

# **Outback Meltdown**

## **Alexis Fleming**

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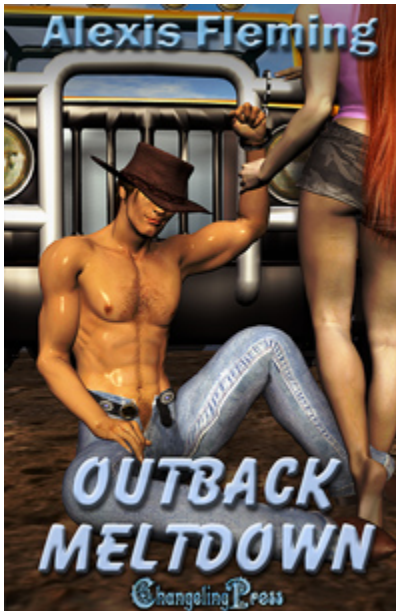
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## Chapter One

“Oooh, baby. Luscious lips. Wanna gimme some head, sweetcheeks?”

Merindah Byrnes stopped in her tracks. Had she heard what she thought she had?

“Aww, come on, babe. Deep throat me, swallow me whole.”

She spun about, looking for the owner of the raspy voice. Afternoon commuters rushing to catch their train home from work crammed the street. Typical city mentality. Head down, pay no attention to anyone else, and whatever you do, don't make eye contact. Those that did quickly flicked their gaze away from her. After all, who wants to eyeball a cop?

No one wanted to be close friends with a cop. That was the trouble with being a policewoman... Merindah grinned. Make that a police person. Have to be politically correct these days.

She glanced around again. She couldn't see anyone acting suspiciously. With a shrug, she turned toward the big gray building squatting on the corner like a giant praying mantis. Police Headquarters, her temporary home for the moment.

With the soles of her shoes slapping on the hard bitumen surface, she marched across the alley that ran down the side of the structure, easy access for the police parking area.

“Come on, bitch. You know you want it. My cock doing a dance in your mouth.”

The raucous voice dragged her to a halt. What the fu... She spun around to check out the alleyway. Once -- she could have imagined it. Twice? No way, no how.

“You wanna fuck, baby?”

Okay, that's it. She'd put a stop to this right now. But first, she had to find out who owned the potty-mouth.

People at the entrance to the alley had stopped, bent on the same agenda. Namely, finding out where the obscene language had come from. She pushed through the crowd and stepped into the alley. At the far end, she saw a couple of colleagues coming from the car park. They didn't appear concerned, so odds were they hadn't been close enough to hear.

She allowed her gaze to track across the motley group of Brisbane inhabitants. The voice was definitely male, if slightly distorted. And the person most likely to be responsible was the one not paying the least attention to what was going on. That one, the man crouched over, facing the brick wall of the corner building.

"Hey, you."

He didn't respond. In fact, he hunched down even more. The angle of his body hid his hands from view, but she could see the movement of his upper arms. Up... Down... Up... Down... If she didn't know better, she'd swear he was jerking off. Right here in the alley.

No freakin' way. Not on her patch.

"Yo, bitch, get over here and fuck me."

Merindah pounced, grabbing his shoulder and trying to spin him around. "I'm talking to you, buster. You turn and face me."

"Damn it, don't do that. I'm not finished."

She shook her head. He's not finished? Well, tough.

In the back of her mind, it registered that the voice was different. Smooth. Velvety. Not at all like the croaky tones of before. She shrugged. So he'd disguised his voice in order to get away with his lewd behavior. Still wasn't going to help him.

The crowd started to laugh, riling Merindah up even more. She'd spent the last five years trying to live down the fact that a lot of people thought she was a woman in a man's job. When would they accept that women were just as competent as men when it came to policing?

Not giving the guy time to react, she grabbed one arm and twisted, forcing it behind his back. She bent the hand inward for a little more leverage. "When I tell you to turn around, mate, I mean right now. Not after you finish getting your jollies."

There was a sudden metallic sound and a loud screeching as she pulled him further from the wall. More laughter from the crowd. Merindah looked around, searching for what was so funny. Her mouth dropped open. A tall birdcage hung from the front of his jeans. Inside was a parrot, a sulphur-crested cockatoo with snow-white feathers and a distinctive yellow crest standing up from its head.

The bird was going mental, trying to spread its wings in the limited space. Squawking its head off and banging its hard beak against the wire. Merindah wanted to cover her ears at the cacophony of sound. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she yelled.

"Let go of me so I can get this blasted cage off my... jeans."

There it was again. That smooth, rich voice that brought to mind sizzling nights and sensual dreams. A girl needed a bit of that in her life. Damn shame she was about to book him.

This time she recognized the American accent. Shit, another tourist who thought he'd take one of Australia's birds home with him. "I'll let you go and you put that cage on the ground, okay?"

"That's what I was trying to do when you grabbed me."

"How the hell did it get attached to your jeans in the first place?"

He leaned over again so the base of the cage sat on the roadway, his hands already at work trying to free it up. "I was carrying it in front of me when the bars got caught around my buckle," he muttered, his head averted as he struggled with his belt.

Hands on hips, she stood there watching him, tapping her foot as he continued to mutter to himself. "Hurry it up. Undo the belt for crying out loud if you can't free it any other way."

"Whoa, baby, you light my fire. I wanna fuck your brains out."

Merindah saw red. How dare this darn... American jerk mock her. The crowd had descended into bouts of laughter, some of them calling out to her to leave the poor bugger alone. To make it worse, her two colleagues stood on the opposite side of the alley crowing like roosters they found it so funny. It'd be around the station in no time flat. Henderson, the oldest of the pair, was the biggest gossip alive.

"Okay, buddy, you're nicked. I don't know about the States, but over here it's an offence to use that type of language in a public place."

At the same time as he whipped his belt off, she reached out and grabbed him by the wrist. The buckle end of the leather strip flew back and swiped her across the arm with enough force to make her wince. "And you can add assaulting a police officer to the charge."

"Hey, it wasn't me," he yelled.

She grabbed his other arm and spun him about, both limbs now twisted up his back. His leg nudged the birdcage, making it rattle against the side of the building. The parrot screamed its outrage, the sound shooting through her head. And all the while, the group of onlookers laughed and snapped pictures as she tried to do her job.

Where was her pride in her status as a police officer now? This guy had made a laughingstock of the uniform. Her ego reared its ugly head. The only way to retrieve the situation was to march him into the police station and book him.

Exerting pressure on his hands, she glared at everyone. "Get about your business, you lot. There's nothing more to see here."

She flicked an angry glance at her fellow officers. "Henderson, if you can stop laughing long enough, grab that parrot cage and haul it into the station."

"Shit, lady, get your hands off me. I didn't do anything. Why the hell are you arresting me?"

"You..." She pushed on his arms a bit harder. "There you go again with the foul language. You're busted, mate."

"I tell you, it wasn't me." He dragged in a loud breath. "It was the parrot." His voice rose on the last word as she propelled him across the alleyway.

"Henderson, get that bloody bird." Ah, crap, now *she* was swearing in public, but damn it to hell, it was enough to make an angel swear.

Ignoring the laughing commuters, she marched her prisoner up the front stairs of headquarters and down the hallway to an interview room. Henderson and his mate brought up the rear with the screeching parrot held aloft.

"Hey, babe, I'm gonna fuck you until your eyes roll up."

Merindah hauled the American to a standstill at the open door of the interview room, shock ratcheting throughout her system. *Oh, my God. Don't let it be so.*

Releasing her hold on the so-called criminal, she turned around and stared back down the hallway. Henderson was bent over, holding his stomach, loud guffaws issuing from his slack mouth. In fact, the whole damn station was laughing.

"How 'bout it, sweetcheeks?"

Merindah wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole. Once again, she'd made herself the laughingstock of the station. She'd like to blame the guy behind her, but it wasn't his fault. This was her standard *modus operandi*. She was either constantly sticking her foot in her mouth, or worse still, acting like the biggest klutz out there.

Another hour. That's all she'd needed. She would have finished for the day and would be heading off on her holiday. One freakin' hour and she'd have avoided all this.

*The fucking parrot could talk.* She should have recognized the hoarse, raspy tone. She was a country girl, for Christ's sake.

She turned to face her captive. A grin tilted his lips and his brown eyes twinkled with merriment. It was the first time she'd gotten a good look at him and, oh brother...

A spiral of heat snaked from her breasts, down her body to center between her legs. She frowned. What the fucking hell had just happened?

He ran a lazy gaze over her, from her face, down her body to the sensible lace-up regulation footwear. Then up again to linger on her chest. Her nipples peaked and pressed against the soft polyester of her uniform shirt, her bra useless in hiding the telltale effects of his sexy once-over.

She gasped, crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. For fuck's sake, this guy had totally pissed her off, had contributed to her making a fool of herself, and suddenly her body went on hormone holiday because he stared at her tits? No fucking way.

"I don't want to hear a word from you, or I just might throw you in the tank," she growled. She was acting the bitch, but for some reason, he unsettled her. She was not about to start lusting after some perverted stranger. Okay, in all fairness, he wasn't perverted, but his parrot sure was.

"Hmm, maybe I should put in a complaint about police brutality." He gave a cheeky wink, straightened up and stepped closer. He flicked a finger over the handcuffs tucked through her belt, setting up a metallic jingle. "I did tell you it was the parrot. Maybe we should ask him if he has any suggestions for a good use for these." He flicked at the handcuffs again.

"Ooh, kinky, sweetcheeks, kinky."

*Damn parrot.*



## Chapter Two

Jason Lawrence couldn't believe this had happened to him, although it did have its funny side. Particularly now that the threat of arrest had disappeared. The look on the policewoman's face when she realized it was the parrot with the mouth like a cesspit was priceless. At the same time, he kind of felt sorry for her. It couldn't be easy having all your workmates laughing at you.

"Okay, joke's over, folks. Tune in next month for the continuing saga of life with Merindah Byrnes." She took a bow, grinning from ear to ear.

Damn but that took class to turn the situation into a joke against herself. Now she had everyone laughing with her and not at her. Smart lady.

Jason grinned. She wasn't just smart. She was sexy as hell. He never realized he'd be prone to the uniform syndrome -- in fact, he'd assumed it referred to women lusting after men in uniform -- but something about this particular woman got to him. Maybe it was her sassy mouth. Then again, maybe it was the way the dark blue uniform trousers hugged her tight little ass. And if she thought crossing her arms over her chest hid the shape of the nipples outlined by the tight fit of her blouse, she was dead wrong.

"Haul that bird into the interview room, Henderson. He can keep us company while I apologize to our friend here." She gestured toward Jason, waving him into the room.

Henderson pushed past Jason and deposited the bird on the table. Strangely enough, the parrot was silent now, sitting in the bottom of the cage, giving everyone in the room the evil eye. Amazing how it could look so threatening. Jason frowned. For some reason, it seemed to have its little beady eye trained on him in particular. For crying out loud, *he* hadn't done anything.

Jason sat down and stared at the parrot. The bird cocked its head to the side so one red-brown eye glared back at him. Then the eye slowly closed as if in a wink.

"Hot and hard, mate, that's what she needs."

Merindah's colleague burst out laughing at the bird's sally. Jason couldn't help himself. He joined in, appreciating the wit of the person who'd taught the parrot to speak.

"Where on earth did you get a parrot that talks like this?" Henderson inquired. "I've heard 'em before, but this one acts as if he knows what he's saying and what reaction he'll get. Amazing. Has it got a name?"

"The guy I bought it from called it Percy Porcelain."

Henderson slapped a large beefy hand on his thigh and burst into gales of laughter again. "Did you hear that, Merindah? Shit, I don't believe it. *Percy Porcelain*, as in *point Percy at the porcelain*?"

Merindah dropped into the chair opposite him, her head in her hands as she tried to stifle her chuckles. Jason looked from one to the other. What the fuck? Okay, it was a weird name for a bird, but he still couldn't see what the joke was.

He'd been coming over to Australia for the last four years to work as a stockman for his Aussie mate, Chase. He thought he'd learned all there was to know about Aussie slang, but obviously, somewhere along the line, he'd missed something.

"Someone want to tell me what the joke is?" He looked to Merindah. "Ma'am?" She simply waved her hand at Henderson, giving him silent permission to deal with explanations.

"It's an old saying, mate. Dates back... oh, years. You know, point Percy at the porcelain." Henderson chortled again, his belly shaking with the depth of his mirth.

Jason still didn't get it. Not until the officer started to unzip his trousers and mimed taking his cock out and pointing it at an imaginary toilet.

"Porcelain, as in a porcelain toilet bowl," Henderson said. "Pis --"

"That's enough of an explanation," Merindah interrupted. "I'm sure the gentleman has the idea now."

"But, Merindah, it's so darn funny. Wait until I tell everyone." Henderson's laughter floated on the air as he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"So how about I just call him Perce?" Jason asked. *Merindah. Pretty name.* "You mind if I call you Merindah?"

*Huh? Merindah?*

*Merindah Byrnes?*

Suddenly, Jason remembered the name of the woman who was supposed to give him a ride out to his mate's property in outback Queensland. He grinned. It was going to be one hell of a trip. *Wonder if she'll take her handcuffs with her?*

"I'm really sorry about this misunderstanding, Mr. --?"

"Lawrence," Jason supplied. He really should let the poor woman off the hook. She may have been overzealous in doing her duty, but given Perce's potty-mouth, he could understand why. "Actually, I'm Jas --"

"I should've let you explain. More to the point, I should've remembered what these parrots are capable of. The sulphur-crested cockatoo makes a great pet, but they're tremendous show-offs. You'll have to buy him some puzzles. They love to take them apart. You'd be amazed at how quickly they can do it."

Merindah knew she was babbling, but she couldn't help herself. This Mr. Lawrence just sat there staring at her, a slight smile curving his sensual lips. She had a sudden urge to lean over and press her mouth to his. Lick her way across his full bottom lip until he opened to her. Thrust --

*Enough, Merindah.* She squirmed on the seat to try to alleviate the sudden throb of her clit. Dampness gathered between her thighs and her pussy felt swollen. The man was a total stranger, yet she had a sudden desire to throw him over the table and rip his clothes off. Crawl up on the table with him and impale herself on his hard cock. And she'd make darn certain it *was* good and hard. Nothing like a bit of lingual stimulation to get the juices flowing.

Freakin' hell, she had to stop this fantasizing. She didn't even know the guy. "Sorry about what happened. I promise you, not all Australians jump first and ask questions later. We do try to give overseas visitors at least a fair chance."

"Don't apologize. I can quite understand how it happened." He grinned. "Well, sort of. I must admit I've never had a woman complain about me talking dirty before."

*I'll bet. They'd cream their pants if he started talking about giving head.*

She rushed into speech, trying to wipe the libidinous images from her mind. "Why *did* you buy a parrot? You know you can't take it home with you, don't you?"

"I'm not going home, at least not at this point. I plan on making my home out here. My sister, Cassie, is marrying one of your Aussie property owners." He tilted his head toward the parrot cage. "Perce here is a gag wedding gift for Cassie and Chase, her prospective bridegroom."

Perce, as if he knew he was the topic of conversation, perked up, turning his beady eye on Merindah.

"Are you wet yet, sweetcheeks?"

Merindah groaned. She wished the bloody bird would shut up. He made her even more conscious of her damp panties.

Mr. Lawrence's words suddenly hit home.

Chase? His sister, Cassie? An outback property?

She sagged back in her chair, shock rampaging throughout her system. "Oh, my gawd," she whispered. *Jason Lawrence*. It couldn't be. Fate wouldn't be so cruel.

There was a sharp rap on the door before Henderson reefed it open and stuck his head around the doorframe. "Hey, Merindah, your godmother's on the phone. I've had them put it through here."

With a grimace, Merindah rose and backed up to the phone attached to the wall beside the door. Jason Lawrence watched her every step of the way. Punching the speaker button, she waited for her godmother to say something. There was no point trying to keep the conversation private. The smirk on Jason's face told her he was well aware who she was.

"Merindah, you there, sweetie?"

Merindah winced. Maisie, Chase's mother, had never learned not to yell into a phone. "Hello, Maisie. Is there some problem? I'll be seeing you in a few hours."

