



The newspaper-seller watched the blonde woman walk out through the gleaming glass doors of her apartment block. Without looking at his watch, he knew it was eight o'clock. She always came through those doors on the dot of eight. As usual, the white Mercedes was waiting for her at the side of the road. He knew that today she would hand her heavy briefcase to the driver, but not get inside the car. Today was the second Tuesday of the month.

The woman turned away from her driver and walked across the road towards him. She was good looking. Well groomed, but not too made up. Hair in a neat bob. She was a bit too thin for his taste, but elegant in those expensive tailored outfits she wore each working day. She had good legs, too, the paper-seller thought for the umpteenth time. And she knew how to walk in high heels. A lot of women never really mastered that. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, but he would put money on her being very close to forty. She was one of those women who spent a lot of money to look younger than they really were.

When she reached his stand, the woman stopped in front of the magazines. Her long fingers flicked quickly down the rack, counting. On the second Tuesday of the

month, she counted how many copies he carried of every magazine. Then she bought one. Always the same one.

‘Good morning,’ he said as she handed over the money. ‘Nice day.’

‘Yes. Very nice.’ She smiled back with remote courtesy.

The paper-seller had no idea why he always thought her smile was sad. The woman seemed to have everything. An apartment in a building with great views of Sydney Harbour. She must have a good job – the Mercedes was evidence of that. She certainly wasn’t poor.

‘You know, that magazine is changing,’ he volunteered as he gave her her change.

‘Really?’

‘Yes. It’s becoming a weekly.’

The woman turned the magazine over in her hands, studying the cover. He never understood why, out of all the magazines on his stand, she always chose that one. *Australian Life* was not exactly a high-class glossy. It was colourful and brassy, but to his mind a little trashy. Not at all like her. She was all class.

‘Do you think people will buy it as a weekly?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he answered. ‘I hope so. More money in my pocket if they do.’

She smiled and nodded goodbye as she turned towards the train station. The paper-seller watched her go. For a year she had been coming to his stand. She was always friendly enough; exchanged some small talk about the weather or one of the newspaper headlines. Asked how his sales were going. Never anything personal. In fact, he didn’t even know her name, and he would have been very surprised if she knew his. She kept her distance. And not just from him. He saw a lot from his position near the

entrance to the station. One thing he had never seen was the woman enter or leave her home with another person, male or female. Underneath that well-presented exterior she must be lonely, the paper-seller thought as he turned to his next customer.

Helen kept the magazine rolled in her hand as she walked through the barrier and on to the platform. Milson's Point station was the last stop before the train crossed Sydney Harbour. It was crowded with commuters heading across the big bridge with its famous iron arch to their city jobs. They were mostly young, middle class and upwardly mobile. They were her demographic.

She walked the length of the platform, but for once she ignored the glorious arc of brilliant blue sky, dramatically accented by the arc of the bridge. April was doing its best to impress, before the winter set in. Helen's attention, however, was totally focused on the hands of her fellow travellers. Carefully she noted which magazines had been purchased for on-train reading. She took particular notice of two girls sharing a copy of the same magazine that she herself held. Their heads were bent in conversation over some item on the page. That was good. She saw a couple of other publications, but that was to be expected. All in all, about the result she saw every time she took this journey. If her gamble paid off, the next time she stood on this platform it would be different.

When she took her seat in the carriage, Helen watched another young woman reading *Australian Life*. She was engrossed in one particular page. At last Helen opened her own copy of the magazine. She quickly flicked forward two pages. She knew exactly what had captured the other reader's attention.

## THE FARMER NEEDS A WIFE

The headline was in bold black letters, but it was the accompanying photograph that caught the eye. The young man leaning against the wooden fence was utterly gorgeous. His eyes were blue, his sandy hair flecked with gold. His open-necked check shirt displayed a glimpse of muscular chest, tanned a deep honey colour. He was holding an Akubra hat, and smiling. He was every woman's fantasy in blue jeans and riding boots.

Imagine your very own Man from Snowy River. He's half Hugh Jackman, mixed with a little Keith Urban and a dash of Eric Bana. The great Australian bushman is out there, and he needs a wife.

What woman hasn't dreamed of getting close to nature with a man as strong as the very earth itself?

*Australian Life* believes in true love and happy-ever-afters – and we have taken on the challenge of finding the perfect mate for the man on the land.

Right now, we are looking to hear from farmers. Tell us about the woman of your dreams. What is she like? What can you offer her? And what would your life together be like?

Girls – you won't have to wait long for your men. From this issue, *Australian Life* will be published weekly. This time next week, we'll have the first of our farmers for you.

Looking for romance? So are we. Let's find it together.

Signed: Helen Woodley, Editor

Helen looked at her name. It was quite possibly the only

thing on the page that was real. The 'farmer' of the photo was in fact a male model, whose streaked blond hair and golden tan were the product of a city salon rather than the outback sun. She didn't know if the model had ever sat on a horse, but she doubted it. And he certainly wasn't looking for a wife. She had been present at the photo shoot, and the model had been very keen to get back to the comforts of the city, and his boyfriend.

It was all a fantasy. That was her job – creating fantasies. She was very good at it.

