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THE WEDDING CHALLENGE

Jessica Hart

 THE AUSTRALIANS



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Jessica Hart

The Wedding Challenge

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City girl Bea is stranded in the Outback—without a shoe shop or department store in sight! At least she's stuck there with a gorgeous man who seems ready for a challenge...so to make her stay a little more bearable, Bea sets him three of them!

1. He can't be tempted to have an affair.
2. He's not allowed to fall in love with her.
3. And definitely, under no circumstances, is he to propose marriage!

How will a self-respecting bachelor like Chase handle such a challenge? Run like the wind—or face it like a man...?

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“Chloe seems to think that being a cook here automatically confers on me the position of your girlfriend.”

To Bea’s annoyance, Chase looked amused, rather than embarrassed.

“And you’re basing all your assumptions on the word of a five-year-old?”

Bea’s lips tightened. She hated the way Chase always made her feel stupid. “Is it true?”

“That you’re my girlfriend?” Chase lifted a mocking eyebrow. “Don’t you think you’d know if you were?”

“It might be such a horrible thought that I’ve blocked it out,” snapped Bea, but to her fury, he only laughed. And that made him look disconcertingly attractive, which made her even crosser.

Jessica Hart had a haphazard career before she began writing to finance a degree in history. Her experience ranged from waitress, theater production assistant and outback cook to newsdesk secretary, expedition P.A. and English teacher, and she has worked in countries as different as France and Indonesia, Australia and Cameroon. She now lives in the north of England, where her hobbies are limited to eating and drinking and traveling when she can, preferably to places where she’ll find good food or desert or tropical rain.

If you’d like to find out more about Jessica Hart, you can visit her Web site www.jessicahart.co.uk

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The Wedding Challenge

Jessica Hart



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CHAPTER ONE

‘GO AND work in the outback?’ Bea stared blankly at her friend. ‘Why would we want to do that?’

‘Why?’ Emily echoed, equally uncomprehending. ‘How can you even ask that, Bea? Everybody wants to work in the outback. It’s beautiful!’

‘It’s not beautiful, it’s brown.’

‘It’s full of hunky men riding around in hats and dusty boots.’

‘It’s full of flies,’ said Bea, unimpressed.

‘Don’t be like that, Bea.’ Emily abandoned her customers and pulled out a chair so that she could sit down opposite her friend. ‘This is the chance of a lifetime! I’ve always wanted to go and work on a cattle station.’

‘What on earth for?’

‘Because it’s different and romantic and wonderful,’ enthused Emily, gesticulating wildly. ‘Besides,’ she went on, clearly grasping at straws by now, ‘it’s part of my heritage.’

Bea goggled at her. To her certain knowledge, Emily had been born and brought up in London, about as far from the outback as you could get. ‘Since when?’

‘My mother’s Australian,’ said Emily loftily.

‘From Melbourne. It’s not exactly the red heart of Australia, is it?’

‘Well, her mother grew up on a cattle station,’ Emily conceded with an edge of defiance.

‘My grandmother grew up in Leamington Spa, but it doesn’t mean I want to go and work there!’

‘Leamington Spa isn’t chock-a-block with men who know how to throw a lasso and wrestle bulls to the ground single-handed, though, is it? Real men, Bea, not like this lot here!’

Emily glanced disparagingly around the bar where she was a waitress. She was wearing a long, white apron, and ignoring customers on nearby tables who were trying to catch her eye.

Bea followed her friend’s gaze. It was a Sunday night, and the bar was buzzing, packed with young people enjoying the end of another great Sydney weekend. As far as Bea could see, every single man there seemed to be tall, broad-shouldered and eminently fanciable. That’s if you weren’t still recovering from being dumped from a very great height and therefore not inclined to fancy any of them.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ she asked.

‘They’re all city boys,’ grumbled Emily. ‘We might as well be in London.’

Through the plate glass window, Bea could see the Opera House, its famous roof lit up against the night sky, and the harbour clustered with yachts bobbing at anchor.

Like London? Bea didn’t think so.

‘You’ve changed your tune, haven’t you?’ she said. ‘It’s only a week or so since all you could talk about was Marcus, and he was as smooth as they come.’

‘Too smooth,’ said Emily, remembering Marcus with a scowl. ‘And I’ve learnt my lesson! I’m sick of guys like him. I want a man with a bit more grit to him.’

‘Well, if it’s grit you want, maybe the outback is the right place for you.’ Bea grinned as she picked up her drink. She wasn’t on duty. ‘I hear it’s very dusty out there!’

‘I’m serious, Bea.’ Emily leant forward persuasively. ‘It’s not as if this is just a whim. Even before we left London, I said I wanted to see the outback while we were over here, didn’t I?’

‘I thought you meant a trip to Alice Springs and a quick whiz round Ayers Rock or Uluru or whatever it’s called now, not stuck on a cattle station!’

‘I don’t want to be a tourist,’ said Emily, lower lip sticking out stubbornly. ‘I want to experience real life in the outback, and what could be better than spending a few weeks on a cattle station?’

Bea could think of quite a few things. In fact, just about anything.

‘Em, we haven’t got long before we have to go home,’ she said reasonably. ‘There’s still so much to see, I really don’t want to spend the rest of my time stuck out in the middle of nowhere. You go if you want to, and I’ll meet up with you later. We did agree that we wouldn’t have to stick together all the time.’

‘I know, but I won’t get the job if you won’t come too,’ Emily wailed. ‘They want two girls, and if you won’t come with me, I won’t even have a chance.’

‘Why can’t they give you a job and find someone else?’ Bea objected.

‘Because the station is a squillion acres and so isolated that they don’t want to risk having two girls who might not get on. Apparently it’s a very famous property in Australia.’ Emily perked up, remembering what she’d been told. ‘Someone told me it was the size of Belgium—or was it Wales? Anyway, it’s big, and it’s got a beautiful old homestead...it’s like your perfect outback property. They’re used to people not staying very long, though, but this time Nick says that they’ve decided to take two friends.’

‘Who’s Nick?’

‘Nick Sutherland. He’s the owner—very attractive,’ said Emily with a dreamy sigh. ‘All blonde and rugged and square-chinned...just my type! And if you won’t come with me, he’ll just find another two girls—I know loads of people who’d jump at the chance of working in a place like Calulla Downs,’ she added with a resentful glance that bounced off Bea, unnoticed. She was used to Emily.

‘Maybe they’ll find two girls who would actually be some use in the outback,’ she pointed out. ‘I can’t see that we’d be much good to them, anyway. We don’t know the first thing about riding or cows or whatever else it is they do out there!’

‘They don’t want jillaroos. They’ve got stockmen to do all that kind of stuff. They need a cook and a governess.’

‘A governess?’ Bea laughed. ‘You’re kidding! I thought governesses went out with Jane Eyre!’

‘Well, I thought it was a bit odd, too,’ Emily confessed, ‘but I gather it just means a nanny really. The little girl’s only five, so it’s not like she’s going to need intensive coaching. I think it’s more a question of looking after her and keeping her amused.’

Bea began to look alarmed. ‘We don’t know the first thing about children!’

‘It can’t be that hard.’ Emily gave an airy wave of her hand. ‘Read her a few stories, make sure she doesn’t lose her teddy bear...it’ll be a doddle.’

‘Well, I don’t want anything to do with her,’ said Bea firmly. ‘Children make me nervous.’

‘It’s all right, I’ll deal with the kid,’ Emily soothed her. ‘You just have to be the cook. You know I can’t cook to save my life, and you’re brilliant,’ she went on, laying on the flattery with a trowel. ‘When I told Nick that you were working for a catering company, he sounded really keen. He said they hardly ever get a qualified cook and—oh, please say you’ll come, Bea! It’s sounds so perfect, and I can’t do it without you. It’ll be fun!’

‘But we’re having fun in Sydney,’ Bea objected. ‘We’ve got jobs, friends, somewhere to stay... you can’t help but have an excellent time here. It won’t be like that in the outback. We’d be stuck in a house with a small child. It’ll be boiling hot and there’ll be nowhere to go and nothing to do. We don’t even know how to ride!’ She shook her head. ‘You’d hate it. I’d certainly hate it.’

