

Cheyenne Blue

A HEART FULL OF HOPE



CHAPTER 1

HOME DELIVERY

HAZEL STOPPED HER VEHICLE OUTSIDE George's house. Whenever George was on the schedule for delivery, he was always the last stop. As usual, she'd moved his groceries from the Good 'n Fresh delivery truck to her own ute. Her excuse was that then she'd go straight home. The reality was that she enjoyed George's company. And someone had to look out for him.

She hefted the shopping and walked along the cracked concrete path, pushing through the overgrown jasmine bushes. Maybe she could suggest trimming them.

Her left thigh twinged as she set down the bags. Long days on her feet could do that, and today had been longer than usual. It was time for another massage.

The front door swung open before the chimes of the "Waltzing Matilda" doorbell managed to get to the part about camping by a billabong.

George's stooped and wire-thin body rested on his stick. His lined face, under the shock of grey hair, broke into a grin. "You're late."

"And you're rude." Hazel returned his smile and picked up the bags again as George swung the door wider. "You know very well why I'm late. If you want your groceries an hour earlier, you only have to ask. But then I'll have to leave them on the doorstep as I do for everyone else."

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George's scruffy little terrier danced around her ankles, sharp teeth bared, obviously thinking about a bite. "Don't, Chip," she warned him. "You know what happened the last time you attacked my ankle."

"I'd rather see you than get my groceries on time. And Chip won't bite you. He knows there are dog treats in those bags." George led the way upstairs to the kitchen. "Kettle boiled a few minutes ago. I'll give it another blast."

Hazel unpacked the two bags of groceries, arranging cans in the half-empty pantry.

With gnarled fingers, George placed teabags in two mugs, then opened the packet of biscuits and set four on a thick, white china plate.

The door of the pantry had swollen, and when she tugged it closed, the handle came off in her hand. Hazel staggered backward, her left leg unable to cope with the sharp movement.

"Steady on, cobber." George put out a hand and grasped her arm as Hazel regained her balance. "I've been meaning to fix that handle. Been loose for a while."

"I'll reattach it for you after we've had our tea." And there was the other reason she always took her own truck to George's house: because her toolbox was on the back, and there was always something small needing attention.

George carried the mugs out to the back deck where there was a view over the farmland that surrounded Dry Creek.

Hazel followed with the plate of Tim Tams and sat in one of the shabby canvas chairs. She picked up her mug and blew on it. "So tell me what's new in your world."

"Since I saw you a week ago?" George side-eyed her. "Seems I should ask you that question. You young 'uns have a more exciting life than senior citizens."

"I don't know about that. Last time, you'd won a bottle of Bundy rum and fifty bucks in the pub raffle, planted green beans, and trespassed over the fields with Chip."

"It's a pleasant walk. Better than the streets. Chip likes it too. There are things for him to roll in."

"At least you gave him a bath."

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“So, what’s new with you? Any young man or woman in your life yet?”

“You know there isn’t. Live for the moment, that’s me, and if that moment doesn’t include a Hayley Raso or Carlos Alcaraz clone, that’s fine by me.”

“You need to start looking. You’re nearly thirty. Your best breeding days are behind you.”

“George!” Hazel set down her tea. “I can’t believe you’re so sexist! As if a woman’s life is only fulfilled if she has kids. And twenty-five is a long way from thirty. I thought we’d got past—” Too late, she saw the twinkle in his eyes and the slow grin spreading across his face.

“Gotcha.”

“You’re wicked,” she grumbled. “You know how to push my buttons. It’s lucky I like you.”

The smile softened on George’s face, and he reached out to squeeze her arm. “I’m the lucky one, Hazel. You brighten my week.”

“Bring you Tim Tams and fix your cupboards, you mean?”

“That too,” he agreed.

Hazel relaxed into the chair. Really, it was very comfortable for an old canvas thing. She sipped her too-strong tea and let her gaze sweep around the surrounding fields where brown cattle picked over the drying grass, and the dry creek that gave the town its name meandered a course through. Now, at the end of winter, it lived up to its name, but summer rains could send it raging. The late-afternoon low sun outlined the hills on the far side of the fields, the magpies were whistling their “where are you” calls to their mates, and the rumble of traffic on the main road had increased to a dull roar.

Hazel sighed. This view never got old, and neither did living in Dry Creek.

“Going to senior citizen night at the RSL later,” George said. “Half-price steaks this week.”

“When’s the courtesy bus picking you up?”