The train pulled into Wynyard station. Helen stood up and stepped out on to the platform. She kept looking at the magazines in the female commuters' hands as she made her way to street level. From here, it was a short walk to work.

Helen's office was on the twenty-third floor. It had a large glass and chrome desk, as befitted her status, and picture windows with a spectacular view of Sydney Harbour. It also had a huge anteroom with desks to accommodate her editorial team. A large table dominated the centre of the room. It was cluttered with paper and photographs, odd bits of fabric and bottles of cosmetics. Her people were gathered around it, already intent on their work.

'Good morning, Helen.'

Her assistant's greeting was immediately echoed by the rest of the team.

'Good morning,' Helen replied to the room in general and continued into her office. Her assistant followed her, as he did every morning, notebook in hand. Helen desperately wanted to tell him to wait, that today she needed a few minutes to herself. A few minutes of peace. But today of all days she couldn't show any weakness. Not even in front of her own staff.

Richard Gordon was a new graduate from journalism school when she hired him as her assistant a year ago. He was twenty-three years old, well dressed and handsome, bright and ambitious. He always arrived at work before she did, and would stay until she left, unless she told him to go. Helen knew that he looked on her as his stepping stone to bigger and better things. That didn't bother her. Quite the opposite. He reminded Helen of herself when she was his age. She trusted him as much as she trusted anyone, which wasn't a great deal. She wanted to ask him if there had been any response yet. It was far too early, of course. The magazine had literally hit the streets in the early hours of that morning. But surely in these days of e-mail, there could already be a response. Had even a single farmer e-mailed to say he wanted a wife? Her whole career was on the line. If she failed, she would be looking for a new job, and there were not a lot of openings for failed magazine editors.

'Contact the printers,' she told Richard, who had followed her into her office. 'Check that everything will be right for next week.'

'I spoke to them yesterday,' Richard replied. 'They'll be ready. They need the final farmer page layout by close of business Thursday.'

Thursday! That was just two days away. She had two days to find fifteen presentable farmers and get their faces and stories on to the printed page. If she didn't, she would be a laughing stock in the industry. Helen didn't acknowledge the sudden twist of panic in her gut.

'That's fine. I expect we'll be getting our first e-mails shortly.' Her voice echoed a confidence she didn't feel. 'I'll want a short-list on my desk by Thursday lunchtime.'

'Yes, Helen.'

‘And I want a close eye kept on the sales figures. We may need a second print run.’ Maybe saying it out loud would make it come true.

‘Okay.’

‘Now, what else have I got today?’

‘A radio interview this morning. You can do that by phone. Then over to Channel Ten for *The Talk Show* interview. That will be live, so you’ll be finished by lunchtime. The GM has invited you to lunch.’

Much as she wanted to cancel it, Helen knew that lunch with the powerful general manager of the television network was almost as important as the interview. She took her place behind the desk.

‘The proofs of your newspaper profile will be here this afternoon,’ Richard continued. ‘I’ll bring them in as soon as they get here.’

Helen nodded. She was nervous about that profile, but no one was ever going to know. ‘Anything else?’

‘Nothing urgent.’

‘All right. Thanks, Richard.’

Richard recognised the dismissal and withdrew, closing the office door behind him.

Helen swivelled the large leather chair to face the big window and its glorious view. Although her eyes were looking at one of the most famous sights in the world, her mind was elsewhere, calculating sales figures and printing costs. She would have to decide tomorrow if there would be another run of the current issue. After that, the printers would be working towards the next.

A year ago, *Australian Life* had been languishing in the market, barely paying its way. The huge media conglomerate that owned it had faced two options – fix it or close it. Helen had been working as the deputy editor of a more

successful rival at the time. She had quit her job and presented herself at the offices of *Australian Life* with a bold plan to turn the ailing monthly into a weekly. It had taken a month to convince them. A month of waking each morning and wondering if she had made a ghastly mistake. A month of wondering if she should ask her old boss to take her back. But she had held out, and at last the owners of *Australian Life* had agreed to her plan.

That had been a year ago: the hardest year of Helen's life, as she had battled to bring her vision to reality. She was changing more than the magazine's publishing schedule. She had designed a whole new look and feel for *Australian Life* – targeting an audience that had previously belonged to her competitors. She had worked seven long days each week, meeting advertisers and printers, planning campaigns, studying costs and returns. The next few weeks would see her succeed or fail.

In all those long months, none of her staff had seen the slightest doubt in Helen's manner. Her outward confidence had never faltered, not for one second. The doubts had been reserved for the long nights when she was too tense to sleep. Only when she was alone was she able to acknowledge her fears. If she was wrong, *Australian Life* would never recover. If the magazine closed, the failure was hers alone, and the whole publishing industry would know. Her career would never recover. If she lost that, she had nothing else.

The whole farmer campaign had been her idea – a hook with which to launch the new-look weekly. She needed it to work. She turned back to her desk. There was surprisingly little for her to do. The next three magazines were already laid out – except for the farmer pages. She had cleared her calendar for these few days, leaving

herself free to do the publicity rounds that were such a vital part of the launch.