‘Just like you were going to hate Australia?’ countered Emily unfairly. ‘You said you didn’t want to come and that you’d be miserable, and now you’re talking about emigrating! I said you would love it, and I was right, wasn’t I?’

Bea had to concede that. ‘Yes,’ she said.

‘So why won’t you believe me when I say you’ll love the outback too? You know what your trouble is?’ Emily went on, and Bea sighed. She knew that an answer wasn’t required, and that Emily was about to tell her anyway.

Sure enough, Emily was leaning forward, all earnest amateur psychologist. ‘I blame Phil,’ she said. ‘He hurt you so badly that now you’re afraid to try anything new.’

‘That’s not true,’ Bea tried to protest, but Emily was on a roll and refused to be interrupted.

‘You’ve got no self-confidence any more. As soon as anyone suggests doing something a bit different, you start making excuses. You wouldn’t even buy that dress the other day because it was a tiny bit shorter than you usually buy.’

‘It made me look fat.’

‘You looked fantastic in it, but you couldn’t have that, could you? Because if you looked fantastic, some bloke might get interested in you and you’d have to risk getting involved again.’

Bea took a defiant slug of wine. ‘Rubbish!’

‘And now I’m offering you the chance of excitement and adventure, and all you want to do is stay safely where you are.’

‘I’ve done adventure,’ Bea said, glad that Emily had got off the subject of her ex-fiancé. ‘I went trekking, didn’t I? Adventure means no loos and no showers and no hair-dryers, and you know I have to wash my hair every morning.’

‘And that means Calulla Downs will be just perfect for you,’ said Emily, seizing the advantage. ‘It’ll be a lot more luxurious than where we’re living now, I can tell you. It’s supposed to be a fabulous old homestead—people pay through the nose to go and stay there—so there’ll be adventure in just being somewhere so isolated, but with the added bonus of hot water and somewhere to plug in your hair-dryer. What more could you ask for?’

‘Shops, bars, clubs, theatres, lights, music...’

‘You can have those any time. This might be our only chance to go to a place like Calulla Downs. You can’t just throw away opportunities when they come your way. Seize the day, and all that.’

‘I don’t know...’

‘It’s not as if it’s for ever,’ Emily wheedled. ‘I’m sure Nick would agree if we said we could just do a month, and then we can spend the rest of the time travelling, the way we’d planned. We could go straight on to the Barrier Reef. What do you say?’

Bea hesitated, aware that she was running out of arguments. This was typical of Emily. She just went on and on and on until it was easier just to give in and do what she wanted.

Sensing that Bea was weakening, Emily pressed home her advantage. ‘Please, Bea,’ she said again. ‘I really, really want to go, and I can’t do it without you. I need you...and I was there for you when you needed me, wasn’t I?’

It was true. She had been. It had been Emily who had come straight round when Phil had told her that he was leaving, and who he was leaving her for. Emily who had dealt with everything while she was too numb to do anything more than lie curled up on the sofa, too wretched even to cry.

Bea sighed. ‘Come on, Emily, you can do better emotional blackmail than that,’ she said. ‘Why not wring out a few tears while you’re at it and accuse me of ruining your life if I don’t agree?’

‘That’s my fall back position,’ said Emily, grinning.

Bea gave in. ‘For a month,’ she said, a warning note in her voice. ‘But I’m not staying a moment longer!’

Emily gave a whoop of delight. ‘You’re a star!’ she said, jumping up to hug her. ‘I knew I could rely on you. I’ll go and ring Nick right now—and yes, I promise I’ll tell him we can only stay a month. But I bet you anything that by the end of that time, you’re going to want to stay for ever!’

‘It looks like being a very long month,’ grumbled Bea, dragging her suitcase across to where a row of orange plastic chairs were ranged uncompromisingly against the wall in what passed for a terminal at Mackinnon airport. ‘I’m bored already, and we’ve only been here ten minutes.’

Ten minutes was all it had taken for the plane to land, to let off six passengers and pick up two, and to take off again. The other four passengers had departed for town, the man who had pushed out the steps, unloaded their cases and checked the joining passengers onto the plane had disappeared, and Bea and Emily had been left alone to watch the plane climb up into the glaring blue sky until it vanished into the distance.

Bea slumped into one of the chairs and put her feet up on her suitcase. 'I suppose you did tell this Nick Sutherland person when we were arriving?'

'Of course I did,' said Emily. 'I told him when the plane got in, and he said he'd send somebody called Chase to pick us up.'

'Chase? What kind of name is that?'

'I think it must be his surname. Nick said that he was the one who ran the station anyway, so I guess he's some kind of manager.'

Bea sniffed. 'Not a very efficient one if he's forgotten that we're coming.'

'He won't have done that. Reliability is these guys' middle name,' said Emily confidently. 'He just won't be rushing.'

'Evidently!'

Emily ignored her sarcasm. 'The strong, silent types don't bother with clock-watching. That's what makes them so attractive. They've got all the time in the world, so they never hurry or get flustered. Bet you anything this guy rolls up in a checked shirt and a battered hat and says g'day in a slow drawl that'll go with his slow smile and his slow hands—'

Starting to hyperventilate, she broke off and fanned herself with her plane ticket. 'I can't wait! He'll be all brown and rangy, and his eyes will be crinkled at the edges from all that time he spends squinting at the far horizon.' Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. 'He might be a bit shy, but he'll be famous for his way with horses and don't get me started on the things he can do with a lasso...! He can rope me in any day!'

Bea couldn't help laughing at her friend's famously rich fantasy life. 'Aren't you thinking of cowboys?' she said. 'In which case, you're in the wrong country.'

'Same man, different hat,' Emily declared authoritatively. 'In the States, cowboys wear those hats which curl up at the sides, but an Australian stockman will wear an Akubra.'

'A what?'

'It's like a cowboy hat, but not so curly.'

Bea was pretty sure that Emily didn't have a clue what she was talking about, but she knew from bitter experience that there was no point in arguing with her.

'I'm surprised you haven't got a hat of your own to go with your outfit,' she said instead, eyeing Emily's pristine jeans, blue checked shirt (clearly specially selected to match her eyes) and the red and white spotted neckerchief. 'I didn't realise we had to come in fancy dress. If you'd told me, I'd have brought along a Stetson and a fringed jacket!'

Emily tossed her blonde curls. 'You can mock, but at least I'm appropriately dressed, unlike some people I could mention! I can't believe you're wearing a dress and those stupid shoes!'

'You love these shoes,' Bea pointed out, twirling her ankle so that she could admire them properly. They couldn't really be called shoes. Shoes was much too prosaic a word for fantasy on heels. 'You were furious when they told you they didn't have any in your size.'

'That was in Sydney. I'm prepared to admit that in their right context, they're fab, but they look absolutely ridiculous out here. I don't know why you couldn't wear jeans at least,' Emily grumbled. 'It's going to look as if you don't know the first thing about the outback, and I'll be associated with you.'

'I don't like travelling in jeans. Anyway, this Nick of yours didn't specify a uniform, did he? He's employing me to cook, not to sit around on fences looking like something out of a cowboy film.'

'Well, don't blame me when this Chase turns out to be a gorgeous hunk who dismisses you as a real city girl,' said Emily with the air of one washing her hands of the matter. 'You'll be left gnashing your teeth and cursing your kitten heels while I'm out learning just how good he is with his hands!'

'I don't care how attractive he is, I wish he'd just turn up.'

Swinging her legs off her suitcase, Bea got up to prowl impatiently around the terminal.

It didn't take long. The terminal wasn't much more than a hut with glass doors looking out onto the runway. A couple of single-engine planes were parked to one side near a water tank, and a

windsock hung limply against its pole. The sky was a relentless blue, and even cocooned in the air-conditioned comfort of the terminal, Bea could practically feel the heat beating down outside.

Beyond the runway, there was nothing, just an expanse of flat, brown earth covered with sparse spinifex grass stretching out to where the horizon shimmered hazily. It seemed to go on forever. Bea had been appalled flying over hundreds of miles of the same, unchanging scenery that morning. For a boring landscape, it was hard to beat. She couldn't understand why Emily was so thrilled with it.

