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Desire

HIS RING,
HER BABY

Maxine Sullivan

HIS BRIDE FOR
THE TAKING

Sandra Hyatt

Sandra Hyatt

**His Ring, Her Baby / His Bride
for the Taking: His Ring, Her
Baby / His Bride for the Taking**

«HarperCollins»

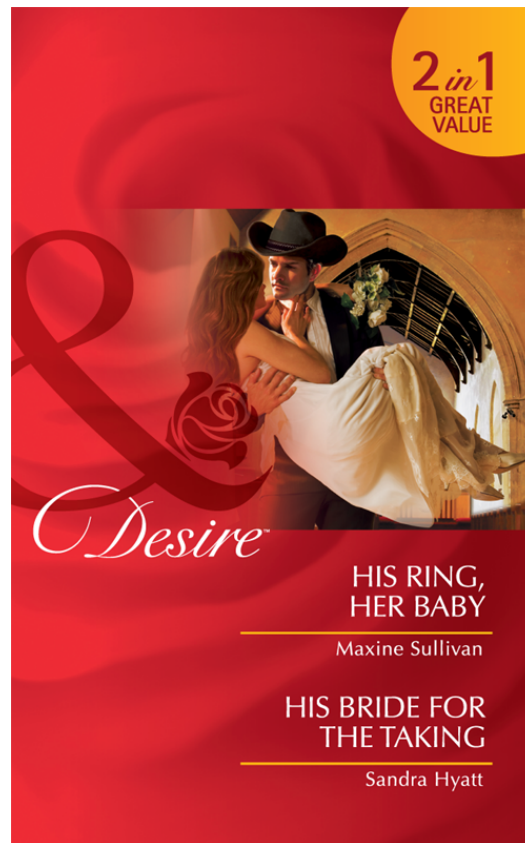
Hyatt S.

His Ring, Her Baby / His Bride for the Taking: His Ring, Her Baby /
His Bride for the Taking / S. Hyatt — «HarperCollins»,

His Ring, Her Baby Vanessa's job title was housekeeper, not fiancée! Billionaire cattleman Kirk Deverill had offered her the job to help her keep her son, although the eligible bachelor hadn't expected her to tell everyone she was also Kirk's bride-to-be! He agreed to Vanessa's ruse for her adorable son's sake and for the opportunity to claim some "husbandly" pleasures. But making their fake engagement real was never going to happen! His Bride for the Taking Prince Rafael Marconi's brother was supposed to wed Alexia Wyndham Jones. So Rafe was escorting the American heiress to his country. But what the royal playboy never bargained for was his fierce attraction to the bride-to-be. Alexia was more surprising, spirited...and sensual than he could have imagined. She was also strictly off-limits...

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HIS RING,
HER BABY
MAXINE SULLIVAN
HIS BRIDE FOR
THE TAKING
SANDRA HYATT



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HIS RING,
HER BABY
MAXINE SULLIVAN

“Marriage is what you were aiming for, wasn’t it?”

She quickly shook her head. “No! I didn’t. I—”

“Enough lying. You’re trying to get someone to marry you and you’ll use any means—any person—to keep your son.” His lips twisted. “I guess I’m just damn lucky I was the one on hand.”

“No! I have no intention of marrying you—or anyone else, for that matter. I’ve just lost my husband, for God’s sake,” she said, her voice catching.

“That didn’t stop you sleeping with me last night, did it?”

She sucked in a breath. “That was a mistake. We’ve already agreed not to repeat it.”

“I told you before I don’t like being used.”

“I’m sorry. If I could take it back without harming my son, then I would.”

A nerve pulsed near his temple. “Fine. I’ll be your fiancé for now. But I can tell you this, Vanessa. I will *never* be your husband.”

About the Author

MAXINE SULLIVAN credits her mother for her lifelong love of romance novels, so it was a natural extension for Maxine to want to write her own romances. She thinks there is nothing better than being a writer and is thrilled to be one of the few Australians to write for the Desire™ line.

Maxine lives in Melbourne, Australia, but over the years has travelled to New Zealand, the UK and the USA. In her own backyard, her husband's job ensured they saw the diversity of the countryside, from the tropics to the Outback, country towns to the cities. She is married to Geoff, who has proven his hero status many times over the years. They have two handsome sons and an assortment of much-loved, previously abandoned animals.

Maxine would love to hear from you. She can be contacted through her website at www.maxinesullivan.com.

To my fabulous agent, Jennifer Schober.

Thanks for your support and enthusiasm, Jenn.

And to Catherine Evans for her helpful advice with the Outback scenes. Thanks, Cath.

Dear Reader,

When my editor suggested I write an Outback story I was thrilled. Not only do I love writing characters drawn together for the sake of a child, but who wouldn't want to write a story set in the romantic Outback? It's a special place that deserves a special love story.

The term "Outback" is not a precise location, and even Australians don't know exactly where the Outback starts and ends. Many Australians live in the cities, others in rural areas called "the bush", and farther out —somewhere "out back"—it turns into the "Outback". Where the line is drawn no one really knows. You're suddenly there in the middle of something that entrances a person in a way you've never known before and you just know that this is it. It's a bit like love.

Of course, Vanessa Hamilton and Kirk Deverill aren't quite so quick to realise they have a love like no other. Vanessa has been mourning her late husband and is now busy trying to protect her son from his smothering grandparents. Kirk has a secret he won't burden any woman with. There are just too many reasons for them not to fall in love.

And if that's the case, then perhaps they'll manage to escape the romantic lure of the Outback. Then again ... perhaps they won't. I hope you enjoy this story.

Happy reading!

Maxine

One

We've sold the motel.

Vanessa Hamilton was still reeling from her cousin's news when she looked up and saw a luxury Range Rover pull up out front of the Jackaroo Plains Motel.

She groaned, wishing she could go think about her situation without interruption from either telephones or guests. Her son was taking his morning nap right now so the timing would have been perfect. She was pleased for Linda and Hugh, of course. It was what they wanted. But she'd only been here three weeks and had planned on staying at least six months.

And right now she had to put all her worry aside as she watched the man push open the glass door. Lord, he was certainly handsome enough to take any woman's mind off her problems.

Or create one.

No one had taught her about these three Rs in school.

Rich.

Rugged.

Red-blooded.

He epitomized everything she imagined a wealthy outback male to be. From the tips of his brown leather boots, to bone-colored trousers and the light blue polo shirt a woman was tempted to rub against, to his wrist where an expensive Rolex glistened in the light.

He stopped in front of the reception desk, his blue eyes filling with masculine appreciation. "You're new here," he drawled.

She lifted her chin, annoyed with herself for finding him attractive. "Are you looking for a room?" she asked in her best no-nonsense voice, already knowing they had nothing suitable. The Plaza Hotel in New York was more his style.

Those blue eyes narrowed on her. "No."

"If you're looking to eat in the restaurant—"

"I'm not."

"You're not here for the gardener's job, are you?" she said, knowing it sounded ridiculous but one never knew.

His low chuckle resonated with something inside her. Something she didn't want to acknowledge.

"No, I'm not here for that, either."

Suddenly she noticed his gaze dart to her left hand, noting her bare fingers. Uneasiness fluttered inside her stomach that he might think her single and available. It had been weird taking off her rings, but the heat had made her fingers swell a little and the alternative had been to have the rings adjusted. She hadn't wanted to do that, seeing her fingers would return to normal once she returned to Sydney.

Just like *she* would return to normal, she had promised herself, realizing now it might happen sooner than expected. Oh, God, she didn't want to go back to the city where her wealthy parents-in-law doted on her one-year-old son, Josh.

More than doted.

Smothered.

"I came to see Linda and Hugh," the man said, drawing her back to the present.

The penny dropped. He was the new owner of the motel. Oh, yes, that explained him. Her cousin said he was rich, predatory, and sucked up failing businesses like a vacuum cleaner, then got rid of half the staff under the guise of modernization.

Well, officially *she* wasn't on the staff.

She gave him a cool look. "They're not here."

"Where are they?"

"Dubbo."

There was a moment's pause. "When will they be back?"

"No idea."

One brow lifted, a questioning light in his eyes. "Are you always this helpful?"

"Only when it's part of the job," she said with a politeness that was nothing more than lip service.

His jaw set. "Look, I'm a friend of Linda and Hugh's and—"

Her heart thudded. "A ... a friend?"

"Yes, Hugh and I went to boarding school together."

"Oh, I thought—" She stopped. Perhaps Linda and Hugh didn't want it known yet that they were selling.

"Yes?"

"It doesn't matter." It all made sense now. She could easily see the two men being friends. Hugh's parents owned a cattle station, but Hugh had been more interested in business than the land and had bought the motel for him and Linda.

Did this man own a cattle station, too? He certainly looked like one of the wealthy landowners.

"The name's Kirk, by the way," he said, snapping her from her thoughts. "Kirk Deverill."

His name flowed over her. Why couldn't he be called Bruce? Or Darryl? Something that didn't sound so masculine or make a woman think about him as a man.

She let out a shaky breath. "I'm Linda's cousin. Vanessa Hamilton."

He paused, as if putting the name to her face and liking what he saw. Then his eyes fell to her lips. "I didn't know Linda had such a beautiful cousin."

She gave a soft gasp. Why did this man's words make her knees weak when almost every available male in town, and some not so available, had said the same thing since her arrival?

The telephone rang and she snatched it up, uncomfortable at the feelings he was raising inside her. She could feel him watching her as she went to a stand to get a brochure on the Western Plains Zoo at Dubbo. She answered a couple of questions for the guest then hung up and put the brochure back.

"I'm sorry. I—" She looked up and caught him eyeing the full length of her denim jeans. "Um ... just a question about the zoo," she finished on a lame note.

"No need to be sorry," he said smoothly, not looking the slightest bit uncomfortable at having been caught. Then he considered her. "So tell me. Why the attitude?"

She cleared her throat. "Attitude?"

"You obviously thought I was someone else."

"Perhaps." It wasn't up to her to tell him about the sale. Besides, he could say he was a friend of Linda and Hugh's but that didn't mean he actually was.

"Someone you don't like."

"Maybe."

"You realize you owe me an apology," he pointed out.

Yes, and he owed her an apology for the way he'd been looking at her, but did she want to go there? No way.

"Of course, there is a way you could make up for it," he said, a light in his eyes telling her this man was very experienced with women.

She stiffened. *Here it comes.* One sexist remark and she'd tie him to a tree for the dingoes to eat.

"Have dinner with me tomorrow night."

"Dinner?" Her heart jumped in her chest. "I can't. I mean, I can't desert Linda and Hugh then. It's going to be a big night for them. I'm helping out around the place, you see, and I—"

"You only had to say no." Her reaction seemed to amuse him. "I'm a big boy. I can take it."

Vanessa didn't know whether to be relieved or irritated that he gave in so easily. She'd expected some sort of fight from the guy.

She drew breath. "Fine then. No, I don't want to have dinner with you tomorrow night."

"How about a rain check?"

She gave a startled laugh. "What happened to 'you only had to say no'?"

"I said I could take it. I didn't say I would." An air of indolence exuded from him. "Now, about that rain check ..."

All at once she wanted to get the better of him. "Okay," she said, planting a smirk on her lips. "Next time it rains I'll have dinner with you."

His brow rose. "You realize we're in the middle of a severe drought, don't you?"

"Yes, I know."

His firm lips relaxed into a lazy smile and her stomach did a flip-flop. Suddenly she wanted to step around the counter and into his arms. Arms that would snake around her hips and pull her up against his aroused body.

Aroused? Yes, she had the feeling she could excite this man, if she chose to make a move on him.

Not that she would, she told herself as she mentally pulled away in confusion. She'd never felt such an instant reaction before. With Mike the attraction had grown as she'd slowly fallen in love.

Mike.

Oh, God, how could she even think about comparing her late husband to this stranger? What was wrong with her today? Maybe it was just too much stress. In any case, it was definitely too much of—

"Kirk!" Linda exclaimed, coming through a side door with Hugh, sending a sigh of relief through Vanessa, who was more than ready to go clean some of the vacated rooms. "You're back from Sydney at last."

"Yes, just passing through on the way home." He gave Linda a kiss on the cheek and shook Hugh's hand. Then his gaze slid across the reception desk. "Your cousin's been looking after me."

Linda darted a smile at Vanessa. "Good."

"Did she tell you about the sale?" Hugh said.

Kirk brows drew together. "Sale?"

Vanessa gave Hugh a helpless smile. "I wasn't sure if I should say anything."

"That's okay, love," Hugh said warmly. "Kirk, we put the motel on the market a few weeks ago and this morning we received our first reasonable offer. That's why we rushed into Dubbo. To sign the contract."

A frown crossed Kirk's face. "You're selling?"

"It's either sell now or lose everything," Hugh said, then his face brightened. "But I've been offered a job to manage some apartments on the Gold Coast. It's come at the perfect time. Linda and I want to have another baby in the not-too-distant future." He hugged his wife to his side. "Don't we, darling?"

Linda smiled up at him. "A little brother or sister for Toby would be lovely."