As if in response to her thoughts, the phone on her desk rang softly.

She picked it up. ‘Richard?’

‘The radio station wants to check the lines and levels,’ he said. ‘The interview will start in about three or four minutes.’

She hated these interviews. It was fine while the questions dealt with the magazine. But inevitably the interviewer would raise the one subject she didn’t want to discuss. It didn’t matter how many times the questions were asked, they never got any easier to answer.

Helen took a slow deep breath. ‘Put them through,’ she said as she carefully donned her professional mask.

‘Ms Woodley?’ a voice said in her ear.

‘Yes, this is Helen Woodley.’ Helen spoke clearly and not too quickly.

‘I’ll be putting you through in a moment. I just wanted to make sure you don’t have your radio playing near the phone, as that will cause us problems.’

‘No. I don’t have the radio playing.’ Helen was a veteran of many such interviews, and knew how they worked.

‘That’s fine. We are in a commercial break at the moment. I’m putting you through.’

A few moments later, the DJ’s cheerful voice sounded in her ear. ‘Welcome back to the breakfast show – and welcome also to Helen Woodley, editor of *Australian Life* magazine, which today launches a brand-new look. Welcome, Helen.’

‘Good morning, Tyrone,’ Helen replied in her best broadcast voice. ‘It’s always a pleasure to talk to you.’

‘So, Helen, you’ve become a matchmaker?’

‘I don’t know that I’d put it quite like that.’ Helen kept her tone light as she tried to steer the interview in the direction she wanted. ‘*Australian Life* has always reached out to all sectors of the country. Now that the magazine is becoming a weekly, there are new opportunities for us, as the publishers, to make a difference in our readers’ lives.’

The words were part of the campaign devised by the company’s publicity department to accompany the new-look magazine. Even to Helen’s ears they sounded false and shallow. But her job was to toe the company line.

‘Your headline says “The Farmer Needs a Wife” – and you’re inviting people to write in. That sounds like matchmaking to me.’ The DJ wasn’t going to be deflected by clever publicity lines.

‘We’re giving people in different parts of the country a rare chance to reach out to each other,’ Helen said.

‘Please tell our listeners how it works.’

‘Well, at the moment we are looking to hear from farmers. Write or e-mail telling us about the woman of your dreams. We’ll publish as many as we can. Then our female readers can write back to the farmer they would like to meet.’

‘And you’ll select a wife for each farmer?’

‘Oh, no. I’m not the one to make that decision.’ Helen tried to keep her tone light. She didn’t want her personal bitterness to intrude. ‘Every letter will be passed on to the farmer it’s addressed to. Then it’s up to the farmers and the letter-writers themselves to decide if they want to take it any further.’

‘And tell me, Helen, are you hoping to find yourself a farmer?’

Helen took a long, slow breath. She had expected this,

but that didn't make it any less intrusive. 'No, Tyrone, I'm not.'

'But Helen, you're a single woman. One of the most eligible bachelorettes around.'

'Every woman who sees a farmer in *Australian Life* can be assured that he will get her letter,' Helen said, ignoring the personal comment.

'And how many farmers have you got?' the DJ asked.

'I honestly don't know,' Helen responded. 'The magazine only came out today. But you can be certain that there will be farmers' details in the next issue, which will be out just one week from today.'

When the interview ended a few moments later, Helen hung up feeling reasonably satisfied. The questions hadn't got as personal as she'd feared, and she had managed to promote the magazine, which was the reason for the interview.

She glanced down at her unusually empty desk. There was little now for her to do but wait. Her reputation was at stake.

There must be some lonely farmers out there . . .

The slamming of the fly-screen door at the back of the house was immediately followed by the thudding of elastic-sided riding boots on a wooden floor.

'Don't get up, sis. I've got it under control.'

Jenny relaxed back into the canvas sling of the squatter's chair, her hand going automatically to the growing bulge at her waist. She was only five months' pregnant, but was already feeling awkward.

'Do you want a cuppa?' The voice was softer as its owner walked on to the shady veranda where Jenny was resting.

She looked up at her brother. Just under two metres tall, and built to match, Peter Nichols was a big man. His skin was tanned, with lines to mark thirty-five years of life in the outback sun. He looked strong and capable, because he was. He could wrestle a half-grown bull to the ground, fly a plane or dredge a watercourse from the parched earth. He was also a useful hand in the kitchen.

‘Tea would be great,’ Jenny said. ‘Thanks.’

Before long he was back, with Jenny’s tea in one hand and a huge glass of cold water for himself in the other. He leaned against the veranda rail as he drank.

‘Are Chris and Sara still in class?’

Jenny nodded. Living in the outback did not mean kids were excused school. It just meant that their classroom was in their own home. When she and Peter were young, they had used a high-frequency radio to attend the School of the Air, listening to lessons from a teacher hundreds of kilometres away. Peter’s eight-year-old twins now had the internet as well as a radio, but the regime was the same. Each day they spent at least an hour working with their teacher and a couple of hours more doing homework, which Jenny supervised.

Of course, when they were a little older, they would be better served by attending a boarding school. But Peter wasn’t ready to talk about that.

