



Covert

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: I'm a runaway princess. He's my grumpy boss.

Together, we're a royal disaster waiting to happen.

Sick of being coddled by her royal family, Sam is determined to prove her independence. Her brilliant plan? Taking a job as a butler to the most infuriatingly stubborn man she's ever met.

Dylan likes his life neat, predictable, and completely free of complications. Sam is bossy, beautiful, and hiding something big.

She's one giant complication!

When he uncovers her secret, their arrangement is doomed.

Because keeping his distance is impossible, and falling for a princess? That's a scandal he might not survive.

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Samantha Piper needed this job more than she needed anything in her entire twenty-five years on the planet.

So what if she'd tampered with the truth, changed her surname, and taken a crash course in subservience? It would be worth it.

Besides, she would've done a lot worse to gain employment as Dylan Harmon's butler.

"What do you think?" Sam pirouetted in front of her best friend, Ebony.

"Honestly?" Ebony made circles at her temple with her index finger. "I think you're nuts."

"Why? Doesn't the uniform fit?" Sam glanced over her shoulder at her reflection in the mirror. "Does it make my butt look big?"

Ebony snorted. "Oh yeah, your minuscule toosh looks gigantic." She rolled her eyes. "Give me a break."

Sam laughed and sat on the part of anatomy under discussion. "You're probably right. I am nuts, but this is what I want to do. The least you can do is support me."

Ebony wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "Hey, who's been your biggest fan all these years? And who gave you a crash course in 'bowing and

scraping, butler-style'? Not to mention a glowing reference."

Sam snickered. "Point taken. Let's hope I remember your tips when it comes to the crunch."

"When is that?" Ebony tapped her bottom lip, pretending to ponder. "When the dashing Dylan asks you to hold his warmed towel as he steps from a hot shower, water sluicing down his great bod, from his broad shoulders to his—"

"Stop." Sam clamped a hand over her friend's mouth. "If I wasn't nervous before, now I'm petrified."

"Since when has any guy intimidated you?"

"If you're referring to my archaic father and his crones, fine, I can usually handle them." She grimaced. "I hope Dylan Harmon proves to be as amenable."

Ebony chuckled. "I'm sure your five hunky brothers would love to hear you describe them as crones."

Sam wrinkled her nose. "To you, they're hunks. To me, they're major pains in the ass."

"Whatever." Ebony glanced at her watch. "Isn't it time you left? Wouldn't want to miss your flight and be late on your first day."

Sam noted the time on her bedside clock and sighed. "Wish me luck. I'm going to need it."

Ebony hugged her. "You'll be fine. Remember everything I taught you and it'll be a cinch."

If only.

Since when had Sam's life been easy? She'd bucked the system for as long as she could remember, ignoring the old-fashioned views of her parents, who were still caught up in the ancient fairytale of their royal blood.

So she descended from Russian royalty? Big deal.

The more her family treated her like a princess, the more she wanted to rebel. When her five, older male siblings joined her parents in reinforcing her "duties" as the only princess in the family, she'd been pushed over the edge.

The result? A three-month contract in Melbourne as Dylan Harmon's butler, as far as she could get from Queensland, family constraints, and their ridiculous expectations.

What better way to shun family ties and prove her independence than accept a position as some rich boy's servant?

Not that she'd told her family that. Instead, she spun some lame story about meeting a prospective husband through her friend Ebony, and they'd bought it. In fact, her parents had practically pushed her out the door when she mentioned the possibility of matrimony to an influential man like Dylan Harmon.

After all, what better way to ensure royal heirs than matching their princess daughter with the prince of Australia's landowners?

"Good luck, honey, you'll be fine. And remember, call me if you need anything." Ebony blew her a kiss as she walked out the door, leaving Sam alone with her thoughts.

Picking up her bag and scanning the room one last time, Sam hoped her best friend

was right and everything would be fine, as long as she kept her mind on the job and Dylan Harmon didn't treat her like the rest of the men in her life.

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She'd had enough of egotistical, overbearing males to last a lifetime, and she had it on good authority he was one of the best.

Defying her brothers was one thing, gaining the upper hand with one of Australia's most eligible bachelors would be another entirely.

Not that his good looks would intimidate her. She loved a challenge, and handling the likes of Dylan Harmon shouldn't be a problem.

Now she had to believe it.

2

Dylan stepped from the shower and dried off, before wrapping a towel around his waist and reaching for a razor.

While shaving, he heard the bedroom door slam and assumed it must be the new butler his mother hired. Not that he needed one, but Liz Harmon seemed hell-bent on making his life easier these days.

"Is that you, Sam? I'll be out in a minute."

Splashing aftershave into his palms and patting his face, he wondered what sort of man his mother deemed suitable. Sam Piper must be a jack-of-all-trades, because his mother believed he needed someone to lend him a hand in all facets of the business.

If he hadn't been so pig-headed, she'd have hired someone a long time ago. They'd

argued about his workload for far too long and he'd finally given in, knowing his mother's interference sprang from concern rather than any great desire to rule his life.

Strolling into the bedroom, he came face to face with a woman.

Not just any woman, but a delicate waif wearing a navy blue uniform with the Harmon coat of arms over her left breast. Once his gaze strayed to her chest, he had a tough time wrenching it back, because the evidence of her femininity, combined with the uniform, could only mean one thing.

"Hi, I'm Sam Piper. Pleased to meet you."

The woman held out her hand and he continued to stare, taking in her short blonde curls, wide green eyes, and heart-shaped face. Not classically beautiful but there was something about her... she had an indefinable quality that could captivate a man before he knew what hit him.

He shook her hand, surprised by the firmness of her grip. "You're the new butler?"

She gave a quaint little bow. "At your service... Sir."

He noted the cheeky pause, the twinkle in her eye. His first assessment had been right. She could be trouble.

"Call me Dylan. Though it won't be for long."

She straightened her shoulders. "Why is that?"

"Because you're fired."

He turned away and headed for the wardrobe, wondering what had possessed his

mother to pull a stunt like this.

“If you’re looking for the charcoal suit, white silk shirt, and maroon tie, they’re hanging on the back of the door.”

He stopped mid-stride and turned around, surprised she appeared unperturbed by his putting an abrupt end to her employment. In fact, she hadn’t moved an inch and didn’t seem at all concerned. “How did you know?”

She shrugged, and he noticed the stubborn set of her shoulders, the subservient clasped hands in front of her body at odds with the defiance in her steady gaze.

“You’re a man of habit. You always wear that combination on a Wednesday.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’ve been studying me?”

“Call it research.” Her demure smile didn’t fool him for a second, especially when defiance sparked her eyes. “All part of the job, Sir.”

“Don’t call me that,” he snapped. He strode across the room and picked up the clothes, wondering when he’d become so predictable. “What are you still doing here? Didn’t you hear me before? Your employment is terminated.”

“I heard you, but I’m not going anywhere.”

He glared at the waif. Rather than being intimidated as most people were around him, she met his gaze directly, not flinching when he moved towards her.

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“Care to repeat that?”

Sam squared her shoulders and silently wished for an extra few inches. It would be difficult to appear threatening when she had to tilt her head back to stare her new employer in the eye, though it provided her with the perfect excuse to stop ogling his near-naked body.

Her gaze had been drawn to that damn towel too often for her liking and she needed something, anything, to distract her.

“You can’t fire me. I’ve signed a three month contract.”

Danger glinted in his eyes, the colour of molten chocolate, and she mentally chastised herself for comparing them to her favourite food.

“Contracts can be broken.” He took a step closer, making her all too aware of his broad, bare chest mere centimetres away.

Resisting the urge to run her hands over his muscular pecs and see if they felt as firm as they looked, she struggled to maintain composure. “I had an intensive interview. I’m sure your mother can vouch that I possess all the necessary skills for this job.”

He barked out a laugh devoid of amusement. “You honestly think you’ve got what it takes to be my butler?”

Sam bit back a smile. Dealing with Dylan Harmon would be easier than facing her brothers’ inquisitions for the last umpteen years.

“If you’re after someone with the right attitude, the right qualifications, and a genuine love of the job, then yes, I’m your woman.”

Her breath hitched as he stared at her, and she hated the helpless flutter deep in her gut that she may have taken on more than she could handle.

“Okay, Miss Piper. Consider yourself on trial for the next three months.” He took a step closer, bringing him within touching distance. “But if you make one wrong move, you’re out.”

Sam battled the urge to close her eyes and block out the hypnotic intensity of his stare. Instead, she took a steadying breath, wishing her erratic pulse would calm down.

As a waft of subtle aftershave with a hint of cloves hit her, she clenched her teeth, wishing her traitorous senses would stop misbehaving. So the guy had a great body, soulful eyes, a killer smile, and smelled good enough to eat? She’d dated better and come away unscathed.

Then why the jittery feeling that wouldn’t quit?

“Call me Sam.” She turned away before she did something stupid, like manhandle her boss on the first day.

“Samantha,” he said, determined to get the upper hand in true alpha fashion.

She knew that tone, the one her brothers used when they were beaten and didn’t want to give in too easily. So Dylan wanted to prove a point by calling her Samantha? No big deal. At least she’d survived his attempted sacking and it had proved to be a lot easier than expected.

“Can I get you anything else?” She gestured at the clothes laid on the bed, hoping he’d send her on an errand that involved being as far away from him and his skimpy towel as possible.

“Actually, yes.” His smirk and sardonic quirk of an eyebrow left her in little doubt she wouldn’t like her assignment. “Your first job can be to reorganise my underwear drawer. I want everything colour coded, neatly arranged, and segmented for every day of the week.”

Yep, she’d been right. He wanted to make her squirm. And oddly, the thought of touching his underwear did exactly that.

Heat flooded her cheeks, though she bit back a host of retorts about what he could do with his underwear and where he could stick it. “Fine.”

“While you’re at it, please choose me something to wear today. Under my suit, that is.”

Sam risked a glance over her shoulder. She could’ve sworn he was laughing at her. However, he stood in the middle of the room, hands clasped over the front of his towel, trying his best to look innocent. She almost snorted at the thought.

How could Lucifer’s evil twin look innocent?

She stalked across the room, opened the top drawer of the dresser, and rummaged around. To her surprise, the first undergarment she laid her hands on was a thong. Leopard print, no less.

Stifling a grin, she hooked it with her index finger and held it out to him. “Perhaps this would be suitable for today?”

His jaw dropped. There was no other way to describe it, because she'd never seen a guy with so much poise appear so totally and utterly shocked.

“That’s not mine,” he said, distaste marring his handsome features.

“Really? Because it’s in your drawer.”

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The corners of her mouth twitched as she struggled to maintain composure.

“Are you calling me a liar?” He placed his hands on hips and glowered as the towel around his waist slipped an inch.

The action distracted her, and for one horrifying yet thrilling moment she thought it might slide down his legs and pool on the floor, along with what was left of his dignity.

Before she could reply he hitched the towel up, strode across the room, and snatched the offending garment out of her hand.

“Give me that. Meg’s been up to her tricks again.”

Sam should have known. Meg was probably five-ten, perfectly proportioned, and had a million silky thongs on rotation.

“One of your conquests?” She couldn’t resist asking, though what he did in his private life shouldn’t concern her in the slightest.

“My wayward niece,” he muttered, “who takes great delight in tormenting me.”

“Way to go, Meg,” she mumbled, thrilled at the thought of any woman getting the better of her uptight new boss.

“I beg your pardon?”

Resisting the urge to imitate his plummy tone, Sam schooled her face into what she hoped was a mask of respect.

“Nothing. Should I get started on my first assignment?” She pointedly stared at the thong in his hand.

“Forget it.” He scrunched the scrap of silk and flung it across the room, where it landed neatly in the trash. “As of now, your duties will consist of business affairs only. I’m more than capable of taking care of myself. Consider this room off limits.”

Fine with her. The less time she spent around the semi-naked tyrant, the better.

In fact, everything about the job had worked in her favour so far and she hoped her luck would hold out.

With a placating smile, she nodded. “Certainly. Where would you like me to start?”

He stared at her for an interminable moment, before turning away and heading to the bathroom. “Meet me in the den in fifteen minutes. We’ll discuss today’s agenda then.”

Dismissed, she gave a mock salute behind his back and headed for the door.

“Samantha, there’s one more thing.” His commanding tone halted her and she swivelled to face him. “Lose the uniform.”

“Now?”

The response slipped out before she could censor it, typical of the feisty banter she exchanged with her brother’s friends, who were like family.

Interest glinted in his eyes before he blinked and stared at her, one brow arched. “Since when did the hired help get so provocative?”

“Since when did the employer think he could ask questions like that?”

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you to not answer a question with a question?”

“No, but she taught me to stay away from men like you.”

She tilted her chin up, determined not to let him see how he affected her. They were almost flirting. At least, she was; he looked plain uncomfortable.

“Men like me?” He frowned and folded his arms, drawing attention to his broad, naked chest.

Her mouth dried as her gaze strayed to that glorious expanse of muscles, noting a smattering of dark hair. She dragged her gaze back to his, hoping her interest didn’t show.

“Men who are egotistical, over-confident, world-beaters, used to getting what they want and letting nothing or nobody stand in their way.”

His self-satisfied grin channelled that arrogance she’d just mentioned. “I didn’t know I was so transparent. Lucky for me, my butler has a degree in psychology as well as servitude. What other talents are you hiding?”

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Sam bit back a host of retorts. Thankfully, her mouth and brain had finally decided to work in sync.

“None. Now we’ve got you sorted out, perhaps I should make a start on the rest of that servitude stuff and organise breakfast in the den for our meeting?”

She had to escape. Having her sexy, bare-chested boss standing too close for comfort did strange things to her insides. Not to mention addling her brain.

“Fine. See you there.”

He opened the door and she brushed past him on her way out, wishing he didn’t look and smell so darn good. Just her luck her new boss would be thirty-something and gorgeous rather than ancient and decrepit like most of the rich landowners in Australia.

“One more thing, Samantha.” His serious tone stopped her.

“Yes?” She turned to see him framed in the doorway, looking every bit the consummate millionaire, even without clothes.

“Welcome to the Harmon conglomerate.”

Before she could respond he slammed the door, leaving her with a distinct feeling that while he’d welcomed her to his world, he’d just turned hers upside down.

Dylan stalked into his mother's sitting room after a brief knock on the door.

Liz Harmon looked up from the newspaper she had spread across the table. "Good morning, darling. Sleep well?"

With a perfunctory nod, he sat opposite her. "I met the butler."

His mother's face lit up. "Isn't Sam wonderful? She came highly recommended."

"From where? Butlers-R-Us?"

"Don't take that tone with me, young man. What seems to be the problem?"

Dylan fiddled with the knife-edge crease of his pants. "She's totally unsuitable. Too young, too feisty, too—"

"Beautiful?" Liz interrupted. "You did notice, didn't you, or has all work and no play made you a dull boy?"

A vision of Sam and those startling green eyes daring him to flirt flashed into his head. He'd tried to be the consummate professional, a boss in charge. Though thankfully, she'd been looking at his face and not lower, where the evidence of how she affected him would have been plain to see beneath the cotton towel.

"I noticed," he muttered, understatement of the year. "Though what her looks have to do with it, I'll never know. It's her qualifications I'm interested in."

Liz flashed one of her knowing smiles, the kind she'd been bestowing since he ate his first bug against her instructions and had thrown up, at four years of age. "She came highly recommended. I spoke with Ebony Larkin, her main referee."

His eyebrows shot up. “She’s worked for the Larkin’s?”

Liz nodded. “Trust me, darling. I wouldn’t have hired just anybody to be your butler. I know how much you need the help.”

“I’m doing fine on my own, Mother.”

“No, you’re not. Between running the business, inspecting the lands around Budgeree, and looking after the family, you are worn out.”

She paused, and he waited for the inevitable reference to his single status. Predictably, his mother didn’t disappoint.

“Besides, you never have time for fun anymore. When are you going to meet a nice, young woman to make your life complete?”

“My life is complete and I like it just the way it is, thanks very much.”

He ignored the bitterness that arose whenever the subject of women entered their conversations. He’d tried the relationship merry-go-round and had hopped off as soon as humanly possible, managing to get his heart trampled in the process.

As far as he was concerned, women and serious commitment didn’t belong in the same sentence, especially with females who looked good, had the right family credentials, yet lied through their expensively capped teeth to get what they wanted. Which is his case, happened to be the Harmon name and fortune.

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He'd worked too damn hard to let his family's wealth fall into unscrupulous hands.

"You don't have to prove anything to anyone, Son. You've taken this business to the next level all on your own."

"But Dad would've wanted more."

Hell, his ambitious father wouldn't have stopped until he owned the entire state of Victoria and then some.

"He would've wanted you to be happy, not to run yourself into the ground." She didn't have to add, 'like he did'.

His workaholic father had taken his work obligations to new levels, driving the family business to skyrocketing profit margins but himself into an early grave in the process.

Dylan still missed him a decade later.

"Besides, don't you think you're taking the role of family protector a tad too seriously? Most of us can take care of ourselves, you know."

Dylan rolled his eyes. "Then why is Meg running around placing racy underwear in my drawer? And why is Allie traipsing round the world like a lost soul?"

He stared at his mother, noting her wrinkle-free skin, the clear eyes, the black hair with barely a gray streak. "Not to mention you."

The corners of Liz's mouth twitched. "Your nieces are more than capable of taking care of themselves. Besides, what have I done?"

He tried a frown and failed. "You're trying to match-make again and I'm not interested."

"I'm not trying anything. If you've got romantic thoughts where the new butler is concerned, that's not my doing."

"Thebutler?"

Sam Piper and him, romantically linked? Not a hope in hell.

He shook his head, trying to ignore her alluring image again. "No, Mother, I was talking about Monique and that dinner party you've organised. Didn't you think I'd see through the ruse?"

This time, Liz laughed outright. "You're getting paranoid. There's no ruse, no hidden agendas. I just thought it was time we got together with our oldest family friends. If you find Monique attractive, that's up to you."

Funnily enough, the thought of spending a sophisticated evening dining with the exquisite Monique Taylor and her parents didn't hold half the appeal it once did. He'd grown up with the leggy brunette and dabbled in a kiss or two when they reached their late teens, but he'd never been interested in taking it further. Though Monique was beautiful, educated, and attuned to his world, there was no spark to light his fire. Not that she hadn't tried, many times.

Dylan relented. "Okay, it will be nice to catch up with the Taylor's, but just to let you know, there won't be any romance between Monique and I, ever. She isn't my type."

His mother was no slouch when it came to matchmaking her only son and she latched onto his last words in a flash. “Then what is your type?”

Petite women with short blonde curls, green eyes he could drown in, and a cheeky smirk that wouldn’t quit.

The thought popped unbidden into his mind and he wondered if he’d lost a grip on reality since he laid eyes on his new butler.

He stood quickly and made for the door. “Goodbye, Mother. I have a meeting scheduled.”

Liz smiled knowingly. “Run all you like, Son, but you can’t hide from love forever.”

Dylan refrained from answering. The day he fell in love would be the day he surrendered his sanity and he had no intention of doing that. He had too much to do to fulfil his dad’s wishes, the one driving force that kept him going these days.

Him, in love?

Not a hope in hell.

4

Sam paced the den while waiting for Dylan.

She couldn’t believe the way she’d reacted to him; beyond stupid. She’d known what she would be in for when she applied for this job. After all, she’d heard about Dylan’s charms first hand from Ebony, whose family had known the Harmon’s forever.

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Ebony had extolled high-and-mighty Dylan's virtues for a full hour before Sam had covered her ears and yelled 'la-la-la'. If she'd heard one more word about the rich, handsome, responsible, caring man soon to be her boss, she would've thrown up.

So, she'd steeled herself for the challenge at hand, knowing Dylan's looks would have little effect if she set her mind to doing a good job to prove a point to her snobby family.

She'd focussed all her energy on taking a crash course on butler etiquette, Ebony-style. Thankfully, her best friend had come through for her in every way, going as far as giving her a fake reference when Liz Harmon called after the gruelling interview she'd endured.

Now that she was here at the Harmon mansion in the posh Melbourne suburb of Toorak, she should be ecstatic. If she could last the distance, it would prove to her family once and for all that she could eke out an existence for herself without their prehistoric expectations for her to marry and produce heirs to continue the royal line.

Not that her title meant anything here in Australia. Most of her Russian ancestors had reneged on their royal heritage a century ago, but not her family. They were hell-bent on resurrecting the past and restoring glory to the Popov name.

Strangely, many historians here were interested in the Popov's too, which was why she had the sense to change her surname when applying for this job.

"So much for obeying orders."

Sam jumped as Dylan's voice interrupted her musings and she whirled to face him.

"I'm here on time, I've stayed out of your bedroom, and breakfast is waiting." She gestured to the sideboard. "What else did you want?"

He strode across the room and helped himself to a piece of toast and a cup of coffee before sitting behind a large mahogany desk. "I thought I told you to lose that uniform."

She frowned as memories of their tense exchange in his bedroom flooded back. "I don't think we agreed on that."

"You're right. We didn't get to finish that conversation, did we?"

He stared at her over the rim of his cup and she could've sworn she read desire in his eyes.

Great. Despite her mental pep talk a few minutes earlier, she still harboured ridiculous fantasies about her gorgeous new boss. He could have any beautiful woman in the world and she thought she'd captured his interest in half an hour?

Yeah, right.

"I thought all your staff wore uniforms." She tried her best to look demure, clasping her hands behind her back.