Jason stood and strode across to stand beside her. He propped one hip against the doorframe, hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans. Merindah couldn't resist checking his body out, particularly the way the denim fabric pulled tight across his lower body. Crap, she'd be in deep shit if she didn't get her libido under control, because all she could think of was getting down on her knees and investigating, as a good cop should.

"I'm talking to you, Merindah. Pay attention," Maisie barked through the phone.

"Sorry."

"That's all right, dear. You've probably had a trying day."

*Oh yeah.*

"I wanted to let you know you don't have to pick Jason up from the hospital. He'll meet you at the police station. Look for a tall guy with dark hair."

"That could describe hundreds of men."

"But this one has a body that will have you panting to rip your knickers off and wave them in his face in invitation."

"Maisie! You're an old lady. You shouldn't be saying these things."

"I might be old, but that doesn't mean I'm dead from the waist down. I can still spot a sexy man at a hundred paces. You wait until you meet Jason. You'll be wishing he'd park his car in your garage tonight." She gave a throaty chuckle. "Every night, for that matter! Now you drive safely and we'll see you soon."

She rang off before Merindah could say anything else. After punching the off button, Merindah stared at Jason. Her face felt hot enough to fry an egg. Talk about embarrassing.

Jason grinned, raising one eyebrow in a sexy tilt. Merindah didn't know what to say for a moment. She swallowed. "Um, I'm pleased to meet you, Jason Lawrence."

"Vroom, vroom," he said, making the sound of a vehicle revving its engine.

She groaned. What else could go wrong today?

At that moment, the parrot flapped its wings and screeched at the top of its birdie voice. Dancing up and down on the spot, it turned a gimlet-eyed gaze on Merindah.

Silence reigned for a bit, before the bird puffed up its chest and opened its beak. Merindah scowled. *Don't do it, you feathered freak, don't you say anything.*

"So who's got the keys to the garage?"

She should have known silent threats were useless. *I'll wring your scrawny neck.*

## Chapter Three

Merindah flicked a stealthy glance at her passenger. Jason had turned sideways in the seat, his head propped up against the window as he watched her. In fact, he hadn't taken his eyes off her for the bulk of the journey, that little half smile curving his mouth and creating itty-bitty dimples in his cheeks. Sexy as all get out. After five and a half hours shut up together in the vehicle, she felt decidedly uncomfortable.

"Sure you don't want me to drive? You must be tired."

Nobody liked to be stared at, but this was different. For some reason, this guy had turned her into a melting mess of hormones. Pulse erratic, body temperature elevated. Shit, if she didn't know better, she'd say she was coming down with a dose of the flu. She'd never met a man who'd caused this instant meltdown.

"Merindah?"

Jason's voice dragged her thoughts away from the state of her body. "Um, no, I'm fine. Anyway, we've just crossed over onto Chase's property. Should only be another hour now." From the corner of her eyes, she saw him shrug.

"I thought it might be too much for you. It's a long drive for a woman."

Heat of a different kind rushed through Merindah's body. She groaned. Another one of his sexist cracks. Just when her brain was trying to come up with a way to tell him she wanted to fuck him silly.

Instead, she gritted her teeth. "Just because I'm a woman doesn't make me any less of a good driver. Hell, we even have women truck drivers over here."

Anyone would think he wanted to rile her up deliberately. And that bloody half-smile of his had begun to annoy the shit out of her. She had the feeling he was laughing at her and she got enough of that at work.

If he wanted to get a reaction out of her, he'd succeeded. One minute, he pissed her off with his remarks, the next, she was fantasizing about what she'd like to do with him. Damn, he was one hot dude. If they were all like this in the States, maybe she should move over there.

She grimaced and silently told her libido to stand down. She shouldn't be feeling like this about another man. She had her own. Well, sort of... Ah, what the fuck! She didn't have anyone. All she had was a six-month flirtation with a man she'd met on-line in a chat room.

Chat rooms weren't really her bag, but the guys at work had dared her to participate in a chat for lonely hearts. They'd expected her to say no, but she'd surprised the hell out of them when she'd agreed. She wasn't about to give them something else to tease her about.

It'd been nothing but a gag, the other officers crowding around during lunch break as she posted outrageous comments in the chat room. Of course, she'd never given out her real name and it had all been a bit of fun. That was, until she'd met one particular guy from the States.

It had started as nothing more than a mild flirtation, but over time, she'd gotten to know her on-line buddy pretty well. Before she knew where she was, she was clock-watching until she knew he'd be on-line. Their conversations had gained a sexual edge as if he, too, had felt the connection. In fact, he'd told her he was on his way out to Australia, her neck of the woods in particular, and wanted to meet her.

Merindah had put him off. She'd wanted to meet him, but she couldn't take the risk. She was a total disaster when it came to relationships. Either she turned into a klutz or she tended to try to take over. She'd rather lust after him from afar than have him dump her because she wasn't what he thought she'd be. Hell, he might not live up to *her* expectations. Better a long distance relationship than none at all.

So why the hell was she getting all hot and bothered about Jason Lawrence? Without trying, he pushed all the right buttons. Her nipples had been in a constant state of erection since she'd met him. The light summer singlet, teamed with the pair of



skimpy shorts she'd changed into before setting out, didn't help. Because of the heat, she'd hadn't bothered with a bra and the fabric rubbed against her throbbing nipples, compounding the problem.

She dragged in a shaky breath. "So, Jason, how's the leg? Maisie said you'd broken it and had to go to Brisbane to have final x-rays to check on the pins they put in." *Get some conversation going here, Merindah.*

Jason stretched his legs out in front of him. "It's not bad. The plaster's been off about three weeks now and the doc gave me the all clear today. Good timing, too. With Chase getting married, he'll want some time off for a honeymoon. I'll fill in for a bit."

"You've known Chase a long while, haven't you?"

"Yeah, we roomed together when he came over to the States to go to his father's old college. I've been coming out here for the last four years to work for him. You should have seen us back in college. Jason Larry and Chase Conman, the girls used to call us. There wasn't a freshman who could hold a candle to us. No one could ever get the better of us."

He burst out laughing, the sound filling the interior of the vehicle. A shiver slid down Merindah's spine. Goosebumps broke out on her arms and her nipples tightened painfully. Damn but he had a sexy laugh.

"Are you wet yet, sweetcheeks?"

Merindah got such a shock she almost ran the car off the road. She wrestled with the wheel and straightened up, flicking a glance over her shoulder. The bloody parrot was sitting on the back of her seat. "Can't you make that bird stay in its cage?"

"Not possible, I'm afraid. It unpicks the lock with its beak." He shooed the parrot onto the back seat, where it promptly climbed up on top of the cage.

"Incoming! Hot and hard, sweetcheeks. You wet yet?"

She squirmed on the leather seat of the vehicle. Shit, did the bird have to be right? She *was* wet, her pussy throbbing. For some unknown reason, she reacted to this man's presence in a way she never had before. Perce's constant sexual comments weren't helping the situation much.

Oh boy, she was in big trouble. She was more than half in love with a man she was too frightened to see. Someone she'd only had contact with through the wonders of the Internet. Someone she thought she knew pretty well. Yet, here she was, lusting after a man she'd only just met. A man she didn't know at all.

Or did she?

Her mind replayed Jason's conversation about when he and Chase were at college. What had he called himself? Jason Larry?

*Jason Larry...?*

Larry... as in an abbreviation for Lawrence when used as a first name?

Her heart felt like it had dropped to the bottom of her stomach. Sweat broke out on her forehead. Surely not? It couldn't be possible. That'd be too much of a coincidence. Just the same, she had to be certain. Time to put her interrogation training into practice.

Before she could say anything, Jason turned toward her again.

"It's funny we never met before, given you're Maisie's goddaughter."

"I guess my holidays just didn't fall at the same time as yours."

Perce jumped up again onto the back of her seat. Merindah was about to push him off when he laid his head down on her shoulder.

"Looks like Percy has fallen in love with you," Jason quipped.

*At least he's not trying to con me.* "So tell me, anyone special waiting at home for you?"

"Not back in the States, but I thought I might have someone over here. A long distance relationship. Seems it wasn't to be though."

"What went wrong?"

"She couldn't be bothered meeting up with me when I got here." He lifted one shoulder in a careless movement. "Doesn't matter. It was only a bit of fun and everyone knows Internet relationships don't work in the long run."

*Hah, I was right.* Merindah started to fume, the anger building up at an alarming rate. Not a coincidence. Jason Lawrence... Jason Larry... Mr. fucking Jay Larry -- her on-line boyfriend.

All one and the same.

It was only a bit of fun, eh?

What was it he'd said? No one -- as in no woman? -- could ever get the better of them.

Is that so? *Well, this is one woman who is about to take you down a peg or two, you cocky bastard.*

For a moment, she pushed aside the thought that she hadn't told him her real name either. Jay -- Jason -- only knew her as Merry, the name her parents had used when she was a kid.

"Ooh, he's been a bad boy. Punish him, punish him," the parrot croaked in her ear.

*You'd better believe it, Perce.* This smartass, upstart American was about to get his comeuppance. A bit of fun, was she?

"Ooh, he's so big. Are you full yet, sweetcheeks?"

Hah, she was full all right. Full of ideas. She cast a sneaky glance at the glove compartment where her badge and handcuffs lay hidden. A mischievous spark ignited into a full-fledged bonfire in her mind. She almost burst out laughing. It was all she could do to control herself.

"It sure is hot. I'd have thought the temperature would have dropped by now." Jason cranked the air-conditioning up a notch. "I tend to forget how hot the outback is."

*Hot? You ain't seen nothin' yet.*

The parrot pushed its beak right up against her ear.

"Meltdown, baby."

She smirked. *Right on, Perce.* It was definitely going to be meltdown -- for Jason Lawrence -- aka Larry the letch.

## Chapter Four

Merindah spun the wheel of the truck and headed off-road, grinning slightly as Jason, caught unawares, had to grab hold of the armrest.

"Wanna tell me where we're going?"

"I thought we'd take a breather. I'm tired. Maybe you're correct. It *is* a long journey for a woman." *Schmuck. What a sexist.*

She reached out and thumped the black button on the dash with the heel of her hand. Twin spotlights on the front of the vehicle blazed with light. "Wouldn't do to hit a 'roo," she said by way of explanation.

"You sure you know where you're going?"

"See that stand of trees over there? That's the creek that runs through Chase's property. If you followed the creek, you'd eventually come to the house. I know it's not far to the homestead, but I really need to get out and stretch my legs."

Merindah maneuvered the car around large boulders and small scrubby bushes. Mulga trees and baby eucalypt gums, some of them devoid of leaves and suffering from the terminal drought in outback Australia, vied for position near the creek. Closer to the edge of the water were towering ghost gums, their white bark making them stand out in the spotlights as if coated in luminescent white paint. Here and there, among the gums, were numerous wattle trees with yellow balls of fluffy flowers.

She started to slow down. Now to find a good spot to camp, at least for a few hours. Tonight was get-even time. A bit of fun, was she? *Hah!* She'd show Jason Lawrence just how hot things could get in outback Australia.

"Look out, it's a kangaroo!"

Before Merindah could react, Jason grabbed the wheel and pulled it toward him. The car swerved, away from the 'roo, but toward an outcropping of rocks and solid mud termite nests.

"Jason, get your hand off the wheel," Merindah cried out as she tried to right the vehicle. Too late. They hit a large rock, the car going up and over it. She winced at the loud clunk as something smacked into the underside of the chassis.

Merindah fought with the wheel. The car skidded in a circle, dust flying up around them. She pumped the brakes frantically, bringing them to a screeching halt under the trailing branches of a Weeping Mulga tree not far from the edge of the creek. Her hands shook as she reached forward and turned the engine off.

She sat there in the darkness, trying to slow her heart rate. Perspiration dotted her forehead, trickling down her face. She clutched the steering wheel, wrists aching with tension. Forcing herself to uncurl her fingers, she buried her hands in her lap. Jason hadn't said a word, but she could hear his heavy breathing beside her. The parrot in the backseat was miraculously silent.

"Why the effing hell did you do that?" Merindah had gotten over her fright and was just plain angry now. "Stupid moron. You could have killed us both."

Before Jason could respond, Perce decided he'd been quiet long enough and screeched as if in mortal danger. The sound lodged in her brain, slithering in behind her eyes and starting a thumping headache. "Shut up, Perce," she muttered.

"'Struth, mate, the sheila can drive."

Against her better judgment, Merindah chuckled. "I swear that bird actually understands the usage of the English language." She stared at the parrot over her shoulder. "Perce, you call me a sheila once more and I really am going to wring your scrawny neck. Woman, girl, even old broad, I don't care. But calling a female a sheila went out with the ark. Men don't do it anymore -- and neither do parrots -- not unless they want a smack in the face."

She knew her laughing and joking was nothing more than a release of the fear that had gripped her when the car went into a spin. She turned toward Jason, expecting him to share her laughter, but his face was deadly serious.

"Merindah, I'm so sorry. Grabbing the wheel was an asinine thing to do. I should know better, but I reacted without thinking." Jason wiped a shaky hand across his forehead, his expression showing surprise at the sweat gathered there.

"Well, it *was* pretty stupid. Don't ever do it again, or I might be tempted to kick your ass." Merindah relented at the remorse swamping his features. "For that matter, I should share the blame. I should never have gone off-road in the dark, even with spotlights."

She reached across Jason, opened the glove box and grabbed one of the flashlights stored there. "Let's see what damage we've done."

Slipping out of the seat, she squatted down beside the car, aiming the powerful beam. The angle wasn't quite right so she rolled onto her back and scooted underneath, training the light above her.

Something dripped onto her face. "Ah, crap," she muttered, swiping her hand across her cheek to wipe away the muck. She didn't need the flashlight to know what it was.

"What's the problem?"

Using her heels, she inched her way out from under the vehicle. Jason extended his hand to help her back on her feet.

Merindah shivered as his hand clasped hers. He stood so close she could see the flecks in his eyes. She'd thought they were dark brown, but up close, she could see green and amber highlights among the brown.

Dragging in a deep breath, she caught a hint of his aftershave. Spicy and alluring, it turned her brain to mush. Heat gathered, rushing through her veins. Her breathing accelerated. Her breasts felt swollen, the nipples hard and throbbing. Holy cow, she felt like a bitch in heat.

Damn it, she was standing here acting like a teenager with her first crush. She pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms over her chest. She'd wanted to turn the tables on him, not make herself vulnerable to *his* manipulations. If he knew how much she wanted him, that's exactly the position she'd be in.

Sitting the flashlight on the hood of the vehicle so it illuminated the area around the driver's side, she dusted off her ass, opened the door and flicked on the interior light. "We cracked the sump when we hit that bump."

She ran her hand through her hair, pulling the band from the knot at the back of her neck and allowing the thick strands to fall to her butt. Ah, crap, now she probably had oil in her hair. She really should get it cut short. It was a darn nuisance to get it up and keep it tidy when she was in uniform. And why the hell was she worrying about her hair when she had a broken-down vehicle and an idiot for a passenger, sexy though he was?

She pulled a cloth from under the front seat and wiped it over her face before scrubbing the oil from her hand.

"We're leaking oil like a sieve." She sighed. "I've got a couple of spare cans, but at the rate it's coming out, we won't get far. The motor will seize up in no time flat. I'll have to radio Chase and have him pick us up."

Reaching into the vehicle, she grabbed the microphone from the cradle on the dash. Before she could turn the CB radio on, Jason slid into the passenger seat. She raised her eyebrows when she spotted the frown on his face. "What?"

"Didn't you say we're less than an hour from the house by road? Less if we follow the creek? We've got the flashlights. Why can't we walk along the edge of the creek until we get to the homestead? We can come back and get the car tomorrow."

"Are you crazy? You've been out here to the Australian outback -- what? -- four years in a row now? You should know better than to make a comment like that."

"I only meant --"

Merindah shook her head. "Doesn't matter what you meant. The rule of thumb is not to leave the vehicle if you break down in the outback. Any dummy knows that."

She flicked on the radio and waited for it to warm up before turning to the right channel. When she heard the static, she held the mike to her mouth and depressed the switch. "Base Station 124, this is Merry101. Come in, Base Station."

She released the talk button and waited for Chase to answer, but all she heard was even more static. She tried again, with the same result. "That's funny." She flicked a glance at her watch. "Maisie should be in the kitchen at this time. She'd hear the radio, even if Chase isn't there. Someone always answers. Maybe we knocked something out of alignment when we hit that darn rock."

