



# PRICELESS PRINCESS

Book 2 Princess-In-Love Series

By

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## Chapter One

"I've come about the job." Her words tumbled out as the homestead door was at last opened in response to her pounding fists.

"You are pretty quick off the mark."

Jade's jaw dropped as she stared at the tall man who had spoken. Gorgeous. Absolutely gob-smacking, pee-me-pants *gawgeous*, she decided.

"You'd better come in." He held the door open and she obediently walked past him into the hallway. Stepping ahead of her, he led the way into a side room and indicated that she should sit in the up-right chair facing a large mahogany desk.

He leaned his hips against the desk and folded his arms across his chest as he studied her.

She waited, pulling at her shirt and crossing, then uncrossing, her legs in her comfortable but old jeans. Her nerves stretched like taut piano strings.

"I'm Blake Jordan, the owner of Stony Creek Station," he said at last. "And you are ...?" His voice was deep with a rich American drawl as smooth and slick and slurpy as Texas oil. Phew! Jade resisted the urge to fan at the heat rising in her face.

"My name is Jade Oliver. You advertised for an accountant to keep your books in order and I want that job."

"You want?" He raised one quizzical eyebrow.

She flushed even more but refused to back down. That must have sounded rude but she *had* to get this job.

"What I mean is I would very much like this position, Mr. Jordan. I am well qualified and ... and this used to be my home. I know it like the back of my hand."

Jade returned his dark, intent gaze. Wow, was he a looker! This guy was supposed to be a rancher from Texas, but he looked as if he had stepped from the pages of a top fashion magazine. Elegant didn't begin to describe him as she studied his long, lean body in a tailored-made charcoal colored suit with a lime green shirt and dark grey tie. Didn't he know that this was a cattle station and you dress down? As in an old shirt, jeans, and comfortable boots, for heaven's sake? Just like she was wearing, for instance?

His jaw flexed with annoyance. "I don't need an accountant."

Hmm, not at all friendly. She didn't blame him. She would be cranky, too, if some unknown person barged in without as much as an appointment and went straight for the jugular.

"That's what you advertised. It was in the local paper this morning."

"I advertised for a book keeper."

"Well, there then. You've got more than you bargained for," Jade said with what she hoped was her most encouraging smile. "Plus, I know how to run the station and I can cook and I've been on umpteen musters and ...."

"And?"

"There's no horse that I can't ride," she finished lamely. And I'm messing this up, as usual. Too much mouth and not clever enough to twist things around in my favor. Jeez! She lowered her eyes aware that she was making a fool of herself.

"Unfortunately, I'm only prepared to pay a book keeper's salary."

Jade's head shot up. "That's fine, Mr. Jordan," she said quickly, her heart

racing.

Blake gave her another assessing stare that curled from the tip of her ears to the ends of her toes. He loosened his tie and undid the top button of his shirt.

"And look at what you'll get," Jade continued. He was interested. "A multi-skilled staff member."

He shrugged off his classy suit jacket. More, more, she fantasized, her hands clutching her file.

"Can I see your resume?"

"Oh yes, of course." Jade pushed the file into his outstretched hand. He walked to the other side of the desk and, sitting down, proceeded to study her application. Jade continued to study him. Thirty-something, dark, thick hair--yum--yum. An angular, tanned face with great bone structure.

"So it was your father who actually owned this property?"

And wonderful dark chocolate eyes with magnificent, super-duper long eyelashes. Double yum--yum.

"Err--yes."

"But it's your mother's signature on all of this paper work."

"My step-mother." Jade swiftly corrected him. "My father died four months ago," she added, silently cursing the familiar tightening of her throat at the thought of her father's death. Don't go there, cry baby.

"I'm sorry to hear that." His voice softened and Jade managed a nod of acknowledgement. Please, *please* don't be sympathetic. It's bad enough coming here, seeing my dad's armchair by the fireplace, the same worn carpet, even the old reading lamp still resting on that cruddy wooden table next to his chair. It's all the same--the same as when I was here a year ago. Jade looked at the door, half expecting her father to walk in.

Blake continued to read her resume. It won't take you long, she almost blurted out. I haven't done much with my life--yet.

"How long did you work for this company after leaving the university?" He jabbed a long finger at a point on her resume.

Here we go--picky, picky. Jade summonsed her most positive demeanor as she faced Blake's speculative eyes. "After leaving the uni with a first class honors degree, I worked in Adelaide for a couple of months with Thistle and Partners, a major international accountancy firm. My dad was taken ill and had to go in to the hospital and a lot of my time was taken up with his care. Mr. Thistle became a trifle prickly about the amount of time I was spending away from work and he let me go." Jade couldn't resist a smirk at her own witticism but Blake's expression remained polite but bland. Gaw'd! No sense of humor.

"Anyhow, after dad died I tried to get another position in the city," she continued, deciding this bloke might look like a Greek God dressed by Armani but underneath that fancy stuff, he was a dried up ol' sour puss. "Then I heard about this job so, here I am."

"I thought you said you had seen an advertisement in the paper this morning."

Help! Suspicious mind. Crikey, gimme a break, it's only a bloody book keeping job. "A friend of mine in Coober Pedy got wind of it and gave me a ring. Then I doubly checked in the paper."

"You've come a long way for a job you might not get."

Jade folded her arms across her chest, mirroring his previous action and stuck her feet out in front of her admiring the tips of her faithful R.M. Williams riding boots. She could feel her temper simmering. "Mr. Jordan. Why wouldn't you give me

this job, I ask you? Who else with my qualifications would want to come to one of the most isolated places on earth to work? Where it's as hot as Hades in the summer and can freeze your balls off in the winter--that's if one has any balls ...." Jade skidded to a screaming halt as she tried to control her runaway mouth.

By not as much as a raised eyebrow or a twitch of that sensual mouth did Blake show any reaction to this outburst. Instead he said in his deep drawl, "If it's so bad here, why do you want the job?"

"Because I need the money and ...and because ... because I feel an affinity to this place. I was born here." Don't you dare tear up, you stupid woman.

There was a palpable silence as Jade returned his stare, defiance shining from her glittering eyes.

"Excuse me, Ms. Oliver. I should have arranged some refreshments after your long trip. I'll only be a few moments."

Suddenly Jade was alone as Blake disappeared to somewhere in the house. The kitchen, she guessed. "You've blown it now, you twit," she chastised herself. "A big mistake trying to bully that robot into hiring me. Hope he brings me a double whisky to make up for all my trouble."

She stood up and walked to the window, staring out at the grotty, unkempt garden. She could see that so much of her beloved home had deteriorated since her father had become ill. The place had a despairing feel of neglect about it and even though there had been good rains at last, it didn't seem to have made much difference to the appearance of the garden and surrounds. For a few moments she could picture the garden as it used to be, a lush, green oasis carefully nurtured by her father for the pleasure of his family. As a young child she would dance along those paths and across the lawns, laughing with delight at the antics of her pet dog Charlie. Of course, that was when her mother had been alive and long before the problems with Ray. So many good memories. How had everything managed to go so very wrong?

Jade glanced at her watch. Fifteen minutes had passed. Where was he? How long did it take to boil a kettle, for God's sake? She felt edgy and disappointed in her behavior. This man was nobody's fool and she had raved on like a pork chop. No wonder he wanted to escape from her. There were questions she would have liked to have asked him like why would a Texas rancher buy a run down cattle station in Australia? Was it just an investment or was he going to live here and work the property? How much had he paid her rotten, cheating step-mother Elizabeth, for the place? Blake Jordan. Hmm, I'll have to Google him, she decided.

She turned as the door opened and an elderly woman came in followed closely by Blake carrying a tray of refreshments.

"Princess? Princess, it really *is* you! Mr. Jordan told me a Ms. Oliver was here," the woman cried, holding out her plump arms. Jade flew across the room into the woman's welcoming embrace.

"Oh, Maggie. I had no idea you would still be here," Jade exclaimed, hugging her closely, her eyes shimmering with tears.

"Elizabeth let me go a few months back but Mr. Jordan very kindly gave me my old job back. I've only been here since this morning which is why the place is looking a bit untidy." Maggie's chin shook with emotion as she turned towards Blake.

"I used to keep this place like a palace when Mr. Oliver and the Princess lived here," she said, pride coloring her voice as she clung to Jade's hand.

"I'm sure you did, Maggie," he replied. Jade stared as he gave Maggie a warm smile which lit up his austere features. Whoa! Down, girl.

"Coffee, Ms. Oliver?" he continued.

"Oh, yes please."

"Perhaps the two of you would like to catch up when we finish this--err--interview?"

His sarcasm didn't go unnoticed by Jade. He was treating this as a joke? She squeezed Maggie's hand. "Sure. I'll see you shortly," Jade reassured the older woman.

"Make sure you do, Princess. I'll be in the kitchen."

Blake waited until the door had closed behind Maggie and then, when they were both seated, handed Jade a strong cup of coffee. He watched as if fascinated as Jade poured a good measure of milk and three teaspoons of sugar into her cup.

"Why the name Princess?" he asked, raising one gorgeous eyebrow.

Jade took a gulp of the coffee. Yep, she needed this. Wish it had been a tot of Johnnie Walker's best, though. "It's a nick-name that my dad used to call me. It caught on with the station staff."

"Well, do you mind if I call you Jade?"

"I prefer Your Highness."

"What?"

"Only joking, Mr. Jordan." Jade laughed and was rewarded with a slow, lazy grin. He's got a dimple there in his left cheek. Owwww, triple yum--yum!

"Yeah, okay." Blake looked down at her resume still lying on the desk before him. Taking a sip of coffee he said, "I have a proposition to put to you."

Yes--Yes! I'll be your wanton sex goddess. Tie me to your bed and do what you want to me. I'll even have your babies so you can continue your Texas dynasty and I won't grizzle when you don't talk to me as long as you keep ... *doing it*.

Jade tried to appear calm and serene as her vivid imagination ran riot. What was the matter with her? She was over loading with lust hormones just because she was sitting across from Mr. Absolutely Fabulous, who was probably a nasty piece of work under all that bronzed skin anyway. She tried to remember the details of her affair with Paul and came up with a complete zero. Zilch. She couldn't even remember what he looked like.

"Yes, Mr. Jordan," she replied politely as she replaced her cup in its saucer, pressed her thighs tightly together and held her hands demurely in her lap.

Blake leaned back in his chair and swung it around so he was looking out of the side windows, his face in profile. Perfect. Magnificently perfect!

"The settlement of the property was a month ago and I've been in Australia only a few days, which is why things are still pretty chaotic."

"Are you going to live here permanently, Mr. Jordan?" Jade interrupted. If he didn't hurry up and get to the point, and she *didn't* get the job, she would never make it to Coober Pedy by nightfall.

He swung to face her. "Yes, I am. As you know and can see, the place has been let go, which is unfortunate. I am sure that when you lived here it was a thriving ranch."

"Station."

"What?"

"Station--it's a ranch in Texas but in Australia we call it a station, Mr. Jordan."

He stared at her for a full half a minute and then said "Do you want to hear this proposition or not?"

Owww, wanton sex goddess proposal coming up. "Of course. Sorry."

"I have two brothers and between us we own six *ranches*, seven now including this one. My brothers will continue to operate the *ranches* in Texas and it's my job to bring this one up to scratch and make it a viable financial concern."

"It will be a big job. I hear that my step-mother sold off nearly all the cattle and sacked most of the staff."

"You heard right and I'm about to build it up again. I've already re-employed five of the stockmen and the previous manager."

"That's great! And I'm so glad you've asked Maggie to come back. She is wonderful. She was my dad's housekeeper for twenty years, you know ...."

Blake held up a hand, stopping Jade in mid-sentence. "Are you normally this talkative?"

"Sorry. I get a bit carried away sometimes," Jade admitted, having the grace to look embarrassed. "I'll keep quiet, I promise. Look, all zipped up." She motioned with two fingers across her lips.

"Hmm." Blake appeared to have lost track of what he was going to say and there was silence as his eyes, dark and unfathomable, rested on her mouth. She pursed her lips so she wouldn't be tempted to speak. This was harder than she thought.

He coughed and then took another swallow of coffee. "Right. As you would have seen from the advertisement in the paper, I need a book keeper with some *station* experience such as ordering, payrolls, taxation requirements and so on. The advertisement stipulated written applications only so I was a bit taken back when you turned up on my doorstep."

Jade opened her mouth to speak and closed it again at the warning in his eyes.

"Before you arrived I had just got in from Adelaide where, as well as finalizing arrangements to buy five thousand head of shorthorns, I found a rental place for my mother to stay."

"Your *mother*?"

Blake wagged a long finger at her causing Jade to clamp a hand over her mouth.

"Yes, I do have a mother, you know," he continued. "In fact, she's Australian, born in Adelaide actually, and she has a lot of friends there with which she's kept in contact."

He waited for this gem of information to sink in and then said, "In a few weeks time she will be coming here to stay, but I have explained to her that I want to get the homestead re-decorated, buy new furniture and some modern appliances--in fact, make it a lovely home. Again," he added as if reading her mind.

"You have the advantage of living here previously and you know the people and you seem to know the industry. So, my proposition is to offer you not only the book keeper's job but also as my assistant to help me bring Stony Creek back to its former glory. I'm prepared to pay you extra for this additional work. Now you can speak."

Play this smart, girl and don't blurt, her sensible voice warned. "Mr. Jordan, that sounds very acceptable. However, I would like to ask a few questions and add some requests." Yeah--that sounds business like.

He waited. *He* certainly didn't have a problem with a runaway mouth.

"Obviously, I will need to live in. Is there room for me?"

"It's a reasonably sized house, as you know. There's plenty of room."

"What I mean is I'm not sure about your wife and kids. Will they mind me living here?"

Blake gave a faint smile. "I'm divorced and I don't have any kids."

Oh, goodie. Better and better.

"If you're worried about being alone with me, you needn't be. Maggie will live in and will take over the annex at the side of the house and as I said, my mother will

be here in a few weeks."

"Oh, right. My salary will include all meals and lodging requirements?"

"Yep."

"I need two days off a week."

"That goes without saying."

"I would also like to go horse-riding each morning--early, before we start work."

Blake shrugged his acceptance.

"Finally, I need to visit Adelaide every other week-end on private business. Is that okay with you?"

"What you do in your time off is up to you. I guess you intend to fly from Cooper Pedy?"

"Coober Pedy, Mr. Jordan. It's *Coober* not Cooper."

Blake stood up and her eyes followed up his thighs and lean hips, over his lime green shirt covering his powerful chest and broad shoulders. Oh, be still, my beating heart. "But, I'm sure the locals will understand if you say Cooper by mistake," she added hastily as she met his irritated expression.

Placing his hands on the desk, he leaned towards her. "Frankly, I don't give a rat's ass whether it's Coober, Cooper, or Timbuktu but, Ms. Oliver, you have a very sassy mouth and I advise you to keep control of it when you're around me. Also, I should have mentioned that you are on three months trial and at the end of that time, we will review your progress." He stood straight and held out his hand.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you." Jade nodded as she placed her hand in his in a formal handshake. "I can start tomorrow, if you like. Even though it's a Sunday we may as well get the show on the road."

Blake frowned. "What about your luggage?"

"I have everything with me in my car. If you tell me which bedroom I'm in, I'll unpack and then help Maggie with the dinner."

She sensed that Blake was flummoxed and probably felt she was steam-rolling him. You ain't seen nothin' yet, my Texan tycoon, she thought. The Princess is home.



## Chapter Two

She was cute. No doubt about it--very cute.

Blake sat down in the shabby armchair and stretched his long legs towards the fire which Maggie had lit to protect against the cold evening. He had changed from his formal suit into blue jeans and a dark blue sweater. In his hand he nursed a much needed beer.

Ms. Jade Oliver was not only good to look at but she was mighty talkative. In fact, she'd got tongue enough for ten rows of teeth, he decided. She had already shown signs of being controlling and bossy but Holy Toledo, she was gorgeous! Heart-shaped face with huge sparkling brown eyes, a mobile mouth which, as well as talk, seemed to smile a lot. Dark, short hair, in a pixie-style cut. Skin the color of magnolia blossom. She wasn't very tall, the top of her head just about reaching his shoulder and she was slight with a small waist and breasts and the most curvaceous ass he had ever seen.

Blake took a long drink of beer, relishing the taste. Yeah, she was one hot little lady and he wasn't sure by any means that he had done the right thing by hiring her. Of course, he could rationalize that she was more than qualified as a book keeper by holding a degree in accountancy, and to score someone who knew how the station business worked was something of a coup. He was going to need all the help he could get to turn this place around. But, he suspected that she was going to be quite a handful and he didn't know if he was up to coping with her. His hand tightened around his glass as he thought of her round, neat butt disappearing down the passage as she danced her way to the kitchen yelling to Maggie at the top of her voice that she'd 'got the job.'

He pressed two fingers against his forehead where a nagging headache was taking hold. He was tired and irritable and he knew it wasn't to do with his new employee. It was the strain and grind of visiting the city. The crushing noises and suffocating fumes of big city life always made him feel like this and as he had attended a series of arranged meetings with stock brokers, bankers, and real estate people, he had felt a mild sense of panic beginning to build. Even his mother's gentle, and at times reproachful, manner had rattled him as they tried to sort out her rental accommodation for the next few weeks. It wasn't until he was airborne and on his way to Stony Creek that he started to breathe more freely. He had reached the conclusion that he hated cities and would be the first person to admit he was a loner. The place where he was really comfortable was in the desolation of the Texas plains and now, here in the wilderness of the Australian Outback.

His craving for this isolation had broken up his marriage to Rose and had driven her away. He had only himself to blame because of his neglect of her. No wonder she had been unfaithful. Perhaps he had never loved her and it had been a sex thing, but even that had bored him after a few weeks of marriage. It had been a long time since he'd felt a woman lying beneath him, soft and small and sweet-smelling, moaning as he pleased her, as he watched her brown eyes light up with passion as she came apart in his arms. Brown eyes? Blake sat up abruptly. Rose had been a model, long and lean with a cascade of blonde hair and china blue eyes that could charm a nest full of rattlesnakes. What the hell was he thinking? He hadn't considered

his sex life since Rose had left him a year ago and yet now his hormones were hopping around like jumping beans.

"Mr. Jordan, dinner is ready." Maggie's voice broke into his wayward thoughts. Get a grip, man. He slowly made his way to the kitchen to face the two new women in his life.

When he walked in, there was no sign of Jade. Maggie was serving a thick, chunky soup into two bowls and she put them on the huge table where places had been set at one end. "Normally I would serve your meals in the dining room, Mr. Jordan, but I didn't think you would mind eating in the kitchen just this once."

He all but ignored her comment, his thoughts elsewhere. "Where's Jade?" As he asked, the back door opened and Jade came in carrying a large empty pot.

"Wow, those blokes can sure eat," she laughed, not noticing Blake standing in the opposite door way. "It was good to see them again after all this time, particularly Lance."

Blake frowned. Lance Sandford was the station manager that he had managed to re-employ. A good looking, single guy. He'd forgotten for a moment that Jade would know most of the men.

It was then that Jade saw him and the smile on her face could have lit up the whole of Vegas, for sure. "Mr. Jordan, come and sit down. The men have just had their dinner in the Chow House," she said, referring to the eating and recreational room that her father had built many years ago so the staff could have their own area away from the main house. "I hope you don't mind but Maggie and I have opened a bottle of wine to celebrate this grand occasion. Will you have some?"

Still frowning, Blake took the glass of wine from Jade's outstretched hand. He had lost control and didn't know what was going on and this young squirt was the reason why. She'd only been here for two hours and had taken over. The ache in his head tightened several notches.

He sat at the table as Maggie placed the soup in front of him and Jade sat at his right. Finding his voice at last he said, "Maggie, I would like you to sit with us and have your dinner." He had better sort out who was boss here and quickly.

Maggie appeared flustered. "Oh, I never sit with the boss, Mr. Jordan. It wouldn't be proper. Besides, I'd be jumping up and down to the stove all the time."

"Sit down. I want to speak to you both." He waited while Maggie hurriedly removed a dish from the oven and then gingerly sat on the chair on the other side of him. Jade looked apprehensive, her eyes on his face.

"Now, let's set some simple ground rules. Firstly, we will have all of our meals together in the kitchen, including the stockmen. It's much nicer in here than the Chow House. Maggie, you're going to need extra help to prepare and serve two or three meals a day for up to a dozen people as we build up the number of staff. Jade, I want you to see about engaging two helpers for Maggie as soon as possible."

Without waiting for an answer from either of them, Blake continued. "And enough of this Mr. Jordan crap. My name is Blake and I expect you both to call me that. We are working as a team to put Stony Creek back on the map where it belongs. I'm the team leader but that doesn't mean you have to bow and scrape to me." He glanced at Maggie as he said this and then turned to Jade who was fidgeting with her soup spoon. "Nor does it mean that you have the authority to over-ride me. I am not a difficult man to get along with but if anyone takes advantage of me, they don't get a second chance. Now, Maggie, get yourself some grub and let's eat."

There was silence as the two women stared across the table at each other. Jade was the first to speak. "That was a very nice speech, Blake and on behalf of Maggie

and me, thanks."

He wasn't sure whether Jade was being sarcastic. She looked innocent enough with her big expressive eyes watching him. It was time to lighten up. He lifted his glass. "Here's to us," he said with a smile. "And here's to the good times ahead." The three clinked glasses in a toast.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night before she climbed into bed, Jade plugged her laptop into the wall, praying that the connection still worked from the times she had used it when she had been on holidays at the homestead. Yes! It worked. Relieved, she began to type.

From: [oliverj@cobped.com.au](mailto:oliverj@cobped.com.au)  
Sent: Friday 8<sup>th</sup> Aug 2006 10.00 PM  
To: Lara Lucas; Dr. Katie Jones  
Subject: I've arrived!

Hello, lovely Lara and Katie,

Well, I've got the job and start work tomorrow. Excitement! What do you think about that! Had a nerve-wracking interview with the new owner of SC but guess what--he's a divorced, drop-dead gorgeous Texan. I tell you, I just about swooned at his feet when I saw him.

But ... and there's always a but, isn't there--he talks real slow, walks real slow and is very grumpy. I don't think he likes women too much but the way he looks I wouldn't mind finding out! Before dinner he gave Maggie and I a lecture about being a team player and then proceeded to tell us that he's in charge and if we go against him, then we get the sack. Honestly!

Anyway, I'm in my old bedroom, which is great and I've finished unpacking my things but had to stop and tell you what's going on.

Katie, I've arranged to go to Adelaide every two weeks so hopefully we can meet up (any excuse to visit the Barossa and do some wine sampling). Have you settled okay in your new job? Fancy you scoring with that huge winery. You are so clever!

Lara, how is our lovely Princess enjoying married life with your hunky Jack? I am still coming down to earth after the wedding. It was unbelievable.

Wouldn't it be great if the three of us could meet in Adelaide soon? Perhaps we could stay at your town house, Lala? Where are you and Jack at the moment?

I miss you guys so much. I feel a bit scared and lonely here--new start, you know the sort of thing. Everyone thinks I'm so confident and only the two of you know that I'm a big bag of gas! Who would have thought after all these years together sweating it out at school and uni that we would now be scattered to the four winds?

I miss dad, too. That last month before he died was terrible and for the entire time dad thought he was getting better. My bloody wicked step-mother never even bothered to visit her own husband in hospital. She just took his pride and joy, Stony Creek, and sold it to a stranger.

As usual I've poured my heart out. I don't know what I would do without you. I had better get some sleep now before I face my first day on the job tomorrow and all that stuff.

Take care, my very best friends, and much love to you both. Lala, give Jack a huge and passionate tongue kiss from me!

Jade xx

*"Princesses together forever"*

Jade pressed the send button and the emails were on their way. She lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling her eyes tracing the well worn cornices. The faint mark of the damp patch was still there. How many times had she studied it in the past few years and would mention it to Tom, her dad, that it was something they would have to fix.

She turned her face into the pillow and squeezed her eyes shut. I was blind, Dad. I never saw these things coming. I was so busy with my own life and friends that I never saw that you were struggling financially and then with your marriage and finally, that rotten illness. I'm so sorry. She let her tears flow unchecked as she reflected what might have been if Tom had lived. But now there were no comforting arms to hold her and smooth her hair like Tom used to do. "It will be alright, Princess," he would say. "Mark my words, it will be alright."

Only it wasn't. Tom had planned to change his will in Jade's favor but had died suddenly just when he appeared to be getting well. His estate had gone automatically to his estranged wife Elizabeth who had greedily grabbed it and put it up for sale. Now this stranger was walking where her father had walked, sitting in *his* chair, sleeping in *his* bed. She resented Blake but realized how ridiculous and petty that was. Besides, she had another aim in mind.

She sat up and, fishing in her handbag, pulled out the sketch Tom had pressed into her hands minutes before he died. It was a crudely drawn map of the station property and near the east fence border Tom had made a large cross. "This is a mine rich in opal," he had whispered to his daughter as she knelt at his bedside in the austere hospital room. "If I don't make it, then take this map and hunt for the spot that I've marked and you'll find the best opal in the world. Dig by the clump of prickly pear trees next to a can of small stones that I left there to mark the spot. There is one slab of opal a few feet down. When you find it, hurry and stake your mine claim. I promise Ray and you will never have to worry about money again."

She fingered the map. There was no scale and she couldn't tell how far into the property it was but surely it couldn't be too hard to find. Tom had told her that he was the only one who knew of the opal deposit and she trusted him--he wouldn't lie to her. This was his gift to Ray and her. She had decided to start her search on horseback in the pretence of taking early morning rides. If needs be, she would take her SUV if it was too far for horseback. She would quietly keep hunting every day until she found it.

And she *would* find it, she swore under her breath. She had to. Ray's life depended on it.

## Chapter Three

"Son of a bitch. Son of a *bitch*!" Jade swore in a very unladylike fashion, her fingers wrestling with the girth strap as she tried to fasten the saddle around Molly's fat stomach.

"Such cussing, Jade Oliver." She leapt about a foot in the air as a deep voice spoke from directly behind her. Her heart plummeted as she swung around to face Blake. What was he doing here so early about to mess up her plans on her very first day? Then her mouth took off as she gaped at him, she couldn't help it.

"Jeez! A real live Texas cowboy. I can't believe it. You look as if you've stepped out of a western--the fastest gun in the west, you know?" She pretended to whirl a gun around in her hand and replace it in an imaginary holster.

"I take it that you're paying me a compliment?" Blake pushed his Texan hat further back on his head and her stomach somersaulted like a buck rabbit chasing a doe. The overhead light from the stable shone directly on him and boy, he was everything she had imagined a handsome cowboy to be.

"Going for a ride?" he asked politely.

Very observant--ten out of ten, she wanted to say. Instead she replied, "Yeah, only Molly keeps blowing her belly out and I can't get the girth done up." Jade turned to the culprit and had another go at tightening the strap. Strong, lean fingers covered hers and she quickly stepped back, coming up against a hard, male body. Confused and embarrassed she turned to find her nose pressed into Blake's warm jacket. It smelt of hay and horse--and him.

"If you move out of the way, I'll fix it for you," he said quietly and Jade managed to stand to one side. Rattled, yes, I'm definitely rattled. Blake easily fastened the girth and then ran his hands over Molly, feeling over her rump and down her legs. Lucky Molly.

"Well, I'll get going." Jade's tone was decisive. Enough drooling for now.

"I'll ride with you."

"There's no need. I will be back to help get breakfast."

"That suits me fine." Blake led the horse from the adjacent stall into the yard and threw a saddle over its back.

"It's best not to ride Prince. He can be really mean and neither of these horses has been ridden for weeks. That's why Molly's so fat. Prince is ...."

"Oliver, shut up." He didn't even raise his voice as he finished adjusting the bridle. Taking the reins, he swung easily into the saddle.

"Come on, wind bag. It's a great morning," he called as he guided the horse into the open area.

Muttering under her breath, Jade scrambled on to Molly and turned the unwilling horse to follow Prince. Outside the dawn was breaking, creating an eerie light as they made their way between the holding yards and along one of the tracks away from the homestead. Except for some prancing around, Prince was well behaved and Jade could see that Blake was a master horseman. He sat straight and easy in the saddle with the elegant grace of a true rider. As for Jade, she felt like a sack of potatoes and she was sure she looked like one. It was over a year since she'd ridden and it was awkward and uncomfortable.

She encouraged Molly to catch up with Prince. I'd better get this morning ride business sorted, she decided. "I didn't think you would be up this early," she began.

