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**LINDSAY ARMSTRONG**  
The Millionaire's Marriage Claim

# Lindsay Armstrong

## The Millionaire's Marriage Claim

### Аннотация

First he took her hostage, and then he asked her to marry him! Jo Lucas's captor is none other than Gavin Hastings IV, millionaire homestead owner, who's suffering from a case of mistaken identity. Somehow the arrogant but sinfully rugged bushman has found his way into Jo's heart—even though he kept her prisoner...all night!And now that Gavin's met her, he wants Jo for his bride. It seems he won't let her go until he has made her his.But the question for Jo is: does Gavin want to keep her because he's fallen in love with her...or as a mother for his little girl?

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## **“But you saved my life!”**

“You actually threw yourself in front of the gun. How can I ever repay you for that?” Jo exclaimed, her face pale and her grey eyes dark with disbelief and emotion.

Gavin pulled his jumper over his head and Jo winced at the sight of the wound in his upper arm. But she immediately pulled off her top, which she ripped into strips with her teeth and fingernails, and then applied as a pad and pressure bandages to his wound.

Gavin Hastings flinched, but there was a suggestion of humor in his eyes as they rested on her, her upper body clad only in a bra, as she worked on the dressings.

“What can you do to repay me, Jo? I think it would be a damn good idea if you married me.” He swayed suddenly, and blacked out.

LINDSAY ARMSTRONG was born in South Africa but now lives in Australia with her New Zealand-born husband and their five children. They have lived in nearly every state of Australia and have tried their hand at some unusual—for them—occupations, such as farming and horse-training...all grist to the mill for a writer! Lindsay started writing romance novels when her youngest child began school and she was left feeling at a loose end. She is still doing it and loving it.

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# CHAPTER ONE

JOANNE LUCAS steered her grey Range Rover over the appalling road and shook her head.

Sure, she hadn't expected the drive to a sheep station somewhere south of Charleville in outback Queensland to be a picnic. But the road had been quite good until she'd turned off onto the station track, and it was far worse than anything she'd anticipated. It was also quite a bit further than she'd expected to drive, and the chill dusk of a winter's evening was drawing in.

She scanned the horizon for some sign of habitation but there was none. This was serious sheep country, the Murweh shire—she knew from the research she'd done it carried approximately eight hundred thousand head of them! There were also cattle stations in the area so you expected it to be wide open and isolated.

On the other hand, her destination, Kin Can station, had quite a reputation. So did its owners, the Hastings family, for wealth and excellence in the wool they bred.

How come they couldn't afford to put in a decent road to the homestead, then? And how on earth did the wool trucks cope with it?

Come to think of it, if she hadn't had her wits about her, she would have missed the small, nearly illegible Kin Can sign on a gate—another surprise because she'd been led to believe the

station was well signposted.

Do they actively discourage visitors? she asked herself, then slammed on the brakes as she topped a rise to see a man standing in the middle of the track aiming a gun at her.

Do they ever! It flashed through her mind, followed immediately by—So what to do now?

Any decision was taken out of her hands as the man loped forward and wrenched her door open before she could lock it. Not only that, he slung the gun over his shoulder and manhandled her out onto the road.

‘Now look here,’ she began, ‘this is insane and—’

‘What’s your name?’ he barked at her as he backed her up against the bonnet.

‘Jo...Joanne, b-but people call me Jo,’ she stammered.

‘Just as I thought, although I was expecting a Joe—of the masculine variety—but perhaps they thought you could seduce me and keep doing it until they tracked me down.’

He paused and a flash of ironic amusement lit his intensely blue eyes as he looked her up and down then murmured, ‘On the other hand, you don’t look that feminine, Jo, so I’ll go with my first scenario.’

Jo, who had gasped several times as he’d spoken, lost her temper and stamped heavily on his toe with the heel of her booted foot.

He didn’t even flinch. ‘Steel toecaps, darlin’,’ he drawled. ‘So it gets your goat up to be called unfeminine?’

Jo breathed heavily but a small portion of her mind conceded that, yes, it had—which was just about as insane as the whole mad situation. Nor could she resist a glance downwards, although she did resist the urge to tell this crazy person that most women would look unfeminine in creased cargo pants, a bulky anorak and a knitted beanie that concealed her hair.

She did quell the sneaky little voice in her head that reminded her some men found her height and straight shoulders unfeminine anyway...

‘Look here, whoever you are,’ she began, ‘I’m expected up at the homestead so—’

‘I’ll bet you are, Jo,’ he rasped, ‘but we’re going a different way. Let’s just see what you’re packing first.’ He started to pat her down like a policeman.

‘Packing?’ It came out in a strangled way edged with outrage as she tried to evade his hands. ‘Will you stop touching me? I’m not packing anything.’

‘Take ’em off, then,’ he ordered as his hands reached her waist.

Jo gaped at him. ‘Take what off?’

‘Your strides, lady.’

‘I most certainly will not—are you out of your mind?’

‘OK! Turn round and lean over the bonnet so I can search for hip holsters, thigh holsters or wherever women carry their concealed weapons.’

Jo stared at him in the fading daylight and wondered if she was the one going mad or—was this a nightmare? But the substance

of her nightmare was anything but dream-like.

He was tall, taller than she was, with good shoulders. In a navy jumper and torn, dirty jeans, he looked to be extremely fit in a lean, rangy way. His thick black hair was short and ruffled and his jaw was covered with black stubble. Then there were those furious blue eyes that gave every indication of a man not to be trifled with.

But why? How? What? she wondered wildly. Some modern day bushranger on the loose? Surely not!

It's not unheard of, she corrected herself immediately, but why would he have been expecting any kind of a 'Joe'?

'Make up your mind,' her tormentor ordered. 'We haven't got all day.'

With trembling fingers, Jo unzipped her anorak and started to lower her cargo pants. Then she got angry again and pulled the anorak off and flung it over the bonnet. She ripped her boots off and stepped out of her pants. 'You may look but don't you dare lay a finger on me again,' she ground out, her grey eyes flashing magnificently.

The man grimaced and raised his eyebrows. 'Well, well!' His gaze dwelt on her figure beneath a fitted, fine-knit blue jumper and pale blue cotton briefs, and drifted down her long legs.

'Just goes to show you shouldn't make snap judgements,' he said with humour, looking back into her eyes, 'since it would be fair to say that in other circumstances you'd be welcome to seduce me, love.' The humour left his eyes. 'Turn around.'

If she'd been angry before, Jo was boiling now, but caution had the upper hand. She turned and lifted her arms to shoulder height. 'Satisfied?' she asked over her shoulder.