Jason opened his mouth to tell her about the satellite phone he always carried out here. He'd learned the hard way that the signal wasn't always strong enough for cell phones, making them next to useless. In this harsh outback country, where help could be hours away, staying in contact was often a necessity for survival. Before he could say anything, Merindah threw the receiver onto the seat and turned on him.

"And as for walking out of here, forget it. I won't allow it. You could fall and hit your head or break that leg again. *Or* get bitten by a snake. We have some of the most deadly snakes in the world and most of them live up around this country."

He wasn't quite the dummy Merindah made him out to be. And he was getting sick and tired of her trying to take him down a peg. She'd been chipping at him for the whole journey. He knew most of it was his fault. He couldn't help but stir her up. He'd wanted a reaction from her and he was sure getting it. Whether it was the right type was a different thing.

Sliding out of the vehicle, he grabbed the light off the hood and trained it on the antenna fixed to the grill guard at the front. "Um, Merindah? You've ripped all the wiring out of the antenna. Plus, it's been snapped in half, probably when we slid in under this tree. You're not going to get anyone with that radio."

"A good hot screw will fix everything."

Jason laughed as Perce added his two-cents-worth. He'd forgotten all about the bloody bird. It had been remarkably quiet since the drama had started. Now it perched



on the hood of the car and bobbed up and down, its yellow crest standing straight up. He shook his head. The bird was wrong. It'd take more than a few screws to fix this, and not the kind of screw Perce was talking about.

"Oh, shut up, Perce." Merindah flounced around to the front of the vehicle and hunkered down, training the torch on the disconnected wires.

"We might be able to rewire the cables, but no way can we do anything about the antenna. At least, not until we get back to the homestead." Jason felt like the moron she'd called him. This was his fault.

"Shit, shit, shit. I never even thought about the antenna. Now how am I going to contact the property? Maisie will worry when we don't turn up tonight."

She looked up at him from her position on the ground and Jason found himself captivated by the picture she presented. The beam from the powerful flashlight highlighted the red of her hair as it flowed around her. He'd never seen hair that long. He wanted to strip her naked and see how she looked covered only by a curtain of red.

The singlet top did nothing to hide the shape and size of her nipples. He had a sudden desire to bend down and take one into his mouth. He started to salivate just thinking about it. The picture in his mind grew brighter. Merindah at his mercy, those long, long legs of hers wrapped about his waist, pulling him in...

"And what the hell do you mean *I* did it? If you hadn't wrenched the wheel, none of this would've happened. Poor Maisie will be worried out of her mind."

She slapped her hand against his leg, jolting him out of his erotic daydream. Jason shook his head to clear it. "If you'd actually let me finish a sentence, I was about to tell you I have a satellite phone in the back of the truck. It's an old one of Chase's, but it works fine."

"You had a sat phone all this time and said nothing?" She glared at him. "Well? Go get it, already!"

Jason ground his teeth as he rounded the back of the vehicle to retrieve the briefcase-style container. He really was getting pissed off at Merindah. She treated him like a recalcitrant child.

He'd tried to make allowances for the fact that she was probably under stress, getting stranded in the bush with a total stranger. But then, he wasn't a total stranger... except she didn't know that.

Chase had rung him in Brisbane to tell him Maisie's goddaughter, Merindah Byrnes, would collect him at Police Headquarters to drive him home. When Jason had made a smartass crack about getting it on with a lady cop, Chase had informed him Merindah fancied herself in love with some American she'd met in a chat room, but that she was too chicken to meet him.

Okay, so maybe hundreds of Aussie women met American men over the Internet, but he was a smart cookie, he could connect the dots. He'd hoped by making that comment about the woman he'd hoped to meet and how it was only just a bit of fun, it would tempt her into confessing she was Merry, but no such luck. Then when he heard her use Merry as her call sign, he knew he was correct.

Should he tell her? Nah, not yet. This little smart-mouthed Aussie *sheila* needed to learn a few lessons in manners.

Dragging the case out of the truck, he stomped back to the front of the vehicle and set it up, pulling the telescopic aerial out to its full length. Ignoring the gestures Merindah made to hand it over to her, he punched in the number and hit send. Once he had Chase on the line, he passed the receiver to Merindah.

"Hey, Chase, we've had a minor mishap. Wanna come and get us?"

"You all right? No one hurt?"

"No, we cracked the sump. Leaking oil like a sieve. We're parked under a tree at the Weeping Mulga waterhole."

"I've got a mare foaling at the moment and it looks like being a difficult birth. It could go on for hours. You mind waiting?"

"How about we just camp here for the night? I've plenty of supplies in the truck. You can come and get us in the morning."

"No problems. Thanks, Merindah, I appreciate it. Put Jason on for a minute, okay?"

Merindah shrugged and handed over the phone. Then she took another flashlight from the front of the car and disappeared in the direction of the creek.

Jason waited until he could no longer see her before he spoke. "What's up, Chase?"

"Is everything really okay? Merindah sounded a little stressed."

"I suspect that's my fault. I can't help needling her. Something about her gets to me. Damn, she's one fine woman. I'd like the chance to know her better. I just wish she'd stop telling me what to do."

Chase burst out laughing, the sound filtering down the phone line. Jason grinned. He knew he was in for a ribbing, particularly after setting his best mate up with his sister. They were never going to let him forget that he and Maisie had played matchmaker.

"I don't believe it," Chase crowed. "Jason the playboy corralled by a woman. Got you tied up in knots, has she, mate? Welcome to the world of hen-pecked males."

"Nothing hen-pecked about me, but Merindah sure needs to learn not everyone wants to play cops and robbers with her. I'm tired of always doing or saying the wrong thing." Jason glanced over his shoulder to see what Merindah was up to. "Look, Chase, I have to be quick. She'll be back any minute. Any chance you can delay that pick-up for... oh, two days? I wouldn't mind the chance to be alone with her."

"Yeah, for you, I guess I can do that, but you take the flack when she finds out." Chase chuckled. "You realize she'll probably just follow the creek in the daylight and arrive at the homestead. She won't attempt it at night, but nothing to stop her doing it when she realizes I'm not coming."

"Then I'll have to give her a reason to stay, won't I? Thanks, mate."

"Hey, before you go, two things. Firstly, remember what I said about her being half in love with some guy she met on-line. Don't think you'll have much luck there."

*That remains to be seen,* Jason thought. If he could somehow get her to admit she was Merry, they might have a chance at finding out if what they'd established on-line was the foundation for a real relationship. Try as he might, he couldn't ignore the fact

that he had his own share of confessing to do. With a shake of his head, he dragged his thoughts back to what Chase was saying.

"And second, check out the cattle in the paddock on the other side of the creek. I haven't had time to get down there and there are rumors floating around about cattle rustling going on. Not certain how true they are, but I want to keep an eye on it. They're my prize heifers. Sure hate to lose any of them. We'll move them up closer to the homestead as soon as you're back."

"Can do. Oh, and don't be surprised if you don't hear from us for a day or so. Funny how these satellite phones break down at the drop of a hat."

Jason hung up to the sound of Chase's laughter. Taking the cover off the phone, he pulled the battery out before reassembling the whole thing and stashing it back in the truck. For a moment, his conscience chipped away at him for his subterfuge. It wasn't something he could dismiss lightly.

Shit, he couldn't do it. He'd have to come clean with her and tell her who he was. Put the phone back together and call Chase to let him know. And hope like hell Merindah didn't kick his ass for not being up-front with her. Hell, he should've said something when she used the name Merry on the radio.

With a sigh, he retraced his steps, and grabbing the phone along with his backpack containing the battery, he squatted down near the antenna. Before he could do anything, he heard a slight rustle. A glance showed Merindah returning from the creek, the glow of the flashlight bobbing in front of her.

It suddenly felt as if a clenched fist had landed in his gut. The air whooshed from his lungs as Merindah stepped into the circle of light in front of the vehicle. The blood in his veins heated up, driving through his body at an astonishing rate. Frigging hell, this was one sexy woman. The picture she presented just about blew his mind.

Her red hair hung down like a thick blanket, so long it all but covered her skimpy shorts. It looked like she was naked, her hair her only adornment. Hell of a picture for a hungry male. His cock certainly thought so. One look and he was rock-hard, pulsing with the need to bury himself in her hot cunt.

"I hope you're not doing what I think you are." She stood in front of him, hands propped on her hips. "If you think you're getting that backpack ready to walk out of here, forget it. It's too dangerous at night."

Ah, shit, then she had to open her mouth. When was she going to credit him with a little sense? He put the pack aside and settled down on the dusty ground, his back against the grill guard of the truck. "Look, Merindah, I don't --"

She slashed her hand through the air to cut him off. "In this instance, I don't care what you want. I'm responsible for you until we get to the homestead."

Dropping the flashlight beside him, she marched around to the passenger door, reefed it open and rummaged around inside. Before he could even come up with a smart answer, she was back, squatting down beside him.

"Just remember, I'm doing this for your own good. I can't take the risk that you'll go off when my back's turned."

She grabbed his wrist, snapped something around it, then pulled his arm close to the grill guard. He tried to move and suddenly found himself restrained, unable to get his hand free.

"Fucking hell, woman, you've handcuffed me to the bloody car!"

## Chapter Five

Every man's dream scenario. To be tied up by a beautiful woman. Jason groaned. This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen.

He yanked on the chain, knowing it wouldn't do any good. He'd been trying for the last hour to get free. Shit, he'd even lowered himself to begging, but Merindah wasn't listening.

"Grab the broad and fuck her."

"Shut up, Perce, or I'll have your guts for garters," Merindah called out.

"And I'll help," Jason muttered. One more sexual remark from that damn bird and he'd explode. His cock was hard enough just watching Merindah. Her shorts had crept up her backside from all the bending she'd been doing. Now he could see the cheeks of her ass every time her hair moved. Whenever she came near enough, he had a sudden desire to lean forward and lick, or better yet, bite those sexy curves.

She was definitely an outback girl. Within a short space of time, she'd cleared a spot, ringed it with stones and had a fire going. Then she'd promptly set about preparing something for them to eat out of her store of dehydrated food. She'd even produced a cold beer from a chiller in the back of the truck.

"Come on, Merindah, it's getting damn hard here on this rocky ground. My butt's going to sleep. You gonna kiss it better for me?"

"Won't do you any harm. It's not like it's cold. In fact, it's getting awfully muggy. Might have a storm on the way."

"All the more reason why you should let me go. I'm not having any fun here, at least not on my own."

Merindah sauntered over and stood in front of him, shaking her head. "Nu-uh, can't do that. How do I know you won't disappear on me?"

She couldn't believe she'd kept a man handcuffed for the better part of an hour. Okay, so she was a cop, and it may well be standard practice for an officer of the law, but not for her. Her mouth twitched as she struggled to keep the grin from her face. Wondered if she should tell him this was the first time she'd ever actually used her handcuffs.

He wanted fun? Well, he'd already told her she was nothing but a bit of fun. Maybe it was time to get in a little payback. "Ah, you poor thing. Is your itty-bitty tushy getting sore? How about I get you a blanket or something to sit on?"

"How about you unchain me instead? Or if you want to keep me tethered, you join me down here."

Grinning, she spun about, twitching her ass as she headed for the back of the truck.

"Yeah, baby, swing it." he whispered.

She had no doubt he meant her to hear. He might have been angry with her in the beginning, but over the last hour, his comments had started to gain a decidedly sexual edge. In fact, sexual tension sizzled through the air, making her conscious of every movement of her body. *And* his, for that matter.

The way he rested back against the grill guard of the truck, legs spread and bent at the knees, she'd have to be a moron to miss the bulge in the front of his trousers. And *her* mama didn't raise no dummies. She really should let him go, but she kinda liked the idea of him being at her mercy.

Perhaps it was time to revisit the raunchy scenario she'd concocted earlier when she'd decided he needed to learn a lesson or two. After all, this might be the only chance she had to get close to him.

With that thought in mind, she stripped down and reached into her overnight bag for a scarlet satin thong, wondering if maybe Jason would be more turned on by

black. She grinned as she stepped into them and settled them high on her hips. At this stage, she didn't think the color mattered.

Arranging her hair so it fell around her like a thick cape, she grabbed the sleeping bag and pillow from the back of the vehicle. Nothing like being prepared. On an afterthought, she reached into her vanity and snapped up the packet of condoms she always kept... just in case. One final thing to collect and she was ready.

"Hey, what are you doing back there? I'm getting lonely," Jason yelled out.

"Can't have that." He jumped as she stepped up beside him and squatted down. "Lift your butt and I'll slide this sleeping bag under you." She unzipped the bag so it covered a larger area and pushed it under his rump, spreading it out around him. Tucking the pillow behind his back, she hid the last two items where he couldn't see them. At least, not yet. Backing up, she sat on her haunches at the edge of the quilted fabric.

"Is that more comfy? Not so hard on your tushy?"

Pushing herself upright, she ambled over and grabbed some more firewood. Bending from the waist with her ass toward him, she laid the dry tree branches on the flames, making certain to keep her long hair out of the way. She wanted to go up in flames this night, but not that way.

"Crap, woman, what happened to your shorts?"

"Oh, I thought seeing as how I have a captive audience, I might give you a bit of entertainment." She ran her hands over her chest, taking care not to part her hair. Didn't want to get him too worked up. Well, she did, but she wanted to drag it out.

With the fire at her back, she swayed from side to side, as if to the beat of unheard music. "You like to dance, Jason? Slow dancing, where my breasts brush up against your chest and your cock nestles between my thighs, rubbing on my pussy? Would you like that, Jason?"

He gulped. "Ah, yeah, sounds good."

Merindah almost lost it and started laughing. Jason's voice came out as a husky croak. He squirmed on the sleeping bag as if he couldn't get comfortable. He'd be even



more uncomfortable by the time she finished. Damn, it was fun playing the vamp at times. Not that she'd ever done this before. She was making it up as she went along.

Jason couldn't believe this was happening. Fucking hell, he was about to be ravaged... he hoped! Part of him wondered if Merindah would go that far, or if she was just teasing him. He thought not. Even in the firelight, he could see the flush staining her face and hear the accelerated rate of her breathing.

His own breathing wasn't much better. If he wasn't careful, he'd start to hyperventilate and pass out. His pulse pounded in his ears. Blood rushed around his body, swelling his cock even more. He had the biggest hard-on he could ever remember having.

"You want to do something for me, Merindah? All night I've been fantasizing about your nipples peeking through your hair. Just a hint to tease, not --"

"You mean like this?"

She parted the red strands a fraction, enough to allow him to see the rosy crests. Jason sucked in a shaky breath. Then the air exited his lungs with an audible whoosh as she flicked her hair over her shoulders. All she had on was a red satin thong and a silver chain around her throat from which hung a key -- he'd take a bet it was the key to the handcuffs. Right now, he didn't care. He was too busy enjoying the show.

"Or would you rather see the whole thing?" She slid her finger into her mouth and sucked, then bathed the tip of one nipple. "Ooh, that feels sooo good." She repeated the gesture with the other nipple. "You want to play with my toys, Jason?"

"Forget the tits. I wanna see the pussy. Are you wet yet, sweetcheeks?"

Jason looked at Merindah and started to laugh. Within seconds, she'd joined him.

"Shut up, Perce," she yelled. "I'm trying to be sexy here."

He grinned. "You don't need to try, *sweetcheeks*. You *are* sexy. I'm so darn turned on I think I'll die if you don't come over here."

She strode over to him, stopping at the edge of the sleeping bag. "Perce is right about one thing."

"What's that?" He swallowed hard as her hands glided down until they settled over her mound. Sliding one hand under the front of the scarlet thong, she cupped her pussy.

"I want you so much I'm already wet."

"Then get your ass over here, woman. You're killing me." Jason tugged at the handcuffs. The rattle of the chain barely impinged on his consciousness. He was too caught up in the sensations ripping through him.

Merindah stepped closer, straddling his body, one long leg on either side of his hips.

"I once heard a joke about the little girl who was upset because she didn't have a penis like her little friend, Johnny. Her mama told her not to be sad because with what she had, she could get one of those..." She stared at the bulge in the front of his jeans. "...any time she wanted. Think mama was correct?"

Jason found himself nodding like an idiot. His mouth had dried up and he had to swallow again before he could speak. "I'm sure mama always knows best," he croaked.

"So... I'll show you mine if you show me yours." She slid one side of the thong down her hip.

