MASTER OF THE OUTBACK
MARGARET WAY
Cherish

Margaret Way

Master of the Outback

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Falling in love with the wrong man could be dangerous… Ghostwriter Genevieve Grenville is trembling, yet excited, as she heads out to Djangala cattle station to finally uncover the mystery that haunts her family. But standing in her way is brooding cattle baron Bret Trevelyan…Bret might look at her with temptation in his eyes, but he'll do everything possible to stop her digging up the past. Even at a distance Bret radiates a powerful charisma but up close, immersed in the cattle baron's Outback world, he is the master. If she's caught snooping, Genevieve will have to answer to him!

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Praise for the author:
"Margaret Way delivers … vividly written,
dramatic stories."
—*RT Book Reviews*
"With climactic scenes, dramatic imagery and
bold characters, Margaret Way makes the Outback
come alive …"
—*RT Book Reviews*

It was hard to take her eyes off the man. She found him to be intoxicating. He had such an air of authority, such presence.

"Ms Grenville?" There was total composure in his voice, a self-assurance that would instantly inspire great confidence in him. More disturbingly, he was looking down at her with the most brilliant dark eyes she had ever seen. She was someone who looked at eyes first. *His* eyes were so dark they were almost black, his gaze so powerfully searching she had the unnerving notion he was able to see right through her. In which case she might be sent packing. Only just thirty, he was an arrestingly handsome man, with an elegance about him and more than a touch of sensuality in the chiselled mouth and the strong, perfectly balanced bone structure. The air of command was of a much older man. One seldom saw it in one so young, unless they were truly exceptional people.

It came as a complete shock to realise she was attracted to him and all in a matter of moments. That couldn't be. It rendered her vulnerable. On the reverse side of instant attraction lay the abyss …

About the Author

MARGARET WAY, a definite Leo, was born and raised in the subtropical River City of Brisbane, capital of the Sunshine State of Queensland. A Conservatorium-trained pianist, teacher, accompanist and vocal coach, she found her musical career came to an unexpected end when she took up writing—initially as a fun thing to do. She currently lives in a harbourside apartment at beautiful Raby Bay, a thirty-minute drive from the state capital, where she loves dining *alfresco* on her plant-filled balcony, overlooking a translucent green marina filled with all manner of pleasure craft: from motor cruisers costing millions of dollars, and big, graceful yachts with carved masts standing tall against the cloudless blue sky, to little bay runabouts. No one and nothing is in a mad rush, and she finds the laid-back village atmosphere very conducive to her writing. With well over one hundred books to her credit, she still believes her best is yet to come.

Welcome to the intensely emotional world of Margaret Way

where rugged, brooding bachelors meet their match in the burning heart of Australia …

Master of the Outback

Margaret Way

www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS spring. Regeneration was in the air. Parks and gardens across the city were aglow with dazzlingly beautiful massed displays of azaleas, rhododendrons, and an astonishing number of spring-flowering bulbs—gorgeous oriental lilies, iris, hyacinth, heavily scented freesias and jonquils, golden daffodils. Sensual perfumes hung over the city like a bride's fine tulle veil. The sky had the blue lustre of an opal, and a few puffy white clouds raced on high.

Genevieve Grenville was near skipping along herself, since the current of her life had picked up. It wasn't all that long ago since she had found herself at a very low point in her life. But that had been *then.* This was *now*—the future. Being positive, counting your blessings was the key. Move on and lock down the humiliating past. Pretty soon she just might be able to.

Her career was helping enormously. She was now a published writer, with a bestseller under her belt. She was certain her literary agent and editor, good friend Maggie McGuire, would have approved the final draft of her new book, *Lovers and Losers.* She was deeply indebted to Maggie for her belief in her, and her expert guidance. Maggie had been with her every step of the way. That included the woeful state of her private life that had left her wondering why she had any ego left.

Her debut novel, *Secrets of the Past*, had saved her, buoying her up. The hardback was doing a celebratory jig in her tote bag as she strode along, fired up with energy. It was a tremendous confidence booster to know that at twenty-seven she was making a name for herself in the literary world. When one was on a roll one had to stick with it; hence *Lovers and Losers* as her quick follow-up.

The reviews for *Secrets of the Past* had been thrillingly good … "A first-rate literary debut …" "A bright new star has appeared on the horizon …" Couldn't beat that. Even more gratifying was the incoming feedback from her readers. One couldn't be a successful writer without one's readership. She had encountered many of her readers wanting to express their appreciation. It was always a pleasure, even a humbling experience, when someone mentioned that reading her book had helped them through a small crisis or a bad patch in their lives.

Genevieve knew all about bad patches.

Secrets of the Past had even made an impact sufficient to carry a well-known magazine's gold sticker: GREAT READ. What better plug could she want? It had come at exactly the right time.

Her ex-fiancé, Mark Reed—the man she had entrusted with her life's happiness—had given in to temptation and slept with the young woman most off-limits in the world to him: her stepsister Carrie-Anne. Carrie-Anne was to have been her chief bridesmaid, for God's sake! She and Mark had been practically at the altar. She didn't think she would ever get over the treachery. The pain of betrayal still burned in her breast. Nor could she entirely control the image of the two of them naked in bed. They had taken something from her she would never get back.

Trust.

But she was over the worst of it. Stiff upper lip and all that. Writing was her solace. She had learned that living with pain, setbacks, and disappointments was what life was all about. If she had been less trusting she would have recognised pocket-size blonde Carrie-Anne's destructive potential. She had always been a devious little creature.

Mark's excuse took the cake. "It was a moment of madness, Gena. It's you I love. But Carrie-Anne is always trying to get one up on you. It's your own fault, in a way. You didn't make enough time for me. Always the damned book!"

What a cop-out! She *had* always made time for him, but she accepted the fact that spoilt rotten Mark had really wanted a woman like Mum, who spoke like a character in a Victorian novel and lived her life dancing attendance on her husband and her adored only son. Mrs Reed had once referred to it as a "noble sacrifice".

"Just hormones, Gena." That had been Carrie-Anne's excuse, her delicious little face contorted by crippling remorse. *"Hormones. They're so dangerous!"*

"Try sky-diving." Genevieve had advised caustically. "Without a parachute. Better yet, take Mark."

There were no excuses for despicable behaviour.

Her appointment with Maggie was scheduled for three o'clock. She had never been known to arrive late. When she did arrive there were two hopefuls waiting. Going to Maggie's was much like going to the doctor's. One could be assured of a wait. Maggie's receptionist Rhoda, a large, flat-faced woman, darted a disapproving glance in her direction. She might have been a full thirty minutes late, or committed the cardinal sin of turning up without an appointment.

"Good afternoon, Rhoda." Genevieve gave the dragon lady a brilliant smile.

Rhoda did not respond. No surprise there. But she did condescend to point a finger at a seat. Here was a woman who wouldn't win any votes for Receptionist of the Year.

With a smile and a nod to the other two hopefuls, Genevieve found a seat on the other side of the room, so she could take out *Secrets of the Past* and appreciate it all over again. She liked the cover. It depicted a beautiful young woman's downbent face above her pen-name: Michelle Laurent. It was the maiden name of her French-born paternal grandmother. "Michelle Laurent" was set in large letters *above* the title. So much better to have it above than beneath. Such an attractive-looking book would draw attention. She had seen it prominently displayed in a bookshop inside a major shopping mall she had cut through on her way over to Maggie's.

Secrets of the Past had been written at night, when she'd still been teaching English and French at her old Alma Mater—a prestigious college for girls. She had enjoyed her years of teaching since university, but as soon as her writing career had taken off she'd found herself in the enviable position of being able to write full-time. Her beloved Michelle's handsome legacy had made that possible.

