

# **The Sky Singer**

**By  
Brandy Golden**

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A Newsite Web Services Book  
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Published by Newsite Web Services, LLC  
P.O. Box 1286, Loganville, Georgia 30052 USA

[disciplineanddesire@hotmail.com](mailto:disciplineanddesire@hotmail.com)

[disciplineanddesire.com](http://disciplineanddesire.com)

## Chapter One

The red dirt runway loomed up before her as Syd deftly brought the twin engine Cessna into the track by visual. The engine spluttered and died just as the landing gear came down and the Ladybird floated on air as she hit the runway and zoomed on up towards the hangar. Then she skillfully applied the brakes and brought the small plane to a smooth halt six feet from the glowering face of fifty five year old Evan Withers.

With an impish smile, Syd flung open the door and nimbly leaped from the body of the plane, ignoring the step, her usually somber eyes alight with mischief.

"Bloody hell, Syd, how many times have I told you to stop cutting it so close?" Growled Evan, running his hand through his salt and pepper hair. His heart was still in his throat and he wished he had some way to get through to the indomitable brat! If she had been his daughter, that route would have been via her backside.

"Stop grouching so much, Evan," grinned Syd, eying the older man. Evan's weathered face bore a year round tan, telltale of his many years in the hot Australian sun and his brown eyes were worried despite his anger. Syd was pretty levelheaded for the most part, but remained stubbornly careless about this and it concerned him deeply. "You're a worry wart, you know that?"

"Evan is right, young man," stressed a deep voice coming around the other side of the plane.

Carter McAllister had seen the foolhardy lad and his green eyes were hostile as he cut under the nose and scowled at Syd, his demeanor arrogant and his stance aggressive. He was a man who was used to taking charge of things and did not suffer fools gladly.

He appraised the boy, the baseball cap worn backwards in a facetious manner; the smooth boyish cut of his face and the worn bib overalls and

faded T-shirt. The lad didn't look a day over fifteen with those big topaz eyes that were curiously fringed with dark lashes.

"How old are you anyway?"

Syd flushed, her temper simmering. "Old enough to fly, if its any of your business," she snapped.

"Syd, this is Carter McAllister. His family owns Karamanda."

Evan's voice held a note of admonition and Syd looked closer at the big man who towered a good foot over her. This must be the brother that had left over a family dispute, thought Syd, her mind working quickly. He would be about thirty-five if memory served her correctly.

"Is this the way you usually treat potential customers," responded Carter acidly. He hadn't missed Syd's recognition of Karamanda.

"Not usually, but then potential customers don't normally criticize me," she replied evenly, ramming her hands into her bib pockets. She knew she had to be careful to keep a tight rein on her attitude, or risk exposure of her identity.

However, she took an instant dislike to this man and his attitude of owning the world around him. It was his air of authority and his expectation that all within his circumference would bow to him that made her disdainful. A man with money and power who didn't mind letting others know he had it, she thought scornfully.

Obviously he mistook her for a boy, but that was just the way she and Evan wanted it, for the moment anyway.

"I was told that Camaroo Services had a good reputation for prompt, swift delivery," ground out Carter. "But it would seem that safety is not their first priority if they hire a pilot with your youth and obvious inexperience. No real pilot would take such a foolish risk!" He stepped closer to Syd, his stance contemptuous as if he dared her to dispute him.

Syd willed her face to remain impassive and she refused to even back up or show any hint of weakness or the desire to run, as she returned stare for stare.

"I want to speak with the manager." Carter's green gaze finally swung to Evan. "Is that YOU, Evan?" he spoke, his voice just the right touch of mocking scorn that left Syd flushing at the implication that it could never be her.

"Yes, I'm the manager," replied Evan, sending Syd a warning look.

Syd leaned against the plane then, her attitude calm and nonchalant, but inside she was fuming. Her knees were trembling and she had purposely moved away from Carter. She needed a little breathing space as she fought to maintain her placid demeanor.

She would let Evan handle Carter McAllister before she said something that would give her away and blow her cover. But she didn't have to like it, she decided, resisting the childish urge to stick her tongue out at him. She hated that Evan was always assumed to be the owner and manager of Camaroo, when in fact, it belonged to her.

"The pilot my father had on retainer is retiring and he recommended Camaroo," Carter said to Evan. "Since I've just returned to Karamanda after a ten year absence, I took his recommendations and came here." The two men began walking towards the office, inside the hanger. "But I hope you've got another pilot besides that brash young fool."

Syd never heard Evan's reply, but she was pretty sure he would take the job himself. She gave in to the childish whim and stuck her tongue out at Carter's back and felt better.

With a deep sigh, she walked to the jeep parked next to the building and slid her slim body into the driver's seat. Only the fact that they needed the business had kept her tongue in check.

She stared out at the blazing colors that streaked along the rim of the sky. The sun was beginning to set and orange and red hues painted the drifting clouds a lighter version of their vivid shades. She never tired of the beauty of the heavens and was at peace when she was in the little plane, high above the ground belting out her music or softly crooning a love song.

Syd loved to fly. In fact, it was a toss up as to which she loved more, flying or singing. Both were a passion for her and she pursued both with a vengeance. She would often sing into the radio, pretending it was a microphone and listen to Evan grouse about the airwaves.

When she and Evan had Camaroo back on its feet, she would be free to study more diligently with her music. But for now, she had to settle for correspondence courses from the Uni and singing at The Gilded Lily to pay for those courses and her expenses. Maybe God would be merciful and give them a break with Carter McAllister. Chances were though, as soon as he heard about the scandal, he would be gone too. People around these parts sure had long memories.

Why anyone would think that her gentle father had had anything to do with smuggling she could not imagine. Yet one by one, their customers had dropped off until Camaroo had become a shadow of its former self. It had been too much stress for her father to see his life's work going down the drain and his reputation sullied.

Syd turned the jeep into the track that lead to the homestead and pulled up behind the house. Her feet took her to the small cemetery out back, as they always did at the end of the day. She stood gazing down at the matching stones, side by side, those of her father and her mother. Al Carstairs had refused to ever leave Camaroo and insisted his family grant his request to be buried there.

She sighed deeply and tears misted her eyes. Her slim fingers stroked the beautiful Stuart Dessert

Pea that grew alongside the graves. She loved and missed her mother, but she deeply mourned her father. Al Carstairs had been her anchor. He had taught her to fly against her mother's heated objections and had strongly encouraged her to go after her dream of a singing career.

"Syd!" Came the disgruntled voice of her younger sister. She turned around to see Cassie coming towards her, already dressed in a green linen sheath, her dark hair pulled away from her face with a matching ribbon. "Syd, you'd better hurry," urged Cassie, picking her way through the dusty track carefully, trying to keep her creamy pumps from getting dirty.

"I know, Cass," replied Syd walking to meet her sixteen-year-old sister. "I was just checking up on Dad."

"Not to be sarcastic or anything, but its not like he's going anywhere," complained Cassie, wishing Sydney would not be so melodramatic all the time. Cassie missed her father too, but she had been closer to her mother. Both girls turned as the honk of Evan's jeep sounded from the road, signaling his excitement.

"Wonder what's up with him?" exclaimed Cassie, wrinkling her delicate nose at the eternal dust billowing behind the jeep.

"I wonder if he got the Karamanda account," responded Syd, her eyes lighting up in excitement. She began to run towards the jeep as it entered the track to the house and was waiting by the back door when Evan pulled up. Cassie followed at a much slower pace, her pumps skirting the dirt clods disdainfully.

"We got it," crowed Evan as he killed the jeep and leaped from the vehicle. For an older man, he was still pretty agile, observed Syd. He grabbed her in a bear hug and swung her around.

"Put me down, Evan," she laughed, gasping for breath. "Oh, I'm so glad! I was hoping he might

hire us, but it's been such a bad run the last two years, I never thought he would!"

"He almost didn't!" scowled Evan grimly. "He was NOT impressed with that stunt you pulled, Syd."

"Oh come on, Evan, you know I can take care of myself," scoffed Syd. "I've been doing that for ages and I know what I'm doing."

"You never know when something could come up and delay your air time, Syd," argued Evan anxiously. "And it could be anything, a bad break in the weather, an overshot of the runway, anything at all!"

He knew Syd flew by the seat of her pants most of the time. She had learned how to fly into Kalgoorlie and back with just enough fuel to get her back to their fueling tanks at Camaroo instead of filling up in town. She was trying very desperately to conserve money and wanted to use the reserves her father had stored over the years instead of having to pay for fuel. But with 30 more years of airtime under his belt than she had, he knew all too well that anything could go wrong at any time!

Syd opened her mouth to reassure him once again, but he cut her off.

"I don't deny the fact that you're a bloody good pilot," Evan argued. "But this is just plain foolhardy and its GOT to stop, Sydney Renee Carstairs!"

"I'll do what I think is necessary to rebuild Camaroo," warned Syd, her eyes glinting as she struggled to rein in her temper. This was Evan, her father's life long friend, and she had great respect for him. But he couldn't tell her what to do, she owned Camaroo!"

Evan stared at her, exasperated. "I should turn you over my knee and paddle some sense into you, Syd, but I'm afraid it's too late for that. Your father should have spanked you years ago!"

"You do and I'll fire you!" replied Syd dangerously, her voice holding a note of warning. He had a lot of nerve, threatening her like that. Her



own father had never raised a hand to her and she wasn't about to let someone else do it!

Evan advanced on her, his brown eyes snapping, his worry for her safety overcoming his reticence. "You know bloody well you won't fire me, my girl, there is too much at stake now and we could lose Camaroo." Determined suddenly to teach her a lesson in safety, as well as manners, he reached out and took her by the arm. Propping his foot up on the back step, he deftly pulled her down over it and held her there with his left hand, while he raised his right hand and brought it down with a resounding slap on her dusty denim covered backside.

"You let me up this instant," raged Syd, surprised and angry at his actions. "Or I WILL bloody well fire you, Evan!"

He landed another slap on her rounded bottom, outlined in the bib covering and this time she squealed. "I better be hearing an apology and a promise not to do that again, or I'm going to wear your rear end out!" In for a penny, in for a pound he decided.

"All right, fine! I'm sorry, now let me up!" ground out Syd, her fury abating somewhat at his threat. She didn't really think he would, but she supposed she shouldn't have threatened to fire her loyal old friend.

"That's a little better," Evan replied dourly, standing her upright. He could see she was angry with him but he didn't care at that point. He cupped her chin in his large hand. "Now see here, young lady, you know I love you two girls like you were my own, and I would hate like hell to see anything happen to you," he told her gruffly.

At his words, Syd relented and let go of her anger. She hadn't really meant that she would fire him. She just didn't like being told what to do, even if it was for her own good.

"I know, Evan, I'm sorry," she answered softly. She put her arms around him and gave him a gentle hug. "Thank you for getting the Karamanda

account. We do need to talk about it, but right now, I have to get changed and get to Kalgoorlie." She motioned to Cassie, who was still standing with her mouth open at the sight of Syd getting swatted by Evan.

"Uh, right...I'm coming," she said, sidling past Evan and running up the steps. She didn't know what had gotten into the normally easygoing man, but she wasn't taking any chances.

The girls disappeared into the house and Evan smiled at Cassie's antics. It wasn't until he was on his way to his own home that it occurred to him that Syd had not promised to not fly short on fuel again.

"Bloody hell," he bit out to no one in particular.

"That girl needs someone to take her in hand, or mark my words, she is going to end up in trouble!"

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Ryan Roglund stared at his father in consternation. "You want me to what?" he exclaimed, his gray eyes snapping. He surveyed his obviously out of his mind parent carefully, looking for signs of a joke being played on him.

Paul Roglund faced his son with a cheerful grin. "You heard me, Ryan. Besides, you've wanted to photograph the outback for a long time. This is your opportunity to help me repay an old debt and fulfill one of your goals at the same time. So how about it?"

The older man leaned back in his desk chair, tapping the tips of his fingers together as he waited for his son's response.

"Let me see the letter," sighed Ryan, already knowing he couldn't say no. But he could make his Dad sweat a little.

Paul handed him the yellowed paper with a grin. He knew his son would not turn him down. Ryan had planned a trip to Australia anyway in the next two to three years, and so a bit sooner at this point wouldn't make a difference. He watched the

younger man scrutinize the letter, knowing his precision brain would be absorbing the message instantly as he read it.

Anyone looking at the two men would see that Ryan was simply a younger version of Paul. Both were well over six foot, but where the older man had graying at the temples, Ryan's hair was black with an ebony sheen and it swirled around the nape of his neck. At 26 years old, Ryan was a thriving free-lance photographer and the lazy dimples in his smile had made many a feminine heart flutter. He was not a typically handsome man, but he had an air of authority and rugged features that made people look twice at him, whether they were female or male.

Ryan read:

*I'm leaving this letter in the care of my lawyer, to be given to you in the event it becomes necessary under the terms outlined to my daughter, Sydney.*

*I told you years ago Paul, that I'd never call in your supposed debt unless it was an emergency, and I meant it. But now, circumstances have conspired to leave me in a bind and I need you to do something for me.*

*Ellen died 6 years ago and I have a weak heart. The doctors say I could have a heart attack anytime. Hell, we all could die at anytime couldn't we? But the fact that you are reading this right now, means the old ticker gave out on me and my daughters need help.*

*My girl, Sydney, loves Camaroo and although she's been told to sell it upon my death, she rarely ever does what she is told. A condition I've not had much control over I'm afraid. She's so like her mother I've not been able to bring myself to discipline her, as I should have. She's a good girl, but used*

*to having her own way and very stubborn. She will do all she can to keep it and I don't want her doing anything wild or that would keep her from pursuing her own goals. If she sells the house and business, she can move into the city with her younger sister and they will be fine. But knowing Sydney, she will fight tooth and nail to keep it, and lord knows what kind of crazy scheme she will come up with!*

*I'd like you to come to Australia and check on my girls and help them get straightened out if they are in a mess, which they are, or you wouldn't be reading this.*

*I've asked my lawyer to verify within six months that Sydney has followed my instructions, and if she hasn't, to then forward this to you.*

*As I remember, you had a way with discipline that certainly kept your family in line. Don't know what it was, but it worked. And I hope you can sort my daughters out as well. I know this is an unusual request Paul, but my girls are very precious to me and I want them to be happy and taken care of once I'm gone.*

*Thank you my friend, I have no doubt you will honor my request. You have always been a man of your word.*

*Your old friend,  
Al Carstairs*

Ryan looked up thoughtfully at this Dad. "Just how do you propose to make this Sydney do what her father has requested?"

Paul grinned. "He also enclosed this." He handed Ryan a legal document.

Ryan took it and scanned the contents. "So if she refuses to cooperate, you will gain custody of this younger sister?"

"Yes, and I'm guessing that will be a big leverage point in dealing with young Sydney," replied Paul, his eyes twinkling.

"Sydney obviously needs some leverage," muttered Ryan, scowling at his grinning parent. The old man was enjoying this way too much!

Paul knew exactly what Ryan was referring to with that ambiguous statement. His son was quite used to the sight of his younger sisters upended over their father's broad lap through the years. Ryan himself had been on the receiving end of his father's discipline a few times and so was well aware of the methods Paul Roglund used to insure good behavior in the Roglund household.

A knock on the study door interrupted his reverie. The door opened and sixteen-year-old Dana Roglund peeked into the room. Her expression instantly registered relief when she saw Ryan and she quickly said, "Oh, you're busy, I'll come back later." She tried to scoot out and close the door but her father swiftly motioned her in with a wave of his hand.

"Get in here Dana, its just Ryan and you're not getting out of this that easily."

Ryan watched in amusement as his younger sister reluctantly shuffled in and closed the door. Her short blond cap of hair and turned up nose gave her a sassy impertinent look and in truth, that was exactly what she was in character as well. She was the youngest of his four sisters and the only one left at home. Her lower lip drooped in a pout that Ryan was quite familiar with as her father merely pointed her towards the corner.

"Awww, come on Dad," she whined as she dragged her feet to the appointed spot. "I was only 20 minutes late last night!"

"It was more like 40, young lady and it's the second time this month! You were let off with a warning last time. You ignored that warning and now must pay the penalty for that foolishness," rebuked her father sternly.

"But Ryan is here!"

"And your point would be?" queried her father, knowing that the last time he had been out of the country, Ryan, who had been left in charge of his younger sibling had spanked Dana himself.

"Nothing," Dana conceded with a sigh, knowing it was pointless anyway. She was well aware of what it meant when you were given an "appointment" with Dad and summoned to his study. Well, you couldn't blame a girl for trying, she thought unhappily.

The two men continued their discussion while Dana fidgeted with her nose in the corner.

Finally Paul handed Ryan a manila envelope. "Here is the rest of the packet that Al sent. In it are pictures of the girls, Camaroo, the address, and how to get there; and anything else you might need." While speaking, he reached down, opened the bottom desk drawer and took out a round wooden paddle, which resembled an oversize ping-pong paddle.

Ryan peered down into the envelope and reached inside for the photos he saw there.

"I've never been to Australia and I wish I could go," continued Paul as he got up and took the straight chair by his desk and set it down in the middle of the room, "but I can't. The doctor doesn't want me to fly right now, and besides, I've got some meetings that preclude me from going. Of course I would go anyway," he crooked his finger at Dana as he spoke, "but since you wanted to go there as well, I think this is better."

Dana walked slowly to her father's right side and unsnapped her jeans. She knew he would leave the panties out of modesty sake, but pants always had to come down. They weren't much protection anyway, she thought ruefully, although she had opted for heavy cotton panties instead of her usual skimpy silkies.

Ryan looked at the picture he held in his hand. He studied the faces of the two young girls

curiously. They had their arms around each other and were laughing into the camera. The taller girl had eyes that looked like topazes and auburn curly hair to her shoulders, a dusting of freckles across her nose. She was not classically beautiful, but she had a determined air about her that lent character to her face and her lips turned up at the corners in a charming gamin grin.

"Now Dana, how many minutes late were you?" His father's lecture registered at the back of his mind, but he paid no attention. His eyes slid to the shorter girl whom he assumed must be Cassie. She resembled her sister, but her hair was darker and pulled back in a ponytail and her eyes appeared to be a dark shade of blue. A very pretty girl, but not with the arresting features of her older sister, mused Ryan, his eyes drawn once again to the puckish grin on Sydney's face. Something tugged at him, but he couldn't quite place the feeling.

"So you're Sydney," he murmured to himself, perusing the rest of the figure outlined in a clingy white knit shirt and casual jean shorts rolled up at mid thigh. Her legs were long and slender and ended in sandaled feet, the toenails painted a hot pink color.

"No, Dad, wait!" pleaded Dana.

Ryan looked around to see his sister being inexorably tugged over her father's waiting knees. Chuckling, he got up and walked over to the pair. He put his arm around Dana to give her a brotherly hug before she went down.

"You better behave yourself and be on time from now on sis," he grinned, his eyes twinkling. "I'll call you later Dad, but yes, I'll take care of this for you." He walked toward the door.

"I knew you would," answered his father in satisfaction as he guided Dana over his lap, positioning her where he wanted, then lifting the paddle.

The loud smack of the paddle on pantied buttocks and the anguished...OW!...Of his sister rang

in his ears as he closed the study door. He bet Dana wouldn't be late very often in the future by the time his father was through with her.

Chuckling, he went to find his mother to tell her goodbye. Speaking of which, he suspected his mother had been on the receiving end of a paddle or two during the course of his parents married life. It was funny, but that thought had never occurred to him until now. He wondered why that was. It had always been normal for him to figure he would paddle his future wife's little behind if she got out of line, but he had never thought about it happening with his own mother before. Interesting, he thought, but it was certainly logical.

As he searched for his mother, he wondered what the airtime was between California and Australia.



## Chapter Two

Sydney crossed two lanes of traffic and slid into the parallel parking spot with a flourish. It was deuced hard to find a parking spot this time of day in Kalgoorlie and she was lucky to find one right in front of the studio; especially one that didn't require multiple neck gyrations to get the car into place.

"Don't take too long," said Cassie, impatient to get to the club.

"I'll be about thirty minutes or so," replied Sydney opening the car door, her slim legs turned to step out of the sporty Jeep Cherokee.

Cassie picked up her book, knowing full well that Sydney's 30 minutes would be true to her word, it was the "or so" part that she had to worry about. She fretted as she watched her sister round the front of the car and across the sidewalk to the door marked "Gordon's Recordings."

Glancing at her watch, she realized it was almost 7:30pm and the show at The Gilded Slipper didn't start until 9:00pm. She sighed and flipped open the book. She wouldn't be able to see Marty until she got to the club, so she might as well finish the murder mystery she was reading.

Inside, Sydney caught Gordon's eye through the glass of the recording studio and he motioned her in.

"Well, are you ready Syd?"

"Ready as I'll ever be!"

"Put these on then and lets get to it," he told her, handing her a set of headphones.

Gordon sat in the chair, the immense panel of buttons before him. Here, he was the master of his ship. With a flip of a button, or the slide of a knob, he could blend and produce the wonder of music to record by.

Syd had already been in several times, and the two of them together had written and set to the music of a live band, the tune of the song Sydney

wanted to produce. All they had to do was add the words.

Sydney took a drink of water and cleared her throat, then sang a few scales to warm up her voice.

Then, holding her right hand over the earphone so she could hear the music, she closed her eyes and concentrated. When the music flowed into her ear, she waited for the cue, then began. Soon the lovely words of her song began to fill the recording studio.

At first Gordon just listened. He was truly amazed at the talent that Sydney had. She was a second soprano, which enabled her to reach some of the higher notes of the soprano and some of the lower notes of the alto voice. The result was a nice blend that made it easy for her to be a versatile singer. Her throaty style and intense concentration made her a natural for a love song. In short, the girl had charisma and stage presence. No doubt about it, she was headed for great things.

Gordon caught her show over at The Gilded Lily every Friday night. He knew it was only a matter of time before she was discovered, if she would allow him to help her. It frustrated him that she wouldn't let him distribute her songs yet, or allow him to help her go on the road, but he knew she had other commitments she was more concerned about at the present time.

He signaled her to begin again and this time, he began to work the panel, developing the tones and sounds in conjunction with the band to background the song to its best advantage.

"Are you meeting the Carstairs girl again tonight?" bit out Red Mason to Marty Leamer.

"Yes boss, just like usual," replied the young man, squinting into the sunset. He shifted uneasily, noting the glower on Red's face and knew he was getting impatient. He was trying his best to get Cassie Carstairs to hit on Evan Withers for a pilot's job, but so far, he hadn't had any luck.

"What's the problem?"

"They already have another pilot. Young lad looks about 15 but Cassie says he's 21.

"What happened to Sydney Carstairs? I thought she came home from college to pilot?"

Marty snickered. "Seems the ranchers and others around these parts don't trust a woman pilot. People kept asking for Evan and refusing to accept Sydney to deliver their goods. They had to give up on that idea and hire a man."

"So we are not getting anywhere this way! You need to find something else they could use you for." Red lit his cigar, drawing on the sweet cherry scented tobacco deeply and flicking the match into the dirt.

"I'd like to date Cassie, but so far she hasn't agreed to go out with me. I think I've almost got her convinced though. She is afraid her older sister Sydney will find out we are meeting and talking privately on the phone and put a stop to it."

"Cassie Carstairs is only sixteen years old. You better watch yourself man or you'll be up on jail bait charges," chuckled Red sardonically, faintly amused at the idea. It was a false amusement however; the man could care less what happened to Cassie, he was only interested in locating the diamonds.

"You're sure her old man stole them?" questioned Marty skeptically.

"Hell no, I'm not sure of anything, but it's the only explanation," bit out Red. He was in a foul mood to begin with and didn't feel like rehashing everything with the young drongo again.

"I was just asking," replied Marty mildly. "Just figured if he stole them, then Camaroo wouldn't be so deep in the dumps."

"There was obviously too much publicity over Steve's death. He couldn't afford to do anything rash."

"But what if he didn't?"

"We've already covered that possibility. Been over the route Steve flew practically inch by inch,"

snapped Red impatiently. All we found was the metal box they were in when I signed them over to him. It was obvious he had used a hacksaw to open it with. That means he hid the diamonds somewhere before he got to the bar."

"I searched his car and his apartment both before the police took over...nothing. Not a trace."

"Yeah I know, and the insurance company went over the plane with a fine tooth comb and came up with zip."

"Suppose Al never had anything to do with it at all. Suppose he was innocent, like he claimed. Then what?"

"I've thought of that too, which is why I want you to get into Camaroo. Maybe Evan Withers was in league with Steve on the side and he's sitting on them, waiting for everything to die down completely before making his move."

"Doesn't really make sense either though. It's been long enough now, almost two years. And Al's been dead for over six months."

"I know that!" ground out Red, his temper simmering as it always did when discussing the loss of 20 million dollars in uncut diamonds. It had taken the insurance company over a year to investigate the case and finally, grudgingly, pay the 20 million dollars to him for the loss of the diamonds.

However, the insurance money wasn't enough for Red, he wanted the diamonds back. The problem was, the insurance company was still sniffing around. They hadn't bought the idea of Al Carstairs having them, even though Red had done his best to throw heat on Al. He really had no idea if Al had been or not, but it had been a convenient tactic to divert suspicion from him.

"Don't worry boss, if the diamonds are on Camaroo, I'll find them," bragged Marty as he walked off the veranda. His cocky arrogant air grated on Red's nerves. The 24 year old was too

brash and Red didn't totally trust him. He only told him what he wanted him to know, and no more.

"You do that, son," he muttered. He took another deep drag on the cigar and watched as the infernal dust broiled out behind the kid's hummer when he drove off the station yard. It was starting to get hot now, the spring months almost behind them as November came into play. By the first of next month, it would be even hotter and drier as summer came to full bloom in the Outback.

He pondered the situation at hand, his eyes narrowing as he considered Evan Withers. No, he was sure the old man had nothing to do with the loss of his diamonds. Steve had double-crossed him, plain and simple. Steve and Marty were the only ones who knew that he had planned on the diamonds disappearing. The plan had been for Steve to meet Marty, and then they would deliver the diamonds to a drop point. At that time, the two men would have been "held up" and the diamonds stolen from them. After the insurance was paid for the theft, they would each have received one hundred thousand dollars apiece for taking a mock beating. He could then have filtered the uncut diamonds into overseas markets with none being the wiser. Everything had been perfectly in place, until Steve had been killed suddenly in a bar fight.

Red took another drag and leaned against the veranda post, continuing his musings. Why had Steve gone to the bar an hour early? And was Marty telling him the truth when he told him what happened that night? His gut instincts told him Marty was hiding something, but what?

Red didn't dare bring in anyone else with the insurance company still nosing around. Even though they had made the payoff, they were keeping careful watch to see if the diamonds resurfaced. He knew they were still there in the background. They had never bought his story completely. They just hadn't been able to prove he was lying anywhere and the diamonds were insured,

so they had had little choice but to pay off. They had dragged their feet long enough though, the pommy bastards.

Dropping the butt on the red earth, he ground it out with his boot. He would use Marty to help him recover his property, and when it was over...well, the Outback was a big place. Dangerous too. Anything could happen to a lad out there. A tight smile pursed his lips.

The Gilded Lily was humming when Sydney and Cassie walked in the rear entrance. They could hear the low rumble of voices, laughter and chatter, the clinking of bottles against chilled glasses from the bar patrons.

It was the usual Friday night crowd, starting to get a little loud, loosening up from the long week at work and ready to dance and clap and get down for a good time.

### Chapter Three

Sydney stared at the nattily dressed lawyer, her topaz eyes turning darker as she strove to control her anger and frustration. "What does this mean, straighten me out?" she gritted between clenched teeth, waving the paper she clutched in her hand.

"Just what it says, Sydney! Your father left instructions for you to sell Camaroo when he died, and as usual, you have ignored him."

The somewhat rounded face of Matthew Gromby was perspiring slightly, the agitation apparent as he faced off with Sydney Carstairs. "I was left with no option but to honor his instructions and send the packet Al left me to his old friend in the states." He took off his round spectacles and proceeded to clean them while he continued.

"I received that letter yesterday, which is why I called Evan and ask him to get you on the radio and have you stop by here this morning before you flew back to Camaroo." He replaced the spectacles and frowned at her. "I could have delivered it to you at the club last night, but I didn't think it would be a good place to receive that kind of news."

"Why couldn't you have let well enough alone, Matthew? You didn't have to notify this...this Paul Roglund. It's really none of his business! I OWN Camaroo and he can't make me do anything I don't want to!"

Matthew inspected Sydney's flushed face, speculating as to how much to tell her. He had drawn up the codicil to the will, remanding young Cassie into Paul Roland's custody should her sister refuse to obey her father's instructions, but he knew how strongly Sydney would object to it. Both of the girls would be devastated if it came to that. He had assumed his old friend knew what he was doing, so he had gone ahead with it. Lord knows someone needed to look out for Sydney; she was her own worst enemy at times!

"Be reasonable, Sydney, you know the Outback is no place for two young girls on their own. And Camaroo Services is a business for a man. You would be better off selling it at least, and moving into the city." His tone and mannerism's were very pompous and it grated on Sydney's nerves.

"That's a chauvinistic thing to say! I can fly as well as any man, or better!"

"Your pilot skills have nothing to do with this, young lady, and you know it! No one is questioning your ability to fly. Your father wanted you safe and happy!"

"I AM safe and happy, and doing what I want to do!"

"What, dressed like a boy? Pretending to be a man so you can make deliveries?" His tone was derisive. "And what about your singing career? I thought you wanted to sing?" He ran his hands through his graying brown hair in frustration. He had been Al's lawyer since the girls were small and knew she planned a career in music. Why wouldn't the silly chit pay attention to anyone?

"I don't want to leave Camaroo! It was Dad's dream. Besides, he and Mom are buried at the station, I don't want strangers to own it!" Sydney's eyes flashed stubbornly.

"So just sell the delivery service," argued Matthew, relenting just a bit, knowing how close she had been to Al. "Or you might try selling off most of the station with the service and keep the house and surrounding grounds. You could handle that."

"I won't give up the cargo service," she insisted implacably. "I want to rebuild it, for Evan and Dad's sake." She walked to the window and stared into the morning traffic of Kalgoorlie. "Besides, without the money from the service, I have no way to keep up the station."

"One thing at a time. Decide what you want to sell and we'll work the rest out," he stated firmly,



hoping she might be seeing a bit of reason. "As for Evan, I'm sure the new owners would keep him on."

