



# FENCED-IN FELIX

A DRIFTER AND A RACEHORSE  
TURN THE OUTBACK UPSIDE  
DOWN.



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## CHAPTER 1

“HEY, FELIX!”

The shout rang loudly in the stillness that was Worrindi’s main street in the middle of the day.

I turned. My friend Narelle stood in the doorway of the weatherboard post office, waving a piece of paper in the air.

“Your parcel’s here! Don’t go home without it.”

I lifted a hand in acknowledgment, and she darted back inside.

My parcel. Anticipation thrummed in my chest. I’d been waiting for my new signage and brochures for over a month; the next baby step on my new venture.

Even as I marched purposefully down the main street, my thoughts raced. If I was quick, I could collect my parcel, pick up some groceries, and maybe treat myself to a beer before I had to hotfoot it home to Jayboro Outstation. I ducked into the store. Although it was big by Worrindi standards, it barely qualified as a chain store. “Small town, small store.” That’s what Narelle liked to say, usually after she’d arrived at a community get-together and discovered someone else was wearing the exact same shirt as her.

I needed curtains. Not something I bought everyday—indeed, the old Queenslander where I lived alone had had the

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same curtains hanging at the windows for the last twenty or so years.

“Faded like last year’s rodeo queen,” Mum used to say. “Imagine how much faster they’d fade if Queensland joined the twenty-first century and brought in daylight saving!” Her old joke, the one she used to trot out every year when the rest of Australia moved the clocks forwards an hour to summer time but Queensland stayed resolutely put.

But these curtains weren’t to replace the ones in my house. No, with luck, those would last another twenty years. Until recently, I’d barely used them anyway; living in the outback meant there were few people to see into your house, and fewer still who would care if they could. I was always up by daybreak, even in the summer when the sun crested the horizon by four, thanks to that same lack of daylight saving. No, these curtains were for the same project as my signage and brochures; my brand new tourist cabins that sat in a scenic spot in my campground. If I could find some blue and yellow curtains to match the doona and sheets on the bed, then I could open the first cabin for visitors today.

“Today,” I whispered to myself as I walked into the store and surveyed their meagre stock. Today could be the start of something big. All I needed were customers. But first, curtains.

I was in luck. At the back of a shelf, I found some curtains with bright yellow sunflowers on a blue background. The print was big and bold, and while it was a bit louder than I would have liked, it would save me a trip to the Isa—Mount Isa, the large town four hours’ drive away.

In the spirit of optimism, I bought four sets, enough to curtain both cabins—the one that was finished and the one that was a timber shell awaiting fit-out whenever I got enough

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money together. But if I didn't buy them now, I'd be lucky to find matching ones a few months down the track, when the second cabin would hopefully be open.

I headed back to where my ute was parked in the shade and put the curtains inside. Next priority was the post office.

Narelle was selling stamps and postcards to a couple of tourists. I waited as she chatted with them about the opal quarry and the camel farm—two of the region's biggest tourist attractions.

When the tourists left, walking out into the sunlight with leaflets clutched in their hands, Narelle turned to me.

"Wait a sec," she said and disappeared out the back. She returned in a couple of minutes, manhandling a large, flat parcel. My new signage. It was bigger than I'd thought and would take some manoeuvring to get it onto the back of the ute. I'd have to tie it down to keep it from getting slapped onto the bitumen if the wind lifted it out of the tray.

Narelle propped the parcel against the counter and disappeared, only to come back a second time with a box. From the way she was puffing, it was heavy. "Your brochures. How many did you order?"

"Maybe a few thousand. It was cheaper that way."

"A few thousand?" Narelle's voice lifted in amazement. "Just how many people are you expecting?" She held out her hand. "Give some to me, and I'll put them on the counter. You heard those tourists; they quizzed me as to where they could find the real outback experience, not the made-up show that some of the bigger towns put on."

"They'll get real all right at Jayboro." I ripped open the parcel, and Narelle handed me scissors to get into the box. It was sealed tighter than a fish's bum hole. Finally, though, I pulled it open and scooped out a bundle of brochures.

“Nice.” Narelle nodded approvingly. “Some fancy designer did you a good job with those.”

On the front was a photo of a group of tourists in akubra hats sitting around a campfire. One of them held a guitar, and the brilliant outback sky blazed with stars above their heads.

*Experience the real outback at Jayboro Outstation.*

I smiled. The brochure looked fantastic, and no tourist would realise that the happy “campers” around the fire were my friends, Sue and Moni, along with a few borrowed jackaroos from the main Jayboro Station. Nor would they know that Moni couldn’t play a single chord on the guitar she held. The brochure gave the feel and the atmosphere of the outback, and that would hopefully be enough to entice them in.

I handed a wad of them to Narelle. “I’ll give you a beer bonus if you send them my way.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” She put the brochures prominently on her small front counter.

I dropped off more brochures at a couple of other businesses in town, run by people I could count on to promote a local venture. Worrindi was a small town that struggled at times, as it was bypassed by the major highway and didn’t have the striking attractions of bigger towns like Winton and the Isa.

I went into the mechanic’s, which was always busy with tourist vehicles choked with the dust of outback roads, and gave some to Bazza behind the counter.

“That ute of yours doesn’t sound so good, Felix,” he said. “Heard it missing on a cylinder as you pulled in. Is it hard to start?”

“Took three tries this morning.”

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“Might just be a dodgy ignition lead. That’s nothing much. If you leave it with me now, I’ll take a look just as soon as I’ve finished with this beast.” He nodded in the direction of a huge four-wheel drive. Its roof rack, awnings, and paraphernalia—all coated with red dirt—proclaimed it to be a tourist vehicle.

“Thanks. Be good if that was it. Keys are in the ignition.”

“No worries.”

I went to the grocery store for some supplies and arranged to pick them up once the ute was fixed. Then I wandered back to see if Bazza was finished.

He was talking to the owner of the four-wheel drive and shot me an apologetic glance. “Can you come back in an hour, Felix?”

I gave him a thumbs up and went back to the street. I was done with errands. Now I had the perfect excuse for a short bit of Felix-time, something I seldom seemed to have.

A few doors up, the wide and welcoming veranda of the Commercial Hotel beckoned. I could kill two birds with one stone and see if the publican would put my brochures on the counter, plus I’d have a beer at the same time. I grabbed more brochures from the ute and headed for the pub.

