

Chapter 1

Dr Daniella Bell knew that for many people, hospitals were scary places. But that had never been true for her. At least, not until recently.

The plain health-service clock showed twelve after midnight. She stood in the intimate familiarity of an emergency bay, the starched white bedsheets forming an island within the multicoloured wall-mounted equipment bins. She could just as easily have been in a hospital in Brisbane and not several thousand kilometres away in the small town of Ryders Ridge, north-west Queensland.

Daniella's hands clenched the chart as a sickening panic rose inside her. That wasn't familiar. She didn't panic, never lost control. She was Dr Bell of the Zen calm.

Or rather, she had been. It was the patient who'd triggered this response. Sarah, a little girl with asthma, now resting under a gurgling nebuliser mask. In fact, everything was already done. Daniella's supervisor, Dr Martin Harris, the one doctor of this formerly one-doctor town, had responded to the emergency call. He had administered the steroids and bronchodilators. Sarah's breathing had become less laboured. Oxygen sats were excellent. The danger was past.

But Daniella couldn't relax.

As she watched Dr Harris work, she poked at her memory. She had no good reason to panic about asthma; she'd seen dozens of cases in Brisbane. But that had been *before*. She tested herself, checking off the elements of asthma management on her fingers, relieved by how easily they came to her. But she was still a long way from her usual self, calm and non-emotional. It frightened her: she wanted to be sure of herself. She wanted to forget.

It wasn't that she was hiding out in this far-from-nearly-everywhere town . . . well, maybe she was. But she preferred to think of it as a sabbatical. Ryders Ridge was as different from Brisbane as she could imagine. And here she worked one on one with an experienced doctor. A perfect place to restore her confidence.

Sarah's parents, Mac and Susan Westerland, were both concerned, but they were familiar with both their daughter's condition and Dr Harris; they had been unobtrusive and comforting. Dr Harris pushed his glasses up his nose and stepped away, leaving the family alone. Daniella followed him out of the room.

'Everything all right?' asked Dr Harris, adjusting his cuffs. He'd asked this question many times since she'd started four days ago, his tone always one of fatherly interest, his white brows raised, glasses slipping down his nose. But Daniella was never sure if he was just keeping an eye on her, or if he saw through her.

'Fine,' she said brightly as they walked down the hall.

'You'll have been on call in Brisbane, I know,' he continued. 'But it's a different beast here. You won't get calls every night, but there're more nights on. As I've said before, I'm very glad to have you here. Until you're comfortable, though, I'll just call you in on the interesting cases.'

Dr Harris stepped towards the sink. Daniella watched as he washed his hands: rinse first, two pumps of pink soap, lather, rinse again. Then a squirt of alcohol gel to finish. The man was meticulous; dressed in a crisp white shirt and navy trousers, even though he'd probably got out of bed to attend the call.

'Sarah comes in quite frequently,' he said over his shoulder. 'I've asked Mac and Susan to bring her to the clinic tomorrow so we can review the management plan. She's a good case, so let's discuss it then.'

He was a real old-school doctor. He exuded confidence and care. One of the nurses had told Daniella that Dr Harris held regular dinner parties at his house and expected the staff to come. She wasn't quite sure what to think of that yet; such familiarity was unheard of in Brisbane.

'I'll stay until the nebs are finished, but you can go now,' he said. 'See you in the clinic at eight.'

When he'd gone back down the hall, Daniella slid Sarah's plump file into the inpatient rack. Everything in Brisbane had been going electronic, but there seemed no sign the trend had spread this far north. She hovered a moment in the hall; it felt wrong to just leave. In Brisbane, there was always something more to do: discharge papers, bloods, rounds. But this wasn't really a proper hospital as far as she was concerned; it only had two beds. It was a glorified emergency room, with a basic X-ray machine and well-stocked shelves, but nothing sophisticated. For anything serious – surgery, intensive care – it was a stop-over point to call for an evac.

She glanced at her watch. The GP clinic next door opened in seven hours; she worked there each day, with Dr Harris in the next room, then they alternated nights on call for the hospital. Or at least they would, when Dr Harris was happy she could do it on her own.

Daniella pushed open the double doors, then walked across the verandah and down onto the concrete path. As she left the lights behind, the sky became a mass of star-punctured indigo, a vaulted roof high overhead. About her, the air swirled silently, her own footsteps the only sound.