“Six. Do you think I look all right? Mavis might be there, and I’m still trying to make an impression.”

“Interesting shirt. The blue suits you. Not sure about the orange squiggles. You get it in the op shop?”

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George smoothed the front of it. "Yah. I like it. It doesn't need ironing."

"Good enough reason to buy it. Mavis won't miss you in that."

"That's the idea." He drained his mug and set it down.

Hazel did the same and stood. "Let me see if I can reattach that handle." She went out to her ute and pulled out some hand tools, and the smaller case that held bolts, screws, and washers.

The handle was an easy fix. She tugged it, and the door creaked open. "Next time, I'll plane the bottom of the door to stop it sticking so much."

George watched as she packed up her toolbox. "How much do I owe you?"

He asked every time, and every time her answer was the same. "A cup of tea and a chat."

He pulled a twenty from the drawer by the stove and held it out. "Take this."

"No, George. That was ten minutes' work."

"Thanks, love." He tucked the cash back in the drawer.

Hazel washed her hands at the kitchen sink. The tap was dripping. She tried turning it tighter, but it made no difference. "Are you home tomorrow morning? I'll be passing, so I can drop in and fix this for you. It won't take long. Some plumber's tape and a new washer should do it."

"Not going anywhere," George said.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow." She kissed his grizzly cheek and waggled her fingers at Chip.

He lifted his upper lip and gave her a half-hearted growl.

"Love you, too, Chip."

It was only a few minutes' drive home. Her mum and dad were in the kitchen. She kissed her dad, Simon, on top of his bald head and hugged her mum, Maxie, around the waist as she stood at the stove reading a book as she stirred something. Her dad put down his iPad. "Look what the cat dragged in. You look dishevelled, Hazel. Everything all right?"

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“Yeah. Long day at work, and then I had to fix George’s cupboard. Petunia’s rubbing a bit, too. Have I got time for a shower before dinner?”

“Of course.” Her mum stirred faster. “I’ve got to get this lemon butter done first. It’s taking longer than usual.”

Hazel went into her bedroom and began her shower preparation. Stool in the cubicle, two towels on the rail beside the walk-in shower, body wash, and shampoo within reach, clean clothes on the closed toilet lid. She turned on the shower, then sat on the bench alongside the shower to remove Petunia—her below-knee prosthetic leg. She propped Petunia and the liner where she could reach them afterward, and stood, gripping the safety rails as she balanced on her one leg before swivelling to rest her nubbin on the shower stool and take a swift and careful shower. In the past, she’d slipped on the wet, soapy tiles, and she was in no hurry to repeat that.

When done, she manoeuvred back to the bench in the bathroom using the safety handles. Dry and dressed, she sat to inspect her nubbin. It was slightly swollen, red up to the knee where the cup had rubbed. Petunia would get the evening off.

Instead, she put on shorts, and reached for her knee crutch against the wall. Once strapped in, she heaved a sigh of relief and scooted back to the kitchen.

“Need a hand with anything?” she asked her mum.

Maxie wiped the jars of lemon butter with a cloth. Her library book lay on the counter. “No, all good. Dinner’s in the oven. You’ve got another few minutes.”

“I’ll set the table.” Hazel grabbed cutlery from the drawer and plates from the cupboard. “What sauces do you want?”

“Spicy,” her mum said. “It’s baked chicken and rice.”

Hazel scooped three different hot sauces from the fridge and set them on the table, then she went over to the sink and started putting away the dishes from the drying rack. “Can I take a jar of that lemon butter to George tomorrow?”

“Of course,” her mum said.

Her dad tapped his iPad with a finger. “How did your quote go today?”

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Hazel gave a little wiggle, and the knee crutch jiggled on the wooden floor. “Great! Mary wants me to do the work. It’s not much—just some shelving in the garage—but she’ll need more work in the future.”

“Well done.” Her dad pulled her into a sideways hug. “You’re building your business, slowly but surely.”

“I’d love for it to grow faster, but I still need to work at Good ’n Fresh. One day though...”

“You’ll get there.” Her mum finished wiping the jars and opened the oven, flapping away the steam that rose. “Dinner’s ready.”

Hazel manoeuvred her knee crutch to her chair, unstrapped it, then lowered herself on one leg to sit.

Her mum set the food on the table. “I was going to make curry, but I got stuck in my book.”

“And are we surprised?” Her dad sent his wife a fond look.

“It’s a Miss Fisher murder mystery,” her mum said. “I had to find out how it ended.”