'Yep.' She stiffened as she felt his fingers on her waist and the elastic of her briefs pinged against her skin. 'Good old Bonds Cottontails, I do believe,' he added. 'OK, get dressed, then we're going for a drive.'

Jo pulled on her cargo pants. 'A drive? How far?'

'Right into—' He paused. 'Why?'

She hesitated, unsure whether to confess that she'd somehow underestimated the distance to Kin Can homestead, and another of her concerns had been that she'd run out of petrol...

'Come on, Jo—' he unslung the gun menacingly '—talk!'

'I don't have much petrol left.'

He swore. 'Bloody women!'

'I believe there's a pump at the house so—'

'Told you that, did they? Well, it's not going to be of any use to me. Get in and switch on so I can see how low the tank is.'

Jo swallowed and finished dressing as quickly as she could. And when she switched the motor on and the petrol gauge was revealed—bordering the red—he swore again, even more murderously, then, 'No spare tanks?'

'No.'

'What are you? One of their molls press-ganged into providing back-up?'

'I have no idea what you're talking about!' Jo cried. 'None of

this makes any sense.’

‘Oh, yes, it does, sweetheart,’ he replied insolently, then rubbed his jaw with a sudden tinge of weariness. It didn’t last long, that first faint sign of weakness, however. ‘Plan B, then,’ he said grimly.

Ten minutes later, Jo was steering her vehicle over another diabolical track, but this time following her captor’s directions.

She’d had no opportunity to escape, as he’d made it quite clear he would shoot her down if she made any attempt to run away. Her request to be told what was going on had received a ‘don’t act all innocent with me, lady’ response.

And he’d quashed, with an impatient wave of his hand and virtually unheard, her solitary attempt to explain who she was, why she was on Kin Can station and her conviction that he was making a terrible mistake.

He’d also searched the vehicle before they’d set off, then glanced at her with a considering frown.

So she drove with a set mouth and her heart hammering; he wouldn’t allow her to use the headlights and the light was almost gone.

‘There,’ he said, pointing to a darker shadow on the landscape. ‘Pull into the shed on the other side.’

At first Jo thought it was only a clump of towering gum trees, then she discerned the outline of two buildings. ‘What is it?’

‘Boundary riders hut,’ he replied tersely as she nosed the vehicle into an old shed.

‘Is it...is this where you live?’

He laughed scornfully. ‘Who are you trying to kid, Jo?’

She sucked in a breath. ‘I’m not trying to kid anyone! I have no idea what’s going on or who on earth you are! What’s your name?’

He glanced at her mockingly. ‘For the purpose of maintaining your charade, why don’t you choose one? Tom, Dick or Harry will do.’

‘I have a better idea,’ she spat at him. ‘Mr Hitler is particularly appropriate for what I think of you!’

‘So the lady has claws,’ he said softly, with an appreciative gleam in his blue eyes, and switched on the inside light.

‘You better believe it.’

Their gazes clashed. It was an angry, defiant moment for Jo, but there was also fear lurking beneath it. Fear and something else—a certain amount of confusion. He might act like a bushranger or a boundary rider gone berserk, but he sounded like neither.

What he said was undoubtedly inflammatory and insulting—let alone the incomprehensibility of it all—but the voice was educated and cultured with the kind of accent that a wealthy, old-money family and a private school steeped in tradition would imbue.

Then there was his navy-blue jumper. If she was any judge, it would have cost a small fortune, being made of especially soft, fine new wool—although they were on a sheep station that

specialized in fine new wool, weren't they?

But most perplexing of all was the frisson tiptoeing along her nerve ends in the form of an awareness of him stealing over her. If you discounted his stubbly jaw and his eyes that could be murderous, he was well proportioned, excellently co-ordinated and rather devastatingly good-looking...

'What?'

She blinked at his question. 'N-nothing.'

'Or—thinking of changing sides?' he suggested. 'Believe me, Jo, you'd be well advised to. Being my moll would have infinite advantages over—'

'Stop it!' She put her hands over her ears. 'I'm no one's moll and have no intention of becoming one!'

'No?' He said it consideringly with his gaze roaming over her narrowly. 'You could have fooled me a moment ago.'

Jo bit her lip and was furious with herself.

He laughed softly. 'You're not much good at this, are you?'

'If I had any idea what you're talking about—'

She broke off as he moved impatiently.

'Enough! Let's get inside. We'll take all your gear.'

'What for?'

'So I can go through it with a fine-tooth comb.' He clicked off the overhead light and jumped out.

She had no choice but to follow suit. The shed had doors and he pushed them closed and latched them, so unless you knew to look, there was no sign of her car. Then he gestured for her to

precede him into the hut.

He did go through her things with a fine-tooth comb, but after he'd secured the hut and lit a fire in the rusty combustion stove from a store of chopped wood and old newspapers.

The wooden hut was small and rudimentary. It had a half-loft storing some bales of old straw, but the ladder to it was broken. There were a couple of uncomfortable-looking narrow beds, a table and two hard chairs, one dilapidated old armchair, a small store of dry and tinned goods and a couple of milk cans filled with water.

There was one high window, but it had been broken and boarded up, and one door. All the same, as a precaution against any light being seen, Jo gathered, he hung a blanket over the door and a rough, dingy towel over the window.

Two things he did she could only approve of: the light and warmth from the stove were welcome against the cold, dark night, and the aroma from the pot of coffee he set on the stove caused her to close her eyes in deep appreciation as she took her anorak off.

On the other hand, two things she noticed while they waited for the coffee added to her confusion. He looked at his wrist, as if to check his watch, then with a grimace of annoyance, pulled it from his pocket and laid it on the table. It had a broken band, she saw, but, although it was plain enough, it was also sleek, platinum and shouted very expensive craftsmanship.

A faint frown knitted her brow. A demented boundary rider

with a couple-of-thousand-dollar watch? Then there were his jeans. Torn and dirty they might be, but they were also designer jeans if she was any judge.

‘No milk, but there is sugar,’ he said presently, and handed her an enamel mug. ‘Help yourself.’ He indicated a sugar caddy.

She took two spoonfuls and looked around as she stirred them in.

‘Take the best chair, ma’am,’ he said with some irony and indicated the armchair.

‘Thanks,’ she murmured and sank down into it. A small cloud of dust rose but she was too tired and tense to care and she realized she was still wearing her beanie. She plucked it off irritably, and turned to look at her captor as he made an involuntary sound.

She raised an eyebrow at him. ‘What have I done now?’

‘Er—nothing,’ he responded. ‘Why on earth do you cover your hair?’