He'd had enough. He'd go stark raving mad if he didn't taste her. Without any warning, he reared up as far as his trapped hand would allow. Wrapping his free arm about her hips, he pulled her close and buried his face between her legs.

The musky scent of her arousal drove him wild. He licked along the crotch of her thong panties, wetting the fabric enough so that it molded to the shape of her. Using his teeth, he pulled the material away and lapped at her pussy. God, she tasted like nothing he'd ever imagined. Ambrosia. Erotic and heady.

His pulse kicked into overdrive. His breathing accelerated. Testosterone drove the heat downward until his cock was engorged to almost painful proportions. His balls tightened until he thought he'd explode.

Merindah buried her hands in his hair, tugging him closer. He was happy to oblige, separating the hot folds and thrusting his tongue into her slick cunt. First a

gentle forage with the very tip and then a hard thrust as deep as he could go. She writhed against him, her creamy juices bathing his face. Her hips undulated, driving him deeper with each movement.

When he pulled back, she moaned, the sound needy, hungry. He took her clit between his teeth and applied gentle pressure. Her hips bucked in reaction. When he flicked at the sensitive flesh with his tongue, her body jerked, grinding against him as if in search of more. He returned to her tight channel, stabbing hard and fast.

Her internal muscles spasmed. He increased the speed. Her hips gyrated faster, uncoordinated and jerky. Just as he thought Merindah would melt completely, Perce emitted a low whistle and sang out like rocker Billy Idol, "Gimme more, gimme more."

Jason pulled back and looked at the quivering Merindah. "I thought that birdcage was covered so Perce wouldn't talk." Then he disappeared under the curtain of red strands again. He hadn't finished his feast yet.

"It is," she gasped.

Then Jason forgot all about the parrot as he plunged his tongue inside her again. Merindah's hot sheath tightened around his tongue. The spasms broke free, the convulsions rippling through her. She screamed out his name as she catapulted into a shuddering climax and it was all he could do to hold onto her.

The bird whistled again. "Meltdown, baby. Meltdown."

Oh yeah, definite meltdown.

## Chapter Six

Merindah's legs gave out. She slithered down to sit astride Jason's thighs. Her pussy throbbed, lingering spasms tightening the muscles, the scarlet thong well and truly soaked.

Before she could catch her breath, Jason dragged her close and, lowering his head, took one nipple into his mouth. She groaned as he tugged at the engorged tip, rolling it between his lips. When he suckled hard, Merindah felt the pull deep inside her. She rocked herself forward and backward until his hard erection nudged at her wet panties and created friction on her aching clit.

"Damn it, Jason, fuck me. I can't wait any longer."

He released her nipple, sliding his mouth to the underside of her breast. God, he was licking her breast like an ice cream cone. And it was the biggest turn on. Then he used his teeth, giving a gentle bite before sucking hard on the area. Merindah shuddered, sensation driving through her. She had no doubt she'd have a mark there tomorrow, but she kind of liked the idea of Jason branding her.

"Lady, I'd love to fuck you, but it's a bit hard with all my clothes on." He nuzzled her neck. "You going to cut me loose?"

Shit, she'd forgotten about the handcuffs. She fingered the silver chain about her throat. Should she? Nah, she hadn't quite finished with Mr. Jason Lawrence.

She shook her head. "Not yet, but there is something else I'm going to cut off."

With that, she leaned forward and slipped her hands around Jason to retrieve the knife and condoms she'd secreted there earlier. The look of disappointment on his face when she sat up made her laugh. "Just wait, Mr. Impatient. First I want to show you something."

"Is this another version of you show me yours and I'll show you mine?" He waggled his eyebrows and leered suggestively.

With a sly grin, Merindah pulled the knife into view. "My blade's pretty big. How about yours?" She slid back on his legs and ran the tip of the knife oh-so-gently across the bulge in his trousers.

Jason froze. Not one twitch. Merindah lifted the knife away from his body and chuckled. "I've finally found a way to shut you up when you piss me off."

"This is not funny," he spluttered. "Fucking hell, woman, that's a *knife*."

She stared at the offending object. "It is? Well, fancy that." She couldn't help herself. The laughter just kept coming. When she'd finally gained some control, she bent close to him and licked at his lips. Damn, he tasted good.

"Have you got a spare shirt and trousers in the truck?" she whispered against his mouth.

He gulped and nodded frantically.

"And do you like a bit of kink with your sex?"

His eyes lit up and his lips twitched. "Try me on for size, *sweetcheeks*."

"Oh, I plan to." She brought the knife up and proceeded to cut the buttons from his shirt. "I'm not strong enough to rip the clothes off your back, but I always wondered what it would be like to *cut* them off a hunky male. Kind of like a pirate does to his female captive, you know? He slides the knife between her boobs and zip... There goes her top and her boobies are swinging free."

"Shiver me timbers, mate, and watch out for that woody."

Jason let loose with a crack of laughter. "I swear that bird is listening to everything we say." He grinned. "Now, where were we?"

"Oh, right about here." Merindah pulled his shirt open and helped him slip his free hand out of the sleeve. Sliding the knife between his arm and the opposite sleeve, she sliced through the fabric.

Not giving him time to react, she laid the knife aside and dipped her head. All that lovely bronzed flesh. No way was she continuing without tasting.

First, she licked her way across his chest, curling her tongue in the smattering of dark hair. His skin tasted slightly salty, warm to the touch, a definite aphrodisiac. Eager to explore further, she moved upward until she could nip at his shoulder. *Seems the gentleman liked to bite. Let's give him a taste of his own medicine.*

Jason jerked in response, but it was the groan sliding from his throat that spurred her on. She swirled the tip of her tongue around the furled edge of his ear before moving across to his mouth.

Jason rose to the occasion and took control. Grabbing her hair, he tugged her closer still, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. She met him halfway, sucking, teasing. Taunting him until he groaned again. The steely erection beneath her ass left her in no doubt he was nicely primed. And he wasn't the only one.

Her pulse raced, heart thudding in her chest. Hot cream flooded her pussy. Heat streaked through her body until it concentrated between her thighs. Her clit throbbed, so highly sensitized she felt she'd explode if she didn't get some relief.

Jason released her lips and licked his way down her throat, leaving little love bites in his wake. When he walked his fingers across her chest and palmed her breast, rolling the nipple between thumb and forefinger, a shudder rocketed through her and she gasped. A streak of fire zapped along her veins, the sensation bordering on pain before it morphed into red-hot, liquid heat in her pussy.

He moved on, his hand caressing her hip. Warm. Enticing. She tilted her pelvis to urge him further. Oh God, so far, but not far enough. She needed him to touch her. To stop the ache between her thighs.

The fiery contact disappeared and she wanted to scream out in disappointment. Before she could give into the frustration, she felt it. The shiver of steel. Cold. Terrifying, if she gave herself a chance to think about it. But there wasn't time to think of anything. Jason wrenched his hand up and she felt the elastic side of her thong give way.

Her mouth dropped open. "Shit, you turned the tables on me, you sneaky cowboy. I was supposed to be cutting you out of *your* clothes."

He held up the knife, a grin curving his lips. "Can't let you have all the fun. Besides, no way am I letting you near my cock with that knife. Not that I don't trust you, but I'd like to keep my crown jewels intact, thank you very much."

"Percy wants some head, baby."

"Shut up, Percy," they both yelled out together.

Merindah collapsed against Jason, chuckling. "I am so going to kill that bird if he keeps this up." Then Jason snaked his hand inside what was left of her thong and teased the curls that hid her pussy. She started to whimper, desperate for an end to the sexual tension that held her in thrall.

"Hell, where's that knife?" she muttered. She grabbed it up from where Jason had dropped it and quickly slit the elastic on the other side of her panties. The front dropped down, allowing him better access.

"Know what I want?" he whispered.

"Probably the same thing I want. Fuck the living crap out of each other." She rocked her hips again, silently begging him to part her lips and plunge his fingers into her aching channel.

"I do want to fuck you, but first I want to see you come. I want to see your face get all tense that moment before you reach your climax. I want to hear your breath catch when I touch you."

Merindah gasped as he spread her swollen labia and trailed one finger along her length. Sensation shafted through her. Not enough, not nearly enough. She needed him to fill her, stretch her, until she felt she couldn't take any more.

"I want to hear you scream out when I do this..."

He raised his knees behind her, supporting her lower back. Then he slipped one finger into her wet pussy, moving it slowly in and out. Merindah threw her head back and a keening cry gusted from her throat. He introduced a second finger and a third, plunging deep, his thumb rubbing her clit at the same time.

"Oh God, don't... don't stop."

Using the pressure of his knees, she arched her hips, lifting her body so he could thrust deeper. He curled his fingers, moving them from side to side. A firestorm swept through her, making her gasp. When he pushed the hood back on her clit and thrummed the bundle of nerve endings, Merindah screamed out her need. Tension tightened her muscles until she felt she was about to come apart at the seams.

"Your cunt is so hot. So wet. I've wanted to do this ever since I first saw you," he whispered. "Come for me, Merindah. I want to feel your juices flowing over my hand."

His words were the trigger that pushed her over into a shattering orgasm. The tension broke, convulsions racing through her, radiating out from where he finger-fucked her. The fire at her back was no greater than the one raging through her bloodstream. Arching backward over Jason's knees, she let the maelstrom take her, oblivious to anything but the sensations hurtling through her and the feel of Jason's fingers in her body.

She was gasping, her breathing erratic, when the final spasm faded away. Leaning forward, she brushed a soft kiss on Jason's mouth. "Oh, I do like a man who talks dirty. How did you know?"

He grinned. "I know more about you than you think."

"Yeah right!" Actually, he probably did. She remembered telling *Jay*, her on-line friend, that sexy talk would trip her into an orgasm with the right man. The thing was, he didn't know she knew who he was.

She also remembered something else. He'd told her he liked a woman who took control, who knew what she wanted and went after it. That he wanted to be ridden, and ridden hard. And she was about to do just that.

"Drop your legs."

He did as she ordered. She scooted down, and with a few quick movements, stripped off his leather belt and unzipped his jeans.

"Hey, you're not going to use the knife, are you?"

She laughed. "No, too hard. This is quicker. Lift up."



When he raised his hips, she skimmed his jeans and underwear down until they caught on his boots. His cock sprang free, thick and hard. The swollen head glistened, a tiny drop of pre-cum highlighting his need. "Can you slide down a bit?" she croaked, her gaze fixed on his rigid erection.

"Sure, but what say you undo the cuffs? This would be a hell of a lot easier then. I can't move properly this way."

"Sorry, not yet."

He raised his eyebrows. "Keep me tied up like this and you'll have to do all the work."

She chuckled. "Hey, I'm all for self-service. Amazing how inventive you can be when you have to look after yourself."

Shaking her head, she tucked the pillow more securely behind him so the grill guard wouldn't dig into him. Then she scooted back until she was level with his thighs. She grinned. Jason might have been worried about the handcuffs, but his mind was definitely on other things. He couldn't keep his eyes off the sway of her breasts. She tucked her hair over one shoulder so his view was unrestricted.

"So you like my long hair, do you, Jason?"

At his rapid nod, she leaned over, and taking a thick hank, brushed it against the rock-hard cock jutting up from the dark pubic hair. His whole body jerked, cock included.

"Lots of things you can do with long hair." She trailed the strands in a feather-light caress from the base of his cock to the swollen head, twining it around the bulbous flesh.

He groaned, the sound dragged from deep in his chest. Merindah grinned, pleased with the reaction she was getting. The sweep of her hair across his lower stomach made the muscles contract violently.

Jason sucked in an audible breath. "Hey, no fun teasing," he said with a groan.

Merindah didn't answer. Instead, resting one hand on Jason's naked thigh, she bent down so the fall of hair hid her from view. For one, two, three minutes, she did

nothing. The muscles in his lower stomach tightened and he started to wriggle on the sleeping bag. Then she ran the tip of her tongue along the thick length.

"Damn you, woman, stop tantalizing and get on with it. I'm dying here."

"Can't stand the heat, cowboy?"

She cupped his balls in one hand and took the swollen head into her mouth. Flicking her tongue across the top, she licked the pre-cum, a moan rippling from her throat. He tasted so good. Tongue swirling, she took him deeper.

Jason lifted his hips, pumping in time to the movement of her mouth. His hoarse breathing filled the air around her, mixing with the crackle of the fire. His temperature rose, evidenced by the heat of his skin. When she felt his balls tighten and the tension gripping his body, she pulled back. "Not yet, boyo," she whispered.

Grabbing a condom from the box she'd tossed onto the sleeping bag, she rolled the prophylactic down over his steely erection, marveling at the tensile strength encased in satin-soft flesh. She could swear his cock grew even harder at her ministrations.

She grinned at Jason as she raised his knees up again. "I'm a great girl for research. I found a copy of the Kama Sutra a few months back. This position is called the swing. Supposed to be good for when a woman wants a bit of control. Some day I'd like to try each and every position. You'd be interested in a little experimentation, wouldn't you, Jason?"

Anticipation driving her pulse rate up, she swung one leg across him, straddling his lower body, her back toward him. "Time to help myself. Now, you be a good boy and lay there and enjoy it, because I'm about to fuck your brains out, Mister."

## Chapter Seven

*Praise the saints, I've hit jackpot. A woman who likes to take the initiative.*

Jason felt like he'd won the million-dollar lottery. His thought processes shut down, caught up in an erotic ride as Merindah wet her fingers in her own juices before wrapping her hand around the base of his erection, sliding her fingers up to the head, then back down again, before repeating the gesture. Pushing up onto her knees, she lowered herself enough that the head of his cock slithered gently inside her creamy cunt.

He wanted to rear up and pump himself into her until he was as deep as he could go. Instead, he gritted his teeth and allowed her to set the pace. Inch by inch, she glided down, making his possession her victory. Internal muscles stretched to accommodate his width, clasp him tight like a lover's embrace. When she'd finally sheathed him in her wet channel, his breath gusted out on a shaky sigh. Heat wrapped around him. The musky scent of her arousal rose to tease at his senses and all he wanted to do was drive into her until he lost the ability to think altogether.

"God, you're so big, so wide. I feel..."

"Am I hurting you?"

She shook her head and her hair brushed across his lower belly, dragging a tortured growl from him.

"No, I feel... full, as if you have totally taken me over. It's... nice."

"Nice?" He raised his eyebrows. He wasn't certain that's how he wanted her to see him.

A gurgle of laughter burst from her. "Okay, just to satisfy your male ego, it's fucking marvelous. I don't ever want to move."

He laughed in turn. "Sorry, sweetcheeks, no can do. In fact..." He angled his hips and raised his ass a fraction. "...I have this burning need to move right now."

A shrill whistle pierced the air. Jason groaned. That darn bird again.

"Hard and fast, sweetcheeks. Da man likes it hard and fast."

"I'm going to kill that bloody sex fiend."

The parrot whistled again and Merindah started to laugh.

Jason felt the vibrations through their physical connection. His feathered friend was right. Oh yeah, he wanted it hard and fast. Perce's comments had a way of getting right to the heart of the matter. And he didn't want to wait any longer. He couldn't. His body was a mass of seething testosterone.

Tethered as he was by one wrist, participation wouldn't be easy. He flexed his muscles and tilted his pelvis. Merindah needed no further urging. Leaning forward over his bent knees, she used the leverage to raise herself up. His cock slid almost all the way out of her cream-filled cunt before she pushed down again, her muscles tightening around him.

"Oh God, this feels so good," she groaned.

She repeated the action until his gut tightened with tension. He wanted to grab her and hold her still so he could ram himself into her until she cried out for completion. But all he could do was use one hand to caress the curve of her ass. When he ran his fingers down the crease between the pale cheeks, Merindah jerked, contracting her muscles hard as if to keep him captive.

"Hard and fast, baby," he whispered as hot sensation shafted through his body.

Lifting up as far as he could, he slid his hand down to where his cock disappeared inside her. She was so wet her creamy juices coated his fingers. He couldn't quite reach her clit. No way to stimulate her there. Not that she appeared to have any problems in that area, but he wanted to be a part of this. He had a need to give her as much pleasure as she gave him.

Returning to the smooth skin of her backside, he ran one wet finger over the puckered hole. He thought she'd balk at the caress. This was not an issue they'd

discussed in their many conversations on-line. Instead, she angled further forward, one hand back to spread the cheeks. All the while, she continued to ride up and down on his rock-hard cock.