As a girl, Jenny had hero-worshipped her tall, handsome brother. He could ride and shoot better than she could. He was stronger and faster. When she was too small to put a halter over her horse’s head, he had done it for her. Like any good hero, he was constantly rescuing her when she got into scrapes. He had got her down off the top of the water tank when the ladder broke, and helped her find the thoroughbred stallion she

had accidentally released from its yard. He had even blacked the eye of a certain city boy who had become overly friendly. Later, he had been best man at her wedding.

And she had been bridesmaid at his.

Even now, Jenny felt deep sorrow as she pictured Karen and Peter standing side by side taking their vows. 'Until death us do part.' If the words still rang in Jenny's ears, how much louder must they sound to her brother? He was given just two short years of marriage – followed by grief that seemed endless. The only joy in his life since his wife's death came from his children. He wasn't yet ready to let them go to boarding school, and that was a problem, because Jenny wouldn't be around much longer to look after them.

Jenny still found it hard to believe that she and Ken were about to become parents. Ken had come to River Downs Station as an eighteen-year-old jackaroo, employed by her father. Raised on Queensland's beaches, he had been determined to make a place for himself in the harsh outback. And he had. Ten years later, he was as skilled a property manager as someone born to the life. Somewhere along the way, he had also fallen in love with the boss's daughter. They had married with her father's blessing a few months before the old man and his wife retired to the east coast. Now Ken and Jenny were also moving east. Ken had been offered a job managing a property in Queensland. He was keen to take on the challenge, and Jenny liked the idea of being closer to her parents when the baby was born. A few weeks from now, she and Ken would be gone from here.

She didn't have much time to sort out her brother's life.

Peter had asked her to find a nanny for the twins. She had tried, placing ads in several newspapers both locally and in Darwin. She had even advertised across the border in Queensland. Not one applicant had seemed even slightly suitable. They were all too young or too old. None had ever been in the outback before, and she doubted they would stay long. Maybe she was being too picky.

‘There were a few letters on the plane,’ Peter said, almost as if his thoughts had followed the same path as hers. ‘There might be a nanny there.’

‘I hope so,’ Jenny replied. ‘We are rapidly running out of time.’

‘We’re going to miss you. I don’t suppose I can convince you to leave Ken and stay with us?’ Peter grinned to emphasise the joke.

‘Sorry.’

‘Well, we’ll just have to learn to manage without you.’

Peter disappeared into the house for a few seconds, returning with the mail parcel. The mail plane only called once a week, so the bundle also contained a collection of newspapers and magazines. Peter left it on the table beside Jenny’s chair.

‘Thanks for doing this,’ he said.

‘It’s the least I can do, since I’m abandoning you.’

‘Ken still in the machinery shed?’ he asked as he placed his dusty Akubra hat on top of his brown hair.

‘I think so.’ Her husband was spending the day on general repairs and maintenance of the motorbikes that were used for daily transport around the property.

‘Okay. See you later, sis.’ Peter went down the wooden stairs two at a time.

Jenny watched him walk across the brown earth towards the cluster of outbuildings. The weathered timber

sheds with their metal roofs and cool dark interiors had been her playground; the wooden rails of the cattle yards were her swings and roundabouts. She closed her eyes, and gave herself up to the peace of the almost silent house she had grown up in. Her ears caught the gentle tick-tick of the metal roof expanding in the afternoon sun. The faint cawing of crows in the home paddocks was as much a part of her life as the feel of the red-brown earth beneath her feet. Two thousand square kilometres of near desert wasn't everyone's idea of paradise, but she loved it and she was going to miss it.

Jenny reached for the pile of letters and magazines on the table next to her. The mail plane would also have brought the household supplies she had ordered by phone yesterday. Without looking, she knew Peter would have left the box on the kitchen bench. That could wait. The kids would have finished class soon, so she had only a short time to read her mail, including any letters from potential nannies. Although the children didn't really need a nanny, they needed a mother. And what her brother needed was a wife . . .

Jenny stared at the magazine cover.

A wife!

Quickly she flicked over the pages. This was perfect. It was exactly what she needed. Her brother had rescued her often enough; now it was her turn. She took the magazine with her as she walked through to the large airy study that served as classroom for the kids and office for their father.

'How's the homework?' she asked the twins.

'We're done, Aunt Jenny.' Sara was a serious and truthful little girl, the image of her mother.

'Can we go down to help Dad now?' Chris asked.

‘No,’ Jenny said quickly. ‘Your dad and uncle are too busy to have the two of you underfoot.’

The answer gave rise to looks of acute disappointment.

‘However,’ Jenny continued, ‘if you were to pack away the groceries, and then stay out of my hair for the next half an hour, we could walk down to the machinery shed later.’

‘All right!’ In a flurry of brown limbs, the twins hugged their aunt and vanished.

They hadn’t turned the computer off. Quickly Jenny typed in the *Australian Life* web address. She scanned the pages as they appeared in front of her. The magazine wanted a photo. Jenny had taken some only recently to send to her parents. She called up a blank document, ready to compose the letter. She would have to be careful. Peter would kill her if he knew what she was doing. Of course, he’d get over it when she found him a wife. For now, she’d simply tell him she was looking for a nanny.

