

CHAPTER ONE

The filthy bastard! I thought. He's watching Patton doing it with his latest conquest. Doesn't he care that anyone from Gold Kangaroo Class could walk in and catch him perverting, even the children, or that Patton, though openly promiscuous, still has a legal right to privacy?

Smarting with outrage, I slid one hand along the carriage wall to counteract the lurching gait of *The Ghan*, crept up close and snapped off a few shots. As soon as I'd downloaded the photos, I'd present them to the security guards. Their powers allowed them to insist that passengers using unacceptable behaviours leave the train. Once my photos showed that this sicko was spying on Patton and his current partner having sex, he'd be put off at the next outback siding.

I hoped he knew how to pray, for the only sure way back to Adelaide was to snag a ride with a passer-by. That would need more than luck, since we were deep in the Australian desert several hundred kilometres south of Alice Springs. Trudging alone across the blazing sands usually meant a slow decline into madness followed by a terrible death from dehydration.

I needn't have worried about making a noise. So absorbed was the creep in what he was seeing through the slightly open door of twinette two, he wouldn't have heard a dingo howling in his ear.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Righteous anger edged my voice.

"Waiting for you," the man drawled, his back still to me. "I need a record of what's inside. Close-ups mainly."

Was he for real?

My mouth went slack. And as it did, comprehension sent a tremble of anxiety over my skin - I knew that voice. As distinctive as Australian rum, and as raw, it ricocheted around my memories.

His name came. "Detective Roscoe." I pivoted ready to leave. Roscoe and I had met twice before. Neither time had been pleasant.

"Before you go, Ms Madison Forbes, why not risk a peek at what I want the photos of," he said, stepping aside.

Stung by the dare in the detective's tone, and smarting that I'd been wrong about discovering a sexual pervert in action, I turned, only to wish I'd kept on walking.

A man lay slumped against the bottom bed, his face pressing into the quilt. The soft golden hair screamed Patton, but he wasn't making love. In fact, he wasn't doing anything.

My stomach acids rioted. I rebelled against the obvious. Patton was young, a lion, bright, tawny-haired, lithe and hungry for power. No way was he this bluish slug, this *immobile* bluish slug on the floor of the twinette he and his father shared on *The Ghan*.

The photographer in me listed details automatically: bent right leg, right foot hidden beneath the torso, left arm flopped across the waist, left palm with its blue-tipped fingers clutching the quilt, silk shaving coat open, hairless chest exposed, also hairless pubic area.

Lights whirled behind my eyes. I grabbed at the door frame. No-one so torqued and twisted could be alive.

"Don't touch!"

An iron hand in a latex glove gripped my wrist, shoving me away from the doorway and into the passage.

"Veneer is perfect for prints," Roscoe rasped. "I thought a would-be detective like you would've known that."

As steady suddenly as Uluru, I lifted my glance from the rubber-slick fingers around my wrist to the detective's face.

With a grunt, Roscoe dropped my hand. "As Officer-in-charge, keeping the area uncontaminated has to be my first priority."

Standing as tall as my five ten allowed, I pulled my unruly red hair back behind my ears. "Of course," I agreed. Right then, wimpy concession beat screaming 'Assault!' or admitting

I'd come over all weak. Besides, Detective Roscoe was right. Legal procedure demanded that all deaths, even heart attacks like this, be checked.

The detective narrowed his eyes as if trying to read my unexpected compliance. Eventually he gave up, shrugged and grumbled, "Madison, this carriage is a crime scene. It has to be preserved exactly as it is until *The Ghan* gets to Adelaide and the forensic experts. That's not for, what, eighteen hours? It's a nuisance to have to wait and an even worse waste of opportunity."

"Crime?" I slumped against the far wall of the passage.

"Yes, crime. Murder in fact."

My heart jagged. I looked again. Patton had been flung down as if now he was dead he no longer mattered. Not just death, I saw this time, but grotesque, deliberate slaughter.