"No!" she stated angrily. "I won't give it up." She shook the paper at him. "This...this Ryan Roglund can just jump in the nearest billabong for all I care. I don't have to listen to him!" She strode across the room and out the door before he could stop her.

"Sydney wait!" He shook his head, dropping into the chair behind his mahogany desk. He didn't envy Ryan Roglund when Sydney found out she might lose Cassie if she didn't obey. Al should have taken that girl in hands years ago he thought. It wasn't the first time he had entertained that thought through the years!

He stood up and walked to the window. There she was, the aggravating wench. Striding down the sidewalk as if she owned the town, her auburn hair billowing behind her. She really was very attractive he speculated. Perhaps this Ryan Roglund might be able to get through to her on another level than just head on. He hoped so. He didn't want to see the girls split; he was quite fond of them both.

He sighed and turned back to his work. His job was done for the moment; the Roglund's would have to handle Sydney Carstairs from now on and secretly, he was relieved.

Sydney was not happy. Straighten her out indeed! She didn't know who this Ryan Roglund was, but he was the one who would be straightened out and pretty damn quick if she had anything to say about it! Flagging down a taxi, she dove into the back seat. "Air cargo depot," she ordered lifting the offensive missive still clutched in her hand.

Her anger simmered as she read the words again.

*Mr. Gromby,*

*I have turned this matter over to my son  
Ryan, who has already left to fly to Australia.*

*He will have no trouble straightening Sydney out and I'm confident that any problems can be resolved relatively quickly. He has your name and number should it be needed, but ask that I notify you and have you apprise young Sydney that he is on his way.*

*Al Carstairs saved my life once as you know now, and has been a solid friend. I am happy to take care of his girls for him. If anything comes up that you feel I should know, don't hesitate to contact me.*

*Sincerely,  
Paul Rogland*

"Arrogant pommy," breathed Sydney furious all over again as she crushed the offending paper up into a tiny ball and stuffed it into her pocket.

She fished for some bills and threw them up front when the driver stopped the taxi, then opened the door, got out, and slammed it shut.

"Your change..." started the taxi driver, but Sydney cut him off.

"Keep it!" She strode angrily towards her waiting plane, anxious to get back and let Evan know this latest development. She did a quick pre-trip of the Ladybird, and then strapped herself in. As she lifted off, her mind worked quickly, knowing they had a real problem if this Roglund fellow found out she was masquerading as a male pilot. They couldn't let that get around! She slammed her fist down on her thigh! "Damn and double damn," she swore softly to herself. Just when they finally got an account that was worth all their accounts put together, this had to happen!

The Karamanda station was one of the biggest and most respected in Western Australia. Besides paying well, it would generate business when people found out they were servicing it. That fact alone was the best part of the deal!

She glanced at the fuel gage. As usual, she thought...just enough to skinny her into Camaroo.

She really did intend to stop doing that. It was obvious Evan was worried about her and she knew he had a point, but with a little bit of luck, maybe she wouldn't have to pinch pennies so tightly anymore. Then she could refuel in Kal before heading home when she came in for her pickups.

She sighed heavily. This WAS going to be a problem; she could feel it in her bones. No point in fretting about it right now. She couldn't do anything until she talked to Evan anyway.

Sydney fished around in her jockey box and came up with the music to her new song. She and Gordon had recorded the words last night, but this was just the soundtrack. She needed the practice and the music would help soothe her nerves.

She put her worries out of her mind and concentrated on the peaceful drone of the engines and the graceful wisps of clouds floating in the blue ocean of space around her. As the music began to play, she hummed softly; found her key, then began to sing.

*"Silver moon peeking in my window...what do you see?*

*Silver moon higher than the heavens...shine for me.*

*You know I need someone; I need that special spark.*

*The spark of love that lights my way...and keeps at bay...*

*The demons in the dark....."*

After a few times through, Sydney flipped the switch so Evan could hear. It seemed when she was flying, time stood still and the words penetrated her being, extending her own feelings into the emotion she was portraying.

*"Silver moon peeking in my window...what do you see?*

*Silver moon higher than the heavens...where  
is he?*

*Silver moon, I need him now, I need that  
special spark.*

*The spark of love that lights my way...and  
keeps at bay...*

*The demons in the dark....."*

Her voice rose and fell in the smooth cadences of the song as Sydney brought the Ladybird nearer to Camaroo, the vastness of the heavens and the music providing a much-needed balm to her soul.

Ryan brought the tan hummer to a stop outside the slightly rundown looking hanger of the Camaroo Cargo Service. It looked a bit scraggly compared to the pictures that Al Carstairs had included in the manila envelope, but he supposed it was due to the fact that Al had been having financial problems for the past two years.

He wiped his face with the kerchief around his neck and looked around. It was already hot here, a contrast to the cool balmy temperatures he had left a few days ago in California. He looked up at the huge building with the Camaroo logo of a Kangaroo carrying several babies in her pouch. The building had been painted white at one time, but the paint was cracked and peeling. He supposed the climate would probably be hard on paint. The lettering was a deep cerulean blue, giving the slight impression of cool water, if anything could be cool in the Outback.

He stepped inside the hangar, feeling relief from the burning sun and saw a door with a sign above it that said, OFFICE. As he neared the open doorway, he could hear the sound of a woman's voice singing. He paused, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up as the lovely melody played over his senses. He had never heard the song before and wondered if it was some Australian recording artist unknown in the States. As the last haunting strains of the tape died away, he heard a deep voice say, "Beautiful, just beautiful."

"Thanks, Evan," he heard a voice reply.

"Are you on the home stretch now? Over." Ryan stepped closer and realized the man was speaking into a hand held radio microphone.

"Yes, I'm bringing the Ladybird in." The sound of a sputtering engine filled the office and Ryan heard the man swear.

"Bloody hell, Syd, not again! Didn't I tell you to stop that!"

Ryan opened his mouth to say hello just as the man at the desk shoved the chair back and bounded up, almost running him over. "Be right with you, mate," he shouted as he dodged around Ryan and ran towards the hangar opening.

Curious, Ryan followed him. In the distance he saw a small twin-engine plane gliding in, its engines cutting out as it came down. Whoever this pilot named Syd was, he had excellent control, mused Ryan, watching the scene unfold. But it looked like he had miscalculated on fuel consumption. A dangerous error that could cause a pilot his life!

He watched while the man strode out to meet the small plane as it rolled to an expert stop. The pilot's door flung open, and a lad in bib overalls with a faded baseball cap jumped to the ground. He folded his arms and leaned against the hangar door, waiting for them to come back.

Evan waited, furious and disappointed at the same time. He had really hoped after yesterday that Syd would not take such an imprudent risk again. Some of his fury abated however, when he saw the worried expression on her face.

"We have a big problem, Evan," confessed Syd, brushing aside the fact that Evan was very irate with her again. "A big, BIG problem!"

"What can possibly be bigger than you purposely not fueling before you left Kal?" yelled Evan, forgetting about the man behind him.

Ryan's ears perked up. The pilot had purposely flown, knowing he would be short on fuel? The lad was either a fool or ignorant, and either way, he

would soon be dead if he kept up these kind of shenanigans.

Syd unexpectedly spotted Ryan, leaning nonchalantly against the side of the hangar doorway and she hissed, "Who is that?"

Evan's eyes followed the direction she was looking. "Oh, him. I don't know. He was just coming in when I heard the Ladybird die and came running out here to make sure you were over the runway." He had calmed down and lowered his voice, but he was still very upset with Syd.

"Well, lets find out what he wants and get rid of him," whispered Syd. "I have to talk to you right away."

"You're darn right you do," growled Evan. "I'm not through with you yet, Syd. I'm not sure but what I'll take a belt to your backside."

"You'll play hell too," muttered Syd, giving Evan a dark look.

"Don't push me, Syd."

They walked up to Ryan and Evan held out his hand. "Hello, I'm Evan Wither's, manager of Camaroo Air Cargo and this is one our pilots, Syd. What can we do for you?"

"You won't have a long career as a pilot if you make a habit of that little trick," Ryan replied, staring at Syd. Those eyes looked very familiar. They were an unusual golden color and fringed in long dark lashes. Something about the cut of the peach colored lips jarred Ryan's senses for some reason, but he brushed the feeling aside and shook hands with Evan. "My name is Ryan Roglund and I'm looking for Sydney Carstairs."

His eyes narrowed when Syd gasped and turned pale. Then it dawned on him. Syd...that must be short for Sydney! No wonder those eyes looked so familiar. They were the topaz's that had stared back at him from the photograph! He stepped forward and grabbed the hat off the lad's head and the auburn curls tumbled.

"Here now, mate, what are you doing?" growled Evan, stepping between Sydney and Ryan.

"Sydney I presume," replied Ryan in a mocking tone. "Why are you dressed like a boy?"

"And just how is it that you know Sydney, but we don't know you mate?" responded Evan evenly, not moving.

"I can answer that one, Evan," retorted Sydney vehemently, stepping from behind her protector. "Apparently Mr. Roglund is here at my father's request, to "straighten me out" she giped delicately, arching her brow scornfully, a faint trace of moisture on the upper lip of the peachy mouth. Her lower lip trembled as anger shot through her veins. At least she was sure it was anger. Looking into the strong carved face of the man she had been told about, she felt small butterflies in her tummy.

"You obviously need it," replied Ryan derisively, not liking her attitude already. "Anyone that would deliberately fly low on fuel is just asking for trouble."

"I do what I think is necessary, not that its any of your business," she responded acidly.

"It IS my business now," Ryan returned harshly, his voice brooking no compromise. "And there will be NO more of those kinds of foolish risks!" His steel gray gaze pinned her.

"You can't just walk in here and start telling me what to do!" Sydney's slim hands flew as she gestured her emotions, a habit she had long ago forgotten she even had.

"I CAN and I AM!" Ryan stepped around Evan to look down into the defiant face of the sprite who was challenging him.

"You bloody well won't!"

"Stop swearing, it's unladylike!"

"Who ever said I was a lady?"

"Hold it!" interrupted Evan, confused. "Let's go into the office and calm down and then you two can explain."

"HE can explain," snapped Sydney, spinning heatedly on her heel. "I'm going home!"

"Sydney!" cried Evan, abashed at the poor manners she was showing their guest, even if he did appear unwanted.

"Let her go...for now," instructed Ryan, his palm itching to make contact with the perky backside that was walking away from him. Those bib overalls might be loose, but the full mounds of flesh beneath the denim fabric moved and swayed in only the way a female's could.

Evan shook his head as he watched her go. She was not normally someone who would back away from a challenge; this Ryan Roglund must have her pretty worried. He turned to meet Ryan's heated gaze as the young man watched Sydney stalk to her jeep, jump over the door to get in and start the vehicle. Red dust boiled out behind it as she spun out.

If it had been black top, she would have squealed for 15 yards Ryan thought. That girl needs a firm hand applied where it will do the most good!

"What's going on here, Roglund," asked Evan, leading the way into the small office and heading for the coffeepot.

Ryan countered with a question of his own. "Did you know that Sydney was instructed by her father to sell Camaroo when he died and move into the city? His gray eyes studied the older man, looking for signs of duplicity.

"Actually, I did," replied Evan evenly, returning the intent look. "But Sydney decided to stay on. I tried to talk her out of it, but I couldn't get anywhere with her. That girl is more stubborn than a mule." He quickly made the coffee setups and turned the pot on. "I stayed with her rather than leave her on her own. And I have to confess I love Camaroo myself." He rubbed the back of his neck wearily. "My whole life is tied up in it and I'd like to



buy her out. But I doubt she would even consider the idea, so I've never said anything."

"I'm here to see that she obeys her father's wishes," replied Ryan cautiously. He had no wish to antagonize the older man, but he might as well know.

"I just don't see how you can accomplish that," sighed Evan. "She is very obstinate."

"I have a few cards up my sleeve that her father gave to my father," responded Ryan. "But I would prefer to discuss it with her first."

"How long are you planning on staying?"

"As long as it takes."

Evan returned with two steaming cups of coffee and motioned Ryan to a chair as he sat down at the desk. "Getting Sydney Carstairs to do anything she doesn't want to would take an act of parliament," he stated seriously. "She is totally used to having her own way and could have benefited with a few spankings from Al, but he never laid a hand on her. Now she's really too old for that."

"Not in my opinion," returned Ryan, judiciously considering the older man's words. "I'd say she is just spoiling for a good paddling."

"Now hold on there, mate, I'm not advocating you start hitting her." Evan studied the young man in front of him, intrigued in spite of himself. "I can't let you do that."

"Evan, when I put Miss Carstairs over my knee, it will be because I choose to, and I'm not asking your permission."

Evan blinked. Well, he thought, this fellow certainly believed in being direct. He studied him closely, noting the cut of the square jaw, the clear gaze of the gray eyes and the neatness of his overall appearance. A man used to being in charge he decided. "And I'm telling you I won't stand by and let you abuse her either."

"I've no intention of abusing her. I came here at her father's request to my father to see what we could do to help her and Cassie, and I intend to do

just that. If that means a trip over my lap for a sound spanking, then that's what she will get. And that stunt with the fuel is enough reason for one right now!"

Evan nodded attentively. "Yes, I've warned her repeatedly about that, but as I said, she is willful. She is trying to conserve money, but that's a risky way to do it and one way I'd rather she didn't take."

The two men chatted for a little while as Ryan explained why he was there, without revealing all that his father had told him. Evan in turn told him more about Camaroo, and the scandal of the smuggling. Finally, both men having measured and assessed each other were satisfied that they both meant the best for Sydney and Cassie.

"Is there room for me to stay up at the ranch?" Ryan asked tiredly, draining his coffee cup and standing up. "I pulled in here first and haven't been up there yet." It had been a long haul and the jet lag was catching up with him.

"Yes, but I doubt that Sydney will want you there." Evan replied, his eyes twinkling. "And here in Australia, it's called a station."

"Sydney is in for a few surprises," returned Ryan mildly.

Evan wasn't fooled by Ryan's tone. In the time he had spent with the young man, he could sense steel beneath that suave city exterior. Well, it was certainly going to be interesting around here for a few days, one way or the other. He grinned to himself as he walked Ryan out to the hummer.

Cassie was delighted. Sydney was in a major hissy fit, pacing and gesturing about this guy named Ryan Roglund who was supposedly coming to force them out of the station. She was so angry it was hard to make sense of what she was saying. But it was best not to interfere until she got the worst of it out of her system. It just made her hotter when you did.

Cassie rarely saw Sydney livid. Her sister had a tendency to keep her intense emotions to herself,

but when she did get riled...look out! Her hands were flying ninety to nothing, as she stalked back and forth, her eyes flashing. She glanced at Bess, their widowed neighbor from Spinier Landing and saw amusement written all over her amiable face.

"I don't know what in bloody hell he thinks he's going to do, but I am NOT leaving Camaroo station!" she blazed, her hands balling into fists as they swept the air and finally rested against her sides, her arms stiff. She stopped pacing to face the two silent women, her stance reeking aggression.

"I don't know who you are talking about, but I wouldn't want to be in his shoes right now," chuckled Bess. The older woman had an earthy warm quality that shone from her brown eyes and she had been almost like a mother to the girls after their own mother had passed away. She had lost her William about the same time Al Carstairs had died and her visits to Camaroo had become a regular thing. Bess had never been able to have children and she loved these two girls like they were her own.

Privately Cassie agreed, but aloud she spoke with vigor. "Will you slow down and start at the beginning Sydney? All you've done is rant and rave and we don't have the slightest idea what is going on!" She tossed her smooth dark hair over her shoulder with a disdainful look at her older sister. "He can't be all bad if he wants you to see reason," she added snidely. She and Bess had been sitting at the kitchen table, having a cup of coffee together when Sydney had burst in the back door, mad as snapping turtle deprived of its beetle.

Sydney opened her mouth to begin again and the doorbell suddenly pealed, echoing in the large family style kitchen.

"That must be him the ratty blighter!" yelled Sydney, heading for the front door. Cassie and Bess looked at each other and jumped up to follow her.

"Now, Sydney, calm down," cautioned the older woman, but her warning fell on deaf ears.

Sydney flung the door open, the doorstop crashing against the wall. She stared at the tall male who towered in the doorway, feeling a strange pull on her senses in spite of her fury.

"Ryan Roglund I presume," she said contemptuously, echoing his previous greeting. But hers was considerably nastier than his had been!

## Chapter Four

The furious figure before him might have set him aback if it hadn't been for the baseball cap that sat defiantly on the springy auburn curls, backwards! Sydney somewhat resembled an overgrown Dennis the menace and he was hard pressed not to laugh outright at the tuft of hair that had worked its way out of the hole in the band and was sticking straight up her forehead. She looked like someone had stolen her best slingshot and the enemy was now in sight! For some insane reason he had the urge to fold her in his arms and defend her from the enemy. There was only one problem...HE was the enemy!

He leaned lazily against the door jam, a sardonic grin appearing on his well defined mouth. "At your service, Syd." He could not have been more chivalrous if he had swept off a top hat and bowed deeply.

For a moment, Sydney was flummoxed. She had expected him to come at her with both guns blazing after the way she had treated him at the hangar. But he seemed to be getting some perverse enjoyment out of it instead and it suddenly ignited the desire to destroy his complacency. "Your services are not required," she retorted sweetly and slammed the door shut in his face.

Sydney heard the gasps behind her, but she was rooted to the spot, the demon imp in her eagerly awaiting his next move. She knew instinctively this was not over yet.

Sure enough, another soft knock landed on the door. She opened the door and immediately cooed, "I gave at the office," and slammed the door shut again, feeling an intense satisfaction at having accomplished it two times in a row.

Once again, a soft tapping landed on the door from the other side. She opened the door to utter yet another scathing comment, but this time the

door was pushed open by a strong brown hand and an imposing figure stepped through the doorway.

"Fuller brush man equipped with just the right hairbrush," he murmured warningly, his gray eyes assessing her face.

Sydney stared at him, trying to determine the hidden meaning behind the phrase. She was sure it was a warning of some kind and she eyed him warily, her nerves tingling in a strange frizzling excitement. "I don't want you here," she finally responded. "There is nothing you can say that will make me leave Camaroo, so you are just wasting your time. You might as well go back where you came from."

"Sydney!" remonstrated Bess as she walked up to greet the big man. "That's no way to speak to a guest!"

"He's NOT a guest, Bess," returned Sydney.

Ignoring Sydney, Bess offered her hand. "Hi, I'm Bess. I'm a neighbor. And I assume you must be the man we have heard a lot about in the last few minutes," she said, her brown eyes gleaming.

"And I'm Cassie," ventured Cassie, coming up to greet Ryan. "I'm Sydney's sister. You must be Ryan." She inspected the somewhat intimidating figure before her. The man oozed sex appeal and charm she thought. Sydney was crazy to be so angry, she should be latching onto this hunk and letting him take her away from all this!

Ryan took both their hands and smiled. "I'm Ryan Roglund. It's a pleasure to meet you both."

Oh my, thought Bess as dimples appeared in the curves of the deceptively lazy smile. If only I were 20 years younger!

Ryan kept an eye on Sydney off to his left. He wouldn't be surprised if she tried to kick him or hit him at the rate she was going. If she did, she would be one sorry little girl he thought grimly.

"What is my sister talking about ,Mr. Roglund?" asked Cassie curiously. "She said you were going to force us out of Camaroo, is that true?"

"Its Ryan, and this is something we need to talk about, Cassie," responded Ryan evenly. "But at the moment, I haven't slept since I left California and I'm dead tired. Is there a room I can have for the time I'm here?"

"No!" exploded Sydney.

"Of course," responded Cassie.

Both girls answered at the same time and Ryan looked impatiently from one to the other. When the two girls glared at each other, Bess stepped forward. "There are plenty of rooms here, Ryan," she replied using his correction, "and I'm sure Sydney won't mind you staying here until your business is concluded."

"But I DO mind, Bess," retorted Sydney.

"Sydney Carstairs, I have had enough of your rudeness to this young man." Bess was suddenly eying her sternly and tapping her foot. "Your mother didn't raise you like this and from what I understand, you haven't even listened to what he has to say. You might try that before you decide to run him off."

"I think Sydney will find I don't run off very easily," Ryan remarked. He was getting tired of this and was ready to call it to a halt. He turned to face the young lady in question. "You may not want me here, but I WILL be here until I'm satisfied that I have done all I can to honor your father's last request.

"I'll decide what to do about my father's requests, its none of your damn business," snarled Sydney, getting hot all over again. Not that she had cooled very much to start with. "Why don't you just go stay in Kalgoorlie if you're so all fired determined to stay here?"

"Because Kalgoorlie is almost three hours away as you well know, and it's to far to travel back and forth each day! It's too hard on a vehicle, not to mention the fact that I have no desire to drive 6 hours a day on roads like these!"

"I could care less what you want," snapped Sydney.

"And at this point, I'm caring a lot less about what you want, young lady," said Ryan in a deceptively calm tone. "You are being quite rude and disrespectful and you should have had your bottom paddled once already today. I'm beginning to think maybe I should remedy that."

"You wouldn't dare lay a hand on me," yelled Sydney, thoroughly appalled.

"Keep pushing me and you'll find out what I dare," he responded grimly stepping towards her.

"Hold it," put in Bess, cutting between the two antagonists. "Cassie, you go show Ryan to a room and I'll talk to Sydney." She turned around and started pushing Sydney towards the kitchen. Sydney was shaking with anger, but she allowed Bess to push her along to the big kitchen and gently down into a chair. Then she sat down in another chair and took her hands in hers. "What's wrong Sydney?" she questioned kindly. Bess had never seen her act quite like this before. She and Ryan were almost shooting sparks off one another.

A few stray tears escaped Sydney's eyes and she turned mutely away. "Nothing, Bess," she whispered, trying to swallow over the lump in her throat. "I don't really want to talk about it." Now that the initial confrontation was over, Sydney was left feeling slightly deflated.

Bess patted her hands and got up to pour them both a cup of coffee. "Well you know," she said conversationally, "that man is not going to just go away because you say so." She wanted to warn Sydney what she was getting into, but she didn't know if she should or not. Her William had been a spanking man and Bess had been over his knee many times during their marriage and it was obvious to her that Ryan was cut from the same cloth. However, she knew that Al Carstairs had not been. Bess was reasonably sure that Cassie and Sydney had never been spanked in their lives!



"It would appear that way wouldn't it?" replied Sydney cautiously. The women sipped their coffee, Sydney not wanting to shut Bess out, but not knowing what to say. There were a lot of confusing feelings inside her and she needed time alone to think them through.

She didn't have any close girlfriends anymore, her best friend had moved to Perth about three years ago. Living in the Outback didn't lend itself to making girlfriends you could see every day. Stations were far apart and most children that lived here were home schooled or had a teacher living on the station if it was large enough. She wasn't used to confiding in anyone very much except for her father. He had been her anchor, her rock and confidante. She missed him terribly.

Knowing that Ryan Roglund was here to try to force her away from the home she loved and the father she had buried churned up deep emotions in her that she didn't seem to be able to define easily. Aside from that, she felt a strong tug of attraction towards the impossible man and it made her angry. She knew instinctively that he was dangerous to her peace of mind and she didn't want to get involved with some arrogant outsider. He was not a man she could ignore and she knew he wasn't finished with her yet. The battle of wills was yet to be fought, and for the first time, Sydney wondered if she might be on the losing end. If only because of the effect he had on her senses! She wondered what it would feel like to have those sensuous lips meet hers in a searing kiss and it scared her. Her heart beat fast as she pictured the chiseled planes of his face in her mind.

No, she decided, she couldn't let him deter her from her task. She HAD to get Camaroo back on its feet. It was a matter of honor. Besides, she would never let strangers own it. It had meant far too much to her father to let that happen, regardless of his instructions to sell it. She knew he hadn't really meant it, he just didn't know what else to do.

Sydney knew it would break his heart if it ever went out of the family, and she didn't intend that to happen, no matter how attractive this Ryan might be. He would not influence her and there wasn't a bloody thing he could do about it. If that's true, then why are you so worried...her conscious giggled at her? She wished she knew the answer to that one!

Cassie was bursting with curiosity as she led Ryan to a guest room along the sprawling right wing of the station. She opened the third door on the right and stepped inside, followed by her weary companion.

Ryan looked curiously around him. The room was light and airy, cool filmy curtains swaying gently from the breeze in the open window. There was a glass door that led out to a veranda, which had seemed to go almost around the entire house. The poster bed against the left wall beckoned him, its oak posts and headboard shiny and polished and a bedspread in the earthy colors of the surrounding countryside neatly tucked up under the pillows.

"Why did you threaten Sydney?" came the curious voice of his host and he swung to meet the interested gaze of the young girl. She looked cool and fresh in green cotton shorts and a green and white pinstriped blouse. She smoothed her dark hair behind a small ear as if aware of her charms already at the ripe old age of almost seventeen and wasn't afraid to try them out.

"Threaten?"

"You know.... uh...you threatened to ...to paddle her," blushed Cassie, thinking of the spansks Marty had landed on her own pert derrière. She was wondering if Ryan was attracted to her sister or if he meant to punish her like Evan had tried to do. Either way, she wasn't very impressed with the threats as being a deterrent to Sydney's behavior, but she was curious. She knew it hadn't been a deterrent for her! If anything, it made her want to

act up more so Marty would do it again! She smiled, hugging her secret to herself.

Ryan studied the heightened color on Cassie's cheeks and wondered why the curiosity. "I did, didn't I?" he answered. "Yes, your sister certainly needs one for flying without the proper amount of fuel needed to get to her destination. That's dangerous and is a very important reason to be paddled good and hard in my book."

"Well, Evan already tried that yesterday and it didn't make a bit of difference," Cassie waved her hand airily at Ryan.

"Evan spanked Sydney yesterday?" questioned Ryan, surprised at this turn of events.

"Sure, he smacked her bottom a couple of times, but she just got mad and ignored him," grinned Cassie. "I guess he figured he had tried everything else so he might as well try that. Scolding her hasn't worked at all. But this didn't either, so I guess he's back to square one again."

That explained a lot to Ryan. Obviously Cassie didn't have the slightest idea what a real spanking was like, and neither did Sydney from the looks of it.

"Well, young lady, I can assure you...if I spank your sister's bottom, or yours either for that matter...getting mad and ignoring ME will be the last thing you will consider." He folded his arms and watched her reaction.

"You'd spank me?" she asked curiously, trying to absorb this turn of events.

"If I thought you needed it," returned Ryan smoothly.

Cassie stared at him, baffled. She knew children got spanked now and then by their parents, not that hers ever had. But she knew it happened. It wasn't like she didn't know what it was supposed to be. But with the new knowledge Marty had imparted to her, she didn't see what the big fuss was all about. After all, neither she nor Sydney was a child anymore. If a guy spanked a girl because he

liked her, then it was just a fun thing, right? So why would Ryan want to spank her...unless he...liked her? But he couldn't like her and Sydney both...could he? He really didn't know either one of them yet!

"But we're not children," she protested finally deciding he must be talking serious punishment. "Spanking is for children. That's why it didn't work for Evan yesterday. Sydney just couldn't take him seriously!"

"Spanking is also for young ladies that ACT irresponsible and inconsiderate like children," corrected Ryan, "which is what Sydney did when she flew too low on fuel."

He lifted her small chin with his forefinger. "And by the time your sister spends several minutes over my knee getting her backside thoroughly paddled, she WILL take it seriously, you can count on that."

Cassie shivered at the determined tone in Ryan's deep voice. She glanced at the huge hand beneath her chin and was unexpectedly glad it was not her he was threatening. "Uhh...do you need some help bringing your bags in," she asked breathlessly, suddenly feeling the need to escape his enigmatic gaze.

"I can manage, but thank you," returned Ryan, watching with amusement as Cassie slunk towards the door.

"Okay, I'll...uhh...leave you to rest then," she gushed, closing the door as she backed out.

Several hours later, Ryan was rested, showered and refreshed; a delicious aroma tickling his nostrils as he made his way to the big kitchen. Bess was just taking some tempting looking hot rolls from the oven and Cassie was setting the table in the country kitchen, a homey atmosphere that tugged at his senses. Someone was missing though.

"Where's Sydney?"

The ladies glanced at each other. "She went into town," Bess finally replied.

"At this time of night?" Ryan looked at them suspiciously. "What for?"

"She went to the Club. Sometimes she does that on Saturday's even though Friday is her usual night," hedged Cassie, not wanting to tell Ryan that Sydney had taken off in spite of Bess's urging to the contrary.

It had already been close to dark when Sydney had decided she needed to go and Bess had not been happy about it. It was a three-hour drive into Kal and she didn't like her and Cassie traveling in on Friday's but at least it was during the light when they usually left and they were together. Plus Sydney had still been in a troubled state of mind and Bess was worried about her. She knew Sydney was trying to get away from Ryan and she didn't like her taking unnecessary risks just to do that. But as usual, Sydney did as she pleased and no one had any say in the matter once her mind was made up.

"What club is this?" Ryan didn't look pleased at all and Cassie was a bit intimidated.

"It's the Gilded Lily, where she does a show every Friday." She responded quickly.

"A show?"

"Yes, she plays the guitar and sings," returned Cassie. "Didn't you know?"

"I knew she was interested in studying music, I didn't know she performed in a bar."

"It's not a bar," protested Cassie, not liking the way Ryan said that. "It's a well respected club and if you're going in, I want to go with you."

"No, you stay here," ordered Ryan.

"What? I don't want to stay here, I want to come!" Cassie had begun to take off her apron. If there was a chance she might see Marty tonight, she wanted to take it. Sydney had already left her behind, to her earlier dismay.

"Not this time. It's time your sister and I had a talk and I don't want to have to worry about where you are or what you are doing too!" Ryan helped

himself to a couple of the hot rolls from the pan and headed towards the door. Bess grinned at his casual manner of making himself at home.

"You don't have to worry about me, I can take care of myself," insisted Cassie, throwing the apron over a chair and following Ryan into the living room.

"I said no, Cassie." Ryan stopped and looked at her, a warning glint in his eye. "Now be a good girl and go have supper with Bess.

Is there a hotel in Kalgoorlie?" he directed the question at Bess, having remanded Cassie to the status of a little girl with that last comment.

"I am NOT a child, Ryan, I can go into town if I want too. I don't have to ask YOU." She was fuming, not used to being dismissed so summarily.

Ryan tried to rein in his irritation. He was not used to having his orders questioned, but he realized Cassie was not familiar with him yet. She soon would be if she kept up that attitude however.