She strode around the hospital's bore-fed lake towards the town of Ryders Ridge. She was only ten minutes' walk from her house; the town itself perhaps the same distance. Eight hundred people lived there, and about as many again in the surrounding district, which spanned hundreds of kilometres. A few hours' drive away was the mining town of Mount Isa, which had the nearest serious medical facility. Anything else seemed an incredible distance: several hours by Royal Flying Doctor Service. All that space was occupied with pastoral farms and the occasional mine. It was strange to think there were people out there, tiny presences in the mass of land.

And all potentially her patients.

Daniella sighed, remembering the panic she'd felt when Sarah had come in. When she'd decided to take up the job here Daniella had told her colleagues she wanted to go bush . . . but really, she hadn't been able to face Brisbane anymore. She ran her thumb across the mobile phone in her pocket. She had left her father behind, too. He would still be up, no doubt; a surgeon himself in a busy hospital. But she couldn't call. They'd argued about her taking the job; he believed she was throwing herself away up here.

Once she'd skirted a dark paddock and trekked past sleeping houses, her own place appeared, white and ghostlike in the glow of the moon. A little fibro cube, generously provided by the health service. At first she'd thought of it as quaint, but after four days she'd abandoned delusions in favour of truth: it was merely functional, and she spent little time there anyway. She climbed the two steps and walked inside, discarding her

shoes on the lino by the door. A stale smell of smoke clung to the curtains and the living-room carpet, no doubt from a previous occupant flouting the no-smoking rule.

She collapsed on the couch without bothering to undress. The bed was too firm and too far from the television, so the couch was where she'd been sleeping. The blanket was still twisted, as she'd left it when Dr Harris called. She shook it and laid it out again.

She lay awake a long time, thinking of her family: her father so far away in Brisbane, and further down south, her brother in the army. She tossed, trying to get comfortable on the old couch. It was better she was alone here, she thought. She wanted to trust herself again, to make this dark terror inside her leave and never return.

She burrowed her face into the couch, then recoiled; the fabric reeked of musty, stale smoke. She twisted back over, willing sleep to come.



Daniella woke after precisely five hours of sleep, a wicked crick in her neck. Yawning, she peeled off yesterday's clothes, pulled on clean trousers and a knit top, and opened the pantry. A daddy-long-legs scuttled into the very empty corner. A single packet of ancient cup-a-soup sat on the middle shelf, the last of the food that had been left there by the previous inhabitant. She'd found a few meals in the freezer, too. Daniella glanced at her watch. No, boiling the kettle would take too long. She'd eat a couple of biscuits from the clinic kitchen, and after work make herself find the supermarket.

She brushed her teeth with her head tilted sideways, trying to undo the crick. Her blonde streaks were growing out, leaving a light brown stripe down her part, as though her internal unrest was starting to show through. Six months ago,

she would never have let it get this bad. After she found the supermarket, she'd have to find the hairdresser.

Once she'd spat out the toothpaste, she scrutinised her face: dark circles under her grey eyes, sallow skin. She was only twenty-seven – why did she look so tired? She pulled a face at the fluoro light over the mirror and wondered how long the country air and sun would take to defeat her indoorsy city complexion.

Time to find out.

From the top of the pantry she pulled down a battered brown felt hat. Left by the previous occupant, it was the first thing she'd seen when she arrived. There'd been a note too: *You'll need this.*

She struck out into the morning, down the straight street lined with neat houses, past the little church at the end of the row. A group of loose-limbed boys rode by on bikes, shouting to each other, weaving over the asphalt, helmets dangling from their handlebars. Daniella grimaced, hoping they wouldn't end up at the hospital later.

She reached the shimmering lake by the hospital and clinic in no time at all. She was glad of the hat. Even early in the morning, the light was harsh and raw. The sky was an enormous blue, a silent, tangible presence, and she felt as though she could confess all her fears up to it. In fact, if she had been sure no one else was listening, she might have done just that.

She arrived at the clinic at half past seven. The two nurses were already there. Jackie, a young woman with dark curls, was shuffling files behind the desk. The other nurse, a quiet but savagely efficient woman, was fiddling with the coffee machine.

'Hi, Jackie,' Daniella called.

‘Hi, doc – I mean Daniella,’ Jackie returned, smiling as she looked up from the files.

‘Hi . . .’ Daniella racked her brains, trying to remember the other nurse’s name. They’d only been on one shift together, but Daniella was dismayed. She could remember a long list of causes for a cough, but not a nurse’s name? Fortunately, the woman’s back was turned.