"I've been up an hour already. Lance and I have already seen to the livestock."

"Oh. You know you don't have to ride with me, Blake. I'm quite safe on my own."

He turned to look at her and as he did the first rays from the sun fell across him placing him in a golden beam of light. The Electric Horseman didn't do this glorious God justice. She absorbed the sight of him with wondrous eyes.

"Have you got your cell phone with you?"

"Phone? No. What do I want that for?"

"From now on I want you to carry it whenever you ride alone, in case of an accident."

Jade snorted with indignation. "That's ridiculous. Besides, my phone doesn't have a signal here."

"Then get it changed over at my expense. The reason that satellite tower has been erected at the homestead is to make sure we have the best communication set up we can get. You should be contactable at all times."

Jade closed her mouth against a ready response, realizing it would be wiser if she complied. After all, it would give her the freedom she required to search for her 'treasure'.

Blake was leading them in the opposite direction to where she wanted to go. Jade made no comment. She didn't want him to suspect anything. After all, she did have three months in which to locate her opal mine, as long as she could manage her finances for that long. After that she was pretty sure Blake would send her on her way. No matter how gorgeous he looked, she sensed that he was a tough, hard-headed businessman and that from the moment they had met yesterday he'd taken a dislike to her. Sure, she was qualified, sure she knew the business, sure she knew the people and even if he didn't like her, he was smart enough to realize that in many ways employing her was going to have huge advantages. But, she would drive him crazy, and he probably realized it already, she thought sadly. She drove most people crazy and she reckoned it could take about three *days* to achieve it with Blake, if she wasn't careful.

She had always been like it since she was a little kid. Excitable, talkative, restless, emotional. Her mother Tania and her dad used to laugh at her antics and she guessed they must have got used to them. However, that hadn't stopped them from taking her to a specialist pediatrician when she was nine to see if she was normal.

"Jade appears to be hyperactive but she'll settle down. Don't worry about it-- just enjoy her," was the doctor's advice.

Her parents thought she would improve when, at the age of eleven, they packed her off to boarding school in Adelaide. She didn't. She was always in trouble and Jade knew if it hadn't been for her two roommates, she would have been sent home in disgrace for her outrageous behavior. Lara and Katie became her best friends and supported and guided Jade through some very troubled waters. They had called themselves the three princesses, although Lara was the only one of the girls with actual royal blood. Officially she was Her Royal Highness Princess Lara of Challoner, a small, independent country in Northern Europe. The three friends had clung to each other like magnets as they weathered the strangeness of their early days at boarding school and then they had remained friends when they went on to university. Katie proved to be the most studious and rarely had her head out of a book and it was she who had encouraged Jade to study for an accountancy degree.

After completing their studies, they had gone their separate ways but vowed to keep in regular contact no matter where they were in the world. It was their love and support that had helped Jade through the grief of losing her father and the tragedy that had overcome her young brother Ray.

Over the years Jade had recognized her faults and had tried very hard to correct them. Most times she won but occasionally she would decide, "Bugger it, accept me as I am."

She thought this now as she nudged Molly forward next to Prince. "Do you ride every morning?" she began.

"Yep."

Oh, hell.

"Don't worry. I prefer to ride alone," he added, his eyes flickering over her face. "I wanted to make sure you could ride as good as you boast."

Jade drew a sharp breath. This was fighting talk. "I don't lie, Mr. Jordan." Her voice was as sarcastic as she dared make it.

"I'm sure you don't." He glanced at her again. "You look a bit rusty though."

"You would look rusty if you had to ride this round, lazy barrel of a horse." Careful, I'm getting cranky.

"Why didn't you ride Prince then?"

Good question.

"I left him for you."

Good answer.

They rode on in silence until Jade couldn't bear it any longer. "So when did you get divorced?"

Blake reined in, causing Molly to bump against Prince's side, squeezing Jade's leg between the two horses in the process. "Yawwooh!" Jade yelped, pushing at Prince's flank.

"Serves you right for being so nosy," Blake said, easily nudging Prince to one side, releasing Jade's leg.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be. I don't quite know what to talk to you about and well, I guess I'm bit nervous and I'm naturally talkative, as you might have gathered. I read about a recent study in Britain which found that women on average utter twenty thousand words a day compared with seven thousand spoken by men."

Blake didn't reply but continued to stare at her as he pushed his hat to the back of his head. He leant forward, his hands resting on the pommel of the saddle and waited.

"The study said it's very easy to categorize women's conversations as idle and essentially meaningless chatter but actually by talking, women release their frustrations and verbalize their ambitions and concerns."

Still he waited.

"While men bottle up their problems, women are quick to share them and, in doing so, listen to help and advice."

"Finished?" He spoke at last.

She nodded. Shit! Gone too far again.

"Listen to advice, huh? Well, Princess Jade Oliver, you have just about used up your quota of words for today, so here's some advice. Don't speak to me again until after breakfast."

Blake couldn't resist treating himself to a wry grin as he set Prince into a gentle canter, leaving Jade to close her mouth and follow. The woman was unbelievable! She didn't give a cuss that he was her boss. He reckoned she'd argue

with a wooden Indian given half the chance. But, by jingles, she was funny. He grinned again as he thought of the animated expression on her little pixie face as she'd explained about the difference between men and women. Yep, there were differences alright and it wasn't just in the number of words they spoke. It was in the way her hand had felt beneath his when he was doing up Molly's saddle--all soft and slender. And the scent from her hair when she had turned in his arms. Jasmine? Honeysuckle? He had wanted to hold her close and feel the warmth of her body against him and cover that sassy, pink mouth with his. That would have shut her up.

He pulled his hat down hard over his forehead as Prince, sensing his master's lack of concentration, gave a playful buck. Enough, Jordan. You've already been badly burnt by a woman as sharp as a mash potato so, let it go. It's only sex.

\* \* \* \*

"Seeing this room already has one desk and enough computer connections, we'll make it the office. Okay?"

She didn't answer.

Blake turned to Jade where she stood in the middle of the lounge. Breakfast was long over and Jade had chatted away to the stockmen like a mad magpie as she had helped Maggie with the fry up of eggs, bacon, and sausages. Afterwards, he had met briefly with Lance in a corner of the kitchen to issue instructions for the day, all of the time aware of Jade's laughter as she listened to some joke one of the guys had told her as she had tackled the pile of washing up. The sooner he got help for Maggie, the better that was for sure.

"Jade?"

She pointed to her lips and made a gesture of a key turning.

Suddenly he got it. "Yeah. You can speak to me now."

"Phew! Thanks. I was well behaved, wasn't I?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

He returned her smile before he could stop himself. Goddamnit! Was she some sort of witch? They had a whole heap of work to do and here he was as hot as a pot of neck bones all because she'd smiled at him.

He sat at the desk and played nervously with a pencil. "You did just fine, honey. Now, get a notebook and let's start a list of what we have to do."

Jade obediently picked up a pad and pen from the desk and sat facing him. "Before we start, can I mention something, Blake?"

Now what? He raised an eyebrow and then gave a slight nod of his head.

"I hope you don't mind, but I'm not keen on being called names such as honey. Or sugar, babe, doll or really any of those names that American males seem to roll off their tongues as if it's their first language. Actually, I don't like the way some Australian men say darl and sheila and chook either, you know the sort of thing. I would prefer it if you called me Jade."

He received a brilliant smile to soften the blow. Okay, two can play at this game. "Noted. How about Princess?"

She looked startled, her eyes huge. It was her turn to be put on the spot. He had her on the run.

"Err, I'll leave that up to you."

"Well, Princess, I guess its time to paint your butt white and run with the antelope."

"I beg your pardon? I don't know what that means." She looked aghast.

Blake leaned back in his chair. He was enjoying this. "It's what we Texans say when we mean--stop arguing and do as you're told."



There was a moment's silence before Jade burst into peals of laughter, the delightful sound filling the room. Blake grinned in response and then, unable to resist her reaction to his dry wit, joined in her laughter. Controlling himself at last, he reached for a tissue from the box on the desk and wiped his eyes. Boy, he felt good! Perhaps that was what he'd been missing of late. A damn good belly laugh.

\* \* \* \*

Jade stretched her aching back and then peered at her watch. It was half past six. No wonder she felt so worn out and her stomach had been shouting loudly for sustenance. Except for a short break at lunch time to grab a sandwich, she and Blake had worked non-stop. He had finally disappeared to go through some stock details with Lance and she was alone at last.

She took a deep breath. She definitely needed this time out. Talk about a hard task master. But, if she was to be perfectly honest she needed a break from Blake's proximity to her. She already knew that his looks left a Greek God for dead but she did think that working with him hour after hour she would have adjusted to the waves of sensuality that flowed from him, enveloping her, causing her blood to boil, her bones to melt and her hands to ache to grab him in some very inappropriate places. Even her mouth went dry and stopped her from talking. That was a *big* problem. Still, it was their first day working together and she rationalized that she would get used to him--hopefully.

Blake's fleeting moment of good humor earlier that morning had been just that, very brief, very fleeting. From then on it had been serious stuff and Jade had to use all of her know-how to keep up with him. Together they had unpacked the two top-of-the-range computers that Blake had bought in Adelaide and after a great deal of puzzlement and occasional swear words from Jade, plus several phone calls to the local IT guy in Coober Pedy, they had managed to connect to the internet and set up the programs.

Jade glanced at the screen saver on her computer and then blushed as she thought of when Blake had leaned over her to study the shorthorn breeding charts. Did he have to choose that moment to look when she had inadvertently pulled up an image of the biggest breeding bull she had ever seen? Trust me to do that. Wow, its dong was *huge* and Blake probably thought I'd flashed it on purpose, she decided miserably. Fortunately, he'd made no comment but whether this was to spare her blushes, she didn't know.

She smiled when she recalled one funny moment in the middle of a pretty hectic day.

"I think it would be a good idea if we set up the MYOB software then I can handle the accountancy side through it," she had said, trying to attract his attention as he scribbled some reminder note to himself.

"What?"

"Mind Your Own Business."

Blake had stared at her in amazement and then his mouth had tightened ominously and a tiny nerve had twitched in his jaw. "What the hell do you mean? This is my business," he snapped.

"No, you don't understand. MYOB is a computer software program. It's short for Mind Your Own Business." She had begun to laugh, couldn't help herself and he gave a rueful grin in response.

"Sorry, my mistake," he said showing that dimple in his cheek and her bones went into near melt-down.

The phone rang loudly and shrilly, jolting Jade into the present. "Jordan and

Associates." Now, where did she get that from? Still, it sounded good.

"Well, hello gorgeous. You're looking beautiful, as usual." The greeting from the deep, laughing voice on the other end of the phone made Jade's hair stand on end.

"Who is this?"

"Wouldn't ya like to know, honey bun."

"Stop messing with me, mister. This is a place of business so you can shut your dirty mouth and piss off ...." She stopped speaking as Blake materialized in front of her, motioning for her to hand over the receiver.

"Crank call," she mouthed conspiratorially.

Rolling his eyes heaven ward, Blake spoke to the nut caller. "Hi, Ethan."

Ethan? She had seen his name on some of the paper work. Blake's brother ringing from Texas. Oh, crikey! She listened to the one-sided conversation, watching Blake's bland expression.

"Yep. She's the book keeper. Yep. Okay. See ya."

Replacing the receiver into its cradle, Blake's lazy, brown eyes met hers across the desk. "That was my brother, Ethan. He asked me to let you know that he thinks you sound like a real doll."

"I guess I should have picked him by the accent," Jade admitted. "But, he made some very personal remarks, Blake. You should tell him to be more careful."

"Why? Going to sue him for sexual harassment?"

Jade decided to ignore his tongue-in-cheek comment. "Also, I'm not your book keeper. I'm your accountant." So cop that.

Blake leaned towards her, his hands resting on the desk. "No. You're not. You may be qualified as an accountant but I employed you as my book keeper and personal assistant. Remember?"

She couldn't take her eyes from his sexy mouth so close to hers. The shape of his lips was perfect, perfect for molding against hers so she could taste him, then she could kiss that dimple and that strong, brown throat and then perhaps make her way right down his chest to his ....

"Jade, did you hear what I said?"

She looked up to meet his quizzical gaze and then began to nervously tidy the already tidy piles of files in front of her. "Yes, I heard and you're right, of course. But, it will add a certain amount of credibility and clout to both of our standing if you refer to me as your accountant."

He gave his sexy grin and Jade clung white-knuckled to the edge of the desk, wondering what he would do if she launched herself across the space between them, wrestled him to the ground and had her wicked way with him. She managed to control a threatening evil leer.

"You are as full of wind as a corn-eating horse, Jade Oliver. But, if it will make you feel better, we'll refer to you as the Stony Creek Station Company accountant in the future."

She nodded, deciding to let the windy horse expression pass her by. Must be a Texas thing, these strange expressions he kept coming out with.

"Come and sit over here for a few minutes before Maggie calls us for dinner," Blake suggested.

Maggie had lit the fire late in the afternoon as the weather had turned cold and it flared into renewed life as Blake loaded a couple more stumps on to it. Jade was exhausted and it did look inviting and comforting.

"I've brought you a drink." Blake placed a scotch and coke in front of her and then, returning to the fire, stretched out in her father's old arm chair.

"Maggie told me you like a whisky at the end of the day." He continued to talk, studying her over the rim of his beer glass.

She got up slowly and with her drink in her hand, settled in the chair opposite him. Taking a large gulp, she swallowed. Her eyes began to water and she fanned a small hand against her mouth. "Thanks. Whoops, I haven't had a scotch for a while," she breathed by way of explanation.

He made her nervous, he could tell and somehow it made him feel better. Her non-stop mouth was hushed, for the moment anyway, as she sipped her drink and curled around in the chair like a warm, soft kitten. Blake blew gently at the froth on the top of his beer. But, there was nothing kittenish about this little lady. Beneath that innocent exterior and chattering diatribe was a magnificent tigress waiting to be unleashed and he was her quarry.

The hunted one.

He kinda liked it.

He saw it in her huge eyes and the movements of that slender body in its tight jeans and chunky sweater. He just knew her breasts would be perfect underneath those clothes. If he closed his eyes he could see them, full and rounded with pert nipples ready for him to suckle. What would she do if he suggested they cut to the chase and had an honest-to-goodness, straight forward fuck? It's what they both wanted, for Chrissake! But, he wouldn't say it and he wouldn't do it. It would be the wrong move, buddy.

"Here you are."

He started guiltily as she thrust a piece of paper at him. "What's this?"

"A list of the lists we have to make. Just getting organized."

Blake glanced through the items. "Cattle, feed, staff, computer programs, budgets, household repairs, new furniture ...." He looked up. "Are you saying you are making a separate list for everything on this list?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes. I've almost finished it. You'll be surprised how well it will work. Aren't you a list maker? It doesn't matter if you're not because I'll do it for you. By the way, we've already hired staff to help Maggie with the chores. They are two aboriginal women who used to work here a few months ago before my dad got ill. They're very good and Maggie likes them. I thought tomorrow you, Maggie, and I can go through the house and make a list of new furniture and linen requirements. Also, there's quite a lot of repair work and painting to be done, which we need to organize. Although firstly, I'll have to finalize an overall budget with you ...."

Blake held up a hand in surrender.

"Sorry." Giving a cheeky smile, Jade pretended to button her lip.

"Why do you do that?" Blake shook his head in bewilderment and then drained his glass of beer. "You either say nothing or you spill everything out at once like a whirling tornado. I know it's only been one day but we've got to learn to get on and so far you are annoying the crap out of me."

Jade sat up, her back very straight, as her smiling face took on a ferocious glare. Here we go, he thought. Tornado heading my way. Get ready to duck.

"You didn't do so badly yourself for a man who hardly speaks and expects me to read his mind all day long. I had to make decisions today because all you did was nod or grunt or simply ignore me."

"Only because I couldn't get a word in edge-wise. Besides, I don't have to please you, young lady. I'm the boss and you need to think about pleasing *me*. If you are so good at mind reading then you would know *exactly* what I want." Blake placed

his glass on the table as the sudden sexual tension between them shot up to near boiling point. Damn, that hadn't come out quite as he meant but at least, by the wide-eyed expression on her face, it had shut her up for the moment.

The phone ringing saved him from having to explain further and he grabbed the receiver before Jade could reach it. "Blake Jordan."

"May I speak to the Princess please?" a soft, cultured female voice asked.

"There's no princess here," he replied irritably.

"But there must be. I know she's there." The voice was insistent.

"There's a Jade Motor-Mouth Oliver here, if that's who you're looking for. Who shall I say is calling? Princess Leia from Star Wars?"

There was a moment's silence from the person on the other end of the phone and Blake could almost feel the arctic freeze zinging down the line.

"This is Her Royal Highness Princess Lara of Challoner," came the ice-cold reply.

## Chapter Four

"A fellow princess wants to talk to you," Blake said dryly, holding the receiver towards Jade. She grabbed it, her face lighting up with excitement.

"Lara? Oh, Lala!"

Leaving his accountant to shriek and gush over her phone call, Blake made his way to the kitchen where Maggie was checking a mighty good smelling roast. Pouring another beer, he leaned against the kitchen cabinet, watching Maggie and the two younger women work.

Unable to resist his curiosity any longer, he said, "Maggie, do you know a Princess Lara?"

Maggie stirred the liquid in a huge pot on top of the stove as she answered. "Bless you, yes. She's Jade's best friend. She and Katie Jones. The three have been as thick as thieves since they were all knee high to a grass hopper."

"Is she a real princess?" Blake tried to sound casual but he was getting more curious by the moment.

"My, yes. She comes from a country somewhere in Europe and she is *very* royal. Her parents are the King and Queen. Mind you, she married an Australian fisherman a few months ago. A fella by the name of Jack Lucas."

"A fisherman? That seems an odd match."

Maggie laughed. "Not when you know Jack. He can buy and sell Lara's country, he's so wealthy. Jade and Katie flew to Europe to be chief bridesmaids at their wedding. It was on tele and everything. You must have seen it?"

Levering himself away from the cabinet, Blake shook his head. "Nope. I don't watch much television," he replied bluntly. "Have Lara and Katie visited here?"

"Many times when they were younger. The three girls were at boarding school and then university together and used to take it in turns to spend the holidays at each others' homes."

"Is Katie a real princess, as well?"

"No. Lara's the only one who is an actual royal but they call themselves the three Princesses, a bit like the three musketeers, I guess. Katie is some sort of doctor now."

Blake rinsed his glass under the tap. "Hmm, interesting story. Thanks, Maggie. Now I know why Jade is called Princess."

Maggie suddenly lowered her voice and became very serious. "I don't mind telling you, Blake, that Jade was the apple of her father's eye and it was dreadful when the first Mrs. Oliver died from cancer and barely a year later Tom married again--married that terrible Elizabeth."

Intrigued in spite of his dislike for gossip, Blake asked. "Why was she terrible?"

"She abused Jade. She was nasty to her all the time and used to smack her around something awful when Tom wasn't here, you know? But Jade never said a word to her dad, thinking that he loved that witch of a woman and she wasn't going to upset him for anything."

Blake frowned. "How old was Jade when this happened?"

"Only sixteen, poor love. Elizabeth was the reason that Jade didn't visit very

often in the past few years. She would spend the holidays with Lara or Katie and her dad missed his little Princess like you wouldn't believe. Then Tom and Elizabeth divorced a year ago, but by then he was already sick."

"Quite a sad story."

"Jade should have been left all of the property, not Elizabeth. It's rightfully hers. Elizabeth was a scheming woman who couldn't wait to get her hands on Tom's money."

"I see. I gather Jade doesn't meet up with Elizabeth at all?"

Maggie laughed, her plump body shaking with mirth. "The last time Jade saw Elizabeth was at Tom's funeral four months ago. Everything was okay until they were leaving the cemetery. Then Elizabeth said something really terrible to Jade and wham! Jade clocked her on the jaw and sent her flying into an open grave. There was a quite a hullabaloo, I can tell you but seeing Elizabeth being helped out of that hole covered in dirt and mud was the funniest sight I've ever seen."

Blake grinned as he thought about it. Princess Jade packing a punch, huh? She was something else, that fiery little dynamo.

"Dinner's about ready, Blake." Maggie directed the women to let the stockmen know as she began to serve up. As she did so, the door from the passage flew open and Jade rushed in.

"Blake, Blake! I know it's only five days away but can I please go to Adelaide on Saturday? Lara and Katie are both going to be there and we're going to have a party. I can work while I'm there and order all of the furniture and things we need and the white goods. Lara's waiting on the phone to hear if it's okay, please?" In her excitement, Jade hopped up and down in front of him.

Gripping her shoulders to keep her still, Blake said, "I'd planned to go to the city anyway so I'll fly you down." He resisted the urge to hug her to him at the delighted expression on her face. The next moment she had gone.

The noise was at its normal high level as the stockmen sat down to eat their dinner when Jade re-appeared at Blake's shoulder holding the phone. "Jack wants to speak to you," she said her mouth close to his ear. "He's Lara's husband."

Blake stood up and, taking the phone, made his way along the passage to the quiet of the office. Turning, he found Jade at his heels. "Go away," he hissed, shutting the door quietly but firmly in her face.

So Jack Lucas wanted to speak to him. Blake guessed it was about his rudeness to Jack's wife--and he *had* been rude. But, how the hell did he know who she was? He'd been getting a trifle pissed off with princesses being thrown at him at every turn. At least now he had a better idea of things after his talk with Maggie. He had surprised himself with that gossip session and his sudden thirst to know more about Jade. So, she hadn't had it so good. Losing her mother, putting up with a nasty step-mother and then, her father dying. Tough going. Jade was probably still grieving if she did but know it. At least, these two friends of hers appeared very supportive.

He sat once again in the old arm chair by the fire and placed the phone to his ear. "Jack? I'm sorry to keep you waiting." Take the positive approach, man. "This is Blake Jordan speaking."

The voice on the other end of the line was definitely Australian, with a rich, friendly manner. Blake's shoulders relaxed as he listened.

"G'day, Blake. It's great to talk to you. I understand from Jade that you're also coming to Adelaide on Saturday?"

"Yeah. I have some business there."

"Well, this is by way of an invitation. Lara and I don't visit the city all that

often but we have a home in North Adelaide. We're having a get-together on Saturday night for the three princesses to meet up and would very much like you to join us, if you will?"

Blake hesitated and then said, "I was rude to your wife earlier, Jack. I'm not sure she'll want me around."

Jack laughed. "Don't worry, she told me. She said it was a very understandable reaction on your part. It was actually her idea that we invite you. We're not putting you on the spot, by the way. There will be about twenty or so of us at the party. Jade also told us that your mother is staying in Adelaide at the moment so please, bring her along."

His mother. He'd almost forgotten about her. "That's very kind of you and Lara. Is it just an excuse for the girls to meet up? I mean, it isn't anyone's birthday, is it?"

"Ah-ha. A man after my own heart. I don't like surprises either, Blake. It's to congratulate Katie and Jade on their new jobs and ...." Blake tensed as he heard the change in Jack's tone "and to announce that Lara is pregnant with our first child."

The pride in Jack's voice was unmistakable and Blake felt an instant closeness with this man he had yet to meet as he warmly congratulated him.

"I'll have to go now Blake, but I wondered how you're coping with Jade."

Blake grunted. "I'm not."

Jack roared with laughter. "Say no more, mate. I quite understand. For your information we call Jade our Priceless Princess."

\* \* \* \*

"This is such a neat plane. Fancy you being a pilot." Jade wriggled in her seat as she peered down at the vast Outback vista twelve thousand feet below.

"I arranged to buy it when I was in Texas," Blake replied. "Most ranchers have their own planes these days, or helicopters, particularly on the big ranches. I'm surprised your dad didn't have one."

Jade watched his long, lean hands at the controls, wishing it was her body that he was caressing so lovingly. It had been five days now that they had worked together but the time hadn't taken the edge off her 'Blake Lust,' as she called it. This was even though Blake had been away most days working with the stockmen. The cattle Blake had bought had arrived from the various stations transported on huge road-trains and Blake had insisted on being there to organize their unloading.

She had made her own significant in-roads into her work with the office as good as she could get it. The account systems were in place and she had completed an inventory of the homestead and out-buildings. Blake had given her the various budgets, which, to her delight, were more than substantial. She could now conduct all of the banking and ordering on-line and was very well satisfied with her first few days of organization.

Her boss seemed pleased, too. He wasn't quite so grumpy and talked more openly to her, mostly because she was making a conscious effort to control her own annoying ways. She had all but given up the idea of finding her opal mine on horseback and decided instead that she would bide her time and when Blake was away, she would go hunting in her vehicle. Besides, each morning Blake had been waiting for her with both horses saddled and ready to go, making it impossible for her to sneak away.

"I thought you wanted to ride alone?" she had queried on the first morning.

"It's safer for us to ride together," was his crisp reply. "And if you don't talk we can enjoy the peace of the Outback."

So she had kept quiet. Instead her eyes were glued to the handsome cowboy who rode ahead of her while she coped with the very round and very faithful Molly. He had been right, of course. The clean, cold air and vibrant colors of the landscape as the sun came up and the raucous calls of the white cockatoos shouldn't be spoilt by the sound of a human voice. More importantly, she had fallen for the beauty of her homeland all over again.

She loved the evenings the most. This man of habit brought her a scotch and coke around six o'clock and they would sit by the fire and discuss the day. He would sip on his beer and often just listen and sometimes laugh at her account of her happenings. She enjoyed making him laugh. The corners of his eyes would crinkle and that gorgeous dimple would show and have her salivating into her drink.

Yes, she wondered about his life before Stony Creek. Was his broken marriage the reason he often looked so sad? Was he still in love with his ex-wife? Was that why he didn't make a pass at her? Or was she not his type? All of these questions and more she would ponder as she tossed around in her comfortable bed at night with the man of her dreams along the passage sleeping in her dad's room. She was getting to know Blake's character and sensed that he was a very personal man--a loner who wouldn't appreciate her interference into his private life. Heaven knew, she'd made enough mistakes already. Even so, she had felt the enormous sexual tension between them and knew it couldn't be her wistful imagination. It was there in his eyes when she would turn suddenly, taking him by surprise. Instantly, he would bring the shutters down and that lazy, laconic look would return.

She closed her eyes against the brightness of the sun's rays as it rose magnificently, casting a golden glow in the tiny cockpit. What the hell did it matter? As much as she would enjoy a sexual fling with this Texan God, she knew that wasn't his style and she had obligations of her own. When she found her opal mine, she would be gone.

"Jade?"

"What?"

"I asked why your dad didn't have a plane."

"Oh, too expensive, I guess. This one must be worth a cool million plus. I'd better add it to the assets register. Are you going to get a chopper?"

"I don't know yet. I noticed there were a couple of motorbikes in one of the sheds. Did your dad prefer to muster with bikes?"

Jade's eyes inexplicably filled with tears and she pretended to look out of the window so Blake wouldn't notice. A tear escaped and trickled down her cheek. She furiously scrubbed it away. When will these moments end, for God's sake? When will I stop grieving for my lovely, caring dad?

"He...he...." she swallowed, tried to speak, and was mortified when Blake's hand encircled her slender wrist.

"It's okay to still feel sad, sweetheart," he said, his thumb gently soothing the soft skin.

She turned and, blinking away the tears, gave him a shaky smile. "I told you not to call me sweetheart, Blake Jordan."

"So you did." Blake concentrated once more on the controls but not before she had glimpsed the sympathy and warmth in his brown eyes. The man has a heart--yippee!

"Sorry about that," she said flippantly, disappointed that he had taken his hand away, enjoying the feel of his skin against hers. "Every now and then it hits me that he's not around anymore. I really miss him." She straightened her shoulders.



"Anyway, dad wasn't keen on mustering by any other way than horseback. Certainly not using planes and helicopters. He used to say it ran the fat off the cattle and he didn't approve. But, he did buy those couple of bikes to help with the round up. It didn't last long."

"Why's that?"

Jade grinned at the memory. "My fault, I guess. I used to ride the bikes around the station pretending to be Evil Kenevil and one day I was trying to jump over one of the trucks."

"Jesus!"

"Yeah, that's what I said as I was careering through the air. I mean, I felt like Barbra Streisand in Yentl--'Hey, Papa, watch me fly.' Fortunately, I landed in the dam on the other side of the truck and got a soaking for my troubles. Dad was pretty cranky and locked the bikes away after that."

She was rewarded by Blake's laughter. "You are priceless, Jade Oliver, do you know that?"

"Yes, I know," she agreed. "To change the subject, I loved that movie Yentl. Do you like movies, Blake?"