How she'd last more than a week in this subservient act, she'd never know. For some strange reason, this man brought out the worst in her. She felt compelled to trade quips with him, to ruffle his suave feathers, to get the better of him in any exchange.

He placed his cup on the desk and rested steepled fingers on his chest. "My personal

assistant doesn't wear a uniform."

"I'm your butler, not your P.A."

Somehow, the title of P.A. conjured up all sorts of vivid images of how personal she could get with the delectable Dylan.

"You've just been promoted," he said, his mouth quirking into a confident smirk. "If you're up to it, that is."

He'd done it again, known exactly how to push her buttons. As if she would ever back down from any challenge he threw at her.

"You're that impressed with me?"

He shook his head. "No need to fish for compliments, Samantha. I've read your C.V. and I'm intrigued. Why would a woman with a degree in economics want to work as a butler? And even better, work for a man with a reputation for being a hard boss?"

She squared her shoulders and hoped the little white lies she had to tell to keep this job wouldn't show on her face.

"I enjoy a challenge, so working for someone with your vast experience in the business world will be a bonus, if and when I decide to enter that field."

She hoped her answer would satisfy his curiosity. When in doubt, flatter.

A glimmer of a smile played about his mouth. "You're not a corporate spy, are you?"

"Your mother checked out my credentials and I'm sure you've discussed my appointment with her by now. What do you think?"

“I think if you’re half as good as your C.V. says you are, you’ll be perfect as my P.A.
So, what do you say?”

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Sam wasn't an idiot. Being Dylan's personal assistant would be a heck of a lot more interesting than bowing and scraping to him and a lot less damaging.

For starters, she had a lot less chance of seeing him almost naked as his P.A. than as his butler.

"I accept," she said. "Thanks for the opportunity."

He nodded his approval. "Good. Now that's settled, let's get started. I need to dictate some letters that need to be sent ASAP. While I do that, you can sort through this pile of invoices I've printed out, and allocate them in monthly and alphabetical order please, with the most urgent bills to be paid uppermost."

If he still printed out invoices rather than doing everything online, the first thing she would do is bring him into the twenty-first century.

But he glowered at her, as if expecting her to fail before she'd begun, so she took the pile and seated herself opposite him, thankful for the huge desk. No chance of accidental contact across a great divide of mahogany.

Though she tried to concentrate on the task at hand, she couldn't resist sneaking a peek as he spoke into a recording device, his low tones soothing her. He'd dressed in the outfit she predicted earlier, though it looked a heck of a lot better on the man than on a hanger.

Visions of their morning interlude drifted into her mind and before she knew it she'd mentally undressed him down to the skimpy towel he'd worn as he strolled into his

bedroom looking a million dollars. How she managed to maintain composure she'd never know.

At least those boring drama classes at high school had been good for something. Old Mrs. Lincoln would have been proud of her "you don't effect me one bit" performance she'd given Dylan earlier.

At that moment, the man in question hit the 'stop' button and looked up.

"Having trouble keeping up?" He pointedly stared at the stack of invoices in front of her and raised an eyebrow.

Fighting a losing battle with a rising heat that flooded her cheeks, she shook her head. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

Lame, even by her standards, but what could she do when the object of an unexpected fantasy glared at her with those dark eyes that screamed 'come and get me'?

"Thinking about what? Some old boyfriend you've left behind in Sydney?"

"I'm not from Sydney." She responded without thinking and predictably, he pounced on her answer.

"But I thought you'd been working for the Larkin's?"

His stare intensified, leaving her squirming like a bug under a six-year-old's magnifying glass in the sun.

Crossing her fingers behind her back, she hoped her voice remained steady. "I was, but I'm from Brisbane originally."

“Ah.” Before she could breathe a sigh of relief, he continued, “So, what about the boyfriend?”

“You’re my boss. My private life is none of your business.”

She folded her arms in a purely defensive gesture, wishing she could ignore that probing stare. Unfortunately, her action drew his stare downward before he quickly returned his gaze to her face.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’ll be spending a lot of time travelling between our outback property and Melbourne, with little time off for socialising. I need to know that you’re one hundred percent committed to this job. Otherwise, I’ll find someone else.”

He picked up a pen and tapped it against the desk, as though impatiently awaiting her answer.

Though it went against the grain, she had to tell him about her private life—or lack of. She needed this job and hadn’t come this far to lose it now.

“There’s no-one special in my life at the moment. You’ll have my entire focus for the time I’m employed.”

“Good. I need all your attention... for the tasks at hand.”

His pause, combined with the subtle change in body language as he leaned towards her, sent her imagination spiralling out of control again.

She stared at him, caught in the hypnotic intensity of his smouldering eyes, wanting to look away yet powerless to do so. If she didn’t know better, she could’ve sworn he felt the bizarre attraction she’d conjured up out of thin air too.

“Are you free tonight?”

She blinked and resisted the impulse to nod like a schoolgirl being asked out on her first date. “That depends on you.”

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He smiled, the rare flash of teeth alleviating the tension perpetually bracketing his mouth, and sending her heart hammering in her chest.

“How so?”

Ignoring her pounding pulse and wondering how she could control her treacherous reactions to her handsome boss, she said, “I don’t know the hours I’ll be expected to work. Your mother suggested I discuss it with you.”

“So, if I say I need you tonight, you’re mine for the evening?”

Crap, she didn’t need this sort of encouragement. Her overactive imagination was doing fine on its own, thank you very much, without help from him.

“As your butler, I would’ve expected to work evenings. As your P.A., I assumed most work could be accomplished during the day?”

His smile broadened. “Not for what I have in mind.”

Thankfully, the intercom buzzed on his desk, saving her from answering. She took a deep breath and wondered if he played word games with all his staff.

Was Dylan Harmon flirting with her, or was her limited experience with men creating fanciful wishes?

Dylan tapped the speaker button. “Yes, Mother?”

Liz Harmon’s voice filtered through the intercom. “I was wondering if you could spare Sam for a moment? I need to discuss a few things with her.”

He looked at his new personal assistant, who had her head bent over the stack of invoices, sorting them into several neat piles as if her life depended on it.

“Sure, as long as it doesn’t take too long. I’ve upgraded her position from butler to P.A. and we have a mountain of work to get through.”

His mother chuckled. “This, from the man who said he didn’t need help?”

He studied the way Sam’s hair fell in loose curls around her face, the slight frown that marred her smooth forehead, the flicker of her tongue as it darted out to moisten her top lip. He noticed she’d done that earlier, when he first strolled out of the bathroom and seen her standing in his bedroom. He assumed it was a nervous reaction, though it sure as hell drove him crazy every time she did it.

How could such an innocuous movement elicit the wayward thoughts about what gorgeous Sam’s tongue could be doing to him?

“Dylan, are you still there?”

Wrenching his thoughts out of the gutter, he replied, “Yes, Mother. I’ll send Samantha right up.”

“Thanks. And by the way, you’re welcome.”

He smiled as his mother’s chuckles petered out and he disconnected. “Leave those invoices for now. You can get back to collating them later.”

Sam looked up, and once again the luminous green of her eyes hit him like a blow to the solar plexus. It wasn't the colour so much as the clarity that shone like a beacon, beckoning him to challenge her, taunt her, anything to get her looking at him with more than passing interest from an employee for her boss.

That's what had prompted him to offer her the job as his personal assistant—the more time she spent in his company, the more chance she might look at him with the spark he glimpsed earlier in his bedroom.

With one, fleeting flare of fire in her eyes, she'd aroused him more than any other woman had in a long time.

She stood, and he had a chance to admire the snug fit of the uniform. He had a real hankering to see her without it. Hell, he wished he could see her trim body with nothing at all, but right now he'd settle for anything else in her wardrobe.

For some strange reason, she had too much poise, too much class, to be wearing a uniform, and he didn't need a constant reminder of her status as his employee.

His thoughts were inappropriate enough without inviting an harassment suit.

“What about my working hours? We didn't resolve how long I'll be working each day.”

He resisted the urge to shake his head. Ever since she walked into his life this morning, his mind had been enveloped in a fog that clouded his every thought. Even now, he could barely remember what they'd been discussing before his mother had interrupted.

“We'll discuss it later.” He waved her away, noting the stiffening of her shoulders, the straightening of her spine.

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Once again, it hit him that she didn't like taking orders, and he wondered what on earth had prompted her take this job.

Something about Sam Piper didn't ring true, he had every intention of finding out exactly what secrets she hid behind that feisty façade.

“Fine.”

Though she said everything was fine, he seriously doubted it. Her rigid posture screamed it wasn't, not by a long shot, and considering his confused libido, he had to agree.

6

Sam slowly exhaled as she closed the den door. She must be insane to contemplate going through with her plan if she couldn't last the morning in Dylan's company.

Could he see how she practically swooned when he smiled at her? As for his asking if she was free tonight, she had to restrain herself from leaping over the desk and straight onto his lap.

Men had never affected her this way. She always managed to keep her relationships strictly platonic, preferring male friends to groping Neanderthals some of her dates turned into at the slightest encouragement.

Even some of the 'pillars of society' her brothers set her up with turned out to be marauding sex maniacs, and she'd managed to avoid their embarrassing advances

with aplomb.

Maybe that made her naïve when it came to men, but did it explain her over-the-top reaction to Dylan?

What made him so special, that every self-preservation mechanism she'd ever used seemed to malfunction whenever he looked at her? Whatever it was, she needed to get a handle on it quick-smart. That's all she needed, her new boss to think she had a crush on him.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door to Liz Harmon's sitting room.

"Come in, Sam."

Sam opened the door, wondering what the older woman could want. After the initial interview they hadn't crossed paths, though she'd taken an instant liking to the elegant Liz.

"You wanted to see me, Mrs. Harmon?"

Liz waved toward a chair. "Take a seat, Sam. And please, call me Liz."

Keeping her surprise from showing, Sam perched on the overstuffed chair and folded her hands in her lap.

Liz reached for a leather-bound book on a nearby table and opened it. "I know all about you, dear."

She fixed Sam with a piercing stare, leaving her in little doubt as to what she meant.

Sam clenched her hands so tight the knuckles whitened, trying to buy valuable time

to compose an answer that wouldn't incriminate yet sounded honest at the same time.

However, Liz continued before she had the chance to speak. "There was something about you that looked familiar at the interview, so I followed a hunch. I'm a great fan of history, you know."

In that instant, any hope Sam harboured that the older lady was simply fishing for information vanished.

Schooling her features into a polite mask, she said, "I can explain—"

"Please." Liz held up her hand. "Indulge an old lady for a moment." She flicked a few pages, before stopping at what looked like a family tree and tracing a line with her finger. "You must be Princess Samantha Popov. Am I correct?" She looked up expectantly, no trace of anger on her face.

Sam didn't know where to look, an embarrassed heat flooding her cheeks. She'd been caught out in her lie on the first day. Mortifying.

Sam nodded, not quite understanding the other woman's excitement. "You're right. I'm sorry for lying to you, but I really need this job."

She stood quickly, wishing the Persian rug beneath her feet would disappear and the ground underneath would open up and swallow her. "I'll pack my things and be out of your way as soon as possible."

Liz slammed the book shut, sending a cloud of dust into the air. "Don't be hasty, child. We have so much to talk about."

Sam shook her head in bewilderment. If Liz appeared excited a moment ago, she now looked downright ecstatic.

“I don’t understand. You want me to stay?”

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Liz waved her back to the chair she'd just vacated. "Of course. I'm sure you had a very good reason for lying to obtain this job and I want to hear it. I also want to hear every last detail of your story, without a single omission."

"I'm not fired?" Sam held her breath, praying for a miracle yet knowing they rarely happened, at least to her.

"Fired? My dear, you've made my day."

"How so?"

Liz grinned, the expression on her face rivalling that of a child on Christmas morning. "If my son thought finding an attractive woman as his butler was a surprise, wait until he finds out I hired a princess."

Sam's heart plummeted. If Dylan found out her background, she'd be out of the Harmon mansion so fast her head would spin.

She needed to stay, for at least three months. Anything less and her family wouldn't be convinced she could make it on her own and she'd be back to square one, enduring their rigid conditions and stipulations regarding her life.

Right now, she needed to convince Liz Harmon that keeping her identity a secret was the best thing for all concerned, even if it meant hiding it from her precious son.

Taking a steadying breath, Sam eyeballed the older lady. By the twinkle in Liz's eye, she hoped Liz would agree to keep her secret, otherwise she'd be back in Brisbane

and pledged to some ancient groom before she could blink.

Tied to some fossil in matrimony because it suited her royal parents and their antiquated ideas? No freaking way.

Liz leaned forward and rubbed her hands together. “Start at the beginning, dear, and tell me everything.”

Resisting the urge to grimace, Sam started talking.

7

Sam hated confusion.

She preferred order, precision, and being in control. However, as she joined Dylan for a late night supper in his den so they could continue working, she knew her preferences had taken a serious hit following the meeting with his mother a week ago.

Rather than berating her for lying and firing her as expected, Liz Harmon had almost clapped her hands in glee as Sam regaled her with a truthful account of her life to date. The older woman had been only too pleased to keep Sam’s secret so she could continue in her farcical role as Dylan’s P.A.

But why? Sam had to know people’s motivations; it was the only way to stay one step ahead. However, she had no intention of giving Liz Harmon the third degree when the woman had done her a huge favour. In fact, for someone who barely knew her, Liz had accepted her version of events with few qualms. In her place, Sam knew she wouldn’t have been as trusting.

“Daydreaming again?”

Sam jumped as Dylan strode into the room and hoped she'd gain control over the fluttery feeling in her gut whenever her boss came within ten feet of her. Her absurd physical reaction to the man hadn't dimmed one iota over the last seven days. If anything, being near him made her want to do all sorts of wild and wicked things, such as strip off and lay across his desk.

Maybe then she'd have a hope of grabbing his attention, because that's all he seemed interested in, the endless stream of paperwork crossing his desk taking up every minute of his day.

She must've imagined the slight glimmer of interest in his enigmatic gaze on her first day, because he'd lived up to his reputed image of the cold, calculating, business tycoon ever since.

His love for the family business bordered on obsession, and she wondered if he ever loosened his tie, took off his shoes, and strolled barefoot in the lush gardens surrounding the mansion.

By his permanent serious expression as he glared at her, she doubted it.

"Daydreaming is healthy. You should try it some time." She noted the tense neck muscles, the lines around his mouth, the smidgen of dark rings under his eyes, and hoped her banter might lighten his mood.

He piled a plate with club sandwiches and grabbed a caffeine-laden energy drink from the sideboard before responding. "Who says I don't?"

"You don't look like the type to indulge in fanciful dreams."

He couldn't look anymore uptight if he tried. He wore a different suit, shirt, and tie for every day of the week, each outfit expertly tailored but boringly conservative, and

she'd yet to see him with a hair out of place. Except that first morning in his bedroom—though she'd managed to effectively block out that provocative memory.

He quirked an eyebrow. "Daydreams are wasted. Maybe I prefer to indulge in fanciful dreams at night?"

Sam looked up quickly, wondering if she'd imagined his lowered tone, the slight husky edge? Probably, as his dark stare remained unreadable as he took a precise bite out of a tuna and mayonnaise sandwich. She ignored the irrational wish to replace the sandwich as his supper. She wouldn't mind him nibbling on her, not one bit.

Spurred on by a crazy urge to match wits with him, she took a sip of coffee and feigned innocence. "What you do at night is no concern of mine."

“Would you like it to be?”

Damn, he was good. Just when she thought she'd got the better of him, he uttered a loaded comeback like that.

“That depends,” she said. “I thought I'd worked enough nights lately, and there's only so much typing, filing, and book-keeping a girl can take.”

“I wasn't talking about work.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

Her heart hammered as she called his bluff. She loved sparring, especially with a man as sharp as Dylan, and she wondered how far she could push it, though every ounce of common sense urged her not to match wits with her boss.

“You've been doing a great job, Samantha. I'm pleased with your work ethic and you've hardly had a night off since you started. How would you like a tour of Melbourne at night?”

He devoured the last of his sandwich, concentrating on his plate as if her answer meant nothing. However, she noticed he ran a finger around the inside of his tight collar, a gesture she'd noted only when he seemed rattled.

“Sounds great. Know any good tour operators?”

He looked up and fixed her with a piercing stare, the chocolate depths of his eyes

drawing her in, deeper than she intended to go.

“Why settle for good when you can have the best?”

“You’re that confident?”

“You’ll have to try me and find out.”

His lips quirked into that killer smile she’d rarely glimpsed since the first day.

She knew accepting his invitation would be a dumb idea. He’d made the offer as repayment for a job well done, and spending time with him after hours could be dangerous.

She had no intention of getting involved with her boss. Her life was complicated enough.

However, she did want to see Melbourne, and what better way than a personal tour with a man who set her pulse racing? If the scenery bored her, she could always cast surreptitious glances his way.

“Okay.” She nodded. “I’d like that. Thanks.”

“Good. I’ll make the arrangements and let you know.” He stared at her for a moment, like he wanted to say something else.

However, he cleared his throat and picked up a stack of contracts. “Let’s get back to these. We still have a lot of work to finish.”

Work was good. Work, she could do. What she couldn’t—and shouldn’t—do was her boss, and she struggled to focus as he droned on about profit margins and shares.

Besides, she had plenty of time to fantasise about her evening out with Dylan once she reached the confines of her bedroom later tonight. In the meantime, she'd continue doing a good job, because she had no intention of letting him renege on his offer.

A night out on the town with a gorgeous guy, even if he was her grumpy boss, sounded like fun, and it had been far too long since she'd had any.

8

Dylan sighed in resignation as he straightened his tie.

Though he'd been looking forward to catching up with the Taylor's, the planned dinner had lost its appeal when he realised it would keep him away from the office for the evening.

He hadn't felt so alive in years, ploughing through reams of work all day and into the evenings, relishing the sense of achievement, with Sam by his side...

An unwelcome thought insinuated its way into his brain and he wondered if his renewed enthusiasm for the job had anything to do with actual work or everything to do with his stunning personal assistant.

He shook his head, trying to dislodge her image and his disturbing thoughts. So what if she'd been by his side, working into those long nights? He'd barely had time to notice her, he'd been so hell-bent on putting the finishing touches on a contract to acquire more land in northern Victoria.

He hadn't registered the slim ankles, the trim waist, the curve of her breasts, the lightly glossed mouth... He groaned, wrenching his wayward thoughts away from her glorious pout and what she could do with it—to him.

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He couldn't believe he'd been so stupid, insisting she ditch the uniform. At least he'd managed to keep his mind somewhat on the job when her lithe body had been encased in boring navy. Now, with the array of suits she wore each day, his imagination took flight, wondering what a stray button undone or removing a lacy camisole would reveal.

Though she didn't dress provocatively, he wished he'd kept his big mouth shut. And now he'd invited her on a night out, who knew what outfit she'd produce to add to his sleepless nights?

Another strange phenomenon; since Sam had entered his life, his ability to sleep through the loudest thunderstorm had mysteriously vanished. Instead, night after night, her image filled his head in an erotic kaleidoscope, making slumber impossible. He hadn't had such vivid dreams since his teenage years, and it rattled him.

He shouldn't be having those thoughts about Sam. Damn it, she was his employee, and a valuable one at that. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her so early in her contract. He'd have to keep his libido under control.

A loud knock interrupted his musings, and for a second he wished it were Sam, back in her role as butler. Thankfully, he'd had the sense to change that little arrangement—the thought of facing her in his bedroom like he had the first day sent his self-control spiralling downhill.

He may be strong-willed, but he wasn't a saint.

“Come in.”

His mother stuck her head around the door. “Ready, darling? The Taylor’s have arrived.”

He nodded and followed her out. “Remember what I said, Mum. No match-making.”

He didn’t like his mother’s sly grin. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

9

Sam towel-dried her hair, donned her oldest jeans and a singlet top, and settled down to watch a movie.

Though she enjoyed working late with Dylan most evenings, having a night off was a welcome relief. He told her he had old family friends coming to dinner and she’d leaped at the chance to spend some quiet time alone.

Since his invitation to give her a guided night tour of Melbourne, their working relationship had become fraught with a weird kind of tension. She’d caught him staring at her several times, an unfathomable expression in his eyes.

If she didn’t know any better, she’d almost think he felt the same bizarre attraction she did, though it had to be a figment of her over-active imagination.

Her last date had been ten months ago, and had ended like the rest of them, with her fending off groping hands. Dylan inviting her on a tour of Melbourne shouldn’t be a big deal. He made it clear it was thanks for the work she’d done, not a date. She’d been the foolish one to put that connotation on it.

Wishing she could stop thinking about him, she searched for her grocery bag of

supplies. She'd walked to the local shops earlier and stocked up on her favourite 'stay-in' food: chocolate cookies, dried apricots, cashew nuts, and cheesy corn chips. Ebony shared her weird taste in snacks and they'd spent many nights curled up on the couch, watching horror movies and scaring themselves silly.

She missed her best friend, their weekly phone chats and occasional texts not the same as sharing every aspect of their lives like they usually did—and had since they met at boarding school all those years ago. Thank goodness Ebony had moved to Brisbane permanently after school finished. Who else would've kept her sane all these years if she hadn't had a friend to off-load her family dramas to?

Sam searched the room, before realising she must've left the bag of goodies in the kitchen when she grabbed a light dinner earlier. Thankful the Harmons would be busy entertaining their guests and no one would see her outfit, she darted down the hall toward the kitchen. However, as she rounded a corner near the guest bathroom, she almost collided with a supermodel.