Greg Anderson stared down at his hands, which lay clasped in his lap. Already they were showing the signs of the past few weeks of hard work. There were a few small cuts on skin which was dark red-brown from exposure to the sun. His hands were starting to look like farmer’s hands. Like his father’s hands. That was wrong. He was only twenty-three. And he was not a farmer. At least, he hadn’t planned to be. But a lot had changed in the last few minutes.

‘... come to terms with it.’ The voice dragged him back to the here and now.

‘I’m sorry,’ Greg said. ‘What did you say?’

‘I’ve told your father,’ the doctor repeated in his best professional manner, ‘but it’s obviously a difficult thing for him to accept.’

Difficult was something of an understatement. His father had no time for weakness in others, and would never admit to it in himself.

‘How long?’

‘With this condition, it’s hard to say,’ the doctor answered. ‘Perhaps years. But I have to be blunt. This form of cardiomyopathy has no cure. All we can do is try to ease the symptoms.’

‘When can he go home?’

‘Greg . . .’ The doctor hesitated. ‘I think I had better explain. You may be able to take him home for short periods. It’ll be good for him. But they will only be visits. He will need constant monitoring and round-the-clock care.’

‘Then he’ll be stuck in hospital for the rest of his life?’

‘There is a good long-term care facility here in Townsville, and I’m sure we can place Robert there.’

Care facility? That was for old men. Greg was struggling to take in the knowledge that his father would never work the farm again.

‘I know Robert is expecting to see you today,’ the doctor continued calmly. ‘Why don’t you go and talk to him? We can meet again in a few days when you have had a chance to think.’

Greg picked up the briefcase he had brought, and left the office in a daze. He walked slowly down the long hallway, his eyes turning neither left nor right. He ignored the cheerful prints on the walls, and the practical tiled floor. He tried not to hear the low sounds from the rooms on either side; tried not to smell the disinfectant that couldn’t disguise the odour of illness and decay. He stopped at the second door from the end. It was open. Greg steeled himself and walked into the room.

The man on the bed appeared to be asleep. His eyes

were closed, and his mouth hung slightly open; the bedcover rose and fell with his slow, deep breathing. He had once been a big man, tall and muscular, but illness had robbed him of that. His face was sunken and much older than his fifty years. His fingers seemed unnaturally long and terribly fragile where his hand lay on his chest, no longer giving the impression of great strength.

As Greg stepped into the room, the man on the bed opened his eyes. There was no sign of confusion or concern in their steely grey glance.

‘You’re late.’

‘Sorry, Dad.’ Greg’s response was automatic, learned as a child.

‘Did you bring the papers?’

‘Yes.’ Greg pulled a chair towards the bed, but not too close. Sitting down, he took the briefcase on to his knees but didn’t open it. ‘Dad, I’ve just been talking to the doctor. He told me that we should start thinking about the future.’

‘I am thinking about the future. That’s why I need to see those papers.’ Robert held out one demanding hand. ‘If I don’t tell you what to do, the farm will be ruined by the time I get out of this place.’

‘That’s what the doctor wanted to talk to me about.’ Greg tried again. ‘He says your condition is—’

‘I don’t want to hear it!’ Robert’s voice was too weak to be called a shout, but it carried the same presumption of obedience that it always had. ‘Doctors! Vultures, I say. I’m not spending the rest of my life in this place. I’m getting out of here. Be better off without all their poking and prodding anyway. Now, I don’t want to hear any more about that. Did you get that water pump repaired? What was the final cost?’

The old man held out his hand again. It was trembling. Greg didn't know if that was due to illness or anger. Reluctantly he opened the briefcase and handed over the paperwork he'd brought.

The old man just grunted and started reading.

Greg stared out the window. One more harvest. That was all it was supposed to be. One more harvest.

It hadn't been easy being Robert Anderson's son. Greg had tried. He did everything his father asked and more. When he was at school, his holidays were spent at the sugar mill. While his friends were chasing girls and partying, he was driving a tractor or harvesting cane. But whatever he did, it was never good enough. Greg sometimes wondered if Robert had been a different man when he was young. When his wife was with him.

Robert had always assumed his son would follow him on the farm. Greg had always known that he wouldn't. He had dreamed of a different future, and planned his escape. Over and over again. The time had never seemed right. He had no skills, other than those needed to be a cane-farmer. He had an adequate education, but no higher qualifications. He had a handsome face and an easy way with people, but you couldn't base your life on that. He had one small talent, but that had never seemed enough. Until a few months ago. The talent that resided in Greg's hands and heart had opened a door, and he was eager to step through it.

Then his father fell ill. At first it seemed like a bad case of flu, and Robert had ignored it. Then it became something else. Greg didn't like his father. He doubted that he even loved him. But he couldn't just walk away. One more harvest, he told himself. He would stay just a few months, until his father was well again.

Greg reached into the pocket of his jeans, for the object that was always there. His fingers closed around the lump of polished metal, his fingertips seeking out the lines and curves that he had wrought on the gleaming surface. His first professional quality piece of silversmithing. His good-luck charm. He closed his fist around the metal so tightly that it hurt. It wasn't going to be just one more harvest.