He shrugged. Uh-Uh. Going back in his shell. Oh well, it was good while it had lasted. "I like black and white movies the most," she continued, not to be put off by his withdrawal.

Blake grunted in response.

"I always think black and white movies look better on colored television sets, don't you?"

Giving her a look of total disbelief, followed by his slow, sexy grin, he said "Time to shut up now, Oliver. We'll be in Adelaide in an hour."

\* \* \* \*

"You know your way around the city, don't you?"

"Yes, sure."

"Then you drive." Blake tossed her the keys of the car rental.

"Are you afraid you'll end up on the wrong side of the road?" Jade teased as she fastened her seatbelt and waited for Blake to adjust his seat before carefully maneuvering the car into the line of traffic leaving the airport.

"Got the shopping list?"

Jade sighed. "Of course."

Blake was silent as they turned on to the main city road. He knew he was being a pain in the ass, but he couldn't seem to help it. As soon as they had left the airport building to walk to the car rental place, his chest tightened and he felt as if he might choke. Perspiration beaded his brow--it was ridiculous to feel like this! A stupid panic attack and he hadn't even got to the city yet. He wondered if he should say anything to Jade. He'd read somewhere that the best thing was to let someone know if you have a panic attack so at least they can help you. He opened his mouth to tell her but pride wouldn't let him utter the words. Besides, knowing Jade, she'd probably treat it as one big joke.

Clearing his throat, he said "I don't want to spend long in the city, Jade, so we're going to shop in one big store only--Manleys."

"Good idea. Although they might not have all the hardware things we need."

Blake tensed as a noisy truck thundered up beside their car and hooted at Jade to let him into her lane. "What the hell are you doing, you stupid, ignorant bastard," Jade shouted, making a rude gesture with her fingers.

Taking a deep, controlling breath, Blake gripped Jade's thigh with his hand.

"Let him in," he snapped and after one glance at his taut, pale features, Jade obliged.

"We are going to spend a significant amount of money at this store so I have arranged for the General Manager to guide and assist us with the orders. Anything we can't get, we'll order on-line when we get back to Stony Creek." Thank Christ! He was feeling better. Concentrating on Jade had helped, he decided, watching her pure, pixie profile as she drove with authority stamped all over her. She was safe and strong and afraid of nothing and nobody. There was radiance about her and for the moment he was very willing to bask in the glow.

"Will you drop me at Lara's when we finish, please? I'm staying there tonight."

She turned to him with a dazzling smile which made him instantly as hot as a billy goat in a pepper patch. She was a natural flirt and boy, did she turn him on. So far he had managed to keep his cool but ... one of these days he was going to jump her bones that was for sure.

"Here we are," she chirped as she swung the car into the store's multi-story park.

Great. One hurdle out of the way and the panicky feeling had subsided. He held her elbow as they made their way from the park down the two flights of stairs to the administration floor of the giant store. Jade stopped mid-flight and pulled off the heavy jacket she was wearing as the heat of the air conditioning hit them. She was wearing tight fitting purple jeans and a lilac sweater which clung to every curve of her high, rounded breasts clipping into her small waist. Blake had stopped, too, and now he gaped at her. No bra. Goddamnit, she wasn't wearing a bra and he could see the outline of her nipples. In fact, he couldn't take his eyes off them.

"What's the matter?"

"You ... you look provocative." Tell her, man, tell her to cover up. You don't want other men staring at her like you're doing, do you?

She gave him what he could only call a shy smile. "I *think* you just paid me a compliment. I knew that my jacket would be too hot in here, so I've brought a lighter jumper with me. She retrieved the garment from her bag and pulled it over her head, hiding her nipples from his view.

"Okay?"

"Yeah, perfect," he replied in relief and they continued on their way.

As they waited for the manager sitting in plush leather chairs in the reception area, Blake leaned over. "Just a couple more things," he whispered so the receptionist couldn't hear.

"What now," she hissed, leaning towards him so that her face was almost within kissing distance from his.

"I'll make the decisions on what we buy and *you* make a note of it. We will be moving fast as I don't like shopping. Afterwards you can drop me off at my mother's place and she and I will get a cab to your friend's house tonight."

"Is that all, boss?"

He was going to say, *no, you have the most beautiful breasts and magnificent body and I want to make love to you* but instead he said, "You're doing a good job, Jade. You're alright."

\* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon after an exhausting day shopping with Blake, Jade rushed up the steps of the elegant town house in the exclusive suburb of North Adelaide and banged on the front door. "Lara, I'm here."

It swung open and she was enveloped in the arms of her best friend. "Oh, Jade, it is so wonderful to see you--wonderful!" Lara couldn't stop hugging her and Jade

felt the tears running down her face with happiness. "Now, don't start that," Lara scolded, wiping Jade's cheeks with some tissues as she walked her in to the magnificent entrance hall.

Jade dropped her overnight bag and did a happy twirl. "I can't believe I'm here, Lala. And I can't believe you're going to have a *baby*." The two of them shrieked and hugged again.

"I just knew by the noise that it had to be Princess Jade arriving," a rich, deep voice murmured and Jade turned and ran into the arms of Lara's husband Jack. He laughed and spun her around as she covered his handsome face with tiny kisses.

"Congratulations, you gorgeous man. I told you making babies would be a cinch for the two of you."

"You did no such thing, you wicked, wicked woman," Lara responded as she and Jack linked arms with Jade and swept her along the hallway to the study. Jack left the two sitting on the lounge, promising he would get them a drink when Katie arrived shortly.

"Tell me about the baby," Jade began, squeezing Lara's hands.

"We only found out for sure a week ago although I couldn't imagine that it wouldn't happen." Lara lowered her eyes, a delicate blush coloring her cheeks. "After all, we've been practicing enough in the last few months."

Jade giggled. "I didn't think Jack was the sort of guy to let you stay a virgin for long."

"Jade! You never cease to amaze me with the things you say." Lara pretended to be shocked.

"Well, Katie and I always knew you were extremely virginal. I'm not sure whether Katie's taken the plunge or not, are you?"

"I have no idea. She would never let on anyway. She isn't a blabber mouth like you."

"Oh come on, Lala. Just because I couldn't wait to rush and tell you that I'd been de-flowered by that super stud from St. Patrick's College?" They both giggled like school girls again as they thought of it. Jade had been sixteen at the time and intensely interested in the opposite sex. Lara and Katie were much quieter and rather in awe of their more flamboyant friend. The last thing that Jade was going to tell them was that sex wasn't all it was cracked up to be--in fact, it was pretty awful and thinking about it now, she knew she had done it just to feel that someone loved and wanted her.

It was the time when her father was so taken up with his new wife and Jade had felt unhappy and unloved. This was proved in no uncertain manner when that summer Elizabeth, taking advantage of Tom being away, had flown into a temper and struck Jade across the face, knocking her over. It was the beginning of several beatings that Elizabeth had dished out to her young, fiery step-daughter during the long weeks of the holiday break. Jade had become more and more rebellious, eventually leaving home to stay with Katie and her parents in Sydney. Katie knew her friend was miserable and had been concerned but Jade had refused to enlighten her on what had happened.

Her one sexual adventure had remained that until she had met Paul Sinclair two years ago at university. Just finishing his law degree, he was handsome and charming and Jade decided it was perhaps timely for a close and loving relationship with a real man, not a school boy. She had been happy at first and had even contemplated moving in with Paul. She was glad that she hadn't. News came back to her that he was seeing other girls behind her back. He denied it, of course, and it

wasn't until Jade had actually caught him in bed with one of their fellow students that she ended the relationship and discovered to her astonishment that she couldn't have cared less. Paul had used his substantial charm to try and repair the damage but Jade was having none of it. The affair had ended almost a year ago and she had decided to swear off men, much to the amusement of Katie and Lara. That is until Blake appeared, Jade admitted, trying to concentrate on what Lara was saying.

"Jack and I went to see Ray yesterday." Lara looked troubled and Jade tensed.

"Thank you, that was really kind of you, Lara. We don't return to the station until four tomorrow afternoon so I'm going to spend the day with him."

"Yes, he said he couldn't wait to see you and that you email him every night and phone him every other day. Also that Katie comes down from the Barossa once a week to see him."

"Yes. She is fantastic." Jade blinked away the tears welling in her eyes. "I really miss him, but I need to work so I can keep paying the hospital fees."

Lara smiled and patted her friend's hand. "You know that Jack and I will always give you the money if you need it, Princess."

"I know and I'm very grateful, but dad left a few thousand dollars for Ray, which helps." She hesitated and then decided against telling Lara about the opal mine. Her father had sworn her to secrecy and that's the way it had to be. She also didn't want Lara to know that there was very little money left and that soon her entire salary would only just cover Ray's fees, as long as they didn't rise again. If they did, she would be in big trouble.

"Tell me again about Ray's terrible disease. How long will he be on a ventilator?"

Jade leaned into her corner of the lounge and began to talk about her eleven year old brother. "It's a type of syndrome--Guillain-Barre Syndrome and is a disorder in which the body's immune system attacks part of the nervous system. No one knows why and how you get it. It's quite rare. Unfortunately, Ray is affected badly and is almost totally paralyzed. He's been placed on a ventilator to help him breathe and it makes it difficult for him to talk, as you would have noticed."

"We did. Jack was quite overcome seeing this bright little kid surrounded with medical equipment and needing to be constantly monitored. I'm afraid we loaded him down with toys and books." Lara looked as if she was going to cry and Jade quickly placed an arm around her shoulders.

"It's alright, Lara. The doctors tell me that Ray is going to be okay. He is probably through the worst part of the disease now and gradually he'll get better and most likely will make a full recovery. It could be as short as a few weeks. Meanwhile, I know he is receiving the best care."

"You poor love, what a time you've had in the past few months."

"Ah-ha," Jade's mischievous smile appeared again. "I did get to go to a magical country called Challoner for a week and attend the fairytale wedding of a real princess."

Lara's face lit up. "I would never have believed that anyone could be as happy as me right now. After the terrible run-around I gave Jack and all of the rows we had, I wonder that he ever wanted to marry me. I love him so much."

The door suddenly swung open and Jack stood there holding a slight, red-headed girl in his arms. "Look who I found on the door step," he joked. "Now I am in my element surrounded with all of these beautiful women."

The other two leapt off the lounge to greet the third princess, Katie.

"Here's to us." They chinked glasses and grinned at each other like Cheshire

cats. After pouring Jade and Katie a glass of champagne and a soda for Lara, Jack had discreetly withdrawn, leaving the three together. Jade took a large gulp of champagne and hiccupped as the bubbles went the wrong way, causing them all to laugh. Her eyes filled with love as she studied her best friends.

Dear Katie, the studious one who had qualified as a microbiologist, with her pert, pretty features and white as milk skin which she carefully protected from the fierce Australian sun. Her shoulder length hair was a glorious titian color and fell into soft curls and waves around her small face, while her rather severe glasses couldn't disguise her beautiful blue eyes.

And ... Lara. Blonde and green-eyed and perfect. The classic princess now happily married and absolutely adored by her husband and soon to have a little Crown Prince or Princess. Unbelievable!

"Now girls, hush up a moment. I want to tell you about tonight." Lara broke into the noisy laughter. "We've invited twenty guests and we're having cocktails at seven and then dinner at seven thirty. Jack has hired a wonderful caterer and staff to spoil us ...and then, my loves, we shall dance the night away to a jazz band." She clasped her hands together in excitement.

"Dinner and dancing? My, you are going overboard." Katie frowned. "I'm not sure I'll have anything posh enough to wear."

"Me neither." Jade groaned. Oh, bugger, she had better phone Blake and warn him so his mother wouldn't feel embarrassed if she hadn't dressed up for the occasion.

"The two of you make me very cross at times." Lara put on her most imperious expression. "I have closets full of evening dresses and when we have finished our drinks, we're going upstairs to play dress-ups."

Jade laughed, catching Lara's excitement, although Katie still looked dubious.

"But before we go anywhere, Jade Motor-Mouth Oliver, which is what your new boss called you, by the way," Lara continued. "Katie and I want to hear all about this gorgeous man."

"I googled him," Katie admitted.

"So did I but I want to hear it from Jade," Lara insisted.

"Of course, I've googled him, as well. Do you know he has a Masters Degree in Business Administration from Harvard University?"

The other two hooted and whistled "More, more."

Jade could feel herself caving in. "Okay, in a nutshell, he's a handsome, rich, divorced Texan cowboy with two brothers back in Texas and his mother is staying here--she's Australian. And ... I fancy him like crazy. However, he's not interested in me so don't get your hopes up."

"You are telling fibs, as usual, Jade. I bet he is interested." Katie turned to Lara. "Don't you agree?"

"Well, we both know what an absolute pain Jade can be so I'm not so sure," Lara said, studying Jade thoughtfully. "We might have to do a little magical manipulation tonight."

Jade grimaced. "Now, girls, back off and whatever you do, don't tell Blake anything about Ray. I don't want him to know."

"Why not?" Both girls chorused in unison.

"Because it's my private business, that's why. Anyway, you won't get anywhere with Blake. He's told me I annoy the crap out of him. So, sorry to dash your plans. Besides, he'll have his mother with him tonight."

"Don't worry, I'll get Jack to keep her occupied. Yes, darlings, this is going to

be a very interesting evening."

Lara and Katie grinned at each other while Jade heaved a huge sigh. Who needed enemies with best friends like these two?

## Chapter Five

"I wish you had given me more warning that we were going to dine with royalty," Eve Jordan chivvied her eldest son as they sat in the back of a limousine taking them across the city to North Adelaide.

"I gave you as much warning as I could, Ma. Besides, when Jade rang she explained that it wasn't a too formal affair."

Blake groaned inwardly and ran a finger around the collar of his shirt and then adjusted his tie. This really wasn't his scene and if he'd thought a bit faster, he would have politely refused Jack's invitation. But his mother had been freaking out with excitement, pulling all her dresses from her wardrobe and working herself into an absolute frenzy about this evening. Even now she wasn't happy with her appearance, touching her silver blonde hair with a nervous hand.

"You look lovely, Ma. I'm proud of you."

She turned and gave him a warm smile, and he was glad he had said it. In her mid-sixties, she was still a beautiful woman, tall and elegant with inordinately good fashion sense. Even though she had lived in Texas since she was twenty-five years old and had met and married Bill Jordan there, she still had an Australian accent and loved visiting her home city of Adelaide whenever she could. Buying Stony Creek had created just the opportunity for her to spend more time in her homeland.

Blake loved and admired his mother very much, knowing how she had struggled to bring up her three sons after Bill, the boys father, had been thrown from a bronco horse and killed fifteen years ago. Blake had been twenty-one then and had taken charge of the business to be joined by his younger brothers, Ethan and Liam, when they had finished school.

"I can't believe that you haven't heard of the Princess, Blake. Sometimes I don't know where your head is at."

Giving a wry smile, Blake listened to his mother raving on about Lara and Jack's wedding which, it appeared, the whole world knew about but him.

"Fancy your staff member being the best friend of a Princess? Quite remarkable."

"Ma, she's called Jade. Jade Oliver and she's our company accountant." Blake felt a sudden need to protect Jade from any likely criticisms and wondered why.

"An accountant. My, what a clever young woman. Is she pretty?"

He slanted a glance at Eve. Here we go. Match-making again. "Yeah, she's pretty. She's also kinda of ...unusual, so don't be surprised at what she might say." There, that should just about cover it, he hoped.

Eve straightened her silk dress carefully over her knees. "I will be so happy when you boys get married and give me grandchildren, Blake."

"I've been married."

"Yes, and for how long was that? Only a year and now you're divorced. It's such a shame. Rose is very keen to get back with you, son. She rings me often and asks after you every time. She's modeling in Dallas at the moment."

"She doesn't need to work. She managed to claim a big enough settlement to never have to work again." Jeez! I sound bitter.

"I think she would gladly have forfeited it all to stay with you."

"I don't want to know this, Ma. It's Ethan and Liam's turn to take the plunge next. Perhaps they'll make a better go of it."

He was relieved when the limousine drew up outside a large town house in a secluded street overlooking a park. He should be used to his mother's inquisitions by now and most times it rolled off him like water off a duck's back. But, tonight was different. He was uncomfortable entering this new world. Jade's world? Or was she a woman of the Outback? For some reason, he hoped the latter.

As they were ushered into the entrance hall the first person to greet them was Jack Lucas. Blake shook hands with him and that feeling of rapport he'd felt for this man when they had spoken on the phone fell into place as they grinned at each other.

They must have been almost the last ones to arrive for as Jack showed them into the study, there appeared to be people everywhere. While he got them a drink, Blake looked around for Jade and then suddenly there she was at his side ... and she took his breath away.

Completely.

In a short, black strapless dress that clung seductively to her slender curves and wearing some sort of cream-colored flower in her hair. Her skin glowed and her lips glistened with a soft pink gloss that he had an instant urge to taste and kiss. Instead he straightened the knot in his tie once again.

"Hi boss, you're looking pretty cool," she said, her eyes giving him a cheeky all over examination.

He found his voice. "You look beautiful," he murmured so that only she could hear and was rewarded by a soft blush rising beneath her magnolia skin. She is shy beneath all that bravado, he realized and it made him want her more.

"Introduce me, Blake," his mother reminded him.

Goddamnit! He was losing it. For a few seconds he'd forgotten where he was and who he was with as he had lost himself in the depths of Jade's melting brown eyes. "Ma, this is Stony Creek's accountant Jade Oliver. Jade, my mother Eve Jordan."

Eve took charge and shook the hand of this fascinating creature that seemed to have be-dazzled her son. "I'm very pleased to meet you, my dear."

Jade moved closer holding Eve's hand in both of hers. "All About Eve—lovely black and white movie. Did you see it?"

"Now, Jade." Blake growled a warning and she covered her mouth with a dainty hand as she rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Sorry, let's start again. Hello, Mrs. Jordan," she beamed, once again holding Eve's hand in hers. "It's so wonderful that you're here. Come and meet Lara."

Before Blake could stop her, Jade had linked her arm in Eve's and was rushing her across the room, dodging people in their path as they went.

"That's Jade for you, mate," a voice said in his ear and he turned to meet Jack's amused expression.

"I did warn my mother that Jade was unusual," Blake replied, laughing and feeling comfortable in the presence of this man.

"Come on, we may as well join your mother so you can meet my wife, then I'll introduce you to some of the other guests."

They reached Lara just as Eve performed a deep and rather wobbly curtsy to her. Lara instantly bent forward, grasping the older woman's elbows and effectively making light of what could have been an embarrassing moment. Blake saw Jade's mouth twitch as she endeavored to be serious and as she looked up at him, he couldn't resist giving her a wink. You're not the only one who can be wicked, little lady.

"So, you are Blake Jordan." He reluctantly turned from Jade to look into the



beautiful, amused eyes of Lara Lucas.

"Princess," he acknowledged and with a bow of his head, bent and kissed her hand.

"How gallant. I'm impressed."

"Not such a cowboy as you imagined?"

"Quite the reverse."

"I trust you have forgiven me for mixing you up with Princess Leia?" Blake returned, enjoying the witty exchange.

"Absolutely. Besides, you being Jade's new boss I have to be a little forgiving, don't I?"

"Not necessarily. Jade seems to say exactly what she likes and doesn't take a great deal of notice of me."

Lara burst out laughing. "I so agree, Blake. It will be some man who can tame my best friend, I can tell you. Don't you think she looks lovely tonight?"

Blake tracked Jade now half way across the room being kissed exuberantly on either cheek by a tall, blond-haired man. "I think she looks *very* lovely. Who's the guy with her?"

Lara glanced at the couple and then, lowering her voice said "Oh, that's Paul Sinclair. He's a lawyer and Jade's ex."

"Her ex-husband?" Blake felt the blood draining from his face.

"Ex-boyfriend, that is. They were quite an item for a while and Paul never really got over her. So, who knows? There could be a rekindling of a love affair tonight. Please excuse me. I'll see you at dinner."

Lara moved away, leaving Blake staring at Jade and willing her to walk away from that octopus bastard. He gritted his teeth as Paul slipped an arm around Jade's tiny waist, pulling her to his side.

"Blake, let me introduce you to the remaining one of the trio. This is Doctor Katie Jones." Jack effectively broke into Blake's evil thoughts and he turned to shake hands with the third Princess.

\* \* \* \*

Jade's energy was flagging and she had begun to pick at her main course of chicken with mustard sauce, one of her favorites. She put it down to her exhausting day shopping with Blake. He disliked shopping? She *loathed* it. But they had certainly achieved what they had set out to do and it felt to her as if they had bought the whole store. She had to give it to Blake. He was well organized. They had started on the top floor in the Manchester Department and worked their way down with Blake making instant decisions "Yes, we'll have that and that and that," with the manager, his assistant and Jade scurrying behind him. Occasionally he had consulted the list, which Jade clutched in her little hot hand but otherwise it was go man--go!

Jade had felt her excitement build as she envisaged the new furniture, carpets and fittings in the old homestead. Blake seemed to be determined to make Stony Creek a show place for his mother to live. It used to be lovely when her own mother was alive, she reflected, pushing a piece of broccoli aimlessly around the plate, but Elizabeth had no interest in its upkeep and although she had lived there with Tom for seven years, Jade could tell that Elizabeth felt no affection, no love for the place. She understood it in a way. After all, it was her mother's home, not Elizabeth's.

She and Blake had finished their shopping spree by four o'clock and she had dropped him outside his mother's swanky rental house in the leafy eastern suburb of Burnside. They had said little on the drive from the city and Jade had guessed that Blake must be tired, as well. She couldn't help but notice his tension when they had

first arrived in Adelaide. He'd looked pale beneath his tan and his whole body had been tense. She had wanted to ask him if he was okay but had decided against it, not wanting to have her head bitten off ... again.

"More wine, Jade?" Paul Sinclair leaned over her and topped up her wine glass.

That was another thing. She had been so cranky when she had discovered that Lara had placed Paul next to her. Lara sat at the head of the long, beautiful dining table with Blake on one side of her and Jade on the other. To Blake's right was that bloody awful Mia Rice-Smith draping herself all over him. Jack was hosting the other end of the table with Katie and Eve on either side of him. She could hear Eve laughing as she enjoyed the fuss Jack was making over her.

"You are such a bitch," Jade had whispered to Lara as they had sat down and she realized Paul was next to her.

"Katie and I planned it while you were in the shower. Don't worry, there's method in our madness, dear Jade," Lara replied equally as softly. "Besides, you couldn't care less about Paul, could you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Blake doesn't know that." Lara's smile was pure smirk. "He's heavenly, darling. Well worth going after."

"For God's sake, Lara. I told you that I annoy the hell out of him."

"He told me he thinks you're beautiful."

"Only because you lent me your designer dress to wear and a bloody great flower to stick in my ear."

"Shh. Just enjoy yourself." Lara ended the conversation, turning to Blake with a wide smile.

So, Jade had plodded through the appetizer, entrée and now the main course with Paul rabbiting on about the major court cases he was handling while she pretended to be interested. She kept glancing surreptitiously at Blake, who didn't look at her once. He is too busy flirting with Lara and that skinny bird Mia. Flirty, flirty, flirty. How come he can indulge in all of those rubbishy innuendoes when with me he can only mumble and mutter and grizzle? Huh! You snake in the grass in your super Armani suit. Even if you said I was beautiful, you also said that to Lara and Katie and that dreadful hyphenated Mia person.

"You're not being very friendly, Jade. I thought we would have lots to talk about. After all, we had discussed getting married."

Paul's drinking too much. That's all I need.

"We did *not* discuss that," she replied sharply. "You were too busy screwing other women to have the time for that kind of conversation."

"You were always the one with the acid tongue, darling. That's what I've missed about you. I've also missed the fantastic sex we used to have." Paul rubbed his finger along her arm and she quickly withdrew it. Leaning closer so the others wouldn't hear she said, "Sex with you was more boring than watching grass grow."

Paul's face tightened with annoyance, but Jade decided she didn't care. He was a jerk and she wasn't going to let him spoil her evening. It was as they were eating dessert that Paul really started to overstep the mark. Jade loved dessert and was tucking into her chocolate mousse with luscious strawberries, when she felt Paul's hand on her knee.

She froze. What the hell did he think he was doing? "Take your hand away or I'll make a scene," she hissed.

Paul smiled indulgently and moved his hand along the inside of her thigh,

stroking her soft skin. "You wouldn't do that, Jade. You wouldn't spoil the party for your best friends. Why don't you relax and enjoy it. No one will know," he said silkily, his hand now reaching the edge of her lace panties. Jade glanced across at Blake. He was busy talking to Lara. In fact, everyone was busy and Paul was right, she wouldn't cause a scene ... he would.

Under the table she balled the hand nearest to Paul and just as he placed a strawberry into his mouth, thumped down as hard as she could on to his crown jewels. The reaction was a lot more that she could have hoped for as Paul choked, tried to swallow, his eyes streaming and then waving his hands in the air unable to speak as Lara, all concern, asked him if he was alright.

"He's fine," Jade said cheerfully giving Paul a huge slap between his shoulder blades. "Just trying to do too many things at once, weren't you, mate?"

Eyes still watering, Paul excused himself, mumbling that he was going to the rest room. Jade continued to eat her dessert as if nothing had happened although, glancing at Blake for the umpteenth time, she found he was looking at her with a very thoughtful expression. Smiling disarmingly, she took a sip of wine, giving herself top marks for bouncing that idiot. Now, if it had been Blake sliding his hand along my thigh, it could have been different. Owwww, I feel a hot flush coming over me just thinking about it.

As the dishes were removed and the champagne poured, Jack stood up and tapped on a glass to claim everyone's attention.

"Friends, this is an informal gathering and you'll probably be glad to know that this is the one and only speech, even though I intend to talk for a couple of hours," he joked, his blue eyes resting lovingly on his wife's face.

Crikey, what a spunk he is and he and Lara are so crazy about each other. Jade watched as Jack escorted Katie to this end of the table. Then she looked at Blake again. His eyes were downcast, his gaze still thoughtful as he gently stroked the stem of his wine glass with long, elegant fingers. Oh-oh, you are even more spunky, Blake Jordan. Stroke *me*, stroke *me*, she wanted to yell.

"Jade!"

She jumped as she realized Jack was waiting for her to come and stand next to her two friends.

"Sorry, I was day-dreaming," she murmured as the three clasped hands, Lara standing in the center of them.

"We noticed," Lara said with a knowing look.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is Lara's and my pleasure to invite you here tonight," Jack began. "Unfortunately, we don't meet often enough but that doesn't mean we need to lose contact." His voice was deep and melodious and resounded around the room as the dinner guests waited expectantly.

"Most of you are long time friends from uni days and it's great to catch up, particularly for these three lovely ladies beside me. We also welcome visitors from Texas into our family of friends, being Blake Jordan and his mother Eve. We hope to see you often in the future."

There was enthusiastic applause, which Blake acknowledged with a polite nod of his head. Jade avidly studied his classic profile. He was so calm, so laid back she almost wished he'd fall out of his chair to upset the works. Still, he hadn't looked so cool when he'd stared at her in her lilac sweater earlier that day, she thought with a lift of her mouth. That had really rocked him. She tuned into what Jack was saying.

"The real reason we are here is to salute three young women who have been best friends since they started boarding school here in Adelaide at the tender age of

eleven. Now, even though they have departed in different directions, they still stick together like glue and believe me, I know the number of emails, texts, and phone calls that spin around the globe between them.

"Friends, the champagne has been poured and I would like you to raise your glasses to congratulate firstly Doctor Katie Jones, who has accepted a position as a scientist with one of South Australia's leading wineries, Jade Oliver, who has moved north again to work as the accountant for her beloved Stony Creek Station and finally, to my Lara, who not only has made me the happiest man alive by marrying me, but now tells me she is expecting our baby. Join me in a toast to the Three Princesses."

There was a huge noise as everyone stood and repeated the toast, many people clapping and cheering. Jade's eyes filled with tears at the pride in Jack's voice as the three friends hugged each other and then drew Jack into their tight circle.

Two hours later and the party was starting to wind down. Jade had talked herself hoarse catching up with uni friends, talking to Eve, to Katie, and even to Paul, who had apologized for his behavior, which she magnanimously accepted. In fact, she had talked to everyone but Blake and she felt madder by the moment as he danced with every woman except her.

She could see him now standing at the bar talking with Jack, so this was her chance. She was going to make a move on him, bugger it. Making her way through the dancers, she stood boldly in front of the two men.

"Blake, unfortunately the band's not playing a Ho-Down, but would you like to dance with me?" Her heart was pounding. Please say yes, *please*.