"Do you like this, Merindah?" He circled the tight little hole, rubbing her own juices over the ridged opening.

"God, yes," she screamed.

"What about this?" Using his thumb, he pushed past the constricting muscle. In response, Merindah thrust down. The sounds of her moans made his cock swell even more. Made his balls tighten with need. Her movements became frantic as she impaled herself time and time again. He removed his thumb and inserted a finger, stretching her, teasing her each time she drove downward. Her muscles tightened and he knew she wasn't far from coming.

Suddenly, the climax hit her. Her body convulsed around him and it was all he could do to control his own carnal desires. She drooped forward over his bent knees, her hair swirling around her like a silken eddy. The sight was so erotic he had to clench his teeth for a moment.

"The key," he managed to say through a throat gone dry with his ragged breathing. "Give me the key, Merindah."

She wrenched the chain over her head, pulling at it when it snagged in her hair. Jason grabbed it and, contorting his body, managed to undo the handcuffs. Then he tightened his hands about Merindah's hips. "On your knees, woman."

Anal sex wasn't something he practiced regularly, but he had enjoyed it with a couple of women in the past. Right now, he wanted this more than anything he'd ever wanted.

"Do you want me to fuck your ass?" He prayed she wouldn't say no. If she objected, there were other ways he could get his relief, but he had a feeling she wouldn't deny him. She had already positioned herself to take him. He moved in behind her. "Is that what you want, Merindah?"

"Fuck you, get on with it," she groaned.

"No, fuck *you*." The condom was slick with her creamy juices. His cock was still hard. He positioned the head at the tight entrance and pushed in, taking his time until she grew accustomed to his invasion.

It wasn't enough for her. She thrust her hips back, taking his full length all at once. The breath gusted from his chest. "God, you're so tight. Take it easy, babe, I don't want to hurt you."

"Harder, Jason. I want you to fuck me hard."

Her body trembled. She moved forward and backward, sliding on his cock, ramming him in and then withdrawing. Jason's control unraveled. He thrust deep, shuddering at the tight feel, at the friction created. Sliding his hand around to her pussy, he caressed her clit, pushing back the hood to gain the greatest response. Then he thrust two fingers into her cunt at the same time he speared her ass with his cock.

Merindah's movements sped up. He pumped harder, deeper, feeling her stretch around him. As the first spasms hit her, it triggered his own climax and he came in a powerful rush, accompanied by the sound of Merindah's scream and his own croaky shout.

When his body stopped shuddering, he pulled out and dealt with the condom. Merindah had collapsed face down on the sleeping bag. He rolled her over and caught her up in his arms, moving her so she rested with him on the pillow she'd provided earlier. Flicking the edge of the sleeping bag over their sweaty bodies, he pulled her close. "Bloody hell, that was mind blowing."

She grinned, although she kept her eyes closed. "Na-ah, not strong enough. That was fucking fan --" She broke off, her eyes snapping open to stare at him. Then she started to laugh.

"What?" He frowned, trying to see what was so funny.

"You've fulfilled one of my long-held fantasies. I've just been ass-fucked... by a Yankee cowboy, no less."

## Chapter Eight

"I thought Chase would be here by now." She frowned. "You did just try him on the sat phone, didn't you?"

"Um, yeah, but I couldn't get through. Maybe he's still having problems with the mare."

"If he was busy, he'd have sent Maisie." She gnawed on the edge of a fingernail. "Hell, I hope nothing has happened."

"I'm sure he's fine." Jason felt like a bastard. Shit, he wished he hadn't started this now. He hadn't meant to upset Merindah like this. He should have remembered the first cardinal rule of the bush. Always stay in contact. Chase had lived out here all his life. He wouldn't break the most basic of tenets of the outback and Merindah knew that.

"Come on, stop worrying. Something's come up and he'll get to us when he can." He stowed the sleeping bag in the back of the truck and came over to give her a hug. He had to find some way to distract her. "How about we have a swim? That rain we had in the early hours of the morning has raised the creek level enough so that we can at least get some relief from the heat."

"Go get the phone and we'll give it another try. Maybe he's back at the homestead now."

Crap, he was going to have to come clean. Merindah was sure to spot that he'd taken the battery out. She was no one's dummy. He shook his head. There was nothing else to do but confess.

Grabbing the case from the back of the truck, he set it up on the hood of the vehicle. Although God knows why. The damn thing wouldn't work anyway.

"Here, let me." Merindah muscled in and grabbed the phone. Within seconds, she'd punched in Chase's number and stood waiting, foot tapping, for some response.

After a moment, she pulled the receiver away from her ear and stared at it. Then she stared at him. "Hey, hang on, there's no signal."

Slamming the receiver back on the cradle, she snapped the case shut. "Jason, you bloody idiot. You should know by now to replace the battery before starting a long trip. The fucking battery is flat. No wonder Chase isn't answering. Are you a moron or what? This is the height of stupidity."

"Well, if you hadn't crashed the truck, we'd have the radio. So who's the idiot?" Jason knew he was reacting out of guilt. He *was* a fucking idiot.

One, he should've told her who he was up front, but he'd wanted to get a reaction out of her. He should've confessed that he was Jay, that he knew she was Merry, the woman he'd thought he'd made a deep enough connection with she'd want to meet up with him when he arrived in Australia. And two, he never should have removed the battery from the phone.

"I wouldn't have crashed the truck if you hadn't grabbed the wheel," she retorted.

He ran his hands through his hair. If this kept up, they'd end up having a full-scale argument. He didn't want to get offside with Merindah. He'd rather take her down and fuck her silly. Last night had been the most fantastic night of his life. He couldn't remember ever being that hungry for a woman. Not any woman -- *Merindah*.

She made him laugh with her sassy, potty-mouth comments. Shit, she was as bad as the parrot. She also angered the hell out of him when she treated him like the idiot child, but he could forgive that, provided she didn't push him too far. Right now, it was probably a good idea to defuse the situation a bit. He should tell her the truth about the battery, but she'd chew his ass off. Better to wait until she'd calmed down.

He tried for a contrite expression. "I'm sorry, babe. This trip got off to a bad start and just seems to be going downhill." He sidled closer, running his hand up and down her back. "I'm sorry I screwed up." He mentally shrugged. It didn't hurt for the guy to take the blame now and then. After all, the whole battery issue had come up because he'd tried to be too devious. He just didn't want to fight with her.



"But there's one thing I wouldn't change. Last night. That was the most fantastic night of my life." Unable to resist the impulse, he trailed his hand over her butt.

Merindah shivered. The cotton shorts she had on were no barrier to the lick of heat his caress caused. She resisted the urge to grin like the cat that had swallowed the canary. Last night was the most erotic night she could remember.

She'd fantasized about kinky sex, but she'd never been game to suggest it to any of the men she'd gone out with. Her relationships had never lasted long enough for her to feel comfortable asking her partner to try something different. With Jason, it had seemed so natural. It was as if they'd done the courtship thing on the Internet, then jumped right into the middle of a steamy affair. And hot damn, he was good.

Another shiver caught her unawares. Her nipples tightened into hard little points and the breath caught in her throat. A wave of unadulterated sexual energy washed over her and she had to struggle to remember she was supposed to be angry with Jason. It was just so damn hard when all she wanted to do was fuck his brains out.

Ah, hell, she was in serious trouble here. She had to get her mind off sex. Crossing her arms over her chest, she turned to Jason. "Didn't you say Chase asked you to check the stock in the creek paddock?"

At his nod, she continued. "So shouldn't you be getting on with it? Like right now?"

"What about that swim?"

"Work first, swim second."

She didn't have a swimsuit with her, but she didn't think it would matter. Jason had seen her in the buff already.

Guilt ate at her for not telling him who she was. He'd commented this morning that he felt like he'd known her forever. There was a darn good reason for that. They'd become pretty close over the past six months. She'd had to watch herself every step of the way so she didn't say something she had no way of knowing, given she was supposed to have only just met him. This had become far too complicated.

"After we've checked the cattle and had a swim, I want to start out for the property. It shouldn't take long to reach the homestead if we follow the creek. But first that swim. It's hotter than Hades. It's starting to cloud over. We could get a summer storm. Sure could do with it."

Okay, so she was babbling again, but she needed to talk to keep her mind off the feel of Jason's body and the mind-numbing pleasure they'd shared. He looked so damn good standing there in nothing but a pair of denim jeans.

"Hey, I thought you said we couldn't walk out of here."

"Not at night," she tossed over her shoulder. "But it's broad daylight. Easy to spot any snakes or other wildlife that might take a fancy to your Yankee butt. And I know this land like the back of my hand. I just didn't want *you* stumbling around in the dark last night."

Merindah stopped and looked back at Jason, her mouth twitching. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't distance herself from him. Either he made her laugh or he made her mad. Either way, he got a reaction. Right now, she was in danger of laughing outright at him.

He'd forgotten what it was like to walk barefooted across the Aussie outback. The heat and the uneven ground strewn with pebbles and broken twigs from the trees forced him to hop from one foot to the other, searching for the one cool spot that wouldn't burn the skin on his feet. If he wasn't careful, he'd fall on his butt.

Eyes twinkling, she stared at his feet. "Bit hot for you, *sweetcheeks*? Should have left your boots on."

Jason laughed. "You're the only sweetcheeks here, babe." He ran his hand over her ass, finishing with a tight glide down the crease between her cheeks.

Heat slammed into her. Merindah gasped, pulse rate climbing. "Um, swim... Yeah, right, let's have that swim fast... er, first." *Great, Merindah, you sound like an asthmatic frog.*

She spun away from him and raced to the edge of the creek where the water was deepest. Not really deep enough for swimming, but enough that she could cool down the heat licking at her vitals.

Toeing off her trainers, she dropped her shorts and, in panties and singlet top, waded into the water. When she was as deep as she could go, she glanced back over her shoulder. Jason was intent on pulling off his jeans, his gaze for once not pinned on her. She quickly slipped the singlet top over her head.

A hoarse wolf-whistle cut through the air. She spun about. Arms crossed in front of her, singlet falling uselessly into the water, she stared at Jason. He stared back, his gaze running over her, causing her nipples to tighten with need. She bit her lip and allowed her own gaze to rove. The bulge in his underwear left her in no doubt the sight turned him on.

Did she want to arouse him? Oh yeah, part of her did. She wanted him to feel as discombobulated as she was.

Was she turning into a prick tease?

God, she hoped not. She hated women like that. Just the same, she was giving off conflicting signals. She knew it and didn't know how to handle it. She was too bloody confused herself.

"Hey, babe, great tits."

Merindah snapped her head up and glared into the branch above her. "How did that darn bird get down here?"

She heard the ripple of the water behind her and realized Jason had taken the opportunity to join her. A hand appeared in front of her, the soggy singlet dangling from one finger.

"He must have picked the lock again."

Grabbing the singlet, Merindah sat down on the sandy creek bottom. The water swirled around her neck, hiding her bare breasts from view. She felt marginally better... until Jason dropped down beside her. She fought to breathe as his arm brushed up against her.

*How pathetic can you get, Merindah? Turned on by the feel of a man's naked arm. Shit,* she was in serious trouble here.

"Hey, sweetcheeks, are you wet yet?"

A gurgle of laughter caught her unawares. "That darn bird pisses the hell out of me at times, but he's an absolute hoot. I'd sure like to meet the man who trained him to talk. Chase is going to kill you."

Jason chuckled. "At the time I thought Perce was a good gag gift for him and Cassie, but you know something? I just might keep him myself."

He reached out, snagged a handful of hair and tugged her close. "Perce is right about one thing."

Merindah gulped as Jason ran his lips down the side of her face. "W-what's that?"

"Great tits, babe."

## Chapter Nine

Merindah threw herself into the kiss, hormones on a wild rush through her body as Jason lapped at her lips. She opened her mouth, sucked his tongue in and started to play. Jason pulled her in front of him, her breasts crushed against his chest. Heat drove the blood through her veins. She may as well have been naked. Her panties felt nonexistent. Jason's hard cock slipped between her thighs and nudged at her pussy, creating a friction that made her hips tilt. She wanted him all over again, just as badly as she had last night.

*Remember, Merindah? You don't do relationships.*

Maybe she could forget that part and enjoy the moment for what it was. Red-hot sex with a guy who had the ability to push every one of her buttons.

Sliding her hands under the water, she went in search of the prize. Before she could wrap her hand around his cock, Jason jerked against her.

"What the fuck..."

Merindah looked up. "Perce got tired of being ignored," she chortled.

The parrot had vacated his bough in the tree and flown down to land on Jason's head. It was the funniest thing she'd ever seen. The more Jason tried to dislodge it, the more it hung on, its claws clutching at his hair.

"Get off, you bloody feathered fiend," he snapped.

"Shhh, shhh. Danger, mate, danger."

Another burst of laughter caught at Merindah. Poor Jason. The damn bird wasn't letting go. It just kept telling them to shush up.

"Shhh, shhh. Look out for danger."

Suddenly, Merindah heard something that didn't belong in the idyllic surroundings. She slammed one hand across Jason's mouth and another over the bird's

beak. It was as if the bird knew exactly what she wanted of him. It took Jason a bit longer.

She bent close to his ear. "Shhh, I think we may have some visitors, and I don't mean Chase."

Trying not to make any noise, she lifted the now-silent bird off his head and placed it on the edge of the bank. The parrot bobbed up and down, but didn't say a word. Staying low in the water, she gestured for Jason to follow her as she made her way to the opposite side of the creek. Crawling in under the low-hanging branches of a Weeping Mulga tree, she stared at the paddock on the other side.

Someone had backed a truck into the paddock. Three men were herding Chase's prize heifers into the truck. The noise she'd heard had been one of the men calling out to the others.

Damn, they were brazen. It was the middle of the day, for crying out loud. She backtracked to the opposite side of the creek, Jason at her heels. Finger to her lips, she signaled silence as she grabbed her shoes and clothing and, Perce on her shoulder, waited for Jason to don his jeans.

Impatience warred with a sudden surge of sexual hunger as he tugged the denim fabric up his wet legs and closed the snap on the front. The sigh that escaped her sounded disappointed even to her own ears. She had to stop this. Right now, there were more important things at stake.

"Come on, let's get back to the truck," she whispered.

Once at the vehicle, she deposited Percy in his cage on the backseat. "The cheek of the bastards. Stealing in broad daylight."

Jason dragged a fresh tee-shirt out of his pack and handed it to Merindah. Shit, she'd forgotten she was wearing nothing but panties. She slipped the shirt over her head, glad it came down to the top of her thighs.

"We have to call the police. Maybe they can catch them when they leave the property."

Merindah reacted without thinking, slapping the back of her hand against Jason's bare chest. "I *am* the police, damn it. And we can't call anyone. The radio is out and the satellite battery is flat, remember?"

Bloody hell, she'd never felt so helpless. All the training in the world and there wasn't a thing she could do. In frustration, she thumped a clenched fist on the top of the vehicle, wincing at the noise.

She frowned as Jason hauled the phone out of the truck. "Jason, it's useless." She dropped her voice to a whisper. The men may not be able to see their truck, but sound carried out here and she'd already blotted her copybook by beating up on the truck.

"Um... it may not be as useless as you think," he muttered.

"What are you talking about? The battery --"

"Is right here," he finished for her.

Merindah's mouth dropped open as Jason upended his backpack and grabbed the battery hidden in the bottom. Taking the cover off the phone, he inserted the power source.

"You had that all the time? It wasn't flat?"

Just then, the sound of tires screeching cut through the thick tension holding her rigid. Ducking out from under the cover of the overhanging branches, Merindah raced along the bank until she reached a point where the undergrowth wasn't so thick. From here, she had a good view across to the paddock.

Two police vehicles, trailed by a cloud of dust, screamed to a halt near the rustlers' truck. Four uniformed officers, plus a man dressed in the drab olive uniform of the Stock Investigation Squad, slid from the cars, weapons drawn. Merindah watched for a few moments to make certain the cattle thieves didn't put up a fight, then turned back to Jason.

She replayed the last few seconds of their conversation over in her mind, unable to take it in for a moment. "The troops have arrived to round up Chase's cattle duffers, so no harm done." She dragged in a shaky breath as she tried to control her rage. "Now, do you mind telling me just why you removed the battery from the phone?" She was

pleased at the even tone that came out when she considered the slow burn that had started deep inside her.