Kirk scowled. "Listen, if you need money to keep the motel afloat—"

Hugh shook his head. "Thanks, mate, but it's been getting too much for us anyway. It'll be nice to have a normal family life again."

Vanessa watched Kirk seriously consider his friends, then give a slow nod. "I'll be sorry to see you both go."

"Hey, we'll only be a few hours away by air," Linda said.

"When does the sale go through?"

“We’re handing over in a month’s time.” Hugh grimaced. “The buyer is Bert Viner and you know what his reputation is like. I don’t like selling to him but—” He put up his hand as Kirk went to speak. “No, we’re fine, Kirk. It’s time for us to move on.”

Linda sighed. “Unfortunately he’ll cut back on staff and I hate that people will lose their jobs. And Vanessa was going to stay for six months but now.” Linda looked at her cousin and her eyes clouded over. “I just didn’t think it would happen this quickly.”

Neither had she, Vanessa thought, forcing a smile. “Oh, Linda, it’s not like you hadn’t told me that you’d put the motel on the market.”

“I know but—”

“Don’t worry about me. This is your *life* we’re talking about.” They’d worked hard to get to this point in their lives.

“I know but—”

“I’ve had a nice break,” Vanessa said firmly.

Linda took a shuddering breath, then her face filled with resolve. “You’re my cousin. We’ll think of something.”

Vanessa’s heart softened as she looked at Linda’s upset face and Hugh’s concerned one. These two people had welcomed her into their home with love and affection and she didn’t want them to feel guilty about any of this.

Then she realized Kirk’s intense gaze was on her. He couldn’t know her circumstances but she suspected he knew she was deeply worried.

So she welcomed Linda’s exclamation. “Oh, heavens, Kirk! We’re standing here talking to you instead of offering you a drink. Or how about I make you some lunch? The restaurant’s closed but I’d be happy to whip something up for you.”

Kirk’s smile said thanks but he replied, “Sorry, I can’t. I need to get home and do some catching up. I’ve been away too long.”

Linda’s expression turned sympathetic. “I’d heard your housekeeper had to go interstate to take care of a family member. It won’t be easy getting someone to replace her.” She pulled a face. “And here, I haven’t even asked how your mother is after her surgery. There were some complications, I believe.”

“Yes, but she’s finally on the mend. Jade’s looking after her now, when she’s not working all the hours under the sun, that is.”

“I wonder who your sister is like?” Linda teased, then her eyes widened. “Oh, I almost forgot. It’s Hugh’s parents’ thirty-fifth wedding anniversary tomorrow and we’re giving them a party in the restaurant. You must come, Kirk. They’d be heartbroken if you didn’t. Isn’t that right, Hugh?”

“You know they always had a soft spot for you,” Hugh said, going over to one of their guests who’d come in and made a beeline for the brochure stand.

“I don’t see how,” Kirk joked after him, and Vanessa had to wonder the same thing, too. The man had a hardness about him that didn’t translate into him being more a friend than a foe. Yet watching him here with Linda and Kirk—and he evidently treated his mother and sister well—didn’t fit. That hardness was more than skin deep, she was sure.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he added.

“Good,” Linda said, taking that for his word. “And if you don’t mind, you can keep an eye on Vanessa. She doesn’t know many people in Jackaroo Plains. She’s only been here from Sydney three weeks.”

Vanessa froze.

“It would be my pleasure,” she heard Kirk say.

She recovered quickly. Her cousin was a mother hen at times but *she* didn’t need looking after, and certainly not by a man who dined on women for breakfast.

“I’ll be fine, Linda. I don’t want to take Kirk away from the other guests.”

“You won’t,” he said, a purposeful gleam in his eyes sending a shock through her, though it shouldn’t have. He’d been making a move on her since he’d walked through the door, and mentally she was already *his*.

“There you are then,” Linda said, giving Vanessa an encouraging smile. All at once she tilted her head thoughtfully. “You’re looking quite flushed, sweetie. It’s this outback heat. You haven’t got the air-conditioning turned up high enough. You should go for a quick swim but don’t stay in the sun too long.”

Vanessa swallowed with difficulty. “What a good idea,” she said, not looking at Kirk.

Thankfully another guest came into the reception area just then, and with Hugh still busy with the previous guest, Linda came around the counter. “Here, cuz. Let me take over. You go have that swim.”

Vanessa didn’t need further prompting. She twirled toward the door marked Private, desperate to grab any excuse to get out of that man’s presence. She heard him tell the others he had to get home.

Then, “Vanessa?”

If only she could ignore him, but Linda and Hugh would think her rude.

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder. “Yes?”

“See you at the party,” he said, an intensity to his eyes that made her softly gasp.

Somehow she managed a jerky nod before making her escape. It hadn’t been an issue before now but tomorrow night she’d tell him he’d got it all wrong. He had to be told she was a widow. There was no way this man would want any involvement with a woman who was still mourning the man she loved.

Kirk Deverill would never accept being second best.

After six weeks away Kirk had looked forward to coming home but now as he drove toward Deverill Downs, he realized the news that his friends were leaving the area shouldn’t really have come as a surprise. He’d miss them. There weren’t many people he totally trusted like he did Hugh and Linda.

So why did his mind keep switching back to a beautiful, green-eyed woman with honey-blond hair? Tall and with a stunning figure, Vanessa Hamilton was a surprise find here in his hometown. A man would have to be six feet under not to want another look at those firm breasts, or at legs so long and slim they’d cling to him like warm sap on a gum tree.

He grimaced to himself. He was certainly waxing lyrical today. Being without a woman for a while did that to a man.

Okay, so that had been his choice, not the other way around. He’d gone to Sydney over a month ago to spend Christmas with his mother, who’d moved to the city after his father’s death. Then his mother had needed an operation and he’d ended up staying longer than expected when there had been a complication. She was fine now, but he’d been glad to be there for her and his sister.

And all that had put a curb on his sex life. Strangely he hadn’t cared. Running into a newly married Samantha, who’d made it clear she was quite willing to resume their affair, had left a bad taste in his mouth. He couldn’t believe three months ago he’d been ready to ask her to marry him. She was the type of woman who hadn’t wanted children and that had suited him perfectly. She’d lived in Sydney but he’d been certain she’d jump at the chance to marry him and move to the outback.

Instead she’d up and married one of his business acquaintances from the city, an older, richer guy who could give her more than “life” on a cattle station. The worse thing was that Kirk had known she would have married *him* if Marcus hadn’t come along.

How could he have read Samantha so wrong? She’d put on such a classy act, duping him into believing they might come to love each other and have a decent life together. Thank God she’d dumped him before he’d told her he was sterile. At least she didn’t have that power over him.

No woman ever would.

Bloody hell, he should have learned his lesson with Jillian and their one-night stand all those years ago at university. Claiming he was the father of her child when he'd known he'd used protection had made him suspicious and proven two things.

She was a liar.

And he was sterile.

Never would he fully trust another woman. Nor would he ever ask another woman to marry him, of that he was certain. He could have plenty of satisfying relationships without marriage. There were plenty of women who wanted nothing more than good company and good sex.

Even Vanessa Hamilton.

It wouldn't be merely good sex with her. It would be *great* sex. She was a feisty one, that one. All that fire flashing in those lovely green eyes, and the way her delicately shaped mouth had pursed with annoyance, she was just what he needed to warm his bed again. It made him wonder what else lay beneath that prickly skin of hers. No doubt about it, he was going to find out.

Two

Vanessa spent the rest of the day helping out around the motel. She, Linda and Hugh had perfected a routine of taking turns to look after Toby and Josh, taking them outside in the private garden area or playing on the living-room rug with the boys. If they were all busy, then one of the staff usually stepped in for a short time. She felt like she had the best of both worlds, and loved being able to help Linda and Hugh as well.

But tonight as she fed Josh his dinner, her heart was heavy, her mind awash with thoughts. Mike had been careless with money and no matter how hard she'd tried to save, he'd spent it as fast. They'd rented an apartment, their car had been on hire purchase, and they hadn't owned much. She'd eventually receive compensation money from Mike's death, but she planned on putting that into a trust account for Josh.

And none of that helped her situation right now. If she returned to Sydney she'd have to find somewhere to live. And she'd have to get a job and put Josh in day care. Or she might have to let Grace and Rupert look after him. Or heaven help her, she and Josh might have to move in with them. Already they had him booked into the right school. It had the right type of people, they'd said, and he'd make the right type of friends.

Oh, God.

Suddenly she felt like she'd been cut adrift. It was the same feeling she'd had when her mother remarried five years ago and went to live in England. She hadn't met Mike then, and with her father having died when she was little, her job in an insurance office had been busy but it hadn't been enough. Linda had been living in Melbourne at the time, and Linda's four brothers and sisters were great cousins but they were older and had lives of their own. She'd felt so alone. Looking at alternatives now, she wasn't sure what was worse.

"You're quiet, sweetie," Linda said from where she sat on the sofa folding washing.

Vanessa winced inwardly as she looked across the open-plan living area to her dark-haired cousin. Was she so transparent?

"Just thinking," she said casually.

"You're not fretting too much about what you're going to do, are you? We'll think of something. I promise."

"You've got enough to worry about right now."

"So one more thing won't matter, will it?" she said, with more bravado than not, Vanessa thought. "In any case, we have a month before we have to leave here."

Vanessa nodded, then continued feeding her son. The best thing she could do for Linda right now was stay calm and pretend she was fine. She rather suspected Linda was doing the same thing for *her* sake.

"By the way," Linda said, after a few moments' pause, "what did you think of Kirk Deverill?"

Vanessa's mouth tightened. She hadn't known whether to say anything to her cousin but.

"You really shouldn't have asked him to keep me company tomorrow night. I'll be busy helping with the party." She didn't dare mention the dinner invitation. Wild horses wouldn't drag that out of her.

Linda's eyebrows rose in disbelief. "I don't believe it! The man's got a ton of money and he's a total hunk and you're *complaining* about spending time with him? Cuz, he's the catch of the century."

"And your point is?" Vanessa said with a touch of sarcasm, then immediately felt bad.

Linda stopped what she was doing, her eyes considering her from across the room. "You don't like him, do you?"

Vanessa went to speak her mind, then looked away to hand Josh the spoon to play with. She'd probably said enough. Kirk Deverill was too handsome for his own good and was quick to take advantage, but much as she wanted to, she wasn't so sure she should share her opinion with her cousin.

She shrugged. "I just don't know the guy, okay?"

Linda sighed. "Mike's been gone six months now, sweetie. You have to get on with your life."

Striving to ignore the empty void in her heart that the mention of her dead husband brought, Vanessa swallowed hard. Her cousin meant well. "I'm trying to get on with my life but that doesn't mean I want you to make dates for me."

"It wasn't meant as an actual date. I just thought it would do you good to see new people."

A bubble of warmth coiled around Vanessa's heart. Her cousin was a lovely person. "I know. And thanks. But I'm not ready. I'm not sure I'll ever be." Would she ever be able to ignore the fear in her heart? The fear of loving and losing.

"Of course, you could always stay home tomorrow night," Linda surprisingly suggested. "Phyllis's granddaughter said she'd babysit but you could look after Josh and Toby yourself. I could tell Kirk you're not feeling well or something."

It was tempting but somehow it smacked of cowardice and Kirk would see right through it. And besides, once he learned of her circumstances she was certain that would be the end of it.

"No, I'll be fine. I guess I can handle him for one night."

Linda winked at her as she stood up with the folded towels. "Sweetie, that man's worth more than a night."

Vanessa gave a weak smile and returned to feeding her son. She had the feeling her cousin was right.

The party was in full swing by the time Kirk arrived the next evening. He was late but he'd had no choice. His housekeeper, Martha, had decided she needed to go look after her sister. He'd made a booking then arranged for one of his men to drive her to Dubbo Airport, but she'd been upset so he'd stayed with her until it was time to leave. He'd never forget how she had helped his mother cope with his father's terminal illness.

And now he put all that out of his mind as he stood near the entrance and ordered a whiskey with one of the young males acting as a drink waiter for the night. The restaurant was crowded but there was only one person he wanted to see tonight.

Vanessa.

She was nowhere to be seen.

Just then, she came through the swinging kitchen door carrying a plate of hors d'oeuvres. An odd jolt shot through his chest. She looked incredible in a short black dress that fitted snugly against her breasts, its thin straps emphasizing her smooth neckline and shoulders, the color a glorious foil to the silken mass of her blond hair.

Without hesitation, he skirted the tables and caught up with her near a potted palm. Intense pleasure coursed through him when he saw the quick spurt of desire in those green eyes before she masked her expression.

She was even more beautiful tonight.

"Good evening, Mr. Deverill," she said with cool politeness.

He raised a mocking eyebrow. "Mister? I'm sure you called me by my name yesterday."

"I'm sure I called you a lot of things yesterday."

The comment made him laugh low and husky. Then, "You look fantastic tonight."

A blush ran over her cheeks.

Not so cool.

"Dance with me," he murmured, wanting nothing more than to hold her in his arms and feel her moving against him.

