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PARENTS OF CONVENIENCE



Jennie Adams

Mills & Boon Cherish

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Parents Of Convenience

«HarperCollins»

Adams J.

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HIS NEWFOUND FAMILY...Max Saunders receives the shock of his life when he discovers he's the father of twin sons he'd had no idea existed—and now they are entirely under his care! How will Max cope with instant single fatherhood? By getting a nanny....Phoebe Gilbert doesn't relish the thought of living with Max, but she can't say no when little children need her! Phoebe soon realizes she's becoming more like a mom to the twins than a nanny. And it seems that Max has got another role lined up for her...as his convenient wife! Will she marry Max for the sake of the twins...?

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“Max, I’m not sure I understand where you’re heading with this.”

“Marriage. The two of us. It would solve everything,” he stated bluntly.

“What?” Phoebe stared at him and wondered if she was dreaming.

“I’m suggesting we marry,” he repeated. “I think it’s a good idea.”

For a second, Phoebe’s heart hoped. She would belong. With Max and Jake and Josh, here in this house, the four of them together. A family. Oh, wow. Max was asking her to form a family with him. He thought she was worthy of that. He’d seen something in her that made him believe....

Then Max started talking and he sounded so businesslike. “I’d have permanent care for my sons and you’d be able to get your credentials eventually, without worrying about money.”

Is that it? Is that all you think marriage means? Phoebe’s excitement sagged and she clamped her lower lip between her teeth, wishing she could clap her hands over her ears and refuse to hear another word. Life never let you off the hook that way though, so she sat there and tried to look as though he hadn’t just offered her the moon and stars, then made her wonder if they were real....

From an early age, Australian author Jennie Adams was most at home perched on a gatepost on the family farm, with her nose in a book. Her love of reading expanded into writing at age eleven, when she began a four-year tenure as a very bad poet.

A gap followed while Jennie pursued a number of careers—bank officer, piano teacher and legal secretary, to name a few. She met and married the love of her life, and had two children who soon became teenagers who knew everything and who are now the two most treasured young adults in her life. She soon realized she wanted to write the romance novels she loved to read. The pursuit of that dream eventually led to the sale of her first Harlequin Romance® novel.

This is Jennie’s debut novel!

Parents of Convenience

Jennie Adams



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CHAPTER ONE

‘HELLO. One rescue party, delivered to your door and ready to get started.’ Phoebe Gilbert examined the two smaller occupants of the room and her heart took a sentimental dive. Max Saunders’s sons were gorgeous. She registered that much while one screamed at top volume with his hands clamped over his ears and the other did his utmost to kick the side out of the best recliner chair in the room.

It looked as though Max really needed that helping hand. The man in question had his back turned while he did his best to remove his kicking child from the vicinity of the chair. He didn’t hear Phoebe’s announcement.

Given the noise level, Phoebe wasn’t particularly surprised. She stepped around an upended box of crushed breakfast cereal and a denuded potted plant and moved further into the room.

As she took in the familiar if unusually messy surroundings, a sense of homecoming crashed over her. It was immediately followed by a painful jolt to the solar plexus, because the feeling was false. She had never belonged anywhere in her life, Mountain Gem included. Not that she cared one way or the other.

You’re over it, remember? That whole ‘wish I had a family’ thing is done with.

Phoebe had a creed. Don’t wish for what you can’t have. And who would want to make a family with a woman whose mother hadn’t wanted her, whose father hadn’t wanted her, and who was barren into the bargain? Some bargain.

She gave a defiant shrug. Those days in the orphanage were long since gone. The one decent thing her father had done was to buy her way into boarding school when she’d been eleven.

Nowadays, she had her daycare children. A never-ending stream of little ones to enjoy as she moved from job to job. As long as she didn’t get too attached, she survived. Beyond that, she was self-sufficient and proud of it. She didn’t need anything more than she already had.

Perhaps coming back to Mountain Gem today had got to her because this visit was so different. In the past, she had felt like the interloper in Max Saunders’s home. Not a charity case—she couldn’t have stood that—but a visitor. Katherine Saunders’s kooky friend. Tolerated by Kath’s big brother, but barely. It had been easy to keep her own emotional distance that way, too.

Today, she was here at Max’s request. To rescue him. It tipped the scales. Yeah. That must be why these feelings had risen to the surface after she had buried them so well. With a determined sniff she focused her thoughts on the here and now. It was much more interesting, anyway.

‘Hello, Max.’ She pitched her voice louder. ‘I knocked but nobody heard me, so I just came in.’

Even from behind, Max was a commanding presence. Tall. Dark-haired. Broad-shouldered, slim about the hips and with those long, long legs. When he faced her she knew that grey eyes would look directly into hers from beneath winged brows.

Her mouth watered suddenly, and she blinked. This was Max, for heaven’s sake. The long-time antagonist of her life. The man who drove her crazy every time they met. So what was with the isn’t he gorgeous? reaction? That had never happened to her before!

Enough of this, she decided. She primed her lungs and gave it her best bellow across five paddocks effort over the screeching. ‘I see the Saunders men are doing their utmost to show the Blue Mountains a good time. Just fancy, two four-year-old boys making more combined racket than an entire Sydney daycare group put together.’

That did the trick. The boys paused momentarily in their noise. And Max whipped around so fast she barely saw the movement. She reacted, though. Her heart paused for a long moment, then restarted at double time.

A sense of panic washed through her and she told herself to wake up. This wasn't attraction. It couldn't be. Her system was just girding up for battle. Yes, that was much more acceptable. 'Hello, Max. I'm here. I'll bet you're pleased I've arrived.'

Max didn't look at all happy to see her, even though he should have been. Instead he stiffened. 'Phoebe.'

The single word, spoken in gravelly accents, managed to convey his deep displeasure at the sight of her.

What was with him, anyway? Didn't he remember this had been his idea? It was not as if she would have dropped everything and cadged a lift out of Sydney to get to him if he hadn't made his need crystal clear. Through Katherine, admittedly, but even so...

She supposed she couldn't expect Max to go too crazy admitting he needed help. It was, after all, the first time he had ever done so, to her knowledge.

And, from her viewpoint, this was about helping the boys, not about Max. When Katherine had phoned Phoebe from America she hadn't only mentioned that Max wasn't coping very well. She had hinted that Max seemed solely focused on getting the boys tidied into some small pocket of his life as quickly as possible.

That worried Phoebe.

Meanwhile, Max was staring at her with that unwelcoming expression still stamped all over him.

'Yes, it's me,' she said. 'In the flesh.' She offered him a view of the point of her chin. 'Given the circumstances, I thought I might have received a warmer welcome.'

She was here to turn this chaos around for him, after all. It may have been pure fantasy to believe he would fall down in abject relief at the sight of her, but she had at least expected civility, not an immediate return to their old hostility.

In other words, you got your hopes up and got them whacked back down to size quick smart. Surely you know better than that? Life didn't dish out lollipops, Phoebe had found. You made your own joy, or you did without. She chose to make her own, and usually she did quite well at it.

'You've caught me at a bad moment.' Max ran a hand through dark, already ruffled hair.