Jo ran her fingers through her cloud of dark gold hair. Someone had once told her it was the colour of beech leaves in autumn. True or not, she regarded it as her crowning glory, perhaps her only glory, and it was certainly her only vanity, her long, thick, silky hair.

She pushed her fringe back and shrugged. ‘It’s cold and dusty out there.’

His blue gaze stayed on her in a rather unnerving manner and she felt a tinge of colour steal into her cheeks because she had

no doubt he was contemplating her figure.

She would have died if she'd known that it had crossed his mind to wonder whether that deep rich gold colour of her hair was duplicated on her body...

He turned his attention rather abruptly to her two bags, unpacking the entire contents of the smaller one onto the table.

Jo sipped her coffee and watched as he went through every item of clothing she'd brought, her writing case, books, sponge bag and make-up, her first-aid kit. He upended her canvas tote bag and her diary, her phone, a map and her purse fell out together with a bag of sweets and some tissues.

He picked up the phone. 'This isn't any good to us out here, we're out of mobile range.'

'So I gathered,' she said bitterly.

He smiled unpleasantly. 'Did you try to get in touch with them after you left Cunnamulla? I would have thought they'd have warned you about that—or supplied you with a satellite phone. Joanne Lucas,' he read as he examined her credit card, her diary, her Medicare card and her driver's licence.

'If you go back to the diary, you'll find my address, my doctor, my dentist and possibly my plumber and electrician.' She eyed him ironically.

He didn't respond, but started to repack the bag. The sight of him handling her underwear again annoyed her intensely, however, and she jumped up. 'I'll do that!'

'OK.' He pushed it all down the table towards her and reached

for the bigger bag. ‘Painting gear, from the earlier look I took at it,’ he said.

He took out a collapsible easel, a heavy box of oil crayons, charcoal pencils, a sheaf of cartridge paper and a smaller box of sharpeners and rubbers. ‘Now that—’ he sat back ‘—has to be an inspired bit of camouflage, Ms Lucas.’

‘You can believe what you like but, as I tried to tell you earlier, I was commissioned by Mrs Adele Hastings of Kin Can station to do her portrait. That’s why I’m here.’

‘Mrs Adele Hastings is not on Kin Can.’

Jo stared at him. ‘But I spoke to her only a few days ago to make the final arrangements!’

He shrugged and folded his arms.

‘How do you know she’s not there, anyway?’ Jo asked.

‘I...made it my business to know.’

Jo frowned. ‘Are you some demented, latter-day bushranger? Or a boundary rider gone berserk? Is that what this is all about?’

‘Go on.’

‘What do you mean, “go on”?’ Her frustration was obvious. ‘All I’m trying to do is make some sense of it.’

‘Fascinating stuff,’ he commented. ‘Just say I were either of those, what would it lead you to assume?’

She gestured with both hands. ‘You...held up the homestead, got sprung maybe, escaped, mistook me for reinforcements and took me hostage—’ She broke off abruptly and her grey eyes dilated as she castigated herself for even mentioning the

possibility.

He smiled. ‘Well, it so happens I did escape, Jo. And not long before I did so, I heard them calling their back-up, by the name of Jo—Joe—whatever, and requesting confirmation of what the back-up vehicle would be. They repeated what they were told—a silver-grey Range Rover.’

This time her eyes virtually stood out on stalks. ‘That’s...that’s —’

‘Coincidence?’ he suggested sweetly. ‘I don’t think so.’ His mouth hardened. ‘Then there’s the fact that you drove in by the back gate, as instructed, which took you a long way out of your way but, being a woman, I presume, you neglected to think of the extra petrol you might need.’

Jo opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, then, ‘So that’s why it seemed a lot further than I’d calculated. But—’ she stopped to think briefly ‘—what happened to the front gate?’

His gaze narrowed on her. ‘You know,’ he said at last, ‘you might be whole lot cleverer than I first thought. You’re certainly an inspired liar—what the hell could have happened to the front gate?’

Jo gritted her teeth. ‘According to Mrs Adele Hastings, the front gate, the main gate, the only gate she mentioned should have been about fifty kilometres back from the gate I drove through. And it should have been well signposted. “You won’t miss it,” she told me. “It’s a big black truck tyre with the name painted in white on it.” Believe me, I kept my eyes peeled but I saw nothing

like that.’

His eyes narrowed but he maintained the attack from a different direction. ‘And you just kept on driving all those extra kilometres?’ he taunted.

‘Yes, I did! But only after I used my mobile phone to contact Kin Can only to find I’d gone out of range. That road was quite good, though, and I thought—what’s fifty kilometres to country people?’

A glimmer of a smile lit his eyes but it was gone as soon as it came.

‘Nevertheless, you have it right. I do intend to hold you hostage, sweetheart, so I hope you mean something to whoever you’re working for, otherwise things could be a little nasty for you.’ He stood up. ‘Care for some soup? Or there’s baked beans, uh, tinned spaghetti—’

Jo went to slap his face, only to end up pinned in his arms.

‘Now, now, Lady Longlegs,’ he said softly. ‘You may be pretty athletic, but you’re no match for me.’

‘Don’t call me that!’

‘I’ll call you what I like. I’m the man with the gun, remember?’

Jo shivered.

He felt it through her clothes and it crossed his mind again that, in different circumstances, Jo Lucas was his kind of woman—tall, with lovely, clean lines and some fascinating curves. As for her face, perhaps not a face to look twice at in the first instance, he thought, but once you did, it held the eye.

Her skin was smooth and creamy, but her lashes and eyebrows were darker than her hair and they framed her grey eyes admirably. Her nose was straight, her mouth was actually fascinating with a slightly swollen bee-stung upper lip that excited a rash impulse to kiss it he had to kill rather swiftly...

And the whole was completely natural, no trace of make-up, no plucking of her eyebrows into coy arches and, he glanced down at her hands, no painted nails.

So what does that all tell me? he wondered. She's a practical, serious-minded person but rather unexpectedly lovely in her own quiet way?

He chewed his lip and stilled the sudden movement she made to free herself and again their gazes clashed. He smiled inwardly at the proud expression in her grey eyes that told him she was hating every moment of being confined in his arms against her will.

If looks could kill, I should be six feet under, he reflected wryly. I wonder how she reacts to being made love to? Soberly or...

He paused his thoughts with an ironic lifting of his eyebrows, and she blinked in sudden confusion as if she'd been trying to read his mind, and failed.

Just as well, he mused with a certain humour, and attempted to direct his thoughts into a more businesslike channel, only to find himself speculating on how she'd got roped into this diabolical situation.