Her gaze darted out over the dance floor in the center of the room. "Dance?"

“Surely even Cinderella can have fun at the ball?” he teased.

“I—” She looked down at the plate and began rearranging the hors d’oeuvres, the faint tremor in her hand shooting satisfaction right through him.

Then she lifted her eyes and moistened her lips. “There’s something I should—”

“Yes, there is,” he said huskily.

Come closer and touch me. Slide your hands around my neck. Press yourself against me.

She drew in a quick breath. “I—” Raising her chin higher, she pulled back her shoulders, unknowingly emphasizing her firm, rounded breasts. “I’ve just got one thing to say to you, Mr. Deverill.”

“What’s that?”

“You are no prince.” With that she took off into the throng.

Amused, Kirk watched the feminine sway of her hips. Then he exhaled a low rush of air. He’d have liked nothing better than to follow her. To slide that zipper open at the back of her dress. To plant kisses all along her spine. And beyond—

The waiter interrupted his thoughts with the glass of whiskey. He took a sip and it burned going down. A long, slow burn.

Just like Vanessa.

Then Hugh’s parents called his name and the world intruded, but over the next hour he couldn’t keep from watching Vanessa mix with the other guests. She smiled graciously. She laughed. And then she’d catch him looking at her and that smile would freeze on her lips, a signal that he affected her as much as she affected him.

Later she disappeared into the kitchen with a pile of dirty glasses. He followed and found her stacking the dishwasher. She was alone, as he’d hoped she would be. She couldn’t know it, but she gave him a bird’s-eye view of her cleavage, the same view he would get if she were lying on top of him. Two perfect globes. His to caress.

“Want some help?” he said huskily.

She straightened, a guarded look in her eyes. “Thanks, but I can manage.” Spinning away, she picked up some clean plates from the table and reached for the top shelf of a cupboard.

He watched as her dress inched up her thighs. Damn, but she had gorgeous legs. Long and slim and firm enough for a man to grip as she rode him home, smooth enough for a man to slide up and into her.

“You owe me a dance, Vanessa.”

Her eyelashes flickered, then her lips twisted. “I’m sure Phyllis would love to come back from her break and find us dancing in her kitchen,” she scoffed, picking up more plates.

Unable to stand another look at those legs, he strode over and took the plates out of her hands, then put them on the shelf himself.

He turned and took slow steps toward her. “We could go outside under the stars, if you’d prefer.” Anywhere.

He didn’t care.

As long as she was in his arms.

“No, I can’t.” She went to spin away.

He put his hand on her arm, stopping her. “One dance can’t hurt us.”

She tensed as if she knew one dance was all it would take. “Kirk, listen. This is all a waste of time.”

“What is?” he murmured, watching the way she suddenly moistened her lips.

“You ... trying to seduce me. It won’t work. I can’t do this.”

He pulled her closer. “Vanessa, you’re only fooling yourself if you think—”

“Kirk, I’m a widow.”

He blinked in shock.

“My husband died six months ago.”

He stared at her, trying to absorb the information.

“I’ve been trying to tell you. I—”

The screen door opened and Phyllis stepped inside the kitchen. “I don’t believe it! Kirk Deverill in my kitchen,” she scolded lightly, then stopped, her gaze going to Vanessa. “Oh, was I interrupting something?”

There was a pause but Kirk couldn’t have spoken to save his life. A widow? She was too young. She was only in her mid-twenties.

Vanessa stepped back. “Not at all, Phyllis,” she assured the motel cook, then headed for a side door. “I’ll leave you two to catch up.” She left the room.

Kirk let her go. He had to. He couldn’t make his feet move right then.

“So how’s your mother, Kirk? I want to hear all about her.”

Hell, what could he say to Vanessa anyway?

“And Martha?” Phyllis added. “I believe her sister isn’t well.”

Kirk slowly turned back to the older woman, forcibly pulling himself together, but his mind was working overtime. He still couldn’t believe Vanessa was a widow.

Christ!

Vanessa was shaking by the time she left the kitchen and slipped into Linda’s bathroom. She’d told him. He knew now. He wouldn’t pursue her further. And that was just as well. Tonight had the signs of being a prelude to a relationship she wasn’t ready for.

A man-woman relationship.

All she had to do was get through the rest of the evening.

Drawing a calming breath, she left the safety of the bathroom and took a few minutes to chat to the teenager babysitting the boys here in Linda’s private quarters. Then she took a quick peek in on a sleeping Josh before heading back to the party.

On entering the restaurant, the first thing she saw was Kirk dancing with a young, raven-haired beauty whose father owned a sheep station not far from town. She gazed up at Kirk as if any minute she’d swoon at his feet.

A touch of cynicism seeped inside Vanessa. He didn’t seem to be worried about *his* attraction for *her* right now, with Tina’s red dress clinging to his dark trousers. Any closer and they’d be joined at the hip.

“Like to dance, Vanessa?” a male voice said beside her, and she looked up to see Seth Collins, one of the other woman’s brothers, standing there, his brown eyes reflecting admiring lights.

She flashed him a smile, glad to have someone take her mind off Kirk. “Lead the way.” On the dance floor she went into his arms. His height forced her to look up at him and he grinned down at her with a face as handsome as his sister’s was beautiful.

Vanessa smiled right back at him, aware that he found her desirable. Unfortunately he did nothing for her. Not like.

Her gaze shot past him to Kirk, who was scowling at her over Tina’s shoulder. There was a determined look in his eyes and suddenly she wasn’t sure being emotionally tied up in her late husband would make any difference to him. Kirk Deverill went after whatever or whoever he wanted.

She dragged her eyes away. “Had enough to eat, Seth?”

He nodded. “Best spread I’ve had in a long time.”

She darted a quick look back at Kirk, who was still looking at her.

And he was getting closer.

Her heart thudded in her chest. She should have known he was the type of man who let nothing get in his way.

Swallowing, she quickly looked at Seth again. “Had enough to drink?”

“More than enough, thanks.”

Kirk was closing in on them, a hard set to his jaw. Nervously she scraped an imaginary strand of hair off her cheek. “Good. We aim to please.”

Seth gave a short laugh that grated on her taut nerves. “You do a good job of looking after your guests.”

Closer still.

“Er ... that’s because everyone’s been so nice to me.”

“I’m sure you’re easy to be ni—”

“Seth,” Kirk interrupted, coming right up beside them, “you’d better take your sister outside. She says she’s going to be sick.”

Tina hiccupped.

“Great,” Seth said ruefully but he immediately released Vanessa and put his arms around Tina. “Come on, sis. Let’s get you some fresh air.” He shrugged at Vanessa regretfully. “Sorry about this.”

“That’s okay.” Vanessa began edging as far away from Kirk as possible. “I have to go check on—”

Kirk pulled her into his arms, wrapping her in his warmth. “We need to talk,” he rasped, and began leading her around the floor as Seth escorted his sister to the door.

Vanessa pulled herself together. “Do you often make women sick when they dance with you?” she said sweetly, not wanting him to know he had her running scared.

His eyes dismissed her comment. “Tell me about your husband,” he all but growled.

Like a flash she grasped that this wasn’t about him pursuing her. All he wanted were answers, nothing more. She could understand that. Most people were curious when they discovered someone so young had been widowed.

Tension eased out of her shoulders. “Mike was a policeman. He was killed in a bank robbery six months ago.” She could count it down to the weeks, days, hours. She would remember the exact date and time for the rest of her life.

A muscle jerked in his jaw. “Hell, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” She’d heard those words so many times from people, and she appreciated them. Yet hearing them come from this man made her feel strange.

“How long were you married?”

Vanessa swallowed. “Two years.”

His hand tightened on her hip. “And were you happy?”

“Very,” was all she could manage, otherwise she’d be thinking about Mike and how much she missed him. And it didn’t seem right to be thinking about him while she was dancing in the arms of another man.

His mouth compressed. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

She didn’t like his tone. “I don’t believe I owe you any details of my private life,” she snapped.

Another couple danced too close and he had to move her out of the way. By the time she fell back into step, she hoped he’d let the subject of her marriage go.

He didn’t.

His eyes snagged hers, almost accusingly. “Why aren’t you wearing any rings?”

She’d *known* he’d noticed. “I’ve taken them off temporarily. They were too tight in the heat.”

Those blue eyes gave her the laser treatment. “You knew I thought you were available.”

Her lips twisted. “You probably think *every* woman is available.”

“Aren’t they?” he mocked.

She sucked in a sharp breath at his arrogance. The road to Sydney must be littered with women who threw themselves at him, but that was no excuse for—

Just then, she saw Cindy standing near the kitchen door carrying her son. “Josh!” She immediately forgot Kirk as she left his arms and hurried over to the babysitter. “Is something wrong? What’s the matter?” She didn’t know what she’d do if anything happened to him.

"I think he heard your voice before. He started crying and won't settle." Cindy pulled a face. "I'm sorry to drag you away."

"Don't be," Vanessa said, lifting Josh in her arms, relieved he wasn't sick. His eyes were wet from crying. She kissed his cheek and smoothed the blond hair off his forehead. "How's Toby?"

"Sound asleep," Cindy said. "I'd better get back to him. Do you want me to take Josh back? He might settle now that he's seen you."

"No, that's fine. I think I'll take him home now." It was getting late and she needed no better excuse to get out of here.

Cindy nodded, then disappeared through the kitchen door.

Vanessa hugged Josh closer, smelling his soft, sweet scent. "Time to take you home and put you to bed, little man." She turned around to find Linda or Hugh and tell them that she was leaving so they wouldn't worry.

She froze. *Kirk*. He'd followed her.

His eyes had an odd glitter. "He's yours?"

She swallowed then nodded, proud of her son but feeling the awkwardness of the moment.

"I'll carry him for you," he said in a brusque voice.

She stiffened. "No, the apartment's only out the back."

"You could fall over in those heels," he said, making her aware he missed nothing about her.

Suddenly she had to get out of here ... away from the restaurant ... away from Kirk Deverill. She had to keep a physical distance, if only to maintain an emotional one.

"No, I'll be fine."

He said something low under his breath. "I insist." His eyes held hers. He wasn't going to give up.

She expelled a shaky sigh. "Okay, but I have to find Linda first and tell her I've gone."

"She's over near the bar."

She looked and saw Linda near the bar, standing beneath the Happy Anniversary banner. Her cousin waved at them and Vanessa indicated she was taking Josh home, and received a speculative look and a nod of acknowledgment.

Then she let Kirk lift Josh from her arms, half expecting Josh to cry—and wishing he would—only he didn't. Then she and Kirk left via the kitchen. Phyllis and a waitress looked up as they passed through, but Vanessa gave a bright smile and hoped she wasn't tomorrow's gossip. And if she was then it was only one person's fault.

His.

Looking directly ahead, she didn't talk as her high heels tapped along the well-lit driveway until they came to the converted garage. Once inside the apartment, she waited until Kirk placed Josh in his crib, then she tucked her son in and moved back into the living room. She saw Kirk's gaze as he took in the room with its polished wood floor, comfortable sofa and handmade cushions.

For a long moment his blue eyes rested on the wedding photograph of her and Mike, who'd been so handsome in his policeman's uniform.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Thanks for carrying Josh for me."

He drew his gaze away from the photograph and looked at her, an unreadable expression in his eyes. "No problem."

Trying to look experienced at this sort of thing, she walked toward him and held out her hand. "I guess this is good night."

His hand slid over hers like a glove. "I guess it is."

She realized her mistake then. She hadn't wanted to touch him. Hadn't wanted to feel his skin against her own, not even in the most casual way.

And she knew that wasn't true.

She *wanted* to touch him.

And there would be nothing cavalier about it.

Something must have shown on her face because he gave a sharp intake of breath. The next instant he brought her hand to his mouth and ever so slowly he kissed the inside of her wrist.

Heat arrowed into her belly, igniting her blood like she had never known before, not even with Mike. Loving Mike had been simple and uncomplicated. Somehow she knew it wouldn't be like that with Kirk.

He dropped her hand and stepped back. "Goodbye, Vanessa," he said thickly, and moved toward the front door.

Then he was gone.

The door shut behind him.

She stood there shaking. Then, stunned by what just one touch could do to her, she collapsed on the couch, her thoughts tumbling down like the house made of straw. Now that she was alone, she wanted him back, wanted him to touch her more, make love to her.

Oh, Lord. What was the matter with her? Mike was still her husband in her heart; meanwhile she longed to hop into bed with the first good-looking man that had come along. What had happened to remaining true to Mike's memory? The father of her child. Kirk Deverill dredged up emotions she intended to keep hidden. Emotions of desire and need that shouldn't be there. Her husband had only been dead six months. How could she yearn to be held close by someone else so soon? A stranger no less.

Her heart squeezed with pain but she didn't cry. The season had come and gone for more tears.

And this feeling for Kirk?

It, too, would pass.

An hour later Vanessa still hadn't fallen asleep. She felt wound up, like a mouse running around one of those exercise wheels. Perhaps a few slow laps of the pool would relax her.