Grandmère Michelle had started to teach her French at toddler stage. She had always given love, support and endless encouragement. To Genevieve's grief Michelle had died very suddenly of complications following a severe bout of influenza. That had been a short time before the manuscript for *Secrets of the Past* had been completed. It was balm to know Michelle had pored over its drafts and offered valuable insights, which Genevieve had wisely acted upon. Maggie often said Michelle was a better editor than she was—and Maggie was the best.

Genevieve had fully intended using her own name, but that all had changed when Michelle died. To her readership she was Michelle Laurent. A tribute to her beloved grandmother. Her father had entrusted her to Michelle after her mother Celine had been killed in a catastrophic five-car pile-up on the freeway. Genevieve had been ten at the time. Her devastated father had taken a few years before remarrying the divorced socialite Sable Carville. Sable had brought her glamorous, much-photographed self to the marriage, along with her little girl, the adorable Shirley Temple look-alike Carrie-Anne, who soon took her stepfather's surname Grenville.

So there they had been—the two little Grenville girls, Genevieve and Carrie-Anne. One tall for her age and gawky to boot, with an unmanageable mane of red hair and freckles, the other the adorable Carrie-Anne, always exquisitely turned out by her fashion-plate mother. Genevieve hadn't received the same attention. Not much point spending time on a stepdaughter who didn't fit the description of "pretty". Only her father, a blue chip lawyer, had foreseen the day when the awkward cygnet would turn into a swan like her mother.

Her maternal grandparents were seldom in the country. After the death of their beloved only child they had become world-travellers, never staying anywhere for long. In their own way they were on the run from the tragedy, and from other family tragedies that reached back decades.

A very intense young man with a mop of bushy hair was being ushered out through Maggie's door, shaking his head in disbelief. From the expression of confusion and outrage on his face, he had discovered his prized manuscript *hadn't* been short-listed for the Booker Prize.

Maggie saw him off with an encouraging, “Keep at it, Colin.” It was like a benign pat on the head. One of the other hopefuls spluttered into laughter. That was a bit unkind. Maggie jiggled her fingers at the two waiting hopefuls, and then gave Genevieve a big smile. “Come on in, Gena.”

Genevieve gathered up her tote bag.

Maggie’s office was very spacious, attesting to her success.The floor was carpeted wall to wall in neutral beige, with a luxurious oriental rug. Her desk was substantial—mahogany with curved legs. Two cream leather armchairs were placed in front of it, and there was a separate seating area with a sofa and armchairs grouped around a glass-topped coffee table. Three of the walls were lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with a lot of leather-bound books with gold lettering on their spines. A large portrait of a very handsome man took pride of place directly behind Maggie—looking over her shoulder, as it were. Most people were allowed to believe it was a family portrait, but Maggie had confessed after a drink or two that she’d bought it because it looked like Sir Richard Hadlee, the famous New Zealand cricket player, in his prime. Maggie had made Genevieve promise not to tell anyone.

Waving a hand towards some point on the ceiling, Maggie moved behind her desk. It was littered with so many manuscripts Genevieve always wondered how Maggie could work in such a shambles. Genevieve took a seat, depositing her tote bag on the floor.

Maggie reached for the glasses she was too vain to wear in public. “We’ve got a cracker here, Gena.” She slapped a satisfied hand on top of the thick manuscript. “I thoroughly enjoyed it. Your readers will too. A stirring tale—great romance, extremely touching in places, all those amazing insights, and your usual clever twists.”

Genevieve’s heart lifted. “I’m glad you like it, Maggie. I owe a lot to you.”

“Maybe a bit,” Maggie conceded. “But you’re a born writer.”

“I’ve always had a compulsion to write going back to my childhood.”

“Of course, dear—a prerequisite.” Maggie looked up tosmile. Maggie smiled often—unlike Rhoda. “So what next?” Maggie asked.

Genevieve shifted back in her chair “I think I’ll take a break, Maggie. A complete change of scene—maybe six months or so. I’ve been going at it pretty intensively, as you know. Losing my grandmother hit me very hard, and then there was the debacle of my engagement.”

“You’re well rid of him,” Maggie huffed. Maggie never kept her strong opinions to herself. “So he was a good-looking charmer? He turned out to be a traitor. As for that treacherous creature Carrie-Anne!” Maggie threw up her hands in disgust.

“I’m over it, Maggie,” Genevieve said. Well, not completely. A *double* betrayal was hard to take.

“As I’ve told you before, dear, you’ve had a lucky break. Think—it could have happened after you were married. He could have betrayed you zillions of times over a lifetime. Honest to God, it brings tears to my eyes. Success puts men off, you know, love,” she confided for the umpteenth time.*“I* should know.”

Maggie had been twice married, twice divorced. Now she was eyeing Genevieve speculatively across the table, her pearly white teeth—the result of expensive cosmetic work—sinking into her bottom lip.

“You wouldn’t consider a break in our fabled Outback, would you?” She asked on the off-chance, with no real expectation of Gena’s saying yes. “You’d be staying on a famous cattle station in the Channel Country. It’s owned and run by one of our most prominent landed families. I can line someone else up, but I thought you could handle it. Have a well-earned holiday as well—recharge the batteries, maybe get inspiration?

Out of nowhere Genevieve experienced one of those moments of searing awareness that came like a thunderclap. She didn’t understand what prompted these moments, but she had come to think of them as a window opening up in her mind.

"What are we talking about here, Maggie? A working holiday?" Her voice sounded calm, but there was a betraying tension in her face.

Maggie's alert brown eyes sharpened. She hadn't missed a bit of it, though she pretended not to notice. "That's it exactly." Maggie could sense Gena's inner disturbance, even if there didn't appear to be any apparent reason for it. "If you're interested, of course, Gena. Should be a piece of cake for you, with the bonus of an Outback holiday."

"More information?" Genevieve requested, knowing in advance what Maggie was going to say. It had been long recognised by the family that Michelle had had an extra sense. *She* had inherited it. No denying genetics.

"Of course, dear." Maggie lowered her eyes, giving Gena a little time to gather herself from that all too brief moment of—what, exactly? "A senior member of the family—Trevelyan is the name, *Miss* Hester Trevelyan, who's had the sense to avoid marriage—needs a ghost writer to help with the family history. That would be from colonial days. And she might want to bring in their illustrious Cornish family background. Richard Trevelyan emigrated to the free colony of South Australia in the mid-1800s. We know there was a big influx of Cornish migrants from the mid-nineteenth century right up until after World War II. It was actively encouraged by the government, I believe."

Genevieve made a real effort to calm her agitation. "After the demise of their tin and copper mines. Cornish mines were known to traders as far back as ancient Greece. It was thought that with their wealth of experience and expertise Australia was the place to come for mining families. The New World—a new beginning. We still refer to Yorke Peninsula in South Australia as 'Little Cornwall'."

"So we do!" Maggie exclaimed. "These Trevelyans have their own family crest."

"How very jolly!"

"The Cornish side of the family did own tin and copper mines, as far as I know, but Richard Trevelyan was the last in a line of sons. He wanted to make his own way, so he decided to found his own dynasty in Australia. Apparently he was more interested in sheep and cattle than in getting involved in the mines—though I believe the Trevelyans *are* heavily involved in the mining industry. Also real estate, hotels, air, rail, and road freight. You name it. A lot of diversification going on there. The current cattle baron is Miss Trevelyan's great-nephew, Bret Trevelyan. Bret short for Bretton, I guess. Bit of information on him: he's just thirty, still unmarried, one of the most eligible bachelors in the country. He was once engaged to the daughter of another well-heeled landed family, the Rawleighs. Obviously the grand romance and the unification of two dynasties fell through. His parents divorced when he was in his early teens. An acrimonious split, I believe. The mother ran off with a family friend—*tsk, tsk.* The father never remarried. He was killed in a bizarre shooting accident on the station. Apparently a guest's rifle discharged when he was climbing over a fence. I don't know the full story. There's a younger brother, Derryl, and a sister, Romayne. Romayne married the Ormond shipping heir two years back—remember? It was a big society wedding. Got a lot of coverage."

