

Laments and Liaisons

Sophia DeLuna



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By
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This story is dedicated to Agota, my dear friend and editor, who helped me change my life for the better,
and who helped me so much with this book that she could probably recite it in her sleep by now.

My apologies for trying your patience to the limit with this novel.

Laments and Liaisons

Prologue

In a spacious luxurious office, a broad-shouldered man in a business suit was standing at the glass panel behind his desk. A mobile phone at his ear, he let his gaze roam over the city and Port Phillip Bay below. "Yes, Gang-gangs and Yellow-tailed Blacks," he said, "First load should be ready to deliver by the first week of December ... Sure ... Nah, that's just some minor inconvenience, no real problem, I assure you. The company will deal with her. You just see that you have the couriers ready by then ... Great. I'll call you when we've got a full load." Calmly, he ended the call, and sliding the mobile back into his breast pocket, he cast another look out the window. Looking rather pleased with himself, he nodded and turned around to get back to his usual business.

Chapter 1

Wiping some residual tears off her face, Lauren sat at her computer, contemplating the fickleness of life. With the publication of her first novel, she had achieved a measure of success ... well, at least an acknowledgement of her talent as a writer, and a change for the better of her poverty stricken financial status. Ironically, at the same time, she knew in her heart, that her five-year relationship had come to an end. She wasn't entirely sure which came first, the ending or the success. Either way, her breaking up would be synonymous with homelessness; the flat was rented by her partner Ashley, so moving out was the only option.

Lauren was acutely reminded of the last time she was in the situation of leaving a long-term relationship. Admittedly, now being a published author did make some difference to her bank account and her pride, nevertheless, she felt just as vulnerable. This time however, she was not entirely alone; she had Emma as her friend, ally and admirer for support. Alas, as always, she was reluctant to ask for help. She had been bitten too often.

Thoughtful, she stared at Emma's photo on the Skype interface. Over the year they had known each other, Emma had frequently extended invitations to Lauren to visit. However this was different, as she had made up her mind to move permanently. Everything seemed to stifle her, the city, the noise, the traffic, but most of all her relationship. The last few months had been hell, and it was doing her life, health, not to mention her creativity no favour. Perhaps, it would not be too forward if she just asked Emma if she knew of a place to rent. It was still an hour to their usual time, but Lauren needed to talk before Ashley returned. Hell, she would even prefer to move out before Ashley returned.

The thought of having to face her partner again caused Lauren to cast her apprehension aside, and taking a shuddering breath, she determinedly brushed a strand of her long curly hair off her face and typed: Emma, are you there? I need to talk.

Soon after, Emma called.

"What's the matter? Are you all right?" asked Emma worriedly, as Lauren's face appeared on the screen. Instead of her usual cheery smile, Lauren looked as if she had been crying.

"Emma, does your offer still stand? I need to get away from here," said Lauren, "I'm thinking of a permanent move, and I wanted to ask you if you know of a place to rent in your town."

"Not off the top of my head," said Emma, and she added quickly, "But you can stay with us, of course."

"I really don't want to be a bother," said Lauren, casting her eyes down.

"Nonsense," said Emma emphatically, "It's not a bother at all; since the boys moved to Melbourne, we have plenty of room to accommodate you for as long as you like. I would love to finally meet you in person, though I am truly sorry that it will be under such circumstances. I'm not surprised from what you told me over the last weeks, but I had hoped things would work out for the two of you. Well, who knows,

perhaps she comes to her senses when you leave her for a while?"

Making a face, Lauren said, "I don't think so. And even if she would, I don't want to put up with her behaviour anymore. No, Emma, I've had enough. I want to leave her for good. It's time to move on."

"All right, Lauren," said Emma, "You obviously have thought it through, and if that is really what you want, I am not going to try to convince you otherwise. And as I said, you are more than welcome to stay with us for as long as you like."

Lauren looked around and went through the other rooms in her mind, and curling a lock of her dark hair around her fingers, she said thoughtfully, "Hm, I don't really have that much stuff. The things I will take with me will probably fit in the car. Are you really sure that it won't be a problem? What if I can't find a place I can afford in your area?"

"It really is no problem, Lauren, and we will find you a place you can afford, don't worry," said Emma.

Lauren was apprehensive. Countless 'what-ifs' were running through her head. Finally, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and with a feeling as if she were jumping off a cliff, she looked straight at Emma and said, "All right. When can I come?"

Emma smiled. "Whenever you are ready."

Leaving Randwick, Lauren fought her way through the Sydney traffic, heading for the Hume Highway. Finally, when she had passed Campbelltown, she heaved a sigh of relief, feeling as if her past now lay behind her, and she was heading towards an unknown but exciting future. Well, as exciting as a sleepy little town in the Yarra Valley could be. Lauren smiled as she recalled how Emma had described the place where she lived ... a spacious two-storey house in a quiet dead-end street in a peaceful small town, called Mountain Creek, which lay snuggled beneath the hills, surrounded by bushland with a view of the mountains. It was within easy driving distance from Melbourne and thus not too isolated.

But however strong her enthusiasm was about finally meeting Emma and the place where she lived, the drive from Sydney to Mountain Creek was long, and Lauren's thoughts drifted back to her relationship with Ashley ...

The change in their relationship had begun when Lauren met Emma Wilson on the Internet, where they used to play the same word games.

Although Emma was married and 11 years older than Lauren, they soon found that they had many interests in common, such as books, films and an interest in languages. When Lauren found how easy Emma was to talk to, they began skyping each other regularly. Emma was also delighted that she had found someone with whom she could chat when she was sitting in the small office next to her husband's workshop, while waiting for incoming calls from customers. They discovered that not only did they have quite a few interests in common, but there was also a remarkable affinity between them. Soon, they were confiding in each other, discussing intimate details about their life. When Lauren told Emma that she was writing stories, Emma had been very encouraging. And when Lauren finally dared to show Emma the stories she had written, Emma was so impressed that she threw herself into helping Lauren getting her work published. As a result their friendship was enhanced even more.

Emma's excitement was contagious, and it fuelled Lauren's motivation and creativity immensely. While they were working on the novel, Lauren became more and more confident about her writing, and she hoped that after 43 years the better half of her life had finally begun.

Unfortunately, the more enthusiastic and fulfilled Lauren felt, the more resentful Ashley became. Through her relationship with Emma, Lauren could now see a way out of her former life. Ashley however, was of the opinion that they should be satisfied with their place in life as there was no way out of it, and Lauren's dreams were just that – dreams, with no link to reality whatsoever. But Lauren had found a way out for herself, and she could see now that Ashley's view didn't apply to her, that in fact it was holding her back. Now, in hindsight, Lauren realised what had been happening. She had moved forward where Ashley just couldn't. It was beyond Ashley's comprehension to understand Lauren's aspirations, and she resented her for moving on.

A lump formed in Lauren's throat as she remembered the events of today which had been the final

straw for Lauren:

Lauren had returned from shopping with a bottle of champagne and a gift for Ashley, intending to share her happiness over a rather big pay cheque. She had been hoping she could put a smile on her partner's face for a change. Alas, as Ashley unwrapped the gift and saw the designer jacket she had been raving about for weeks, she threw the package at Lauren, and swiping the two glasses of champagne off the table she yelled, "I don't need your fucking charity!" and she grabbed her old jacket and stormed out.

Lauren still remembered vividly, how she had winced as the front door slammed shut, and felt as if the door had shut on her relationship as well. She had stood frozen in the middle of the room, the partly unwrapped package pressed to her chest, staring at the broken pieces of glass on the floor, tears silently running down her face. When she finally managed to move, she stepped over the shards, placed the package on the table, headed for her room and switched on the computer.

Now she was nearing Albury, and glancing at her fuel meter, she put her memories aside and decided to stop at the next service station. After having filled the car, she went to the cashier to pay, and noticing that there was a restaurant attached, she decided to take a break.

When she returned to the car, laden with snacks, and headed back onto the road, her thoughts wandered back to Ashley. Her parting words still stung.

When Ashley had returned several hours after Lauren's conversation with Emma, Lauren was just picking up the last two bags to take to the car.

"What's going on here?" asked Ashley.

"I'm leaving," said Lauren and wanted to step around Ashley, but Ashley stopped her by grabbing her arm.

"What do you mean, you're leaving? Where are you going?"

"I am leaving you, Ashley," said Lauren as calmly as she could manage, as Ashley's grip on her arm was hurting her.

Lauren almost lost her balance when Ashley forcefully shoved her and spat, "You fucking bitch! Now that you're rich you leave me hanging. I'm not good enough for you anymore now, huh? Well, screw you!"

Lauren had refrained from responding and left.

She had managed to stay calm then, but now, tears were coming to Lauren's eyes and sobs began to rise in her chest. Taking a deep breath, she wiped her eyes and decided to put her emotions aside. She would have plenty of time to deal with them when she reached Mountain Creek; she really needed to concentrate on the road now.

Chapter 2

It took Lauren quite some time to find Emma's concealed driveway in the darkness, and when she finally found the house, it was almost four in the morning. Now there was light downstairs in the house as well as outside, and a short, rounded woman, with curly, somewhat dishevelled hair, dressed in a pink robe, was gesturing Lauren to park in the drive. As she drove closer, Lauren recognised Emma by the same broad smile on her face that Lauren had become so familiar with on Skype.

"Thank goodness you arrived safely," said Emma relieved as Lauren got out of the car, and embracing Lauren, who was quite a bit taller than Emma had expected, she said, "It's so nice to meet you at last. But you must be tired. Come inside."

"Thank you," said Lauren, exhausted, but with a happy smile. And grabbing her hoodie jacket and the bag from the passenger seat, she followed Emma into the house.

"Would you like something to drink or to eat perhaps before I show you to your room?" asked Emma.

"If it's not too much trouble, a cup of tea would be nice," said Lauren.

Gesturing towards the dining table, Emma smiled and said, "Have a seat. I'll put the kettle on."

Lauren was looking around the spacious family room with an open kitchen area. The wooden furniture, the wood-panelled ceiling and the soft dim lights were giving the room a cosy, warm atmosphere. Framed photos of Emma's boys adorned the centre of the mantelpiece, while on each corner

two trophies proudly showed Ben's success at fishing.

As Emma was preparing the tea, Lauren said, "I'm glad that you are up so early. I missed the driveway the first time, and without the lights on I would probably have missed it on the way back, too."

"It is easy to miss, especially in the dark," said Emma, "I usually get up at six, but I heard you the first time you drove past, so I got up."

"Oh, I didn't mean to wake you."

Placing the bone china teapot and cups and a plate of biscuits on the table, Emma reassured Lauren, "It's not a problem. I'm just glad you arrived safely."

While Emma poured the tea, Lauren said, "Well, I'm glad no one opened the door at the other house after all."

"Oh, you rang at the wrong house first?" asked Emma.

"Yes, at the one at the end of the road, because the lights were on. I knew it was not your house, but I thought if they are up, perhaps they could give me directions, or let me wait inside till dawn. But no one answered, so I drove back," explained Lauren and reached for her cup of tea.

"It must have been Charlotte's house. She probably picked up yet another attractive tourist, and was too 'occupied' to open the door," said Emma, rolling her eyes.

"Oh. I see," said Lauren.

Emma grinned and said, "It gives the neighbourhood something to talk about."

"Oh," said Lauren, wondering if she would become the topic of conversation, too.

Showing Lauren to her room, Emma said, "I will need to be in the office in the morning, but Ben and I will be back for lunch, and I will take the rest of the day off. If you get up before we are back, do make yourself at home."

"Thank you," said Lauren, and Emma wished her a good night and left the room.

Lauren was so tired by now; she just undressed and flopped into bed.

Emma went back into the family room, and sitting down at the table, she looked fondly at the place that Lauren had vacated. She was truly happy that Lauren had come. The once so quiet and hesitant woman had changed so much since they had first met on the game server. It had been so easy to encourage Lauren; she was such a quick learner and a remarkable student. When Lauren's first book got published, her success had confirmed Emma's faith in her writing, and it had been a boost to Lauren's confidence. Now Lauren was far more optimistic and enthusiastic, and Emma was immensely proud of her. She admired Lauren's courage to make such a quick decision to take Emma's offer in order to change her life.

Sometimes, Emma wished she could be as footloose and fancy free. But she had chosen a different life, a life of security, when she married Ben, settled down and had children. She had met him in Mountain Creek at the age of 16, soon after her parents had bought a weekender in town.

Emma and her older sister had started to explore the area on their new bikes. One day Emma's bike got a puncture, and her sister quickly rode back home to get their father. Emma laid the bike down on the side of the road and taking off her jacket, she spread it out and sat down to wait for her father. She was dreaming away, chewing on a gum leaf when a boy with fishing gear on a bike came down the path at the end of the road. Emma still remembered how she had been amused by the somewhat clumsy way in which he had asked her if he could help. She smiled as she recalled how she had watched him as he repaired the bike, thinking that he looked awfully cute with his ruffled, flaxen hair.

When her father turned into the road, Emma and Ben were already riding towards him, happily chatting.

They became friends and from then on spent most of the weekends and holidays together. They went on cycling tours and outings, and they could chat about anything and everything. The relationship eventually became romantic, and Ben occasionally visited her in Melbourne. They dreamt of backpacking around the world, sleeping under the stars as soon as he had finished his training as an electrician and she

got her arts degree at the university; and they were saving as much as they could to make their dream come true. However, shortly after she got her degree in linguistics, Emma discovered she was pregnant, and thus they postponed their travel-plans. They married, and bought a small weatherboard house in Mountain Creek. Emma still had to smile whenever she drove past the old house. It had been a happy time in their life. Ben had been working for his father as an electrician in his business, while Emma cared for the house and their first son, Lukas, and kept her language skills up to date. Their plans were postponed yet again when their second son, Daniel, was born. Emma smiled fondly as she remembered the first time she held him in her arms; she had been so blissfully happy.

Life became harder, when two years later, Ben's parents died in a car accident. Ben now had to manage the business on his own, while Emma helped with the office work. They sold their house, and moved into the in-laws' house, which they extended to make room for their growing family. And then just as Daniel was starting school, giving Emma a bit more free time, she got pregnant with a third child.

And then somehow while Emma helped Ben with the business, cared for the large house and garden and raised the kids, her degree in linguistics was gathering dust on the shelf. Forgotten were her career plans and their dreams of travelling the world. And until her sons moved out, she had not regretted her choices at all. She hadn't even really thought about her former plans until now. She had been too busy, and despite the difficulties, she had been happy. However, when three years ago their youngest son, Ricky, moved to Melbourne, just as his brothers had done before, Emma had suddenly found herself surrounded by emptiness, and she had felt a tremendous sense of loss. However, she had never really pondered about her life, but now that she was recalling the past, she realised that before she had met Lauren, the most intellectual thing she did in her life, were the book club meetings with her friends, the occasional foreign language novel she read, and playing word games on the computer. The contact with Lauren, who was living such a different life, had triggered something inside Emma, causing her to think about the missed opportunities in her life. Not that she really regretted her choices in life, but nonetheless she wondered how life could have been different ... how it might still become different...

Perhaps, thought Emma, perhaps Lauren didn't even need to find a place of her own. As far as Emma was concerned, Lauren could stay forever, and Ben certainly wouldn't mind. The house was big enough, too big for two people, thought Emma, and far too quiet. With Lauren there would be more life in the house again. She would have someone to talk to when Ben was watching sports or was with his mates. She could show Lauren around, and they could do all sorts of things together.

It wasn't that Emma didn't have anyone at all. She did have wonderful neighbours, who were her friends, and she liked them a lot. But Lauren was interesting. Coming from a background so different from her own, and having lived a very different life, Lauren brought a fresh perspective into the drab monotony of Emma's everyday life.

Hearing Ben get up, Emma smiled. She still loved Ben dearly, even though their life had become predictable and far too quiet for her liking. Who knew, perhaps the little excitement of Lauren being in the house would brighten up their life as well? With this thought in mind, Emma got up to clear the table and prepare breakfast for Ben and herself.

Later that morning, as Emma was doing the shopping at the supermarket before lunch, she spotted Charlotte in the veggie section.

"Hello Charlotte! Already up?" said Emma while she grabbed a bag of potatoes.

The tall, well groomed brunette in fashionable clothes, looked puzzled at Emma and asked, "Already? It's almost noon."

"Well, I just thought since you were up into the wee hours ..." said Emma.

Putting a cucumber in her shopping cart, Charlotte said, "I don't know that it is any of your business, but I haven't been up into the wee hours. So, whoever told you that I was must have been dreaming or something."

"Oh, my apologies," said Emma, visibly puzzled, "A guest of mine arrived this morning, and she said she rang the bell at the house at the end of the road because the lights were on there, but no one answered. I thought she must have meant your place."

Charlotte shook her head, and adjusting the sunglasses on her head, she said, "No, it wasn't my place,

and my place isn't exactly the end of the road either, as much as you may all wish it was. However, Dave Jones seems to be back. I also saw lights on in the house the other night."

Furrowing her brow, Emma said, "It would surprise me if he were back. Betty said that he is going to try to sell the house via an estate agent in Melbourne, and that he wouldn't set foot in this town again."

"Then maybe he has found someone, and we have a new neighbour," suggested Charlotte.

"Well, they certainly won't be staying for long," said Emma and continued, "Anyway, I need to get going. See you soon." And she rushed to the checkout.

As Lauren, Emma and Ben were having lunch, Emma said, "I met Charlotte at the supermarket, and apparently it was not her doorbell you rang, Lauren. So, I suppose when you said 'at the end of the road' you meant the actual end of Cockatoo Drive, not just the end of the sealed road, yes?"

"Well, it was definitely the end," said Lauren, "Further ahead there was only a narrow path through the bush."

"Don't go there," said Ben gently but determinedly, "Don't go past the end of the sealed road if you value your life."

Lauren looked questioningly at Ben. He was a handsome man, thought Lauren, sturdy and not much taller than Emma, but he still had a full head of hair, and his flaxen hair only showed a bit of grey at the temples. He didn't wear glasses, and his brown eyes always looked as if they were smiling. He had a deep, calm voice that reminded Lauren of her grandfather, whom she had adored as a child. Why should she not go past the end of the sealed road?

Emma explained, "The place is haunted, Lauren. It belongs to the Mourning Lady of the Creek, even if some people refuse to acknowledge this."

"You are having me on," said Lauren, smiling.

"No, I'm not," said Emma, and turning to Ben, she went on, "Charlotte said she also saw lights on in the house the other night. Have you heard anything about Jones having sold yet?"

"No," said Ben, "And I'm sure Matt would have told me, he always knows what's going on. But I'll see him tonight, and I'll ask him."

"Who is this intriguing 'Mourning Lady of the Creek'?" asked Lauren.

"No one knows for sure," said Ben, "But my father saw her back then, and he would not call her 'Lady' because he was certain that she was not human. He used to call her the 'Demon of Death'." Leaning back in his chair, looking rather pleased with himself, and his eyes twinkling even more, Ben began relating the story as he had heard it from his father countless times before.

"It happened on a Saturday evening in the summer of 1953. My father was mending the fences when he saw his neighbour Lewis coming down the road; and behind him from the house further up the road a creature came flying towards him. She looked like the taller one of the two ladies who were living in the house at the time, but obviously she was not a human female. Shortly before she reached Lewis, she stopped mid-air, stretched out her arm and made a gesture with her hand. Her eyes had always been unusually light blue, but now they were of a glowing bluish-white. Lewis slumped to the ground almost instantly. My father stood frozen to the spot, afraid that the creature would attack him too. But she just turned around and headed back to the house. My father rushed to Lewis. He was dead. As my father looked back to the house, he saw the creature carrying the shorter lady out of the house and into the bush." Taking a sip of water, Ben continued, "The doctor couldn't find any unnatural cause of death, and concluded death by heart attack. Lewis had scratch wounds and bruises on his body, which the doctor said were possibly caused by a fight with a woman. Blood stains and signs of a fight in the house confirmed his suspicion. A search party was sent out to find the lady and the presumed 'Demon'. They returned without success but with two of the men injured. Supposedly they had just tripped, and one had broken his ankle, and the other his arm. However, most of the people believed it had been a warning from the 'Demon of Death'. Since then the people of Mountain Creek avoid going near the house or into the bush at the end of the road. Many people from out of town have tried, anyway, calling those who warned them superstitious. All of them suffered injuries of one kind or another."

"Wow! What an intriguing story," said Lauren. "So, the end of the sealed road is where Lewis died?"

"No. It's where the 'Demon' halted," said Ben. "When Charlotte bought the property between the

Williams's and the haunted land, she managed to convince the constructors to seal the road to at least up to half of her property ... after she proved that nothing had happened to her in over half a year while she was driving back and forth over the 'point of death', which is next to her driveway."

"I see. And why did you call her the 'Mourning Lady of the Creek'?" Lauren asked Emma.

"Because sometimes you can hear her sing her lament songs in a strange language when you walk on the path on the other side of Cockatoo Creek," explained Emma. "I don't believe that she is actually a demon. But even if she is human, she is still like a wounded animal who will attack anyone who steps into her territory. But she is rather a blessing for us also."

"How so?" asked Lauren.

"Well, the town was threatened by fires more than once. However, the houses on this side of the creek were never affected," said Emma, "And we believe that she is to thank for this."

"Wow, that's awesome," said Lauren.

Chapter 3

After dinner, Emma and Lauren went over to Olivia's. Each Friday while Ben spent the evening with his mates playing snooker, Emma and Caroline met at Olivia's to discuss books. And since Emma had started to help Lauren with her writing, they often discussed Lauren's work in a combined effort of improving it. And of course the latest news of the neighbourhood was always on the agenda also.

Lauren had already talked to Caroline and Olivia via Skype on several occasions, and she was looking forward to finally meeting them in person.

Caroline, Emma's neighbour to the right, was a rather cheerful and chatty, rounded woman in her fifties with a preference for loose dresses with colourful flowery patterns. She owned and managed a café in town, which often served as a meeting place for the neighbours. She had permanently moved into their holiday house, and acquired the café after her divorce, ten years ago.

Olivia, who lived opposite Caroline, was the quietest of the three friends. She was in her late fifties, and still worked in the local bookshop where she started her working career. Now she was half owner and joint manager. She was born in her house, and had lived there with her parents until their death. It was an old two-storey cottage with a large garden that was the envy of many of the neighbours. Both her parents had died several years ago, thus, Olivia was now living by herself, her only house-mate being the old, flightless cockatoo, Mr Darcy, who was named by Olivia after her favourite fictional character from "Pride and Prejudice". She had found the injured bird as a teenager.

It was a balmy spring evening, and they were sitting on the veranda, looking out onto the picturesque garden with the late spring flowers, celebrating Lauren's success with a bottle of champagne and a decadent chocolate cake that Caroline had brought for the occasion.

"Here's to the continuation of a promising career as an author," toasted Caroline.

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Olivia and Emma.

"Thank you," said Lauren with a happy smile on her face. "You can't imagine how much it means to me that all of you have taken such an interest in my writing. And it is so nice to be able to share my happiness with you."

"It is such a pleasure to see you succeeding as an author, Lauren," said Emma, "That Ashley couldn't see you in this way, is truly her loss."

"You will find someone else, eventually," said Olivia reassuringly.

"Says the woman who has been carrying a torch for James for years, and refuses to give him the slightest hint," said Caroline, who just couldn't help teasing Olivia about this whenever the possibility arose.

"He is not interested," said Olivia stubbornly.

"Keep denying it if you must," said Caroline while helping herself to a rather generous slice of the cake, "But I tell you there is a reason why your garden is far more beautiful than mine. It's because he takes extra good care of it."

"He does not," protested Olivia.

"Yes, he does," said Emma grinning, "Just yesterday I saw him leaving your garden before lunch. And isn't Tuesday his usual day?"

"Perhaps he just forgot something," mumbled Olivia.

"Yeah sure," said Emma, "The poor man must be having Alzheimer's as he keeps forgetting things in your garden on a regular basis. Ask Betty, she has seen him in your garden countless times."

Seizing the occasion to change the subject, Olivia said, "Sometimes I'm wondering if Betty has video cameras installed. How come she sees everything that's going on at all the properties around her?"

Taking a sip of champagne, Caroline pointed out, "And not just at those around her. This morning she came to the café to warn me, and I quote, 'If you don't get the loose shingles on the roof over your door fixed soon, they might fall on your head.' God only knows how she came to notice this."

"Did she by chance say anything about Jones having sold?" asked Emma.

"No," said Caroline, "Is there a reason why are you asking?"

"Yes, it's because Lauren said the lights were on in the house this morning. She rang the bell, but no one opened," explained Emma.

"Gosh, I'm glad you are all right, Lauren," exclaimed Olivia, and scolded, "You should have warned her not to go there, Emma."

"It's all right," said Lauren, "I'm fine. Nothing happened."

"Well, thank goodness that nothing happened," said Caroline, "It is creepy that the lights were on. I'm sure Betty would have mentioned if she had seen a new occupant moving in. We were chatting for quite a while, and I'm sure that a new owner of the haunted house would have been far more interesting news for her to tell than lamenting for the umpteenth time about her daughter's liaison with Nicholas."

"Indeed," said Emma, rolling her eyes.

"Say, what do you think about installing one or two computer stations with Internet access in my café?" asked Caroline, "I have been pondering over it for a while now, and I'd like to hear your opinions."

"I think that's a good idea," said Emma, and again she was reminded of how very boring her life had become, especially compared to the lives of her friends. Somehow, despite being surrounded by her best friends, Emma suddenly felt alone and out of place. Here she was, the only one with a husband and family, and yet she was the loneliest one of them all. The others were forever reinventing their life to make it more interesting, while she was mainly sitting in the office, waiting for calls to come in; and if it weren't for Lauren, she would be bored out of her mind.

"Yes, I agree," said Olivia. "The library has a couple also, but you have to be a member to use them. I believe that tourists would rather sit in the café. It would give them the opportunity to write a quick email while they are having a cup of coffee."

"What about you, Lauren," asked Caroline, "Would you use a computer in a café if you were a tourist or if you didn't have your own computer with Internet access?"

"I think it's a great idea, Internet cafés seem to be rather successful, especially with backpackers," said Lauren, "Of course I'm not a good person to comment on this, as I'm pretty unsociable. I wouldn't even go to a café on my own, let alone travel, unless I really have to."

"You never struck me as being unsociable," said Olivia surprised. "Are you uncomfortable being here now?"

"No!" exclaimed Lauren forcefully, "I feel great here! I'm not sure why ..."

The others waited patiently while Lauren pensively looked at the glass of wine in her hand.

Looking up, Lauren said thoughtfully, "Your conversation is interesting, and you encourage me to talk, you even give me time to think. You seem to be interested in my opinion. I rarely ever had the feeling that others were interested in what I had to say, so I remained silent. And since I can be silent far more comfortably at home, I usually avoided parties and the like, if I could."

"Seems to me like you've just been in the wrong company," said Caroline. "I'm glad you came here."

"Indeed," said Olivia, "With your book, you have brought some intellectual challenge into our lives. It is a pleasure to finally have you here in person."

Surprised, Lauren said, "I never thought of my book as being intellectual. It's just a fantasy novel, after all."

"Yes," said Emma, "But whereas formerly we were just talking about the books we read and what we liked or disliked about them, we are now actively involved in the process. It gives us something to really think about, and we have had a lot of interesting discussions over it. You certainly made my life more interesting, Lauren."

"Mine too," said Olivia. "I managed to complete an arts degree through Open University recently,

majoring in history and literature, but I never get much chance to use what I learned."

"Wow, you went to such an effort, that's admirable!" said Lauren.

"It wasn't really such an effort," said Olivia with a shrug. "I have always wanted to do it, and having online connection made it possible, since Mr Darcy doesn't allow me to leave the house too often."

"The Internet is the greatest invention ever, isn't it?" said Lauren enthusiastically.

"Well, I think the water closet wasn't such a bad idea, either," said Caroline jokingly as she re-joined the others at the table.

Laughing, the others agreed, while Caroline poured herself a glass of wine.

"And what made you start your café," asked Lauren.

"Well, as you can see from my figure, I have always enjoyed eating, especially cakes," said Caroline grinning, "And I've always loved baking, and I tended to bake more than I could possibly eat on my own. The idea of having my own café developed when I was in Italy with my husband. I think it's quite an appropriate way to share my passion for baking. Although nowadays I don't do all the baking myself, it would be a bit much, but I have a couple of very good bakers who supply me with the best cakes and pastries. And with the Café here in town, it's a bit like inviting friends every day." "With the advantage of getting payed for it," she added cheekily.

"It's great that you can have such successful businesses in such a small town," said Lauren.

"Well it's a lot about the personal service," said Olivia. "The majority of the people here in Mountain Creek are against any impersonal chain stores and big businesses. Margaret and I know most of our customers' taste very well, and they appreciate that we are reading a lot ourselves, so that we are able to recommend titles to them. And I am always trying to get our readers interested by asking authors to come here to sign and talk about their books, which is not an easy task with Mountain Creek being such a small town, but the people here love such events." And she added enthusiastically, "Maybe you could come for a book signing Lauren?"

"Oh ... I'm not sure if I can," said Lauren, a bit uncomfortably. But seeing Olivia's pleading look, she relented, "Well, I guess I could give it a go."

"Please do," said Olivia, "We have sold 14 copies of your book so far, and I'm sure that people are dying to get to know you, especially now that you will be living here."

Lauren felt quite flabbergasted and overwhelmed by receiving so much attention; however, she couldn't deny being thrilled at the same time.

"You are all so active although you are all older than I am. All of you seem to have found your niche in life," said Lauren.

'*Well, not me apparently,*' thought Emma, and she wondered how it was possible that with Lauren being here, she felt more distanced from her friends than ever. Of course she was happy that her friends got along well with Lauren. After all, the young woman had had rather a difficult past, and she truly deserved all the attention. Nonetheless, at the moment Emma felt as if her friends had forgotten all about her. And with everyone bragging about their activities and achievements Emma just couldn't compete.

"Well of course we have no romantic interest to fill in the long empty nights, so we get creative and busy," said Caroline, tongue in cheek.

Hearing her friends chuckling, Emma looked up and noticed that over her brooding, she had missed the cause for their merriment. She forced herself to grin as not to look like a spoilsport, but she needn't have bothered as the others went on chatting and laughing, blissfully unaware of Emma's slipping mood. And suddenly Emma could truly understand how Lauren must have felt in her past. And her closest friends, whom she had known for decades and who were now ignoring her, had told Lauren that she had just been in the wrong company ... '*What an irony!*' thought Emma.

The friends went on chatting, and by the time they were leaving, Lauren had learned quite a lot about the life in Mountain Creek in general, and about the life of the neighbours of Cockatoo Drive in particular. And when she was lying in bed, she felt genuinely happy. She was amazed at how intimately casual the three women were with each other, and how they were switching from one subject to the next with ease. Although, when she thought about Emma, she realised that her friend had been rather quiet during the evening, and she was beginning to wonder why. She recalled how very tired Emma had seemed when they said good night. But had she really just been tired? Or was there more to it? Could she be envious because Olivia and Caroline had been talking so much about their businesses and activities? '*Nah,*' thought Lauren, Emma and Ben's business was doing great, as far as she knew, and Emma was

quite active. She was involved in so many activities. And maintaining the large house and garden as well as keeping in touch with her sons and extended family was certainly time-consuming. On top of that she was helping Lauren. And perhaps with the additional effort of having to care for yet another person with Lauren being here it was all becoming too much for her. Concluding that this was probably the case, Lauren decided that she would do her best to find a place of her own as soon as possible as not to burden Emma much longer.

Chapter 4

The next morning at breakfast, Emma asked Ben if Matt had any information about the sale of Jones' house.

"He hasn't sold yet," said Ben. "When I told Matt about the lights being on in the house, he called Jones. Jones became quite upset, saying that the damn 'ghost' had cost him a fortune, and that we should mind our own business, and keep our mouth shut as not to spoil his chances of selling the property."

"There are enough people who won't believe us anyway. Just look at him, he didn't believe any of us. Superstitious country bumpkins he called us," said Emma.

"Whoa!" said Lauren, "It serves him right that he can't sell."

"Well, he will never sell it as long as his asking price is two million," said Ben.

"What?!" exclaimed Emma in disbelief.

"Yes. Matt says he wants to recoup all his expenses," said Ben.

"Oh, come on, it may be an architect designed luxury home he had built, but I don't think that even with the construction company from the city the building of the house would have cost more than half a million," said Emma. "And as for the land with the old shack, he paid far less than that. How would his expenses ever add up to two million?"

"Perhaps he is including the cost of all the band-aids and bandages he needed while he was here ...," suggested Ben, and chuckled. Seeing Emma's disapproving look, he sobered and said, "I know, you don't like people making fun of his injuries, but you have to admit that there was a certain comical side to the consequences of his stubbornness. I mean, it must have cost him kilometres of bandages before he finally believed us," said Ben, and couldn't stifle the laughter bubbling up again.

"You are terrible!" said Emma, but even she had to grin as she thought back at all the images of Jones after yet another 'accident', while adamantly repeating that it had *just* been an accident.

Meanwhile, Olivia was doing her usual morning chores before she had to leave for work. It was a beautiful sunny day, and she was humming a happy tune while Mr Darcy was noisily following her around the house on the ropes and branches that had been attached to the ceilings in order to give him the chance to exercise without needing to fly. Giving him a piece of fruit as she did every morning, Olivia continued preparing his food for the day. Then she went to open his personal door to the aviary where he would stay until she returned home. Entering the spacious cage through the full sized door, Olivia put the water bowl and the food dishes in their place before turning to the bird who was impatiently demanding his usual morning scratch, and rather loudly at that.

When she had said good-bye to Mr Darcy, she went inside, grabbed her bag and keys and headed for the carport. She was just about to turn into the road when she spotted a dog limping towards her car. Backing up into her driveway, she got out of the car and rushed out onto the road. The dog was now at level with the Wilson's property, and Olivia rushed towards it. Stopping the dog at their driveway, Olivia said, "Hey girl, what happened to you? Are you injured?" She really had to get to work to open the shop, and knowing that Emma was usually at home on a Saturday morning, Olivia led the dog by the collar to Emma's front door and rang the doorbell.

"Hi Emma! Thank God you are home," said Olivia.

"Where on earth did the dog come from?" asked Emma, "Is it injured?"

"I found her wandering on the road," said Olivia. "I really need to get to work, would you mind looking after her?"

Squatting down to pet the rather filthy looking dog that was just barely recognisable as a golden retriever, Emma said, "Of course, we'll look after her. We'll take her to Susan's for a check-up."

After they had washed and dried the dog, Lauren accompanied Emma to the vet's surgery, which was run by one of their neighbours. Lauren was quite taken by the charm of the small town in daylight. The little shops lined the right hand side, between the main road and the Yarra, while on the left hand side there was a small park adjoining the community hall and the Anglican Church. They passed Emma and Ben's office, and then Emma turned into the side street between Caroline's Café and the supermarket to park the car on the parking area behind the stores.

"What a lovely view," exclaimed Lauren as she got out of the car and looked at tree ferns and the grassy slope that led down to the Yarra where a paddling of ducks was enjoying the sunny morning.

"Yes, it is," said Emma, who was holding the dog with a rope that served as a substitute for a leash. "Come on. Susan's practice is right over there," she pointed at the small building that was built adjacent to the back of Caroline's Café.

Susan Kelly was a woman in her late forties, of a strong, athletic build, only slightly taller than Lauren. Her short, honey blonde hair was turning grey, but her intelligent looking green eyes did not need glasses, yet. Fascinated, Lauren watched Susan's hands as she examined the dog. They were strong but slender hands that reflected years of work, and the frequent washing required for the job had probably done its share. Lauren was mesmerised, and she had to force herself to look at the dog instead.

Susan was certain that she had never seen the dog before, and since the dog was neither wearing a name tag nor was she micro-chipped, there was no way to determine the owner. And since Susan had not heard of a missing golden retriever, she suggested putting a note on the community notice board and at the closest animal shelter. The dog was not in the greatest shape, and Susan surmised that she must have been on her own for quite a while. However, as far as Susan could see, there was no problem that couldn't be cured with good care, and when she was done with the examination, she asked if Emma would be able to keep the dog for the time being. Before Emma could answer, Lauren asked, "Can I keep her, please?"