Pushing herself out of bed, she peeked out her bedroom window. The glow of night-lights showed the pool area empty of people, with most of the motel guests having retired for the night and others still at the party on the other side of the motel. With the pool close enough to keep an eye on her apartment, she didn't need any further encouragement to slip into her one-piece swimsuit.

Five minutes later, pleased that out here the party sounded as though it had wound down some and that Kirk would probably have left, she dropped her towel on a deck chair and carefully descended the steps at the corner of the pool.

As she eased in up to her neck, ripples fanned out around her and the reflections of the dimmed lights gently bounced over the surface of the water. For a few seconds she enjoyed the anointment, the warm lotion of the water massaging her body, helping her to unwind.

Then she kicked off from the wall of the pool and started to swim, keeping as quiet as possible as she sliced smoothly through the water, not wanting anyone to join her and spoil this for her.

Twenty laps later she felt tired but at last she felt refreshed. Rolling onto her back in the middle of the pool, she looked up at the night sky. The darkened shape of a bird flew across the silhouette of the moon. Stars twinkled down on her from a bed of velvet. An owl hooted in the distance. This was the life. She could so get used to—

"You came to Jackaroo Plains for a reason, didn't you?" a deep male voice said.

She swallowed water and began to choke. Her peace shattered, she tried to catch her breath as her feet touched the bottom of the pool to stand up. In a dimly lit area in the corner, Kirk sat on one of the deck chairs. Had he been there all along?

"Are you following me?" she demanded.

"No. I was out here already."

Her breath suspended in midair. The thought of him watching her slowly step into the pool surrounded by night-lights, seeing her body outlined by the one-piece she wore, made her quiver inside.

"And you didn't answer my question," he reminded her.

“What question was that?”

“You came here to help get over your grief, didn’t you? That’s why Linda’s so concerned about you.”

No need to tell him about her in-laws. It was none of his business. “Linda worries too much.”

He got to his feet and strolled toward the pool. “So what will you do when they sell the motel? Go back to Sydney?”

She didn’t know what she was going to do. “I’m working on something now,” she fibbed, not wanting him to know how desperate she felt. She turned the conversation away from her. “Anyway, why are you out here? I thought you’d be enjoying the party.”

He stood looking down at her, watching the moonlit water lap at the top of her breasts, his strong features holding a certain sensuality that made her shiver. “I needed some fresh air.”

Pretending his husky voice didn’t perturb her, she eased backward in the water, slowly moving around, trying to look unaffected by him.

“I guess you’ll be heading home soon then,” she said, hoping against hope that he’d take the hint.

“I’ve booked a room for the night.”

She stopped moving. Had he expected to share it with someone? Her? This was his friends’ motel, but he would be discreet, she knew.

All at once she became conscious of feeling a tiny bit cold but she didn’t want to get out of the pool in front of him. He’d seen more than enough of her tonight.

He frowned. “You’re getting cold. Come on, I’ll help you out of there.” All action now, he went and picked up her towel from the chair.

Her heartbeat started to skip. “No, it’s okay. I’m fine. I’ll just swim around some more then go back to my apartment. No need for you to wait around.”

His frown deepened. “I’m not leaving you here alone, Vanessa. You could get a cramp.”

“I won’t.” She hoped she didn’t sound as desperate as she felt, but suspected she did. “You really should be going back to the party.”

A very masculine look suddenly entered his eyes. “I should?” He paused. “Why?”

She drew an unsteady breath. “Er ... why?” Her throat closed up. Her mind froze. She couldn’t think of a thing to say that didn’t give away how much he was affecting her.

Then a mask came down over his face. “Come on, Vanessa. Get out of the pool.” Clearly remote now, he opened the towel and held it up for her.

She wavered.

“Vanessa?”

She stared at him, then told herself he was only concerned for her welfare, nothing else. It was either that or she’d never get out of the pool.

She dared not look at him as she concentrated on moving through the water toward him. Her foot found the first step and she began to rise out of the pool. She could feel his eyes on her as the water sluiced down over her swimsuit, each step up exposing every inch of her body to him.

She reached the top step and looked up.

Their eyes locked.

The air stilled between them.

He moved closer. “Let me,” he murmured, standing in front of her, slipping it around her shoulders.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. “Um ... you might get wet.”

“I don’t mind.” He pulled the edges of the towel tight at the column of her throat, bringing her closer, against him.

Their bodies touched.

Sizzled.

She felt him all the way down to her toes.

Suddenly she saw tiny flames in his eyes and an ache that had been growing all night throbbed through her veins. She wanted to touch the full curve of his mouth with her own just once, to taste its warmth, its strength.

He lowered his head and she trembled, and with a silent sigh, closed her eyes as his mouth covered hers. Her lips met his and he kissed her ... and kissed her more ... long and slow. Oddly enough her lips felt as if they were welcoming him home. He tasted both familiar yet unsettling, firm yet gentle. A heady mixture of the known and unknown.

He drew her closer, cupping the back of her head and deepening the kiss. Then groaning a low sound that seemed to wrench from deep inside him, he pulled her hips tightly against his arousal, letting her know what he wanted. She leaned into him, reveling in the sexual heat which spread like bushfire from his body to hers. She decided then and there that he felt as good as he looked. And she moved closer still. Need was everything. She needed more than the taste of his mouth. More than the feel of her breasts against his hard chest. She needed to feel him inside her. For the first time ever she understood why they called it consummation.

She wanted to be *consumed* by him.

Without warning, he broke away, breathing heavily, his eyes smoldering for her. A pulse leaped along the hard line of his jaw. “Vanessa, go,” he rasped.

She swallowed over the lump in her throat. “I—”

“Go.”

She didn’t need to be told a second time. Whirling around, she ran back to her apartment as fast as her legs would take her. When she finally closed the door behind her, she sank to her knees and brought her hand to her mouth. Dear God, what had she done? Everything she’d believed about herself and the type of woman she was had just been proven wrong.

She had betrayed Mike.

Worse. She’d kissed another man and found something in that kiss she’d never found in the two years of loving her husband.

Lust.

She had wanted to melt in Kirk’s arms and have him carry her off to bed and a night of whirlwind passion and blessed satiation. Except that Kirk hadn’t given her the chance, had he? No thanks to her, she thought with self-deprecation.

So shouldn’t that make her happy?

Yes.

Why, then, did she have an inexplicable feeling of emptiness? As if she’d lost something important she’d never really had.

Kirk had a raw feeling in his gut as he let himself into his motel room. The party was over for him in more ways than one. The woman he was so attracted to ... the woman he’d wanted to make his own ... was not only a grieving widow but a mother as well.

Why the friggin’ hell hadn’t someone thought to mention it yesterday? He wouldn’t have come here tonight. He wouldn’t have gotten involved. Now he had the taste of Vanessa Hamilton in his mouth.

And the imprint of her body on his clothes.

Dammit, the last thing he wanted to see right now was his reflection in the mirror. He was wet all the way from his blazer and shirt down to the front of his trousers, the dampness touching his skin through the material. His pulse quickened. Just looking at himself reminded him what she’d felt like in his arms. Soft and willowy, her curves flush against him.

Not that he’d forget in any hurry.

Just like he wouldn’t forget she was a young widow with a small child. No question now why she’d been fighting his advances. She was still getting over the death of her husband. And he intended to leave her to it.

Of course all that begged the question.

If she hadn't felt anything for *him*, what exactly had she been fighting?

Three

Vanessa had a very restless night, so the next morning the last thing she wanted to hear when she picked up the office telephone was her mother-in-law's voice on the other end of the line. Guilt immediately washed over her. She'd been married to this woman's son—and she'd kissed another man last night.

"How is my little Joshua doing?"

Vanessa shuddered. The thrice-weekly phone calls were getting too much. And he wasn't *her* Joshua at all.

"He's fine, Grace," she said, keeping her tone neutral.

"We miss him."

"I know you do." They could at least agree on that.

"Did you receive the parcel of special baby cereal I sent for him? I know you like feeding him that cheap brand but I'm told this one is the most nutritional for a child his age."

Vanessa held back a wince. The baby cereal she fed Josh was a good brand off the supermarket shelf. And it wasn't too cheap either. "Yes, it arrived. Thank you."

"And did the clothes fit him? I bought them from one of the best stores in the city. I don't want him looking like nobody cares about him."

Vanessa swallowed back a retort at the dig. "The clothes fit just fine, Grace." They were expensive and nice for going out, but not for everyday use.

"Good."

All at once Vanessa was aware of Linda in the reception area. They knew each other so well and it was hard keeping anything from her cousin. Linda had already mentioned how she'd seen Kirk leave the party with her last night, and how he hadn't come back, but there had been no insinuation in the comment, despite her curiosity. Linda knew she didn't bed-hop.

"We have some exciting news," Grace's voice cut across her thoughts. "Nadine is pregnant."

"Really?" She was genuinely happy for her sister-in-law. "That's wonderful. You must be pleased."

"We are." Then Grace gave a shaky sigh. "If only Michael was here. He'd be over the moon for his sister."

Vanessa took a breath. "Yes." Mike had loved his sister.

How close was Kirk to his own sister? she wondered, then forced herself to dismiss her thoughts. What Kirk Deverill and his family were to each other didn't matter to her. She just hoped he checked out of his room and went home soon. It put her on edge knowing he was here in the motel somewhere.

"Grace, I must go now." She listened further. "Yes, I'll give Josh a big hug from you and Rupert." She hung up and took a deep breath to steady herself. Her in-laws always made her uneasy.

Linda came to the doorway. "She never asks how you're doing, does she? It's always about Josh."

Vanessa shrugged. "She knows I'm okay."

"You're too generous."

Vanessa rather thought Grace would say she wasn't generous enough, especially where Josh was concerned. The older couple would take him from her in a heartbeat.

"Generous or not, I'd better get back to cleaning those motel rooms. It was a full house last night and—"

"I've got it!" Linda said, springing forward into the office. "Oh, why didn't I think of this before?" She broke into a big smile. "You're coming with us to Queensland, sweetie."

Vanessa came around the desk. "What?"

"I can't let you and Josh go back to your in-laws. We'll find you an apartment close to us and I'll look after Josh if you need to get a job."

Vanessa's heart thudded for a moment before reality set in. "Thanks for thinking of me, Linda, but it wouldn't be fair on either you or Hugh. Or Toby. You're starting a new life. You'll have responsibilities that go with Hugh's new job as caretaker. You don't need me adding to the mix."

Linda made a dismissive gesture. "You wouldn't be adding to anything."

"And what if you're pregnant? You told me you had terrible morning sickness with Toby. Can you imagine looking after *two* infants as well as feeling nauseated and off-color?" Vanessa shook her head. "No, it's a lovely offer but I can't accept."

Her cousin's face began to fall. "Well, perhaps you could put Josh in day care. I know it's not ideal but—"

"I don't think I can afford an apartment as well as day care," Vanessa said gently, hating to shoot her cousin down.

Just then there was a noise at the doorway and they both looked around to see Kirk and Hugh entering the office.

"You two look serious," Hugh said, a question in his eyes, but it was the flat look in Kirk's eyes that made Vanessa's gaze dart away. Their kiss last night should not have happened.

"We've been discussing Vanessa's situation."

Vanessa could feel her cheeks warm. The last thing she wanted was to discuss this in front of Kirk. "Linda, please, I'll sort things out."

Her cousin sighed. "I wish you could at least stay here."

"I doubt the new owner would want me living in his motel without paying the full rate."

"We could ask him to give you a job."

"I can't see that happening. You said yourself he'd be making cutbacks."

Linda's shoulders sagged. "But I can't stand the thought of you going back to those awful in-laws of yours."

Vanessa shifted a look at Kirk and saw his eyes sharpen. She groaned inwardly. "They're not that bad," she managed to joke.

"Aren't they?"

Vanessa forced a smile at both Linda and Hugh. "Something will turn up. I'm sure of it."

And if it didn't, then perhaps it was best that she did return to Sydney. And soon for Linda's sake. And she would find a way to stop her parents-in-law from smothering Josh.

She would.

"Honestly, there's no need to worry about me. We still have a month to sort things out." Then a thought occurred to her and she grabbed at it for the moment. "I might even be able to find a job somewhere in the area. It doesn't have to be at the motel. I'm pretty good at waiting on tables and I'm not bad at cooking and cleaning, either." She smiled at her cousin with more confidence than she felt.

Linda's brows pulled together. "But where would you live?"

"I'll advertise. Someone might even have a spare room where I can board. It doesn't have to be in Jackaroo Plains." She really liked the town but it wouldn't be a good idea with Kirk close by. "There's plenty of other places on the map, you know."

"Hey, that's a good idea, Vanessa," Hugh agreed.

Vanessa smiled. "Thanks."

"I guess that's a possibility," Linda was saying, as if to herself.

"Sure it is," Vanessa added, trying to be enthusiastic. "I'm sure lots of people would welcome not only the company but the extra income as well." She realized Kirk was watching them with a frown and she smiled at him, hoping he'd help put Linda's mind at rest. "Isn't that right, Kirk? There would be plenty of people looking for someone to share with, don't you think?"