'What's this?'

Greg forced his attention back to the room. His father was holding out the accounts book, pointing to an entry with one trembling finger. Greg had been expecting this.

'I bought a computer.'

'A computer! We don't need a computer!' The old man was shaking now with anger.

'Yes, we do.' Greg forced his voice to remain calm. 'You should have got one years ago. I'm using it for business accounts, letters and so forth.' It wasn't exactly a lie. He would use it for farm accounts. But it did have another purpose.

'Can't you write letters by hand? I did it for years.'

He could, but he wasn't going to admit it. 'I'm getting internet services installed this week,' he added, determined to get this over with.

'Internet! Rubbish.' Robert Anderson's body might have weakened, but he was still a man of strong opinion. 'Our family has run that farm for generations without the internet.'

Greg could continue to run the farm without the internet, but that wasn't the point. If he was to be trapped on the farm, the internet could be his link to a different world. He might be able to start a website. Sell his jewellery. It would be his escape.

'It's only thirty-five dollars a month, Dad. And it's a tax deduction. There's no need for you to worry about it.'

'I see what you're trying to do. You want to cut me out, don't you? Just because I'm stuck in this place. When I get out, things will change . . .'

Thirty minutes later, Greg left. He got behind the wheel of the dusty farm utility, started the engine and headed homewards. Within a few minutes he had left the town behind. The long straight line of the road stretched ahead of him, like the years he was going to face, chained to a house that had never felt like a home and to a bitter and sick man. Without a conscious thought, he finally turned off the main road on to the gravel farm road, pausing briefly to collect a bundle of envelopes from the rusty old oil drum that served as the Anderson farm mailbox.

A bright flash of lightning woke him from the daze he had been in since he left the hospital. There was a storm coming. The lightning also drew his attention to a plastic-covered parcel lying on the ground. Greg reached for it as the first drops of rain started to splatter on his windscreen. It was a magazine, addressed to his neighbour's wife. Obviously it had been dropped by mistake. Greg would simply put it in the oil drum for the mailman to collect the next day. Before he could, his eye caught the headline and he paused.

### **THE FARMER NEEDS A WIFE**

He almost laughed out loud. Then he tossed the magazine on to the seat beside him. If he was going to be a farmer after all, he might as well order a farmer's wife.

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Leigh Kenyon grunted with effort as she braced one foot against the fence post. Carefully she leaned her whole weight against the pull of the wire. Twisting her hands, she locked the wire around the post a second time. Quickly reversing the long-handled fencing pliers, she took a twist on the wire. Then she released her pent-up breath, eased off the tension and tested the wire with her hand. It was locked around the post, taut as a guitar string. She caught the wire in the pliers once again and added two more twists. Satisfied, she stepped back, pulled off her leather gloves and her baseball cap and used the back of her hand to wipe away the sweat that was running down her face.

High summer had passed and it wasn't that hot, but mending the trellises that supported her vines was hard work. Leigh slipped the pliers into the back pocket of her dusty blue jeans as she walked back to her truck. The water bottle was sitting on the ground in the shade near the back of the vehicle. She unscrewed the top and lifted it to take a long draught of the cool liquid. She poured a little over her head, and ran her fingers roughly through her short dark hair, then leaned back against the vehicle and ran her eye down along the trellis.

That's not too bad, she thought.

The wire was once more taut. The vines had already been pruned after the harvest, but when the new growth came in the spring, the trellis would be there to support it.

'Just three more to go,' Leigh said out loud, with some satisfaction. Once the repairs were complete, she could start building more trellis lines, opening a new block ready for planting in the spring. It would be the first new planting since she had walked on to the small winery three

years before. She slowly turned her head to run her eyes over the neat blocks, down to the cluster of buildings.

She wasn't doing too badly. Just twenty-nine years of age, and the owner of a winery in the Hunter Valley. The name Leigh Kenyon was now listed among the growers in Australia's premier wine region.

'Take that and shove it, Jack Thorne,' she whispered, then laughed out loud, telling herself that it didn't hurt any more. It really didn't.

Leigh didn't wear a wristwatch when she was working. She didn't need to. A glance at the sun told her she still had some daylight left. Enough time to start working on the next run. She took a final swig from the water bottle, then bent to drag the roll of fencing wire across to the next post.

An hour later, she was struggling with the same roll of wire. The sun was low and her working day was almost over. All she had left to do was load her tools into the back of her truck and she could head for the house and a welcome shower. She had dragged the roll of fencing wire to the back of the truck, and just had to lift it a couple of feet on to the tailgate. A simple thing, but not so easy to do. The wire was just that bit too heavy for her at the end of the day when she was tired.

There were times when being alone really sucked.

Almost as if it had been called by her words, Leigh heard the sound of an engine on the dirt track that ran beside her property.

'No. Please, not him.' But it couldn't be anyone else.

She heard the engine stop. Without turning around, she knew her neighbour would be striding towards her with that self-assurance that she found so irritating. And why did he always appear when she was covered with

sweat? Just once she would like meet him with her hair combed and maybe wearing some make-up.