"I remember." Genevieve sat quietly. She knew all about the Trevelyan family.

"The cattle station is vast—on the Simpson Desert fringe," Maggie continued. "Djangala, they call it. Aboriginal. No idea what it means. You don't pronounce the D. They also own a chain of cattle *and* sheep stations across Queensland, New South Wales, the Northern Territory and the Kimberley. So they're super-rich and very proud of their heritage." Maggie sat back, intrigued by Gena's initial reaction. It was almost as though she had thrown a switch. "Miss Trevelyan is well into her seventies, but apparently still in good health."

Genevieve concentrated on breathing in and out gently. She hoped she didn't look as perturbed as she felt.

She had first overheard the name Trevelyan in a conversation between her maternal grandparents when she was twelve. Her grandparents had returned home on one of their periodic visits to celebrate her birthday. She had been about to enter the room to tell them lunch was ready when she was stopped in her tracks by the sound of her grandmother's voice. It had literally throbbed

with pain. Even at that tender age she had known the pain sprang from a deep well of anguish—as if the event Nan spoke of had straddled her life and caused her the deepest torment.

Genevieve had since come to realise what was the past for some people was as yesterday to others.

Nan had been speaking of a tragic event in her youth, the trauma of it still fresh in her mind. Genevieve had hung back, a strange jangling in her ears. She hadn't been deliberately eavesdropping. She couldn't have moved even if she had wanted to. One peek had revealed tears pouring down her grandmother's face. The grief she'd suddenly felt had—incredibly—been a variation on Nan's own.

Afterwards, she hadn't dared ask who the Trevelyans were. She'd had to find out for herself years later. She wasn't about to tell Maggie the story now. She would be agog. But Genevieve knew beyond doubt that she would take on the role of ghostwriter for Hester Trevelyan. It was the only opportunity she would ever get.

CHAPTER TWO

Two weeks later.

HER nightmares came for her by night. Unlike most dreams, they didn't vanish on awakening; they stayed with her. She knew what caused them. The shock entry of the Trevelyans into her life.

Her maternal grandmother's first cousin, Catherine Lytton, had died in tragic circumstances on the Trevelyan family's Djangala Station in the late 1950s. It reassured Genevieve to know any family connection of hers would be difficult to trace. She wrote under the pen-name Michelle Laurent, and she was going to Djangala as Genevieve Grenville. She had insisted Maggie did not mention her blossoming literary career, let alone her pen-name. Maggie hadn't been altogether happy about it, but had given in to Genevieve's adamant request. It was essential she go incognito. Everything was organised for her trip.

Djangala had escaped being contaminated by scandal. Catherine's death had been deemed a tragic accident. A city girl, she had stepped too close to the crumbling edge of an escarpment the better to admire the stupendous view. The ground had abruptly crumbled beneath her, hurtling her to her death on the plain below. The Trevelyans and the police officer who had headed the investigation had been in totalagreement—an accidental death that had devastated them all. A beautiful young woman with her whole life before her!

Not a word of the marriage proposal Catherine Lytton had received from Geraint Trevelyan ever surfaced. Only Catherine had written ecstatically about it to her favourite cousin.

Trevelyan had later gone on to marry Patricia Newell, long stuck in the wings as his future wife. Catherine had been on Djangala as companion for her friend Patricia. The two young women had gone to boarding school together and had kept up their friendship.

Once again the wheels of fate were set in motion.

Geraint Trevelyan was Bret Trevelyan's grandfather.

Genevieve's father, who had torn strips off Mark and Carrie-Anne, had given his approval of her new assignment, thinking it would hasten the healing process and that the Trevelyans were a splendid pioneering dynasty. He had no idea of Genevieve's true motivation. The Grenville side of the family had never learned Nan's secret. But Genevieve, given such an unforeseen opportunity, was determined on learning the truth about the final days of Catherine's life. She'd had a *burning* curiosity since the age of twelve—both because she was family and, it had to be said, due to her nature as a budding writer—to solve this mystery. Mysteries cried out to be solved.

Had Catherine's death simply been a disastrous accident? Or was there more to it? Had the Trevelyan family buried the truth, as Catherine's family had had to bury her broken body? The "accident" might well have revolved around the eternal triangle. People did terrible things for love.

Old faded photographs of the two young women revealed they had been physical opposites. Catherine tallish, very slender, with strawberry blonde hair, deep blue eyes and porcelain skin; Patricia petite, a little on the stocky side, with fine dark eyes and an abundance of dark hair. The photographs, all of them taken between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, showed two young and untested girls.

Derryl Trevelyan, the younger son, was picking her up at her front door. They were to drive to the commercial airfield when the Trevelyan King Air was on standby to fly them to Djangala.

It was almost time to leave. She took one last look in the pier mirror.

Portrait of a serious-minded, bookish young woman, capable of taking on a challenge with no thought whatsoever of being on the lookout for an Outback millionaire.

Maggie had allowed her to read Miss Trevelyan's curt letter.

Please don't send me some glamorous young woman. Someone imagining she's going to have a good time along the way. Such young women annoy me. I want someone dedicated, serious about their work. I will possibly keep odd hours, depending on my health. There will be free time, but this

is first and foremost a *job.* Not an Outback holiday. I don't need anyone, either, who will run off home when she realises just how isolated we are. A plain young woman would suit, as long as she's not dull and she knows what she's about.

Given such parameters, Genevieve had deliberately played down her looks. Her Titian mane was drawn back tightly from her face and pinned into a thick coil at her nape. She wore the lightest make-up. She wore a silk shirt, but the colour was a subdued chocolate, and not her usual skinny jeans, but comfortable tan trousers and tan boots. To further enhance the scholarly look she'd had clear glass put into bookish frames.

She would have laughed at herself, only she felt anything but lighthearted. She was going into the Trevelyan desert stronghold where Catherine had been trapped.

A young man struck a languid pose against the passenger side of a late model hire-car. He was wearing casual clothes, but managed to look the very picture of sartorial elegance.

"Ms Grenville?" He looked her over. No smile. Clearly she was a big disappointment.

"That's right," she responded pleasantly. "Would you mind giving me a hand with my luggage?"

A slight hesitation, as though he was above such things. "Certainly."

She was grateful for that small mercy. Taking charge of the smaller suitcase herself, she pushed the large suitcase through the front gate.

"That the lot?" he asked, as though his back had seized up.

"It's not exactly a lot." For the first time she looked directly into his face. He was handsome. Thick dark hair, clear tanned skin, eyes neither brown nor green but a mix of the two. "If I need anything else it can be sent on."

"Nice place you've got there." He was looking back at her contemporary single-storey home. It had great street appeal. She had lived in it, furnished to her tastes, for the past three years. Her father had given her the substantial deposit. He would have bought the house for her but she had insisted she pay it off. "Is it yours?" he asked, as though she were renting.

"It will be when I pay it off," she answered dryly.

During the drive to the airport he made little attempt at conversation. He did, however, deign to ask what she did.

"I'm a schoolteacher."

"Schoolteacher, eh?" He made it sound jaw-crackingly dreary.

"Well, up until fairly recently. I enjoyed teaching, but now I want to concentrate on my writing."

"That won't bring you in much," he commented, with droll disdain.