"I know you are not a child, Cassie," he answered reasonably. "But I am not taking you into town. I've explained my reasons and I won't be questioned. Now, unless you wish to be treated like a child, I suggest you stop acting like one and behave yourself." When she huffed out the front door and slammed it, he turned again to Bess.

"Are these girls always like this?" He ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

Bess's eyes twinkled at him. "I'm afraid no is not a word either girl is used to," she laughed. "You are going to have your work cut out for you if mean to convince Sydney to leave Camaroo. And yes, there is a hotel in town. The Frontiersman is small but well kept and the girls sometimes stay there when they go in on Friday nights. I suspect that's where Sydney will stay tonight when she is finished at the Gilded Lily."

"Then that's probably what I will do as well, unless I'm chasing her back this way again," stated Ryan, striding to the front door. He went out, closing it behind him.

He paused on the rambling veranda, looking around him. He didn't see Cassie anywhere. She would get over her snit, he decided, opening the door to the hummer. As was his usual habit, he glanced into the back seat. The light from the overhead pole light made the blanket in the back appear lumpy. Or was it lumpy? Suspicious, he opened the back door and yanked the blanket out. A disgruntled Cassie sat up, her blue eyes spitting furiously at him.

Ryan couldn't help but grin at the picture she made. Instead of being fearful and repentant at being found out, she was indignant and furious that her plan hadn't worked.

Cassie on the other hand, seeing the grin on Ryan's face, mistook it to mean she had won and he was admiring her cute ingenuity enough to relent and give her what she wanted.

"I take it your dictionary doesn't have the word no in it?" he asked easily.

"Oh come on, Ryan," Cassie wheedled, her blue eyes pleading. "You will take me won't you? I'm already in the car." She pouted up at him, sure of conquest.

"I guess there's no time like the present for you to understand I mean exactly what I say," responded Ryan firmly, grasping her by the upper arms and hauling her out of the seat. He then propped his foot up on the running board and laid her face down over his knee, her toes barely brushing the ground.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" Cassie's feet kicked the air helplessly, her hands grabbing the cloth of his pant leg trying to push up.

But Ryan just pinned her body with his left hand and raised his right. Suddenly realizing what was happening, Cassie began to protest in earnest.

"You can't do...YEOCH!"

Her stunned cry rang out in the night air as Ryan's hard palm connected with her tender

upturned buttocks and a loud...SMACKK!...burnt into her soft flesh.

And then another! SMACKK!!

"NOO!" screamed Cassie desperately, the fiery swats burning through her cotton shorts. She tried desperately to block his swing by putting her hand back, but Ryan just grabbed her wrist and pinned it against her lower back.

"Can't have the hand in the way," he commented cheerfully, feeling satisfaction for the first time since he had met these two sisters. The feeling gave impetus to a third boiling SMACKK!

"AACKK!" screeched Cassie, realizing the swats Marty had given her were nothing compared to this. "Let me up, Ryan, please let me up," she begged desperately, totally unprepared for the painful onslaught.

"I just want to make sure we understand each other," replied Ryan conversationally, peppering the rounded bottom with three more roasting smacks. He was pleased to hear the sob in Cassie's voice.

"I underst...st...stand," she choked out, the sob bursting from her chest as she kicked out again, desperate to get away. But Ryan held her easily and seared her bottom with three more blazing spansks!

Cassie's bottom was on fire and she realized she was going nowhere until he was finished with her. That knowledge made her feel completely helpless and at his mercy and she broke into wild sobs, pleading and promising she would stay with Bess.

"Well, Cassie," began Ryan, firmly holding her in place. "Still think a spanking can't do any good?"

"No, no I don't think that," sobbed Cassie, thoroughly subdued and afraid he was going to spank her some more.

With that admission, Ryan relented and pulled her up, folding her into his warm embrace for a comforting hug. "I'm glad we understand each other."



"Why don't you come with me, Cassie," came the sympathetic voice of Bess. Ryan had been so intent on teaching Cassie a lesson that he hadn't realized Bess was there. He looked into her brown eyes, but saw no censure in them. She smiled at him as he handed Cassie into her motherly arms.

"She tried to stowaway," explained Ryan reasonably, attempting to explain but feeling no need to make excuses. She had gotten off easily with only 9 swats as it was. If he had to do it again, it would be a lot more.

"It had to happen sooner or later," replied Bess simply. "If it wasn't you, it would be someone else most likely. Might as well learn she can't have it all her own way all the time."

He smiled at her then, understanding passing between them. He winked at her and climbed into the hummer. "You're next, Sydney," he promised himself as he turned the hummer into the red track leading away from the house to the road.

Three hours later, Ryan opened the door and walked into the Gilded Lily, looking around with interest. He had just ordered a drink from the waitress when the spotlight came on over the little stage and Sydney walked into the light and seated herself on the stool, a guitar strapped around her neck.

"Tonight, I want to present you all with my newest song," Sydney announced, her limber fingers picking out a familiar strain that Ryan had heard somewhere before. When her melodious voice began to croon the hauntingly lovely words he had heard in the hanger that morning, he realized it must have been her singing the whole time, and not a tape.

"So you're the mysterious sky singer," he murmured to himself. He sat back and relaxed, studying her intently while she sang, her magic stilling the crowd in the little club as they all listened, entranced at the beautiful words.

Sydney, he thought to himself, you are definitely wasted at Camaroo station.

## Chapter Five

Bess led the sniffling Cassie into the house as Ryan drove off. As soon as she had heard the first bloodcurdling screech, she had known what was happening. It wasn't the first time Cassie or Sydney had pulled that stowaway stunt. They had done it to Al all the time. Al always relented and let them go with him.

Apparently she had been right about Ryan though. She had suspected as much when she heard that comment about the Fuller Brush man. Ah well, it wouldn't do Cassie any harm to have a firm influence in her life for a while. She just wondered how Sydney would take it. Bess was not as close to Sydney as she was Cassie and she knew Sydney was much more intense and deeply emotional. She didn't trust easily and would not give over to Ryan the way Cassie had. And she was sure Ryan wouldn't give over to Sydney!

"He didn't h...have to spank so h...hard," hiccupped Cassie. She was feeling very sorry for herself and looking for sympathy from Bess. Now that it was over with, she was feeling a bit angry as well.

"He did say no Cassie, if you remember. How many times?" Bess eyed her sternly as she sat her down at the kitchen table. She couldn't resist a small smile as she turned away to get the casserole she had prepared.

Cassie wiggled uncomfortably on the hard chair, indignant at the burning sensations still emanating from her seat. She had rubbed vigorously on her way into the house, but it hadn't erased the stinging ache from her lower cheeks. "Since when does no really mean no around here? Dad never meant no. He just hadn't been talked into it yet." Cassie pouted at Bess, her blue eyes still teary.

Bess sat down to the table and started dipping the casserole. "Well darling, I think you've learned that when Ryan says no, it means no. And if I were

you, I would leave well enough alone before you he gives you a real spanking." She began to eat.

Cassie's mouth dropped open. A real spanking? "W...what do you mean, Bess?" she quavered. "That WAS a real spanking...wasn't it?" It was certainly nothing like Marty had given her!

Bess laughed and shook her head. "Just eat your supper love...there's a good girl. When we are finished here, we'll go to my house and pack a bag. Sydney and I decided it might be a good idea if I stay here for awhile."

Cassie began to eat, but her thoughts were chaotic. She wasn't sure she liked this new development. What if Ryan found out about her and Marty? If Sydney wouldn't like it, she was pretty sure Ryan wouldn't like it. And Ryan had a lot more convincing power than Sydney did! This is just great, she thought sarcastically. Maybe he won't pay any attention, even if he finds out. It's not like it's any of his business or anything. She brightened at the thought. If I can just keep it under cover until he talks Sydney into moving into town, then I can see Marty whenever I want to.

"Oh that's great, Bess," she answered distractedly. It wasn't the first time Bess had spent time with them. Maybe she could help run interference with Ryan. What am I thinking, she asked herself. Here I am acting like Ryan is suddenly running Camaroo. Humph, she pouted. He can't just walk in here and take over. Besides, Sydney won't let him. That thought cheered her up. Sydney was very determined and obstinate. Then her face fell again. Of course Sydney hadn't met Ryan's hard hand yet. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to change her mind after all. Oh dear, she thought. I think I'm getting a headache. She sighed and squirmed on her chair.

Bess watched the play of emotions across Cassie's expressive face and chuckled. It was obvious Ryan had put her in a tizzy.

Bess knew about Cassie's visits with Marty at The Gilded Lily. She had asked Dan to keep an eye on Cassie when Sydney was performing. She was a little perturbed that Marty had twice taken Cassie outside the club. Dan had been ready to follow them on both occasions, but they had returned before he had the chance.

Dan was a long time friend of hers and William's and he had been happy to do Bess a favor and keep an eye on the girls when they were there, without them knowing it. Sydney was fiercely independent and Bess did not want to intrude, but she did worry about them both.

Cassie had assured Dan that Marty was only a friend and she hoped that's all it was. Marty was far too old for a young girl like Cassie. The question was, why was he hanging around her? The word around town was that Marty saw other girls, but Friday seemed to be reserved for Cassie. She wondered why. She shrugged her shoulders and bent to her supper. Time would tell she thought.

Sydney drank in the wonder of the magnificent sunset. It seemed almost magical as the burning ball of blazing orange, its hue taken from the shadows and reflections of the earth around her, began to sink below the vast horizon. It felt like she was on the edge of the world, a tiny insignificant speck as her land cruiser sped along the red earth link to the man made appendages that she knew were only a few hours away. The vastness of this land appealed to her senses. The freedom she felt here second only to the heavens above her. Someday she would have her own helicopter and pilot about wherever she chose, whenever she chose, but for now...she was chained to four rubber rings and her imagination.

God must have surely made Australia first she decided. Only the brushes of new paint could be so vivid, so colorful, and so totally splendid. The land was old, ancient in tradition and peoples, steeped in legends and superb in its different phases. After a

spring rain, the earth would blossom into millions of tiny wildflowers, carpeting the broad expanses of the red soil for as far as the eye could see. She loved it fiercely and it fed her soul. But it was the heavens that fascinated her the most. She never tired of looking at the sky, from the bright cobalt hues of a hot summer day, to the superb slashes of the magenta and ocher colors of the master artist at work in the sunsets.

It was already cooling as the desert wound down from the heat of the day and she shivered slightly. Although how much the shiver was due to the temperature change and how much to the intruding images of Ryan's steel gray eyes she didn't know.

Sydney knew she was only putting off the inevitable, but she hadn't been able to face Ryan yet. She had been blazing hot under the collar when Matthew had given her the letter from Paul Roglund declaring Ryan's ability to "straighten her out." But she had not been prepared for the impact on her senses when she had stood face to face with those eyes. They were far too sharp and probing and she did not want them assessing her, discovering her hidden yearnings and feelings, turning her inside out. Not to mention his authoritative air that gave the impression of a man used to being obeyed.

Sydney did not like bossy men. She had already established that fact a long time ago and she was dead certain Ryan was as bossy as the creator could turn out. And that comment about the brush man...what in the world was that suppose to mean? She was aware of the Fuller Brush man concept. A man that traveled door-to-door selling all kinds of brushes and whatnot, but it was a notion long dead now.

She shrugged her slender shoulders, her fingers probing the knot of tension in her neck. Maybe after doing a show for Dan, she would feel better. A night at the Frontiersman was always relaxing and Martha let her stay for free, so she wouldn't have to face Ryan until tomorrow. Perhaps by then, her

mind could shore up her defenses and control her reactions to his disturbing presence.

Her mind drifted over the words to her song. Only she knew how vulnerable she felt at night with her father gone. Her demons in the dark were very real and they sometimes prevented her from sleeping.

The fear that she would lose Camaroo weighed heavily on her mind, especially at night and it was then that she often wished she had someone to share her troubles with. She had met some young men when she was at Uni, but they hadn't impressed her. They had all seemed shallow somehow...without depth or substance. None had touched her inner guarded feelings, or had that dizzying effect that Ryan produced with a single glance.

"Just sell Camaroo, Sydney," her father had urged. "You and Cassie don't need to be out here alone. I want to know that you girls are going to be taken care of after I'm gone. Promise me you'll sell it." She had heard his mouth say one thing and his eyes tell her something else. And he had worked like the very devil to save it, and his good name, himself. Fate had intervened however and he hadn't had the time to complete his work.

Sydney knew she had to do it for him. She slammed her fist against the steering wheel. "You won't make me change my mind Ryan Roglund, no matter what you say," she declared fiercely, her eyes misting with unshed tears. "I won't let you!"

Dan inspected the flint eyed stranger as he drank his beer and watched Sydney. Bess had already called him an hour ago and told him about Roglund's purposes in being at Camaroo and how he had taken young Cassie in hand. She spoke highly of him and personally, Dan agreed with the man. The girls didn't belong out there in the outback alone and Sydney should be listening to her father. She had a hell of a voice though and Dan's business had picked up on Friday's now that Sydney was a

regular performer. Working her in on a Saturday was no problem at all. He wished he could book her all weekend, but she wouldn't do it.

He poured himself a beer and went to Roglund's booth. "Cheers mate, my name is Dan. Bess called and told me you were on your way." He held out his hand to the American.

"Ryan Roglund," responded Ryan, standing up and shaking the older man's hand. "And yes, it seems Sydney decided she needed to come into town tonight. So I decided to follow her." He studied Dan's easy smile but wasn't fooled by the camaraderie. He had the look of sharp businessman. Must be a good friend of Bess's for her to call ahead he decided.

Dan nodded at Sydney. "Beautiful voice, eh? That little Sheila has quite a talent. She had made my business almost double on Friday nights." Both men sat down as Ryan invited Dan to join him with a motion of his hand.

"Yes, beautiful," Ryan murmured, watching the subject of their conversation. Sydney had gathered her lovely auburn curls into a large shell comb, leaving fiery tendrils to escape along the sides of her face and the nape of her neck. Her golden skin gleamed in the glow of the spotlight and the luscious peach lips crooned the tender lyrics while her eyes closed now and then as she became absorbed in the emotions of the song. She wore a cream silk blouse in a western cut; open a couple of buttons at the throat where the expanse of creamy skin was adorned by a golden serpentine chain. The blouse was tucked tidily into black leather pants and her feet encased in a soft black suede ankle boot.

Dan chuckled at Ryan's concentration and wasn't sure if he was referring to the song or the singer. He would be right on both counts though Dan thought as he watched Sydney perform. Ryan's absorption gave him the chance to study the American for a moment and he decided he liked



what he saw. Maybe Sydney's interests would turn elsewhere besides Camaroo and she would give up the losing notion of restoring it to its old glory.

Dan wasn't sure how much Ryan knew about Camaroo or the Carstairs, but if he were going to be involved, he needed to know about Cassie and Marty. It was a situation that Dan did not like, but Cassie was like her sister, stubborn. And if he did anything to separate the two young people, it would most likely drive Cassie right into Marty's arms. So he kept an eye on them for Bess and Al's sake and kept his ear to the ground trying to find out what Marty was into. So far he had come up with nothing except the info that Marty was looking for a job and had his eye on Camaroo. It just seemed too coincidental to Dan, knowing the scandal that had helped to destroy Al and the fact that the diamonds had never been found.

He looked up as the door opened and the object of his thoughts sauntered in, a young girl on his arm. Dan's eyes narrowed as he watched Marty's reaction to Sydney. He shook the girl off his arm and quickly scanned the booths and tables. It was obvious he was looking for Cassie, assuming she would have come in with her sister.

"Behind you, mate," he said softly to Ryan. "The one with the blond hair and young Sheila on his side just inside the door? That's the bloke that reserves his Friday nights for young Cassie." He stared meaningfully at Ryan, who nodded and casually turned around as if surveying the room and took in the man in question.

"How old is he?" questioned Ryan. He was not impressed with what he saw and he turned again to face Dan.

"I believe he's around 24...name is Marty Leamer and he works for Red Mason."

"I see." Ryan recognized Red Mason. He and Evan had chatted about him that morning. "And he has his eye on Cassie? "She's quite a bit younger than he is." He glanced at the young girl clinging

now to Marty's arm. "If he is interested in Cassie, what's he doing with her?"

"A good question, mate," grinned Dan. "Does make you wonder doesn't it?" He leaned forward. "Word has it he is looking to get hired on at Camaroo. Seems he is dissatisfied with Red."

Ryan's keen mind grasped the ironies immediately. "Wonder why he would want to leave a thriving successful station to hire into a losing proposition?" muttered Ryan, studying Dan's impassive face.

"Now that's a right good question, son," beamed Dan, pleased with Ryan's quick intelligence.

The object of their discussion approached the table, smiling at Dan. "Cassie around?" he asked casually, his gaze swinging to Ryan, dismissing him and swinging back.

"Nope, she didn't come in with Sydney tonight." He waved his hand towards Ryan. "This is Ryan Roglund. He is staying out at Camaroo to help Sydney out for awhile."

Ryan noticed Dan's emphasis on helping Sydney rather than the true reason he was there, but he played along with it. He was interested to note that Marty's smile turned very ingratiating suddenly.

"Pleased to meet you, mate," he responded with a smile that didn't reach his guarded eyes. "Sydney is supposed to be calling me this week to help pull the Duke's engine. I offered to help just for the experience. You going to be in on it?"

"I imagine I will."

"Know anything about planes?" probed Marty.

"I know a fair bit." Ryan deflected the question easily, giving nothing away, nor confirming Sydney's supposed call.

"You American?"

"Yes."

"How do you know Sydney," Marty finally asked bluntly, frustrated at the lack of information coming from Ryan.

"Her father and my father go way back," drawled Ryan amused at the younger man's obvious digging.

"How long are you staying?" Marty gave up all pretense of being discreet.

"As long as I need to," returned Ryan unperturbed.

"Well, tell Sydney to call me," blustered Marty finally, his face flushing, but apparently unwilling to leave the table without a confirmation.

"I'll do that," replied Ryan smoothly. He stared enigmatically at the flustered Marty who spun on his heel and walked to the waiting brunette, hustling her out of the club.

"You're bloody all right, mate," chortled Dan, beaming at the younger man. "The young drongo never had a chance did he?" He chuckled in delight at the little scene that had just played out.

"I'll take that as a compliment," returned Ryan dryly, slightly amused at the older man. He gazed speculatively at Dan. "Why do you suppose he wants to get to Camaroo so bad he's willing to work on a plane engine for nothing?"

Dan sharp blue eyes returned Ryan's stare. "Another good question, mate," he murmured at last, wondering the same thing himself.

Sydney began another song; a rollicking fun song about a cattle herder and his troubles and soon everyone in the club was stamping and clapping along with the lyrics.

Ryan was entranced. It was the first time he had actually seen Sydney smile. Her whole face lit up and the upturned corners of her mouth sported the cutest dimples he had ever seen. She laughed in delight as one of the men from the audience came up and danced and stamped around her while she was playing. She stood up, holding the guitar over her head and did a "dose doe" with the man, then "boot scooted" around him. She threw her head back and laughed, then bowed to the man and shooed him off the stage. Her fingers flew as she

concentrated on playing the rhythm faster and faster until she finally ended on a loud single strum, and then bowed as the crowd clapped and stamped for more.

There was no doubt in his mind that Sydney was a very talented entertainer. He stared, enrapt as she seated herself again. The lights dimmed and she began a soft love song that was almost as spellbinding as Demons in the Dark had been. Ryan had never heard that song either and he bet it was another one she had written.

Finally, Ryan turned to Dan, who was silently observing him. "I'm very curious as to why Sydney wants to hang onto Camaroo so badly when she is so talented. Any ideas?" he asked, taking a long drink of his beer. He waited for Dan to answer.

Dan swallowed the last of his beer and stood up. "I think you better ask Sydney that one Ryan. I have my ideas but I can't speak for her." He grinned encouragingly. "And if you are planning on catching her, she always leaves by the back door." He gestured at Sydney who was exiting the stage, headed for the back room.

"I'll do that." Ryan smiled and nodded to Dan and followed Sydney down the softly lit hallway, pausing to tap at the door he had seen her enter.

Dan watched him go, a sardonic grin on his face. Ryan was going to have his work cut out with that one. Sydney's mulish nature was legendary and when she stuck her heels in, God help the person who tried to change her mind. He had read between the lines easily when Ryan had said she had "decided to come to town." If he knew Sydney, it was more like she just took off. He picked up the empty beer mugs and headed for the bar, keeping an ear out for possible altercations coming from Sydney's dressing room. Chances were, he might have to come to Ryan's rescue. His smile really widened at that thought.

On the other side of the door, Sydney started when she heard the tap. She knew who it was.

When the lights had come back up, she had caught a glimpse of Ryan talking to Dan and her heart had jumped into her throat. She wasn't ready to face him yet! How had he found her? That's a dumb question, Sydney, she muttered to herself. Cassie and Bess had told him where the Gilded Lily was of course! Probably told him about the Frontiersman too!

Cassie was all for selling everything and moving into the city. They had argued over it several times and she couldn't seem to make Cassie understand how she felt about it.

She gasped as the doorknob suddenly turned and a dark head looked around the edge of opened door.

"What do you want?" she hissed, her eyes wide and startled. "Why did you follow me into town?"

Ryan stepped inside and closed the door, then leaned against it, folding his arms and studying her lazily.

"Is there somewhere we can go that's private to talk?"

"I told you, I don't want to talk to you, much less go anywhere with you!"

Ryan was fast losing patience. "I've come a long way to talk to YOU Sydney Carstairs and I have no intention of leaving here until I do! You've led me a merry chase so far but I'm done with it!" He walked over to her and looked down into those beautiful bright eyes, so indignant and yet somehow vulnerable. "Now you are going to walk out this door with me, get in my car, and take me someplace private where we can talk. Is that clear?"

Sydney was not used to being addressed in this manner. Her gentle father had never ordered her around in his life and no one else had either. The only ones that got away with kindly badgering were those she loved and cared about, and Ryan was NOT one of those! Sydney's mouth dropped open,

then closed, then opened again with a deadly retort. The words were clear and well spaced.

"Go...to...bloody...hell!"

That did it. Ryan had finally had enough! This slip of a girl had defied him, insulted him, slammed the door in his face twice, took off on him twice, and now was point blank refusing to obey. A man could only take so much and still retain some semblance of a man! He dipped his left shoulder and easily lifted her over it in a traditional fireman's carry. Then he strode to the door, opened it and stepped into the hallway, looking for the back exit. So far, there had been no reaction from his precocious bundle.

Sydney was shocked speechless. It had happened so swiftly. The air had whooshed out of her lungs with an oomph when Ryan had dipped his shoulder under her stomach. She had been preparing another scathing retort when he had caught her by surprise, but now reaction set in and all hell broke loose!

"Put me down, you asinine chauvinist pig! What in the name of the queen's bloody crown do you think you are doing!" She began to kick furiously and pound her fists into his broad lower back, wishing she could find a way to bite him! She brought her left elbow up, trying to jab him in the back of the head. "I said...Put me down!"

She screamed indignantly when a series of sharp stinging swats landed on her backside. "How DARE you!" She renewed her kicking, and started twisting, trying to fall off his shoulder.

Dan heard the ruckus and came bounding down the hall just Ryan landed the swats on Sydney's upturned derrière. He paused; hands on his hips, his jovial countenance alight with amusement. He wagged his bushy brown eyebrows at Sydney's furious face.

"Need any help there?" he asked, trying not to laugh.

"Call the police, Dan!" demanded Sydney, her face red with indignation and rage. She felt herself moving as Ryan swung around to face Dan.

"I was talking to, Ryan," chuckled Dan.

"I've got it under control, Dan," returned Ryan smoothly, grasping his wiggling prize firmly. Just point me in the direction of the back door."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," yelled Sydney. She renewed her efforts for freedom.

"Oh yes you are," answered Ryan firmly, gripping her thighs tighter. "And if you don't stop struggling, I'm going to start spanking seriously. We are already drawing an audience and if you prefer your little butt paddled right here in public, I can accommodate you. Otherwise, settle down until we get someplace more private to talk." He emphasized the "talk" with a hefty smack on her bottom.

She screeched..."OW!"...in pain and fury.

"End of the hall, turn left. You can't miss it," said Dan, pointing towards the back.

"Dan you traitorrrrr!" wailed Sydney as Ryan turned and strode down the hallway. She was appalled to see the doorway behind Dan filled with amused faces, all seemingly laughing at her. She was so embarrassed she stopped fighting to free herself and endured the ride with stiff dignity.

"Talk to him, Sydney," Dan called after the disappearing duo. "He's a good man." Dan made a mental note to call Bess and apprise her of these latest developments. "Shows over folks, go back to what you were doing." He shooed the people back from the hallway entrance, chuckling as he headed for his private office.

## Chapter Six

"You can put me down now," Sydney ground out scathingly through clenched teeth. "You've shown everyone what a big man you are, now let me walk." She was perched over Ryan's broad shoulder, being carried out the back door of The Gilded Lily and presumably to his car. Her pert little bottom was stinging from the humiliating spanks he had delivered inside and she was decidedly angry. She didn't dare struggle anymore for fear he would land some more spanks on her tender backside and she didn't want anyone else to witness such a humiliating occurrence.

"I believe I'll just hang on to you until we get to my car," answered Ryan doggedly, not putting it past her to take off running. He didn't know Kalgoorlie and it was nighttime and he had no intention of losing his quarry now that he had captured her. But she COULD make a fool of him and he had no intention of going there again today! He carried her effortlessly and it wasn't that far to his car.

"I don't WANT you to carry me," Sydney hissed, her insides suddenly feeling strange and rubbery. His close proximity was making her feel breathless as the male scent of him intoxicated her senses. She would rather stay furious with him than feel this way!

"That's just too bad then isn't it, because I am, whether you like it or not!"

"You're insufferable!"

"And you're incorrigible!"

"Neanderthal!"

"Brat!" He emphasized this last denouncement with a sharp swat to her upturned buttocks.

"Stop that!" demanded Sydney, looking around her.

"Then behave!" he demanded in return. He had reached the car and he bent over slightly to slide her off his shoulder, retaining a firm grip on her



arm. Opening the driver's door, he motioned her to get inside, his sharp eyes watching for any escape attempt or the possibility of bodily damage.

"Where are you taking me," she snapped, feeling braver now that her bottom was out of his target range.

"Like I said before, somewhere we can talk. Now get in." He gently pushed her into the car, holding onto her while he followed. Once inside, he hit the door locks that kept children from trying to get out. He grinned when she slid across the seat and immediately tried the door handle.

"Damn" she muttered in frustration, jabbing at the door lock.

"Get back over here," Ryan said, pulling her back towards the middle. "I don't trust you not the find a way to break the window or something."

"Oh there's something I'd like to break, but it wouldn't be the window," she smiled sweetly at him, the smile not reaching her eyes. Her eyes were spitting daggers at him and he shook his head in sardonic amusement.

"So where's someplace private that we can talk?"

Sydney folded her arms and stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge the question. He may have kidnapped her, but she'd be darned if she were going to help him.

"I'm going to count to three, and if you haven't answered me by then, I'll just take your pants down and spank you right here," Ryan said conversationally. There were a few people on the streets, some coming in and out of The Gilded Lily.

She swung to face him, incensed at his announcement. "You wouldn't dare!"

"One!" He stared back, his gray eyes unflinching beneath her murderous stare.

"You are not spanking me here or anywhere else!" she guaranteed him, certain he was bluffing.

"Two!" He continued to gaze implacably at her, never wavering.

Uncertain suddenly, Sydney began to fidget. He surely wouldn't take her pants down, much less spank her...would he? Not for real surely. He had put on a cute show at the club but that's all it wasn't it?

"You are such a twit if you think I believe that," she said scornfully, trying to keep up a bravado that she was quickly losing.

"Three!" Ryan stated decisively, reaching for the waistband of her leather pants.

"Don't you dare!" Sydney screeched, slapping ineffectually at the large brown hands that were quickly popping the metal snap, unzipping the zipper and pulling the creamy silk blouse up!

Ryan grabbed the open sides of the pants, his fingers inside the matching cream panties she wore. "Last chance," he stated quietly, looking down into her panicked face. The silky skin beneath his fingers was suddenly filling him with unexpected sensations.

Sydney blushed, her breath coming in short gasps as she grabbed each of his big hands in her own small ones. His cool fingers on her warm skin were doing funny things to her ability to breathe normally. "Okay!" she squeaked. "Just let me go."

"I'll let you go when you start talking." He stared into her big golden eyes, so wide and anxious. "But it's only a temporary reprieve young lady. You are going over my lap with your pants down before this night is over. You can count on that!"

"B...but you can't do that," she whispered mesmerized by his words and the gray eyes so close to her own. Her stomach was flipping strangely and she felt dizzy suddenly.

"Oh yes I can," he assured her, his fingers lazily feeling the texture of her satiny skin. "You did a foolish thing today and have several times before according to Evan. Not to mention making me chase you all over the place and doing your best to

cause me all kinds of grief. You have a very sharp tongue, Sydney Carstairs and a dangerous temper."

"Dangerous?" she echoed fearfully, his words sending sharp electrical impulses through her abdomen and she felt her will to resist slowly crumbling.

"Yes," he murmured silkily, "dangerous to your lovely bottom. I can't allow that kind of behavior," he breathed, his lips scant tenths of an inch from her trembling ones. He was having a harder time concentrating than he thought he should be, but those peachy lips were so vulnerable and those big eyes so enchantingly worried. He closed the distance between them and took those lips beneath his own, feeling a sharp surge of desire that had him hard in an instant. His left hand moved up behind her head, burying itself in her auburn curls and tugging her head gently up so he could drink more deeply from the sweetness of her mouth.

Sydney watched those chiseled lips claim her own waiting ones and a soft sigh escaped as her eyes closed, her senses swimming. There was nothing in her world but the feel and scent of this man, and she desired to get closer, to melt into him, to let him take her wherever he wished to go. She moaned helplessly and leaned into him, the buds of her breasts standing at attention in salute to the passion this man was creating within her. Her soft arms crept around his neck hanging on for dear life in a tidal sweep of the senses that was drowning her. She wanted him. It was as simply as that. And the woman in her recognized his matching desire and need.

Ryan crushed her to his chest, the heat threatening to engulf him as his desire ignited bright and instantaneous. He growled low in his throat, a feral growl of ownership, a taking of one's mate, searing her lips with his brand, his hands slipping up the back of the silky material of her blouse. One hand slid to the front, closing over the ripe full peach of her breast, his thumb sliding

across the hardened nipple. She gasped and he deepened the kiss, his senses spiraling, barely able to keep under control the primal urge to strip her willing body and bury his throbbing shaft in her feminine softness.