Placing his drink on the bar, Blake nodded to Jack and then, placing his hand on her arm, led her on to the tiny, crowded dance floor. Jade closed her eyes as his arms came around her and she leaned against his hard body. The music was slow and funky and they swayed gently together, neither of them speaking. Jade inhaled the subtle smell of his after-shave and caressed the fine texture of his jacket where her hand rested on his shoulder. She felt almost giddy with ecstasy as Blake rested his cheek against her hair. Don't speak, idiot girl. Just hold on to this moment--this precious moment.

Then she ruined it all. "I bet you dance like this with all the girls," she teased, lifting her head to look at him. His eyes had been sexy and slumberous. Now they were inquisitive--no, change that to impatient.

"I could say the same about you and the men you've been flirting with."

"Nah! I don't flirt. I just talk," she scoffed.

"I'm interested to know what happened between you and that guy Sinclair at dinner. I noticed he's left now."

Jade grinned. If I reach up a little I could kiss his dimple. "He was getting a bit creepy so I ... I whopped him one where it hurts men the most."

Hell, the dimple has disappeared. He's cranky.

"You should have let me know, Jade. That sort of behavior is not acceptable."

"I can look after myself, boss," she replied, with a nonchalant shrug.

"I'm not so sure that you can." He pulled her closer and she could feel his thighs and hips pressing against her. "You're not seeing him tomorrow, are you?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Only, my mother wondered if you would like to come for lunch."

Shit! Trust that to happen. Why did All About Eve have to suggest that when Jade couldn't possibly go. "I'm sorry, Blake but I told you that I'm tied up tomorrow but I can come a little earlier on the way to the airport if you like."

His face was expressionless. "Doesn't matter to me, it was Eve's invitation, not

mine."

Bastard! He couldn't care less about me. He stepped away as the dance finished.

"The band is packing up," he said, leading her to the bar. "I'd better get Ma home."

Jade stood where she was as, with a great deal of noise, the guests said their goodbyes. She felt at a loss, realizing she had stuffed up with Blake. Why couldn't she have been natural with him instead of acting like a love-sick, stupid over-the-top bimbo? She moved closer to Lara and Jack where they stood in the entrance hall saying an enthusiastic goodbye to the Jordans.

Lara quickly placed a white fake fur cloak around Jade's shoulders. "It's cold outside but you should go and see your guests off the premises," she said, gently pushing Jade after the other two. Blake helped his mother into the waiting car and Jade waved to her before turning to Blake.

"I hope you enjoyed it," she said, suddenly shy.

Blake stared at her for what seemed like an eternity but was a few seconds.

"I know. I look like Little White Riding Hood." She laughed. "This is Lara's cloak."

Stepping close, Blake pulled the hood up over her head, protecting her from the cold air, and then, cradling her face between his hands, he said "Oliver ... you talk too much." His mouth closed over hers, and as his tongue traced the fullness of her lips, shivers of desire raced through her as she allowed him entry, pressing closer to him.

He drew back and said softly "Remember Jade, that whoever you are tied up with tomorrow, at the end of the day you're coming home with me."

He stepped into the car and it swept away, leaving Jade standing on the pavement staring after it with a look of amazement on her flushed face.

"Papa, can you hear me?" she whispered to the night sky. "Papa, I've fallen in love."

## Chapter Six

"Blake was absolutely charming and I'm sure he is just right for Jade." Lara bit into a piece of toast as she spoke. The three women and Jack were eating breakfast in the modern, comfortable kitchen the morning after the party. At least the women were eating and talking, Jade noted, while Jack was hidden behind his paper.

"I was watching him closely and, yes, he is charming, but I don't know how you can say that he's right for Jade," Katie retorted.

"Didn't you see the way he kept looking at her throughout the dinner and how closely he held her when they were dancing? It was *so* romantic." Sighing, Lara delicately sipped her herbal tea.

Time to say something, Jade decided. "Look, please stop match-making, you guys. I've told you that Blake is immune to me. I irritate him."

But, little do you know that he kissed me. So there!

Katie jumped in. "Then if you irritate him, he's not immune, Jade. I think he's gradually feeling his way with you."

"Whoo-hoo, I should be so lucky." To hide her embarrassment, Jade made light of Katie's comment and wished they would change the topic of conversation. Contrary to what they thought, she wasn't a blabber mouth and had decided not to tell them about the kiss Blake had given her, or his parting remark. That was her precious secret to keep and nurture. If only she knew what he wanted from her. Were they destined to have an affair? Or something more permanent? Or more likely a quick bang and then 'goodbye, Jade'. After all, they had only known each other a week for goodness sake! He certainly hadn't been happy about the Paul Sinclair episode and had also acted rather possessively about today, probably thinking she was meeting up with a male friend. She was--her little brother.

"I don't know how long he's been divorced, but he could be woman shy, particularly if he was in a ghastly marriage," Lara continued with her in-depth analysis and then hesitated as Jack slowly lowered his paper, giving her a cool glance.

"If it will satisfy your extraordinary curiosity, Blake Jordan is only recently divorced," he said, pointedly. "He doesn't appear to have any hang ups about women from my brief conversations with him last night, but I would venture a guess that he's a loner. He seems intent on making a success of his business and taking care of his mother."

Jack paused and took a swallow of coffee well aware that he was under the scrutiny of three pairs of wide eyes.

"Nevertheless," he continued. "The man's no fool and I'm sure he finds Jade very attractive. I mean, who wouldn't?"

Jade pretended to pat down a blush rising in her cheeks.

"But Katie, and especially you Lara, need to leave well alone."

Lara's green eyes sparked with annoyance. "Are you telling us off, Jack Lucas?"

"Yes, I am. Jade has been through a tough time but she's managing okay and she knows we are here if she needs us. For all her wackiness, she has a good head on her shoulders."

Wackie? Jade wasn't sure she liked that.

"It shouldn't matter if Jade doesn't find her true love in Blake," Jack went on. Yes, it does.

"And it shouldn't matter if Jade *never* gets married and has kids."

Yes, it does.

Jack's eyes softened as they caressed his wife's crest-fallen face. "But, don't manipulate her, Lara. I'm sure that one day a handsome white knight will come along on his white charger and rescue our Princess Jade, and that knight may very well be Blake, but if it doesn't happen, so be it."

Jade took in the expressions on her friends' faces. Wow, Jack certainly didn't believe in beating around the bush. She wondered just what he and Blake had discussed last night in their quiet moments together to warrant such a vehement response. She should say something in support of her friends.

"Jack, it's okay. I appreciate Lara and Katie's comments, I really do."

Lara touched her arm. "Jack's right. I *was* trying to be manipulative. I'm sorry, Jade."

Kissing both women on the cheek, Jade said cheekily "Do you know what, Lara, I *love* your husband and I might just run off with him and bugger Blake Jordan."

Their spontaneous laughter broke the slight tension in the air and Jack, after giving his wife a lingering kiss, offered to brew them another pot of coffee before disappearing to make some phone calls.

"There are two sets of keys to this house, one for each of you," Lara said, as they cleared the breakfast things. "Jack and I want you both to use this place as your own any time you're in Adelaide. You have the alarm code, so you can come and go as you please, just let each other know on the email and copy me in."

"That is so kind of you," Katie responded. "Are the two of you going away again?"

"Yes. Jack has business in Japan next week so we are going over there and then he is taking me to China for a little holiday. I've always wanted to go there."

"Do you think you should be traveling so much?" Jade's expression reflected her anxiety for Lara and the baby now growing inside of her.

"Don't worry, Jack has planned everything. After China, we are returning to Australia and living at Port Margaret for a few months. Then a few weeks before the birth, we're going to Challoner. My mother insists the baby is born there."

Katie frowned. "Does Jack mind that?"

"Heavens, no. He gets on very well with my parents and he understands how excited our whole country is about welcoming a new Prince or Princess."

\* \* \* \*

It was ten o'clock as Jade made her way along the pristine corridors of The Woodlands Private Hospital a few kilometers away from North Adelaide. She had told Ray that she would be there at ten thirty but realized that she couldn't wait any longer. She desperately wanted to see her little brother and hold him close and tell him how much she missed him.

After bidding her friends an affectionate farewell and promising to keep in contact, she had driven to the city to buy Ray the latest Harry Potter book, which she knew he wanted. Also, she indulged him with three DVDs, even though she could ill afford it and Lara and Jack had loaded him with gifts the previous day.

The door to Ray's room was open and she raced in, her anxious face studying Ray where he lay in bed with his eyes closed. Placing her parcels on the bedside cabinet, she quietly sat on the edge of the bed and reached for his small hand, holding it against her cheek. Ray opened his eyes and grinned when he saw her.

"You're early, Sis," he breathed, his speaking punctuated by regular pauses as the ventilator controlled the movement of his chest.

"I couldn't wait to see ya, tiger." Jade bent over, managing to give him a hug and several kisses.

"Stop it, Jade. Mary might see."

"Oh, Mary's still your favorite nurse, is she?" Jade teased. "Does she always download all my emails?"

"Yeah, she's great. And she says I'm her best patient even if I do get grumpy sometimes."

Feeling tears prickling the back of her eyes, Jade rummaged through the packages, showing Ray what she had brought him. His delight was infectious and they giggled as Jade slipped the DVD of *Antz* into the player set up opposite Ray's bed.

"I *love* this movie," Ray sighed with pleasure.

"So do I," Jade said, copying his sigh.

"Yesterday Lara and Jack brought me *The Incredible Hulk*. That's really cool."

"Yes, well they *are* cool," Jade replied, adjusting Ray's bed so he was tilted slightly.

As he watched the movie, she glanced around the private room. It was costing heaps to keep Ray here, but it was worth every cent, she decided. The staff had allowed Jade to make the room a home-away-from-home with Ray's favorite posters hanging on every wall, shelves full of books and movies, and a whole lot of his toys and games scattered around.

A computer sat to one side and it was on this that Ray received her email messages and funny jokes. The phone by his bed had to be held to his ear by one of the staff whenever she rang and she blessed them for their tender care and patience in looking after her brother.

The Guillain-Barre Syndrome was taking its toll on Ray's young and vulnerable body. He had lost weight and his brown eyes looked huge in his small face, with his thatch of dark hair sticking up on end at the moment. Taking up much of the space by the bed were various monitors tracking Ray's condition with the ventilator constantly pushing Ray's chest up and down making a steady whooshing noise as it did so.

Jade held Ray's hand and turned to watch the movie, wondering again why this rotten illness should strike her brother down. He had only been two years old when their mother had died of cancer and he barely remembered her. In the year following her death Jade, at fifteen, had become Ray's substitute mother, spending as much of her time as she could with him. Then her dad had met Elizabeth and Jade had felt some relief that Ray would have a real mother to care for him again.

To give Elizabeth her due, she had seemed to care about the little boy, particularly in the first few years, although when Jade had been abused verbally and physically by Elizabeth, she was afraid that Ray would suffer the same kind of cruelty. Frantically, she would question Ray to make sure he was okay and was relieved when he explained that Elizabeth was kind to him.

When Ray was nine, like Jade, he'd been sent to an exclusive boarding school in Adelaide. Jade, who was then at uni, would visit him often during term time. The most hurtful thing was trying to understand why, after Elizabeth and her father separated, Elizabeth never came to visit Ray, particularly now, when he was so sick. His step-mother hadn't wanted custody of him when Tom died and the courts had agreed that Jade should be appointed Ray's legal guardian. He was now her



responsibility and she would never let him down. Never!

"Jade?"

Dismissing these dark thoughts, she turned to the person she loved most in the world. "Yes, little buddy?"

"Ten boys from my class visited me on Friday."

"Yes, I can see all the cards they brought. That was really great of them."

"But, Mr. Carmichael came, as well." Ray rolled his eyes and Jade laughed. She had arranged with the school for private tuition three times a week for Ray and Jade knew that Mr. Carmichael was a sympathetic and clever teacher, but it didn't stop Ray from grizzling.

"Never mind. Just remember you'll be smarter than all your mates when you go back to school." She thought of the two huge accounts she had recently received for school fees and Carmichael's salary. Jeez, how am I going to pay them? If I don't find dad's opal mine, I may have to take out a bank loan. But, even that could prove difficult. I have no collateral and if I lose my job ....

"When will I be able to go back to school?"

Jade swallowed. Over the past few weeks, Ray had asked this question repeatedly and it was getting harder and harder to answer. "I don't know yet, Ray. Tomorrow I'm phoning your doctor but last week when I rang he said you were improving. He thinks that soon you'll be able to breathe on your own and they will take you off the ventilator. Then, we know you're on the mend." She made a funny face, trying to make him laugh as she squeezed his arm.

"I miss you, Jade."

"Me too, Braveheart."

"Why have you got to work up at the station? It's so far away."

"I know. It was the only work I could get and we need the money, mate."

Jade had decided not to tell Ray about her father's legacy. It would only give him false hope, and she still had to find the mine and stake her claim.

"I miss dad, too." Ray's bottom lip trembled and Jade cursed the tears that instantly welled in her eyes as she hugged him close.

"So do I, sweetie. But it won't be long before I make enough money and I can move back here. We'll set up our own place and go to every footy match and watch terrible movies together." She looked down at him and was rewarded with a watery grin.

"Yeah, I'd like that," he replied.

\* \* \* \*

Jade felt emotionally drained as she drove towards Eve Jordan's house in the eastern suburbs to pick up Blake. Every time she visited Ray she came away with this awful sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as she tried to recover from the strain of being positive and cheerful for his sake.

She banged her hand on the steering wheel, feeling only marginally better after shouting a few angry swear words at no one in particular. It was just on three o'clock and she knew Blake's flight plan was scheduled for take off at four thirty so she was in plenty of time.

When she knocked on the door, Eve opened it and beckoned her in. "I have brewed the coffee, Jade dear," she said, leading the way into a charming, fully-furnished lounge room.

Jade waited until they had sat in the comfortable arm chairs and Eve had poured her a coffee before she asked, "Where's Blake? We will have to leave for the airport soon."

Sharp, too sharp Jade. But I don't feel like having a polite cup of coffee when I've just left my kid brother paralyzed and crying his eyes out.

"He's making a few phone calls and won't be long, but I thought we could use these few minutes to have a nice friendly chat."

Oh-oh. Take the initiative, Jade. You don't know whether she is going to put you on the spot or not.

"That will be nice. Tell me, Eve, it puzzles me why you haven't involved yourself in the refurbishment of the homestead. I would think you'd enjoy picking the colors and furnishings."

Good one.

"Heaven's, no. I've had my share of that back in Texas, dear. Its high time Blake took on that role instead of riding the range, so to speak. Besides, he has you to help him and you strike me as being imminently sensible."

"Well, thanks but Blake is paying me to do it as part of my job."

"And so he should." Eve replaced her cup into its saucer. "Blake tells me that the new things will arrive within the next couple of weeks so I will come up after that."

"Great. You'll love Stony Creek, Eve. It's going to look fantastic with a new paint job and all of the things we've ordered."

A strange look came over Eve's face. Jade couldn't describe it--sort of cunning?

"I'm not staying long, Jade dear. A few weeks and then I shall fly to Texas to visit my other sons."

"Oh, when will you be back?"

"Perhaps in January, but I shall be staying here. Blake is considering buying this place for me. You see, coincidentally its right next door to one of my oldest and dearest friends. I love it here."

Jade glanced at her watch. Eve was being weird but at least Jade was finding out what was happening seeing Blake didn't feel inclined to tell her. "It sounds nice. I misunderstood. I thought Blake was doing the place up especially for you."

"No dear. Not at all. Ah, here he comes now. Time for a cuppa, son?"

Blake strolled in, more handsome than ever in a black sweat shirt and jeans. He was in the process of pulling on his warm cowboy jacket and smiled at Jade as he grabbed a cup of coffee from his mother, swallowing it in one gulp. Jade looked down, not wanting him to read her thoughts, which were very wicked at that moment.

"Sorry for the hold up. We'd better go, Jade. I don't want to be too late getting back."

Eve kissed her son on both cheeks and then did the same to Jade, much to her surprise. "Exciting times ahead," she whispered, making Jade wonder what the hell she meant.

\* \* \* \*

Jade adjusted her head phones as they took off from Adelaide airport's small plane terminal. Blake had checked the clearance with the control tower and now they were soaring through the sky into the late afternoon sunshine.

She sat back in her seat and listened to the friendly, but professional exchange between Blake and the controller. If it hadn't been for her terrible worries about Ray, she would be happy. She was with Blake and they were going home. Yes, very happy. She sang to herself 'Come fly with me, let's fly, let's fly away' as Blake leveled the plane and adjusted some of the instruments.

Although he had spoken little to her on the drive to the airport, she could sense

that, like her, he was relaxed and pleased to be going home. Still, they had to talk about something, didn't they? Otherwise she would burst.

"Did you enjoy last night's party?"

"Yep."

"I think Lara and Jack liked you very much."

"They're nice people."

"Katie really liked you, too."

"Yep."

Here goes, ready or not. "Do you think we should have an affair?"

## Chapter Seven

Holy Toledo, how the hell did he answer this one? Blake was so shocked by Jade's question that he was sure he had let the plane's nose dip. Adjusting the slight bounce, he gripped the joy stick for dear life and, clearing his throat, risked a glance at the astonishing woman at his side. He felt as confused as a cow on Astroturf as he took in her wide eyes and lips the color of pink roses that would taste like the sweetest honey. He knew. He had tasted them last night.

"What caused you to ask me that, Jade?" Better do a little neat tap-dancing. She shrugged. "I thought it would be good for us. Kind of clear the air."

"I'm not into stealing other guys' women." It was time to do some probing, buddy boy.

"I'm not going with anyone, Blake." She sounded mighty puzzled.

"Sinclair?"

"No! I finished with him over a year ago."

"Well, what about this man you spent the day with today?"

There was silence except for the noise of the engines. Blake held his breath.

"That's my brother, Ray. He's eleven and at boarding school in the city. I was with him. He's the reason I would like to go to Adelaide every other week-end."

Blake wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead. Her kid brother, for Christ's sake, and he'd been letting vicious attacks of jealousy gnaw at him all day imagining what she might be doing with some guy.

"By an affair, I guess you mean have sex?" If she could be blunt so could he ... and then some.

Jade fidgeted nervously in her seat and Blake realized he'd gained control. She wasn't as self-assured as she made out.

"I know it sounds pretty crass when you put it in that way and I know you didn't like me at first but ...but over these past few days, and I could be quite wrong so forgive me if I am, but I thought you had come to quite like me. Well, fancy me, really. I mean, you kissed me last night and it was such a nice kiss ... sexy, I guess and it got me thinking ...."

Blake held up his hand. "Stop it, Jade. You're gabbling."

"I know. I can't help it. I haven't asked a man to have an affair before and I'm nervous."

He placed a hand on her arm and felt a tremor go through her. She was something else, this girl. He couldn't think straight, his brain spinning from her suggestion. "Look, this isn't the best time to talk about such matters." He deliberately made his tone soothing. "How about we discuss it after dinner tonight over a drink?"

"Okay." Jade's voice was subdued. I've hurt her feelings but what else can I say, he thought. She has me totally dumbfounded. I need to think.

\* \* \* \*

"There you go."

Jade shook her head. "I had a scotch before dinner."

"I'm offering you another one," he said, holding the glass in front of her.

She took it reluctantly. This was Blake's way of softening the blow. Get me drunk and then I won't hurt so much when he turns me down.

"Come and sit here." Instead of his usual arm chair, her dad's chair, he had decided to sit on the equally dilapidated sofa. He patted the space next to him and she gingerly perched on the edge of the seat. He looks as relaxed as all hell, she thought, as he stretched that long, lean, gorgeous, made-for-sex body and sipped a brandy.

"I didn't know you were a brandy man?" Inane remark but at least it was something. Perhaps she could put on the television. Anything to stop her from talking.

"Sit back, Jade. I'm not going to attack you."

More's the pity. She curled into the corner of the sofa as far away as she could get from him and waited, wondering what he was going to say. She knew she had shocked the living daylights out of him by her proposition and if she hadn't been so crazy for him, she would have handled everything so much better. She would have been alluring and sex-goddess-like, working Blake into such a lather of erotic need that he would have yelled, "Yes, yes, I want you, my beautiful, magnificent Princess. Let me ravish you in front of the fire on this moth-eaten old carpet." But, she wasn't that smart.

"Tell me again why you would like us to have an affair?"

"It's a sex thing, I guess. You're an attractive man and we're almost alone here. It could help our working relationship." Swallow the whisky. I wish it was a double with no coke, just ice.

"Are you promiscuous, Jade?"

"No!" It was her turn to be shocked.

"When did you last have a casual affair?"

"I ...I haven't had one."

"Sinclair?"

"I was with him for a year. I thought we might eventually get married."

"And you didn't because he was unfaithful. He let you down."

"Who told you that?"

"Jack."

Bloody Jack. She knew he and Blake had been discussing her private life. "What else did he tell you?"

"Not much. Just to make sure I didn't hurt you." Blake shifted slightly, moving closer.

"Huh. Ever since Jack married Lara he's taken over the role of the big protector for Katie and me."

"Don't knock it. If I knew you were going around propositioning strange men, I'd feel protective too."

Jade squished more tightly into her corner. "As I said this is the first time I've ever done anything like this. Besides, you're not strange--at least, I don't think so. You are not into kinky sex, are you?"

Blake roared with laughter and she almost drooled watching the light in his eyes and those dimples dimpling in his cheeks. He had two dimples. I only noticed one before. How fascinating.

"No. I don't think you would call it kinky," he said and then his face grew serious as he caught her hand in his, holding it tenderly and soothing his fingers over her soft skin. "Jade, it's no use denying that I'm attracted to you, you're a lovely young woman but ...."

"Have you had casual affairs?" she broke in, anything to stop him saying the inevitable.

"Well, a couple. I'm not into one night stands but neither relationship lasted more than a few weeks, so I guess you could call them casual."

"Were you unfaithful to your wife?"

His face hardened and the grip on her hand tightened. "No. I don't do unfaithful."

Whoops, sensitive area.

"The difference is that I walked away from those casual affairs without either of us getting burnt. That wouldn't happen with us."

She leaned forward, her shoulder touching his. This was more like it. "Why? Do you have deeper feelings for me?"

"It's *you* I'm worried about. You know very well that with most men it's the sex thing. They enjoy a good fuck and don't get emotionally involved."

"Owwh! You said *fuck*," she whispered in awe.

Blake smiled and lifted her hand to his lips. So romantic, my shining White Knight.

"What I'm trying to say, if you'll stop flapping your gums for a second, is this. As your employer I have a serious responsibility to take care of and protect you. If we have an affair, when it reaches its conclusion, and it will, I will shrug and walk away. You, on the other hand, will be angry and hurt. Our working relationship will be angry and you will move back to Adelaide hating my guts--and probably will be turned off men for life."

Jade moved even closer, leaning into his chest as she stared into his dark, brooding eyes. "Are you saying I will turn into a lesbian?" she queried with a teasing smile.

"You know I'm not."

"What you *are* saying is that I'm more vulnerable than you and will get emotionally involved, while you'll enjoy my body without feeling any other attachment to me?"

He frowned and touched her cheek with his hand. "Not you and me as much as most males and females. It's the way we're made--the way our hormones work."

She was losing the battle. Perhaps one last try. "We could time our affair like my job, review it after three months. Or, it's actually two point three months now," she added.

Blake shook his head. "No, Jade. I may kick myself for turning down such a generous offer but ...no."

"I'm on the pill and I'm very healthy. You won't need to worry about protection."

"How come you're on the pill?" Suspicion colored his voice. Wrong thing to say, Jade.

"Not because of what you're thinking. I have painful periods and the doctor prescribes them to help me."

Too late. She'd lost.

He kissed her in what she was sure was supposed to be a comforting peck. Well, hold on to your gun, cowboy, because here I am. She responded to his gentle kiss by threading her fingers through his thick hair and kissing him with an urgency that shocked even her. Blood pounded in her brain and her emotions whirled and skidded as she savored him, tasting his lips, his tongue, his teeth.

He pulled away long enough to whisper in an agonized voice "Don't do this to us, honey," before his arms crushed her close and his mouth took hers with a savage intensity. She gave herself freely to his passion as a hunger for each other threatened to consume them.

"Jade ... Jade." His breathing was erratic as he moved back, his hands on her

shoulders. "This doesn't prove anything except we are probably sexually compatible. It doesn't alter what I said."

Slumping into her corner, Jade reached for her drink from the side table.

"Okay. I'm sorry to cause problems," she said, pretending that she wasn't in the least overcome by that kiss. Like heck, she wasn't. "I'm going to bed now."

He didn't reply as she got up, taking her glass with her, so as a parting shot she said, "If you change your mind, you know where I live."

## Chapter Eight

"Here's your coffee."

Blake nodded his thanks as Jade placed the mug beside him as he continued to work at his computer. Glancing up at the clock on the mantelpiece, he noted it was right on ten thirty. Jade and Maggie never failed to be punctual with all things.

Not that he cared, he decided, leaning back in his chair and studying Jade's bent head as she scrutinized the papers on her desk. He'd never been one for regimentation even though there had to be a certain amount of it when running a large cattle ranch, particularly one as run down as Stony Creek had been.

It was over two weeks since their strange conversation about having an affair. Jade hadn't mentioned it since and to give her credit, she hadn't let it affect her work or her manner. Her smile was still as open as ever and she would tease him on occasion if he deserved it, but she was careful never to touch him, never to hold his gaze for too long, never to get personal.

And it was seriously pissing him off!

Sure she still had attitude and would rear up like a tigress protecting her young if she felt strongly about something, and she still talked quite a bit. But not as much as she used to and ... he missed that.

They had accomplished a great deal in the past two weeks between them and the other staff. He now had five thousand head of the finest shorthorns grazing on his land, had bought five additional cattle horses and employed a further four stockmen, making nine men all told, including Lance, his manager.

Jade and he had arranged for various building repairs to be completed around the homestead and the adjacent staff quarters and yesterday workmen had completed the job of re-painting the inside and now the outer walls of the house. It had been an upheaval with people, dust and debris in every direction and Maggie had blown her fuse a few times as she coped with the extra meals and housework.

He gave a wry grin. Within the chaos Jade had been like a mini-tornado pushing, pulling, supervising, bossing, cajoling everyone but always with a smile that rocked the guys back on their heels. Blake was sure they would crawl over broken glass for her, if she asked. There was still a lot of work to do on the property itself but he now felt more in control, seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. The gardens surrounding the homestead hadn't been touched but following a welcome thunderstorm yesterday with good accompanying rains, a gardening handyman had arrived from Coober Pedy that morning and had begun to get the garden into shape.

Jade had proved to be remarkable, working tirelessly from keeping the books to arranging the food menus and ordering with Maggie, to wielding a paint brush on occasion. When she had said she was going to give their early morning rides a miss for a few days because she was tired, he could well believe it, but in his heart he knew she was avoiding him, afraid of what might happen between them on those beautiful, magical mornings as the dawn came up over the wilderness.

He watched her now intent on her work, her dark hair cut into the nape of her slender neck. He could see the curve of her cheek and the long, silky eyelashes shielding those beautiful brown eyes. Her check shirt was neatly tucked into her purple jeans which fitted snugly around her cute behind. He'd like that little butt to be



sitting on his lap right now. In fact, he longed to press his lips against her vulnerable neck and have her lean against him so he could slowly and lovingly caress her breasts, feeling her nipples tighten and peak with excitement and longing.

He shifted uncomfortably as his body hardened and he endeavored to put a stopper on his sensual imagination. He had still been right to stop the affair before it began, he consoled himself. And she would never know that he had lied.

He nearly said it aloud. He had *lied*, not just to protect her but himself, telling her he would walk away when their affair was over. Only he knew he couldn't. He was already emotionally involved.

"Have you anything else for the mail plane, Blake? It will be here in an hour."

As she turned, her smile was still there but did her eyes lack warmth? Did she hate him so much for humiliating her and turning her proposition down? I had to do it, sweetheart. We were heading for disaster. I'm falling in love with you and I've already messed up Rose's life. I can't destroy yours, as well.

"Blake? Did you hear?"

"Sorry, No, I don't have anything." He sat up straight and grabbed his coffee. The mail plane delivered not only mail but other supplies three times a week and was their main life-line to the outside world, although he knew he had the back up of his own plane when he needed it.

"We've had a request from the Tourist Commission asking us to consider running Outback riding holidays. You know, where they see how a working station operates and go on cattle drives?"