Familiar, slightly wavy hair that had always given her itchy fingers, not that it meant anything. She had an appreciation of fine things, that was all. She really couldn't be held accountable for the fact that she found Max aesthetically pleasing. Nor for the fact that her artistic interpretation of Max seemed to be creating more of a problem than usual this visit.

The din was back in full force again. She pitched her voice to rise above it. 'I'd guess you've had a few of those today. Bad moments, that is.' She gestured to a congealed glob of green stuff which was stuck to his shirt and resisted the urge to smirk. Max never got in a mess, in any sense of the word. 'Rough lunch?'

'There was a slight problem with the meal plans, yes.' His eyes narrowed to warning slits and his strong jaw clamped into an uncompromising line.

She had goaded him slightly, she admitted, but just the tiniest bit. In the past he had taken far more from her without letting it get to him. He really must be feeling his difficulties.

'If you've come to visit Katherine,' he said, 'I'm afraid you've picked the wrong time. She's not here.'

'Well, yes, I know that.' She pursed her lower lip over her upper. A habit she had when she needed to work out a particular complexity. Why was he pretending that he hadn't expected her?

He waved a hand at the *mêlée*, which was continuing behind him. 'As you can see, I have my hands full. I don't have time to entertain.'

'What do you mean, entertain?' It was Phoebe's turn to frown. After all, Katherine's request, or rather Max's request made through his sister, had brought Phoebe here. She knew as well as anyone that Katherine was snowbound in Montana and not likely to appear back in Oz any time soon. Yet

Max acted as though he hadn't known Phoebe was coming. A sinking feeling started up inside her and quickly took hold.

'Katherine didn't tell you it was me.' It was the only explanation. At the continued incomprehension on Max's face, Phoebe knew she was right. No wonder Katherine had been so cagey on the phone. 'The nanny. Katherine didn't tell you that I was to be the nanny for your boys.'

His face darkened beneath his tan. 'You schemed with Katherine to play nanny to my sons?'

Of all the arrogant nerve! She blinked several times while righteous anger roared through her. 'I answered a plea for help,' she articulated very slowly, as if that would help her to calm down at all. 'Quite a different thing, Max.'

Schemed, indeed! For two pins Phoebe would leave him to his pride, and his problems. Except his boys deserved better than that. They deserved to have proper care, and that field of care just happened to be her speciality.

Any fool could see they were feeling scared and uneasy. Phoebe could fix that and, now that she thought about it, she wasn't going to let the small matter of a short-sighted, incompetent new parent get in her way. Even if that parent was Max Saunders. 'It was your plea, as it happens.'

'In the first place,' Max growled, 'I don't plead. I certainly never gave out any such plea for help from you.'

She had already figured that out. Phoebe sucked her lungs full of air and got ready to blast him. 'That's not the impression Katherine gave me. She said—'

'Never mind what she said. I can guess.' His face darkened even further. 'I'll kill her.'

'Whatever.' Phoebe wasn't thirteen years old any more. Nor fifteen, nor sixteen, nor even eighteen and, yes, they had fought it out all through those formative years of hers. Had fought over her right to be in charge of herself, even though Max had had nothing to do with the keeping of her. Had fought about politics and economics and dyeing her hair black and orange. And had fought about pretty much everything else as well.

Max was thirteen years her senior. For a while, that had given him an advantage, but eventually she had caught up. Had learned to hold her own ground and started winning her share of the skirmishes.

Now she was a mature twenty-two. An experienced child-care worker and, although he had no idea of it yet, in this case, Max's salvation. She had no intention of allowing him to browbeat her into defeat before she even gave things a try.

Besides, she loved these mountains and this vast sheep and apple farm that had belonged to Saunders family members for generations.

Phoebe refused to acknowledge, even to herself, that she needed to come here sometimes. Just to soak up that oh-so-false feeling of belonging.

Hmph. If she owned Mountain Gem she would involve herself hands-on, not leave it to a manager who didn't even live on the same property. It seemed as good a thing as any to get aggressive about right now.

'How's the rare and precious stone business coming?' she sniped. 'Made any more millions lately?' Max had clinched a deal with the elusive Danvers Corporation recently to sell Saunders original jewellery creations through Danvers's Australian stores. Phoebe knew that much because Katherine had told her how pleased Max had been.

Katherine had also mentioned that Max had dated Cameron Danvers's daughter Felicity once or twice in recent months. Phoebe wondered if Max mixed business and pleasure often, then pushed the thought aside. Why should she be interested in the long line of women who paraded through Max's life, be they past or present?

'I'll set up the video link and have my managerial team give you a report,' Max sniped back over the noise of his boisterous and not at all happy sons. 'Since I've been stuck working from home,

that's as close as I ever get to the business. Where would you like to hear from first? Greece? France? Germany?

He made it sound as though watching over his sons was a real chore. Something he'd had foisted on him and didn't want.

Phoebe paused. Perhaps that was exactly how he felt. If that was the case, it simply underlined how important it was that the boys had someone here who would stand firmly in their corner. 'Actually, Max, I'm not that interested in your business.'

'Trying to goad me, Phoebe?' He offered a smile that was one hundred per cent gleaming irritation. 'If so, you'll have to do better than that.'

'No offence meant.' She gave him the benefit of an unblinking and unrepentant stare. 'I was just expressing my thoughts.'

'Always a dangerous pastime where you're concerned.'

The dart barely made an impact. For one thing, she was used to his barbs. And, for another, he was avoiding the real issue. 'There are other commitments in life that are even more important than making money.'

He glared at her. 'Is there a point to this?'

Phoebe pulled a face. Not willing to admit a thing, are you, Max?

'Well, you still look like you need help.' She glanced at the howling and kicking boys. No way would she desert them to Max's ministrations, or lack thereof. 'A lot of it, I'd say. Whatever Katherine may have led us to believe, and I might add she's hoaxed both of us not just you, that fact remains.'

She waved a hand in his direction, determined to take hold of this conversation and steer it the way she wanted.

Enough of this nonsense of him criticising her personality. She already knew she was different—the sort that broke the mould and scared most people off in the process. She didn't need Max to emphasise the point. 'You look as though you haven't slept in days—your hair's all ruffled, you have beard shadow, which is not like you at all, and you're covered in goop.'

Even so, he still managed to look gorgeous. Was it any wonder she needed to let off steam by criticising him? These mixed reactions to Max were enough to drive her crazy. At least he wasn't the reason she felt at home here.

Mountain Gem's bush setting, with its gum trees and low scrub, and the sense of stability inside the walls of the old homestead—those were the things that called to her, that could tangle her up, if she didn't watch herself. 'Even I didn't get that grotty when I was working with my daycare kids. Whether you want to admit it or not, you need me right now.'

Oh, it felt good to say those words. He would hate having to agree with her.

'What I need,' Max ground out through strong white teeth, 'is a competent, mature nanny. Someone who can help me accustom my sons to life here. They need to settle in, and soon.'