She was bound to be someone's lover, surely? Brought in on a tide of passion, perhaps—but no, it just didn't seem to fit her. Neither did she look venal, although it was hard to tell with women. But what was left? A grudge? What the hell could she, personally, have against him? A grudge against society, then, or...

That was when he paused to ask himself if there could be some mistake?

But how about all those coincidences? Too many to be believable? Yes. On the other hand, she appeared to have no suspicious equipment, no equipment at all other than a useless mobile phone. But did that preclude her from simply driving a back-up vehicle? It did not and he couldn't afford to take any chances anyway.

He let her go abruptly.

'I've had a thought,' she said quietly. 'While you're holding me hostage here, the real Joe, if there is such a person, is probably making his way to the homestead as we speak.'

His eyes narrowed again. 'Time will tell, lady.'

'Who are you?' It came out unwittingly and she bit her lip but, once said, she decided to persevere. 'At least tell me what's going on. Surely, as a hostage, I'm entitled to know what I've got myself into?'

Several expressions chased across his eyes—did she imagine it or was one of them a trace of perplexity? If so, it was immediately replaced with bland insolence.

‘Got yourself into?’ he repeated. ‘A bed of your own making, I would imagine, Jo. In the meantime, I don’t know about you, but it’s going to be baked beans and biscuits for me.’

Two hours later, the hut was quiet and dim.

Jo had eaten a few spoonfuls of baked beans, she’d attended to a call of nature in the rough outhouse attached to the hut, and been attended in turn by her captor. When she’d finished, they’d both stood outside for a short time, listening and trying to probe the dense, chill darkness for any sign of life, but there had been none.

In Jo’s case, she’d also been trying to get her bearings just in case an opportunity to escape came up.

Then he’d shepherded her inside and told her to go to sleep.

The beds were along the walls at right angles to each other, their thin grey and white ticking mattresses unadorned by sheets, although each bed had one dismal-looking pillow and one hairy-looking blanket.

She took her anorak off again and her boots, and prepared to lie down, but he stopped her suddenly.

‘Get your night gear on,’ he ordered.

‘What for?’

‘You are going to bed.’

She gestured contemptuously. ‘You call this a bed?’

‘It’s all there is.’

‘Perhaps, but I’d feel much happier in my clothes. There could be fleas, there could be ticks, there could be—anything.’

‘All the same, Jo, I’d rather you got into your PJs. I’ll get them for you.’ He picked up her bag.

‘No—hang on!’ she protested with her hands planted on her hips. ‘If you think I’m going to afford you some kind of a peep show, if that’s why you want me to change into pyjamas, you’re mistaken, Dick!’

He raised a lazy eyebrow and scanned her from head to toe. Her hands-on-hips posture and her straight back made the jut of her breasts particularly enticing beneath the fine pale blue wool of her jumper.

‘What a pleasant thought,’ he said softly, eyeing the outline of her nipples and the narrowness of her waist. ‘But—’ his lips twitched as she looked downwards and hastily amended her stance ‘—sadly, it wasn’t what I had in mind. I fully intended to step outside while you changed.’

‘So why...what...?’ She stared at him in confusion.

‘It’s simple, sweetheart,’ he said. ‘You’re much less likely to be running around the countryside in your nightwear, should you devise some devilish plan of escape. Apart from anything else—’ he smiled at her with pure devilry ‘—you’d freeze. Don’t be long,’ he added. ‘I’m not too happy about freezing either.’ He stepped outside.

Jo unclenched her jaw and said every swear word she could think of beneath her breath. But there was nothing for it other than to retrieve the least revealing of the two pairs of pyjamas she’d packed, and change into them.

‘Decent?’ he called.

‘Yes.’

‘Decent and—mad,’ he murmured as he came in, closed the door behind him and rearranged the blanket. ‘Mmm.’ He scanned her from head to toe. ‘I see you kept your bra on. Not much protection against—anything, I would have thought.’

Jo looked down at her pyjamas. In a fine white cotton, with bands of filigree embroidery, her bra was visible beneath the top, but the alternative had been a pair of short, sleeveless pyjamas in a sensuous lilac satin.

She raised her gaze to his face. ‘I’ll get even with you one day for all this if it’s the last thing I do.’

‘Should be interesting. Go to bed, Jo.’

‘What...what are you going to do?’

‘Wait and watch, what else?’

‘If you dare try crawling into my bed—’ she began, but he cut her off.

‘I don’t actually hold with rape, whatever else you may think of me. I prefer my women warm and willing. Unless—’ he cocked an eyebrow at her ‘—a bit of hostility is what turns you on?’

‘You’re disgusting,’ she said through her teeth.

He laughed softly. ‘There is quite—a body of evidence that would disagree with you.’

‘I can imagine. Gangster molls, no doubt.’

His expression cooled. ‘Certainly none of them have been as good an actress as you are, my dear.’ He turned away to pick up

her boots, her anorak and her bag of clothes and he slung them onto the loft.

Jo could have screamed from frustration. Instead, with an expression of rigid distaste but supreme self-control, she lay down on the bed and pulled the blanket up.

Sleep, of course, was the furthest thing from her mind, although she closed her eyes a couple of times as the fire in the stove burnt low, and her captor lounged back in the armchair—with his gun across his knees.

If she could feign sleep, she reasoned, perhaps he would lower his guard, even fall asleep himself? But what could she do if she managed to sneak out of the hut? He had her car keys in his pocket and he'd locked the car; her clothes and boots were out of reach. And, as he had so diabolically foreseen, running around the rough terrain outside in her bare feet and pyjamas was highly unappealing if not to say inviting pneumonia and injury.

But perhaps I could hide, she mused. He doesn't appear to have a torch and perhaps I could sneak a blanket out with me?

She strained her eyes in the gloom and stared at the door. There was no lock, only a bolt on the inside and—her heart started to beat faster as she remembered—a bolt on the outside as well. How much better if she could not only sneak out and find a place to hide, but lock the man inside the hut as well? If he was trying to escape detection for whatever reason, he'd hardly shoot his way out of the hut...

She took some deep breaths to compose herself and moved

slightly. The bed squeaked a bit but he didn't stir.

Gotcha, she thought, but decided to wait a while longer in case he was only cat-napping.

Ten minutes later, she sat up cautiously, and waited. No movement from the armchair, so she eased herself off the bed and flinched at the series of squeaks. Still no movement from the chair, though, but she stood quietly, trying to adjust her eyes to the gloom. The fire was nearly out in the stove but eventually she could see him. He was sprawled out with his head back and one arm hanging over the side of the chair.