A fly buzzed against the glass, but apart from that the silence was crushing. Bea sighed and looked at her watch again.

'Perhaps Nick Whatsisname has changed his mind and employed someone else,' she suggested hopefully.

'It's Nick Sutherland, and I'm sure he wouldn't do anything like that.' Emily leapt to his defence. 'He sounded really pleased when I rang and told him that you'd be coming with me. I wish you'd met him,' she went on. 'He was gorgeous, and nice with it—and we know what a rare combination that is!'

'If he's so nice, why isn't he coming to pick us up himself?'

'He's not here.' Emily sounded distinctly regretful. 'His wife's working overseas, and he's gone to be with her. That's why they need someone to look after the kids on the station.'

'Wife?' Bea shook her head in mock sympathy. 'It must have been a bit of a blow when you heard about her!'

Emily sighed. 'I know...but I suppose he was a bit old for me. And he did say something about a brother,' she added airily.

'Younger brother?'

'I think so.'

'Married?'

'No. I'm pretty sure Nick said he wasn't.'

All was now becoming clear to Bea.

'Name?' she asked.

'I don't know,' said Emily regretfully. 'I couldn't ask too many questions. I didn't want to look too obvious, and Nick didn't say very much, just that he would be keeping an eye on things. I got the impression he might have his own property.'

'Shame. Bit of a waste of your country-girl outfit if he's not even going to be there!'

'Oh, well, there's always this Chase person. I know a manager isn't quite the same but I bet he's to die for.'

'He might be married.'

'I shouldn't think so. These guys don't get out much,' said Emily hopefully. 'I've always fancied having a wild affair with a strong, silent farmer type. Anyway, with any luck we'll have the brother and the manager, so we can have one each!'

'Thanks, but I've always thought the appeal of the strong, silent type was overrated. I like a man who can talk about something more than cows. I'm going outside to see if there's any sign of him.'

Retrieving the sunglasses from the top of her head, Bea settled them on her nose and pushed open the door. The heat hit her like a blow, and even behind her glasses she had to screw up her eyes against the glare.

At least there was no chance of missing anyone on a road like this, she thought, squinting first one way and then another along an absolutely straight, absolutely empty, road. She hoped one of Emily's fantasy figures would turn up soon, as the only alternative was clearly going to be to walk into town, and it looked like a very long way.

It was a relief to get back into the air-conditioning, but both girls were soon thoroughly bored and fed up. They took it in turns to go outside and check on the traffic, but in an hour and a half counted only three road trains rumbling past.

Eventually Bea remembered a copy of *Cosmopolitan* in her suitcase, and she had just lost herself in an article about the joys of city living when a dull drone overhead made them both look up.

A tiny plane with wings that seemed to be propped up on long poles dropped lightly onto the runway and taxied towards the terminal, its propeller still blurring. As the girls watched, the plane came to a stop, the propeller faltered and slowed, and a man jumped out and set off towards the terminal at a brisk pace.

‘Do you think this is him?’

Emily sounded disappointed, presumably because of the absence of a checked shirt. He wasn’t giving a very good impression of being unhurried either. In fact, even from a distance, he looked distinctly impatient.

On the other hand, he was definitely tall and rangy, thought Bea. Nice broad shoulders, too, she couldn’t help noticing. As far as build went, he was everything Emily could want.

‘Can’t be,’ she said. ‘He’s not wearing a hat.’

Emily was obviously struggling to make the best of things. ‘He can fly a plane,’ she said. ‘That’s good.’

If the man noticed the two girls studying him through the big plate glass windows, he gave no sign of it. Instead, he stiff-armed the swing door in a manner worthy of the most harried city executive and strode into the terminal.

Bea gave Emily a sympathetic glance. His body might be good—actually, it was even more impressive at close quarters—but the rest of him was a distinct disappointment. He was just a very ordinary-looking man, with an irritated expression.

She judged him to be in his early thirties, but something about him made him seem older than that. Obviously ignorant of the sartorial codes Emily found so romantic, he was wearing jeans and a dull brown shirt. In fact, dull brown seemed to be something of a theme. He had a brown face and dull brown hair, and Bea fully expected to meet dull brown eyes too but, as his gaze swept over them, she was taken aback to discover that they weren’t brown at all, but an icy, almost startling, blue, and very unfriendly.

As the cold eyes encountered hers, she felt something like a tiny shock, and an odd feeling shivered down her spine. Putting her chin up, Bea stared back at him. She wasn’t about to be intimidated by a cowboy in a brown shirt.

Chase’s heart sank as he took in the two girls before him. So much for Nick and the ‘suitable’ girls he had found. ‘They’ll be perfect,’ he had enthused before getting on the plane and no doubt forgetting all about them.

Chase didn’t think they looked perfect at all. There was a very pretty blonde one, dressed for some reason in a cowgirl outfit, and a brunette who looked as if she was off to a party in a skimpy dress and high heels, for God’s sake. She had a wide, lush mouth that sat oddly with the snooty expression she was wearing. Chase was hard put to decide which of them looked more ridiculous.

Suitable? Perfect? Thanks, Nick, he sighed inwardly. Personally, he had them down as nothing but trouble.

Which was all he needed right now.

Outwardly, he looked from one to the other, trying to guess which one was Emily Williams. He picked the brunette with her nose stuck in the air. Emily sounded a prissy, old-fashioned name, and she looked the type.

Or maybe not, with that mouth.

‘Emily Williams?’

It came out brusquer than he had intended, and the brunette was clearly not impressed.

‘This is Emily,’ she said, gesturing at the blonde girl, who smiled a little uncertainly. ‘I’m Bea Stevenson.’

Her voice was very clear and English, and Chase wondered whether she expected him to bow.

‘Bee?’ he repeated. What kind of name was that? ‘As in buzzing and honey?’

‘As in Beatrice,’ she said coldly. ‘You must be Mr Chase.’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Most people just call me Chase.’

Bea ignored that. She probably didn’t like being associated with ‘most people’, Chase decided.

‘Didn’t Mr Sutherland tell you that we were coming?’

‘I wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t,’ Chase pointed out crisply. ‘I’ve got better things to do than hang around at the airport on the off chance that a couple of cooks are going to turn up.’

‘We’ve all got better things to do,’ she snapped, ‘but it hasn’t stopped us from having to hang around all afternoon. The plane got in two hours ago!’

‘Sorry about that,’ said Chase, not sounding at all sorry. ‘We’ve been putting a mob of cattle through the yards, and I couldn’t get away any earlier.’

‘Are we supposed to be grateful that you could spare the time to come and get us?’

‘Bea...’

Bea pushed her hair defiantly behind her ears and met Emily’s pleading blue eyes. She knew it was a bit soon to get into a stand-up argument, but something about this man rubbed her up the wrong way.

‘You should be grateful I remembered, anyway,’ he said, unmoved by her tone. ‘I need to get back as soon as possible,’ he added briskly, ‘so if you’re ready, I suggest you get your things and we’ll go.’

‘In the plane?’ Emily revived magically at the prospect.

‘It’s the quickest way.’ Chase glanced at her. ‘It’s not a problem, is it?’

‘Oh, no, I’ve always wanted to go in a small plane,’ she assured him. ‘It’s all so exciting!’

Chase suppressed a sigh. One who was keen, and one who was obviously going to hate every minute of it. They’d had both types before, and it was a toss up as to which was the hardest to deal with. The keen ones, probably. The girls who hated it usually burst into tears and insisted on going home the very next day. Perhaps Bea Stevenson would be the same.

Although she didn’t look like a girl who would cry easily. Too proud for that, Chase guessed, taking in the stubborn set of her chin.

‘Where are your things?’

They indicated two huge suitcases in the corner of the room, and he raised one eyebrow. ‘Brought your ball gowns and the kitchen sink, have you?’ he asked sardonically.

Bea bristled. ‘We thought we’d bring a few books and things to keep us occupied,’ she said in a cool voice. She wasn’t about to tell him about the hair-dryer. ‘We didn’t want to be bored.’