He seemed to stiffen before speaking. "Yes, I suppose there would be."

Linda looked at her cousin with restrained enthusiasm. “We’d have to find someone good and decent. I don’t want you staying with just anyone.”

Vanessa could relax for a while now. “I wouldn’t, I promise. I’d make sure I checked it out thoroughly before accepting any offer.”

“Good idea. And Hugh and Kirk have a lot of connections. They might know of someone who can take you in.” She looked at the men. “Isn’t that right, guys?” She turned back to Vanessa. “We’ll make sure you and Josh.” Unexpectedly her words trailed away and an odd light entered her eyes.

Vanessa suspected some problem had occurred to Linda, but for now she’d had enough. “Great.” She leaned up and kissed her cousin’s cheek, touched by her concern. “Now I’d better go finish those rooms so they’ll be ready for tonight.”

Giving them all a sweeping smile, she headed for the door, making her escape without incident but surprised by the hard look in Kirk’s eyes as she passed him.

It was almost as if she’d done something wrong.

Kirk watched Vanessa walk away. He should have known what she was planning the minute he stepped inside the room. She didn’t want to return to Sydney and she needed somewhere to live, so she had no compunction in using him. He’d watched her work Linda like an expert, with all that talk about being good at cooking and cleaning and how she’d be looking to share a house with someone *in the area*.

Him.

It was clear she was angling for his housekeeper job and had no problem using her cousin to get it.

Women! Were they all the same? Jillian. Samantha. Now Vanessa. He’d expected more from her for some reason. He’d thought she’d have the integrity not to use a man for her own purposes, whether those purposes were for a valid reason or not. How could he have read her so wrong?

“Oh, my God, I’ve just realized something.”

Kirk stiffened. *Here it comes*, he thought. Linda had fallen for it hook, line and sinker, piecing it together as if it was all her idea. Exactly as Vanessa had known she would.

Linda’s eyes were lit with excitement. “Oh, God, Kirk, Vanessa would be perfect to replace Martha, don’t you think? Heavens, I can’t believe I’m only thinking of it now. Phyllis told me last night at the party that Martha left yesterday to stay with her sister for six months. I should have thought of it then.”

His jaw clenched. “Sorry, but that’s not a good idea.”

Linda blinked at him. “Wh-what?”

He hated to disappoint her but he didn’t want Vanessa living in his house. She was too much temptation. And too much trouble. Nothing good would come of them being stuck together in an isolated house for six months. Not now he knew she was a widow.

“I’m sorry, Linda,” he said, encompassing Hugh in his words. “I know she’s your cousin but I don’t think it would work out.”

A frown marred Linda’s forehead. “I don’t understand. Why not? She’s a wonderful person and a good worker. I can vouch for her. So can Hugh. Can’t you, Hugh?” She paused but not enough to give her husband time to respond. “If it’s because of Josh, he’s not a problem. He’s a good little boy.”

Kirk ignored a jolt. He’d never told his friends about his condition. It was just something so private ... so personal. “I’m sure he is.”

“You don’t understand how important this is. I’m worried about her. I don’t think she’s ready to go back to Sydney. She’s been here less than a month and that’s not enough time for Josh’s grandparents to cut the apron strings. Grace is still phoning here every couple of days. And it’s always about Josh, never Vanessa.”

Kirk didn’t like the sound of that, but perhaps Linda was overreacting. Surely Vanessa’s in-laws couldn’t be *that* bad?

And if they were, it still wasn't up to him to sort out Vanessa's family problems. If Vanessa came to live with him—correction, to live in his house—she'd have more problems than her in-laws. Despite the attraction between them, she wasn't ready for a physical relationship.

And that was *all* he wanted.

Hugh put his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Darling, Kirk might already have someone else in mind."

She shook her head. "You don't, Kirk, do you? You told Phyllis you would have to look for someone." All at once her eyes riveted on him. "I know there's something going on between the two of you. It's as plain as the freckles on my nose. But you've got to look beyond that. You're her only hope. Don't turn your back on her now."

Silence rent the air, then Hugh growled, "Linda, shut up."

Kirk heard him but knew nothing would shut Linda up when she was protecting one of her own. "That's a low blow, Linda." She must know not too many people would get away with saying something like that to him.

She held his gaze. "I know, but this is too important to me. And to Vanessa and Josh."

He lifted a brow. "Are you sure you're not trying to ease your own guilt?"

She sucked in a sharp breath. "You certainly know how to give as good as you get." Then she recovered quickly with a challenge in her eyes that reminded him of Vanessa. "So, what's the verdict?"

Kirk looked at his friends. He loved Linda like a sister but even sisters were women who liked to manipulate men. And he knew Hugh would support his wife in this, even if he didn't agree with her.

All this for one woman.

Vanessa looked up from making the bed and caught her breath. Kirk stood leaning against the doorjamb of the vacant motel room.

"Well done, Vanessa," he said with a cynical twist to his lips and a hard look in his eyes that shocked her.

She frowned as she straightened. "What do you mean?"

"You must know I need a housekeeper."

She nodded. "I know your housekeeper's sister is sick."

"And yesterday Martha took six months off and flew to Adelaide to look after her." He gave an eloquent pause. "As I told Phyllis last night."

She was puzzled. "I don't understand. What's that got to do with me?"

"Everything."

She blinked. "I don't get what you're saying."

He pushed away from the door and came a few steps into the room. "Last night I asked you what you were going to do about your situation and you said you were working on something. That was after you heard the news about Martha, no doubt." He gave a harsh laugh. "Of course, I didn't know you meant you were working on *me*."

She felt her eyes go wide. "Wh-what? I wasn't."

"And just now with Linda, you were perfect. All that talk about cooking and cleaning and about someone with a spare room where you can board, then asking me what I thought."

"But I didn't mean anything by that. I was just trying to—"

"I know what you were trying to do. And it worked, as you knew it would. Linda thinks it's the perfect solution for you to be my housekeeper for six months."

"What!" This was ridiculous. How could Linda think such a thing? Or him?

There was something else they needed to take into account, too. "What about my son?"

"He won't be a problem," he said, his expression closed.

She swallowed hard. He had to know that being his housekeeper was the last thing she would want. Working for him would bring him too close. She wouldn't—couldn't—live under the same roof as him.

“Just forget what Linda said then.”

“I can’t forget it. She and Hugh mean a lot to me. I won’t lose their friendship because of you.”

She winced inwardly. Why was she suddenly the scum of the earth? “They wouldn’t hold it against you.”

“Really? Linda loves you like a sister. If you go anywhere else and things don’t work out, then it’s going to wreck our friendship. You know it and so do I.” His features set with absolute determination. “I won’t allow that to happen.”

The breath caught in her throat. She understood him wanting to protect his friendship with Linda and Hugh, but this wasn’t *her* fault. How could things get so muddled so quickly?

“I need you to start as soon as possible,” he said in clipped tones, dragging her back to the moment. “I’ll give you a couple of days to wrap up things here. I’m sure Linda will understand,” he added, his lip curling.

She hated his derision. And his unfounded accusations. She had done nothing wrong and that made angry bile rise in her throat.

She lifted her chin. “No, thanks. You can keep your job. I don’t accept charity. And I certainly don’t accept anything that’s begrudgingly given.”

A hint of something that could be admiration flickered in his eyes before vanishing. “So *you’re* going to tell Linda that you refused my offer then.”

She swallowed hard as she remembered her cousin’s anxiety. “That’s not fair.”

He shrugged. “I’m only telling you that *I’m* not going to be held responsible for upsetting Linda further or for her thinking I didn’t ask you.” His eyes didn’t leave her face. “You can go back to Sydney or not, but the job offer is there.”

But he wished it wasn’t *her* who needed the job, she silently inserted.

“By the way, it’s not charity,” he added. “I do need a housekeeper for six months. You’ll have plenty of privacy. Your rooms would be on the other side of the house with your own bathroom.”

Her shoulders slumped. It would have been best if Kirk *did* have a problem with her son. Then they’d both have an excuse not to even consider her going to live at his cattle station.

And then what?

Panic stirred in Vanessa’s chest for her son. Did she really want to drag Josh back to the city after only a few weeks away? Or to another country town? And did she want to give up all the one-on-one time she had with Josh right now? She would have to juggle every moment between work and home, time that would be better spent with Josh, at least for six more months. His childhood was too precious.

For her son she would change her mind.

“Okay then, I accept.”

Something dark pooled in his eyes before he said dryly, “Use a bit more enthusiasm when you tell Linda, will you?”

She ignored that. “There’s one condition though.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’s that?”

Had he forgotten their kiss? Had he forgotten how much they’d wanted each other last night? She hadn’t.

“You’re not to touch me.” It was a knee-jerk response, but she felt vulnerable where he was concerned. She needed a guarantee to help her keep her emotions safeguarded. “I’ll be there to work, Kirk. Nothing more, nothing less.”

He watched her in silence for a few seconds. “I have no intention of touching you again. It’ll be a working relationship and that’s all.”

“Good. We understand each other now.”

He turned away but all at once he turned back. A pulse beat in his cheek. “By the way. I promise not to touch you again, Vanessa. I haven’t promised not to want you.”

Two days later, Vanessa sat beside Kirk as he drove his Range Rover toward Deverill Downs. Waves of thirsty grass kept them company on either side of the road; inside the vehicle low music played in the background while Josh slept in the new infant seat Kirk had installed. Apart from asking her if she was comfortable or needed anything, he didn't speak. The angry vibes were still bouncing off him, though they weren't as frequent, but they were still there below the surface.

It didn't bode well for the next six months, and Vanessa now regretted not having this out with Linda. In hindsight she should have said something during the past two days, but Linda had been so relieved about it all that she hadn't had the heart. Besides, Linda probably wouldn't have listened anyway. Her cousin was the headstrong one of the family, Vanessa mused with affection.

"Something funny?"

Vanessa blinked, then shook her head. "No, nothing," she said, aware that he probably thought she was congratulating herself on fooling him.

Sheesh!

An hour later, and having seen only one car, they turned onto a winding dirt road that appeared to lead nowhere. A few miles farther in, tall gum trees began to pepper the side of the road, creating an avenue of trees that took them right up to the homestead.

She gasped softly when she saw the house and its setting. Long and sprawling with a deep verandah appearing to go all the way around, it was enclosed by a well-kept garden and a front lawn that could only be green from underground water brought up by an artesian bore. In a landscape baked brown by the sun, it truly looked like an oasis in the desert. Definitely a Blue Ribbon property.

"This is lovely," she murmured, as he pulled up on the driveway. "Very." She thought for a word. "Gentrified."

He shot her a cynical look. "Glad you like it."

For the sake of peace she bit back an angry comment as she hopped out of the vehicle and he did the same. Just then his cell phone rang and he answered it, while she went to the backseat and unbuckled Josh.

He finished his call. "I have to go. There's a small emergency over at the cattle yards with the calves," he said, all business now. He indicated a direction. "The manager's residence and workmen cottages are about a mile away over there, and the cattle yards are behind them." He opened the rear door of the Range Rover as he spoke. "Do you think you can look after yourself?"

"Of course. Josh and I will be fine." It would be a relief to be out of his presence.

"I'll put your luggage up here for now." He lifted out two suitcases and placed them on the verandah, then went and got the playpen she'd brought with her. Josh wasn't walking yet but he could crawl very fast and the playpen would keep him out of mischief. Everything else Kirk had said would be supplied for a small child, and she figured they were probably on loan from one of his employees and their family. "Take a look around. Your bedrooms are at the back of the house on the right and you'll find plenty to eat. I'm not sure what time I'll get back." He carried the last two suitcases. "Martha left a list of instructions and one of the wives has left a casserole in the fridge for tonight's dinner."

At least she didn't have to rush to find her feet.

He transferred a few more items, then he got back into the Range Rover. "If you need me, call me on my cell phone. Martha wrote the number down with the instructions."

And Martha was obviously Wonder Woman, Vanessa mused, as she stood there with Josh in her arms and watched Kirk drive off. She sighed. At least she could be pleased about one thing. Kirk's comments were that of an employer to employee.

Which they were, of course.

And that was exactly how it would stay, she told herself as she went inside to take a look around her new *temporary* home.

The house was generous in proportion. On one side there were formal living and dining rooms and a wood-paneled study. There were six bedrooms with ensuites, one of which was a very feminine

room that must be his sister's. And there were two very masculine bedrooms, one lived in—Kirk's — and one that looked as if it hadn't been used for years.

Curious.

In a wing farther along, there was the main bedroom with a sitting area. She assumed it had been his parents' bedroom, especially when she saw a framed photograph of two teenage boys and a young girl. One of the boys was obviously Kirk and the other looked like him so she assumed he had a brother, which would explain the other masculine bedroom. The girl must be their sister, Jade.

The kitchen was on the other side of the house and was a total delight. It had magnificent granite bench tops and Italian floor tiles and all the latest appliances. A child's high chair that looked brand-new sat in one corner, surprising her. She'd thought for sure the furniture would be secondhand. Kirk must have really pulled out all the stops to get them bought and sent here in time.