"Watch where you're going," the sultry brunette muttered, as she smoothed a hand over her shiny, shoulder-length hair.

"Sorry," Sam said, feeling like one of the ugly stepsisters standing next to Cinderella at the ball.

The beauty wrinkled her nose. "Who are you?"

Resisting the urge to wipe her hand down the front of her jeans before she offered it, she said, "Sam Piper. I'm Dylan's personal assistant."

The other woman's eyebrows shot up. "You're the P.A. he's been raving about?"

Pride filled Sam, though it was quickly replaced by some strange emotion she could

easily label as jealousy. This supermodel look-a-like could only be one of the Taylor's, the old family friends Dylan had told her about. Funnily enough, when he'd said old, she assumed he referred to their ages as well as the length of their acquaintance.

Sam squared her shoulders, though she fell inches short of the towering woman in front of her. "Yes, I'm very good at what I do."

"And what's that?" The woman's haughty tone echoed in the marble hallway.

Sam didn't like being spoken down to, never had, and she responded in impish fashion.

"I'm there for Dylan in whatever capacity he needs me. After all, that's the service a personal assistant should provide, don't you think?"

The woman's beautiful features contorted. So Sam's barb had hit home? That meant the woman had more than a friendly interest in Dylan, and irrationally, the realisation filled Sam with dread.

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She couldn't compete with this stunner—not that she had any intention of doing so. The sooner she realised fantasising about her boss was off-limits, the easier this job would become.

“I think your work speaks for itself, Samantha”

Sam froze as Dylan appeared behind the woman. Mortification filled her as she wondered how much of their conversation he'd overheard.

Raising her eyes to meet his, she was unprepared for the appreciative glow in his gaze as it skimmed her faded jeans with the tear above one knee to the expanse of skin exposed by her skimpy top.

“Thank you.” She didn't know if her gratitude stemmed from the verbal compliment or the approval in his stare. “I'll leave you two to get back to dinner.”

“So, you've met Monique?”

Sam shook her head. “Not officially. We sort of ran into each other.”

“Oh?” Dylan stared at her, intense, probing, and she had the sudden feeling he could look into her very soul and see her animosity for the other woman simmering below the surface.

Monique laughed, a fake sound to match the rest of her. “Yes, it was quite amusing, actually. No harm done, Miss Piper?”

As the brunette laid a possessive hand on Dylan's arm, Sam wasn't so sure about the no harm bit. Right now, she had a distinct urge to harm someone, and she was looking straight at her.

Instead, she schooled her face into a polite mask. "Nice to meet you. Enjoy your dinner."

She hurried down the hallway and into the kitchen without a backward glance. If that's the type of woman Dylan wanted, he could have her.

Losing sight of her goal at this early stage into her employment would be disastrous. She had a long way to go to prove a point to her family, and getting 'ideas' about her handsome boss would only prove detrimental.

As the memory of his appreciative stare returned, she knew focussing all her attention on her goal and less on Dylan would prove a lot harder than expected.

10

Sam snuggled deeper into the cushions, ignoring the incessant pounding that threatened to disrupt the delightful dream she'd been having about Bradley Cooper and Chris Hemsworth fighting over her.

However, the noise intensified, and she reluctantly struggled to consciousness, vowing to stream one of Chris's action movies again in the hope of rekindling the dream.

Glancing at her watch, she was surprised to see she'd dozed for over an hour and it was well after midnight. She padded across to the door and opened it, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“What do you want?” She frowned at Dylan, knowing she sounded like a recalcitrant child. She’d never been any good on wakening, whatever time of day or night.

“I needed to see you.”

She stepped away from the door, letting him into the small sitting room. “Now?”

He pointed at the TV, where it showed a thumbnail of the movie she’d been watching when she dozed off. “Yes, unless you were expecting Chris Hemsworth?”

Her cheeks flooded with heat. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

He laughed, a warm, rich sound that enveloped her in an intimate cocoon. “Someone’s got a crush.”

She folded her arms and glared at him, wishing he would leave her alone. It was hard enough spending time with him in the den each day; having him in her room, standing here as if he owned the world and knew it, was not conducive to her peace of mind.

So what if she harboured fantasies about Chris? They were unattainable—unlike the living, breathing fantasy before her, who she could reach out to and...

“Are you all right?” He closed the distance between them, his signature aftershave washing over her in a sensuous wave.

She inhaled, infusing her senses with the smell, knowing the potent combination of spicy clove aftershave and pure Dylan couldn’t be good for her health, yet doing it anyway.

“I’m tired,” she murmured, and turned away, not ready to face his tenderness.

She preferred his bossy, tyrannical side to this gentle caring which could undo her good intentions to keep him at bay in a second.

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“I’ve been working you too hard, haven’t I?”

To her amazement, he reached out to her, laid his hands on her upper arms, and turned her around to face him.

“No,” she muttered, as her skin burned beneath his touch.

Though he hadn’t stroked or caressed, the nerve endings in her body had taken on a life of their own beneath his scorching hands and were firing all sorts of mixed messages to her overheated imagination.

“Are you telling me the truth?”

If he only knew.

“I’m fine, Dylan. How did the dinner party go?”

She had to move onto safer ground, grasping for any topic that would wrench her mind away from the reaction of her treacherous body to his touch.

He lowered his hands, leaving her hankering for more. Though she knew she shouldn’t harbour erotic yearnings for her boss, she wished he’d slide his hands around her, haul her close, and kiss her senseless.

“The dinner party was a usual get together with old friends. Fine food, fine wine, boring small talk.”

“Really? Seems like you and Monique would have loads to talk about. Sharing childhood anecdotes, making plans for the future...”

He stared at her, the corners of his mouth twitching. “Are you jealous?”

“Of course not. She seems to be the perfect woman for you.”

“And how would you know that?”

The twitching had broadened to a smirk and she wished her attention wouldn’t keep focussing on his lips.

She shrugged, feigning indifference. “Call it intuition.”

He took a step closer, invading her personal space again and sending her pulse racing.

“Monique is not my type.”

He had to be baiting her. She shouldn’t ask the next question. However, with his dark eyes boring into hers and his body standing so close she could feel the heat radiating off it, she went ahead and did it anyway.

“What is your type?” She asked, soft and breathy, flicking her tongue out to moisten her top lip.

He didn’t answer her question. Instead, his head descended with infinite slowness, before his lips brushed hers in the barest of kisses.

A kiss designed to tease, to question, to give her a chance to stop this madness before it began.

Instead, she sighed and melded to him, his muscled chest crushing her breasts, setting her body alight.

She considering resisting, a fleeing thought quickly discarded as his mouth closed over hers and she moaned. His tongue taunted hers, his expertise leaving her breathless, clinging to him, yearning for more.

He tasted of the finest port aperitif—rich and sweet—and she longed to prolong the kiss, the moment, for as long as possible.

Because this was no ordinary kiss.

Sam knew it the moment his lips touched hers. The fiery reaction of her body, the urge to take this to the next level so quickly, the total loss of self-consciousness, had everything to do with this man and his toe-curling kiss of a lifetime.

She'd never experienced anything like it.

If Dylan kissed like this, how good would the sex be?

She's never thrown caution to the wind when it came to men. So with great reluctance she eased her lips from his and pulled away, needing to refocus before she lost control and dragged him into the bedroom.

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With her limited sexual experience, Dylan and his earth shattering kiss had awakened a latent passion she hadn't known existed, and it wouldn't take much for her to lose her mind completely and sleep with her boss.

"We shouldn't have done that," he said, sounding tortured as he backed away, staring at her with growing horror, like he'd made the biggest mistake of his life.

"Probably not," she said, her pulse hammering in time with her pounding heart. "Though at least we've established one thing."

"What's that?"

"We know what your type is."

Dylan cursed and cast her one last tortured glance before he turned and walked out the door.

11

Dylan shouldn't have kissed Sam.

Apart from being unprofessional, irrational, and inexplicable, it made sleep impossible for the next week.

Every time he closed his eyes, her provocative image danced before him, faded denim hugging her lean legs and some sort of short top that should be banned barely skimming her flat, tanned midriff.

The moment he'd seen her standing next to Monique he'd had a hard time tearing his gaze away from that bared expanse of flesh that beckoned to be touched.

So what had he done? Made up some lame excuse about needing to see her and barged into her room, manhandling her in the process. Not one of his smarter moves.

Then again, nothing he'd done since Sam entered his life made much sense. He'd never needed a personal assistant before, yet she'd insinuated her way into his business, becoming indispensable.

Hell, he hardly made a move these days without asking her opinion.

Since when did he need anyone's help? He'd run the family business with little assistance from anybody for years and done a damn fine job. He knew his dad would've been proud, but it didn't ease the burden, the endless drive, of proving he was the man of the family.

From an early age, his father had drummed the ideals of loyalty, responsibility, and family obligation into him, and he hadn't forgotten a single lesson. He'd spent most of his life living up to his dad's values and hadn't regretted a single moment.

Until now.

Somehow, Sam's presence in his life had opened a void he didn't know existed. Though he couldn't put his finger on it, she made him feel ancient, like he'd lived a lifetime yet had nothing to show for it. Stupid, considering he owned one of the largest tracts of land in Australia.

He'd apologised for his unprofessionalism the morning after that kiss and she'd accepted it with aplomb. By her embarrassed blush, she'd wanted to forget it happened as much as he did.

They'd stuck to a strict work schedule since, most of their duties conducted in silence. It hadn't been uncomfortable, per se, but two people hellbent on forgetting their slip up.

As for tonight and that tour of Melbourne he promised her, he couldn't renege no matter how much he wanted to.

Yet another value his father had drilled into him: always honour your obligations.

Shaking his head, he shrugged into his jacket and headed for the door. Though he didn't want to conduct this personalised tour, he had no choice. By his warped sense of duty, he owed her.

His dad would be proud.

Dylan always paid his dues.

12

Sam tried on and discarded several outfits before settling on black skinny leg pants and a ruby top. She wrinkled her nose at her reflection, wishing she hadn't been looking forward to this evening so much.

No matter how much she tried to convince herself this would simply be a night out as repayment for her hard work, she couldn't forget Dylan's kiss.

They'd apologised for their lapse in judgement and spent the last week treading carefully, working in silence. She only spoke to ask questions after he delegated a task and he stuck to a manic schedule that left little time for talk let alone anything else.

She should've been glad. Their frantic work pace left her exhausted and falling asleep quickly every night. Less time to ponder what that kiss meant.

And the many ways she could tempt him to do it again.

Now, she had to spend a whole evening in his company without the safety net of pen, paper, computer, spreadsheets, or endless invoices. No hiding behind business questions or typing dictated letters. Instead, she'd be forced to make small talk and heaven forbid, face possible interrogation about her personal life.

Not to mention the more daunting prospect if Dylan turned on the charm. If he flashed that rare killer smile or stared at her with those chocolate brown eyes, she'd be a goner.

Dashing a slick of gloss across her lips, she hoped she had more willpower than she'd shown that night he'd come to her room. She should have pushed him away and given him a verbal barrage. Instead, she'd submitted to that mind-blowing kiss with all the fierceness of a purring cat. All she'd needed to do was roll over and beg for her tummy to be rubbed, an action she'd been perilously close to doing before she pulled away.

As if on cue, a knock sounded at her door. Straightening her shoulders and taking a deep breath, she opened it, doing her utmost to appear nonchalant.

"Hey," Dylan said, sounding oddly shy. "Ready to go?"

She nodded, wishing her heart would stop hammering a staccato beat. She's never shied away from confrontation—her brothers could attest to that—and she needed to clear the air with Dylan.

“Before we go, we need to talk.”

His smile faded, replaced by his residual frown. “About what?”

“That kiss and the ramifications.”

He grimaced and swiped a hand over his face. “I’ve already apologised and I thought we’d moved past it—”

“We have, but working with you this past week has been tense, and I don’t like it. Especially after I thought we’d made headway in our relationship.”

His eyes widened in horror and she almost laughed. “Our working relationship. But for the record, I’m upfront about what I want out of life, as you probably guessed when I barrelled my way into being your butler initially, so I want you to know something.”

“What?”

“I enjoyed the kiss. I invited the kiss. So you’ve got nothing to worry about in the harassment stakes, or about me being your employee. Tonight, we’re not work colleagues.”

The frown furrowing his brow deepened. “Then what are we?”

“Friends?”

“Friends,” he parroted, as if trying it on for size.

“And it’s okay if friends flirt and have fun and relax, okay?”

He didn’t respond, and she could see the inner war he waged—honour and duty

battling what she hoped was attraction.

He cleared his throat. “That’s nice in theory, but what happens when we’re back in the office?”

Of course he’d be logical about this.

“We won’t be the first workplace romance and we wouldn’t be the last. I’m consenting to shenanigans. Are you?”

His frown faded and the corners of his mouth twitched. “You say the damndest things.”

“Just getting everything out in the open so there’s no room to misconstrue anything.”

“Like?”

“Like when I tell you to lead the way to the car so I can perv on your butt.”

“The view’s that good, huh?”

He finally smiled and she exhaled in relief.

They could do this. It had been too long since she’d had fun with a guy; not one that had been grilled by her brothers first, that is. The whole interrogation thing tended to be a dampener on any budding romance so she was determined to make the most of her freedom in Melbourne.

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With a defiant toss of her hair, she said, “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t checked it out.” She paused to nudge him with her elbow. “Yet.”

His chuckles followed her down the hallway and out to the car, where she leaned against the door and tried her best to look nonchalant.

“By the way, you look great.” He opened the passenger door for her, a waft of spicy aftershave washing over her and sending her already reeling senses spiralling dangerously out of control.

“Thanks. See? How hard was that, getting into the friendship zone?”

Sam didn’t hear his muttered reply as she slid into the car and he closed the door before moving around to the driver’s side.

“So, where are we off to?”

“Dinner at Southbank, a cruise up the Yarra, coffee on the observation deck of the Rialto.” He paused. “And anything else that takes your fancy.”

She risked a quick glance at him, noting the relaxed shoulders, the slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. She’d never seen him this laidback and it scared her.

She wanted this. She’d just demanded it. But she hadn’t factored in that if she couldn’t resist him at his stern, business best, she had no hope with this new, friendly Dylan.

“Let’s just take it as it comes, okay?”

“Sounds good to me,” he said, and she wondered if she heard his sigh of relief or she imagined it.

He drove with the expertise of a man used to handling the large SUV and she wondered if he had any faults. She’d never met a man who exuded such confidence in everything he did. She was almost jealous of his self-assurance when she was still finding her way in the world.

He pointed out several landmarks as he drove, saving her from making conversation. If she thought working in the confines of a den had been difficult, being enclosed in a car with a man who smelled good enough to eat did strange things to her insides.

Once they were settled at an intimate table for two at a plush seafood restaurant, had ordered their meal, and had their wine glasses filled, he focused his attention on her.

“Tell me the Samantha Piper story.”

Almost choking on her wine, Sam cleared her throat and made a lightning fast decision to stick to as much of the truth as possible.

“Not much to tell. I come from a fairly conservative family, with five brothers who are major pains. I’ve done a business degree, but I’d prefer to get some hands-on life experience before I pursue a career in the field.”

“Five brothers?” His eyebrows rose. “Bet your dates get a rough time.”

She rolled her eyes, remembering the painful interrogations, the endless probing for information the few guys she’d dated had to endure. “Don’t remind me.”

“So, how many dates were there?” He pinned her with a fierce stare, as if trying to drag her darkest and deepest secrets from her.

She shrugged and bit back a grin. “I lost count after the first fifty.”

“You can’t be serious?” Appalled, his eyes widened, and she bit back a laugh.

“Deadly.” She smiled and mentally counted the men she’d had the misfortune to go out with on one hand. None had measured up to the man sitting opposite her, and for one, brief second she wished they’d met under different circumstances.

There was no way she could allow anything serious to develop between them, not when her presence in his life was based on a lie. “Why are you so interested in my life story anyway?”

“It pays to know who I’m working with.”

He avoided her eyes and Sam knew he was hiding something. Someone had burned him before and the memory still lingered, intensifying her guilt at deceiving him.

“Speaking of work, when do we leave for Budgereee?” She tried to sound casual, thankful to move the topic of conversation onto safer ground.

“In the next few weeks.” He sipped his wine and leaned back, the earlier tension while he’d been grilling her gone. “Funny, I didn’t pick you to be the outback type. Are you sure you’re ready for the barren plains?”

“There you go again, trying to figure out what ‘type’ I am. So tell me, what is the outback type? Brawny women in flannel checkered shirts and jodhpurs, cracking whips and rounding up their men along with the cattle?”

“Nice stereotype.” He chuckled. “I picked you to be a city girl. Something in the way you dress... ” He trailed off as his gaze skimmed her top, lingering a second too long on her cleavage, before returning to her face.

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Sam tried not to squirm, the intensity of his stare sending her pulse skyrocketing. Thankfully, she was saved from answering by the arrival of their meals, and quickly focussed her attention on the plate of steaming scallops in front of her. As she speared one of the plump molluscs and bit into its juicy freshness, he reached across the table toward her.

“You have some parsley right there.”

She froze, as he brushed his thumb across the corner of her mouth and let it stray to her bottom lip.

It took every ounce of willpower to resist the powerful urge to turn toward his hand and nibble his finger.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, as he removed his thumb, bowing her head and wishing for longer hair to shield her dazed expression.

“No problem.”

His voice sounded husky and she wondered if had any idea the sort of effect he had on her. She’d never experienced such a profound sense of confusion when it came to a man: the jittery nerves, the racing pulse, the hollow stomach. It disconcerted yet electrified her simultaneously.

As she mopped up the last of the garlic sauce with bread, Sam risked a glance at Dylan. Relishing the luxury of studying his impressive profile as he turned to gesture at a waiter, she didn’t notice the man walking purposefully toward them until it was

too late.

“Hey, Princess. Fancy seeing you here.”

Sam’s heart sank. Quade Miller, her eldest brother Dimitri’s best friend, towered over their table, his expression smug as he glanced from her to Dylan and back again.

She clenched her hands under the table, wondering how much Dimitri had told Quade about her journey to Melbourne and wishing he wouldn’t call her princess. All her brothers and their moronic friends had called her that for as long as she could remember, delighting in the fact she hated it.

“Hi, Quade. How are you?” Pasting a fake smile on her face, she made the necessary introductions. “By the way, this is Dylan.”

Quade’s grin broadened as he shook Dylan’s hand. “Nice to meet you. Heard a lot about you.”

“Really?” Dylan quirked an eyebrow and gave Quade the same supercilious glare she’d seen countless times before, the one reserved for people who displeased him in some way.

“Yeah, Sam keeps her family informed of her goings on.” Quade shot her another cheeky grin. “Way to go, Princess. So everything I’ve heard is true?”

Please don’t blow it, she silently wished, knowing one wrong word from Quade could send her plans straight to hell, along with her lying soul.

“Possibly, though you know how that brother of mine loves to gossip.” She deliberately kept her response light, knowing Quade would report back to Dimitri and her family, who thought she was head over heels in love with Dylan Harmon, her

prospective husband, as she had implied to them.

Quade winked and jerked his head in Dylan's direction. "In this case, I think he's hit the nail on the head. Seems like all the speculation is correct."

Dylan continued to glare daggers in Quade's direction and Sam knew she had to get rid of the other man fast.

So far, so good, but all it would take was one stray word to blow her cover.

"Nice seeing you, Quade. Though if you don't mind, we'd like to finish our dinner." She sent a warm smile in Dylan's direction, hoping Quade would get the hint.

Thankfully, he did. "Sure thing, Princess. You have fun."

He nodded at Dylan. "Nice meeting you, Dylan. I'm sure I'll be seeing more of you in the future."

Sam swore she heard Dylan mutter 'not if I can help it' under his breath as Quade walked away and joined a large party at a table across the room.

Dylan's frigid stare made her want to rub the goosebumps from her arms. "Who's he?"

She noted the clenched jaw, the thinned lips, and wondered why Quade had made Dylan so uptight. If anyone should've been uncomfortable, it was her. She'd been so sure Dylan would read something into her rigid posture and stilted answers yet here he was, looking like an actor who'd forgotten his lines on opening night.

"An old friend," she said, sipping her water, thankful for the opportunity Quade had presented her.

Though she'd spoken to and texted her family, trying to convince them her continued absence meant she grew closer to her prospective 'husband', Quade's back-up story that he'd seen her having a cosy dinner with her intended would be exactly what she needed to keep their prying noses at bay.

"An old boyfriend?"

"Jealous?" She almost chuckled at the notion, but the strange look that flitted across his face made her wonder.

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“Ofhim?” He made it sound like taking on Quade and winning would be child’s play. “Not likely. Just curious, that’s all.”

Eager to put the whole episode behind them, she said, “Quade’s a friend of my brother. We practically grew up together.”

“He seemed overly familiar.”

“He’s a jackass, just like my brothers.”

Who would never let her hear the end of it if they discovered the real reason she was spending time with Dylan Harmon: working for him.

“Let’s finish and take that cruise,” he said, as eager to ditch the subject of Quade as her.

Thankfully, the rest of the meal passed without incident. They made mundane small talk scattered between courses—pan-seared garlic prawns, cumin-encrusted lamb shoulder, and a melt in the mouth pistachio soufflé’—followed by a stroll along the Yarra River and a ride in a gondola.

A relaxed, fun evening, as she wanted.

However, just as she managed to replace the lid on her fantasies surrounding Dylan, he did something that pried it open.

He kissed her.

Again.

13

Dylan had known this evening would end in disaster, yet he'd gone ahead anyway, consequences be damned.