*Ah, shit, I'm in for it now.* Jason backed up a pace, leaving the phone on the ground at Merindah's feet. He didn't like the look on her face. "Look, Merindah, calm down." He held his hand up, cutting her off before she could speak again. "It's no big thing."

"No big thing! The most important rule about living in the outback is staying in touch and you dismantle the phone? Are you a total idiot? An imbecilic, moronic greenhorn who --"

*"And that's part of the reason I did it."* Jason took a deep breath and tried to modulate his tone. He wasn't about to get into a screaming match over this. "I was sick and tired of you trying to take me down. I figured you needed to learn a few lessons."

"I needed to learn a few lessons? What about you, with your cocky, chauvinistic comments? You deliberately tried to get a rise out of me."

She stood toe to toe with him, not quite as tall as he was, but tall enough that he didn't have to strain to look down at her. Her face was flushed. It should have clashed with her red hair, but all it did was make him want to wrap his arms around her and make this all right.

"You didn't let me finish." She jerked back when he tried to place his hand on her shoulder. "I wanted to spend time alone with you. When you crashed the car, I thought it was a perfect time to get to know you in person."

She didn't appear to hear him. She was too intent on venting her frustration on him.

"We've sat here all day and we could have been on the phone asking Chase what's holding him up?" She balled up her fist and punched him on the arm.

"Chase knew about it. I had a chat with him about you and asked him to delay the pick up for a couple of days before I dismantled the phone."



She hit him again. "What? Chase knew about this little subterfuge? You wait until I get hold of him. I suppose the two of you had a good laugh at the stupid copper who doesn't know when she's being taken for a ride. Give the Aussie chick a good time and show her how fantastic the great Yankee lover is."

"Don't you have a go at Chase over this. It was all my idea. I told you, I wanted to spend time with you."

"Here I was, worrying about you wandering off into the dark last night because I didn't want anything happening to you. It was all a big fat lie." She poked him hard on the chest with one long finger.

Jason took another step back, needing to put space between him and that rapier-like finger. "Chase couldn't pick us up last night anyway. And you can't tell me you didn't enjoy what happened between us, because I'd call you a liar. You were as much a part of that as I was. Fuck, woman, you were the one who introduced the handcuffs."

"You lied to me. Do you know how much I hate that? I deal with liars every day as a cop and now you're doing it, too." She poked him again. "Do I have some type of sign on my forehead? *Sucker*."

God damn it, she'd bore a hole right through his chest if she kept this up. Enough!

Jason knew if he didn't leave now, he'd say something he'd regret later. He turned and walked away, backtracking to grab the phone so he could call Chase to come get them. He'd hated lying to her last night and now it was coming back to haunt him. He should have come clean earlier. He should apologize now, but she'd made him so fucking angry, he couldn't help trying to get in the last shot.

"Yeah, well, I wasn't the only one lying, was I, *Merry*?"

## Chapter Ten

Merindah gasped. Oh, my gawd, did she hear what she thought she did?

*Merry?*

He knew? He fucking knew and he'd said nothing. Instead, he'd allowed her to make a fool of herself. Again!

No wonder he'd told her he knew more about her than she thought he did. She'd spilled her guts to him on-line. Told him her most intimate secrets. Like how a guy talking dirty while making love turned her on. He'd probably been laughing behind her back the whole time. *And* he'd had the temerity to tell Chase about her?

She'd kill him. She'd kill them both. A red haze blanketed her mind. Anger zapped through her bloodstream. Her skin prickled as if her body no longer fit its outer casing.

Jason turned his head and flicked a mocking grin over his shoulder, as if wanting to see how she'd taken his parting sally. It was the final straw. The match to her tinder. People had been laughing at her all her life and she was sick of it.

Throwing herself across the space separating them, Merindah slammed into Jason's back. She hit him hard, the breath crushed from her chest for a moment.

"All this time and you knew," she gasped out. She wrapped one arm around his neck and thumped at his shoulder with the other.

Her attack had taken him by surprise. The phone went flying. Jason hit the deck, dust rising up around him. Merindah hung on and went down with him.

"You could have told me." She hit him again, a spurt of satisfaction shafting through her when he grunted.

"Get off me, woman. Are you crazy?"

He heaved up and threw himself sideways. Merindah found herself flat on the ground, Jason astride her, his hands and weight pinning her down.

She bucked her lower body, trying to dislodge him.

"Hold still, Merindah. If you give me a minute, I'll try to explain."

"Don't bother, you lying shyster. Damn, you must have had a good laugh. Stupid Aussie country girl taken in by the famous *Jay Larry*, the scourge of the university campus and all female freshmen everywhere."

He pulled his head back and stared at her, his eyes narrowed. "And how long have *you* known Jay and Jason was the same person? I could ask you the same thing. Why didn't *you* say something?"

Merindah squirmed, fighting to break his grip. Her anger was just as hot, but now another emotion had taken hold. Pure, unadulterated lust. Shit, she didn't want sexual hunger to distract her. She had a full head of steam going here and someone -- Jason, aka Jay Larry -- was going to get it. Why waste a good bout of sizzling anger?

She kicked her legs out. It achieved nothing. Jason tightened his hold and slid forward, his hard erection nudging at the juncture of her thighs. Her clit started to throb. Nipples peaked and pressed against the fabric of the tee-shirt she'd borrowed from Jason. Without thinking, she lifted her hips, pushing closer to him.

Then she pulled back. No way! No fucking way. She hadn't finished venting yet. "How the hell did you know who I was?"

"For one thing, you made the mistake of using *Merry* for your radio call sign. Did you think I was so stupid I wouldn't notice?"

Merindah tried to regulate her racing pulse. She dragged in a deep breath, but all it did was make her breasts more prominent. Jason's eyes zeroed in on the telltale sign of her arousal. To distract him, she balled up her fist and tried to thump him on the chest. He had too tight a hold on her for it to do much damage.

"Why the hell didn't you say something straight away?"

"What? Spill my guts to the woman who couldn't even bother meeting me when I got here? My ego's not so big I can risk you kicking my ass to the curb. Damn you, didn't the last six months mean anything to you? Explain yourself, woman."

"I don't have to explain anything to you." She started to squirm again, bucking and pushing to get free. Ah, fuck this, she'd had enough. Heaving up, she managed to unbalance Jason. He tilted sideways. She continued the momentum, flipping them over until he was on his back and she sat astride him.

"And how dare you discuss this with Chase. How embarrassing. I'll never forgive you for that." Heat flooded her face and she knew her cheeks were bright red.

"Chase only knows --"

"I don't want to hear it. You had no right to share my most intimate secrets with anyone else."

"Bloody hell, woman, will you stop for a moment and listen?"

Before Merindah could respond, Jason's greater strength came into play. He rolled them over, dust flying up around them as she kicked out with her legs.

What had started as an argument now became a game -- one where the only satisfactory outcome would be sexual gratification for both of them. The grin on Jason's face, along with the thick erection straining against her, told her he'd noticed the change, too.

She arched her hips, her lips quirking when Jason groaned, settling his body deeper into the cradle of her thighs. He relaxed his guard and she took the opportunity to spin them over again, their bodies brushing and straining against each other.

God, she was perverted. She wanted to make love to him right here, under a rapidly darkening sky as the weather closed in. The zap of forked lightning and the rumble of thunder she heard in the distance just heightened the sexual tension pulling at her gut.

"Give up, Merindah. I'm stronger than you," Jason grunted.

"Like hell, cowboy."

“You guys having fun playing in the dirt like a couple of kids? Thought you were supposed to look after my stock?”

## Chapter Eleven

Shock exploded through Jason. His heartbeat, already elevated, went into overdrive. For a moment, he felt lightheaded as he stared up at the tall man standing over him.

"Ah, hi, Chase. How you doing? Nice day, isn't it?"

*Oh, crap, what an inane thing to say, you blithering idiot.* Here he was, just about to make love to the sexiest woman alive, and that's all he could think of? Another few minutes and Chase would have found them not only down and dirty, but stripped to the bone.

He glanced at Merindah. A rosy flush painted her face. Eyes downcast, she scrambled off him and pushed herself to her feet, tugging his borrowed tee-shirt down to cover her butt. A shaft of disappointment slashed through him at the loss of her weight. He could get used to having her plastered to his body like a second skin.

Following Merindah's actions, he pulled himself upright. His back felt stiff with its covering of dust and leaf debris. "Sorry, we didn't hear you drive up."

Chase burst out laughing. "I'm not surprised. It's pretty obvious you had other things on your mind."

"Ah, we wanted to call you because --"

Chase snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Rustlers... in the creek paddock... We were going to get you to call the police." Jason couldn't believe he was stumbling over his words like this. He felt like a kid caught in a misdemeanor.

Chase slapped him on the back. "I was already onto it, old mate. I'm sure you heard the police cars racing into the paddock next door." He laughed. "Or maybe you didn't. Too occupied with other things, I guess."

He grinned, but Jason ignored his silent invitation to indulge in the banter they usually shared. "How did you know about the cattle thieves? It's not that long since we spotted them in the paddock." He cut a glance at his watch and grimaced. Hell, he'd been messing around in the dirt for close on half an hour.

Merindah had disappeared into the back of the truck, reemerging moments later dressed in jeans and her own shirt. She'd even pulled her hair back into an untidy ponytail. He'd miss the sight of those long, long legs vanishing into a curtain of red hair.

"Jonesie, the cop who's standing in until the new sergeant takes over, was out at the homestead to warn me about the cattle rustlers. The police are pretty pro-active when it comes to cattle duffing out here."

Jason shook his head. Yet another idiomatic word he didn't know the meaning of. And he thought he was ready to become an Aussie? "Cattle duffing? Aussie for cattle rustling, I presume." Chase just grinned at him. "So how did you know this was going on right now?"

"I was about to come down and check when the vet rang to say he'd seen a truck in the creek paddock. With the police already on the scene, it was easy to call up reinforcements and hotfoot it down here to catch the bastards before they got away with all my prize heifers. Cops are rounding them up right now. I thought I'd see if you were ready to come home yet."

"Yeah, I guess." He stared at Merindah as she hauled the luggage out of the truck. Obviously the interlude was over... and he still hadn't had a chance to explain.

"What about you, Merindah?" Chase said as he reached the pile of luggage. "You all finished here?"

Merindah turned from her self-appointed task and glared first at Jason and then at Chase. "Nothing to finish." She shrugged. "Anyway, I need to get back to the homestead so I can have a shower. I feel extremely dirty."

"Yeah, rolling around on the ground will do that to a person, squirt." Chase grinned, reaching out to tug on her ponytail.

She pulled her head back. "Don't call me squirt. I'm not ten years old any longer." Darn Chase and his teasing. He'd been doing it since she was old enough to remember.

"I will never understand women, mate." Chase shook his head. "First she tells me she's in love with some man she met on the Internet. Now I find her cavorting in the dirt with my best friend. Maybe you can convince her all this on-line stuff is a load of bullshit. I mean, how can you fall in love with someone you've never even met?"

Merindah wanted to dig a hole and crawl right in. She couldn't believe Chase had told Jason something she'd shared in confidence. Had Jason suspected who she was right from the beginning? For God's sake, who'd believe this string of coincidences?

Chase had told him she was in love with a man she met on the Internet. She lived in Brisbane, a fact she shared in their chats. And she called herself Merry. If he didn't know beforehand, he must've figured it out by the time she stranded them.

"Ah, Chase," Jason said. "For your information, *I'm* the man Merindah was talking about."

"Shut up, Jason," she ground out. "There's no need for Chase to know any more."

"Oh, my gawd, I don't believe it. You two were -- oh, that is priceless." Chase slapped his hand on his denim-clad leg. "Jason Larry romancing a woman on the Internet. Never thought I'd see the day."

He punched Jason on the arm. "Hah, no wonder you asked me to delay pick-up. Sorry I couldn't give you the full two days you wanted. Although from what I saw when I arrived, you managed quite well within the time you had."

*Ah, crap, this was just too much.*

Merindah wanted to scream. She grabbed one of the sleeping bags from the back of the truck and threw it at Chase. "Shut the fuck up, Chase. I am sick to death of being the butt of everyone's jokes."



Tears flooded her eyes and she could barely see the utility approaching the creek at breakneck speed. It pulled up with a screech of brakes and a thick cloud of dust. Merindah grinned, keeping her eyes wide open so the tears wouldn't overflow.

*Maisie.* No one else drove like that. Maisie had taken the place of her mother after her mom's death, and right now, she needed the soft comforting arms of a loving parent.

Okay, so she was being a *girl*, but she was sick and tired of trying to be tough. Of trying to fit into a man's world. So there were other policewomen in the service, but somehow, she always ended up in some macho-controlled station where the men treated her like a bit of fluff. She'd molded herself to fit in, right down to the cesspit language she'd adopted. Perce had nothing on her. It had become so ingrained over the last few years, she wasn't certain she could control her mouth any longer.

She didn't want this any longer. She wanted to be sexy and feminine, a woman men desired. More important, one man. But she'd blown her chance there. Or rather, he had. The one thing she could never forgive him for was talking about her to Chase.

Or had he? Her reasoning powers were screwed up right now. She now knew Chase had repeated what she'd told him, but how much had Jason shared when he'd spoken to Chase on the sat phone? He must have given Chase a reason for delaying their rescue. Right now, she was too upset to make sense of it all.

The little, gray-haired woman stepped from the driver's side of the utility and pushed the bush hat up from her face. "Hey, sweetie, am I glad to see you. It's been ages."

For the moment, Merindah ignored the young woman who slid out of the opposite side. She rushed to the vehicle, the tears barely contained. When she was close enough, she enfolded Maisie in her arms. The older woman only came up to her shoulder, but that didn't make her hug any less fierce.

Without letting go, Maisie twisted so she could see her son. "Chase, Jonesie said to tell you, seeing the cattle are already loaded, he's having one of the boys drive the truck up to the home paddock and will off-load the stock there. Okay?"

She turned to Merindah, holding her at arm's length. "You have no idea how good it is to see you. I've missed you, love."

Merindah's lower lip wobbled and she was unable to prevent the tears tracking down her cheeks. She hated being a wuss, but her emotions seemed to have gotten the better of her. "I'm glad to see you, too. I've wanted to come home for such a long time, but it just hasn't been possible."

"Hey, what's this? Tears?"

With a sniffle, Merindah used the back of her hand to wipe the moisture from her face. "It's nothing, Maisie. I'm just being a bloody idiot."

Maisie stood back and planted her hands on her hips, her ample bust pushed forward. It was almost enough to make Merindah smile. She'd seen her like this so many times, usually when Merindah and Chase had gotten up to mischief.

"Merindah Byrnes, you are not a woman given to tears. So who's been hurting you?"

"It's nothing. I just --" She couldn't help the glance she cast at the two men leaning against the truck. Chase had his back to her, but Jason was staring at her, his face shuttered as he talked to his friend. One guess who they were talking about.

Maisie followed her line of sight, a frown gathering the wrinkles on her forehead. "Chase O'Connor, have you been teasing Merindah again? How many times have I told you to cut it out? It was okay when she was a little girl, but she's a grown woman now and it's just not on." She waved a hand at Merindah. "Look how much you've upset her."

Both Chase and Jason started over to the utility. Merindah couldn't face either of them. Jason had probably just spent the last five minutes telling Chase all about their wild night with the handcuffs. For the first time since she'd instigated it, she felt cheap.

And damn it, her eyes had started leaking again. She had turned into a watering pot. "Maisie, it's all right. Chase didn't... It was --"

"If it wasn't Chase, it must have been Jason," she snapped. She turned to the other passenger of the vehicle. "Cassie -- oh, Merindah, meet Jason's sister, Cassie -- Cassie, put her in the truck."

Then she marched up and despite her short stature, managed to clip both men around the ears. "Whatever it is you two have done, you'd better make it right, and quick. I've waited ages for Merindah to come home. I'm not going to have this holiday spoiled by your juvenile jokes."

"Are you wet yet, sweetcheeks? Wanna give me head?"

Merindah slapped a hand over her mouth as Perce spat out his latest sexual comment. While tears still rained down her cheeks, chuckles bubbled up and burst from her lips. The shock on Maisie's face was priceless. So too was the flush of chagrin on Jason's cheeks. Hah, served him right. Let him explain to Chase why he now had a potty-mouthed bird for a pet.