"Tell them no." He hadn't meant to snap.

"It is very good money. We could do up the corner out-building into visitors' quarters with bunk beds and shower facilities."

Blake stood up, towering over Jade where she still sat at her computer. "I said no, Jade. I don't want strangers here and we don't need the money. We've got enough to do with the care of the cattle and horses without looking after holiday makers. In a few months we'll need all our resources to prepare the muster and sort out the breeding program."

"I know that. It was just a suggestion." She looked forlorn and he tensed, fighting the need to hold her close and explain that he couldn't share her with anyone.

Instead he said, "Tomorrow I'm going away for a couple of days with Pete and Dave," referring to two of the stockmen. "Lance has told me that there's some fence repairs needed near the western boundary."

Jade frowned. "Why do you have to go? Surely they can see to that?"

"Yeah, they can but I *want* to go. I'm a cowboy. It's what I do. I don't like being stuck in here all day peering at a computer and taking calls from my mad brothers."

Christ! He was being an ass-hole. He wished he could take Jade with him and to hell with welding fence posts. They would lie under a carpet of twinkling stars and he would make love to her. Make love like she had never known before.

"Are you taking the horses?"

Reasonable question. Blake consciously relaxed his shoulders. Get over your bad mood, Jordan. "Pete and Dave will take them in the road train with all the gear and I'll drive the SUV. Will you be alright while I'm away?"

She lifted her face and he could see the stubborn set of her jaw. At least she wasn't going to Adelaide. She had flown down last week-end from Coober Pedy to see her brother and told Blake that she had stayed at Lara and Jack's place. God, he had missed her! He had been like a bear with a sore head until she had arrived home

on Sunday night. He hated her going away and yet he was going to do just that. But he had to. He needed the isolation of the bush and more importantly, to put some distance between them so he could control this growing obsession he had about her ... wanting her every moment of the day and night until it was burning him up.

"What shall I do if the Manley delivery arrives from Adelaide?"

He laughed. "You're asking me, Ms. Total Organizer? Get the men to unload it and put the stuff where you think best. I'll soon tell you if I don't like it when I get back."

She turned away and he could feel the dejection emanating from her in huge waves. He took a step towards her and then changed his mind.

"Jade, if you need me for anything you can contact me on the HF radio or cell phone. Okay?"

"I won't need you," she replied, her back still turned to him.

\* \* \* \*

"Maggie. I'm going out for a while. I won't be too long." Jade stood outside the kitchen door and shouted to the housekeeper who was preparing the next meal, as usual.

"I'll make a sandwich for your lunch, Princess," she replied and Jade watched through the crack in the door as Maggie wiped her flour-covered hands on her apron. She is coming this way--quick.

"Don't worry. I had such a big breakfast, I'll get something for myself if I'm hungry," she called and scooted as fast as she could along the passage before Maggie could see her. It wasn't that she didn't want to see Maggie, and it wasn't as if she was actually telling lies, but today was it. She was going treasure hunting.

Blake had left the previous day with two of his stockmen to complete his 'cowboy chores', as she secretly called them, and was due back tomorrow. Jade had phoned Manley's in the city and confirmed that the delivery of furniture and white goods would be there on Friday, which gave her today to seek out her opal mine with no interruptions. She had decided that the only way she was going to find the mine was by motor vehicle and with the help of her father's sketch, and a map of the station and surrounds she had found in a desk drawer, she was determined to succeed.

"Drinking water, petrol topped up, HF radio connected, camping gear and blankets, plus a spade and pick axe for digging and a stake with my name on--yes," she muttered aloud as she checked the vehicle. Not that she needed the camping gear but best be prepared for any eventuality when driving in the Outback. She hoped that she would need the spade and stake. She had noted on the map what looked like a rocky outcrop with some bigger vegetation about forty kilometers along the boundary fence and she was hopeful that was it. The prickly pear cactus that hid her treasure.

Jade hummed to herself as she drove away from the homestead. It was a relief to be alone and enjoy the beauty of the red earth and bright blue sky. The rains had soaked into the dry ground and although muddy in places, her four-wheel drive would be able to cope with most terrains.

Her thoughts returned to Blake, as she knew they would. How she had got through the past two weeks she would never know. Yes, she had been humiliated when he had so gently and eloquently refused her suggestion to have an affair. Huh! You've got big hang ups, Blake Jordan, acting like you don't want me when I know that you do."

Jade concentrated on avoiding a couple of pot holes in the dirt road. She stopped and checked her map and then the speedometer showing the distance traveled on the dashboard. By her calculations she had driven thirty kilometers from the

homestead and needed to turn east and head towards the fence boundary for about another ten kilometers. There would be no dirt roads from now on, just rough open terrain.

"Of course, it was probably your wife and your mother that stuffed you up between them, Blake," she continued with her analysis. "Your mother is weird and should stick to the knit and natter groups and your wife left you. Now, what does that tell you?"

Jade took a drink from the water bottle at her side. Even though it was winter, the sun was now warm and she switched on the air-conditioner for a short burst of cold air. Well, no matter what and even if she had quite enjoyed these last few days of physical work, she would stick to her original plan. Find the mine, stake her claim and when she had some money, set up a home for Ray and her. To hell with a pompous cowboy who couldn't recognize a great offer when it was shoved under his nose. She and Blake could have had a few weeks of rampant, mind-blowing sex and then she would have left. Emotions would have been ignored, she decided, chewing at her bottom lip. Except, I'm in love with him. Hopelessly. I tremble every time he comes near me. The trouble is he isn't even a sex maniac. He is a moody, grumpy, bad-tempered bastard who, although he says he is attracted to me, doesn't want to do it with me.

Suddenly Jade sighted something a couple of hundred meters ahead and turning on the wipers, she let them clear away the dust and mud from the windscreen and peered again. Wow! A whole lot of prickly pear trees. Surely she had found it. Accelerating forward, she didn't notice that the left hand wheels were on the edge of a rocky outcrop with a drop into a small ravine. The next moment the SUV began to slip on the loose stones and then, to her horror, slid into the ravine, turning over and over as if in slow-motion until it landed on its roof with its wheels spinning madly.

"Ohmygod. Ohmygod!" Jade was still in her seat hanging upside down, held firmly by her seat belt. She managed to reach forward and turn off the engine, grimacing at the pain in her shoulder as she did so. There was an eerie silence except for the harsh sound of Jade's breathing. Jeez! Papa, what have I done? What *have* I done?

She concentrated on any pains she could feel in her body. Her head, that was it. Awkwardly touching her forehead where it had bumped on the side of the car, she gasped at the sight of blood on her fingers. Don't panic, kid. It's only a cut. She felt blood dripping into her hair. Ow! I'm bleeding upside down. This gives a whole new meaning to 'down under.' She tried to open the door, but it was wedged tight. She was well and truly stuck. She listened for the drip of leaking petrol. Isn't that what usually happens? Then, POW! No more Jade. She needed help, fast.

She grabbed at the HF radio transmitter and, trying to control her shaking hand, pressed the on-button. "Lance, are you there? Anyone? Ah ...over."

There was an awful crackling noise and then Blake's deep voice came through the speaker. Her eyes filled with tears at the sound.

"Jade? What's the problem? Over."

"I've had a ... a little accident."

"What sort of accident? Jade?"

Oh-Oh, feeling woozy. No time to lose. "I've rolled my car. I'm hanging upside down. Blake ...."

"Where are you?" His voice was sharp.

She peered at the dashboard reading the speedometer. "On the eastern fence boundary thirty point five kilometers from the homestead. Over."

"Are you hurt? Do you need the Flying Doctor?"

"I've got a few cuts and bruises. Blake, will you excuse me, please? I need to faint. Over ... and out."

\* \* \* \*

This had to be the worse Blake had ever felt. He wanted to throw up but knew he didn't have time. Jade sounded in serious trouble and she needed him.

Needed him now.

He called to one of the stockmen loading some welding gear into the road train. "Pete, there's been an accident. Jade's rolled her vehicle."

"Crikey!"

"Yeah. I don't know how badly she's hurt, but I want you to call the Flying Doctor and see if they can get out to our airstrip."

"Yes, boss."

"I'll cover their expenses if they need me to. Jade's given me her location so I'm going to drive there and bring her back to the homestead. You and Dave finish packing up and get out of here."

With these words Blake was on his way, driving faster than he should but still aware he had to be careful. He worked out it would take him a couple of hours to get to Jade from where he was. Christ Almighty! He hoped she was alright and if she was, he would have a few harsh words to say.

All thoughts of chastising her were driven from his head when he eventually saw Jade's SUV ten meters below him. Scrambling down the slope, scattering stones in all directions, he climbed onto the upturned car and managed to wrench open the driver's side door.

Jade hung in mid-air, one side of her head matted with blood, her face deathly pale, her eyes closed. His heart pounding ready to burst, Blake carefully released the seat belt and, catching her, gently lifted her free of the vehicle, placing her on the ground well away from the wreckage.

"Jade? Talk to me, sweetheart."

As he smoothed her cheek, her eyelids fluttered open.

"Talk to me? How nice. I'll remind you of that later," she murmured with a faint smile.

"Where are you hurt? Is it just this cut on your head? Jade!" Was she going to pass out? He knew he should be calm but felt he was losing it.

Jade struggled to sit up but his hands held her.

"I'm fine now, Blake. Let me get up."

"Not on your life, lady," he replied and then lifted her as if she was the most fragile piece of china.

"White Knights aren't supposed to speak to damsels in distress in that way," she said as her head lolled against his chest.

With a struggle, he climbed the stony embankment and carried her to his vehicle, laying her across the hood. His hands shook as he retrieved the first aid kit and, cleaning up the blood around the cut on her head, proceeded to bandage it. When he had completed that, he ran gentle hands over her limbs and body feeling for other injuries.

Jade stirred. "*Now* he chooses to grope me," she joked and then winced as she moved her head.

"Shut up, Oliver. I'm going to put you in the back seat. You're trembling and probably going into shock."

"Blake? I want to thank you for rescuing me."

He hesitated as he looked down at her heart-shaped face, still as white as a sheet. Unable to stop himself, he bent and kissed her lips. "You're enough to make a grown cowboy cry," he murmured, placing her on the back seat and covering her with blankets. Gently he lifted her head and placed a rug beneath it.

\* \* \* \*

"She's okay, Blake. A few bruises and the main thing is the bump on the head and the cut, which looks worse than it is. It only needed two stitches. I would think her car rolled over very slowly, which saved her from serious injury."

Blake shook Doctor Ashley Martin's hand as they stood talking in the kitchen. "Thanks, Ashley. I really appreciate you coming out at such short notice. I'd like to make a donation to the Flying Doctor Service to help things along."

"We were only doing our job but we are always grateful for any support-- thanks." The young doctor pulled on his jacket. "We'd better go before it gets dark."

Blake walked with him to the plane parked at the end of the airstrip and shook hands with the pilot who was about to climb into the cockpit.

"Oh, one other thing, Blake." Ashley turned to him. "The Princess is very sleepy. It's partly due to shock and exhaustion and partly from the shot I gave her, but I recommend that someone watches over her tonight."

"Why?"

"Her head wound shouldn't cause any trouble but you, or someone, should rouse her every hour or two. If you can't wake her, call us." With that dire warning, Ashley climbed into the plane and it took off into the evening sky.

Blake raced back to the homestead where Maggie was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a well earned cup of tea.

"Jade okay?" Cool it, Jordan.

"Yes. She had some soup for dinner and had gone back to sleep the last time I looked in on her."

Explaining to Maggie what the doctor had said and seeing her instant concern, Blake placed a hand on her shoulder to reassure her. "I'll stay in Jade's room tonight and keep checking her. Don't worry, Maggie."

"Are you sure, boss? I'll get a pillow and some blankets for you and perhaps you can use Jade's old wicker chair to sit in. Let me know if you need me. "

Blake took a quick shower and dressed again in shorts and a casual short-sleeved shirt. As he arranged a blanket in place on the chair, Jade opened sleepy eyes and stared at him.

"Go away, this is my bedroom," she whispered and went immediately back to sleep.

Well, what now? Was this normal? She looked better, not so pale. His hastily wound bandage had been replaced by Ashley with a neat bandage on the cut just above her left eyebrow. Maggie had washed her and helped her to change into a nightdress--and what a nightdress, he thought. Talk about thick flannelette and a sexual turn off. It was buttoned high at the neck and had long sleeves fastened at the wrists.

He sat in the chair. Damn, but it was uncomfortable. Perhaps he'd let her sleep for an hour and then wake her. He did this three times over the next three hours and each time he woke her, she got madder.

"Piss off and let me sleep, you mangy mongrel," she yelled the last time.

Blake sighed and studied her face, beautiful and peaceful once more in sleep. Oh, to hell with it. Pulling off his shirt and shorts and leaving on his boxers, he crawled under the covers with her. The soft mattress felt like heaven to his tired,

aching muscles as he stretched his body along side of hers. He left the bedside lamp on so he could see to check her and then closed his eyes.

"What are you doing in my bed, boss?" A voice was whispering in his ear and something soft and sweet-smelling was curled up against him closer than a flea on a dog. He lifted himself on to his elbow and looked down at her. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"What's the time?"

"Two thirty in the morning. If you were supposed to be keeping an eye on me, you are not doing a very good job."

She gave a cheeky smile and his heart began to race as he gently touched the plaster over her eye and then her cheek bone, which had turned a magnificent shade of purple.

"That's a great bruise," he murmured.

"I'm into sympathy," she replied, wriggling closer. He could feel the outline of her breasts against his chest and then she lifted her hips so his erection pressed into her soft stomach. God help me, I'm losing it.

"You've got a lot to answer for, Princess," he managed to say, still in a whisper.

"Yes. But in the morning."

"You did say you were on the pill, didn't you?"

"Yes. Why are we whispering?"

He let his hand smooth over her knee and then her thigh, gradually dragging the flannelette nightdress upwards as he did so, "Your proposition about having an affair ...."

Her breath was sweet on his lips.

"Yes?"

"I accept."

## Chapter Nine

"Pinch me, I'm dreaming. You want to have sex with me?"

"No. I want to make love to you, sassy mouth."

Jade blinked at Blake's handsome face looking down into hers. With a wondrous hand she traced the dimples showing in his cheeks. "I can't believe it. Why now? Is it because of the accident?"

Blake's grin turned into a frown and then he tenderly kissed the prominent bruise on her cheek-bone. "Maybe," he said softly. "Maybe the realization has hit me that you might have been seriously hurt, or even have died waiting for me to reach you."

"And you would have missed your opportunity for a bang," she chimed in flippantly.

"Something like that."

To her dismay, the shutters had come down. Bugger! Me and my big mouth. "Blake, I'm sorry. I'm not looking for reasons. I just fancy you like crazy."

Good, he was back.

"We should be careful. What about any other bruises? Where do you hurt?"

"Everywhere."

"What?"

"I hurt everywhere for your touch, for your kisses, for you, silly." She wasn't going to let him wriggle out of this one.

He smiled his sexy smile and Jade almost jumped his bones right there, but she was learning by her mistakes. This was a man who liked to be in control and she would need to lie back and enjoy. Hmm, not a bad idea, particularly seeing she was a trifle stiff and sore, although she wasn't going to let on. Knowing this White Knight, he might just be gentlemanly enough to put her orgasm on hold until another day. Not this time, mate.

"Let's get rid of this ... nightdress first, huh?" She shifted so he could remove her warm, favorite nightie. The lamp was still on and she watched his face and heard his sharp intake of breath as he studied her breasts. Without being egotistical, she was quite proud of her boobs, she had to admit. They were full and round and oh so sensitive.

She tensed as Blake ran a light finger over them, causing her nipples to rise up like mini-volcanoes. Blake pulled back the covers so that her naked body was exposed to him.

Help! Please say you like me.

"You are perfect, Jade," he breathed, his dark eyes compelling as they met hers. Then he bent and kissed a point on her rib cage. "There's a bruise here, sweetheart," he murmured and she froze as he blew on it and then covered it with tiny kisses.

"I'm *so* nervous," she finally admitted, letting out a jagged breath.

"Good. So you should be." He grinned with obvious enjoyment before his mouth covered hers and she drank in the sweetness of his kiss.

She writhed against him as he held her hands above her head and his mouth traced a sensuous path along her neck and across her breasts until his tongue explored

one rosy peak, touching, licking, and sucking.

Jade moaned with an erotic pleasure. "Blake, take your gear off because I need you inside of me," she gasped and as he released her hands, she helped him push his boxers away and felt the warmth of his hard body on her.

"Take it easy, Princess." She was relieved to hear that his voice was also tortured as once again he suckled her breasts. She placed her arms around his neck and across his powerful shoulders, loving the silky feel of his skin.

He caressed her body with his hands in quick, urgent movements causing her to pant with excitement. "I'm going to come if you don't hurry up and do it, Blake," she yelled in near panic.

"Hang on then, sweetheart. It could be a bumpy ride." Lifting her hips, he entered her and her muscles expanded to take his impressive sex. She placed her legs around his back and moved against him.

"Christ, Jade, I'm not going to last," he groaned, perspiration breaking out on his forehead as he strained for control.

"Then go for it," she cried and he did just that as he thrust into her hard and fast powerless to stop what was happening between them. "Yes--Yes--Yes!" she shouted as a mighty orgasm rippled through her.

Blake immediately followed with a roar of delight as a final thrust shot him over the edge into the stratosphere.

They lay panting in each others' arms. Jade was the first to recover. "That was--"

"Don't speak yet," he said, placing a hand across her mouth.

She waited a few moments reveling in the feel of his body on her, still inside her. This man she loved had given her the most erotic, high powered sensation ever. She wanted more already. More--more.

Finally, he lifted his head and kissed her. "You can speak now as long as you're sensible," he said, his hands cupping her breasts.

"All I was going to say was that I didn't fake that orgasm. Not like in *When Harry Met Sally*. You know, where they are in a café and she pretends to have an orgasm and shouts Yes, Yes, Yes!"

His dimples appeared. "No, I don't know but I know you didn't fake it, my love."

My love? He called me, my love. I'm gob-smacking delirious.

"How do you know?"

"I felt your muscles contract around me. It was like being held in a very tight velvet vice. Fantastic!"

Well, she'd done something right. About to move from beneath him, she suddenly stopped. "You're ready for me again," she told him in wonder. "I can feel your penis growing inside of me. It's huge."

He looked pleased and said in a wolf-type voice "All the better to make love to you, my dear." His expression was sinful as he began to move within her. She lay back, letting him have his wicked, heavenly way once again.

\* \* \* \*

"It's five thirty. I'll have to get up." Blake looked into Jade's face as she hovered above him having enjoyed her umpteenth orgasm in the last three hours.

"You *are* up," she said cheekily, rocking on him.

"Come here. Let me touch you again," he replied as he reached and ran his hands over her breasts and hips until his fingers massaged the sensitive nub at her very core pressing hard against him.



Jade smiled, flinging her head back as she relished the feelings he evoked. This gorgeous man who could be so grumpy and righteous had to be the world's best lover, not that she had much experience to go on but ... he was something else. She gasped as he caught her narrow hips in his hands, releasing and then pulling her against him, creating a magnificent friction as with several deep strokes, he exploded into her moist sweetness. She trembled and he held her tightly. Unbelievably she had come again and she jiggled up and down on him with excitement.

"I've lost count of how many times we've made love," she said happily as she flopped into the space beside him and he cradled her against his shoulder.

"You're going to need to take it easy today, Jade. You will be sore and I mean from the accident."

She kissed his jaw. "Nah! I'm tough," she scoffed. "But ...."

"But what?"

"How are we going to handle things? I mean, do you want to continue our relationship?" Please, say yes. Pretty please.

"You are the most remarkably sexy and responsive woman I have ever known ...."

Don't say that. How many women have you known, for Lordy's sake?

"But, I think we should take it one day at a time and see how we go."

"What about other people knowing? Your mother is due to arrive next week."

Blake rubbed a hand over his jaw, the bristles making a rasping sound as he did so. "Yeah, that's a problem, although I think she should stay in the master suite, as we discussed. I'll move into the bedroom next to this one. It's nice and handy."

"Don't you want Eve to know about us?"

"Not yet."

He was very decisive, damn it. She felt like telling him to stand up and be counted but it was early days yet and he *had* told her she was the sexiest woman he'd ever been with, after all.

"Besides, she's now told me she only wants to stay a couple of weeks and then fly to Texas to see Ethan and Liam," he continued.

Good. I can cope with that.

Blake got out of bed and pulled on his clothes. "I'll get Maggie to bring you breakfast in bed this once, Jade, but when you're up and about I intend to find out what the hell you were doing careering around the Outback and driving into ravines." His eyes were serious on her face and she didn't like it. She would have to think up a fib to get out of that one.

"Yes, boss," she said as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. She held her arms up to him. "Can I have a kiss goodbye?"

His mouth on hers held the promise of the passion to come, erotically delicious and delightfully demanding.

\* \* \* \*

Blake paused to lean against the barn door. It was still early and with Dave's help, he had finished feeding and mucking out the mares and foals. He had taken Prince for their usual ride and never had a morning been so fresh and glorious. He had felt like bursting into song.

He should have felt tired having only slept for a brief time last night and then using all that extra energy.

But, he didn't.

He grinned. He felt fantastically alive and kicking. For the first time since he had ended his disastrous marriage over a year ago, he was happy, really happy. He

closed his eyes and Jade's face floated into his vision. She had responded to his love-making with a passion that knocked him out, and he could still feel her hands on him, gentle and loving.

"You're in big trouble, buddy," he murmured. "You can't wait to make love to her again, feel her body pulsing under yours, watch her face as she comes and yet ... are you sure that's what she wants? Yes, she wants sex but does she want a serious relationship?" He sat on a bale of hay, stretching his legs in front of him. No, he didn't know, that was for sure. She was like a chameleon, constantly changing. He didn't know whether she was a country girl or a city slicker. She certainly had pretty slick friends. He couldn't dispel the feeling that she would disappear one day soon and never return. Of course, she did have her brother in Adelaide. Perhaps he could suggest the kid comes up here for the holiday?

Rose had run away from him and their home. But she had run off to some guy who owned a modeling agency in Dallas. She had said she couldn't bear the isolation of the ranch one more day and that Blake had neglected her. He guessed he had if he were totally honest about it. Then prior to the divorce she said she had finished her affair and begged him to take her back, professing her undying love for him. He had long since forgiven her for being unfaithful and deserting him, but he didn't love her anymore. If he had ever loved her, he thought sadly. Rose was still friendly with his mother and he had decided to let bygones be bygones and bore Rose no malice. It took two people to mess up a marriage and he now realized that he was as much to blame with his casual attitude.

He chewed on a piece of straw cowboy-style. With Jade you couldn't be casual, he decided. She had attitude and was in your face constantly. She annoyed the hell of him but under all that hoo-ha, he recognized a vulnerable, loving, and loyal woman. And she was so damned funny. Yep, he was crazy about her. But he wasn't sure of her feelings other than she thoroughly enjoyed his love-making. He knew she thought him grumpy and bad tempered as well as impossible most of the time and a workaholic, other than that ....

God, he hoped she had told the truth about being on the pill or they'd be in trouble. She would be pregnant for sure. He had bought a box of condoms in Adelaide when his mother had been looking the other way so subconsciously he must have known something like this was going to happen. The trouble was he'd been too carried away last night to even bother to find where he had hidden them in some drawer in his bedroom. On reflection, he decided he quite liked the idea of Jade having his baby. Yeah, at least Ma would be pleased to have a much wanted grandchild.

He brushed the straw from his jeans and made his way to the homestead kitchen door. It was time to feed the inner man with some breakfast. The noise hit him before he had the door half way open. It was laughter from the men as they gathered around the huge table with his Jade sitting there in all her glory still sporting a huge bruise and plaster on her face as she relayed the story of her accident. The men quieted down as Blake took his seat at the head of the table with Jade at his left, as usual.

After exchanging pleasantries with the men, he turned to Jade. "I thought you were going to take it easy today?"

Maggie interrupted. "I did take in her breakfast but there she was, already showered and dressed," she said, defensively.

"Our Princess won't let a little accident slow her down," Lance joked.

Blake's good mood rapidly disappeared. "*Your* Princess could have killed herself," he scowled.

Finishing a mouthful of toast, Jade had obviously decided to ignore Blake's bad mood and said boastfully "It takes more than a tumble down a hill to get rid of me." Then she added, "When can we salvage my car, Blake? I need to claim on the insurance."

There was silence except for the clatter of cutlery.

"It won't hurt out there for a couple of days. It's totaled anyway."

"But I've got stuff in it."

"What stuff?"

"Well, camping gear and a first aid kit and ...." She closed her lips and looked down. She's guilty about something, Blake decided, but his inquisition could wait.

When he walked into the office thirty minutes later, he caught her swallowing a tablet. He picked up and inspected the box of pain killers.

"Headache?"

"Not really." She was instantly in denial. "I'm just a bit sore in a few places."

He placed his hands on her shoulders gently massaging her slender frame. Now they were alone he was rapidly losing it again, especially when she leaned into him, her hands covering his.

He lifted her from the office chair and sat in the dilapidated arm chair with her on his lap. "In a few places?" he queried, kissing her bruised cheek.

She giggled. "In lots of places, actually."

Her skin was as soft as the petals on a flower, he thought, as his lips continued to caress her jaw and then the perfumed hollow in her neck. When his mouth touched hers, he was unprepared for her passionate response as she thrust her tongue against his, their mouths burning into each other. "I want you, Blake. I want you," she breathed.

He shuddered with his need for her but was still shocked when she jumped from his lap and ran to lock the door. She gave a wicked smile as she returned and unzipped his jeans allowing his substantial erection some air.

"Yippee," she cried, hastily pulling off her slacks and panties and climbing on to him, her legs dangling over the arms of the chair. He laughed as she lowered herself on to his penis and began to move on him. He couldn't help it, she appeared to have no inhibitions and boy, did she feel good. He was going to come very soon.

"Whoo-hoo," she yelled as he stroked hard and fast, his hands tight on her hips. Her muscles tightened and spasmed around him as a look of absolute bliss crossed her face and her eyes glazed with passion.

Lifting her while she was in the throes of her orgasm and still joined with him, Blake staggered across the room and laid her on one of the desks, scattering papers and files in all directions. "Whoo-hoo," he shouted, in a return victory cry as he came inside her with what had to be the best orgasm he had ever had.

"We can't keep doing this," he said fifteen minutes later when they had recovered, tidied their clothes and were sitting at their computers.

"Why? I don't think you're running out of steam if that last display is anything to go by."

He grinned and wondered how he was going to get any work done with Jade nearby. "We'll try and control ourselves during the day." Some hope, he thought, as she came and stood by him.

"And at night, will you make love to me?"

"Yes."

"What about when your Ma's here?"

"I'll find a way as long as you stop yelling when you come."

Her delightful laughter rang out and she bent to kiss him. "I'm not that loud," she whispered against his mouth.

"Yes, you are. It's just as well Maggie is in the annex at night out of hearing range. You're encouraging me to shout, as well."

"So you should. It's good for you. You're changing from a quiet, morose cowboy into a raving exhibitionist."

"How do you know I don't always make love that way?" Christ! He shouldn't have said that. The joy immediately left her face and in its place that vulnerable, hurt look had returned. He had to change the subject.

"You haven't told me what you were doing to cause your accident and write off your vehicle." Not a good change of subject, Jordan. She moved away, her shoulders tensing.

"I wanted to go for a drive. I felt cooped up here."

Yep, definitely defensive.

"Why didn't you go for a ride on one of the horses?"

She turned. "I thought I'd be safer in the SUV. You're always warning me about riding alone."

Hmm, he couldn't deny that. And he knew the feeling of being cooped up only too well. He'd had it often.

"Okay. Let's not say anymore about it. Come here and kiss me, sweetheart and then we'll start work."

Obediently, she kissed him and he couldn't resist holding her close, his head resting on her breasts as her fingers threaded through his hair.

\* \* \* \*

There! It looked great. Jade clapped her hands with pleasure as she stood back to admire the décor of the master suite.

It was a week later and Blake had driven to Coober Pedy to pick up Eve at the airport. She had refused Blake's offer to fly to Adelaide and fetch her saying she knew he was busy and she preferred to catch the domestic flight.

Eve was right, Jade thought. They had been very busy. The huge delivery truck had arrived from Adelaide last Friday and Blake, Maggie, and she had spent days sorting out carpets and furniture and linen. Maggie had been ecstatic with the large new cooker and washing machine that Blake had bought while Jade had found her own piece of heaven as she hung new curtains, replaced furniture, and generally brought the old homestead into glittering life.