From the moment he laid eyes on Sam, in her slinky black pants and shimmering red top, his caveman instincts had risen to the fore and all he wanted to do was drag her back to his room.

Ridiculous, as he'd never had that urge with any other woman in his past. He'd done the dating rounds, but every relationship soured when his girlfriends revealed their true colours.

They'd never been truly interested in him; the major attraction being marrying for the Harmon name and fortune. Since the last disaster three years ago, he'd sworn to avoid game players, women who'd lie to get what they wanted.

Perhaps that explained his attraction to Sam? She was a refreshing change from the contrived, artificial women that usually graced his path, from her tousled blonde curls to her quirky sense of humour. She teased him, reeling him in with a beguiling openness that had him hankering for more.

And what had he done?

The one thing he'd sworn he wouldn't do again.

He kissed her.

Correction, he devoured her, until they'd been breathless and in dire danger of being

tipped into the icy Yarra River.

Rather than berating him, she had the audacity to laugh.

“Stop it. It’s not funny.” His mouth twitched with the effort of trying not to join in her laughter.

Her peals of laughter drew curious glances from other couples drifting along the river in nearby gondolas.

“Sam, your mirth is putting a serious dent in my male ego. Was my technique that bad?”

Her chuckles petered out and she stared at him with those wide green eyes that bewitched him from the first minute he’d seen her.

“I’m pretty sure you can gauge from my response exactly how well you kiss.” She touched his hand. “And that’s the first time you’ve called me that.”

“What?”

“Sam. You usually call me ‘Samantha’ in that plummy accent of yours.”

“I don’t have a plummy accent.”

“Do so.”

“Do not.”

She smiled, the moonlight glinting off her teeth. “Who would’ve thought, the high and mighty Dylan Harmon reduced to bickering like a child?”

“Must be your influence.” He poked out his tongue like a ten-year-old trying to prove a point.

Her expression sobered as she stared at his tongue, her intensity reviving memories of the scorching kiss they had shared moments ago.

It had started so innocently, with her excited jiggling rocking the boat and he’d admonished her, reluctantly admitting he couldn’t swim. She proceeded to rock the boat even more, until he seriously thought they might tip into the river.

So he’d done the first thing that entered his head to stop her; reached for her and held her within his arms. However, he hadn’t planned the part where she tilted her head up, with that playful smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, mere inches from his.

He’d lost it, his lips crushing hers before he knew what he was doing. Her response, startling in its eagerness, had only served to fire his libido and they’d kissed like two teenagers barely coming up for air. The violent swaying of the boat had brought him back to the present and he realised their predicament. If common sense wasn’t a passion-dampener, maybe a dip in the icy Yarra would be?

And what had she done? She laughed at him, loud, infectious chuckles that begged him to join in. So much for keeping his distance. He'd landed himself smack bang in the middle of a situation he had no idea how to extricate from.

He admired her for confronting their attraction back at the house, for making it clear she wanted something to happen between them with no repercussions. But he hadn't been brought up to treat women that way, and it didn't sit well with him that she wanted to start something while under his roof.

"At the risk of rocking the boat again, how about that coffee you mentioned earlier?" She smirked, and all he could do was stare at the slight dimple that flashed in and out at the corner of her mouth.

He folded his arms, wishing the simple defensive gesture could hold his wayward emotions at bay.

"Sounds good to me. I think you've done enough boat rocking for one night."

"Spoilsport," Sam murmured, watching Dylan use the pole to manoeuvre them toward shore.

She'd never been on a gondola before, believing Venice had the monopoly on them. She'd been pleasantly surprised when their cruise on the Yarra entailed a trip in one of the long, narrow boats, until Dylan sat next to her on the padded seat and she realised exactly how small the boat was.

If she had a hard time controlling her imagination at dinner, she had no hope in the confines of a boat with his muscular body pressed up against her, radiating enough heat to spontaneously combust her on the spot.

Unable to get a grip on her burgeoning crush, she behaved like a mischievous imp in

the hope her antics would distract from the urge to snuggle into his arms.

Instead, they backfired. If she thought their first kiss had been mind-blowing, this one had been earth-shattering.

The man could kiss.

Dylan managed to ignite sparks that exploded into fireworks, leaving her dazed.

She floated through the rest of the evening, barely noticing the stunning views of Melbourne from the top of the Rialto building while sipping a creamy latte. Though she'd done her utmost to convince herself this wasn't a date, it had been one of the best evenings she'd spent with a guy in a long time.

On a scale of one to ten, it scored a twelve.

It wasn't until later, when she thanked him for a 'nice' evening with a polite nod of her head, that it struck her. Despite their strong working relationship—the main common link they shared—they hadn't discussed business once tonight. They chatted about anything and everything, and seeing Dylan relax had captivated her.

She'd expected her speech earlier in the evening about indulging their attraction to send him scuttling for cover. Dylan, introverted at the best of times, should've been scared off by her bold declaration.

Instead, he kissed her.

And they ended up laughing about it. She could definitely get used to laidback Dylan, but she had a sneaking suspicion when she arrived for work in the morning, he'd be back to his hands-off best.

As the sprawling homestead came into view, Sam tried not to bounce on the leather seat in excitement.

“Welcome to Budgereee,” Dylan said, audible pride in his voice.

“It’s breathtaking.”

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Understatement of the year. The beautiful landscape had held her enthralled for most of the trip, but nothing Dylan said could have prepared her for the beauty of his family's property.

As the car swept up the circular drive to the front door, she admired the wide verandahs, French doors, and floor to ceiling windows that dominated the huge house.

Despite its size, it didn't detract from the beauty of the land beyond, towering eucalypts dotting the landscape between native Australian flora.

"I didn't know you loved the outback so much?" He killed the engine and turned toward her, curiosity in his eyes.

"I've been to my fair share of remote areas in Queensland."

"I thought you were from Brisbane?"

Guilt flooded her. She hated having to lie, especially to an upstanding guy like Dylan. "I've travelled a fair bit."

He quirked an eyebrow. "You've done a lot for someone so young. How did you manage to fit it all in?"

How could she tell him the truth—that she'd lived most of her life in Queensland, making regular trips to her family's outback properties whenever she could? She'd woven a tangled web and the closer she got to Dylan, the more likely she would tear

down the whole deception.

She shrugged and reached for the door handle, eager to escape the confines of the car and Dylan's probing questions. "Hey, I'm a woman of many talents. Haven't you worked that out by now?"

His eyes glowed as the sun set, bathing them in a kaleidoscope of fiery colour: burnt orange, deep purple, and vibrant magenta.

"I'm well aware of your talents, Samantha."

The burning intensity of his gaze scorched her, eliciting an excited shiver that started at the nape of her neck and travelled down her spine to the tips of her toes.

She bolted from the car without saying a word, wishing she could turn off her traitorous emotions. She read too much into every word he said and it would get her into trouble, big trouble. Thank goodness they'd be chaperoned for the next few days, otherwise there would be no telling what she'd be tempted to do.

"Looks like Ebony has arrived," she called over her shoulder, looking forward to spending some time with her best friend.

Though Dylan had initially been surprised at her friendship with a once-employer, he suggested she invite Ebony to stay as a 'chaperone'. His old-fashioned values seemed overly-quaint, though she welcomed the opportunity. She missed her frank, girl talk with Ebony, though she'd have to stay on her toes not to let slip her growing feelings for Dylan. Ebony was no fool and her best friend was renowned for putting two and two together and coming up with five.

"Great. It's been a couple of years since I've seen her," he said, carrying their bags to the front door.

Before he could insert his key into the lock, the door flew open and Ebony raced onto the verandah and straight into Dylan's arms. "Hey, Stud. Long time no see."

Sam struggled not to gape, a war of emotions tearing through her, ranging from joy at seeing her best friend to jealousy at seeing Ebony draped over Dylan.

And his reaction to her gorgeous friend didn't assuage her concern. He pulled back a fraction and looked her up and down.

"Wow, look at you, Bony. You've filled out and then some."

Ebony chuckled. "Not so bony anymore, huh?"

"You can say that again." He wolf-whistled as Ebony twirled, revealing long, tanned legs beneath a peasant skirt.

Sam stepped forward, wanting to deflect the attention away from Ebony and hating herself for it. "Hi there, stranger. How are you?"

Ebony squealed and enveloped her in a bear hug. "Girlfriend, you're looking absolutely fab. Working for this tyrant can't be all bad."

Sam hugged Ebony tight, hating how the green-eyed monster had raised its ugly head with her best friend. Why shouldn't Ebony greet Dylan with such enthusiasm? They'd been family friends for years.

She pulled away and glanced at Dylan, who appeared surprisingly smug. He watched them with an amused expression, as if the thought of two women discussing him was a new experience, one he found exceedingly pleasant.

"You'd be surprised, Eb. Working for this guy can be hell at times."

“Is that right? Everyone knows I’m a pussycat in the boardroom.” Dylan’s mock indignation made them laugh as Sam clamped down on her first thought, ‘as long as he’s a tiger in the bedroom.’

“We’re going to have a great time,” Ebony said, wrapping her arms around their waists and dragging them toward the front door. “And not too much work, you two. Time to live a little.”

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Sam had already taken Ebony's advice and look where it had got her. As much as she tried to deny it, she'd fallen for Dylan, and there wasn't one damn thing she could do about it.

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Sam waited for the knock she knew would come.

As if on cue, a loud rapping sounded at her bedroom door before it flew open and Ebony barged in.

"Hey you. What's going on?" Ebony threw herself face down on Sam's bed and rested her chin in her hands. "Tell me everything and don't leave out a single detail."

Sam smiled and wondered how she'd survived the last few weeks without their chats. They'd shared every detail of their lives for as long as she could remember, yet how could she begin to describe the strange feelings Dylan aroused. She could barely admit them to herself.

Sam shrugged, aiming for nonchalant. "Not much to tell."

Ebony threw a pillow at her. "Don't give me that. You're glowing, and it can't be the smoggy Melbourne air that's caused it."

Sam sat cross-legged on the floor next to the bed and stared up at her best friend. "What can I say? I love my job."

“You sure it’s just the job you love?” Ebony wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“What else could it be?” Sam lowered her gaze so her friend couldn’t see the truth in her eyes.

“Uh-oh,” Ebony groaned. “It’s worse than I first thought. You’ve fallen for him, haven’t you?”

“Don’t be silly,” fibbed Sam. “I’m enjoying the challenge of working as a P.A. rather than sitting around and waiting for my crazy parents to marry me off to some decrepit old fool.”

“Speaking of which...” Ebony trailed off and Sam looked up, the furtive expression on her friend’s face far from reassuring.

“What have they done this time?”

Ebony sighed and rolled her eyes. “That rat Quade told them you and Dylan are joined at the hip, and should be announcing your engagement any day now.”

“What’s wrong with that? That’s one of the reasons I took this job, to get them off my case.”

Ebony held her hand up. “Not so fast, babe. Your folks are saying if the announcement doesn’t happen ASAP they’re going to ‘send Max down to Melbourne to drag you back to Brisbane and up the aisle, no excuses this time’, end of quote.”

“What?” Sam leaped to her feet and started pacing the room. “They can’t seriously believe I’d consider marrying that old fogey? I’ve already told them how I feel.”

“You know your folks. They won’t take no for an answer.” Ebony shrugged. “They

expect you to start acting like a princess, sooner rather than later.”

“How did you hear this?” Sam stopped stomping and stared at her friend.

Ebony blushed. “Peter told me.”

“Don’t tell me you still have a thing for my buffoon of a brother?”

Ebony shook her head as the rose colour staining her cheeks deepened. “No, we’re just friends. I happened to run into him at a charity dinner last week, that’s all.”

Sam snorted. “You’re taste in men is deteriorating, as much as I’d love to have you as a sister-in-law.”

Ebony unfolded her long legs from the bed and stood. “Hey, it’s not my taste in men we’re discussing here, it’s yours.”

She laid a hand on Sam’s shoulder as her voice lowered to a conspiratorial level. “Is it serious with Dylan?”

Sam paused before answering. If she told her best friend the truth, would Ebony accidentally let something slip to Dylan? They’d been friends for a long time and Ebony was renowned for her ‘slip of the tongue’ comments.

Sam knew Dylan was probably toying with her. Heck, he didn’t have a reputation as one of Australia’s most eligible bachelors for nothing. So what if he’d kissed her a few times? He probably did it every day of the week with women in his sphere. She’d been the stupid one for reading more into it and she didn’t need her best friend reinforcing it.

“Dylan’s a nice guy and I enjoy working with him.” She hoped her evasive answer

would satisfy her curious friend.

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She hadn't lied—she just hadn't told the whole truth.

Ebony tut-tutted. "I know you, Sammy. You're hiding something. And I could've sworn you wanted to tear my eyes out earlier when I threw myself at Dylan." She chuckled. "Why else do you think I did it? Nothing like testing the water."

Sam grimaced, remembering her earlier jealousy. She hoped she wasn't that transparent; no wonder Dylan had looked so smug.

"Test all you like, Bony."

Ebony's chuckles grew to raucous laughter. "You are jealous. Though don't worry, I'm not interested in Dylan. I have other fish to fry and they're tastier than him."

Sam doubted that. She'd never met a man who compared to Dylan Harmon. It wasn't just his charisma and his looks, not to mention the fact he kissed like a dream. He exuded an indefinable quality that attracted her against her better judgement.

"So what are you going to do about your parents?"

"As long as they stay in Brisbane and keep that sleaze Max away, I'm safe." Sam paused for a moment, then clicked her fingers as an idea flashed into her head. "That's where you come in."

"Huh?"

Sam wrapped an arm around Ebony's shoulder. "As my best friend, I consider it your

duty to look after my interests.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing? Don’t forget who got you this job in the first place.”

“I know, but I need your help. If you could feed back some vital info, like how close I am to Dylan, how an announcement isn’t far off, how happy I am in Melbourne with him, then wouldn’t that assuage their curiosity? You’ll be reinforcing what they’ve heard from Quade and considering how close we are, it would mean more coming from you.”

Ebony’s eyes narrowed. “And how am I suppose to do this?”

“Through your goodfriend Peter, of course.” Sam snickered. “I’m sure you could arrange another accidental meeting.”

Once again, colour suffused her friend’s cheeks. “Okay, smarty-pants. Maybe I have got a thing for your brother, and our meeting wasn’t so coincidental. But lying to him doesn’t exactly help my cause. What if he finds out? He won’t look twice at me.”

“Please, Eb,” Sam cajoled. “You don’t want me married off to an ancient creep like Max and whisked away to Europe, do you?”

“As if that would happen,” Ebony snorted. “Max is as Australian as you.”

“Who thinks like my father, a refugee of Russia’s fifteenth century. So, what do you say? Will you do it?”

A mischievous gleam shone from Ebony’s dark eyes. “Fine, I’ll do it. On one condition.”

Sam desperately needed Ebony's co-operation if her plan was to succeed, but she'd never been any good at paying a price.

Wasn't that what dragged her into this mess in the first place?

Her parents, thanks to their old-fashioned European values, felt that she owed them and her heritage in some way. And, according to them, the only way to do it was marry a fellow descendent of the Russian aristocracy and produce a dozen royal heirs.

"What's the condition?"

"You put in a good word for me with Peter."

Sam sighed in relief. Pointing out Ebony's good points to her Neanderthal brother would be a small price to pay for her friend's co-operation.

"No worries. Though personally, I think you need your head read."

"No accounting for taste, is there?"

Sam heard the uncertainty in her friend's voice and remorse flooded her. Who was she to judge matters of the heart? Look at her predicament with Dylan, her billionaire boss.

She hugged Ebony. "I'm glad you're here, Eb. It'll be great catching up. I've missed you."

"Ditto, girlfriend." She squirmed out of Sam's arms. "Enough of the mushy stuff. I'll leave you to unpack. See you at dinner."

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As Ebony left the room, Sam wondered if she'd lost her mind. She worked for a man she grew to like more with each passing day, lying to her family about the true relationship they shared, and hoped the two tall tales would never intersect.

She must be nuts.Or desperate.

All she had to do was last a few more months, then she'd tell her parents the truth: that she'd never been involved with Dylan, that she'd been working for him and proved she could earn a living and eke out an existence without the protection of a man.

Surely they would have to believe her then?

16

Dylan sat on the verandah, enjoying the cool night air. Being at Budgeree never failed to invigorate him, every sound and scent wrapping him in a comforting familiarity.

He'd grown up here, sticking close to his dad, learning the ins and outs of the business his dad valued more than life itself. Until Dylan had matured, or so he thought at the time.

Had it been maturity that urged him to abandon his family to spread his wings, traipsing around the world in search of the next best thing? Surprisingly, it had been under his nose all along, but he failed to recognise it.

And his selfishness had killed his dad in the process.

“Feel like some company?”

He looked up at Sam and bit back his first retort of ‘not really’. Funnily enough, she fitted in around here, and it surprised him. It wasn’t her worn jeans, denim shirts, or leather boots that gave that impression; instead, it was a feeling, an instinct that she genuinely belonged in this isolated countryside.

He gestured at the rocking chair. “Have a seat.”

She settled into the chair, the creaking wood reminding him of nights long ago when he used to perch on his mother’s lap and she’d tell him wonderful stories about bunyips and wombats while the night sounds of hooting owls and wheezing possums lulled him to sleep.

“You look like you’re doing some serious thinking,” she said, her tone tentative, as if she didn’t want to intrude.

“Rehashing old memories.”

He gazed at the growing darkness, wishing it didn’t feel so damn comfortable to be sitting here with her. He didn’t want to feel this way about Sam. She’d be out of his life sooner rather than later and he’d had enough of losing people who mattered to him.

“Are you. sure I’m not intruding?”

He heard the vulnerability in her voice and wished they had met in another time, another place. He wasn’t ready for a relationship, no matter how wonderful the woman.

Besides, he had enough responsibilities with the family and his dad’s legacy, and he

could never shirk them.

Look what happened the last time he'd done that.

"No, it's nice to have company out here. Usually I'm on my own."

"Not that you seem bothered by that," she said. "I get the feeling you're a bit of a loner."

"Psychoanalysing me again, Samantha?"

She chuckled, the light sound eliciting an almost visceral response as his gut twisted with longing.

Damn, he had it bad. Though he'd done his best to keep their relationship strictly platonic, he couldn't forget the few forbidden kisses they'd shared or the way she'd responded to him.

It has been the reason he invited Ebony out here, to act as some sort of Edwardian chaperone. Unfortunately, that plan had backfired as the wayward Ebony seemed to delight in taunting him, and throwing him and Sam together as much as possible.

Though he'd known Sam had worked for the Larkins, he had no idea the two girls were such firm friends. One woman ganging up on him at a time was more than enough.

"You're too complicated to figure out. Besides, why should I bother?" Her smile lit her eyes. She was one of few people he knew who smiled like that, with her whole face and not just an upward movement of her lips.

"Aren't you up for the challenge?" He asked, knowing he shouldn't spar with her but

unable to resist.

A gradual warmth started in the vicinity of his chest and spread outward, making his insides do strange things as he contemplated the ways in which he would like to challenge her.

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Starting with more eager responses from her luscious lips...

“I thrive on a challenge. Thought you’d have figured that out by now.” She fixed him with an indescribable stare from her cat-like eyes. “After all, I work for you, don’t I?”

He laughed, a genuine deep chuckle that echoed through the ghost gums. It felt good. In fact, it felt downright wonderful, and he wondered how long since this place had been privy to laughter. “Touché, Miss Piper.”

She rocked gently, her toes pushing against the floor, the rhythmic action as soothing as her presence. “Tell me about your life here.”

Surprised at her swift change of subject, he gave her the edited version. “Budgerees’ thousand acres was the first tract of land my dad bought here. Though he expanded the business over the years, this place held a special place in our hearts.”

He paused, ignoring the stab of guilt that memories of his father and his love of the land always seemed to ignite within him. “Still does.”

“Family means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

Her innocuous question unerringly homed in on his emotions whenever he sat in this very place and surveyed the property that would belong to the Harmon’s for generations to come.

“Family is everything.”

“But don’t you ever feel stifled? Or need to run away?”

He heard something in her voice that made him look up, but when he studied her face, the serene expression hadn’t altered, though she wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Never. Shirking responsibilities is for children.” He scowled, speaking from personal experience. “Or cowards.”

Sam’s heart sank at Dylan’s cold, curt words.

What would he think of her if he knew the truth, that she was one of those cowards he’d mentioned with such antipathy and loathing?

She responded more sharply than intended. “Not everyone is cut out for shouldering the burdens of their family.”

He pinned her with a stare that took her breath away: intense, probing, willing her to listen. “I wouldn’t consider family expectations a burden. How about you?”

He trapped her. She couldn’t tell him yet another lie, not when she lived a lie every day.

“Everyone’s family is different. Maybe I’m not ready to shoulder what my family expects me to?”

“Is that why you ran away?”

Ouch. He knew how to kick a girl when she was down.

She instilled as much calm into her voice as she could muster before answering. “I applied for a job working as your butler. How could that be classed as running

away?”

He shrugged, the simple action that drew her attention to his broad shoulders encased beneath a cable knit, and speeding up her pulse in the process.

“Call it a hunch. Even though you said you needed the experience before branching into the business world, I still don’t understand why you’d want to work for someone like me in such a subservient role.”

“We’re not all meant to be rulers in this world.”

She wished her family understood that sentiment and would allow her to denounce her heritage.