‘You won’t have time to be bored at Calulla Downs,’ he said, unimpressed by their forethought.

Bea opened her mouth to tell him that she would be the judge of what bored her or not, but Chase was already striding over to the cases. ‘Is this yours?’ he said to Emily as he took hold of the blue one.

‘Yes, it’s a bit heavy, I’m afraid...’

Emily trailed off as he picked it up in one hand and glanced from the red suitcase to Bea. ‘Want me to take this one for you?’ he asked.

Bea lifted her chin proudly. ‘I can manage, thank you.’

‘OK.’

To her fury, he took her at her word and headed for the doors, carrying Emily’s suitcase as if it was empty. He didn’t even have to put it down to open the door. Bea was left to struggle after him across the tarmac. Her case had wheels, but it was so heavy that it kept toppling sideways and snagging at her ankles, which did nothing to improve her temper.

‘So much for slow smiles and slow draws!’ she said bitterly to Emily who was doing her best to help keep the case upright. ‘This guy makes that lot you see jumping up and down at the Stock Exchange whenever there’s a financial crisis look laid-back!’

‘Perhaps he’s just having a bad day,’ said Emily.

‘He’s not the only one!’ grumbled Bea, stopping to wipe her forehead with the back of her arm. The heat was pouring down and then bouncing back off the tarmac until she thought she was about to expire, but she made herself carry on. Frankly, she would rather collapse into a sweaty puddle than ask the sneering Mr Chase for help!

Reaching the plane, Chase threw the case into the hold and turned to watch the two English girls trailing across the tarmac. The brunette, Bea she called herself, was clearly struggling, but just as clearly would rather die than ask him to help.

Well, if that’s the way she wanted to be, let her. It was no skin off his nose, Chase thought, but he couldn’t help noticing how tired she looked when she finally hauled her case up to the plane. Her face was a bright, shiny pink and her smooth brown hair was pushed wearily behind her ears.

Chase indicated the hold. ‘Do you want to put the case in there, or shall I do it for you?’

Bea shot him a fulminating glance. There was no way she could lift the case six inches off the ground, let alone all the way up there.

‘Thank you,’ she said stiffly, and perversely hated him for the ease with which he tossed the case into the plane.

As if she hadn’t been humiliated enough, she still had to get into the plane, a process which made Bea regret taking such a stand about refusing to dress the part. Of course, they couldn’t have anything easy like steps. The wings were set high on the body of the plane, and you had to climb in underneath by setting your foot on the strut and hauling yourself up. In her jeans and boots, Emily managed it without any difficulty and settled herself in the front seat, swivelling round to watch Bea’s efforts with a smug grin.

Gritting her teeth, Bea tried to follow her example, but the soles of her shoes kept slipping off the smooth strut and she couldn’t find any purchase to pull herself into the cabin.

She heard Chase sigh behind her, and the next moment found herself set brusquely aside. He stepped easily up into the cabin and reached down a peremptory hand.

‘Here, I’ll pull you up,’ he said.

Bea would have given almost anything she possessed not to accept his help, but it was a question of taking his hand or being left on the tarmac. She was very conscious of the cool strength of his fingers as they closed around hers and he lifted her effortlessly off the ground.

Already scarlet with the heat and humiliation, she flushed a deeper and even more unbecoming shade of red as she scrambled up and collapsed in an inelegant heap beside him. Somewhere along the line, her dress had got rucked up and Chase was subjected to an eyeful of her thighs in all their lack of glory. If he had been hoping for a glimpse of slender golden legs, he must have been sadly disappointed. Bea’s thighs were absolutely not her best feature.

Serve him right, thought Bea, hastily covering them up. She wished she had taken the tarmac option.

Her only comfort was the thought that he probably wished she’d stayed behind, too.

As it was, it looked like they were stuck with each other for the duration.

CHAPTER TWO

APART from a faint lifting of his eyebrow, which was somehow worse than an open sneer, Chase gave no sign that he had even noticed her legs. He dropped her hand pretty quickly, though, pulled the door to, and went forward to fold himself easily into the pilot's seat.

Bea was left to brush herself down and get herself into one of the small passenger seats behind Emily, who grinned knowingly at her. She glared back.

Chase was flicking buttons above his head, ignoring both of them. Bea just hoped that he knew what he was doing. She had never been in a plane this small before, certainly not one with a propeller. It looked pretty flimsy, too. She tapped the side panel dubiously. Oh, for a jumbo jet, four massive engines, and a pilot in a navy-blue uniform with multiple rows of gold braid!

'Seat belt?'

She started as Chase turned abruptly to fix her with that unnervingly cool blue stare.

'Oh...yes...' She fumbled for her belt, but her fingers were clumsy under his icy gaze and it seemed to take forever to snap it into place.

'Are you secure?' he asked with an edge of impatience.

'I'm a bit neurotic about my weight and I've got a massive complex about my hair, but on the whole, yes, I'd say that I was as well-balanced as the next person.'

'What?' Chase stared at her as if she had suddenly sprouted tentacles and turned into an alien, which was probably how she seemed to him.

Bea rolled her eyes. 'Yes, I've fastened my seat belt.'

With a final hard look, Chase turned back to the controls, and they were soon speeding down the runway, the propeller a blur on the plane's nose. The sound of the engine reverberated deafeningly through the cabin. Bea's stomach dropped alarmingly as they lifted into the air, and she closed her eyes and clutched at her seat. If she survived this trip, she was never, ever, ever going to let Emily talk her into doing anything else.

When she felt the plane level off, she opened her eyes cautiously and risked a glance out of the window, and promptly regretted it. The ground looked very far away, a flat, reddish-brown expanse that stretched out interminably in every direction. Bea could see the tiny shadow of the plane travelling along the ground below them, and wished that she were down with it, instead of suspended in midair.

In the front seat, Emily was chatting away, apparently unperturbed by the fact that she was sitting a thousand feet up in a flimsy tin can powered by little more than a rubber band. She had obviously recovered from her initial disappointment and was doing her best to flirt with Chase, although she wasn't getting very far, judging by his monosyllabic replies. After the way he had pulled her into the plane, his strength couldn't be denied, and no one could call him chatty, but Bea didn't think he was quite what Emily had in mind on the strong, silent front.

She hoped not, anyway. She had a nasty feeling that Chase was not the kind of man to mess with. He certainly didn't look the type to put up with much nonsense. Still, it was odd that he was so unresponsive. Very few men were immune to Emily's sparkling blue eyes and spectacular lashes, but Chase seemed impervious to her many charms.

Maybe he just didn't like women, Bea thought. It would be a shame with that mouth. Or maybe he was married after all. There was no reason why he shouldn't be. The thought made Bea frown for some reason, and she leant forward casually, as if to get something from her handbag so that she could check out his left hand on the joystick.

No wedding ring. Nice hands, though.

Bea relaxed slightly and sat back, only to realise that the lack of a ring probably didn't mean much. She couldn't imagine outback men going in for jewellery in a big way. If Emily's description

was anything to go by, they were all macho in the extreme and would consider wedding rings something only city boys wore.

Not that Chase seemed particularly macho, but there was something spare and uncompromising about him. Definitely a no-frills type, she thought.

So he might be married.

Bea's eyes rested on him speculatively. She couldn't see his expression, just the edge of his jaw, his ear and the side of his throat. He had a good, strong neck, she couldn't help noticing. She'd always had a thing about men's necks. It didn't bother Emily, but Bea couldn't bear thin, scrawny ones. She liked her men strong and solid all over.

How did Chase like his women? Bea found herself wondering. It was pretty obvious that he didn't have much time for brunettes with a stylish shoe sense! No, he'd probably go for a robust, no-nonsense type, she decided. Blonde, probably, with short sensible hair that didn't require washing, moussing and blow-drying every day, and a minimal beauty routine.

Oh, well. Each to his own. It wasn't as if she cared.

Although it did seem a waste of a neck like that.

Bea looked away with a tiny sigh.

If only there was anything else to look at! Looking down at the ground made her feel ill, and the sky was just a blue glare that made her feel dizzy. Bea tried looking at her hands, but that was just boring, and it was impossible not to let her mind drift towards imagining how Chase would be with his wife. Was he always this chilly and forbidding, or did he relax with a woman he liked enough to marry? He might even smile. Imagine what that would be like!