‘Leigh. I was passing. Do you need some help?’

Why did he always sound so patronising? Leigh fixed a smile on her face and turned around.

‘Hello, Simon.’

It wasn’t fair that such an annoying person should look like that. Simon Bradford should have been a movie star or a model. He was a head taller than Leigh. A lifetime of outdoor work had made his body muscular and hard. His skin was tanned a healthy brown and the sun had also touched his wavy hair with gold. He had blue eyes to die for, and when he smiled, as he was now, he revealed a set of perfect white teeth. He was as clever and successful as he was good looking. He was enough to set any girl’s pulse racing.

He was also number two on Leigh’s most hated men list, second only to Jack Thorne, her ex-fiancé.

‘Let me get that.’ He reached down and took a hold of the heavy roll of wire. With the greatest of ease, he swung it into the back of the truck, where it landed with a loud crash. ‘There you go.’

‘Thanks,’ Leigh muttered, trying to be gracious. She was also fighting the urge to tidy her short hair, or hide her sweaty hands with their chipped and dirty nails.

‘No problem.’ Simon started collecting the tools Leigh had dropped to the ground while she struggled with the wire roll.

‘Leave them,’ she told him. ‘I can do that.’

‘It’s nothing.’ The fencing bar and pliers followed the wire into the truck. Simon turned his whole attention to Leigh. ‘I just want to help. I’m always here if you need me. You know that.’

Leigh knew no such thing. 'I'm fine. Really. I will call if I need you.' Like hell she would.

'Good.'

He just stood looking down at her, making her feel small and inadequate. She *was* small, of course, but she was actually highly capable and very confident of her own abilities. Except when she was around Simon Bradford. Something about him turned her into a gibbering idiot.

Leigh knew that what he really wanted was her land. Her tiny winery sat almost smack in the middle of Simon's vast holdings. The previous owner had refused to sell it to him, not wanting his pride and joy to be swallowed up by a vast corporate machine. Instead, he'd sold to an eager young couple about to embark on a life together.

When Jack left, it didn't take long for Simon to come knocking on Leigh's door, offering to relieve her of the burden.

Not in this life – or the next.

But harsh reality had forced her to make one compromise. Until she was able to make and market her own wine, she had to sell her harvest. Simon's big winery was close and needed more grapes than he could grow. She sold him hers because it was a financial necessity, but she didn't like it. It also meant she had to be friendly to the man and hide her contempt beneath a cheerful exterior. Next year, she should be able to make her own wine, and would take great pleasure in refusing Simon's offer for her fruit. She desperately hoped that when she did, her success would annoy Simon as much as everything about him annoyed her.

'Have you got your tickets for the Winegrowers' Dinner yet?' he asked.

Leigh hadn't. She wasn't planning to go. The annual dinner was *the* social event of the season. All the winegrowers attended. Three years ago, Leigh and Jack had gone together and she had enjoyed mixing with other growers. The next two years she had gone alone, and hated every sympathetic smile she had received from men and women alike. Simon had been there, of course, looking resplendent in a tailor-made dinner suit, some beautiful young thing draped over his arm.

'No. Not yet.' She wasn't about to say she wasn't going.

'Don't wait too long,' Simon advised. 'They are selling fast. You don't want to miss out.'

Yes, I do, Leigh thought.

'If you don't have a date,' Simon continued, oblivious to her growing tension, 'I might be able to help. I've already invited someone, but I know one or two—'

'There's no need,' Leigh interrupted, wondering if it was time to promote him to number one on her hate list. 'I have a date, thank you.' She smiled at him as she seethed inside.

'Oh, good. I look forward to meeting him. Perhaps we can have a dance?' Simon added lightly.

The thought almost made Leigh choke.

Simon ran an expert eye down the fence line she was building. 'This is a good bit of land. The vines will do well here.'

*My* vines, she wanted to say. They'll never be yours, so don't even bother making another offer. Instead she said, 'I think so too.'

Her voice must have given some hint of her thoughts. Simon cast a sideways glance at her, a slight frown creasing his brow. Then, with a nod, he turned away to walk back to his car. Leigh did not watch him go. She

checked that all her fencing tools were back in her truck, and then got behind the wheel and started her engine.

Her anger faded quickly as she drove off her own land, down the road towards the small shop at the crossroads. What had she been thinking, lying like that? She didn't have a date for the dinner. She hadn't had a date since Jack left, and wasn't likely to either. Keeping the small vineyard going took all of her time and energy. She couldn't remember the last time she had gone out to dinner. Her irregular phone calls to her parents in Sydney were about the closest she came to a social life.

Inside the shop, Leigh collected her bread and milk. She was selecting her usual wine-related magazines from the rack when her eye fell on the cover of *Australian Life*. She saw the headline and didn't pause to think. She picked the magazine up and paid for it with the others. She did think about it as she drove home and walked into her kitchen. Then she found a pen and pad, and started writing, before her courage failed her.

*Dear Editor,*

*My name is Leigh. I am a woman, and I am a farmer too . . .*

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'Here's the short-list, Helen.' Richard dropped a folder filled with letters and photos on to Helen's desk.