'All nicely compartmentalised? It won't work, you know.' She paused to consider the rest of what he had said. 'And, for your information, I am competent. You should see my employer references. I've worked at any number of childcare facilities, and all bar one of them—'

'I admit I've lost three nannies in swift succession.' He interrupted her as though he hadn't even been listening. Probably he hadn't, since he never took any notice when she tried to prove a point. 'The boys have been ratty. None of the nannies had a lot of experience. Frankly, I don't think you would last any longer with them than the others have.'

'So you'd like me to simply get out of the way?'

Instead of answering straight away, Max glanced down at his shirt, grimaced, tugged it off and wadded it into a ball in one tanned fist. Only then did he meet her gaze, his own unflinching and uncompromising. There wasn't a shred of warmth in it. 'I'm glad you understand. Now that we have that sorted out, I'll see you to the door.'

Suiting action to words he stepped forward, intent, apparently, on manoeuvring her outside with as much haste as possible. The gall of the man left her speechless. So, unfortunately, did the sight of so much of his bare skin.

Phoebe made a concerted effort to pull herself together. 'You're not throwing me out. I won't go.'

She slapped a hand against the centre of his chest, intent on stopping his motion towards the door. Heated, hard male flesh met the pads of her fingers, the palm of her hand.

Big mistake. She drew back, flustered and rather appalled because her body was telling her in a very clear tone that this was a man. One worthy of her feminine interest. On a personal level.

This was no sense of homecoming bothering her now. It was attraction to Max. She may have tried to deny it, but the proof was in her tingling fingers. She was on completely alien territory and had no idea how to cope with the change.

She decided to ignore it, and hope it went away. It had to be some sort of aberration, anyway. So yes, she would just shrug it off and, before she knew it, it would be forgotten. A faded memory, never to be repeated.

'I'm staying, Max, and I'm going to help your sons.' If she focused on the purpose of her presence here she would be just fine. She squared her shoulders and stepped around him.

'I've worked at Sydney Platypus Daycare.' Until they tossed me out on my ear for having too much of an opinion about everything, but that was the only bad ending I've had in a job so far. 'Trust me, four-year-old kicking screamers don't frighten me in the least, and nor does their father. You wanted a seasoned childcare worker, and that's what you've got.'

'What I've got is more trouble than I want.' Max muttered the opinion beneath his breath.

Phoebe still heard it and, typically, was goaded into retaliation. 'Don't tell me the famous Maximilian can't balance two small boys and a nanny? Doesn't sound like much of a challenge to me.'

His mouth tightened.

She told herself it served him right. He had asked for it, after all.

Stand aside, Max, and let me show you how things are done.

Besides, she had been having just the slightest bit of trouble finding a new job. When Katherine had told her about Max needing help, Phoebe had been somewhat out of funds, and she had given up her tiny bedsit in Sydney to come here. Not a good time to try to move on elsewhere just now.

Oh, bother Max anyway. This wasn't about him. She deliberately raised her voice without looking at his sons. 'I am so hungry. You won't mind if I go to the kitchen and make a big, ugly, sloppy sandwich with heaps of really gooey stuff dripping out the sides and drooling over the floor, will you, Max?'

This question elicited an appalled expression from Max, and startled but definitely interested expressions from both boys. Phoebe breezed past the lot of them to the large kitchen and hauled the fridge door open.

Secretly, she was horrified by the sight of the long, rectangular kitchen. Max prided himself on keeping that room spick and span, but at the moment it rivalled a garbage dump, with mess from floor to ceiling.

She made the best of riffling through the slim pickings inside the fridge, tossing anything edible she could find on to the one bit of service counter that wasn't already cluttered with dirty dishes. All the while she raved about her appetite and how good it would feel to stuff this sandwich down.

'I'll probably even burp loudly at the end, just like a pig,' she added with a fiendish wiggle of her brows.

Max's sons, wide-eyed and encouragingly silent, sidled inside the door, shoulder to shoulder, their gazes locked on the monster sandwich tower Phoebe was assembling with deft hands.

She hoped Max had more supplies stashed in the cupboards than he did in the fridge but, for now, she focused on her sandwich and on getting the two little boys fed so they could give in to their exhaustion and conk out for the night.

Beneath the identical sets of hazel eyes—they must have got those from their late mother—both boys sported dark, weary smudges and overly pale skins. Poor things.

‘Mmm hmm. I haven’t had a monster sandwich for ten thousand years.’ She cut the sandwich into four enormous pieces and crammed as much as she could of the first piece into her mouth, chewing in feigned ecstasy. Actually, it wasn’t too bad, given the raw materials. ‘All this needs is some milk to wash it down.’

A half bottle of the stuff being the only thing of note now left in the fridge, she helped herself to a plastic mug, which was miraculously still clean and secure in the cupboard, and swilled some down.

‘Brilliant. My tummy is starting to feel better already.’ She rubbed it appreciatively. ‘But then, not just anybody can eat a big monster sandwich like this. Only really brave people can, and people who drink milk as well to wash it down properly in the monster-honoured tradition.’

She glanced at Max and almost laughed at the expression of pure outrage on his face. Didn’t he know what she was doing?

Given that he hadn’t said anything, she assumed he was so appalled he was speechless. ‘Thanks for the food, Max. I’m sure you didn’t mind that I helped myself like this.’ She grinned at him through her milk moustache.

Inside, she silently warned him not to blow it. The boys were close to capitulating. She could feel it. But if Max went off at her now, goodness knew what would happen.

She wished he would put a shirt on, too, drat it. How could the man be so comfortable in his own skin, and so oblivious to the effect of the sight of that skin on others? Her, for example.

She stuffed more sandwich in before the thought could tumble out of her foolhardy mouth, and rolled her eyes at the boys as she slurped more milk from her mug.

Any moment now they would drop their guards fully and let her start to help them.

And any moment now Phoebe would get past wanting to run her hands all over Max Saunders’s bare chest. Sandwiches she could handle. But that other kind of craving was pure trouble.

CHAPTER TWO

‘DO YOU suppose we could give some consideration to my sons at some point?’ Max glared at the interloper in his kitchen and marvelled that he could want her so badly. His desire to throttle her was as strong as the desire had been earlier to kiss her! The first was perfectly normal. It happened to him all the time. The second was a shock.

This was Phoebe. His sister’s untamed and untameable best friend. Normally, the sight of her simply made him want to grind his teeth. He was, in fact, grinding them right now. Well, just look at her, for heaven’s sake!

Wild, coarse-looking hair in every shade from blonde to middle brown crowned her head like an unruly mop. In the centre of this display of hairdressing disaster rested an enormous pink bow with a pair of black eyes imprinted on it. When Phoebe moved he got the impression of two sets of eyeballs darting this way and that, instead of just one.

She had an elfin face, with a pointy chin that always seemed to be angled to challenge him. Right now, the normally lean cheeks were distended with sandwich and milk coated her upper lip.

‘Mmph.’ Phoebe chewed, then mumbled something around her sandwich that sounded like, ‘We are considering your sons.’

‘Not in my reality, we’re not.’ Max’s gaze moved from her face to her outrageous clothing. Her overalls were such a bright shade of pink they made his eyes ache. The green shirt she wore underneath clashed abominably. And here she was, calmly eating him out of house and home while Jake and Josh stood watching, starving. How was that helping the boys?