"Sure," said Emma, "It might be good if you have a companion when you are living on your own. By the way," Emma turned to Susan and asked offhand, "Do you happen to know of a house for Lauren to rent here in town?"

Emma had not actually thought that Susan would know a place to rent, and she was quite unpleasantly surprised as Susan said smiling, "As it happens I do. The old cottage on my property is empty since Amber and Chantal went overseas. I have been taking care of it, but since they won't be coming back any time soon, I suggested to Amber to rent it, and she thought it was a good idea. So, if you like, you can have a look and see if you like it, Lauren."

Hesitating, Lauren asked, "What would it cost?"

Shrugging, Susan said, "Oh, I don't know. If you are taking care of it, it will spare me a lot of time and work, so if you are just paying for the utility costs, that's fine by me."

Blinking in astonishment, Lauren said, "Wow, isn't that a bit too generous? You don't even know me."

"Oh, but I know who you are, Lauren; I read your book and I loved it, and the neighbourhood is talking about you. It's great to finally meet you," said Susan, and grinning she explained, "I may not be a member of the 'books and gossip' club," she winked at Emma while she continued, "But I'm an avid reader, and I buy my books from Olivia, and I get my dose of gossip from my clients and from Caroline when I'm having my daily coffee at her café."

"I see," said Lauren grinning. "I'm glad you like my book."

"I do," said Susan, "And I hope to read more of your work. So, if you like, we can meet in the evening, and I'll show you the house."

"That would be great! Thank you!" said Lauren. "Oh, and what do I owe you for ... Lucy's consultation?"

"Ah, so it's Lucy, is it?" said Susan, and after pondering shortly, she suggested, "How about a signed copy of your book?"

Lauren smiled happily and said, "All right! I'll bring it this evening."

Chapter 5

After the visit to the vet, Emma and Lauren went shopping for groceries and picked up a few essentials for Lucy. On the way they popped into the bookshop to pick up a copy of Lauren's book. They let Olivia know that Lucy was fine, and that Lauren had decided to keep her, provided that no one came forward to claim her.

Later, as Lauren and Lucy were waiting outside the butcher's, a tall, nicely curved brunette approached Lauren, shoving her sunglasses up on her head. Lauren blushed under the woman's appreciative glance.

"Hi there," greeted the woman with interest in her voice, and with a quick glance at Lucy, she said, "Nice dog. You must be new in town, are you here visiting?"

"No, I'm planning to stay here, for the time being, at least," said Lauren.

"Oh, I see," said the woman obviously pleased, "Well, I'm Charlotte Brown. Guess I'll see you around then."

"You certainly will," said Lauren, "I'm Lauren Taylor, and if I'm not mistaken, we are living in the same street for the time being."

Looking questioningly for a moment, Charlotte recalled her encounter with Emma and said, "Ah, you are Emma's guest."

Smiling, Lauren said, "Yes."

"Hello Amy! You look as if someone died. What's wrong?" asked Emma, as she bumped into Amy Smith, her neighbour to the left, at the butcher's.

Sighing, the slender, blue-eyed female said, "Mother is back, and she is very much alive." "Unfortunately," she added mumbling.

"Back?" asked Emma surprised, "I didn't even know she had left."

"She left on Thursday. Gosh, this time I thought she might finally act on her threat and stay in her Toorak apartment for good ... or at least for a little longer," said Amy, brushing a strand of her long dark hair aside.

Laying a comforting hand on Amy's shoulder, Emma said, "She is an elderly woman, Amy. She needs you, even if she would never admit it."

Emma knew that Marjory Smith was a difficult person even on her best days, and Emma could very well sympathise with Amy. Having been married to a lawyer, and coming from a rather wealthy family, Mrs Smith had never been fond of her daughter's choice of marrying a salesman and buying a weekender 'in the middle of the bush'. And when Amy's husband ran off with a younger woman and left Amy with the weekend house and rather a meagre settlement six years ago, Mrs Smith had expected Amy to sell the house, and move into the spacious apartment in Toorak with her parents. Instead, Amy moved into 'that backwater town' permanently. Nonetheless, despite her disdain for her daughter's place of residence and her lifestyle, Mrs Smith more or less moved in with her daughter after she was widowed a year ago. She didn't go out much and instead stayed at home, ordering Amy about, and annoying her by rather loudly indulging in her 'sophisticated cultural interests', which mainly consisted of listening to classical music. The only neighbours she deemed worthy of socialising with were the Williams', as Thomas, Betty's husband, was at least an architect, who worked as a consultant for a Melbourne firm, and Betty came from a fairly wealthy German family, the home country of Mrs Smith's favourite composers. Emma and the other neighbours, however, rarely ever received an acknowledgement from Amy's mother, except for the few instances when they met at the Williams' house and Mrs Smith grudgingly endured their company.

Amy humphed and said, "She may be in her seventies, but I tell you, the only reason why she needs me is because she has no one else she can pester since my father died and Chantal moved overseas. I should follow my daughter's example and emigrate. But then again, mother would probably track me down, even if I moved to the North Pole. And then she would accuse me of wanting to freeze her to death." Amy sighed.

Emma couldn't suppress a chuckle, and she asked, "What was the argument about this time?"

"Oh, it was because I'm an utterly ruthless and selfish person who doesn't have the slightest bit of sympathy for her poor old mother," said Amy.

"What did you do? Serve her lukewarm tea again?" asked Emma grinning.

"Worse," said Amy, her lips twitching. "I didn't buy her faked migraine attack, and thus, instead of putting out my cigarette as she asked, I had the audacity to advise her to go lie down in her room instead of listening to her Wagner CD on the smoke-polluted veranda in the bright sunlight. And I didn't even bother to look up from my crossword puzzle to watch her great performance."

"You really are one selfish bitch," said Emma seriously, before breaking into laughter. And even Amy had to chuckle.

"Thanks for cheering me up, Emma," said Amy, "I really needed that. But I must go now and get the food home, or she'll accuse me of wanting to starve her to death. I suppose I'll see you tomorrow at Betty's?"

"Yes, we'll be there, and my friend Lauren also," said Emma, and gestured towards Lauren who was still chatting with Charlotte.

"Ah, she is the writer you were telling me about, right?" asked Amy.

"Yes. She will probably move into Amber's house," said Emma.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" said Amy, and more seriously she added, "Do warn her that my mother will be there too, won't you, and if your friend can't quote Shakespeare, we will all be hearing the lecture about the downfall of the English language again."

Emma groaned, and Amy finally headed home.

Charlotte was just saying good-bye to Lauren, as Emma left the butcher's. The butcher had a charming way of chatting up the ladies, so buying the meat was always a time consuming process. Emma waved to Charlotte in passing.

"I see you have already met our Charlotte," said Emma while they were making their way back to the car.

"Yes," said Lauren, "She is very nice. She suggested we could meet for cup of coffee some time. She was very welcoming and friendly."

"Well, apart from being the 'enfant terrible' of Mountain Creek, she is also a rather cosmopolitan woman ... no pun intended," said Emma, grinning. "And she comes from Sydney. Perhaps you can find things you have in common. She is also friendly with the younger people in town; and being well travelled, she has a lot of interesting stories to tell. I'm sure you will enjoy her company."

Chapter 6

Amber's house was located at the end of Wombat Road, which ran parallel to Cockatoo Drive on the opposite side of the creek. The only other house in the street was Susan's extensive property, while on the other side of the road there was only bushland.

When Emma turned into the driveway of Amber's house, Susan was already there. Not one to waste time waiting, she was just in the process of securing a vine of a climbing plant to the top of the pergola, thus she only acknowledged them with a quick wave of her arm before turning her back on them again.

Mesmerised, Lauren watched the smooth play of muscles on Susan's bare shoulders and arms. The vet was evenly tanned, and she looked positively gorgeous in her navy blue singlet and blue jeans, thought Lauren.

"Are you coming, or would you rather keep staring?" asked Emma, amused.

Blushing, Lauren stammered, "Uh, sorry, I'm coming."

While Lauren was getting out of the car, Susan turned around, and wiping her hands on her jeans, she walked towards the two women.

Smiling, Lauren handed Susan the signed copy of her book and said, "Your 'payment'."

Opening the book, Susan read the inscription, 'For Susan, this is my first ever signed copy as a thank

you for your generosity. Lauren Taylor.' Surprised, Susan said, "Oh! Thank you." And smiling, she asked, "Would you like me to show you through the house now?"

Lauren nodded, and Susan led them through the rooms of the rather small weatherboard house. The kitchen and the lounge room was one big open area with bare wooden floors and pine panelled walls with exposed beams on the ceiling, making the room appear larger and very airy. Intrigued, Lauren regarded the framed photographs of nude women that were decorating the walls of the lounge room. So far she had thought that Amber and Chantal were friends, but seeing the art prints, she was beginning to wonder if they were actually more than just friends. The house had very simple furniture and a huge open stone fireplace, which added to the simplicity. Obviously the house had been very tastefully renovated and redecorated, and recently at that. Lauren was particularly delighted that the bedroom, like the lounge room, had French windows opening onto the decking and the lovely garden with a view of the pastures and the creek. Through the trees on the other side of the creek, a large three-story house was just barely visible.

"Always remember to draw the drapes," warned Emma, "Or everyone in Cockatoo Drive will know what's going on in your bedroom. That's the Williams' house."

Susan chuckled and said, "Indeed. Amber had planned to plant trees as a screen for exactly this reason, but then she and Chantal decided to go on a working holiday in the UK."

"I see," said Lauren and shrugged. "Well, I'm single now, so there won't be much going on here anyway."

"Oh, you never know what the future holds," said Emma. "You may find a reason to draw the drapes sooner than you can imagine right now." After all, she had found a place to live on her own sooner than Emma would have imagined, or more precisely, sooner than she would have hoped, thought Emma a tad sadly.

"Well, I'm not going to search, so the 'reason' would have to find me," said Lauren, "But it really doesn't concern me at the moment." And turning to Susan, she said, "I really love the house. Does your offer still hold?"

"Of course," said Susan, "You pay for the utilities, and you look after the property. I will show you what needs to be done regularly. So, if it is acceptable, you may move in whenever you wish."

"Hm, perhaps you could show me first what needs to be done?" asked Lauren. "I have never lived in a house by myself, so I'm not sure if I can handle it."

Touching Lauren's shoulder encouragingly, Susan said, "I'm sure you can handle it. Come on, I'll show you." And she gestured Lauren and Emma to follow her.

Lauren was a bit apprehensive after Susan had showed her around, but Susan assured Lauren that it really wasn't difficult, just time consuming, and of course she would help Lauren to start with, "And if you find you can't cope with it, you can still hire James as a gardener. I prefer not to pay for things I can do myself, but it's your choice and your money, so I won't argue if you choose to pay for help."

"I'm not sure if I could afford to pay a gardener," said Lauren, but straightening up, she said with determination, "However, I have learned that I shouldn't give up before I have even tried. So, I will try."

"Great," said Susan, "So, when are you going to move in?"

Turning to Emma, Lauren said, "It will be getting dark soon. I would rather move in during the day, so if you don't mind me staying for another night, I would like to move in tomorrow morning."

Emma shook her head smiling, and said, "Of course I don't mind." After all, Lauren had not asked if she minded her moving out so quickly. Though, Emma knew that she would have answered in the negative as well, even if in that case it would have been a lie. If Lauren needed this to be happy, then Emma would not stand in her way, even if Emma was significantly less happy with this outcome. Casting her own glum feelings aside, Emma turned her attention to the others.

"Excellent," said Susan, and pondering, she asked, "Say, do you like horse riding?"

Lauren's face lit up, "I love horse riding!"

Smiling happily, Susan asked, "Would you like to go for a ride tomorrow afternoon?"

"I would love to," said Lauren, "But Emma? When are we expected at the Williams'?"

"There is no specific time," said Emma, "Any time after six will be fine."

"Okay!" said Lauren happily.

"Wonderful," said Susan, "How about I come and pick you up at three?"

Lauren beamed, "That would be great."

When they were driving back to Emma's place, Lauren remarked, "Susan is really nice and very attractive."

"Yes, she is," said Emma a bit surprised, and grinning she added, "And she has never asked me if I would like to go riding with her, or any of our neighbours as far as I know."

"Oh," said Lauren, not sure what to make of this comment.

"Mind you," said Emma, "I don't think any of us would want to, and perhaps she just assumes that we wouldn't. But I have never seen her quite so obliging to anyone before. I was actually quite surprised that she read your book; I thought she confined her reading habits to 'Hoofbeats' and 'The Veterinarian' or something the like. I wouldn't have thought she would read a novel, even less one with a lesbian theme."

And Emma told Lauren, that since she knew her, Susan had always been a rather solitary person, although Emma had heard that she had not always been like this. But no one knew what happened during her time in the UK, where she had studied and worked for several years. One day, about 22 years ago, after the Waler stud farm of her parents had been destroyed by a bushfire, killing both her parents, Susan came back with her daughter Amber, and a few months later, she opened her own veterinary practice. The locals were rather pleased that Mountain Creek had its own vet again, as since Susan's grandfather had died 35 years ago, they had had to drive to the vet in the next town. Susan had always been rather secretive about her life then, and she had remained so, despite the friendship of Amber and Chantal.

"God knows what happened during her stay overseas," said Emma, "I'm glad that she likes you, and I'm sure you will become good friends."

"Say, I have been wondering," said Lauren, "What is the relationship between the girls?"

"Actually," said Emma, "I have always thought they were just good friends. However, now after seeing those photos in the house, I am really not too sure."

At night, while Lauren had fallen asleep rather quickly, still exhausted from all the changes, Emma lay in bed awake, thinking about Susan. She wondered why Olivia had never mentioned that Susan bought books at her shop. Of course, Olivia was not in the habit of blurting out what her customers bought, but couldn't she at least have mentioned that she had sold Lauren's book to Susan? Did Susan often buy books with a lesbian theme? Emma realised that she didn't really know much about the vet at all. Could she be gay? "*Nah, she has a child, after all,*" thought Emma, and she cast this thought aside. And turning around, she drifted into a fitful sleep.

Chapter 7

The next morning, Lauren and Lucy were walking the boundaries of their new home. It had not taken much time for Lauren to unload her car. But before she was going to put things in their place, Lauren had decided to take a break and explore her new surroundings. Climbing plants overgrowing a pergola were providing shade on the entrance side of the house, while on the opposite side, several large tree ferns and other native trees and bushes were screening an outdoor setting from view. Being spring, many of the plants were in flower around the house, and only the vegetable garden on the northern side was mainly left bare, except for a few perennial herbs. Beyond the garden area around the house, pastures stretched out to the natural borders of the property, which were defined by the creek, the road that ran parallel to the creek, and two footpaths. It was a sunny late spring morning that did not yet have the heat of summer but a pleasant warmth and a gentle breeze, and Lauren was delighted with her new home and the fragrance of the country air. When she and Lucy reached the eastern end of the property, Lauren spotted a woman with a wide straw hat and a long flowing skirt, looking quite surreal, on the footbridge that led

over the creek. For a moment, Lauren stood still, wondering if she might be seeing the Lady of the Creek, however, when she realised it was Charlotte, Lauren relaxed and waved to her. As Charlotte waved back, Lauren and Lucy started walking towards her.

"Hi Lauren," greeted Charlotte, "Exploring your new environment? Have you moved in already?"

"Yes," said Lauren while Charlotte petted Lucy. "It didn't take long." And looking around she said, "It's very pretty here."

"Yes, it is, indeed. I'm going for a walk, would you like to come?" asked Charlotte.

Looking at her watch and seeing that she still had four hours, four very long hours, until Susan would call for her, Lauren said, "Yes, sure," and together they started walking towards the bush.

"I heard you are from Sydney," said Charlotte.

"Yes, that's right," said Lauren, "At least I lived there for a long time. Originally I'm from further north."

"I'm from Sydney too. What brought you to this neck of the woods, if I may ask?" asked Charlotte.

"Emma," said Lauren. "I thought it would be nice to live closer to her as she is my best friend. I have known her for a while now, and she has already invited me to come and visit several times. And since my relationship broke up, it was the perfect opportunity to come. And how did you come to choose this place?"

Charlotte shrugged, "I couldn't stand being near the sea anymore," and she explained, "My husband drowned 15 years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Lauren.

"It's okay," said Charlotte, "It was a long time ago. I'm fine now. I still wouldn't like to go back to the coast, though. I really love it here. The bush, the animals, the silence ... it's beautiful."

"Yes, it is indeed beautiful," agreed Lauren. "I'm not too sure about the silence, though," and grinning she explained, "Well, sure, you don't have the traffic noise, but the kookaburras aren't exactly the quietest neighbours to have in your garden, either. Gosh, yesterday night it sounded as if there were hundreds of them in Emma's garden."

Charlotte chuckled, "We could hear them in our back yard in Sydney, too, so I'm used to them, and I rather like the noise they make. I lived in Cremorne with my husband, very close to the reserve, and we had a lot of native birds there. But I wasn't referring to the noise. What I meant was the silence with regards to life. There's no hustle, no flurry of activity here and no masses of people ..."

"Shh, can you hear that?" asked Lauren and halted.

"Yes, she is singing," said Charlotte.

"The Mourning Lady of the Creek?" asked Lauren, while she petted Lucy who was obviously wondering why they were halting.

"Yes."

"Can we go closer?" asked Lauren.

"A little," said Charlotte, "Further ahead the path gets closer to the creek again. From there you can hear her better. But don't cross the creek, Lauren."

"I won't," promised Lauren and shortened Lucy's leash as they followed Charlotte. "I have already been warned. I'm not superstitious, but I will do as I'm told."

"Good," said Charlotte. "Mind you, I didn't believe it at first, either. After all, I encountered no problems on my property, which they had told me was haunted too. So, when I heard her the first time, I tried to find her. However, when I stumbled on a perfectly level path and sprained my wrist while trying to break the fall, even I was convinced that I should rather head back, and not set foot on her land again."

When they could see the creek through the trees yet again, Charlotte led them to the edge of the creek where they sat down on a boulder and listened to the singing, accompanied by the murmur of the water.

"Do you know what language it is?" asked Lauren quietly.

"I don't have the faintest idea," said Charlotte. "I can say for sure that I have never heard it anywhere else, and I have travelled extensively with my husband."

"She sounds so very sad," said Lauren.

"Mhm," acknowledged Charlotte.

Later, as they were walking back home, Lauren said pensively, "How can she still have such a beautiful clear voice? I mean, she must be really old by now."

"Well, I guess you can't apply human standards to her, because I suppose if she were human, she

wouldn't be singing anymore at all, she would probably be dead," said Charlotte and continued, "They say she was in her late-thirties in 1953. But no one can say for sure, because they found that her papers were forged, as were those of the other lady. Thus, no one knows who they were or where they really came from. What I'm wondering, though, is why is she still mourning? I mean, I loved my husband dearly, and it was very hard in the beginning, and it took me over two years before I could face life again. But eventually I figured that life goes on, and he certainly wouldn't have wanted me to keep mourning for the rest of my life. To keep mourning and hide from the rest of the world for almost 60 years ... it can't be healthy, whoever or whatever she may be, if you ask me."

"How very sad," said Lauren, wondering what kind of creature the Lady might be, and not quite able to imagine that someone with such a beautiful voice could be dangerous in any way.

"Yes," agreed Charlotte, and they walked the rest of the way in silence.

As they reached the border of Lauren's new home, Lauren asked, "Are you also coming to the Williams' in the evening?"

Shaking her head, Charlotte said grinning, "No, Betty prefers talking about me, rather than with me."

"Oh," said Lauren, not sure what else to say.

"Don't worry," said Charlotte, "It's not as if she doesn't talk to me at all, she just doesn't invite me to her place anymore. However, she is not an unpleasant person. She is just a bit old-fashioned in some regards, and gossip is her life, so be careful what you say in her vicinity if you don't want everyone in Mountain Creek to know about it." Charlotte winked at Lauren, and then she said, "If you like we can go for a walk together again soon."

"I'd like that," said Lauren.

"Great," said Charlotte and heading towards the bridge, she turned around and added grinning, "Have fun with the gossip gang!"

Making a face, Lauren chuckled, and headed home with Lucy.

Chapter 8

Engrossed in getting her computer running, Lauren startled when the doorbell rang. Looking at the time, she saw that it was a quarter to three, and she rushed to open the door. She almost fell over Lucy in the process as the dog beat her to the door.

"Hi," said Susan, grinning at Lauren's confused look, and she reached down to pet Lucy.

"Hi," said Lauren, and spotting the horses tied to the railing of the deck she said surprised, "Wow, you brought the horses."

"Yes, of course," said Susan amused.

"Cool service," mumbled Lauren perplexed, and said, "Do come in, I'll just get changed."

While Lauren disappeared into the bedroom, Susan looked around, and noticing the switched on computer, she called, "Ah, you already set up a place for your muse."

"Pardon?" said Lauren, peeking into the room.

"I mean your computer," said Susan.

"Oh, yes, I need to shut it down before we leave. I'm almost ready," said Lauren and retreated into the bedroom.

When Lauren returned, her wild locks tamed into a ponytail, and dressed in jeans and a fresh T-shirt, she went over to the computer. Shutting it down, she headed for the door where she had her shoes lined up.

Susan had watched the attractive female with amusement, wondering why she was so flustered all of a sudden. However, when Lucy got up and trotted towards the door, Susan asked, "Are you going to leave Lucy in the house?"

Turning to face Susan, Lauren said, "I was planning to. Is this going to be a problem? Don't you want her in the house?"

"It's not a problem for me," assured Susan, "I'm just not sure if Lucy is used to being alone in a house."

"I don't think she minds it," said Lauren, and added grinning, "I left her in the bedroom while I was unloading the car. When I was done and opened the door to let her out, she lay spread out on the bed and

only reluctantly left it."

Susan laughed, "All right, that sounds like she is quite happy with being in the house."

"She seems to be a very gentle and well-behaved dog," said Lauren, "I wonder where she came from."

Getting up, Susan said, "We will probably never find out, so far no one has come forward, but I'm glad that she has a good home now."

As they left the house, Susan commented mumbling on Lauren locking the door, "I really should follow your example."

"Sorry?" asked Lauren as she turned around, and went over to the buckskin gelding.

"You locked the door," explained Susan, while she mounted her black mare. "I tend to forget locking it."

Surprised, Lauren looked up at Susan and said, "How can one forget to lock the door? Anybody could just walk in."

Shrugging her shoulders, Susan said, "Usually this is not a problem around here. However, there have been break-ins recently, so I guess I should really get used to it."

"You really should," said Lauren, and while she untied the reins from the railing, she wondered how someone like Susan could act so carelessly with regards to her possessions. Caressing the gelding's head, she asked, "What's his name?"

"Eeyore," said Susan, grinning.

"As the donkey in Winnie-the-Pooh?" asked Lauren incredulously.

"Yes," said Susan, and while Lauren mounted, Susan explained, "My daughter named him. He is 22, the same age as my daughter. She was seven when we bought him; we had watched a Winnie-the-Pooh video the day before. The name actually suits him. He is quite phlegmatic, and he has always been an exceptionally gentle horse. Amber usually rides him without a saddle, and as you have probably noticed, he goes with just a halter. He is not used to a bit anymore."

"How sweet!" said Lauren, and caressed Eeyore's mane.

"Are you ready?" asked Susan, thinking that Lauren looked positively ravishing on a horse, with her dark-skinned, exotic look, her tall figure and her long, slender legs gripping the saddle ... *'Gosh, Eeyore, you are one lucky guy!'* thought Susan, and quickly sobered as Lauren turned to face her.

"Yes," said Lauren beaming. It felt so good to sit on a horse again, thought Lauren; she hadn't done this in over a decade. Urging Eeyore to follow Susan's horse, Lauren admired Susan's muscular figure. *'Damn, she looks good!'* thought Lauren, and as soon as they were on the road, she guided Eeyore next to Susan, as not to risk being caught staring again, and this time by the object of her interest. And as Susan's mare snorted slightly, Lauren asked, "And what's the name of your horse?"

"Her official paddock name is Hecate, after the Greek Goddess of witchcraft," said Susan, grinning, and she added, "But I rarely ever call her that."

"What do you call her?" Lauren wanted to know.

Shrugging her shoulders, Susan said, "Just girl or sweetie, or something the like."

Lauren chuckled and said, "She still looks young. How old is she?"

"She is only seven. I bought her two years ago, after I had to put down my old horse, Sally."

"Gosh, that must have been hard, having to do this yourself," said Lauren with compassion.

Shaking her head, Susan said, "No, I rather do it myself. But losing Sally was not easy, of course. I had her for 20 years, and she was a wonderful horse. Hecate is very different. Her father is a Thoroughbred, and she is rather nervous and very energetic, just the opposite of Sally who was a very calm, flaxen chestnut, and a pure bred medium type Waler as Eeyore. I guess I wanted a horse that didn't remind me of her."

"That's understandable," said Lauren softly.

Susan, smiled, acknowledging Lauren's perceptibility. They were riding at a leisurely walk towards the bush, only the horses' hooves breaking the silence of the afternoon. The sun was shining brightly, but a gentle breeze served to keep the felt temperature at a pleasant level. And Susan thought about how Amber had not been as understanding back then. She had been of the opinion that Susan should not buy such a difficult and young horse – at her age. Susan had still been feeling the loss of her beloved Sally,

and so this comment had caused her to react rather strongly, resulting in the first really bad fight with her daughter. It had taken Susan a while to realise that her daughter was just concerned for her. She had then promised Amber that she would not ride alone on "The horse from Hell" until Amber was convinced that Susan could handle her. Amber had agreed, and they had reconciled with an evening at home, just the two of them, having Amber's favourite meal, and later snuggling on the sofa while watching their favourite movie. It had not taken long to reassure Amber that Hecate was not really as bad as she believed. She had a fiery and spirited temperament, yes, but Susan was very well capable of handling her, and going alongside Eeyore decidedly helped to calm the young mare's nerves.

Susan immensely missed the rides with her daughter. Granted, she missed her daughter in general, but she missed her the most when she was riding alone. The rides with Amber had always been so very precious to Susan. They had had their best discussions on their rides; there was a special kind of intimacy between them when they were on horseback, alone in the bush. It was very unique and never quite like it in other situations. Perhaps it could become like this with Lauren also? If her book was any indication, Lauren was gay, as the main characters were lesbians. And that Lauren had looked quite intrigued at the art prints, whereas Emma had embarrassedly tried to avoid looking at them, seemed to be a clue also. Perhaps there was a chance for Susan? Well, that seemed to be too good to be true, thought Susan, but it was definitely nice to be riding with Lauren, and she didn't feel so alone with Lauren beside her. Susan grinned, as she looked to the side and caught Lauren gazing at her.

Blushing, Lauren stammered, "Uh, sorry." And she cursed herself that yet again she had not been able to restrain herself. She had been wondering about Susan's past and who the father of her daughter was, after all, no one had mentioned him yet. However, as she saw Susan's thoughtful expression, she thought that it might be too intrusive to ask. But, she couldn't resist taking the opportunity of Susan's absent-mindedness and have a closer look at the attractive vet. She was stunned when she realised the contrast ... while just a few days ago she had been living in a shabby flat with Ashley and her pet rat, now she was living in a beautiful house on her own with a really nice dog, and to top it she was riding alongside a gorgeous woman in such wonderful surroundings. She was amazed at how much one's life could change in such a short time. And she had wondered if Susan might be gay as she was reading lesbian novels. However, she decided that this was too good to be true. After all, that Susan had a child, kind of suggested that she was not.

Lauren was quite relieved about the distraction, when she spotted a bird that flew away as they came closer, and she asked, "What kind of bird was that? I have never seen one like it."

"It was a Painted Honeyeater. They are quite rare," explained Susan. "There are many birds living in this part of the bush, which are listed as threatened."

"Is this a conservation reserve?" asked Lauren.

"No. We couldn't ride here if it was," said Susan with a wink, and she added, "It is my property."

Looking at Susan in disbelief, Lauren asked, "Gosh, how big is your property?"

"About 500 hectares of bushland and 100 hectares of pastures, including our houses and the gardens," said Susan.

"Holy cow!" exclaimed Lauren, but just as she wanted to comment further, she got distracted when she recognised the place where she had sat with Charlotte earlier. She marvelled at how different the view was from a horse as opposed to when she had walked with Charlotte, and pointing towards the creek, she said, "I have been here with Charlotte this morning. We listened to the singing of the Lady of the Creek. She has such a beautiful voice."

"Yes, she does," said Susan absentmindedly.

"Is something wrong?" asked Lauren when Susan kept silently staring into the distance.

Looking at Lauren, Susan smiled and said, "No. It's all right. Are you up to trotting?"

"Yes, sure," said Lauren.

Nonetheless, Susan stayed strangely quiet. And although Lauren enjoyed the ride very much, after a while she was beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable. She had attempted to start a conversation several times, but Susan had only responded rather monosyllabically, if at all. She seemed absentminded and brooding, and Lauren was wondering if perhaps her mentioning of Charlotte had caused it. Was there a history between the two? Was there something unpleasant in their past relationship? Or did Susan disapprove of Charlotte's lifestyle? Somehow Susan didn't strike her as intolerant.

On the way back, Lauren could bear it no longer, and she asked bluntly, "Do you have a problem with

Charlotte?"

"What?" asked Susan, confused.

"Well, you have been oddly quiet since I mentioned that I have been listening to the Lady of the Creek with Charlotte, so I have been wondering if maybe there is a problem between the two of you," explained Lauren.

"No," said Susan, "I don't have a problem with Charlotte. She is all right."

"Then what is the problem? Is it me?" asked Lauren.

They had just reached a junction, and instead of answering, Susan halted and asked, "Could you please wait here for a bit? I would like to check something."

Lauren regarded her questioningly and asked, "But you will come back, won't you?"

"Of course!" said Susan.

"All right, I'll wait."

"Thanks. And stay on the horse, please. I'll be back as soon as I can," promised Susan.

"Okay," said Lauren, and Susan turned to the right and spurred her mare to a trot.

Susan could bear it no longer. She liked Lauren a lot, and she wondered why they had not heard any singing. Had something happened to her friend? She was getting old, after all. Even if she was perfectly healthy and never asked for help – and rarely ever accepted it if it was offered, Susan couldn't help but worry about her friend, and she urged the horse on until they reached a spot where the path came very close to the creek. Crossing the creek, Susan urged the mare through the bracken undergrowth on the other side and onto a barely visible path to the left amongst eucalypts and wattle trees. The path led away from the creek and ascended slightly, ending at an open grassed area full of flowers and flowering bushes, looking oddly out of place in the middle of the bush. A rather rundown miner's cottage graced the centre. Next to it lay an extensive vegetable garden, partly surrounded by hedges of berries, behind which fruit trees of different varieties were providing some shade. Jumping off the horse, Susan exclaimed, "Gosh, I'm glad you are all right, Fheyanna!" and tying Hecate to the railing of the veranda, Susan asked the tall elderly female in olive coloured cargo pants who came to greet her, "Why didn't you sing for her?"

Fheyanna smiled, causing the wrinkles around her light-blue eyes to deepen. Her long white hair, which fell down to her elbows, was glistening in the sunlight; a bright red headband kept it off her distinctive face. Invitingly, she gestured towards the old and weathered steps, and said gently, "Sit down, my dear."

"I can't, Fheyanna," said Susan, "I don't have the time. She is waiting for me."

Fheyanna just tilted her head and raised an eyebrow, causing Susan to heave an exasperated sigh and to sit down on the steps.

Nodding approvingly, Fheyanna sat down beside Susan and leaning forward, her elbows on her thighs, she folded her old, wrinkled hands and stared quietly into the distance.

It took Susan an effort not to fidget, but she knew she was supposed to relax, so she did her best to calm down and breathe the heavy, fragrant air.

After a minute that felt like eternity for Susan, Fheyanna finally spoke, still looking into the distance, "She likes you."

"And I like her," said Susan.

"So you do," said Fheyanna nodding.

"Do you object?" asked Susan.

"Not at all," said Fheyanna calmly.

"So, are you going to sing for her?"

"There is no need."

Furrowing her brow, Susan said, "I don't understand."

Turning to Susan, Fheyanna smiled, and patting Susan's knee, she assured her, "You will understand soon enough." And getting up, she said, "Go, she is getting impatient."

Confused, Susan got up and asked, "May I tell her about you?"

Regarding Susan for a moment, Fheyanna said, "Decide for yourself when and what to tell her. My

permission you have."

Susan nodded and said, "All right. Thank you."

Making a shooing gesture, Fheyanna said, "Go, and teach her some patience, will you?"

Grinning, Susan mounted her horse and said, "I'll do my best." And waving good-bye, she turned the horse and headed back the way she had come.

Lauren had been rather puzzled as to why Susan rushed off like that, and she was wondering what she was doing. Looking around, she spotted a goanna making its way through the undergrowth. Lauren liked goannas and other reptiles. There were many tiny lizards living around her new home, she had even spotted one in the lounge room. Surprised, she had noticed that Lucy didn't attempt to chase and catch the lizard; instead she had only eyed the tiny critter warily. Perhaps, she had been bitten by one, thought Lauren, and she was glad that she didn't need to worry about her little housemates. With a smile Lauren watched the goanna starting to climb a gum tree. What had started as a fresh morning had turned into a rather hot spring day as the mid-afternoon hush settled. There was no breeze, no noise, just the buzzing of the flies, which indicated that summer was imminent.

Lauren loved her country very much, but she could have done without the flies, she thought as she was fanning her face to shoo away the annoying buzzers. "Where the Hell has Susan got to?" Lauren cursed impatiently.

When she had crossed the creek again, Susan urged her mare to a canter, only slowing down shortly before she reached Lauren.

"Sorry that it took me so long," said Susan smiling, "But at least I'm less worried now."

"Then it was worth the wait," said Lauren reassuringly, and they continued on the way home.

"So, you are going to the Williams' later, hm?" said Susan.

"Yes," said Lauren and continued thoughtfully, "It feels strange to be included in all this neighbourly activity. I have never been so social in my entire life."

"Well, as long as you are enjoying yourself, there's nothing wrong with being social. I just hope it won't keep you from writing, I want to read more novels from you," said Susan grinning.

Smiling, Lauren assured Susan that she would definitely keep on writing, and she told her that she was in the process of writing a new novel.

As they reached Lauren's house and she dismounted, Susan asked, "Say, would you like to come over for dinner on Tuesday?"

Turning around, Lauren looked at Susan and said, "Yes, I would." And as she handed Susan the reins their fingers touched, neither of them retreating while they gazed into each other's eyes, until Susan's mare shifted her weight and snorted. The two women grinned at each other, and as Lauren retracted her hand, Susan said, "See you at my place on Tuesday at six then?"

"I'm looking forward to it," said Lauren and took a step backwards to allow Susan to pass.

Lauren stood there staring after Susan until she reached the bend, and just as Lauren was about to turn towards the house, Susan looked back at her and waved. Waving back, Lauren grinned and finally headed home as Susan vanished around the bend.

Chapter 9

Lauren was getting ready for the barbecue. Not being used to riding anymore, her muscles were a bit sore, and it would probably be worse tomorrow, but she didn't care. Dancing from the bedroom to the bathroom, singing a jolly advertisement jingle, painfully out of tune, Lauren laughed at Lucy's sceptical gaze and vanished into the shower.

Taking a last sniff at her hands, she deeply inhaled the intoxicating smell of horses and leather. With a happy sigh, she turned on the water and started to sing the jingle once more.

Meanwhile, happiness was painfully absent in the Smiths' household.

"For Christ's sake, Mother, it is a barbeque not a gala dinner!" exclaimed Amy when her mother yet again objected to Amy's choice of clothes.

"Watch your tongue, Amy," admonished Marjory Smith. "Even if it is just a barbeque, it is no excuse to dress like a slob."

"Stop it, Mother," said Amy while she covered the salad she had prepared, "You know that I won't wear a dress."

"You could at least put on a decent pair of slacks," remarked Mrs Smith.

"It is over 30 degrees outside, it is perfectly acceptable to wear shorts," said Amy and headed for the door. Opening the door, she turned around and asked, "Are you coming or not?"

Grudgingly, Mrs Smith grabbed her handbag and followed Amy, leaving a trace of sweet smelling perfume in her wake. And shaking her head she exclaimed, "Lord, what have I done to deserve this child?!"