Closing her eyes, Bea was alarmed to find that she could imagine it all too clearly, and the picture of that stern mouth relaxing into a smile left her with such a queer feeling inside that her eyes snapped open again.

Nerves, she told herself.

'Are you OK?'

Chase's brusque voice made her jump, and she jerked her head round to find him regarding her with a frown. His eyes were uncomfortably keen, and in spite of herself Bea flushed, remembering the wayward trend of her thoughts.

'I'm fine,' she said stiffly.

He had turned right round in his seat to look at her. 'You seem a bit nervous,' he commented.

'I'm not in the least nervous,' lied Bea in a brittle voice, adding pointedly, 'I might feel better if you were looking where you were going, though.'

A half-smile quirked the corner of his mouth. 'This old girl can fly herself. It's not as if there's anything to bump into up here, anyway.'

'Maybe not, but there's plenty to bump into down there,' she said, pointing at the ground.

'Relax, Bea.' It was Emily's turn to swivel round in her seat. 'I tell you what, why don't we change places? You'll get a much better view up here.'

'No,' said Bea, a little too quickly. The plane felt unstable enough as it was without them all playing musical chairs. 'I mean, I'm happy where I am.'

'Are you sure? It's a fabulous view!'

Of what? Bea wondered. Brown, brown and more brown? She could see more than enough from her side window.

'I'm sure,' she said, thinking longingly of Sydney. She could be in the kitchen, preparing for the evening ahead. The catering company had been a great place to work, and no two days were the same. One day they might be doing a five-course dinner for eight, and the next canapés for eight hundred. It had been hard work, but Bea loved it. It had been good experience too, and had given her plenty of ideas for when she branched out on her own.

Remembering the atmosphere of controlled chaos and the surge of adrenalin that somehow made everything come together at the last moment, Bea sighed. Afterwards they would all go for a drink in a noisy bar and then she'd get the ferry across the harbour to the house she and Emily had shared with two friends. Sydney seemed part of a different world from this interminable journey.

The noise and the vibration and the smell of fuel was making her feel queasy, and she clamped her lips together as her stomach churned. Excellent, being sick was all she needed to complete the good impression she had made on Chase so far. She could just imagine his expression if she chucked up in his plane.

At least on proper planes they gave you a sick bag. Bea hunted surreptitiously through her handbag, but couldn't find so much as a tissue. And she certainly wasn't using the bag itself! She had bought it in Italy, and it was one of her favourites.

Oh, God, please don't let me be sick, she prayed silently, pressing her lips together as her stomach gave another alarming lurch. Hadn't she been through enough humiliation today?

Clearing her throat, she leant forward. 'Um...how much longer will it take us to get to Calulla Downs, Mr Chase?'

'Only another twenty minutes or so,' he said, glancing over his shoulder. 'And you can call me Chase.'

Where did he think they were? In the army? Bea had no intention of barking his surname at him, but she was damned if she was going to be interested enough to ask for his first name either. 'I'd rather stick to Mr Chase for now,' she said coolly as she sat back in her seat.

Chase glanced at her again, and then shrugged. 'If that's what you want.'

In fact, it was nearly half an hour before the little plane began its descent. Somehow Bea got through it without throwing up, but it was a close run thing. She was so relieved at the prospect of landing that even the flat scrub below them looked inviting. She didn't care how brown and boring it was, as long as it was firm beneath her feet.

The plane had barely touched down before she was out of her seat belt and waiting by the door like a dog sensing the prospect of a walk. Chase gave her an odd look, as he bent to push the door open.

'Hang on a minute,' he said irritably when Bea made to clamber out. 'You'll break your ankle if you try and jump down in those shoes.'

Evidently exasperated, he swung himself down in one fluid motion and turned to hold up his arms. 'Well, come on,' he ordered, as Bea dithered, torn between her longing to be back on terra firma and an acute attack of shyness at the thought of touching him.

In the end, she didn't have much choice. She leant forward and took hold of his shoulders as he grasped her firmly by the waist and lifted her bodily onto the ground. It only took a second, but that was quite long enough for Bea to register the rock-hard body and the warmth of his hands searing through the flimsy material of her dress. It might even have been that rather than the heels which made her stumble slightly as she landed and fall against him.

'Sorry,' she muttered, flustered by his closeness.

Chase wasn't flustered. He simply put her aside like a parcel and held up a hand to help Emily jump down before unloading their suitcases.

'You look a bit funny,' said Emily to Bea. 'Are you all right?'

Before Bea could answer, the sound of an engine made them turn to see a pick-up truck bumping along a track towards them, red dust hanging in a cloud in its wake. It stopped beside the plane and a man got out.

And not just any man. Emily drew a deep breath, her concern for Bea forgotten. Here was her fantasy at last!

He was tall and lean and incredibly handsome, with just the right hint of toughness. Here was a man who could ride the bucking bronco, and wrestle bulls to the ground before breakfast. He didn't actually have a lasso in his hand, but you could just tell that it was looped onto his saddle.

In fact, thought Bea, the only thing that was missing was that trusty horse. By rights he should have ridden up and swung easily to the ground. A pick-up truck didn't have quite the same effect, but she could see that Emily didn't care. In every other way he was perfect. The dusty boots, the checked shirt rolled up to reveal powerful forearms...he even had a hat tilted over his eyes.

'Maybe this is Nick's brother,' Emily whispered hopefully to Bea and sent him a dazzling smile.

He gave a slow smile in return, outback man incarnate. It was like watching Emily's fantasy come alive, so much so that when he actually tipped his hat, Bea almost laughed out loud. Any minute now he would whip off his hat and bend Emily back over his arm for a kiss before tossing her over his saddle and galloping off with her into the sunset. At the very least, he would call her ma'am, surely?

Instead he spoke to Chase. 'I brought the ute out when I heard you coming in. I thought you might want a lift back in case the girls here had some luggage to bring in.'

Oh, yes, even the right Australian drawl. Emily was starry-eyed. 'I think I've just died and gone to heaven,' she sighed to Bea.

'I don't think he's Nick's brother, though.' Less dazzled, Bea was watching the two men together. They were of a similar age, and Chase was shorter and more compact, but in some indefinable way you could tell that he was in charge. 'If you're planning on becoming mistress of a million acres, I'd hang on and check out the brother first.'

'What do I care about acres?' Emily was well gone. 'Did you see the way he smiled?'

Bea was more concerned about the way the men were throwing their suitcases into the back of the ute. She hoped her hair-dryer would stand up to all the rough handling.

'This is Baz,' said Chase, belatedly remembering to make the introductions.

'Hi,' said Emily before he could go any further. Her eyes shone as she smiled at Baz. 'I'm Emily.'

'Welcome to Calulla Downs, Emily,' he said in his deep, delicious voice.

Chase eyed them sardonically. Here they went again! He'd lost count of the number of girls he'd seen swoon at Baz's feet. The little blonde was clearly a romantic like all the others. Baz barely had to open his mouth and they were besotted. Chase was surprised that he never seemed to get bored with all that uncritical adoration. For himself, he preferred a bit more of a challenge.

Involuntarily, he glanced at Bea. A smile was tugging at the corners of her lush mouth as she watched her friend gazing dreamily at the stockman, and the snooty expression that had so riled him had been replaced by a gleam of amusement. Chase was taken aback to see how different she looked, and even more disconcerted to discover that he was pleased that she was apparently immune to Baz's legendary charms.

She wasn't as pretty as her friend, but her face had more character with its dark brows, firm nose and stubborn chin. And that mouth. Her straight brown hair was cut in a bob that he guessed was normally immaculately shiny but which right then was looking rather the worse for wear, with her fringe sticking to her forehead and the rest hanging limply around her pale face. She had been nervous in the plane, and probably more than a little sick, but she hadn't been going to admit it, and Chase thought she was probably still feeling a bit queasy.

She turned her head suddenly, as if becoming aware of his gaze, and their eyes met for a tiny moment. There was a funny little jolt in the air, and he found himself remembering the warmth of her body between his hands as he lifted her down from the plane.