There was also a decent-size bedroom that had a small sitting area with a television and DVD player, which she assumed had been for the housekeeper. In the smaller bedroom next to it, there was a crib for Josh that looked new as well. She was touched by Kirk's thoughtfulness. He was certainly determined to accommodate her son's needs in a nice way.

At the center rear of the house was a family sunroom, with an informal dining room close to the kitchen, but it was the dining table that brought an empty ache to her heart. Having been an only child, she'd always loved the idea of a big family sitting around the table, sharing their lives. Linda had been lucky in that respect. She'd had brothers and sisters. But with *her* father dead and it having been only Vanessa and her mother, it had never happened.

It was just a dream now, of course. Mike was gone, and Grace and Rupert didn't exactly fit the image of the extended family she had in her mind. They didn't want to *share* her life. They wanted to *control* it.

Just thinking about her parents-in-law made her uneasy as she carried her things inside and unpacked. She'd telephoned them this morning determined to tell them about her new job, but in the end she hadn't been able to bring herself to mention it. She would have to do it eventually, but right now she didn't need the recriminations or emotional blackmail Grace would inflict on her.

She sighed. At best, if she called them three times a week, she'd probably have some vital time to herself before needing to come clean. Only if they called the motel and someone other than Linda or Hugh answered the phone would they learn the truth. Her cousin and Hugh certainly wouldn't tell them.

Kirk didn't arrive back until seven. She heard the Range Rover drive around the side of the house, and he came into the kitchen looking ruggedly handsome, his face bronzed by the sun's rays. He was enough to make any woman catch her breath.

For a moment he just stood there looking at her, his eyes dark and hooded, until she could feel a blush start in her neck. Thankfully his gaze moved to Josh sitting in the high chair before sliding back to her.

"Settled in okay?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, trying to look busy as she opened a jar of chocolate sprinkles to put on top of the dessert she'd made.

"I see you brought your luggage inside."

She lifted her shoulder. "I needed to unpack."

A few seconds ticked by.

"I'll go shower and clean up before dinner then."

"It'll be ready when you are."

He exited through the kitchen and she concentrated on *not* thinking about Kirk naked in the shower, water spewing off his shoulders and waist. But the image wouldn't budge and the parfaits were well and truly covered with chocolate by the time Josh started to fidget in the high chair.

Her cheeks hot, she lifted her son and carried him down the hallway to put him in his crib. Josh generally settled straight away to sleep and she hoped he would this evening. Her first night here, she didn't want him being too demanding.

She'd already set the table for Kirk in the informal dining room, taking a chance that was where he ate his meals. If he wanted to be served in the more formal dining room then she'd do it his way in the future.

He came to the door as she was checking on the casserole. She caught a glimpse of him dressed in cargo pants and a navy polo shirt. Her pulse skipped a beat.

"Josh gone to bed?"

She closed the door to the wall oven. "Yes. It was a big day for him."

A moment's silence, then, "Where are we eating?"

We?

She looked up and saw him frowning at the table in the far corner of the kitchen where she'd set a place for herself. Surely he didn't want to eat in here with her?

She jerked her head toward the informal dining room. "*You're* eating in there."

His eyes slammed into hers. "You'll be eating with me, of course."

She stiffened. "I'm the housekeeper. I'll eat in here."

"Don't be ridiculous."

She didn't think she was being ridiculous at all. She was just being ... cautious.

She lifted her eyebrow. "Did Martha eat her meals with you?"

"No, but I didn't dance with her and kiss her, either."

She gasped. "I don't believe you said that!"

His mouth tightened. "Don't argue, Vanessa. You eat in there with me from now on, or I eat in here with you. Take your pick."

"But ... but ... this is crazy. You don't even want me working here. Why would you want to eat with me?"

He looked inflexible. "I'm not going to sit in the living room and eat by myself while you sit in here and eat. You and Josh are to join me. End of argument."

He was including Josh in this?

All at once she wondered something. Kirk obviously had plenty of friends in town, and he had plenty of staff on the cattle station, and by the look of his study he was a very busy man there as well. But despite appearances, was he lonely living here in this big house by himself? Did he miss his family? She didn't want to be a family substitute for a man, not even inadvertently. Her own family had already been decimated by the loss of her husband. She couldn't do this again.

Then she looked at the unforgiving look in Kirk's eyes and realized she'd gotten it wrong. This man didn't need her company. He had a full life. He was just determined to make it difficult for her.

Her chin rose as her anger reached its limit. "If you think I'm going to be your whipping boy for the next six months then you have another think coming, *Mr. Deverill*. You either treat me with the respect you afford any employee or I leave tomorrow and I don't care what Linda's reaction will be."

He appeared a little taken aback.

Then he slowly inclined his head with a look of grudging admiration. "You have my word I'll treat you with respect."

She released a breath. "Thank you," she said, recognizing he hadn't forgiven her for thinking she'd used him. He wouldn't forgive her that, but at least now he wouldn't be in her face all the time. "Okay. Now please go in there and I'll bring in the food."

He made a point of grabbing the knife and fork she'd set out for herself. "I'll take these in for you, shall I?"

She nodded. As she watched him leave, she was wondering how she was going to cope eating her meals with him. Her emotions were already being tossed around like clothes in a dryer. Feelings she wanted tucked away nice and neatly in a drawer where no one could see or touch them.

Definitely not Kirk.

Taking a deep breath, she gave him a generous serving of casserole and herself a smaller portion, then took off her apron and smoothed her hands down her skirt. She was glad now that she'd changed into something more formal than jeans.

She groaned inwardly when she saw where she was expected to sit. Kirk had placed her next to him on his right. She'd half hoped he'd put the length of the table between them.

"Everything fine with your rooms?" Kirk said, after she got settled.

"Yes, thank you." She remembered the extra items and she softened toward him. "And thank you for arranging all that baby furniture for Josh. I can't pay you back in one lump sum, but please give me the total amount and I'll make some arrangement to pay by installments."

"Don't worry about it."

"But I don't expect you to supply baby furniture for my son."

"It'll get plenty of use in future," he dismissed, and began eating.

She grasped what he meant. "Oh, of course. If you marry you might use them again."

His face hardened as he swallowed his food before speaking. "No, I meant they can be passed on to someone else in the family eventually."

She picked up her fork. "Oh, I see."

Obviously his future wife wouldn't want secondhand things used by the housekeeper. Grace certainly would never have used anything secondhand, and Nadine would certainly never have to worry about using secondhand furniture, either. Grace wouldn't let her.

"Is there anything else you need?"

"No, the list Martha left was very thorough."

After that they ate their way through dinner while Kirk explained about his routine and more about her duties. At all times his tone was courteous but detached.

Then she brought out the parfaits and tried not to blush at the reason for so many chocolate sprinkles. She *had* gone a bit crazy with them while she'd been thinking about Kirk in the shower.

"You're a good cook," he said after he'd finished eating and placed his spoon in the empty parfait glass.

"I really only made the dessert," she said, hoping any blush in her cheeks would be put down to the compliment and not her wayward thoughts.

"Then I look forward to future meals."

She looked at him to see if he was being sarcastic but his features were calm and controlled.

"By the way, your duties may be more extensive than you thought."

She tensed. Was he going to want bed as well as breakfast?

With a knowing look in his eyes, he placed his napkin on the table and stood up. "Leave the cleaning up for now. I have a surprise for you in the barn."

That got her attention.

She looked up at him suspiciously. "What sort of surprise?"

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you," he drawled.

She went with him out the kitchen door and along the path that led to a large barn. She'd seen a couple of horses in the fenced paddock connected to the back of it earlier today, but she was wary of horses and had decided she wouldn't be going near them any time soon.

Just like she was wary of Kirk, she reminded herself, not relaxing until she stepped inside the barn and saw the puppies. They were playing in an area cordoned off so that they couldn't escape.

"Ooh, aren't they're gorgeous?" she said, instinctively falling to her knees to pat their soft fur, forgetting to be guarded with Kirk. "How old are they?"

“About six weeks.”

She laughed as the puppies surrounded her and a mediumsize dog came trotting up and sniffed her hand. “Is this their mother? Is she some sort of sheep dog?”

A wry smile coated his mouth. “She thinks she is, but no, little Suzi’s what we call a ‘bitza.’ A bit of this and a bit of that.” He crouched down and patted the dog’s head. “I suspect that’s why someone dumped her.”

Her heart saddened. “They dumped her? Out here?”

He nodded. “She turned up here one day a few years back, starving and her paws bleeding. She’s been with me ever since.”

Her assessment of the man went up. She stood and brushed the dirt from her knees. “I guess you need someone to take care of them.”

He got to his feet. “If you want to.”

“I’d love to,” she said sincerely.

He looked almost surprised by her response. “Good. One of my men has been looking after them while I’ve been away but I’m sure he’ll be happy to pass the job to you.”

They were standing close and instantly she felt all tingly and aware of his strength. “Er.” She stepped back. “Well, I’d better go clean up the dinner things.”

She hurried away without waiting for a response, aware of him watching her. Lord, the attraction was still there between them and if she thought eating together was going to be hard, then how was she going to cope with moments like these?

Right now she didn’t have the answer.

Ten minutes later, he walked through the kitchen. “I’ll be in the study,” he said tersely.

She was relieved. “Do you need anything else?”

His eyes flickered but all he said was, “No. Nothing.”

He was remote again and that was fine by her. She wanted it to stay this way. Please God.

She finished cleaning up, then went to her room and watched television before showering and falling into bed. It had been a long day for Josh, but it had been an even longer day for his mother.

Four

At six the next morning, Vanessa stood in the doorway of the kitchen and watched Kirk cooking breakfast at the stove. How was she going to stand looking at *this* every morning? *This* being one male dressed in a khaki shirt and denim jeans who looked more delicious than the breakfast he was making.

As if he sensed he was being watched, he glimpsed over his shoulder, his gaze flicking down over her white top and black jeans. “Good morning,” he said, his voice telling her nothing, but his eyes had darkened.

Her nipples instantly tingled and she frowned to cover up her fast-beating heart. “What are you doing?” she asked, taking control of the conversation. Lord knew she had to take control of something.

He turned away to crack an egg into the frying pan. “Cooking breakfast.”

“But why are you doing it? I thought that was why I was here.” Pride suddenly made her tense. “I told you before I don’t accept charity.”

His head shot up. “And I didn’t offer it. You’re here to run the household, not only the cooking.”

She let out a slow breath. Okay, so she’d overreacted a little, but was it any wonder when the man in front of her looked as if he’d been lifted from the cover of a women’s magazine.

“You should have left breakfast to me,” she felt obligated to say, glad that at least she was going to be of use around here.

“I thought I’d let you settle in on your first morning here.”

“Thanks, but I rose ahead of time so I could get things ready for you in case Josh woke early, too.”

“No need to do that. I can always wait. Your son can’t.”

Her heart tilted. She was not sure she wanted to see more of the caring side to Kirk Deverill. She wanted to dislike the man. “I would think—”

“Then don’t. If I need to have breakfast early in future and you’re not around, then I’ll make it myself.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

He slanted her a sardonic glance. “I think I can manage to feed myself occasionally.”

Fine. Who was she to tell him what to do?

“By the way, there’s no need for you to feed Suzi this morning. I’ve already done it. You can start tonight.” He began transferring the bacon onto a plate. “Take a seat. Breakfast is ready.”

She looked across at the bacon and eggs, then up at the man himself. For a moment she was distracted again by the look of him. “I think I hear Josh,” she said, spinning away.

She hurried down the hallway. She hadn’t heard Josh at all, but she needed time to get used to sharing breakfast alone with an attractive man other than her husband.

Of course, she had to remember Mike had often been doing shift work and hadn’t been home for breakfast, though that wasn’t the point. Not being used to intimacy with another man was the main thing here.

Josh was just waking up as she tiptoed over to his crib. She gave him a big good-morning kiss and proceeded to change his diaper and dress him, and by the time she headed back to the kitchen she heard Kirk’s vehicle leaving.

Relieved yet anxious to start with her duties, she nevertheless took her time to have a little breakfast with her son. Now *he* was one man she didn’t mind sharing breakfast with. Afterward she took him to see the puppies.

Back inside, she started on the housework, carrying him around with her wherever she went and letting him play on the floor where she could keep an eye on him. Eventually she could no longer

put off going into Kirk's bedroom. The scent in the air was pleasant and she felt odd entering this masculine domain, as if she were stepping closer to the man himself.

She didn't linger. He was fairly tidy, so she had to only make his bed and straighten up the bathroom. She was actually quite amused to see the damp towel on the bathroom floor. It made him appear more human somehow.

Midmorning she heard a vehicle drive up and when she looked it was Kirk. She was thankful she hadn't still been cleaning his room. In some way it would have made it seem more personal.

"Would you like some cake and coffee?" she asked as he came through the door.

"No, I've just had some." He didn't say where but she figured it was with his men. "Is Josh still awake?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I've got to check something and I thought I'd give you a small tour of the place at the same time."