"You probably distracted Him with that terrible perfume of yours, so He mixed up the babies, and the poor girl whom you wanted, who would have loved to wear pink tulle dresses and go to ballet lessons had to grow up on a cattle station," suggested Amy while they headed for the Williams' house.

"A cattle station, yes, that would have been more suitable for you," said Mrs Smith.

"At least on one thing we agree," remarked Amy dryly.

When Lauren with Lucy neared the Williams' house, Lauren slowed down as she looked at the size of the house that seemed so much more impressive up close than it had from afar. Even though from this side one could only see two of the three levels. She paused for a minute, a bit daunted by its lavish appearance. She had never been invited to such a spatial luxurious property.

Hesitantly she went closer, wondering if she should ring the front door bell. But when she heard laughter and saw a tiled path leading to the side of the building, she decided to try her luck. The path led to wide steps beside the house that led down to the lower level ending at a huge terrace beyond which was a swimming pool, surrounded by an impeccably landscaped garden. The well-tended garden ended with a line of trees at the creek through which Lauren could see her new home. She stopped shortly and closed her eyes to inhale the fragrance of the roses that lined the steps, but when Lucy pulled at the leash, she opened her eyes again and continued her way downwards.

Spotting Lauren as she made her way down the steps, Betty went to meet her.

After exchanging greetings, Lauren said, "Wow, what a gorgeous place!"

"Thank you. Come I'll introduce you to the others," said Betty. Taking the bottle of wine Lauren had brought, she led Lauren to the terrace, where she introduced her to Amy and Marjory Smith.

Seeing Lauren arrive, Thomas put his barbecue fork down and came forward. Holding out his hand, he introduced himself grinning, "Hi Lauren, I'm Thomas, the chief cook for the day."

Lauren was a bit surprised that opposed to his wife's formality, Thomas appeared so humorous and casual, and she happily returned the greeting.

With a twinkle in his eye and a broad smile he asked Lauren, "What would you like to drink?"

"A glass of lemonade, please," said Lauren.

After Thomas had handed her the lemonade and went back to the barbecue, Lauren stood there a bit forlorn with the glass in one hand and Lucy's leash in the other, when she heard Marjory yell out, "Young lady! You are an author, I hear."

"Uh, yes," said Lauren, not accustomed to being called a young lady or an author; and she hesitantly walked over to Marjory.

"What do you write?" asked Mrs Smith.

"Fiction," said Lauren, "Mainly fantasy and romance."

"I only read classics myself," said Marjory.

"Her new novel is shaping up very well," said Emma, who just approached them with a drink in her

hand. Before she could go on, they were interrupted by Thomas.

"The steaks are done. Come and get it," announced Thomas, placing the plate with the meat on the large trestle table that was set up for the food.

For a while everyone was occupied filling up their plates, giving Lauren the opportunity to study the guests. Emma had warned her about Marjory Smith, and now that she had been introduced to her, Lauren was quite relieved that she could choose a place at the 'smokers and animals' end of the large table.

The evening progressed rather pleasantly. And except for Marjory, who seemed to seize every opportunity to criticize people, Lauren thought that all of the neighbours were exceptionally nice. Even Betty, though lamenting a lot about various topics, showed a warm-hearted attitude in other regards. Thus, when the desserts came out, Lauren had come to feel very much at ease. However, this feeling changed when Amy mentioned that she would rather pass on dessert or Charlotte would sweep her off the court tomorrow at tennis, and Betty started complaining,

"If only that woman would limit her activity to the tennis court!"

"What has she done this time?" asked Ben grinning, always eager to hear Betty's outrageous version of Charlotte's newest escapades.

Taking a deep breath, Betty started, "She is going to yoga classes at Nicholas'. I swear, if Sarah ever marries him, I disown her! Anyway, Charlotte is now practicing yoga on her sun deck – in the nude! Can you imagine that? I'm sure she is only doing this to annoy me."

"Why does it annoy you?" asked Lauren.

"She does it in the nude!" Betty repeated indignantly.

"But she does it on her own property," said Lauren, "I can't even see her house from here."

"You can see it from the balcony of the upper level," explained Betty, irritated.

"But didn't you say earlier that the rooms of your children are on the upper level? And that they aren't living at home anymore?" asked Lauren.

"I still have to keep the rooms clean," said Betty annoyed. "In any case, it is disgustingly immoral to run around in the nude where everyone can see you."

Lauren was just about to respond, when Emma remarked, "Betty, you have truly outdone yourself with this cheesecake."

"It's the same one that I always make," said Betty, not too happy about Emma's intervention.

"No," said Emma, and savouring another bite she added, "There is something different about it."

"Hm, come to think of it," said Betty thoughtfully, "I did use a different quark this time. Thomas found a German dairy farmer who sells it direct."

The conversation drifted to food and recipes, sports and neighbourhood issues, and Lauren was quite relieved when Lucy became restless, giving her an excuse to escape.

Chapter 10

As they were trudging home, Lauren wondered if she had messed up, yet again, a great opportunity to make friends by putting her foot in her mouth.

After they returned home, Lauren went to bed, and as Lucy joined her, Lauren hugged the dog and buried her face in her fur. Lucy was far more understanding, thought Lauren. She was friendly towards everyone; she didn't mind their status, their ethnicity or whatever habits they had. Why couldn't everyone be as nice as Lucy? "*Perhaps I should stick to dogs,*" thought Lauren. And as she was hugging Lucy, Lauren thought back about the people at the party. She had been warned about Marjory and Betty. And they had certainly lived up to their reputation. She should just have kept silent. Her habit of saying what she thought had brought her into trouble more often than she cared to remember. It was probably one of the reasons that made it difficult for her to keep friends, and she had lost one or two jobs because of it as well. When would she finally learn to bite her tongue? Once again she was reminded of her breakup with Ashley. Perhaps she was still being a bit touchy and fearful with regards to relationships. After all, the wound was still a bit raw. Nonetheless, thinking back to the beginning of their relationship, Lauren now realised that they had always been different. Ashley had not actually changed much since they had met in the pet shop where Lauren was working, five years ago.

Ashley had bought food for Gianna, her Mink Berkshire coloured rat that she used to carry with her.

Intrigued, Lauren had watched the woman with the rat, as she carried on a conversation with her pet while she was perusing the snacks for rodents. Lauren thought it endearing that someone would discuss the food options with their pet, and besides that the woman did look rather fetching. Her short, jet-black hair was fashionably styled, and the trendy black shirt and jeans showed off her well-toned body and enhanced the beauty of her dark skin. Ashley had caught her staring, and with a glitter in her dark brown eyes and a huge grin on her face, she had approached Lauren.

Lauren had been amazed at Ashley's boldness to flirt with her, and ask her out on a date in the middle of the pet shop – though, granted the shop had been rather deserted at the time. She had agreed, and they met at local pub in the evening. That night Lauren had spent at Ashley's, and it wasn't long before Lauren had moved in with her.

Looking back, Lauren wondered how they survived five years together, as apart from their mutual attraction and their love of sex, they didn't really have much in common at all. They didn't like the same music, didn't like the same films; only the love of animals was something they shared, though Lauren would have far more preferred to have a dog or a cat rather than buying another rat when Gianna died. Ashley was exuberant and energetic, while Lauren was rather quiet and shy. Ashley spent her money on drinks and clothes, and she loved shopping, going out, and partying with her friends. In the beginning Lauren let herself be dragged around by Ashley. However, after the pet shop had closed and she lost her job two years ago, Lauren had refused to accompany Ashley, claiming it to be too costly. And although this was true, it had not been the main reason. Lauren simply preferred staying at home, reading a book or writing, to being surrounded by Ashley's loud, drinking and smoking friends. And she didn't feel the need to invest money in fancy clothes, either.

The lifestyle of the people here in Mountain Creek was far more to Lauren's liking. The barbeque at Betty's had been very pleasant. Of course they were all of a slightly older generation, but this rather suited Lauren. If not for Betty's condemning of Charlotte, the neighbourhood party could have been one of the best experiences in Lauren's social life. Sadly, the argument had ruined everything, and she would be surprised if Betty invited her again. Mind you, she wasn't too sure if she wanted another invitation, considering Betty's aggravating attitude.

With her thoughts in turmoil, it had taken Lauren a while to drift into sleep, so when Lucy woke her early on Monday morning, she tiredly dragged herself out of bed, pulled on a T-Shirt and padded barefoot to the door to let the dog out without bothering to collar her. Squinting against the bright morning sun, Lauren sat down on the steps, and leaning against the railing, she closed her eyes and dozed off almost instantaneously.

Lauren didn't hear Charlotte greeting Lucy, and she came to with a start as Charlotte called out, "Good morning sleepyhead!"

Shuddering and rubbing her eyes, Lauren squinted at Charlotte and mumbled, "Uh, morning. Sorry, must have dozed off."

While Lauren was getting up, Charlotte asked, amused, "Been up into the wee hours with the gossip gang?"

"Nah, been up into the wee hours thinking about the gossip gang," said Lauren and offered, "Want to come in? I'll just make myself presentable."

"I think you look cute," said Charlotte grinning.

Snorting, Lauren said, "Thanks, I guess." And as Charlotte followed her into the house, she added, "Help yourself to coffee and sit down. I'll just take a quick shower."

Helping herself to a cup of coffee, Charlotte sat down on the sofa and looked around. She had never been in this house before, and she was always interested in other people's houses as they told a lot about the owner. As her eyes glanced around the room, she raised an appreciative eyebrow when her eyes fell on the black and white art prints of nude women that decorated the walls, and she wondered if they were Lauren's, or if they were left behind by Amber.

As Lauren entered the room dressed in a bathrobe and saw Charlotte admiring one of the art prints, she said, "They are beautiful, aren't they?"

"Indeed," said Charlotte.

"I think I will leave them hanging there," said Lauren, and padding over to the bedroom she said, "I'll be right back."

"*One riddle solved,*" thought Charlotte, "*One to go.*"

Later, they were sitting on the deck. Lauren was having a bowl of cornflakes, and Charlotte with a second cup of coffee in her hands, asked, "So, what had you thinking so much about the gossip gang? Disturbing news?"

Taking a sip of her tea, Lauren said, "I guess Betty won't invite me again anytime soon."

"Why? Did you tell her that you will keep the nude photos?" Charlotte joked.

"No. I defended you for doing yoga in the nude on your sun deck," said Lauren.

Laughing out loud, Charlotte said, "Gosh, how will she pass her time when the trees will have grown enough to block her view of my property? Poor you, you should have let her rave. She has a gorgeous place, and her cheesecake is to die for."

"I don't care for the place or the cake if I have to listen to her picking on people!" exclaimed Lauren.

"Oh, come on, she is just very old fashioned in some regards," Charlotte tried to calm Lauren. "And lamenting and gossiping are her favourite pastimes. But she really isn't a bad person, Lauren. She contributes quite a lot to this community, and if someone needs her, she is there to help in a heartbeat."

"Why are you defending her although you are the one on whom she picks the most? Besides Nicholas, that is," said Lauren.

Laughing again, Charlotte said, "Because like Nicholas, I don't care what she says about me. She isn't doing any harm by it. People can judge for themselves. And those who matter don't have a problem with me as I am. ... They have just learned to keep their mouth shut when they are with Betty. And if you want my advice, so should you," Charlotte added chuckling.

"Yeah, I realised that too late. Boy, I guess there are still a lot of things I need to learn about small town life," said Lauren and sighed.

"You will," said Charlotte reassuringly. "By the way, did anyone mention if Jones has sold yet?"

Thinking for a moment while she was chewing on the spoonful of cornflakes, Lauren wiped her mouth on a paper napkin and said, "No. Why, did you see lights again?"

"Yes, and I'm really starting to wonder what's going on there, as I never see anyone. And it doesn't seem as if any of the neighbours has seen anyone so far, either."

"Hm, on Saturday Ben said that Jones hasn't sold yet, and that he is asking two million for the property," said Lauren.

"Two million?!" asked Charlotte in disbelief, "I knew he was nuts, but this is ridiculous. He will never find anyone stupid enough to pay that price."

"That's what Emma and Ben think too," said Lauren. "But if you want to know who is there, why don't you just ring at the door?"

"No, no, no, I'm not going there!" exclaimed Charlotte, "Jones got himself quite a few injuries on that property. It belongs to the Lady."

"Yeah, I know, but what if he's just clumsy?"

"Unlikely with that kind of body," said Charlotte, and her gaze became distant as she recalled the broad-shouldered, well-toned, extraordinarily handsome man. Too unfortunate that she hadn't known he wouldn't stay ... she'd have definitely tried her luck with him ... clumsy or not, he'd certainly have a hell of a lot of stamina.

Seeing Charlotte's absentminded appreciative glance change into a dreamy grin, Lauren rolled her eyes and interrupted her reverie, "Whatever he looks like, he could still be clumsy. What does he do for a living?"

Charlotte focussed on Lauren, and her grin changed into a thoughtful expression. "I don't know exactly, just that he is in the travel business. But he's driving a new BMW, and the house *was* expensive, even if it's not worth two million, so his business must do quite well."

"Hm, if he's in the travel business, perhaps he lets the house off the record to make some money on the side, and that's why he hates people asking questions?"

Recalling the image of Jones' again, Charlotte nodded slowly. "That, I think, could be possible. He has

a bit of a roguish air to him, in spite of the rather casual and colourful clothes he wears, which don't quite match with the image of a BMW-driver anyway, if you ask me. It wouldn't surprise me if he had some illegal business going on the side. But damn, the guy looks hot!"

"Just goes to show that you can't tell the good guys from the bad guys just by look," said Lauren.

"Whoa! Wait a minute!" exclaimed Charlotte. "We don't know if Jones is a bad guy. We've just been speculating. And even if he were involved in a bit of tax evasion, that doesn't exactly make him a 'bad guy' in my book."

Lauren felt her face flush. "Of course, you are right. I got a bit carried away there. I'm sorry." And getting up, she busied herself with putting the empty dishes on the tray.

Charlotte chuckled, and said, "You look cute when you're embarrassed."

Lauren blushed even more, and she stammered evasively, "Uh, I just take these inside. Don't want to attract any more flies."

Grinning, Charlotte got up and said, "Well, I should head home now, and get dressed for the tennis." And as she followed Lauren inside, she asked, "How about coming to the tennis with Amy and me? I'm sure we can find a fourth person to play doubles."

Shaking her head, Lauren declined as she put the tray on the kitchen bench, "No, thanks. I don't play tennis. I'm only into indoor sports, apart from walking and horse-riding."

Grinning, Charlotte said, "Okay, then maybe we can go for a walk tomorrow."

"That would be nice," said Lauren, smiling, as she walked Charlotte to the door.

Lauren spent the rest of the morning working on her novel, and after lunch she went for a walk with Lucy. When they returned, Lauren spotted Emma's car in the driveway, and she quickened her pace. As Emma appeared from behind the house, Lucy yelped excitedly and tugged at the leash. Lauren let the leash go, and laughing, she watched the dog bolt towards Emma.

Bracing herself for impact, Emma leaned down and greeted Lucy, who stopped in front of her, wagging her tail like a furry whip.

As Lauren joined them, she said apologetically, "Hi Emma, I didn't expect you, or I'd have returned earlier. Do come in."

Freeing Lucy from the leash, Emma followed Lauren. "No worries. I just thought I'd check if everything is all right with you and Lucy." And of course with Lauren having no Internet yet, Emma would have been bored out of her mind just sitting in the office. So, instead of numbing her boredom with playing word games, she decided to forward incoming calls to her mobile and headed for Lauren's, hoping that they could spend some time together.

"Do you have time for a cup of coffee?" asked Lauren

"Sure, that would be nice," said Emma, relief showing on her face.

"Great! I'll make a fresh pot," said Lauren and headed for the kitchen.

"Your computer is still on," noticed Emma, "Have you been working? I hope I'm not keeping you from writing."

"No, no, that's okay," called Lauren, and as Emma came closer, she lowered her voice, "I have written quite a lot already, and I can go on later. We can talk about some ideas I have in mind, if you like."

"Of course," said Emma.

Chapter 11

The next morning, Lauren got up unusually early. She was in a particularly cheerful mood, and she chuckled when Lucy looked at her drowsily. "Can't believe I'm up before you, huh?" said Lauren as she ruffled the dog's fur. "Go back to sleep, if you like," Lauren offered, as she walked over to the wardrobe.

The dog yawned and stretched languidly as she got up from her place next to the bed.

The previous day Lauren had been very prolific with regards to her writing, especially after having talked her ideas over with Emma. So now, she was looking forward to taking some time off and enjoying a beautiful morning outdoors walking with Charlotte and later the dinner at Susan's. "Gosh, I love my

new life!" exclaimed Lauren happily, and she crouched down to give Lucy a hug. "And you are the icing on the cake!"

This time Charlotte took Lauren and Lucy on a different walk. The narrow path that started opposite of Susan's property wound uphill, and after an exhausting half hour it led to a beautiful vantage point from which they could look down at Mountain Creek and the Yarra Valley.

"Wow, this is stunning," said Lauren, still out of breath.

"Told you it was worth the effort," said Charlotte, smiling.

"You were right. I love it!"

They sat down on a log, admiring the view, while Lucy flopped down at their feet.

"Have you ever thought of writing a travel book or a romance novel?" asked Charlotte.

"I'm just in the process of writing a romance novel."

"Excellent!"

"But I don't think I could write a travel book. Why?"

"Because I would like to read something you wrote. But I'm not really interested in fantasy stories. When will your novel be finished?"

"Well, it'll take a few months still," said Lauren, and she blushed as she continued, "And I suppose you might not like my romance stories, either." So far, the subject of her sexuality hadn't come up with Charlotte, and Lauren was not sure if the neighbours had told her, and if they hadn't, as to how she would react.

"What makes you think that?" asked Charlotte curiously.

"The protagonists are both female," mumbled Lauren, her hair obscuring her face from Charlotte's view as she leaned down to pet Lucy.

"I see," said Charlotte, and thinking for a moment, she asked, "Have you ever read a novel where the protagonists are a male and a female?"

Looking up, Lauren brushed her hair off her face and said, "Sure."

"And, has there been any that you liked?"

"Of course," said Lauren, and she sat up, encouraged as she could now guess where Charlotte was heading.

"So, why would I not like your novel?" asked Charlotte. "I have never read a lesbian novel, but I would think that as long as it's well crafted, I would still enjoy reading it."

Lauren grinned. "Okay, I'll let you know when I'm finished."

Later, as they were nearing Lauren's place, Charlotte asked, "Would you like to come to the local cinema with me tonight? We could stop for a light meal afterwards."

"Sorry, I'd love to, but I'm going to see Susan in the evening," said Lauren.

"Why?"

"She invited me for dinner," said Lauren.

"That's quite unusual for her," said Charlotte. "I don't think she has ever invited anyone from town. She's pretty reserved."

"Emma already wondered about it. Perhaps it's just because I'm now living in her house?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Charlotte said, "Hm, I guess that could be. But then again, she already invited you for a horse ride ... and she's single ..." Charlotte looked thoughtful, and with a mischievous grin she added, "Who knows; maybe our good old vet has the hots for you ..." and she laughed as Lauren blushed furiously.

Lauren dressed in jeans and T-Shirt, thinking that, whatever Charlotte's comment had suggested, the vet was certainly only inviting her for a casual dinner as a neighbour. However, when she and Lucy arrived at Susan's place with a bottle of wine, and Susan opened the door, dressed in rather posh pair of linen slacks and shirt, Lauren wondered for a moment, if her choice of attire was appropriate after all. But

Susan greeted Lauren with a beaming smile on her face, which caused Lauren's thoughts about the clothes to vanish, and she handed Susan the wine.

Taking the offered bottle, Susan said appreciatively, "Pinot Noir, good choice. It will go well with the pasta dish. Come in."

Lauren and Lucy followed Susan through the rather spacious house and onto the back porch where Susan had set a small wooden table in quite a romantic fashion.

"What a lovely home," said Lauren, and yet again she wondered if she had misjudged Susan's intentions, and Charlotte had been right after all. Not that she would have minded to be wrong in this case. In fact, she couldn't deny being quite attracted to the vet.

"Thank you," said Susan. "I hope you like linguine with cherry tomatoes and goat's cheese."

"Sounds delicious," said Lauren appreciatively.

Smiling, Susan said, "Make yourself comfortable, and enjoy the view. I'll just check on the linguine, and I'll be right back."

As Susan disappeared into the house, Lauren let her gaze wander over the somewhat wild looking garden and the paddocks beyond where the horses were grazing.

The meal was truly delicious, and they were enjoying a light-hearted conversation. After dinner, they went inside, and Lauren looked around the spacious living room. She noticed that Susan seemed to have a knack for nature photography as well as for semi-precious stones, as there were quite a few framed pictures of animals, plants and forest scenery hanging on the wood panelled walls, and the shelves and the mantelpiece were decorated with animal sculptures made of different stones.

Lauren was dying to know more about Susan, but she wasn't sure as to what questions Susan might find too intrusive. But later as Susan disappeared into the kitchen to get the coffee and the cheese and biscuits, Lauren stared at the place Susan had vacated and wondered. She got the feeling that there was something Susan wanted to tell her, but she also felt that she was holding back, as every time they got to a more personal subject, Susan directed the conversation back to a more general level. It seemed as if there was something in Susan's life that caused her to be secretive, and Lauren was immensely curious as to what that might be. But of course she could not ask, and it seemed like Susan didn't want to get too personal with her, so Lauren would probably never know. After all, the neighbours hadn't found out in decades, so why would Susan tell her anything, being the newcomer here. Unless, perhaps if their relationship became more intimate after all. And even though it didn't seem as if Susan were pursuing such, Lauren wondered why Susan then had created such a romantic atmosphere. Well, Lauren wasn't really looking for another relationship so soon after her breakup with Ashley, so she would just take it slowly and see where it might lead.

Thus, Lauren and Susan kept talking about various 'safe' topics, and listening to soft music, while Lucy slept outstretched on the rug in front of the open fireplace until it was time for them to go.

As they were standing on the deck at the front door, Lauren asked hesitantly, "Would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow?"

"I would love to," said Susan, "However, I have to go to Melbourne tomorrow, so I won't be home until late. How about Thursday?"

Lauren smiled and said, "Thursday, six, at my place?"

"Sounds good," said Susan.

For a while they just stood there, gazing at each other, however, neither of them moved closer, and when Lucy pulled towards the steps the moment was gone, and they just grinned and said good night.

Susan remained on the deck until Lauren disappeared from her view. She really liked Lauren ... actually, she more than just liked her. Smiling to herself, Susan went back inside.

Chapter 12

When Lauren let Lucy out the next morning, she sat down on the steps and gazed in the direction of Susan's property. She couldn't see the house from this point, but sometimes she could see the horses. But

it was only six o'clock, and they were probably close to the house, waiting for Susan. Lauren wondered why she had invited Susan last night. It had been a spontaneous idea, and if she had contemplated about it, she wouldn't have thought that Susan would accept. But she had accepted. Why had she accepted? Well, she had suggested tomorrow instead of today, but she could just as easily have said that she had no time today and left it at that. And had Lauren just imagined it, or had Susan been considering kissing her when they stood there just gazing at each other. It had certainly felt like it, with Susan's intense gaze roaming over her face. But then again, it had been dark, with only the lanterns at the door illuminating their faces, and the fragrance from the blooming jasmine that was growing nearby had been intoxicating, making her feel a bit heady. Perhaps she had just imagined it, after all.

It was overcast and a bit coolish this morning, and Lauren shivered in her T-shirt and boxers, so she was quite relieved when Lucy returned, and she could go back inside. After feeding the dog she took a hot shower. Afterwards, while she was making breakfast for herself, she considered eating inside. But she loved sitting on the deck or in the garden with the fresh country air and the sounds of the bush surrounding her. She had lived closed up far too long. Ashley's flat had a small balcony, but they had never used it. It was just no fun to sit outside staring at the neighbouring houses and listening to the traffic noise. And Lauren still had to stay inside when she was working on her novel. Considering all this, Lauren headed for the bedroom to put on a jumper, then placed her cornflakes bowl and a cup of coffee on a tray and went outside to sit on the deck.

Gosh, how she had missed the country life! Though, for some reason, she hadn't even realised how much she missed it until now. Somehow, she had avoided thinking back to the time in Queensland, where she grew up. It had hurt too much to be reminded of her parents. But now she was thinking of her grandparents and the good times she had had at their place. One of the things she remembered was that her grandparents had a garden with a few fruit trees and a large veggie patch, which served to make them rather self-sufficient.

Finishing her cornflakes, Lauren thought about the empty patch in her garden. Perhaps she could manage to become a little more self-sufficient herself. Getting up, she walked around the house, and leaning on the rail, she looked at the patch of bare soil, imagining what she could plant there. Realising that she didn't know enough about the local climate, she decided to make a trip to the small garden centre in town, and since Ben's office was on the way, she would stop by and ask Emma for advice.

Later, as Lauren was digging the prospective veggie patch, her thoughts drifted yet again to Susan and the ambivalent signals she was giving. Why had she created such a romantic atmosphere when she wasn't going to follow it through? Lauren thought about Ashley, and jamming the spade into the hardened soil, she muttered to herself, "At least she was direct in her approach." At least there had been no tiptoeing around each other, no guessing whether the other was interested or not. And although Lauren was not quite as daring and blunt as Ashley was, saying what was on their mind was something they had in common. On the other hand, this directness had caused them trouble more often than not, and it had also quite frequently led to fights between them, especially towards the end. Crouching down, Lauren carefully removed a tomato seedling out of the tray. And regarding the plant for a moment, she thought that perhaps Susan's approach was the better one after all. And Lauren didn't really want to go into another relationship so soon anyway, so why was she even thinking about all this? She wondered. Determined, she abandoned her train of thought, and started planting the seedlings she had bought.

Two hours later, she was done with her garden work. Feeling that once she sat down, she would have a hard time getting up again, she took Lucy for a short walk. And when she had finally showered and eaten, she fell into bed, completely knackered. "*Boy, am I going to be sore tomorrow,*" was the last thing she thought before she fell asleep.

When Susan was finally driving home from her business meeting in Melbourne, her thoughts drifted to the previous night. Had she misjudged Lauren's interest? On their ride, Susan could have sworn that

Lauren was attracted to her, but yesterday she hadn't really given any indication that she was interested in more than a nice evening with her landlady, causing Susan to be reluctant about getting too personal. But then there was that rather awkward moment at the end. Lauren had stood there gazing at her as if she were waiting for something, as if ... hell, it was so long ago that Susan had been in a relationship, and she just didn't dare to trust her instincts any more ... she had searched Lauren's face, trying to judge if she could dare to kiss her goodnight. Perhaps Lauren was just shy, perhaps she was waiting for her to make the first move, but Susan just wasn't sure, and then Lucy had interrupted the moment. Pondering now, Susan realised that it wasn't only that she had been unsure about what Lauren wanted, she also wasn't exactly sure about what she wanted herself. Was it a good idea to pursue a relationship with Lauren? Feelings could be treacherous, after all. And she had not been in a relationship since Jennifer had left her 22 years ago. "*Gosh, so much time has passed,*" thought Susan, was she even still capable to be in a relationship? She was a busy woman after all, and she was used to her routines. She had grown so accustomed to her solitary life, though she had to admit that since Amber left for the UK, a feeling of loneliness had crept up on her. Hell, if she was honest, it had already started when Amber finished school and started university five years ago; she had just refused to acknowledge it, thinking it was just a normal reaction of the only child leaving home, and that she should let go instead of feeling glum. However, Lauren had piqued Susan's interest from the moment she found her profile on the Internet after having read her book. And now that she had met Lauren, Susan discovered that she was still capable of feeling feelings long forgotten; feelings that, albeit immensely pleasant, rocked the cosy place of solitude to which she had retreated long ago; and they threatened her sense of security. Some major soul-searching was in order, decided Susan, but since she was reaching Mountain Creek, she postponed her endeavour for the time being and concentrated on the road.

As she finally lay in bed, her thoughts wandered to Lauren and the dinner invitation the next day. Should she cancel? But then she thought about Fheyanna's words, that there was no need to sing for Lauren's protection in the bush. And she did not object to them liking each other, either. Fheyanna actually seemed to like Lauren too. And Fheyanna could somehow see into people's hearts. But then again, Fheyanna was not all-knowing. Could she have foreseen that the relationship with Jennifer would turn out badly? Probably not. On the other hand, Susan had had several wonderful years with Jennifer, and they had resulted in her decision to have Amber. Would she have wanted to miss out on these, just as not to have to experience the ugly breakup? "No," Susan decided. She would not want to exchange these times, and especially not Amber, for anything in the world. Perhaps Lauren was exactly what she needed now. Perhaps it was time for a change now that Amber was living her own life. Perhaps she should finally bury her past and her worries to give her feelings for Lauren room to grow, and to give both of them a chance to explore and see where things may lead.

Having made up her mind, Susan decided to take the risk and go with her feelings. And with a smile on her face, and the image of Lauren on her mind, she finally fell asleep.

Chapter 13

It was a rather busy day for Susan, thus there was not much time to think about the upcoming dinner with Lauren, and when she finally got home and had taken care of the horses, she noticed dismayed that she only had half an hour to get ready.

She took a quick shower, gave her short hair a cursory brush, and rushed into her bedroom. Opening her wardrobe, she picked over her assortment of clothes, which, as she now realised, didn't really give her an ample choice. The linen pants she had worn on Tuesday were still in the laundry, and although she thought that she looked positively gorgeous in it, she really didn't want to wear her only evening dress. That would be a bit much, although it would be rather impressive, thought Susan grinning. Sighing, Susan made a mental note to broaden the range of her attire the next time she was in Melbourne, and pulled out one of her countless pairs of jeans and a white polo shirt.

Seeing that she still had ten minutes left, she grabbed a pruner and went into the garden. Cutting off

three fern leaves, she went over to the rose bushes. Collecting five red roses, Susan hesitated, walked to the next bush, and added three white roses to the bouquet so as not to appear too blatant. Satisfied, she went back into the house, tied the flowers together, grabbed the bottle of wine she had left on the bench, and headed for Lauren's place.

Lauren had spent the morning writing, and since the Internet connection was working by now, she and Emma had returned to their former routine of going over the latest chapters after lunch. Today Lauren had told Emma about her dinner with Susan, and that she was beginning to develop feelings for the vet, and casting her eyes down, she blushed and added, "And I think that Susan is interested in me too."

Emma raised her eyebrows in surprise, and she said, "Are you sure?"

"Well, she is giving mixed signals, so I'm not entirely sure," said Lauren.

Taking a deep breath, Emma said gently, "I certainly don't want to crush your hopes, and perhaps you are right, after all, but I have never perceived Susan as being romantically interested in women, and I never heard of anyone saying that she was. If I were you, I wouldn't build up too much hope, as to not be disappointed in case you misread her intentions."

"Okay," said Lauren thoughtfully.

"Also," said Emma, "I really don't want to influence you, but I believe it might be better if you would take it slowly, even if she were interested in you. After all, you have only just ended a bad relationship, and with so many changes in your life on top of that, I think it would be better not to rush right into another relationship, even if Susan is sincere."

Reluctantly, Lauren had agreed with Emma, as she had not planned to embark on a relationship any time soon. Also, she was a bit afraid of messing up her chances by ruining something from the start, just because she misjudged either Susan's or even her own feelings.

Nonetheless, she couldn't help being excited about the dinner tonight, and she had done her best to provide what she considered a decent meal. She had bought a bottle of wine and two of the best frozen pizzas she could get, and had prepared a rocket salad with tomatoes and buffalo mozzarella. And after she had given Lucy an extra careful brush, she had set the table in the garden on the east side of the house, for it was screened from Betty's view, and the trees also provided some shade on this hot November day. Before she put the pizza in the oven, she took a long shower, and since Susan had worn rather chic clothes at her place, Lauren opted for her best pair of slacks this time and a smart tailored shirt.

As Susan rang the bell, Lauren once again almost fell over Lucy who always beat her to the door. Scolding Lucy, Lauren opened the door, and a smile lit up her face as she saw Susan with the bottle of wine and the bunch of roses.

"Hi," said Susan grinning, and handed Lauren her offerings, so she could pet the rather impatiently waiting dog.

"Thank you," said Lauren, "Sorry, but greeting people seems to be the only thing where she can't restrain herself." And as a ping was sounding, she added, "Come in, I need to get the pizzas out of the oven," and she rushed to the kitchen.

Stepping inside, Susan closed the door and asked, "Can I help you?"

"Yes," said Lauren, "Perhaps you could help me carry the pizzas outside."

"Mmh, they smell delicious, I'm starving," said Susan as she walked over to the kitchen.

As Lauren looked at the bouquet, she asked, "Do you happen to know if there is a vase here somewhere?"

"Yes," said Susan, and gesturing towards the left-hand wall cupboard, she said, "In the cupboard over there."

"Ah, yes," said Lauren, and choosing a suitable vase, she filled it with water, and placing the flowers in it, she said, "They are so beautiful, are they from your garden?"

"Of course," said Susan, smiling.

"They look perfect in this vase, thank you. Come, let's go outside."

As they were eating, Lauren was quite relieved to learn that Susan didn't really cook all that often for herself, either, and didn't consider frozen pizza a sin.

"What did you do before you started writing?" asked Susan.

Taking a sip of her wine, Lauren said, "I had a variety of jobs in the past, but I was unemployed when I started writing. The last job I had was in a pet shop. Before that I did pizza delivery, and I can assure you that this frozen pizza is better than those I delivered," Lauren grinned, and took another slice of pizza.

Susan smiled and said, "I hope you will stick to the writing. I really like your style."

"Thank you," said Lauren, "Yes, I believe I have finally found my vocation. A bit late, no?"

"Better late than never," said Susan. "And for the writing I suppose it is helpful that you gathered some life experiences first. Though, of course, it also needs the gift of creativity, for which I admire you greatly."

"Thanks," said Lauren, and not quite knowing what else to say, she took another bite from her pizza. Somehow, being reminded of her past made her feel self-conscious in front of Susan, who had studied, and had a 'proper' job which required a lot of knowledge and responsibility. And she was wealthy. All the people here were wealthy, at least compared to herself. So far, Lauren hadn't really thought about this fact. Everything had been so new and exciting, and the people here had welcomed her with open arms. They made her feel as if she belonged, despite her being just a beginner author with meagre finances. Perhaps, thought Lauren, perhaps this was also the reason for Susan wearing jeans today ... perhaps she didn't want to make her uncomfortable by wearing posh clothes as she did the last time. Though, at their last dinner Lauren had not felt uncomfortable at all. For some reason, the difference between them had only just hit her.

Leaning back in her chair, Susan regarded Lauren and said, "A penny for your thoughts."

Shaken out of her reverie, Lauren stammered, "Uh, sorry."

"Is something on your mind?" asked Susan.

"Uh, no I ...," feverishly searching for a distraction, Lauren gestured at the sky and said, "It looks like it's going to rain soon. Shall we go inside?"

Turning her head, Susan looked up at the approaching dark clouds behind her, and nodding she said, "Yes, we probably should."

They began to carry some of the dishes inside, however, as they returned to fetch the rest, the first heavy raindrops started to fall, and Susan called, "Go back inside, and close the windows, I'll get the rest."

"Okay," acknowledged Lauren, and dashed inside just as it started pouring.

As Susan finally rushed in after tidying up outside, she was soaking wet. Leaving her shoes at the door, she put the glasses and the half-empty bottle of wine on the kitchen bench, and turned to Lauren who just came out of the bedroom. "Say, do you have something I could wear, I got a bit wet?"

"Gosh, you are drenched!" exclaimed Lauren, "Come, let's see if we can find something suitable," and she gestured Susan to follow her back into the bedroom.

"I have nothing that meets your standards, though. I hope you don't mind," said Lauren as she opened the wardrobe.

With a puzzled look at Lauren, Susan asked, "What standards? A pair of sweat pants and a T-shirt will do."

"Ah, well, okay," said Lauren, and pulled out a pair of black sweats with the price tag still attached, which she quickly removed, and a pack of three white T-shirts.

"Is there a specific reason why you are making such a fuss?" asked Susan as she took the offered sweats while Lauren removed the T-shirts from the packaging.