"What have you done with the other passengers from *The Brolga*?" As soon as the question was out I wished I could call it back. It tied me to helping Roscoe as securely as if I'd openly agreed to his request.

The crooked loop of his lips showed me he knew it. "Locked them next door in the Lounge and Bar car."

"Do they know about this?" I couldn't help it. I had to know.

"No."

"What reason did you give for shutting them out of their rooms?"

"I didn't, just herded them in. Safety in numbers, you know. Anyway, it makes it easier to check them off against the guest manifold to see if anyone else is missing."

"You think the murderer is one of them - us, not one of the crew?" My berth was in this carriage. I was one of them - us.

One eyebrow lifted. "Could be either. All I know is that he, or she, is still on the loose."

When I said nothing more because I couldn't make the words come, Roscoe sent me a real smile, one that crinkled his face with sympathy. For the first time I saw it - Roscoe was like a toffee, hardened outside by constant exposure to the vile crimes of psychotics and sociopaths, but mushy with compassion inside.

When he took out a notepad, my past came back to haunt me: *take notes, heaps of them* - the first lesson of the private detective training I'd enjoyed until the sinister side of people, the side that drove some into acts of pure malevolence, had sent me scuttling for the safety of landscape and real-life photography.

The lessons having been reactivated during my search for my father, and reinforced while hunting the killer of the boy in the boathouse, I knew what Roscoe would soon be writing - first, the lay of the body and descriptions of Patton's hair, clothing and jewellery. Then, anything unusual or out of place. Next, he'd move in close. After examining the wound, locating the weapon and searching for stains, tears or displacement in the clothing, he'd note extra bruises, cuts or wounds. Finally, if he had a thermometer, he'd take the body's temperature to enable the time of death to be computed. A sinister list, not one that appealed, despite lists being my preferred way of ordering my life.

Once more my stomach scrolled. I didn't need this. The two murders I'd already been involved in had concerned people I'd cared for. This one didn't. Let someone else flounder through its revulsion. "Detective Roscoe. It's been, um, interesting to see you again. Maybe we can catch up properly when you're not so busy. The Lounge and Bar car for *The Brolga* passengers, you said?"

"The photos, Madison?" Hard-eyed, Roscoe stopped writing. He waited, pencil poised. When I didn't answer, his lips thinned. "There's no-one else."

No! I gripped my camera strap. No way is the taint of corruption worth the thrill of the chase, especially when the victim is a stranger.

Stranger? Not quite. I'd known Patton long enough to wonder what it would be like to go to bed with him.

And I knew the most damning evidence was usually collected during the first few hours after a criminal act. Photos would capture clues that might be lost before *The Ghan* reached Adelaide, might help bring Patton's murderer to justice.

Needing one last prompt, I glanced into twinette two. Patton was still there, still dead.

That's when I found a voice. Because it wasn't mine, it worked before I knew I'd opened my mouth. "Patton's head is in shadow. I'll have to go in close if you want sharp details." My face heated. Okay. A smart person would've chosen a Bundy and Coke in the Lounge and Bar car.

"Start with half a dozen from the doorway. After I check the cabin, you can enter to take the close-ups."

Work from wide out and move into the crime scene: lesson two.

"Who..." I coughed. "Who found him?"

"His father."

"Poor Sherman." I'd first met the Americans when we'd boarded *The Ghan* in Darwin for its inaugural trip south to Adelaide. Though Sherman had annoyed me with his concentration on money and male power, Patton's social agility had made up for his father's shortcomings. During the day and a bit we'd been travelling, he'd charmed most of the females in our carriage.

"How did Patton... I mean, what happened to him?"

"Garrotted."

"What?" An image of overweight Mafia rejects slicing people's heads almost from their bodies with hunks of wire, left my mouth as dry as the Simpson Desert.

"Strangled with a ligature, if you want to get technical."

Patton's body covered most of the floor of the space-efficient cabin. "It doesn't look like there was much of a struggle."