She hid her surprise. He wasn't being overly friendly but all the same she was glad he'd thought to ask her. "That would be lovely."

"It won't be the full tour but we could still be a couple of hours by the time we visit the cattle yards. You might want to bring along whatever you need for Josh, and something cold for us to drink in case we're longer than I plan." He headed for his study. "I've got to make a few calls first. Let me know when you're ready."

It wasn't too long before they were all off and driving in his Range Rover. The windows were tinted for protection from the sun and the air-conditioning inside the cabin made it a comfortable ride as he drove along a well-worn gravel road. It took Josh a nanosecond to fall asleep in the child's seat in the back.

A few miles farther and he turned off onto a smaller road. The drought was obvious out here, the area sun-baked and parched, with only the gum trees and their gray-green leaves giving any hint of color.

"Where are we going?" she asked, when it looked as if they were just driving for the sake of driving, though she knew that wasn't the case.

"I want to check one of the fences."

In the distance ahead, heat ribboned across the road. "How large is the cattle station?"

"Let's just say it would take us a couple of hours to drive around the boundary."

She was impressed. "That's pretty big."

"My great-grandfather settled out here a long time ago. Deverills have been breeding cattle here ever since," he said with a touch of pride in his voice.

She stole a look at his profile, so strong and dynamic like the man himself. Then he sent her a fleeting look and she quickly focused back on the road ahead. "I can see how easy it would be to become lost out here."

"If you stick to the roads it will lead you somewhere eventually."

She gave a delicate snort. "The roads? You mean these dirt tracks?"

He actually smiled. "Around here, if you drive on it, then it's a road."

She smiled back and she saw his eyes drop to her mouth. The air thickened between them. Then he returned to his driving and she returned to looking out the window, her heart thumping. She knew his look hadn't been deliberate and that made it all the more unsettling.

Farther on they came to a gate across the road and Kirk slowed the vehicle then stopped in front of it, letting the engine run. Vanessa sat there, too, wondering what he was going to do next. Perhaps it was automated?

He turned his head to face her. "It's the passenger's job to hop out and open the gate."

She was startled. "It is?"

"It's customary, yes."

Oh, yes, she remembered hearing about the outback custom now, but had never experienced it.

"It's easy enough to do," he said. "Just unhook the chain and you can swing the gate open."

"Okay." She did as he said, aware he was watching her. Those eyes sent a trickle of sweat running down between her breasts but she ignored it as she hopped back in the vehicle.

He drove forward and stopped. "Now you have to close it," he said, his lips twitching.

She didn't find it funny. "Why didn't you say so before?"

"You didn't ask."

She shot him a withering glance, then got out of the vehicle, closed the gate, then got back in. She had no problem with opening and shutting the gate, but the rest of it was an unnecessary effort. He could have at least told her instead of letting her look a fool.

"Lighten up, Vanessa," he said, after they'd been driving a minute or so.

"*Me* lighten up? You're the one who—"

"Bloody hell!" Unexpectedly he turned the wheel and drove off the road and onto the dried grass. It became clear he was heading for a portion of a broken fence. "I knew it. Brady was supposed to fix this yesterday." He didn't look pleased as he stopped the vehicle beneath a tree. "He'll have to go."

She was relieved *she* wasn't the object of his anger but she felt a little sorry for this Brady. "Perhaps he didn't have enough time?"

"Then he could bloody well make time," he snapped, then expelled a breath. "This isn't the first time he hasn't followed orders. He was given a second chance and now he's lied to my farm manager. That's it as far as I'm concerned."

She could understand that, but still she couldn't help but feel sorry for the other man. Kirk would be a hard taskmaster. He didn't like being let down. *She* knew that more than anyone.

He opened his door and climbed out of the vehicle. "You can get out and stretch your legs, if you like." Then he peeked over the back at a sleeping Josh. "It's going to get hot in here with the engine off, but I can't keep the air-con running for too long even with the engine on. It'll be best if you open all the doors to give him some breeze. I'll try not to be too long, but let me know if he starts stressing and we'll head back."

Vanessa did as suggested and opened all the doors while he retrieved a toolbox from the back. He may be hard on others but she couldn't fault his thoughtfulness in regards to her son. He certainly showed a very human side when it came to Josh.

Unlike the side he showed her.

No, she wouldn't think that right now. Kirk was kind enough to bring her on this outing when he'd had no need, especially as he didn't want her as his housekeeper in the first place.

It was enough.

The quiet must have woken Josh because he opened his eyes. Chatting to him, she poured some water on a cloth and wiped his face to keep him cool, then unbuckled him and gave him a bottle of juice. She stood under the tree and watched Kirk fix the fence, Josh on her hip.

"How's he doing?" Kirk asked after a few minutes.

"He's okay."

"I'm almost done here. We'll soon have him cool."

His genuine interest in her son's well-being took her by surprise again, but not for the first time since Mike's death she wondered about Josh not having a father. As a child she'd taught herself not to miss having a dad, but would her son? Her childhood had been difficult at times when so many of the other kids seemed to have a father. Would Josh feel cheated because he didn't have a man to show him all the things that fathers should? Or because he didn't have a father who could come to the school play or a church picnic? A father to complete the family?

Her thoughts too painful, she pushed her sadness away.

Just then Kirk reached forward to pick up one of the tools from the box, and her gaze lowered to the open neck of his khaki shirt where she could see a light sprinkling of chest hair. All at once her hands itched to slide through the wisps of dark hair and curl her fingers into him. Quickly she looked away.

“Finished,” he said after a few more minutes, then dropped the tools back in the box and came toward her. “Ready for the rest of the tour?”

She nodded. She was more than ready to move on.

Soon they were on their way again, heading back the way they’d come—at least she *thought* they were—then taking a detour. She had to open and close a couple of gates but soon they seemed to be coming back toward civilization.

“That paddock over there is a cropping paddock,” he pointed out as they drove.

“There’s nothing in it. Is that because of the drought?”

“No. It’s just been sprayed, that’s all. That way it can be ready to plant crops in a few months’ time.”

“What sort of crops?”

“Cereals. Things like wheat, which we sell, and barley and oats for cattle feed.”

Then he went on to show her all the different types of paddocks from calf paddocks to weaner paddocks, breeding cow paddocks to bull paddocks. There were so many paddocks her head spun. And they weren’t tiny little parcels of land, either. They stretched for miles and miles.

“Naturally I keep my best stud cows in a separate paddock closer to the yards.”

“Of course.” She understood these animals cost thousands of dollars. He’d have them where his men could keep a close eye on them.

Finally they drove up to the cattle yards. Beyond were huge sheds that Kirk said stored feed and fertilizer and machinery, and farther beyond were the manager’s residence and the workmen’s cottages.

One of the men rushed to open the gate for them and Vanessa smiled to herself. She never thought someone opening a gate would be such a big thing, yet she felt like a queen.

She was soon introduced to some of the staff. She could imagine her presence as housekeeper was making the rounds of gossip, but they were all very polite and pleasant and some of the men even seemed shy.

Then she was introduced to the farm manager, but not before she heard Kirk ask him about Brady’s whereabouts and learned that Tom had fired the man over a dispute earlier. Brady apparently had already cleared out.

“Good,” Kirk said, looking grimly satisfied.

Before long the farm manager’s wife, Fay, hurried over to introduce herself. She was a pleasant woman in her forties who insisted they come to the house for lunch.

“Thanks, Fay,” Kirk said, “but one of the trucks has arrived early to pick up a load of stock for sale. Tom and I have to help.” He looked at Vanessa. “I’m sure Vanessa would be happy to keep you company.”

“I’d love to,” Vanessa said.

She and Josh ended up staying a couple of hours, and she learned that Fay was Kirk’s office manager and helped out a lot with the bookwork.

“I can do a lot from here,” Fay said, showing Vanessa her office, complete with the latest computer equipment. “And twice a week I pop up to the main house to do things like filing or collecting the letters for the post that I’ve e-mailed Kirk and he’s signed.” Fay smiled. “But I always made time for coffee and a chat with Martha.”

“Well, I hope you’ll make time for the same with me.”

Fay’s smile widened. “That would be lovely.”

After that, Kirk drove Vanessa and Josh back to the homestead. “What do you think of Fay?” he asked, once he’d parked the Range Rover near the front steps. “You seemed to get on well together.”

Her face relaxed. “She’s really nice.”

He nodded, then, “And what do you think of Deverill Downs?”

She had the feeling he cared what she thought. “It has a certain charm,” she said, and meant it, then recognized that this really wasn’t about *her*. This was about the pride he had for his cattle station.

He looked pleased and that was that.

The next morning, Vanessa had put Josh down for his morning nap when she heard Suzi barking out in the barn. She didn’t want to think about snakes, though it definitely crossed her mind as she made her way outside.

She found Suzi over in the corner, barking at something beneath a large wooden bench. Heart thumping, Vanessa took a quick look back at the knee-high partition erected around the pups. She counted them and realized one was missing, then saw a small hole at one corner of the wood where it must have escaped.

Grabbing the flashlight hanging near the door, she shone it under the bench. And there was a sleeping puppy. Suzi hadn’t been able to get to her offspring because a roll of wire partially blocked it.

She turned to Suzi. “So you think we should get him out, huh?”

Suzi sat looking at her expectantly.

“Okay, little mother. Give me a moment.”

Trying not to think about spiders and snakes and every other poisonous animal that seemed to inhabit this country, Vanessa reached under the bench and drew the puppy toward her.

“Here we go,” she said, placing it in front of Suzi, who barked then picked it up in her teeth and trotted back to the others.

Smiling, Vanessa pushed herself to her feet. But as she went to stand, she heard a ripping noise and felt a pain at the back of her left shoulder blade. She gasped. Had she just been bitten by a snake? She glanced behind her and went weak with relief when she saw a nail sticking out of the bench.

Reaching over her shoulder, she managed to touch the gash. Her fingers came away with blood on them. Great. That was all she needed. Stitches.

Looking in the bathroom mirror a few minutes later, she was thankful to see a cut only about half an inch long and not too deep. A bit painful but nothing she couldn’t handle, she decided, dabbing at it with antiseptic cream from the first-aid kit in the laundry room, then changing into another blouse.

It hurt like the devil as she went back to the kitchen but she ignored the pain as best she could. She’d just decided to gather the ingredients to make a lemon meringue pie for dessert when she heard the sound of Kirk’s vehicle returning.

Her pulse started to race and she called herself a fool for letting him affect her this way. He was her employer, for heaven’s sake. He had come home for lunch, that was all. He hadn’t come home to see *her*.

Vanessa reminded herself that she still had to be wary where Kirk was concerned. Attraction, that was all it was. She’d been without her husband for a while, and Kirk was used to having any woman he wanted.

She heard him come in the back door and stop to wash his hands in the laundry, then his footsteps came to the kitchen door. She pretended to be busy wiping the sink down.

A moment crept by.

She knew he was there.

She started to casually turn and—

“Bloody hell, Vanessa.” He strode toward her. “You’ve got blood on the back of your blouse. What happened?”

She whirled around and found Kirk far too close for comfort. Alarm flashed through her.

She swallowed. "One of the pups escaped and I got caught on a nail getting him out from under the bench."

"Let me take a look."

She stepped back but came up against the sink. "No, I cleaned it up myself and put some antiseptic cream on it. And I had a tetanus shot last year when I walked on a nail, so you don't have to worry about that."

Kirk ignored her as he turned her around, holding her still. "It's been bleeding. Now it's stuck to your shirt. I'd better take a proper look at it."

She went to move away. "It's nothing. Really."

"You may need stitches."

"I don't."

He paid no attention as he strode toward the laundry room. "I'll get the first-aid kit. We'll use the guest bathroom. It's got good light in there." He disappeared, then came back with the small box in his hand. "Come on, Vanessa. Don't dilly-dally. You don't want to risk it getting infected."

There was nothing for it but to follow him along the hallway to the guest bathroom.

He placed a stool in front of the basin. "Sit."

She sat but she was getting annoyed at his bossy attitude. "Want me to roll over, too?"

His gaze snapped to hers in the mirror. "I generally save that for the bedroom," he said, with a smirk.

"You wish!"

A glint returned to his eyes before he pulled out a wad of cotton wool from the first-aid kit. "Right. It's going to hurt like hell, but if I wet it first the material should come off easily." He paused at their reflection, his eyes plunging to her blouse then up again. "You know you'll have to take that off afterward, don't you?"

All at once the air charged with electricity. It zipped between them, alive and determined to be recognized.

Panic rose in her throat. Her eyes darted to the box of assorted items. "Didn't I see a pair of scissors in there? Just cut around it. I don't mind."

His movements stiff, he turned the faucet on and held the cotton wool under running water. "You'll ruin another shirt," he warned.

She shrugged. "What's one more?"

Not looking at her, he placed the water-soaked gauze on the cut and dabbed at it a few times, causing her to flinch. "Sorry, I'm being as gentle as I can."

She swallowed. "I know."

"There." Another second or two and he lifted the cotton wool away. "You should be able to take the blouse off now without too much damage."