Handing Susan a T-shirt, Lauren said embarrassed, "I just don't want to offer you my worn old clothes. These are from a cheap chain store, too, but at least they are new."

Shaking her head, Susan said, "Lauren, most of my clothes come from cheap chain stores. I don't really fuss much over clothes; I just like to be comfortable."

"Oh," said Lauren, and grinning she added, "We are more alike than I thought, then." And handing Susan a big towel, she said, "I'll go and get the dessert ready. I hope you like the tiramisu from Caroline's."

"It's my favourite," said Susan as Lauren left the room. While she was changing clothes, Susan wondered why Lauren suddenly seemed to be so self-conscious around her. She couldn't imagine anything that she had said would have caused it, and she wondered if perhaps one of the neighbours had said something about her to Lauren, though what that could have been, she had no idea. The neighbours didn't really know much about her. And although some of them had known her as a child, she had not really mixed with anyone from town since she had returned from Scotland. One of the reasons for this was Fheyanna; the other was her time in Scotland about which she did not want people to know back then. And although times had changed, and most people had also, Susan still rather kept her private life to herself. Perhaps this caused people to speculate about her, but in what way, Susan could not imagine. She had lived a rather solitary life, raising her daughter and doing her job, she never had any affairs, and she never gave away who Amber's father was, either. Her mother's cousin, Mary, didn't have any connections with the people from Mountain Creek, and the only other person who knew more about Susan's past was Amber. However, maybe something got back to Amy via Chantal. Did Lauren now doubt Susan's interest in her? Well, she would wait and see ...

As they were sitting on the sofa, eating their cake, and listening to the pouring rain outside, Lauren reached down, and placing a small box onto the table, she asked, "I have been wanting to ask you, if you would like to take this box back to your place. They are rather personal things like photos and notebooks."

"Oh, I must have overlooked them when I cleared out the place for you," said Susan, and opening the box, she took out a framed photograph of Amber and Chantal, a fond look appearing on her face. Susan had taken the photo last summer on one of their picnics, on which they went on horseback. The girls were sitting on a rug, and Amber had her arms thrown around Chantal from behind, and her long hair was fluttering in the wind. Both of them were laughing into the camera. They were wearing matching T-shirts that said GEEK in Greek letters, Chantal wore a white one with black letters, and Amber a black one with white letters. They had just bought them online and were wearing them for the first time. Susan remembered that she had found the shirts rather silly. Nevertheless, she loved the photo so much that she had printed two copies and framed them. One sat on her desk at her practice, and the other she had given to Amber – the one she was now holding in her hands.

"They were in a drawer of one of the bedside tables," said Lauren, smiling. "They are both very pretty. Which one is your daughter, the redhead or the brunette?"

"The redhead," said Susan, grinning

"Did she also study veterinary science?" asked Lauren.

Shaking her head, Susan regarded the photo and said a touch sadly, "No, as much as she loves animals and nature, what really fascinates her is computers and technology. They both studied software engineering."

"Are you disappointed that she is not following in your footsteps?"

"No, not at all; it's rather practical to have a computer geek at hand," said Susan with a grin, and shrugging her shoulders, she said, "I just miss her, that's all."

"I see. Are you skyping with her?" asked Lauren.

"Yes, I couldn't do without that," said Susan, and put the photo back in the box.

"Communication is so much easier nowadays with all the technology, isn't it? You studied abroad, didn't you?" asked Lauren as she drew her legs up under her onto the sofa, reclining, with one arm on the backrest. Somehow, with the cosy, warm atmosphere in the room and the sound of the rain on the roof, she felt much more at ease now, safe somehow.

"Yes, in Scotland," said Susan, smiling, and taking a sip of wine, she leaned back also.

"It must have been a lot harder back then to be away from home," said Lauren sympathetically.

"It was a lot harder in some ways," said Susan, "But even with Skype it wouldn't have made much difference."

"Why not?" asked Lauren softly.

Staring at the wine glass in her hands, Susan listened to the patter of the rain on the roof, and, as she looked up at Lauren, whose dark brown eyes looked so very gently at her, she suddenly felt the need to share her past with Lauren. She still didn't know what the neighbours had told Lauren about her, and for some reason she wanted Lauren to know the truth. She didn't know why, but it was important to her. Nonetheless it was still not easy for her to talk about her past, and she wasn't sure where to begin.

When Susan was taking her time to answer, Lauren asked gently, "Does it upset you to talk about it? Is it because of Amber's father?"

"No, it's not because of Amber's father," said Susan, smiling, "I'm still on very good terms with him."

"How long were you in a relationship with him?"

"I was never in a relationship with him. We ..." Susan was interrupted by a loud crack of thunder.

"Gosh! That almost gave me a heart attack!" exclaimed Lauren.

"I guess I should head home," said Susan and started to get up.

Grasping Susan's arm to hold her back, Lauren exclaimed, "Are you crazy? You can't go out in this weather!" and letting go of Susan's arm, she added calmly, "Why don't you stay here for the night?"

"You wouldn't mind?" asked Susan softly.

Lauren felt her ears burning as she shook her head, and she smiled shyly.

Chapter 14

Lauren woke up in the early dawn, encircled by Susan's strong arms. A face-splitting grin formed on her face, and she closed her eyes again, as she recalled the previous night.

It had started so innocently. Lauren had asked Susan if she needed to get up early, and when Susan answered in the affirmative, Lauren got up to get Susan a fresh towel, saying that the spare room was ready. Susan followed her into the bedroom, and when Lauren handed her a towel, their hands touched, and they stood there gazing at each other for a while.

Lauren had not dared to move, as her insecurities had suddenly returned with a vengeance. However, this time, no one interrupted them, and when Susan slowly closed the distance between them, Lauren willingly melted into the kiss.

Lauren was shaken out of her reverie, when Susan suddenly held her tighter. However, as she mumbled something unintelligible, Lauren realised that she was still sleeping. Looking at the clock, Lauren saw that they still had a few minutes before the alarm would sound, thus, she decided to let Susan sleep, and closed her eyes. She was just about to let her thoughts drift back to the previous night once more, when her eyes flew open again and she stared in horror at the blue morning sky. Groaning, she shut her eyes again, thinking, "*So much for finding a reason for drawing the bloody drapes ...*"

Susan stirred, and as shortly after she nuzzled the back of Lauren's neck, Lauren forgot all about the open drapes and hummed, "Good morning."

"Good morning," purred Susan.

Lauren was just about to turn around, when the alarm sounded. Groaning, she slowly extracted herself from Susan's embrace. "Ouch," she cried, as a strand of her long hair was caught under Susan's arm.

"Sorry," said Susan, and moved so that Lauren could finally reach over to the bedside table and silence the annoying bleeping. When at last it was peacefully quiet again, Lauren turned to look at Susan, and she smiled widely, as Susan opened her arms and said invitingly, "Come here."

Sharing tender kisses and caresses, they soon forgot about the time, and Susan would probably have been late for work, had they not been rudely interrupted.

"Eeewww," exclaimed Lauren with disgust, and shoving Lucy aside who had joined them in bed, she wiped her face and scolded, "I hate it when you do that!"

Susan laughed, and reaching over to ruffle the dog's fur she said, "She just wants some attention too."

"Yeah, well, she doesn't need to beslobber my face to get my attention," said Lauren grumpily.

"But you didn't react to her when she jumped on the bed," said Susan grinning as she got up.

Getting up, too, Lauren tried to defend herself grinning, "Just because you had my undivided

attention."

"Well, you either learn to divide your attention or get used to being beslobbered," said Susan cheekily while she gathered up her clothes.

"Or I could teach her to stay out of the bed," countered Lauren.

"That's another option, of course," said Susan, "But can you resist this look?" she gestured towards Lucy who was lying on the bed, her head on her front paws, watching their interaction with puppy-dog eyes.

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Lauren pointed her finger at the dog and complained, "You are not playing fair!"

Laughing, Susan headed for the bathroom.

As they were having a quick breakfast at the small kitchen table, Lauren looked at Susan and asked hesitantly, "Say, do you wish to keep this a secret?"

"What? Us having breakfast?" asked Susan jokingly. As Lauren made a face, Susan sobered and said, "Honestly, I don't know. So far I have mostly kept my private life to myself, and actually, I would rather keep it that way. However, I'm not sure if that's possible or even necessary with regards to us."

Looking thoughtful, Lauren said, "Hm, we didn't draw the bloody drapes, and even if Betty couldn't see anything through the rain, if she sees you when you are leaving, everyone will know that you have spent the night here."

"With the heavy rain last night I don't think she could see anything, and for the same reason I believe it wouldn't necessarily cause her to draw conclusions if she sees me leaving," said Susan.

"Okay, that is for last night, but if it happens more often, they will find out eventually, won't they?" asked Lauren, and she added cautiously, "Or do you wish last night to remain a unique experience?"

Reaching for Lauren's hand, Susan said, "No, I don't. And you are probably right. I guess I should have a little more faith in our neighbours."

"They all know that I'm a lesbian, and they don't seem to have a problem with me," said Lauren reassuringly.

Squeezing Lauren's hand, Susan nodded. "All right," and getting up, she said, "I must go. I need to attend to the horses before I go to work." And as Lauren got up, too, Susan drew her into an embrace, and they shared a tender kiss until Susan reluctantly ended it. Gently caressing Lauren's cheek, she tilted her head to the side and asked, "Say, would you like to come with me?"

"Where to?"

"Well, first I need to take care of the horses, and then get a few things from my practice. But I only have one appointment at a farm this morning, and it's a beautiful drive, it takes about 20 minutes. I could show you a bit of the area before I have to get back to my practice to catch up with some office work."

Lauren's face lit up. "I would love to come with you!"

"All right," said Susan. "I'll go ahead, and you'll follow when you're ready, okay?"

"Okay!"

Chapter 15

When they arrived at the parking area of the practice, Susan said, "It's going to take a few minutes, so if you'd rather walk a while with Lucy ..."

"Well, Lucy probably prefers a walk to a visit to your practice," said Lauren, grinning, "So, I'll humour her."

However, as Susan disappeared inside, Lauren suddenly recalled that yesterday, when she had bought the tiramisu, she had spotted quaint little picnic baskets at Caroline's Café ... grinning, Lauren headed for the back entrance of the café.

"Hi Lauren," greeted Caroline, and joked, "Did I already get you addicted?"

Lauren chuckled. "It seems you did. Say, what does one of these picnic baskets cost?" she pointed at the small straw baskets, lined with red gingham, that were displayed on a table next to the counter.

"That depends on what you wish me to put in it," said Caroline, and asked, "Are you going for a picnic with Emma?"

Lauren inwardly breathed a sigh of relief when they were interrupted by a group of cyclists entering the café.

"I guess I had better hurry," said Lauren, and shortening Lucy's leash, she took a basket and quickly chose her order.

As Caroline handed Lauren the change, Lauren asked, "See you tonight?"

"Of course!" said Caroline, "Seven at your place, right?"

"Yes," said Lauren, and grabbing the basket, she addressed Lucy, "Come on," and they made their way through the milling bikers.

Susan was already standing by the Jeep, looking around for Lauren and Lucy, when she spotted them leaving the café. Sighing, she shook her head, put her vet's bag in the boot and got into the car. Couldn't Lauren at least have waited a few days before announcing it to the whole world?

Opening the back door for Lucy, Lauren waited till the dog had jumped in, then she raised the basket and said cheerfully, "Surprise!" When Susan didn't turn to look, Lauren's face fell. She placed the basket behind her seat, shut the door and went to sit next to Susan. The vet was staring straight ahead, refusing to look at her. Searching Susan's face, she asked, "What's wrong?"

Deciding not to jump to conclusions too soon, Susan started the car and asked as calmly as she could manage, "Did you tell her?"

Understanding immediately what Susan was thinking, Lauren reassured her, "No. I didn't tell her anything," and grinning, she pointed at the bicycles, which were lined up next to the back entrance, as they drove past. "Luckily, she was too busy, so she didn't interrogate me further."

Stopping at the main road, Susan quickly glanced at Lauren as she surveyed the traffic. "Further? So she did interrogate you?"

"She asked if I was going for a picnic with Emma," said Lauren, as Susan turned into the road, "But then the cyclists came in, and I was let off the hook. I just grabbed a basket and told her what I wanted. However, tonight the book club will be meeting at my place. And I'm not exactly sure as to how I am going to avoid any further questions then." Sighing, she asked frustrated, "How did you manage to keep your private life secret over decades in this place?"

In spite of herself, Susan had to smirk at Lauren's frustration, and she said, "By not getting chummy with anyone from town."

"Bugger!" said Lauren, and slumped in her seat, her frisky mood for a picnic in the country completely vanished.

Taking a deep breath, Susan said, "Look, I'm sorry for being a bit harsh. I'm probably just a bit paranoid, and there's no actual need for me to worry. It's just that I have kept my private life to myself for over 20 years, and I don't feel too comfortable that this is going to change now all of a sudden. It will certainly take me some time to get used to it." Reaching over to touch Lauren's thigh, she added, "Just bear with me."

Laying her hand over Susan's, Lauren said, "Of course. And after all, it's not as if I'd be burning to blurt out any details about us. The only thing I find a bit difficult to keep secret is that we are together. Especially keeping this from Emma will be difficult."

"How long have you known Emma?" asked Susan, and giving Lauren's hand a squeeze, she retracted her hand to have both hands on the wheel again.

"For over a year," said Lauren while she gazed out of the window, admiring the view.

"And how close are you, if I may ask?"

"She is my best friend ... uh, was ... um ... well, I guess she still is ..." Lauren blushed as she realised that she was a bit at a loss as to how her relationship with Susan would affect her friendship with Emma. She certainly couldn't confide as much in Emma as she had before. Not with Susan being her partner. Would this jeopardise their friendship? But then again, it had already been a bit awkward to be around Emma for real. And although this awkwardness had mostly vanished, a part of it remained, even after Lauren had moved into her own place. It wasn't anything Lauren could pinpoint, just a subtle feeling that something was bothering Emma. But when she had asked her the other day, Emma had said she was fine. And later Emma had kind of warned her about pursuing a relationship with Susan. Would Emma be disappointed when she learned that Lauren was now with Susan?

"Why are you so uncertain? Did you have a disagreement?" asked Susan.

"No," said Lauren, and looking down at her nervously clenched hands she explained, "It's just that ... well, I suppose things will change, and in a way they already have; but I don't know how it's going to be." And looking up at Susan, she said, "I don't want to lose Emma."

"Why would you lose her?" asked Susan.

"I don't know," said Lauren, and heaving a sigh, she admitted, "Maybe I'm just paranoid."

Laughing, Susan said, "Gosh, we are a pair!" And Lauren had to chuckle, too.

"So, what's in that basket?" asked Susan, grinning.

A smile lit up Lauren's face, and she said, "Panini with different fillings, a bag of cookies, and two bottles of ginger beer."

"Mmmh," hummed Susan, "Are they the Italian ones? I love Caroline's Italian cookies."

"Yes, they are," said Lauren.

"She still makes them herself, I think," and pointing ahead, Susan said, "We're here. It's going to take me about an hour, and then I'll find us a nice picnic place, okay?"

"Okay!" said Lauren, her cheerfulness returning.

While Susan attended to her patients, Lauren went for a walk with Lucy. As they returned to the Jeep, Susan was saying goodbye to the farmer's wife.

When Susan turned the car and headed back towards the main road, she said, "Now, let's find a nice place. I only have about an hour, though. Still need to do some paperwork before I open the practice."

"Can't you do that in the evening?" asked Lauren. "It's such a beautiful day."

"No, I can't. I can't concentrate in the evening," explained Susan and turned left into the main road, in the direction of Mountain Creek.

"Oh, I think your concentration was perfectly fine last night," said Lauren suggestively, and ran her fingers over Susan's arm.

Grinning, Susan said, "Okay, let me rephrase that. I can't concentrate on mind-numbing paperwork in the evening, especially when there are things I'd much rather do. And although I love what you are doing, could you stop it, as I can't concentrate on the driving, either."

"Okay," said Lauren, retracting her hand. "I hope you'll find us a nice place soon."

Raising an eyebrow, Susan said, "Just to be clear on this. I'm going to find us a place for a picnic."

"Sure," said Lauren seriously, suppressing a grin as Susan shot her a suspicious glance.

A few minutes later, Susan turned into a narrow dirt road that led through the bush and ended at a partly overgrown fire-break track. Taking a blanket and a packet of dog treats from the boot, Susan led Lauren and Lucy down a narrow path until they reached a small clearing at a creek. The sunlight was filtering through the gums, causing a beautiful play of light and shadow on the water surface and the bracken undergrowth. A family of ducks was silently paddling on the water.

"Wow! You're really good at finding secret places," said Lauren, impressed. "It's beautiful!"

Susan smiled. "I used to ride here for picnics with Amber."

Placing a hand on Susan's arm, Lauren said, "Thank you for sharing it with me."

"My pleasure," said Susan, and resisting the urge to kiss Lauren, she just smiled and moved to spread the blanket.

As Lauren placed the basket on the blanket and sat down, Susan opened the packet of treats and gave one to Lucy, who snatched it and lay down to gnaw on it. "I'm glad you like them, girl," said Susan.

"She seems to eat anything you give her," said Lauren, unpacking the basket.

Sitting down next to Lauren, Susan took a bottle of ginger beer, and opening it, she asked, "What kind of Panini did you get?"

"Salami, prosciutto, Swiss cheese and mozzarella-tomato," said Lauren. "Which do you like?"

Susan shrugged. "I'm not in the mood for Swiss cheese, otherwise I don't care."

"Okay, and I'm not in the mood for prosciutto," said Lauren and handed Susan the prosciutto and the mozzarella Panini, each wrapped in a red gingham paper napkin.

As they were eating, Lucy got up and attempted to join them on the blanket. Lauren held her off and asked Susan, "Do you think I can let her off the leash?"

"Yes, I think you can. Knowing her now, I don't think she ran off on her own."

"Okay," said Lauren, and unhooking the leash, she grabbed a nearby twig. Showing it to Lucy, she snatched it away before the dog could snap at it; and calling, "Get it!" she threw the twig into the creek. The dog bolted after the twig and launched into the water.

"Uh ... I'm not sure if that was a wise idea," said Susan.

Turning to look at Susan, Lauren asked, "Why?"

Susan gestured ahead and reached for the basket to rescue the leftover food. She just about managed to put them in the basket when Lauren let out a squeal and scrambled behind Susan's back to avoid the shower from the shaking dog.

Watching Lucy as she lay down on the blanket, gnawing happily at her booty, Susan said deadpan, "You ought to be punished."

"It's not her fault," Lauren defended the dog and embraced Susan from behind.

Turning her head, Susan raised an eyebrow at Lauren. Water dripping from her bangs, she said, "I wasn't talking to the dog."

"Oh," said Lauren, and letting go of Susan, she attempted to scramble away as she saw the sparkle in Susan's eyes.

But Susan was quicker and stronger, so after a short wrestle, she had pinned Lauren to the blanket. Looking down at Lauren, pondering what to do with her, she was interrupted by Lucy pawing at her. "Down!" Susan commanded. The dog immediately obeyed. "Wow, she is well trained, indeed," said Susan impressed. "Good girl!"

Being still pinned down by Susan, Lauren asked, "Pity, I guess the same command wouldn't work on you now, or would it?" and she grinned mischievously.

Speechless for a moment, a grin formed on Susan's face, and she purred, "Not as a command, but if you ask me very nicely ..."

Buttoning up her shirt, Susan muttered, "Gosh, I can't believe we've spent two hours here, while piles of paperwork are waiting to be done at the surgery."

"It's like playing hooky," said Lauren grinning, while she combed her fingers through her hair to get some order into her tousled locks.

"I never played hooky," said Susan, and she reached over to pick a few bits of the bush from Lauren's hair.

Stopping her combing, Lauren gazed at Susan in disbelief. "You are kidding me."

"No, I'm not," said Susan, "I loved school."

"Nerd," said Lauren playfully, and gave Susan a peck on the cheek. "But you don't love paperwork, or do you?"

Susan made a face and as Lauren chuckled, she rolled her eyes and started gathering up the shredded paper napkins that lay scattered all over the place. "Gosh, Lucy, I'm glad you weren't bored."

Lauren chuckled as Lucy perked up her ears and wagged her tail. "You did a good job," she said laughing, and ruffled Lucy's fur.

When her humans were not including her in their game, and knocked over the basket, Lucy had taken it as an invitation to keep herself occupied by helping herself to the snacks.

Lauren got up to help Susan clear up the mess, and soon they were on their way home.

"I really must do the paperwork, and I don't want to do it over the weekend, so I won't be home until late," said Susan as she was driving up Wombat Road.

"I won't have time tonight, either," said Lauren, "The book club will meet at my place today."

Sighing, Susan said, "I'd be grateful, if you could manage not to tell everyone how we spent the morning."

"I won't," promised Lauren. "I'm still not sure how I'm going to keep our relationship secret from Emma, but I'll try."

Stopping the Jeep next to Lauren's car, Susan said, "Tell her if you can't avoid it, but please no details, okay?"

"Absolutely," said Lauren, "I don't kiss and tell," and instead of kissing Susan goodbye as she would have preferred, she just squeezed her hand quickly and said, "See you tomorrow?"

"We could go for a ride in the afternoon, if you like."

"I'd love to," said Lauren, and opened the backdoor for Lucy. "Okay, see you then," and mischievously she added, "It was nice of you to forget your paperwork for a while."

Susan rolled her eyes, but despite herself she couldn't help feeling like an exuberant teenager as Lauren's comment caused a flutter in her heart.

Chapter 16

Lauren still had two hours before Emma would call, and she was sitting at the computer, attempting to get at least a bit of writing done before then. However, her thoughts were constantly drifting to Susan. Thus, after half an hour, Lauren gave up on her attempts of working. Instead, she put on some romantic music, grabbed the T-shirt Susan had worn the previous night, flopped down on the couch, and inhaling Susan's scent, she closed her eyes and relished in the memories.

She was shaken out of her reverie, when the incoming-message signal of Skype sounded a bit earlier than usual. Hastily, Lauren got up and rushed over to the computer. Seeing that the message was indeed from Emma, Lauren composed herself and clicked on the call button.

"Hi Lauren, I'm a bit early, I hope you don't mind," said Emma.

"Not at all," reassured Lauren.

"How was your dinner last night?"

Trying to avoid talking about Susan, and also feeling a bit guilty for not having followed Emma's advice and not knowing how she would react, Lauren casually answered, "Oh, it was pretty good."

"The rain was rather heavy last night. When did Susan leave?" Emma asked curiously.

Trying to be evasive without lying, Lauren said, "She left fairly early."

"Oh, so she left before the rain started?" asked Emma surprised.

"No," said Lauren.

"Poor thing," said Emma, "She must have been drenched to the skin on her way home. Why didn't you let her stay for the night?"

"Um ... actually, I did," admitted Lauren. The following pause from Emma felt like an eternity for Lauren, causing her heart to race, fearing Emma's response.

"So you meant she left early in the morning, yes?"

Lauren's face flushed as she admitted ruefully, "Yes."

"I haven't had this trick pulled on me since my kids grew up," said Emma pensively.

"I'm sorry, Emma," said Lauren. "Susan would prefer to maintain her low profile, and I didn't want to upset you."

"Why would I be upset?" asked Emma.

"Well, because you were rather adamant with your advice to take things slowly, and I really had intended to, but ... well ... things turned out differently, and I don't regret it. And I was afraid it might upset you. But it feels so right, Emma. Please, don't be upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm just worried about you," said Emma, and she added softly, "I love you like you were my own daughter, Lauren. As you know, I never had a daughter, and perhaps I was a bit overprotective, not only with regards to you, but also with regards to our relationship. I always find it difficult to let go."

"But there is no need to let go," said Lauren gently, "I'm not going anywhere. You mean the world to me, Emma, and that's not going to change. Regardless of how many other friendships or relationships I may have in the future, no one will ever be able to replace you."

As Emma stayed silent for a while, Lauren asked, "Are you still there?"

"Yes," said Emma quietly, and clearing her throat, she repeated, "Yes, I'm here. Thank you for your kind words." And as Lauren didn't quite know how to go on, Emma asked, "So Susan does like women after all, huh?"

"Well, she likes me," said Lauren grinning.

"I am happy for you, Lauren, I really am," said Emma. "And as I said, Susan is a sincere woman, even

though she is not the most sociable person. But then again, you haven't been particularly sociable either before you came here, so who knows, perhaps two kindred souls have finally found each other."

"Kindred souls ... that sounds nice," said Lauren dreamily.

"So, have you written anything today, or has your mind just dwelled on cloud nine?" asked Emma jokingly.

"Uh ... caught," said Lauren, and she felt her ears getting hot again.

Laughing, Emma said, "Take a few days off from the writing and enjoy the sensation."

"I'd appreciate that," said Lauren with a smile.

"The meeting this evening stands, though, yes? Or have you changed your plans?"

"Of course I haven't changed them," exclaimed Lauren, and she reconfirmed, "Seven at my place, and I will prepare dinner."

"You don't need to go to great effort for the dinner," said Emma, "Just throw something on the barbie, and we will bring the salads and desserts."

"Sounds great," said Lauren.

When at seven in the evening the friends arrived together in Caroline's yellow Fiat 500 convertible, Lauren wondered how they had all fit into the tiny car and even more so how they were going to fit back once they had eaten all the salads and cakes they brought. And while Lauren tended to the chicken satay on the small barbecue, the friends seated themselves at the table nearby, and Olivia let Mr Darcy climb on the stand she had brought for him.

"So, how was your picnic today?" asked Caroline, looking from Lauren to Emma. "I'm sorry that I couldn't chat more this morning."

Sending a quick unobtrusive look to Emma, Lauren turned to the barbecue to conceal her crimson-flushed face.

Catching on immediately, Emma said, "Oh, it was really nice."

"You seem to be settling into your new life very well, Lauren," said Olivia.

"Indeed, you are positively glowing," remarked Caroline.

Still blushing, Lauren refrained from facing them and said, "I do love it here. It is inspiring to be surrounded by such beautiful countryside, and it is wonderful to be accepted by so many people. I have never had so many friends in my life, and I can't remember having ever been as happy as I am now."

"You certainly have adapted quickly," said Caroline while she opened a bottle of wine, "It is hard to believe that you only arrived a week ago."

"Yes," agreed Olivia, "Somehow it feels as if you have always been here."

Finally daring to turn around, Lauren smiled and said, "Thank you."

"So, how is the new novel progressing?" asked Olivia.

Seeing that Lauren was reluctant to answer, Emma said, "I told her to take a few days off. It seems like she's been here forever, but she shouldn't wear herself out."

And while Lauren sent a thankful look towards Emma for the rescue, Caroline said, "Of course, Emma, that's good advice. Don't let yourself be pressured by our impatience, Lauren. We are just dying to finally get a peek at the new book."

Placing a plate with the chicken on the table, Lauren pondered, "Hm, I'm about three quarters finished. What do you think, Emma, could we go over what we have so far, and then let them have a peek at it? Maybe they have some suggestions we haven't thought of, yet?"

"Oh, no, I would rather wait for the finished book, and make suggestions then, just as we did the last time," said Olivia, "I also don't like serials, because it tends to annoy me when the story stops before it's finished."

"I don't mind that," said Caroline, "So, if you would like me to help before it's finished, just tell me. But I can just as well wait."

"All right, it's your decision, Lauren," said Emma, "If you feel like it, send me the file of what we have so far. I will go over it, and we can talk about it then."

"Okay, I'll send it tomorrow. Gosh, this rice salad is good!" said Lauren, "Who made this?"

"Rice salad is Emma's speciality," said Caroline, causing Lauren to send a beaming smile to Emma.

And as Emma smiled back at her with a slightly mischievous glint in her eyes that went unnoticed by the others, Lauren felt almost giddy with joy. Something very precious had happened between them this evening, and they both felt it, a secret understanding that needed no words.

The evening passed very pleasantly. Olivia related a few teasers of new books in her store which she thought might be interesting to discuss with the others and, as always, news about the neighbourhood were exchanged.

As the friends bid goodbye, Emma hugged Lauren a tad longer than usual, and she whispered, "I'd like to hear what we did on that picnic one day."

Chapter 17

Lauren had made an effort to spend time with Emma on Saturday, as she was still feeling a bit guilty towards Emma for various reasons. After a pleasantly long chat she was feeling much better about things. As for the rest of the weekend she spent with Susan, going for a ride and doing some chores in their gardens together. It had been really nice to do such trivial things in each other's company, thought Lauren, and the weather had been fantastic. She didn't mind going home rather early on Sunday, as Susan wanted to talk to her daughter for they had missed their chat on Saturday.

As Lauren woke up on Monday, a look out of the window confirmed that it was yet again a beautiful and sunny November day, and she felt happy and content. Just one more week and it would be summer. Swinging her feet out of bed, Lauren hugged Lucy who came to greet her. "Are you up for a walk?" she asked as she got up. The dog wagged her tail and looked expectantly at Lauren. Grinning, Lauren said, "I guess that means yes. Just let me get ready."

It was still early when Lauren and Lucy headed for the bush, accompanied by the morning concert of the kookaburras. Lauren now let Lucy run free, delighted that the dog never ventured too far, and continuously looked back at Lauren, as if checking on her. They went to a clearing they had discovered on one of their walks and played with a ball Lauren had brought until Lucy lost interest in the game. "You're hungry, huh? Me too," said Lauren, and they headed back home.

As they were nearing the house, Lucy suddenly sprinted forward, and as Lauren jogged after her and rounded the corner, she spotted Charlotte who just rose from a chair on the deck to brace herself for the impact. Ruffling the fur of the bouncing and tail-wagging dog, Charlotte said, "There you are! Have you been for a walk already?"

"Morning Charlotte," said Lauren as she climbed the stairs.

"Good morning. You are up early," greeted Charlotte.

"Yes, I guess I'm getting used to the country ways," said Lauren, "Do come in."

Charlotte watched while Lauren fed Lucy and prepared breakfast for herself.

"Tea or coffee, and some raisin toast?" Lauren asked.

"Tea and toast," said Charlotte, "I need to calm my nerves."

"What's wrong?" asked Lauren, adding more tea to the pot.

"Yesterday I saw someone in Jones' house."

"Who?" asked Lauren.

"If I knew that, I'd feel better," said Charlotte, and added, "Or not as the case may be."

"Why does it upset you so much?" asked Lauren as she poured the boiling water in the tea pot. She couldn't quite comprehend why people were making such a fuss about Jones' house. Where she had lived in Sydney, no one ever cared what was going on in the other units, and in a way, Lauren had rather liked that. Of course, now that she was living in such a close-knit community, Lauren felt far less isolated, and she did care about her neighbours. It was just such a pity that problems would come up when she was being in such a delightfully happy mood.

"I don't know. I just have a bad feeling," said Charlotte.

"Have you been watching thrillers or something?" asked Lauren jokingly.

"No, I have not," said Charlotte emphatically.

"Okay, okay," said Lauren, and piled everything on the tray. Suddenly recalling the stories about the Lady of the Creek, she asked, "Could it have been the Lady you saw?"

Charlotte shook her head, and following Lauren outside, she said, "No. I'm sure the person was male." "Hm, then what if someone rented or bought the property, and he got injured and needs help? And even if not, shouldn't we at least warn him?" mused Lauren, and as Charlotte stayed silent, she added, "We could at least take a peek into the drive and see if there is a car parked on the property, or can you see that from your house?"

Taking a sip of her tea, Charlotte shook her head and said, "No, I can only see one of the side windows and a bit of the back yard, the rest is screened by trees." And heaving a sigh, she said, "All right, we can take a peek into the drive. But I won't step onto the property."

"Deal," agreed Lauren.

As they passed Charlotte's driveway, Lucy suddenly became reluctant to go further, and Lauren said encouragingly, "Come on, we'll just take a peek," and they continued to walk slowly towards Jones' driveway. However, shortly before they reached it, Lucy started to growl, and whining she pulled backwards.

Seeing the dog's behaviour, the two women gaped at each other, goose bumps appearing on their arms, and without a word they both turned around and headed back down the road, Lucy with her tail between her legs.

At her drive, Charlotte asked, "Would you like to come in for a bit?"

Lauren nodded and followed Charlotte inside.

Taking a pitcher of lemonade out of the fridge and grabbing a couple of glasses, Charlotte said, "Let's sit on the deck."

Outside, Charlotte put the glasses and the pitcher on the table, flopped down on the chair and exclaimed, "Gosh that was creepy!" And shuddering, she straightened and filled their glasses.

Lauren shook herself and remarked, "Indeed."

Taking a sip of lemonade, Charlotte asked, "What do you think she smelled?"

"Something or someone really terrible," said Lauren with a shudder.

"Perhaps just a snake?" suggested Charlotte half-heartedly.

"And react in fear from right after your driveway? Unlikely," said Lauren while she petted Lucy soothingly.

They discussed their experience for a while longer, until Charlotte said she had to leave for her tennis date with Amy. "Would you like to come with me?"

Shaking her head, Lauren got up and said, "Maybe another time. I really want to go on working on my novel."

"I see. Well, then, may the muse be with you," joked Charlotte.

Chapter 18

The tennis club was attached to the Anglican Church, and it was frequently used as a meeting place by the locals. They had friendly tournaments on a regular basis in which both Charlotte and Amy participated in singles as well as in doubles matches with reasonable success. Both of them took these friendly matches rather seriously. Somehow, the matches brought out the competitive streak even in Amy. Charlotte gathered that Amy took the tennis as an outlet for the trouble her mother was causing her. Here Amy could beat the crap out of the ball and get rid of all her pent up frustration and energy. Today they were just having a practise game against each other, which Charlotte won rather tightly this time. "*Marjory must be having a particularly nasty day,*" thought Charlotte as she was panting from exhaustion.

Afterwards, they helped themselves to cold drinks, which the Vicar's wife provided to fill the charity tin. It was pleasant to sit down on the terrace after a match for a refreshing drink and a chat, and watch the others play.

Before Amy could start ranting about Marjory, Charlotte took the opportunity to tell

Amy what she and Lauren had experienced, and she asked, "What do you think of this?"

"I think that the dog probably smelled the presence of the Lady of the Creek," said Amy, and pausing for a moment, she continued, "I find it very commendable of the dog to warn you. After all, who knows what might have happened to you had you ventured further."

"Oh, well, so far no one died on the property as far as I know. Even Jones only ever had rather minor injuries, and we only wanted to peek down the drive. But it was definitely creepy," said Charlotte and she reached for her mineral water.

"I bet it was," said Amy, "You definitely wouldn't get me to go that far. However, I do agree with you, it is very strange that you saw someone on Jones' property. How about we leave here and meet with Betty and Emma at Caroline's Café? It's Monday and they should be back from the walk with their group. They are probably already at the café."

"All right," said Charlotte, "Let's see what they think. Perhaps Betty has some news by now."

When Charlotte and Amy arrived at the café, their neighbours were already sitting at their favourite table out front. As usual, Caroline had joined them for a chat, while her assistant tended to the customers.

Betty was not particularly happy about Charlotte joining them, but since her curiosity was greater than her dislike of Charlotte, she listened intrigued while Charlotte told them of her sighting, and of what she had experienced with Lauren and Lucy in the morning.

"How could you drag Lauren into this?" asked Caroline upset.

"I didn't," said Charlotte, "She wanted to go to investigate, and I told her I would only go as far as peeking down the driveway. And we didn't even get that far, as Lucy freaked out before we even reached the drive."

"The dog probably sensed the presence of the Lady of the Creek," said Betty and the others nodded in agreement while Betty stirred her coffee, thinking that she hated coffee with milk and sugar, but this Italian brew, which Caroline served and everyone praised, was simply unpalatable for her without it. However, she had already had a glass of water, and she would rather drink the disgusting brew than having another glass, she needed a caffeine fix. Taking a sip of the coffee, she scrunched her face and inwardly cursed Charlotte for having distracted her when she had put the sugar in her coffee.

"I don't know," said Charlotte thoughtfully, "I have been thinking, and recalling the walk in the bush with Lauren and Lucy last week, I'm wondering ... we did hear the Lady then, and we sat down at the creek to listen to her singing. Lucy didn't show any sign of fright then, on the contrary. She was sitting between us, and she laid her head on my knee, and now that I think of it, it almost seemed as if she enjoyed listening."