A horn blared as a car swept by theirs, its headlights illuminating them in its temporary passage. They sprung apart, Sydney's lip's trembling as she blushed and ducked her head trying to hide the naked desire she knew would be in her eyes. "That way," she said shakily, pointing towards the right turn of the corner ahead of them, trying to regain her equilibrium. She attempted to tuck her blouse in and fix her clothing as Ryan started the car and signaled to pull away.

Ryan on his part was fast becoming worried about his flammable reaction to Miss Sydney Carstairs. The girl literally set him on fire and he shifted uncomfortably, trying to reduce the swelling in his nether region that was straining against his trousers. He was dead set on spanking her exasperating little fanny, but could he control his desire to have her once her bottom was bared to his ministrations?

Following her directions, it was only a few minutes before he pulled up before the Frontiersman. He tugged her out of the car with him and a few minutes later, Sydney was letting herself into a room Martha had never put her in before. She gazed around curiously. This room was one of Martha's suites, although she hadn't said anything about putting her in one.

She sat down on the bed and flopped back, a sigh escaping her lips. At least she had gotten rid of Ryan. She smirked as she remembered the scene in the lobby....

Jerking her arm out of Ryan's grasp, Sydney quickly walked up to the counter. "Hello Martha," she said a bit breathless. She was still trying to absorb the encounter in the car and her fingers were shaky. Her glance slid sideways as Ryan came

to join her. "I came into town to do a show. Do you have any room for me tonight?"

"Of course, dear," assured Martha, her faded blue eyes twinkling as she took in Sydney's stubborn face. "What about your friend?" She turned to Ryan. "Do you need a room too young man?"

"I'm not sure what he plans to do," interjected Sydney impishly, her smile crinkling at the corners to expose the devilish dimples again, "but if you'll just give me the key, I'll get out of your way and let him make his own arrangements."

Ryan had scowled at her then, but Martha was handing her the key and she took it and headed for the stairs to the second floor. As she approached the stairs, she glanced back to see him staring enigmatically after her and she flashed him a triumphant grin as she bounded up the stairs.

She was safely ensconced in her room now and she had no intention of opening the door for him this time. She really didn't believe his threat to spank her was real, but there was no point in taking chances after all. This reprieve would give her time to shore up her crumbling defenses and stir up her anger at him again.

The thought that she was only putting off the inevitable reared its ugly head, but she firmly pushed it back down. She had no intention of leaving Camaroo and she didn't want to argue about it...at least not yet. She knew she was going to have get that through to the persistent man somehow, but right now, she didn't want to face him. Besides, it wouldn't do him any harm to cool his heels until morning. He deserved it for that humiliating scene he had put her through at The Gilded Lily.

She would fix Dan later, she decided, getting up to turn on the television. He had a lot of nerve, supporting Ryan in his caveman tactics! People didn't act like that these days...at least not civilized

people anyway! She kicked her shoes off, watching the credits coming up on an old movie.

She started when she heard a door slam behind her and she spun around, her heart beating fast. She was astonished to see Ryan standing just inside the connecting door to her suite room. "You! But how? What are you doing?" Sydney stammered and held her hand up as she backed away from the advancing Ryan. "H...how did you get in here?" she asked dazedly.

"Why, through the door to my room darlin'," he drawled in an irritating cowboy imitation. He continued his steady gait with her retreating all the way.

"W...what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to put you over my knee and spank you!"

"No!" she squeaked as her back rammed up against the exit door. She whirled around, grabbing the doorknob. It turned and she yanked at the door, but the emergency chain kept it from opening. Her shaking fingers were scrabbling to unlock it when a hard palm landed flat on the door above her head, effectively slamming it shut. A muscled arm slid around her waist and hefted her off the floor.

"Let go of me," she squealed as felt herself being carried across the room. She pushed at the confining arm, her feet kicking back at his legs, but he simply continued walking calmly to the bed.

Ryan kept a firm grip on his squirming baggage, ignoring the kicking feet. Reaching the bed, he sat her on the floor, taking her by the upper arm and spun her to face him. "Now then, little girl, you and I have some talking to do."

"I'm not talking to you," she screeched, infuriated at his highhandedness. She kicked out at him, landing a bruising blow on his shin.

"That does it," he snarled. "If there was a chance in hell your bottom would have come out of this unscathed, you just shoved it down the tubes, young lady." He grabbed the waistband of her

leather pants, deftly opening them and yanking them down to her knees despite her protests. He sat quickly on the bed, swiftly pulling her over his knees at the same time.

Sydney tried to keep from going over Ryan's lap, but her pants impeded her attempts to back away and she found herself suddenly staring at the cream colored carpet as she caught herself coming down. She couldn't believe he was actually following through on his threat to spank her. People just didn't do this, she assured herself desperately...then tried to remind him of that fact. "You can't do this," she cried. "Stop it Ryan, I won't let you spank me!"

"I'm not asking your permission, Miss Carstairs," he answered bluntly. "You've got a darn good spanking coming and I intend to see that you get it." With that he popped a blistering spank on her right cheek. *SMAACCKK!*

"Damn you!" she hissed as the hard palm left its stinging message. She was rewarded with another one on her left cheek. *SMAACCKK!*

"Ow! Stop it!"

"I can see a little humility is order here," announced Ryan. He quickly slid his thumb beneath the waistband of her cream satin panties.

"Don't you dare!" choked Sydney reaching back to grab ineffectually at her sliding undies.

"Young ladies who swear lose their panties," replied Ryan unperturbed. He grabbed her wrist and pinned it to her lower back.

"I won't swear anymore, I promise," she hastily assured him kicking helplessly.

"Too late!" he said cheerfully. "That's the third time today you've been warned about swearing at me. You have a quite a list of infractions built up here, darlin, and I'm going to make sure everyone of them is accounted for." He easily slid the aforementioned article of clothing down her thrashing legs to join the leather pants, which were quickly sliding off.

"I hate you," she raged at him, red to the roots of her hair and angry in her embarrassment.

"That's okay, little girl, 'cause I'm not too fond of you right now either," he replied grimly. He raised his arm and brought his hard palm crashing down on her quivering buttocks. She kicked and screeched, but Ryan paid no heed to her protestations, his determination to teach her a lesson foremost in his mind.

His shin throbbed, he was tired from the long drive into town again, he was tired of chasing this little brat, albeit a lovely one, all over hell and back and he had had enough! He was mindful however of the fact that this was probably the first spanking she had every received and so did not put his full strength into it. After a few dozen firm swats, he paused, resting his hand on the squirming bottom.

Sydney was close to tears. She was afraid she couldn't hold out much longer when he stopped. This was without a doubt the most humiliating thing that had ever happened to her in her 21 years of life!

"Now then, young lady, are you ready to settle down and stop fighting me?" he asked, his palm beginning to caress the warm reddened skin.

"Let me up, Ryan," Sydney said hoarsely, refusing to let him reduce her to tears. His hand on her bottom was doing strange things to her senses again and she found herself wanting to arch into that soothing touch.

She was a stubborn thing, Ryan thought exasperated yet admiring her spirit at the same time. His fingers slid over the delicious cleft between her cheeks and he stared appreciatively at the delightful shape of her firm curving swells. He shook off the entrancing sight of her wiggling rear and raised his arm again. "You don't sound like you've learned anything yet, darlin'," he replied and he resumed peppering her with sharp popping swats designed to sting and humiliate.





Ryan sensed her embarrassment and he leaned over and picked up her panties, slipping her small feet into them as she blushed and held onto his shoulder. She stood up to facilitate his easing them up her long legs and gently over her reddened buttocks, the smooth golden softness of her skin making his breath catch.

"Are you ready to listen now?" he asked softly turning her to face him as he stood up.

"I guess so," she replied shyly, still feeling the burning trail of his fingers up her legs. It was a different burn though than her throbbing bottom cheeks and it did queer things to her tummy. "I still don't like it that you spanked me though. It will take a while for me to forgive you for that." She tossed her head defiantly.

Ryan looked down at her, his eyes twinkling. "You deserved it, although I hadn't quite planned on doing it that way," he responded. "I had planned on talking first and making sure you understood why you were getting spanked, but after that little stunt in the lobby, you pushed me too far for one day."

"I don't think you should use your superior strength against me unfairly," she said calmly gingerly testing her buttocks with her fingers. "It's not fair."

"Is that so?" he questioned skeptically. He leaned over and pulled up his pant leg. "What do you call that?" he asked pointing to the bruising swollen skin on his shin. "Was that fair?"

"You deserved it," she replied her mouth turning up in an watery grin of satisfaction.

"If I deserved that, then you deserve your sore bottom," he countered silkily. "And not only that, but I don't fly when I'm low on fuel. So you double deserved it, not to mention all the nasty trouble you've put me through today just to have a talk with you."

She opened her mouth to offer a blistering reply but none came to mind. A twinge of conscious

smote her at that moment and she allowed as how he might have a point, but she wasn't going to admit it. Instead she offered a question. "How did you get the room next to mine?" She looked at him curiously.

"Pre-planning," he replied smoothly, chuckling.

"You...you mean you set me up?" she asked in amazement.

"Lets just say I had a premonition," he said with a male grin of satisfaction. He looked down at the shimmering golden eyes, still shining with leftover tears. "I called in on Martha before I came to the club. After talking with her I had the rooms all ready set up just in case I lost you again. I figured I'd catch up with you here."

"Why you...you...!" Sydney was for once, at a loss for words. Ryan looked so smug and pleased with himself that she desperately wanted to shatter his complacency. Either that or burst out laughing. She settled for the first option and drew back her foot for a shot at his other shin.

"Don't do it, little girl," came the warning. His growl slid over her nerve endings and seemed to pool in her bottom cheeks. "You won't like the results if you do," he added for good measure, seeing her hesitate. When she continued to debate the option, her little foot poised in the backward position, his hands went to his belt and he began to unbuckle it.

Sydney watched in fascination, like a mouse caught in the mesmerizing gaze of the hunter. It was a challenge as old as time immemorial. The survival of the fittest; will against will. It was a battle Sydney instinctively knew she couldn't win, yet her own fierce independent and untamed nature refusing to give in until the very last vestige of opportunity to win was gone.

Ryan refused to move out of range, his own dominant will exerting itself. His fingers grabbed the belt buckle and gently pulled, the leather sliding along the cloth of his pants, his eyes never leaving

her face. "If I have to use this, you will be bare bottomed over the back of that chair over there, wishing you had never given in to a foolish impulse," he said quietly.

Give it up, Sydney, her brain warned her. This is a battle you can't win. She glanced sideways at the cloth-covered chair he had indicated. A mental image of herself draped over it kicking and crying while he applied the belt to her already sore bottom flashed into her mind. She suddenly knew without a doubt that he would be true to his word.

If she allowed herself the luxury of kicking him again, she would be having a hard time sitting for a while. She shivered and gently dropped her foot flat on the ground. "Fiiiine," she drawled nonchalantly. "Just be a big bully then." She spun on her heel and walked to the chair, sitting down to stare at him insolently.

For a moment Ryan just stood there, considering. He didn't like the look on her face, but she had backed off. He could allow her a small victory he supposed, although a part of him almost wished she had defied him. The thought of those creamy reddened buttocks high in the air awaiting his ministrations did strange things to his breathing. Punishment it might be, but after the punishment...he shut the door on those images firmly, before something else began to harden.

Ryan re-threaded the belt through the loops and took the chair opposite to Sydney's. "All right, Miss Sydney Carstairs," he said, making himself comfortable, "suppose you tell me why you want to keep Camaroo."

## Chapter Seven

Sydney studied Ryan. She didn't know this man, but in the last twelve hours, he had caused her tremendous turmoil. His rugged looks and commanding air made him a man impossible to ignore and her smarting bottom was testament to that fact. She still found it hard to grasp the fact that he had bared her defenseless rear and spanked her with a calm and deadly precision, then showed no remorse for having done it!

No one had ever done anything so outrageous to her in her life, yet here he was, ready to have a conversation as if it was a normal everyday occurrence! His gray eyes studied her in return, watching her expectantly. He had a coiled energy that reminded her of a large cat and it was disconcerting to be under the piercing gaze. She leaned on her hip and rubbed her burning bum absentmindedly as she pondered the best course of action.

Ryan grinned to himself as he let his eyes wander over her flushed face, the slight pout in the peachy lips and the golden eyes, still wet and apprehensive. She looked delicious and he felt the age old primal urge to drag her to the bed and have his way with her, to turn that pouty look to passion and...he quickly put a stop on his errant thoughts as he felt the growing tightening of his trousers. Now was not the time. He wanted answers and he would have them if he had to put her delightful tush over his lap again and get his answers that way. The image of her rounded tight swells reddening under his palm was a hard one to push away. He cleared his throat and asked again. "So why do you want to keep Camaroo, Sydney?"

"My father loved Camaroo! He would never want me to sell it, not really," she replied guardedly.

"According to the lawyer, those were his instructions though," responded Ryan thoughtfully.

"You didn't know my father, it wasn't what he wanted," she said heatedly. "it's what he thought he had to do!"

"Nevertheless, it WAS his last wish," insisted Ryan firmly, his eyes never leaving her face.

"I don't care what he said! I was there when he told me that and I could read between the lines! It was NOT what he really wanted!" She stared defiantly at him. "Dad did not want Camaroo to go out of the family. My mother is buried there, his whole life is there!" Sydney stood up and began to pace, her hands flying expressively, relaying the passion she was feeling.

"That Red Mason ruined my Dad! Ruined his business by accusing him of smuggling! Of course the diamonds were never found, but that didn't matter. Red continued to spread it around, keep it alive, make sure that people would doubt him!" She stopped pacing and faced Ryan, her eyes snapping. "It broke Dad's spirit and I will find a way to clear his name and put Camaroo back on its feet," she declared passionately.

"Have you considered just selling the business and keeping the homestead?" Ryan didn't like the way this was going. This was more than just a petulant young woman with a misguided wish to keep her father's business alive. Sydney was intense and passionate in her appeals and he couldn't help but be touched by the earnestness of her pleas.

"That's what Matthew said, but I need the business to make a living. Singing at the club, even all weekend like Dan wants will not cover it and I can't afford to spend time trying to launch a singing career just yet. Besides, there are...other considerations," she said hesitantly, not wanting to bring up Cassie. "And there's no guarantee I'll get anywhere for a long time yet." She paused to stare out the window. She couldn't leave Cassie on her own and she couldn't take her with her either.

"And you don't want to hire a pilot," finished Ryan, watching her, considering her plight, looking for a way for her to continue her music career.

"I can't afford to hire a pilot," she corrected, jamming her palms in the back pockets of her jeans.

"So you dress like a boy and masquerade as one instead."

"It's not a masquerade! I'm a fully licensed, well-qualified pilot! The men at these stations just don't like the idea of a woman flying around the bush," she shot back, aggravated with the antiques that posed for men in her country.

"They show good sense," muttered Ryan. "The Outback is a dangerous place."

"I can take care of myself!"

"Yes, I've seen how well you do that, taking foolish risks," he scowled.

Sydney flushed and bit her lip. "I do what I think is necessary and I know my limits," she said stubbornly.

"There will be no more flying low on fuel," he said, a thread of steel running through his words. Already he felt the need to protect her from her own imprudence, even if she didn't want that protection!

"It's my decision to make, not yours!"

"Then it will be my decision to blister your stubborn little butt if you do it again," he warned, the storm clouds gathering in his gray eyes. He really didn't want to go about paddling her all the time, but she was making it darned hard for him to achieve his objective in being here.

Sydney felt tears of frustration spring to her eyes and she turned her head to the side, not looking at him. It had been a long, eventful and agonizingly frustrating day and she was close to really breaking down and she refused to allow herself to be humiliated like that.

"Just go away," she whispered painfully. "Go away and leave me alone. I told you I wouldn't sell Camaroo and you can't make me change my mind."

It means too much to me...to Dad. So just leave....please?"

Now was the time to spring his ace in the hole, but Ryan found himself reluctant to do so. She looked so vulnerable, the auburn wisps trailing down her temples and the small white teeth biting her lower lip to keep it from trembling. He wanted to put his arms around her and offer her comfort, solve all her problems for her but he knew she would resist him.

He considered his options. He could walk away, but then his father would not leave it unresolved. He figured she would never allow him to help her financially. She had a very prickly pride and would probably throw something at him and he'd just have to spank her again.

He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. Finally he walked over to her and took her proud chin between his fingers, turning her to face him. The unshed tears shimmering in the topaz of her eyes melted his heart.

"I'll tell you what," he said softly. "I'll make you a deal. I have a project going to film shots of the Outback, life on a station, however I choose to develop a look at Australia for a travel magazine. In return, for room and board, I'll pilot for you and leave you free to get your office at the hangar in order and solicit business. Evan told me things were in a mess and you didn't have time to do the paper work. In a few weeks, we'll look at your business strategies you've put in place and decide if it has a chance to work. How does that sound?" He smiled encouragingly at her.

Sydney looked up at him suspiciously, her heart beating fast at his nearness. The endearing dimple that appeared at the curve of his cheeks made her breath catch in her throat and she pulled away. "W...why would you want to do anything for me," she stammered. It was hard to breath in that close proximity to him and she felt like a gauche schoolgirl with a crush on the football player.



"Our father's were friends. No reason why we can't be friends too. Call it an old debt my father wants to repay to your father. Besides, it's not cheap to stay here; free room and board is nothing to sneeze at!"

I don't know what the heck I'm doing, thought Ryan. I'm supposed to be getting her out of Camaroo, not helping her stay there!

Sydney felt oddly disappointed at his answer, but then what had she expected? An undying pledge of instant love from a man she had known barely a day? She brushed the silly thought aside.

Ryan watched her expressive face as she mulled over his offer. He hoped she took him up on it because he really did not want to bring up the alternative. Taking Cassie away from her would be emotional blackmail at its worst. Not something he wanted to indulge in very bad, especially now that he had seen and talked with her.

"Are you a licensed pilot?" she finally asked.

"Yes I am, and its current although I may need to get one here. I'll have to check on that."

Sydney couldn't see any good reason to refuse his offer. It would seem churlish to do so, and besides...a part of her wanted the opportunity to get to know him better. Another part of her warned her to stay as far away from him and his hard palm and engaging smile as possible! But that was just a fluke she decided. He wouldn't be doing that again; she'd make sure he understood.

"Well, okay," she finally agreed, "but NO more spanking me. I'm not a child!"

"No, you certainly aren't," he smiled wickedly, his appreciative gaze traveling up and down her slender body. "I'd say we have a deal and as long as you don't act like an irresponsible child, you won't get treated like one." His white teeth flashed as he smiled, his gray eyes twinkling at her discomfort.

Sydney opened her mouth to retort, but his mouth swooped down to claim her lips, cutting off

her words. He gave her a searing kiss, and then turned her around to swat her sore rear before striding to the connecting door and opening it.

"You will stop that!" Sydney demanded rubbing furiously.

"Goodnight Sydney, pleasant dreams," he shot back to her, then stepped through and shut the door behind him.

"What an infuriating, egotistical, arrogant man he is," she fumed, locking the door on her side. She had not missed the fact that he had ignored her last demand completely.

She sat down by the phone and called Dan, asking him to send someone over with the bag that had been left behind when Ryan had pulled his caveman stunt. Then she lay back on the bed to wait, squirming experimentally, checking out the tenderness in her backside.

She really had to make Ryan understand that swatting her was NOT going to fly, she decided grumpily, yawning. And the sooner the better!

Dan hung up the phone, chuckling. He had a pretty good idea how things had gone between Ryan and Sydney, especially with Sydney's stubbornness. She had sounded miffed and a bit snuffly over the phone when she asked for her bag. Probably nursing wounded pride and a sore bottom he guessed.

Dan had paddled his Amelia now and then, bless her heart. She hadn't needed it much; she had been a good girl for the most part, but there were a few times when he had had to make it plain who wore the pants in the family. He had often wondered whether William had given Bess a good dose of his hand now and then too. She had been a sassy one in her younger days...still was once in awhile!

Lately he had found himself drawn to her warm good humor and cheerful air more than ever. It was time he moved on, he knew that. He was a lonely widower, nearing fifty and he didn't want to

spend the rest of his life alone. And he had always admired Bess. Perhaps they could get on together, if she was willing to give him the time of day.

He picked up the phone and punched in Sydney's home number. He smiled when Bess's soft hello came across the line. "Papa bear to Mama hen, the chick has landed," he rumbled into the phone.

On the other end of the line, Bess smiled at his verbal antics. He really was a dear man and had been such a good friend since William had been gone. Dan had lost his Amelia six months ago due to cancer. She had been ill for the better part of a year though and it had been hard on Dan, and on her as well. Amelia had been a good friend.

She had sensed Dan's budding interest in her lately and she had been exploring her feelings for him. They had taken to sharing long conversations and an occasional meal when she came into town, but she had held back. Due to the nature of her and William's relationship, she hesitated to get involved with anyone because she knew someone else might not understand her needs and it had been wonderful with William. She'd rather live the rest of her life alone than take a chance on being disappointed. They didn't make men like her William anymore.

Ryan certainly seemed to be exhibiting all the same attributes however and she wondered how Sydney would deal with it. The air itself had been charged with electricity between her and Ryan and she knew the two were attracted to each other. It would take some doing though, to handle Sydney effectively and she wished them both luck.

"Thank you, Papa Bear," she responded lightly. "You knew I would be worried and you have relieved my mind. What a sweet man you are." She teased him gently, liking the growing camaraderie that was developing between them.

"You're welcome, love. How's Cassie doing?"

"She is asleep of course, it's pretty late. She is not very happy with Ryan at the moment, but she will get over it."

"No, it won't hurt her to run into a brick wall now and then," he chuckled. Bess had already explained earlier what Ryan had done. "Doesn't do any woman harm to learn who's boss in this world and a little bottom over a firm knee is just the right way to teach it," he teased, waiting for her reaction.

"Dan Deffield! What a chauvinist you are," exclaimed Bess, her stomach turning cartwheels at the unexpected provocation. She had been thinking he had taken this all too... normalish! Maybe there was something here she might need to explore after all.

She felt a stirring of desire she hadn't felt since William died. She wasn't a young woman in the throes of new love anymore, but a woman in her middle forties that knew what spanking could add to a relationship and she missed it terribly. "I didn't know you were a spanker," she added on impulse. Nothing ventured nothing gained she thought after the words had left her mouth.

"And I didn't know you liked to be spanked," returned Dan softly, taking a chance as well. He wished she were facing him where he could read her body language. Just talking with her about it was causing certain parts of his anatomy to respond like a kid again!

Bess felt her face turning red and was glad he wasn't there to witness it. "Goes to show how much you really know about me doesn't it?" she returned with a mock haughtiness.

"It does seem I've been a bit remiss in my duties," he murmured.

"What duties?"

"Seeing as how William was my best friend and I'm looking out for you, I should have tanned your backside a few times in the last few years I'm thinking." He was getting into the spirit of the

occasion now and he was enjoying himself with great relish.

"What??" Bess asked, amazed at his sudden boldness.

"Like the time you insisted on driving home at midnight a few months ago and I let you go. I worried about you for three hours until you called and I knew you were back safe. I should have just turned you over my knee and made you stay in town until the next day." He waited for her response, not realizing he was holding his breath.

There was a pause and then her voice, a bit husky, came over the phone, "maybe you should have."

"Dinner tomorrow night?" he asked silkily. "I think we have some things to discuss."

Bess felt that old familiar churning that had been absent for a long time. "How about if I fix it at my place," she whispered, letting herself go with the flow. It had been sooo long!

"You have a deal, pretty lady," he growled menacingly. "I'll see you at 6:00pm and if dinner isn't ready on time, we'll have even more to talk about."

"Dan?" Purred Bess throatily.

"Yes?"

"Suck rocks!" Then she hung up. She stayed still, waiting for the phone to ring. It did.

"What did you say?" came the outraged voice on the other end of the line.

"I said suck rocks!" She hung up again. She waited again for the phone to ring....it did!

"You are asking for it aren't you?" came his growling tones across the wire.

She burst out laughing then and said, "I'll see you at 6:00pm and...Dan?"

"Yes?"

"Don't be late or dinner goes in the trash. Night!" She hung up and laughed to herself, imagining his craggy face staring at the phone.

She didn't expect him to call back this time. Whatever he had to say would be said tomorrow.

She got up and made her way to the bedroom. She could hardly wait!

"The hell you say!" bit out Red, chewing on the end of his cigar. "What's this bloody American doing on the scene?" He stared at Marty in frustration.

"I'm not sure," replied Marty, scowling. "Dan said he was there to help Sydney out and he was as bloody closemouthed as a man can get. I couldn't even get him to tell me he'd have Sydney call me!"

Red got up and went to the liquor cabinet to pour himself a drink. "We don't need this kind of a complication." He threw back a shot of whiskey and turned to the younger man. "Who knows what his real reasons for being there are. Damn place is getting too crowded by half." He counted on his fingers..."You got Evan, the young fool of a pilot, Sydney natting around the hangar and now another one? That makes four people hanging about the bloody airstrip! How are you going to look for anything even if you get in there!" He poured himself another shot.

"I don't know, but I'll find a way," shot back Marty stubbornly.

Red studied the younger man. He didn't trust the young fool, and he still had a hunch he knew something he wasn't telling. "Don't try to double-cross me, Marty," Red finally added in a voice filled with deadly promise. "They'll never find what's left of you if I find out you're running a con on me."

Marty went pale and he stammered, "I...I'm not boss. Honest to God, I'm not lying to you!" Marty felt the sweat pop out on his forehead. Steve hadn't trusted Red Mason and he had wanted some insurance that he and Marty wouldn't end up in some unfortunate accident somewhere after their end of the bargain with Red was complete. There had been plenty of rumors concerning Red and his penchant for tying up what he considered loose

ends. If something went wrong...they could end up in a croc's belly somewhere with no one the wiser.

His hand shook slightly as he lit a cigarette and tried to be as nonchalant as possible under Red's sharp eye. The problem was, Steve hadn't told him everything. Just that he planned on hiding the diamonds and then demanding certain conditions from Red be met before he would give them back to him.

Marty hadn't known how Steve planned on hiding them, but he knew it must have happened at the point where Steve returned to Camaroo and before he got came into Kalgoorlie. By Marty and Red's calculations, Steve had come straight to the bar after landing back at the airstrip. That meant he had to have done whatever he was going to do at Camaroo, maybe even have hidden them there.

Steve's flight bag had still been in his car and he hadn't changed clothes. He still had on the Camaroo pilot's shirt in the bar. He could have passed them off to someone else on his way into town, but that was very unlikely. Red had his fingers on all the comings and goings of Kalgoorlie underworld and there hadn't been a peep or a diamond surface anywhere.

No, most likely he had hidden them at the hangar. The FBI had eliminated the airplane as well as Steve's car. No unusual activities in the local banks. No new safety deposit boxes opened etc. No, Red had eliminated all possibilities, one by one except for Camaroo. And he hadn't wanted to launch anything there with the insurance company still watching. That's why it was Marty's job to infiltrate and get the chance to work from the inside.

Marty took a drag on his cigarette. They had been slowly spreading the rumor that Marty was dissatisfied with Red as an employer and Red was letting it be known that he wasn't thrilled with Marty either.

Marty shifted uneasily. The whole concept had a two-edged sword consensus. If Marty were to disappear, they wouldn't look to Red very hard, especially if he weren't working for him anymore. On the good side, it would get Sydney to trust him a little more and maybe get her to hire him, or at least get him into Camaroo.

He thought of Cassie. She was supposed to be helping him, but he suspected she just had a crush on him more than anything else. She was a sweet little thing and he'd love to take her up on the unconscious signals she was sending him, but it would have to wait.

"I'll call Cassie sometime tomorrow and have her put a bug in Sydney's ear," he finally said, grinding out his cigarette in the ashtray on the desk.

"You do that," returned Red evenly. The smoke from his cigar curled through the air in front of him and he lazily blew some smoke rings in the air.

Red's easy demeanor didn't fool Marty. He knew the man was searching for a weakness, any sign at all that Marty was not playing it straight with him. It was time he started planning exactly what he was going to do if he did find the diamonds. He'd like to live long enough to spend his cut and like Steve, he found he didn't trust the wiry red-haired man in front of him. His eyes were cold and Marty didn't think he had ever seen them warm up.

Red watched Marty as he spun on his heel and left the study. He took another deep drag on the cigar and propped his booted feet up on the corner of the desk. He wasn't going to wait much longer for Marty to get something happening. He had waited long enough. If the young fool didn't get in there this week, he'd arrange a few night visits. One way or the other, Red intended to have that hangar, house and grounds searched inside and out. If Marty didn't want to cooperate, then his usefulness was at an end as far as he was concerned.



"Bull?" he called softly, waiting for the side door to his study to open.

"Yes, boss," came the deep reply as a barrel chested man opened the door and stepped into the room. The man was huge, his muscles bulging in the massive arms. His deeply sunken dark eyes were as cold and calculating as Red's.

"You need to be ready," Red answered thinly to his cousin. No one knew Bull was his cousin and that was the way they wanted to keep it. Bull was useful to Red in a lot of ways, and in return, Red took care of him. They were loyal to each other, as loyal as men of their caliber could be anyway. "I may have a little job for you pretty soon."

The big man nodded somberly. Whatever Red wanted done was all right by him. "Just say the word boss, I'll be ready." He gazed at the door Marty had just left through. "He the one?"

Red chuckled; coldly amused at Bull's quick grasp of the situation. "All in good time, Bull, all in good time."

## Chapter Eight

Ryan knocked softly on the connecting door, waiting for Sydney to answer it. When she didn't, he went down to the desk to talk to Martha.

"Well good morning," said Martha cheerfully. "Did you sleep well?"

"Sure did," replied Ryan, grinning at her morning humor. "Has Sydney been down?"

"Oh my yes, she left an hour ago," returned Martha, her faded blue eyes twinkling. "She said to tell you she had to work at the hangar because Evan had deliveries to make today at their new account."

"Did she really tell you that, Martha," asked Ryan shrewdly, "or did you ask?" Knowing Sydney, he doubted she would have considered it necessary to leave him a message. None of his business would be her first thought.