The gun was still in his lap and an almost overwhelming temptation came to her—she only had to steal forward and grab it—but she had no knowledge of guns at all. What was there to know, though? Anyone could pull a trigger, not necessarily at him, but if he knew she was prepared to fire the damn gun wouldn't that be enough?

Then he moved and she froze. But all he did was turn slightly and bring his arm up so that his hand rested across the gun. And he muttered something unintelligible, but slept on.

Almost weak with relief, Jo stayed where she was for a few minutes, but decided that grabbing the gun was out—she could get herself shot. And she lifted the blanket off the bed and tiptoed towards the door where, with infinite care, she moved the blanket covering it aside and eased the bolt ever so slowly backwards.

'Nice try, darling.'

She nearly jumped a foot off the floor and lurched round to

find him standing behind her with the gun pointed straight at her heart. How he'd got there so soundlessly was a mystery.

'Wh-what woke you?' she stammered.

'Don't know. Some sixth sense, maybe. What—' he looked at her ironically '—did you hope to achieve, Jo?'

Her shoulders slumped. 'I don't know. But,' she said with more spirit, 'I couldn't just lie there and accept—fate or whatever!'

He stared down at her. There was an agitated pulse thudding at the base of her throat and her eyes were wide and terrified but also stubborn.

He heaved an inward sigh and lowered the gun. Whatever she was, this woman was getting to him, he acknowledged. There were things he couldn't help admiring about her. You had to be brave to try to escape out into an unknown landscape on a frigid night with no shoes and only an old blanket.

But he still couldn't afford to take the chance that she wasn't who she said she was, however brave and—all the rest.

He turned away to put some more wood in the stove, then he stretched and studied his options. He had no idea what had woken him but one thing he did know—over twenty-four hours without sleep was taking its toll and his gaze fell longingly on the beds.

'OK,' he said, 'here's what we'll do.' He pushed her bed lengthwise against the other one, closing it in against the wall. 'You hop into that one—' he indicated the one against the wall '—and I'll use this one.'

She opened her mouth to protest but he forestalled her

wearily. ‘Jo, you’re in no physical danger from me. However, I should warn you that the only way you can escape from that bed is to climb over me, and you mightn’t find me in as conciliatory a mood were you to try. Now will you hop in?’

She hesitated, then did as she was told, to lie with her back to the second bed. He put her blanket over her and lay down, grappling with his own.

He was right, she realized. There was probably two inches’ leeway from the other walls at the head and the foot of both beds so she was effectively penned in. She sighed and wriggled a bit to get comfortable.

A sleepy voice behind her said, ‘You’re right. These are only an apology for beds. You’ll be pleased to hear, if you are Joanne Lucas, wandering portrait painter, that the beds up at the homestead are much more comfortable.’

‘How would you know?’

‘I’ve tried ’em.’

Jo frowned. ‘These people you imagine I’m part of—who are they? And why are you running from them?’

‘Kidnappers, as if you didn’t know.’

Jo cast her blanket aside and sat up. ‘Oh, this is ridiculous! Why would anyone, but particularly me, want to kidnap you?’

‘For my sins,’ her captor said, ‘I happen to be Gavin Hastings the Fourth.’

## CHAPTER TWO

JO WAS struck speechless for several minutes, but her mind was jumping as she recalled her several conversations with Mrs Adele Hastings, his—if he was who he said he was—mother!

She could only describe Adele Hastings as talkative. A child called Rosie had featured frequently in her conversations, but Jo had never been able to work out whose child she was.

Her son Gavin had also featured prominently, so that Jo was in the possession, quite ancillary to the business of doing the lady's portrait, of a store of knowledge about Gavin Hastings.

He was an excellent son, a bit high-handed at times, mind you, a bit prone to getting his own way, but extremely capable, he could turn his hand to just about anything, which he needed to be able to do to run the vast Hastings empire inherited from his father...and so Mrs Hastings had gone on, although admittedly in very well-bred tones.

Jo had done a bit of research on the family and discovered that it was quite a dynasty. The first Gavin Hastings had been a pioneer. His grandson, Gavin's father, had not only extended the family holdings, he'd diversified into cattle. He'd also married Adele Delaney, daughter of a press baron. Jo hadn't researched any further since it was Adele's portrait she was doing.

How come, though, she wondered, Adele hadn't told her excellent, high-handed—that bit was quite believable!—son

about the portrait? And how come Mrs Hastings wasn't on Kin Can? On the other hand, if he was who he said he was, it explained the fine clothes, the watch, the cultured accent, although it still seemed incomprehensible he didn't know about the portrait.

She looked down at her captor to pose this question to him, but Gavin Hastings the Fourth was fast asleep.

Jo sank back to her pillow thoughtfully. The light from the stove was stronger now and she didn't have to peer through the gloom to make out his features. In repose, he looked younger, but she guessed he was around thirty-four.

Sleep, however, didn't diminish his good looks, although it did present him as much less arrogant. Above the bristles his skin was lightly tanned, his dark eyebrows less satanic, and his mouth that could be so hard or smile so sardonically, insolently, ironically—she had a whole range of less-than-pleasant expressions to recall even after such a short acquaintance—was relaxed and well cut.

One couldn't doubt, she decided, that, all spruced up, Gavin Hastings would be dynamically attractive.

He could also be extremely unpleasant, she reminded herself. He could be cutting and unforgivably personal even if he was being pursued by a gang of kidnappers—and she still had to prove to him she was no 'gangster's moll'.

Perhaps if she drew his portrait he'd believe her? Not now, of course, but at the first opportunity. As for being in a kidnap situation with him...

Her tired brain gave up at that point, and she fell asleep.

She had no idea how much later it was when she was wrenched awake by a drumming sound. She sat up with her hand to her throat and a dry mouth, only to feel someone's arm slide around her and hear a voice say, 'It's rain. Good news, really.'

'Who...what...?' It all came tumbling back to her. 'Rain! It sounds like a machine gun!'

'Old tin roof, no insulation, that's all.'

Jo shivered. There was no sign of light coming from the stove and it was very cold. 'Why good news?' she asked.

'Should make it harder for them to find us, assuming they're still looking—I don't know about you, but I'm freezing.'

'You could always build up the fire,' she suggested.

She heard a low chuckle. 'Got a better idea. Lie back, Miss Lucas—I presume it is Miss?'

Jo ignored the question and asked one of her own. 'Why?'

'So we can cuddle up and put both blankets over us.'

'That is not on my agenda!'

'Well, it is on mine.' And Jo found herself being propelled backwards into his arms.

'I always suspected it would come to this,' she said bitterly.

'What?'