Because that’s exactly what her family expected her to be; a rich, pampered princess to sit upon a pretend throne and order those around her to do her bidding.

Hell would freeze over before she succumbed to their wishes.

“Are you judging me for what I have and what I do?” His dark eyes didn’t waver as his stare bored into her soul.

She hated the icy contempt in his voice. If he only knew she hadn’t referred to the Harmon’s, but her illustrious Popov family, the masters of expectation.

She stood, eager to escape before she said something she might regret. “I’m not judging anybody. Goodnight, Dylan. See you in the morning.”

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She walked away without looking back, clamping down on the urge to run from his all-to-seeing stare.

17

Sam knew she shouldn't do it.

Every fibre of her being screamed that accompanying Dylan to this business dinner would be the wrong thing to do, but what choice did she have when the man she fell for more each day had practically begged her.

She thought she'd been clever, pushing him away since they returned from Budgereee. However, her plan had backfired, and all she'd succeeded in doing was inflaming Dylan's curiosity further.

Though their working relationship continued to flourish, he'd fired several probing questions at her when she least expected it, as if trying to discover her deepest secrets.

Now this.

Flying to Sydney with Dylan and attending some big function as his partner was another idea of keeping her distance. Or her cool.

She'd barely survived their week at Budgereee together, and if Ebony hadn't been there, Sam would've done something stupid. Strangely, she'd felt a sense of peace, of belonging, at the isolated homestead that she'd yet to find elsewhere.

Initially, she put it down to the rugged beauty of the surrounds and the tranquillity that pervaded the outback. However, as the week passed in a flurry of business meetings, land surveillance, and bookkeeping, she realised it was something more.

Despite the giant chip of family responsibility Dylan carried around on his shoulders, she'd grown to recognise he thrived on it, and for a brief, irrational moment she imagined what it would be like to share his dream, his vision, of making the barren tract of land flourish.

"You've been awfully quiet," Dylan said, and Sam turned toward him, wishing the business class seats had more room between them.

She'd been all too aware of his proximity since they first boarded the flight, and even now, as he stared at her with those enigmatic dark eyes, had to resist from leaning into him.

"Just taking some time out." She forced a smile. "My boss is a slave driver, you know. I barely have a minute to myself these days."

She rolled her eyes, enjoying the spark in his whenever they exchanged this sort of banter. For a man his age, Dylan Harmon was far too serious. Time for him to lighten up—if that was possible.

"Your boss values your input, that's why he drives you so hard."

"Is that right?" She wondered how far she could push him. "So, is that why you invited me along to this dinner? Because you value my input?"

A flicker of appreciation shot through his eyes as he stared at her lips. "There are many reasons why I invited you to this dinner."

Her heart picked up tempo as he continued to stare at her, and she wondered what demon drove her to flirt with him. She knew it could be dangerous, she knew it was wrong.

Yet she wanted him more than she'd wanted anything in her life. "Why don't you tell me a few of these so-called reasons?"

He paused and she could've sworn he leaned even closer. "You're smart, witty, and gorgeous, three attributes I value in a dinner companion. How's that for starters?"

His warm breath caressed her cheek, sending a scattering of goosebumps across her skin. She was playing with fire and if she wasn't careful, would get seriously burned.

"Gorgeous, huh?"

"Come on, Samantha. Don't tell me I'm the first man to ever tell you that?"

He held her chin and tilted her face upward, scrutinising it with the expertise of an art critic evaluating a priceless piece.

Sam could barely breathe, let alone respond, as his thumb gently brushed her bottom lip.

"You must have men falling at your feet, ready to whisk you up the aisle at a moment's encouragement."

His words doused her like a bucket of cold water as an image of Max flashed across her mind. Though tall and distinguished for a man of fifty, there was something about the way he stared at her that made her skin crawl.

Why would a man that age, who had everything money could buy, want to get

married to a girl he'd watched grow up?

Several reasons crossed her mind, none of them pleasant.

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She pulled away from Dylan, breaking his tenuous contact. “I have no intention of traipsing up the aisle with any man.”

He raised an eyebrow at her sharp retort and she quickly softened it before his curiosity prompted him to ask any probing questions.

“I prefer to keep the hordes of men falling at my feet guessing.”

“Really?”

She nodded, wishing he wouldn't stare at her with those all-seeing, all-knowing eyes. “Nothing like a bit of mystery to keep a man on his toes.”

“Is that why you won't tell me anything about yourself? Sticking to the old adage of ‘treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen’?”

“There's not much to tell.” She crossed her fingers, hoping she wouldn't be struck down for telling such a monstrous lie.

He smiled, and her heart gave a treacherous lurch. “You didn't ask if I was keen after the way you've treated me.”

The lurch gave way to pounding as her heart thundered in her chest. “I treat you mean?”

“Yet I'm still keen.”

He reached across and squeezed her hand, his touch sending her precarious sense of self-control spiralling downhill, fast.

Hoping her voice wouldn't shake, she took a steadying breath before responding. "I'll be leaving in a few weeks and I know I said at the start that I'd love to explore this thing between us. But do you think it's worth starting something now?"

"It's too late." He interlaced his fingers with hers, drawing her hand to his lips. "It's already started."

His kiss burned the back of her hand, leaving a scorching imprint like a brand, and she realised they had started something, yet for the life of her she couldn't figure out what it was.

Mutual attraction, deep friendship, or a whole lot more?

As the plane descended into Sydney, Sam reclaimed her hand and fervently wished whatever this feeling, it wasn't a 'whole lot more'.

Falling in love with Dylan Harmon would be the stupidest thing she'd done in a long time—apart from running away from her family and hiding as his employee in the first place.

But what if it was too late?

18

As Dylan slipped into his tux jacket and adjusted his bow tie one last time, he hoped this evening wouldn't be too boring for Sam.

He'd attended countless dinners like this, where rich landowners mingled, discussing

work and not much else. Most of his fellow business associates were years older than him and he had little in common with them, apart from a love of the land.

He would've rather avoided this particular gathering altogether, if not for a small niggle in his gut telling him if could get Sam alone, away from work, she might open up to him.

So, he'd booked flights to Sydney, rooms in one of the city's top hotels, and tickets to the conference and dinner, all in the hope the woman who piqued his interest more with each passing day would come clean and divulge the secrets she hid.

Despite many cunning attempts to drag snippets of information from her about her past, she'd held fast, not giving him one iota. And the more she kept him guessing, the more intrigued he became, until he could hardly function these days without wondering what made Samantha Piper tick.

As for their physical attraction, he'd managed to keep his libido under control. Just. He'd grown used to cold showers at the end of a day's work after spending endless hours resisting the lure of her light, floral fragrance, a forbidden glimpse of cleavage as she reached across his desk, or the tantalising sweep of her tongue as it moistened her lips while she concentrated on a particular task.

Yeah, it had been hell working with her these last few months and pretending like he didn't feel anything for her, but what else could he do?

He valued her astute opinions as a businesswoman and didn't want to risk losing her, despite his reluctance to hire her in the first place. Sure, he'd toyed with their attraction on a few occasions, but thankfully, neither of them seemed keen to pursue it. He should be glad, yet he couldn't help feeling disappointed too.

He knocked at Sam's hotel room door, and when it opened, he gaped at the exquisite

vision before him, her body wrapped in a soft blue fabric that hugged in all the right places and brought out the matching flecks in her green eyes. She'd used subtle makeup to highlight her gorgeous eyes and lush lips, and had pinned her curls back in some sort of elaborate arrangement. Her appearance screamed 'grab me' and he had to curb the impulse to do exactly that.

“Right on time. I like a man who's punctual.”

Sam smiled, taking Dylan's gob-smacked expression as an indication of approval.

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She twirled, revelling in the soft chiffon swishing around her ankles. “You like?”

He nodded, his expression of wonder all the reassurance she needed. “You look incredible.”

Her skin tingled under the intensity of his stare and she resisted the impulse to rub her bare arms.

“Good. I know this dinner is important to you and I wanted to make an impression.”

He whistled, long and low. “Well, you’ve certainly done that.”

She picked up her sequinned evening bag and pretended to swat him with it. “I didn’t want to impress you, just your colleagues.”

“Who?”

He continued to stare at her and she wondered if he’d lost his mind.

“Your colleagues. You know, those people you do business with, the same ones we’re going to have dinner with.”

He shook his head. “Change of plans. Room service. Here. Now.”

She laughed and tucked her hand through the crook of his arm. “Thanks for the compliment. Now, let’s go.”

When Sam had purchased the dress, she knew it looked good on her: the strapless bodice highlighted her delicate shoulders, the fitted line accentuated her slimness—she'd lost weight over the last year, stressing over her parents' expectations of her as they pushed her toward creepy Max.

Though she craved Dylan's approval, she'd been totally unprepared for the blatant desire blazing in his eyes when he first saw her in the dress, and for one, dizzying moment, she thought he might take her into his arms, back her into the room, and kick the door shut.

"How do you expect me to concentrate on business tonight with you looking like that?"

"Like what?" She batted her eyelashes in exaggerated coquettishness.

He waited until the elevator doors slid shut before answering. "Like every man's fantasy come to life."

Her breath hitched as he placed both hands on her shoulders and bent toward her, his lips brushing hers.

She'd been unprepared for the kiss, though didn't stop to analyse it as she responded with matching eagerness, wrapping her arms around him and moulding against the lean hardness of his body.

He kissed her like a man starved, a deep, endless kiss that reached down to her soul, making her crave him more than she cared to admit.

This overwhelming, helpless feeling that she belonged to him—only him—terrified her beyond belief.

He groaned as she pulled away and buried her face into the crook of his neck.

Rather than calming her, his aftershave infused her senses as she took a steadying breath that threatened to tear apart the last shred of her self-control.

“There’s no use hiding from this, from us,” he whispered in her ear, his lips raining a blazing trail of light kisses from her earlobe to the hollow above her collarbone.

“Dylan—“

He silenced her with a quick peck on the lips. “Let’s table this discussion for later.”

Sam didn’t have time to respond as the elevator doors slid open and in walked the last man she expected—or wanted—to see.

19

“Hello, Samantha. What are you doing here?”

If Dylan’s scintillating kiss hadn’t already sent Sam into a tailspin, the sight of Max Sherpov staring down his aristocratic nose at her would have.

What the hell was he doing here?

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She schooled her face into what she hoped was a mask of nonchalance, while her insides churned with dread.

“Hi, Max. I’m here on business.”

“Business?” Max raised an eyebrow and glanced at Dylan, at her dress, and back again.

Resisting the urge to tug at her bodice, she squared her shoulders. “Max, this is Dylan Harmon,” knowing the instant Max that had entered the elevator her cover would be blown.

Dylan stuck out his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Max.”

Though by the dour expression on his face, Sam knew he didn’t mean it.

“Max is an old friend of my family,” she said, compelled to fill the awkward silence that descended on them.

As the doors slid open on the ground floor, Max shook his head, the supercilious smirk that she despised marring his haughty features.

“Come now, Samantha, I’m much more than that.”

Staring at Max with all the disdain she could muster, she said, “If you’ll excuse us, Max, our table is waiting. Nice seeing you again.”

She slipped a hand into Dylan's and strolled from the elevator, hoping her wobbly legs would hold her upright, at least until they reached the ballroom.

Thankfully, Dylan seemed just as anxious to escape Max's overbearing presence, and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze as they were led to their table.

He didn't speak until they sat, giving her valuable time to compose herself. Seeing Max had shaken her more than she cared to admit. Her stomach roiled with anxiety as she knew she'd have to answer questions that may have far-reaching consequences for her future with the man still holding her hand.

"Nice company you keep." Dylan's judgemental tone irked and when he released her hand, she felt oddly bereft.

"Hey, I don't pick my parent's friends."

"Is that all he is to you?"

Sam resisted the urge to stick her fingers down her throat and make vomiting sounds at the thought of Max being anything but a friend to her.

"What do you think?"

"I think that old guy is smitten with you." She barely heard his "not that I blame him."

She shrugged, hating herself for having to perpetuate the lie she'd woven. "He means nothing to me. My parents seem to like him, which is more than I can say for me."

"He acted as if he owned you." Dylan persisted, gnawing at her waning resistance. "Especially that wisecrack about meaning more to you."

Sam couldn't hold out much longer. She needed to tell Dylan some snippet of truth, otherwise he wouldn't stop until he dragged the whole, sordid story from her.

She sighed, wishing she hadn't started down the disastrous road her hare-brained scheme had managed to steer her.

"My parents think Max would make good husband material."

"What?" Dylan reared back, appalled. "He's old enough to be your father."

"Try telling that to my folks."

She could hardly believe that after all the years her parents had lived in Australia, they hadn't lost any of their European heritage, hanging onto archaic traditions with grim determination.

"But why?"

Sam had to tread carefully if she didn't want her entire lie to unravel before her eyes. "They have old-fashioned values, believing every woman needs a man to take care of her, to provide for her. A woman's place should be in the home, not the boardroom."

She watched the shock register in his eyes and hoped his interrogation would end sooner rather than later.

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“Then why let you attend university? Why the business degree?”

Sam shrugged, remembering the fateful day she’d enrolled in the course and plucked up the courage to tell her parents.

“Simple, really. I blackmailed them.”

His eyebrows shot up. “I need to hear this story.”

“I told them if they didn’t let me attend university, I’d elope with Frank Larson.”

Dylan shook his head. “I’m almost afraid to ask.”

A hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Who is Frank Larson?”

“My high school sweetheart. Not that he knew anything about it.”

She chuckled at the memory of freckly, brace-face Frank, wondering what she’d ever seen in her dorky lab partner. “I used the idea of him to frighten my parents into giving in to my desperation to attend university. Told them that Frank and I were madly in love, and if they didn’t listen to me I’d run away to Vegas with Frank and get married.”

She rolled her eyes. “As if I’d be stupid enough to do that, even if Frank returned my unrequited love.”

Dylan chuckled. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

He twisted a stray curl around his fingertip, the tenderness in his gaze causing her heart to flip-flop. “Let’s make a deal. For tonight, there will be no more talk of Frank, Max, or any other men you have hidden in your past. Tonight, there’s just you and me.”

Her breath hitched as he leaned toward her and for one crazy moment she thought he would kiss her like he had in the elevator.

Instead, he whispered in her ear, “Does that sound like a plan to you?”

Sam nodded, as he planted a soft kiss near her temple before he pulled away to acknowledge the first of the other table occupants to arrive.

However, as the evening proceeded and she endured the endless small talk, the boring speeches, and picked at the food on her plate, she was constantly aware of the man at her side and his overwhelming presence.

And unable to stop thinking about what would happen later when he walked her back to her room.

Sneaking a quick peek at Dylan, she knew she’d be a goner if he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her. Logically, she’d be flirting with disaster if they took it all the way, changing their relationship status before her three months were up.

But what about your heart?

Unfortunately, she’d already lost that particular organ to Dylan Harmon, and he held it right where she didn’t want it—in the palm of his hand.

Dylan repeatedly punched and pummelled his pillow, hoping it might help him fall asleep.

It didn't. He'd tossed and turned for the last hour, his head filled with images of the woman in the room next door, taunting him to follow through with what he'd started earlier.

Damn, he'd been a fool, allowing her to slip through his fingers, when right now he could be having the best sex of his life with a woman who fired his passion with a simple flick of her hair.

As expected, the evening had bored him to tears, yet he'd been aware of Sam for every second of it. Having her by his side filled him with pride. He'd treated her like a cherished partner, a fact that hadn't gone unnoticed by his associates.

He'd be the talk of Sydney in the morning. The sooner he escaped back to Melbourne with Sam, the better. Or better yet, he could whisk her away to Budgerie and finish what they'd started.

Why hadn't he asked what she wanted? He'd walked her back to her room, his hand in the small of her back doing little for his restraint. The feel of her hot skin through the thin, gauzy material of her dress had teased him, tempted him. Instead, he'd stood outside her door, staring at her with what he hoped was a clear message in his eyes, not saying much at all.

He knew she wanted him too yet they'd stared at each other like two dorks, neither willing to make the first move. So he planted an all-too-brief kiss on her cheek, she thanked him for an 'interesting' evening, and closed her door, leaving him gawking like a jilted teenager.

So much for sweeping her off her feet and into his bed. All he'd succeeded in doing

was gaining another sleepless night, though not for the reason he'd anticipated.

He rolled out of bed and padded across the dark room. He pulled back the blackout drapes, taking in the glittering view of Sydney laid out like a sparkling fairyland many storeys below.

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He'd always had a soft spot for this glamorous city, though his heart belonged to the vast tracts of land in northern Victoria where he could ride for miles in solitude and gaze upon the Harmon acreage with pride.

Sam had seemed to understand his love of Budgereee, even though she didn't share his love of family responsibility. Not that he blamed her, after hearing about her parent's archaic views on marriage.

He unwittingly clenched his fists at the thought of her tied to that jerk Max. He'd wanted to punch the creep for the lecherous way he'd leered at Sam, not to mention the pitying glance the old man had sent his way, as if he didn't stand a chance.

Do you want a chance?

Turning away from the million-dollar view, he rubbed his temples and headed back to bed.

Damned if he knew.

21

Sam mentally cursed as she walked along the concourse towards the boarding gate. She'd never believed in coincidence or karma, yet how could she explain running into Quade in Melbourne, Max last night, and now this, the unexpected appearance of two other men in her life?

It had to be fate's way of paying her back for all the lies she'd told over the last few

months.

“Hey, Princess. Fancy seeing you here.” Nick, her youngest brother, enveloped her in a bear hug.

“Looking good, Sis. What are you doing in Sydney?” Peter, the second oldest, tweaked her nose as he always did. “And where’s the man?”

Sam prayed Dylan would not appear in the next few minutes. He wanted to buy some obscure farming magazine and she hoped the bookstore had to go through a backlog of stock to find it.

“He’s around,” she said, keeping her answer purposely vague. “What are you two doing here?”

A faint blush stained Peter’s cheeks. Unfortunately, he possessed the same fair Popov complexion she did. “I was invited to some fancy party and Nicky wanted to accompany me, to scope out the ladies.”

“Whose party?”

Sam hid a grin, knowing exactly whose event Peter had flown down to Sydney to attend. He must be keener on Ebony than she thought, because he hated leaving the Brisbane sunshine and he hated flying even more.

“Ebony’s parents threw some fancy shin-dig to raise money for impoverished kids, so I thought I’d lend a helping hand.” Peter paused and looked away, cementing Sam’s suspicions that her brother was more smitten than he’d like to believe. “I’m surprised you weren’t there, showing off your betrothed.”

“Herwhat?”

Sam froze, unaware Dylan had walked up behind her. Before she could answer, Nick thrust out his hand.

“You must be Dylan. Pleased to meet you. I’m Nick and this is Pete, brothers of this crazy woman.”

She slowly exhaled, unaware she’d been holding her breath. If Nick had mentioned their surname, she would’ve really had some explaining to do. Not that she was off the hook entirely.

Dylan eyed her with confusion. “Yeah, I’m Dylan, though you guys obviously know more about me than I know about you.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “That’d be right. Keeping you in the dark, is she? That’s our sis, always with the secrets.”

Sam intervened quickly, wishing she could drag Dylan away before things turned really ugly. “Why would I talk about you two when we’ve got more important things to discuss?”

She threaded her arm through Dylan’s, hoping to convince her brothers about the authenticity of her make-believe betrothal, yet not wanting to alert Dylan to the fact.

Nick guffawed. “I bet you do.” He grabbed Peter’s arm. “Come on. Let’s leave the two lovebirds alone.” He raised his other hand. “See you later, Princess. Nice to meet you, Dylan.”

As her brothers walked away, chuckling at some joke, Sam wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

“Lovebirds? Betrothed?” Dylan disengaged from her grip. “Where did your brothers

get that idea? And why does everyone you know call you princess?”

This was it.

Her opportunity to come clean.

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But the truth stuck in her throat, because the thought of disillusioning this man she'd come to care for... she couldn't do it.

So yet again, she opted for the partial truth rather than a full-blown lie.

“You don't know my brothers. The five of them are a constant pain in the butt. They've always teased me, especially about boyfriends. So seeing me with you, it's their warped sense of humour to tease me in front of you.” She faked a laugh, hating that she continued lying to him considering how close they'd grown. “And I've already explained the marriage thing. If I spend more than two seconds in the company of any man, he's my 'betrothed'. Sick, huh?”

She swallowed, needing to ease the dryness of her parched throat. She'd never been good at lying but with this much practice, she would soon be an expert. “As for the princess thing, same reason. My brothers and their friends have always called me that because I hate it.”

Dylan stared, as if trying to read every telltale line on her face. Thankfully, the final boarding call for their flight boomed from the loudspeaker and she bent to pick up her hand luggage, breaking his intense scrutiny.

“You certainly have an interesting family.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, knowing he'd bought her concocted story for now and hating every minute of it.

“You call them interesting. I prefer whacky, annoying, and insane.”

He laid a restraining hand on her arm as she turned away. “Don’t underestimate the value of family. They are the most important thing in the world.”

Sam didn’t respond. She didn’t need a lecture on family values from a man who wouldn’t understand what she’d been through growing up. It had been difficult enough being a teenager, without the added pressure of some obsolete royal title being bestowed on her like a prize she should treasure yet didn’t want.

Let him spout a whole lot of platitudes about family. In her opinion, nothing he could say would change how she felt.

“Let’s get back to Melbourne,” she said, knowing the further away she got from the far-reaching influence of the Popov’s, the better.

22

If Dylan thought meeting Sam’s brothers might encourage her to open up to him, he’d been wrong.