"Well," hedged Martha, then she laughed. "You're right, I did ask her. I thought you might want to know," she added. She looked at him thoughtfully, thinking what a fine match he would make for Sydney. She had been bringing extra towels to their rooms when she had heard the slaps of flesh on flesh and the muffled cries coming from Sydney's room. It hadn't taken her but a second to realize he was exacting retribution for Sydney's antics from her little backside. A good strong man she had decided. Just what young Sydney needed. Al had let the girls slide too much. Not that they were bad girls or anything. Just used to wrapping him around their fingers. The little devils could talk him into anything!

Sydney had flushed when Martha had asked her if she wanted her to give Ryan a message. When she had grudgingly told her the plans she had for the morning, Martha had chuckled and shook her head. There goes one independent young lady, she thought as she watched Sydney stride out the door. It wasn't any of her business of course, but she

didn't think Cassie and Sydney belonged out there by themselves either. She and Bess swapped gossip now and then over a cup of coffee and she knew Bess was worried about the girls. She had confided in her that Sydney was the young man that was hired at Camaroo, but she didn't let on. Martha had liked Al and thought it a shame that Red Mason had accused him so unjustly of smuggling those diamonds. Odd they had never turned up though. She did what she could to help by giving the girls a room when they came into town on Fridays.

"Thanks, Martha," grinned Ryan. "I'll just be on my way then. Know where I can get a good breakfast around here?"

"Sure! Try Ollie's. Its just around the corner and has a buffet with anything you might fancy on it."

"I'll do that." He nodded to Martha and went off to find breakfast, his first task of the day. His second was to find a helicopter. He had no intention of driving 6 hours every time he wanted to come into town. His Dad wouldn't mind footing the bill; after all, it was his idea that had brought him here.

An hour later, he parked his car at the small airport outside Kalgoorlie and made arrangements to rent a chopper on a week-to-week basis. It would be a lot easier to get around in the outback, and back and forth to town this way. A heck of a lot faster, he thought in satisfaction as he piloted the craft towards Camaroo. He was glad he had taken those flying lessons a few years ago; they had come in handy more than once. It hadn't been hard to add a helicopter license to his credentials either. With any luck, he would be at the hangar well before Sydney! He chuckled to himself at the thought.

The phone was ringing and Cassie rushed to pick it up. It was probably Marty and she didn't want Bess answering it. "Hello?"

"Hello there, little love, how are you this morning?"

It was Marty all right and he sounded way too cheerful for her grumpy mood. "Just a minute," she hissed. Glancing over at Bess's curious look, she took the remote receiver and walked into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. "Bess is staying with us, we have to be careful," she said in a definite grouchy tone.

She rubbed her tender posterior irritably. She had waked up this morning and felt the tenderness in her bottom cheeks immediately when she sat up on the bed. Walking to the bathroom, she had pulled her panties down and held up her nightie to check her out backside in the mirror. She hadn't seen anything, but it felt sore just the same and it aggravated her that Ryan had spanked her like that.

"What's wrong?" asked Marty curiously. He could tell from the tone of her voice that she was out of sorts.

"Nothing," she snapped back. It wasn't nothing, but she wasn't going to tell him what it was! She also had a sinking feeling Ryan was going to be making things his business in the future too and she didn't like the feeling of being hemmed even more.

"Something must be wrong, you sound grouchy," he returned reasonably.

"I said nothing, so drop it will you?" Cassie tried to sound nicer, but failed miserably.

"Oh ho, sounds like somebody's little bottom needs warming," growled Marty in mock fierceness.

"Don't touch my butt again...ever," remonstrated Cassie. Ryan's hard hand had left quite the impression and she was not willing to play games or joke about spanking at that point.

"Good grief, Cassie, I'm just playing with you," complained Marty, backtracking. He thought she'd liked it a few days ago! He really didn't like having to placate her. He was more used to girls who made no bones about what they wanted from him and he from them. And when he was done with

them, there were always more fish in the sea to choose from. But he needed Cassie...for now anyway.

"Oh...I'm sorry, Marty, you're right," Cassie felt bad at his reproach. "It's not your fault I'm crabby this morning." She sighed and tucked her hair behind her ear. "It's all Ryan's fault!"

"You mean that American that's here to help your sister?" asked Marty suspiciously.

"How did you know?"

"I met him at the club last night. Arrogant pommy." Marty flushed as he remembered the disdain Ryan had treated him to under Dan's amused eye.

"Yes, well, he's actually here to talk Sydney into selling Camaroo and moving into the city. It was what Dad wanted but Sydney has this hare brained idea of building the business back up and maybe clearing Dad's name over the diamonds."

Marty's complete attention was instantly focused on Cassie's petulant words.

"Is that so?" I thought Sydney didn't want to sell?" This could complicate things if the station were suddenly up for sale. All kinds of things happen when new people take over a business. He had to find a way inside, and soon! He knew Red was already suspicious of him. And after last night, he was considering cutting his losses altogether and just getting out of town. The only problem was, he'd have to leave Australia altogether to get away from Red. No, his best bet was to help Red recover the diamonds and make himself indispensable to the man. If he ever found out for a minute that he had known Steve was going to double-cross him, he'd disappear or have an untimely accident. He had no doubts on that score.

"She doesn't want to sell," replied Cassie, "but if she did, I would be in the city all the time." She waited for him to comment on that.

"Ummmm, that would be more to my liking," responded Marty throatily, right on cue.

They continued to chat, Cassie flirting and Marty responding delightfully until he finally steered the conversation around to the purpose of his call. "So, love, has Sydney said anymore about the Duke's engine getting pulled this week?"

"No, she hasn't," replied Cassie peevishly. Sometimes it seemed like Marty had a one-track mind. And after his blatant admiration of her sister, Cassie wasn't sure she wanted him working at Camaroo after all. What if Sydney decided to steal Marty away from her?"

"Well, how about if I drive out there today and talk to her myself," he suggested. "Is she going to be home today?"

"She is going to be at the hangar today. Evan has deliveries to make and she is watching the shop," she answered. "But I'll be here! And Bess is going home for the afternoon and evening. She won't be back until tomorrow." She held her breath, waiting for his response to her blatant hints.

"You know I'd like to come see you, little love," he said silkily. "But what about the American? Where will he be?"

"Oh, him," said Cassie, flustered. She had forgotten about Ryan! "I...uhh...I don't know what his plans are. Probably he'll hang around the hangar or something." Her heart was beating fast at the thought of meeting Marty alone in the house. Did she dare? Why not, she decided! Besides, it didn't matter what Ryan thought. It wasn't any of his business!

Cassie often chafed under Sydney and Bess's protectiveness. She wanted to make her own decisions and get a job and a car and not be stuck out here on this hot dusty god forsaken station forever! She was bored, to put it mildly!

"Okay," said Marty. "I'll be out there just before lunch, if you're sure its okay."

"Of course its okay, and I'll have lunch ready," agreed Cassie, recklessly throwing caution to the winds. She was tired of everyone telling her what

she could and couldn't do. It was time to take charge of her life! She rang off and went to replace the receiver on its hook, smiling triumphantly at Bess.

Bess wondered what she was up to, but she didn't say anything. She was distracted by the thoughts of Dan and the coming evening. She picked up her bag and hugged Cassie, giving her a quick peck on the cheek. "Well, I'm off, honey, you be good, you hear? I've left something for you girls for lunch. I've made enough for all of you if Sydney and Ryan come in."

"Bye, Bess, see you tomorrow then," Cassie returned smiling and waving her out the door.

Now to get ready for Marty! Those cool lime green shorts should be just the ticket and they showed off her legs to perfection. She hurried to the bedroom to try them on, her mind thinking of the matches she might put with the shorts that would look really good with her hair and tanned skin. She was bursting with excitement!

Sydney drove through the magnificent landscape, but her mind was a long way from the view. She went over the events of the previous evening.

Going into town to get away from Ryan had proved fruitless and she had ended up spanked for her evasion tactics. As if he had a right! She snorted indelicately. How had she let him do that to her she wondered? She flushed with mortification as she pictured in her mind how she must have looked, bare-bottomed over his strong thighs; her bum perched in the air to receive his hard palm. It was too degrading for words and she had found herself unable to face him this morning. So she had deliberately gotten up early and taken off.

Her mind drifted to the deal Ryan had struck with her. What was supposed to happen at the end of the trial month? Would he expect her to sell then? Because if he did, he was spitting in the wind! She had no intention of selling...ever! When

she got the station producing enough to hire another pilot and then a secretary, she intended to leave Evan in charge and go on the road or back to the University. Gordon seemed to think she should put the rest of her schooling on hold and try the circuit with a band. She shrugged her shoulders. Maybe, eventually, she would sell the business once she was making enough money to support her home. She had no idea how long that would take, but until then, she didn't see things changing much.

In another year, Cassie would be ready for Uni, or at least to move into Kal or Perth and begin her own career goals. She wanted to become a teacher, and Sydney intended to support her as much as she could.

She sighed. So much to do; so little time and money. It would help if they could find those diamonds, but Sydney figured Steve must have hidden them or given them to someone. She knew her father hadn't had them, but the insurance company had intruded into their lives anyway, causing havoc everywhere. They seemed convinced that her father must have gotten rid of them somehow, even though they went over Camaroo's business books and grounds in painstaking details. Her father had managed to forestall the search of their home due to lack of evidence, but they had gone over the planes and the hangar quite thoroughly. Then they had packed up all their files and taken off with them.

It really was a puzzle and one that Sydney harbored a wishful hope of eventually solving. No one else seemed to believe it could happen though and had long ago stopped worrying about it.

They had finally received the records back from the insurance company and Sydney planned on going over them, looking for anything they might have missed. Even though she had been at Uni when it happened, she knew that Courtney had kept painstaking records. The company secretary may have been a ditz, but she was good at her job.



Knowing her father and Courtney better than any investigators ever could, she might pick up on something they would miss. If there was anything to pick up on that is.

Sydney hadn't known Steve very well. He had been hired about six months before she left home, but she knew her Dad has trusted him. She figured Steve must have gotten mixed up with Red Mason somehow and that's how all this had come about. It was a puzzle, no doubt.

Now that Ryan was going to be flying for them, perhaps she would have time to finally be able to get the office and books in order and catalog the mess the investigators had left all their files in.

She wouldn't give up, she decided mulishly. There HAD to be something there. Something everyone had missed.

Sydney pulled into the hangar and noted with surprise the red and black chopper sitting near the hangar. "I wonder who that is?" she muttered. She didn't see any station logos indicating where it came from. Well, she'd find out soon enough!

Inside the office, Ryan and Evan were chatting over a cup of coffee. Ryan had probed more deeply into the story of the diamonds and their devastating effect on Al Carstair's life and Evan had been happy to ramble on and talk about his old friend.

"It's not just the scandal that caused problems for Al," continued Evan. "After Ellen died, Al lost heart and started letting the station go. He started selling off the cattle, little by little and making other changes."

Evan paused to pour a fresh cup of coffee. "Al only had Sydney and Cassie, and with them being women, he never wanted to saddle them with a large station to run. He figured they would go their way, get married and make their own lives with their husbands. He even sold off several hundred acres of the station land once the cattle were gone and started spending more and more time here. And this business did make him and the girls a

pretty good living, until the scandal. Red Mason has political influence that Al couldn't fight, not to mention the suspicion of old friends and neighbors. Business just started drying up.

When he died six months ago, Sydney left the Uni to take care of Cassie and somewhere along the line, developed the scheme to get Camaroo back on its feet." He paused for another drink of coffee.

"I know of the two girls, Sydney loves Camaroo the best. She has always loved flying and she loves the land. And she loved her Daddy as well! It hurt her greatly to see Al go downhill so fast and I think she harbors a wish for revenge on Red. She has mentioned more than once how grand it would be to find those diamonds and clear Al's name, but it wasn't what Al wanted. He wanted the girls cared for and happy.

But Sydney is stubborn, just like Al. She saw the part of Al that broke when all that scandal hit and she wants to fix it; make it up to him, avenge him so to speak. Al didn't want her wasting her life here on a dried out washed up business, as he put it."

Evan chuckled. "I couldn't afford to buy Al out when the business was thriving, but now I think I could get financing to buy Sydney out. The business is showing a small but stable profit with Sydney piloting, and the Karamanda station we just took on will help get some of the old debt cleared up."

"Where do you see Camaroo being in a month from now?" asked Ryan attentively. He went on to tell Evan of deal he had made with Sydney.

"I can't see a whole lot changing, Ryan," admitted Evan honestly, pushing his cap back. "Karamanda is going to go a long way towards easing some of the pressure, but it still won't support the girls at Uni. Which was why Al wanted Sydney to sell both and get out. It would have given them a good start towards pursuing their own lives."

"Why didn't Al sell it himself?"

"Actually, he tried," admitted Evan. "But I couldn't get the deal financed and he had a heart attack before he could find another buyer. But I know he wanted too. With Al gone, Sydney swore she was going to rebuild it. No one has been able to get her to see reason." He chuckled. "Stubborn little thing, that one."

"Yes, she certainly is," mused Ryan mulling over the things Evan had told him. He wondered if he was making a mistake in the deal he had offered Sydney. Wasn't he just putting off the inevitable? In a weak moment, he had let a pair of beautiful eyes and trembling lips influence him down a softer path. He should have stuck to his guns and sprung his ace in the hole on her right up front.

It would probably be best if he spent as little time in her company as possible while he was here. Before she turned him into a quivering blob of jello unable to make a hard decision! He had already agreed to this month. He'd do what he had to do and when the month was up, he would force her hand. He grimaced as he finished the cold coffee, his decision feeling just about as good as the coffee sliding down his throat.

"Good morning, Evan...Ryan," came Sydney's guarded greeting as she walked into the office. "Your helicopter outside?" Her eyes were wary as she studied Ryan. He seemed tense and he answered her with a cool nod of his head. "Yes, I rented it this morning."

"We used to have one at one time," she replied just as cool. What was up with him? She wondered. She wasn't sure what she had expected from him, but this wasn't it. She walked over to pour herself a cup of coffee."

"Well, I have to get to Karamanda," said Evan standing up. "You heading the Ladybird in for supplies Sydney?"

"No," said Sydney. "That's Ryan's job now. That is...if you're still up to it?" She arched her delicate brow at him.

For a second Ryan was tempted to tell her the deal was off, but something held him back. Even in her hauteur, there was something vulnerable about her that touched him. "Give me the supply list and the flight plan," he responded tersely.

Sydney watched as he strode out of the office, paperwork in hand. Then with a sigh, she turned to the task of emptying the cartoons of files the insurance company had returned onto the worktable to begin the huge task of cataloging and researching.

She was deep in the files when she heard the office door open. Turning around she saw Marty walk in, an ingratiating smile on his handsome face.

"Cheers, Sydney!" He grinned cheerfully at her, taking in her trim figure appreciatively.

"Cheers, Marty. What brings you out here?" Some papers slipped out of the folder laying to close to the end of the table and fanned out over the floor. She bent to pick them up at the same time Marty sprang forward.

"Let me help you with that," he said quickly, gathering them together.

"Thank you." She took the papers from his outstretched hand and opened the folder to replace them.

"What is all this?" he asked curiously, gazing at the loaded table.

"It's the files and records we finally got back from the insurance company," she replied.

"What a mess!"

"Tell me about it!"

"Can I help with anything?" he asked eagerly, hoping this might be a break.

"This stuff is so boring, I wouldn't inflict it on anyone."

"Oh I don't mind, he answered, flashing her a grin. "I'm used to paperwork, I do a lot of it."

She laughed and shook her head. "Its your boredom level."

They began to work together and Marty talked to her about working on the Duke's engines. She told him Evan was finalizing the plans for that this weekend if he was still interested.

He slowly brought the conversation around to the subject of selling Camaroo and she flat denied it.

Marty smiled to himself, very pleased with the last hour's work. He glanced at his watch. "Are you going home for lunch? Cassie invited me and I'm meeting her at 11:00am at the house. I'll give you a ride over in my chopper," he added.

"Cassie invited you to lunch?" She stared at him cautiously. How come she hadn't known about this she wondered?

"I hope that's okay with you?" he asked politely.

"Well...yeah...I guess so," she answered hesitantly. "Thanks, I will go with you," she added impulsively. Perhaps she better keep an eye on these two.

They got in the chopper with the Flanders logo on the side and Sydney grimaced with distaste.

"What's the matter, don't you like choppers?" He grinned at her.

"Its not that. I don't like Red Mason or anything to do with him," she replied lightly.

"Whoa, I just work for the guy," declared Marty holding his hands up as if to ward her off.

She laughed at his antics. "Maybe you should find another job."

"I'm trying, but so far she hasn't hired me." He gave her a sly look and for an instant, Sydney wondered why he would want to work for Camaroo. Cassie had mentioned the subject a few times, but she had always brushed her aside. She couldn't even begin to entertain the idea of hiring a pilot yet. "I can't hire anyone right now, Marty," she answered.

"Well, I heard you have a young inexperienced kid working for you. I'd work for what you're paying him if he's not working out." He tried not to sound too eager.

Sydney realized with a start that he was referring to her. "Why would you want to work for so much less?" she asked suspiciously. "You have a good job already."

"I'm tired of being Mason's gopher," he responded testily. He slid a sideways glance at her as he brought the chopper down behind the house. "I want a real pilots job, not just a part-time gopher and paper jockey."

Sydney considered his comment, and then shrugged her slender shoulders. "I can guarantee you couldn't live on what Syd makes," she answered dryly. "But I'll keep you in mind for the future. Syd won't be permanent."

Cassie stood at the window and watched as Marty and Sydney ran from beneath the swirling blades. What the heck were they doing together? Her fingernails dug into the palm of her hand as she realized Marty must have stopped at the airstrip first and brought Sydney home to have lunch with them. Unshed tears burned at the back of her eyelids and her temper soared. She had so been looking forward to having Marty to herself once she had bravely made the decision to invite him. And now, it was all ruined! She didn't know which one she was most angry at. Him for being attracted to her sister, or Sydney for spoiling their chance to be alone!

## Chapter Nine

Ryan had seen the Flanders chopper take off as he dropped the Ladybird onto the dirt landing strip. Striding into the hanger, he didn't see Sydney anywhere around and her jeep was still there. Must have gone to the house for lunch, he decided. Although Marty could have taken her into town he thought reluctantly. He felt a twinge of something he refused to acknowledge as jealousy while he climbed into his own chopper.

He thought about the situation as he flew towards the station. Marty must be getting desperate to come in person looking for unsolicited work. Either that, or he had a major interest in Cassie, which was not a good thing. He would have to have a talk with Sydney and Evan. If Marty was sniffing around because of the diamonds, it meant he knew something that they didn't. Or Red was sending him. Either way, they needed to find out what was going on.

Cassie was on low simmer when Marty and Sydney came through the front door. She arched her brow sarcastically at them both. "Decided to come for lunch today, Sydney?" she asked snidely. Her glance encompassed Marty and he had the grace to flush.

"I stopped by the hangar on my way in and thought I'd see if Sydney would like a ride over." He knew Cassie was jealous and it didn't set well with him. He was about ready to wash his hands of her totally. She had almost reached the end of her usefulness as far as he was concerned, especially with Sydney responding so well to his charms this morning. Red was right in this aspect. Jail bait wasn't worth the risk.

"What's for lunch, Cassie?" asked Sydney sensing the young girls irritation.

"Bess left shrimp salad and iced tea and I made some croissants," she said petulantly, flouncing into the kitchen. She looked up when the sound of

another chopper flying over the house caught their attention.

"That must be, Ryan," said Sydney, feeling strangely happy all of a sudden. They were just getting seated around the family style table in the kitchen when the object of Sydney's comment walked through the doorway.

Marty had seated himself at one end of the table with Cassie and Sydney on either side of him. Ryan took the other end and sent him a mocking smile.

Conversation was decidedly stilted over lunch as Marty tried to flirt with both girls and Ryan watched in amused derision.

Finally Marty stood up and offered his arm to Cassie. "Care to show me around?" It would do no good to antagonize her he decided and he didn't want a case of sour grapes causing a problem for him either.

Cassie was only too happy to oblige. She took his arm and the two went off with Cassie chattering happily.

Sydney got up from the table and began clearing up. She tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. She didn't know what she had expected from Ryan today, but after the intimacies they had shared the day before, not to mention her bare bottom being spanked, this amused sarcasm was not it. She just didn't know why it bothered her so much. She would have preferred to care less, but she found she did care.

Ryan watched Sydney as she moved around, her back ramrod stiff. He knew he was hurting her feelings, but dammit, she was getting under his skin too fast and he didn't like it!

"Do you need some help?" he finally asked heavily.

"No, thank you," came the reply as cool as an arctic wind off the mountains.

He got up and walked out the door, castigating himself all the way. He was headed for the chopper when he caught sight of Marty and Cassie in a clinch



beneath the shade of a gum tree. He walked over, clearing his throat as he approached. The couple sprang guiltily apart and Cassie blushed.

"She's a little young for you, Leamer," he drawled, ignoring Cassie's outraged gasp.

"I don't see it as any of your business," returned Marty evenly.

"I'm making it my business. Al put me in charge of these girls...for now."

"My father died six months ago, Ryan!" stormed Cassie, her blue eyes boring holes in him.

"Just the same, he called in a debt, and I'm here to repay it on my father's behalf," insisted Ryan. "And that means protecting you, whether you wish it or not."

Marty wanted to tell Ryan where to put it, but he backed down. He didn't want to lose the ground he had gained today and besides, it would give him an excuse to extricate himself from Cassie's jealousy. Still, it went against his pride to be told to take a hike in so many words.

"My apologies," he said stiffly. "Perhaps I was out of line." He turned to Cassie. "I'll see you for dinner at the club Friday night, Cassie." He nodded to Ryan and headed for his chopper.

"You...you...you can't do that!" sputtered Cassie indignantly.

"He is too old for you Cassie."

"That's for me to decide, not you!" she yelled furiously. "And I don't believe Dad would put a total stranger in charge of me and Sydney. You just want to throw your weight around and I won't stand for it!"

"Are you calling me a liar, young lady?" replied Ryan dangerously, his gray eyes like flint. "Your father asked my father to see you girls safely settled. In my book, that puts me in charge."

"I don't care about your dumb old book," responded Cassie hotly. "You're not coming in here and telling me what to do...you're not!" In her rage

and frustration, Cassie's arm flew back with the iced tea glass in her hand.

"Don't you dare throw that..." began Ryan, but Cassie was already doing so.

She threw the glass with all her disappointment at being thwarted behind it.

Ryan dodged the glass easily, but it hit a rock behind him and shattered into pieces.

"Pick it up," he ordered quietly.

"No...I won't!" Cassie stamped her foot in defiance, her lower lip trembling in anger.

Ryan reached up and broke off a slender branch from the gum tree and began stripping the leaves from it. "You will, or you feel this on your rear end."

Cassie looked doubtfully at the tree branch he held in his hands. He wouldn't really hit her with that stick. He was bluffing.

"I won't...and you can't make me." She started around him to go to the house but Ryan took her by the arm, halting her progress.

"Let go of me!"

"Last chance...pick up the glass."

"No!" Cassie was trying to jerk her arm out of his grasp when a strip of fire suddenly flared across her buttocks.

"Ouch!" she yelped as she jumped and grabbed her burning cheeks with her right hand. She stared accusingly at him. "You hit me!"

"I cracked you across your bottom with this switch and you're going to get more if you don't pick up that glass," he answered firmly, staring her down. "Temper tantrums are for five year olds."

Cassie refused to show fear, but she gulped anyway. "Fine, I'll pick it up, but I hate you." Her voice quivered as she fought to control the threat of tears.

"That's your choice," he answered firmly, "as long as you obey."

He watched enigmatically as she picked up the broken glass and stalked to the house. Then he

threw the switch aside and headed for a chair on the front veranda. Sydney would need a ride back to the hangar and he would wait for her.

Cassie kept her dignity until she stepped inside the kitchen door, then she dumped the glass in the trashcan with a strangled sob and ran to her bedroom.

Sydney quickly followed, concerned that something had happened between her sister and Marty. "Cassie, what's wrong honey? What's happened to upset you so badly?" Did Marty do something?"

She had intended to take Cassie to task for inviting Marty without her permission, but this was clearly not the time.

"I hate him," sobbed Cassie vehemently. "He is so mean!"

"Marty?" asked Sydney. "You mean Marty?"

"No!" wailed Cassie, her blue eyes swimming in tears. "Ryan!" She turned to look up at Sydney from her tummy. "He hit me with a stick Sydney!"

"He hit you?" questioned Sydney, aghast at the thought. "You stay here, I'll get to the bottom of this!" She went storming out the kitchen door, looking for Ryan. When she didn't see him out back, she walked around front and spied him sitting on the front swing.

She charged up the steps, bristling with indignation. "What did you do to Cassie? She says you hit her with a stick!"

"I gave her a swat on her rear with a switch," replied Ryan, his smoldering gaze flicking up and down her tanned legs.

"You're kidding," said Sydney in consternation.

Ryan merely folded his arms across his broad chest. "No, I'm not kidding. If she expects to have temper tantrums and throw things at me then she can expect to be treated like a child. A simple switch is a very common implement of correction in the states. Stings like the very devil and leaves a lasting impression for a little while. I highly doubt

she will throw anything at me again in the very near future. Besides, she only got one swat. She should experience a full switching, they are definite attitude adjusters."

"Did you ever get switched?" asked Sydney nonplussed.

"Once or twice," he admitted with a lazy grin. "I'm a fast learner. It didn't take more than that to learn not to sass Mom or Dad anywhere near a tree anyway." His grin had Sydney's stomach jumping. There were those dimples again.

"I think you broke her heart," said Sydney sympathetically.

"She will get over it, but I will go talk to her. I wanted her to have some time to think about it." He stood up and looked down into her face. "You do realize that Marty is chatting her up?"

"I knew they were friends," she answered cautiously.

"It wasn't just a friends kiss I caught them at a little while ago," he replied thoughtfully. He had her in a serious lip lock."

"Lip lock?"

"Kiss," he translated with a knowing grin. "American expression I guess."

"Must be," she blushed. "I've never heard it put quite like that." Her golden eyes sparkled up at him.

Ryan's gaze slid to Sydney's peachy lips and he badly wanted to put her in a lip lock, but he resisted. "I'll go talk to her now." He spun on his heel and strode off.

Sydney watched him go into the house, feeling like she had been brushed aside. But was that a twinge of regret she had seen in those gray eyes? She sighed and took his seat on the swing, her toe pushing it back and forth to create a breeze against her temples. She would give them some time before asking Ryan to take her back to work.

Cassie stared resentfully at her well-shaped cheeks in the bathroom mirror. There was a red

stripe right across the center of them, marring the perfection of the pale globes. He had a lot of nerve, she thought, pulling her panties and shorts back in place. She was dabbing a cold cloth at her eyes to relieve the puffiness when she heard the knock on the door. She hastily dropped the cloth in the sink and walked back into the bedroom.

"May I come in?" Ryan opened the door and looked around the edge.

"I guess so," she looked away from him, refusing to meet his gaze.

"Did you learn anything, young lady?" he asked firmly, noting her sulky look. If Cassie had expected an apology, she was doomed to disappointment.

Cassie flushed under his steely gaze and bit back a hot retort. She highly resented his interference, but she was developing a respect for him that made her hold her tongue.

"Okay," she finally admitted. "Maybe I shouldn't have thrown the glass. But it's my business what I do with Marty."

Ryan watched her as she shifted from one foot to the other. He was reminded of a spitting kitten that refused to back down even when it knew it was beaten.

"That's not entirely true, little girl," he answered gently. "There are people who love and care about you and that makes it their business because they worry when they think you may be headed for trouble."

"I can take care of myself," she mumbled refusing to meet his eyes.

He walked up to her and tipped her chin up to face him. "I know you can, but sometimes we all need a little help. You are young and inexperienced and sometimes the Marty's of the world are only out for them. You could get badly hurt."

He thought of his own sisters and some of the experiences they had gone through. He came by his protective instincts quite honestly he supposed.

He didn't know Cassie very well yet, but he knew Marty's type and he was sure she was headed for trouble with that one.

His switch from a stern demeanor to worried friend put her off kilter. She wanted to be mad at him but it was difficult when he was suddenly being so nice. She settled for pouting.

An idea suddenly hit Ryan. "I hear you are having a birthday in another week and a half. How about you and Sydney make some arrangements for a nice seashore excursion for a few days and I'll fly us over in the chopper. You girls can show me around Perth."

Cassie's eyes went wide and her mouth opened in a round oh of surprise. "You would do that for me?" she asked breathlessly, her eyes suddenly shining.

"Sure, it will make a nice holiday from this infernal heat." The beach suddenly sounded great, even to his ears.

"Ohh, Ryan," she exclaimed throwing her arms around him with all the exuberance of youth. "That would be wonderful! Thank you thank you!" She went running to the door of her bedroom. "I have to tell Sydney." She rushed out and Ryan followed at a more sedate pace.

"Sydneyyyyy," sang out Cassie as she ran through the house looking for her sister. She stopped as Sydney flung open the front door and stepped inside.

"What?" she asked worriedly. "What are you yelling about."

"Sydney guess what?" she cried excitedly. "Ryan is going to take us to the beach in Perth week after next for my birthday! Isn't that wonderful?" She was fair to bursting with excitement.

"Well, this is certainly a change of attitude," replied Sydney, amused at her sister's antics. She gave Ryan a derisive grin and he smiled smugly back at her.

"Shall we call Frannie, Sydney? She lives in Perth and has told us to call her anytime we want to use her beach house. Should we?"

"Yes, I think that would be a great idea," she answered guardedly. "You do that and let me know what you find out, Cassie. In the meantime, I need to get back to work, that is, if Ryan will be kind enough to fly me back?" She gazed cynically at him, her golden eyes hiding her secrets well behind them.

Ryan strode to the front door and opened it, bowing at the waist. "Your chariot awaits, my dear."

Sydney rolled her eyes and brushed past him, ignoring the urge to sidle sideways at his raised eyebrow. But for some insane reason the day seemed a lot brighter.

Having gotten successfully past him, Sydney was unprepared for the stinging smack that landed on the seat of her khaki shorts as she reached the first step off the veranda.

"Ouch!" she yelped and covered her bottom with both hands. "Sneak attack! No Fair!" She stared at him in mock accusation, her heart unexpectedly lighter.

"Rolling your eyes is not allowed," he said complacently.

"Neither are highhanded Americans, but you're here anyway," she retorted smartly, dodging another swat at that remark. "Now cut that out, I told you no more of that nonsense!"