"Perhaps not." She was struck by his young-man arrogance. "And what about you? You're a cattleman?" He didn't look it. He might have been a male model. He didn't look *tough* either, in the way she imagined a man of the land would look.

"Bret's the cattle baron," he offered, all sarcasm now. "I'm the second son—the off-sider."

He made it sound like a drop-out. "Does that bother you?"

He shot her a sharp sideways glance, as if reassessing her. "I wouldn't change *my* life. Bret is the boss. I lag a long way behind. I wouldn't want the job anyway."

Most probably he couldn't handle it.

"Too much hard work, too much responsibility. No downtime. We all know all work and no play makes for a dull guy. I wouldn't want to handle the business side of things either. Bret is the brain."

Which let him off the hook. His brother Bret wasn't a dull guy, Genevieve was prepared to bet. Despite Derryl's claim he didn't want the job, and his feigned nonchalance, she had an intuitive grasp on the nature of the brothers' relationship. Bret Trevelyan would be the *strong* one—Master of Djangala.

"And you have a sister? Romayne?" She got off what she recognised as a touchy subject. "Such a beautiful name. One doesn't hear it often."

"Ah, I see you've read up on us."

"A little. I *am* coming to live on the station for some months."

"Working for dear Aunt Hester." Sardonic emphasis on the *dear.* "She's got it into her head she wants a history of the Trevelyan family. Only problem is she's not a writer. That's where you come in. She used to be a very good pianist. Studied here and in London. Can't play now, which I count as a blessing. She used to go on and on for hours. Mercifully she has arthritis in her hands."

"That's a shame," Genevieve said with genuine sympathy. "Her playing would have given her great pleasure and comfort. Music has such power to soothe. You're fond of your great-aunt?"

He gave a theatrical sigh. "Impossible! Aunt Hester is a real old tartar. I'm not surprised no one wanted to marry her, for all the dowry she could have brought to a match. You'd think she was the Grand Duchess Anastasia, the way she acts. The only one she loves and listens to is Bret. He'll get her money as well—not that he needs it." His tone couldn't conceal a raft of hidden resentments.

She knew she was deliberately trying to draw him out. "Surely she loves you and your sister?"

"Yes. Romayne's married. Happily, thank God. Not much happiness in our family. Aunt Hester never took any notice of Romayne and me. Romayne is the image of our mother. Know about her?"

She answered with care. "Not really, Derryl. I know your father is dead. I know your parents were divorced. Is that right?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "You're going to hear it anyway. A pretty shabby affair, but it happens —even with royalty. Mother ran off with a family friend. Apparently she longed for a different life. Our father got custody. Our mother allegedly begged for Romayne, her girl. Dad told her to push off. There was no question of Bret's going to live with her. Bretton was the heir. Our father's longed-for Number One Son. Even as a kid Bret knew what his life was going to be. His destiny, if you like."

"You don't sound all that happy with *your* lot, Derryl?"

His answer was a curl of the lip. "Not so easy to get away. Bret holds the purse-strings. He administers the family trust. Sometimes I feel trapped in a wasteland. At least Bret sent Romayne off with a splendid dowry, just like in the olden days. Not that her husband can ever get his hands on it. Bret saw to that. Romayne is financially secure for life, no matter what. Needless to say she worships the ground Bret treads upon."

To inspire such love Bret Trevelyan couldn't be all that bad, Genevieve thought. She shifted the conversation on to more general topics. Derryl evidently liked wallowing in self-pity.

Even at a distance, Bret Trevelyan radiated a powerful charisma. He broke away from a small all-male group as they pulled up, coming towards them. He was tall, very lean, but powerfully built, with straight wide shoulders and a body naturally endowed with virile grace. The group of cattlemen stood beside a very impressive twin turboprop she recognised as a Beechcraft King Air. One of her father's most important clients was a retail magnate who had recently bought the eight-seater, and employed a regular pilot. The Trevelyans' little run-about had cost *millions.*

That wasn't fair. She knew the King Air was the toughest aircraft in its class. It could take off from both major airports and short gravelled runways, which would be a big plus in the Outback. There was another important factor: it could operate effortlessly at high altitudes and under extreme weather conditions, which it no doubt would encounter.

Up close, the Trevelyan lineage was apparent in both brothers. Only Bret Trevelyan appeared to be a man of a higher order. It was in the way he held himself, the way he moved. Indeed, it was hard to take her eyes off the man. She found him to be wonderful-looking. He had such an air of authority,such presence. Moreover, he had all the *toughness* she had found wanting in his younger brother.

"Ms Grenville?"

There was total composure in his voice, a self-assurance that would instantly inspire great confidence in *him.* He was inches taller than his brother—well over six feet. More disturbingly, he was looking down at her with the most brilliant dark eyes she had ever seen. She was someone who looked at eyes first. *His* eyes were so dark they were almost black, his gaze so powerfully searching

she had the unnerving notion he was able to see right through her. In which case she might be sent packing. Only just thirty, he was an arrestingly handsome man, with an elegance about him and more than a touch of sensuality in the chiselled mouth and the strong, perfectly balanced bone structure. The air of command was that of a much older man. One seldom saw it in one so young, unless he was a truly exceptional person.

It came as a complete shock to realise she was attracted to him—and all in a matter of moments. That couldn't be. It rendered her vulnerable. On the reverse side of instant attraction lay the abyss. Catherine had found that out, if her claim of a serious love affair with Geraint Trevelyan were true. And why would it not be? Catherine hadn't lied.

She paused briefly to collect herself. "Genevieve, please. Or Gena, if you prefer."

They had extended hands at much the same time. Now a chain of little tremors ran down her spine as his long callus-tipped fingers fell over the soft skin at the back of her hand. Contact sparked a reaction akin to an electric thrill. She certainly felt a tingling right up her arm, and an odd thump of her heart. It was an extraordinary feeling, but nothing could be served by it. Whatever a woman felt for this man, she would just know it would be fathoms deeper than anything she had hitherto experienced.

"Genevieve it is." His brilliant eyes appeared to glitter for a single moment. Deeper, darker-toned than his brother's, his voice was similarly cultured. No ordinary "bushies" the Trevelyans. "Have you travelled to the Outback before?"

Derryl hadn't asked that question. "Uluru and the Olgas, Katajuta—but that was years ago. An unforgettable experience I want to renew."

"I'm sure we can arrange it," he said smoothly. "Now, I'd like you to come aboard." He shot a look over Genevieve's head to where his self-alleged badly-done-by brother was standing watching them—not with detachment, but with frowning interest. "Derryl, could you bring Genevieve's luggage? We need to get away as soon as possible."

Derryl's muffled reply held irritation, which his brother ignored. Obviously Derryl thought his position in the scheme of things put him far above hauling luggage.

It was hard to stop herself from being *thrilled.* She was going on a journey that might take her to the brink of discovery. Potentially dangerous or not, she was on her way. Plenty of women would fall down in unabashed adoration before Bret Trevelyan. She was not going to be one of them. Every moment, every minute, every day she had to keep in mind her kinswoman Catherine, who had lost her young life on Djangala Station. Had she made a fatal mistake falling in love with Geraint Trevelyan, a man beyond any doubt the wrong man for her? Falling in love with the wrong man could be dangerous. Historically, there were mountains of evidence of that.

Trevelyan would be dropping the cattlemen off along the way. He made brief introductions, and all four men responded with genuine friendliness and courtesy.

Less than five minutes later they were all seated in a superior styled and fitted-out cabin. She could see that the very comfortable fully articulated club seating had been configured for the cattlemen to continue their discussions in private. She sat farther back in the aircraft, pretty well on her own, which suited her, marvelling at the state-of-the-art technology—fingertip controls, an audio-visual system, LED lighting, etc. Aft was a restroom, no doubt offering toilet, vanity and other upmarket amenities.