"Percy needs some petting."

"Tough, you feathered freak. You are so not getting it." Neither was she, at least not with Jason. Because this little mental aberration was over. It was time she went back to being a rough, tough cop, the sort who gave no quarter. But first of all, she had to put her heart back together again.

*Think that's possible, Merindah?*

## Chapter Twelve

Merindah stripped off her tee-shirt, tossing it across the room. "Shit, it's hot," she muttered. "No way am I going to get any sleep tonight."

After flipping the pillow to the cool side, she threw herself back on the bed. The ceiling fan did little more than stir the hot air around. She'd opened the French doors in the hope it would cool the room down, but no such luck.

The humidity must be approaching at least ninety percent. If only the storm would break. From where she lay, she could see the jagged bolts of lightning slash across the dark sky, followed by threatening bellows of thunder. The wind whipped through the crowns of the eucalypt gums and Mulga trees, creating a constant rustling that sounded like the whisper of a thousand voices. But still no sign of rain.

"Lordy, if it doesn't come soon, I'll get no rest at all." She was bone-weary, as if she hadn't slept for ages.

*Ah, but you didn't get much sleep last night, did you, Merindah?*

She'd managed to avoid Jason once they were back at the homestead. Maisie had given her one of the side rooms that opened out onto the verandah at the back of the house. Jason and Chase had been caught up with the police and getting the stock resettled, not returning to the house until late in the evening.

After spending time getting to know Cassie and finding out how Maisie had conspired with Jason to get Cassie and Chase together, she'd opted for a light supper on a tray in her room and an early night. She knew it was simply a way of avoiding Jason, but she really was tired. If only she could sleep. Her body was exhausted, but her mind wouldn't shut down.

Images of Jason cuffed to the front of the truck jumped into her head. Following on from that was an erotic mental movie of how they'd entertained themselves for a

good portion of the night. Her breasts immediately tingled and her breathing accelerated. Merindah moaned, one hand toying with a hard nipple. The other slid down her body and cupped her pussy, trying to ease the ache.

"Hard and fast, sweetcheeks. That's what you need."

Merindah groaned. "Shut up, Perce," she ground out. How the hell did she end up with Perce parked outside her room? Last thing she remembered was Chase saying he wasn't accepting the bird as a wedding present. That as punishment for trying to get one up on his mate, Jason got to keep the potty-mouthed fiend. Now it was going to sit all night outside her door and tell her what she needed?

She groaned again. "Trust the freakin' bird to be right." Hard and fast was what she wanted, but only with Jason. She moved her hips, rubbing her fingers over her clit through the satin of her panties. Her body felt as hot as the air around her, as if she were about to combust.

Her hips jerked. The breath caught in her throat. Lightning flashed, illuminating the room for a moment. Thunder rumbled, the sound upping the tension in her body. Needing to find relief, she slid her hand under the fabric and touched her pussy, not surprised to feel the creamy dampness on her fingers.

"I can do that for you."

"What the fu --" She pulled her hand away and struggled to sit up, grabbing the sheet and pulling it up to cover her breasts. "What the hell are you doing sneaking around in the middle of the night?"

Another shaft of lightning slashed through the darkened sky, closer than the one before. The glow outlined Jason as he leaned against the open doorway. Merindah sucked in her breath. He was naked except for a pair of boxers riding low on his hips. Shit, how the hell was she supposed to keep it together when he turned up like this?

"What are you doing here?" *Damn, did she have to sound so breathy?*

"I'm right next door."

"I didn't mean that. What are you doing in my room?"

"I came to see what Perce was going on about and heard you talking to yourself."

"I wasn't talking to myself. I was telling that darn parrot to shut up." *Just what had she said?* She had to break this habit of talking to herself. It could lead to too many embarrassing moments.

Jason levered himself away from the doorframe and sauntered in to perch on the end of the bed. Merindah shivered, goosebumps bursting to life on her exposed skin.

The intimate atmosphere began to impinge on Merindah's consciousness. Jason was so close she could reach out and drag her fingertips down his bare arm. If she wanted to... and she did! God help her, she had it bad. She had to press her lips together to stop herself begging him to climb into bed with her and make her scream in orgasmic pleasure again.

It was time she put a stop to this, before she gave in to temptation.

"Sweetcheeks, I need some head."

"That bloody bird is driving me crazy," she spat out as hormones went on a rapid march throughout her body.

"Me, too," Jason responded. "Every time he calls you sweetcheeks, I think of handcuffs and hot erotic sex on a sleeping bag in the outback bush. The most fantastic night of my life." He turned toward her. "Look, Merindah, we need to talk about what happened. We --"

"I have no desire to discuss it." She shrugged. "So it was a night of hot sex. So what? It's not going to happen again."

She slithered out of bed and grabbed her tee-shirt, dragging it on over her head before the next bolt of lightning. She couldn't stand much more of this.

Just then, she heard a slight shuffle at the French doors and Cassie popped her head in.

"If you two don't want to be on the receiving end of Maisie's matchmaking, you better not let her catch you sitting there in a darkened bedroom."

"Not going to happen," Merindah retorted. "She told me that after you and Chase, she is never going to interfere in anyone else's life again. Too much soul-searching involved, according to her."

Cassie laughed. "I still wouldn't trust her. You never know what Maisie will get up to." She paused for a moment and stared over her shoulder at the night sky. "Hey, come on outside. It's starting to rain."

That was the best news Merindah had heard for a long while. Dashing out the French doors, she crossed the verandah and stepped out into the night. Arms wide, she spun around, grinning as the storm gathered force and the light drizzle turned into a summer downpour. It was only the proximity of the lightning that drove her back under cover of the verandah.

"Chase will be happy," Cassie said. "He's been pretty worried about the dam levels. The problem is, we need a steady downpour over several days for it to do any good."

"Maybe now it will cool down enough to let me sleep." Merindah pushed the damp hair out of her eyes. If she was honest, she knew it wasn't just the heat keeping her from getting any rest. Thoughts of Jason continued to plague her. "And on that note, folks, I need to dry off and get to bed. Maisie will no doubt have us up at some ungodly hour to eat the big cooked breakfast she's famous for."

"Everybody should start the day with a hot meal inside their belly," Cassie said.

Her perfect imitation of Maisie's no-nonsense tone made Merindah laugh. She really liked the girl Chase had chosen to fall in love with, not that there was much choosing done by the sounds of it. One thing for certain, Cassie would keep Chase on his toes.

"Hey, I just thought of something." Merindah stared at Cassie, the frown on her face at odds with the twitching of her mouth. "Just what were you doing running around in the middle of the night?"

"I've just been down to the stables. Chase is worried about the foal that was born earlier today. It's not doing so well. He's decided to sleep down there tonight." She yawned. "I'm off to bed. Night all."

"I'd better go, too," Jason said. "Maisie has me detailed to start scrubbing down the bunkrooms tomorrow." He stepped closer and laid a hand on Merindah's shoulder. "Will you give me some time tomorrow so I can explain about Chase and what I did or didn't tell him? We need to discuss this."

*Ah, crap, why did he have to mention that again?* "Nothing to discuss. It was a one-night stand. Mark it up on the bedpost as another notch. *Jay Larry* rides again." She turned toward her bedroom.

"For crying out loud, Merindah, it's not like that. You are --"

"Not interested, Jason. Tell it to someone who cares."

Perce suddenly decided to take a hand in the conversation. "Ah, sweetcheeks, you're breaking my heart."

"Go to bed, Jason, and take that sexually frustrated parrot with you."

She walked inside, pulling the lace curtain over the open French doors. Stripping off her sopping tee-shirt and panties, she slipped into bed.

"Kiss her goodnight, you moron."

Trust Perce to have the last word.

She wanted to go to Jason and tell him she did care, but she couldn't. She had a feeling that if she got involved with Jason, when he walked away it would hurt too much for her to handle. She wasn't that strong. And he would walk away, because she always screwed up.

"You don't do relationships, Merindah," she chanted softly to herself.



## Chapter Thirteen

"Jason, if you're not going to do the job properly, get out the way and let me in there." Merindah stood at the door of the last room in the shearers' quarters, hands on hips and foot tapping. "For crying out loud, why can't men take direction?"

"Because they're men?" Cassie chimed in.

"If you asked me, instead of ordering me around, I might take some notice of you." Jason climbed down from the ladder and threw the cleaning rag into the bucket on the floor. "Damn it, woman, you just have to have the last word, don't you? What is it with you having to be in control all the time?"

Merindah glared at him before she bent over and grabbed the rag, wringing it out and tossing it aside. She hefted the bucket and held it out to Jason. "Take it outside, empty it and refill it with fresh water. This time, add some liquid sugar soap. The paint won't adhere properly if all the grease and cigarette smoke isn't removed and sugar soap is the only thing that will really get it clean."

With a muttered curse, Jason wrenched the bucket away. Dirty water sloshed from side to side, gaining momentum as he tilted it even further. Before Merindah could yell at him to be careful, water cascaded over the rim. She jumped, but not fast enough. Her sneakers received a dousing, both inside and out.

She picked one foot up and shook it. "Bloody hell, Jason, look what you've done."

He lifted one eyebrow and smirked at her. "Sorry, you should have gotten out of the way. We poor men are such dummies when it comes to doing things like this."

"You did that on purpose. Jason Lawrence, you are so juvenile at times. Why don't you just grow up?"

"Hah, look who's talking."

Grabbing the bucket from him, she dropped it back on the floor. "I should throw the whole lot over you and teach you a lesson."

"Yeah, you and whose army?" he sneered.

She was being a bitch, reacting out of a combination of embarrassment and anger. *And* a fully-fledged case of hormone harassment. She was as bad as Jason, acting like a kid who deserved a swift kick in the ass. She needed to do her own growing up.

"I'll take the bucket and empty it." Bending down, she grabbed the handle and turned toward the door.

"Oh no, you don't." Jason pried it from her hand, spilling more water in the process. "I'm not having the great Merindah Byrnes, the biggest know-all in history, say I'm not pulling my weight. She might get her itty-bitty red thong in a twist."

Heat washed up over Merindah's face at his mention of the thong they'd both destroyed out by the creek. She clenched her fists, tempted to smack him one. Damn it, just when she was trying to be nice. "Shut up, Jason, just... shut up."

"I'd suggest both of you be quiet. You're acting like a couple of kids."

Merindah spun toward the door to see Maisie standing there, arms akimbo, mouth pursed with disapproval. *Oh-ohh, I am so in trouble.*

She remembered that pose from her childhood. Maisie, with hands propped on hips and a steely-eyed stare, meant you were about to receive a royal set-down. She might be short, but what she lost in height, she made up for in determination. No one, but no one, dared defy her when she had her mad mother face on.

"I'm sorry, Maisie," she said, jumping in before Maisie could get started.

"So you should be... and it's not me you should be apologizing to." She turned her rapier gaze on Jason. "And you! Go empty that bucket and get fresh water."

With another glare toward Merindah, Jason picked up the bucket and stomped out the door.

"And play nice when you come back," Maisie called after him. "Merindah, you'd better learn that men don't like to be pushed around, not unless they're into domination, and I don't think Jason is. Too much testosterone there."

"Maisie, what do you know about domination?" Cassie chipped in with a gurgle of laughter.

"A lot more than you might think, young lady." Maisie grinned. "I'm old, not dead. Must I keep reminding you girls of that fact?" She picked up a cleaning cloth and tossed it across the room to Merindah. "You, young lady, had better learn that you'll attract more flies with honey than you will with vinegar. If you want to catch Jason, you'd better mend your ways."

At that moment, Jason returned with the fresh water. Placing the bucket down, he opened the bottle of liquid sugar soap and poured in a generous dollop. "Who said I wanted to be caught? If I did decide I wanted to hook up with a woman, it sure as hell wouldn't be that ball-busting cop over there. She'd suck the life out of me."

Pain shafted through Merindah. She suddenly felt as if she wanted to cry. In fact, she had to swallow the lump in the back of her throat and blink her eyes to clear the suspicious moisture collecting there. No way would she let Jason see he'd upset her so much. And she was damned if she was going to let him get away with his smart-ass comment, although she had to struggle to come up with something suitably cutting to say.

"If the other night was any indication, I wouldn't have you if you were the last man left alive in the outback. Hell, man, I want some fire in my relationship. Not a wussy American who can't tell a real orgasm from a make-believe one. I wouldn't be the first woman to pretend to have an orgasm so some idiot's fragile ego wouldn't get bent out of shape."

She laughed, well aware the sound carried a hint of the tears that threatened to overflow at any minute. From the corner of her eye, she saw Cassie edging out of the open door of the room. Ah, hell, she'd embarrassed them all. At this rate, Maisie would ask her to leave.

Jason grabbed a cleaning cloth and tossed it into the bucket, bending to grab it and wring most of the water from it. "Lady, you were begging for it. You couldn't get

your clothes off fast enough. You were so damn hot you would have cut me out of my clothes with that knife of yours just to get at my cock."

"I give up. I thought if I gave you rooms side by side and got you working together, you'd iron out your differences, but I can see this is not going to work." Maisie threw her arms into the air and promptly vacated the room.

Merindah was aware of Maisie departing, but she was on a roll, almost as if she couldn't stop. She should shut her mouth right now, but for some reason, she was compelled to take this to its final conclusion. And it didn't take much brainpower to work out what that was.

If she drove Jason away now, maybe she'd save herself some hurt down the track when he decided she wasn't the vamp she pretended to be that night. She'd never admitted it to herself before, but no time like the present. She was a coward. She was just too full of fear to commit herself to a man.

"Hah, I told you, but obviously you weren't listening. With what I have I can get what you have any time I like. Maybe it's time to start indulging myself."

Jason threw the wet cloth across the room, smacking Merindah on the shoulder. "I have just about had enough of this," he spat out.

"Yeah, and I've had enough of the two of you."

Merindah spun around. Chase stood at the door with a grim expression on his face.

"If your *friend* here would just close his mouth --"

"You both need to shut up. You're giving me a headache." He glared at Jason. "Cassie is loading the truck. Drive out to all the boundary riders' huts and restock the staples. Last time I was at the one on the western boundary, we were just about out of everything. You'd better take some dry firewood from the homestead. No way will you find any in this deluge."

Chase pushed his hat back on his head. "Sorry about sending you out in the rain, mate. Shouldn't take you longer than a couple of hours. When you get back, we'll get into the painting."

Jason flicked a glance full of disdain at Merindah. "I'd rather be out in that than standing here getting my nuts ground into paste by an idiot woman who's out to prove a point." He turned and marched from the room.

Merindah watched him go. She wanted to call him back and apologize. Worse, she wanted to kiss and make up. She missed his laughter, his sense of the ridiculous. More than that, she missed the friendship they'd developed over the Internet. It had only just struck her that, after what had gone on, she'd lost her cyber relationship, too.

This was what she'd tried to avoid by refusing to meet him when he came to Australia. All for nothing. She sighed. Maybe that was for the best.

*Yeah, it most definitely is, Merindah. You don't do relationships.*

## Chapter Fourteen

"How the heck can someone fall in love with a person they've never met except on the Internet?"

Merindah bunched the pillows up behind her and leaned back, legs pulled up beneath her. She couldn't believe how she'd let her mouth run away with her. Jason didn't deserve that, even if she *was* angry with him for spilling his guts to Chase. And she still wasn't certain about that.

"It happens. Heck, I fell in love with a photo."

She glanced across at Cassie curled up in the easy chair near the French doors. She'd been so busy berating herself, she'd forgotten Chase's fiancée was even there. "So you lusted after Chase before you even met him?"

Cassie chuckled. "I used to fantasize about throwing him down, ripping his clothes off and screwing his brains out. So yeah, I lusted after him, but it went much deeper than that. I was more than half in love with him before I got here, I just didn't know it."

"But you seemed to work it all out. You and Chase are perfect for each other."

"We had quite a few fights before we got to the point of admitting we loved each other. You and Jason could sort this out if you really want to."

Cassie leaned forward and balanced her elbows on her knees. "Why didn't you agree to meet him when he asked you? I had a good talk with him when he first arrived back in Australia. He told me one of the reasons he set me up with Chase was that he wanted to move here permanently because he'd met an Aussie girl on-line who just might be the one to make him settle down. He at least wanted to give it a shot."