Despite his attempts to draw her into conversation about her family, her childhood, or anything remotely personal since, she’d thwarted him at every turn, leaving him with the distinct impression she had some deep, dark secret.

And now, as her three-month trial period drew to a close, he was no closer to knowing anything about the woman who had snuck under his carefully erected barriers against emotional involvement.

He wanted to make her position as his personal assistant permanent. It would be the perfect solution, providing him with a valuable asset to his business while giving him an opportunity to explore his unfamiliar, growing feelings.

He couldn't deny it any longer.

Despite her attempts to keep him at arm's length since their return from Sydney, he wanted her.

Not just in the physical sense, but on a deeper level. He wanted Sam Piper in his life. By his side. In whatever capacity she wanted to be.

He genuinely liked her yet, wouldn't go as far as to admit to the other 'L' word.

He couldn't acknowledge that word or the helpless feelings it reinforced—he'd lost his father because he'd been too pig-headed to admit to that emotion, yet he'd be damned if he associated 'love' and 'Sam' in the same thought.

Not yet, anyway.

So, that left him with only one option.

Offer her a permanent position as his personal assistant and see what developed between them.

Luckily, he knew the perfect way to persuade her to accept his offer.

23

As they entered the gates to Budgeree, a strange sense of belonging enveloped Sam.

She stared out the passenger window, wishing she didn't feel this way. It would be hard enough walking away from Dylan next week, without the added complication of yearning for a lifestyle she could never have.

Not that she harboured any desire to live on the land before now—she'd been a city girl her entire life, eagerly escaping her family's acres in northern Queensland to live the high life in Brisbane. Though that probably had more to do with breaking the shackles of the Popov's rather than any burning desire to live in the city.

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“You like this place, don’t you?” Dylan spoke softly, as if reluctant to break the spell that enveloped them the moment he pulled up in front of the homestead and switched off the engine.

She nodded. “There’s something about it that reaches out and grabs you.”

He smiled, his warmth infusing her with some indefinable emotion she daredn’t analyse. “I’m glad you feel that way. It makes things a lot easier.”

Sam looked away quickly, not willing to ask what he meant by ‘things’. She flung open the car door and climbed out, wondering what had possessed her to accompany him on this trip.

He’d badgered her into it, saying her presence was vital in finalising a few business contracts, but she hadn’t been fooled. She noticed a certain gleam in Dylan’s eyes since they returned from Sydney, as if he wouldn’t take no for an answer the next time they were alone together, and they’d have ‘the talk’ she’d been avoiding.

To reinforce it, he’d made it perfectly clear there would be no chaperone at Budgerie this time, a fact that made her pulse race in a potent mixture of anticipation and trepidation.

She couldn’t bear thinking about the expression on his face when she told him the truth.

She followed him into the house, admiring the snug denim moulded to his butt, and the long, confident strides that spoke volumes about the man. Nothing intimidated

him, and he strutted as if he owned the world, allowing nobody to stand in his way. Even in faded jeans and a checkered shirt, he exuded an aura of power, one that drew her in deeper with each passing day.

“You can sleep in here... if you want.”

He deposited her bag in the spare room she'd inhabited last time, though his significant pause left her in little doubt as to where he hoped she'd be sleeping, or not sleeping, tonight.

“Thanks.”

She strode across the room, pulled back the curtains, and took in the stunning view, needing to focus on something, anything, other than Dylan. He dwarfed everything in the room and the longer he looked at her with those enigmatic eyes, the harder it would be to maintain a platonic distance.

Hoping he'd take the hint that she wanted to be alone, Sam continued to stare out the window.

“Is everything all right?”

She startled, wishing she hadn't turned her back on him. Rather than leave the room, he'd snuck up behind her, his voice a mere whisper from her ear.

“I'm fine,” she said, moving away from the welcoming heat radiating off his body.

“No, you're not.” He reached out and snagged her arm, stopping her in her tracks.

“Tell me what's wrong.”

She stared at his hand, wishing she could shake it off, pick up her bag, and bolt out of

this house and out of his life.

Who had she been kidding? She could no more resist this guy than denounce her heritage—and the sooner she faced facts, the better.

“Maybe later.” She pulled away and thankfully, he released her.

She unzipped her bag and started fumbling with her clothes, furiously blinking away the tears that had inexplicably filled her eyes. She’d never been prone to tears, yet the way her emotions had been swinging lately, she’d been close to waterworks several times.

“I’m here for you, Samantha. Whatever you need, even if it’s a friend to talk to. I’m here.”

His low voice reached out and wrapped her in comforting warmth, beckoning her to turn around, bury her head against his chest, and sob out her sorry tale.

Instead, she nodded, not trusting herself to speak as the tears trickled down her cheeks.

Thankfully, he didn’t touch her, and only hesitated a moment longer before leaving the room. As soon as she heard the latch click, she sank onto the bed, buried her face in her hands, and cried, though for the life of her she couldn’t figure out if they were tears of regret for her soon-to-be departure, shame at her lies, or that she was on the verge of losing the man she’d been foolish enough to fall in love with.

Dylan had no idea why Sam had been upset when they arrived earlier that afternoon. She seemed to love this place as much as he did, and her strange behaviour scuttled in

his plans.

He had it all figured out; lay out a lavish dinner, ply her with compliments about how her skills in the office impressed him, then offer her the job of a lifetime.

If anything else developed during that conversation, like the two of them finally facing up to the weird relationship they'd fallen into...that would be fine too.

Now, he didn't know whether he should wait until tomorrow and try again, or repack the four-wheel drive and head back to Melbourne.

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Or maybe he could stop pretending like he needed her to accept this job and admit he wanted to keep her around because he'd developed feelings.

Dylan was no fool. He knew there would be other personal assistants as competent as Sam. So hiding his real feelings behind a job offer was a dumbass move.

He had to come clean and ask if she wanted to stay beyond the three months so they could explore their developing feelings.

Correction.Hisdeveloping feelings.

He grimaced, wondering when he'd become such a sap. He'd managed to stay single and emotionally tangle-free for the last few years, just the way he liked it.

Yet here he was, already pining for a pint-sized blonde dynamo that would probably walk out of his life in a week without a backward glance, taking her damn secrets with her.

He needed to confront her and demand the truth.

But he hated prying in other people's business, as much as he hated people delving into his.

How could he expect something of her that he wouldn't willingly give?

"Wuss," he muttered under his breath, slamming the back door as he headed for the stables.

A fast and furious ride would get the adrenaline flowing, and get rid of this emotional lethargy sapping him of every ounce of common sense he possessed.

He was sick of playing these games.

If Sam wanted anything more from him other than a pay cheque before the end of next week, she would have to show him.

25

Sam dug her heels into the mare's sides, urging the horse to follow the distant streak across the horizon in any pace faster than a slow trot.

She'd ridden Speedy last time, soon recognising the plodding mare had been named in the typical Australian way of labelling opposite characteristics: Bluey for redheads, Shorty for anyone over six feet tall, and Mouse for the powerful stallion Dylan now rode like a man possessed.

True to form, Speedy could barely raise a canter as she followed her stable-mate, and Sam resigned herself to eventually catching up with Dylan and his mount—sometime tomorrow.

She'd seen Dylan tear out of the stable, riding his horse like a madman with a million demons on his tail. She'd wanted to take a ride this afternoon in the hope it might clear her head and it seemed Dylan had the same idea. Though she'd hardly call his hair-raising gallop a leisurely ride.

So she followed him, not wanting to lose her way on the vast plains of Budgerie and hoping she'd know what to say when she caught up with him.

Though the tears she shed earlier had been cathartic, she still had no idea how she

could bear to leave Dylan next week. She had an inkling he might ask her to stay on as his personal assistant, but what would that achieve apart from prolonging the agony?

Besides, her parents wouldn't wait much longer to meet her 'betrothed' and she didn't want her elaborate lie falling down around her ears, with Dylan witnessing it. She'd had enough close calls and couldn't believe her luck had held out this long.

Which only left her with one option. Leave next week as planned and return to her family in the hope they would accept the undeniable proof she could make it on her own without the support of any man as her husband and chief protector.

And hopefully, Dylan would be none the wiser of his involvement in her plan or that she'd lost her heart to him.

As if on cue, his vision rose before her, man and stallion standing still on a ridge, silhouetted against the vibrant ochre setting sun. Sam swallowed the lump of emotion in her throat, wishing she could imprint this moment on her mind forever, a cherished memory she could resurrect at will during the lonely months ahead.

As if sensing her presence, Dylan turned and guided Mouse down the hill toward her. She waited, overcome by a powerful desire that this could be a life she could get used to; riding out to meet the man of her dreams at the end of a day and accompanying him home, to their home, where they could stay wrapped in each other's arms all night and face whatever the next day would bring, together.

Sam resisted the urge to shake her head and dislodge the ludicrous fantasy. There would be no shared life at Budgereee, no welcoming homecomings, no man of her dreams.

Instead, she would be left with nothing... apart from the chance to make the most of every second she had left with the man she loved.

Once the idea insinuated its way into her head, she couldn't ignore it. What harm could it do, to make the most of their remaining time together? Treasured memories would be the only thing left to sustain her in the months ahead, when the full force of what she'd lost would hit her.

Squaring her shoulders as he stopped beside her, she smiled. "I thought you might get lost out here on your own."

His perpetual frown softened as he reached toward her and ran an index finger lightly down her cheek. "You have a smudge of dirt right there."

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He straightened quickly, depriving her of the chance to lean against his hand. “You shouldn’t have followed me out here. I don’t have time to send out a search party if you get lost.”

Sam noted his rigid posture and the frown that hadn’t disappeared. If she planned to make him want her tonight, she had her work cut out for her.

“I had no choice. When Speedy wants her man, she’ll stop at nothing. I sat along for the ride.”

His eyes darkened imperceptibly in the waning light and she resisted the urge to squirm in the saddle. Silence stretched between them as she struggled to find something bright and witty to say. Thankfully, Mouse pawed the ground as if keen to get moving, breaking their deadlocked stare.

“Let’s head back. I’m starving.” He wheeled around, not sending her a backward look.

So am I.

Though Sam knew her hunger had nothing to do with food and everything to do with the man sitting on his horse, surveying his land.

She’d made a lightning-fast decision several minutes ago and she hoped she had the guts to go through with it.

If this was her last week with Dylan, she would make the most of it, no tears, no

regrets.

She wanted him, more than she'd ever wanted any man, and for tonight, she would cast aside her inhibitions, her common sense, and every self-preservation mechanism that screamed she might be doing the wrong thing, and go after him. No holds barred.

She smiled as the homestead came into sight, knowing Dylan wouldn't know what hit him when she pulled out all stops tonight.

And prayed she'd have the strength to walk away when it ended.

26

Dylan sat in the worn recliner that had been his dad's favourite and stretched his legs out toward the blazing fire.

"Here's your wine. Cheers." Sam touched the rim of her glass to his before raising it to her lips and taking a sip.

He gulped the wine without tasting it, wishing he could tear his gaze away from her mouth while simultaneously wishing for those lips to do a whole lot more.

"Cheers," he murmured, knowing that for as long as he lived, he would never figure women out.

Since their ride, Sam had done her best to appear cheerful and relaxed, the exact opposite of her demeanour when they arrived.

She made small talk over dinner and had appeared genuinely interested in his plans for this place, his pride and joy. He hadn't felt so comfortable in a woman's presence in a long time and knew now would be as good a time as any to broach the subject of

her ongoing contract.

“Samantha, we need to talk.”

To his amazement, she laughed and reached for his glass. “Are you ever going to lighten up and call me Sam again?”

He could’ve sworn she sashayed across the room, setting their glasses on the mantelpiece before turning to face him, an inviting, coy smile playing across her lips.

“Well?”

He leaned back in the chair and placed his hands behind his head, admiring her silhouette with the fire at her back. As if basking in his appreciation, she stretched her arms back toward the heat and rubbed her hands together, the simple action pulling her shirt taut against her chest and outlining the curve of her breasts.

Heat surged through his body as he fought the impulse to drag her down to the sheepskin rug in front of the fire and tear open her shirt. “You think I need to lighten up?”

“I know you do.”

Reading his mind, she sank onto the rug and his fantasy took flight. He imagined peeling the clothes from her body, exposing the skin beneath to his hands and mouth, before making them both climb the walls with mind-blowing sex.

“Dylan?”

Even the soft, breathy way she uttered his name had him focussing on all the wrong cues.

If he didn't know any better, he could've sworn she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

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He practically leaped from the chair and strode toward the door before he did something really dumb, like join her on that damn rug.

“I’m going to bed. See you in the morning.”

“Mind if I join you?”

Her whisper stopped him dead in his tracks.

“What did you say?” He turned, knowing his fantasy must’ve turned into an auditory hallucination, yet wishing he’d heard correctly.

She didn’t respond immediately and he knew he must be going mad. However, as he took a step to walk out the door, she held out her hand to him.

“Come here, Dylan.”

He crossed the room in an instant, sank to his knees in front of the crackling fire, and pulled her into his arms.

“Don’t just sit there.” Her lips curved into a tempting smile. “Aren’t you going to kiss me?”

Dylan didn’t need further encouragement as he lowered his head and covered her mouth in a searing kiss.

She moaned, and he lost all sense of control, plundering her mouth with the abandon

of a man starved. He pulled her flush against him, sealing their bodies together, desperate to feel her pressed against him.

She melded into him, her hands clamping around his neck. She stroked the nape of his neck, her fingernails lightly grazing his skin while her mouth nibbled hot kisses across his jaw. Sparks flew—and not just from the sap of a log that suddenly ignited in the hearth.

In a strangled voice, he managed to ask, “Are you sure about this?”

“No more questions,” she whispered against the side of his mouth. “Tonight is about you and me. Think you can handle it?”

She guided his hands to her breasts, leaving him in little doubt as to the exact parts she wanted him to handle, and sending the last of his chivalry up the chimney in a puff of smoke.

Before he could answer, she pulled him toward her for another kiss and they sank onto the downy softness of the rug. He claimed her lips, feasting on the sweetness of liquor and delicious Sam.

“I want you, Sam,” he murmured, as he undid each button on her shirt before sliding his hand beneath the scrap of lace that encased her breasts, his fingers stroking the soft skin until he thought he’d lose his mind.

Sam arched toward Dylan as his thumb grazed her nipple, shards of electrifying fire shooting through her body. She lost control the moment he first touched her... and she loved every minute of it sheer abandon, revelling in finally giving in to the pulsating need between them.

“You pick a fine time to finally call me Sam.” She gasped as his fingers momentarily

left her breast and splayed across her stomach before moving lower, creating an instant yearning that wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than his naked body joined with hers.

She'd never been this turned on, and the powerless feeling of being swept along in the wake of their shared passion left her breathless and clamouring for more.

“Timing is everything, sweetheart.”

He gathered her to him and cradled her, sensing her need, poised to give her everything she wanted.

She stared at the man she loved in the flickering firelight, wondering if the tenderness she glimpsed in his eyes was a figment of her overheated imagination or wishful thinking.

Though in this moment, she didn't want to waste time analysing. Dylan's kiss, his touch, had set her alight and every inch of her body burned, wanting more. Wanting it all.

“Trust me,” he whispered, brushing a wayward curl back from her face before tracing a slow, deliberate line from her temple to her lips, his finger skimming over her bottom lip repeatedly, firing her desire with each gentle stroke.

She strained toward him and he stilled her by splaying his palm over her heart. Could he feel how furiously it beat for him? Did he understand the significance of his hand placement?

He owned her heart.

Her soul.

This dour, workaholic, gorgeous man had become her everything, and she intended on proving it to him tonight.

“I trust you,” she murmured, as he rose, holding her in his arms, and walked through the old homestead toward the master bedroom.

27

Sam woke to the raucous chuckles of a kookaburra and stretched, wondering what had happened to her cotton T-shirt during the night. She always wore the faded rugby shirt to bed, yet it had miraculously disappeared.

In that second, reality rushed over her and she sat bolt upright, clutched the sheet to her chest, and glanced around the room as memories of last night flooded back.

It hadn't been a dream.

She'd slept in the master bedroom—with its antique Blackwood furniture and burgundy lined drapes—in the king-sized four poster bed, wearing nothing but a smile.

And the man who had put it there was nowhere in sight.

She'd been dreading this moment ever since she'd thrown caution to the wind yesterday and decided to seduce Dylan.

How should she act afterward? What should she say?

They weren't strangers who could walk away without a backward glance. She still had a job to do, even if it was only for another week. Yet how could she face him now, with the scorching memories of sex burned into her brain, and keep their relationship business focussed?

Determined not to make a fool of herself, she slid out of bed and winced, aching in muscles she didn't know existed. She needed a shower, fresh clothes, and a steaming mug of coffee in that order. Then, and only then, could she entertain the thought of facing Dylan.

She picked up her discarded clothes from the floor, crept across the hallway, and scurried into her room, thankful the man who rocked her world last night was nowhere in sight.

Maybe she'd figure out what to say during her shower? She sighed with pleasure as she stepped under the steaming jets and let the hot water sluice down her body, wondering if he was avoiding her.

Not that she could blame him. He probably thought she'd lost her mind, coming onto him last night after practically falling apart earlier that afternoon.

She would have a lot of explaining to do... if she ever plucked up enough courage to leave the shelter of her room.

Reaching for the soap, her hand stilled as a blast of cold air hit her back, closely followed by the warmth of a hard, male body.

Anaroused, male body, pressing firmly against her.

"Let me do that."

Dylan wrapped his arms around her from behind and she leaned back, her legs turning to jelly as he soaped the front of her body, circling her breasts in slow, concentric circles until she groaned aloud.

So much for figuring out what to say to him. There wasn't much need for talking as

she lost herself in the passionate haze of Dylan's attention—rolling her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, licking her neck in long sweeps, sliding his hand down the front of her body before his fingers delved between her legs—every erotic movement clearly reflected in the mirror opposite, heightening her senses until the pleasure built, her muscles spasmed, and her world exploded in a kaleidoscope of satiation.

As her heart rate returned to a pace resembling normal, she sagged against him, not trusting herself to speak.

“See you in the kitchen.”

He planted a quick peck under her earlobe and stepped out of the shower, as if the last twenty-four hours had never happened.

And just like that, Sam realised the secret dream she'd been harbouring for the last few months, the one where Dylan would fall madly in love with her and become her fiancé for real, had been just that, a fanciful dream.

Now, it was time to wake up.

28

Sam deserved a trophy.

In fact, she deserved an entire truckload of acting awards for the performance she put on today.

She'd been the epitome of the efficient personal assistant, like her boss wanted. Because that's how Dylan had behaved all day, like a tyrannical boss who demanded nothing less than perfection from an employee.

There hadn't been a hint of the intimacies they shared last night, not to mention their steamy session in the shower this morning.

Instead, he pretended as if nothing had happened between them and she picked up on his cues and followed suit. After all, it was for the best. They had no future beyond next week and it was time she started to believe it.

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“Could you pass me that document?” Dylan pointed at the pile of papers to her left while studying the invoice in his hand.

“So much for the magical P word,” she muttered, resisting the urge to throw the paper at him.

“Don’t be childish.” He glared at her as if she’d uttered an obscenity.

She quirked an eyebrow. “Since when are manners considered childish?”

He ignored her and returned to studying the document, while her temper rose several notches. She’d tolerated his barked commands and surly attitude all day, knowing she could only take so much.

Though he’d been demanding over the past few months, he’d never been rude, and she wondered if his churlish display today was designed to push her away.

If so, he was doing a fine job of it.

She took a calming breath and returned to adding the column of figures she’d been working on, wishing her life was as easy to compute.

“By the way, we’re leaving as soon as we’ve finished this pile.”

She looked up in time to find him staring at her with the oddest expression—a bewildering mix of confusion, regret, lust, hope—before he quickly returned to the paper in his hand.

“Thanks for the notice,” she said, wondering what had happened to the easy-going camaraderie they shared before last night.

Rather than bringing them closer as she’d anticipated, their interlude had widened the gap between them to massive proportions.

“I’m not in the mood, Samantha.”

That did it. She’d had enough of his condescending tone and all-round bad attitude for one day.

Standing, she slammed the completed spreadsheet on the table in front of him, and stalked toward the door, only pausing when she reached it.

“Pity you didn’t say the same last night when I came onto you. Would’ve saved us your immature performance today.”

Shocked, he gaped, but she didn’t give him a chance to reply.

“I’ll meet you out the front in fifteen minutes,” she said, hoping her voice wouldn’t quaver. “After all, our business here is finished.”

She walked away, head held high, while for the second time in as many days, Sam fought a useless battle against tears as she silently cursed the man who had turned her world upside down.

29

On their return to Melbourne, Dylan stalked into his room and flung his bag onto the floor, wondering how he’d managed to make such a mess of things.

Rather than a sojourn at Budgerie opening the door to a deeper relationship with Sam, the time they spent there had well and truly slammed it shut.

He'd acted like a jerk today, saying the wrong things and behaving like an ass, when what he really wanted to do was drag her back to his bed and have wild, passionate sex with her all day long.

He couldn't get the image of her water-slicked body out of his mind, or the way she abandoned any pretence at shyness this morning and joined in their heated session in the shower, watching their erotic reflection in the mirror the entire time.

He'd never experienced anything like it before—correction, he'd never experienced the feelings that sex with Sam elicited, before.

What had he done about it? Pushed her away in the coldest way possible, not daring to believe he'd been foolish enough to fall in love with her.