‘Roselyn,’ mouthed Jackie with a grin as she tucked an escaping curl back behind her ear.

‘. . . Roselyn,’ finished Daniella, shooting Jackie a grateful look.

‘Nice hat,’ said Jackie.

Daniella whipped it off and put it on top of the filing cabinet just as Dr Harris came in. As usual, he was dressed in beautifully ironed trousers and shirt, with braces and a bow tie.

‘Good morning, Daniella. How did you sleep?’

The pleasantries continued as they all sat down for the morning briefing at the laminex table in the clinic kitchen, which functioned as both lunch and meeting room. Daniella could hardly believe the sum total of the staff to cover sixteen hundred people: two doctors, two nurses and some community volunteer ambos for the four-wheel-drive ambulance – it hardly seemed enough. Dr Harris had been here ten years, he’d told her proudly, much of that time as the only doctor. From the awe the nurses she’d met so far held him in, and her own research, Daniella knew that staying so long was almost unheard of in such an isolated place.

Dr Harris scrutinised the appointments, sorting the charts into two piles, one for him, one for Daniella. ‘Now, Mr McLeod . . . I’d better see him today . . . and Mrs Blake . . .’

By the time the meeting ended, the waiting room was nearly full, and Dr Harris’s pile was twice the height of Daniella’s.

This wouldn't keep her busy. She took a breath and leaned forward. 'Dr Harris, do you want me to take the on-call tonight?'

The nurses glanced at each other. Dr Harris looked at Daniella over his glasses.

'I just mean, since you were called out last night,' she clarified, hoping her cheeks weren't as red as they felt.

Dr Harris shook his head. 'I appreciate the offer, but let's stick to the roster for now.'

As Jackie and Roselyn left to check the rooms, Daniella picked up her pile, feeling chastened.

Dr Harris smiled at her kindly. 'Keen to get into it? I know it must seem like I'm being overly cautious, and I admire your enthusiasm. It's good. But I know you've only worked in the city before: things are a bit different out here. I want you to be prepared and comfortable, let yourself get settled in. I'll always call you if there're any good things to see, like last night. All right?' He smiled again.

Daniella nodded, swallowing hard. In the city, the policy was often the opposite: throw the young ones in at the deep end, let them sink or swim. She'd done her time being terrified of being on call – a year of internship, two as a house officer. She'd loved the job, and managed to get past the fear. So after that, feeling lost inside a big hospital had been a shock, a large part of why she'd come to Ryders. She didn't want similar terrors sneaking up on her here.

She placed the files on the front desk and picked up the first one. Mandy Rawlinson. Daniella looked around the waiting room. A greying couple sat by the door. A young woman in jeans and a windcheater was next to them, leafing through an old *Woman's Day*. Then a woman with watchful eyes and a toddler on her lap, and a young man in a flannelette shirt with a grease-smeared face and some papers in his work-scarred

hands. Daniella could seldom tell just by looking why patients had come. It was one of the reasons she loved her job: what people told her once they were behind closed doors implied a trust that she cherished.

Jackie caught her eye, nodding towards the little girl in the woman's lap. Daniella took a deep breath, summoning her courage. 'Mandy?' she asked.

Mandy and her mother rose at once. Daniella looked for any signs of illness. Despondency. Dull eyes. Listlessness. But the girl skipped happily down the hall and climbed up on the treatment couch.

'Daniella Bell,' she introduced herself, sticking out her hand to Mandy's mother.

'I know, you're the new doc,' said the woman. 'I'm Kirsty.'

'And you're Mandy,' said Daniella, turning to the little girl, who nodded, looking at her mother for approval. 'How old are you, Mandy?'

'Four,' said the girl.

'When's your birthday?'

Another glance at Mum. 'Tomorrow.'

'Fantastic! Are you having a party?'

The girl nodded.

'So, what can I do for you today?' Daniella addressed the question to Mandy but included Kirsty in her glance. This was the trick with children – treating them as individuals without leaving out the parents.

Kirsty gave her daughter a quick encouraging nod and Mandy solemnly pulled up her sleeve.

'Oh, you're here for your immunisations? Wonderful.'

So this was the kind of thing Dr Harris was putting on her pile. She was glad it wasn't something more serious, but couldn't help feeling a little frustrated at the same time.

‘Well, Mandy, there’re three needles. We might get Nurse Jackie and do them all at once. Then, we’ll get you some special bandaids and you can get on with planning your party.’

