

1.

Only the faded floral armchair beside the door was empty. Apart from that the house looked just as it always had, sitting there smiling away at the end of the driveway, the verandah cluttered with boxes and bags. Her view was slightly obscured from where she sat behind the steering wheel but no doubt there'd be boots lined up along the wall, hats and Driza-Bones hanging on hooks, saddle blankets and tack scattered all over the place. What was the expression – the more things change, the more they stay the same? Well, almost the same, but not entirely.

There were weeds strangling what was left of the garden, paint peeling from the white timber fences, a crushed Coke can littering the once spotless path. But apart from all that she could have been in a time warp. The horses were here still. Must be a dozen or more. She hadn't been sure they would be after all these years, but here they were freckling the paddocks, heads lowered, chewing at tufts of grass to while away the day.

Yes, it all seemed pretty much the way it had been before she left. Except for one thing: the quiet. No people, no cars, no noise. Only the sound of wind rustling through gumleaves and the humming of cicadas working their way up to a crescendo somewhere above her head.

Eve took a deep breath and stepped down from the kombi, everything inside her shaking. Maybe being back here again wasn't going to be as easy as she'd thought.

She bent over to open the gate. Damn. It was locked, padlocked, but maybe she had the key. She went back to the van and rummaged around in her bag until she found the set of keys, then tried each one, jamming them into the heavy metal lock that held the chain fast, turning them one way and then the next. But no luck.

‘Shit. Now what do we do, Banjo?’

The rust-coloured kelpie pricked his ears and stood to attention, giving her a lick on the hand.

‘Hmm, no help. Thanks anyway, mate.’

She leaned on the gate and rubbed the dog’s head. He sat and nuzzled against her leg, water dripping from his tongue. A magpie flew down onto the grass nearby, eyeing the pair as it strutted around pecking at the ground. Banjo stared back, watched its every move, let out a soft whine.

‘Stay.’

Late afternoon sun warmed the back of her neck. She gave the gate one last rattle, half hoping it would do the trick. When it didn’t work she kicked it, refusing to wince when her boot connected with metal. The magpie flapped away and Banjo’s ears drooped.

‘Oh well, no use just standing around, may as well leave the van here and head on in.’

The side door of the kombi slid open with a clunk. Eve hauled a duffle bag from the back seat before leaning all her weight against the door and slamming it closed. Must get that bloody thing fixed one day. She shoved the bag through the gap between the fence railings and climbed through after it. Banjo scrambled under and darted up the driveway, head down, sniffing in the glut of fresh smells. Bag slung over her shoulder, she followed along behind.

Her grip tightened around the handles of her bag as she approached the house she’d fled as a seventeen-year-old. Everything then had been so crazy. She’d stormed out of the place without looking back, but inside she’d felt her whole life being sucked into a vortex, leaving just the shell of her, the part that was walking out the gate.

And that had been the end of the only life and place she’d ever known.

Now she was back, but it wouldn’t be for long. This time she’d leave with

something behind her, some cash to set herself up, maybe even the chance to get a place of her own.

Banjo's bark snapped her from her reverie. 'What is it, boy?' He stopped and turned in front of her, still barking, his tail whipping the air like a lethal weapon. A goose waddled towards them, swaggering along like a security guard, unperturbed by the dog's complaints. As it got closer it stretched out its neck, pointed its crusty orange beak and let out a loud hiss. Banjo cowered, then slunk behind Eve's legs. The goose turned and headed back to the dam, job done.

'You're a real hero, aren't you mate?'