Even though the lunch rush was over, there were a few people rubbing the long bar with their elbows. I recognised some locals, and there was also a handful of tourists enjoying a beer or browsing the historic photos on the wall.

The barperson was new. She was a short woman with a mop of unruly curls that bounced on her shoulders as she moved. A string of white and turquoise beads glinted in her hair, and she wore a tie-dye T-shirt with a pair of very tight denim shorts. She was maybe thirty, but it was obvious from her economical movements as she poured pots that she was experienced at bar work.

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I deliberately picked a spot close to the tourists and waited while the barperson served more people. Her tight shorts rode up as she stretched up to snag a packet of chips from the top of the wire rack to reveal more of her muscled thighs. From the appreciative glances, it seemed that cheese and onion was the most popular flavour of the day.

Finally, she came over. "What can I get you?" Her smile crinkled fine lines at the corners of her eyes, and her skin was tanned, the year-round tan of someone who spends a lot of time outdoors.

"A pot of light, please." An imp of mischief made me add, "And a packet of cheese and onion chips."

The view as she stretched up to the top of the rack was once again nothing short of spectacular. She set the chips and a beer down on the counter in front of me. "Five fifty, please."

I counted out the coins and watched as she whirled around to ring up the sale. For the next few minutes, she was busy serving other customers. She wasn't graceful or pretty. If she were a horse, she'd be a stockhorse rather than a thoroughbred, but she moved with the lightness of one who is comfortable in her skin.

A drifter, I decided. One of Australia's casual workforce, moving from place to place, following seasonal work in small towns. She'd probably learnt of the bar job from one of the city employment agencies, and they'd given her the job over the gap-year students from Europe. She'd probably stay a few weeks, maybe a month or two, and then move on, maybe to pick strawberries near the coast or mangoes up the Top End. But in the meantime, here she was, pouring beer in Worrindi, doubtless staying in one of the tiny rooms above the pub.

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Lost in my thoughts, I didn't realise I'd been caught staring until my gaze drifted up, away from her backside, to find her amused smile and direct gaze staring straight back at me.

"Can I get you anything else?"

My breath froze in my throat, afraid she'd be annoyed by my staring. But there was a half smile on her face. She didn't seem too pissed off. I suspected she was enjoying my appreciation. That seldom happened.

I opted for professional—after all, I had an agenda here. "Actually, you might be able to help. I'm Felix, and I run a campground at Jayboro Outstation, about half an hour from here. I've got a couple of cabins available too." Mentally, I crossed my fingers against the white lie. The second cabin would be open soon. "I wondered if it would be okay to put my new brochures on the bar."

She smiled, and the impish mischief of it made her instantly look younger. Maybe late twenties. "Nice to meet you, Felix. I'm Josie. New in town, but you probably already know that if you live around here."

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm used to seeing Chris or Madge behind the bar."

"They're still here, of course, but I'm here as well."

I noticed she didn't say for how long or in what capacity.

"Chris used to have some of my old leaflets somewhere. Maybe you could check with him?"

"No need." She picked up the top one and studied it. "Nice looking campground." Her words were slightly louder, and pitched at the couple of tourists nearby. "Looks like a peaceful place to stop. Do you have powered sites, or is it just tent camping?"



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The answer was clearly written on the brochure, but I appreciated what she was doing. “Powered sites, tent sites, and the cabins, which are brand new.”

The tourists were openly listening now. With luck, I’d have guests by evening.

“And I lead trail rides,” I continued. “I have horses to suit beginners through to experienced riders.”

That caught her attention past the little boost she was giving me for the benefit of long ears. “Oh? I’ll have to come out. I love to ride, but I haven’t had a chance to do so in a while. Be nice to be back in the saddle.”

“Please do. The number’s on the bottom. I’m sure I can find you something good to ride.”

She glanced at me again, and her lips twitched as if in on a private joke. Her eyes were a warm brown, slightly flecked. Intriguing. But I was here to entice campers, not a woman I might find attractive.

She took the brochures and placed them on the end of the bar, next to the collection tin for the Royal Flying Doctor Service. As I sipped my beer, the tourists came up to take a brochure. They read it, folded it, and tucked it in a top pocket.

For the next twenty minutes, I enjoyed the drift of time. Just me and a beer. No horses to feed, no tourists to talk to, no toilet block to clean. I let my mind wander, and if my gaze sometimes followed the tempting outline of Josie behind the bar, well, what of it? There were few enough women around here who even gave the hint that they might not mind the appreciative gaze of another woman.

I was tempted to have a second beer so that I could rest my elbows on the bar and watch Josie’s deft movements as she poured beer and bantered with customers. And yes, watch the

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play of muscles in her legs. But I couldn't linger; I had my ute to collect and things to do back at Jayboro. Always something to do.

I stood, picked up my hat, and took my leave.

Josie waved from the end of the bar. "See you around, Felix."

I lifted a hand in reply and went out into the sunlight.

Bazza had finished with my ute. It was parked in the street, as if its battered and dusty sides weren't good enough to grace his forecourt. I knew better, though; Bazza was simply busy. Indeed, the forecourt was jammed with a fleet of Toyotas, all with interstate plates.

Inside the office, Bazza looked harried. "Needs a new ABS sensor," he said to a grey-haired man who seemed to be the leader of the tourist group. "It'll take two days to arrive, even with express delivery."

The tourist said something I couldn't hear.

"The alternative is I disconnect the sensor, but no, I don't know what that will do to your warranty." Bazza shrugged. "Your choice."

The tourists debated amongst themselves, and Bazza came over to me. "I replaced an ignition lead, and it's going much better now. Keys are in it. You can fix me up next time you're in town. I don't have time to do the invoice right now." He gestured with his thumb at the tourists. "Gotta get this one sorted."

I nodded and thanked him. Worrindi was a few hours' drive from the nearest city big enough to have a supply of uncommon items. Things like car parts didn't arrive in a blink via courier. It was one of the reasons I loved the place.

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The new curtains looked fantastic. They were maybe a little long and brushed the floor, but they gave the cabin a lift of colour. When they were closed, the cabin was cosy and welcoming. I opened them again and tied them back with the matching loops. Now all I needed were my first guests.

I stepped outside and saw a dusty four-wheel drive towing a camper trailer at the house, parked near my hand-painted sign that said *Office*. I ambled over. It was the couple from the hotel in Worrindi.