Daniella grabbed a handful of colourful Mr Men bandaids and let Mandy pick the ones she wanted. ‘So, do you live in town?’ she asked Kirsty once she’d called Jackie in.

‘No, on Benders Station.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘North-east, about three hours’ drive.’

‘Three hours?’ Daniella paused in laying out the needles in the little tray. ‘Wow, you must have been up early.’

Kirsty laughed. ‘No – about the usual time.’

‘And what do you grow at Benders?’

‘Cows!’ answered Mandy.

Daniella and Jackie laughed and Mandy swung her legs happily.

‘Sounds great,’ said Daniella. ‘Okay, Mandy. Here we go then.’

Jackie was an expert with two needles in one hand. A moment later, the swabs and injections were all done, and the special bandaids applied. Jackie dispensed a bright pink lollipop, and Kirsty administered cuddles until Mandy’s bottom lip stopped quivering.

‘You’re the bravest girl I’ve ever seen,’ said Daniella in genuine amazement.

‘She’s just like her dad,’ said Kirsty, kissing her daughter.

Jackie gave them a quick smile and turned away.

Kirsty paused as they were leaving the treatment room. ‘Say, if you want to see the place, you’re welcome anytime. Come for dinner. We’d love to have you.’

Daniella smiled and said she’d try. As the pair left the clinic, she shook her head. ‘Incredible. Never seen a four-year-old like that.’

Jackie nodded and handed her the next file.

Daniella glanced at it, then looked around the waiting room. 'Shaun?'

Shaun Groves was a sheep farmer needing a script refill for his blood pressure meds. As she took his vitals, he told her at length about his sheep and then his wife, whom he seemed to hold in equally high esteem.

'You should come to dinner,' he finished.

'That's very generous of you,' said Daniella, writing out the script refill, amused at the second invitation in one day. 'I'll try to do that if I'm ever off duty.'

'Course, 'course,' said Shaun. 'Magine you've got a lot on, getting settled in and all.'

And so the day passed. Shaun was followed by two more children for shots, then two pairs of grey nomads from the caravan park, both with gastric complaints. In between appointments she ate biscuits to appease her grumbling belly, avoiding the awful coffee that Roselyn drank like a camel. Later, Dr Harris called her in to help (or, as she soon realised, watch) him cut a skin cancer from a patient called Garry, a jackeroo. Daniella had done many such minor surgeries in Brisbane, but she watched patiently. At least Garry didn't invite her to dinner.

In the mid-afternoon, Sarah, the little girl with asthma from the previous night, came in for a check-up. Dr Harris watched as Daniella listened to Sarah's chest and chatted to her mother about her asthma action plan.

By the end of the day, Daniella was exhausted. It hadn't been flat out, but she'd had to concentrate on each unfamiliar thing, from the new patients to where they stored prescription pads.

She stepped outside the air-conditioned rooms. It was early July, but the heat hit her immediately. Leaning against

the wall, she soaked up the sun like a lizard. It was clinical inside, clean and bright and cool, but out here a thin film of dust covered everything, glittering with minerals. The big blue sky was a tent sheet flung high above.

The sliding door opened beside her. 'Going home?' asked Jackie, pulling her bag over her shoulder.

'Yes,' said Daniella, then remembered the cup-a-soup. 'I mean, no, I need to find the supermarket. Can you tell me where it is? I was given a lightning-fast tour on Monday and I can't remember.'

'God, you've been eating soup and biscuits for five days, haven't you!' said Jackie, shaking her head. 'Your docs are all the same. Come on, I'll give you a lift. I'm picking up my boy from Mum's – it's right next door.'

Daniella gratefully followed Jackie to her crew cab ute. As she opened the passenger door, she had to shield her eyes against the glass-reflected sun. She was missing something.

'Just a sec,' she said, running back to the clinic.

Dr Harris was collecting his bag from behind the desk as Daniella retrieved the battered hat from the filing cabinet. He smiled at her.

'That old dust bag,' he said. 'You don't know how many heads have been in that thing. Probably every single locum who's lived in the health-service house, at least.' He tapped his chin, remembering. 'I think the first registrar I had here brought it with him and left it behind. Someone should have retired it years ago.' He stepped forward and ushered Daniella and her hat ahead of him. 'But I guess it'll do a while yet. Oh, and before I forget: I'm making a roast on Sunday night, having a few people round. You must come. Jacqueline, too.'