“And we’ll eat chicken and rice without complaint.” Her dad uttered a theatrical sigh and squeezed Maxie’s hand. “Nothing wrong with that. It’s as good as a five-star restaurant.”

Hazel stared at her plate to hide her smile. That was her dad’s response every time her mum lost track of the time—but it was true, everything she cooked was great, and who wouldn’t rather read than cook? Her mum had perfected the art of doing both simultaneously.

Hazel’s fingers clenched the fork. Now if only she could perfect the art of building her fledgling business and earning enough to keep her afloat—well, that would be worth celebrating.

CHAPTER 2

BREAKING AND ENTERING

HAZEL BACKED HER TRUCK INTO George's driveway. The blinds were still down in the two-storey house, but Chip was barking inside. She yanked her toolbox off the back of the ute and went up to the front door. Chip let loose a volley of barks when the "Waltzing Matilda" door chime sounded, but there was no other sound. George had to be on the back balcony.

She waited a couple of minutes, then rang the bell again. Still nothing other than intermittent thumps on the door, which had to be Chip hurling himself against it. Hazel sucked her lower lip. This was unusual. She hesitated, then pressed her ear to the door. Chip whined and scratched the timber.

"Shh, Chippie. I'm trying to listen."

Chip whined once more, then was quiet. She banged on the door. "George? Are you there?" When she pressed her ear to the door again, a faint "Help" sounded through the wood.

Hazel's heart turned to ice. *What's happened?* Scenarios of medical emergencies ran through her head—or maybe the toilet door had stuck again and trapped him. "I hear you, George. I'm coming." She walked as fast as she could around the house. None of the downstairs windows were open and the garage door was locked.

An upstairs window yawned open, but even if she had a ladder, there was no way she could safely climb it and scramble through the

window. Her prosthetic leg was good, but not action-woman ready. She circled around the house again. She could call the police, but they'd likely break down the door. If she couldn't enter in the next three minutes, she'd call them.

One of the sliding garage windows gave a few centimetres when she tugged it. She yanked harder, worry for George making her fingers slip. The window slid some, then jammed again. By jiggling and tugging, she got it open enough that she could slip through. She grabbed the trestle from her ute and placed it under the window. Hoping it wouldn't tip, she pulled herself up until she could straddle the sill, and then lowered herself to the floor.

"George?" she called. "I'm inside. Where are you?"

"Bathroom." His voice, fainter than usual, drifted down the stairs.

She hurried up the internal stairs, panic hammering in her head. Chip danced at the top, too distracted to even growl at her.

The bathroom door was half open, and there on the floor... Hazel's heart froze at the sight of George lying on the tiles.

"Oh my god!" She pushed the door open further.

George was slumped at an awkward angle, half covered by a towel. Cool air drifted in from the open window, and his skin had a grey tinge.

"I slipped getting out the shower. Pretty sure I've busted something." His lips were blue. "Hip probably. I'm a goner, Hazel."

"You're not. I'm here now, and I'm calling an ambulance. You'll be okay." Hazel swallowed the anxiety in her throat and squeezed his hand. Then she hurried to his bedroom, dragged the quilt from the bed, and grabbed the pillow. Back in the bathroom, she covered him with the quilt and lifted his head to position it on the pillow. Then she pressed triple zero.

The operator's calmness helped steady her skittering heartbeat.

"An ambulance is on its way. Can you open the front door for the crew? You've done the right thing getting the quilt. Try not to move him, but if there are more blankets, put them over him, as long as it doesn't hurt his hip."

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Another blanket. Where did he keep them? The only one she could think of was Chip's dog blanket, and that was more dog hair than anything.

"Hall cupboard," George said, apparently reading her mind.

Of course.

Chip was barking again, so she grabbed his collar and dragged him to the bedroom and shut him inside. She went downstairs and opened the front door, propping it with one of George's boots. Then she snagged a second quilt from the cupboard.

"Can I have some water?" George asked. His voice held a quiver she'd never heard before.

"I'm sorry, but no. If the paramedics say it's okay, you can, but not before then. What else can I do for you?"

"I suppose a double brandy's out of the question?"

"You suppose right." He had to be in a lot of pain. Should she give him a painkiller? But the ambulance would be here soon. One advantage of a small town—they didn't have far to come. "How long have you been here?"

"Last night." George's breath came in shallow pants. "Knew I should have got one of those alarm thingamajigs you wear around your neck."

"The ones for old people?" Hazel tried to smile. "That's what you always said."