‘Calm down, Max.’ Phoebe had finished her mouthful of food and looked ready to take another enormous bite.

She claimed to be here to help. What a joke that was.

‘I need round the clock, competent childcare,’ Max informed her in a tone that would have made icicles sprout in a scorching desert. ‘Not some wraith-like fairy creature with nothing to share but silly monster talk that will probably make my boys cry in the night.’

As if Max needed any more of that. He wasn’t cut out for this parent thing. Just look at the mess he had made of trying to raise Katherine after their parents had died. After a few weeks of Max trying to involve himself in her life, his twelve-year-old sister had begged him to go back to working long hours. Jake and Josh’s advent into his care hadn’t met with any better success.

Max might be great at money but he stank at family. The sooner he got his sons into organised care and returned to his normal way of life, the better it would be for everyone.

First up, he had to get rid of the eating machine, namely Phoebe. Guilt pinched him briefly. Maybe she was eating because she was hungry. She did look thinner than the last time he had seen her—what, six months ago? Did she not have enough money?

That thought simply made him angry all over again, for hadn’t he tried to ensure her financial security in the past, only to have her toss his efforts back into his face in no uncertain terms?

She was Katherine’s friend, Max had plenty of funds and didn’t see the problem, but Phoebe was ever Phoebe—stubborn, cantankerous and totally unwilling to listen, even to the most reasonable of ideas.

Like accepting a permanent loan from him to set herself up in a home and get some formal training. Instead she flitted from one poorly paid assistant’s job to the next as the mood took her.

‘What was Katherine thinking, to encourage you to come here now?’

And why was he still standing here, allowing this farce to go on?

‘She was thinking smart. Something you appear to have lost the ability to do at the moment.’ Phoebe licked a drop of milk from the corner of her mouth and Max’s stomach contracted.

He recognised the feeling. He just didn't understand why it was happening to him. This was Phoebe. The bane of his life. He did not find her desirable. He simply couldn't.

Liar, liar, his libido chanted.

'I'm not scared of monsters.'

'I'm not, neither.'

Jake and Josh strode towards Phoebe on sturdy small legs, hands fisted on hips, chins stuck out.

'I eat monster s'wiches.'

'I eats 'em too.'

Since they'd arrived a week ago, his sons had alternately played up, cried inconsolably, sulked, and mashed and smashed his house to pieces. Max wondered what form the next outbreak would take, and how many seconds of peace remained until it started.

Phoebe may have got his sons to speak, but her methods were unorthodox and bound to lead to trouble. It would be best if he dispatched her now.

He fixed her with a glare and gestured towards the living room. 'If you're quite finished demolishing my kitchen, we need to talk.'

'Not right now.' She smiled back at him blandly, but with the threat of daggers in her pale blue eyes. Even the spare eyes on her bow seemed to be glaring. 'A person can't simply leave a monster sandwich sitting around the place. It might jump up and run away.'

'Don't make yourself any more ridiculous than you already are.' Max had had more than enough of her silly talk. Monster sandwiches, indeed.

But the boys giggled at her suggestion. Actually laughed. Their faces crinkled and they chortled for a full few seconds.

Something tugged at Max, deep down in his gut. How was he going to do this? They were so vulnerable, so completely dependent on him. How could he raise them or, rather, find somebody to raise them, who would come somewhere close to making up for his inadequacies? Someone who would allow them to find joy in their lives, to be happy and cheerful and carefree?

'Me eat it,' said Jake.

'Me, too,' Josh added.

'Eat the monster switchwitch.'

'And drink the milk.'

Phoebe hummed and hawed, but offered to share with a gleam in her eye that revealed a certain satisfaction.

Moments later, his sons were eating with every indication of pleasure. They drank a small cup of milk apiece, while Phoebe scooped up dishes and dumped them into the over-flowing dishwasher and Max stared, stupefied, his feet rooted to the floor.

Phoebe had only been here minutes and she had the boys literally eating out of her hand. This minor miracle. How had it come about? He had no time to consider further, because as fast as his sons had eaten and drank they drooped, and Phoebe swooped.

'Clean jammies, Max, in the bathroom.' She scooped a boy on to each hip, as though she did it all the time, and swept them away.

By the time Max joined her, bemused, with two pint-sized pairs of pyjamas in his hands, she had washed faces, supervised teeth and stripped two small bodies to the bare minimum. The boys were slipped into their night attire and herded along to their beds.

'I'll be sleeping in the room next door to yours if either of you get scared or decide your beds are too lumpy or anything.' Phoebe gave each child a quick pat and backed towards the door. 'I happen to know my bed is the most comfortable in the house, because I've slept in it heaps of times before.'

'See you.' With a wave and a grin she stepped out the door, somehow managing to herd Max with her. As she did so, she brushed against him. Max's body tensed in reaction to her nearness.

‘They’ll be crying before you can say boo.’ He stood in the corridor, waiting for the yells of rage or screeches of fear, but they didn’t come.

That just left Max, trying to deal with wanting Phoebe and wanting her out of his house in roughly equal measures. Or he told himself the balance was about fifty-fifty.

‘I’m too tired to deal with you tonight.’ He grumbled the words at her gracelessly, a counterpart to his body’s unwelcome reaction to her. She was his sister’s best friend, not to mention all wrong for Max in every way it was possible to imagine.

He did not need to desire her on top of every other thing going on in his life at present. ‘Now that they’re asleep I can’t leave them in order to drive you back into town, either. Brent—my new gardener—was going out for the evening, so I can’t ask him to do it. You’ll have to go tomorrow.’

‘No need to thank me. Yet.’ Phoebe stepped past him into the doorway of the room she always used when she visited, which, thank God, Max thought, hadn’t been often lately.

‘I realise your pride must be tangled around your ankles right now,’ she added. ‘Get some sleep. Maybe tomorrow you’ll be able to accept that I’m the best thing that’s happened to you this week.’

‘You’re not staying.’ The forceful words were a wasted effort because she’d closed the door in his face.

Disgusted, speechless, Max stared at it. Who did she think she was, anyway?

It was more of a splintering sound than an all-out crunch. In fact, as accidents went, this one almost registered as a non-event. Until Phoebe looked over her shoulder and saw the damage.

‘Oh, poop. I’m in trouble now.’ She had her hand on the door latch of Max’s monster four-wheel drive, preparing to get out, before she remembered what she had, for a split second, forgotten. She wasn’t alone.

Her two small charges didn’t hesitate to offer their reminders, gleefully, from the back seat of the Range Rover.

‘Poop, poop, poop,’ Josh crowed, getting louder with each use of the word. ‘Poop, poop, poop!’

‘You crunched it.’ This came from Jake, who had managed to slither himself around enough in his car seat to survey the farmhouse’s wrecked veranda latticing. ‘Max be mad. Mad, mad, mad.’

Phoebe grimaced a smile into the rearview mirror at the identical mirthful faces. Isn’t it great that they feel safe and happy enough to express themselves to me this morning?