"I don't take orders from brats!"

"And I don't take orders period," she one-upped him, laughing as she began to run to the chopper.

Ryan followed at a more sedate pace. "We'll see about that, Miss Sydney Renee Carstairs," he murmured, watching the enticing bottom ahead of him. "We'll just see about that."

Bess fidgeted nervously with the silverware, checking the spotless linen one more time. It was a

full half hour before Dan would be there and she was as jittery as a young girl going to the prom.

She wandered into the bathroom and checked her appearance in the full-length mirror for the umpteenth time. The woman who stared back at her was no longer a young girl but a curvaceous older figure with a few strands of silver running through the chestnut waves that fell softly to her shoulders. Her creamy, lightly tanned skin, one of her best features was still smooth and unblemished although a few tiny lines at the corner of her eyes were making their appearance noticed. Her brown eyes were just that, brown and uninteresting, although William had said they looked like a joey caught in the headlights when he had to spank her. They were wide spaced and open, her soft brows arching above them, their coloring matching her long dark lashes. She had never had to use mascara, much to the envy of her friends.

Her eyes traveled down the length of her figure sheathed in a sleeveless cream cotton dress that tapered to her waist and then gently flared into a fuller skirt that fell to her knees. Her legs were bare and her feet encased in a simple sling back tan sandal with a small heel.

Would Dan think she was attractive? She wondered. She didn't have the willowy appearance of youth anymore, but she thought she was passable. The idea of being over Dan's lap made the air in the room seem suddenly close and stuffy and she took a deep breath.

It had been so long since she had been in that position and now that the prospect was imminent, she was worried and fearful. Should she tell Dan what she wanted? Just how much had he really spanked Amelia?

She sighed and wandered back into the living room, gazing out the window at the mountains way out on the horizon. The sun was beginning to set behind them and it looked like a huge burning globe, reminding her of how her bottom had looked



now and then when William had set fire to her cheeks.

Could she make Dan understand that she just needed a spanking sometimes? Just needed to feel the strength of Williams broad palm against her cheeks or the bite of his belt or paddle, burning away all the recriminations and failures she allotted to herself?

William had understood; in fact, he had insisted from the beginning of their marriage that he would spank her when he thought she needed it.

Course there were many times she earned it and didn't want it, but there were times when she hadn't done anything at all, and she just needed to feel his love and reassurance that he was there for her.

After a while, he had learned to read her moods and she never had to ask anymore. He was always right there with whatever she needed and she had loved him to distraction for his sensitivity.

She smiled a secret smile as she remembered his twinkling eyes when he would pat her bottom and say, "Time for a love spanking honey." She understood that sometimes he just needed to spank her too and those times were usually followed by the most delectable lovemaking.

The soft knock on the door interrupted her reverie and startled her. Her heart jumped in her throat and her mouth felt dry suddenly. He was here.

Dan pulled up in front of Bess's house, the evening sun casting long lazy shadows that stretched from the base of the trees along the ground. He had been thinking about the coming evening ever since talking with Bess yesterday and found himself looking forward to it immensely.

He would always love Amelia, but it was time to move on and make room for someone else in his life. She had told him to do so, but he hadn't wanted to for a long time. He guessed it was because he just didn't think he would ever find anyone that would suit him like she had.

He grinned to himself as he recalled her pert little bottom in the air over the back of the couch, waiting for his belt of correction. She was always sorry, the little scamp, but that didn't seem to stop her from getting herself into trouble just the same. Sometimes he suspected she did things on purpose, which was fine with him. He always enjoyed applying a bit of discipline and then taking her completely, enjoying her submission to his dominance.

He didn't enjoy it when he really had to correct her though, but it had been necessary now and then. Those times were usually fraught with tears and emotion and it was hard on him to hear her cries of anguish, knowing his burning strap was setting her backside on fire and she would be sore for a few days. But she was always so sweetly apologetic and well behaved afterwards that he knew she needed those spankings too.

His thoughts moved on to Bess. He wondered if William had spanked her for discipline. He suspected that he must have for Bess to have talked the way she did yesterday. It had been a wonderful surprise for him to find that out and he had a long list of things to settle with her now that he knew she had been spanked before. He wondered if she ever missed it, or if William had just done what he thought was needed now and then and discipline and been all they engaged in. He was glad the conversation had gotten to this subject, for it had been the deciding factor that cemented his feelings towards Bess. He hoped he wasn't wrong.

Dan knocked softly on the door and heard the footsteps inside coming to answer. He took off his hat and worried it in his fingers as the door opened. His mouth dropped into an O of surprise and a lick of desire surged through him when she smiled.

"Hello, Dan, you're right on time," she teased, her liquid brown eyes sparkling up at him.

"Evening, honey," he said hoarsely, taking in her lovely appearance. "You look beautiful tonight." His admiring eyes traveled the length of her, all the way to the slim ankles and feet and back up. He grinned as a blush diffused the velvety cheeks and she seemed suddenly shy.

"What's the matter, cat got your tongue," he teased when she didn't answer his compliment.

She flushed again and stammered, "N...no, just thinking what a flatterer you are, Dan. Young girls are beautiful, us older women are acceptable."

Dan couldn't believe his ears. She was an enticing vision of a mature woman and she didn't seem to realize it. "I don't want to hear you say that again," he growled. "You either don't realize you are beautiful or you are deliberately underrating yourself and either way, I'm telling you, you are very lovely, Bess. And if I hear you putting yourself down like that again, I'm going to add it to the already long list we have to discuss tonight!"

Bess's face softened as his brusque scolding. "You really think so?"

"I know so!"

"Yes, sir," she laughed then, giving him a mock salute. "I'll try to remember that."

"See that you do!"

"Dinner is ready, come on in." He followed her into the dining room and she waved him to a seat at the table.

Bess sat at his right side and lifted the dish off the chicken, the aroma of spicy teriyaki filling the air.

Dan sniffed appreciatively. "This smells wonderful, Bess," he said enthusiastically. "I think you found the way to my heart!" He grinned boyishly at her as she passed him the dish filled with delicately seasoned vegetables.

Bess was pleased and they chatted and laughed, enjoying the meal and the wine, her nervousness abated for the moment.

She was taking her last sip of wine when he asked softly, "Are you ready for our discussion, young lady?"

Her stomach clenched and her hand trembled slightly as she carefully set the goblet back on the tablecloth.

Turning to stare at him, she flushed when he covered her left hand with his own huge palm. She couldn't help but notice how it dwarfed hers and the thought of it landing hard spansks on her bottom had her feeling breathless suddenly.

"Are we going to have a discussion?" she asked tremulously, her big brown eyes looking at him in a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

"Oh, yes," he said, his eyes glinting. He stood up and pulled her up with him. "There are a lot of things we need to discuss that I've been remiss in. But that's not going to happen again, young lady. From now on, I'm taking my duties very seriously. Do you understand me?" He looked sternly at her, waiting for her to answer him.

"Yes, sir," murmured Bess softly, her heart beating rapidly. "Yes sir, I understand."

## Chapter Ten

Dan gently tugged Bess towards the living room, the huge green brocade sofa being his destination. He liked the way the entire home seemed airy and light with its green color schemes and touches of soothing white. The paintings of Australia's native birds made splashes of color here and there and lent the feeling of a tropical setting.

Seating himself on the sofa, he lightly pulled Bess down beside him tucking her into his shoulder as his arm went around her.

Bess relaxed and rested her hand on his thigh; grateful he wasn't going to just toss her over his lap. She had been nervously wondering how he would proceed, but she guessed she shouldn't have worried. Still, her stomach clenched involuntarily when his low rumble sounded in her ear.

"I'd like to start seeing you, Bess, on a regular basis," he began, his fingers playing with her bare shoulder. "Would you do me the honor?"

She looked up at him then and smiled. "I think I'd like that, Dan." She blushed slightly as his piercing gaze searched her features, gauging her sincerity.

"Are you sure you're ready?" He asked, wanting her to want it as much as he did.

Bess didn't even hesitate. William had been gone six years and she had never thought to meet anyone like him again. Now that she had discovered Dan, she had no intention of playing the shy maiden...at least not in that way. In many ways, she was shy and unsure of herself. But she was sure she wanted to grasp this opportunity with both hands. "Yes, Dan, I'm sure."

His brown eyes bored into hers, searching, questioning. He then nodded, satisfied with her answer. "Now that we have that established," he husked finally, "let's move on to a long overdue discussion. That means you need to be in a certain

position, young lady." He raised his eyebrows at her and patted his thigh. "Right here."

Was she ready for this part? Bess gulped and looked into the uncompromising set of his face. She remembered how William's stern demeanor had always had her stomach playing leapfrog and boy, the frogs were leaping right now!

"It's the only time I'll ask, Bess," he growled softly, waiting for her decision.

She understood that he wanted her to accept him, to accept his right to spank her, for her to give consent to their future by submitting herself this first time. After that, he would not need to ask again; he would already have her consent to exert his authority.

She wondered briefly what would happen if she refused. Then she set the thought aside. She knew what would happen. He would make polite conversation and then he would walk out the door...and probably out of her life and things would never progress any further. This was obviously as much a part of him as it had been William, and a part of her as well.

Her decision made long in advance, Bess stood up, and then turned to face him. Taking a deep breath, she nodded her acquiescence and began to lower herself across his lap, placing her hands on the cushion on the other side of his broad thighs. She trembled in anticipation and fear, wondering if she was really ready for this after all. Those same old familiar thoughts that assailed her at these times really had the frogs jumping!

Dan guided her down, adjusting her over his strong legs, then folded her legs up one by one and gently removed the tan sandals from her feet. That accomplished, he then began to pull the skirt of her dress up her back, folding it beneath his left arm. His heart tripped faster as he lightly patted the firm swells of her buttocks beneath the white satin, then rested his palm there. He took a moment to

appreciate the lovely view before him, feeling his arousal already straining at the folds of his pants.

Bess shivered slightly as she felt cool air where the skirt of her dress had been. She blushed again, realizing what he would be seeing. It had been eons since William had performed this very act and there had been no one since him. She knew her bottom was a bit fuller than it had been in her younger years and she was embarrassed.

"I...I'm sorry," she whispered sheepishly, looking back at him. "I know I'm no slender willow anymore." She jumped when she felt the crack of his palm across the middle of her lower cheeks. "Ohhh!"

"What did I tell you about knocking yourself?" he replied sternly. He landed two more blistering spanks, one on each cheek, and then deftly sent the panties to mid thigh. "I warned you earlier that I would have none of that kind of talk, young lady!"

"Oh! Ouch!" Bess gasped, her breath catching at the fiery sting that suffused her buttocks. She had forgotten just how much this actually hurt! "I...I'm sorry, I just...I." her words turned into more yelps when his hand cracked hard across her bottom six more times in rapid succession. "Ow...ohhhoOWowww!" Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Are we clear on this now?" Dan lightly caressed the reddening cheeks, marveling at the smooth silky surface. How she could imagine these plump full mounds could be anything but attractive was beyond him. He shook his head derisively. Women! They all wanted to look like sticks with no shape to them! Give him a voluptuous full figured woman any day. He couldn't imagine trying to spank some model that had nothing to her. There wouldn't be any of that scrumptious bounce he loved so well, not to mention the lovely curves and valleys to explore and run his hands over.

"You are lovely, Bess, I've already told you that and I don't want to hear another word about it!" He

emphasized his words with another heartfelt slap to her posterior. *CRACCKKKKK!!*

Bess squealed, "Yes, sir!" as the last spank landed with a fiery burn. "I won't say another word," she assured him, her eyes swimming with unshed tears. She would have to be careful around him she decided, her bottom smarting quite fiercely. His hand had felt like a wooden paddle landing on her tender buttocks!

"Good," he said with satisfaction. "Now then, about the night you disobeyed me and drove back alone at midnight."

"Disobeyed?" queried Bess skeptically.

"Same thing as, young lady," he answered with a too cheerful tone. "I wanted you to stay in town and you insisted on having your own way. I worried about you for three hours until you called and said you had made it home safely!" He looked proud of himself as if pointing out that his suffering made him correct in assessing it as disobedience

"Dan you idiot!" snorted Bess. "You didn't have any right to order me around and you know it." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could take them back.

A portentous silence filled the air as her words just hung there between them. "Idiot?" he asked silkily. "Did you just call me an idiot?"

Bess gulped at the ominous tones and wondered how she could have had the audacity to say that, given the position she was in at the moment. There had to be better times to argue with a stubborn man like Dan. It was she who was the idiot! "Oh...well..." she began.

Slap! Spank! Swat! Splat! Dan cracked his hard palm down against Bess's tender bottom over and over, igniting pain and fire in her cheeks, ignoring the wiggling and squirming, and never once missing his bucking target.

Bess tried hard to be as still as possible, but it was rapidly becoming a monumental task. It had been so long since she had had a spanking that she



was unprepared for the hot blistering sensations that seared her when his hand connected with her shrinking flesh. Knowing she had wanted this didn't make it any easier to accept once she was receiving it!

Sobs clawed at the back of her throat and unshed tears burned her eyes as she stoically tried to be brave, but fate was against her. The gasps, ohs and ows finally turned into a full fledged protest; her hands flew back to cover her bottom and her feet kicked up in a reflex action to stop the onslaught.

"Dannnn...you have to stop...I...I...I can't...t...take anymoreeeeeee!" she wailed, the sobs finally breaking free. "Oh no...please...no more," she begged as he firmly grasped her wrists in one large hand and slid her legs down to where he could cover them with his long right one. She began to buck and twist frantically, begging him not to continue.

"Sshhhh, its all right, Bess," he replied soothingly, his hand caressing the reddened skin, gently patting and stroking until she began to calm down. "You're scared, I know. It's been a long time hasn't it?" His gentle manner was her undoing and she cried freely then, letting the healing tears flow.

"Yes," she sobbed. It has been a l...long time, Dan. I'd forgotten how much it h...hurts."

"Trust me, Bess. I'll never hurt you...I promise you that," he said tenderly as he stroked up and down her creamy thighs, feeling her body trembling with reaction and pain. "But I think we both know we aren't quite finished yet are we?" He waited for her to speak, taking his time and not rushing her.

The burn and pain were already diminishing under Dan's ministrations and Bess knew she had panicked and that he was right. They weren't finished. But oh...how hard it was to admit that! "N...no, sir," she whispered hoarsely.

"Talk to me then, honey, tell me some of the things you've felt badly about. Let me help you." His calm urging made Bess feel safe and she thought about how to start.

After a moment, she hesitantly began, telling him some of her feelings of frustration with herself during the years, letting go of old pressures and strain, giving herself over to Dan little by little. As she talked, Dan would interject with hard spansks, or a flurry of firm yet not so hard spansks, taking her to the brink of frantic and then backing off.

"Good girl," Dan congratulated her finally when she ran out of things to discuss. He rubbed her bright red bottom. "We are going to finish now. Bess. I want you to understand that I won't tolerate you putting yourself down and doing things that are dangerous or harmful to us as a couple. Up to this point I've let you control this spanking, but now I'm in control, honey. Do you trust me?"

Bess was sniffing, tears running down her cheeks, and she felt a mess. But she realized she did trust him. She knew she had been in control and she also knew she wanted him to be! She looked back at him, seeing the tenderness in his eyes, yet the firm set of his jaw that meant he would not back down from her in the future and she knew instinctively that this was what she needed. "Yes," she whispered, her eyes shining.

In spite of her resolutions, Bess could not help bucking and fighting when the scalding spansks began again. Swift and hard Dan paddled her, her buttocks turning crimson beneath his scorching hand. He retained a firm grip on her and she was helpless to do anything but submit.

Finally her spirit submitted as well and she buckled over his knee, sobbing helplessly. It was then he released her and gently pulled her up, cradling her between his thighs while she cried into his broad chest.

Bess was a mass of feelings. Her bottom ached, her eyes had to be red and ugly, and she needed a

Kleenex, but she felt lighter than she had in years. Dan handed her his handkerchief and she mopped her tear stained face and blew her nose, her sobs winding down finally. With a big sigh she relaxed against him and laid her head on his shoulder.

Dan wrapped his arms around her in a comforting embrace. Lifting her chin, his eyes twinkled at her. "Feeling better now?" When she nodded shyly, he kissed the tip of her nose. "I think I'm falling in love with you, Bess."

Her smile was like the rainbow peaking through the storm wet clouds and something inside him clicked. "Let me rephrase that, I know I'm falling in love with you."

"Me too," she whispered softly, looking up at him. And she knew it was true, even as his head bent to claim her waiting lips.

Tentatively he pressed against her tender mouth, urging the petals to open, his tongue flicking along the underside of her top lip. She moaned and opened fuller to receive him, hot desire flooded her willing veins like molten lava. Her arms crept around his neck, her breasts pressing into his chest, straining to get even closer as his arms enfolded her.

Dan felt like he was ready to burst; it had been too long and he went from low simmer to raging boil very rapidly. He quickly pulled the white sheath up and over her head, the knickers having already come off, leaving her only in a white lacy bra.

Bess flung her head back, her body trembling uncontrollably as Dan bent to flick the tightening bud through the lace. She was hot and moist with desire and well beyond stopping herself, so when the last restraint was disposed of she gasped as his mouth suckled the rosy offerings in front of him.

"Oh God, Bess, I don't think I can wait much longer," he said hoarsely, lifting her to straddle him. "Up on your knees, honey, quick!"

Bess went up on her knees while Dan quickly opened his pants to let his hard swollen member thrust forth, then groaned as she began to lower herself onto it, inch by inch, gasping at the fullness of him.

He slid down slightly and angled himself forward, to thrust more deeply into the burning core of her womanhood trying to hold back to bring her with him.

Bess could feel herself tightening as the orgasm hit her fast and hard, his upward thrusts sending her to the brink of ecstasy and a small scream escaped as she rode it out until one last thrust sent them both over the edge and then she fell on his chest, panting heavily.

"That was wonderful, Bess," Dan whispered in her hair, his breathing starting to slow. "You are wonderful!" His hands slid up and down her naked back in long, slow sweeps.

Bess lifted her head to look into his eyes. "Yes it was," she returned huskily, "but you still have way too many clothes on. Don't you think?"

"Shall we adjourn this meeting to the appropriate room?" he chuckled. "After all, we aren't teenagers anymore, hoping our parents are asleep. And yes, I think you will need to fix that little problem."

"And just what is the appropriate room?" she teased wickedly as she stood up on her feet and pulled him up with her. She began unbuttoning his shirt, planting little kisses along his chest as each one let his shirt fall away a little bit more. "After all, the kitchen has a nice table in it, the family room has a nice soft rug....OW!" She protested as he swung her around and planted a firm SWAT! on her already sore backside.

"You madam, are a hussy!" he remonstrated, rubbing the sting out with his palm.

"And you love it!" she chuckled taking his hand and pulling him towards her bedroom.

"I believe I do, madam...yes...I believe I do!" With a growl he swung her up in his arms and headed to the bedroom, his laughing captive warm and willing.

Sydney sat on the front veranda, softly strumming her guitar and trying to pick out the melody for a new song she was working on. She had the words in her head; she just needed to free them from within herself through the music.

She felt troubled over Ryan's attitude and music always soothed her, helped her express her feelings. He had stayed away all afternoon and she wasn't even sure where he was. Out filming she supposed.

It was odd that he should come on so strong the first day he was here and then today, nothing! It was like he was suddenly scared of her or something. Not that it bothered her all that much. She wondered if he had thought she would roll over and agree to everything he said if she let him kiss her. If so, he couldn't have been more wrong! Maybe he realized that and it irked him and made him short tempered and distant with her. She shrugged her slender shoulders. Men! Who could understand them?

Ryan stood just inside the door, leaning against the jam in the dark, listening. He had done some fly byes of a few stations today, but hadn't found just what he was looking for yet. He liked the looks of Karamanda. It was an immense station and was an excellent example of how a station was set up almost like a small town. He would probably use that for his documentary, but he needed to see it from the ground. Making the arrangements shouldn't be a problem though, since it was one of Camaroo's accounts now.

He studied Sydney's profile in the moonlight. He knew he was terribly attracted to her and it bothered him. He didn't want to be attracted to this stubborn Aussie girl. They lived worlds and a

continent apart. He just wanted to do his job and go home. She was destined for success and he didn't want to be a "groupie hanger on" like a lot of star's husbands. Husbands? Where had that thought come from? But he knew he was fooling himself.

Restlessly, he turned and paced into the kitchen for a drink of water. Sydney was the marrying kind and so was he. And he wanted his marriage to last, like his parents. The probability of theirs doing so was slim to none, not with the careers they each pursued. In spite of his best intentions, he was drawn once again to the doorway to listen.

"I loved when I saw you,

I knew it was true...You spoke to me...and fate stepped in...

And somehow...I knew..."

Sydney played with the words and the melody, not stopping to think she might be describing herself. She just closed her eyes and let herself feel. Finally, she stopped and leaned back against the padded cushions, gazing out over the starlit landscape. She could hear the faint laugh of a kookaburra in the distance and the gum trees stood tall and ghostly in the moonlight.

She would have to get Gordon to help her smooth out the melody and harmony. He was very good at that. She knew what she wanted and she could feel it would be a great song. She started when she heard the screen door open. Turning, she saw Ryan stepping out.

"A new song?" came the quiet question. He seated himself on the plank railing and looked at her, watching the soft guarded gleam in her golden eyes as she acknowledged his presence. He knew he had put that watchfulness there and he felt a faint tremor of regret.

"Yes."

"Its sounding great so far," he added helpfully.

"Thank you." She didn't say anything else; she didn't know what to say. She watched the light

glisten off the ebony blackness of his hair and she longed to touch its sheen. His face was more shadowed with the light at his back, and his eyes seemed dark and mysterious. She sensed a coiled energy about him and wondered what was bothering him.

At last Ryan raked his fingers through his black hair and said, "Look, Sydney, I think maybe we got off to a bad start yesterday." He stared intently at her then, waiting for her to say something.

"I...maybe...okay, we did get pretty angry with each other," she admitted finally, not really sure what he was looking for, but hoping it wasn't what she was afraid it would be.

"Yes, there is that," he responded, "but I was thinking about the kissing. I shouldn't have kissed you like that, I'm sorry."

Sydney's heart sank. It WAS what she was afraid of. He hadn't really enjoyed it and had just been using it to turn her to his way of thinking.

"It was...nothing," she replied striving for detachment. "It was just a kiss, no big deal." She waved her hand dismissively as if the unimportant had just been relegated to the trash heap. But inside she was dismayed. It had been important...to her anyway. She hadn't realized just how much until it was taken away.

Ryan was a bit baffled. She certainly didn't seem to mind; she was brushing the whole incident off as a mere aberration to sanity, unimportant. He felt surprisingly deflated.

"Right then, so...no more kissing." He knew instantly that had come out wrong.

Sydney stood up then, her eyes flashing fire at him. "Look, I didn't kiss you, you kissed me! So don't tell me no more kissing like you are afraid I'm going to throw myself all over you or something, because I'm not!"

"I didn't mean it like that!"

"No? Well just how did you mean it, Mr. Roglund?" She stared icily at him.

"I just meant that I don't think getting involved is a good idea," he growled in frustration.

"I never said it was! You came on to me. I'm perfectly happy for you to go back to the states and leave me alone. In fact, the sooner the better! Why not tonight?" She glared at him, furious that he was warning her off him when she hadn't even started it.

"I told you I didn't mean it like that," he snapped again.

"It was just a kiss, that's all. It meant nothing to me so keep your stupid warnings to yourself. You leave ME alone, got it?" She stalked furiously to the door and yanked it open. She felt him hold the door for her and she was headed for her room when she felt herself spun around.

"I'm trying to be reasonable, but you're making this really difficult," he gritted out. "I said I didn't mean it like that and I didn't. I'm sorry."

"So now you're sorry you kissed me too, is that it?" She jerked out of his grasp. "Don't let the door hit you on the way out!" Inside she was hurting badly, but she refused to show it on the surface.

Ryan grabbed her then and pulled her roughly into his chest. His hand entwined in her hair, drawing her head back as his head came down, his lips taking hers in an angry kiss.

Sydney pushed at him furiously, trying to jerk her head from side to side, but he held her fast, he strong left arm circling her body, his hand holding her hair tightly.

His mouth punished as he ground his lips against hers, hungrily seeking a reaction. Sydney moaned and relented, letting him ravage her soft mouth. He softened as she yielded, becoming the supplicant, branding her with a searing flame of passion.

Ryan drank deeply, unable to pull himself away now that he was once again kissing her and desire raged through him like a forest fire. The desire to



punish turned to need and he sought her mouth hungrily, lost in her sweet essence.

"What's going on?"

The couple sprang apart, turning to see Cassie staring curiously at them from her bedroom doorway.

Ryan breathed deeply. "Nothing, we were just talking, that's all," he bit out.

"Didn't look like talking to me," added Cassie, an impish smile on her face.

"Mr. Roglund here was just telling me how much he misses the states and wants to go home," said Sydney snidely, struggling to get her breathing under control. Her eyes were huge in her pale face and she castigated herself for her reaction to him.

"You're leaving?" squeaked Cassie in dismay. "What about my birthday party in Perth?"

Ryan sent Sydney a killing look. "No, Cassie, I'm not leaving. Your sister just wishes I was."

"Boy do I ever," muttered Sydney, trying to regain control.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but you have a business to sell," he answered evenly. "And it's my business to see that it happens."

"If you'd keep your nose out of MY business, we wouldn't be having any problems," she returned sarcastically.

"And if you weren't so prickly, we would get along a lot better!"

"I don't want to get along with you, I want you out of here!"

"What you want and what you get are two different things and if you keep up this attitude, you're going to end up over my knee again."

"You spanked her!" squeaked Cassie in surprise.

"Be quiet, Cassie and go to your room," ordered Ryan scowling at her. Cassie backed huffily into her room and slammed the door.

"Stop threatening me!" demanded Sydney.

"Maybe you better go to your room too, before I do more than threaten." Ryan's patience was about

at an end. His gray eyes were deadly serious as he stared at the defiant girl in front of him. He was relieved when she spun on her heel and walked haughtily away.

"I'm going because I can't stand the sight of you, not because you said so," she flung over her shoulder. He winced when the door to her bedroom slammed and the house shook slightly.

"That didn't go well," he sighed.

## Chapter Eleven

"Is everything all right between you two?" asked Evan curiously. He had just passed Ryan, who simply given him a curt nod, and he was now watching Sydney as she went through her preflight warm-up on the Ladybird.

"Yeah, sure." Sydney avoided looking at Evan directly. She continued her preflight preparations. "He just has an appointment at Karamanda this morning."

Ryan had come in and told her he was going straight to Karamanda for a photo shoot with Carter McAllister and his younger sister. It was apparently the only time they could accommodate him and he didn't want to miss the morning light; so Sydney would need to do the supply run into Kal today.

"Does he now," replied Evan with interest. "I don't suppose it has anything to do with Kelsey McAllister does it?" He looked speculatively at her, wondering if it bothered her. He had seen the attraction between Ryan and Sydney when Ryan first arrived, but they had been very polite and distant to each other all week and Ryan had not spent any spare time at the hangar at all. Marty Leamer had been there a couple of times, helping Sydney with paperwork files, but Ryan had not stayed around.

"I wouldn't know," replied Sydney coolly, although her heart lurched at the thought. Kelsey was a beautiful girl of twenty-five, closer to Ryan's age. Groomed and trained to be a wealthy man's social wife. Probably much more to Ryan's liking than someone like her anyway. She was a nobody, with nowhere to go at present.

"Perhaps so...maybe they will suit each other," she said stiffly, refusing to allow even a hint of her feelings to show through. "I'm not his nursemaid anyway, he doesn't have to tell me what he is doing, except for the business end of his job."

"No, I suppose not," replied Evan solicitously. Sound like a case of "me thinks she doth protest too much", he thought, but he didn't say anything else. He waved her off as she turned the small plane towards the runway and watched her take off. Very smooth as usual. He turned to the hangar and headed for the coffeepot.

Ryan sighed impatiently. The light was quickly turning and he wasn't going to be able to get the shots he wanted. Kelsey McAllister was a scheming young woman and Ryan was having a hard time trying to be patient. It was obvious that she wanted to prolong their time together and he didn't return the desire.

Sydney's face floated across his mind, her golden eyes staring accusingly at him. He knew he had been distant all week, but every time he got near her, he felt the desire to yank her into his arms and kiss her until the guarded look disappeared and she yielded to him. But that was dangerous and not fair to Sydney. He wasn't sure he wanted to get involved this fast and his resolve to stay away faded more every time he saw her.

"Is this good, Ryan?" Kelsey's petulant voice interrupted his drifting thoughts and he refocused on the blond haired girl in front of him.

"No, Kelsey, it's not going to work I'm afraid," answered Ryan. He turned his camera off and capped it with the lens cover. "The proper light just isn't lasting long enough this morning for the shots I want. We'll have to try again."

Kelsey smiled then, a satisfied smile. Her china blue eyes watched as Ryan put his equipment away, happy that he would be coming back. She had hoped that might be the case if she didn't cooperate properly. She put her hand with the red tipped nails on his arm. "How about some lunch in Kal then?"

"I don't think..." he began but Kelsey cut him off.

"Now don't say no!" she pouted. "Otherwise I might just have to go visit my cousin for a few

days. She has wanted me to come and I've put it off so we can do these photo shoots. But of course if you aren't interested in me staying, then...." Her voice trailed off, leaving Ryan in little doubt as to her meaning.

He glanced her, tempted to tell her to forget it, but he badly wanted these shots. And they would be perfect with the beautiful blond in the forefront. He didn't take kindly to blackmail though, however sweetly it was put forth. He compared her to Sydney and realized that he much preferred Sydney's bluntness and lack of subterfuge, even it was directed harshly at him.

"Go to the chopper," he directed briefly, gathering his equipment together. "I'll just get the rest of this stuff and meet you there in a minute."

He wondered what Sydney was doing. Then he thought of her habit of flying low on fuel and he was immediately concerned. He hoped she didn't decide to do that today. He would hate to have to spank her again, but he would if she defied him. It would be just like her to do that though. Perhaps he'd better cut lunch short and check on her. He quickly ran to the chopper and stowed his equipment in the box in the back, then opened the pilot's door and hopped in.

Kelsey was happy to see he seemed excited about something. Maybe he was glad to be taking her to lunch after all. "What's got you all eager suddenly?" she purred, hoping to elicit a response from him.