Banjo inched out of his hiding place, tail now firmly between his legs. She whistled and he jumped up and darted around in circles, clearly happy the threat was gone, enjoying the space and freedom after the long drive. The knot between her shoulders softened. What had it been – four hours on the road with only a quick coffee stop? She'd smoked too many cigarettes on the way and listened to way too much country radio. It was late afternoon now. The sun already sinking behind the hills, the sky marbled, pink and orange and mauve. A watercolour painting in a huge outdoor gallery. A family of ducks fluttered down and landed at the side of the dam. They plopped into the water one by one, the ducklings following along in a line behind their parents, leaving a pattern of circles rippling out across the surface. One and then another and another. They cruised through the reeds and slipped up the bank of the small island of rock in the middle of the water. Did ducks mate for life, like doves and penguins? Lots of animals did. Maybe only humans had a problem with the concept.

Well, some humans anyway.

She pushed that thought as far into the back corner of her mind as it would go and kept walking, each footstep bringing her closer and closer to the house. The holding yards at the back of the main arena were empty. The last time she'd seen them they'd been filled with horses already saddled up for the trail, waiting patiently. That chestnut, Bella, the old draughty, and the ugly little bay all the kids loved. She was supposed to be the one taking a group out for a ride that day, but she'd left well before they'd even arrived.

*Okay, enough.*

She turned the corner and walked up the steps, threw her bag on the verandah and herself down next to it sending a cloud of dust motes into the air. She flattened her palms against the rough fabric of the chair, traced over the petals of one of the barely-there flowers with her index finger. A shudder tripped up her spine but she shook it away. Sitting here in *her* favourite spot seemed so wrong. Being back here again was stirring up more memories than she cared to deal with. She drew in a breath against the storm of brewing emotions. It had all been a long time ago and she'd boxed it up with her old photos and heartaches and put it under lock and key. She'd moved on, made a new life for herself, left the wild, confused teenager she'd once been far behind. It had taken a while but she'd dealt with all the shit that had happened here and she wasn't going to let those ghosts come back to haunt her again.

Even if the most recently departed ghost was the reason for her return.

Slipping a cigarette from the packet in her bag, she fumbled around in her pockets for a lighter. *Shit.* Must have left it in the car. Oh well. She picked up the keys to the house instead, no excuse now to delay the inevitable, no reason not to open the door and step inside.

A car engine hummed, then stopped. Banjo lifted his head. Both on their feet, they looked towards the end of the driveway where a figure was undoing the padlock and pushing open the gate. The man got back into the silver four-wheel drive he'd parked beside the kombi and started down the drive towards them.

Who the hell was this?

Banjo let out a yap.

'Sshh. Drop.' He whimpered and lay back down, chin between his paws, as Eve descended the steps, unlit cigarette and keys still in hand. The car pulled up by the shed and a tall, broad-shouldered man climbed out.

'Hello, Angie.'

The voice was instantly familiar, but the face was a stranger's. Or was it? He came closer, eyes the colour of worn denim, that man-on-a-mission walk. His thick wavy hair was grey now, and his weathered face more lined

but it was definitely him. ‘Harry?’

He gave a nod but no smile and the lack of it raised every one of her hackles. ‘No-one’s called me Angie for years.’

‘That’s your name, isn’t it?’

‘Not anymore. It’s Eve now.’ Her full name, as Harry well knew, was Evangeline. She’d never been able to work out why her mother had given her such a longwinded Victorian one but then again she’d never been able to work out a lot of things about her mother. And it had given her options. For the first seventeen years of her life she’d been Angie but, later, when she wanted to get as far away as possible from her adolescent self, she’d opted for Eve. The reality of being Angie again was like a slap in the face. She didn’t bother telling him she wasn’t a Flanagan anymore either.

‘Well, I used to be Uncle Harry to you, but now you’re all grown up I guess things have changed.’ The sarcasm in his voice made her stand a little taller. ‘That your van out there?’

‘Yeah, couldn’t get the gate open. The solicitor gave me a bunch of keys but that one wasn’t on it.’

‘That’d be because it’s here.’ He slipped a key from his chain and held it up to show her. Like he was baiting her, waiting for her to reach for it just so he could whip it away. But she wasn’t going to bite. Kept her arms firmly by her sides. Banjo wandered over and sniffed Harry’s leg. ‘Kelpie?’