"I believe you are imagining things," said Betty, "I have never heard of a dog listening to music. Hating music and howling, yes, but enjoy listening? I think that's a bit far-fetched."

"Well, anyway," said Charlotte, "It still doesn't explain who the male person in Jones' house was. Are you sure that it couldn't have been Jones?"

"Positive," said Betty. "When I saw him the last time, he said he would sell, and he was quite adamant that he would never set foot in 'this damn town' again," and she couldn't help adding, "It wouldn't surprise me if you were just hallucinating. If you didn't run around naked in public, you wouldn't need to suspect voyeurs behind every bush."

"At least, as far as I could see, he didn't use binoculars as you do," countered Charlotte grinning.

Trying to prevent things from getting nasty, Emma suggested, "Perhaps it was the Lady you saw?"

Charlotte shook her head, "No, I am fairly certain that the person was male."

Caroline pointed out, "Well, whoever it was, I'm sure they will leave soon anyway. The Lady will see to it."

"Yes, indeed," said Emma, and Amy and Betty agreed, while Charlotte couldn't help continuing to feel uneasy about the whole issue. And as the neighbours started chatting about other things, Charlotte excused herself and left.

Charlotte spent the rest of the day on the deck from which she could see part of Jones' property, not

able to concentrate on the book she was reading, as her gaze constantly wandered to the neighbouring house. And despite not having seen anything unusual during the day, Charlotte had a hard time falling asleep and frequently got up to walk to the window and check the neighbouring house. However, this night there was no light on, and nothing seemed to indicate that anyone was living there.

Having finally fallen asleep in the wee hours, Charlotte woke up rather late on Tuesday morning, feeling exhausted and still uneasy. Taking a quick shower, she decided to see if Lauren was willing to go for a walk, as she couldn't get the image of Lucy looking as if she enjoyed the singing out of her head. She was wondering if she really just had imagined it. Thus, she just grabbed a banana, and eating it on the way, she headed towards Lauren's.

For Lauren the previous day had been exceptionally productive, in addition to her writing she had managed to get the laundry done as well, delighted that she could hang it out in the garden, and after taking Lucy for a long walk, she had continued writing until late at night. Thus, she was just having breakfast when the doorbell rang.

After Charlotte had told her about her meeting with the neighbours and her thoughts about Lucy's behaviour, Lauren agreed to go for a walk and see if they could reproduce the scenario. "I didn't hear her sing since our walk, so I hope we'll hear her today." said Lauren, and getting up, she started to clear the table.

"Hm, I hear her every time I walk on that path," said Charlotte, helping Lauren with the dishes.

"Well, I've mostly been there in the afternoon," said Lauren as they went into the kitchen, "Perhaps she only sings in the morning?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Charlotte said, "I rarely walk in the afternoon, but I'm sure I have heard her at other times as well."

Both women were excited when soon after entering the bush, they heard the Lady singing again, and they walked to the place where they had sat the last time, closely watching Lucy's reaction.

Now observing the dog closer, they were both quite surprised to witness that Lucy seemed to walk closer to Charlotte. And when they reached the place at the creek, Lucy again sat down between the two of them, but laid her head on Charlotte's leg, and with perked up ears seemed, indeed, to listen to the singing. On the way back, the dog again stayed close to Charlotte, whereas, as soon as they reached the end of the bush, she trotted forward, sniffing at the ground here and there just as she usually did.

Neither of the women knew what to make of this. However, they both thought that if Lucy liked the singing of the Lady, it seemed somewhat unlikely that she would freak out over sensing the presence of the Lady at Jones' property. Thus, they concluded that it must have been something else that frightened the dog. As to what that was, however, remained a riddle.

"I'm going to see Susan in the evening," said Lauren, "I will ask her what she thinks. Being a vet, perhaps she knows something about dog psychology and can shed some light on Lucy's behaviour."

"Good idea," said Charlotte, "Let me know what she said, will you?"

"Sure."

Chapter 19

In the evening, Lauren was just about to leave the house when the phone rang.

"It's me, Susan. Say, could we postpone the dinner for an hour? There was an emergency, and I'm only just on my way home."

Thinking quickly, Lauren said, "I have a better idea. I bought steaks today. How about I bring them to your place and throw them on the barbie while you look after the horses? I can bring some salad, too."

"That sounds like a really good idea, Lauren! To be honest, I'm not particularly in the mood to cook."

"Well, then that's settled," said Lauren. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Gosh, it's nice to have company again," said Susan as she helped herself to the salad.

Lauren shot her a beaming smile. It was comments like this that reassured her and caused her to forget the difference in the social status between them. When she was alone, she still sometimes wondered what Susan's expectations were, and if there was a possibility of a shared future for the two of them. But when they were together, Susan always managed to make her feel appreciated, and all her doubts disappeared, leaving her to feel only the joy of the moment.

When they had finished dinner, they cleared the table and did the dishes together, while Lucy flopped down on the cool tiled floor, watching them.

When they had all returned to the deck to enjoy the balmy night, Lauren remembered to ask, "I have been wondering about Lucy's behaviour, and I hope that perhaps you could shed some light on it."

"What kind of behaviour are you referring to?" asked Susan "She seems to behave perfectly well to me."

Lauren told her about her experiences with Charlotte, and the discussion with the neighbours. When she was finished, Susan said thoughtfully, "Well, I'm certain that Lucy's reaction at Jones' property was not related to the Lady of the Creek. However, I've been wondering about something else, and this may or may not be related to your story ... there was an old Holden with New South Wales number plates parked at the bend. The first time I consciously noticed it was on Wednesday evening when I returned from Melbourne. I'm sure I've seen it the week before also, but I didn't really pay attention as I thought it belonged to tourists who were bushwalking, which is not unusual. However, the car remained parked there both weekends but I never saw anyone. I am fairly certain, though, that the car was moved at least once on Saturday, as when I returned home from work it was parked slightly further towards your house than it was when I left in the morning. It was still there when you went home on Sunday, but yesterday morning it was gone and has not reappeared."

"I have seen it too," said Lauren. "Do you think they could have been in Jones' house?"

"I'm not sure," said Susan, "But now that you got me thinking, I don't know where else they would have stayed. I mean, there are only our houses in this street, and it is quite a long way to walk to town, so why park the car here?"

"Unless you don't want to be seen," said Lauren.

Taking a sip of wine, Susan nodded and said, "Exactly."

"But don't you think Betty would have noticed if someone went onto Jones' property?" asked Lauren.

"You don't need to access Jones' house from Cockatoo Drive," said Susan. "You can fairly easily access it by walking the path from Wombat Road, and crossing the creek just a few metres into the bush. That's already Jones' property, and just up the hill you would be in his garden. And as I said, it is not unusual that tourists park their cars in Wombat Road and go for a walk. I'm sure not even Betty would get suspicious if she saw bushwalkers."

"I see," said Lauren, and petting Lucy's head she added pensively, "But why would Lucy react so strongly? Do you think it is possible that she belonged to them, and they treated her badly?"

"It could be an explanation," said Susan.

"Bastards!" exclaimed Lauren.

After a moment of silence, Lauren said, "I wonder why Jones doesn't seem to care about what's going on in his house. I mean, Ben said when Matt called him to tell him that people had seen light on in his house, Jones got upset and said we should mind our own business and keep our mouths shut as not to spoil his chances of selling. But what if someone burgled his house, or used it for something criminal?"

"Jones doesn't want to sell," said Susan.

"Did he tell you that?" asked Lauren.

"No, but I can put two and two together," said Susan, and explained, "If someone asks two million for a property that isn't even worth half that, it is telling me that he doesn't really want to sell. However, there is more to Jones than meets the eye."

"Ben said, Jones wants to recoup all his expenses, and suggested that he is including the cost of his injuries," said Lauren.

"Jones was never injured on that property," said Susan, and as Lauren regarded her questioningly, she elaborated, "I have seen him in Melbourne. He showed no signs of injury, although the day before, here in town, he had been covered with band-aids and bandages, and he had 'supposedly' sprained his ankle. The next day back here in town, he was yet again limping and covered with band-aids and bandages."

"Perhaps the man you saw in the city was someone else?" suggested Lauren.

Raising her eyebrow, Susan asked, "A doppelganger with the same beard and a black BMW, who talked to someone on his mobile in Jones' voice?"

"Okay, that's rather unlikely," admitted Lauren, and asked, "Have you ever told this to the police?"

"No," said Susan.

"Why not?" asked Lauren.

"It's not exactly criminal to fake injuries."

"But why do you let the others believe that he was injured?" Lauren wanted to know.

"They want to believe that the place is haunted by the Lady of the Creek, and it is better to keep it that way," said Susan, placing her glass on the table.

Furrowing her brow, Lauren asked, "Why?"

Leaning back in her chair, Susan regarded Lauren for a short while. She was still not comfortable with the fact that Lauren seemed to be on rather familiar terms with all the people from Cockatoo Drive. Would she be able to keep the secret from them? Well, she had so far kept their relationship to herself with the exception of Emma, thought Susan. And even Emma seemed to be able to hold her tongue. And Fheyanna seemed to trust Lauren, or she wouldn't have given her permission to tell Lauren about her.

Lauren felt a bit uncomfortable under Susan's silent gaze, as if she was being appraised in some way, as if Susan wanted to assess if Lauren was worthy of her trust.

Finally, Susan broke the silence, and leaning forward, she said, "What I'm going to tell you should remain between us, all right?"

"Of course," said Lauren.

Susan turned sideways on her chair, a glass of wine in her hand, and fixing her gaze on a point somewhere in the distance, she started to speak, "That people believe Fheyanna to be dangerous was never intended nor enforced by her. Nevertheless, it serves as a perfect protection for her."

"So, she did not kill the guy and cause injuries to countless people?" asked Lauren.

Shaking her head, Susan said, "No, she didn't."

"But Ben said his father saw her," said Lauren.

"He saw her as she was about to kill Lewis, because he killed her partner after brutally raping her," said Susan, "However, when she saw that he was about to die anyway, she stopped herself, and instead of rescuing him as she could have, she turned and headed back home. Denial of assistance is the only crime Fheyanna ever committed."

Silently, Lauren looked at the glass in her hands while she digested this. Then she said quietly, "No one ever mentioned what Lewis did."

"Because they don't know what he did," said Susan, "And although they could have come to this conclusion, it seems that people tend to put the blame on those who are different, rather than on one of their own."

"Boy, do I ever have experienced the truth of that," said Lauren quietly.

Susan turned back on her chair and regarded Lauren with her dark skin and her beautiful brown eyes. They hadn't talked much about their past yet, and Susan wondered if Lauren's bad experiences had been because of her heritage, or rather because she was a lesbian, or both.

Looking at Susan, Lauren asked, "Is this the reason why the Lady ... uh, Fheyanna needs to be protected, because she is different?"

Susan nodded, "Yes."

"How is she different?" Lauren wanted to know.

"Fheyanna has skills that go beyond people's comprehension, and the spirits of nature communicate with her wherever she lives," said Susan.

"What kind of skills?"

"She has many skills, and not even I know everything about her," said Susan, "I know that she has healing skills, and that she can somehow feel what people feel, even from a distance. And with the help of the spirits she grows fruit and vegetables of a size and quality that beats everything I've ever seen."

"Wow, that sounds pretty amazing," said Lauren. "Why would this be a problem? There are people who are making money with such kind of skills."

Susan hesitated. "Perhaps it wouldn't be a problem nowadays. But it has been in her past. People accused her of all sorts of things, and as you know, they are still doing it."

"Well, yes, but perhaps they wouldn't do it if they knew the truth. And Emma and Ben regard her as a blessing, too, despite fearing her."

"Ah, yes, the rumour of the fire protection," said Susan, "Funny enough there aren't many who believe in this nice rumour. Most people here rather stick to the version of the evil demon."

"How could they ever believe in that?" asked Lauren, while she poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher. "I mean, Ben's father's story of her flying with glowing eyes is a bit hard to believe. Or can she actually do that?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Susan. "She does have very unusual light blue eyes and a rather dark complexion, and she is very tall. By now her hair has turned completely white, and I think it actually gives her a bit of a fairy-like air, but back then it was jet black and perhaps it was the combination of her looks and her skills and later her lifestyle that caused people to associate her with evil. I don't know."

"With lifestyle, you mean that she was living with a woman?" asked Lauren.

"That and that they were wary of social contacts. When they came here they were living a rather secluded life, hoping to find some peace. But people were getting suspicious. So they moved to the cottage in the bush and only used the garden of the old house."

"Where did they come from?"

"Fheyanna is from Wales. Her partner was from England, I think," said Susan.

"I have been wondering," said Lauren, "Why is she is still so sad after all the time that has passed?"

"She is not sad," said Susan. "Not anymore."

Looking questioningly, Lauren said, "But her songs, they sound sad."

Shaking her head, Susan said, "They are not sad, either. They are songs to the spirits of nature, to protect certain people upon entering the bush."

"Wow," said Lauren, "And do you think Lucy can understand them somehow?"

Nodding, Susan said, "Yes, I think so."

Lauren looked pensive for a while, and then suddenly her face fell. And with a sad look at Lucy who was gnawing on a pig ear Susan had given her, Lauren asked, "Do you think I should give her to Charlotte?"

"No," said Susan confused, "Why, would you do that?"

"Because she rather seems to protect Charlotte," said Lauren sadly.

Shaking her head, Susan said, "That's just because Fheyanna sings for Charlotte's protection. I don't know why she doesn't sing for you. I went to ask her on our first ride. She said there is no need to sing for you, and that I would understand soon. I have tried to figure it out, but so far I haven't."

"Hm, she doesn't sing for you, either. At least I didn't hear her singing on our rides," said Lauren.

Smiling, Susan said, "She hasn't been singing for me since we became friends. The spirits accept me as being in union with her. Hence I am automatically under their protection as soon as I enter the bush. Just as she is protected by them since they quasi adopted her when she came to live in the bush."

"I see," said Lauren. "So you mean I am automatically protected, too, you just don't know why?"

"Yes," said Susan, and rubbing her arms, she added, "It is getting a bit cool here, let's go inside?"

"Okay," said Lauren smiling.

As they settled on the sofa, Lauren asked, "How did you come to know her?"

Susan smiled as she remembered. "She came to me when I was desperate. I wanted to go to Glasgow to study, because my girlfriend and her family were returning to Scotland, but my parents wouldn't let me go."

"She came to your house?" asked Lauren surprised.

Susan shook her head. "No. I was in the bush. I had been listening to her 'lament songs' from when I was a child, and I knew them by heart. Of course I had never dared to sing along aloud while in the bush. But on that day I was so desperate that when I heard her, I just couldn't help but sing along. I didn't care what she would do to me, and I sang until I was more sobbing than singing. I was so engulfed in my misery that I didn't notice when she stopped singing. Suddenly she was standing in front of me and asked me, 'What is troubling you so?' I was pretty terrified, but she reassured me that there was no need to be

afraid and introduced herself as Fheyanna."

Taking a sip of water, Lauren asked, "And did she convince your parents to let you go?"

"No. My parents never knew her as anyone other than the Lady of the Creek." And Susan went on relating to Lauren what had happened.

After Susan had told Fheyanna what was troubling her, Fheyanna had simply said, "Come back here tomorrow. We will get you to Scotland."

Puzzled, Susan asked, "How?"

"I will show you. Tomorrow," said Fheyanna and left.

Susan stared after her until she disappeared from view. As she finally shook herself out of her bafflement, she wondered if she had just dreamt this or if it had really happened. Nevertheless, she felt as if a weight had been lifted from her soul, and she went home, still puzzled but excitedly looking forward to the following day.

When Susan came to the same spot the next day, Fheyanna was already waiting for her, and she said, "Follow me."

Reluctantly, Susan followed Fheyanna to the other side of the creek, and she was quite surprised when they reached the house in the middle of the bush. Back then, she had felt as if she had just stepped into a fairy tale.

Fheyanna gestured Susan to come onto the veranda where a bundle was lying on the table.

Susan's jaw dropped as Fheyanna opened the bundle and said, "I am not sure how much value this has nowadays, but I suppose it will get you to the UK."

Staring at the revealed gold nugget, Susan stammered, "Wow, this must be worth a fortune!"

"Will it suffice to get you to Scotland to stay with your love and do your studies?" asked Fheyanna.

"Fheyanna!" exclaimed Susan, and picking up the nugget, she said, "It would more than suffice."

Smiling, Fheyanna said, "Excellent. So, take it. Build a life for you and your love." "And take good care of each other," she added as an afterthought.

"Of course, I protested that I couldn't possibly accept a gift of such high value," said Susan, "But Fheyanna just said, *"It is of no value to me, dear. But it would mean a lot to me if it can help to ease your concerns."*"

"Wow, that's awesome!" said Lauren, as Susan paused to take a sip of water.

"Yes," said Susan, "And it's funny, how I remember all this as if it had been yesterday. Anyway, I never actually needed Fheyanna's nugget. My mother eventually understood on her own accord how important it was to me to go to Scotland and be with Jennifer, and she helped me against my father's will."

"And you didn't even tell your mother about Fheyanna?" asked Lauren.

Shaking her head, Susan said, "I might have told her later on. But back then not even I knew much about Fheyanna, as I went to Scotland just a few months after I met her, and I wasn't in contact with her for years. When the farm was destroyed in a bushfire, and I came back home, my mother was fighting for her life. When I finally decided to ask Fheyanna for help, she agreed. However, by the time we reached the hospital, my mother had already died. "

"Gosh, how very sad," said Lauren, and she took Susan's hand between hers.

"Yes, it is," said Susan, smiling at Lauren's comforting gesture, "I'm sure my mother would have liked her."

Chapter 20

On Wednesday morning Lauren was eager to start work. It had been ever such a pleasant and interesting evening at Susan's. Who would ever have thought that a serene and down to earth woman as Susan was secretly the friend of the mysterious Lady of the Creek? This fact alone fuelled Lauren's imagination, and combined with what Susan had told her about Fheyanna, several ideas for stories had been sprouting in her head, so she didn't even bother with breakfast, and turned the computer on as soon as she had gone for a short walk with Lucy and had fed her. And while the dog was happily munching

away, Lauren opened her file of story ideas and started adding the new ones to the list.

Susan's night had been significantly less pleasant. While at first she had been blissfully occupied with thoughts about Lauren, when she recalled their conversation about Jones and the Holden, she became rather unsettled. Suddenly, she wondered if there might indeed be something criminal going on at Jones' property. After a few hours of restless sleep, she decided to get up and pay a visit to Fheyanna to ask her if she had sensed anything unusual.

The sun had just risen when Susan entered the bush on her mare and there was still a cool nip in the air. A glance towards Jones' property didn't reveal anything unusual, and she had not seen the Holden or any other car in Wombat Road, either.

As Susan arrived at the old cottage, Fheyanna was already waiting for her with two mugs of tea placed on the table on the deck.

Tying Hecate to the railing, Susan greeted Fheyanna, and walking up the steps, she seated herself at the old weathered table.

Silently, they drank their tea until Fheyanna asked, "Now, what is it that unsettles you, dear?"

Susan told Fheyanna about what she had experienced, and what she had heard from Lauren. When she finished, she asked, "Did you sense anything unusual with regards to these things?"

Fheyanna looked pensive for a while, and then she said, "I have not sensed anything unusual within my range of awareness. However, I am beginning to worry about Gordon."

"What's wrong with him?" asked Susan.

"You know he comes for a visit every full moon," said Fheyanna, and as Susan nodded, Fheyanna went on, "It is now several days past full moon, but he has not come yet, although I sensed his presence on the day before full moon. But then he left the bush, like he sometimes does to get a loaf of bread for us, but he has not reappeared."

Taking a sip of her tea, Susan thought about the old hippie who had to be in his late seventies by now, and she asked, "You don't know where he lives, do you?"

Shaking her head, Fheyanna said, "No. He never told me, and I never asked. I can only say that he usually leaves my range of awareness in the east."

"Did he ever tell you his full name?" asked Susan.

Again, Fheyanna shook her head, "No. I am not even sure if Gordon is his proper name."

Sighing, Susan said, "That makes it quite difficult to track him down, to see if he is all right."

"He does not want to be 'tracked down', just like me," said Fheyanna.

"*He probably has himself a little marihuana plantation that he doesn't want anyone to find out about,*" thought Susan amused, and she said, "I will try to find out if someone knows about his whereabouts."

And getting up she said, "I must go now. I will let you know if I find out anything."

Susan quickly made her way home to get ready to drive to her first farm visit.

After finishing her rounds, Susan drove home to change her clothes and have a quick lunch. When she was finished, she saw that she still had some time to spare before she had to drive to Melbourne, thus, she decided to drop by at Matt's real estate agency in town. After they had exchanged greetings, Susan asked, "Matt, could you do me a favour? Could you find out if there is any property listed under the name Gordon, surname unknown, presumably in the bush north or northeast of Mountain Creek?"

"Are you talking about the old hippie? Have you seen him?" asked Matt, twirling a pencil between his fingers.

Surprised, Susan said, "Yes, that would be the one, but I haven't seen him, he seems to be missing."

"Well, you are a bit late," said Matt grinning, "The news already reached me. Nicholas Johnson is asking around after him. Gordon seems to be a friend of his who lives somewhere in the bush northeast of

Nicholas' place. However, I couldn't find any property listed there under the name Gordon, and judging from what they are saying about him, he might just be a squatter. Nicholas says he used to disappear for a couple of days every full moon. And he used to return with a backpack full of supplies, but this time he didn't reappear again. Nobody knows where he used to go. According to Nicholas, he used to say that he was going to pay a visit to the Moon Goddess. If you ask me, he probably raided some gardens."

Of course Susan knew where Gordon used to go at full moon, and that he got the supplies from Fheyanna whose garden always produced far more than she could possibly consume on her own. However, since Susan would not reveal anything about Fheyanna, and she knew that Gordon never made it to her place this time anyway, Susan did not bother to correct Matt, and she just said, "Well, at least some people seem to know him. I must go now. Could you call me if you learn anything about Gordon's whereabouts?"

"Sure," said Matt and he asked, "Are you going to come to the Neighbourhood Watch meeting on Friday?"

"Unless there is an emergency, yes, I will be there," said Susan and left.

Meanwhile several of the neighbours of Cockatoo Drive had gathered at Caroline's Café, talking about the newest gossip of the missing hippie.

"I saw him at the baker's on Saturday. And it's not the first time that I saw him there," said Betty with disgust showing on her face, and she added, "It does not surprise me that this filthy old scallywag is a friend of Nicholas'."

Disregarding the comment, Charlotte asked, "At what time did you see him at the baker's?"

Taking a sip of the unloved coffee, which at least was not too sweet this time, Betty thought for a moment, and then said, "I usually go shopping between nine and ten on Saturdays. So I would say I saw him closer to ten, as I normally go to the baker's last."

"Olivia saw him, too," said Emma, who was nursing a cup of tea. "She said it must have been between half past nine and half past ten, as she was rearranging the window display then, and he smiled at her as he walked by. She said he was coming from the east, so, it was probably after he had been to the baker's."

"Did anyone see him after that?" asked Charlotte.

The others shook their heads, and Betty remarked, "I really don't know why everyone is making such a fuss about the old bloke. He is probably just lying around somewhere, smoking pot. I'm sure he will reappear eventually, when he comes back to reality."

"Gordon is a really kind old man, Betty," said Charlotte. "I don't know if he smokes pot, but even if he does, he has his routines, and his walks at full moon are one of them. Since Nicholas moved into his house ten years ago, Gordon always dropped by when he went on his walks, and again when he returned. He should have returned by Monday at the latest."

"I know, I know," said Betty, "Sarah told me that already. However, people change their routines occasionally, and I wouldn't think that a day or two would make such a difference for someone like him. Who knows, perhaps he just found a better place to stay?"

"Perhaps he is the one you saw in Jones' house?" suggested Caroline.

"Now, that might very well be," said Betty. "He could have found out that the house is deserted, and that Jones won't come back, and he decided to stay there."

Looking thoughtful, Charlotte said, "I don't know. The person I saw didn't look like Gordon. Even if I saw just the silhouette, I am fairly certain that the person had short hair not long hair tied back into a ponytail as Gordon's. And why wouldn't he tell Nicholas if he knew he wasn't going to return?"

"Would you tell people if you were going to squat?" asked Betty.

Caroline and Amy agreed with Betty, Charlotte, however, was not convinced, and Emma did look rather thoughtful as well.

Chapter 21

As Charlotte left the café, Emma followed immediately behind her, and intercepting Charlotte at her

car, Emma said, "I think someone should investigate Jones' property to see if Gordon is there. After all, he is an old man, what if he was injured and needs help?"

"I agree," said Charlotte, and leaning back against her car she continued, "Even though I'm still certain that it was not Gordon I saw there on Sunday. But something weird is definitely going on there, and I'm fairly sure that it was not the Lady of the Creek that scared Lucy." And Charlotte quickly told Emma about the experiment she and Lauren had done with Lucy in the bush, and their conclusion that the dog's behaviour then was hardly congruent with the one she had showed at Jones' property, and thus it would most certainly not have been the Lady whom she sensed, but someone or something else.

Pulling out her mobile, Charlotte said, "Wait a moment, Emma, I'm going to call Nicholas."

Nicholas didn't have any news regarding Gordon, and as Charlotte told him about their suspicions about Jones' property, Nicholas agreed to come and meet at Charlotte's place in an hour, and that he would bring Sarah and a few friends.

As Charlotte had related what Nicholas had told her, Emma said, "Ben is working at Matt's office today. I will go over and try to persuade him to come along. Perhaps, if several of us go, the Lady won't harm us. After all, the construction company from the city only had one incident while they were building Jones' house."

"You are right, Emma," said Charlotte, "And whatever strange things are going on there, it will surely be less dangerous if there are several of us."

"All right, I'll be at your place in an hour, with or without Ben," said Emma determinedly.

At Matt's office, Ben was not particularly happy about his wife's ideas. In his opinion it was foolish to risk the wrath of the Lady of the Creek.

Emma, however, was adamant that she would accompany Charlotte and the others, and Matt, with his endless curiosity, said, "I wish I could come with you. Unfortunately, I have an appointment with a client from out of town in an hour." And turning to Ben, he said, "Come on, Ben, you can continue your work here later. You don't want to tell me that you are going to chicken out, while three women are brave enough to go to investigate, do you?"

Ben tried again to convince Emma to stay out of it, but to no avail.

Emma turned towards the door and said, "Stay out of it, if you wish, but I am going, Ben."

"All right, all right," said Ben exasperatedly, "I'll come with you."

"Let me know what you find out," called Matt as they left his office.

As Emma and Ben arrived at Charlotte's place, Lauren was just walking up the drive, without Lucy, and when Nicholas and his friends arrived in two cars shortly after, Emma and Ben were quite surprised as two huge bloodhounds jumped out of Nicholas' friend's old Land Rover. Everyone was introduced, and after Lauren had told them about the Holden Susan had found suspicious, they left Charlotte's property, turning to the right to walk up the road to Jones' land, Shaun with his bloodhounds leading.

None of them had ever set foot on the property, and with the exception of Charlotte and Lauren they had never even walked beyond the sealed road, and they were getting increasingly nervous. But as Shaun and the hounds didn't seem to have a problem when they entered the drive, the others followed reluctantly.

There was no car to be seen anywhere, and Shaun walked over to the door of the small but stylish new house, and rang the bell. They waited for a while, and as no one opened, Shaun went over to the window, trying to get a glimpse inside. However, there was no way to see anything, as rather expensive looking curtains were concealing the view. Unfortunately, the same was true for all the other windows; and a walk through the large garden and the bush on the borders didn't reveal anything noticeable, either. The only thing that the neighbours found remarkable was that the garden was exceptionally well maintained, and rather recently at that, as there were absolutely no weeds to be seen in the flowerbeds or around the bushes, and there were almost no leaves cluttering the lawn. As the hounds seemed to be getting bored, and started digging up one of the flowerbeds, Shaun shortened their leashes and suggested they leave.

They all went back to Charlotte's place, and seated themselves around the large teak table on her sun deck to discuss the matter, while Lauren helped Charlotte with the drinks

As Charlotte and Lauren came outside, each with a tray of glasses and a pitcher of iced tea, Emma said, "Gordon could still be in the house. Perhaps he is just not able to open the door. What if he is injured or even dead?"

"I don't think he is in the house, Emma," said Ben. "Charlotte said that the person she saw wasn't Gordon, and this person was in the house on Sunday, right?"

"Yes," said Charlotte.

"What I'm wondering though is, why did your hounds dig at the flowerbed? Perhaps they smelled something?" asked Lauren.

Shaun shrugged, and with a look at his dogs, each gnawing on a bone, he said, "There is nothing unusual about it. They do it all the time if I don't watch them, especially when they are bored or when there is a freshly planted area."

"The garden really looked surprisingly well maintained," said Emma. "Perhaps the person you saw was a gardener Jones hired?"

"If it was someone Jones hired, then why wouldn't he say so when Matt told him about people having seen the light on in the house?" asked Ben.

"Perhaps he just didn't want us to know about it, as not to talk to him and tell him about the Lady?" suggested Emma.

"Or perhaps Lauren was right with her suggestion that Jones lets the house off the record to make some money on the side," said Charlotte.

As the discussion didn't lead anywhere, the neighbours agreed to address the issue at the Neighbourhood Watch meeting on Friday, and Nicholas said that he would make an attempt to locate Gordon's place by then.

Chapter 22

Meanwhile, Gordon was sitting in a brown leather armchair, his beard neatly trimmed, feeling decidedly uncomfortable in his newly acquired city clothes as he was waiting for his host to finish a phone call.

"Yes, Greg, this is a big fish, and I can assure you that he is trustworthy. He is an old mate of my father. ... No, I would rather not tell you his name, unless it becomes unavoidable. However, I would prefer it if you could handle this without him. ... Yes, you can meet him at my place for more information. Let's say seven pm. ... All right, see you then." Turning to Gordon, the rather hefty redhead was just about to say something when the doorbell rang, "Sorry, I'll be right back."

Opening the door, his face lit up, and he said, surprised, "Susan!"

"Hi Steven, I'm a bit early," apologised Susan as she kissed him on the cheek, "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all, come in," and as he stepped aside to make way for her, he said, "I got an unexpected visitor, though. I hope you don't mind if he joins us for dinner. He is an old friend of my father's."

"That's fine," said Susan. However, she stopped in her tracks as she was ushered into the living room, and the guest exclaimed,

"Susan!"

"Gordon?" Susan asked, barely recognising the old hippie in his posh outfit.

"Gordon?" asked Steven confused.

"Ah well," said Gordon, "I guess my cover is blown now."

"People are worried about you," scolded Susan as she sat down on the leather couch, while Steven, still looking confused, scratched his beard, watching the two.

"I'm sorry, Susan, but it was of uttermost importance to come here," explained Gordon, "I will tell you, but I must ask you to keep it to yourself."

And as Susan had promised, Gordon turned to Steven and said, "Stop looking so stupid, and get her a drink."

Gordon and Susan grinned as Steven shook himself out of his bafflement, and said, "Uh, sure."

When Steven returned and they were all seated, Gordon related his story:

Some 30 years ago, Gordon, then known as Geoffrey McNamara, had worked for a big development company in Sydney. They had grown quite large and one branch of them had specialised in building resorts in wilderness areas.

Gordon moved up through the ranks but somehow he never realised how ruthless this business was, until he fell in love with a woman who lived in the town close to where they were planning to develop their latest project. She was the leader of the local group who was fighting the proposed development, and Gordon had been given the task to convince them of the advantages their resort would bring to the community.

However, the woman opened his eyes as to how much damage they were doing to the environment and to the local business by building these resorts. He discussed with her how things could be improved, and then he tried to talk about it with his boss, but Mr Von Helsen was not showing any compassion for the locals, nor was he at all interested in other ideas, and Gordon realised that this whole business was not about building resorts as opportunities for travellers from all over the world to experience the natural beauty of Australia, neither were they doing it to bring employment to the local communities. These only were the reasons they presented to the public, and it had been what Gordon believed in. However, his boss made clear to him that the only goal was to make a profit, and if Gordon was not capable of doing his share to achieve this, he should quit and get himself a job at the Salvation Army or whatever.

Disillusioned, Gordon quit his job, intending to join the local group and help them in their endeavour to stop the development. However, as he drove into town, about to tell the woman about his decision, she was not at home. And when he entered the café they had often frequented, locals told him that she died in a car accident. They were certain that this was the work of Von Helsen's company, and they accused Gordon of being complicit with it.

Gordon was crushed about the death of his love, and dismayed about the accusations of the locals. As much as he despised his boss' lack of moral attitude, he could not believe that Von Helsen would go as far as to murder those who opposed him.

Having lost his job, his love and all purpose of life, Gordon drove home to Sydney, and drank himself into oblivion. However, he had never been a heavy drinker, and the next morning he felt so miserable that he decided he never wanted to experience this again. He spent the day in bed, feeling more dead than alive, but in the evening while watching TV, he perked up when he saw an interview about a couple of hippies who were travelling around Australia in a campervan.

The next day Gordon bought a campervan, and as soon as he had sold his house, which didn't take long as the houses in his suburb were much sought-after, he set off on a journey around the country. At first he just drove and drove with the radio playing loudly, trying to keep his mind from thinking, trying to forget, but soon he started revelling in the beauty of the places he saw, and he drove slower, took more breaks and turned the radio off. And whenever he liked a place, he stayed for a while, enjoying his surroundings and listening to the sounds of the outdoors.

About a year later, he came to Melbourne. Knowing that in only a day he would be back in Sydney, he suddenly dreaded going on. And he decided to stay for a while to figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

He stayed for a few months, exploring the surrounding area, until one day, he came across a real estate offer northeast of Mountain Creek, a little mud-brick house with a small garden with a vegetable patch and a few fruit trees, stretching down to a creek, surrounded by 100 acres of bush, which was being sold with the property for a real bargain. At the time he didn't really know why this offer attracted his attention, but for some reason it seemed to call out to him. The next day he called the real estate agent, and when he saw the place, he had such a strong feeling of coming home, that he immediately agreed to buy it.

He sold the campervan, as there was only a footpath going to his new home, and he was not about to destroy any bit of nature anymore if he could help it, he would simply get used to walking. He renovated the house, planted vegetables and a few more fruit trees, and relished in the beauty of it all. He still had more than enough money in his account, and would be able to live on the interests for the rest of his life if he kept his expenses to a reasonable limit. It took him quite a while to get used to his new life, but eventually he managed to live almost solely from his garden and occasional fishing. He changed his name

just for himself, because he thought it appropriate as he felt he was no longer Geoffrey McNamara.

For some reason he was not keen on company anymore, and apart from rare visits to the town to buy a loaf of bread and cheese and other items he needed, he didn't talk to anyone for almost a year. It was then that he met 'the Moon Goddess'.

Gordon winked at Susan as he went on telling his story.

She treated him when he was bitten by a snake. From then on, he paid her a visit every full moon. And on one of these occasions he had met Susan. And when Nicholas had his house built and moved in, Gordon thought he looked like someone he wanted to befriend.

Thus, he had lived a rather happy life until last Saturday, when he was just strolling up Wombat Road, an old Holden from NSW, passed by and stopped at the bend. At first he didn't think anything of it, but when he saw that one of the blokes getting out of the car was wearing clothes rather inappropriate for bushwalking, he became suspicious. And when he heard the other one calling the posh one Mr Von Helsen, Gordon knew they were not here for bushwalking. However, not wanting to risk being remembered by Von Helsen, who was probably the youngest son of Gordon's old boss', Gordon turned into the drive to Amber's house and let the two men pass. Knowing that Amber wasn't there, he rang the door, and as inconspicuously as he could, he watched the blokes until they were out of sight. As he followed them, he saw them entering the bush, and then crossing the creek. He went after them, and hiding behind bushes, he overheard them talking.

As Gordon continued that he heard them talking about a stubborn lady who refused to sell her property, and Von Helsen telling the other guy that he should just see to it that the land was maintained properly and that all the incubators were set up, assuring him that they would 'take care of the Kelly woman', Susan intercepted, "That would be me. But I'm not going to sell, neither to them, nor to Jones, nor to anyone."