He didn't have room in his life for love, a useless emotion that complicated simple relationships and turned them into dependent affairs fraught with responsibilities.

If anyone should know, he should.

Look at what had happened with his dad.

A knock interrupted his thoughts. "Can I come in, Son?"

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“Sure, Mother.” He took a deep breath, hoping she couldn’t read the dejection on his face.

He should’ve known better. As soon as Liz entered the room, his mother homed in on his mood immediately.

“Is everything all right?”

“Of course.”

He avoided eye contact, knowing he’d always been a lousy liar. Pity he hadn’t felt the same earlier that day; he had little trouble hiding the truth about his feelings from Sam.

Liz sat down on his bed and patted the spot next to her. “Come here and tell me all about it.”

He stiffened, not willing to admit the truth to his mother. Hell, he was having a hard enough time admitting it to himself.

And then, with the unerring precision of a lifetime spent reading him, she guessed his main problem.

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

He schooled his expression into impassivity, knowing it wouldn’t fool his mother.

“You’ve been reading too many romance novels. Isn’t it time you branched out into another genre, like crime?”

His mother shook her head, as if he’d disappointed her with his glib response.

“The only crime around here is the one occurring right in front of me. When are you going to learn that taking a chance on love isn’t so bad?”

“Who said anything about love?”

She smiled, that same knowing smile she’d given him when he’d pulled out his first tooth and said it had fallen out, when he’d fibbed about a stomach ache to avoid an exam at school, when he’d said his first love bite was a result of a snooker cue accidentally hitting him in the neck.

“You don’t have to say a thing. It’s written all over your face.” She clasped her hands together as her grin broadened. “A mother knows these things.”

“Leave it alone, please. I don’t want to talk about it.”

He paced the room, feeling like a circus lion about to be prodded into jumping through hoops. Too cruel.

“If you don’t want to talk to me, why don’t you talk to the lady in question?”

He remembered the expression on Sam’s face as she’d flung that comment about his mood at him before leaving Budgerees. Though she’d used sass to cover her hurt, he’d seen right through her, feeling like a bastard in the process.

And what had he done? Absolutely nothing.

“Sam and I need to sort out a few issues.”

Liz’s expression brightened at his admission and he held up a hand before she rushed out to start planning the wedding. “They involve her ongoing employment, not the state of her heart. Or mine, for that matter.”

“Shame.”

His mother’s disappointment surprised him. Sure, she wanted to see him married off—she’d been not-so-subtle in shoving him in Monique Taylor’s direction for years—but why push him toward Sam? She barely knew her.

So why was his mother almost forcing him to admit his love for Sam?

“Fine. If you want to talk to your decrepit old mother, I’m here for you.” She stood and straightened her skirt. “Just remember, darling. Follow your heart.”

She kissed him on the cheek, before leaving him alone with a host of unwelcome thoughts, most of them centred around Sam and how he could make it up to her for his atrocious behaviour.

30

Sam didn’t unpack on her return to Melbourne.

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Why bother, when she'd have to repack in a week? Or less, if she had her way. Why prolong the agony?

Dylan had made it more than clear he couldn't tolerate her presence in his life any longer, and after the way he behaved today, the feeling was entirely mutual.

Ebony had been right—love was for suckers. Though by the goofy expression on her brother Pete's face when he mentioned her friend at the airport in Sydney, Ebony could be heading for a big fall—if she hadn't fallen already.

Tears stung Sam's eyes as she thought about her friend. She really needed a shoulder to cry on at the moment and Ebony would be perfect.

Wiping her eyes with an angry swipe of her hand and cursing her stupidity at shedding tears for a man who wasn't worth it, she dumped the paperwork she'd been working on, making a neat pile in the middle of his desk, and picked up her phone. A quick call to her bestie would do wonders; if anyone could talk sense into her, Ebony could.

Sam brought up her favourites, tapped Ebony's number, and waited while the phone rang. Thankfully, Ebony picked up on the fifth ring.

"Eb, it's me."

"Hey, Sammy. What's up? You sound awful."

"That obvious, huh?"

“What’s he done?”

Ebony had an unerring talent of homing in on a problem. It annoyed Sam at times but right now, she was grateful for it.

So Sam poured out the whole sorry story to her best friend, leaving nothing out.

When Sam’s tirade finished, Ebony said, “Why don’t you tell him the truth?”

“And say what? ‘Hey Dylan, even though I’ve been your employee for the last three months, it’s all been a lie and what I really want is for us to get married and live happily ever after.’ Yeah, right. I’m sure he’d love that.”

“I mean tell him the truth about how you feel. What have you got to lose?”

At that moment, Sam heard a faint click behind her. She cupped a hand over the phone and turned around, the sight of Dylan glowering at her sending her heart plummeting.

“We need to talk,” he said through gritted teeth. “Now.”

If she thought he’d been angry earlier, she’d underestimated him. The terse, clipped tone, along with the folded arms and fierce frown, indicated he’d surpassed anger and had entered the furious stage.

“I’ll call you back later,” Sam said softly into the phone.

“If that’s who I think it is, go for it.”

Another of Ebony’s life mottos, though in this case, Sam knew it was way too late to follow her friend’s advice. She’d already ‘gone for it’ and it had landed her in more

trouble than it had been worth.

“Bye.”

As Sam hung up, she wondered how much of her conversation Dylan had overheard. By the deepening frown and the way he stalked across the room toward her, he’d heard plenty.

“Take a seat,” he snapped, pointing to the ergonomic chair she’d occupied almost every day over the last few months. “And let’s talk about your employment.”

“Don’t make it sound so appealing,” she muttered, before sitting. Though she didn’t take kindly to orders, she knew now wasn’t the time to push back. Dylan looked mad as hell—and she’d been stupid enough to provoke him.

He clenched his fists and took several deep breaths before continuing. “I wanted to offer you a permanent position as my personal assistant. You’ve done a great job, better than I could’ve hoped for, and I thought it’s time to cement our business arrangement.”

Sam didn’t know what to say. She thought he’d overheard her conversation with Ebony and would subject her to an interrogation; instead, she almost sagged with relief as she realised he wanted to discuss her job. The anger was probably a carry-over from this morning—he hadn’t spoken a word on their return trip to Melbourne, which had been fine with her.

As she opened her mouth to respond, he held up a hand.

“Don’t.”

He spat the word and she knew in an instant her relief had been short-lived.

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“I don’t want to hear another word out of your lying mouth.” He glared at her, his eyes turning to molten chocolate as they smouldered with rage.

The flicker of hope within Sam shrivelled and died as she realised he’d heard every damning word she uttered on the phone.

And she’d now have to come clean to the last man on earth she hoped would ever learn the truth.

“Let me explain—“

“I don’t want to hear it,” he interrupted, slamming a fist against a filing cabinet.

Sam sank further into the chair, wishing she could say something, anything, to allay the way he must be feeling right now.

She hated being lied to, almost as much as she hated being pushed around by others, and she knew Dylan wouldn’t be satisfied with anything less than the truth.

However, before she could speak, he swung to face her again, neck muscles rigid against the collar of his shirt, an angry flush staining his tanned cheeks.

“I thought you were different, yet you’re not. You’re just like the rest. And I despise you for it.”

He’d startled her when he thumped the steel filing cabinet and her pulse raced. Now, with icy contempt dripping from every word and his cold stare, the blood flowing in

her veins froze.

“The rest?” She spoke quietly, hoping her tone would soothe him. It didn’t.

“You lied to me, Samantha, just like the rest of the two-faced women who’ve tried to insinuate their way into my life for monetary gain. I heard you admit it on the phone. You came here under the pretence of working for me, when all you really wanted was a ring on your finger and an easy way into the Harmon fortune. Well, forget it. Your scheme hasn’t worked. Now get the hell out!”

Sam paled as Dylan fixed her with a stare that would’ve sent most people in his business world scuttling for cover.

She didn’t refute his accusations or offer any kind of explanation. Instead, she sat there, clasping her hands together and shaking her head.

Pain, swift and raw, knifed his heart as he watched her, wishing she could’ve been different and knowing the wish was futile.

He’d heard her say her stint here had been a sham and what she’d hoped for was marriage.

So much for his instincts to read people.

He’d been so careful in the past, not falling victim to the women who entered his life with sweet, empty words designed to entice him.

They hadn’t loved him; they’d all been out for one thing, easy access to the Harmon fortune.

He’d managed to harden his heart and thwart them all.

Until now.

That's what gutted him most. This time, he'd fallen in love against his better judgement, and it hurt like the devil to be betrayed this way.

Though all wasn't lost. He'd discovered Sam's plan in time to save the family fortune, if not his heart.

He squared his shoulders and glared at her, instilling every ounce of hurt and betrayal into his voice.

"I said, get the hell out!"

She stood and headed toward the door, not even casting a glance in his direction.

Dylan's heart shattered as he watched the woman he loved walk out of his life.

31

"It's for the best... it's for the best..." Sam silently repeated the words over and over during the flight to Brisbane.

However, as much as she tried to believe them, she couldn't ignore the image burned into her retinas of Dylan's horrified expression as he flung accusations at her, hatred etched into every line of his face.

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She should be angry. She should hate him for jumping to conclusions. Instead, she felt bereft, as if someone had reached into her chest and ripped her heart out, leaving a gaping, aching hole.

She'd never experienced such total and utter desolation and knew it would take a lifetime to recover from loving Dylan.

So what if her plan to prove her independence to her parents had succeeded? It would be a hollow victory, considering she'd lost her heart in the process.

She may be mad at him for lumping her in with the rest of the bimbos who'd tried to ensnare him, though she couldn't blame him for jumping to conclusions. He'd overheard her say to Ebony that she'd lied to him, and though she couldn't quite recall her exact words she'd mumbled something about marrying him too. Ironical, that accusation hadn't been far from the truth. She would've married him in a second if he'd asked.

After the plane touched down and Sam disembarked, she scanned the crowd for her brother Pete. Despite her protestations to Ebony that everything was all right when she'd called her from Melbourne airport, her friend had sensed trouble and insisted she would notify Peter to pick her up when Sam arrived home. In no mood to argue at the time, Sam had reluctantly agreed.

However, as Pete spotted her among the disembarking passengers and enveloped her in a bear hug, she wondered at her sanity. She was in no mood for lengthy interrogations or explanations, two things her brothers were experts at.

Stifling the urge to sob into Pete's shirt, Sam pulled away.

"Thanks for picking me up."

"No problem." Pete picked up her luggage and headed for the nearest exit, leaving Sam gaping.

"What? No questions? No prying?"

He stopped and turned around. "Come on, Sis. It's me you're talking to."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Since when did you become sensitive to my feelings?"

Her brothers had taken it in turns to tease, berate, and lecture her for most of her twenty-five years and she couldn't believe Pete had turned over a new leaf now.

He shrugged, appearing oddly uncomfortable. "I had a chat with Ebs. She told me to lay off you, in no uncertain terms."

Sam tried to smother a grin and failed. If she had any doubts about the blossoming relationship between Pete and her best friend, her brother had just laid them to rest. He must be head over heels to take advice from a woman, especially one as opinionated as Ebony.

"When's the wedding?"

She couldn't resist teasing him, because it took the focus off her problems for more than two seconds.

To her amazement, Pete blushed. "She told you, didn't she?"

“Told me what?”

He shook his head. “It’s supposed to be a secret. Damn woman.”

Sam grabbed Pete’s arm as a smidgeon of an idea took root and quickly grew to beanstalk proportions. “You’re getting married?”

“Sshh.” He glanced around as if she’d announced it over the airport loudspeaker. “Nobody knows, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“You’re marrying Ebony?” Sam needed to find the nearest chair—and fast—before she collapsed. “You’re kidding, right?”

Pete stared at her and she’d never seen her brother so serious. “No, I’m not kidding. We love each other, probably have for years, and it’s time to make it official.”

“But why all the secrecy?”

“You of all people should know the answer to that one, Princess.”

With a blinding flash of clarity, Sam understood. While she’d been away, perhaps her brothers had borne some of her parent’s pressure in ‘living up to the Popov name’ and ‘marrying to fit their heritage’. After all that she’d endured the last few years, she finally had an ally.

She leaned over and hugged Pete. “I’m really happy for you. And don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me. Though I’m going to kill Ebony. She didn’t tell me a word.”

Pete squeezed her back. “She didn’t think it was the right time, what with your romantic problems and all...” He trailed off, as if he’d said too much.

Sam pasted a bright smile on her face, determined not to let her pain resurface in front of her brother.

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“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

However, as he filled her in on family news as they travelled home, Sam seriously wondered if she’d ever be fine again.

32

Dylan rarely drank, believing it impeded his judgement.

However, as he downed a second straight whiskey in the space of an hour, he allowed himself the luxury of a wry smile.

He hadn’t needed alcohol to impede his judgement when it came to Sam—he’d done a damn good job of botching it all on his own.

Even now, after brooding on how foolish he’d been to fall for her act, he couldn’t believe they were over.

He dropped his head in his hands and rubbed his temples, wishing the hot blonde with the rapier mind and sharper wit had never entered his life three months ago. He’d been behaving out of character ever since, and despite her betrayal, a small part of him still wanted her more than he’d ever wanted any woman.

“Why did Sam leave?”

His head snapped up at the sound of his mother’s voice. She must have snuck into the den, as he had several hours earlier, though what he’d overheard changed his life

forever.

“She lied to me.”

His mother pulled up the nearest seat. “She told you, huh?”

“You knew about this?”

He shook his head, hearing but not quite believing his mother would support such a scheme. She would obviously go to any lengths to see him married and it sickened him almost as much as Sam’s betrayal.

His mother shrugged, as if supporting a gold-digger and her claims to lay a hand on the Harmon fortune was no big deal. “Yes, I knew. I guessed the truth when I first saw her and we had a chat that confirmed it.”

Dylan took a deep breath, struggling to get air into his constricting lungs. “And you supported her?”

“Well, she explained things to me, and I didn’t see any harm in it.”

He leaped up from his chair, his temper flaring out of control for the second time that day.

“You didn’t see the harm in that little schemer setting her sights on using me to get at our fortune?” His voice rose several octaves and he didn’t care. “What were you thinking?”

To his amazement, his mother laughed. Not just an intimidated titter or a smothered chuckle, but an all-out belly laugh.

“Where did you get the idea Sam was after our fortune?”

He folded his arms and glared at the one woman in this world he thought he could trust.

“I overheard her on the phone earlier. She said she’d lied to me all this time and she wanted to marry me.”

“Oh dear,” his mother wiped away the tears from the corners of her eyes. “You’ve got it all wrong.”

“How?”

By the grave expression on his mother’s face, he had an inkling he wouldn’t like what she had to say.

“Have you heard of the Popov family?”

“Of course. Who hasn’t? They own most of Queensland.”

“Did you also know they are descendants of Russian royalty?”

Dylan couldn’t fathom why Liz would be rambling about Russian royalty at a time like this, but he decided to give his mother the benefit of the doubt. She rarely minced words and was obviously leading somewhere with this.

“Get to the point, Mother.”

She reached for a handkerchief and dabbed at her nose. “I don’t think Sam was after the Harmon fortune. She wouldn’t need it, being a princess and all.”

“What?”

He never thought dementia with increasing age would be a problem for his mother, but maybe senility had crept up on her overnight?

“Samantha is the only daughter of the Popov family. And a rich princess in her own right.”

Liz had the grace to look away, not quite able to meet his eye, but she couldn’t hide a growing grin.

Feeling like an idiot—and the only person in the room who didn’t have a clue—he said, “I don’t understand. Why the ruse? Why change her surname, why work for me, why mention marriage?”

He shook his head, trying to make sense of the barrage of questions that swirled around his brain.

“Why don’t you ask her?”

His mother stood and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. “It’s the only way.”

Reeling from his mother's revelations and more confused than ever, he waited until she left the room before reaching for the phone.

33

Sam's reunion with her parents hadn't gone quite as expected.

She'd anticipated an interrogation of mammoth proportions, mainly revolving around her absent fiancé.

Instead, they welcomed her with open arms, lavishing her with more love than they had in her twenty-five years to date. Rather than plying her with questions, they smothered her, reinforcing how much they'd missed her.

She couldn't handle this drastic change in her strict, orthodox parents, and the truth had spilled out before she could stop it.

Well, most of the truth.

She told them about working for Dylan Harmon to prove her independence, about being liberated living away from her family, about how Max made her skin crawl, and the thought of marrying him would sever her relationship with them permanently.

She'd cried tears of relief when they embraced her and apologised for driving her to such lengths, admitting they hadn't realised the pressure they'd been placing on her and the rest of their children.

The experience had been a catalyst in changing her relationship with her parents and if she'd known what her harebrained scheme would do, she might've done it a long time ago.

She' told them everything, almost, leaving out the part where she'd lost her heart to a man who now despised her.

But she hadn't had time to dwell. Once Pete had seen his parents change of attitude, he'd told them about marrying Ebony, and the entire family had been coerced into making the wedding happen as soon as possible.

It had barely been a week since she returned from Melbourne, and today, her best friend would become her sister-in-law.

Putting the finishing touches on her makeup, she knocked on the interconnecting door of the hotel rooms the girls had used to get ready for the big day.

"Are you finished, Eb? It's almost time to go."

The door swung open and in typical flamboyant style, her friend struck a pose.

"What do you think? Do I look like a bride?"

Sam smiled and brushed away the tears that sprung to her eyes at the sight of her friend clad in an ivory sheath dotted with crystals, her usual flyaway hair smoothed into a sleek chignon and adorned with a sparkling tiara, and sheer veil that dropped to the floor.

"You look incredible. Pete's going to pass out when he sees you."

Ebony rolled her eyes. "Let's hope not. It's taken too much effort to get him this far and I'll be damned if he backs out now."

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“There’s no chance of that. My dorky brother is absolutely crazy for you. Are you sure you want to become part of our insane family?”

To her amazement, tears glistened in Ebony’s eyes. Her friend rarely cried; Sam could count the number of times Ebony let emotion get the better of her.

“We’re already family, and don’t you forget it.”

Sam hugged her best friend and blinked back her tears, knowing if she let them fall now she’d never stop.

Since her return from Melbourne and in the privacy of her room each night, she’d cried enough tears to fill the Pacific twice over and she’d be damned if she let her heartbreak spoil Ebony and Pete’s wedding day.

Ebony released her. “Time to get this show on the road. There’s a chapel down the road where my charming prince is waiting.”

Sam chuckled, unable to associate the brother who had put frogs in her bed with Ebony’s version of a charming prince.

“If you say so. Though personally, I think that guy’s a fable, ranking alongside that gingerbread house I spent years searching for in our local rainforest as a kid.”

“They’re not all like Dylan, you know,” Ebony said, fixing her with a pointed stare.

Sam shrugged, wishing her friend hadn’t brought up the man she’d been trying

desperately to forget.

“It’s not his fault. I lied to him. It’s natural he’d jump to conclusions about the rest.”

“That’s BS. If the guy had half a brain in his head he would’ve followed you here and given you a chance to explain. Don’t you dare defend him.”

Sam squeezed Ebony’s arm and led her to the door. “Calm down. It isn’t good for the bride to get this riled before the ceremony. Besides, Dylan Harmon is history. Let’s focus on more important matters, like getting you married.”

Thankfully, Ebony dropped the subject, leaving Sam to wonder how long it would take before she believed her own propaganda and relegated the memory of the one man she loved to past history.

34

After a week of endless business problems, Dylan had finally managed to arrange a flight to Brisbane.

He had to cancel the trip several times, leading him to believe that perhaps he wasn’t destined to sort out the mess with Sam.

However, he couldn’t get her out of his mind, and he knew he owed it to himself to find closure, one way or the other.

He wanted answers to several puzzling questions and Sam was the only woman who could provide them.

Striding to the front door of the Popov mansion, he took in the sweeping river views, the manicured lawns, and the impressive façade of the entrance with its marble tiled

verandah, towering columns, and double wrought iron door, wondering for the hundredth time why a woman with this much wealth would want to work for him.

Despite what he'd learned in his investigations—that Samantha was in fact a princess—he still couldn't shake the feeling she'd set her sights on him in the matrimonial stakes.

Why else would she have said it when he'd overheard her on the phone?

There had to be more behind her scheme in working for him and he wouldn't leave Brisbane until he had answers.

He thumped on the door, out of his depth for the first time in years, and not relishing the feeling one bit.

As the door opened, he smiled when Peter, Sam's brother, stepped toward him. But before he could say anything, Peter glowered at him and clenched his fist.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

35

Dylan held out his hand, hoping the other man wouldn't punch him in the nose, which is exactly what he looked like doing.

“Hi, Peter. I'm Dylan Harmon. We met at the airport in Sydney, when your sister was working for me?”

Peter stared at him like he was pond scum and ignored his outstretched hand. “I remember. Now answer my question. What are you doing here?”

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Dylan let his hand drop, wondering where the other man's animosity had sprung from. Surely he was the one who'd been wronged in this whole fiasco?

Though with Sam's penchant for lying, who knew what story she'd concocted for her family, which would certainly account for her brother's antagonistic behaviour.

"I've come to see Sam. Is she here?"

To his surprise, Peter laughed. "No, she isn't. She stayed at a hotel last night before heading to the chapel. Besides, haven't you left this a bit late?"

Dylan's heart plummeted as the words penetrated his brain and he realised Peter was wearing a tuxedo.

Surely Sam wasn't getting married?

In an instant, the image of Sam and that creep they bumped into at the hotel in Sydney sprung to mind, and it took all his willpower not to shake the truth out of her smug brother.