They were underway. The aircraft was taxiing down the runway, then within moments, smooth as silk, it gained height, fast climbing into the dazzling blue air. There was no loud drone from the twin turbo props. Inside the aircraft it was remarkably quiet. She could even darken the window, if she so chose. Derryl had elected to take the trip in the cockpit with his brother, which told her he wasn't about to waste time on *her.* She was grateful for that.

Some change in the aircraft woke her. A change in altitude. She straightened up, amazed to find she had drifted off. Smoothing her hair, she stared out of the window. Trevelyan was bringing

the King Air around in a slow tilting curve, making a descent onto what appeared to be a fairly large settlement in the middle of nowhere. A whole collection of buildings sprawled beneath her, and further off mobs of cattle browsed peacefully on a lushness she had not expected to see. But then this was Australia—a continent of searing drought and raging floods.

The great irony was that the arid red landscape had turned into a wild paradise. The Three Great Rivers system of the Outback—Georgina, Diamantina, Cooper Creek—now mostly dry, had run with water in some places fifty miles wide. What lay beneath her was the nation's fabled Channel Country in the remote south-west. It was the country's leading producer of beef, the home of the cattle kings.

The Great Flood, as it was now called, had filled every channel, billabong, waterhole, and clay pan. The floodwaters had even reached the ephemeral Lake Eyre at the continent's centre, the lowest point. Lake Eyre filled rarely—maybe twice in a century. She had seen pictures published in all the newspapers of the thousands and thousands of birds, including the wonderful pelicans that had flown thousands of kilometres to breed there. How did the birds know? They had to fly continual reconnaissance missions. But this was Australia—a land of ten-year droughts and monstrous floods. Somehow the land and the people came back.

She found herself gritting her teeth as they prepared to land on the all weather airstrip. She had never been ecstatic about flying, even in the Airbus. This flight had been remarkably smooth, but she wasn't at home in light aircraft, however splendid. Landing was more dangerous than taking off. The four cattlemen were ready to disembark, all four remembering her name, doffing their akubras politely. Painted on the corrugated iron roof of the hangar below, she had seen the name of the station: Kuna Kura Downs.

Derryl Trevelyan followed the disembarking cattlemen, talking all the while, Trevelyan came last. He beckoned to her, brilliant dark eyes continuing to measure her, the sort of person she was.

"Opportunity to stretch your legs," he said, a smile deepening the sexy brackets at the sides of his mouth.

"Thank you." God, how a smile could challenge one's composure! "But the seating is anything but cramped."

"You enjoyed the flight?"

She nodded. "I have to admit it was so smooth I fell asleep."

"Flying conditions were excellent," he said. "Come along. You might like to meet our friends and closest neighbours to the north-east—the Rawleighs. We won't be staying more than ten minutes. I want to get home."

She did what she was told. Trevelyan commanded. People obeyed. She felt a touch jittery, as though he knew all about her but had still allowed her to come. Surely that couldn't be so? He couldn't know about Catherine and the family connection? A man like that would be too busy to check out a mere ghostwriter. Something he might think akin to a ventriloquist's dummy.

A tall, athletic young woman, with long dark hair worn in a thick plait down her back, detached herself from the small group, running towards Trevelyan, arms uplifted in greeting, her lightly tanned face wreathed in welcoming smiles.

All hail the conquering hero!

Genevieve guessed he was long used to it.

"Bret!" the young woman exclaimed in a kind of ecstasy, launching herself at him.

Genevieve waited with great interest for Trevelyan's response. He didn't draw her to him, as the young woman clearly hoped. He didn't go so far as to give her the salute with a kiss on both cheeks either, but he did dip his handsome head to brush her cheek. "How are you, Liane?"

Information started to drill through Genevieve's brain. Rawleigh? Hadn't he once been engaged to a Liane Rawleigh?

No time to ponder. There were introductions to be made. Up close, Liane Rawleigh put her in mind of a sleek thoroughbred. She was exceptionally good-looking, with ice-blue eyes in stunning contrast to her dark hair. She appeared unable to extricate herself from Trevelyan—indeed she was clinging to him with possessive pride. The engagement might well be off, but it was obvious Liane hadn't fallen out of love with him. So who had ditched whom? How had it come about?

Liane continued to hang off his arm while he introduced Genevieve as the writer his great-aunt had hired to help her with her book. Liane regarded her with what Genevieve interpreted as an expression of guarded superiority. Genevieve wasn't an invited guest.

Ms Rawleigh had an educated, rather assertive voice. "Have you ever done anything like that before?" she questioned, as though Genevieve's chances of successfully ghosting a distinguished biography of the Trevelyan family were extremely slim. Her air of general disregard struck Genevieve as very off-putting. In a way it was much like Derryl Trevelyan's manner. Liane's tight smile to her was a far different variety from the one bestowed upon the cattle baron Trevelyan. She couldn't see why, but Genevieve thought there was something vaguely *malicious* about it. Maybe it was a trick of the heavy-lidded eyes.

Super-athletic in her sapphire T-shirt and skin-tight jeans, she had a high full bust over an enviably narrow waist and slim hips, and as Genevieve was appraising Trevelyan's exfiancée, Liane Rawleigh was giving *her* a comprehensive once over. Women were much harder to fool than men. Liane would have checked her eyes, skin, hair, her figure and either consider she had deliberately played down her looks or she had little style to speak of.

"I'm confident I can do the job," Genevieve responded pleasantly, without actually answering the question.

"Well, I wish you luck." Liane spoke like a woman who never ceased to be amazed. "Come over and meet Daddy. He wants a word with you, Bret, if you have a moment. I should warn you, I think it's about Kit."

Trevelyan responded with an elegant shift of a wide shoulder. He had beautiful, thick raven hair that curled up at the collar of his bush shirt. No time for the hairdresser, like his brother. He didn't have his younger brother's insufferable arrogance either—and he was the boss.

"Well, he is having a very tough time of it," Trevelyan commented.

Genevieve liked his compassion.

"Wallowing in it," Liane offered derisively.

Trevelyan didn't respond. He began to move off—a man blessed with vibrant energy.

Lew Rawleigh looked the part of a prominent, prosperous cattle man. The surprise was he was *short.* No more than five-nine in his high boots. Trevelyan towered over him. But his body was substantial—heavy shoulders, tightly muscled arms, trim through the middle—and he had iron-grey hair, charcoal-coloured eyes. He greeted Genevieve in cordial fashion. Certainly he was friendlier than his daughter.

"Ms Grenville."

"Please—Gena."

"Good to meet you, Gena. We hope to see more of you while you're here."

"I'd like that." A white lie. She knew Liane Rawleigh hadn't taken to her, nor she to Liane.

Genevieve had her hand pumped twice. She just managed not to wince. Trevelyan, a big man, hadn't subjected her to a bonecrusher, though she was sure Lew Rawleigh was unaware of his vice-like grip. His gaze was keen, as though he was trying to place her. That would be an ever-present anxiety. Some flicker of recognition. She was a woman harbouring a secret. Some might call it a guilty secret. She *did* bear a resemblance to her great-aunt Catherine. But her colouring was of a different palette. Anyway, Lew Rawleigh was somewhere in his mid-fifties. He would have been a small child at the time.

Nevertheless he would know of that early tragedy on Djangala Station. She supposed everyone in the Outback would have accepted it as a terrible accident. Sadly, people all too frequently stood too close to rocky ledges, shelves of cliffs, even precipices. The thrill was in the danger.

Liane had lifted her dark head eagerly to Trevelyan, all sweetness and light. “You’re going to come up to the house for coffee, aren’t you, Bret?” she urged. “Derryl said he’d like some.”