"I didn't know they were talking about you," said Gordon worriedly. "Damn, girl, you are in big trouble."

Chapter 23

The three of them sat down to dinner, but unfortunately it was overshadowed by the worry-laden atmosphere. Steven asked Susan to stay for the meeting with Greg, who, as she learned, was a Senior Detective with the Victoria Police. Gordon told him everything he knew; and when Susan had added what she had noticed, and that Von Helsen's company, and later Jones, had been pressuring her to sell her bush property to them, Gordon as well as Greg suspected that Jones was working for Von Helsen. Greg advised Susan to be careful and guarded, as it would take a while to gather enough evidence to be able to stop the criminal activities of Von Helsen's company. He also asked her to keep silent about the whole issue, as not to risk anyone of the company getting suspicious.

When Greg left, Steven offered Susan and Gordon to stay the night, but Gordon couldn't wait to get back into the bush, and Susan had to check on her horses. Susan offered Gordon a lift, and as they bid goodbye, she promised to keep Steven informed.

It took them a while to get through the city traffic, but as they left Melbourne, and were driving on the Mountain Highway towards Mountain Creek, Gordon thought about Steven's unusually fiery red, curly hair and his bright blue eyes, and he said thoughtfully, "Say, is it just my imagination or do Amber and Steven resemble each other?"

Her view fixed on the road, Susan said, "They do, don't they?" and she smiled at the memory.

Gordon respectfully refrained from inquiring further, and they drove on through the starlit night in companionable silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Gordon's thoughts drifted back to his past until he fell into an exhausted sleep.

Having discussed with Gordon what they would tell the others, Susan parked her Jeep in the drive and led Gordon into the house as she had suggested that he should stay the night and he had agreed. She showed him the bathroom and the spare bedroom, and then she went over to the telephone and searched

for Nicholas' number.

"Hi Nicholas, this is Susan Kelly ... Sorry for the late call, but I thought you would like to know that I have picked up Gordon on my way back from Melbourne ... Yes, he is fine. He will stay the night at my place ... No, he doesn't want to come to the phone, but he asked me to call you ... He said, he would come over to your place tomorrow ... You're welcome. Have a good night." And turning to Gordon, Susan said, "He was very relieved to hear that you are fine."

"He is a good chap," said Gordon. "I'm sorry to have worried him. I guess I have been on my own for too long, so that it didn't even occur to me to inform people, so they wouldn't be concerned."

"Well, perhaps you will be getting used to it again now," said Susan, smiling.

"Perhaps," said Gordon.

As Susan got up on Thursday morning, Gordon was already gone. She knew that he wanted to pay a visit to Fheyanna as soon as possible so that she wouldn't worry any longer, but Susan would have thought that he would at least stay for breakfast. Taking a quick look in the spare bedroom, Susan noticed surprised that the bed was perfectly made, and when she went to the bathroom, the used towels were the only sign that he had been here. Susan would never have thought that a bloke, especially someone like Gordon would be so meticulous. Shaking her head in wonderment, Susan got ready for the day.

During her lunch break, Susan called Lauren.

"Hi Susan," Lauren greeted her cheerily. "Gosh, it's nice to hear your voice! What are you up to?"

"Swamped with work," said Susan truthfully, "But I thought I'd give you a quick call and ask if you'd like to have dinner at the Chinese tonight."

"I'd love to! When?"

"How about you pick me up at seven at my place?"

"I'll be there," said Lauren.

"Excellent! How's the novel progressing?"

"Brilliantly! I've been working on it all morning and almost all day yesterday, apart from the search for Gordon, that is. I heard you found him, is that right?"

"Yeah," said Susan and not wanting to go into a lengthy discussion about Gordon, she added quickly, "Listen, I have to get back to work. See you tonight, then?"

"Okeydokey!" said Lauren.

Chapter 24

Friday Susan was bracing herself for yet another busy day. Having known her tight schedule in advance, she had told Lauren the previous evening over dinner that she wouldn't have the time to call as she had two rather tricky surgeries in the morning as well as several appointments in the afternoon, and she really couldn't afford being distracted. Inwardly, she was getting a bit annoyed at herself, as whenever she wasn't with Lauren, she was thinking of her, and she really needed to concentrate on her work. Of course she wouldn't say this to Lauren, after all, it was not her fault that she was behaving like a love-struck teenager. She didn't tell her either, that the trouble with Von Helsen's company was adding to her stress, and she deliberately avoided talking about Gordon as well. And since on Friday evening there would be the Neighbourhood Watch meeting for Susan and the book club meeting for Lauren, they had planned to get together on Saturday.

As Susan finally left her practice, she was not looking forward to attending the meeting. She would much rather have liked to take a relaxing bath and go to bed early. There had been complications with her last patient, and she had almost lost the dog. And although everything had turned out well in the end and the owner could fetch the dog in the afternoon, Susan was still exhausted and miffed at herself for not having foreseen the trouble, thus winding down alone at home would be so much more appealing. However, when she returned home, she was unpleasantly reminded of Von Helsen's company when she

saw the old Holden parked at the bend again. And to add insult to injury, she found yet another letter from the company in her mailbox.

As she entered the house, the phone rang. Annoyed, she picked up the phone, and was greeted by a representative from the company, who told her that she had better sign the offer she had received in the mail or she might regret it.

In spite of what she had learned from Gordon, Susan didn't quite get the hint at first, and thus, she told the bloke that he could stick his offer where the sun doesn't shine, she would definitely not sell, and hung up.

The moment she put the phone down she froze, as it suddenly dawned on her what the message had meant; that the man's comments had actually been a threat.

Susan shuddered, and although she had been asked not to say anything about the link to Von Helsen's company, she decided she would report her sighting of the Holden at the meeting, as it did not belong in Wombat Road after all, and she hoped she would feel a little less worried if at least more people knew about the reappearance of the car. Thus, Susan had bid goodbye to the thought of a relaxing bath, attended to the horses, took a quick shower and went to the meeting.

She arrived late as she had to park some distance away. "Gosh, seems like the half of the town is at the meeting," she mumbled to herself as she walked past the unusual number of cars on her way to the community hall. Thus, she was not surprised to find the large hall crowded as if they were giving out free tickets for the cricket. Pushing her way through the crowd, Susan nodded greetings to those she recognised, and made her way to the front where she spotted a couple of free seats. Andrew and Mark, the town's two police officers were standing next to the table up front, deep in discussion with a group of people from the southern part of Mountain Creek. Charlotte, Nicholas and Sarah were talking with a group of people at the side of the room. Judging by their serious expressions they were not engaged in idle chit-chat. Matt and the vicar were deep in conversation with some of the local business people, and the earnest look on their faces indicated that the meeting was probably going to get side-tracked yet again. Susan sighed inwardly, hoping that the supporters of Von Helsen's development plan would restrain themselves and stay on topic. She seated herself, thankful that she could take the weight off her feet, and glanced around. The headmistress of the school was animatedly chatting with Betty and the wife of the vicar at the other side of the room, and their glances across the room to Charlotte and her friends indicated that they were the topic of the conversation. Looking at Charlotte, Susan had to admit that she was a very attractive woman. She always looked so alive, always appeared so interested in what was going on around her. Her well groomed, well dressed figure looked rather out of place at this small town gathering. Her friends, so unlike Charlotte with regards to looks, didn't fit in any better, though; especially Nicholas and Shaun with their dreadlocks.

Pondering if it would be too rude to kick her shoes off as her feet were killing her, Susan's thoughts were interrupted by a voice asking, "Are you saving this seat for anyone?"

Looking up, Susan realised it was Amy.

Sitting down before Susan had time to reply, Amy immediately started asking if Susan had heard from the girls lately. "Chantal is very good at many things, but keeping me informed about her doings is not one of them. Next time you talk to Amber, could you ask her to remind Chantal that it is her grandmother's birthday next week? My life won't be worth living if she forgets ..." She was interrupted by Andrew welcoming everyone, and Susan just quickly assured her that she would tell Amber.

After a few seconds of hustle and bustle as the latecomers found seats, the meeting began with the first issue on the agenda. A number of robberies in the south of Mountain Creek as well as damage to several street lights in the east and northeast of the town had all taken place during the last two weeks, and people were asked if they had noticed anything suspicious that might lead to catching the culprits.

Even though Susan was fairly certain that the robberies and broken street lights were not related to the Holden, she used the opportunity to relate her sightings when no one else was forthcoming with information. This in turn caused Charlotte to raise the next issue, which was about the strange goings on at Jones' property.

John Jensen, the owner of the golf club who was one of the people who had been robbed, spoke up, "All these things would not be happening if there was more life in this town; if certain people would not hinder the development." He stared at Susan, and although she did not want to rise to the bait, as this meeting was not about the development, after all, and she did not want to risk getting dragged into a

discussion about the issue now, she couldn't help responding nonetheless, "Mr Jensen, your wish for 'more life' in this town has a major downside. The resort would destroy a large area of bush."

"It is an eco-friendly resort, Ms Kelly," said Mr Jensen, "And the company mainly wants to build an access road through your property. And who knows, perhaps if all the construction people from the city go there, the Lady of the Creek will finally cease her assaults. Then Mr Jones could finally sell his house, which would settle your issues about the things going on there, and with the resort being a major attraction, Mountain Creek could blossom instead of being regarded as a superstitious backwater town. I really can't see why you are so bloody stubborn and refuse to sell that bit of useless bushland."

Charlotte said, "There is no need to accuse Ms Kelly. The majority of the people here are against the development. We don't care if we are regarded as a 'superstitious backwater town', we love Mountain Creek as it is, peaceful and quiet, surrounded by beautiful countryside. And the resort wouldn't change a thing about the issues raised here anyway. It would be over a kilometre away, in the middle of the bush. No one over there would ever notice anything going on here in town, especially not at night."

"And all the tourists who will trample around the bush and jam the streets with their cars could not care less about your houses being robbed or our street lights being damaged," remarked Nicholas.

"But more tourists also means that business will flourish," said Craig Bennett, the owner of the local supermarket. "And I don't mean just mine. The town would grow, so the council could install more policemen, thus, there could be more patrols, which would enhance our security."

"Have you ever had a look at the statistics?" asked Nicholas. "The bigger the town, the more crime there is, usually. Bigger is not always better."

"Most crime is related to unemployment," said John, "The resort would create work for the locals, especially for the young, and so would the flourishing local trade."

"There is no need for this kind of work here," said Sarah, "There is no unemployment in Mountain Creek."

"That's just because all the young people move to Melbourne or other cities," said Craig.

"Not all of them move," said Sarah, "And many return after they have finished their studies."

"Studies, hah!" exclaimed John disdainfully, "Truly, I would not count all your hippie colonies that are growing on the outskirts as an asset. You are a disgrace to a modern town!"

To everyone's surprise, Betty spoke up, "Well, tough, John, Mountain Creek is NOT a modern town in the way you would like it to be. So far we have successfully fought any larger supermarket and burger chain, and we will continue to fight every business that is not owned by someone from town. And if you are so opposed to Mountain Creek and its hippie colonies, then maybe you should move to a 'modern town'."

The majority of the people present applauded, and before the discussion went any further, Andrew went on with the remaining issues on the agenda.

Chapter 25

As Susan drove home after the meeting, she suddenly didn't look forward to being alone in the house, with the Holden being back and having been threatened on the phone. Pondering her options, Susan turned into Wombat Road, and deciding that it wouldn't hurt to have a look if Lauren was back from her book club meeting, and in case she was, to ask if she would mind putting up with her for the night, she drove past her own driveway and glancing at the Holden in passing, she headed for Lauren's place.

Lauren was home and she welcomed Susan's company; and when she learned that Susan hadn't eaten yet, they went into the kitchen and raided the fridge.

Filling their plates up with leftovers, they made themselves comfortable on the sofa, and Susan gave Lauren a short account of the meeting.

"Do you generally object about the development, or is it because of Fheyanna?" asked Lauren.

"It's both," said Susan, "But in this case it's mainly about Fheyanna, yes. The access road they want to build would be a stone's throw from her garden."

"Oh, I see. But nobody actually knows this, no?"

"No, they don't. They want to buy the land beyond my property, but they need an access road, and the shortest way would be the old extension of Cockatoo Drive. It once led right through the bush up to a

sawmill that was destroyed in the Black Friday Fires in 1939 and was never rebuilt. I bought this land specifically because of Fheyanna, but I didn't buy the piece of land beyond the sawmill back then because I didn't think that anyone would ever be interested in it." Susan leaned back on the sofa and sighed. Gosh, she was exhausted.

Regarding Susan's tired expression, Lauren asked, "How about I draw you a bath, then you can relax while I clean up, hm?"

Susan opened her eyes and gazed at Lauren. "You are an angel, Lauren."

Snorting, Lauren said, "Hardly," and planting a quick kiss on Susan's lips, she got up and said, "Relax, close your eyes, I'll let you know when it's ready."

Rushing out of the building, past Betty and a group of neighbours, Charlotte ran to the parking space, and looking around she cursed, "Damn!"

"What's the hurry?" asked Betty.

"I found Susan's wallet," said Charlotte, holding up the black leather wallet. "I guess she left already."

"Yes, she was one of the first to leave," acknowledged Betty.

"Oh well, I'm going to drop it off at her place then," said Charlotte, and headed for her car.

The next morning, Susan woke up with Lauren's arm draped over her. Smiling, she looked at Lauren, and tenderly brushed a curl from her face. It was still early, and there was no rush, as on Saturdays Susan only opened the practice from 12 to 2pm.

Susan had not told Lauren about the threat or any of the things she had learned from Gordon; as a reason for her coming she had only told Lauren that for some reason she didn't feel like spending the night alone in her house. With a smile, she remembered how she had come to Lauren with a sense of impending doom, and then it had been so nice with Lauren. She had tried to hide her exhaustion, not wanting to pollute the relationship with her problems, but Lauren had seen her fatigue, and she had been so sweet. It had been such a pleasure to be pampered. Susan hadn't experienced anything like this in a long, long time, and she was starting to believe that the blossoming relationship between them could become a really good and long-lasting one.

Meanwhile, Betty was wondering what was wrong with Charlotte. She had not seen any lights on in Charlotte's house the previous night, and the windows were still closed also, although it had been rather a hot night. Thus, Betty decided to look in on Charlotte before she went shopping.

Turning into Charlotte's driveway, Betty couldn't see Charlotte's car anywhere, and since Charlotte only had a carport, it could only mean that she had not returned home. Betty couldn't fathom why Charlotte would stay at Susan's place, and backing into the road, she drove into town, intending to do her shopping. However, the question of Charlotte's whereabouts was nagging at her, so she turned into Wombat Road and headed for Susan's place, just to satisfy her curiosity.

Turning into Susan's driveway, Betty immediately recognised Charlotte's Toyota. Susan's car, however, was nowhere to be seen. "Hm, she may have parked in the garage," Betty mumbled to herself and drove on, intending to drive past the Toyota to turn her car on the large gravelled forecourt. Glancing towards the front door, she hit the brakes. Quickly getting out of the car, she rushed over to the person who was lying on the deck in front of the open door.

"Charlotte!" Betty exclaimed as she squatted down next to her.

Groaning, Charlotte opened her eyes and croaked, "Betty? Thank God for your nosiness!"

"What happened?" asked Betty.

"No idea," croaked Charlotte and coughed. "Ouch, gosh that hurts!"

Pulling out her mobile, Betty called the ambulance and the police, and when she ended the second call, she looked at Charlotte, who was trying to move, and said, "Wait, let me help you." And carefully,

she positioned herself and helped Charlotte to settle against her.

After another coughing bout, Charlotte hummed and croaked, "I shall broaden my prey-pattern"

"Huh?" asked Betty.

"I wasn't aware how good rounded women feel," explained Charlotte, and groaned in pain as Betty winced.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Betty in disgust, "Can't you ever think of something other than sex?"

"Such as?" asked Charlotte, and she tried to grin but failed.

"Damn, that's my phone," cursed Susan as they were rudely interrupted by the muffled sound of 'Don't Worry Be Happy'.

"Don't answer it," purred Lauren, and continued nibbling at Susan's earlobe.

"I have to," said Susan, and extracting herself from under Lauren, she got out of the bed. "It might be an emergency," she explained while she fumbled for her mobile in the pockets of her pants.

Not recognising the caller's number, Susan answered, "Yes?"

"Susan? This is Betty. Where the hell are you?"

Annoyed, Susan said, "I don't think that is any of your business."

"Yes, it is. I'm at your house. You have obviously been robbed, and Charlotte was attacked. I have called the police and the ambulance. You had better get here as soon as you can."

Shocked, Susan responded, "I'll be there in a few minutes," and hung up.

Seeing Susan's blanched face, Lauren asked worriedly, "What's wrong?"

"My house has been robbed, and they injured Charlotte. I must go," explained Susan while she dressed as quickly as she could.

"I'm coming with you," said Lauren.

Chapter 26

When Susan and Lauren arrived at the house in Susan's car, Andrew was already there, talking on the patrol car's radio. Getting out of the car, Susan sighed inwardly as she noticed Betty curiously glancing back and forth between Lauren and herself. Lauren had been right, after all, 'they would find out eventually'; though Susan wouldn't have thought it would be this quickly. Well, it didn't matter now; Susan was far more concerned about Charlotte who was lying on the deck, her head on Betty's thigh, her features contorted with pain. However, while Lauren was rushing up the steps, Susan was stopped by Andrew.

When Andrew asked Susan for some ID, Susan reached for the back pocket of her pants and cursed, "Damn, I must have lost my wallet. I'll go and have a look in the car," and she was about to turn, but Andrew intercepted, "You don't need to look for it." And he explained what Charlotte and Betty had told him. Charlotte had had the wallet in her hand when she left her car, however, she couldn't remember climbing the steps or anything beyond that, and the wallet was nowhere to be found.

"Damn, so she only got attacked because she wanted to return my wretched wallet," cursed Susan, and with a desperate look at Charlotte, she said, "I'm so sorry!"

The ambulance arrived, and Charlotte was taken to hospital. Betty and Lauren went over to Andrew and Susan, and Betty asked if he needed anything of her, or if she may leave.

"You may leave," said Andrew, "If there are any further questions, I will get in touch."

"All right, thanks," said Betty and turned to leave.

Placing a hand on Betty's arm, Susan said, "Thank you for calling me. I'm so sorry I was rude. Please let me know how she is doing."

"Of course," promised Betty and left.

Just as she turned her car on the drive, reinforcement arrived from the regional police station.

Since Susan and Lauren weren't allowed to enter the house before the forensic people were finished, they excused themselves and went to attend to the horses.

"I admire your gut feeling, that made you come to my place last night," said Lauren while she

caressed the head of one of the horses. "If only Charlotte had not come here."

"If only I hadn't lost the damn wallet," said Susan forcefully as she threw a bale of hay into the bale feeder.

"Well, there's no point in dwelling on 'if only'," said Lauren, "Let's hope that she will recover soon."

"You are right," said Susan.

"Are you free in the afternoon?" asked Lauren. "I could ask Emma to mind Lucy, and we could go and visit Charlotte together."

"Yes, unless there is an emergency or the police needs me, I think I can make it," said Susan. "Would you stay here with me until all is settled?"

"Of course," said Lauren. "Though, I guess I should go and get Lucy. This may take a while, after all."

"Yes, do that," said Susan.

When the forensic people were finally done, Susan was asked if she had had a rather tall visitor, supposedly male, the day before. When she answered in the negative, they told her that the robbers had supposedly entered through the backdoor, as they had found fresh shoeprints size 11 in the garden, leading towards the backdoor. Since there was no broken window and no damage to the locks on either door, they asked Susan if anyone had a spare key to her house.

"No, there is only a spare key in the garage," said Susan, "However, I suppose it is still there. They wouldn't have needed it. I frequently forget to lock the backdoor."

"Gosh, Susan!" exclaimed Andrew, "You really should know better."

"Oh come on, Andrew, if it had been locked, they would just have smashed the windows as they did in the other houses," said Susan. "At least I don't have to deal with broken windows on top of all this shit."

"Well, your insurance company will have a different view on this," said Andrew. "You may go in now, and have a look and tell us what is missing."

As Susan went through the house, she saw with relief that they had not touched the safe. However, her laptop, her webcam, two external hard drives and her digital camera were missing. And to Susan's dismay, a photo of Amber had disappeared as well.

"What kind of frame was it in?" asked Andrew.

"It was a Georgian silver frame I inherited from my grandmother," said Susan quietly. Suddenly she felt dizzy, and she braced herself at her desk.

"Well, then it's not a surprise that they took it," said Andrew. "They can make money from it."

"Then why didn't they take the horse sculptures on the mantelpiece, or the clock in the dining room? They are worth far more," said Susan.

"Perhaps they didn't look into the dining room, and the sculptures were too heavy," suggested Andrew. "And they were probably interrupted by Charlotte. Who knows, perhaps they would have taken more, had they had more time."

"That's illogical," said Susan, "After Charlotte was out of the way they had all the time in the world to take whatever they wanted."

"Burglars are not necessarily logical, Susan," said Andrew, "They may have thought you would come home soon also, or if they thought Charlotte to be the house owner, they may just have got cold feet."

"Can I make a phone call in private?" asked Susan.

"Of course," said Andrew. "I'm done here anyway. If you find that something else is missing, just call me and we'll add it to the list."

Suddenly, they heard a dog growling and then barking with whines in between. Staring at each other for a second, Susan exclaimed, "Lucy!" and they both rushed outside.

Chapter 27

Standing at the entry of Susan's driveway, Lauren was trying to reassure Lucy, but the dog was beside herself, her tail between her legs, she tried to pull away.

"Don't force her. Take her home," called Susan.

"Okay," called Lauren, and letting go of Lucy's collar, she turned around, and holding onto the leash, she let herself be pulled homewards by the dog.

"Has the dog been here before?" asked Andrew.

"Yes, she has; and no, she did not react like this," said Susan. "But, Lauren told me that she has reacted similarly when she came close to Jones' property."

"When was that?" asked Andrew.

Thinking for a moment, Susan said, "I can't remember. You will have to ask Lauren. I really need to make a phone call now, before I get ready for work."

"You are going to open your practice after what has happened?" asked Andrew surprised.

"Of course; but I will stop by at your office after work," said Susan and turned to head inside.

"All right," said Andrew, "See you then. Take care."

While Andrew drove to Lauren's place to question her about Lucy's behaviour at Jones' property, Susan went inside and called Greg. Relating to him everything about the incident and the threat on the phone, she asked him if she may tell Andrew Barnes what she had learned about Von Helsen's company. "I am certain that this was not actually a robbery, but a serious warning, Greg. They just made it look like a robbery so that the police wouldn't get suspicious. There are just too many things that don't make sense otherwise. I'm afraid that them taking the frame with the picture of my daughter is meant as a warning that they will hurt her if I don't sell. And I'm sure that they intentionally attacked Charlotte, mistaking her for me."

"The way you are describing it, and with the knowledge we have, I tend to agree, Susan," said Greg, "However, didn't you say that your daughter is overseas?"

"Yes, she is working in the UK," acknowledged Susan.

"I don't think they would go to that extent, I rather believe they want to scare you into thinking they would," said Greg. He was not at all happy that things had become so involved so quickly, and he told Susan that they didn't have anything in their hands on Von Helsen, yet, that would confirm what Gordon had told them. "On the other hand, with this incident they may just have given us an opportunity to get them. I will inform the policeman of your town myself. And you just be careful, take your girlfriend on a vacation, or at least try to avoid being alone in the house."

"Do you think they will ...," she left the rest unsaid.

"You aren't going to sign their offer, are you?" said Greg.

"Of course not!" said Susan, and then she added, "Oh ... I see."

"Be careful, Susan."

"I will."

In the afternoon, Lauren and Susan were driving to the hospital together.

"I hope she'll be okay," said Lauren.

"Yeah," said Susan monosyllabically, her thoughts occupied with the whole situation and the conversation she had had with Greg.

Lauren cast a worried look at Susan, but she remained quiet, thinking that Susan probably needed time to digest what had happened.

When they arrived at the ward on which Charlotte was supposed to be, they were greeted by Betty, "Thank God you're here! Waiting alone is truly dreadful. She is still in surgery."

"What is the matter with her?" asked Susan.

"I couldn't memorise the medical terms," said Betty apologetically, "But it has to do with a cracked rib and suspected spinal injuries. And with or without surgery, there is a risk that she may be paralysed."

"Oh God!" exclaimed Lauren.

Susan went deathly pale. Speechless, she stared at Betty without really seeing her. "... or you might regret it ... or you might regret it ..." the voice of Von Helsen's representative kept replaying in her mind.

Betty grasped Susan's arm as she saw her swaying slightly, and she said, "You had better sit down. You look like you are going to faint," and with the help of Lauren, she guided Susan to the closest chair.

"This is all my fault," said Susan quietly after she had sat down.

"Nonsense!" said Betty, "You didn't do this to her."

"You don't understand," said Susan, but as she was not allowed to explain it, she stayed quiet.

"But I do," said Lauren, "You feel guilty because your gut feeling caused you to stay at my place; and you think Charlotte was attacked in your place because you lost your wallet. But you did not lose your wallet on purpose, and you could not know that burglars would be at your house, or that Charlotte would come to your place to bring you the wallet and be attacked. It is a terrible situation, but it is not your fault at all, Susan."

Susan just shook her head weakly. Despite the company, she felt utterly alone and helpless. Why did she have to promise not to tell anyone? All right, Betty was a risk factor with her love of gossip, but why couldn't she at least tell Lauren? What difference would it make? Lauren would certainly not jeopardise the police investigation in any way. She knew Lauren wanted to reassure her, but she didn't understand, couldn't understand that these were not the reasons for her guilty feeling. What bothered her most was that she had not called Greg right after she got the threatening call instead of going to that damn meeting. And that she had insulted the representative instead of playing for time and saying that she would think about the offer. How could she have been so stupid and not even realise that it had been a threat until she hung up, and this although she knew the background story from Gordon? She should have been the one who paid for her own stupidity, not Charlotte!

Chapter 28

The doctor finally came to tell Betty that Charlotte was out of surgery, and that she may sit in the recovery room with her until she woke up. When Betty asked him how Charlotte was doing, he told her that there had been complications during surgery, and that he could not tell at this point if Charlotte would fully recover. They would conduct further tests tomorrow, which would give them a more accurate prognosis.

All three women were dismayed at the news, and together they went to see Charlotte in the recovery room.

"She looks so pale," said Lauren.

"That's normal after major surgery." Susan tried to sound reassuring, but her worried look betrayed her feelings.

It took till the early evening for Charlotte to wake up, and even then she only stayed awake for a few minutes before she drifted back into sleep.

Reluctantly, Susan said, "I should go and look after the horses."

"Sure, go ahead," said Betty. "I will stay with her for as long as they let me, and I'll ring you if there is any change."

"Are you sure you don't want us to stay with you?" asked Lauren.

"There's not much any of us can do here, anyway," said Betty. "But since Thomas is on a fishing weekend, there's no need for me to go home, so I'll stay here as long as I can."

"That is so kind of you, Betty," said Susan and got up. "Give her our love, and tell her that we'll be back tomorrow, will you?"

"I'll do that," said Betty.

Lauren drove on the way home, as Susan was too distraught.

"I'm sure she will be all right," said Lauren in an attempt to reassure Susan as well as herself while she was driving towards Mountain Creek. And as Susan remained quiet, she said a touch too harshly, "Stop beating yourself up, Susan. It was not your fault. And your guilty feeling is not going to help Charlotte."

"Pretending everything will be fine won't help her either," said Susan testily. Although she had not had much contact with Charlotte, seeing the once so active and vibrant woman lying so still in the

hospital bed and imagining her paralysed had sorely shocked Susan.

"I am not pretending that everything will be fine," said Lauren defensively, "But I dearly hope it will be."

"I hope so, too," said Susan.

Laying a comforting hand on Susan's thigh, Lauren said, "Then let's hope for the best, hm. And after all, it's amazing what doctors can do nowadays; perhaps she will be fine, really."

They drove the rest of the way home in silence, heading to Susan's place first because of the horses. When they were finished with the horses, Lauren asked if Susan would like to come over and stay the night at her place.

Smiling weakly, Susan said, "Oh yes that would be nice, thanks. But I need to call my daughter. How about you go and get Lucy and have a chat with Emma while I do that? You can take my car."

"Okay. When do you think you'll be finished?" Lauren wanted to know.

"At about ten," said Susan.

"All right," said Lauren, and looking at Susan, she hesitantly took a step forward, not sure if Susan might rather keep a distance at this moment.

Susan however, closed the remaining distance between them, and enfolding Lauren in her arms, she said, "I am so glad you are here, you are such a comfort to me, Lauren. I'm sorry that I'm not the most pleasant company right now."

Lauren leaned slightly back in the embrace to look at Susan, and gently caressing Susan's face she said, "Don't worry about it. There will be better times again."

"I guess I can't understand Betty," said Lauren to Emma as they were sitting on Emma's back porch with a glass of wine. "She seemed like a totally different person today."

Smiling, Emma said, "Betty may not approve of Charlotte's behaviour, but she cares about her, nevertheless, just as we all do, perhaps even more so."

Tilting her head questioningly, Lauren waited for Emma to elaborate.

"When Charlotte moved here, Betty became friends with her rather quickly. Charlotte was still recuperating from the loss of her husband, and Betty enjoyed being supportive towards her and listening to all the stories she had to tell from their various travels." Taking a sip of wine, Emma continued, "Everything changed, when Betty learned that Charlotte was having an affair with Michael Howards, a salesman from town."

"But she doesn't seem to have a problem with Susan and me," said Lauren, confused.

Shaking her head, Emma said, "She doesn't. But she couldn't understand how Charlotte could revel in memories of the time with her husband, and then suddenly hop into bed with another man, and even worse with a married man; whose wife, happened to be in the same charity group as Betty to add insult to injury."

"Oh," said Lauren. "What happened then?"

"Well, the affair became public, and mind you, it was not Betty who spilled it; she only broke up the friendship with Charlotte, and no one knew why until the rumour got round and she couldn't any longer restrain herself from commenting on it. Michael resented Charlotte for having destroyed his reputation and reconciled with his wife. They sold the house and moved away. Since then, Charlotte never again got involved with a local."

"I see," said Lauren, and thinking back at Charlotte lying in the hospital bed, pale and quiet, she sighed, "Gosh, I hope she will recover."

"If there is the slightest possibility, then I'm sure she will recover," said Emma, and with a wink she added, "She is one of the most resilient women I know, and not being active just isn't an option for her. I suppose that even if she would remain paralysed, she would quickly adapt and start doing sports in a wheelchair."

"I hope you are right," said Lauren.

"How was the talk with your daughter?" asked Lauren as she and Susan were driving to her place. Smiling, Susan said, "It was a nice distraction. They are having a lot of fun in Scotland."

"Did you tell her what happened?"

"No. I didn't want to worry her. She was so very happy; telling me about all the things they have been doing. I just couldn't bring myself to destroy her bliss," said Susan, and turned into Lauren's driveway.

"But won't she be even more worried when she learns about it via Amy?" asked Lauren as she unfastened her seatbelt.

"Amy doesn't have a computer," said Susan, "She hates computers. She and Chantal write via snail mail, so I've got time to prepare myself to tell her. Though, thinking about it, I guess I had better tell her soon, as Betty does call Chantal occasionally. Chantal is her goddaughter. And I guess I should really tell her about us as well before she hears about it from other people." Heaving a sigh, Susan got out of the car.

Later that night, when Susan and Lauren were lying in bed, Lauren suddenly thought of something, and turning towards Susan, she asked, "You said that Fheyanna had healing abilities ... do you think she could help Charlotte?"

Rolling onto her back, Susan stared at the ceiling and said, "She probably could. But she won't leave the bush."

"But didn't you say she left the bush to help your mother?"

"That was over twenty years ago, Lauren. She hasn't left the bush since."

"Well, but couldn't you at least ask her?" suggested Lauren. "After all, she does sing for Charlotte, doesn't that mean she likes her?"

"It certainly does," said Susan.

"But she can't know what happened to Charlotte, unless you tell her. Maybe you should give her a chance to make her own decision?"

Susan lay silent, pondering for a while, causing Lauren to wonder if she had fallen asleep. But then she turned to Lauren and said, "I guess you are right. Let's see what the doctors say tomorrow after the tests. If the results are bad, I will go and talk to Fheyanna."

Chapter 29

Despite the glimmer of hope that Charlotte might make a full recovery, it had taken Susan a long time to fall asleep. Lauren had long been up when Susan finally woke. As Susan sat up, she groaned and pressed her hand against her head.

Having heard Susan stir, Lauren went into the bedroom and said cheerfully, "Good morning, love ..." she paused as she saw Susan sitting on the edge of the bed, holding her head. Rushing to her, she touched Susan's shoulder and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Just a headache," said Susan dismissively, "Do you have any painkillers?"

"Sure," said Lauren, "I'll get them for you." And squeezing Susan's shoulder, she left the room.

Over breakfast Lauren told Susan that Betty had called while Susan was in the shower. She and Amy were already at the hospital, and the first of Charlotte's tests did not show a lot of promise. Lauren had told her that they would drive to the hospital in the afternoon.

"I will go and see Fheyanna after I have finished with the horses," said Susan.

Lauren nodded and said, "May I help?"

"Of course you may."

When they were finished with the horses, Lauren helped Susan fix a rail of the timber fence that had

come loose. This done, they prepared one of the horses for a ride, and when Susan was getting the bridle and saddle from the stable, Lauren waited outside and caressed the gelding. As she let her gaze wander around, Lauren suddenly spotted a tall, white-haired female, dressed in a multi-coloured summer dress, which might have been fashionable for a twenty-something female in the 50s, walking up the driveway in sturdy hiking boots. Blinking at the unusual sight, Lauren called, "Susan, you have a visitor."

Coming out of the stable, Susan stopped in her tracks and breathed surprised, "Fheyanna!" Hastily, she put the saddle and bridle down and rushed to Fheyanna who had stopped in front of the house, looking around appreciatively. "I was just about to ride to your place," said Susan.

Ignoring the comment, Fheyanna said, "A nice place you have built yourself."

"Thanks," said Susan confused, "How come you are here? You couldn't have sensed me from your place, could you?"

Smiling, Fheyanna shook her head, "No." And without further explanation, she walked towards Lauren who had been watching the two with amused curiosity.

Befuddled, Susan stared after Fheyanna for a second before she shook herself out of her daze and followed her.

"What is it that amuses you so?" asked Fheyanna.

Lauren who had unsuccessfully tried to suppress a grin, sobered instantly, and blushing, she stammered, "Uh ... sorry ... I didn't mean to offend you."

"I did not take offense," said Fheyanna, still waiting for an answer.

"It is your dress, Fheyanna," said Susan, "Why aren't you wearing your usual clothes?"

Turning to Susan, Fheyanna explained, "I thought they would be inappropriate for a hospital visit."

"Hospital visit?" asked Susan dumbfounded.

"Yes," said Fheyanna, "Gordon told me that Charlotte needs me."

"Gordon? How does he know?"

"Nicholas and Sarah told him," said Fheyanna.

"Gosh, the speed of the bush telegraph never ceases to amaze me," said Susan. "Anyway, you can't wear that dress, Fheyanna. Especially not with those boots," Susan emphasised, and turning towards the house she said, "Come in, let's see if we can find something that fits you."

"Shall I put Copper back into the paddock?" asked Lauren.

"Oh, yes, please," said Susan, "And you can also put the saddle and bridle back in the stable, if you don't mind."

"Consider it done," said Lauren.

Chapter 30

Meanwhile Emma and her family were celebrating Ricky's, her youngest son's, birthday at the pizzeria "La Bella Casa" in Carlton. Looking around, Emma noticed that it was rather a trendy place where most of the clientele was twenty-something, and she was pleasantly surprised that Ricky had chosen to celebrate here with them. Smiling, she took the menu from the waiter, and began studying it, while Ben ordered the drinks. Having decided on a light pasta dish, Emma leaned back and regarded her sons. She was pleased at the way they had turned out, and rather impressed at how much at ease they seemed to be in this environment.

While they were eating, Ben and the boys started talking about sports, much to Emma's chagrin. After dinner, the discussion about the cricket continued, and Daniel openly started texting on his mobile. Emma could bear it no longer, and in an attempt to change the subject, she interrupted Daniel and asked, "How is your project coming along?"