'And this is Bea,' Chase said to Baz almost roughly.

'G'day, Bea.'

'Hello.' Her voice sounded comically high and brittle after Baz's deep, slow tones, but something in the way Chase had been watching her had put her on edge. Retrieving her sunglasses from the top of her head, she put them on and hoped they would hide her expression.

'Where's Chloe?' Chase was asking, all briskness, as if he hadn't even noticed that odd frisson in the air as their eyes had met.

Perhaps he hadn't, thought Bea. Perhaps she had imagined it.

Baz was talking about somebody called Julie, while Emily hung on his every word. And there was plenty of time to do that. Bea had never heard anyone speak quite so slowly.

‘We may as well pick her up on the way, then.’

As if the hierarchy wasn’t already obvious, Chase strode over to the ute and opened the driver’s door, while Baz climbed into the open back with the suitcases.

Emily gave Bea a nudge. ‘You get in,’ she said, obviously hoping that she would be able to get in the back with Baz, but her plan was foiled when Chase leant over the bench seat and opened the door.

‘There’s room for three,’ he said drily.

Which meant, of course, that Bea was stuck in the middle. The gear stick was set into the column of the steering wheel, so there was nothing to stop her sliding across the shiny leather seat against Chase. She kept edging back towards Emily, who used her bottom to shunt her back into the middle.

‘Budge over, Bea,’ she said. ‘You’re squashing me.’

Bea clung to the bar across the dashboard and concentrated on not brushing against Chase’s arm, but it was hard when the ute was lurching and bumping over the rough ground.

‘Who’s Julie?’ she asked to distract herself from the solid length of his thigh on the seat next to hers.

From the fine hairs at his wrist glinting in the sunlight.

From his hands on the steering wheel and the tingling where his touch seemed imprinted still on her skin.

Bea shivered, and Chase shot her a curious glance. ‘Julie’s married to one of the stockmen,’ was all he said. ‘He’s known as the married man, which means he gets a house on the property. Julie’s got two kids of her own, but she’s been keeping an eye on Chloe until you got here.’

He pulled up outside a low house which looked to Bea as if it had been plonked down in the middle of the bush with an arbitrary fence thrown around it to create a yard otherwise indistinguishable from the surrounding scrub. Three children were playing in the shade of the long veranda, but when they saw the ute pull up at the gate, a little girl detached herself and came tumbling down the steps.

‘Uncle Chase! Uncle Chase!’

Glad of the excuse to get out of the car, Bea had slid out after Chase, just in time to see him smile at the child who threw herself at him.

It gave Bea a horrible fright. For one terrible moment she thought that her heart had actually stopped beating, but the next instant it had slammed back into action, thudding painfully against her ribs and sucking all the oxygen from her lungs so that it was difficult to breathe properly.

For God’s sake, she scolded herself. It was only a smile! You’ve seen a man smile before, haven’t you?

Not like that, an inner voice answered.

She was so taken up with breathing again that it took a minute to realise just what she had heard. Uncle Chase?

Bea swallowed. ‘Uncle?’ she repeated in a hollow voice.

Chase looked at her over the top of the cab. There was no mistaking the glint of mockery in his eyes. ‘Uncle Chase,’ he confirmed, the little girl hanging off one hand.

Even Emily was diverted from Baz for a moment. ‘You’re Nick’s brother?’ she said, staring.

‘I’m Chase Sutherland,’ he agreed.

‘We thought you were the manager!’ Emily put her hand to her mouth and giggled. ‘You must have thought Bea was weird when she insisted on calling you Mr Chase!’

Bea gritted her teeth. ‘I’m sure Mr Sutherland knew perfectly well what we thought,’ she said tightly, glaring at Chase. ‘Why didn’t you tell us Chase was your first name?’ she demanded.

‘I told you to call me Chase,’ he pointed out with what she was sure was a smirk. ‘But you seemed pretty set on calling me Mr. I thought maybe things were more formal where you come from.’

He hadn’t thought anything of the kind, Bea thought savagely. He had just enjoyed seeing her making a complete idiot of herself.

Chase put one hand on the shoulder of the little girl in her denim dungarees. Her blonde hair was tied up in bunches and she had an angelic face belied by the expression in her sharp green eyes.

‘This is Chloe,’ said Chase. ‘Say hello to Emily and Bea, Chloe. Oh, I’m sorry!’ He caught himself up and looked at Bea in mock apology. ‘Would you prefer her to call you Miss Bea? I know how keen you are on formality!’

‘Bea’s fine,’ she said grittily and forced herself to smile at the child as Emily was doing. ‘Hello, Chloe.’

Chloe eyed her warily. ‘Hello,’ she said without enthusiasm.

Bea and Emily exchanged a glance. Even inexperienced as they were, they recognised the mutinous set to that little mouth.

‘Emily and Bea are going to look after you until Dad comes home,’ said Chase.

‘Emily is going to look after you,’ Bea put in firmly. She knew absolutely nothing about children, and she had no intention of getting roped in to looking after one. ‘I’m just the cook.’

Chloe studied her with suspicious green eyes. ‘Why do we have to call you Miss Bea?’ she demanded.

‘That was just your uncle’s idea of a joke,’ said Bea.

‘Why?’

‘I’ve no idea. It wasn’t very funny, was it?’

A smile twitched at the corner of Chase’s mouth as he went over to speak to Baz. To Emily’s dismay, the stockman nodded, tipped his hat again in their direction, and walked off.

‘Don’t panic,’ said Chase drily, correctly interpreting the look on Emily’s face. ‘You’ll see him again this evening. If you get in the ute, I’ll be back in a minute,’ he added. ‘Chloe, you get in too.’

The three of them squeezed into the front seat and, when Chase reappeared, they set off down a fork in the track. Bea could feel the dust gritting her skin already, and her hair felt awful. She couldn’t believe why anyone would choose to live out here. There was nothing but scrub, a few spindly trees and the bare earth, cracked and baking in the heat.

And then Chase swung off the main track, and they suddenly found themselves in an oasis of green. It was so unexpected that Bea actually gasped. Tall trees cast fractured shade over a lawn where a sprinkler flickered. There were lemon trees and great clumps of pink oleanders and purple bougainvillea, and set amidst it all the homestead, a solid, stone building with a deep veranda running around all sides and an air of gracious calm.

‘Oh, it’s beautiful!’ Emily cried.

Bea said nothing, but she had to admit to herself that things might not be quite as bad as she had feared.

Chase drove round the back to a big, dusty yard and parked the ute under a gum tree. From this view the homestead was less impressive. Nobody was wasting water on the working side of the house, with its collection of sheds, its water tanks and windmill.

Inside, though, the homestead was cool and quiet. The floors were of polished wood and the furniture was a comfortable mixture of the antique and the modern. Someone, thought Bea, had a lot of style.

And a lot of money.

Chase dumped their cases in a room with twin beds and looked at his watch. ‘I’ll show you the kitchen,’ he said to Bea, ‘and then leave you to get on with it.’

Leaving Emily to cope with Chloe on her own, he strode back down the corridor, with Bea forced to trot to keep up with him.

‘This is the kitchen,’ he said, opening a door into a large room equipped, to Bea’s relief, with what looked like the latest technology. He pointed through a door on the other side of the room. ‘We eat on the veranda through there.’

‘What, outside?’

‘It’s cooler out there.’

‘Yes, but what about the flies?’

‘It’s screened in,’ said Chase impatiently, as if she was supposed to know that everyone in the outback ate on their verandas. ‘Now, you should find everything you need over there,’ he went on, pointing at a wall of steel fridges and freezers. ‘There’s a larder and a cold store as well. I suggest you keep opening doors until you find what you need. The stockmen will come over for supper at seven o’clock, so you’ll need to have a meal ready by then. Any questions?’

“‘What am I doing here” springs to mind!’ sighed Bea.

Chase frowned. ‘I understood you were a qualified cook.’

‘I am. That doesn’t make me a mind reader!’

He glanced irritably at his watch, impatient to be gone. ‘What do you need to know?’