She had begged Blake for her dad's old arm chair, asking if she could have it in her bedroom and of course, he had agreed. In fact, there wasn't much that Blake refused her these days, particularly in the bedroom department. She hugged her arms at the thought of their love-making every night. It was beyond anything Jade had ever imagined and she was completely besotted with her handsome Texan.

She smiled as she moved an ornament into a more appropriate position as she thought of the number of times they had slipped up and made love in the office ... and the bathroom ... and once, in the kitchen when Maggie had gone out. Blake couldn't keep his hands off her and she was just as bad, if not worse.

The only thing that disappointed her was the fact that he never said he loved her. Yes, she was beautiful, wonderful, the best ... all of those things he said, and more. She, in turn, had held her tongue. After all, he was using her for very pleasurable sex and perhaps that was all he wanted. It had certainly changed his personality and from being quiet and often grumpy he was now lively with a fantastic sense of humor she had found much to her chagrin as he often teased her

unmercifully. She didn't know how he wanted to handle their sex life while Eve was here. He hadn't said. Hopefully he would still want her every night.

She shrugged. What had happened didn't make any difference to her need to find her opal mine and she was still waiting for the chance to hunt for it again. Two of the guys had rescued her vehicle and she had secretly removed and hidden the maps, plus the tools and stake. When she went looking next time she would have to borrow one of the station's SUV's but, this time, she would be more careful.

It was past six o'clock and she had finished feeding the mares and was ready to return to the homestead when she saw Blake's vehicle parked in the driveway. Her heart began to pound with excitement. He was back!

Running, she reached the kitchen door and heard voices from the passage leading to the dining room. Pulling up short, she smoothed her hands over her hair and dirty clothes. She smelt of horses. She should have showered and changed, but it was too late now. Blake had been away for seven hours and she couldn't wait to see him even if she wasn't able to fling herself in his arms in front of Eve.

Moving to the passage door, she almost bumped into a strange woman. A tall, beautiful and blonde woman who was the first to recover.

"Hi, honey," she said, holding out an elegant hand with long red fingernails. "You must be the little secretary. I'm Rose Jordan, Blake's wife."

## Chapter Ten

Speechless. Jade realized for the first time in her life that she was speechless, as she automatically grasped the other woman's hand.

"Have you been in the barn with the horses?" Rose delicately sniffed the air as she disengaged herself from Jade.

I've found my voice, thank God. "Yes, I've been messing around with horse shit so I suggest you clean off." She watched gleefully as Rose hurriedly washed her hands in the kitchen sink.

I hate her, hate her, hate her!

The decision wasn't hard to make as Jade eyed her opposition. Wearing a fitted bright red dress which clung to her elegant, slim figure, the color was a perfect foil for her wavy, shoulder-length blonde hair. Matching red shoes with at least four inch heels ensured that the beauty towered over Jade as she turned to her, china blue eyes wide in a perfectly made up face.

"Is Eve here?" Jade asked wondering if she had walked into someone's nightmare.

"Yes, of course. She and Blake are with the housekeeper in the dining room, discussing dinner, I think." Rose was nothing if not polite but her high-pitched southern drawl was already grating on Jade.

She turned and walked along the passage into the dining room where the other three appeared to be deep in conversation.

"My dear, how lovely to see you." Eve seemed genuinely pleased to greet Jade as she held out her arms.

"You had better not hug me, Eve. I've been out with the horses and haven't had a shower yet." She couldn't look at Blake, not yet, until she found out what the hell was going on.

"Wait for a moment, dear. Blake is about to open a bottle of champagne to celebrate our arrival."

"How nice." She couldn't keep the cool edge from her voice.

"And Maggie is going to serve us dinner in here," Eve continued, smiling at Maggie who looked pleased at the arrival of the guests.

"How nice," Jade repeated moving closer to the plump housekeeper. "I'll help you, Maggie."

"After all, we hardly want to have our meal with the stockmen." Rose had joined them, her eyes on Blake as he set five champagne glasses in place on the dining table.

"No, of course not," Jade said sweetly. "Although Maggie does make them wash the horse shit off their hands before they sit down."

There were a few moments of palpable silence and then Eve and Rose laughed simultaneously. They're nervous, Jade decided. Nervous of Blake, not her and she'd bet her bottom dollar that he had no idea Rose would be arriving along with Eve. Or had he? Had he perhaps planned it all?

His eyes narrowed as he handed Jade a glass of champagne. It was a clear warning which said 'don't be difficult or you'll be in trouble'.

"Isn't it nice that Rose decided to visit?" Eve said to no one in particular.

"When I said I was coming here she couldn't resist seeing this old homestead and of course, finding out how Blake was getting along."

Rose preened herself, sliding a hand over one slender hip. "Well, Blake and I do go back a long way," she murmured.

Jade couldn't stand it. She placed her untouched champagne glass on the table. "Sorry, not to my taste," she said, pursing her lips. "Come on Maggie, we had better go and start dinner."

"Jade, I would like you to dine with us." Hallelujah, the Master's Voice.

Blake stood in front of her as she tucked her arm into Maggie's and they were about to leave the room. "That isn't a request," he said quietly. "I want you here."

Jade hesitated and then seeing the determined look in his eyes, decided not to argue. She shrugged her acceptance. As she and Maggie left the room, she heard Rose say, "Oh dear, I do hope she has a shower before dinner."

Right! War is declared, you yellow-haired, smart-assed, skinny bird. Jade quietly fumed as she had a quick consultation with Maggie and her two helpers, planning a simple dinner menu that Maggie would cook while the two women served the stockmen in the kitchen.

Blake and his guests had moved into the main lounge so Jade took the opportunity to shower and change into a clean shirt and jeans. A touch of lip gloss was all she would concede to, she decided, rapidly setting the dining room table and then going to the kitchen to help Maggie.

She was banging the soup pot on the stove with some force when a glass of scotch and coke was shoved under her nose. She turned to face Blake.

"I didn't know about Rose," he said, as she took a large, welcoming swallow of her drink.

"It's bloody rude to just turn up," she blurted. "What was Eve thinking?"

Blake smiled and she managed to refrain from jumping into his arms and kissing him stupid. "I believe she is hoping for Rose and me to reconcile."

I've gone white. Quick, another mouthful of whisky to stop me from fainting.

"I don't have any quarrel with Rose these days," he continued, leaning his hips against the kitchen table. "She and my mother are guests in this house so we need to make them feel welcome."

"Are you warning me to be polite?"

"Yeah."

"Huh! That works both ways. Honestly, telling me I stink. Who the hell does she think she is?"

"Well, you probably did." Laughing, he moved away. "Let us know when chow is up," he said, as a parting remark.

Maggie and she exchanged glances. "I don't like her, Maggie."

"I know, love."

"If she goes after Blake, I swear I'll ... I'll ...."

"It takes two to tango, just remember that, Princess. If Blake wants to patch it up with his ex-wife, there's not much we can do about it."

Wanna a bet? Jade stirred the soup, mulling over Maggie's words. Was Blake playing her for a fool? Was he lying to her? Perhaps he knew all the time that his precious Rose was coming here hence the big spend up on furniture and all the other mod cons and ... hence the condoms. Yesterday she had found a huge packet of them in his cabinet drawer when she had moved his things into the bedroom next to hers. She had laughed, thinking at least he had been prepared even if he didn't need them. But, what if they were to use when he resumed banging Rose? She ground her teeth in

fury at the thought. My eyes must have turned from brown to a monstrous green by now. Hate her. Hate her.

\* \* \* \*

"You and Blake have done a wonderful job in making this home welcoming and attractive, Jade dear." Eve was expansive in her compliments as Jade cleared the main course plates and replaced them with a large platter of cheese and fruit.

"It's lovely," Rose agreed. "Of course, there would be a few things I would change but ...."

"Like what?" Jade's tone was terse, to say the least.

Blake watched in fascination as Jade's stubborn little chin shot up. She looked beautiful even with that slight yellowing on her cheekbone where her bruise had almost faded. Rose had changed from her red dress into a royal blue velvet trouser suit and compared to Jade looked like a colorful peacock with her bright feathers and flashing jewelry. He'd certainly been shocked when she had walked off that plane with his mother and for a moment had felt like turning and walking away, leaving them standing on the tarmac.

"I'm only visiting for a few days." Rose had said as she kissed him on the lips. "Just wanted to see how y'all were doing."

He knew better. She *did* want to reconcile with him, God knew why and Eve was in it up to her eyebrows. Okay, he would be a polite host, but he wasn't going to let Jade get hurt. To hell with them.

"Blake? You're not listening, dear." He turned to his mother. "Rose was just asking about our sleeping arrangements."

Oh, bull crap! Here we go. Before he could reply Rose broke in, "I was suggesting to Eve that she take the master suite, as you planned, honey, and I'll have Jade's room. She can either sleep with your housekeeper or in the staff quarters."

"I'll sleep with the men, no problems." Jade was as quick as a flash.

"No, you won't, Jade Oliver. You'll stay put in your own room." He scowled. This wasn't funny any more. He was getting cranky.

"Of course, I could always share with you, sugar babe. It's not as if we ain't done it before," Rose said, giggling as she smoothed elegant fingers along his arm.

Blake groaned inwardly at the look on Jade's face. Rose didn't know what danger she was getting herself into. "*I'll* sleep with the men," he said bluntly, wondering how he was going to last a night without Jade in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Jade had a headache and it wasn't from the three whiskies she had drunk, or the brandy she had gulped when, after dinner, at Eve's suggestion, they had sat in the comfortable new chairs in the lounge.

At ten o'clock Jade had politely excused herself, not meeting Blake's eyes. Thankfully, she escaped to her bedroom and pondered the evening. Her dislike for Rose hadn't eased in the slightest. It had got worse, as everything Rose had said seemed to have a nasty double meaning. If she wasn't busy cutting Jade down to size, she was flirting with Blake, reminding him of the wonderful times they had had when they were married. Gimme a break!

Even though her head was pounding Jade wrote her nightly email to Ray, telling him some of the funny things that had happened during her day and that she would see him at the weekend. She wondered whether she should email Lara and Katie and tell them what was happening to her and then decided against it. How did she explain that she was savage with jealousy over Blake's ex-wife and getting ready to kill her? As for Blake, where were his guts? Why didn't he turf this rattle snake out



of their love nest? Well, you're going to suffer as much as me, mate, because this means no loving moments for either of us. Unless he was doing it with Rose? Holy crap! Would she hear them making love in the next door bedroom? Or would Blake sneak Rose away somewhere? But where? Son of a bitch!

She was so busy seething that she hardly registered the gentle tap on her door and then joy flooded thought her. Blake! He'd come for her. She tore open the door only to come face to face with Rose's amused expression.

"Hi, honey, can I come in?"

No. Piss off.

"If you insist." Be cool, be polite Jade.

Rose sat in her dad's chair. "Not exactly classy," she remarked, rubbing a disdainful hand over the arm.

Yikes, she would have to disinfect it now. "That was my father's chair," she said sharply.

"Yeah, well I'm sorry to disturb you, sweetie pie, but I thought it might be a good idea for us to have a little talk."

Jade shrugged and sat on the edge of the bed waiting.

"I sensed that you were hung up over Blake the moment I saw you, honey." Rose paused for effect and Jade couldn't help but admire the speed with which she got to the point.

"I wanted to tell ya so you're not embarrassed if ya hear that I came up to this God forsaken hole at Blake's invitation. He has explained that he still loves me and we're going to get back together again. We're going to return to Texas and give our marriage another go."

Jade couldn't speak. Speechless again, her mouth was as dry as a ten year drought.

"I'm sure he had a bit of fun with ya. That's the way he is and I forgive him for that. I accept a man like Blake has needs, you know what I mean? But I'm here now and believe me, sugar, when Blake and I are together we're hotter than a honeymoon hotel."

And I have had enough.

Opening the door, Jade gestured for Rose to leave. "Get out before I do something *you* will regret," she said through clenched teeth. Keep calm, Princess. Think of how Lara would handle this.

Rose turned at the door. "No hard feelings, Jade. It's the way it is. And don't talk to Blake about this. You know what men are like. They don't appreciate women's talk."

Jade leaned her face towards Rose and hissed "Blake doesn't like to talk at all when he's with me, honey child. He prefers me naturally horizontal *all the time*." And with that she slammed the door in Rose's face, glad to have the last, if stupid, remark.

The next morning she avoided Blake and his women like the plague, having an early breakfast and settling to her work in the office. She tensed when Blake appeared with Rose at his elbow.

"I'm going to fly the girls to Coober Pedy," he remarked in a matter of fact voice. "They are keen on buying some opals."

"That will be nice." Jade didn't look up. "What time will you be back?"

"By late this afternoon. Are you going to be okay?"

"Sure, I've got to file these company tax returns today. Good opal hunting," she said, trying to make her voice pleasant and light.

Go, please go.

Blake swung her chair towards him and touched the small cut above her eye. "Still healing?" he said, his face watchful on hers.

She tried hard not to melt into his dark eyes. "Yes."

"Come on, Blake. Time for you to spoil your baby doll," Rose simpered, pulling at his arm. "He's promised to buy me the best opal in Coober Pedy," she smirked at Jade.

"Oh, you've got a million dollars to spare, have you, Blake?"

He gave her a friendly little tap on her pert nose. "Meow," he mouthed.

Jade returned to her work glad to see the back of them for the day but jealous that Rose would be in Blake's company. Oh well, we'll see who has the best opals. Just wait until I find my mine then watch me fly!

Jade worked hard throughout the day without interruption except for a sandwich lunch with Maggie when they discussed the menu for dinner that night. She had been tempted to have another hunt for her treasure while Blake was away but realized she would be in trouble if she didn't complete the business returns.

Wondering how she would get through another evening with Rose, Jade considered inventing a headache and staying in her room but realized that Blake would come looking for her. So she silently endured the inane chatter, made complimentary noises over the opal necklaces that Blake had bought for both Eve and Rose and buttoned her mouth at the bizarre pieces of furniture, ornaments and silk flowers Rose had brought for the homestead.

"Blake said he has to work out on the property tomorrow, so Eve and I decided we would pretty the place up a bit more," Rose said, by way of explanation.

That would be right. Blake's clearing out leaving me here with the monster. Help! I'm going to lock myself in the office all day.

It was lunchtime the next day and Jade stopped work and lifted her head. There was a strong smell of burning. Really strong.

Walking into the kitchen, she said to Maggie "What's that smell? Something is on fire."

Maggie sighed and took another sip of her tea. "It's that bloody woman," she replied. Jade frowned. It was unlike Maggie to be so outspoken. "She's been through the lounge and bedrooms and chucked out some stuff and replaced it with the things she bought yesterday. She has also taken the junk you and Blake threw in the barn and she and Eve are having a huge bonfire, acting like a couple of kids. I can tell you Princess that Blake's not going to be happy about this."

Maggie was right about one thing, the fire was enormous. Jade gasped as she saw the amount of things with which they had fueled the fire. Then her heart gave a peculiar twist because there in the middle of the fire burning merrily away was her dad's chair. The tears welled in her eyes before she could stop them. "Oh, Papa, look what they've done," she whispered. "Rose knew that was your chair."

Rose and Eve had taken the precaution of hosing water on the ground around the edges of the fire, making the surrounds extremely muddy and slippery. Jade didn't care as she walked through the mud, her eyes still on Tom's chair.

"Isn't this fun, Jade? It's a wonderful case of out with the old and in with the new." Rose was hopping up and down in her magnificent Texan boots with enormous heels, of course. She made a glorious picture dressed in tight white jeans and a matching jacket covered in small blue and pink glittering stars. On her head she wore a bright pink cowboy hat. Jade had to admit, she looked fantastic. For a freak.

Eve seemed to have lost interest in the fire and had turned away so Jade seized her opportunity. Moving closer, she gave Rose's butt a tiny push. Rose teetered

precariouly for what seemed an age and then gravity won out as she went sprawling face down in the soft, gooey mud.

"Oh my goodness, what a shame." Jade was instantly all concern as Eve hurried over and together they helped a spluttering Rose to her feet.

"You ... you did this! Owwh! How dare you!" Rose could hardly speak she was so angry as she endeavored to wipe the muck from her face and clothes.

Jade tried to keep a straight face and failed. Wow, that mud sure went a long way.

"I'll make you pay for this," Rose sobbed as, helped by Eve, she squelched her way towards the kitchen door of the homestead.

"Don't forget your hat," Jade said, running after her and placing the filthy thing on Rose's blonde curls. Then gleefully smacking her hands together in a final dismissive gesture, she turned around to find her nose pressed into Blake's chest.

Whoops.

"Hi there, didn't think you would be back so soon," she said quickly, wiping the grin from her face as she looked up at him.

"I saw what you did, Oliver." His voice was deep and very serious.

She decided honesty had to be the best policy. "She deserved it. She's nasty ... and I'm not sorry," she added.

"Come with me."

Boy, he sure looked angry. She was probably going to lose her job. Hell. She followed him into the stables where he leaned against the door of one of the stalls and folded his arms across his chest.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Why did you do it?"

"I told you, she was asking for it."

Jade placed her hands on her hips taking a defiant stance as she faced him and prepared her attack.

"You might be going to marry her again but she has no right to come here and throw her weight around as if she owns the place. And she said terrible things to me so I told her that you liked having sex with me and you preferred me permanently horizontal."

"What?"

"I did. And you're as much to blame," she huffed. "You let me believe you were prettying the place up for Eve and all the time it was for *her*, your *fucking* fancy, dressed to the nines, lolly-legs ex-wife."

"Jade ...."

The warning signs were there but she didn't care.

"You even bought a huge box of condoms and I thought they were for me, you bastard."

"How do you know about any condoms?"

"Because I found them in your drawer when I changed over the bedrooms." She was dancing around him now like a prize fighter, making little jabs at him with her bunched fists. "You were going to screw her after you had been making love to me, you low-down, two-timing Texan turkey."

"Texan turkey?" His sexy mouth twitched with amusement.

"Yeah." Her fist connected with his midriff by mistake and he didn't as much as flinch while she shook her hand and grimaced with pain.

"Jade, you need to cool down," he replied.

"I will not cool down. You deserve to be horse whipped, you traitor."

Before she could take another swing at him, he lifted her bodily and dunked her in the nearby horse trough which was brimming with water.

"Oh." She came up gasping for air, soaked to the skin. "Oh, this is freezing."

Blake bent over her, cradling her wet face between his hands.

"I told you to cool it. You wouldn't listen," he murmured, kissing her gently on the lips.

"Oh." Her arms slid up over his neck as he lifted her from the trough, the water streaming over them.

"Blake, she ... she burnt my dad's chair. She knew it was his and she still destroyed it." Her chin shook and she buried her head into his shoulder as he carried her to one of the stalls and laid her down on the straw.

"I'm sorry to hear that, angel."

Angel? Had she heard right?

She lifted her head and he kissed her again.

"But if you could have controlled that hot little temper of yours for one day you would have found out that I'm not marrying Rose now, or ever. In fact, she leaves tomorrow."

"Oh. Does she know this?"

"No. But she will in about an hour's time. I didn't ask her to come here, but I was willing to put up with her until she started going for you and no one does that. No one, understand?"

"Oh."

"Will you stop saying oh because every time you do I have to kiss that round, luscious mouth of yours," he grinned and stopped the next oh with his lips.

"You don't love her then?"

"No way. However, there is one little lady around here who's more ornery and obstinate than any mule and that's you, Princess Jade Oliver. If you did but know it, Rose didn't stand a chance while you're around. See, I'm plum crazy about you."

## Chapter Eleven

"You are?"

Jade wasn't sure whether she was shivering from the cold or the effect of Blake's words. How romantic. Her White Knight had returned to claim her.

Blake stood up and grabbed an old army coat lying over the stable door.

"Here, put this around you," he said, kneeling and wrapping her in the heavy garment.

"Now, I suggest you go and have a hot shower and get ready for dinner."

"Are you expecting me to apologize to that woman?"

"No."

Jade frowned. That was a surprise. "I will you know, if you want me to."

"Okay."

She had walked into that one. "Promise me she'll leave tomorrow?"

"Yep. I promise." He helped her up and adjusted the coat around her small, shivering body.

"I deserved to be dunked in that trough. I'm sorry."

"Yes, you did and I accept your apology."

Hmm, what now.

"Say it again." She placed her arms around his waist and he pushed the strands of wet hair from her forehead.

"What?"

Jade grinned. "You know, the bit about liking me."

His fingers were warm and sensual against her cold skin as he caressed the shape of her cheekbones and delicate jaw line. "I said I was crazy about you and when Rose has gone you're coming back into my bed." His kiss was deep and passionate and made her head spin.

"What about Eve," she managed to gasp.

"She's not invited. There's not enough room for all of us."

Jade giggled. "My, a sense of humor and you know very well what I mean."

"I'm going to tell her. She's a woman of the world but if she doesn't like us sleeping together, then too bad." More kisses, more passionate this time. Phew, I'm swooning.

"But for now try and behave yourself. I swear I'll make it up to you tomorrow night with a vengeance," he continued, his last kiss full of promise.

\* \* \* \*

Blake must have done a good job sorting out his other women for both were pleasant to Jade at dinner and the evening passed cordially enough. True to her word, Jade had gone to Rose's room before dinner and apologized for the mud incident and to her credit, Rose had laughed.

"I guess I must have looked some sight, huh?"

Jade gave a tentative smile, not sure she could trust this new attitude. Then Rose really surprised her by giving Jade a hug. "I like a gal who knows what she wants and fights for it," she told the gob-smacked Jade. "I was never right for Blake and it wouldn't have worked. He deserves someone like you." Not sure whether she was being paid a compliment, Jade decided to let the matter go.

Then she had another shock when, over pre-dinner drinks Eve whispered

"Well done, Jade. I knew we could do it."

"Pardon?"

"I knew we could shock Blake into a few decisions. Bringing Rose here worked very well."

Jade had gulped her drink. What was going on here? She and Blake were surrounded by manipulating women. Crikey!

\* \* \* \*

The next day Rose said her farewells to Eve and Jade. She was on her way to Texas and Blake had offered to fly her to Adelaide where she was booked on an international flight leaving that evening.

Jade decided to do the monthly stock orders and it took her most of the day to check and then complete the on-line work. She was gratified to discover that Eve and Maggie were getting on like two best friends and Eve was helping Maggie in the kitchen with some new recipes.

At five o'clock, Jade poured herself a straight whisky and, sitting in the new soft arm chair in the office, used the time to think. Blake wasn't expected until six and she needed these precious moments to get her brain in order.

So, Rose had gone. Good. What other women lurked in the wings? Blake said he was crazy about her. Crazy? That meant nuts, mad, stupid, insane--but, not in love, she thought dismally. He was crazy for her body. Like he had said, men are all about sex. The physical act. They enjoyed it and didn't like any emotional baggage. Rose would have been an emotional disaster of the worse order. No wonder he didn't want to know about her.

Jade wished Blake and she knew each other better. Why was he such a loner, so withdrawn at times? What was his relationship with his family? He obviously loved his mother and was always friendly when he spoke on the phone to his younger brothers, but he never told Jade anything. For instance, what had gone wrong with his marriage, really gone wrong? He seemed to be the sort of person that when he made a commitment, it was for life – forever, which might be the reason he was now love and marriage shy. He had already messed up once, badly.

She stood up and looked out of the window. It was almost dark. She hated Blake flying his plane at night. She picked up the whisky decanter and slopped another drink into her glass. Hmm, feeling good all the way down.

Should she ask him outright? "Hey, Blake, I know you like bonking me but do you love me and are you willing to commit to me for the rest of your life? Oh, and that includes paying all the medical bills and school fees for my little brother and any other outstanding finances I might accrue from time to time." Funny ha-ha. She couldn't ask him that. It was a sure way to end this relationship. After all, they had only known each other a short time, how could she possibly expect this type of commitment?

Yes, he had opened up sexually. In fact, he led the way with his wonderful erotic love-making and with his complete lack of embarrassment. She sat down again and crossed her legs. I want him *now*. I want him to do it to me across this chair, that desk, on the floor. Oh, Christ!

Wrong sort of thinking, Jade. I'm as sex mad as he is and even more secretive about my life. I haven't told him how ill Ray is and how short of money I am. How I am hunting on *his* land to stake *my* claim for *my* opal mine. She hung her head. "Papa, I do have to cool things with Blake, don't I? I know I have to look after Ray and I will never break my promise to you. I will find your gift to us."

\* \* \* \*

Home at last. Blake climbed from the cockpit and proceeded to secure the plane. Physically he felt tired and stiff but mentally he was on red alert. He was home and about to see Jade.

He walked across the strip and through the paddock leading to the homestead. The lights shone out from almost every window, making the place look warm and inviting. He pulled his jacket more closely around him. It was still cold in the evenings, but it was also fresh and stimulating.

He imagined Jade in the kitchen talking to Eve and Maggie, probably giving them a drink by this time. His mother had shocked him by her response to his quite blunt statement last night.

"Ma, I've arranged for Rose to leave tomorrow," he had said. "She wants to go home."

"I understand, son. Jade is not an easy person for Rose to get along with."

He felt instantly defensive. "It's not about Jade. Well, that's wrong, it is." He had corrected himself. "Ma, Jade and I are an item and it's not appropriate for Rose to be here."

God, he had sounded so pompous.

"I'm very pleased. Jade is a nice person. What do you mean--an item?" Eve had suddenly appeared confused.

"We're sleeping together."

"Is it only for the sex then, dear?"

He had almost felt embarrassed talking to his mother about such things. "No. I'm serious about her but we're taking it one day at a time. I just didn't want you to be shocked."

His mother nodded wisely. "But I'm not, Blake. Believe me, I'm not."

He pushed open the gate and walked up the path smiling wryly as he thought of Jade tipping Rose into the mud. He had been too far away at the time to stop it but had seen the whole scenario acted out in front of him.

The little devil! She hadn't liked Rose from the very first moment, and he had expected some sort of explosion to happen ... but not that!

"Jade Oliver, I'm in love with you, and I want you back in my arms where you belong," he murmured. Taking a small box from his pocket, he flicked it open so the light from the kitchen window fell across an opal ring nestling in a bed of velvet.

Jade's engagement ring. It was magnificent and as he twisted the box, the ring seemed to reflect every color ever created. He had bought it today in Adelaide as, thinking of Jade he had successfully dismissed any feelings of panic and strolled confidently through the city center to the top jewelry store. Yep, it had cost him heaps but he didn't care. Tonight he was going to ask Jade to be his wife.

## Chapter Twelve

"I think I'll have an early night. I've had such a busy day with Maggie in the kitchen." Eve stretched and yawned as Jade finished clearing the coffee cups.

"Are you alright, Ma?" Blake studied his mother closely. She didn't look tired, just an excuse he guessed, so that Jade and he could be alone. He could cope with that.

"Yes, dear. I just want to make sure I enjoy every moment here before we fly to Texas on Monday so I don't want to get over tired."

Jade stopped in the process of putting the place mats in the drawer. "We?" she asked, as her eyebrows rose.

"Blake and me, Jade dear. Didn't Blake tell you he has to fly over on business? I've decided to leave a few days earlier so we can keep each other company on the flight."

"No. He didn't tell me."

"Tut, tut, son." Eve wagged a finger at Blake. "You should keep your assistant better informed."

Blake wasn't sure but he thought he saw a slight smirk on Eve's face as she bent to kiss him goodnight.

"Let's go into the lounge and I'll get us a brandy," he said when Eve had gone. "It's cold in here." And about to get colder judging by the waves of frostiness emanating from Jade.

"Good idea. It's probably time we had a private talk."

She chose to sit in one of the arm chairs and he noticed she was careful that their fingers didn't touch when she accepted the brandy glass.

He stretched out on the lounge. It wasn't looking too good for a marriage proposal at the moment, he decided, swirling the golden liquid around in the glass. "I was going to tell you about Texas but Ma beat me to it." He might as well clear the air.

"It's none of my business where and when you chose to go anywhere."

Oh, yeah, she was definitely pissed off.

"It *is* your business, sweetheart. Some issues have come up with my other companies and it's easier for me to go over and sort it out face-to-face. Particularly, it gives me the chance to discuss matters with Ethan and Liam."

She was quiet for a moment and then, taking him by surprise, moved and sat next to him, resting her hand on his thigh. He linked his fingers with hers. This was more like his Jade.

"I'm sorry I'm being a pain, as usual," she said, turning to him with her open smile.