Trevelyan declined. “I’m really sorry, Liane, but I need to get back. Another time, perhaps?”

The sweetness vanished. Liane couldn’t control her reaction. “God, you spend too much time on Djangala as it is!” She couldn’t hide her disappointment, or the edge of anger in her voice.

“That’s my job, Liane,” he said smoothly, but with an air of finality.

Clearly this was a very sore point with Liane. To Genevieve’s keenly observant eyes Trevelyan looked utterly unmoved, although Genevieve could sense upset as well as sexual excitement in Liane.

“Is there something you wanted to say to me, Lew?” He turned back to Liane’s father with an entirely different expression.

“If you wouldn’t mind sparing me a few minutes?” Lew Rawleigh shoved his large hands into the pockets of his dusty jeans. “I just heard the stock squad have frozen Kit Wakefield’s account. Just about everything has gone wrong for poor Kit.”

“All the afflictions of Job,” Trevelyan remarked, placing a hand on the older man’s shoulder to lead him a short distance away to discuss the financial plight of the man Genevieve supposed was a fellow cattleman.

“Poor old Kit be damned!” Liane huffed and puffed. “He’s only himself to blame. His wife drowned in a freak flash flood last year. She paid a lethal pride for a piece of utter stupidity, but she wasn’t an Outback girl. Everyone rallied around Kit—we were all very supportive—but before long he was hitting the bottle big-time and making a lot of bad decisions. I’m not the least surprised he’s in trouble, and expecting us to bail him out.”

For a moment Genevieve was at a loss for words. She felt an urgent need for Liane to stop. A young woman had lost her life. God knew the terror that young woman must have felt with a wall of water coming at her, the depths of anguish her husband must feel now. Genevieve shuddered in horror. Where was the sympathy? The compassion?

“Surely a year is a very short time to mourn the death of a wife in such devastating circumstances?” she said. “Heartbreak is very difficult to overcome. Lives get derailed. It would take a long time to get back to even a semblance of normal life.”

Liane’s blue eyes snapped back from staring after Trevelyan’s shot daggers at her. Obviously he was the only one worth paying attention to. Everything and everybody appeared to be only a background for Bret Trevelyan.

“Armchair psychologist, are we? He didn’t love her,” she stated, flicking aloft an impatient hand. “He married her on the rebound. A case of catch-as-catch-can,” she added cruelly.

Genevieve stared back through her round glasses, thoroughly dismayed. What had Trevelyan seen in this woman? What had inspired his love, even if it had only been for the short term? Okay, she was physically very attractive. And he’d probably known her all her life. The Outback was vast, but there were very few people in it. Proclivity? Everyone would know everyone else?

And Liane’s way with him was vastly different from her way with anyone she didn’t consider important in the scheme of things.

“What was his wife’s first name?” Was it because of Catherine she had instantly identified with the drowned young woman, as if they had once been friends? Was she already drawing a connecting line?

“Sondra. Silly name.”

“I like it.”

“*You* would.” Liane gave an acerbic laugh.

"And so would countless numbers of people," Genevieve said, torn by an urge to rattle Liane Rawleigh's cage.

Here was a woman potentially dangerous. A snap judgement, but she was pretty sure her instincts were spot-on. Liane Rawleigh was a proud woman, a vengeful woman. A woman who barely beneath the surface was filled with discontent, possibly a total dissatisfaction with her life. And why not? She still loved Trevelyan. The break-up of any engagement was an emotionally wrenching turn of events. No one knew that better than she. She started to look for excuses. Maybe the abrasive manner was a cover-up? It wasn't easy dealing with a sense of failure, hurt and humiliation. But where was the compassion for Sondra Wakefield, let alone the grieving living Kit? Liane sounded as if she despised Sondra Wakefield. That telling *catch-as-catch-can.* What could have inspired that?

"Are you certain it was a marriage on the rebound?" she found herself asking, in perhaps too probing a voice.

"I should be." Liane's glare was hard and intense. "Who are you, anyway? Some sort of counsellor? As far as I know you've been employed by Hester to do the job of ghostwriting."

"I merely asked a question." Genevieve's reply was mild, though she felt exposed to this woman's dark side.

Liane lifted a haughty chin. "To answer your question, *I* turned Kit Wakefield down at least twice."

"Oh, I see." Genevieve spoke as though she'd been offered a more than adequate explanation. "I understood you were engaged to Bret Trevelyan at one time?"

What did she have to lose by asking a few pertinent questions—or impertinent questions for that matter? She needed to know a great deal more about everyone within the Trevelyan circle. Throw out a few challenges if she had to.

"Nothing to do with you." The startling blue eyes flared like the sun off ice.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to upset you." Genevieve spoke with what she hoped was an appropriate note of apology.

Liane shrugged, a bitter smile running across her mouth. "What happened was that I got tired of waiting for Bret to set a date for our wedding. It's always Djangala. He's married to the place. I admit it's a huge responsibility. Too much has been put on his shoulders right from when he was a kid. But I wasn't going to take *second* place. Not me!"

She wasn't speaking the truth. No way had Liane Rawleigh decided to break off the engagement. She was still crazily in love with him. Liane was also sure Trevelyan wouldn't talk about it, allowing her to put whatever spin she liked on their split.

"So how long do you think you'll be here?" Liane's eyes returned to fixating on Trevelyan's tall, commanding figure. Obviously every moment of time with him was precious.

"I have six months at my disposal." Genevieve felt a stab of pity for her.

Liane's head snapped back. "Surely it won't take that long?" She looked as if she was struggling to come to terms with it. "Hester has gathered all possible documentation. You won't have to conduct any searches. She's been at it like a bower bird for years on end. She has the Trevelyan family history at her fingertips—both from Cornwall and Australia."

"Six months isn't a long time," Genevieve pointed out. "I'm surprised you would think it is. The first draft must be completed. The final draft can be done elsewhere, but I'll have my work cut out even then."

"Well, that's what you're here for, isn't it?" Liane asked with cold rationalisation. "To work?"

"Certainly. But I intend to take my time off. I want to see Uluru and the Olgas again. Bret did say he would make that possible."

The finely arched black brows shot to her hairline. "*Bret* did?" Liane's stare could have drilled a hole in a steel door. She actually looked quite savage. They might have been enemies on a battlefield.

"I imagine he could organise it," Genevieve responded with composure. "He didn't say *he* would take me, of course. I appreciate he's a very busy man. Maybe Derryl?"

A look of amusement crossed Liane's high-mettled face. "You're not Derryl's type, my dear. Derryl likes glamour girls, not academics. Besides, Derryl can't fly the Beechcraft. I wouldn't go making any plans either. Hester will keep you extremely busy. She's a very domineering old b—biddy." She'd nearly said *bitch*—stopped just in time. "Thinks she's far more important in the scheme of things than she is. We never did get on. I tried, but pretty soon I didn't bother. I know she did her utmost to influence Bret against me. Unforgivable in my book. Don't worry, Ms Grenville, you'll be expected to toe a fine line."

"I assure you I haven't thought differently." Genevieve's answer was mild. "Nevertheless, I'm entitled to my time off. That was part of our agreement."

"Make sure Uluru and the Olgas are your *only* distractions." Liane's stare was very direct.

It was an unequivocal warning.

"What are you saying?"

"You *know* what I'm saying," Liane answered bluntly. "You're not that dumb."

Genevieve gave a faint laugh. "I'm not dumb at all."

"No, just dull."

Genevieve didn't respond to the jibe. "So why are you worried?" She decided to have a crack at Liane. It wasn't as though she was in any danger of becoming Liane's next best friend.

"Worried?" Liane sounded furiously affronted.