Her breathing shallowed.

His eyes caught and held hers, and suddenly she was imagining having his strong arms around her, his warm kisses.

"Want some help?" he said, his voice thickening, a pulse ticking in the strong cord of his neck.

She could feel herself blush. "Er ... no. I can manage." She willed her hands to move, only they wouldn't.

A few seconds went by.

"Sure?"

"Yes. I mean, no."

The blue of his eyes darkened like a midnight sky. "Can't make up your mind?" he asked huskily.

"No. I mean, yes."

He made a guttural sound, his expression stilling. All at once there was nothing more serious than this moment. Nothing more serious than *them*.

She watched, mesmerized in the mirror, as his hand came to rest on her good shoulder ... rested then tiptoed along her collarbone to her throat.

She moistened her lips. "Er ... what are you doing?"

His blue eyes said it all. "I don't know," he muttered. "I just don't bloody know."

Her heartbeat slammed against her ribs. She had to bring back some sense of sanity. "Don't touch, remember?" she tried to remind him, tried to take charge, only her voice merely dropped into the whirlpool of sensuality in the room.

"I remember. But ... if I *were* to touch I'd do it like." His index finger touched the sensitive hollows of her neck. "This."

She moaned silently, her breath entering her lungs in short spurts.

His finger slipped inside the collar of her blouse. "And touching's not always the same as ... caressing." He stroked the top of one breast.

Oh, God.

"It's not?"

"No. There's a difference." Another pass over the top of her breast. "Feel it?"

She moistened her lips. She could feel nothing else. Closing her eyes, she gave in for a moment, all soft and pliable and very much a woman. "Oh, yes."

And he was very much a man.

An *aroused* man. She only had to turn her head and she'd be able to press her cheek against him, inhale him and—

Her eyes burst open and she jumped to her feet, shaken by how easily things had gotten out of control. "Um ... it'll be okay. Don't worry about the cut. It won't get infected. I know it won't. It—"

His face closed up. The moment had passed. "Sit down, Vanessa."

She shook her head. "No. It'll be fine, you'll see." She leaped the distance to the open doorway.

"Vanessa?"

She turned. "Look, it's okay. I'll just stick a plaster over it or something."

His eyes pierced the distance between them. "You know, Vanessa, sometimes a plaster isn't enough."

Unable to stand the tension of being cooped up in the house with Vanessa any longer, Kirk ate a quick lunch then took off for the cattle yards to see how his men were going with fixing a broken water pipe. He had to keep busy.

What the hell was he thinking bringing her here to Deverill Downs? Damn him for letting himself be coerced into this. She hadn't fooled him, of course. She may fool herself into believing that using him was acceptable, but any respect he afforded her was only as she wanted—as an employee. And even that was going to be difficult for him at times when every instinct inside him warred between wanting her and trying to keep perspective.

God, she'd looked bloody magnificent when she'd flared up at him though. She was lucky he hadn't swept her up in his arms, carried her to his room and made love to her until dawn.

He'd known it was going to be difficult keeping his hands off her. So the last thing he'd needed today was to apply first aid to her back.

Her lovely, sexy back.

Just the thought of touching her soft skin ... of being in a confined space with her ... her scent ... drove him wild.

He had to stop thinking about it.

He had to stop thinking about *her*.

He even managed to do that during dinner that evening but only because she was right there in front of him and he didn't have to *think*. Not when he could *see* her.

Josh ate dinner with them, and that helped, though Kirk suspected Vanessa deliberately kept her son up past his bedtime. Not that he minded. He had to admit he was growing to like the kid. Josh had a charm that snuck up on a person.

Like the boy's mother.

Only, Vanessa's charm wasn't pure and innocent like her son's. There was danger in her charms. A man could drown in them. Drown and not even care.

Thankfully tonight there was a lifesaver in the vicinity in the form of Josh. He was a welcome distraction and Kirk couldn't help but be mildly amused at his antics. Every time Vanessa turned away from him to eat her dinner, Josh babbled something and dropped his spoon over the side of the high chair.

Kirk looked at her son and felt something kick him inside. Josh was like the son he would have loved to have had one day.

The son he would *never* have.

He forced away his inner pain. "He's doing that deliberately, you know," he felt obligated to point out as she mildly scolded Josh and gave him a new spoon.

"I know," she said, her mouth curving with tenderness.

Careful, he told himself. "You do?"

"It's a game, Kirk, that's all." Josh babbled and dropped the spoon again and she gave a soft chuckle. "See." She bent to pick it up but this time didn't replace the spoon. "No more, young man. That's enough."

Kirk's brows drew together. All that bending over wasn't good for her back.

Her lovely, sexy back.

The image returned. Both of them in the bathroom. The scent of her. "How's the cut?" he all but growled.

Her safe-and-sound smile faltered and two pink dots appeared in her cheeks. "It's a bit sore," she said, averting her eyes.

Masculine pleasure spurted through him at her reaction. She might not admit she was attracted to him, but her body couldn't deny the magnetism between them.

"Then keep an eye on it," he said gruffly, and went back to eating.

Straight after dinner he headed to the study, glad to be able to throw himself into his bookwork with renewed determination. He even managed to put thoughts of Vanessa aside and concentrate on the job at hand.

There was always a ton of paperwork to deal with in an operation this size. Fay was a terrific help as an office assistant, and he employed someone in Jackaroo Plains to do his accounts. But there was still a lot to do himself. Filling in government forms and surveys, plus keeping up-to-date with world breeding programs, latest research and development, and long-range weather predictions, took up much of his time.

Around an hour later he remembered he'd left the local newspaper on the hallway table. It had market data on recent sales and stock prices and he'd wanted to read it.

As he headed down the hallway, he heard Vanessa's soft voice in the kitchen.

"I said I'd call you when I could, Grace," she was quietly chiding. "You didn't have to call the motel."

For a minute he thought they had visitors, but then he realized she must be talking on her cell phone.

"No, I wasn't trying to hide anything from you. I just wanted to settle in here first."

Pause.

"There's nothing to be upset about. I was going to stay at Jackaroo Plains for six months anyway. Nothing's really changed."

Another pause.

“What? You’ve got a dossier on him already? Then you’ll know he’s a good man.”

They were talking about *him*.

“He’s rich? So? That’s not why I’m here. Money doesn’t matter to me. I’m only his temporary housekeeper when all is said and done.”

A long silence followed her words.

“Grace, I can’t help it if you don’t like it. I needed to get away for a while. You know that.” All at once, Josh started to cry. “Look, I have to go. Josh needs to go to bed.”

Silence.

“Yes, he’s up late but he’s a bit restless tonight. He might be teething. Yes, call me later in the week.”

She hung up.

There was a heavy sigh. “And yes, Grace, I’m peachy-keen, too,” she mused out loud.

Kirk didn’t bother about the newspaper. He quietly went back to the study and frowned as he sat down at his desk. Okay, so that conversation had substantiated some of what Linda had told him about Vanessa’s in-laws. They *had* sounded a trifle overbearing.

But perhaps they were merely concerned for the welfare of their family? That was understandable. He sure as hell would be checking out a person if one of his family were staying with someone he didn’t know.

No, he wasn’t convinced Vanessa had needed this job.

And that meant she hadn’t needed to use *him*.

Five

Vanessa wasn't sure how she managed to fall asleep that night. She kept seeing images of Kirk's fingers sliding over the top of her breasts, interspersed with images of her outraged in-laws. Either way she was in trouble. Kirk wasn't supposed to "touch" her, and she wasn't supposed to let him, and neither of them wanted any type of intimate relations. And then there was Grace and Rupert. Her in-laws had not been happy after telephoning the motel, only to be told by one of the staff that Vanessa and Josh had moved to Deverill Downs.

So she should have expected to see them getting out of the rental car just after ten. She was vacuuming at the time and hadn't heard the car drive up.

At least Kirk wasn't here to witness any of this. She could only hope they would be gone by the time he came home for lunch.

Pushing open the screen door, she stepped onto the verandah as they marched up the steps. "This *is* a surprise," she said with a smile that took all her control.

And then some.

Grace gave her a quick peck on the cheek, but her eyes were cold. "We wanted to come and see Joshua."

"Of course."

Rupert kissed her cheek next. "We haven't seen the boy since Christmas."

The boy.

Vanessa gritted her teeth. "The boy" had a name. And while it might seem a lot of time since Christmas to her in-laws, it wasn't near enough time for Vanessa. All those phone calls had made it seem far less than five weeks ago.

"Did you have much trouble finding us?" she asked, hoping Grace didn't hear the hint of sarcasm in her voice. She had to stay composed. She didn't want any more trouble than expected from them.

"A little," her mother-in-law said, brushing a speck of fluff off her expensive pantsuit. She looked up and gave a false smile. "But that won't stop us seeing our grandson." Her smile didn't reach her eyes.

Rupert rubbed his hands together. "Where is he?"

Vanessa's gaze shot to her father-in-law. "Who?"

"Joshua, of course."

"Oh, yes." She kept her face blank, not giving anything away. For a minute there she'd thought he meant Kirk. "He's taking his morning nap."

"Then wake him up and let us see the boy," Rupert said. "We've come a long way."

Vanessa held on to her temper. "Let's have a cool drink first. Josh should be awake by then." She pointed to the wicker chairs along the verandah. "Take a seat, relax and look at the view."

They hesitated but for once she stood her ground until they were seated, then she went to get the drinks. She didn't want them inside and today wasn't too hot to sit outside, thank goodness. As it was, she kept an ear out in case they decided to enter the house. She didn't trust them not to look for Josh and wake him up, leaving him cranky long after they left.

If they left.

The thought filled her with anxiety. She certainly hoped they didn't expect to stay here overnight. She would definitely have to put her foot down if they did. She was only the housekeeper here and she could imagine Kirk's response.

She carried the tray out to them. “So. What do you think of the place?” she chatted. “It’s lovely, isn’t it? I hope it’s put your mind at rest about Josh and myself moving here.”

“That’s only temporary, dear,” Grace clarified, then surveyed the area with a critical eye. “Yes, it’s nice but far too isolated. What if Joshua came down with something? What if you needed a doctor?”

“Then we’d call one to come out here or go into town. We’re not that far from civilization.” She began pouring the iced tea. “Are you staying in the area long? I suppose you’ve already booked into a motel.”

For the life of her she couldn’t imagine them staying at Linda and Hugh’s motel. They would prefer one of the larger ones in Dubbo.

“We came straight from Dubbo Airport and haven’t booked in anywhere yet. We thought we might—” Grace broke off as Vanessa handed her the glass. “Oh, my God, you’re not wearing your rings. What happened to them, Vanessa? Have you lost them?”

Vanessa hid her wince. Trust her mother-in-law to spot that straightaway and make it sound as if it was the crime of the century.

“No, I’ve put them in a safe place. They were too tight out here in this heat, that’s all. I didn’t want to get them adjusted, so I decided to take them off until I go back to Sydney.”

Mollified, Grace accepted the explanation. “Yes, everything should return to normal once you’re back home.”

Vanessa looked down at her drink. Was Sydney home anymore? She wasn’t so sure.

“Someone’s coming.”

Vanessa heard her father-in-law’s words and her head snapped up. She groaned inwardly. Kirk’s Range Rover could be seen driving toward the house.

“That’s my employer,” she said brightly. Heaven help her. Grace would spot the tension between them at fifty paces.

“Good. I want to meet this Kirk Deverill,” Rupert said, a self-important quality in his voice.

“Why?” Vanessa’s brightness dimmed, her back up now. She couldn’t help it.

“Our grandson is living in his house.”

Was Rupert insulting Kirk? It certainly sounded like it. And it was one thing for *her* to think bad of Kirk. It was another for these two people to consider Kirk some sort of villain when they hadn’t even met him.

“I think we have that right,” Grace added.

Vanessa silently choked. These two people had little rights where Josh was concerned. Yes, they had rights as grandparents to concern themselves with their grandchild’s well-being. But more than that and any further “right” with them was totally *wrong*.

“I believe you’ll find both Josh and I are in safe hands with Kirk.”

Grace shot her a sharp look as the vehicle drew to a halt behind the rental car. “You call your employer by his first name?”

Grace would have a fit if she knew that Kirk had kissed her daughter-in-law, that he’d touched her breasts. “They’re very friendly out here.”

Her mother-in-law clicked her tongue. “It would never do in the city, Vanessa. Remember that when you come back home.”

There it was again. Did Grace have to keep mentioning about going back home? Her in-laws had no idea what a true home should be like. Mike had known that and he’d often ignored their antics, but in the long run they’d still been his parents.

She remained in her chair as Kirk came up the steps, carrying his hat. Better not to let any of them know how anxious she felt. “Kirk, I hope you don’t mind, but my parents-in-law have come to visit,” she said, then introduced them.

He inclined his head at the older couple. “Not at all.” He didn’t glance her way and for that she was grateful. “You’ve come a long way.”

“We thought it our responsibility to come and check things out,” Rupert said, without quite the haughty tone he’d used before. Clearly Rupert recognized a potential enemy.

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