She swallowed.

'You have a bad mind, Josie,' he said into her hair. 'Are you off men for some reason? Is that why there's this intense suspicion?'

'Sharing a bed with a stranger—being forced to,' she

amended, 'is enough to make any woman suspicious, surely? Not to mention all the rest of it. After all, you were the one who brought up seduction in the first place.'

'For my sins again,' he murmured. 'But you have to admit it's warmer like this.'

It was. It also felt—she couldn't quite work out why—safer. Because she knew who he was now? And knew she was on the side of the 'goodies'? Still very much suspect, of course, she reminded herself, but talk about a series of incredible coincidences!

One thing she was certain of, though, she had not missed Kin Can's main gate, so what had happened to it?

She opened her mouth, not only to bring that up, but so much more. Did he have any idea who his potential kidnappers were? How had he escaped them? But his deep, slow breathing and the relaxation of his arm about her waist told her he was asleep again.

She smiled unexpectedly. So much for seduction. But if you could believe what he himself had alluded to, a body of evidence—a whole lot of women who found him attractive, in other words—suggested he was a much safer bet asleep.

What kind of women appealed to him? she wondered suddenly. Gorgeous? Definitely. Sexy? Had to be. Joanne Lucas?

She moved abruptly and removed herself from beneath his arm and slid cautiously onto the other bed, still trying to share both blankets. He didn't move at all.

It was barely dawn when Gavin Hastings stirred and lay still

again. Then he sniffed and frowned. His cheek was resting against someone's hair, hair that felt silky soft and gave up the faint fragrance of—what?

For some reason, a bottle of shampoo swam into his mental vision, a clear plastic bottle decorated with apples and pears and filled with green liquid—of course! Amongst Joanne Lucas's toiletries had been just such a bottle of shampoo; it was her hair and it smelled very faintly of pears.

Something else from her toiletries swam into his mind; a pink lady's razor with which, no doubt, she shaved those long, lovely legs. He rubbed his jaw wistfully. Even a pink razor would be extremely welcome to someone who hadn't shaved for two days.

Then his mind wandered onto another pleasure—the woman sleeping peacefully in his arms. Her body was soft and warm against his, in fact her curves felt sensational nestled into him and, he reflected ruefully, he had better get himself out of this situation before a certain claim he'd made earlier proved to be incorrect.

But, as he moved Jo Lucas gently away from him, she murmured softly, a small sound of protest, and she buried her head against his shoulder.

A spark of humour lit his eyes. You're going to hate me when I make mention of this, Josie, and if you get on your high horse again, as you most likely will, I shall no doubt bring it up...won't be able to resist it!

The humour died as he stared down at the sleeping girl in his

arms. Not only the perfume of her hair, but her smooth, soft skin and her warm, lovely body teased his senses.

His memory took flight again, not to a bottle of shampoo this time, but the vision of her without her cargo pants and the high, rounded swell of her hips beneath a pair of no-nonsense Bonds Cottontails. If she was a pleasure to study from the front, he thought, it would surely be a sheer pleasure to watch her walking away from you with those hips swinging beneath a flimsy skirt...

He dragged his mind back with an effort. Who the hell was she? Not only that, how often had he used women to make him forget, only to find they were an anodyne but not the real thing?

He got out of the bed less than gently and stretched vigorously. When he turned back, Jo's eyes were open, and completely bewildered.

'Morning, Miss Lucas,' he said briskly. 'Time to get back to the fray.'

Jo stayed exactly as she was for a long moment, then she sat up abruptly and combed her hair back with her fingers. 'Good morning.'

'Sleep well?' he enquired with a mocking tinge of irony.

'I...er...must have. I don't seem to remember much about it.'

'Just as well.' He waited, bastard that he was, as her eyes looked confused again, then he changed the subject completely. 'You may not have noticed but it's still raining. Here's what I suggest—we make use of your fold-up umbrella to visit the outhouse, then you can do what you like while I do a recce.'

‘Do what I like?’ Jo repeated uncertainly.

‘Get dressed in peace, perhaps heat some water on the stove for a wash—I’ll build up the fire—or, contemplate your navel if that’s what you prefer to do at this hour of the morning.’

Her eyes darkened and he knew it would have given her great pleasure to tell him to get lost, but in much more colourful language. She kept her mouth shut, however, and climbed out of bed.

‘Here.’ Something made him take pity on her, and he reached for her anorak. ‘Wear this.’

She accepted it but refused to look at him, even when he pulled her bags and boots down as well.

Fifteen minutes later Jo was on her own in the hut, bolted in from the outside to her intense annoyance, but he had got the fire going and there were both the coffee-pot and a pot of water for washing simmering on the stove.

After a brief wash and dressing in a fleecy-lined grey tracksuit, she felt a lot better. She brushed her hair and tied it back and made herself a pot of coffee. And she pictured Gavin Hastings reconnoitring with, not only her fold-up umbrella, but the plastic poncho she always carried—neither of which would afford him great protection, but they had to be better than nothing in the downpour outside.

Gavin Hastings, she reflected, who had made a nasty little remark about something it was just as well she couldn’t remember—what?

She surely couldn't have slept through his taking advantage of her in any way. She surely wouldn't have taken advantage of him in any way so...?

She glanced over at the two beds. Only one of them, narrow as it was, still bore the sagging imprint of being slept on. She clicked her teeth together in sheer annoyance.

She must have spent the night in his arms, right up close and personal. Only two bodies in one dilapidated old bed made for one body would cause it to stay sagged like that. To make it worse, the sagging bed was his, the bed on the outside, so she must have been the one to move over.

Clearly a tactical error, she thought, even if I was half asleep. I must have been cold and scared—I must have been mad!

The coffee-pot bubbled at that point, so she poured herself a mug and tried to turn her mind away from things she couldn't change. Then she remembered her idea of doing his portrait in a bid to prove she was who she'd said she was.

It turned out to be an exercise with curious side effects as she opened her pencil box and tore a piece of cartridge paper in half...

She'd always been a sketcher. For as long as she could remember, she'd doodled and etched and found it a great comfort, but paints had never particularly appealed to her. She'd tried watercolours, oils and acrylics but found that none of them was her medium.

At eighteen, however, her life had changed dramatically and

she'd gone to art school for a year. That was where she'd discovered oil crayons—and it had all fallen into place. It had not been a lack of colour appreciation, her failure with paint, it had been her difficulty in merging the two techniques, drawing and painting.

Oil crayons allowed her to draw in colour, and she virtually hadn't stopped since the discovery. So that now, at twenty-four, she had a small but growing reputation in portraiture.