"Mebbe eighty-four is old, after all." He fell silent again.

Please hurry. Hazel shot him what she hoped was a reassuring smile and wished hard for the ambulance. Would they use sirens? Maybe not.

And then "Waltzing Matilda," chimed, and a male voice called, "Ambulance. We're coming up."

"We're in the bathroom," Hazel replied.

The small room was suddenly crammed with two men wearing navy paramedic uniforms. One crouched by George and started assessing him, attaching monitors and inserting an intravenous line to inject something. The other asked questions.

Hazel squeezed past, back to the hall. Her hands shook and her knees trembled. Would George be all right? The paramedics were

cheery and reassuring, but she had the feeling they'd be like that even if the patient was drawing their final breath.

"Almost certainly a fractured neck of femur," one said. "We're taking you to the hospital, George. Will your granddaughter be coming with you?"

They meant her, Hazel realised. "I'm just a friend. George, do you want me to call anyone?"

"My brother, Bill. He's in Melbourne. The number's in the drawer under the phone."

She nodded. "I'll come with you if you'd like."

"Will I be home this evening to feed my dog?" he asked the paramedic.

"Fraid not, George. We'll have to keep you in for a bit."

"I'll be right, Hazel. Will you look after Chip for me?"

"I'll feed him," Hazel said. "Or take him home with me."

"Chip will like that," George said. His eyes were closing. Whatever was in the injection had to be making him drowsy. "Spare key is under the garden gnome at the back."

"I'll find it. Don't worry. I'll make sure everything's okay here."

Hazel stood aside as the ambos stabilised the hip and transferred George onto a stretcher and then to a wheeled trolley by the front door. With the oxygen mask on, George's face was losing the grey tinge, but his forehead wrinkled, as if he was in pain. "I'll call the hospital later. See how you are."

He gave her a weak thumbs up, and then the paramedics rolled the trolley to the waiting ambulance.

Hazel found the key under a creepy-looking gnome in the overgrown garden bed and went back into the house.

She let Chip out of the bedroom. He growled and backed until his butt was against the wall. Despite his grumpy demeanour, her heart went out to him. She kneeled carefully and held out her hand. "It's okay, Chippie. I know you're scared. I am too. We both have to hope your daddy is okay."

His growling intensified and his ears flattened on his head.

"You're going to come home with me, okay? I can't leave you alone." She kept talking nonsense until Chip edged forward.

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His nose touched her hand, and he sighed.

“I’ll find your leash, and you get to live with us until your daddy’s home. You’ll like it. I think you’ll be spoiled rotten.”

Chip gave an almost human-like sniff and sat at her feet. She fondled his ears. “That’s it. You know me, and sometimes you even like me. Hold on to that thought, Chippie, you’re going to need it.”

She sat for a couple more minutes, then levered herself to her feet. She needed to call George’s brother.

CHAPTER 3

THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

IMOGEN WENT AROUND BEHIND HER assistant's desk to stand at her shoulder. The flurry of fingers on the keyboard and the sudden appearance of an Excel spreadsheet told her Serenity had been playing her zombie apocalypse game again. She watched as Serenity entered some figures, seemingly at random, and delete them a moment later. "What level did you reach?"

"Thirty-two. Oh!" The back of Serenity's neck flamed red.

Imogen turned away. "Please check your e-mail. I sent you a To-Do list for today nearly twenty minutes ago." She stalked back to her office.

She tapped her fingers on the oak desk as she waited for Serenity's acknowledgement that she'd received the e-mail. On the other side of the glass wall, her assistant bit her lip, pulled her chair closer to the monitor and started typing.

Imogen switched her attention back to the quarterly budget—her least favourite task. She frowned. Once again, no figures had arrived from Tim, manager of the Enoggera store. She dashed off a quick e-mail with a curt request he have them to her by close of business.

A tinny version of a hip hop track sounded. Imogen compressed her lips as Serenity abandoned work and snatched up the phone. If she'd had her way, Serenity would have been history six months ago, and she'd have a capable assistant. HR's answer was to send Serenity

on a productivity course, the only benefit of which Imogen could see was teaching Serenity to alt-tab to hide her zombie game.

Imogen got up and closed her office door. Maybe, once the budget was done, she'd sit down with Serenity and come up with some suggestions for further learning. With a stab of guilt, she remembered having that conversation with Serenity some months ago—but there had never been time to follow through.

Her desk phone rang, and she snatched it up on the second ring. A Melbourne number. Maybe it was Head Office. "Imogen Alexander."