‘Yep, we go everywhere together. Don’t we, Banj?’ At the sound of his name he trotted back to her and sat. The silence thickened. She stood her ground and waited for Harry to hand her the key.

‘I’ve been feeding the horses and looking after things a bit since . . .’ He looked at the house, down at the ground, scraped at the gravel with his foot. ‘Since your mother passed away. Haven’t had a whole lot of time but did what I could.’

‘Thanks. I appreciate it.’

‘I didn’t do it for you.’ His voice was quiet but sharp as a blade.

‘No.’ It was clear where this was heading but she wouldn’t be going along for the ride. All she wanted was a cigarette, a drink and a decent night’s sleep.

Harry looked towards the hill where the horses stood waiting at the

fence for their evening meal, then came a step closer. ‘What do you plan on doing?’

‘With the place? Spruce it up a bit, get an agent in and put it on the market.’

‘Thought maybe you’d come back and settle. Keep the business going. That’s what your mother would have wanted.’ A rush of blood pounded through her ears. Her kneecaps quivered. Who the hell was he to tell her what *her* mother would have wanted? It was none of his business what she chose to do with the place. Even though they hadn’t seen each other for twenty years, Nell had left her everything. It was hers now and she could do whatever she wanted without answering to anyone. She took a breath before she spoke again, made sure her voice was steady.

‘Well, you know as well as I do that she and I hadn’t spoken for years. I’m not about to martyr myself to keep the memory of a dead woman alive.’ His jaw hardened at the reference to her mother. ‘And I haven’t been near a horse since I was seventeen.’

Harry shook his head. ‘I don’t know what she was thinking, leaving this place to you.’ He was practically spitting the words at her now, any pretense of civility gone.

‘Me neither, but she did, so there you go.’

*Now just piss off and leave me alone, you nosy old bastard.*

‘Aren’t you even going to ask how she’d been all that time you didn’t bother to come back and see her? How she died?’

‘No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.’ She folded her arms and waited for the assault.

Harry stared at her and she met his gaze. He was an old man now, not the fit, tanned ‘uncle’ who had carried her on his shoulders through the paddocks, lifted her over the fence so she could run all the way to his house, calling out to his wife, Aunty Margo, that the ‘princess’ was here for scones and cordial. She kept her eyes on him. Was he tearing up or was it the fading light playing tricks?

*Shit, don’t do this to me, just let me get on with what I came here for and let everything else be.*

‘You’re not the girl you were raised to be, Angie. But I guess we knew that a long time ago. I came over here to see if we could bury the hatchet,

see if I could give you a hand. But if you'd rather I leave you alone then so be it.'

'Thanks for the offer, Harry.' She made a point of dropping the 'Uncle' bit again, just as he'd made a point of using her old name.

'Suit yourself.' He turned and went back to the driver's door.

'Harry.'

He stopped but didn't turn around.

'The key?'

For a few moments the two of them froze in a silent stand-off, like two cardboard cut-outs positioned on a stage – Eve's eyes focused on the thick waves of silver hair at the back of the man's head, Harry's left knee bent, heel lifted about to take the next step, his right hand holding the key in mid-air. He half turned then and threw it over the bonnet of the car. It landed in the dirt at the bottom of the steps. Banjo jumped up and sniffed it before circling around and depositing himself back down with a groan.

Eve bent and picked up the key as Harry's car disappeared in a cloud of dirt. He swerved around the kombi and drove off without stopping to shut the gate. A hush fell across the property. Daylight had weakened into the thin phosphorescence of twilight. One of the horses whinnied. A soft breeze rustled the tops of the gum trees.

She jiggled the keys in her hand and stared out into the approaching night, a quick shiver rattling her frame.

'We don't need any help, do we, Banj? We're just fine on our own, aren't we?'

*Just fine.*