Of course, doing portraits had its downside. You were often at the mercy of less-than-likeable characters and your fingers itched to portray them that way. It had, however, gained her recognition, and once that reputation was well established she would be able to draw what she pleased and sell it—landscapes and particularly children, whom she loved to draw, although not necessarily as their parents wanted them portrayed.

As she organized herself as best she could, she practised a familiar technique. She breathed deeply and cleared her mind—and she called up her captor.

As always, some emotions came with the image she was seeing in her mind's eye, her reaction to her subject, but what caused her to blink in surprise was the veritable kaleidoscope of emotions that came along with Gavin Hastings's dark, good-looking face.

She discovered that her fingers longed to score and slash lines and angles onto the paper with her crayons in a caricature of the devil with very blue eyes.

Jo, Jo, she chided herself, if he's to be believed, he's been

subject to a kidnap attempt so he's bound to be antsy!

Doesn't matter, she retorted. I don't like him, but I especially don't like the way I do like some things about this man I don't like. And I resent wondering, actually wondering, what he thinks of me!

She stared down at the still-pristine piece of paper beneath her fingers and was horrified to find herself breathing raggedly. This isn't going to work, she thought. There's only one way I can draw Gavin Hastings with any peace of mind and that's asleep.

She had no idea how much later it was when she heard the bolt being withdrawn on the other side of the door, but some instinct made her throw her anorak over all the evidence of her endeavours.

He came in looking as mean and nasty as any demented bushranger, daubed with mud and soaking wet.

Her eyes widened, then she looked at her watch and realized he'd been away for over an hour. 'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Concerned for me, maybe even missed me?' he queried sardonically. 'No, I'm not all right. Put some water on to boil.'

Jo opened her mouth to take issue with his manner, then changed her mind, and he started to peel off his clothes.

'Uh—what happened to the umbrella and the poncho?' she ventured.

'They were about as useless as a pocket handkerchief so I threw them away.'

Joanne listened to the rain pounding on the roof for a moment.

‘Yes, well, they weren’t designed for this kind of downpour.’ She refilled the coffee-pot and set it on the stove. ‘Did you—achieve anything?’ She turned to look at him, but turned away abruptly—he was down to his underpants and socks. Then she took hold and told herself not to be spinsterish. ‘Here.’

She took a blanket off the bed and handed it over.

He didn’t thank her as he draped it around him. Instead, as their gazes met his was full of such chilling scorn that she flinched.

She had to say, ‘Look, none of this is my fault. It’s no good being angry with me. If anything, it’s counterproductive.’

‘Really.’ He sat down at the table. ‘Have you been able to come up with anything productive while you’ve been twiddling your thumbs?’ he asked unpleasantly.

She set her teeth.

‘Well, I’ll tell you what I’ve been doing,’ he said. ‘Skulking around my own property, stealing my own fuel, which I then had to carry like a packhorse, while you’ve been—’ his gaze strayed to a corner of the pencil box protruding from beneath her anorak and he swept the jacket aside ‘—I don’t believe this—painting!’

‘It’s not painting. I don’t use paints. I use oil crayons.’

‘Nevertheless—’ He stopped and studied his portrait, but what he thought of it she was destined not to know because, although he blinked once, he then looked up at her with palpable menace. ‘Do you honestly think this proves anything?’

‘I...’ She bit her lip. ‘I was hoping it would.’

‘Then you thought wrong, lady. So—’ he relaxed somewhat, but the attack didn’t relax at all as he studied the portrait again ‘—you looked your fill while I was asleep, Jo?’

Some colour came to her cheeks. ‘It’s a habit I have. Bones, lines, angles, muscles are my stock-in-trade.’

‘What about cuddling up to strange men?’

The hiss of droplets turning to steam on the stove top told her the water had boiled, but she ignored it. ‘I must have been asleep. I certainly don’t remember doing it. I must have been cold—that’s all there is to it.’

He watched her set mouth and returned her level grey gaze for a moment, then shrugged. ‘It was very pleasant, as it happens. Would you be so kind as to clear the table, Miss Lucas, and would you lend me your pink razor?’

Jo parted her lips, but then closed them.

‘You’re right,’ he said as if she’d spoken, ‘I need a shave. It might even put me in a better frame of mind. You wouldn’t happen to have a mirror?’

She had more. She had a small cake of soap, a clean, slightly damp towel, a toothbrush and toothpaste, but the mirror was tiny.

He used it all the same, squinting at it humorously for any patches of bristle he’d missed. Then he cleaned his teeth with heartfelt relief.

‘I like a lady with a good, sharp razor,’ he commented at one stage. ‘New?’ He held it up to the light.

‘It was new,’ Jo agreed dryly.

He laughed. 'Might not be good for much after ploughing through that beard, but if we ever get out of here, Jo, I'll buy you another one. Ouch.' He fingered his jaw. 'You wouldn't have any aftershave lotion, by any chance?'

'If that's designed to make me feel less than feminine,' she said pointedly, 'it's like water off a duck's back. No, I don't, but you could try this.' She handed him a bottle out of her toilet bag.

He turned it over in his hands and read the label. 'Witch hazel? What's that?'

'A very good, natural astringent that should make your skin feel all tingly and fresh.'

'Ah.' He poured some into his palms and slapped it on his face. 'You're right! A woman of great resource. Incidentally—' he screwed the cap on the bottle '—I thought I'd dispelled that less-than-feminine tag?'

During his ministrations, he'd shoved the blanket down to his waist and she had picked up his wet clothes and hung them on the other chair in front of the fire.

'I don't give a damn about what you think of me in that regard,' she replied, but the truth was the sleek muscles of his shoulders, the springy dark hair on his chest, his tapering, rock-hard torso were all hard to ignore for two reasons. The funny little sensation they brought to the pit of her stomach and a very real desire to capture such male perfection on paper.

There was a little silence. Then he said ironically, 'You're a hard nut to crack, Josie.'

She shrugged and busied herself with making breakfast—this time tinned stew and biscuits. But her fingers stilled as she remembered what he'd said earlier, and she turned to him suddenly. 'Fuel?'

His eyes narrowed. 'I wondered when that would sink in,' he murmured.

'So you got some? How? Did you get up to the house?'

He shook his head. 'There's a machinery shed not that far away.'

She turned back to the stew. 'So we're...we can...go?'

'No. There's a creek up and running between us and the gate we wouldn't get through even in a four-wheel drive at the moment.'

Jo served up breakfast. She handed him a knife and fork, then sat in the armchair with her plate balanced on her knees and chose her next words with care.

'There are some things I don't understand. Were you completely alone on the station when they kidnapped you?'