Roscoe swooped. "You've been in this roomette before?"

"No." It was none of his business what I'd *thought* of doing before deciding Patton wasn't my type. "It's just that everything looks tidy, like it's where it should be." My nose twitched, separating the acrid odours of voided wastes from the tart smell of male perfume. "I would've thought a struggle in a twinette would've knocked over a few more things than a bottle of aftershave."

"That's speculation, Madison."

"Oh," I mumbled. *Just the facts - lesson number three.*

Like a red heeler at the hoofs of a stray cow, Roscoe pounced on my amateur status. "From the passage door the room looks tidy except for the messed up bedding and a glass on the floor. That's it."

Resentment at Roscoe's cavalier treatment sparked a flash fire in me. I decided to be upfront, to make it clear my commitment to making pictorial brochures on the unique benefits of a train holiday in northern Australia and taking souvenir shots for passengers were *my* first priorities, not playing catch-the-murderer with him.

"Let's put our cards on the table, *Detective*. When the Train Manager told me a passenger wanted me, I assumed I'd be photographing a living person. When you showed me there'd been a murder, I wanted to run. For reasons of civic duty, I didn't. However," I took a deep breath and rushed on before he could interrupt, "I didn't expect to be treated like a fool every time I opened my mouth. Either respect my contribution as a volunteer or ask one of the security guards to photograph your crime scene."

Roscoe's pained look matched his verbal response. "I need an accurate record of what I find. It's not often a detective gets a warm body to work with." He held out an oversized camera of his own. "All I have is this antiquated video recorder and one cassette and an audio recorder with a couple of tapes. If the heat's too hot, show me how to work your digital for stills and get out of my kitchen."

Crass bastard! "I can handle *heat*," I claimed. "What I can't handle is *you*."

"What a shame," Roscoe leered.

I shoved my camera back into its case.

"What are you doing?"

"Going to join the other passengers. Listening to them speculate about why they're confined in the Lounge and Bar car has more appeal than being harassed by you."

Roscoe's body quivered, then stilled. "I've gone too far?"

I didn't bother to answer.

His voice dropped to a gruff whisper. "What if I said I was, um, sorry?"

The light gleaming in his eyes and the smile playing in the corners where his lips joined encouraged me to push. "How sorry?"

"Enough to act nice." He rubbed at the lines above his nose. "Look, Madison. I was shunted onto this train, officially as trouble-shooter on its two inaugural trips but really for R and R. Stress, you know, from the day job. No-one in the hierarchy expected a murder. But it's happened, and I'm here and so are you, just us until *The Ghan* reaches Adelaide in the morning. By then the trail will be cold, and worse, the passengers will be released. While they're still on the train I - *we* - have a chance to catch the perpetrator."

It was the longest speech I'd ever heard Roscoe make. Besides, the *we* sounded genuine. "Well," I hedged.

"Okay, okay! You're a good photographer. You don't panic easily. You've had some training in detecting and some experience. You don't talk out of turn. You're not a cop but you'll do until the real thing gets here."

"Thank you." *I think.*

"So, can we get back to the job?" He fumbled a second pair of latex gloves from his trouser pocket and held them out.

"Already there," I sighed, accepting the gloves. "Half a dozen shots from the doorway, you said?"

My mind raced as I snapped. After the horrors of finding first my father's body and then the boy's, I'd promised never again. Now Patton, someone I'd been talking to only a few hours ago, was dead and here I was once more, sucked in despite my promise. But not for long. I'd take the photos then run. No-one would blame me.

A shimmer of foreboding trickled down my neck, thrilling yet horrifying at the same time - the killer was probably still on the train, lurking amongst the passengers, pretending to be as normal, as ordinary as the rest of us, yet Patton's body suggested a deliberate pose, one orchestrated by a psychopathic monster who would kill again now he'd tasted blood.

Unless he was stopped.

Roscoe could do that with help, but only with help. My jaw tightened. I was involved until we arrived in Adelaide, whether I liked it or not.