"Imogen, it's Father." The crisp baritone rolled down the line. A voice to project into a packed courtroom, or to enthrall an auditorium of students enough that they put down their phones and listened. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. And you and Mother?" She modulated her tone to the same even delivery that he preferred.

"We're both in rude health. Hoping to get away for a break somewhere warmer now that the semester is over."

She made a non-committal noise. Maybe they were coming to visit—although her parents' visits were fleeting: a few days when they would stay in a five-star hotel rather than in her townhouse, and they would dine out together every night. Once the pleasantries were done, and enquiries made as to her career (on the rise), her relationship status (still gay, still single), and her finances (considering the purchase of an investment property), the conversation would meander over her parents' careers (both professors at Melbourne University) and amusing stories about their students. Really, it was all very civilised and all very predictable and pleasant.

"You're welcome to come and stay with me—"

"We've actually booked to go to the Maldives," her father said. "We're supposed to be leaving tomorrow."

"But—" Imogen frowned. Maybe one of them had a work commitment they couldn't get out of.

"I had a call from a friend of George's," her father said. "He's in the Dry Creek hospital. Seems he fell and fractured his hip."

“Oh no.” Imogen gripped the phone harder with suddenly icy fingers. Was this a soft lead in to worse news? “Is...is he going to be okay?”

“The surgery was successful, but with elderly people, the rehabilitation and recovery is most important. He’ll be ready for discharge in three days.”

She let out a slow, careful breath. George was okay—and that was the main thing. How long had it been since she’d seen her uncle? She couldn’t remember. More than a year—maybe even two. But it was a flight or a seven-hour drive to Dry Creek from Brisbane, and she seldom had the time. “I’ll try to get up to see him this weekend. He should be home by then.”

“That’s not why I’m calling,” her father said. “The hospital won’t discharge him unless there’s someone to stay with him. He’ll qualify for home nursing, but someone needs to get that set up for him. You know what a stubborn old fool George is—he’s apparently still swearing that he doesn’t need help, and he just wants to go home. Of course he can’t. He’ll still be mainly bedridden.”

Imogen licked her dry lips. “I’ll take Friday off and go for a couple of nights. I can collect him from the hospital and stay with him that weekend.”

“He’ll like that.” Her father sighed. “You always were his favourite family member.”

“Save the flattery; it’s not like there’s much choice. You, Mother, me. That’s it.”

“Still, it’s true. Can you arrange for home care? You’ll need to do that as soon as possible.”

“Surely the hospital social work team would be better able to do that?”

“Maybe years ago. Now, there’s barely a social worker, let alone a team. The hospital asked us to do it. Ada would arrange it, but our flight leaves at seven tomorrow morning. Better they have someone local to contact—at least you’re in Queensland.”

“Don’t worry, Father, I’ll manage it.”

“You’re a great girl.”

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The praise warmed her. Thirty-four years old, a regional manager of a nationwide chain of convenience stores, her own million-dollar townhouse, and still her daddy's approval was something she craved. "Maybe George is *my* favourite relative," she teased.

Her father laughed. "That could be true."

Imogen caught sight of Serenity through the glass wall of her office. She was still talking on her mobile. Her lips thinned. "I have to go, Father. But I'll sort out some care for George and go see him this weekend. I hope you and Mother have a pleasant holiday."

"Thank you." Now that their trip was assured, her father's voice hummed with satisfaction.

She ended the call and considered her diary for the rest of the week. She could free up Friday—if she put in extra hours today and tomorrow.

Serenity laughed and ended her call. If she had a competent assistant, it would be a breeze—she could offload some of her tasks. She tapped her pen on the desk as she thought. Maybe this was the time to put some of that responsibility on Serenity. Maybe she'd just been waiting for a chance and would rise to the occasion.

Imogen started an e-mail to her assistant and typed a list of things to do before the end of the day. Five items. That shouldn't be too much for her, although she'd never attempted two of them before. Still, she was a personal assistant; she needed to act like one.

Opening her browser, Imogen started hunting for aged-care providers in Dry Creek. There were two in town, and more in Rockhampton, the larger town thirty minutes away.

Through the glass, Serenity snapped upright in her seat and reached for her mouse. Good. She must have received the e-mail.

A moment later, there was a knock on her door.

"Come in."

Serenity sidled into the room, her ever-present mobile clutched in one hand. "Uh, Imogen, can I talk to you a moment?"

Imogen dragged her eyes from the screen. "Sure. Have a seat."