Genevieve pressed on regardless. "You have no need to be. I promise I won't lose sight of why I'm here."

It was as well Trevelyan was coming back. She'd had about enough of Liane, who would have her work cut out, constantly warning off any young woman she perceived to be a threat.

Even a dull ghostwriter who just happened to be hiding in plain sight.

CHAPTER THREE

GENEVIEVE had never seen anything like the remote splendour of Djangala. The sun blazed down on innumerable lagoons, creeks, swamps, and billabongs, the water throwing back reflections of thousands of small suns and glittery pinpoints of diamond-like light. Anyone would have been thrilled by it all. She was conscious of nature and its power as she had never been in the city. Nature was sublime—whether it worked for you or catastrophically against you.

All the waterways were bordered by verdant trees and vegetation in striking contrast to the rust-red of the plains that stretched away to the horizons. Desert oaks dotted the vast empty terrain, and acacias more abundant than gums in arid areas, with large areas of mulga woodlands that abounded with what seemed like thousands and thousands of small yellow wildflowers.

A hundred or more emu—Australia's endemic flightless bird—disturbed by the descending aircraft, were streaking across the landscape at a rate of knots. She knew when threatened they could reach speeds of up to sixty miles per hour. It was fascinating to watch their flight. The kangaroos had to be taking their midday siesta. She could only spot ten or so, in a loosely knit group. Some were standing upright like a man, balancing on powerfully muscular hind legs and long tail, others were attending meticulously to their grooming,licking their forearms. It was an endearing sight to see the two wild animals that held the nation's coat of arms aloft in their natural habitat.

The great Djangala herd, like that of its neighbouring station, Kuna Kura Downs, was strung out across the open plains. Large sections were being driven towards waterholes to drink.

There couldn't have been a better way to appreciate the awe-inspiring landscape than from the air. From her wonderful vantage point she could look down on Djangala's homestead, surrounded at a distance by numerous satellite buildings. It was a far bigger enterprise than Kuna Kura. She was struck by the thought that, had things gone to plan, two Outback dynasties might have been united in marriage.

And aren't you glad it didn't happen?

Safely on the ground, they were met by a Jeep manned by a laconic individual called Jeff, who was waiting to drive them up to the house. The way he straightened immediately out of his slouch told Genevieve the boss was held in very high regard indeed. She supposed out here Trevelyan was king of all he surveyed. Yet for all his commanding manner and self-assurance she hadn't detected any arrogance. Derryl, who *hadn't* inherited the reins, was the arrogant one.

The long driveway was an *allee* of long-established palms with waving mop-heads. Genevieve sat forward as they approached the main compound, with its eight-foot-high enclosing wall that offered protection against the dust storms that periodically swept in from the desert. The towering sand hills had been an amazing sight from the air, running as they did in parallel lines, like the giant waves of the ocean. The sand even gave the illusion of being composed of silk.

An extremely vigorous climber with glossy heart-shaped leaves and great sprays of white tubular flowers fell in thick latticework over the wall. The creeper conveyed an astonishing air of exotic lushness in the semi-desert. As they neared the impressive gold-tipped black wrought-iron gate, flanked by huge date palms, it suddenly parted in the middle, and each half slowly pulled back to the side as Jeff operated the controls.

They were inside the Trevelyan desert fortress at last!

It was a fantasy land of its kind, Genevieve thought. So *isolated.* If one wanted to leave one couldn't simply jump in a car and drive off in a big hurry. By air was really the only way out. In the past, tourists not sufficiently respectful of the dangers of this desert heartland had come to grief—some dying, others mercifully saved by land or aerial surveillance.

Genevieve looked about her with intense concentration, storing up everything for the future. That was what made her a writer. She had studied various photographs of Djangala Station in large

coffee table books featuring many of the country's finest properties. The photographs didn't do the homestead justice. Nor could the photographs convey how utterly bizarre it was to come upon such a mansion set in the middle of nowhere. But then she remembered the homestead had had as much importance to early settlers as the castle to an English lord. A homestead was any rural dwelling, but Djangala was the homestead of the "landed aristocracy"—the great pioneering families who, regardless of where they settled to make their fortunes, built houses of long-term permanence to proclaim their success.

Djangala wasn't the traditional kind of Georgian house "gentleman squatters" in Tasmania, New South Wales, and Victoria had built in memory of the Old Country, the place of their birth. Djangala homestead, a twenty-room mansion, had a decidedly Spanish look. How intriguing! Maybe Richard Trevelyan, who had built it, had taken the Grand Tour of Europe and retained an image of the sort of house he wanted to build? Whatever its architecture, the mansion, constructed of finely cut sandstone, had a wonderfully romantic appeal. A two-storey central section with an arched colonnade was flanked on either side by tall rectangular wings. The upper floor, probably bedrooms, was decorated with little curved balconies that overlooked the landscaped grounds. Four chimneys sat atop the terracotta-tiled roof. She knew from past trips to the Red Centre that desert sands cooled down amazingly at night.

This definitely was *not* a humble abode. Genevieve wondered if Catherine had found her first sight of Djangala homestead as thrilling as she did. Had Catherine felt the same buzz of excitement? Only what had started for Catherine as a welcome invitation to visit a historic station had ended in a terrifying experience and death. Life could be destroyed in a second. Accident or not? That was what she was here to determine. She could almost see Catherine out of the corner of her eye. Catherine of the long blonde hair and radiant blue eyes. Catherine, forever young.

Her thoughts sobered. Many things weren't as they seemed. No one really knew what had happened. Catherine had been alone at the time.

Or had she?

Had the policeman in charge of the investigation checked out alibis, or were the Trevelyans too highly esteemed to have to account for themselves?

Trevelyan, standing a little distance off, was struck by the demeanour of the young woman Hester had chosen to ghostwrite the family history. At the moment she appeared caught in a reverie he thought oddly melancholic, as though she was trying to silence some mournful voice in her head. Maybe she was struggling with personal hurt or disappointment? He supposed it would come out sooner or later.

It was he who had allowed this to happen, by giving Hester the go-ahead. It had been in the nature of giving her something to fill her time and her active mind, but he was fully prepared to self-publish—if the book was ever finished, that was. It had started out as a simple exercise in humouring Hester, but the downside was that he was becoming increasingly wary of having many of the old stories raked up. On a historic station like Djangala there were lots of stories to be told.

One he preferred not to be exposed again to the light of day was the tragic death of his grandmother's friend, Catherine Lytton. The verdict had been accidental death, but he had always had the uncomfortable feeling something wasn't quite right. He had no proof. He'd been born well over twenty years later, and as far as he could establish there had been no hint of foul play—just this unspoken gut feeling. He knew his father had experienced it too. Catherine Lytton, over the years, had grown to be a taboo subject.

There were other things he preferred not to get into print too. His father's accidental death at the hands of a visitor to the station unused to fire arms. The visitor had been devastated at the time, blaming himself terribly. Then there was the ugly break up of his parents' marriage, and his mother's defection with a family friend. Oddly, she had never married him after the divorce came through. The great rift had never been mended.

All in all there were many things he would prefer to remain private. God knew there was enough *safe* material.

Genevieve Grenville intrigued him. Instinct told him she was a woman in disguise: a young woman playing a role. The lenses in her bookish spectacles were clear glass—a dead giveaway. What was the reason behind that? Another thing: here was a beautiful woman going all out not to draw attention to herself. Again, why? Playing it safe? Was she in hiding for some reason? Or did she think she would make a better impression on Hester if she damped her looks way down? Perhaps that was it.

When he had the time he would check Ms Genevieve Grenville out—although she came with excellent references. Apparently she had taught for some years at a prestigious girls' school—Grange Hall. Even he had heard of it. It was quite possible it was then she had begun to camouflage her very real beauty. Girls' schools didn't encourage fashion plates. Too much distraction for the students—especially the teenagers she had taught.