'How many have we had?' Helen asked.

'Up to this morning, just over three hundred, including e-mails,' her assistant enthused.

Helen closed her eyes for a moment, relief flooding through her.

'That's a great response in just three days,' Richard continued. 'There should be a similar number again as the

snail mail comes in from the more remote places. And this is just the first week.'

'That's all good news.' Helen smiled at him. 'Based on those figures, I think we can easily sustain farmers for three weeks. I'll have this week's list ready in about an hour.'

'I'll tell layout that it's coming,' Richard said as he left.

Helen allowed herself a few quiet moments of satisfaction. It looked like her idea was working. Thank God!

She opened the folder and glanced at the top sheet. It was a list of names, ages and locations. Her team had already selected the most promising letters. Thirty names chosen from three hundred. That was just one in ten. The others were simply not handsome enough, or perhaps their letters were dull. Some would have been out of contention because of poor-quality photographs. The magazine needed farmers who were saleable. Helen frowned. She didn't like the way that sounded. Still, it was only in her head. The rejected farmers would receive a polite letter explaining the overwhelming response and the lack of space to include everyone. The thirty farmers in her folder were the lucky ones. Half of them would feature in the next issue of *Australian Life*. It was her job to pick them.

Helen spread the files out across the glass top of her desk, with the photos clearly visible. Without reading a single word about the candidates, she rejected three simply because she didn't like the photos. That left twenty-seven.

She wanted to include the widest possible range of ages, types of farm and locations in the magazine. With that in mind, she cut another three applicants, then settled down to read the rest carefully.

An hour later, she was almost done. The rejects were back in the short-list folder. They would get a second chance next week. Fourteen applications lay in a pile by her left hand. The final two sat side by side in front of her, while she weighed them up. One was a New South Wales cattleman; the other a canegrower from Townsville.

She reviewed the cattleman's letter. It was articulate and interesting, and the accompanying photo was good. But she already had one cattleman. A quick look through the pile of accepted farmers located that particular letter. It was great. Thirty-five years old. A widower with two small children living in the back of nowhere in the Northern Territory. Even the station name was romantic: River Downs – two thousand square kilometres of Australian outback. This one was a winner.

The canefarmer was very young. In the photograph he looked handsome. Dark hair, blue eyes. Nice broad shoulders. Helen wondered why someone like that needed her magazine to find a wife. Still, that wasn't her problem. Her job was selling magazines, and if the canefarmer would help, then he would have the final place. He listed making jewellery as one of his hobbies. That would attract some interest.

'All right, Greg Anderson, twenty-three years old, of Townsville,' she said as she added the file to the accepted pile. 'You're in.'

That made fifteen.

Helen spread the photos out across her desk for one last review. She was very pleased with the selection. Something for everyone was the magazine's promise – and that was what she had chosen. Young and old, they farmed everything from sheep to tomatoes. One even farmed

ostriches. He hadn't been particularly handsome, nor was his letter very articulate. But an ostrich farmer was an attention-getter.

As was the woman.

Helen picked up the file, and studied the face that stared back at her. She was young and quite pretty, was this . . . Helen checked the file . . . Leigh Kenyon. A winegrower in the Hunter Valley. Helen wondered briefly if life was as difficult for a single woman winegrower as it was for a single woman editor of a national magazine. Not that it mattered. The important thing was that having a female farmer would increase the appeal of the campaign.

Helen gathered up both sets of files and walked into the main office.

'Keep these,' she instructed Richard as she handed him the rejects. 'We can review them when we see what new applicants we get for next week.'

She walked to the big layout desk. Pushing aside the clutter to make room, she laid the photos out one by one, listening closely to the reactions of her team. If these farmers got her team talking, they'd do the same to her readers. The excited buzz as the photos were passed around the table told her everything she needed to know. She stood back a little and allowed her staff to do the job they were paid for.

A loud knock at the open door announced the arrival of her boss.

'Helen!' Jim Sommerton was a short, round man with a big voice.

'Jim.' She moved to intercept the chief executive before he could involve himself in the work that was taking place. Jim was a man with a great head for running a media empire, but a lousy head for designing a magazine.

‘It’s looking good,’ he boomed. ‘The sales figures. The second printing. That’s the right stuff!’

‘Thank you,’ Helen said. ‘I expect next week will do even better.’

‘I hope so.’ Jim was obviously keeping a close eye on what she was doing. ‘I want to see the mail room overflowing with lonely-hearts letters.’

Helen nodded. Jim was a bit hard to take in large doses. He had originally opposed her idea. Now she expected he’d try to take some of the credit.

‘Now don’t you go giving away all those brawny men.’ He nudged her roughly in the side with one elbow and winked. ‘You might want to keep one for yourself.’

Helen forced a laugh, but it faded as soon as Jim walked out. He hadn’t made her feel like laughing. With just a few words and a leer, he had made the whole farmer campaign seem slightly sleazy and left a bitter taste in her mouth.

‘It’s ready, Helen.’ The layout artist called her back to the big table.

Helen looked over the pages.

‘Get it to the printer,’ she said.