-Eight

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## MELBOURNE

Ten days later, Rob Stuart again walked past Flinders Street station, St Paul's Cathedral dominating the opposite corner. A lump swelled in his throat at the sight. Tears threatening.

Past the newspaper seller and his range of magazines.

Again, an image like his own. *Entertainment Weekly*.

### **STOP PRESS**

#### ***AUSTRALIA FARWELLS FAVOURITE SON***

*Thousands of Melbourne citizens farewelled their favourite son on Friday as Larry Devine's cortège passed adoring fans packing both sides of Swanston Street.*

*Born Jack Stuart and famously known as Larry Devine to his myriad of fans, he died of a sudden heart attack last Saturday. His second in four months.*

*A who's who of the Australian entertainment industry and scores of politicians made their final farewell to the doyen of the Australia's film and TV industry, filling every pew of St Paul's Cathedral for the service. Thousands stood outside, listening to the service through loudspeakers. The Prime Minister, followed by speaker after speaker spoke of his life, his acting skill, his endless accomplishments and his adoring fans. A highlight was the reading of a personal note from Hollywood actress Megan Strong who expressed her disappointment that she missed the opportunity to meet him.*

*Larry's sudden death represents the end of an era for the entertainment industry.*

*Next week's Entertainment Weekly will include a full colour, lift-out feature detailing both highlights of Larry's life and times, and pictures from his funeral.*

The article made no reference to the reality of Larry's tragic end.

A collaboration of the film production company, the Alice Springs and Northern Territory tourism bodies, the Northern Territory Police and Government all hushed-up the reality of Larry's gruesome death.

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Six years later, the setting sun crept below the crag-like silhouette of Mt Gillen that dominates the outback town. Initially a vibrant orange ball, its afterglow fired the horizon with a deep golden hue. The rich red of the rugged hills deepened, the glow reflecting off the stark white trunks of the stately river gums.

Four people admired the spectacle.

In true Australian tradition, two men stood possessively by the barbeque, each hugging a stubby of VB beer in a stubby cooler, savouring the ice-cold liquid. Mike Thompson stared at the thick, juicy steaks sizzling on the solid steel hotplate. Concentration wracking his face, he was determined that the meat would be grilled to perfection.

"Great to see you back." There was sincerity in Mike's welcoming smile. "And so relaxed compared to the events of your last visit."

"Not wrong there," Rob Stuart replied. "Larry's death was the turning point. I always lived in his shadow. Always felt inadequate. A great weight was suddenly lifted from my shoulders. It's not that I didn't love him. How couldn't I? But now I feel a free man."

"And back in Alice Springs?"

"All part of it. Before *A Dingo's Lair* I was just drifting. No direction, taking things as they came and a no-commitment relationship. Just idling along. Year after year."

"It was a challenging time for us all," replied Mike. "But enough of the past. Steak's ready. Time to join the ladies."

Sarah-Jane Dupre and Pam Griffiths arranged the salads to complete the feast, their crisp white wine equally cold. It was the first time the four had been together since *A Dingo's Lair*.

"We couldn't help but see you were both so close during most of the filming," said Pam. "But after the roof incident, you gave Rob his marching orders in no uncertain terms. Rob was furious."

"And none of it my fault," grinned Rob, looking for Sara-Jane's reaction.

"Yet here you are. Even closer. How come?"

The twinkle in Sarah-Jane's deep green eyes enhanced her already radiant face. "You shouldn't always take things at face value Pam. Once everything settled down, the publicity generated over the mystery man's attempt on Megan's life was a godsend. You can't buy that sort

of publicity. But for the film to reach its full box office potential we had to have a scapegoat, and as the executive producer, I had to act. Rob was the only real candidate. Collateral damage.”

“Collateral damage? Seems even more reason for him to hate you. Not the close partners you seem now.”

“Purely a business decision. Not a personal one. We had a good thing going and despite making him the scapegoat; I pulled out all stops to ensure he benefited from the experience. No way I’d let him really suffer from the incident.”

“Apart from the gut-rending loss of dear old Larry, it was the best thing that could have happened.” Rob’s grin stretched from ear to ear. “Sarah-Jane helped finance the first *Crocodile Dundee* film and ensured I was its safety officer. A world-wide hit, of course.”

Rob reached into the Esky cooler for another beer. “That really was a challenge, what with bar room brawls, wild crocodiles and buffaloes, rivers, forests, the New York Bowie knife scene and Mick Dundee’s walk over a sea of subway shoulders. Certainly tested my safety planning, choreography and supervision skills. But more importantly, it brought us back together. If we hadn’t both worked together again, it would’ve all been over. Just a brief fling out here in The Alice.”

Sarah-Jane placed her hand possessively on Rob’s shoulder, raising her eyes to stare into his. “It’s amazing how a chance encounter on the other side of the world has led us to a life together in the States. Rob’s like no-one I’ve ever met.”

“Don’t know about that, but some of it must be true.” Rob grinned as his hand lowered to Sarah-Jane’s waist. “Still can’t believe she’s happy with a hick from the sticks like me but I’m certainly happy at last. Despite Sarah-Jane always getting whatever she wants.”

“And woe betide if he gets in my way.”

“And when I do, I’m like a leaf in a whirlwind. Enjoying every minute of the ride.”

“And now you’re both filming part of this *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* here in Alice Springs? Sounds a strange story to me,” said Pam. “Two drag queens and a tranny making a road-trip to Central Australia in a big pink bus. I can’t see that becoming a hit.”

“I think you’ll be surprised,” replied Sarah-Jane.

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# AUTHORS NOTES

As with other titles in the series, *Outback Drama* is a fictional story woven through real events of the time. Stories partly inspired by the author living in Alice Springs for some eighteen years.

Sequenced with other *Outback Adventures* stories, *Outback Drama* takes place between *Outback Danger's* Jennair depot event and its Government House ceremony.

This story was influenced by the author's participation as a film 'extra' on the films *Evil Angels* with Meryl Streep and Sam Neill and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (if you look closely enough, those who know the author may recognise him in the scenes entering and leaving the *Evil Angels* courtroom and in the cabaret room of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*). Although Larry Devine, Sarah-Jane, the Redbank Gorge visit and the rooftop and airport parcel incidents are pure invention, the story otherwise reasonably describes the Alice Springs elements of the filming of *Evil Angels* (named *A Cry in the Dark* for overseas release).

The character Rob Stuart is based on a long-time friend. As a Melbourne policeman he was threatened with a gun, was a rally driver, a police driving instructor, a film stunt driver and was the safety officer on the *Evil Angels* set. He did not, however, grow up in Hobart or have a famous film star brother.

Additional background information can be accessed by *Outback Adventures* newsletter subscribers (subscribe via [williamsimsbooks.com](http://williamsimsbooks.com)) where you will find details of the other books in the series.