God, he wanted to kiss her so badly, touch her beautiful breasts outlined under her blouse, pull off those damn blasted jeans and feel her skin next to his.

"I know I've seen off Rose and that Eve has given our relationship her nod of approval," Jade continued, her fingers rubbing against his. "But, I can't do it, Blake. I can't."

"Can't do what?"

"Have sex with you while your mother is only a few feet away along the



passage."

"Is that all that's worrying you? She won't hear us if you don't yell like a banshee like you usually do."

"That's not the point."

"I could stick some duct tape over that sweet little mouth of yours. That should sort it."

Uh-Uh, she wasn't laughing. Something was seriously wrong. He watched as she gathered herself together. Houston, Houston, we've got a problem.

"I'm trying to explain that it is only sex. That's all we have. And don't get me wrong, its wonderful, mind-blowing sex and you are the most gorgeous lover ever but, that's all it is. We don't talk about personal things. We don't know anything about our innermost thoughts. I don't know what makes you tick and you know next to nothing about me. You say you're crazy about me but that's only because you want to have a physical relationship. Sex may be fine for a while but not for a relationship of substance."

He was beginning to panic. She was slipping away from him.

"I don't agree. We don't have to find out every single thing about each other. Getting to know someone is a gradual process that sometimes can take years. We already have something very precious, which is sexual compatibility. You are bringing a woman's emotion into it."

Jade stood up and faced him. Her face was flushed and she was tearing up. Shit!

"I *am* a woman. I have every right to be emotional. Our relationship, if we can call it that, is tenuous to say the least. I don't know you, Blake. You're constantly leaving me wide open to pain and hurt feelings and I can't cope with it." A tear rolled down her cheek.

He stood up and pulled her into his arms. "Please don't cry, honey."

"Don't call me honey." She pressed her face into his shoulder.

"I've a suggestion to make."

She looked up, her eyes still swimming in tears. "What?"

He bent and kissed her before saying "We'll give each other time, if that's what you want. We'll talk until the next cattle muster if it will make you feel more comfortable and when you're ready, we'll connect again sexually."

Now he knew he was *really* crazy about her to suggest such an idea. Still, she was a sensual woman who had proved she loved having sex with him so he didn't think the wait would be too long.

"I'm going to Adelaide tomorrow. You haven't forgotten, have you?"

He had. "Don't go."

"I have to. I've promised my brother. Also, I'm meeting Katie."

"When do you get back? Monday?"

"Yes."

"I'll be gone. I'm away a week."

She swallowed and he resisted the urge to pull her hips against his throbbing body. Talk about frustration!

Stepping away, she wiped her hands across her cheeks, brushing away the tears like a child. "That may be for the best. We'll begin our talks when you get back."

"Sounds like you're arranging a trade summit meeting. Are you going to prepare an agenda?"

"Don't make fun of this, Blake. I'm deadly serious. If you think anything of me, then please say this is the thing to do."

There was something niggling her. He knew it and it wasn't the fact that she didn't feel connected with him emotionally. It was deeper, more sinister and when he got back from the States he would make sure he unraveled it--completely.

But, for now he would lock away Jade's ring. He had been acting like a love-sick teenager imagining everything would go smoothly and someone as contrary and complex as Jade would agree to marry someone like him. He was wrong and he would have to handle things differently.

\* \* \* \*

"Ms. Oliver?"

Jade stopped and clutched Katie's hand as Ray's doctor walked towards them. It was Sunday morning and she and Katie had met up and were going to spend the day with Ray before Jade flew back to Coober Pedy the next morning and Katie returned to her work in the Barossa Valley.

With her heart pounding as if it would burst, Jade searched the doctor's face for a clue. "Is my brother worse?" Her voice was husky and unnatural. Katie placed a protective arm around Jade's shoulder.

"No, nothing like that," he hastily reassured her. "We took Ray off the ventilator earlier this morning. He's breathing on his own now and is much improved so I think you should find a very happy little boy waiting for you."

"Oh, my goodness." Jade's face was wreathed in smiles as she hugged her friend and they hurried along the hospital corridor to Ray's room.

"Stop it, Jade." Ray pretended to be super cool as Jade enthusiastically kissed him but she could tell how excited he was. She and Katie dumped new games and DVDs on to his bed and for the next couple of hours, pandemonium rained as they celebrated Ray's good news.

"The doc said that if I go on as I am, I should be able to come home in about a month. That's not very long, is it? Just in time for the school holidays." Ray grinned as the two women exchanged glances. Jade gestured to Katie that they would talk later.

By mid-afternoon, Ray was getting tired and Jade decided to let him rest. They said their goodbyes and Katie drove them to Lara's house in North Adelaide.

"Do you have to go back to the Barossa tonight?" Jade asked as she unloaded the few groceries she had bought and placed the perishables in the fridge.

"No, I don't have to. I'll leave early in the morning and stay here with you tonight so we can have a girl gos."

Jade grinned with delight. "That would be great, Katie. I need someone to talk to."

"Princess, when we met I took one look at your face and thought that might be the case." They laughed, best friends comfortable in each others' company.

Later that evening after dinner they had coffee by the fire, enjoying the luxury of Lara and Jack's beautiful town house. Katie sat opposite Jade and waited expectantly. Jade suddenly became tongue tied. Where did she begin, for heaven's sake?

"Come on, Jade. It's not like you to hold back." Katie did some sweet talking and over her favorite scotch and coke, Jade poured out her troubles.

Katie was a great listener, Jade decided an hour later as she sat back in her chair feeling a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She had told her everything, including how much she loved Blake, how miserable she was and how important it was to her and Ray to find the opal mine. As she expected, Katie had offered to help her out with money but Jade adamantly refused.

"And if you dare mention it to Lara, I'll never speak to you again. You know very well that Jack and she will rush in and pay all my debts and I will feel terrible."

Katie propped her feet up on the coffee table. "It seems so ridiculous, Jade. You have friends willing to help you and although I don't have much money, you're welcome to it."

"Thank you, but no."

"Okay. Why don't you tell Blake?"

"No, Katie! When I find the mine, I need to register my claim or he might take it from me. I'm not sure of the legalities, after all, it is on his land." Jade rested her chin on her hand, looking gloomily at her friend. "I have to find it soon. Ray will be leaving hospital and we will have no where to live. I can't expect to stay here in Lara and Jack's place. I couldn't ask that."

"You are a strange woman, Jade Oliver. You are so self reliant. There are times when you have to accept help from other people, and who more appropriate than your best friends? When I said tell Blake, I meant tell him Ray is ill and when he comes out of hospital you would like him to come and live at the station in the school holidays. Also, ask him for a financial advance on your salary so you can pay off your debts."

Jade sighed. "You don't get it, do you? I don't want to owe him anything. I told you I love him but unfortunately, he doesn't love me. In a few weeks when my review comes up, it will all be over and he'll let me go, that's how much our relationship means to him."

"I don't believe you. You underestimate his feelings for you, Princess." Jade could see that Katie's patience was wearing thin.

"No, I don't. Oh, I know he's all fancy talk now about getting to know each other but he is placating me, Katie. Putting it crudely, he likes to bonk me and thinks I'll have got over my little hissy fit by the time he gets back and bonking will continue forthwith."

Katie laughed. "Well, it will, won't it?"

Jade hung her head. "I really don't know. I love him so much that I'm almost prepared to continue a sexual liaison because of it, but I'm afraid of getting my heart broken. Dramatic, huh?"

"I'm not sure how to advise you." Katie touched Jade's arm in a comforting gesture. "Perhaps you should take one step at a time. Search for your father's gift first. But honestly, I've got a feeling it will be like hunting for a needle in a haystack."

\* \* \* \*

Jade carefully checked the station's vehicle for all her requirements. It was very much a déjà vu of the last time she went treasure hunting only now Blake was in Texas and couldn't help her if she got into strife. This time she had added a larger pick axe, several wooden markers, a pair of gloves to protect her hands when she was digging and a tape to measure the exact position of the mine from the boundary fence.

She drove quietly away from the homestead as dawn was breaking, leaving a note for Maggie to say she was going out for a while to check some stock requirements. How easily the lies were coming to her these days, she thought as an hour and a half later she found the clump of prickly pear trees. Sitting on the ground near the biggest tree was a small can filled with stones, just like Tom had said. This had to be the spot. Her heart began to drum with excitement.

The rains had made the ground at least reasonably soft and she dutifully thanked God for his help with this matter as she laid out her tools rather like a doctor preparing for an operation. Marking a spot next to the can, she began to dig.

Two hours later, she sat dejectedly on the edge of the large pit she had made. She was coated in mud and dust, her back was killing her and her hands were covered in blisters even through her gloves. Not one glimmer of an opal. Katie was right. She was looking for a needle in a haystack.

Drinking deeply from her water flask, she stared miserably into the hole. "Papa, you've sold me a bum's steer this time. There's bugger all here." As she stared, the sun's rays glistened on something colored at the bottom of the pit. Jumping down with her pick axe in her hand, she rubbed away the dirt from the spot and to her amazement and joy uncovered a glittering piece of rock.

"Ohmygod." She shrieked as she dug it out carefully using her pick axe to loosen it. She held up the rock and gasped as it reflected a multitude of colors under the bright sun. Tears streamed down her grimy face as she climbed from the hole and danced around, holding the stone high in the air above her head.

"Opal, the most beautiful opal. Papa, we've done it, Thank you. Thank you!"

### Chapter Thirteen

Trying to contain her excitement, Jade hid the rock in a blanket in the front seat of the SUV. Then she quickly shoveled the pile of dirt back into the pit and smoothed it over.

Her moment of glory came when she wrote her name on a piece of cardboard, attached it to the biggest stake and plunged it into the earth. "Yes! Papa, this is for you and Ray." She knelt beside the stake and spent precious moments thinking of her father and everything he had been to her. She shed tears for him and her mother, her beautiful mother and finally, for Blake. "Forgive me, Blake and try to love me just a little," she whispered into the still, calm air.

Later, arriving at the homestead, she sneaked through the front door carrying the slab of opal under her arm and hoping that Maggie wouldn't see her. She hurriedly showered and changed and then removed any incriminating evidence from the vehicle and hosed it down.

To catch up on her work, she stayed late in the office eating her dinner on the run as she planned her next move. Tomorrow she would drive to Coober Pedy on the pretence of conducting company business. That wouldn't really be a lie because she would do that, but afterwards she would register her claim and try to get a value on the opal.

\* \* \* \*

"That will be three hundred and seventy three dollars, young lady." She didn't know the man in the Primary Industries and Resources Office in the center of Coober Pedy where she was required to lodge her claim, and she was glad. The guilt was weighing heavier and heavier on her shoulders. Could she be accused of stealing from Blake? She didn't think so.

"You realize you will have to attend workshops on mine safety and operations before you can legally use the mine?" He was glowering at her and Jade glared back.

"Yes. That's fine." Mind your own business, mate. I pay your salary.

Her opal was burning a hole in her briefcase as she left the claims office and made her way along the street to Stan Polinski's jewelry store. At least she felt comfortable with Stan who had been great friends with her father.

He was in the back of the store, working on the setting for an opal necklace. Jade wondered if this was where Blake had bought the necklaces for Eve and Rose. Looking up, Stan's face broke into a toothy grin. "Little Princess, how ya going?"

Jade laughed, giving the wiry old man a hug. "Long time--no see, Stan," she said settling on a stool at the bench and watching him work.

"I heard you were back at the station working for the American."

"Yes. It's good, I'm really enjoying it." Most of the time. "Stan, can you value a piece of opal for me and promise to keep quiet about it?"

The old man looked up, curiosity written across his craggy face. "Never broken a promise yet, Princess. Let's have a look."

Jade undid her briefcase and carefully un-wrapping the stone, laid it in front of him. "I slept with it under my pillow last night," she said, her voice tight. Please let this be good opal, please.

She decided Stan's swear words were too bad to be ever repeated as he closely

examined the stone with his eye glass. Eventually he said "Jade, this is *black* opal. As you know, it's rare but it's the best and there are some good deposits around Coober Pedy, if you can find them. It's a beautiful stone, bloody beautiful."

She was glad Stan was smart enough not to ask where she had got it. "How much do you think its worth?"

He examined it again and Jade held her breath. "Around two fifty thou."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?" Jade gripped the edges of the bench to stop herself from falling over.

Stan rubbed a wrinkled hand over his bristly jaw. "Well, three hundred then. Do ya wanna sell it?"

"Yes."

"Show me the proof of ownership."

Jade produced the copies of the claim and registration of the mine, her hands trembling as she spread the papers for him to see.

"Stay here. Gotta make a couple of phone calls."

The old man disappeared into the tiny office at the back of the store and she waited patiently for him to return.

One hour later, she had banked a check for three hundred thousand dollars in her account. She couldn't believe it! As soon as it had cleared she would be able to pay all of Ray's expenses, even buy a new car and have money for a deposit on a home for them. And this was from one piece of stone from the mine. Even if there weren't any others, she was happy. He dad had saved them and made sure their futures were secure. Holy Moly, what a relief, she thought, treating herself to a coffee and donut in one of the nearby cafes.

She picked up some special feed for the mares, and a small gold clock that she knew Maggie would like and on a whim, bought a silk nightdress with lace and ribbons, the most luxurious thing she had ever owned. Now for the long drive home. Humming as she sped along the Outback roads, she realized for the first time in a year that she felt secure. Not happy exactly but financially safe. She wouldn't feel happy until Blake was home and she had talked to him.

At least she could now think clearly. She would take Katie's advice and tell Blake about Ray, her debts and her father's gift. She knew Blake didn't need the money but decided she would offer him half the shares in the mine. Was that generous or what? Besides, she would need to employ professional miners to work the mine and Blake would need to know about that. "Method in my madness," she said aloud. "Blake will understand and forgive me for staking a claim on his land, even though I'm entitled to do it. I'll tell him I love him, and although I know he doesn't love me, we will see what happens."

\* \* \* \*

It was a long week without Blake but with her renewed energy, Jade felt she could move mountains. The office was pristine perfect, as was the rest of the homestead. She painted the front fence and gates a bright yellow and then changed her mind and re-painted them in white. Then she planted some extra native grasses and plants in the garden, lovingly talking to them each day and encouraging them to grow.

A phone call to Katie filled her in on Jade's news, although she decided not to tell Ray until she visited him next time. She and Katie also agreed not to tell Lara what was happening, having received an email from Jack saying Lara was suffering badly from morning sickness, which continued all day and she was taking things very easy. Instead, Jade sent her a huge arrangement of flowers.

She had gleefully written checks to pay for what she owed Ray's hospital and school and felt more of the tension lift from her.

Blake had telephoned a couple of times but had seemed cool and withdrawn, which worried her but she consoled herself by counting the days and hours until he would be home.

It was mid-afternoon on the following Monday and Jade was cantering across the home paddock on Prince when she heard and then saw Blake's plane coming in to land. She rode to the edge of the strip and waited as he strolled towards her, case in hand. Her eyes ate him up as he came closer. He was more handsome than ever, casually elegant in beige slacks and a dark green pullover. How I've missed you, gawgeous.

"So this is what my accountant does while her boss is away?" he joked, resting a hand on Prince's neck.

"You bet. I've had a great week," she replied with a dazzling smile as she jumped down and walked beside him, leading Prince by the reins.

"Everything in order then?"

"Yep."

"You appear remarkably cheerful. Is this because you're glad to see me?"

Jade stopped and Prince nudged her with his head. Blake set his case on the ground and folded his arms across his chest.

"Yes, I'm very glad to see you and if you're not too tired, will you make love to me tonight?" There, she had said it. Love making first and talking later.

Blake pulled her into his arms and she reveled in the feel of his body against hers and the clean smell of him. "I'd never be too tired for an offer like that," he murmured against her lips.

"I missed you so much, Blake," she sighed, her hand threading into his dark, thick hair as her mouth opened beneath his. His kiss was hard and demanding, leaving them both breathless.

"I feel an early night coming on, Princess Jade. What happened to all that 'getting to know you' stuff, by the way?"

"We will talk later. Much later," she smiled.

\* \* \* \*

They ate dinner with the stockmen in the kitchen but Jade didn't taste a thing. Her eyes kept wandering over Blake's beloved face and imaging his long, elegant hands on her body, caressing, teasing, and loving her. She was sure the others must have noticed her lack of concentration but if they did, no one said anything.

"Here's your scotch." Blake handed her a drink as they sat in the lounge after dinner.

"Aren't you going to have a brandy?" Yikes, I can hardly speak for wanting him.

"No. I'm going to have a shower and then go to bed."

Her face fell and he laughed. "Gotcha!" He kissed her petulant lips. "I'll meet you in your room in a little while, Okay?"

"Okay!"

The sun had come out again for Jade as she raced to the bathroom, showered and when Blake came into the bedroom a little later wearing his robe, she was lying in bed all frills and ribbons in her new pink nightdress. The lamps were low and the scene was set for seduction.

"This is nice," he said, his fingers examining the silk almost covering her breasts.

"All the better to tempt you, My Lord." She batted her eyelids.

He leaned forward and pressed his lips in the hollow between her breasts.

"You smell like a garden of flowers. I won't need any tempting, My Lady."

"Then take off your robe and come to bed, my beautiful White Knight." Jade's heart was pounding as she pulled undone the tie of his robe and saw he was naked underneath. "Me thinks you may want to plunder this gentle maiden," she whispered, her hand encircling his fully erect shaft.

"You thinks right although why we are talking like this, I'm not too sure," he laughed, tossing the robe to one side and pulling back the covers. For a moment he looked at her taking in the outline of her perfect body beneath the silk nightdress. Gradually he eased the garment over her knees and thighs and then her hips, until she lay naked before him.

"Open your legs, Your Highness," he said, with a pretend fierce expression on his face.

She immediately did so and then drew a sharp breath as he bent over her, touching her woman's core with his tongue and then slowly kissing and sucking her sensitive nub.

"Blake, wait. Don't do this, I'm going to come." Jade's hands clutched his dark head as he ignored her pleas and continued to suckle her as wave after wave of ecstasy washed over her.

"Okay, I can't wait any longer," he said, as he moved up her still pulsing body and thrust his sex into her moist warmth. "You feel so good, my Jade. Hang on, here we go."

She did hang on, loving every moment as he lifted her hips and plunged into her time and time again. Jade went with him, catching his rhythm and yelling as she climaxed with him, feeling his powerful body shaking with his own fulfillment.

"You are beautiful," he murmured against her throat. "I love making you yell."

She laughed, holding him hard against her. "I have to make up for lost yells while you've been away."

Blake rolled over on to his back and Jade cuddled into him. "I want to tell you something important. Can we talk?"

"Hmm."

It was now or never. "You know I have a brother in Adelaide. Well ...." She stopped mid-sentence as she felt Blake's body relaxing and his breathing change.

He had fallen instantly into a deep sleep.



## Chapter Fourteen

Blake woke suddenly. He had been having a wild dream that Jade had disappeared. No one had been able to find her on the station, not even the police, and he had an ominous feeling that she was dead.

He was sweating and anxious. It had been more like a damned nightmare than a dream. He glanced at the bedside clock. It was only seven. At least he hadn't woken at some unearthly hour in the middle of the night like he usually did when affected by jet lag. He turned over. Jade was still asleep, which was unusual for her. Normally she was up at first light. He studied the beauty of her face, young and vulnerable in sleep although her arms flung above her head suggested total abandonment, as long as it was only for him, he decided pulling the sheet away from her breasts.

She had been so giving last night in their love-making, like she always was but from the moment she had met him at the airstrip there had been something different about her. Some sort of indefinable happiness had shone from her eyes as if all was well with the world. As if she had come to an important decision in her life.

He stroked a gentle finger along her soft cheek and then down over her breasts marveling at her pearl-like skin. She stirred and then turned her back on him, snuggling more closely into her pillow. He should let her sleep but he knew he couldn't. He wanted her. He smoothed his hand down the delicate curve of her spine to where her small butt rounded into perfect lines. Her skin was like silk under his fingers as he traced the softness of her hip and then her breast, lightly touching the nipple. He held his breath as she stretched and then pushed her butt back into the contours of his body. His sex pressed hard into the cleft of her bottom as his heart began to hammer in his chest.

Christ, yes, he wanted her!

He continued to stroke her nipples as his arms encompassed her and she wriggled against him so his penis teased the entry to her vagina. He could hear the quickening of her breathing as he adjusted their positions so he was lying on top of her with her face turned into the pillow. Lifting her butt, she allowed him to fully enter her and he tenderly kissed the back of her neck as he began to make slow and sensuous love to her. His body throbbed with every stroke inside her warm, wet core, which squeezed and held him. He moved his hands under her so his fingers found her sensitive clitoris and he gently rubbed it in rhythm with his thrusting movements. She moaned and then panted, as her fingers gripped the pillow. He could feel the strong muscles of her vagina tightening and knew she was about to come and he increased their pleasure by pounding faster and faster into her. His breath came in short gasps as he held her tightly and with a hoarse cry reached a climax that seemed to go on forever.

Beneath him, Jade's body was pulsating and he continued to hold her until she was quiet. He gently turned her to face him. They were both breathing hard and her face was flushed as she caressed his shoulders and kissed him softly on the mouth.

"That was some way to be woken up," she whispered, as if in awe of what had happened between them.

"I couldn't resist you," he replied, his lips moving to her breasts. "You sleep in," he added, and after a few moments she closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

My Jade, he thought. Would the rest of her life be with him? Was it time to ask her to be his wife? He remembered that she was going to talk to him about something last night but he had been tired and so jet lagged that he must have fallen asleep. There was plenty of time for talking. In the meantime he would let her dream on.

Carefully getting out of the bed without disturbing her, he showered and dressed and then made his way to the kitchen and made a strong, black coffee. Maggie and the others were up and about but rather than wait for breakfast, he took his coffee into the office deciding to do some work.

The place was immaculate and from what he could see at a quick glance, Jade had kept all of the book work up to date except for opening the mail, which was in a pile on her desk. Then he remembered the mail plane would have made a delivery yesterday and obviously Jade hadn't opened it yet. He skimmed through the envelopes and packages noting almost everything appeared to be accounts, until he saw one addressed to him marked private and confidential.

Impatiently, he ripped it open and then stilled, shock and disbelief holding him rigid. It was a formal document from the Primary Industries Office informing him that a mine claim had been made on his land lodged by Jade Rebecca Oliver. He read it through not taking it in. Then he laughed. Jade had lodged a claim on his behalf, but why? Then he read it again, more thoroughly. No, the claim for an opal mine had been Jade's. It was *her* mine. Bull crap! What was going on?

"Why didn't you wake me? Have you had breakfast?"

Speak of the devil.

He stood up and turned to her, knowing the disbelief must still be showing in his face. Her smile disappeared as she looked at the paper in his hand.

"What is it? Is something wrong with Eve?" She looked frightened now.

"Perhaps you can explain this?"

She took the paper from him. He noticed her hands were shaking as she read it. "I was going to tell you about this. I can explain." He could see panic in her face.

His eyes narrowed. She looked as guilty as hell. "This should be good. If I've read that document correctly, you have lodged a claim for an opal mine on my land."

"Yes ... well, yes, that's right but it's not what it seems." She had paled and sat down suddenly in one of the chairs.

"Was this a plan you had all along?" He was on the attack as the realization of the lies she had told began to sink in.

"I ... I ...."

"Did you know about this mine when you applied for the job here?" By hell, he was going to get the truth out of her.

"Yes."

"So, you've been hunting for it?"

"Yes."

"And that explains your little adventure into the bush when you had your accident." Yeah, it was all coming together now.

"I wasn't sure where it was. I couldn't say anything."

"Why not? No, don't answer. It's obvious you wanted to keep it to yourself, you greedy little bitch." He took a deep breath endeavoring to control the anger rising in him. "I gather from that form that you have found it. And was it a good find, Jade?" He leaned his hands on the desk, his face now as white as hers but with suppressed rage.

"Yes." She hung her head.

"Really? You have been busy."

"It's not what you think. I found a slab of black opal and I sold it."

"For how much?"

"Three hundred thousand. There's probably more opal in the mine."

"Congratulations. No wonder you were so happy last night. Couldn't wait to lasso me and keep me sexually satisfied, could you? Is this what you were going to tell me about last night when you had me nice and mellow prepared to do anything for you? Oh, Blake, by the way, I've stolen a piece of your land worth a few million. I'm sure you won't mind," he mimicked.

"It was a gift from my father. He told me about it and gave me a map. It is all quite legal." Her voice was stronger now and she stood up facing him.

"And that makes it all okay? You have to be kidding! We'll see what my attorney says about that because technically your step-mother sold that land to me."

"This is ridiculous, Blake. You can't think I meant to cheat you?"

"Well, you tell me what it looks like. You wriggled your way into a job and into my affections with just one aim in mind, to feed your own greed. You make me sick." He turned away not sure whether he could bring himself to look at her anymore.

Jade touched his arm and he shook her hand away. "I can't trust you anymore, Jade. I want you to leave. I will pay you a month's salary in lieu of notice. Just get out of here today."

"But I haven't told you everything. You haven't let me explain. I'm willing to give you half the mine but I have ...."

He turned on her and she stepped back in alarm. "Spare me the details. Save your money because your mine claim is going to be tied up in the courts for years and you might just need that three hundred thousand to cover some of your legal fees."

For God's sake don't cry, he wanted to say as he watched her tear up. He prepared himself for more excuses. However, her shoulders suddenly sagged in defeat.

"You won't let me explain, so yes, I'll leave," she said, her obstinate little chin shaking with emotion. "You're not the man I thought you were Blake, or you would understand."

Blake was quieter now. He shrugged. "I'm going out for the day. Be gone by the time I get back."

She nodded.

He looked at her sadly. "If you had only realized, Jade that you could have had it all. The station, the mine and ... my love. But, by lying to me you've blown it, big time. Big time."

## Chapter Fifteen

"Katie? It's me. Can I come and stay with you for a couple of days?" She was holding it together pretty well except for the voice quiver on the last couple of words.

"Of course. When?" The response was warm and welcoming and nearly Jade's undoing.

"Today. I've managed to get on an afternoon plane and I'll pick up a rental car from the airport in Adelaide. Will that give you time to get home from work?"

"Yes. You know where I hide the key if you get there before me." Katie rang off and Jade knew that she was too smart to ask questions yet.

She had arranged for one of the stockmen to drive her to Coober Pedy in the station's SUV and by twelve o'clock they were on their way. Jade had said a brief goodbye to the few stockmen who were breaking in horses in the compound and managed to hold it together although when she said goodbye to Maggie it was more difficult. Maggie's tears flowed as the older woman stressed her concern and bewilderment at Jade's sudden departure as Jade promised to write to her in a few days.

Now she was on her way to Adelaide. She looked out of the plane window, noticing the earth beginning to harden as the sun's rays strengthened and dried the ground after the recent rains. It had been a good year for rain, an unusual occurrence as often as many as three or more years would go by without any. Blake would do well, with his cattle thriving across the huge station property.

She wondered if he would investigate her mine. Blake's copy of her claim had pin-pointed exactly where the claim was and for all she knew, he might mine it himself. But, knowing Blake as she did, she knew he wouldn't. That wasn't his style. He would rather battle her in court.

\* \* \* \*

"Right. What's going on? Let's hear it." Katie was very matter of fact as she opened the door to her apartment in the Barossa Valley, north of Adelaide. She gathered a now weeping Jade in her arms.

"Oh, K-K-K-Katie, I've been so strong up to now. I didn't cry when I left Maggie and Molly, or Coober Pedy but ...." She hiccupped. "But, now I'm ready to bawl."

"A drink required, I think." Katie poured two glasses of finest red wine produced in the Beauvais Winery where she worked. She pushed one of the glasses into Jade's hand where she sat huddled on the sofa.

"Got any scotch?" Jade sniffed loudly and then blew her nose.

"No! Now drink that and tell me what has happened this time."

Jade's face crumpled again. "Blake sacked me because I didn't tell him about the mine and he called me a greedy bitch and said he is going to sue me."

Another hiccup.

"And he said ... he said I could have had it all--including his love, Katie. Only I can't be trusted because I lied to him and he wouldn't listen to what I wanted to say."

"Be quiet now, Jade. I've got the picture. Now sit back, calm yourself and let's go through it slowly step by step."

It was after ten o'clock by the time Katie felt satisfied that she had got Jade's

entire story. In between talking, they cooked an omelet for dinner and Jade finished the bottle of wine and started another one. She lay sprawled across the sofa and smiled mistily at her friend.