'No, I wasn't. The head stockman was—immobilized before they came after me.'

'Not killed?' Her eyes were dark with shock.

'No. But captured and tied up and removed heaven alone knows where.' He started to eat with evident hunger.

'And there was no family, no one else?' she asked with a frown.

'Jo—' he paused with his fork poised and glinted her an assessing look '—whoever they are, they'd done their homework.'

It's a long weekend, it happens to be the district's annual rodeo with all its attendant parties, B and S balls and the like. A lot of people are away from home, in other words. It so happens I was supposed to be away from home but I changed my mind at the last minute.'

'Is that why your mother isn't home?' she asked perplexedly.

This time he waved his fork. 'My mother took off for Brisbane two days ago. Some show she'd forgotten she had tickets for. I can only be grateful she wasn't there and neither, particularly, was Rosie.' Suddenly, his blue gaze seemed to drill right through her.

Jo blinked. 'She mentioned a Rosie several times when we spoke on the phone—a child, I gathered, but I couldn't work out whose.'

He stared at her for another long moment, then finished his breakfast and put his knife and fork together. 'Mine.'

Jo digested this with several blinks. 'Well, what about your wife?' she ventured.

'She died in childbirth.' He pushed his plate away and there was something completely dark and shuttered in his expression. 'Any chance of a cup of coffee?'

'Of course,' Jo murmured and got up to attend to it. 'Would...' she hesitated '...would I be right in assuming your mother is a tad absent-minded?'

He looked heavenwards. 'My mother, God bless her, has developed a memory like a sieve lately.'

'Well—' Jo put a mug of coffee in front of him '—that explains

it!’

‘You mean it explains why she forgot you were due to descend on Kin Can?’

‘Yes!’ Jo put her hands on her hips.

‘Doesn’t explain why she never once mentioned anything about getting her portrait painted—drawn, whatever—to me.’

Jo subsided. ‘Perhaps she meant to surprise you?’

‘So how do you think she was going to explain you, in the flesh, away?’

‘I don’t know—she’s your mother!’

‘For my sins—yet again,’ he said dryly, and got up. ‘I don’t suppose you have any men’s clothing in your bag of tricks?’ he added moodily and hitched the blanket around him again.

Jo merely stared at him steadily.

‘Once again, if looks could kill I’d be six feet under. OK, Miss Lucas, assuming you are lily-white, above board and all the rest, do you have any suggestions?’

Jo resisted the urge to give vent to her feelings—she posed a question instead. ‘How many are there?’

‘Two. They wore balaclavas so I have no idea who they are.’

‘How did you escape?’

He sat down on the corner of the table. ‘Checking up on me, Jo?’

‘I do only have your word for it.’

He mulled over this for a moment, then grimaced. ‘They trussed me up like a chicken and locked me overnight in a

windowless storeroom. What they didn't know was that under the lino there was a trapdoor—the house is on stilts about two feet above the ground, handy in times of flood. I got away through it.'

'How? If you were trussed up like a chicken?'

He rubbed his wrists and Jo noticed, for the first time, almost red-raw, chafing marks on the inside of each wrist. 'I found a pair of old scissors and managed to saw through the rope with them. Not that easy since my hands were tied against my back.'

'No,' she agreed with a tinge of awe, which she immediately tried to mask by adding, 'Why didn't they take you away instead of storing you in the house for a whole night?'

He glanced at her. 'Well, you see, Josie, I wasn't their target.'

She stared at him blankly.

'No,' he said meditatively and rubbed his chin. 'It was Rosie they'd planned to snatch, my six-year-old daughter—a much softer target.'

Jo's mouth fell open.

'As you say.'

'But...are you sure?'

'I'm quite sure. I heard all the discussion, all the recriminations going on throughout the night, all the new plans being made. They decided since they'd got me they'd take me in her place, but that's why they called for some back-up.'

'Thank heavens for your mother's bad memory,' Jo said a little shakenly.

'All the same, not only do I have to get myself off Kin Can,

I have to prevent my mother and Rosie waltzing back into their arms. They cut all the phone lines, you see.’

‘Won’t that make people—your mother—suspicious?’

‘Not necessarily. The system can have its problems out here and it is rodeo weekend.’

‘I do have a suggestion,’ she said slowly. ‘Not to do with how to escape, but I feel pretty sure they must have also removed...any indication it was Kin Can station from the main gate. Perhaps to confuse anyone looking for the place?’

He gave it some thought as well as tossing her a considering look.

‘Believe me,’ she said quietly, ‘that is why you found me on the back track.’

‘Hmm... You could be right.’ He shrugged. ‘The main problem now is—have they given up and gone away? Or, are they waiting to trap me somehow, even out searching for me?’

‘They don’t sound terribly well organized.’

He stood up, cast the blanket off and reached for his clothes. ‘Fate may have conspired against them, the weather certainly has, but they’re a dangerous duo—trio if Joe got through. One of them, at least, is using a mixture of drugs and alcohol to keep himself hepped up.’

Jo shivered and watched as he struggled into his damp jeans, T-shirt and jumper. ‘Did they offer you any violence? Other than tying you up?’

His lips twisted. ‘A kick in the kidneys, a wallop over the head

—’ he searched his scalp through his dark hair and winced as he obviously found a bump ‘—and several others, but perhaps I gave them some provocation.’

‘You didn’t go quietly?’ she hazarded.

‘No, my dear, I didn’t.’

Something in the way he said it chilled Jo to the core. She had no doubt Gavin Hastings would be a bad man to cross.

‘As for the rest of it, they had the foresight to immobilize every other vehicle up at the house and they locked the dogs in the shed and threw away the key. The gun was a lucky break for me. Case, the foreman, must have forgotten to put it away in the gun cupboard in the shed. I nearly tripped over it.’

Jo collected the tin plates and empty mugs and stacked them on the floor next to the stove. ‘So your plan was to intercept the other Joe and...?’ She looked a question at him.

‘Force him to drive me to the nearest phone.’ He watched her as she swept some biscuit crumbs off the table with her hand, and she became aware that the lurking suspicion was back in his eyes.

‘Silver-grey Range Rovers are pretty common, you know.’

‘Perhaps. How about a Joe and a Jo?’

She hesitated. ‘I—’

But a crack of sound split the air and a bullet tore through one wall and buried itself in the opposite wall.

For a second they both froze, then Gavin Hastings leapt off the table and in a flying rugby tackle crashed her to the floor only just before another shot splintered the door around the bolt. Two

minutes later the door had been kicked open and a man with a gun and wearing a balaclava was standing over them.

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