Looking up for an instant, Daniel said, "Great," and went on typing.

"How does Kelly like her new job?" Emma inquired about their eldest son's, Lukas', long-term girlfriend, who had taken on a job at a travel agency a few months ago.

"She likes it well enough," said Lukas absentmindedly, as he was listening to Ben and Ricky debating who would win the Ashes.

"It is truly unfortunate that she couldn't come today," said Emma, wishing she had someone less monosyllabic to talk with. "Will she at least join us at Christmas?"

"I don't know," said Lukas evasively.

"Any other plans in the near future?" asked Emma, hoping that perhaps the two would finally marry.

"Yeah," said Lukas, "We're going to Bali with friends."

"Oh, I have heard that Bali is a beautiful place," said Emma, delighted. "When are you going?"

"February."

Furrowing her brow, Emma asked, "February? But you are going to be here on your birthday, aren't you?"

"No, Mum." Spotting a friend of his entering the restaurant, Lukas exclaimed, "Hey Mark!" and avoiding any further debate with his mother, he got up to meet Mark and his girlfriend.

Sighing, Emma emptied the glass of complimentary Amaretto that the waiter had brought. Glancing over to Ricky, she noticed that he was checking his watch yet again, and she asked, "Are you waiting for something specific, Ricky?"

"Yeah, we've got to leave in 15 minutes," said Ricky.

"Why do we have to leave?" asked Emma curiously, wondering what kind of surprise Ricky had planned.

"Well, you don't have to," said Ricky, "But Luke, Dan and I are going to meet with friends at Point Cook. They've organised a private ghost tour at the Point Cook Homestead with a candlelit dinner before the tour as a birthday present."

"That sounds quite interesting," said Emma, and in a desperate attempt to do something adventurous with her children for a change, she asked, "Perhaps we could join you?"

"Sorry, but the evening was booked ages ago," said Ricky. "I didn't think you'd be interested in a ghost tour. It's for young people."

Emma opened her mouth, about to retort, "*I'm 54, I'm not over the hill yet, thank you very much!*" but not wanting to start an argument on her son's birthday, she shut her mouth again and remained silent. 'It's for young people' ... why on earth would her sons consider her too old for a ghost tour?

When they left, Emma looked rather crestfallen; and Lukas, feeling her disappointment, laid an arm around his mother's shoulder and said, "Enjoy the evening, Mum. Relax, read a book, do something you like."

'Do something you like' ... she would have liked to spend time with her children, do something adventurous with them for a change ... but that thought had obviously not occurred to them. 'Relax' ... Any more relaxing and she'd feel like a worn-out elastic band of her grandmother's knickers, thought Emma. Nonetheless, she smiled weakly and wished her children a great evening. After all, thought Emma, she should probably be thankful that he hadn't suggested for her to do some geriatric exercises or something of the like.

Dejected, Emma gazed after the boys who were suddenly talking excitedly as they walked to Lukas' car.

Touching Emma at the small of her back, Ben said gently, "Come on, love. Let's go home."

Emma nodded sadly and let Ben lead her to their car.

Chapter 31

At Susan's place, when the three of them were ready to go, Fheyanna looked far less conspicuous than before, though still somewhat awkward. The brown cargo pants Susan usually wore to work in the country, and which she had to roll up as they were a bit too long, just barely reached Fheyanna's ankles, and Fheyanna had to wear them with a belt as Susan was not quite as slender as she was. The olive coloured V-neck T-shirt that Susan had once accidentally bought a size too large was still rather loose fitting for Fheyanna. "*Luckily*," thought Susan, as Fheyanna adamantly refused to wear a bra. The hiking boots still looked a bit out of place for a hospital visit on a hot spring day, but at least now they went with the rest of the clothes.

They drove to Lauren's place first to get Lucy and a hair tie for Fheyanna, so she could tie her long white hair into a ponytail. Next they took Lucy to Olivia, who had fortunately been at home and agreed to mind the dog, as Emma and Ben were spending the day in Melbourne.

On the way to the hospital, Susan asked Fheyanna, who was sitting in the passenger seat, "How would you like to be introduced?"

"As Fheyanna," said Fheyanna amused.

As Susan looked at her questioningly, Fheyanna became serious and said, "I am old, Susan. I don't care much anymore as to what happens to me. If healing Charlotte is the last thing I will do, then so be it."

Susan took her eyes off the road for a second to glance at Fheyanna, and she asked in consternation, "Why would it be the last thing you do?"

"We don't have to tell anyone anything about you," exclaimed Lauren.

Shaking her head with a smile on her face, Fheyanna said, "Charlotte will recognise me, and so will Betty and Amy if they hear me singing."

"Damn! I hadn't thought of that," cursed Susan.

They drove in silence for a while, until Lauren proposed, "I could ask Betty and Amy to have lunch with me while you two are visiting Charlotte. Charlotte would certainly be able to keep your secret, don't you think?"

"That's a great idea!" said Susan.

"No," said Fheyanna, "I am tired of hiding." And reluctantly she added, "And I would like you to be there, Lauren."

"Me? Why?" asked Lauren, surprised.

"You will see. And if you don't, it won't matter," said Fheyanna enigmatically.

Fheyanna refused to participate in further conversation; she was occupied taking in the new impressions of all the things that had changed since she had last left the bush. Some of it she had already seen on photos and in books Susan had showed her, but of course seeing it all with her own eyes was rather different. The cars and the style of the houses had changed greatly, and there were so many now of both. Mountain Creek as well as the other small towns they were driving through on their way to the hospital had all expanded. All the roads were sealed now, and Fheyanna was quite amazed at all the new supermarkets, restaurants and cafés. There was a large golf course on the former farmland of Mr and Mrs McKenzie, and a tourist information centre where once the old schoolhouse had been; the new school was now located in a far bigger building a block further down the road. A cinema in the next town caused Fheyanna to shake her head at the weird films that were being advertised. The last film she had seen was 'Bush Christmas' sometime in the late 1940s; back then there had not been a cinema in the area, films were shown in the community hall.

When they arrived at the hospital, they spotted Betty and Amy standing in the shade next to Betty's Mercedes; Amy with the obligatory cigarette between her fingers. Susan parked her Jeep next to them, and they got out of the car to greet the two neighbours.

"Betty, Amy, this is Fheyanna an old friend of mine," introduced Susan.

"Old indeed," remarked Fheyanna, her eyes glinting with humour, causing the others to chuckle.

"Where do you come from?" asked Betty, trying to figure out why the elderly female was dressed so strangely.

"I was born in Wales," said Fheyanna truthfully.

"Ah," said Betty, "I don't know much about Wales, I'm afraid." And turning to Susan, she asked, "So, you know each other from your time in the UK?"

"No," said Susan, and to keep Betty from inquiring further, she asked, "How is Charlotte doing?"

Both, Betty's and Amy's faces fell, and Betty said, "Not good. She seems to be in denial. After all the tests they did, the doctors say that the chances of a full recovery are rather low, but Charlotte keeps insisting that she knows she will fully recover."

"She keeps talking of some weird vision she had while she was in the CT," said Amy, "She even joked that I had better use her 'time off' to train, as she will be up and about to beat me at tennis in no time."

Fheyanna smiled, and Susan asked, "So, what are they doing with her now?"

"Nothing," said Amy, "I just needed a break."

"Me too," said Betty, "It is rather difficult to see her so delusional. She believes that angels will come

and heal her, and she isn't even religious. She will be so devastated when she finally realises that there will be no miraculous healing."

"Her interpretation leaves a bit to be desired," mumbled Fheyanna, shaking her head. Then, looking at Betty and Amy with piercing blue eyes, she said determinedly, "However, your perception of life and people leaves quite a lot to be desired. But your hearts are in the right place. Come, you may learn something." And without waiting for the others, Fheyanna strode to the entrance of the hospital.

"Who the hell does she think she is?" said Betty indignantly.

"Who knows, who cares," said Amy absentmindedly, and she followed the enigmatic female as if hypnotised.

Lauren followed also, and in turning, Susan said to Betty, "She invited you to come. So, come and see for yourself."

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Betty followed the others.

When all the women entered one after the other, Charlotte said, amused, "Wow, fancy that, a neighbourhood party and I'm invited!" Looking at Betty with a cheeky grin, she quipped, "Had I known that being in hospital was a requirement to be included, I'd have injured myself sooner." Then her gaze fell on Fheyanna, and she asked, "And who is the lady with the stunning blue eyes?"

Moving next to Charlotte's bed, Fheyanna looked intensely into Charlotte's eyes and said, "I am Fheyanna. I am here to heal you."

Betty, who was standing with the others at the foot of the bed, whispered to Susan, "What is she talking about? Is she nuts?"

"Shhh," hushed Amy.

Charlotte's face lit up as she suddenly recognised the eyes, and she breathed in awe, "You are one of the angels!"

Shaking her head, Fheyanna said, "No, Charlotte. I am a human being just like you."

"Well, I certainly can't heal people," said Charlotte.

"And I can't play tennis," said Fheyanna with a twinkle in her eyes.

Grinning, Charlotte said, "If you heal me, I teach you."

"Thank you, but I believe, I am a bit too old for that," said Fheyanna, smiling.

"Okay, so, what do I have to do?" asked Charlotte, eager to get out of the bed and out of the hospital.

"Nothing," said Fheyanna, "Just relax and listen, and if you can feel it, focus on the healing energy."

"All right," said Charlotte, and closed her eyes.

Fheyanna moved so that she could touch the top of Charlotte's head with her right hand, while moving slowly back and forth with her left hand, and finally keeping it hovering just below Charlotte's throat, palm down. Then, Fheyanna started singing.

Charlotte, Betty and Amy gaped at Fheyanna in surprise as they recognised the voice.

Looking at the wrinkled face of the dark skinned female, Charlotte met Fheyanna's light-blue eyes. The 'Lady of the Creek' was now looking incredibly tenderly at her. And her voice was so soft and clear. And although Charlotte could not understand a single word of the song, she was deeply touched by it all. Swallowing a lump in her throat, she closed her eyes again so she may do as Fheyanna had told her.

Quite some time had passed, when Lauren noticed that Fheyanna's fingers trembled slightly, and her voice seemed to weaken. At first, Lauren didn't think much of it, other than that it must be quite strenuous to keep the hand hovering in the air and to sing for so long. But as she looked closer at Fheyanna, a feeling of urgency crept up on her, unsettled her, and it grew into a feeling of alarm when she noticed Fheyanna slightly swaying. In an instant she was at Fheyanna's side, and without thinking, she placed a hand on Fheyanna's back.

Lauren gasped and closed her eyes when she suddenly felt a current of energy surge through her body and through her hand, causing it to tingle strongly where it touched Fheyanna's back.

Without really understanding what was happening, the other women followed. Susan stepped next to

Lauren, grasping her hand; Amy went over to the other side of the bed and reached for Susan's hand; and even Betty followed, taking Amy's and Charlotte's hand. Together they felt the current of energy surging through their bodies, connecting them all in such a profound way none of them could ever have imagined, while they listened to Fheyanna's singing that was now more powerful again.

It took them a while to realise that Fheyanna had stopped singing. Blinking their eyes open, they gazed at each other with a mix of bliss and awe until they came out of their dazed state, and a look of confusion settled on their faces.

"I can move my feet!" exclaimed Charlotte excitedly, and she tried to sit up, but Fheyanna held her back.

"Patience, dear. Take it slowly. Give your body time to adjust."

"You really have healed her," said Betty dumbfounded.

"With the help of all of you," said Fheyanna while she let her appreciative glance wander over the faces of the women.

Chapter 32

Everyone was silent for a while, contemplating what had happened. The second bed in the room was empty, and as Fheyanna slowly walked over to it, Lauren said, "This was why you wanted me here, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Fheyanna as she took off her boots and lay down.

Furrowing her brow, Lauren asked, "But how did you know? I mean, I didn't even know what I was doing, or why I was doing it ... actually, I still don't know."

"The spirits were guiding you," said Fheyanna. "I knew you were connected with them from the first time I felt your presence. However, I also knew that you were not aware of it, and thus, I did not know if you would respond to their guidance."

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Lauren.

Fheyanna turned her head to look at the ceiling, then, closing her eyes, she said quietly, "It is not for me to interfere with other people's decisions."

"This certainly didn't concern her when she killed Lewis, or injured Jones, not to mention what she did to all the others," mumbled Betty to Amy.

Fheyanna did not respond. Slowly, without looking at anyone, she got up, put on her boots and started lacing them.

And while Susan rushed to Fheyanna to stop her, Lauren whirled around to face Betty, and blurted out, "You bloody judgemental bitch! It is people like you who make life living hell for people who do not exactly fit into your stupid norms. How can you condemn someone just because they are different in some way, or even worse just according to hearsay?"

Meanwhile Susan placed a hand on Fheyanna's shoulder, and said, "Don't let her words get to you, Fheyanna. Please, just lie back, I can see that you need rest."

Straightening and turning to look at Susan, Fheyanna leaned against the bed and covered Susan's hand with hers. Her hand and her long, bony fingers felt cool despite the heat that came in through the open window. There was a profound weariness in her eyes that Susan had never seen in them before, and it worried her, even though Fheyanna smiled weakly at her and reassured softly, "I can rest at home."

Charlotte had cautiously got up, and took a few steps to reach Fheyanna, while Lauren kept arguing with Betty. Leaning against the bedside table, Charlotte touched Fheyanna's shoulder and said gently, "You healed me. You exhausted yourself by taking care of me. Please, give me a chance to show my gratitude; come to my place, and let me take care of you now, at least until you feel better."

Surprised, Fheyanna glanced quickly at Charlotte, and looking down at her left boot, which was still unlaced, she said quietly, "I need to look after my garden."

"I can do that," said Susan.

Raising an eyebrow at Susan, Fheyanna said, "Thank you, but I have seen your garden."

"It doesn't always look like that," said Susan apologetically, "I have been rather busy lately. But I can take a week off. That would probably do me a lot of good anyway."

"I can help, too," said Amy, "I have time, and I love gardening."

Fheyanna felt warmed by the offers of the women and their obvious concern for her, and she felt so very weary. If not for the help of Lauren and the others, Fheyanna knew, she would not be standing here now. She had known before she decided to help Charlotte, that such a major task would be too much for her in her old age, and she had not been certain if she could even manage to finish it. But she had grown quite fond of Charlotte over the years. Charlotte loved to listen to her singing, and although she misinterpreted the songs as lament songs, as everyone did, it had always touched Fheyanna that Charlotte felt so much compassion towards her. Thus, Fheyanna had decided to help her, even if she would die in the process. She was tired of hiding anyway. She was getting old, and living on her own in the bush was getting harder each year. However, when she saw Lauren at Susan's place, she knew that the spirits would try to guide Lauren to assist her, and that, if Lauren responded, life might not yet be over for her after all. And now not only Lauren had helped her, but all these women had assisted, even Betty.

Betty's comment had hurt Fheyanna deeply. She could not understand why Betty was still judging her, despite having experienced the spiritual connection with her, and despite feeling admiration for her at the same time. Fheyanna did not want to explain herself. Especially not to someone who was so quick to pass judgement. Fheyanna heard Lauren and Betty argue. Betty kept insisting that she was not condemning Fheyanna. She valued what Fheyanna did for Charlotte, she was just wondering about certain other things.

Fheyanna did not want to deal with this, she wanted to go home. Home to her cottage and her garden, surrounded by the tranquillity of the bush and the soothing presence of the spirits. Peace. That was all she wished for.

When Fheyanna came to, she had to grin before she even opened her eyes as she heard Susan singing the song to the spirits for protection of herself, interspersed with nonsensical words, which she had obviously misunderstood. However, the amusement was replaced by wonder when she sensed the presence of all the other women, including Charlotte and even Betty, who were sending their energy through Lauren in a combined effort to heal Fheyanna. She would have to teach them not to exhaust themselves by using their own energy, thought Fheyanna. She had only done this to boost the healing energy, as her concentration was ceasing, and she could not have held her position for much longer. She would also have to teach Susan the proper songs. Susan had never asked Fheyanna to teach her, but perhaps it was time to offer to teach her.

"She is coming to," exclaimed Betty as Fheyanna opened her eyes.

Susan stopped singing, and Lauren asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," said Fheyanna and sat up.

"You gave us quite a scare when you fainted all of a sudden," scolded Betty.

Regarding Betty, Fheyanna said astonished, "You are scared." Suddenly she could understand Betty as she had lost her own fear of Betty's continuous judging, and thus, could sense what lay beyond it.

"Of course I was scared, I don't want you to die," said Betty defensively, and she took a step backwards as Fheyanna moved her legs to Betty's side of the bed.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, her head slightly tilted to the side, Fheyanna regarded Betty pensively. The other women curiously watched the two in silence.

"I don't want you to die, either," said Fheyanna softly, "I have sung for your protection whenever you entered my range of awareness, just as I did for your husband and your children."

Betty stared at Fheyanna, dumbfounded. After Lauren had told her that Fheyanna had never done harm to anyone, and after all that she had experienced today, things seemed to appear in a rather different light, and Fheyanna's explanation although not quite comprehensible, somehow made sense in a strange way.

Spreading her arms invitingly, Fheyanna said gently, "Come here."

Hesitantly, Betty stepped forward and let herself be enfolded in Fheyanna's embrace. Reluctantly, she wrapped her arms around the old woman and returned the hug.

Chapter 33

It was early evening when they left the hospital. Charlotte and Fheyanna were both still walking rather tentatively to the car. It had taken some persuasion to convince the doctors to do another check, as to acknowledge that Charlotte was indeed healed. Upon their astonished questioning, Charlotte had told them that her friends had done a healing prayer ceremony for her, and in the end the doctors had reluctantly released her.

Fheyanna had finally agreed to accept Charlotte's invitation to stay at least for a few days, thus, Susan and Lauren drove alone in Susan's car, while Charlotte and Fheyanna left with Betty and Amy.

On the way home, Susan asked, "Could I interest you in dinner at the Chinese restaurant?"

"Hmm," hummed Lauren thoughtfully, and she asked, "I'd love to, but shouldn't we rather collect Lucy from Olivia?"

"Oh, I don't know. Olivia seemed to be quite happy to have company with all the neighbours being away," said Susan. "But if you like, we can call her and ask if she minds."

When they called Olivia from Susan's mobile, Olivia didn't answer.

"She is probably in the garden or went for a walk with Lucy," said Susan, "And she only has landline as far as I know."

"Yes, she has no mobile, but what if something happened to her? What if the burglars came to her place this time?" asked Lauren upset.

"I am fairly certain that they didn't," said Susan, "But I'll call Betty and ask her to stop by Olivia's place to see if she is all right."

After Betty reassured them that she would drive by, and let them know, Lauren reluctantly accepted the dinner invitation.

They had just placed their order when Betty called to tell them that Olivia was not at home, and neither Lucy nor Mr Darcy was to be seen. However, everything looked perfectly normal, and thus, she assumed that Olivia had taken them for a walk.

Their meals arrived, but Lauren was unable to relax, and she could not comprehend how Susan could be so calm.

Now that Charlotte was healed and Fheyanna was being looked after, too, Susan felt an immediate sense of relieve. And since Olivia didn't have anything to do with Von Helsen's company, and they probably wouldn't attack another person in Susan's place yet again ... at least not so soon ... Susan was not worried about Olivia at all. She would have much rather liked to talk about what had happened at the hospital. However, just as she was about to reassure Lauren, her mobile rang.

"Betty? What is it?" asked Susan.

"You had better come home soon. Lucy is tied to Lauren's deck, Mr Darcy is here also, screaming like mad, and Olivia is nowhere to be seen. And Emma is missing also," said Betty upset.

"Shit!" cursed Susan, "We'll be there as soon as we can."

When Betty had dropped off the others, she drove home. Surprised, she noticed that Thomas had already returned from his fishing weekend with their son, Alexander. Entering the house, she was even more surprised to find Ben lounging on the sofa with a can of beer, watching the cricket with Thomas.

"Hello Ben. I thought you were in Melbourne celebrating Ricky's birthday," said Betty.

"Hello Betty. We were. But in the evening he wanted to celebrate with his friends, so there's no room for his old parents," said Ben.

"Oh dear, how did Emma take this?" asked Betty, thinking about how hard it was for Emma now that all of their three sons had left home.

Ben sighed and said, "She was not happy about it. But Olivia saw us coming, and she asked if Emma would like to go for a walk with her. I'm sure that will cheer her up."

"I see," said Betty, "Say, when did they leave?"

"At about four. They are probably back by now," said Ben, casting a glance at the screen.

"Ah, they must be at your place then, as I just stopped by Olivia's and there was no one there."

"Perhaps," said Ben absentmindedly, distracted by the game, his view fixed on the TV again.

"Well, I guess you two don't need me here, so I'm going to see if I can find them to tell them that Charlotte is back home, among other things ... " Betty waited to see if the men wished to know more, but Thomas only said with his eyes glued to the screen, "That's great news, I'm sure they will be delighted to hear it."

Rolling her eyes at the men, Betty turned and said, "Have fun watching the game." Calling Emma at home, Betty received no answer, and Emma's mobile was turned off, thus Betty assumed that they were sitting in the garden, and she decided to drive by. However, when she came to Emma's house, no one opened the door, and checking at Olivia's again, no one was there, either. Since Caroline was working this Sunday, she decided to drive by the café to see if they were there. When Caroline told her that she had not seen them at all today, Betty decided to drive around to Wombat Road to see if she could find any trace of them there.

Everything seemed to be as usual at Susan's place; however, Betty spotted an old Holden with New South Wales number plates and a black, Victorian registered BMW parked at the bend, which resembled Jones' car. She proceeded to drive slowly past the cars, and she cursed her poor memory for remembering numbers, as she couldn't recall Jones' number. However, when she stopped and got out to peek inside, she couldn't see anything that hinted that it belonged to Jones, so she got back in her car and drove further on to Lauren's house. She was just turning into Lauren's driveway, when she saw and heard Mr Darcy screaming loudly, and shortly after Lucy started barking excitedly. Betty noticed with dismay that the dog was tied to the rail and the cockatoo was hopping agitatedly on the rail, screaming at the top of his lungs.

Chapter 34

Sunday was Olivia's day to relax, and apart from the occasional invitation in the evening, she would usually spend the day alone at home, reading and listening to music. This Sunday, however, she had been starting to feel rather uneasy about being alone, as she wasn't only alone at home, but also in the whole street, as all her neighbours were away. And after what had happened to Charlotte, Olivia couldn't help but being constantly aware of how very alone she was, causing her to jump at every slight noise.

She had been extremely relieved when Lauren had asked her to mind Lucy. With the dog in the house she felt far more reassured.

When in the afternoon it became cloudy and a fresh breeze was blowing, Olivia thought it would be nice to go for a walk with Lucy and Mr Darcy. And putting on her leather vest, she put Lucy on the leash, placed the cockatoo on her shoulder and left the house.

As she saw Ben's car pass by, Olivia wondered why they had returned so early. Knowing that the Wilson's family get togethers seemed to be rather disastrous lately, Olivia walked over to Emma's to ask her if she would like to go for a walk.

"How come that Lucy is with you? Is something wrong with Lauren?" asked Emma, after greeting Olivia at the door.

"No, Lauren is fine. She and Susan asked me to mind Lucy as you weren't at home and they wanted to visit Charlotte," said Olivia.

"Ah, I see," said Emma thoughtfully.

"I think the two make a rather cute couple. It also explains Lauren's constantly radiant look," Olivia grinned.

"Mhm," acknowledged Emma. She had known that Lauren and Susan's cover had been blown, as they had appeared at Susan's place together and by that, had told Betty without words that Susan had spent the night with Lauren - again. Of course, Betty had told everyone about the news when she called them from the hospital to inform them about Charlotte's condition.

Olivia went on, "There was someone else in Susan's car also, but I couldn't make out who it was. I am pleased that I decided to visit Charlotte tomorrow. There will be enough people visiting her today. Anyway, I was just about to go for a walk, and I was wondering if you would like to come with me."

Emma was very thankful for the offer. Ben was also rather grateful to Olivia for lending emotional support to his wife, and even more grateful for allowing him to escape and see if Thomas was back from

his trip and watch the cricket with him.

Olivia offered Emma to take Lucy's leash, and deciding to take the shortcut through Olivia's garden, they set off for their walk.

As they were crossing the creek, which was the natural border between Olivia's and Susan's property, Mr Darcy complained rather loudly when Olivia lost her balance for a moment on one of the stepping-stones, forcing the cockatoo to dig his claws into the leather and flap his wings.

"Sorry," apologised Olivia, and ruffled Mr Darcy's feathers on his head as soon as they had reached the other side.

The quartet turned to the left, walking on the narrow path behind the paddocks, heading towards the bush, and Olivia asked, "So, what happened at Ricky's birthday?"

Sighing, Emma said, "He and his brothers made plans to celebrate the rest of the day with his friends from the university, just as Daniel did for the past two years. I don't understand it, Olivia. It doesn't seem as if any of my sons appreciate family anymore at all, even though we all get along quite well. Lukas won't even be here for his next birthday, he is going to be in Bali with his girlfriend."

"Will they at least come home for Christmas?" asked Olivia.

"So far none of them has said otherwise," said Emma, "So, I suppose they will come. They will probably turn up on our birthdays, too, but why won't they ever come in between? They rarely ever even call. Of course I am happy that they are happy and that they have friends and a fulfilled life, but somehow..." Emma sighed and went on, "Somehow I can't help feeling sad that they hardly ever include us in their lives anymore."

Olivia linked her arm with Emma's to give her some comfort.

Emma smiled, and sighing yet again, she said, "I had hoped that with Lauren it might be different. But even she moved to a place of her own after just a few days, although she could have stayed at our place forever."

"Well, she didn't plan it, it just happened to work out this way. And I suppose she also needed to get her own place for her self-confidence," said Olivia.

"I guess you are right," said Emma, "And at least we are talking almost daily, and she does assure me how very much she values our friendship. Nevertheless, I can't help feeling old and excluded since she has fallen for Susan. And Susan isn't even that much younger than I am."

"Would you rather have liked Lauren to fall for you?" asked Olivia, only partly joking.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Emma.

"Then what?" asked Olivia.

"I don't know," said Emma resignedly. "I guess I'm just feeling sorry for myself and a bit rejected."

"I have said it before; I really think you should consider doing something solely for yourself, Emma," said Olivia. "All your life you have bent over backwards to do things for others, and you are still doing it. You are fussing over Ben and over your boys, and now you seem to have adopted Lauren. You are helping her every day, but what do you gain from it, Emma? For you, personally," asked Olivia.

"I love helping her," protested Emma, "And it makes me feel useful and appreciated."

"Exactly, but does it really? And to whom did she give her first signed copy? Susan."

"I did not ask her for it," said Emma defensively, though she had to admit to herself that she had felt quite disappointed about it at the time, and being reminded of it still stung.

"Of course, you did not ask for it, otherwise she would certainly have given it to you. But why did it not occur to Lauren to give you the honour? I'm not saying that she did it intentionally, she most certainly didn't, but nonetheless you would have been the one who deserved it, Emma," said Olivia.

They were interrupted when Lucy started growling. At the bend, in the distance, partly hidden by trees, they could see the blue Holden and a black car. Two men were arguing, and one of them looked like Jones, but neither Olivia nor Emma was sure, and a third guy was leaning against the black car, lighting a cigarette, seemingly disinterested about the argument. Lucy began pulling towards Lauren's place, and so the two women went on with their walk.

Chapter 35

Lauren was beside herself when she learned that Emma was missing too. There was no way she could

sit and eat, so Susan apologised to the waiter and asked if they could take the food with them.

"Can't you drive faster?" asked Lauren nervously.

"I can, but I won't," said Susan with a calm that even surprised herself. "It won't help anyone if we have an accident."

"I know, I know," said Lauren annoyed, and frustrated she exclaimed, "God I thought Mountain Creek was a really quiet country town, but it's worse than Sydney!"

"I can understand that it seems like this to you now," said Susan, and she added tongue in cheek, "But believe me, Mountain Creek usually is a really quiet town, or at least it was till you arrived."

"Well, I'm well known to create havoc wherever I go," replied Lauren cheekily, recognising Susan's intention to lighten the mood. Nonetheless she continued to be exceedingly worried.

When they arrived at Lauren's house, Amy and Thomas were sitting on the deck with Lucy, while Betty and Ben were both agitatedly walking back and forth in front of the house, talking on their mobiles.

Lauren and Susan went up on the deck, but before Amy and Thomas could fill them in, Betty got off the phone, and she was fuming, "This is unbelievable! I finally reached Andrew, and can you imagine that he didn't hear the phone because he was watching the damn cricket?"

"He is only human, Betty," said Ben, who just joined the others on the deck.

"No," exclaimed Betty forcefully, still standing in front of the deck, "He is a police officer!"

"Have you called Charlotte, yet?" asked Susan.

"No," said Amy, "We thought she and Fheyanna should get some rest."

"I will call her," said Susan, "Fheyanna should be able to locate them fairly easily if they are not too far away." However, as she called Charlotte, the line was occupied, and Susan said, "I'll try again later."

Charlotte had told Fheyanna to make herself comfortable on the couch while she prepared some sandwiches for them. They had eaten in companionable silence, and when they were finished, Fheyanna had just been about to answer a question of Charlotte's when she suddenly paused.

Getting up, Fheyanna said, "I must go. The lady with the three sons and the quiet one with the cockatoo are in trouble."

Grasping Fheyanna's arm to hold her back, Charlotte said, "Wait. That must be Emma and Olivia. How do you mean, they are in trouble?"

"I can sense them. They are scared and distraught," explained Fheyanna.

"Why?" asked Charlotte.

"I don't know. I can only sense their feelings. But I can tell that they are very close by. I must find them," said Fheyanna and wanted to extract herself from Charlotte's grip.

"No, wait. We should both rest. It won't help anyone if we exhaust ourselves. I will call the police," said Charlotte.

"No!" exclaimed Fheyanna, upset, "Please don't."

Thinking quickly, Charlotte asked, "Would it be all right if I call Nicholas? He is a good friend of mine, we can trust him. He can bring his friend with the bloodhounds. They will find them."

"All right," said Fheyanna, who knew about Nicholas from Gordon, "But they have to be quick."

"*We are already on our way,*" said Nicholas. "*Betty called and told us that the two are missing, and she can't reach Andrew or Mark. So we are going to do the search on our own.*"

"They are not far," said Charlotte.

"*How do you know? Where are they?*" asked Nicholas.

"I will explain later. But it is fairly certain that they are very close to my place."

"Jones'!" Charlotte and Nicholas exclaimed at once.

"Wait a minute, I will check with someone," and muting the phone, Charlotte asked Fheyanna, "If you go to the window over there, could you tell if they are on the neighbouring property?"

"Our place," breathed Fheyanna. And closing her eyes, she concentrated. "Yes, they are."

"Nick? Positive, they are at Jones' place. Be quick, they are in danger, but do be careful."

"*All right, we just passed Wombat Road. We'll be coming up Cockatoo Drive then. Call Betty and tell her to send the others from the other side.*"

"I will. Good Luck!"

Chapter 36

Emma and Olivia were held captive in the only intact room of the old ruin that had once been Fheyanna's house, gagged and tied to some old wooden garden chairs. The air was stale and the room was stifling hot. They were beginning to believe that if Jones wasn't going to kill them, they would soon die of dehydration or heatstroke. Emma inwardly berated herself for having acted so recklessly.

When Lucy had pulled towards Lauren's house, they rang the doorbell to see if Lauren was there, and while they were waiting, Emma saw the men they had sighted previously passing by. And suddenly she had felt the urge to show everyone that she was not the old and dull overprotective mother hen everyone thought her to be, but an intelligent, feisty woman who could be quite adventurous if she wanted to be. Thus, she handed Lucy's leash to Olivia and said, "I'm going to see what they are up to."

"Wait! You can't spy on them willy-nilly," Olivia tried to stop her, but Emma was determined to find out what was going on, and pursing her lips, she said, "I'm not exactly spying on them; I am going for a walk." And turning around, she walked down the steps.

Olivia was not about to let Emma go alone, so she tied Lucy to the deck, placed Mr Darcy on the rail, and telling them to behave themselves, hurried to catch up with Emma.

They followed the men at a fair distance, so as to look inconspicuous, and they saw them crossing the creek a few metres into the bush.

"I thought it was Jones," said Emma triumphantly, as they were watching the men climbing up to Jones' property, "Different clothes and haircut and without a beard now, but I'm sure it is him."

"Yes," agreed Olivia, "Or at least his ugly twin."

"And it makes you wonder why they parked so far away and why they are sneaking onto the property through the bush," said Emma, "I mean, it is his land, so why don't they just drive all the way to his house?"

"Well, they probably don't want to be seen," said Olivia, "Come on, let's go back."

"Go back, if you like. There is something very fishy going on here, and I'm going to find out what it is," said Emma, and without waiting for a response, she headed towards the creek.

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Olivia followed.

When she reached Emma, who was hiding behind a row of bushes, Emma gestured Olivia to crouch down, and said in a hushed voice, "They went inside. There is no cover around the house, and you can't see inside anyway, so I'm going to wait here till they come out."

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed Olivia, earning a disapproving look and a "Shhh!" from Emma. Lowering her voice, Olivia went on, "What if they stay inside till tomorrow? You can't possibly stay here all night."

"I won't stay all night," whispered Emma, "I don't think they will, either. I'm sure they will come out before long. They are up to something. They definitely don't look like friends spending a weekend together. More like doing business of some sort ... the criminal sort, if you ask me." And turning her view back to the house she said, "Look, they opened the curtains." Pondering her options for a while, she said thoughtfully, "If I head over to the back of the house and then sneak around the corner, perhaps I could get a glimpse inside ... or at least eavesdrop on them ..."

"Now I know you are crazy, Emma," remarked Olivia. "I guess all the emotional stress is getting to you. Let's go home. You can take a nice relaxing bath, read a good book ... do something for yourself."

"I am doing this for myself!" stated Emma annoyed. Why did everybody want her to relax? Did Olivia think she couldn't do a simple investigation just because she was over fifty? If Olivia herself felt like this, fine. But Emma was not about to let herself be restricted by her age. Finally there was something exciting going on, and she would be damned if she let this opportunity pass just because people thought she was too old for adventures. And she went on, "Go home, if you like. I can manage on my own." And without waiting for a response, she headed for the back of the house alongside the bushes, careful to duck low enough as to not to be seen.

Olivia hesitated for a moment, unsure if she should rather go and get help. However, she really did not

want to leave Emma alone with these men, and perhaps it would be better if there were two of them. So in the end she decided to follow Emma.

Now, Olivia was cursing her decision and the damned thing that bit her, as well as Emma's sudden interest in adventures, and most of all Jones and his men. Whatever kind of creature it had been that bit her, it had caused her to cry out, resulting in them being discovered and captured. At least the bite had not been lethal, but gosh her leg hurt! The burning sensation combined with the suffocating heat made her feel as if she was going through purgatory, and for some reason she couldn't help but think of James. If only she had had the guts to invite him for a cup of tea. Now she would never get the chance.

Chapter 37

Betty was talking on the phone with Charlotte when Matt turned into Lauren's driveway, with Andrew following right behind him.

"Please don't tell Andrew about Fheyanna, Betty. And tell the others to keep quiet as well," said Charlotte.

"I will," promised Betty, and she quickly hung up and informed the waiting neighbours.

The friends were not happy when Andrew told them to stay away from Jones' property, and he drove around to Cockatoo Drive as to ensure that Shaun, Nicholas and Sarah wouldn't get into trouble.

"We should have told him about the Lady," said Ben. "Of course he can't do anything without proof." As far as he was concerned the privacy issue of the Lady was rather irrelevant, as he was far more worried for his wife.

"No, Ben," said Betty. "In this case I do not agree. As much as I'm concerned about Emma, we can't jeopardise Fheyanna's safety for Emma's sake. We must find another way to get Andrew to help us."

"Didn't you say they have the bloodhounds with them?" asked Susan.

"Yes," said Betty. "Shaun and the hounds are with them. Why?"