“G’day,” I greeted them. “Can I help you?”

“We overheard you talking to your friend in the pub,” the woman said. “Can we see your campground?”

I took them down to have a look. The light was starting to drop, and it slanted over the ground in the clarity of evening. A row of galahs sat expectantly on a railing, and overhead, a flock of budgies wheeled in the sort of tight formation that would be the envy of stunt pilots the world over. A couple of red kangaroos grazed in one corner, not put off by the young couple sitting outside their campervan a few yards away watching them. The scene looked peaceful and welcoming, like a magazine picture captioned *the peace of an outback evening welcomes the weary traveller*.

The woman sighed in a soft shudder of breath. “This looks wonderful. Can we stay for three nights?”

I sent mental thanks to Josie, no doubt still pouring beer at the Commercial.

“Of course. Why don’t you pick your spot and then come up to the office? I’ll fix you up.”



## CHAPTER 2

I CAN'T SAY THERE WAS a rush as a result of my new signage, now prominently displayed on the highway by the gravel road that led to Jayboro, but there was a trickle. The couple who'd overheard me talking in the pub moved on to explore the delights of the Northern Territory and were replaced by a German couple and a campervan bursting with gap-year Brits. The teenagers proved my first test of tact and diplomacy, as their idea of a good time involved a staggering amount of beer, loud music, and conversation around an inferno of a campfire. I hated to spoil their fun, but the other campers were complaining. I suggested they shift their camp to the far end of the campground, where they wouldn't have to walk as far to find firewood. Bleary eyed with morning hangovers, they agreed with surprising docility, and everyone was happy.

I spent my days working on the campground as well as preparing the second cabin for rental. I sanded the wooden floors and borrowed one of the hands from the main station to help me fix the kitchen cupboards on the wall.

It was a red-letter day when I rented the completed cabin for the first time to a pair of grey nomads—older people who were spending their retirement travelling around Australia. Although they had a tidy set-up in the back of their four-wheel

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drive, they liked to allow themselves a little more space every so often—as the woman said with a smile—to make sure they didn't kill each other before they got to Alice Springs. They stayed two nights, and their enthusiastic Facebook posts made me think I might attract some of their friends.

When the sun went down, I'd return to the house where I grew up. It was too large for just one person, but it was still my house, inherited when Mum died. The weatherboard walls held the echoes of my parents, of my bandy-legged father and my crackling-with-life mother. I was born here, and I'd never lived anywhere else. I'd grown up running wild with the rest of the station kids and attending school in Worrindi. I'd sat impatiently on the school bus coming home, feet drumming as I waited to run in the door, drop my school bag on the floor, change into jeans, and get out to the horses. I'd broken my first colt when I was eleven. Won my first barrel race when I was thirteen. On the personal side, my childhood bedroom at the back of the house was where Mum had sat on the edge of my bed and told me about periods and pregnancy, about love and sex. The kitchen was where I'd told her that I would never date a boy because I liked girls. And the master bedroom, where I now slept, was where I'd watched Mum fade away over long months as the cancer ate into her bones.

The bed in the master bedroom was new, but most other things were the same. The en suite bathroom had been enlarged to allow wheelchair access, and the small steps and angles of an old house had been smoothed to make getting around easier. Even though she was gone, the house still held the imprint of Mum and the bouncing gaiety that had defined her life. I'd thought of remaining in my childhood bedroom after she died, but the room was small and the bathroom awkward and

old-fashioned, so after a couple of months, when I could enter the master bedroom without seeing Mum lying there like frail cobwebs in the bed, I moved my things. The house was mine now, only mine, and it seemed stupid not to use it to the full extent.

One morning, about a week after my trip to Worrindi, I sat in the old parlour turned office, flipping through my bookings. I had no trail rides arranged, but I still had to check on my horses and on hay. Winter was the dry season in the outback, and realistically, I couldn't expect rain for another few months at least, if then. The horses were already starting to become ribby.

I grabbed my akubra and went out to the veranda to find my boots. The phone rang as I was jamming them on my feet. I raced back inside and grabbed the phone before it could ring out. If only there was mobile reception here, I wouldn't miss so many calls. "Jayboro Outstation, this is Felix."

"Hi Felix, this is Josie. I don't know if you remember me, I'm the—"

"Barperson at the Commercial," I interrupted. I smiled at the remembered pleasure of watching her stretch for the cheese and onion chips. Too late, I wondered what she'd make of me remembering her so well. But I'd never been good at playing it cool.

"Yeah. That's me. You've got a good memory."

A mental image of her legs flashed through my mind. "Suppose it comes of having to remember guests."

"True." Was that disappointment in her voice? "I'm the same. So many people come into a pub, and they all get offended if you don't remember them."

I pressed the phone closer to my ear and glanced at the caller ID. Private number. Oh well.

“But I remember you very well,” Josie continued. “For lots of reasons. I’ve been sending all sorts of people down to your campground. Grey nomads, a few backpackers. I hope at least some of them found you.”

“Quite a few have, but they didn’t say who recommended them, or I’d have dropped by to thank you.”

“You can thank me anyway if you want,” Josie said. “It struck me I’m sending all sorts of people out to you, and maybe I could take a look myself. Actually, I know it’s short notice, but I was wondering if you could fit me in for a trail ride this morning? I have a last-minute day off.”

“That’s no problem. There’s no one else booked today. What time?”

“I’m sitting in my car, ready to drive away. According to your brochure, I’ll be there in half an hour. I don’t mind waiting if you’re busy, but it would be good to ride before it gets too hot.”

“Drive slowly, and that will be fine. It will take me a bit to get the horses ready.”

“Thanks. See you, Felix.”

The phone went dead. I hurried out of the house. In truth, I wouldn’t be ready in half an hour, but I hadn’t wanted to put her off. Halfway to the barn, I realised, too, that I had neglected to ask her about her horse experience, the sort of ride she wanted, or how long she wanted to go for. She’d mentioned being able to ride, so I figured she’d want something with a bit of liveliness to it. I went into the home paddock with a couple of halters and looked at my small herd. Patchwork should do her nicely; the piebald mare was a lively but obedient ride with a surprising turn of speed and agility on her. She’d been my last barrel racing pony before I’d stopped competing to care for

Mum. And if Josie was riding Patch, I'd need something equally speedy to keep up with her, or she'd leave me floundering. I slipped the halters on Patch and a young stockhorse, Ben, and led them back to the barn.