He hadn't missed the glorious flame of her hair—full of body, however tightly she had tried to control it—or the fluid grace of movement, the radiant smile, the flawless skin and fine features. Her large almond eyes were an alluring sea-green. He imagined mermaids had eyes like that. Cool, iridescent green. He even had a mental picture of her sitting on a rock, combing out her long hair with a seashell fashioned into a comb. The image amused him. It would be interesting to get to know the woman beneath the disguise.

He asked Jeff to take Ms Grenville's luggage into the house. Derryl had rushed ahead. It hadn't dawned on Derryl that Ms Grenville was not as she seemed. He hadn't bothered to take a close look at her. Derryl had a line-up of pretty girlfriends—all of them with big plans to land Derryl Trevelyan. They might well get more or less, depending on their viewpoint, than they bargained for. Derryl's temperament up to date had manifested itself as selfish to the core. He had often considered whether the fact their mother had abandoned them had significantly affected his younger brother's mindset. No one seemed to be able to meet his needs—although *he* had a clear conscience on that one.

For most of their lives Derryl had see-sawed between looking up to him as his big brother and detesting him, or his position as the first-born son, and then later his authority.

Worse, on a working cattle station, Derryl *hated* work of any kind. So much so that he would have to make some hard decisions soon. Derryl wasn't carrying his weight. He knew the men were fed up with his brother's lack of commitment. His trusted overseer Steve Cahill had told him on more than one occasion that he couldn't rely on Derryl to carry out an order, when all other station hands jumped to as expected.

From time to time Derryl talked about heading off to one of the capital cities, but he never did. It seemed very much as if he had no real ambition outside of making life as easy as he possibly could. He had a long-running conflict with authority anyway: endless complaints and a whole catalogue of resentments towards their father, endless sibling rivalry with him. It had proved very stressful for the household.

"Ms Grenville?"

His resonant voice was a clarion call to the present. Genevieve spun quickly, coming out of her reverie. "Please—call me Genevieve," she invited.

He gave her another of those half-smiles that to her consternation caused the sweetest pain to her heart. Apprehension set in. She wasn't a free agent. She had to remember why she was here. Unwise attraction could lead into dark labyrinths. Unwise attraction could even undermine one's life.

"I thought perhaps I was breaking in on a private moment," he said, dark eyes studying her in such a way that a wave of heat rushed from Genevieve's head to her toes.

It sparked off a moment of panic. He was far too perceptive. The white smile in his sun-bronzed face was madly attractive, in accord with his whole dynamic. He had a beautiful mouth—firm, very masculine, sculpted with definite edges. She felt understandable alarm at the stirring within her.

Trevelyan had such a compelling aura that her memory of Mark faded away into nothingness. How was that possible?

Her fiancé, a lover she'd been intimate with, all but obliterated? She might be in need of a powerful distraction, but not Trevelyan.

"Why aren't you wearing sunglasses?" he was asking. "You really need them." He was watching the effect of the sun on her flaming hair. It was flashing out all the bright coppers, the rosy reds, the threads of metallic gold.

Genevieve looked down, patting the mustard-coloured leather tote bag she had slung over her shoulder. She wondered if he'd noticed the designer label stitched onto the front. Probably had. "They're in here somewhere," she said.

"Find them."

"I know an order when I hear one."

"It is."

"Okay." This was a man well used to giving orders. She kept her head down as she removed her fake glasses and popped them into the capacious bag, rummaging for her sunglasses. Tiffany & Co. Again the expensive label would stand out—like the sparkling silver circles on the winged sides. Couldn't be helped. Anyway, there had been no suggestion she was struggling financially. She'd held down a well-paid teaching job.

"Let's go into the house," he said, gesturing with his arm to the curving flight of stone steps. "You must be aware, as a redhead, you have to be doubly careful in the sun. I don't want our sun to bake you." Her skin didn't have the milky-white ultra-sensitive texture of many redheads, he had noted. It had the luscious stroke-me creamy quality of magnolia petals. Still, she would have to use plenty of protection.

"I'll be careful—promise." Genevieve's musical ear was becoming attuned to all the whistles and trills that filled the air around them, the rush of brilliantly coloured wings. Birds would naturally be attracted to all the nectar-rich plants—the grevilleas, the bottlebrushes and the banksias, to name a few. "I've brought plenty of sunblock."

"If you run out you can get some at the station store. We stock just about everything—clothing, boots, hats, etc. Do you ride?" He found himself hoping she did. She was moving beside him with effortless grace, tallish, very slender, without looking in the least unathletic.

"I need to get in a little practice, but, yes. I learned to ride as a child. I love horses." Enthusiasm suddenly entered her voice, causing a charming lilt. "My parents bought me my first pony when I was six—a gentle little Shetland. I have to say I pestered them. My mother thought I was too young. She wanted to wait a year or two. But I got my way. Apparently I had a natural ability, and I had a great teacher. She was patient and kind and an expert rider herself. She always won prizes for dressage. I still remember groups of us going out hacking with her." Genevieve paused as if in remembrance. "We lived on acreage in those days—good grazing for horses. I used to ride every day when I came home from school. I did all the feeding, watering and exercising, as I was supposed to. When I was ten my father bought me the most beautiful Arabian." She didn't say it had been to cheer her up. "I called her Soraya, after the beautiful divorced wife of an ex-Shah—remember?"

"I do. She couldn't give him children."

"Yes. My Soraya was inclined to be skittish. I was thrown a few times, but I never broke anything."

"So your parents were indulgent?" They must have been. Buying ponies and beautiful, elegant Arabs was a serious financial commitment. Although the acreage lifestyle would have helped.

"Very." She averted her head, as though studying the superb central fountain—a focal point for the landscaping. It was playing, which she found delightful—silver streams spilling down over two great bowls like a waterfall. It added greatly to the illusion of cool.

"And your father is what?" She had unmistakable class.

"He's a lawyer," she offered briefly.

He let it go. She was prepared to talk horses, but not prepared to talk about family. "And your mother? Please don't think I'm asking intrusive questions. I'd like to know a little more about you."

"Nothing much to know," she said, her expression settling back into a quiet reserve. "I've led an uneventful life."

"Now, why do I think that's not true?" he said in a decidedly challenging tone. "You haven't told me about your mother. She must be a very beautiful woman if you take after her."

Genevieve was stunned. She'd truly believed she had made herself unobtrusive. Her efforts appeared to have made no difference to Trevelyan.

"I do take after my mother, but I'd hardly call myself beautiful."

"Nonsense." With his height he loomed over her. "The beautiful know they're beautiful—just as powerful people know they're powerful. Beauty *is* power. It's commonly accepted a beautiful woman has power over a man."

"You occupy a powerful enough position yourself," she retorted, to get off the subject of herself. She had the feeling he was determined on getting to know more about her.

"It's a life crammed with hard work, Genevieve. And I don't lose track of the great responsibility to use power for *good.* But we were talking about your mother …?"

She felt exposed again. "My mother died in a car pile-up on the freeway in heavy rain."

"Ah! I'm sorry to hear that." He spoke with very real empathy. "How old were you?"

"Ten. I'll remember that shocking day until I die. For along time my father and I were in denial. It didn't seem possible. The light of our lives—there one day, gone the next. I learned then that there are absolutely no certainties in life."

"I'm in total agreement on that. You and your father took it very hard?"

"It was a terrible time." She swallowed on a lump in her throat.

"I'm sorry." He fully understood her pain. Probably her father had remarried at some time—if only to give his child a caring stepmother. Some very nice woman she could turn to—especially at such a vulnerable age.

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