‘How many I’m cooking for, for a start.’

‘Oh.’ It was a reasonable enough question, Chase allowed grudgingly. ‘Nine of us, plus you two. Chloe eats separately in the evening. She should be in bed by seven.’

‘I’ll tell Emily,’ said Bea sweetly. ‘Any special dietary requirements?’

She was looking straight at him, and Chase saw her eyes properly for the first time. They were golden, the colour of warm honey, and very clear.

‘Meat,’ he said gruffly, annoyed with himself for even noticing. ‘Nothing fancy.’

‘Well, I should be able to cope with that.’

She didn’t even bother to disguise her sarcasm, and Chase shot her a look as he took a hat from the hooks by the door.

‘You’re not much good to me if you can’t,’ he said, and went out, letting the screen door bang behind him.

He didn’t reappear until six o’clock. Bea looked up as the screen door creaked and then went back to slicing carrots vengefully.

The door clattered back into place and Chase hung his hat on a hook. ‘Is everything OK?’

The casual note in his voice infuriated Bea.

‘Oh, yes, everything’s fine!’ she said, tight-lipped, her knife flashing dangerously as it demolished the carrots. ‘We’ve been dumped in the middle of nowhere, with no idea of where anything is or how anything works...and you disappear and just leave us to get on with it!’

‘I thought you wanted to come and work on a cattle station?’

‘Emily wanted to come. Personally, I appreciate a more professional set-up!’

Chase eyed her cautiously. She seemed tense, and he knew from past experience that the last thing you wanted was a tense cook at this stage of the evening. If they wanted to eat tonight, he would have to be careful not to provoke her.

‘You seem to have managed, anyway,’ he said pacifically. ‘Something smells good. Did you find everything you needed?’

‘Eventually,’ said Bea with something of a snap. If she had, it was no thanks to him!

There was a tiny pause.

‘Where’s Emily?’ Chase tried again.

‘Giving Chloe a bath.’

‘Has she been all right?’ Bea reached for another carrot, her edginess at the sight of Chase easing slightly. ‘She seems a bit...wary,’ she said.

There had been a definite sense of wills being measured and in Chloe's case at least, some calculation as to how much she could get away with. It hadn't taken her long to realise that the answer was 'a lot' as far as Emily was concerned.

Still, it wasn't her problem, Bea told herself firmly. She had enough to do as it was. Finding your way around a strange kitchen and producing supper for eleven with no warning was problem enough for her!

She had changed, Chase realised. She had replaced those ridiculous shoes with flat sandals and the dress with cotton trousers and a sleeveless top beneath a practical apron. Her hair was pushed behind her ears, and her lashes were lowered as her eyes followed the rapid slicing movements of the knife in her hand.

For some reason Chase felt awkward. 'She's a nice kid when she gets to know you,' he said after a moment. 'She's had to get used to a lot of different people passing through, and she tends to take her time before deciding whether she likes you or not. I don't blame her.'

'Nor do I.' Bea looked up from her knife and he was struck again by how clear her eyes were. 'I do exactly the same.'

Although that wasn't quite true, was it? She had decided she didn't like Chase straight away.

There was another pause. Bea reached for another carrot.

'It must be difficult for Chloe with her mother being away as well as her father. When is she coming back?'

Chase had gone over to the beer fridge, but he stilled with his hand on the door and turned to face her, his brows drawn together. 'Didn't Nick explain the situation?'

'I've never met him,' said Bea. 'I gathered from Emily that his wife was working in the States and that he'd gone to join her.'

Chase's hand fell. 'It's a bit more complicated than that,' he said slowly.

Bea paused in mid-slice, and something in his expression made her lay the knife down. 'What?'

'Georgie's left Nick.'

'Oh, I see,' she said uncomfortably. 'And Chloe?'

'She doesn't know. She's too young to understand.'

Chase pulled a beer out of the fridge and wrenched off the top before belatedly remembering to offer Bea one. She shook her head and he sat down at the table, turning the bottle between his hands. It went against the grain to pass on Nick and Georgie's private business, but she and Emily really needed to know the situation so that they didn't upset Chloe unnecessarily.

'Nick's gone to try and persuade Georgie to come home,' he said.

To his relief, Bea didn't offer sympathy or sit down next to him and encourage him to tell her the whole story. Instead she swept the carrots off the board into a saucepan and picked up an onion.

'Why has... Georgie?... gone to America? Is she really working?'

'Oh, yes, she's working all right. That's part of the problem. Georgie's an actress. She's making a movie somewhere in Texas, and she's got a starring role.'

Bea froze and put down her knife very carefully. 'We're not talking about Georgie Grainger by any chance, are we?'

'You've heard of her?' Chase took a pull of his beer. 'Georgie would be pleased.'

Bea opened her mouth and then closed it again. Georgie Grainger was not yet in Nicole Kidman's league, but comparisons were already being made. She had had a small part in a film that had turned into the unexpected success of the previous year, breaking all box office records, and for a while the media couldn't get enough of her.

Bea remembered seeing her being interviewed on a television chat show, and how envious she had been of her creamy skin and swinging chestnut hair and spectacular green eyes.

'She's gorgeous, isn't she?' she had said to Phil, but he had only grunted and said that he preferred blondes.

That should have been a warning.

CHAPTER THREE

‘I DIDN’T realise that she was married,’ she said after a moment. Georgie Grainger had seemed so young and so glamorous that it was hard to imagine her as a wife and mother, let alone in a place like Calulla Downs!

‘Not many people did. She was told to keep it quiet. Apparently a husband and a baby aren’t the right image for an up and coming star.’ There was a bitter edge to Chase’s voice. ‘Once you’ve made it, a baby is the ultimate accessory, I understand, but when you’re still trying to hit the big time...no, much better to hide them away. They kept telling Georgie that she had a great future. They talked about Hollywood and dazzled her with hints of multimillion-dollar deals. You can see why cooking a roast for the stockmen would lose appeal, can’t you?’

Only too well, thought Bea, but it didn’t seem tactful to say so. She had never wanted to be a movie star, but she could certainly understand the lure of Los Angeles after Calulla Downs. She’d been here less than half a day and already she couldn’t wait to head back to the bright lights.

On the other hand, she didn’t have a husband and a small child to think about.

She went back to chopping onions. ‘Why did Georgie marry your brother if she wanted to be an actress?’ she asked. ‘She must have known there wouldn’t be much scope for her career out here.’

For a moment she thought Chase wasn’t going to reply. He was brooding over his beer, frowning down into it as if it held the answer to her question.

‘She was very young when she met Nick,’ he said eventually. ‘She was just out of drama school and the play she was in folded after a couple of weeks. It seemed then that her career wasn’t going anywhere, and Nick can be very persuasive. He swept her off her feet.’

When Bea glanced at him under her lashes, his face was stern and set. He obviously disapproved of his brother’s romance. It was hard to imagine Chase sweeping a girl off her feet, she thought. Tapping his watch and telling her to make up her mind would be more his style.

Unaware of her thoughts, Chase was still talking about his sister-in-law. ‘I think marriage for Georgie was just another role she could play. She saw herself as mistress of a famous cattle station, and was carried away by the romance of it all. She should have known better,’ he added drily. ‘She grew up on a property down south, but I guess she thought it would be different here. It wasn’t, of course. It was just more isolated.’

He looked at Bea, but she was busy chopping onions and it was impossible to tell what she thought.

‘Georgie did try,’ he went on, almost as if he had to convince her. ‘She used to love having parties, and the homestead was always full of her friends, but then we had a bad drought and things were a bit tight for while. Georgie decided that we should get into the tourist business, and spent a fortune we couldn’t afford on all this.’ He waved a hand at the gleaming array of kitchen equipment.

‘She redecorated the homestead, built a new wing with extra bedrooms, and insisted on employing a chef, all with the idea of taking paying guests who wanted to experience life on a station, but without getting their hands dirty or sacrificing home comforts.’

‘It’s been popular, too,’ Chase had to acknowledge. ‘We’ve never advertised, but Georgie had so many friends that word of mouth was more than enough. And then a friend of a friend from her acting days turned up. He’d made it big in Hollywood and he decided Georgie was just the fresh face they needed. Before we quite knew what was happening, he’d persuaded her to fly out to LA and audition for a small part and the whole circus took off from there.’