I liked to check on the campers in the mornings to make sure everything was okay, but today, the rounds would have to wait.

I was brushing Ben's tail when I heard a car. A door slammed, and then footsteps came down the barn aisle.

"Felix?"

I straightened from Ben's rear end and smiled. "Hi, Josie. Nice to see you again."

Her smile could have been merely friendly, the practiced smile of a bartender, but I thought there was an extra curve to it, more than she needed for the appearance of friendliness. It crinkled her eyes.

She looked good. My gaze flicked up and down. I told myself it was a professional assessment to make sure she was suitably dressed for the ride, but deep down I knew better—I just wanted to check her out. She was appropriately, if eccentrically, dressed. Her jeans were close-fitting and would protect her legs from rubbing on the saddle, but they were mauve, and she'd paired them with a lime green singlet and akubra hat. But her boots were well-worn and sturdy and obviously hadn't been new for a long time. They were flat-heeled leather, the boots of a stockman.

Ben, the big sook that he was, ambled over to the bar and pushed his nose against her shoulder, leaving a damp mark on the singlet. She rested her palm against his cheek and worked her fingers up to scratch him behind the ear. He closed his eyes in pleasure and dropped his nose down to rest between her breasts. Lucky nose.



“Am I riding this one?”

“No. Ben’s a pussycat, but he pulls like a train. I’m sure you’d prefer your arms remained attached. You’re riding Patchwork. She’s in the next stall.”

Josie paced down to where Patch looked over the bar, ears pricked, ready to meet a new friend.

“Aren’t you the pretty one?” Josie crooned, her voice low and sweet. “Aren’t you the dainty girl?”

“Don’t let her looks fool you. She’s fast as a bullet and gutsy as they come. She and I won the open barrel racing competition three years in a row at the Mount Isa Rodeo.”

“I’m honoured you’re letting me ride her.”

“I figured if you’ve ridden a fair bit, you wouldn’t appreciate one of the quieter horses. Patch will give you a good time.” I finished tacking Ben, pushed the bar across, and led him out into the aisle.

Josie followed suit, and led Patch out. She handled the mare with confidence; obviously, she was used to horses.

We mounted, and I led the way out of the yard, along the beaten path that skirted the edge of the campground. A couple sitting outside their caravan lifted a hand as we went by, and Josie waved back. “I sent those two here,” she said. “Must have been three days ago. I guess they like it.”

“I hope so.”

We rode side by side, far enough apart that I could make sure Josie was comfortable in the saddle. She rode in a loose manner, not quite slouched Australian stockman style but not upright English, either. I guessed she’d grown up with ponies, learnt at a riding school somewhere, and then relaxed into a more casual style. But she was easy on the horse, with light hands, and Patch, by her pricked ears and free movement, was clearly fine.

Josie was also comfortable with silence, something I appreciated. My love of quietness came from growing up in the bush, where low population density meant that I'd often been alone. Had Josie also grown up somewhere rural? I stole a glance at her. Her mop of curls exploded out from underneath the riding helmet, beads glinting in the sunlight. This particular piece of scenery was clearly new to her, but as she glanced around, it was obvious she was familiar with the outback.

Then she looked across at me and grinned. "Do you have any idea how good this is after a week of serving beer to sweaty station hands and dusty tourists?" She continued without waiting for my response. "Bloody good. It's been months since I've been on a horse." She patted Patch's neck. "And this mare is a darling."

"She is. And you're handling her nicely."

Patch sidestepped a lizard and snorted, and Josie momentarily swayed in the saddle. I revised my opinion slightly. Despite Josie's comfort on the horse, maybe she wasn't as experienced as I'd thought. But it could also just be that she hadn't ridden for a while.

"Thanks. How many horses do you keep here?"

"Half a dozen, all for trail riding. A couple of quiet ones for beginners. A couple of ponies for kids, and these two."

"I have a horse down in South Australia. I haven't seen her in months, of course. I miss her."

That explained her ease around horses. "What's your horse like?"

"She's a thoroughbred, an ex-racehorse. Feisty and utterly beautiful. She didn't do well at the track—not fast enough."

"You must miss her."

"Yeah. But I move around a lot. It's hard to do that with a horse in tow. I'd love a dog, but even that would be hard."

A lot of the jobs I take come with accommodation—like the Commercial—and they're usually reluctant to have a dog. Maybe I should get a caravan and be self-sufficient, but I don't think my old car would tow it."

"Where do you keep your horse?"

"In South Australia, at a friend's place." Josie shut her mouth abruptly. The sentence clipped off as if she wanted to say more but didn't.

"Is that where you're from?"

"Yeah. Small town north of Adelaide. Not outback, but still fairly rural. I learnt to ride there as a kid, getting lessons in exchange for mucking out at local stables. I left when I was seventeen, been moving around since."

I wondered when she'd stopped off long enough to acquire a horse, but figured it wasn't my business. Josie had doubtlessly had some extended times in one place.

She nudged Patch closer to me, and the horse obliged, shifting close enough that Josie's stirrup banged against mine. "Worrindi is a good place, though. Think I'll stick around a while. Chris and Madge are decent people, and I like working for them. That isn't often the case with these sorts of jobs. Got sick of working for dickheads a long time ago; that's one of the reasons I move so often. They also pay me fairly, and I've got a reasonable room upstairs. And now that I've met you, I know where I can come on my days off." She looked at me sideways from under the helmet. "That is, if you don't mind and you've got a spot for a rider."

"Of course not. I don't mind if you want to call at the last minute, as you did this morning. As long as you're not offended if I'm fully booked—although that doesn't happen often."

She blew out a gusty sigh. "That's great. Thanks, Felix."

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We'd moved away from the fence as we rode, and the expanse of land unfurled beneath our horses' hooves. "Want to go faster?" I asked.

In response, she nudged Patch forwards, and the willing mare leapt into a fast canter. I followed but held back to let her set the pace. Dust billowed as Josie and Patch increased pace. Patch was a competitive horse, and she responded as much to my horse at her flank as to Josie's urgings. Josie sat the pace well. The dust blew into my face, and I urged Ben forwards into the clearer air, which only spurred Patch on. Neck and neck, we raced along the red ground, sand and dust in our faces.