‘It’s probably best if you don’t say poop too often, Josh,’ she corrected automatically. ‘Words like that are really best left for the big people. And, Jake, Max is your father, as I’ve already explained several times today. You address him as Dad or Daddy, not Max, and you don’t know if he’ll be mad because he hasn’t seen the damage yet.’

Phoebe knew, but that wasn’t the point. She had been doing so well today, too. She had got the boys up, had dressed them and herded them outside, all the while allowing Max to sleep. Total consideration, that was what she had delivered to him.

She had then forced herself to drive his enormous car to the nearest reasonably sized town, despite her trepidation at getting behind the wheel of something so intimidatingly large. With almost the last of her own dwindling funds, she had bought the boys’ breakfast and stocked up on a few necessities. All of this to help out, but would Max think about that now? She doubted it.

Phoebe didn’t want to admit that she might have wanted, even slightly, to gain Max’s approval for her extra efforts. What would be the point of that?

She kicked the toe of one booted foot against the brake pedal in frustration. ‘It’s his fault anyway, for letting the foodstuffs run out that way. No cereal in the cupboards. Barely any milk, no bread, no fruit. What was he thinking?’

She refused to acknowledge any other feelings. Like dread, anxiety or guilt. Those were for the past, for an uneasy teenager who hadn’t felt at home with herself, let alone with anyone else, and especially not here, under Max’s ever watchful eye.

‘Katherine’s friendship was worth it,’ she muttered. Meanwhile, there was only one thing for it, she decided. She had to get to Max before he got to her.

‘Jake, Josh.’ She fixed the boys with her most practised stern expression. ‘Wait here until I’m ready to get you out. Do not move. Understand?’

Phoebe emerged from the vehicle into the cool morning air and drew a deep, calming breath. A young man was working inside one of the sheds in the distance, but didn’t appear to have noticed her. Brent—the new gardener? At least he hadn’t witnessed the result of her rush of overconfidence.

What had she been thinking about, to try to back the vehicle up to the steps that way? She couldn’t even see over the headrest. ‘Oh, well. Might as well go face the music.’

As she started towards the house Max came charging out. An ominous-looking frown marred his face. Jeans, sturdy boots and a dark T-shirt all appeared to have been pulled on in a hurry, and his hair stood on end. Straight from his bed, Phoebe decided, and told her raging hormones to get over it. Like, for ever!

‘Why am I not surprised to see my car butted up to the veranda, which is now completely smashed to bits?’ Max’s question cut through the space separating them. ‘Oh, that’s right,’ he added. ‘It’s because you’re in residence.’

His gaze moved to his sons, who were still peering, grinning, over the backs of their booster seats. ‘I knew you’d be a bad influence and here’s the proof, not even twenty-four hours later. I don’t suppose you’d care to explain what you were thinking.’

‘I knew you’d react like this. How predictable.’ She may have been slightly in the wrong in this particular skirmish but, even so, Phoebe wasn’t about to admit it.

They met nose to nose at the foot of the veranda.

‘What’s predictable is you taking my car and mangling things with it.’ Max pointed to the four-wheel drive, then at the latticework, which was lying in fragments on the ground. ‘Look what you’ve done. You know you’re not a good driver. You should never have got into it.’

‘If I’m a bad driver, and I’m not saying that I am because I’m not, you can thank yourself for it.’ Did he think having this happen had made her happy, either? It had been a well-intentioned accident. Couldn’t Max at least try to see that? ‘You’re the one who attempted to teach me and proved you weren’t man enough to do a good job. And I took the car to help you, as it happens.’

‘I don’t see how crashing my car could possibly be helping me,’ Max said sarcastically. ‘And, for your information, I faced my mortality on a regular basis for months at a time for your sake so you could learn to drive. These are the thanks I get, apparently.’

Oh, good. Heap the guilt on, why don’t you? She screwed her face up into an aggressive moue. ‘I was stocking up on groceries.’

‘Is that my fault? You ate the entire kitchen for your dinner last night.’

‘I did not.’ She stamped her foot.

Max’s gaze roved over her, from the blue jeans down to the hiking boots and rust-coloured socks, then back up and over the bright orange tie-dyed cheesecloth shirt.

His anger seemed to reach fresh heights. ‘You’re naked underneath those clothes.’

‘And you’re irrational, as ever.’ She paused and blinked. In fact, it had been a very strange thing for him to say.

Suddenly all yesterday’s heated reaction was back in force. Drat Max for reminding her. Phoebe tried not to think about nakedness and Max, but didn’t do very well. She took a shaky breath.

‘If I’m irrational,’ Max said slowly and clearly, ‘it’s because you make a nutcase out of me any time we’re within shouting range of each other.’

Okay, well, maybe that brought things back into perspective a bit. If she could just settle her ruffled pheromones back into place, everything should be fine. Sort of.

‘In range,’ she repeated. ‘Um, yes.’

They were certainly in range now. So close together that she could see right into his eyes, could see the storminess and the sudden darkening as he stared down at her. Her breath caught, and she tried to whip her indignation back around her. I do not want to kiss him!

‘I’ll pay for the damage to your car and the veranda, Max.’ She stepped away from him and waved a hand as though she dealt with this kind of thing every day. And as though she wasn’t in the least disturbed by his nearness.

‘Don’t bother about the cost. I’ll fix it myself.’ Max’s hands came up to rest on his slim hips. ‘How did you get here yesterday, by the way?’

What did he care? She shrugged. ‘I hitched, of course.’

‘That’s dangerous.’ Disapproval radiated from him.

‘Hitching’s not dangerous when you know the driver well enough to trust him or her.’ She glared right back. ‘And don’t try to distract me. I’ll pay for the damage to the car and the veranda. I take responsibility for my actions, unlike some people I could name.’

‘Like newly appointed parents, you mean?’ His tone warned her to back off, fast.

Instead, she nodded and swept him with what she hoped was a shrivelling look. ‘Yes, exactly like that. I wonder what your latest female friend thinks of the two new acquisitions to your home?’

‘There is no...’ He trailed off, shook his head, and pushed out one arm in a wide, dismissive arc. ‘You’re criticising me. Again. Don’t you ever get tired of it?’

‘It’s justified.’ Phoebe poked him in the chest with one finger. This had been coming since she arrived last night. Since before then, actually, when Katherine had first told her that Max had suddenly discovered he was a father. She might as well get it out in the open and be done with it. ‘It’s not like you’ve exactly proved to be the commitment type in the past, is it? One girlfriend after the next, and none of them lasting beyond their first hint that they’d like something more from you than sex and a rapid farewell. It’s no wonder you weren’t told you were a father, even if I am surprised that you were careless about something like that.’ She prodded him with her finger again. ‘Do you even want them, Max? You certainly don’t act like it.’

As the words tumbled out, she realised she had gone too far and wished she could take them back. Max’s face slowly blanked of all expression, until only a stark, hard-edged mask remained.

‘I think it’s time I put a stop to this,’ he said in a voice that was chilling in its calmness. His hand snaked out and wrapped around her arm. ‘Before I lose my temper. As for my sex life, it’s no business of yours.’

‘Am I supposed to be scared?’ She fell back on bravado and hoped it would work.

Max simply glared at her. ‘That might be a good idea.’