Hell, Sam had told him her parents had been trying to marry her off to that old fool.

What if Dylan had been stupid enough to push her into the fogey's arms?

"Where's the chapel?" He fixed Peter with a stony stare.

Peter shook his head. "Oh no, you don't. There's no way you're going to disrupt this

day. Get the hell away from here and leave my sister alone. She doesn't want to see you."

Fury surged through Dylan's body, rooting him to the spot. He had to see Sam one last time, even if it was to tell her she was making the biggest mistake of her life.

She should be marrying him, not some sleazy old creep, and he'd be damned if he let this wedding happen.

He clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to calm down, knowing what he said in the next minute could very well decide his fate.

"I love her," he finally blurted, the words scaring the hell out of him.

To his amazement, Peter laughed and slapped him on the back.

"Why didn't you say so? You can ride to the chapel with me. Let's go."

36

The limousine ride to the chapel was the longest in Dylan's entire life.

He barely listened to Peter's small talk, his mind fixed on the image of Sam in a bridal gown being joined in matrimony to old Max, whose name he'd finally remembered.

The thought made him physically ill and he downed several whiskeys Peter handed him, before he realised he needed to be sober to convince Sam she'd be making the biggest mistake of her life marrying Max.

The limo barely pulled up when Dylan threw open the door and sprinted for the

chapel.

“Hey, what’s the hurry? There’s plenty of time for you two to talk after the ceremony,” Peter yelled, only serving to fuel Dylan’s urgency.

Had Peter lost his mind? After the ceremony would be too late and Dylan would be damned if he let the best thing to ever happen to him slip through his fingers.

Guests stared at him as he ran through the grounds and burst into the chapel. Thankfully, Sam wasn’t standing at the altar as he’d envisaged, though his relief was short-lived as a minister strolled down the aisle toward him.

“You’re looking for the bride?”

Dylan nodded, swallowing the bitterness that rose at the thought of Sam taking her place in front of that altar without him. “Is she here?”

The minister pointed to a small room near the entrance. “She’s in there, looking absolutely radiant. I’ve seen a few brides in my time, but this one—“

“Thanks.”

Dylan left the minister gaping as he ran toward the heavy mahogany door and pushed it open without knocking.

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His heart clenched at the sight of the woman in a beautiful wedding dress, though the sunlight streaming through the stained glass window blinded him for a moment.

“Sam, we need to talk.” He strode into the room, determined to make her see sense and stop this farcical wedding.

“Well, you won’t find her here. She’s taking a walk by the river.”

Dylan’s jaw dropped as the woman by the window turned and walked toward him.

“Ebony? What the hell are you doing, dressed up like that?”

Ebony rolled her eyes. “I’m getting married, stupid. And this is what brides wear.”

“You’re getting married too?” Dylan stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. “But what about Sam? And Max?”

“What about them?”

The corner’s of Ebony’s mouth twitched, leaving Dylan flummoxed. What the hell was going on here?

“Peter led me to believe Sam was getting married today...” he trailed off, wondering if he’d jumped to conclusions yet again.

He’d acted like a madman when confronting Peter, and now that he thought about it, at no stage did Sam’s brother say the bride was his sister. Dylan had assumed, and

been crazy at the thought of losing the woman he loved that he hadn't stopped to rationalise.

"I'm an idiot," he muttered, shaking his head.

Ebony's smirk softened to a smile as she led him to the door and gave him a none-too-gentle shove.

"Why don't you go find Sam? I think you two need to talk."

He nodded, filled with a wild, unrestrained hope that maybe he could salvage their relationship.

Following a winding path to the river, he spotted Sam sitting on a bench. His eyes drank in the sight of her like a thirst-starved man; she looked incredible, wearing a soft-flowing pink halter gown that accentuated her delicate blonde colouring, her curls loose around her shoulders and blowing gently in the breeze.

His reaction, instantaneous and visceral, left him winded. He wanted this woman—he needed this woman—more than he'd ever needed anyone before.

He wouldn't leave here without her.

37

Sam glanced at her watch, knowing she should head back to the chapel, yet reluctant to leave the tranquillity of the river.

She took a deep breath, filled with a sense of calm she rarely found anywhere else. The outback had a similar effect on her, though she quickly pushed that thought from her mind. It reminded her of Budgerie and dredged up a host of memories best

forgotten.

As she stood and brushed down her skirt, a shadow fell across her.

“Hello, Sam.”

Her head snapped up at the sound of Dylan’s voice and she almost collapsed back onto the bench.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

She stared at him in disbelief, hardly recognising the dishevelled man before her. What had happened to the suave, sophisticated Dylan Harmon she’d been stupid enough to fall in love with?

This man bore little resemblance to the confident billionaire, with dark circles under his eyes indicating a lack of sleep, his suit crumpled, the top button of his shirt undone, and his tie awry. She’d never seen Dylan like this and for a brief moment she hoped he’d missed her as she much as she’d missed him over the last week.

“Please, Sam, I need to talk—”

“You’ve wasted your time.” She shook her head, steeling her nerve not to give in like her inner voice, the one who wanted to wrap her arms him, urged her to do.

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“I don’t think so.” His lips set in a stubborn line. “There’s too much that needs to be said.”

She squinted, wishing she hadn’t left her sunglasses in the car. The last thing she needed was for him to read the hope, the yearning, in her eyes.

“I thought you said it all in Melbourne.” She folded her arms, remembering his accusations and the way he’d crushed her heart. “Besides, aren’t you nervous I might be out to steal your precious fortune?”

“Not my finest moment.” He grimaced as he sat and patted the seat next to him. “Why didn’t you tell me you were a princess?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Who told you that?”

She perched on the edge of the bench, as far away from Dylan as possible. She could already smell his familiar cologne and her traitorous body responded in ways it shouldn’t.

“My mother told me.”

He paused, as if gathering his thoughts, and she resisted the urge to reach over and smooth away the frown permanently etched in his brow.

“Why didn’t you tell me? And why the name change? Why work for me?” He shook his head, confusion clouding his eyes. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Guilty as charged. She should've never involved him in her scheme to make her parents see sense.

"If I told you my history, I wouldn't have been hired. And I needed the job, desperately."

"But why? You have all the money in the world." He stared at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"It wasn't about the money." She took a steadying breath, hoping he would understand. "I've told you about my parent's expectations?"

His slight nod encouraged her to continue.

"It went deeper than that. They were so caught up in the orthodox traditions of their heritage, they made my life hell growing up. I had to buck the system and the only way I could think of was to prove to them I could make it on my own, without their influence or money."

Despite her explanation, she caught the puzzled gleam in his eyes.

"Then why mention marriage to me?"

Sam knew she'd have to be extremely careful in answering his question if she didn't want to reveal too much about her true feelings.

"What you overheard that day was a joke. Ebony was in on the plan from the start, which is why she gave your mother a false reference. She also knew I lied to my parents and told them the reason I headed to Melbourne was to further a relationship with you. I was merely discussing that with her."

An uncomfortable silence ensued and she wished he would say something, anything, to break the growing tension.

“What about the rest?”

“The rest?”

She pretended not to understand the question, when she knew exactly what Dylan referred to and the memory set her heart pounding.

“What happened at Budgeree, between us. Was that part of an act too?”

He’d given her the perfect opportunity to end it, right here, right now.

All she had to do was reach for a final white lie and answer his question in the affirmative, and he’d walk out of her life for good.

He’d accepted her explanation for lying to him about her work, but which man would tolerate a woman faking affection when it came to the bedroom?

She opened her mouth to say ‘yes’ but couldn’t do it. Despite everything that had happened, and her week of self-indoctrination ‘you don’t love him’, she couldn’t lie to him again.

“Sam?”

She heard the uncertainty in his voice and it undid the last of her fleeting resistance.

Looking up, she stared him straight in the eye.

“No, that wasn’t an act.”

His eyes darkened to almost-black. “Then what was it?”

No matter how much she loved him, she couldn’t admit it. So what if he’d come here? He still hadn’t told her why and she’d be damned if she made a complete fool of herself by admitting her feelings.

“I was attracted to you from the start, like I told you. We’d been flirting for a while, we’d kissed a few times, so it seemed natural to take it to the next level.”

“That’s it?”

She schooled her features into a mask of indifference and shrugged. “What else could it be?”

He paled beneath his tan and she almost felt sorry for him. “Uh... I thought you might have feelings for me.”

“Feelings?”

She laughed, a bitter sound that did little to soothe the pain in her heart. Seeing Dylan again had resurrected her barely suppressed love; hearing him talk about feelings was too much.

“Come on, Dylan, we both know that would be disastrous.”

“Why?”

“We’re too different.” She waved a hand between them. “I’m trying to escape the shackles of my family, you’re so wound up in family responsibilities you can’t see straight.”

His eyes widened a fraction, drawing her into their seductive depths. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

And in that moment, Sam knew how to put an end to the heartache.

“Your attachment to Budgeree borders on obsessive. From what I’ve heard, it doesn’t take a genius to figure that you’re carrying some huge chip on your shoulder because of your dad. Is that why you’re so protective of the Harmon fortune?”

She’d done it; hit him where he was most vulnerable. Surely he’d leave her alone now?

He stood and thrust his hands in his pockets, anger radiating off him in waves, unable to meet her gaze.

“Sorry to have bothered you.”

“No bother. See you round.”

He didn’t respond and she watched him walk away, her heart breaking all over again.

“You’re an idiot, no doubt about it.” Ebony huffed out an exasperated breath and glared at her.

Sam stared at Ebony, surprised by her friend’s vehement reaction. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. You sure know how to kick a woman when she’s down.”

The wedding and reception had gone off without a hitch, despite Sam’s constant battle to hold back tears. Now, as she helped her friend change into her going away outfit, she’d finally told Ebony what happened with Dylan earlier.

What she hadn’t counted on was Ebony’s reaction.

“Are you that thick?” Ebony knocked on Sam’s head as if checking it wasn’t hollow. “Can’t you see the man’s in love with you?”

Sam snorted, hating the irrational flicker of hope in her heart. “Yeah, right.”

She turned away and busied herself with hanging Ebony’s beautiful dress.

Ebony grabbed her arm. “Did you give him a chance?”

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Sam looked away, unable to meet her friend's probing stare. "What for? It's hopeless. We're too different."

"See? What did I tell you? Idiot, with a capital I."

Sam shook free of Ebony's grasp, blinking back tears for the hundredth time that day. "Take it easy, Eb. I don't need this right now."

Ebony shimmied into her skirt and zipped up, giving Sam time to compose herself.

"Look, I shouldn't be telling you this, but you need to know." Ebony sighed. "The worst thing you could've said to Dylan was accuse him of carrying around baggage about his father."

"Why?"

By the sombre expression on her friend's face, Sam didn't want to know the answer.

"Because he is caught up on some weird guilt trip where his dad is concerned. His dad died while Dylan was overseas, kicking up his heels and shunning his family responsibilities."

Just like you.

The thought sprung to Sam's mind and she couldn't shake it. What if one of her parents had died while she'd been hiding in Melbourne? She would probably feel the same guilt Dylan did and would try to make up for it the best way she knew how.

Was that what drove him? It more than explained his ties to Budgerie, and his distaste for her views on family that she expressed while staying there.

Sam grimaced. "I've made a huge mistake, haven't I?"

"Colossal." Ebony guided her toward the door. "Now, go after him."

"To Melbourne?"

Sam doubted she had the courage to fly down there and confront the guy she'd hurt so much.

Besides, what if her friend's assumptions were wrong and he didn't love her? He probably came to Brisbane to confront her after learning the truth from his mother, nothing more.

Ebony grinned, the same cheeky smile Sam had grown to recognise meant 'trouble' over the years.

"No, silly, I'm not talking about you flying to Melbourne." Ebony rolled her eyes. "The man had enough class after you broke his heart down by the river to come back to the chapel and wish me good luck. And I managed to find out where he's staying tonight, in case you'd botched things, which his hangdog expression told me you had."

Ebony winked. "So if you're very nice to me, I may tell you where you can find that lovely, patient man, if you want to go to him and start grovelling."

Sam hugged her friend. "What would I do without you?"

"Probably make a total hotchpotch of your life." Ebony whispered in her ear where

Sam could find Dylan. “Now go.”

Ebony wriggled out of her embrace before practically shoving Sam out the door.

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Dylan turned off the taps and stepped from the shower, wishing the hot water had done more to soothe his aching body.

He’d had a week of sleepless nights thanks to his obsession with Sam, tossing and turning until the wee hours, and the flight to Brisbane hadn’t helped. The only seat available had been economy and folding his long legs into such cramped quarters had been beyond uncomfortable.

To make matters worse, the entire trip had been a waste of time. and he couldn’t wait to return to Melbourne and put the whole sordid mess behind him.

A tentative knock sounded at the door and he cursed whoever had the audacity to disrupt him tonight of all nights. He needed peace, and with his phone turned off the anonymity of a hotel room could provide it.

He wrapped a towel around his waist before padding across the plush carpet and wrenching open the door.

Sam stood on the other side, doing her utmost not to stare at his chest and failing miserably. It reminded him of the day they first met in his bedroom, when he’d seen the flicker of interest in her eyes despite her attempts to hide it.

He wouldn’t be so foolish to misinterpret her reaction this time.

“Can I come in?”

Her voice came out a whisper, and for one, insane moment, despite all that had happened and all she’d said, he wanted to reach out and envelop her in his arms.

“I’m going to bed,” he muttered, hoping his glare would drive her away.

Unfortunately, his words conjured up visions of taking her with him, and a certain part of his anatomy responded in predictable fashion.

“This won’t take long.”

Her green eyes pleaded and she worried her lower lip with her teeth. He’d never seen her like this—nervous, vulnerable, almost fearful—and despite his intentions to push her away, it shook him.

“Fine. But make it snappy.”

He opened the door wider and gestured her in, trying to ignore the waft of floral perfume that enveloped him in a sensuous cloud as she entered his hotel room. Rather than gaining control of his libido, his body flared with desire at the familiar scent and he mentally chastised himself for still wanting her.

She strolled to the window and looked at the view, before squaring her shoulders and turning to face him.

“I came here to apologise.”

“Too late for that, isn’t it?”

No matter what she said now, it wouldn’t make one iota of difference. He’d resolved to forget this woman and throw himself into what he knew best, making his family business flourish.

“I hope not.” She stared at him with sad eyes, beseeching him to listen. “I shouldn’t have said those things about your father. I was way out of line and hope you’ll forgive me.”

“Forget it.”

He waved away her apology as if it meant nothing. Words were useless now. Too much had happened for a trite apology to mean much.

“Please, let me finish.” She plucked at a loose thread on her gown and he imagined the gossamer-thin thing would unravel before his eyes. Yet another indication of how sleep-deprived he was, ridiculous wishful thinking. “I know how you feel—“

“You have no idea how I feel.” His patience finally snapped. “I was like you once, trying to shirk family responsibilities with every fibre of my being. And you know what happened? It killed my dad.”

He stalked toward her, wishing she’d stop staring at him with pity in her eyes.

“I couldn’t wait to escape, especially Budgereee. My dad would rave for hours about how that piece of land would be the crowning jewel in the Harmon fortune, and all that time I would listen and nod and plan my life away from it.”

He snapped his fingers. “Then I finally did it. I left dad, his pipe dreams, and the whole damn lot behind me and didn’t look back.”

He shook his head, the old familiar pain cleaving his chest in two. “Do you want to know what happened? The pressure of running the business alone killed him. I killed him,” He shouted, willing her to understand, the sight of tears welling in her eyes doing little to calm him.

He turned away, wishing she’d get the hell out of his life. He hadn’t meant to tell her all that. The truth had spilled out, leaving him strangely relieved.

She’d been the first person he’d ever voiced his guilt to, though he knew his mother suspected how he felt.

“Don’t you think he would’ve wanted you to live a little before taking on such a huge responsibility?”

“How would you know what he wanted? You weren’t there. You didn’t see the disappointment in his eyes the day I told him I was going away, with no idea of when I’d be back.”

The pain of that memory had eaten away at Dylan for more years than he cared to remember, though he’d done his best to make up for it by shouldering the family’s responsibilities on his return.

“Your mother told me,” she said, so softly he wondered if he imagined it.

“Told you what?”

“How your dad felt when you left. We discussed it that first day when I told her my family secrets. She mentioned you’d be a tough taskmaster but there were reasons for it, then she told me about your dad and why you drive yourself so hard.”

Dylan turned back to face her, wanting to hear the truth yet wishing they never started

this conversation.

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“Why would my mother would confide in you, the queen of deception?”

She ignored his barb, though he noted a downward turn of her lips. “He loved you, more than you ever knew. He was proud you’d stayed around so long to learn the ropes from him and he hoped you’d return one day to continue his dream. He never begrudged you that time away, nor did he kill himself trying to make up for your absence. Heart attacks happen for a lot of reasons and he died doing what he loved best, running the family business.”

She paused to wipe away a lone tear that trickled down her cheek. “Your mother said she’s tried to tell you several times but you always change the subject, so she decided to leave well enough alone. Though I think it’s time you sat down with her and had a long chat about your father, don’t you?”

Rather than Sam’s tears abating, as he expected once she finished her spiel, they now flowed unchecked, leaving him at a loss.

“Save the tears, Sam. I don’t need your sympathy.”

He turned his back on her and strolled toward the window, wishing she’d leave him the hell alone. He needed to assimilate what she’d told him, to sort out his feelings regarding his family.

“If you don’t want my sympathy, what about my love?”

The whispered words slammed home, though it took him a good ten seconds to register their meaning.

“What did you say?”

He jumped as she slid her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his back.

“I love you,” she said, squeezing him so tightly he could hardly breathe. Or was it the overwhelming sensation of disbelief that had him struggling for air?

He loosened her grip and turned to face her, searching for the right words and failing miserably.

Sam took a steadying breath and continued before she lost the last of her courage.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but I lied to you earlier. Again. What happened at Budgeree between us was proof of how I feel about you. I fell in love with you almost from the beginning but didn’t want to admit it, and when I thought our time together was drawing to a close, I wanted to take away some lasting memory of our time together.”

“So, you used me for sex?”

To her delight, a slow smile crept across his face, the same sexy smile she’d grown to love, and she knew in that moment she had a chance to win him back.

“I wouldn’t call it using.” She allowed her hands to play over his back, raking the bare skin lightly with her nails. “Call it a mutually satisfying arrangement.”

He growled in response and pulled her close, his lips crushing hers in a scorching kiss. Her tongue snaked out to meet his, teasing, tasting, and she wanted him with a ferocity that staggered.

She thought she would never have this chance again, so she'd thrown caution to the wind and admitted her true feelings.

She loved Dylan Harmon and wanted to shout it to the world.

He leaned into her, the evidence of his arousal sending a flood of pleasure rushing through her, and with a slow, deliberate movement, she ground her hips against his.

He broke the kiss, staring at her with undisguised lust and more than a hint of confusion.

"You do know I love you too?"

As her body throbbed with soul-wrenching need her mind managed to assimilate what he'd said, and she smiled, a seductive upturning of her lips designed to entice.

"Show me."

EPILOGUE

Sam stared into the growing darkness and tried to ignore the faint niggles of apprehension in her gut.

Dylan should've returned an hour ago, and despite his extensive knowledge of Budgerees and its surrounding lands, she couldn't help but worry.

Although they spent most of their time here, she knew the outback held a multitude of hidden dangers cleverly disguised by its raw, unadulterated beauty.

She turned away from the window and busied herself with making a cup of tea, anything to take her mind off the absence of her husband.

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Her husband.

Even after a year, the thought of Dylan Harmon being entirely hers still brought a smile to her face and a heated flush to her cheeks. They'd been married here at Budgeree, surrounded by family, in a quiet affair as they both wanted.

She still worked as his personal assistant, though some of the tasks in her job description seemed more personal than others—and she loved every minute of it.

She wandered out to the verandah and sat in her favourite rocking chair, cradling a mug of tea in her hands. Outback nights could plunge to subzero temperatures and tonight would prove to be no exception.

All the better to cuddle up with someone warm... Dylan's seductive voice popped into her head and she took a sip of tea, wishing he'd appear.

She finished her tea and started rocking, the gentle motion soothing her rampant nerves. Her eyes drifted shut, as she mentally planned what they'd do tomorrow. Go for a ride to the far paddocks. Head into town to stock up supplies. Have an afternoon nap, one of their favourite pastimes...

“Wake up, Gorgeous. Time to give your husband the welcome home he deserves.”

Sam jumped as Dylan brushed her lips with a feather-light kiss, surprised she'd dozed off. She leaped from the chair and wrapped her arms around him, snuggling into the warmth of his body, breathing in the intoxicating blend of sweat, horse, and pure Dylan.

“Where have you been?”

He hugged her tight, stroking her hair away from her face. “Working. You know, that thing I do for a living. Missed me, huh?”

“Come here, hubby.” She pulled his head down and kissed him, her throat growing thick with the emotion she now recognised as true love.

“Now that’s what I call a homecoming,” he murmured against the side of her mouth, his hands pulling her flush against him.

“Stick with me, honey, and you’ll go places.”

“Is that so?”

He twisted a curl around his finger and gently tugged on it, his gaze firmly fixed on her lips.

She nodded, basking in the love they shared. “So, think you can handle being married to royalty?”

She often teased him with the same question, knowing the answer before he opened his mouth to respond.

“With you by my side, Princess, I can handle anything.”

He swept her into his arms and strode into the homestead to prove it.