"Slow," I yelled at Josie. "Soft sand ahead."

She obeyed and steadied Patch, turning her in a wide circle to reduce speed.

I came up alongside her again and slackened the reins to let Ben stretch and cool. It was still very early, only around eight, but the sun was already warm. Momentarily, thoughts of the camp kitchen that needed cleaning and the second cabin still needing work intruded, but those thoughts left my head for the pleasure of the here and now.

"You live here alone, Felix?" Josie glanced at me sideways as we ambled along.

"Yeah. Since my mother died a few years ago."

"No partner?" That same sideways look. "Seems to me, going by the propositions I've had in the Commercial, that there's no shortage of willing blokes around."

I wondered whether to set her right about my sexuality. Normally, I figured it was no one's business except my own, and it never came up with any of the passing tourists. But Josie had said she'd be back.

"Plenty of blokes," I said. "But they're not my type."

“What is your type?” There was a smile in her voice, along with something more, the tiniest edge of interest, of flirtation.

“Someone who likes the outdoors, down to earth, practical. Honest.”

“That’s it? You’re not asking for Brad Pitt?”

“And female. But they don’t need to look like Angelina Jolie.” I concentrated on Ben’s ears rather than Josie, in case she would withdraw.

“I thought so. No wonder you live alone. Not many pickings around here for us.”

She’d said “us”.

“Not much. But that’s fine. Even if I lived in the city, I wouldn’t be one for the pubs and clubs.”

“Me neither.” She stretched out a hand towards me, and I took it. She clasped my fingers briefly, then released. “It’s nice to talk to you though, Felix.”

I wondered what she’d heard in Worrindi, if that was the reason for seeking me out, but she pre-empted me. “No one said anything, in case you’re wondering. I figured I’d read you right when you dropped off the brochures at the pub. And the good people of Worrindi think I’m just very picky.”

Small towns could be difficult for anyone growing up different. It had been okay for me—I’d been lucky—but I’d heard stories from others that made it clear that wasn’t always the case. My friend, Sue, lived a few hours away in a place that was even smaller than Worrindi. She’d grown up in the outback, and she’d told me her story; her experience hadn’t been nearly as positive as mine. She’d denied her sexuality for ten years before she couldn’t repress herself any longer. And I’d been the person to break her same-sex drought.

“Worrindi’s okay,” I said. “Most of them know I’m a lesbian. Word travels fast around here. We may be spread out in the outback, but the bush telegraph works well.”

Josie grinned. “They haven’t spread the word about me yet. My life’s an open book—apart from all the secrets.”

I grinned back. “If you’re around for a while, you’ll have to meet my friends Sue and Moni. They’re four hours away, but they sometimes come up for a weekend.”

The shared knowledge of sexuality had advanced our tentative friendship.

“I’d like that.”

The horses moved apart as they picked their way over a rough piece of ground, and we were silent. Josie stared at the horizon, and there was a stillness about her, an aura of contentment. I glanced at my watch. We’d been out for nearly two hours. We hadn’t fixed how long the ride would be before we left, but we’d ridden in a wide circle and were now about twenty minutes from the barn, approaching a point where we could either head back along the fence line or take a loop out the other side. I looked over at Josie. If she hadn’t ridden for a while, those two hours would be enough, or she’d be as stiff as a plank tomorrow. And I had a cabin to work on.

“By the time we get back, we’ll have been out for two hours. Are you happy to leave it at that?” I asked.

“That’s fine. I realise I messed up your day by calling at the last minute. I’m glad you were able to fit me in.”

“No worries. But now I’ve got to clean the camp kitchen and do other chores. Nothing very exciting.”

“Would you mind if I took a look around? I’d love to come for another ride, maybe next week, if that suited you. I was thinking I could bring my tent and stay over if I can swing two days off in a row.”

## CHEYENNE BLUE

Warm and nebulous feelings of anticipation surged through me, pleasure that Josie wanted to spend more time out here. But then, she probably wanted simply to get away from the pub and Worrindi. Living on the premises as she did, she was always on call. Part of the problem of working bar in a small town was that most everyone knew you, and even when you were off duty, the perception of availability continued. I concentrated on her face as I replied, “There’s some good tent sites closer to Birragum Creek. Quiet. You’d be surprised at how many people want to be near to the toilet block.”

“Not me. I like my own space. When I’m moving on, I never stop in campgrounds. I just find somewhere quiet and pull over by the side of the road. I’ve only ever been asked to leave a couple of times, once because I was trespassing and once by the police because I was too close to the edge of town.”

“You could just do that here, if you wanted. Honestly, you don’t have to stay in a campground. The whole outback is one enormous quiet place to pull over.”

She laughed. “Are you putting me off?”

“No! I’d be delighted if you stayed over. But don’t feel obliged.”

“I’d like to. It’s lovely here. With the added bonus of a hot shower. At least, I assume it’s hot?”

“Of course.”

We’d reached the barn as we chatted, and I led the way around the back. I dismounted and loosened Ben’s girth. Josie followed suit, but her movements were slower. She’d be quite stiff come morning. I led Ben into the barn, and she followed with Patch.

The ride was over, and I had a million and one things I had to do. Still, I lingered.

“Big barn,” Josie said. “Stalls for twelve. Were there more horses at one point?”

“We had more when my parents were alive. Their horses, my two ponies. The main station also kept some here from time to time. We often had a couple of youngsters for breaking. I still take one occasionally, but I haven’t had any for a while.”

Josie stood with her hand on Patch’s neck, the light filtering in through the gaps in the timber. She’d removed the helmet, and the sunlight turned her riotous hair into a halo of light. She wasn’t beautiful, in her mismatched old clothes, but she was intriguing. Part of me—a rather large part—was delighted I’d be seeing her again.

The silence stretched. I couldn’t keep staring, so I jammed my hands in the pockets of my jeans. “Come up to the office, and we can settle up for the ride.”

“The ride. Right.” There was a definite hint of amusement in her voice.

I straightened my shoulders. Yes, I lived in a remote area, where the possibilities of finding a lover were Buckley’s and Nunn, to use the well-loved expression. But it didn’t mean that because a fellow lesbian had appeared in my life, we were automatically going to fall into each other’s arms.