‘Well, I’m not scared. Far from it.’ She tugged at her arm and he let it go.

Phoebe couldn’t let the conversation go, though. She ploughed on, well aware that she was in dangerous territory, but she needed to know this. ‘Do you deny that you’re just trying to push your sons off on to a nanny so you can ignore them? You can’t just bury yourself in work, in your old way of life, and pretend everything else doesn’t exist.’

For a moment he didn’t speak. When he did, his words were cold, his eyes hard and unyielding. ‘I will make the choices for my sons that I believe are in their best interests and that, Phoebe, is not something I will justify to you or negotiate about.’

Although he still looked angry, Phoebe also got the impression she had hurt him. Regret unfurled inside her. ‘Max.’ She stretched out a hand.

He ignored it and stepped back, gesturing towards the back of the car. ‘My sons are getting restless. Maybe you should get them out of the car, if you’re quite finished with this little discussion.’

‘What about you?’ She bit her lip. ‘What are you going to do now?’

‘I’m going inside to phone around for a new nanny. What else?’

The dart found its mark, although she tried hard not to show it. She didn't want to go. Stupid, wasn't it, to want to hang around here? All that was likely to happen if she did was that she would get too attached to Max's sons and be upset when she had to leave them.

Phoebe tried, but sometimes her overactive mothering instinct didn't exactly stay under control as well as she wanted it to. Empty womb syndrome, she thought, trying to be cynical and failing utterly.

She refused to admit that she might not want to leave Max either.

'Whatever you feel is best, Max.' She lifted one shoulder and let it drop. 'The only thing I care about is that your boys are in the best hands.' A hint of steel crept into her voice. 'And that is something that I will make absolutely sure of, no matter what.'

He shook his head. 'Do I really need to remind you that you don't even have a say in this?'

Indeed, she didn't have a say. They weren't her sons. She had no hold on them whatsoever, despite the fact that they had crept into a corner of her heart already, just by being their cute, irascible selves.

Phoebe had no business feeling attached to Max, either, even if it was only physical attraction. And it was only that, she assured herself. Which was bad enough.

'You can say what you want.' She returned him stare for stare, determined that he wouldn't guess he had hit a raw patch with that last question. 'It won't change my attitude one iota.'

'Won't it? We'll see about that.' Max turned on his heel and walked away.

CHAPTER THREE

‘FINE. Let Max get his new nanny and bring her back here and send me packing. As if I care about it.’ Phoebe tossed the damp towel in the hamper, hitched her old nightshirt back on to her shoulder where it had slipped down, and stepped out of the bathroom into the hallway.

Max had been gone all day. He had stalked to his study after their altercation, then left a while later, without so much as a by your leave and looking grim enough that she had decided to keep out of his way.

He hadn’t returned since and, even as Phoebe thought about this, irritation flared afresh.

She paused to peek into the boys’ room and nodded with satisfaction when she saw that both Jake and Josh were still soundly asleep. That little tug thing happened in her heart again, and she sighed. The boys had been a gift to her for such a short time.

‘I’ll get over it.’ But she didn’t feel particularly reconciled. In fact, the more she thought about this whole day, and the previous evening, too, the angrier she became all over again.

‘The man doesn’t want me here,’ she muttered, stalking determinedly away from the bedroom with the two sleeping forms in it. ‘He doesn’t trust me to do a good job, yet he leaves me alone with his sons all day and doesn’t even tell me where he’s going. As if I wouldn’t start to fall for them when he leaves the field clear for me like that.’

It was Max’s fault that she was struggling not to care. All his! Phoebe hurried on towards the kitchen and the promise of a cup of soothing tea before she turned in to bed. Today would doubtless be her last in the role of nanny here. After that, all these inner turmoils would be a moot point, anyway.

A light shone at the end of the kitchen. Max sat at the table, eating the meal she had set aside for him and poring over a batch of documents. He must have got back while she’d been showering.

‘Where’s the new nanny? I thought you’d have brought her with you.’ Phoebe paused in the doorway, her bare feet braced on the vinyl flooring. The room was cool, the large windows over the sink reflecting the inky blackness outside.

Max wasn’t quite as cool. His expression reflected both weariness and heat. The latter set her senses on alert, and she pulled an irritated face at herself. Not now, okay? As if she didn’t have enough on her mind.

She couldn’t help thinking that Max was affected too, though, which only made it tougher for her to distance herself from her reactions to him. It amazed her that Max could want her, even on the most basic of levels. Things had changed. She didn’t quite know why, but something told her there would never be any going back to the way they used to be.

What did that leave, though? She certainly wasn’t interested in becoming one of his many fly-by-night involvements. Fortunately, she could control these random reactions to him. Provided she kept her distance, she was under no threat.

‘Thanks for leaving me a meal.’ Max glanced back down at his plate, then up again. ‘I didn’t expect you to go to any trouble.’

‘Believe it or not, I can be quite organised when I try.’ Phoebe relaxed somewhat, confident in her ability to hold her foolish reactions to him at bay. ‘I didn’t actually find it too dramatic to cook enough food for four dinners instead of three, even with such limited resources to choose from.’

It seemed best to try not to dwell on the fact that her skin was tingling simply because Max was near.

She came further into the room, noticing for the first time the clutter of bulging shopping bags at the far end. Max had apparently, at some point during his day-long absence, found time to stock up on grocery supplies. ‘You haven’t answered my question. Do you have a new nanny organised?’

He pushed his plate and the documents aside and gestured for her to join him.

She did. Reluctantly. Nobody liked to be fired, after all, and that was what Max was bound to do to her any moment now.

Up close, Max looked even more tired, and she acknowledged that her presence here hadn't helped him, much as she had believed it could. Even though she still believed she could assist him a great deal with his sons, it wasn't going to happen.

Phoebe decided that she would rather bow out of her own accord than have Max push her. Given their propensity towards wanting to kill each other on sight, she supposed it was no surprise that Max didn't want her here.

The inexplicable heat they seemed to be generating between them was simply another complication to pile on to the rest. Max didn't like complications. Phoebe didn't either, really.

Still, something in the region of her heart ached at the thought of leaving. She told herself to ignore it. Just so long as Max had made acceptable arrangements. The boys had to come first, no matter what.

'I can be out of here any time you want, Max.' There. She had made it easy for him, and it barely felt like cutting out a piece of herself at all. Phoebe was used to taking care of herself. This time would be no different. 'I only came to help you because I thought you wanted me and were in a bad way.'

'I was in a bad way.' The admission was gruff.

'Yes, you were in a mess.' She smiled to let him know she meant no malice by the comment. 'For what it's worth, Jake and Josh have had a reasonable day. I did my best to keep them busy.'

'And cleaned up most of the house while you were at it.' He shook his head. 'You didn't have to—'

'I know.' Even so, it had been kind of fun, playing house for a while in something larger than a shoe box. Dangerous, too, though, because playing house was too close to playing happy families. To falling in love with the boys. To wanting Max, and aching for things she could never have.

Argh! Phoebe suppressed the aggravated screech building up inside her. She must need to get out in the sunshine more or something. Build up the happy vibes inside her head and put a stop to these underrated, overdramatised, ridiculous yearnings.