"What?" Ryan looked down at her, a bemused look on his face. "Oh, nothing. Just thinking about something I need to do." He turned the key then and the noise precluded further conversation for the moment as the blades began to churn and the engine to growl.

Beside him, Kelsey was aggravated. Obviously it wasn't the idea of lunch with her that had gotten him going!

They were just emerging from The Gilded Lily as Sydney was approaching the club.

She looked startled at first, then that guarded look came into her eyes and she muttered, "Hello Ryan, Kelsey. Nice to see you again Kelsey."

"You too, Sydney," replied Kelsey coolly. It was strange that Ryan had rushed her through lunch, barely paying attention to her and now he was holding her arm, keeping her in place to talk to Sydney Carstairs of all people.

Ryan could sense the tension immediately between the two girls, but he replied. "Good morning, Sydney. How is the loading coming? Did Sam have everything we needed?"

"Yes, he is finishing the loading now. I decided to grab a sandwich while I was waiting." Sydney glanced from Ryan to Kelsey and back again, her face giving nothing away but a slight flush.

"You have refueled haven't you?"

Kelsey stared at Ryan, the proprietary tone not lost on her. She didn't like the implications and she turned to view the competition, her petulant gaze reassessing Sydney through jealous eyes.

"I'll refuel when I'm ready, Ryan," returned Sydney smoothly. She tried to push on past him into the club, but he took her arm, holding her back.

"You WILL refuel before leaving town, is that clear?"

The naked command in his voice had Sydney turning red with embarrassment and anger.

"Don't tell me how to do my job, Ryan," she hissed through gritted teeth. How dare he treat her like an imbecile in front of someone else? Especially the beautiful and sophisticated Kelsey McAllister. The spoiled darling of the jet set!

"You know what will happen if you don't," he said ominously. "And I mean it, Sydney, I'm not joking or playing around."

"Spare me the false concern, Ryan," she said nastily, jerking her arm away from him. If he was

so damned concerned about her, why had he avoided her all week? This time she succeeded in getting past him and he turned as if to follow her, but Kelsey grabbed his arm.

"I'm sure she has the sense to refuel her plane, Ryan, why so hot and bothered?" she asked, resentment permeating her voice.

Ryan didn't answer her, but hailed a taxi instead and pushed her inside, following her and slamming the door. "To the airstrip," he ordered the driver. "And step on it please, I'm in a hurry."

Sydney seethed through lunch, her temper barely under control. How dare he treat her like that in public...and to threaten her like that! She wondered if he had told the beautiful blond Kelsey what he would do to her if she disobeyed? She flushed with embarrassment all over again, hoping he hadn't been THAT crass!

He had better not try to spank her again or she would deck him next time! He was lucky she hadn't the last time, she thought, soothing herself with that threat. She refused to remember how little choice she had had in the matter once Ryan had taken control. She just wouldn't let it happen again, that's all.

"What's wrong, Sydney?"

She looked up to see the amused face of Dan staring at her. "You've been over here talking to yourself and looking all hot and mad for the last 30 minutes now." He chuckled, figuring it had something to do with Ryan, but just what, he didn't know.

"Nothing, Dan," muttered Sydney, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. "Nothing I can't handle anyway." If Dan had known to what she was referring, he would have laughed outright.

"Okay, I can take a hint," he chuckled. "You coming in tomorrow night as usual?"

She smiled then. "You know I wouldn't miss it!"

"Good, I'm expecting a full house tomorrow, so get your voice all warmed up."

"Will do, boss," she said cheekily, sliding out of the vinyl booth. "I need to get going, got to head back to Camaroo. Still working on those blasted files. It's going to take forever to get that mess straightened out."

"Fly carefully then," replied Dan, taking the remnants of her lunch to throw away. He watched her as she walked out the door, and then shook his head. A stubborn girl, that one.

He wondered what was going on with her and Ryan. They had seemed so promising last weekend, but Bess said they had hardly spoken two words to each other all week.

Looked like Sydney didn't have a license on being stubborn. He sighed and walked to the kitchen. Well, they were going to have to work it out.

Sydney fished through her wallet for the credit card. "Damn, must have left it at the hangar." The thought gave her a perverse satisfaction. She had hated herself all the way back to the warehouse, having finally decided to go ahead and refuel. She really didn't want to, but remembering Evan's concerned face, she had decided to go ahead and do it anyway. She refused to even consider that Ryan's threat might have anything to do with her decision.

"You need fuel, Sydney?" Sam's bright eyes peered inquisitively at her.

"Uhh...no...no I have enough to get back to Camaroo with. Besides, I forgot the company credit card."

"Now you know I can extend credit. Ryan can pay it next time he comes in."

"No, that won't be necessary, Sam. It's not fair to ask you to do that. It just messes up your books and all." Sydney found herself relishing the idea of having a good excuse for not obeying Ryan...that is if he could pull himself away from Kelsey McAllister long enough to even care.



"It's all right, I can juggle the books until the credit is paid," insisted Sam. He had caught on to what Sydney was doing a long time ago, but decided it was her business. Now that Ryan was making the runs though, he figured Ryan wouldn't be happy if he let Sydney leave without filling the Ladybird up. Then again, it really wasn't his concern. He could only offer, if she chose not to take him up on his offer, who was he to interfere?

"Don't worry about it. I've got all I need to get back to Camaroo and I'll fill up there." She strode off then, leaving Sam behind shrugging his shoulders.

When Sydney was airborne once again, her spirits lifted and she put in her music tape. As usual, all normal thought went out the window as the heavens and the music worked their magic in her soul. She sang her heart out, flipping the mike on a minute before she was getting ready to come down towards Camaroo's airstrip.

Suddenly, she spied the red and black chopper sitting off to the side in its usual place.

"Damn!" she squeaked. How had he gotten here ahead of her? He was supposed to be tied up with Kelsey! In her initial panic, she pulled up on the wheel, bringing the nose of the plane back up. Quickly realizing what had happened, she hastened to make the correction, but knew it was too late. "Oh my god," she whispered. "I'm not going to make it!"

Sydney knew she would never be able to stop the Ladybird in her usual run; she would have to circle the airstrip and come back for another landing. Unfortunately, just as she flew over the hangar, the engine sputtered and died.

"Double damn," she muttered, cold fear stealing over her. Why hadn't she listened to Ryan? She turned the wheel sharply as she began to try and circle back around, but she knew it was useless. The Ladybird was going to land all right, but it

wouldn't be on the airstrip! She sent a small prayer heavenward.

Its funny how things seem to happen in slow motion when an emergency was about to happen. She could see Ryan and Evan running out of the hangar from the corner of her eye and she could see the red ground rushing up to meet her as she fought to keep the Ladybird level coming down. She quickly lowered the landing gear and hung on as the planes wheels touched down, the uneven ground causing her to bounce and whip back and forth within the seatbelt. She applied the brakes as best she could, but it was a very rough landing and she was fighting the wheel.

Suddenly a sharp embankment loomed on the left side and the back left wheel slammed into it, catching and spinning the plane around in a half circle. When it came to a screeching halt, Sydney's head bounced against the frame above her, cutting into her temple, then whipping her to the right again, but she was down! Thank god!

She was panting hard; her head back against the headrest, eyes closed when the door to the plane was yanked open.

Evan and Ryan had been sipping coffee and listening to the strains of Sydney's latest song fill the hanger when an expletive had startled them. The strangled "damn" that had come through the microphone had filled Ryan with dread and he stared at Evan as it quickly dawned on them that Sydney was going over the hanger.

"I'll bet she didn't fill up before she left," yelled Ryan as he bounded out the door.

"She better have," growled Evan, right behind him. But he feared Ryan was right and his heart leapt into his throat. They were just exiting the hanger in time to see Sydney start her turn when the engine sputtered and died.

"She didn't," exclaimed Ryan furiously, his blood racing as he sped towards the plane that was

bucking and bouncing as it rocked along the uneven ground. "Hold onto her, Sydney," he muttered.

He cursed when he saw the wheel ram into the embankment and spin the plane around, bringing it to a rocking halt. At least she was down...now to see if she was badly hurt.

Running up to the plane, he yanked the door opened and paled at the sight before him. Sydney's head was lolling back and blood was running down the side of her face. Her eyes were closed...was she unconscious then?

"Sydney," he cried urgently. "Sydney, are you all right?"

She opened her golden eyes to look at him, their pupils dilated...and dazed looking.

Possible concussion, he thought. He needed to get her to the hospital. He stepped up on the stair and reached inside to unfasten her seatbelt, scanning for any other obvious injuries. Seeing none, he gathered her up in his arms and stepped down with her, immediately striding towards the black and red chopper.

"Is she conscious, Ryan," asked Evan worriedly, hurrying along beside them. Sydney was awfully pale, her eyes closed and saying nothing. He didn't like the looks of the cut on her temple either. It was bleeding profusely, but he knew head wounds could do that without being serious.

"I'm taking her to the hospital in Kal to be on the safe side," answered Ryan grimly. "But I don't think it's serious.

"No, I don't want to go to the hospital," said Sydney weakly, stirring in his arms. "I'm just fine, just a little...shook up is all."

"You're going and that's final," replied Ryan, his tone brooking no refusal. "Head wounds have to be checked for concussion."

Evan opened the door to the back and Ryan sat her on the seat, pulling the seat belt around her. "You ride along beside her Evan," said Ryan. "Make sure she doesn't go to sleep yet."

"Sure will," murmured Evan, climbing into the chopper and sitting on the bench seat beside Sydney. He put his arm around her and let her rest against his shoulder.

It wasn't very long it seemed to Sydney, before they were landing on the hospital heliport. Ryan had called ahead and they were standing by with a gurney to take her into the emergency room.

"All this fuss is really not necessary," grumbled Sydney, beginning to feel more like her self as the shock wore off. She shrank back into the gurney as Ryan leveled a furious stare at her. She didn't say anything else.

Thirty minutes later, the men stood up as the doctor wheeled her out of the examining room. Her head had a white bandage on it and she looked pretty pale, but she seemed otherwise normal.

"How is she?" asked Ryan.

"She is going to be just fine," assured the Doctor. "The bandage is temporary, the cut didn't even need stitches, but she will have a bruise along her temple for awhile. There is no concussion and everything else checks out. She is one lucky young lady I'd say," he finished cheerfully. "I don't have too many patients from airplane wrecks and certainly none who have been able to walk away with barely a scratch!"

Ryan breathed a sigh of relief that he didn't know he'd been holding. It had been an enlightening time for him, sitting there waiting for Sydney while the Doctor worked on her. His hands had shaken as realized how close he had come to losing her. It put things in a whole new perspective for him and he realized he was falling in love with the aggravating girl. He'd been afraid of that all along. Ever since he had seen her picture that day in his Dad's office, that impish smile and those golden eyes had tugged at him for some reason. Apparently, fighting it was going to be a useless endeavor.

They stopped at the door exiting the hospital and Sydney stood up. "You take care now," said the young Doctor cheerfully. "And don't go crashing any more planes. You might not be so lucky next time."

"Thank you, Doctor, I'll try to remember that," she commented dryly.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure she remembers," said Ryan silkily, his voice giving nothing away to the Doctor, but speaking volumes to Sydney and she shivered in apprehension. That had certainly sounded ominous and she avoided looking at him as they walked out the revolving doors and back into the hot dry heat of Kalgoorlie.

Ryan took her arm and walked her back to the chopper, opening the door for her and Evan. She winced slightly as he shut it with a little more force than necessary and she glanced sideways at Evan, who was also looking very grim.

Sydney didn't really know what to say, so she said nothing. Both men were silent on the return trip to Camaroo. Of course it would have been difficult to hold a conversation, but still, they didn't even try.

Ryan dropped Evan off at the hangar, and then lifted off again for the house.

"What about my car?" asked Sydney, but he didn't answer. She studied his set profile as he flew. It looked like it was carved in granite and she felt her stomach doing cartwheels. She gulped as she remembered her earlier vow to make sure he didn't spank her again. Somehow, it didn't seem as easy to do as it had at lunchtime.

Ryan set the chopper down and escorted Sydney to the house. When they came in through the front door, Bess and Cassie were there and they were shocked at the blood on Sydney's clothes and the bandage on her head.

"What happened to Sydney," squealed Cassie, rushing to her sister. "Are you all right?"

"What happened, Ryan," questioned Bess, her brown eyes filled with motherly concern.

"I'm fine," responded Sydney as she returned Cassie's hug. "Just shook up, that's all."

"Sydney decided not to fill up in Kal again today," said Ryan harshly to Bess. "Then she miscalculated and overshot the runway, forcing her to bring the Ladybird down off the landing strip."

"Oh my god, Sydney," gasped Bess, going pale. "You could have been killed!"

"Evan told you to stop doing that, Sydney," yelled Cassie. She stared accusingly at her older sister, biting her lip to keep back the tears. "What if you hadn't made it? What would happen to me?"

Sydney flushed then, realizing that Cassie was not just being selfish, but trying to make her feel guilty...and it was working!

"Go get a shower and take a nap, Sydney," instructed Ryan, a steel thread running through his voice. "When you wake up, we are going to discuss it."

Sydney met his inscrutable gaze and she trembled. She badly wanted to rail at him and tell him he couldn't do anything to her, but she didn't. She knew without a doubt he was going to spank her. She also realized in that instance that she couldn't stop him short of calling the police and having him hauled off and she couldn't do that. She cared for him too much.

Her stomach turned somersaults again and she turned quietly away. Somewhere along the way, she had fallen for him and she wasn't sure when it had happened. She sniffled, feeling sorry for herself as she shuffled towards her bedroom, her usual fiery manner quite subdued.

Bess and Cassie stared after her, unsure of what had come over Sydney.

"You're going to spank her aren't you, Ryan?" remarked Cassie intuitively.

"Sshh...Cassie!" admonished Bess. But she was sure Cassie was right.

"Yes I am," answered Ryan heavily. "And I would appreciate it if you don't try to interfere." He gazed steadily at Bess, imploring her understanding, but set on his course of action, with or without it.

Bess and Cassie both nodded their agreement, Cassie's eyes huge in her pale face. "I think...maybe...she might deserve it," she whispered hesitantly. She wanted to stick up for Sydney, but at the same time, the idea of losing her sister terrified her. If Ryan's idea of discipline cured Sydney of her foolhardy risk taking, then Cassie was agreeable to it.

"I think she does too," agreed Ryan. "I intend to make sure she won't want to repeat this mistake again." Cassie nodded and turned to follow Sydney.

"You won't hurt her will you, Ryan?" Bess searched his gray eyes, wanting reassurance that Ryan would not go overboard.

"I will NOT hurt her," assured Ryan, taking Bess's hand and squeezing it. "But I WILL make it hard for her to sit comfortably for the next few days. I want her to remember this lesson so I don't have to repeat it."

"You care for her don't you?" Bess questioned softly.

Ryan hesitated for a moment. "Yes...yes I do, Bess. I've tried to fight it, but I can't anymore. When I thought I might lose her today, it made me realize I'm falling in love with her whether I want to or not."

Bess smiled then and squeezed his hand in return. "Don't you worry, it will all work out, you'll see."

Ryan acknowledged her words with a rueful grin and a deep sigh. "I'll be back later. I'm going to help Evan check out the Ladybird for damages."

"I'll start supper," replied Bess, watching him as his long strides took him out the door.

## Chapter Twelve

"Looks like pulling the Duke's engine is going on hold mate," said Evan grimly. He and Ryan had towed the Ladybird into the hangar and were checking her out. The smell of fuel had been strong and they didn't want to start the engines until they looked the plane over.

"It looks like there's quite a bit of damage," remarked Ryan. "The landing gear is busted, and the left wing is cracked."

"That's probably where the fuel smell is coming from," answered Evan, peering up at the underside of the wing. "I can see leaking from here."

"The windshield is busted too."

Evan turned and peered inside the cockpit where Ryan was checking the control panel.

"Yes, and that will have to be ordered in special from the States." He sighed and shook his head. "If only Sydney had listened, all this could have been avoided. Repairs are going to cost a pretty penny and set us back big time. I'm really tempted to take some of it out of her hide except I'm too bloody relieved that she is all right!"

"I'll be taking care of that myself."

Evan stared stonily at Ryan. "I know what she did was wrong, but you've got no call to be hurting her mate." He seemed to forget that he had just threatened her himself. From Evan's point of view, someone who cared was best at disciplining a woman, and it didn't appear that Ryan cared for Sydney after all. At least from the way things had gone this week.

"I have no intention of hurting her, Evan," returned Ryan patiently for the second time today. "But I am going to spank her for this. I made a promise and I intend to keep it."

"Maybe its not my place to ask, but do you care about her or not? Cause if you don't, then I don't think you have any right to be doing that."



"What you are really asking is if I'm in love with her isn't it?" Ryan countered.

"Well are you?" Evan was a blunt man.

"You Aussies don't believe in beating around the bush do you?" asked Ryan, somewhat amused. Bess had already asked him that today.

"We don't go in much for subterfuge, if that's what you mean."

"Fair enough I suppose." Ryan jumped down from the cockpit and faced Evan straight on. "I do care for Sydney...and yes...I sure I'm falling in love with her even though I don't want to. Does that answer your question?"

"Why wouldn't you want to?" Evan bristled at Ryan's words. Was there something wrong with Sydney?

Ryan really wasn't in the mood for a heart to heart talk with Evan, but he knew he was concerned.

"Look, Evan, Sydney and I are heading in different directions in life. She is destined for a career in music and me...I fly all over the world...sometimes to dangerous places to take photographs. I'm just not sure we could ever make it together."

"You young people," grouched Evan. "Always putting up obstacles before you get to them. Love has a way of working out if two people are willing to try. Might take some doing, and some sacrifice on both your parts, but to give it up before you even take a shot at it is just plain foolish!" He turned his back on Ryan and walked into the office, headed for the dependable old coffeepot. Now there was something a man could rely on!

Ryan stared thoughtfully at Evan as he walked away. The man had a point he finally conceded.

Sydney was gathering her things for a shower when Cassie slipped inside the bedroom and leaned back against the door, staring at her. Her eyes were huge in her pale face, their deep blue color almost black with emotion.

Tentatively Sydney smiled, and then held out her arms to her younger sister who flew into them, burying her face in Sydney's shoulder.

"I'm so glad you're all right," sniffled Cassie, hugging her desperately.

"Me too, honey," replied Sydney gratefully, the small endearment slipping out.

"Ryan is pretty upset with you."

"I know." Sydney turned and headed for the shower, not wanting to talk about Ryan.

"He...he is going to spank you, Sydney."

"I know that too." Sydney turned to face Cassie from the bathroom doorway. Her sister was biting her lower lip, looking as despondent as she felt. "Don't worry, it'll be all right."

It was hard to smile encouragingly at Cassie when she felt so awful herself...but she did.

She turned away from Cassie and closed the bathroom door. She felt bad enough without enduring any more of her sister's well meaning confidences.

As the hot spray from the shower stung her in the face, a few tears slid down her cheeks with the soothing water. She didn't want to be spanked! She trembled, remembering herself over Ryan's lap the first time, her bare bum in the air and his hard palm paddling her cheeks until she was sobbing. She hugged her middle, feeling a frisson of fear jolting through her and she groaned.

Maybe she should take off again and not be here when he came in. No, that wouldn't do any good she admitted. It was just putting off the inevitable. He had tracked her down once and been exposed to public embarrassment. No point in advertising the fact she was in trouble again.

It was a very forlorn Sydney that slunk into the bed a short time later, the events of the morning and the knowledge of her upcoming spanking making her feel miserable. She sniffled pitifully as she turned on her side, and curled up spoon fashion

with her arm under her head. She felt lonely and punished just by being sent to bed.

Sighing deeply, she wished with all her heart she had listened to Ryan instead of letting her pride get in the way. A stray tear worked its way down her cheek and dampened the pillow. Slowly her eyes closed and she drifted off to sleep.

Sydney moaned restlessly in her sleep. Once again she was in the Ladybird, the fear choking her, making it hard for her to breath. When she saw red ground rushing up to meet her she gasped and jerked awake.

For a moment, she was disoriented, and then a familiar face swung into her line of vision as she turned her head. She must have fallen asleep immediately she realized and then woke up when she started dreaming.

"Feeling better?" came Ryan's deep tones as he gazed down at her. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, a look of concern in his gray eyes as he noted the tear trail on her cheek.

Sydney's golden eyes went wide in apprehension. Oh God...this is it!

"I...I must have fallen asleep," she whispered, trying to swallow. Her throat felt dry as she stared up at him. Her fingers tenderly probed the soreness on her temple. Maybe she could fake a setback?

"Yes, you've been sleeping for three hours." He reached up and tenderly moved her fingers aside so he could inspect the bruise. "It's already turning colors."

She flipped the covers back and sat up. Once she slid her long legs off the side of the bed and stood up, she wobbled a bit. Ryan put his hands on her hips to steady her. The matching blue satin tank top and shorts were modest, but his hands seemed to burn through the silky material and she felt her breasts spring to attention. Flushing, she muttered a thank you and padded into the bathroom and shut the door.

Fifteen minutes later, she still hadn't gotten the courage to leave the bathroom. A light tap sounded on the door. "Sydney? Are you all right?"

"Umm...yeah...yeah I'm fine."

"Are you stalling by any chance?"

*Well, of course she was stalling! That should be obvious to any drongo!*

"I'm coming," she answered. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door. He was standing there, his arms folded across his seemingly massive chest and she felt like a lamb to the slaughter! She eyed the bedroom door behind him and once again contemplated the chances of running.

"You're not really thinking of running are you?" His eyebrow quirked and a grin lit up his angular features. She scowled at him. He seemed to be enjoying her discomfiture suddenly.

*I could try throwing myself on the mercy of the court!*

She rejected the idea even as it popped into her mind. No, she wouldn't beg...not yet anyway.

She just stood there hanging her head, one foot rubbing the back of her other leg.

"I think we need to start with some corner time," remarked Ryan taking her arm and leading her to the corner of the room.

"I'm not standing in any stupid corner," snapped Sydney indignantly. The next thing she knew her butt was stinging as Ryan popped her a few times.

"Ouch!" she yelped, grabbing her rear and staring accusingly at him.

He just turned her into the corner and moved her hands away. "No rubbing. Now you think about why you are getting this spanking. That's the purpose of corner time. You need to realize that you earned it and you need to change your behavior."

Sydney stood there muttering about highhanded men until Ryan slid his fingers into the waistband of her pajama bottoms and swiftly lowered them to mid thighs.

"No, don't do that," gasped Sydney, catching the waistband and trying to drag them back up.

But Ryan quickly took both wrists in one hand and lowered the shorts again, then landed several more stinging spanks on her bare cheeks.

"The pants stay down and the hands stay up! Your spanking hasn't even started yet Sydney, so if I were you, I'd stop fighting me before you get a whole lot more than I had planned." His strict harsh tones stilled her hands immediately and he let her go. "Now start thinking about why you are there!"

She finally folded her arms across her middle and the image of the hospital popped into her mind. She sighed as the images flitted through her mental projector and she began to feel guilty and remorseful. The parade of worried faces danced through her mind and she realized she had horribly upset those that cared about her. Cassie's scared and shocked face upset her more than anything and she truly realized how narrow her escape had been. She could have easily been killed. She was a very lucky girl all things considered.

Ryan recognized the symptoms of regret when Sydney's auburn curls fell across her face; her head dipped and a heavy sigh left her lips. It was time.

"Come here, Sydney."

Sydney turned slowly, biting her lip. There were unshed tears shining in the golden depths of her eyes and she slowly padded across the floor. He was sitting on the side of her bed, a heavy looking hairbrush laying beside him that she had never seen before.

"W...what's that?"

"It's a common implement of correction in the states," he answered. "The wooden hairbrush." He held it up for her to look at.

"Like the switches?" she joked feebly, her knees starting to tremble.

He laid the brush down and reached for her, drawing her to his right side. When he started to

draw her down and over his lap, she pulled back. "No, I can't do this, Ryan," she said fearfully.

"Yes you can, Sydney," he replied decisively. "You were warned what I would do and you ignored me. You brought this on yourself. You're just lucky you are even here to receive this spanking."

He brought her swiftly on down, lying her over his lap and stretched out along the bed. Holding her hip firmly with his left hand he rested his right on her quivering cheeks.

Sydney held her breath and tried not to imagine how she must look from his vantage point. His hand on her bottom felt warm to the touch and she shivered, enjoying the feel of it against her silky flesh.

When he ran his palm down one golden thigh and back up the other one, she couldn't help but moan in delight. His gentle fingers brushed lightly up the cleft between her buttocks, eliciting a gasping protest. "W...what are you doing, Ryan," she whispered hoarsely, looking back at him.

"I'm admiring the view," he answered huskily. "You are beautiful, Sydney. I wish I didn't have to punish you, I'd much rather make love to you."

"You don't have to, Ryan. I promise I'll never fly low on fuel again. I've learned my lesson, honest!"

Looking into those earnest golden eyes, Ryan was sorely tempted to let it go and turn her over to explore the delights of her sensual body. The hardness between his legs was getting to be a habit around her and he longed to plunge into her female depths and satisfy himself in her sweetness, to brand her his own. His fingers explored her moist womanhood and he gently rubbed the soft bud between his fingers enjoying the arch of her buttocks against his hand.

Regretfully, he left the delights of her sex and raised his palm in the air. "I'm sure you have, Sydney and I'm happy to hear you say that. But I always keep my promises." His hand landed in the

middle of her buttocks with a searing spank, eliciting a painful yelp.

He continued to hand spank her squirming buttocks with his hand until her legs began to tattoo a rhythm up and down on the bed and she began to twist and turn her hips, trying to escape the stinging pain that was slowly building up.

"Owwwww!" she whimpered helplessly, tried hard not to cry.

"Ohhhh...owwOWWwww! Please stop, Ryan, I'll never do it again, I promise."

"I hope not Sydney, I really hope not," replied Ryan gravely, shifting her body so her legs dipped between his, then placing his right leg over both of hers.

"W...what are you doing?" quavered Sydney, glancing around to see this new development. She paled when she saw him pick up the hairbrush and she instantly understood that this was going to hurt a whole lot more in a very short time!

"NOOO!" She closed her eyes and buried her face in the quilt when she saw his arm go up.

Hot pain exploded in her right cheek as the brush landed with a heavy thud against her warm tender flesh.

"AIEEE!" she yelled, unprepared for this kind of pain. Her body jerked and she bucked up, not realizing she was just presenting a better target. A second blow bit into her left cheek and she tried to kick his leg off hers, but it was hopeless. He had her pinned firmly.

"OWWW!!!"

In the kitchen, Cassie jumped when Sydney's loud cry came down the hallway. It was followed by another and another and she put her hands over her ears and ran out the back door.

Bess was made of sterner stuff and she sipped her coffee and tried to remember that Sydney had earned this and she did not intend to interfere. Boy, it was hard!

In the bedroom, Sydney was bucking in earnest, howling in pain as the brush bit into the curves of her lower cheeks.

"Oh pleeeeeeasee," she begged, "please stop, Ryan!"

She was sobbing wildly as Ryan landed the last six of the full thirty smacks firmly against that tender curve of the sit spot. Then he dropped the brush and began to caress her flaming skin. Her bum was hot and swollen and he picked up the cooling cream he had laid on the bed with the brush.

Ryan knew she was miserable and that she had never been spanked like this before so he applied the cream liberally, talking soothingly to her at the same time.

"There's a good girl, darling, you did well. It's all over now.... you're forgiven. Sssshhhh...its all over, Sydney." Slowly her sobs began to quiet as she lay on the bed, allowing his soothing ministrations and soft words to heal her wounded spirit and throbbing backside.

*Oh God, this hurts!*

Never again, she vowed to herself, would she make the mistake of playing with the fuel! Especially not as long as Ryan was around! Not that she would anyway, Cassie's reaction had already cured her of that.

Ryan gently picked her up and cradled her against his broad chest. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly, brushing his hand down her soft curls and tucking her head under his chin. He hated hurting her like this, but it had been necessary. He was pretty sure she had learned a good lesson today, and lived to tell the tale. She was lucky!

Sydney nestled in his comforting arms, her sore bottom hot against his bare thigh. "I really am sorry, Ryan," she said mournfully, sniffing against his shirt. "How bad are the damages to the Ladybird?"



"Pretty bad, I'm afraid." As he rattled off the list of problems, Sydney's heart sank.

"We aren't going to be able to fly her for several weeks then," she said sorrowfully. "That is really going to hurt us! Not to mention the cost!"

Ryan tipped her chin up to look at him. "I think now is the time to allow Evan to start purchasing the flight business. I spoke with him about it and he is willing to invest in the repairs in return for part ownership, preceding buying you out."

Sydney felt the blow of betrayal like a sickening punch in the stomach. Ryan had gone behind her back! Slowly she stood up and gingerly pulled up her pajama bottoms. "I told you I was not going to sell Camaroo and I meant it!"

"Just a minute, Sydney..."

She walked stiffly to the door and opened it. "Please leave now. You did what you came to do." She refused to look at him as he walked over to her.

"This isn't over, Sydney. Just when are you going to see reason? When you are forced into bankruptcy court?"

When she refused to answer he spun on his heel and left before he put her back over his knee again. She was SO exasperating!

Evan had offered to fund the repairs while they checked the Ladybird over and Ryan had thought it was a great solution, to all their problems. Apparently Sydney didn't even want Evan to have it!

He slammed the door behind him as he entered his room. Dragging his suitcase out of the closet, he took out the envelope that held the papers his Dad had given him. He took out the guardianship papers for Cassie and read them over once more.

Finally he sighed and threw the envelope on the dresser. He couldn't do it. He knew he couldn't, it was too late. The aggravating brat had stolen his heart somehow and he couldn't bring himself to

cause her that kind of pain. But what in the hell was he going to do with her?

Sydney picked up her guitar and slid open the patio window, stepping out on the veranda into the cool night air. Padding softly to one of the pillowed deck loungers, she lay back against the cushion and propped her guitar up on her lap where she could reach it. Looking at the stars, the pain in her heart was second only to the pain in her aching buttocks and she delicately ran her fingers across the strings. She began to sing tenderly, feeling the music wash over her as she softly crooned the words to Demons in the Dark.

*You know I need someone; I need that  
special spark.  
The spark of love that lights my way...and  
keeps at bay...  
The demons in the dark....."*

*The spark of love that lights my way...and  
keeps at bay...  
The demons in the dark....."*

Tears slid down her cheeks as she sang. She wanted Ryan to be the one to keep her demons in the dark at bay, but it looked like he was one of the demons. "I'm sorry Dad," she whispered. "I don't know if I can do this after all."