I led the way to the office. It was at the front of the house and opened to the veranda, which made it easier for campers and tourists to find me. In the early days, before I’d got better signage, I’d been surprised in the shower by a wide-eyed pair of Spanish backpackers. Maybe they’d thought it was a quirky Australian custom to greet visitors wrapped only in a bath towel, but the next day, I’d gone into Worrindi and bought the biggest office sign I could find.



## CHEYENNE BLUE

Mum's desk dominated the room; it was where she used to do the accounts. Now, it was where I attempted to do the accounts. Each year, I dreaded tax time.

I sat at the desk and pulled out the cash box. Josie followed me in and looked at the array of photos on the wall. I knew what they were: my parents when they were young; Dad bull riding at the Isa rodeo; Mum barrel racing or working with a young horse; the two of them at the local picnic races, all dressed up in their finery. A couple of me as a child, earnest, with long plaits and a gap in my front teeth. One of me with a pony that I remembered well as it was such a bugger of a thing. Another with the first colt that I broke. A third of me and that same colt at the Isa show, clearing a fence by most of half a metre.

"Your parents?" She stared at a photo of Mum and Dad.

"Yeah. My father was head stockman at the main Jayboro Station. When he retired after working for Jayboro his whole life, the owners gifted him this house and the land that the barn and campground are on. Now they're mine."

"Decent of them." Her gaze switched to a photo of me and Patch. "There's a lot of good people around here." She swung around to face me. "That's becoming a rarity. Sometimes it seems everyone's just out for what they can get, and they don't care who they shaft in the process."

Her voice was light. If she'd been shafted, she obviously hadn't let it get to her. I watched the subtle play of muscles under her tanned skin, revealed by the scooped back of her singlet. Maybe she sensed my gaze as she turned and caught me staring. I averted my eyes, but her lips twitched as she said, "How much do I owe you?"

I told her the amount and waited as she pulled a battered coin purse from her jeans and counted out some crumpled notes.

“Thank you.”

“Can I call you when I know my next days off? Chris and Madge are great, but it’s hard for them to know in advance sometimes.”

“No worries. I can generally fit someone in at short notice.” I blew my breath out. “Even if I wish that wasn’t the case. It would be great if I were fully booked.”

“One day. The word on the street is that outback tourism is booming.”

“The street being Worrindi’s main drag?”

“Yeah. But it is on the up. All the grey nomads on the move, people in their four-wheel drives escaping the pressures of the city.”

“Maybe I should offer them a Back-to-Basics experience. They could sleep in my unfinished cabin and clean my toilet block. That would clear their head.”

“Can’t see that one taking off somehow.” She picked up her hat. “I won’t hold you up. Those toilet blocks are singing your name. I’ll have a wander around, then head away. Thanks for the ride. I really enjoyed it.”

“Me too.” The words were out before I could consider how they sounded—overly friendly for what was basically a customer. But I had enjoyed the ride—and Josie’s company.

She smiled, jammed the hat on her head, and disappeared out into the sharp daylight.

I opened the cash box and placed her money inside. I couldn’t sit around. I had a camp kitchen to clean.



## CHAPTER 3

A WEEK WENT PAST AND, to my surprise, the new cabin was rented for five of the seven nights. Feedback from guests was generally positive: they loved the peace and location. Acting on a couple of suggestions, I started offering a dinner pack that guests could cook in the camp kitchen, as well as a couple of different breakfast packs. It hadn't occurred to me that the people who usually stayed in towns wouldn't have food with them. It meant I had to have more provisions on hand, but it made me a tidy profit.

I also needed to get the second cabin up and running—and soon.

It was now midwinter and the height of the outback tourist season. The days were pleasantly warm and sunny, the nights chilly enough that a campfire was a pleasure. Even the flies, one of the major annoyances of outback life, were few. This was potentially my busiest time of year, and I hoped to make enough to tide me over the summer months, when the heat and flies would become unbearable, and the wet season could make the roads impassable.

It was also a good time for trail rides as the campers didn't have to get up at an unearthly hour to make it bearable. But in summer, even if the trail rides dried up, the horses still needed

attention. They didn't go off to the coast with a surfboard; they were still here and still needed care and fodder.

I sat in the office one evening, surrounded by the photos of my parents, and calculated how much it would cost me to get the second cabin open. It wasn't a fortune; compared to the loan I already had from the bank, it was a very low amount. But I was reluctant to borrow more, if indeed the bank would stump up the finance. I was trying to set aside money to meet the loan repayments over the summer. A little more on top of that would be a huge struggle.

"What would you do, Mum?" I lifted my glass of water to her in the photo.

I knew what her answer would have been. She would roll up her sleeves, find another hour in the day to work, and eat meatloaf for dinner for the fifth time that week without complaint, because it was cheap and easy to do.

I resolved to get the second cabin open as soon as I could. Tomorrow, I would ring Matt at the main station and see if I could borrow his floor sander. I'd pick it up on the way to Worrindi to buy stain and varnish for the floorboards. I'd also see what furniture I could find in town. A trip to the Isa and the bigger stores would suck away a day.

If I got lucky, if I put in the work, maybe I could get the second cabin open in a couple of weeks.

I rose and headed for the door. It was late by my standards, nearly ten. The phone rang. For a second, I considered leaving it, but habit won out. Calls late at night in the outback were seldom trivial. But although I'd expected it to be a neighbour, someone from Jayboro Station, I recognised Josie's voice immediately. It was brisk, like her manner, and from the background noise, she was in the Commercial.

## CHEYENNE BLUE

“Hey,” she said, and I liked that she felt she knew me well enough not to say who was calling. “I gotta be quick. I’m working, and they’re screaming for beer here. You’d think there was a drought.” Her amused snort echoed down the line. “But I was wondering if you could fit me in for a ride early tomorrow? I could be with you at seven. I can’t stay over as I have to work tomorrow night, but I’d love to come.”

Mentally, I shredded the day I’d planned and refused to let myself think it was because of her. I’d do it for any tourist. A couple of hours trail ride money would help the finances. I’d go to town later.

“Sure,” I said. “The earlier the better.”

“No worries. I’ll see you tomorrow. Looking forward to it.” There was a pause, and her next words were obviously directed to someone in the bar. “Hang on, Ty. Your beer’s coming. We won’t run out in the meantime.” To me she said, “Gotta run. See you.”