Merindah snorted in a very unladylike manner. "Yeah right. He told me it was nothing but a bit of fun."

"Is that why you're so angry with him?"

"I was, but I got even for that." Merindah couldn't help but grin as she thought of their night of fiery passion. Then she wiped the grin from her face. "I just have a feeling he spilled everything to Chase. Guys talk, and Chase is just as bad. I feel like a fool. Seems I've been playing the idiot all my life and I'm sick to death of it."

Cassie shook her head. "Chase told me you'd fallen for some American in a chat room, but he had no idea it was Jason, because Jason had sworn me to secrecy. Chase was in the wrong. When he rang Jason to let him know you were driving him out here, he shouldn't have said anything. He broke a confidence, but that's all he's guilty of."

Merindah got up and started to pace across the room. Seven steps... turn... seven steps back. She was too wired to sit still. "I still think Jason told Chase about what happened out by the creek. I keep finding them huddled in corners talking."

"No, you did that," Cassie said.

"Huh? I did? When?"

"Down in the shearers' quarters when you started talking about your... what was it... red thong or something. Or was that Jason? Doesn't matter. I didn't need to be too bright to work out what'd happened. Besides, the tension between you and Jason was so thick, I could have collected it up and bagged it."

Cassie stood up and halted Merindah's march across the room. Grabbing one arm, she tugged her toward the French doors. "Come on, let's go for a ride. You need some fresh air. You're like a caged tiger. Go on out to the utility and I'll grab the keys."

Merindah shrugged. Might as well. She wasn't achieving anything here, going over and over the last couple of days in her mind.

By the time she'd reached the garage, Cassie was just rushing out the front door of the homestead, keys in one hand and the birdcage in the other.

"Where are we going and why are we taking that feathered delinquent with us?" she asked when Cassie joined her in the vehicle, parking the birdcage between them on the front seat.

Cassie gunned the engine and reversed out onto the drive, pointing the truck toward the hills in the distance. "I thought we'd drive around a bit and then follow the fence line back. We can check the dams for Chase and see how much the water level has risen." She flicked Merindah a cheeky grin. "And Perce could do with some fresh air, too."

"As long as he keeps his smart-ass comments to himself," Merindah muttered and turned to stare out the window at the changes twelve hours of rain could make to such a barren landscape.

\* \* \*

"Where are we?" Merindah shook herself out of her daze.

"I have to drop off some kerosene. Never know when one of the boundary riders will have to use it. With all the cattle duffing going on, I would imagine the guys will do regular checks on the fences." She jumped from the utility and rounded the back, calling to Merindah, "Come give me a hand with this drum, will you?"

For a moment, Merindah felt a quiver of apprehension. Hadn't Chase sent Jason up to stock the huts? She just prayed he wasn't at this one. She was nowhere near ready to face him yet.

Taking one end of the drum, she helped Cassie carry it over and deposit it on the verandah of the timber hut. Cassie opened the door and stepped inside, Merindah following.

It wasn't a large room, but it contained everything a man might need to survive out here in the outback. With no electricity, the wood-fired stove tucked into one corner beside a bank of cupboards was the only means of cooking. An iron-framed bed took up most of the space. A wooden dining table and two chairs, fashioned from the local timber, took up the rest. The only thing out of place was the kerosene refrigerator humming away on the opposite side of the room.

"Hey, who turned on the refrigerator?" Merindah felt as if her heart had dropped into the bottom of her stomach. *Please, God, don't let this be the one Jason was visiting.*



"What are you two doing out here?"

Merindah groaned.

"Hey, Jason, you forgot to take the kerosene drum with you." Cassie grasped Jason by the hand and tugged him over to where Merindah stood.

Jason tried to shake her off. "Cassie, what the hell --"

"Listen up, big brother." She dug into her pocket with her free hand. "You've been a grump since you got back yesterday. I'm sick of it." She dragged a pair of handcuffs out of her pocket and snapped them around Jason's wrist. Then she grabbed Merindah's hand and secured her to Jason. "And you, Merindah. That tongue of yours is sharp enough to slice through a slab of beef."

Merindah's mouth fell open in shock. She snapped it closed and reached with her free hand for the chain she always wore around her neck, only to find her throat bare.

Cassie grinned. "If you're looking for the key, forget it. I lifted it this morning while you were changing. And when you were busy fighting with Jason, I swiped your handcuffs."

"Take these darn things off," Jason demanded. "The joke's over. I have work to do."

"Nope, for the moment you're stuck with each other." Darting over to the dining table, Cassie grabbed keys lying there. "I'll take these as well. You can stay here until I decide to come get you. It will give you time to sort out your differences. I am not going to have you ruin my wedding because you can't get on."

"Cassie, you can't do this to me," Merindah wailed as Cassie disappeared out the door.

Merindah glanced at Jason, expecting to see anger on his face. Instead, a slight smile tilted his lips.

"I didn't think Cassie had it in her. There's only one thing missing and it would be just like our little romp by the creek."

Before Merindah could say a word, Cassie appeared again, holding Perce's cage aloft. "He appears to have started all this, so he should be in on the finish." She deposited the cage on the floor and retreated.

"Let's get down and dirty, sweetcheeks."

Merindah didn't know whether to laugh or cry. How the hell was she going to handle another night with Jason and a parrot that liked to give advice on sex?

## Chapter Fifteen

"Well, it's..." Jason lifted his wrist to stare at his watch, dragging Merindah's hand up with his, "...almost five-thirty. Cassie won't come back until tomorrow. How do you propose we spend the night?"

Merindah glared at him, anger flashing in her eyes. Better the anger than complete indifference. At least it gave him something to work with, because whether she liked it or not, there were strong vibes between them and he wasn't going to allow her to walk away until they'd explored them.

"I don't care what *you* do. *I'm* going to the bathroom."

"This should be interesting. I'm coming, too."

"Jason Lawrence, I can go to the bathroom on my own. I won't have you following me around like a puppy on a string."

"Yes, you will." He lifted his hand, pulling on the handcuffs.

"Ahh, crap. I can't believe this."

He dared to lean forward and drop a light kiss on the tip of her nose. "Poetic justice. Payback for the other night."

She spun toward him, trapping their hands between their bodies. "Did you set this up?"

"I had nothing to do with it. I think Cassie is genuinely worried we'll be on bad terms for her wedding." He grasped her hand, pulling her toward the door. "Let's get you to the bathroom, then we can talk."

"I have nothing to say to you," she muttered.

He guided her out the back of the hut where he'd parked the truck. The useless truck, now that Cassie had his keys. Not really useless. It was an older model so he could easily hot-wire it, but he wasn't going to. He wanted this time to set things

straight with Merindah. She needed to know he wasn't one for kissing and telling. He hadn't shot his mouth off to Chase, but the sexual tension shimmering between them had been a clear indicator that something was going on.

She annoyed the crap out of him at times with her sassy mouth, but he realized it was also a turn-on. He liked a woman who gave as good as she got and Merindah certainly did that. She made him feel alive.

With no power or sewage out here at the hut, the toilet was a simple chemical affair housed in a timber building. Jason opened the door and waved Merindah in. "You going to be able to handle things with one hand?"

Merindah snorted. "You don't think I'd ask you for help, do you?" She stepped inside and tried to close the door. It was impossible. With her arm extended, she couldn't reach the toilet. "Um, Jason?"

"Yeah? Got a problem?"

She grimaced at the laughter in his voice. Damn him, he was enjoying this. "Okay, I give up." She let out a big sigh of resignation. "Stand in the doorway, but keep your face turned away. And I want you to sing."

"Sing? Are you crazy? My singing is enough to curdle the milk of every cow within striking distance. Why the hell do you want me to sing?"

Merindah didn't quite know how to put it. He might have seen her naked. He might have fucked her silly every which way there is. But some things a girl just needed privacy for.

"Aha, now I understand," Jason suddenly said. "You're embarrassed. Hell, it's a natural function, woman. No way am I going to sing. Now that *would* be embarrassing."

"Please, Jason. I really need to go."

He sighed. "How about I talk instead?"

"That'll do." Merindah wriggled around until she could get her shorts down. "So start," she ordered.

"Now I have you as a captive audience, you're going to listen to me. First, I did not tell Chase about us. Hell, you were the one responsible for announcing it to everyone this morning."

"I know," she murmured. "That was my fault."

"Huh? Did I hear you right? You're admitting to something?" He chuckled. "And don't get your knickers in a twist. I can feel that riveting stare of yours from here. It's boring holes in my back. I love it when you're feisty, but I wanna survive this talk, okay?"

Merindah stood and righted her clothing. She couldn't help but grin. Maybe Cassie had the right idea after all. "You don't mind it that I've got a mouth like a sewer and I swagger about like a man? Or that I'm not very feminine?"

"I hope you're finished, woman, because I'm turning around." He did so, grabbing Merindah with his free hand and tossing her over his shoulder. That meant that the other hand was pulled up around his neck, but it didn't seem to faze him.

He marched inside and dropped her onto the bed, following her down and using his weight to pin her there. "Are you crazy? You are the sexiest, most feminine woman I've come across in a long while."

Merindah felt as if her insides had melted. Tension gripped her lower belly, sliding down until it centered between her thighs. A delicious shiver rippled through her. "You mean it?"

"You doubt me? For crying out loud, I can't be around you without getting a hard-on, even when I'm angry with you." He dragged her hand down his body until she could cup his hard erection. "You feel that? What's that tell you?"

"Um, you want me?" Merindah curled her hand around the thick length of his cock, exerting pressure until he closed his eyes and groaned.

"Babe, that is an understatement." His hips jerked and he ground himself against her hand. "This is bizarre. I feel like I'm ready to jerk off, with my hand down there, too."

"Can you twist your hand? Because I have the perfect place you can put it."

Jason grinned and moved his hand. Suddenly, she felt the heat of his palm against her pussy. For a few moments, he just held it there. Then he ran the tip of his fingers over the crotch of her shorts in a lazy pattern.

Heat slammed into Merindah, igniting nerve endings throughout her body. Her clit started to throb. Moisture gathered, making it easy for the passage of Jason's fingers when he slipped his hand under the edge of her shorts and panties and parted her swollen labia. His movement pulled her hand away from his hard cock, but Merindah wasn't about to complain.

"God, Jason, I want you to fuck me, right now."

"No, I won't fuck you, but I will make love to you."

He inserted two fingers and thrust deep. Her hips lifted off the bed, seeking to hold him when he withdrew a fraction.

"You know it *is* love, don't you, Merindah? I'm not looking for a few quick fucks whenever you come up here to the property. This is forever, sweetcheeks, even if it means I have to go live in the city."

Merindah grinned. "Nah, wouldn't ask that of you. I haven't told anyone yet, but I'm the new police sergeant for the area. I take up my promotion in three weeks."

She ran one finger around the sensual curve of his lips, shuddering when he opened his mouth and sucked the finger inside, swirling his tongue up and down the length. "There is one thing, though." She couldn't look at him. "I... ah, I don't do relationships very well. I have this unfortunate habit of trying to take over all the time. Men don't like that."

Chuckles rumbled up from deep in Jason's chest. "I've already gathered that." His mouth quirked. "I have no doubt we'll fight like cats and dogs, but just think how much fun we'll have making up. I'm willing to give it a shot. Are you?"

"Are you wet yet, sweetcheeks?"

Merindah lifted her head to see Perce sitting on the iron frame at the bottom of the bed. The little potty-mouth had picked the lock on his cage again. "You bet your

little button eyes I'm wet, Perce. Now shut up and go to sleep. I don't feel like making love with you sitting there watching me."

The bird closed its eyes and tucked its beak down into his chest feathers. Merindah started to laugh, Jason joining in.

"I swear that bird understands everything."

"Meltdown, babe," Perce said without opening his eyes.

"Right on, Perce," Jason retorted just moments before he lowered his head and captured Merindah's lips in a heated kiss.

Merindah submerged herself in the taste of him, thrusting her tongue into his mouth to catch the groan he uttered when she traced the shape of his rigid cock. Using only her sense of touch, she undid his belt and slid the zipper of his jeans down.

Anticipation accelerated her breathing. Her hand trembled as she slid it inside his boxers to cup his balls. Jason pressed his hips closer.

The door of the hut suddenly flew open and banged on the wall. Merindah jerked her hand from Jason's jeans. Jason rolled off the bed and tried to stand up, forgetting Merindah was a temporary fixture on his wrist. She found herself sliding off the bed and landing on her ass on the timbered floor.

"Christ, mate, I'm damn sorry this happened. I couldn't believe it when Cassie told me she'd left you up here handcuffed to Merindah. I rushed here as fa --"

"It's meltdown time."

"I can see that," Chase said. "Seems you don't need rescuing after all."

Cassie pushed her way into the hut. "You two settled your differences yet?"

Merindah had never been so embarrassed in her life. Using the bed for leverage, she managed to scramble up off the floor. Jason clasped her hand and dragged her close to his side.

"Chase, your timing stinks, *mate*." Jason tried to do up his jeans one-handed, but gave up in defeat.

"You need some help there, big brother?" Cassie smirked. "I take it you and Merindah have decided to kiss and make up." She looked pointedly at Jason's hand where he held the front of his pants together.

"I should smack your butt, Cassie, for doing this," Jason said. "Instead, I'll just say thank you."

"Does this mean Merindah is staying?"

Merindah grinned. "If you can stand the two of us alternatively fighting and making up. I have a feeling he's as stubborn as I am."

Chase started to chuckle. Within minutes, it had developed into a deep belly laugh. "I don't believe it. Jay Larry, the biggest womanizer around in his heyday and he's about to get leg-shackled."

"You can laugh, mate, but at least I found my own girl. I didn't need someone to match-make for me."

Merindah heard a shuffling at the doorway moments before Maisie stepped into view. Lord, the whole family was here. She didn't know whether to laugh or hide her head in embarrassment.

"Wanna bet?" Maisie said to Jason. "You've just been deposed, my lad. I am the king of match-makers." She shrugged. "Okay, maybe a queen."

"Are you telling me *you* set this up?" Merindah asked. "I thought Cassie --"

Maisie advanced on Jason, and, as casual as you please, zipped up his jeans. "I'm sure you heard how Jason was responsible for getting Chase and Cassie together. I was his man on the spot until he got here." She chuckled. "You should have seen their faces when they realized Jason was behind it all."

"But that doesn't explain how you managed all this." Merindah wanted to laugh at the stunned expression on Jason's face.

"You devious old woman," he said with a grin. "You've had Cassie doing all your dirty work for you. I've been out-maneuvered by an expert."

"The only thing I didn't plan for was you and Merindah having an Internet relationship. That could've thrown a real spanner in the works."



Merindah was laughing so hard, she had to clutch at Jason to keep her balance. When she'd finally caught her breath, she grinned. "Beaten by a little old lady. I love it." Then she reached up and whispered in his ear.

Jason smiled. "I like the way you think." Turning to the others, he held out his hand. "Cassie, I'll have the keys to the truck and the handcuffs please." He waited until she'd handed them over. "Chase, I think your mom and Cassie need to go back to the homestead and get some rest. Conniving is hard work."

He bent down and dropped a kiss on Maisie's cheek. "Old woman, you just may have done me the greatest favor of my life. Now go home."

"Hah, you don't need to tell me when I'm not wanted. You two want to get on with the kissie kissie stuff."

Merindah gave Maisie a quick hug. "We're about to take Perce's advice and create some outback meltdown of our own." She grinned at Chase. "Oh, and by the way, we'll have to buy you and Cassie a new wedding present. We've decided Perce is worth keeping. Any bird that knows that much about sex deserves a good home."

"Are you wet yet, sweetcheeks?"

## Alexis Fleming

Alexis Fleming's first book was a bedtime story for her children called *Sammy the Snail*, written and illustrated totally in crayon. She hooked her children in and created a new career for herself, a career that gives her immense satisfaction and a lot of fun.

She now writes her own bedtime stories, but be warned, these are strictly adults only!

A voracious reader, Alexis' first love has always been romance, whether on this world or the next. Now she turns her hand to erotic romance, giving her readers a taste of the steamy side of love, along with a dash of comedy.

When she isn't tied to her computer creating sizzling stories, Alexis, along with her husband and a demon cat called Chloe, runs a motel situated on the edge of a National Marine Park in Jervis Bay, New South Wales, Australia. You can visit with Alexis at [www.alexisfleming.net](http://www.alexisfleming.net).