'Sometimes it's better for little children to get the feeling that you're simply going about your business,' she said, pulling herself back to the conversation with some difficulty, 'with them tagging along. It takes the pressure off them a bit. Anyway, it was just for the day.'

Now that the time had come to bow out she found it difficult to come up with the right words, but she promised herself she would get there somehow. No way would she allow Max to even suspect that she didn't want to move on. 'So, when does the new nanny arrive? Tonight? Is she from Sydney? Travelling out by car? I can be out of your hair in no time.' Once I check her over and decide she's okay. 'You'll barely notice I've been here.'

This seemed to amuse Max, for he glanced at her in a rather comprehensive way and shook his head. 'You're a lot of things, Phoebe, but unnoticeable isn't one of them. Everything about you draws attention, whether you intend it to or not.'

'I don't see how that can be true.' Or at least not in a positive way. Basically, she considered herself to be a mere blob on the greater canvas of life. If she were to be abducted by aliens tomorrow, who would even care? Katherine, she supposed, but that was about it. Max would probably send the aliens a sympathy card.

Max's rich laugh rang out. 'Don't you? What about the way you dress, for starters?'

'Dress?' Oh, that. She chose her clothing from second-hand shops mostly, or bought cheap from warehouses when she got the chance. 'I admit I don't dress like a business executive, but then—' she shrugged '—I'm not one.'

'The guitar and the emblem? Those are not attention-getters?'

For a moment she didn't understand what he was talking about. She certainly wasn't any kind of musician. Then she glanced down at her T-shirt. Although faded now, it sported a screen print of an electric guitar, with the words *Bite Me* emblazoned across the front.

'This thing?' She shrugged. 'It was, um, a gift from a band member I knew once. I could hardly refuse to wear it.'

With Max examining the article so thoroughly, she felt very aware of her bareness underneath.

To distract herself, she peered across the kitchen at the groceries and noticed a bag overflowing with bananas. 'Are you sure you haven't overdone it on the fruit? I hope half of that doesn't go to waste.'

Max followed the direction of her gaze. 'I bought them for the banana-smoothie freak.'

'What? But I won't be here.' Banana smoothies were a long-time passion of hers, a fact that both Max and Katherine knew well. Phoebe stood up and padded across the room to poke the bag with one foot.

Did he mean to give her the bananas as some sort of parting gift? Then a different thought occurred. 'Oh. Does the new nanny like banana smoothies too?'

'There is no new nanny.' Max joined her beside the pile of bags. His voice roughened to a gruff rumble. 'There's just you and a heap of bananas. You might as well stay long enough to eat them.'

It wasn't the warmest invitation-cum-job-affirmation she had ever had. And it was painfully temporary. Despite all this, her heart lifted. She could stay. Help the boys. Enjoy....

Hello. Stop sign, here. No dreaming the impossible, remember?

'What happened? Did the boys' reputations scare off all the contenders?' She didn't mean that. In fact, she felt Max had greatly exaggerated any behavioural challenges they may have displayed since they'd arrived.

Frankly, they struck her as two very normal, very vigorous little boys who'd recently lost their mother and didn't quite know what to do with their new surroundings. 'No, even though they're a little out of sorts at the moment, I find that hard to believe. You must be looking in the wrong places.'

'Trust me, I looked. I asked. I phoned around.'

'For an hour tops this morning, then you disappeared. Are you telling me you spent all day scouring agencies and came home empty-handed?' Foolishly, a part of her needed to believe that Max had really wanted to keep her on. She slapped that part down hard.

'I started. I met a few people.' Frustration filtered into Max's tone. 'An old bag with a pursed-up mouth, a woman who was so out of shape she got puffed getting out of her chair. Cranky nannies, stupid ones, disciplinarians in sheep's clothing.'

He made a chopping motion with his hand. 'It wasn't working. None of them felt right. I gave up and spent the afternoon at my office, trying to get some work done and figure out what to do about this problem. Neither of which effort was particularly successful.'

'I see.' And Phoebe thought she probably did. In the face of all those problematical nannies and his unsatisfactory time at work, Max had stockpiled on bananas and come back to regroup. To get his plan honed down to razor sharpness before he went out and snaffled not just a good nanny but a nanny par excellence, tailored to his exact requirements.

That made a rather Max kind of sense. 'You need time to sort things out? You'd like me to hang around until you can do that? A few days, maybe.' For good or bad, she didn't even hesitate. 'I'll do it.'

For the boys, she added silently, but only in the same way any responsible childcare worker would care about them. It was a belated effort to justify her decision. She was about to say more when a shaft of moonlight outside the window drew her attention to a number of bulky boxes. 'What's all that?'

Max followed the direction of her gaze. 'It's a climbing frame for the boys. It has to be assembled, but I should be able to knock that out in a couple of hours tomorrow.'

Wow. She hadn't expected him to think of something like that. 'Good idea. It'll give them something to expend their energy on other than kicking in your furniture and screaming the house down.'

He grimaced. 'That was the idea, and I have to have something to keep me occupied while I work out what to do with them.'

Some force compelled her to tell him, 'You could be a brilliant father, Max, if you just let yourself—'

'Don't.' He trapped her in an angry gaze. 'Don't tell me what I can and can't do, or be.'

Well, she supposed she had asked for that. Acknowledging his answer didn't make it any more palatable, though. Why couldn't he just love them, accept them? Instead of trying so hard to keep them at arms' length?

Was she asking about his boys now, or about herself? The boys, of course! Phoebe had sorted out her own life history long ago and, she might add, none of it had anything to do with Max. Drat it, whatever bee had got in her brain box, she wished it would get back out again.

'I'll help you as much as I can.' That was what mattered most right now. When he turned to face her, she offered a small smile. 'It's what I came here for.'

She laughed a little, just to show she didn't care too much. That she wasn't still just a little bit worried that getting to play families any longer might cause problems for her later. 'Until you get a new nanny, that is.'

'Thank you, Phoebe. I appreciate your willingness to try.' The words may almost have choked him—she didn't know—but at least he gave it a go. 'And it would be a shame to waste the bananas.'

If Max could attempt a joke, the least she could do was be gracious. In the spirit of the moment, she stuck out her hand. 'To my tenure as temporary nanny, then.'

Max took her hand in his. 'To getting my sons settled.'

Their opinions on the term settled didn't exactly line up, but Phoebe nodded anyway, then retrieved her hand from the disturbing contact with his. 'May I ask you some questions?'

Now might not be the best time, but when would be better? Max was in a reasonably mellow frame of mind, they were trying to get along and the boys weren't here to eavesdrop on the conversation.

'What is it that you want to know?'

'I'd like you to tell me about their mother.' Did you love her? Was she in love with you? Are you still in love with her? Or was she just like all the others? Can you not even remember what she looked like properly?

Phoebe told herself she wanted to know for the boys' sakes, but it wasn't entirely true. She wanted to know how Max had felt about the woman who had mothered his children. And she wanted to know what kind of woman had given birth to Max's sons. Had nursed them through the baby illnesses and toddling scrapes and bruises.