I was left staring at the phone in my hand, the dial tone buzzing.

\* \* \*

The next morning, one of the campers stopped me as I took my usual walk through the campground on the way to the barn. “Hi Felix, I was wondering if you had a spot on a ride this morning?”

I didn’t know much about Dan. He was a solitary traveller, and he and his small campervan had been a fixture at the lower end of the camp area for the past few days. He seemed to spend most of his time writing on a laptop or watching the birdlife through binoculars. From what I’d seen of his van whenever I stopped for pleasantries, it was a home-made set up, with a

single platform bunk and plastic containers for storage. I had him pegged as doing some sort of paper-pushing job or maybe something technical that didn't require many people skills.

I thought fast. "I have one other person coming at seven. If that's not too soon for you, I can take you then. Otherwise, I'm afraid it will have to be tomorrow."

He gave a short nod and turned away into the van, leaving me to wonder if I'd offended him somehow. But he was back quick-smart with what looked like a bicycle helmet in his hand. "Thanks. I'm ready. I'll come now."

I eyed the helmet, which was covered in plastic ties that stuck up and were supposed to stop magpies swooping. Clearly, he was a total beginner.

"No rush. What sort of riding experience do you have?"

"None," he admitted. "Is that okay?"

I hoped Josie wouldn't be too mad, but I'd successfully taken people with disparate abilities before. I summoned my most reassuring smile, the one I used for worried mothers when I took their small children for an amble around the paddock. "Perfectly fine. I have a couple of quiet horses. I'll see you over there."

Over at the barn, I grabbed three small buckets of feed, put them in the stalls, and opened them up. My small herd was gathered around the gate, like people waiting to board a bus. I opened the gate a crack and managed to let through the three horses I wanted: Patch, Ben, and a quiet mare called Smoke. The remaining three horses jostled at the gate, annoyed that they had missed out. But I only had enough to feed the horses that were working that day.

I'd brushed Patch off and was starting on Ben when I heard footsteps. I peered underneath Ben's belly as I brushed

his forelegs, and saw mauve jeans walking towards me. I straightened. Josie walked down the centre aisle. She stopped at Patch's stall to whisper nonsense to the mare.

I stepped out from behind Ben's bulk, and she caught sight of me. an unguarded initial smile lit her face, and she tilted her head to one side.

"Hey." It wasn't my most inspired opening, but the pleasure on Josie's face robbed me of anything more eloquent.

She came closer and rested a hand on Ben's neck. It was a casual, comfortable gesture. "Hey yourself." She yawned. "Sorry. Had a late night last night. We close when the last person leaves or midnight, whichever comes soonest, and last night it was midnight."

"A ride should wake you up."

"That's why I'm here. Am I riding Patch again?"

I nodded. "You seemed to enjoy her last time. We have another person with us today, one of the campers, Dan. He's a total beginner, but I'll make sure you get some faster time."

"No worries. I didn't expect I would always be the only one." She paused. "Nice as it was."

Her riot of curls caught the sun slanting in through the gaps in the barn wall.

"I'll just finish up with these three. If you want a coffee to wake yourself up, go over to the camp kitchen. You'll find some instant there and milk in the fridge." Part of me hoped she'd stay and chat, but she nodded and disappeared in that direction.

Left alone, I was able to finish the three horses. By the time she returned, I was helping Dan onto Smoke. He was obviously nervous but determined not to show it, and his fingers wound into Smoke's mane, clutching harder as she shifted her weight. I adjusted Dan's stirrups and showed him how to sit.

Josie saw that I was busy and went over to Patch, checked the girth, and mounted. I had to leave Dan for a minute while I mounted Ben, and Josie moved over on Patch and chatted to Dan. The bartender at work. She obviously had the people skills to put them at ease. Dan's shoulders relaxed, and he loosened his death grip enough to give Smoke a tentative pat.

I led the way out of the yard and along the fence line to where the creek cut a winding course through the parched ground. It was dry, of course, and would remain that way until the summer rains came. I'd picked this way as beginners tended to feel more secure when there was something on one side, even something as insubstantial as two strands of barbed wire held up by rotting fence posts. But that line gave them some security, an artificial marker in an open landscape. And it was true. The horses plodded along like docile cattle, and if anything were to spook them—usually wildlife—then there was only one way for them to turn.

I glanced back. Dan was tipped forwards in a precarious position over Smoke's neck. Josie rode behind, reins in one hand, the other resting in, to what was to the casual eye, a loose position on her thigh. But I could see that she was ready to react if necessary, to lean forwards and grab Smoke's reins.

She didn't *have* to take on the role of Tail-End Charlie, but I was glad she had.

I halted Ben and waited for Smoke to catch up. "You're doing well, Dan. Try sitting back in the saddle a little more. You'll feel more comfortable if you do."

He nodded and obeyed, smiling as Smoke responded and relaxed. Josie came up on his other side, and we ambled along, three abreast. I pointed out a mob of kangaroos grazing on the meagre vegetation on the far side of the creek. Dan must have



felt confident enough to look around, as he pointed out a fairy wren hopping through the tangled branches of a mulga tree.

There was no chance for private conversation with Josie, but, I told myself, that was fine. This was my life, my business. Ensuring the likes of Dan had a good time so that they wanted to come back, maybe instil some small appreciation for the outback and its people—well, that was my purpose here. It wasn't to develop a friendship with an intriguing woman. It wasn't to flirt, no matter how much I wanted to.

Half an hour into our gentle ride, I pointed out a wider loop to Josie. "If you want to go at your own pace, keep that fence line on your right. Dan and I will cut across the middle, and you can catch up with us."

Josie grinned. "I'd like that."

She turned Patch and urged her away from us. Patch laid back her ears and jibbed, and it took Josie a minute or so to persuade her to leave. But once away, she pushed Patch into a floating canter, and I took a minute to admire how the coloured horse moved over the land. Josie urged her on, and her neck lengthened. Josie sat easily, relaxed in the saddle. I wished I was with her, racing along like that.

I turned to Dan. "How d'you feel about a trot?"

Dan nodded and gripped the front of the saddle.

Josie caught up with us when we were nearly back at the barn. Her curls were more disordered than ever, and Patch was damp with sweat. Both of them had obviously enjoyed themselves.

She ran a hand down Patch's neck. "This lady moves like the wind."

"Especially when her head's towards the barn."