‘Didn’t Nick want her to go?’

‘Have you ever seen a picture of Georgie?’ Chase countered.

‘Yes.’

‘Then you’ll know how beautiful she is.’

His voice softened imperceptibly, and Bea sent him a sharp look. He had sounded as if he disapproved of Georgie before, but now she wondered how he really felt about his beautiful sister-in-law.

‘Nick was jealous?’

‘Of course he was. Any man would have felt the same.’

Including him? Bea wondered.

‘He could see that she was getting bored out here, though,’ Chase was saying, unaware of her mental interruption. ‘He encouraged her to go back to acting at first, but none of us expected that her career would take off the way it has. Suddenly Georgie’s a star, and everything’s changed. When this new part came up, Nick didn’t want her to take it, and he told her she would have to choose between him and the movie.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Bea. She could just imagine how that had gone down.

‘Quite. Georgie’s not the kind of person to give in to an ultimatum like that, and of course they had a huge argument which ended up with her demanding a divorce. She wanted to take Chloe with her, but Nick said that she wouldn’t be able to look after her properly while she was filming, and I think Georgie knew herself that she’d be better here until everything was sorted out.’

‘Is that why Nick’s gone to the States? To arrange the divorce?’

‘No, he wants Georgie back. He was devastated when she left, but a lot of hard things were said on both sides, and it won’t be easy. He didn’t even tell Georgie he was coming. I’m not sure he even knows exactly where to find her, but he was determined to track her down and persuade her to give him another chance.

‘He asked me if I would keep an eye on Chloe while he was gone, but it’s a busy time on the station, so I said I’d do it if he found someone to replace the cook and the governess who’d both left in a huff. They couldn’t cope with the rows. I told Nick we’d had enough prima donnas around here and to make sure that he got someone suitable.’

Chase looked at Bea. ‘So he gave the job to you and Emily,’ he said drily.

Bea bridled. ‘Is that what you think we are? Prima donnas?’

‘I don’t know about that, but you’re definitely not what I had in mind when I asked for someone suitable!’

She lifted a chin in what he already thought of as a familiar gesture. ‘How do you know?’

Chase finished his beer and set the bottle back down on the table. ‘I knew the moment I saw those shoes you were wearing,’ he said. ‘They didn’t look very suitable to me!’

‘Why do I let you talk me into these things?’ Bea threw back the sheet and climbed into bed. ‘“You’ll love it,” you said. “It’ll be an adventure,” you said.’

‘Well, it is,’ said Emily, still brushing her hair.

‘What’s adventurous about getting up at four-thirty tomorrow morning?’

‘Think of the romance, Bea! Feeding the men before they saddle up, waving them off to a hard day’s work as they ride into the dawn...it’ll be wonderful.’

‘If you think it’s so romantic, you can get up and cook breakfast for them!’

‘You know I can’t cook,’ said Emily, ‘and there’s no point in both of us getting up, is there?’

She put down the hairbrush and began slathering moisturiser into her face and neck. She was always very strict about her beauty regime. Bea often thought it was the only area in which Emily had any discipline.

‘I’m so glad we came, aren’t you?’ she was saying, rather muffled. ‘It’s even better than I thought it would be! You can practically feel the possibilities of romance buzzing in the air!’

Bea stared glumly at the ceiling. ‘The only possibility I can see is the chance of being heartily bored for the next month.’

‘You’re not looking in the right place.’

‘The stockmen’s quarters, I suppose?’

‘You’ve got to admit it looks promising!’

‘It?’

‘OK, he,’ Emily conceded with a grin. ‘Baz is to die for, isn’t he?’

Bea considered the matter. ‘I can see he’s good-looking,’ she said slowly, ‘but he hasn’t got a lot to say for himself, has he?’

Not that anyone round the table that night had had much to say much for themselves. Emily hadn’t given them a chance. Thrilled with everything, and especially with Baz, she had been on sparkling form, flashing her bright blue eyes at the shy young men who had trooped in at seven o’clock and stood around awkwardly, mumbling names. They had all been dazzled.

All except Chase, thought Bea. She had a feeling that it would take a lot to dazzle him.

‘Baz doesn’t need all that superficial chatter,’ Emily was saying as she got into bed. ‘He just needs to sit there and I go all squirmy inside.’ She heaved a dreamy sigh.

‘I thought the governess always had a passionate affair with the master,’ said Bea. ‘What happened to your plan to be mistress of a million acres?’

‘Oh, well, Nick’s off the market if he’s steamed off to Hollywood to fetch his wife, and that just leaves Chase, and I can’t imagine having an affair with him, can you?’

The worst thing was that Bea could. ‘Why not?’ was all she said.

‘He’s a bit of a cold fish, isn’t he?’ said Emily, settling herself in bed. ‘I tried to chat to him in the plane, but it was like trying to flirt with a brick wall. I don’t see him having a passionate affair with anyone. He doesn’t look like he knows what passion means!’

‘No,’ agreed Bea after the tiniest hesitation. She had thought much the same herself, but when she remembered his mouth, she wasn’t quite so sure.

‘He’s too dour for me,’ Emily went on. ‘You’d never guess he was related to Nick. With a name like Sutherland he must be a throwback to some Scottish ancestors. He could do with lightening up a bit, if you ask me. It might make him less intimidating.’

‘I wouldn’t say that he was intimidating,’ said Bea, thinking about the way Chase had sat at the kitchen table and told her about his brother’s marriage. He hadn’t been friendly exactly, but he hadn’t been quite as dismissive either.

‘That’s because you don’t intimidate easily,’ said Emily. ‘Anyway, I think he likes you.’

Bea sat up and stared across at her friend. ‘How do you work that out?’

‘I noticed him watching you at dinner.’

So Emily had noticed too. Bea had wondered if she was imagining it, or if it had just been chance that whenever she looked up her eyes had encountered Chase’s cool blue ones. His expression had been impossible to read, but she didn’t think it had been one of liking.

‘He was probably just wondering how soon he could get rid of us,’ she said with an unsuccessful laugh.

‘He’d better not have been,’ said Emily, reaching out to switch off the bedside light. ‘I’ve just found the man of my dreams. I’ve got no intention of leaving on Chase Sutherland’s say so!’

When the alarm went off at four-thirty the next morning, Bea sat bolt upright. She had been sleeping uneasily, dreading the moment when it would go off, and now she groped for the clock and switched it off quickly.

Rubbing her eyes, she switched on the little lamp by her bed. There had been no need to worry about waking Emily. She was sound asleep, one arm flung above her head. You could have conducted a rousing rendition of the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ under spotlights without her so much as stirring.

It was pitch dark outside and the early morning air was unpleasantly chilly. Bea dressed, shivering. Nobody had told her it could be cold in the outback, and she hadn’t brought a jumper with her. The best she could do was a T-shirt and chinos. Hugging her arms together, Bea cast a last, longing glance at her warm bed and crept down the darkened corridor to the kitchen.

The overhead lights were very bright when she switched them on and she had to screw up her eyes until she got used to them. It didn't stop her feeling any less of a zombie, though. Her body kept insisting that it had missed out on a good four hours sleep to which it was accustomed, and refused to co-operate as Bea moved blearily around the kitchen, putting on the kettle, laying the table and setting out cereals, and jams for toast.

Chase appeared just before five, and something about the sight of him jerked Bea abruptly awake. His presence seemed to fill the kitchen. Under the harsh overhead light, his features were stronger and more definite than she remembered, but his eyes were as cool and keen as ever.

As they swept over her, Bea was suddenly acutely conscious that her hair was rioting uncontrollably around her head, that she hadn't so much as washed her face and that she was bug-eyed from lack of sleep. She eyed him with resentment. He made it look as if it was perfectly normal to have breakfast in the middle of the night.

Chase was glad to see that she was up and appeared to have breakfast under control, although she looked less than her usual immaculate self. There was a cross, tousled air to her this morning, and he had a sudden, disturbing awareness that she had just got out of bed.

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