What Phoebe wouldn't give for a chance at all of that. After all her careful thoughts, Phoebe was disgusted to realise she was jealous of someone who wasn't even alive any more. Of someone who had been close to Max once in a way Phoebe would never be.

Are you mad?

She had to be, to even consider wanting that kind of relationship with him. Max didn't stay with women, she warned herself. Phoebe shouldn't have asked about the boys' mother. Shouldn't have opened up the subject. Except that the boys needed to be able to deal with their feelings. So she explained, 'If I'm to help Jake and Josh to adjust to the changes taking place in their lives, I need to understand a bit about their mother.'

'Maryellen was a university lecturer who happened to have an interest in precious gems, particularly in some of the more unique settings such as Saunders Enterprises provides.' A muscle in Max's jaw tightened. She got the feeling he didn't really want to be talking about this but, even

so, he held her gaze. 'I met her at a special display evening of some of our more unique Australian opal designs.'

His comments revealed nothing of what he may have felt towards Maryellen. Was that because he hadn't cared about her really?

'I suppose she was gorgeous.' The words bubbled out before Phoebe could stop them.

Max's shrug confirmed it. 'We had a brief affair. She was a career woman to the core. She certainly wasn't interested in commitment and neither was I. At the end of her visit to Sydney, we parted amicably and I forgot about her until the day her lawyers contacted me, informing me of her death, my paternity and the expectation that I should collect my sons immediately.'

So Maryellen had just been another in the long line of Max's conquests, but perhaps, if Max had known she was having his children, that might have been different. Oh, Phoebe just wished she could stop worrying at the whole issue!

Max blew out a long breath. 'The boys were in the care of the nanny Maryellen had used but she was a teenager, relying on her mother to help her until I got there. It was far from an ideal situation.'

Tension radiated from Max's big body and he clamped his jaw down hard. 'Discovering I was a father came as a shock, but it shocked me more that Maryellen never contacted me. I thought she knew me well enough...'

Apparently Max had thought they'd had some kind of connection. 'Does this mean you're secure in terms of custody?' Phoebe wanted to know.

'Yes. Maryellen had no other family and I was named as sole guardian and also noted on their birth certificates as their father. There's no doubt that they're my responsibility.'

What a sad way to put it. What an even sadder thing it was that if Maryellen hadn't died Max might very likely never have known he had sons. 'I'm sorry, Max.'

'It doesn't matter.' His expression became fierce for a moment before he smoothed it back into bland indifference. 'All that counts now is that I do my best for them.'

How did he reconcile that with wanting to dump them off on to a nanny? 'Just one other thing. I'm sorry to ask, but how did Maryellen die?'

'An accident at an archaeological site. The boys weren't with her at the time.'

Phoebe didn't want to think about it any more. Her emotions had jumped back and forth quite enough for one day. 'I'll say goodnight, Max. It's getting late and I'm sure the boys will be up with the kookaburras in the morning.'

'Thank you, Phoebe.' Max caught her arm as she moved to pass him, staying her. 'For agreeing to remain here for now.'

A lot went unsaid in those few words. Their antagonism and attraction. The fact that it wouldn't be easy. That they were both on uncharted ground in this.

'You're welcome.' She looked up at him, thinking that would be the end of it. But something in his gaze changed and he bent his head, probably to drop a kiss on her cheek.

Okay. It would be a novel experience, Max being nice, but she would do her best not to keel over with shock. Phoebe braced to receive the salute, then felt her breath hitch as his lips met not her cheek, but her mouth. The feelings that bombarded her then, stunned her to her toes.

All she could think, was, Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness, oh-my-goodness! She was going into shock, or cardiac arrest or something. Her breath stuttered, a shiver started at the base of her neck and quickly suffused her.

Max's hands gripped her shoulders, holding her still while his mouth moulded to hers in slow, steady exploration. No wonder women got involved with him, even though he was a love 'em and leave 'em type. The man's kisses were dynamite.

Phoebe melted into him, into the kiss. Like a big old blob of butter in a pan. Why, oh why, had he done it? Why did he continue it, even now as her bones melted?

It was Max, not Mountain Gem or Katherine or any of the rest of it, that gave her that feeling of coming home. The thought came from nowhere. She denied it instantly. It couldn't be that. This was a potent kiss, from an experienced man, that was all.

And oh, boy, it really was all that. She lost her concentration in the heat of it. Sensations bombarded her from all sides. The touch of those warm, firm lips, pressed so intimately against her own. The scrape of his jaw against her softer skin.

His fingers moved to her chin, angling it as he kissed her, and she wanted to be angled and kissed more and still more.

For a moment insanity took her, and she kissed him back with all her worth. Their bodies pressed together and his arms crushed her close. Heat roared through her, burning her up until she was almost convinced she could smell scorched butter. But sense and reason came back eventually, and with them an all-important question. Two, actually.

What was she doing?

And with Max, of all people?

'No.' She wrenched away on a gasp, horrified by her own complicity and thoroughly uneasy with Max's behaviour. Was he lost in thoughts of Maryellen? Had that made him kiss Phoebe? A sort of misplaced guilt or resentment or something?

All Phoebe knew was that she had almost become crazy for a moment there. Had almost believed that there was something about Max that she had to have to survive. Madness. Sheer idiotic lunacy. It was just as well she had come back to her senses before things went any further.

Max appeared as stunned as her, his face etched in taut lines as he stared at her, breathing hard. 'That was—' He broke off, raked both hands through his hair as though all the demons of hell had come to roost on him at once.

Then he forcibly rearranged his facial muscles. Rolled his shoulders. Sucked in a deep breath and blew it out again. 'So you'll be helping out as the nanny until I can get a replacement. I'll payroll you at the same rate I offered the others.'

He named a figure.

Phoebe nodded without taking it in. Back to business was good, if only she could get even a single part of her to change to the appropriate channel, instead of getting stuck on FM One-Oh-Kiss!

'Good.' Max inclined his head and took a step backwards, then another. 'Great. That's settled then. That's all...settled.'

'Settled,' Phoebe parroted and, for good measure, nodded just as Max had done. She was still in shock, her senses reeling, some unhelpful part of her suggesting that Max's kiss was something she might like to repeat. Right now, even. 'It's business, right?'

'Yes.' Max pushed his hands into his pockets and studied the painting on the wall to her left. 'That's right.' His gaze tracked over her and, once she was thoroughly singed, moved away again. 'It's business.'

Good. They could forget this had ever happened. That was best. Because clearly Phoebe couldn't afford to be attracted to Max. Not when it resulted in this kind of impact on her.

She would keep right out of his path in future, metaphorically speaking. Keep it businesslike. Avoid all thoughts of intimacy. And, while she was at it, she would avoid all comparisons between Max, his sons and herself and any kind of happy families.

Max wanted to payroll a nanny. For now, Phoebe was that person. She would think of the job as clocking in, clocking out. A business arrangement, no feelings involved. She could do that. Right? 'That's all organised, then.' She tried for some sort of distant nonchalance, failed utterly and decided to cut and run instead. 'Uh, I'll see you around,' she said, and fled.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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