Serenity sat on the edge of the chair to one side of the desk. Her short skirt rode up, revealing plump, pale thighs, and a flash of lacey underwear. Imogen averted her gaze. At some point, they needed to have a chat about appropriate professional wear.

“The list you sent. I’ve never called the lawyers. They always ask for you when they call.”

“There’s no reason you can’t talk to them.” Imogen sent her a cool smile. “Familiarise yourself with the WorkCover claim and ask the paralegal for an update.”

“Um, okay.” Serenity squirmed in her seat. “But wouldn’t it be better if you did that?”

Imogen steepled her fingers. “Serenity, it’s time to give you more challenging tasks. Maybe then you won’t be so unoccupied that you have time for computer games.”

Serenity’s mouth dropped open and she fidgeted in her seat. “Uh, sorry. But I’ve never been taught about legal stuff. I don’t want to mess up.”

Really. Imogen suppressed a sigh. “Fine. I’ll call the lawyers. Are you okay with the rest of those tasks?”

Serenity’s pink cheeks matched the blouse straining across her bosom. “I guess.”

Abruptly, a vestige of sympathy stirred. Serenity couldn’t be over twenty, and this was her first job. “Okay, I’ll call Tim as well. But there’s a trade-off. Normally, I wouldn’t ask you to do this, as it’s a personal matter rather than a work one, but it’s urgent.” She turned her screen so Serenity could see. “Can you call the aged care providers who service Dry Creek and obtain their rates for twenty-four-hour nursing care for...say five days, and then the hourly rate for in-home care thereafter. Find out how quickly they can begin. Note it all down and send it to me by Thursday lunchtime. Can you do that?”

Serenity nodded. “Yes. That’s more what I’m good at.”

“Great.” Imogen summoned a smile. “Please attend to the other things on the list first before doing this. Next week, you and I will sit down and come up with some sort of personal development plan for you. One you have input in, rather than HR.”

“Yes, Imogen. Thank you, Imogen.” Serenity stood, her head bobbing like a nodding dog on the parcel shelf of an old Holden. She hurried out of the office, sat and picked up her desk phone.

Hopefully, this time, Serenity would produce some results.

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* * *

Imogen ended Thursday's Zoom meeting with a sigh of relief. Persuading Foodsters to give Whistlestop a better deal on their products had been a tough sell, but she'd finally got them to agree to a small percentage reduction by reminding them that Whistlestop was opening more convenience stores around Brisbane. Imogen rose from her desk and picked up her bone-china cup and saucer then went out to the office kitchen to make a cup of tea. As she spooned the loose-leaf Earl Grey into an infuser and waited for the kettle to boil, she mentally ran over her remaining tasks. It all seemed under control—even Serenity had completed her allocated work.

Except Serenity hadn't got back to her about care for George. Tea in hand, she headed back to her office and stopped at Serenity's desk. With an internal sigh, she noted the girl's quick Alt-Tab and the nonsense spreadsheet appeared once more. "How did you go with the aged care providers? I haven't seen your summary yet. Please send it over as soon as possible."

Serenity fidgeted with the mouse. "I, er, haven't finished it."

Imogen tightened her lips. "And why not?"

Serenity blanched at the icy tone. "I spoke with one in Dry Creek. Two of the ones in Rockhampton said they didn't travel that far. Another didn't answer. And the other three said they'd get back to me and haven't."

The girl was hopeless. Incompetent and lazy. "Did you follow up with the ones who said they'd get back to you?"

"Uh, no. I figured if they hadn't called back, they had nothing to say."

"Or they were answering the queries of people who *did* call back. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, Serenity. That's as true in business as it is in life." Imogen turned away. "Send me what you have immediately." She stalked into her office, closed the door, and counted to ten. Next week, whether HR liked it or not, she and Serenity were going to have a serious chat.

She took a sip of tea, letting the fragrant brew calm her.

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Serenity was typing frantically. No doubt she was only now preparing the e-mail about care providers. Imogen would give her until she finished her tea.

As she took the last sip, her e-mail pinged. Imogen settled her glasses more firmly on her nose and opened the message. It was as Serenity had said: the only details were from one provider—Coreena Care—who could assist. There was no mention of urgent or emergency care. And the hourly cost made her eyes water. Imogen tapped out a quick reply to Serenity, asking her to follow up with the remaining providers and send her an e-mail ASAP in summary.

It was gone four, and her flight to Rockhampton left at eight the next morning. With a sigh, Imogen turned back to her computer.

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