Josie grinned. "There is that." She jogged up alongside Dan and I. "Enjoying yourself, Dan?"

## FENCED-IN FELIX

Dan looked more relaxed. He sat more easily, and Smoke's steadiness had given him confidence. "Yeah."

Back at the barn, though, he was noticeably stiff as he slid from Smoke's back.

"Here." I took her reins. "Go for a walk. Loosen up a bit. You can settle up with me later."

"Thanks." He patted Smoke's neck. "I enjoyed that. A first for me. Hopefully not the last, although not for a few days."

I had two horses to do to Josie's one, so she finished first. She came over and rested her arms on the edge of Smoke's stall.

"You've got plenty of space here. You could have half a dozen more horses."

I bent to brush dust from Smoke's foreleg. "Barn space, yes, but the land is poor. It barely supports the six I have now."

"How many have you had in the past?"

"Nine was the maximum, back in the days when I took youngsters for breaking. But that was during the good years, when we had proper wet seasons."

"Word is this year could see some good rains."

"Let's hope. Can never rely on it though. I've seen the land go for years without real rain, and I've seen it under a metre of flood water."

I straightened. Josie leant on the door, fiddling with the thong on her hat.

"I want to ask you something," she said. "Not sure what you'll say."

"Oh?" I tried to appear open. In truth, I had no idea what she wanted.

"I like it in Worrindi. The pub's a good place to be. Nice people." Her mouth crooked up at one corner. The motion was fascinating. "Believe me, that is not always the case." Her

fingers worried at the thong on the hat. “Anyway, I thought I’d stay around. A while. Maybe a lot longer, if it works out. I told you I have a horse?”

I nodded, my gaze on the restless movement of her fingers.

“I’d like to have her near. I was given her. Otherwise there’s no way I’d have bought a horse, not with my lifestyle. But she’s mine, and I’d like to have her somewhere close. Her name’s Flame.”

*Flame.* It conjured up a picture of a delicate, feisty horse, quick as lightning with movements of fire. But as tempting as the picture was, I knew I had to say no.

“She sounds like a beaut horse. But honestly, Josie, I don’t think I can have her here. I just don’t have the grazing. Most likely, I’m going to have to buy hay before long, and that’s very expensive.”

“I’ll pay for her agistment—I didn’t mean for you to keep her for nothing. I’ve thought about what I can afford.” She named a figure that was generous.

The money was tempting. With the extra, I could finish up the second cabin.

I shook my head. “That’s a good offer, but it’s more than you’d pay at other places. But I still don’t think I could do it if I have to buy hay.”

“If it comes to that, how about I purchase the hay for her?”

I ducked down to Smoke’s forelegs again to give myself time to think. The dollars marching through my head beat a compelling rhythm, but before I fell on Josie’s neck shrieking “yes!”, I had to give this more thought.

“I’m a thirty-minute drive from Worrindi. It would cost you to drive out here, and you may not be able to come that

often. I'm sure there is somewhere closer to town where you could keep her. If you want, I'll ask—"

"No." She leant forwards, and her face took on a strange intensity. "I want her to be here with you. If you'll take her, that is. She's special. I don't want to trust her to just anyone. I can pay, if that's what you're worried about."

"It's not. I trust you." And I did. I wasn't just saying the words. For all her nomadic ways, Josie seemed like someone I could rely on. Maybe I'd wake up one morning with a horse that didn't belong to me and no way of contacting the owner and no money coming in—I'd heard of that happening to others—but I didn't think so.

"I can give you a month up front. I'll transfer it to your bank if you agree."

It was a lot of money for someone earning minimum wage less board in a pub. Maybe she had money put aside.

"If you take her, I'll know she'll be well looked after. Cared for. So many places just throw a horse in a paddock and forget about it until the next bill's due." Her head ducked, and she glanced at me from under her hat. "And it would give me an excuse to come out here. To see you."

It wasn't fair of her to play the flirtation card with someone who was obviously interested.

I stood up again, with Smoke between us, and rested my hands on her withers. "Look, I'll think about it, okay? I can't give you an answer now. I need to think about grazing, hay, and things like that." *And about you wanting to see me again.* "Will Flame be okay in with the others? I don't think it will work if she has to be by herself."

"I'm sure she will be. Thanks, Felix, for at least thinking about it."

## CHEYENNE BLUE

“I’ll let you know.”

She nodded, and with a quick smile, she walked off.

I watched her go, watched the sway of her backside under those mauve pants, and tried not to think about the fact that she wanted to spend time with me.

\* \* \*

That evening, I sat in Mum’s office and juggled numbers in my spreadsheet. If I had an extra guaranteed income coming in, I could put a lot more into the cabins. It would make a difference. I could go out tomorrow and buy everything I needed for the second cabin from my savings and, hopefully, recuperate it over the next few weeks.

I removed the money Flame would bring in from the spreadsheet and looked again. Sure, I still had the money I’d set aside to cover repayments in the wet season, but if I used that, then I lost the buffer of safety. I would be flying too close to the wind. If the wet season closed the roads, then I was done like a dinner.

There was no doubt about it; the money that Josie would pay for boarding her horse would be good.

I drummed a pen on the desktop. Josie must want Flame here very badly. There were cheaper places closer to Worrindi, places that were easier to get to. But if Josie wanted to spend time with me, as she’d said, she didn’t need to bring her horse from South Australia to do so. She only had to drive out for a ride or invite me into town. We weren’t friends, not yet, but the seeds of friendship were there.

But all that was irrelevant. What mattered now was that if I took Flame, then it would be a boost to my business and my

finances. Josie's reasons, whatever they were—well, they were her concern.

I picked up the phone before I could change my mind and called the Commercial.

She answered the phone on the sixth ring, just as I was about to hang up.

"I'll take her." Too late, I realised I should have said who was calling, what I was calling about. But it didn't seem to matter.

"Hi, Felix." There was laughter in her voice, and in the background, the clink of glasses and loud voices. "You're talking about my horse?"

"Yes. If you're happy to put her in with mine and pay for any extra feed, then I'll take her."

"I'm glad. She'll be in good hands."

"I'll do my best."

"I know you will." A purr reverberated in her voice. "I'll call you when I've arranged transport."

The conversation ended, and I hung up feeling as if I was on the edge of something I couldn't control.

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# FENCED-IN FELIX

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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