"Bloodhounds are perfect scent hounds, and Shaun has worked with them, so if he sets them on Betty's or Olivia's trail, they will most certainly find them," said Susan. "And if the dogs follow the trail to Jones', I suppose Andrew could accept that as evidence, and he might then give permission to let them search even on Jones' property."

"I'll call Sarah," said Betty quickly, and pulled out her mobile.

Sarah and the others had just grudgingly obeyed Andrew's orders and were leaving the property. When Betty told Sarah about Susan's idea, Sarah asked Shaun about the dogs.

"*Mum? Great idea! We will stop by Olivia's. Shaun will have the dogs search from there,*" said Sarah.

"Excellent!" said Betty, and told the others the news.

Andrew had reported to his superior what was going on, and asked for instructions as to how he should proceed under the circumstances, as he did suspect that Jones had indeed something to do with the disappearance of the two women, even if he had no proof of his suspicion.

He was told that reinforcement would be sent his way with search dogs, and that he should see to it that the neighbours would not interfere with the investigation.

However, when Andrew arrived at Lauren's place, only Amy and Matt were there with Lucy and Mr Darcy.

Assuming the worst, Andrew asked, "Where are the others?"

"Shaun's bloodhounds picked up Olivia's scent trail. The others are following them. They headed for the bush," said Matt.

"Damn!" cursed Andrew, and reaching for his mobile radio, he went back to his car.

In Jones' garden, Thomas, Nicholas and Betty went to hold off Jones who stormed out of the house, outraged about people running around on his property.

Meanwhile Shaun and the others were following the bloodhounds to the far end of the garden where an old, partly overgrown and ruined cottage was almost concealed by the bush. The hounds bayed loudly in front of the wooden door, which was dangling on its hinges. The roof was heavily damaged on this part of the house. However, when Shaun opened the squeaking door and stepped inside, he saw that the rubbish had been shoved to the side to make way to another closed door towards which the dogs were pulling now under continuous loud baying.

As Shaun opened the door, Ben and Lauren rushed in to free Emma, while Sarah and Susan hurried to free Olivia.

After praising his excited dogs, Shaun left the old shack to tell the others that they found the women.

Andrew was doing his best to keep the situation from escalating, however, as Shaun called out that they found Emma and Olivia in the ruin, bound and gagged, a man sprinted from behind the house, and running through the garden, he headed for the bush. Shaun immediately followed him with the dogs. At the same time another man appeared in the open door with a gun in his hand, and grabbing Jones from behind, he held the gun at Jones' back and exclaimed, "Stay where you are, all of you, or I'll shoot him!"

Meanwhile at Lauren's place, Matt exclaimed, "Gordon!" and getting up from his chair, he rushed towards Gordon who was coming out of the bush, frogmarching a young bloke. Following him with Lucy, Amy saw a police car driving up the road.

The bloke struggled and tried to bolt, but even though Gordon was at the end of his strength, with Matt's help he managed to secure the guy.

When the policemen asked what had happened, Gordon told them that he had caught the guy red-handed as he was collecting eggs from a nest hole. "His accomplice made off, but I managed to catch this one."

Amy suddenly jumped as a shot was heard.

Chapter 38

"Oh God!" breathed Charlotte when they heard the shot. As they couldn't see from the window what was going on at Jones' property, she and Fheyanna had settled themselves on the sofa, and Fheyanna had continuously reported what she felt.

Laying a comforting hand on Charlotte's knee, Fheyanna said, "They are all right. I think it hit one of the men whom I don't know. He has lost consciousness, but I can still feel his presence. The others are upset, but not harmed." It was difficult for Fheyanna to feel so many people in her range of awareness, and she started to become more and more exhausted. It was with great relief that she realised it had not been one of their friends who had been injured, as in her condition she could not have helped them. That she could not help the guy was causing her no regrets. His emotions had felt cold and unscrupulous. Tired, Fheyanna leaned back.

An hour later everything had calmed down, and while Fheyanna had dozed off on the sofa, Charlotte could not stand the wait any longer; she had to know what had happened. She got up, and taking the phone with her into the bedroom as to not disturb Fheyanna, she called Betty.

"Everyone is fine, except Jones," said Betty. "He was shot by his companion, and was taken to hospital. The police are still interviewing everyone. Seems like there was a big operation going on ..."

Betty continued relating everything she knew so far, until she was called to be interviewed.

When Charlotte went back into the living room, she felt greatly relieved. Seeing that Fheyanna was still sleeping on the couch, Charlotte grabbed a night gown from her wardrobe, made the bed in the guest

bedroom, and went back to Fheyanna. Gently shaking Fheyanna's shoulder, Charlotte said, "Come on, you will sleep better in the guest bedroom."

Back at their home, Emma and Ben were sitting on the sofa, and Emma was leaning into Ben's embrace. They sat in silence for a long time just savouring each other's company, until Emma said quietly, "Ben?"

"Mhmhm," Ben hummed.

"It's probably the wrong time to ask, but I have been thinking while I was ..." Emma trailed off, not sure how to express that while they were held captive and she had thought they were going to die, she had pondered about her life, and what she was missing.

"What have you been thinking?" asked Ben gently. He had been so worried about losing his wife, and his heart ached when he thought about what she must have gone through.

Turning to look at her husband, Emma asked, "Do you remember our first year together?"

A smile appeared on Ben's face, and he said, "Of course, I do."

"Do you remember our dream?"

Caressing Emma's hair, Ben said, "Yes, we wanted to see the world after I finished my training, backpacking and sleeping under the stars."

Nodding, Emma said quietly, "We never did."

"You still want to see the world?" asked Ben softly.

"Not backpacking, and I would prefer to sleep in a proper bed, but yes, I would still love to travel the world with you, Ben," said Emma.

Kissing his wife tenderly, he asked, "Where would you like to go first?"

A beaming smile spread over Emma's face, and she said, "Europe. It's winter over there, and I would love to see the Alps when they're covered in snow."

"Would you like to go before or after Christmas?" asked Ben.

Hesitating just shortly, Emma said determinedly, "Over Christmas."

Ben looked at his wife in surprise, and seeing her determined and happy face, he realised what this decision entailed, and he asked, grinning, "A cosy little cottage in Austria, just the two of us?"

"Mhmm, sounds heavenly, doesn't it?"

"Indeed," agreed Ben.

When Olivia finally came home she felt decidedly uncomfortable as she walked through the empty rooms of her old house, while Mr Darcy happily wandered over the ropes to his food bowl.

After showering and changing into comfortable clothes, Olivia felt somewhat better and went into the kitchen to make herself something to eat. As she put the kettle on, she jumped when she heard the doorbell. Scared, she stared at the door, unable to move.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she heard Caroline's voice call, "Olivia? It's only me, Caroline." And hastily Olivia went to open the door.

Surprised, Caroline hugged her friend, when Olivia threw her arms around her, incoherently babbling apologies and thankyou's amid sobs and tears.

"Gosh, Olivia, you are shaking. Come, let's sit down," said Caroline, slowly extracting herself from the embrace.

Caroline led her friend to the sofa, and when Olivia had calmed somewhat, she told Caroline about her experiences.

Caroline had already heard the gist of it from Betty, which was why she had come over to look in on Olivia. However, she had not expected her to be so shaken, and when Olivia paused for a moment, Caroline asked, "May I get you something to drink?"

"Actually, I was about to make something to eat," said Olivia, sniffing and got up. Caroline followed her, and said, "All right, let's go into the kitchen and rustle up a sandwich."

Over the sandwiches Caroline continued to listen to Olivia's chatting about her experiences of the day,

not realising how late it was getting.

When Caroline made an attempt to leave, Olivia asked her if she would mind staying the night, as she was still feeling decidedly uncomfortable alone in the house. Caroline was not too keen on spending the night on her own either, and so they went upstairs and got themselves ready for bed, while Mr Darcy climbed onto his usual roosting place next to the window in Olivia's bedroom.

Caroline settled on the bed, waiting for her friend to fall asleep. Both felt quite reassured by each other's presence, and shortly after they drifted into dreamless sleep.

Susan and Lauren were sitting on a bench on Susan's deck, watching the sunset, Lucy lay outstretched on the deck, 'running' in her dreams, and Gordon had retired to the guest bedroom.

"What a day!" said Susan.

"What a week," said Lauren.

"Indeed," agreed Susan.

"I'm so glad that everyone is all right."

"Well, everyone except Jones," said Susan.

"Yeah, but he was a criminal. Imagine how many animals died because of him," said Lauren

"True. Nonetheless, I wouldn't have wished him to die," said Susan.

Pondering for a while, Lauren asked, "Do you think we could have saved him?"

"I don't know," said Susan pensively, "Before today I never even imagined that I could do such a thing. I thought it was something only Fheyanna and maybe a few other gifted people could do. But now I'm wondering if Fheyanna could teach me."

"Yes, it would be great if she would teach us," said Lauren, "It was an amazing experience. Perhaps we could work together, as we did for Fheyanna, you sing and I do the connection, because I have no talent for singing, absolutely none whatsoever."

Susan grinned and said, "It worked with me singing the wrong song, so I suppose you could do it without singing, too. Perhaps the singing just serves to enhance the energy, or it makes concentration easier because it is meditative or something? We will have to ask Fheyanna."

"Do you think she will be more sociable, now that all the neighbours have proved that she has nothing to fear from them?" asked Lauren.

"I don't know," said Susan, "But the fear of how people react is not the only reason for her living as a recluse. Being among people has always been a problem for her because she feels the presence of everyone in her range of awareness, and it is difficult for her to block them out. That's how she met her partner, Sheena. She cared for Fheyanna when she was suffering from too many people on the ship to Australia, most of whom were children, and all of them were more or less traumatised from the war. The constant awareness of all of them was too much for her, but of course no one would believe her. Only Sheena did."

"Oh God," breathed Lauren, "The hospital must have been torture for her."

"Yes," said Susan quietly.

Feeling Susan's mood turn sombre, Lauren prepared to get up and asked, "How about a cup of tea?"

Smiling at the obvious attempt to cheer her up, Susan got up and reaching out her hand to Lauren, she said, "Sounds good. Come on, let's go inside."

When they had comfortably settled themselves on the sofa, and were sipping their tea, Lauren said hesitantly, "Perhaps it is the wrong time to talk about it, but I'm wondering ... with all the events that have happened, we didn't really get the chance to talk about us. What do you feel? Do you think there could be a future for us?"

Smiling at Lauren over her cup, Susan said, "You are right, we didn't get much of a chance to talk, or even think about us. What am I feeling? ... hm ... I am feeling so very comfortable with you that it is actually hard to imagine going back to being alone again, and this although I had really come to love my solitary life. I guess that means I am indeed thinking that there could be a future for us. And what are your feelings?"

Lauren blushed and said quietly, "I am seriously falling for you." And looking up at Susan, who was smiling broadly, she continued, "But I'm afraid."

When Lauren did not elaborate, Susan set her cup on the table, and turning to face Lauren, she asked gently, "What are you so afraid of?"

Staring into her cup, Lauren explained, "My past experiences haven't been the greatest, and I am still somehow recuperating from my last relationship. I know I can't compare you to my former partners, because you are totally different. I have never known anyone like you. And I don't know what your expectations are."

Furrowing her brow, Susan asked, "What kind of expectations do you mean?"

"Any kind," said Lauren. "I mean, you are wealthy, you have a degree, you are a well-respected woman here in town; I'm not in your league."

"Whoever gave you that idea?" asked Susan surprised. "Is this why you have been acting so peculiar on occasions?"

"Huh?" asked Lauren confused.

"Lauren, I don't know what people are saying about me, but there is no reason to think that you are not in my league," said Susan. "First of all, I am not 'wealthy'. I'm fairly well-off, I'll give you that, but if you continue writing the way you are doing, you will probably be wealthier than I will ever be. Does this bother me? Not in the slightest. I don't give a damn about how much or how little money someone has. I have a degree, all right, and I even have my own practise, and I can't complain about too few clients. All of this is simply a consequence of years of hard work and the love for my profession. You don't have a degree, so what? Your book is your degree, Lauren. You have worked hard to accomplish it, and you obviously love writing, and people love what you write, so the success and the reputation will follow eventually."

"And what if they don't? What if I never manage to sell another book?" asked Lauren, setting her now empty cup on the table.

"Do you love writing?" asked Susan seriously.

"Yes," said Lauren.

"Great. And you are good at it," said Susan. "So, all you need to do is to continue writing, and hopefully your books will continue to be published. And if you don't make a fortune with it, who cares? Just do what you love doing. Okay?"

"Okay," said Lauren, and with a shy look at Susan, she asked, "And I guess you don't mind my heritage, huh?"

"I don't even know what your heritage is, Lauren," said Susan. "And I definitely don't mind. But, if you tell me you are actually from Mars, I expect you to give me details," joked Susan.

Grinning, Lauren said, "I'm not. But I'm not exactly white, either."

"You don't say!" remarked Susan with feigned surprise.

Blushing, Lauren chuckled at herself, and said, "Okay, that was a stupid statement."

"Unless you thought I was blind," said Susan, grinning.

Heaving a sigh, Lauren said, "All right, my mother is Welsh-Aboriginal. My father is Australian with some Aboriginal background."

"That's interesting; you are sharing the Welsh background with Fheyanna," said Susan, "And your parents live in Sydney?"

"No, they live in Brisbane," said Lauren. "At least I suppose they still live there. I'm not in contact with them anymore. They never forgave me that I didn't go to university and instead moved to Newcastle with my girlfriend, who was 15 years older."

"Even your mother, wow, that's hard," said Susan sympathetically. "Did you ever try to see if they might have changed their minds?"

Lauren nodded, and said, "Yes, I called them 1996 when said girlfriend dumped me after ten years, and I stood there with little money and nowhere to go." And with a shrug of her shoulders she continued, "My mother hung up on me, and when I tried again, my father at least listened to me, but then he asked if I would consider marrying and going to university. When I told him that I didn't want to study anymore, and that same-sex marriage wasn't possible as far as I knew, he said I shouldn't call again unless I would 'come to my senses'. Well, and since I haven't 'come to my senses', and I never will, I have never called them again."

"Hm, that's 15 years ago," said Susan thoughtfully, "Times have changed. Perhaps they have also?"

Shaking her head, Lauren said, "Nah, I don't think so." And grinning she added, "If you were a guy

and you would marry me, they might consider talking to me again," and seriously she continued, "Though they would wonder why you as a white, wealthy professional would want a loser like me."

Heaving a sigh, Susan shook her head and said, "Now I understand your anxiety." And taking Lauren's hand between hers, she said, "And to tell you why I want you ... the first thing that touched me was your book, I really like the way you write, Lauren, and I can safely say that I am not biased about this, as I read it before I knew anything about you. Okay, Olivia recommended the book to me, but she didn't say anything about you at first, and she has recommended many books to me in the past, and I did not like all of them. Next, I looked you up on the publisher's website, and I was delighted when I found your photo there." Susan gently caressed Lauren's face while she continued, "You are so beautiful, Lauren. And when you came into my practice with Emma and Lucy, Gosh! I had a hard time concentrating on Lucy instead of just blatantly staring at you and asking you out for dinner right away as I would have liked."

Lauren chuckled and said, "You are pretty good at hiding your feelings. I didn't notice any of that."

"As you said, I'm a professional," said Susan deadpan. "But I'm not finished, yet." And playing with a lock of Lauren's long hair, she continued, "At first I became a bit reluctant when I learned that you are chatting with all the neighbours already, knowing how much they all love to gossip. But now I have come to truly admire you for your easy-going way with people, as I have learned that I don't have to hide from them who I am. They are not like my father. And even those whom I knew from childhood, they are not like their parents, who were condemning Fheyanna. However, you coming here, capturing everybody's heart in just a few days, and getting actively engaged in the issues of the neighbourhood, fitting in as if you had been here forever ... well, at first this was a bit frightening for me, but now I think it is awesome."

Blushing, Lauren said, "I would never have imagined that it would be like this. I have never been very social in my life. I have always been the outsider. This is the first time in my life that so many people just accept me as I am. From the very beginning they treated me as if I belonged. A few times, when I lay in bed at the end of the day, I was scared that sooner or later this might change, and they would turn against me after all. But the next day usually something happened, and I simply forgot about my fears and just acted without thinking."

"Well, your forgetting about fears seems to be contagious," said Susan, grinning, and sliding her fingers over Lauren's arm, she added in a loving voice, "In your vicinity one just can't help but feel comfortable."

"Except, maybe Betty," remarked Lauren.

"Betty is in a class of her own," said Susan, "She doesn't like to forget her fears, she rather denies them and relishes in bitching and lamenting. But as it seems, with the combined effort, yours and Fheyanna's, even she has changed. I was quite impressed when she defended Fheyanna's privacy as Ben said we should have told Andrew about her."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Lauren. "Charlotte was right after all. She told me in the beginning that Betty was actually all right, and not the stupid bitch I thought her to be."

"Mhm," hummed Susan, and leaning closer towards Lauren, she whispered, "Before we get carried away with talking about other people again ... I would rather continue showing you how much I want you..."

Lauren whimpered from bliss as their lips met, however, after a while she reluctantly ended the kiss and said, "Uh ... Gordon."

"Huh?" uttered Susan confused, and looked around. Not seeing him anywhere, she asked, "What about him?"

"Nothing, I would just prefer to continue in privacy, as I don't want him to walk in on us," said Lauren, blushing.

"I guess you are right. Wouldn't want to give the poor man a heart attack," said Susan smirking. And getting up, she held out her hand to Lauren and said, "Shower, then bedroom?"

Smiling broadly, Lauren let herself be pulled up and said, "Sounds good."

Chapter 39

Emma and Ben had managed to book a last-minute offer of a two week holiday over Christmas and New Year in a rather secluded cabin in the Austrian Alps, followed by four weeks touring through the Alpine regions of Europe. When they told their sons about their plans and about the events that had transpired, they all were flabbergasted that their mother was voluntarily missing out on Christmas, especially after such a traumatic experience.

"Oh, it was not really traumatic; it was an exciting adventure and rather an eye-opening experience. And I am not missing out on Christmas, either. I am going to have the most romantic Christmas of my life," was Emma's response, and Ben was delighted to see his wife glowing with gleeful excitement.

The whole family had gathered for a small family celebration a week before Emma and Ben departed, and it had been the best time Emma had had with her family in many years.

Ricky, their youngest son, was not too thrilled about his mother's recovered adventurous spirit, and he was quite worried about his parents driving around snowy mountains in foreign countries by themselves. Ben reassured him that he was not adventurous enough to drive on the 'wrong side of the road', and much less under such conditions; they would travel around by train, bus and cable cars.

"And horse-drawn sleighs," added Emma cheerfully, and her eyes were twinkling excitedly, making her appear so much younger that her sons could only stare at her in amazement.

"I don't get how the two of you can be so adventurous all of a sudden. Especially you, Mum," said Ricky, "Thinking that the most adventurous thing you let us do was to accompany you and Dad for a bushwalk and listen to the Lady of the Creek. You didn't even allow us to dangle our feet out the window of Puffing Billy!"

"That's not entirely true," Lukas defended his mother, "She did allow Daniel and me to do that once." And he grinned at his mother as he recalled the event.

Smirking, Emma said to Ricky, "You do have a rather selective memory, if I may say so. You do not recollect the reason why I didn't let you do that, and that we only ever rode the Puffing Billy when we went to visit your grandmother in Ferntree Gully?"

"It is very unfortunate that you can't remember this first ride," said Ben apologetically, "You were only two then, your grandmother had just moved to Ferntree Gully, and your mother actually must have held you out the window too, as when your grandmother and I met you at the train in Belgrave, all of you were covered in soot." He chuckled as he recalled the sight of them.

"Nanna was so not amused," said Lukas, chuckling.

"Talking about old ladies," Daniel remarked, "What is it you were hinting at when you called, regarding the Lady of the Creek?"

As Emma told them the story about Fheyanna, the boys were rather disillusioned that the Lady of the Creek wasn't dangerous at all, but was actually just an old woman.

"Oh, but she is not just an old lady," said Emma, "After all, she has some very special qualities."

"Well, maybe. Nonetheless, I think Grandpa's story had more thrill," said Ricky.

"Grandpa surely knew how to spin a yarn," said Ben with a grin. "And although he always swore that they were true, he seems to have been rather generous with regards to spicing them up."

The family laughed. They had a great time recalling memories, and when it was time to leave even Ricky was convinced that the change in their parents was a good one.

Emma smiled as she recalled the evening with her sons, and while she was setting the table for a farewell barbecue, her thoughts drifted to her neighbours. Everyone had agreed to come, even Fheyanna and Gordon. When Emma had met Fheyanna at Charlotte's the day after her adventure, she had instantly taken the old lady to her heart. Amazed, she had listened to Fheyanna, and later to Charlotte after Fheyanna had excused herself and went to bed. Emma felt very happy that Fheyanna had finally decided to end her hermit life, and she was very glad that as long as people were calmly living their day-to-day life, Fheyanna seemed to be able to cope with the constant awareness of the neighbours. However, although she got several offers from neighbours to move in with them, Fheyanna wanted to stay in her cottage, but she had gladly accepted the offer of the neighbours to visit her and to help her with her garden as well as with repairs to the cottage, and occasionally she accepted invitations from the neighbours as well.

Emma's thoughts were interrupted by the chime of the doorbell, and since Ben was occupied cooking the steaks Emma went to open the door.

"Hello Amy! Come in," said Emma, surprised.

"Hi Emma," said Amy, "I hope you don't mind that I'm early. I can help you with the preparations if you like."

"Of course I don't mind," said Emma, "However, there is not much left to help with, I'm as good as finished. Where is Marjory?"

"She will come later, unfortunately," grumbled Amy. "After she cleaned the kitchen, talked to the carpenter and fumigated the house."

Puzzled, Emma led Amy to the set table in the garden, and asked, "Didn't she just fumigate it a few weeks ago?"

Seating herself, Amy lit a cigarette, and after taking a long drag and exhaling slowly, she said, "Yes, but today she spotted a huntsman in the kitchen."

"Uh oh," said Emma, barely holding back a chuckle, while Ben turned back to the barbecue to hide his grin. Marjory's arachnophobia, as well as her general dislike of insects and other creatures, was a well-known fact in the neighbourhood.

Taking another long drag of her cigarette, Amy exclaimed, "I tell you, the woman will send me to an early grave if she goes on like this!" And while Emma poured them a glass of wine, Amy recounted, "It started with her complaining about the salad I was going to make. I know I'm not the greatest cook in the world, but really, what is there to complain about a simple garden salad? Anyway, she kept pestering me until I had enough. I put everything down, told her to suit herself and left." Taking a sip of wine and another drag of her cigarette, Amy went on, "I was just calming my nerves with a cigarette on the deck when I heard an ear-splitting scream, followed by loud banging. Of course I immediately rushed into the house ... and stopped dead in the doorway when I saw her manically hitting the kitchen bench with a frying pan, the ingredients of the salad now decorating every surface of the kitchen, not to mention walls and the ceiling." Heaving a sigh, Amy ended the story, "Needless to say, the huntsman didn't survive the flogging, and neither did the pan or the bench top for that matter, not to mention the salad. That's why I arrived empty-handed."

Ben and Emma broke into howling laughter, and grinning, Amy said, "All right, in hindsight it seems quite funny. But the kitchen bench was only a year old, and it was my best pan for Christ's sake! And I seriously thought mother had lost it completely." And while Emma and Ben still couldn't control their laughter, Amy emptied her glass of wine.

"And you are not helping her to clean up?" asked Emma when she had calmed down.

"Nope, no way," said Amy. "She is an adult woman; she is very well capable of cleaning up her own mess."

"Gosh, you are hard on your poor old mother," said Ben, grinning.

Amy snorted and said, "Poor old mother ... please say that again when she is here, I would love to hear her giving you a dressing-down for a change."

Chuckling, Ben said, "I guess I rather pass on that one."

Mr Darcy didn't quite know what to make of Olivia's change in behaviour. In the mornings he now had to wake his mistress, as the funny thing on her bedside table seemed to have lost its voice so that Mr Darcy had to do the job in its place ... not that he minded much, as Olivia now used to greet him exceedingly happily, and she kept humming merry tunes all morning. She also must have lost her ability to count somehow, as now his nuts and seeds bowl always contained one more of his favourite nuts than it had before. During the days, she had been staying at home for some time now, however, in the afternoons and evenings she barely had time for Mr Darcy anymore, and that was something he would have objected to rather fiercely, had it not been James, the marvellous toymaker, with whom she now used to spend her time.

Mr Darcy knew James well, as he used to work in the garden several times a week, and he always used to spend a few minutes talking to Mr Darcy. However, the cockatoo had not known that James was such a great toymaker, and now he brought a new one for him every day. Today, James was even

accompanying him and Olivia to Emma's, and he had brought several little cardboard boxes on a string, in which there were treats hidden, as Mr Darcy suspected.

Thus, Mr Darcy was not going to complain about Olivia's changed behaviour, since over all his life had changed for the better ... "*Yes, definitely better,*" he thought as he had chewed through the first cardboard box and found a shelled almond.

Meanwhile, Olivia was laughing with the others about Amy's latest story, which she had repeated now that all the neighbours, with the exception of Marjory and Gordon, had arrived. As the laughter had abated, Olivia looked at James who was sitting next to her, watching Mr Darcy cracking the almond. A fond smile appeared on her face as she recalled the day after their adventure.

She had got up rather late, woken up by Mr Darcy's imitated sound of her alarm clock. Caroline had only groaned and rolled over, but Olivia knew that the cockatoo would not stop until she got up to give him breakfast. Thus, she had tiredly padded downstairs, followed by an excitedly babbling Mr Darcy.

She had just finished with the bird's breakfast preparation, and decided to stay up and brew some coffee when the doorbell chimed. Thinking that it was probably Emma, she didn't bother about her appearance and padded barefoot and still unkempt and in her nightwear to open the door.

Flushing crimson, she stared speechlessly at James who was holding a bouquet in his hands and stammered, "Uh, sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. I just ... I heard about what happened, and I just wanted to ask if you are all right." And remembering the flowers, he held them out to Olivia and said, "And I wanted to give you these."

As Olivia shyly reached for the flowers, and said, "Thank you," he was about to turn around, but Olivia stopped him, saying, "Please, don't go. Come in. I'll just have a quick shower." And to Olivia's relief, he had accepted the invite. Just a minute later, however, as James had just sat down on the couch, Olivia wished she had not been so quick with her invitation, and she blushed yet again, as Caroline trotted downstairs, dishevelled and just in T-shirt and underwear, and mumbled, "Morning Olivia. Say, I lost one of my earrings, if you find it in bed ... oh! Uh, ... good morning James!" And as he looked disbelieving from one woman to the other, Caroline rescued the helplessly embarrassed Olivia by explaining, "Uh, don't get the wrong impression, James. It's not what it looks like. I only stayed with her as her friend, because she felt uncomfortable alone in the house after what has happened. I'll be gone in a minute," and she turned and rushed upstairs.

Now, Olivia had to grin at the memory. It had taken her quite some time to regain her composure. Over breakfast James and she had tentatively started to talk, and during the last week, while Olivia had taken leave from work to recover, she and James had become quite comfortable with each other.

Marjory arrived, overdressed and enveloped in a cloud of sweet perfume, as always.

"*Gosh, she looks like a Toorak matron, though her hat would be more suitable for a Buckingham Palace garden party,*" thought Lauren.

Marjory sat down at the head of the table, adjacent to Ben and Thomas as usual, leaving the last place between Fheyanna and James free.

"Caroline, I must say that you are quite talented at choosing employees," said Marjory, "Even though the girl's English leaves a lot to be desired, she is rather skilled at cleaning. She was done before I finished getting quotes to the pest control services and the carpenters, and she did it very well."

"You hired Pakshi to clean up your mess?" asked Amy in disbelief.

Raising an eyebrow at her daughter, who was sitting at the other end of the table, Marjory said, "I hired her to clean up the mess *you* refused to clean up."

"I might have thought about it, had you offered to pay me," countered Amy.

"I beg your pardon?" said Marjory indignantly, "Pay you to clean up the mess in your own kitchen, which *you* caused by not sufficiently cleaning the house? I don't think so. By the way I got you a reasonable offer from a carpenter, and I will pay for the professional fumigation." And ponderingly she added, "I am also thinking of hiring the girl to clean the house properly on a regular basis, since you are obviously incapable of doing it on your own."

Amy took a deep breath, and decided to remain silent for the sake of the neighbours who were giving her looks of sympathy, but didn't dare to interfere in the dispute between mother and daughter.

"The next batch of the meat is ready, would you like some," Ben asked Marjory, hoping to reduce the tense mood.

"Yes, thank you, Benjamin," said Marjory politely, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

Sometime later, the doorbell chimed, and while Emma went to open it, Ben got up to get fresh cans of beer for Thomas and himself.

The remaining friends broke into laughter as Marjory disgustedly fished a fly out of her glass of water with a spoon, wondering why it had been attracted to the water rather than to Lauren's lemonade, and Amy remarked dryly, "It probably committed suicide upon smelling your perfume."

Ignoring the comment and the laughter, Marjory glanced intrigued at the sophisticated looking elderly man, who was just led through the garden by Emma. "*Finally someone with style,*" thought Marjory "... *apart from this ridiculous pony tail ...*" and she raised her eyebrow at the aesthetically offensive hairdo.

Several people at the table did a double take as they recognised that it was Gordon, dressed as if he was going to attend a business meeting.

As Gordon reached the table, he sniffed, and smiling, he said, "I like this perfume; it reminds me of my mother."

The others chuckled at seeing Marjory's face.

Realising his *faux pas*, Gordon tried to explain, however, he only dug himself deeper by saying, "She died very young."

The others broke into howling laughter, and Gordon stammered, "Uh, what I meant to say was ..."

"I know what you meant," said Marjory in a surprisingly gentle tone, and casting a quick annoyed glance at the others, she continued, "Don't mind them. Sit down next to me." And shoving Ben's plate aside, she pointed at the seat adjacent to her.

Nodding politely, Gordon took the offered seat, and introduced himself to Marjory.

Heaving a sigh, Emma took her dishes to clear space for Ben, and sat down between Fheyanna and James.

Leaning towards Emma and laying a comforting hand on her arm, Fheyanna said quietly, "She may just have found a cure for her permanent discontent."

Turning to the others, Gordon excused himself for being late, and explained that he had been to Melbourne to see the solicitor about buying Jones' property. Gordon felt that his solitary life had come to an end, and he also quite liked the place, and the style of Jones' house appealed to him, thus he had decided to find out if he could buy it for a reasonable price. "The house will be up for sale after the legal matters are settled."

"Are you going to sell your old house then?" asked Ben.

"No, I will keep it as a retreat," said Gordon, "I have grown too accustomed to the solitude to give it up forever."

"It seems we are living in a time of change," said Fheyanna, smiling.

"Indeed," said Ben, and raising his can of beer he toasted, "Here's to positive changes!"

"Hear, hear!" responded the neighbours.

And raising her glass of wine, Emma said, "Here's to Lauren, with whom all the excitement started!"

"Here's to terrific neighbours," said Lauren.

More toasts were made, the neighbours wished Emma and Ben a wonderful time in Europe, and all were enjoying the get-together and the balmy evening.

At some point, Lauren became silent, and when Lucy became restless, and Lauren got up to walk with her to the far edge of the garden, Susan followed them. At the end of the garden, Lauren stopped and looked contemplatively at the red sunset. Stepping next to Lauren, Susan put an arm around her partner and asked, "Are you apprehensive about the future?"

Smiling, Lauren looked at Susan and said, "A bit." And turning fully towards her, Lauren linked her arms around Susan's neck and continued, "But I'm also very much looking forward to it."

"So am I," said Susan and leaned forward.

Epilogue

Two nights before Emma's departure, Lauren invited her for dinner and a chat. They hadn't spent

much time together recently, and Lauren really wanted to talk to Emma before she left for Europe. Lauren didn't hear Emma arrive, and she looked up when Lucy dashed to the back door. Surprised she noticed that Emma had arrived a bit earlier than expected.

Emma was rather taken aback when she saw that Lauren was wearing an apron and a delicious smell wafted through the house. She noticed the table impeccably set, with an embroidered tablecloth and matching serviettes and fine china, and as a final touch, there was a vase of flowers on the table.

"What on earth brought on this domesticity? I was expecting frozen pizza! Is it Susan's influence?" asked Emma rather touched by the effort Lauren was making.

"Well, sort of," replied Lauren. "It is nice to cook when your efforts are appreciated. I thought we eat inside. It's such a humid evening, and the mozzies would eat us alive out there. Come through, I'm almost there, just waiting for the bread to warm."

While Emma perched herself on a stool at the kitchen bench, Lauren poured her a glass of wine. "I should have invited Ben too," said Lauren, "But I really wanted some time just with you before you leave."

"That's okay, Ben understands," said Emma, and added, "The boys are giving him a send-off at the pub, so it worked out well."

They chatted for a while, and when the bread was ready, Lauren ushered Emma to the table. Lauren had made an effort with the dinner, too. She had cooked Emma's favourite, moussaka, and had prepared a couple of dips to go with the bread for the entrée.

"Gosh this looks delicious! You never cease to amaze me, Lauren. I never pictured you as a gourmet cook," said Emma.

"You don't think I am becoming too countrified?" asked Lauren, "I am becoming rather fond of housework, gardening and cooking. It rather terrifies me!" and taking a sip of wine, she went on, "I do appreciate all the help you have given me, and your friendship, of course. I wanted to show my appreciation."

"You probably helped me more than I helped you," said Emma. "Remember when we first met on the game server? Who would have thought that we would become such good friends and that you would achieve success in such a short time."

"Yes, I just heard from my publisher, they accepted my second novel. The first one is going to be released internationally in the New Year. I am finding it a bit hard to absorb it all. Perhaps I'm doing the 'domestic bit' to make sure that my feet stay firmly on the ground," answered Lauren, "However, you'll be flying soon!"

"Well yes, we are off on our second honeymoon in a couple of days. How is it going with Susan? Do you have any firm plans for the future?"

"Just a moment, I need to get the moussaka out of the oven."

When they settled down to their meal, accompanied by a delicious Greek salad, Lauren chose her words carefully,

"We both want to take it slowly, so we're not moving in together yet. But I guess we will eventually. I do have some reservations, but on the whole I do feel very positive about the future. Susan wants us to go on a short holiday in the New Year, perhaps to Fiji, so we can get to know each other better; and she really does need a break. Personally, I would prefer to spend the time here, doing ordinary things. I really enjoy it when we do things together around the property, and we could relax by riding, going on picnics ..." Lauren suddenly stopped, blushing furiously at the memory of implicating Emma and putting her in a position of having to lie to her friends.

"Now that you mention it, we never did discuss what 'we' did on that picnic. I'm still rather curious," said Emma grinning.

"Believe me, you don't want to know," mumbled Lauren.

"Oh but I do. Perhaps I could add it to my list of 'things to do with Ben'," joked Emma.

To change the subject and to avoid any further personal questioning, Lauren asked, "How is Ben after all the traumatic events of the last weeks?"

"You know, Ben is Ben," answered Emma, "He just bumbles along, taking everything in his stride. He is looking rather smug and pleased with himself lately, constantly thinking up interesting things for us to do. I used to be able to read him like a book. Now, I can't ever tell what he is up to next. Be careful what you wish for! It's all a bit exhausting. He is thinking of taking on someone next year to help with the

workload. It will give us a chance to travel a bit more. Actually, I have plans of my own. I'm not sure how it will go, but I thought I might start giving French classes a couple of nights a week. I could cope with beginners and intermediate level, but I'll have to see what response I get ..."

"That's great!" interrupted Lauren. "Count me in. I studied French at school, but my French is rather rusty now. I am sure Susan would come too, it would be nice for us to do it together ..." For the second time, Lauren stopped in mid-sentence when Susan was mentioned. She was acutely aware of the fact that her relationship with Susan would change her relationship with Emma. And more so, she was aware that Emma knew this too. And with a faltering voice, for something to say, she added, "We are so lucky Emma."

"We are rather," replied Emma, not being entirely sure who the 'we' referred to in Lauren's statement, and then added, "Let's not spoil the evening by getting sentimental and soppy," and with her eyes glistening with tears, she raised her glass,

"Here's to our friendship, may we treasure it forever!"

"I'll second that," replied Lauren, lifting her glass.

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