"I think I'm drunk," she murmured, her mouth struggling with the words. Pondering this statement for a few moments she said, "Yes, I'm definitely pissed, but I feel so much better after talking to you. Shall I ring Lara?" She tried to reach the phone but Katie laughingly moved it out of her reach.

"Absolutely not. You are *definitely* drunk and you're going to have a mighty hangover in the morning. But, we'll talk more then. Let's get you to bed."

Jade allowed Katie to help her undress and put her to bed in the small guest room. "You should see me now, Blake Jordan," Jade yelled as she wobbled on the edge of the bed with Katie trying to pull her nightdress over her. "You might hate me but I've got friends to look after me. Bet you don't, you son of a bitch, unless it's your lolly-legs Barbie doll."

"Shh, Jade. It's time to go to sleep. I'm sure you'll find that Blake likes you just as you are."

Jade laid her spinning head on the soft pillow. "That's the line from that movie...." Jade was asleep before she could finish the sentence.

\* \* \* \*

"Oh bugger! Oh, my head." Jade struggled to sit up in bed to find Katie standing in front of her holding two pain killers and a glass of water in her hand.

"You'll feel better soon." Katie's voice was loud but comforting, Jade decided, as she obediently swallowed the pills.

"I've got to go to work soon, but I've taken a half day off so we can talk *sensibly* this afternoon and work out what to do." She bunched the pillows behind Jade's head and tidied the bedclothes. "You take it easy and stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"Yes, Mummy." Jade gave a mischievous grin and then a grimace as another hammer came crashing down on her head. "I'm never going to drink alcohol again," she vowed, waving as Katie closed the bedroom door.

Jade had recovered sufficiently enough to serve a light lunch of cold meats and salad when Katie returned at one o'clock. During the afternoon Katie probed deeper into Jade's problems.

"I think the most important thing to establish is do you love Blake or is it a sex thing? And be truthful." Katie frowned a warning, knowing that Jade was probably going to make a silly joke to cover her embarrassment.

"Yes, I love him." Jade gave an apologetic smile. "At first he was much too serious, too slow, too grumpy, too much of a loner, but as I got to know him I recognized that he is a caring, loving man who would never let you down, never be unfaithful. This is why I'm humiliated and hurt that he should hate me so now. We had such a great thing going Katie, and I thought--this is it, but through my own stupidity I've blown it all apart."

"You must admit, you deserve it. What did you expect of him when he found you out on all of those lies?"

"I didn't lie--not really."

"Princess ...." Katie raised her eyebrows.

"I just didn't tell him, that's different that lying."

Katie smiled and Jade knew she was thinking 'there goes our Jade again, twisting things around'.

"What am I going to do? I have some money now, but I need to get work and

find a place for when Ray comes out of hospital. Perhaps I could send an email to Blake and explain things that way?"

Putting on the coffee percolator, Katie stood with her hands on her hips, facing her friend. "How about this. Give Blake time to cool down because he is very angry with you at the moment. Stay at Lara and Jack's place for the time being. I wouldn't rush finding a house or renting anywhere yet--and register with some of the human resource companies for a casual job."

"That sounds okay."

"It is. It will give you time to catch your breath. You'll be able to visit Ray more often and you can be miserable on your own without crying all over my house."

Laughing, Jade hugged her friend. "You are the best, Katie Jones. I don't know what I would do without you. I'm such a stupid idiot."

"Ah-ha, but potentially a very rich stupid idiot."

\* \* \* \*

Blake checked the directions and claim document again as he stopped the SUV by some prickly pear cactus trees on the eastern edge of the property. This was about where Jade's mine should be. Getting out, he walked slowly towards the trees and then saw a number of stakes surrounding a larger one in the center with something attached. He noticed the outline of a pit that Jade must have dug. It was sizeable and would have been hard work to excavate and find her slab of opal. Reading the piece of writing on the cardboard on the central stake, he couldn't help smiling. It had the date and then said "This mine is hereby claimed by Jade Rebecca Oliver. Yippee!"

He sat down and studied the earth where she had dug. It was now two weeks since she had left and he missed her. Missed her like there was no tomorrow. Her smile, her laughter, her touch, every single thing about her, even the way she talked ninety miles an hour.

Earlier that day he had taken a call from a Human Resource company in Adelaide asking for a reference for Jade. Regretfully, he'd handled it. She had been fantastic at her job and he had ended up giving the woman on the phone a good review of Jade's work hating every moment of their conversation. This meant that Jade was searching for a job in Adelaide and he was helping her to find one. Helping her to move further away from him.

He groaned and rested his head in his hands. "Jade, why did you lie to me?" he said aloud. "Did this pile of earth with its few pieces of colored stone mean more to you than what we had together?"

\* \* \* \*

"You should have a proper dinner, Blake." Maggie was scolding him again as she brought his requested sandwich to him in the office that evening.

"I'm trying to catch up on this work," he replied bluntly.

"Don't snap at me, boss. You wouldn't be in this pickle if you hadn't sacked the Princess."

He couldn't be bothered to reply. Maggie had taken a few verbal swipes at him over the two weeks and although it had annoyed the hell out of him at first, now he almost looked for it. It was like the punishment he deserved for his stupidity in letting Jade go.

The phone ringing made him jump and he waved Maggie away as he answered it. It was probably Ethan calling from the States.

"Yep. Blake Jordan."

"Blake, its Katie Jones here. I trust you remember me."

He was on instant alert. "Yes, of course I do. How are you?"

"I'm not very well, actually."

"I'm sorry to hear--"

She cut across him. "You see I have a best friend called Jade Oliver who is breaking her heart over some nasty, rough, tough, Texan cowboy, and I'm angry about it." She didn't sound angry. She was ice-cool and very much in control.

"I can't do much about that, Katie. I don't have time for liars." Put that in your test tube and shake it, Doctor Jones.

"Jade is not a liar. She has faults I admit, but if she misled you it was for a good reason."

Oh, this should be interesting. He leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs in front of him. "You're going to have to sell me hard on this one, honey."

"If you would stop making smart remarks, I will tell you. Also, Jade has no idea that I am ringing, but I can't bear her unhappiness any longer--and she's only been in Adelaide for a short time, for goodness sake."

Blake swallowed. Katie didn't seem the sort of woman to mess around and the fact that twice now she had mentioned that Jade was unhappy, worried the heck out of him.

"I'm listening," he said, his voice gruff.

"You're probably aware that Jade's mother died when Jade was fifteen and Ray, her little brother, was only two. Her father Tom married again and his second wife Elizabeth hated Jade and verbally and physically abused her."

"I know. Maggie told me." He also knew his tone was coming over as--so what?

Katie's crystal-clear voice continued. "What you don't know is that Jade is now Ray's legal guardian and Ray is suffering from a life threatening illness--a disorder called Guillain-Barre Syndrome. Ray has been seriously ill for three months and several times Jade thought she had lost him. She did manage to get him into The Woodlands, a top private hospital here in Adelaide, and he's pulling through."

Blake straightened in his chair, his heart setting up a strange pounding. "I didn't know this."

"No. I'm sure you didn't. Jade is a very private person in many ways. It's an expensive hospital and Jade was finding it hard to meet the costs, plus pay Ray's boarding school fees. You see, she promised her dying father that she would always care for Ray and give him the best that she possibly could."

"That's why her father left her the mine, to help her?"

"Exactly. The day he died he told her about the mine and where it was. That was his gift to his children. He didn't know that as soon as he was dead Elizabeth would sell the property."

Rubbing a hand over his face, Blake clutched the phone closer to his ear. "Thanks for telling me. Any other surprises?"

"No. It's up to you now. She is staying at Lara's place and I believe you have her mobile number. But I beg of you, please don't take her to court and sue her over this mine."

"I'll have to think things over, Katie. Thanks." He felt sick in the pit of his stomach. What had he done, for Chrissake?

"One last thing. Jade loves you, madly and deeply. If you don't feel the same way then stay away from her. You have already broken her heart once."

\* \* \* \*

"See you tomorrow, Ray. I'll take you out in your wheel-chair again. It won't

be long before you come home." Jade blew a kiss and surprise, surprise, Ray returned it. Perhaps his favorite nurse Mary was *out* of favor at the moment.

She stopped at the nurses' station to have her usual little chin-wag, when one of them leaned over the counter. "There's a spunky guy waiting to see you in the relatives' room," she whispered conspiratorially.

Hmm. Couldn't be a new doctor, could it? Hope it's not that bloody Paul Sinclair. He had phoned Jade a couple of times in the past few days and she had told him to piss off in no uncertain terms. Perhaps he wasn't taking no for an answer and had followed her here.

Swinging open the door, she stopped and clutched the handle for dear life. In front of her was a White Knight disguised as Blake Jordan. In his hand he held an exquisite toy plane.

"No thanks, I prefer the bigger ones when I go flying," she joked, nodding to the plane and trying to control her trembling limbs.

He gave that slow, sexy grin and her stomach decided to perform like an acrobat from Cirque du Soleil.

"Hi, Princess. I've missed you."



## Chapter Sixteen

"Well, you've got no one to do your book work, have you? I wouldn't have been doing my job properly if you didn't miss that." Act cool, Jade. He can't bounce back into your life with no explanation. "How did you know I was here?"

His mouth tightened.

Jade shrugged. "I know. Katie rang you. I suppose she told you everything. Wait until I get hold of her, I'll thump her lights out."

That stirred him into action. "She loves you, Jade. You're lucky to have a friend like her."

"I know that, Mr. High and Mighty. I suppose you've brought that plane to give to Ray. At least *he'll* be pleased to see you." You're being so nasty, Jade. Hush your mouth.

"I would like to meet him, if that's okay."

Jade led the way along the corridor to Ray's room, her head spinning. Blake was so relaxed, so super cool and she was like a Cat on a Hot Tin Roof—oh, forget it! She was angry with herself that she couldn't be calm and sophisticated and able to think of clever things to say to pull him down a peg or two. Hadn't he roasted her the last time she was with him? Hadn't he thrown her out without giving her the proper right of reply? She wished she knew exactly what Katie had said.

"Here he is." She stepped forward so she could see Ray first. "Hi, trouper. This is Mr. Jordan from Stony Creek. He popped in to see you and has brought you a present."

Ray's eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he saw the plane. "Gee, thanks Mr. Jordan. Is this electronically controlled?" He tried to hold it but his hands refused to cooperate.

Jade rescued the plane and balanced it on Ray's chest. "He breathes on his own now," she explained to Blake. "And the paralysis is gradually disappearing. He even walked a couple of steps yesterday, didn't you, buddy?"

Blake sat on the edge of the bed. "That's great going, Ray. It won't be long before you're out in the park flying that plane." His smile was so tender that Jade felt tears prick the back of her eyes. Don't show you that you care what he does. Don't!

"Will you help me fly it, Blake?"

"Sure. If that's okay with Jade."

Ray stared at him earnestly. "I'm sorry Jade had to give up her job at your station. She said she wanted to fuss over me more often." He made a face. "And she does."

Blake laughed. "Yeah, well big sisters are like that sometimes," he confided, with a broad wink.

Jade's mind leapt ahead. They were getting on too well. Ray would get attached to Blake and then he would be gone. Not good enough.

"Blake has to leave now, mate," she said, placing the plane on the cabinet by his bed.

Cheerfully Ray said goodbye to his new friend and awkwardly shook hands with Blake who seemed unable to reply. Jade sneaked a glance at him. He was pale and looked sort of odd.

"Are you feeling okay?" She caught his arm and guided him to the relatives' room. "Sit in here for a while."

"I'll be alright in a moment."

"Put your head between your knees, that's what you do for fainting." She rested her hand on his shoulder. "Shall I call a nurse?"

"I'm not going to faint, Jade. I ... I don't like hospitals, that's all and to see your kid brother in that big bed, I found it disturbing."

The color returned to his face and he gave a shaky grin. "As a matter of fact, I don't like cities, lifts, crowds ... may as well admit to my weaknesses."

"Does this mean you're not perfect?" she joked, trying to put him at ease. "I'm not either."

"I know."

"Hmm. Besides coming to see my brother, why else are you here, Blake?" Now she was getting somewhere. Attack. Attack.

"To talk with you."

"Really? You surprise me. I was at least expecting you to hand me a solicitor's letter."

He stood up and instantly she felt at a disadvantage. "I anticipated that you would be difficult but not such a pain in the butt, Jade. If we can't talk sensibly, then I'll go."

Jumping up, Jade still felt at a disadvantage so she stood on a foot stool which brought her on level eye contact with Blake. And what eyes! Beautiful, dark melting chocolate with the silkiest of eyelashes. She felt she was falling into an abyss. Fight it, Jade.

"I have every right to be a pain after the way you treated me." Her hands automatically went to her hips.

"We can row here or go to Lara's place, please yourself."

"Right then. We will go there and you can get down on your knees and apologize to me ... and I might or then again, I might not, accept."

Blake put an end to her lecture by lifting her down from her pedestal. She managed to contain the urge to throw her arms around his neck and crush her trembling body against his. Sex, that's all it is, Jade sweetie. Only the desire to be his wanton sex goddess. Yum!

They drove to North Adelaide in Jade's newly purchased car and although she had been very frugal with her spending, she hated to admit she had bought a cheap and possibly not too reliable car. She expected Blake to say something about it, but he was strangely quiet, studying the parks and buildings as they drove along.

"Where are you staying tonight?" Jade threw the car keys on the hall table along with her bag.

"Here."

"No, you're not, Blake Jordan. I'm not having sex with you, if that's what you're thinking. Last time when I wanted to talk you fell asleep."

"I was jet lagged."

"That's no excuse."

"Yes, it is."

Jade paused and then stared at him good and hard. "You never used to argue like this, Blake."

"Only because I couldn't get a word in edge-wise. Now, I've learnt from the expert."

The door bell ringing made them both jump and Jade was first to wrench the

door open to find Paul Sinclair on the doorstep clutching a huge bunch of flowers.

"Hello Jade. I thought I would pop in to see how you are going."

She was flustered. Shit! Why did he have to turn up now? She felt, rather than saw Blake close behind her. "She's doing just fine, Sinclair," he said in his deep, slurpy Texas oil voice. "I'm sorry we can't ask you in, we've got business to attend to." He leaned forward and took the flowers from Paul, dumped them into Jade's arms and shut the door in Paul's face.

"That was *so* rude," Jade spluttered.

"Why? Did you want to see him?"

"No."

"Well then. The flowers are nice. You had better put them in some water."

"At least he *brought* me some flowers," she said pointedly as they walked to the kitchen and she searched for a vase.

"Just because a rooster has wings don't mean it can fly."

Blake pulled two huge steaks from the freezer and laid them on the sink while Jade arranged the flowers into some sort of semblance of style.

"Another of your weird expressions. What does that mean?"

"Appearances can be deceptive."

"Oh great," she said sarcastically. "What *are* you doing?"

"I'm thawing these steaks for the dinner I'm going to cook in a little while.

Now I am going to pour you a scotch and we're going to talk ... and no, we are not going to have sex. I'll sleep in one of the other bedrooms."

Jade opened her mouth once, then again, but no words came out. He didn't want to have sex with her? She would see about that. After they had talked, that is, she reminded herself.

"I'm nervous now," she admitted, when they were seated in arm chairs either side of the fire, nursing their drinks.

"Why? You wanted to talk and you're the one who's mad with me."

She took a gulp of scotch. Ah, to hell with never touching alcohol again. It tasted great. "Yes, I am mad, Blake."

"Would you like to recap and tell me why?" He was so gorgeous in his royal blue sweater and designer jeans. He was wearing his R.M William's riding boots. Ride 'em, cowboy.

"I tried to explain the reason why I needed money. I tried to tell you about dad's gift and Ray being ill, but you wouldn't listen. You threw me out of the house."

He looked thoughtful as he studied his beer and then shifted his legs, making himself more comfortable. "You're right. I'm sorry, Jade. I was so cranky that you had misled me, firstly into employing you and then the fact that you sneaked out hunting for the mine ... and could have been killed." He held up his hand to stop her butting in.

"Look at it from my point of view. I had told you I was crazy about you and it must have been obvious that I couldn't keep my hands off you so, when I saw the mine claim I felt totally deceived."

"That wasn't my intention."

Blake put his glass down and flexed his hands and she realized that she wasn't the only one who was nervous. "I'll be honest with you, Jade. I have a major problem with commitment. I have proved it already in the most disastrous way when I messed up my marriage."

Jade gave a tiny snort of indignation. "Huh, after meeting Rose, I wouldn't think that would be hard." She knew that she was being catty but Blake had to stop believing everything was his fault, damn it. How could he ever commit to her

otherwise?

"We were wrong from the beginning. Rose was born and raised in Dallas and was a city girl through and through. She just wasn't suited to life on a ranch. But I didn't help matters. I didn't love her enough to help her through the bad times."

He paused and Jade sensed his sadness. She got up and knelt at his feet, resting her hands on his thighs. "You shouldn't blame yourself," she said softly.

"I'm also a loner. I need the open spaces, the air, the sky, the sun, and the isolation. I'm not a recluse, but I need a woman who can cope with that and hopefully feels a little the same way."

She wanted to wave her hand in the air and shout at the top of her voice--Take me! Take me!

"All of Eve's match-making isn't going to make a damn bit of difference if the woman I want doesn't love me with all my faults," he continued with a wry smile.

She was stuck. Was it her turn to speak? Perhaps he didn't love her?

"You played me for a fool, Jade."

Jade leaned forward, her face etched with concern. "I didn't realize that, Blake. I had promised my dad that I wouldn't tell anyone. I think he was worried that somebody might jump my claim."

She squirmed as his eyes seemed to caress her face. "I know that now," he replied. "But if you had only told me then, I would have *given* you the mine. In fact, I would have given you anything you asked for--money, cattle, horses ... me."

"You?"

He laughed and, reaching down, pulled her on to his lap as he placed their drinks on a side table. "Yes, me. Don't you know how much I love you, Princess? I'm not very good with words, not like you, but I would fly to the moon and back to show you how ready I am to commit to you. I love everything about you. Your beauty, your humor, your energy, your loyalty, your attitude and the fact that you care so deeply for Ray. I even love your ten-gallon mouth. You complete me."

"Oh my. That's a line from Jerry Maguire. Did you see that movie?"

"No. I bloody well did not. Just concentrate, woman. You are everything I want, do ya get it? You love Stony Creek and together we are making it work. I want you as my partner. I love you, crazy girl."

"Wow, I didn't think you could ever love me like that. I mean, I'm so annoying and I speak without thinking."

"I know your faults, Jade. I still love you."

"Tell me more, *more*." She wriggled on his lap and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Well, how do you feel about me?" Her heart leapt at his sudden look of uncertainty as his hands stilled on her arms.

"Let me see. You are Texan, that's not bad although you do talk with a funny accent and have strange sayings. You're often grumpy and bad tempered, but that's okay, I ignore that. You're clever and love animals and you disappear into the sunset on your horse to commune with nature--I like that. You don't like crowds and hospitals so you aren't entirely made of granite. You are handsome, strong, tender, gentle, and so sexy and you make love to me as if you really care."

He looked pleased as he pressed butterfly-soft kisses on her neck. "That's not a bad report."

"No. Oh, and one last thing. I love you with all my heart. I fell for you from the moment you opened that door and I've been falling ever since. I'm sorry I told fibs about the mine but please don't sue me."

There, she had told him straight and the look of exquisite tenderness on his face made her want to curl up and die – well not die, exactly.

"Stand up for a moment, sweetheart. I have a couple of gifts for you."

Jade stood in front of him as he pulled the claim paper from his jeans pocket and with a flourish, tore it up. "The mine is yours to do with what you wish," he said.

Then he pulled a bag from behind the chair, which Jade had been curious about earlier but hadn't liked to look. "There ya go. I sort of got the message that you are crazy about movies so I hope I've picked some good ones."

She shrieked as she emptied out dozens of DVDs of modern and old movies. "Oh, you wonderful man," she cried, flinging herself into his arms.

He swung her around laughing as she covered his face with kisses. "I've got one more present. Shut your eyes," he said, setting her down.

"Wow! Go on, surprise me." She squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

"Open them now."

She blinked away the instant tears that welled in her eyes as, kneeling before her, he said, "Jade Rebecca Oliver, will you marry me?" He held out a small box and she gasped in wonder at the beautiful opal ring nestling inside.

Kneeling opposite him, she looked up into his eyes so full of love. "Yes, yes, yes," she whispered as he slipped the ring on her finger.

It was much later that they made their way to the kitchen and Blake kept his promise and cooked the steaks for dinner. To Jade every mouthful tasted like heaven as she gazed love-struck across the table at her man.

"Will it always be like this?" she asked.

"No."

"What?"

"You're going to come back with me to Stony Creek and as soon as he is well enough, Ray is coming up there, too. We'll get him a nurse to start with and I know Maggie will spoil him."

Jade clapped her hands in excitement. "Then what?"

"We're going to be married on the station."

"And invite Katie and Lara and Jack and Eve and your brothers and the stockmen and Rose."

"Rose?"

"Yes. She likes me really, believe it or not."

Blake pushed back his chair, lifted Jade into his arms and walked towards the stairs and up to the bedroom.

"Well, she is quite nice," Jade continued, hugging him tightly around his neck. "She forgave me for pushing her into the mud and ...."

"You know what, Oliver?"

"What?"

"You talk too much," he said, laying her on the bed and kissing her very thoroughly.

Wanton sex goddess has been silenced for ever, she decided. Well, at least, until breakfast time.

## Chapter Seventeen

From: [lara@challonerpalace.com](mailto:lara@challonerpalace.com)  
Sent: Monday 31<sup>st</sup> December 4.15PM  
To: Dr. Katie Jones; Jade Jordan  
Subject: HNY – It's cold!

Hello lovely Katie and Jade,  
Happy New Year!

Jack and I have arrived safely in Challoner. Honestly, Jack was a real pain because as you know, I haven't got long to go and he was scared I would have the baby on the plane. Talk about nervous!

Anyway, we're here and it's cold enough to freeze your what-nots. Mummy and Daddy were very welcoming and have arranged a huge New Year's Eve Ball tonight in our honor. I've managed to get a dress that disguises my bulge but Jack says I should be proud of it and stick my stomach out as much as possible. Of course I'm proud, but that doesn't stop me wanting to look elegant or princess-like, as you would both know, my fellow Princesses.

I do have some really good news. Carl, my naughty big brother, is going seriously with a lady called Maria. She is a Countess from one of the European royal houses--don't know which one. I hope this comes to something. He has had so many relationships, if you can call them that, and the press go crazy each time, then it fizzles out. At least Carl has given up his terrible gambling habit and has curtailed his drinking. I don't think he would dare do anything else what with Jack and my father on his case.

I still can't get over your wedding, Jade. Wasn't it wonderful? Blake is so like Jack and won't stand for anything but the best but is so calm and relaxed. Let us know how you're enjoying Texas, won't you?

Here's another question, or rather an invitation this time. Jack and I would love you all to come to Challoner for a holiday as soon as the baby is born. Will you try and do that? You would stay in the palace, of course, and the weather should start to improve by then. My parents have already given it the official nod. Please say yes!

Katie, can you get the time off from work for a couple of weeks?

Jack is making signals saying its time for me to rest before the ball tonight. Honestly, I love being spoilt. I *love* Jack. Who would have thought that this time last year, you and I would be married to these beautiful men, Jade Jordan?

And Katie, you are next on our list, so be warned. There is a man out there somewhere waiting for a gorgeous blue-eyed redhead, if only we could get you out of your laboratory for two minutes.

Take care and write or phone soon.

Much love

Lara (Lala)

*"Princesses together forever"*

From: [jonesk@beauvaiswinery.com](mailto:jonesk@beauvaiswinery.com)  
Sent: Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007 6.30AM

To: Lara Lucas; Jade Jordan  
Subject: A real prince!

Hi Lala and Jade,  
Happy New Year to you both!

Yes, I'm still recovering from your wedding, Jade. It was so great having it at Christmas, although my parents weren't too happy that I didn't get home to Sydney. Also, I haven't helped matters by deciding to work over the New Year. It's a public holiday here today and very quiet in the labs so I'm having a terrific catch-up.

My boss is a great guy. Now don't get any ideas, he's in his forties and very happily married, but he is proving to be a tremendous mentor for me as a lot of the work I'm doing is out of the norm. I've also found some anomalies in the making of several wines which I can't work out at the moment. It has me intrigued.

Enough of that. In a few weeks the BIG boss arrives from France to look through the plant and--get this, you match-makers, he is Prince Armande Beauvais. Yes, a *real* prince. I googled him and he looks absolutely gorgeous in his official photo. Here's his web address if you have time to look [www.royalfamily-beauvais/france.com](http://www.royalfamily-beauvais/france.com) You're not related to him, are you, Lara? I know many of the European royals are related.

Unfortunately, I am a very small cog in the wheel here and may not even get to meet him. However, you mentioned trying to get over to Challoner after the baby is born, Lala. I'm working like mad to accumulate some leave and I'm hoping that the company will allow me to visit the main winery in Beauvais on a business trip and then I might be able to wangle a few days with you. Hope so.

Jade, very married lady, I trust you're having a wonderful honeymoon with your gorgeous cowboy husband. Tell him that if he gives you any trouble, I will speak to him personally. That will sort him out. He's afraid of me. Ha ha!

Have to go now. My test tubes are bubbling.  
Keep in touch.

Love Katie  
*"Princesses together forever"*

From: [jordanj@texrancho.com](mailto:jordanj@texrancho.com)  
Sent: Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007 8.00AM  
To: Lara Lucas; Dr. Katie Jones  
Subject: Honeymoon bliss!

Hi Princesses,

Right back at ya. That's an American expression, for you uneducated people.

Without going into explicit details I have to tell you that I'm having the most wonderful honeymoon in every possible way!

We are staying at Blake's own Texas ranch and I tell you girls, the house looks as if it was used in *Gone with the Wind*. Absolutely gorgeous! Blake's brothers have the ranches on either side and there are three other properties which have managers living on them. Between you and me, I don't know why they don't join them all up. I teased Blake and told him that even then it wouldn't be much bigger in size than Stony Creek.

At this exact moment I'm propped up in bed nursing a sore butt (they say butt here, by the way, not bum or bottom). I escaped from Blake yesterday when he had a

business meeting with his brothers and thought I would try my hand at riding a Texas bronco. The bloody thing pitched me off in the dirt and I landed as hard as hell on my rear end. I've got a bruise the size of Texas. Blake was the most angry I've ever seen him. He called me all sorts of terrible names and it was then that I found out that his dad had been killed when he got tossed by a bronco. Whoops! We still have a lot of talking to do, me thinks. Anyway, making up was fantastic except, because of my bruise, I had to take the upper hand, if you know what I mean.

Ethan and Liam are lovely. They are very handsome and unmarried, Katie. Ethan is noisy and flirts outrageously with me while Liam is much quieter. A true man of the land, like Blake. And guess what? Eve is with us at the moment but then she is going to settle permanently in Adelaide next to her best friend from years back.

Except--drum roll--her best friend is a male called Mike and a widower. Dah dah! It appears after Mike's wife died, Mike kept corresponding with Eve and now there're going to get married. Ohmygod! Another wedding.

Blake and I are flying back to Australia in a couple of weeks after he has shown me a few more wonderful American sights and then, as I told you at the wedding, we are settling at the homestead and going to continue to run the station. Blake has decided we need to be way out in the Outback so that the rest of the world can't hear our rows. Good idea. Of course, you know that Ray is already there and is almost well enough to go back to school.

Yes, Lara and Jack, we would love to come and visit you in Challoner when the time is right. Just let us know. In fact, Blake has suggested we charter a private plane so Katie, if you can get away, you can come with us.

And Katie, I've looked up your Prince's royal site. You are *so* right. He is magnificent! Brought me out in an instant hot flush. I wish I was there to tizzy you up a bit for his visit. You don't make enough of yourself and you are so beautiful, isn't she Lara? Don't forget, I owe you after you sorted Blake out (I've decided not to thump your lights out now seeing you knocked some sense into my husband).

I had better finish. Blake has just brought me breakfast in bed and offered to massage my poor bruised butt. Who am I to refuse an offer like that?

I still can't believe he loves me. Annoying, talkative, can't keep still, little 'ol me, but he does. He has borrowed Jack's expression and calls me Priceless Princess, except that he says I am priceless beyond any jewel and beyond any words. That's nice ... I think. Anyway, I like it.

Lara, take care of our royal babe and Katie go capture that Prince.

Hugs and kisses

Jade

Jade Rebecca Jordan (Priceless Princess)

*"Princesses together forever"*

THE END