She got up and set the guitar aside, then walked out in the darkness to her parent's graves. Kneeling beside her Dad's stone she talked to him. "This is all my fault, Dad. I caused all this trouble and now we may not make it. I promised you I'd get Camaroo back on its feet and sell it healthy and profitable, but I think I blew it. I vowed to clear your name, Dad, I really did, but I can't seem to make anything work lately."

She uncurled her legs and sat down, resting her head on her bent knees and folded arms as she

began to sob. "I failed you, Dad, I don't think I'm going to make it. I'm really sorry I let you down."

Ryan had returned to Sydney's room and stood silently listening to her sing, then followed her to her father's grave. At last he began to understand the depth of her passion for wanting to restore Camaroo. Her deep need to avenge her father. He wished he'd given her more of a chance to talk to him; maybe she wouldn't have defied him so quickly.

He had been so wrapped up in staying away from her, that he had pushed away her confidence. Small wonder she didn't trust him.

It tore at his heart to hear her sob like that and he couldn't stop himself from going to her. He grasped her upper arms, pulling her up and into his hard chest.

At first Sydney fought against him. She tried to push him away, and then failing that she calmed down and just stood there in his embrace, sobbing heart brokenly.

He began to place tender kisses on her forehead, then her eyelids, finally tipping her chin up to take her soft lips with his own.

"Sshhh, darling, don't cry anymore," he said tenderly against her mouth. "Please trust me, Sydney, I want to help you. I'm falling in love with you."

Sydney started at his words and gazed through her tears into his gray eyes, softened in the moonlight.

When she didn't answer him, he bent to kiss her again and was rewarded with her soft arms sliding around his neck and her breasts thrusting up against his chest. She moaned softly in her throat as one of his hands slid up beneath the satin tank and gently rolled a pebbling nub between his thumb and finger. She sought his comfort and was rewarded with an answering growl deep in his throat as he ravaged her mouth, his arm holding her tightly around her slender waist.

He wanted to take her right here, sweep those flimsy shorts down and bend her over to receive his throbbing shaft until he had conquered her and obtained exquisite relief for himself. It wasn't the time or the place though and he held himself back.

Ryan bent and slid his arm under her legs and picked her up. He carried her back to the porch and sat down in the lounge, bringing her down into his lap to be nestled in his arms as he lay back.

Sydney didn't want to think anymore. She just allowed herself the comfort of Ryan's arms and his warm body against hers.

"Tell me about your Dad," he requested softly, his hand caressing up and down her back.

She hesitated, not sure what to say.

"Please?"

Haltingly she began to talk. It got easier as she went along and she became lost in the memories of her childhood while Ryan listened. As she talked he began to understand her more and more and to realize what a complex person she really was. But most of all, he began to understand her desires concerning Camaroo and her father. It was a wonderful dream, but not very realistic.

"Sydney," he began cautiously. "Will you let me help you? I would really like to."

She stiffened in his arms. "I don't want your money, Ryan, if that's what you mean," she said proudly.

"I know that. I didn't expect you would. But would you at least think about Evan's offer? We could all work it out together if we try. You know Evan really wants Camaroo and your father would have sold it to him already, but he didn't have the funds at the time."

"I know," she whispered resignedly.

Ryan continued, encouraged at her reply. "And maybe along the way, we might find some clues as to what happened to the diamonds. There is something that doesn't add up in all of this, and it revolves around Marty."

"Marty?" Sydney sat up and looked at him. "What does Marty have to do with it?"

"Have you ever ask yourself why he wants into Camaroo?" Ryan's piercing gaze looked into her golden eyes. "And didn't you say he and Steve were friends?"

"Well, I did think it a bit strange, but figured it was like he said...that he was tired of working for Red Mason, and who can blame him? And yes, he and Steve were friends according to my father."

"I think we need to encourage Marty to come out here more often and keep an eye on him. With the Ladybird down, we will have to fly in shifts anyway, so either Evan or I will be at the hangar with you. Let's keep going through those files and arrange times to leave him alone; then maybe watch him through binoculars. My gut instinct tells me he is looking for something, and I'll just bet it's those diamonds."

"You know, you could be right," exclaimed Sydney, excited at the idea. "So you are thinking Marty knows more than he's told anyone and that's why he wants inside. He wants to snoop around and see what he can find. It does sort of make sense!"

"Exactly!"

She got to her feet. "I think I'm hungry," she pronounced. "I missed dinner and lunch both. Are you hungry? If we are going into the spy business, we need to have lots of energy." She reached down and helped pull him out of the lounge.

"As a matter of fact I am," Ryan chuckled, delighted at her enthusiasm. "Let's go see what Bess left for supper."

Sydney grabbed her guitar and stepped inside. Ryan followed her and waited while she put her guitar away, his eyes greedily watching her rounded buttocks as she bent over. He groaned slightly and adjusted his crotch.

She padded to the bedroom door on bare feet and looked behind her. "Coming?"

"Yes, I'm coming." He tried not to think about the fact that she had not returned his declaration of falling in love. He would worry about that later.

## Chapter Thirteen

Sydney stood under the hot shower. Her neck muscles were stiff and sore, her buttocks were sore, and her entire body felt like she had been drug through a dog door backwards, but despite all this, she felt incredibly blessed to be alive.

She hugged the knowledge of Ryan's declaration of falling in love with her to herself like a hard-won prize that she wasn't ready to share with anyone yet. She wasn't sure how she felt about it herself. She wanted it, yet she didn't want it.

She turned off the shower and stepped out to grab the towel and wrap it around her hair. Turning her back to the mirror, she checked her rear for residual damages.

"Bonzers!" she exclaimed, probing her buttocks gently. She was sporting some good bruises from that hairbrush. No wonder her butt had been so tender when she sat up this morning!

Sydney wasn't sure how she felt about that either. She had never liked bossy men and she knew without a doubt that had been part of the reason she had disobeyed Ryan yesterday. She just flat didn't want him telling her what to do!

She found she did rather like this particular bossy man though. She was pretty sure that was putting it mildly, but she wasn't ready to admit to herself that she might actually be in love with a man who believed in spanking her!

Did he really have a right to do that? She pondered the idea as she dressed for the day. Did men really spank women these days? It would seem that Ryan did, but she was pretty sure she didn't want him spanking her ever again. She'd just tell him it wasn't allowed!

*You said that the last time!*

"Oh shut up," she muttered fiercely to her unruly thoughts. Now the man had her talking to herself!

A knock sounded on the bedroom door and Cassie peeked around the door jamb. "You okay this morning?" She padded over to her sister, concern in the depths of her blue eyes.

Sydney smiled encouragingly at her. "Yes, I'm fine." She could see the questions in Cassie's eyes, but she didn't feel like talking about her spanking.

Cassie fidgeted with her fingernails. "Can I help at the hanger? With the files I mean?"

"Don't you have schoolwork to do?" Sydney rubbed her bottom absentmindedly.

Cassie noted her actions. "Was it bad?" she asked sympathetically.

Sydney flushed delicately, and then replied, "It hurt like hell if that's what you mean."

"It sounded like it." It was Cassie's turn to flush as Sydney turned to stare at her. "I mean...we were in the kitchen and...well..." her voice trailed off and she shrugged her shoulders. "So can I come to the hangar?"

Sydney cleared her throat, a bit nonplussed. She figured Bess and Cassie would have heard her yelling, but to have it put into words was discomforting.

"Uhh...yeah...sure." Sydney turned away to go put on her makeup. She felt arms slip around her then and she turned back into Cassie's sympathetic embrace.

"I'm sorry you got spanked, but I'm glad you're okay," she said rather shyly.

Sydney relaxed and hugged her sister back. "It's okay, I guess Ryan did warn me. I don't have anyone to blame but myself." She tried to brush off her discomfort with the subject. "And yes, you can come to the hangar as long as your work is up to date."

"It is," said Cassie excitedly. "I'll go get ready!" She hoped Marty would be there; he hadn't called since last weekend.

As Sydney leaned over the sink to apply her makeup, another knock sounded on the door and



Bess poked her head around the door jamb. Seeing Sydney in the bathroom, she closed the door behind her and walked over to her.

"How are you feeling this morning hon?" Her warm brown eyes perused Sydney's flushing face.

"I'm fine Bess, thanks for asking."

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay, that was a close call yesterday. Sometimes you can suffer from after shock."

"My muscles are sore and I have a bit of a headache, but otherwise I'm fine."

"How about your bum?" asked Bess, her eye's twinkling.

Sydney turned to face Bess. "Bess, do men really spank women?" She flushed again...it was becoming a habit lately! "I mean like Ryan has me? Is that...normal?"

Bess looked at her thoughtfully. "Some men do Sydney."

"Did William spank you?"

"Yes...yes he did." It was Bess's turn to flush. She and Sydney had not talked on a very personal level before, but she was happy that she was opening up to her enough to ask, however uncomfortable the questions might be.

"And that was okay with you?" Sydney watched her curiously, feeling the need to know these answers suddenly.

"It was...what I needed," she finished quietly. "Some men are spanking men and some aren't Sydney. And it's the same with women really. Some can accept it and some can't. Some even want it and enjoy the discipline in their lives. Some...enjoy different kinds of spankings."

"Enjoy it?" echoed Sydney disbelievingly. She couldn't imagine how anyone in their right mind could enjoy having their bottom bared and spanked hard with a hairbrush until they were sore and bruised and bawling.

"Like I said," smiled Bess. "There are different kinds of spankings, not all of them are for discipline

and punishment. I'm sure if you and Ryan get married, you will find out about the other kind."

"Married!"

"Well, that's usually what people do when they fall in love." Bess laughed at Sydney's horrified expression.

Sydney turned to her makeup. She hadn't thought much further than getting Camaroo on its feet, helping Cassie, and starting her music career. Marriage was another whole ballgame. She frowned at her reflection in the mirror.

"I guess so Bess, I just hadn't really thought about it. I don't think Ryan wants to marry me."

"Why would you say that?"

Sydney looked at Bess. "We don't seem to get along very well most of the time." She didn't want to tell Bess what Ryan had said. It didn't seem all that real suddenly when you looked at their track record!

"You haven't known each other very long," replied Bess dryly. "Give it some time. You two sure strike enough sparks off each other when you are together."

"I know," sighed Sydney. "He is SO darn bossy! I hate bossy men!"

"Hate and love are opposite sides of the same coin they say."

"Whoever THEY is, probably never got spanked! Otherwise THEY wouldn't have so much to say all the time!" She wrinkled her nose at Bess and grinned.

"You're just used to your father. He was very mild mannered."

Sydney sighed heavily. "I know, I really miss him, Bess."

Bess put her arms around Sydney and gently hugged her, hoping she wouldn't stiffen up on her. "I know, honey, I'm sorry."

At first Sydney didn't respond, then she sagged against Bess and returned the hug, allowing herself the motherly comfort. There were tears in her eyes

when she stood back. "Will it always hurt this much?" she whispered.

"No, it will dim in time." Bess reached out and smoothed a lock of hair behind Sydney's ear. "And the good memories will remain to be taken out and treasured all over again. It just takes time."

Sydney wiped her eyes with a Kleenex and straightened her shoulders. "Well, I'm off to work. Cassie is going with me today."

Bess smiled encouragingly at her. "I going into town early today to meet Dan at the club. So I'll see you girls there later and catch your show."

"Seeing Dan again?" teased Sydney lightly, trying to lighten the mood. She was surprised when Bess blushed.

"Yes."

When Bess didn't offer anymore, Sydney cleared her throat and turned for the door.

"Well, I'm off." She didn't want to pry.

"Sydney," called Bess gently.

Sydney turned and gazed at Bess questioningly.

"Dan and I are going to get married. We just haven't announced it yet, but I'd like you to know."

"That's wonderful, Bess! I'm happy for you," replied Sydney earnestly, reaching out to hug Bess this time. "I really like Dan, he has been very good to me."

"And to me," added Bess, her brown eyes shining.

Sydney just had to ask. "Is he...uhh...you know."

"A spanking man?"

Sydney nodded.

"Yes he is I'm happy to say."

Sydney grinned. "Well, at least I have someone to commiserate with."

"Yes you do, and I'm always here for you, Sydney. Come talk to me anytime."

The two women smiled at each other, content in a tentative new relationship. Arm in arm they headed for the door.

Cassie chattered excitedly as they drove to the hangar. She looked fresh and pretty in her new yellow knit shirt and khaki shorts. She complained when Sydney hit a pothole with the jeep and she bounced sideways.

"Take it easy, Sydney! The wind is already messing up my hair and the dust is blowing all over my new shirt. Why did we have to drive the jeep anyway? We could have taken the land cruiser!"

Sydney let Cassie's whines and chatter go in one ear and out the other as she thought about the things Ryan had told her the night before. It did make sense now that he had said it. She pictured Marty in a new light.

She had thought about what might have happened to the diamonds thousands of times over the past several months. And just like everyone else, she could not imagine where they had gone. One thing was for sure; she would be watching Marty like a hawk from now on!

She was surprised to see Marty already there when she pulled into her usual spot. Ryan must have let him in. He and Evan were always here first since they did the cargo runs.

Cassie's eyes lit up when she saw Marty's truck. Her lips curved in a smile and she tried not to appear too eager when Sydney glanced at her.

"Cheers lovely Sheilas," enthused Marty when the girls walked into the office. The hum of the air conditioner already running indicated a hot day and the cool air felt good on their warm faces.

"Cheers, Marty," greeted Cassie enthusiastically while Sydney nodded with a guarded smile.

"Good morning girls," smiled Ryan, reverting to the typical American greeting. "It's about time you slug a beds got here. I guess Cassie held you up getting ready didn't she?"

His good-natured teasing had Cassie looking indignant and he laughed at her.

"I'll have you know that I had to wait on her!" came the huffy response.

"I guess that's allowed, since Sydney is usually never late. We'll overlook it this time." His gray eyes gleamed in his tanned face as he checked her over carefully. They had parted on good terms last night, but with women, you never knew! They could get mad when you least expect it.

"Well," drawled Sydney dryly, checking her watch, "since we are a whole of...two minutes late...that is mighty generous of you, Ryan." Why did the air in the room always seem in short supply when he smiled at her? She was glad for the loose comfortable T-shirt she wore when her perky breasts did their usual salute.

Marty watched their exchange with growing interest. He lazily perused Cassie's trim figure and felt a flicker of regret knowing he would probably never get to enjoy HER the way he'd like to. Now it looked like Sydney was attracted to the sharp-eyed Ryan. That meant hands off there too. He shrugged his shoulders philosophically. You win some; you lose some. And there were other fish in the sea. Cassie was more of a nuisance than she was worth anyway.

The four young people spent the next few hours sorting papers into file folders and Marty picked up a new box to open and set it on the table.

"What's in here? More files?" He cut the top with a box cutter and proceeded to open the flaps.

Sydney peered inside. "Oh, it's the message logs," she replied. She reached in and took out the first four books. They were dated on the front. Courtney had been very meticulous about keeping the messages recorded. "There are about 4 boxes of those."

Marty took the books out of the box and reached for another one. Soon he had all four of them open and the stacks of logs on the table in front of him. There was one log that was open, the page flipped behind the spiral backing and he picked it up. Seating himself on the chair, he was almost hidden behind the stacks of log books and he casually

looked it over, then sat up straighter when he realized it was open on the date of Steve's death.

His heart began to beat faster and he scanned the pages looking at the messages that had come in. There should have been one for him from Steve. Courtney had given it to him. Suddenly it leapt out at him and his hands trembled as he read.

Meet me at the Sunrise at 5:00 and we'll toss back some tequila with the lady.

Oh my God! The stupid bitch! She had delivered the message wrong! She had told him that Steve said to meet him at the Sunrise at 5:00 for a drink! He quickly slapped the log closed and stood up.

"I'm going to go outside for a quick one, I'll be back in a few minutes." He tried to appear nonchalant as he sauntered to the door and walked out front of the hangar. With shaking fingers he lit up a cigarette and took a deep drag, willing his pulse to slow down.

Trying to keep his excitement down, he absorbed the message.

*Toss back some tequila with the lady.*

It was a clue to him! Steve had been trying to tell him where the diamonds were, but what did it mean?

He took another drag. He had been with Steve the night he had tried homemade Tequila Sunrises. Steve had never had that particular drink before, favoring the rum and cokes or just a cold beer instead. Marty had made one for him and then had to drive him to the hospital a short time later. It turned out Steve was allergic to grenadine!

He had wondered why Steve wanted him to meet him at the Sunrise; they rarely went there. He assumed it was because he knew a girl that worked there and Steve had wanted to see her. But then to find out he had arrived an entire hour earlier than planned and died in a bar fight had always mystified Marty. It was time he paid the Sunrise, and Della, another visit.

Soft arms slid around Marty's waist and he felt his ire rise. Cassie! The last person he wanted to see right now; he wasn't in the mood to pander to her immature wiles! Breaking her hold, he turned to face her.

"I'm so glad you are here, Marty," purred Cassie, her blue eyes shining up at him. She leaned up on tiptoes to plant a kiss on his chin.

He pushed her back brusquely. "Look, Cassie, you have to get this idea of you and me out of your head, okay? It was fun for awhile, but your Ryan made it clear that you are off limits and I don't intend to get thrown in jail for any girl, no matter how beautiful she is."

"He's not MY Ryan," protested Cassie hotly. "He's obviously Sydney's Ryan and I don't care what he says. I'm old enough to make my own decisions." Her blue eyes stormed at him, her hands on her slim hips as she made her declarations.

Marty felt torn. He really wanted to be shed of Cassie; but it looked like she was very determined to change his mind. He also wanted to drag her around to the back and take what she was offering, but it was too dangerous. Besides, he didn't want to burn his bridges lest he still needed to come back. He opted for ducking out of the situation temporarily. He'd been going to leave anyway. There was a lady he wanted to pay a call on.

"I have some business I have to see to. Red just called me," he lied glibly. "Tell Sydney I'll see her later." He hurried to his car.

Cassie watched, her lip in a pout as he spun around and headed towards Kal. What in the world was eating him? She wished for the ten thousandth time that Sydney would just sell this dusty old place and move into Kal! Sulking, she returned to the office.

Inside, Ryan and Cassie were going over the message log that Marty had discarded. They had

found the message to Marty; but couldn't understand what had caused his reaction.

"Are we reading more into this than is here?" questioned Sydney, perplexed.

"I don't think so," replied Ryan thoughtfully. "There is something in this message that disturbed Marty, that much was obvious. We might not have caught it if we hadn't been watching him so closely, but it looks like it meant something to him and that's why he went outside...to hide his reaction. It's the only message to him within three pages and you said it's the same date Steve died."

They both looked up when Cassie came back looking very unhappy. "Marty said to tell you Red called him and he had to go." She flopped disgruntled into a chair.

Ryan and Sydney looked at each other, each thinking the same thing. "I'll warm up the chopper," said Ryan. He headed for the door.

"Come on, Cassie, we'll drop you off at home," said Sydney; turning on the mike to tell Evan they were going out for a while.

"Wait! Where are you going?" protested Cassie. "What's going on? Why is everyone acting so weird?" She trailed after Ryan as he headed for the chopper.

Sydney finished her task, and then headed after them.

"Would one of you please tell me what's going on!" demanded Cassie. "And I DON'T want to go home, Sydney. Bess is gone for the day and I'd just be there alone...again! I'm tired of sitting at home by myself." She stared at both of them as they stopped to face her, her arms folded and her toe tapping the ground.

Ryan glanced at Sydney and then at Cassie's sulky face, wondering how much to tell her. He didn't know if she could keep it to herself given her interest in Marty.

"Did you get the birthday beach plans finalized with Frannie?" He tried to divert her.



"Yes, we are all set except for the time. She already has her home rented for the weekend and was checking to see if they were leaving Monday morning or afternoon. She needs a few hours to prepare for us before we get there." Cassie hurried quickly, trying to keep up with Ryan's long strides that were taking him away from her. "But that STILL doesn't answer my question!"

Ryan stopped and turned to face her again. "Look, honey, Sydney and I think we might be onto some clues as to how the diamonds disappeared. That's where we are going, to check it out." He carefully avoided mentioning Marty.

"I want to come!" enthused Cassie, her face lighting up. "I won't be in the way, I promise!"

"I guess you can come, Cassie." Sydney answered her sister's question. "As long as you are SURE you don't have any schoolwork to do."

"I'm not a baby, Sydney," flared Cassie. "I don't need you to watch me like a five year old!"

"I know that!"

"Then stop treating me that way." She turned her back on Sydney and reached for the chopper door.

Sydney glanced at Ryan and he shrugged his shoulders.

Sighing, Sydney climbed into the passenger's side and made preparations to take off. As the whine of the engines started and the blades began to turn, she thought about what Cassie had said. No, her little sister certainly wasn't a baby anymore, and that was part of the problem! She was much too grownup and with these new revelations about Marty, she didn't want her anywhere around him.

Her mind drifted to the message that Steve had left.

*Meet me at the Sunrise at 5:00 and we'll toss back some tequila with the lady.*

What lady? What did it mean? Had Steve given the diamonds to a lady friend? If so, the insurance company had surely checked that out all ready.

She felt a small flicker of hope in her breast. Was it possible she might be able to clear her Dad's name after all? It was almost too good to be true and when that was the case...it was usually really the case!

Ryan's voice spoke in her ear and she adjusted the volume on the headset.

"Where is this Sunrise?"

"It's on the edge of town, near the airport. It's a pretty rough place and not too far from The Cozy Kanga mobile home park."

Ryan glanced at his watch, 10:30am. "Do you think it will be open at this hour?"

"It depends on whether they have any food or not. Dan opens at 11:00am because he serves lunch, but I have never been to the Sunrise, so I don't know."

"What? Never been to a romp' in...stomp 'in...boot scoot' in bar before?" Ryan's eyebrows went up as he teased her.

She grinned and shook her head.

"Well shoot, woman! How are you supposed to watch my back for me if we get jumped?"

"Are you planning on starting a brawl?" she queried politely, her eyebrow arching.

"No, but if I walk in with two beautiful women on my arms, someone may get jealous and try to steal one of you, then I'd have to kill him.... and then general mayhem would ensue...and well...you know the rest!" His cocky grin lit up his dark eyes and Sydney laughed.

This was another side of him she hadn't seen yet and it was delightful. She had the urge to lean over and place a kiss on those dimples crinkling at the sides of his smiling mouth and she felt her breath catch yet again.

Ryan in turn was entranced. Seeing Sydney laugh was pure pleasure! Those shining eyes with their tigerish hues complimented the deep auburn locks surrounding them and reminded him of the morning sun lighting up the horizon at dawn.

"I shouldn't worry, Sir Lancelot, I'm sure the midnight brawlers are fast asleep at this hour. We should be safe I would think." Her golden eyes danced at him and he wanted to drag her into his arms and kiss her until she gasped for air and returned his ardor.

His head bent unerringly towards hers, reaching for those peachy lips as the rock hard length of him strained against the tightening pants.

"All right, break it up you two," came Cassie's amused voice into their headsets.

They jerked apart and Sydney slunk back into her seat, her face flushing with embarrassment once again. It seemed to be a chronic state for her these days.

Ryan lifted off then and it wasn't long before they were sitting in front of the Sunrise, staring at the little bar. Ryan studied it curiously. It wasn't much as far as bars go but it had an interesting design along the outside. There was an alternating pattern of cutouts around the outside walls of the bar. First a tequila bottle followed by a margarita goblet, and then beer bottles design. The cutouts probably had lights that would light up at night, but for now, you couldn't see them that well.

Along the upper third of the wall, big two by six boards were studded there and the cutouts were fastened to them. Interesting, those cutouts looked hollow.

"Shall we go in?" murmured Ryan, his hand on the door. At the girls nod, he opened the door and they all stepped inside.

Once inside, they waited for their eyes to adjust to the dim lighting from the bright outdoor sun and then they looked curiously around.

Seeing a woman at the bar, Ryan headed over and the three of them soon butted up against the wood, watching her curiously. She looked up and smiled at them, then put her rag under the counter and walked over to wait on them.

"Hi, I'm Della Winsted. You folks look lost, anything I can help you with?" She looked closer at Sydney. "I know you, you're Al Carstairs daughter and you sing at The Gilded Lily. I sure enjoy your show every Friday!

## Chapter Fourteen

"What can I do for you, honey?" Della addressed Sydney, hoping she might want a singing job at the Sunrise, but doubting it. That little girl was headed for the big time.

"Well, actually, Della," began Sydney, "we were wondering if we could ask you a few questions about the day that Steve Anderson died."

A sad look came over Della's face. "Oh yes, Steve. That was pretty sad; sad about your father too, Sydney. I don't think Al deserved that scandal."

Ryan watched Della's face carefully, looking for subterfuge, but saw none...yet.

Sydney nodded, acknowledging her sympathy. "We were wondering if you could tell us anything about the events of that day," she continued cautiously.

Della laid her rag on the bar and motioned them to a table to sit down for a bit. "I've told the police and the insurance company everything as best I remember it," she said, her brows puckering together. "What do you want to know?"

Did you know Steve very well?" questioned Ryan.

"Steve and I were friends," she said quietly. "And sometimes more than friends, if you get my drift, but mostly friends. He used to come and do odd jobs around here once in a while for extra cash. The night he died, Benny had him changing some bulbs in the neons. Benny owns the bar, I just manage it."

She took out a cigarette and a lighter. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

Sydney, Ryan and Cassie nodded their assent to her request.

Della took a drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke to the side. The short dark cap of hair swayed when she turned her head and Cassie

watched interestedly, liking the long red fingernails that extended from the end of Della's fingers.

"Neons?" asked Cassie.

"The neon lights that runs around the outside of the bar. Sometimes a bulb burns out here and there and they have to be replaced. Have to have someone on a ladder to get up there though, and Benny doesn't like heights, so Steve usually did it for him."

"Was Steve meeting a lady here that night? Asked Sydney curiously.

"No, Steve had a girlfriend over in Perth he said he was planning on asking to marry him. I never met her though, and she never showed for the funeral. Weirdest thing."

"Are those cutouts hollow?" asked Ryan interestedly.

Della's bright green eyes glittered at him. "Yes they are, but if you're thinking Steve hid the diamonds down inside one of them, forget it. The insurance men thought the same thing and they checked them all...nothing."

"What about the men that attacked Steve, could they have taken the diamonds?" asked Sydney.

"Nah, the men never even left the bar. The police were here and they checked them over completely. They were drunk as skunks and they all got into it and it was just a big brawl. One of them pulled a knife and it surprised Steve while he was fighting the other one. Got him from the side. Dammed idiot didn't even remember it when he sobered up."

She flicked the cigarette against the side of the ashtray, her voice going hoarse with emotion. "It's a bloody shame when a man kills someone else and can't even remember doing it. Makes you wonder what life is all about sometimes doesn't it?" she asked bitterly.

The trio stared at her, Cassie fidgeting uncomfortably. "He didn't give them to you I guess," she said with the bluntness of youth.

Della laughed humorlessly at her cheek. "No, he didn't give them to me, sweetie, I wouldn't still be in this dump if he had." Grinding the cigarette out in the ashtray, she stood up. "I need to get back to work, anything else you want to know?"

"No," replied Sydney. "Thanks for talking with us."

"No problem...and remember...anytime you want to change jobs, come see me." She walked away then, knowing Sydney wouldn't be coming, but needing to say something to end the conversation. Talking about Steve had brought up some painful memories best left forgotten.

Ryan herded them back outside into the hot crisp air. He stood back and looked at the outside walls of the bar once again. "Interesting," he murmured.

"What's interesting?" asked Sydney curiously. She followed his gaze to the wooden cutouts Ryan seemed to be staring out. "Della already said the insurance company checked inside those cutouts."

"I know," replied Ryan thoughtfully. "And I'm sure they left no stone unturned around this bar. But there was something in that message to ..." he paused, glancing at Cassie.

"Come on, let's go get some lunch." He started towards the car, the girls following.

A short while later, Della Winsted opened the door to her small trailer in the mobile home park near the bar and stopped dead in her tracks. "Marty! What are you doing inside my house?"

"Get in here," Marty snarled, grabbing her arm and pulling her inside. "You and me are going to have a talk and you better be giving me the answers I want to hear this time. No more lies!"

"Let go of me," screeched Della, trying to jerk away. But Marty was too strong and he threw her onto the couch and slammed the door.

"Where are the diamonds?" Marty's face was a mask of rage. "I finally got Steve's message; he was meeting you at the Sunrise that night! You

have to have those diamonds and have been hiding them all this time. Where are they bitch?" He advanced on her and Della shrank back against the sofa.

"I d...don't know what you are talking about, Marty," she said fearfully. "I told you everything I know! Steve was coming here to do some work for Benny...like I said. I honestly don't know what you are talking about!"

Marty grabbed her by the upper shoulders and pulled her to her feet. "Liar!" He backhanded her across the face, sending her crashing back into the sofa once again.

"NO!" screamed Della. "Marty....please...you have to believe me, he wasn't meeting me!" She held the side of her face, sobbing and shrinking away from Marty's fury.

But Marty was getting angrier. To have the diamonds so close yet unattainable was eating at him. He had thought about it all the way in and it was the only thing that made sense!

He scowled at Della in frustration. The feeling of Red closing in on him was also fueling his anger; he needed to find those diamonds!

"Steve brought you in on the scam didn't he? Don't lie to me! He had to, it's the only reasonable explanation!" He pulled Della to her feet again, shaking her mercilessly. "Answer me!"

"What scam? I don't know what you are talking about?" Della whimpered, shrinking away from the irate man. "Steve never told me anything!"

"The scam of Red's to get the insurance money for the diamonds and have Steve steal the diamonds back for him...that's what scam!" snapped Marty. "Don't pretend you don't know anything about it...you have to! Now tell me where you hid them!" He backhanded her again and she fell against the sofa, sobbing helplessly.

"I don't know," she moaned. "Honest to God, Marty, I don't have a clue what you are talking about!"



Marty hit her again then, and she collapsed face down on the sofa. Grabbing her hair, he yanked her head back and said hoarsely. "I found the message that dumb blond Courtney screwed up. Steve said to meet him at the Sunrise at 5:00pm and we'd "toss back some tequila with the lady." He paused and looked into her eyes. "That's you Della, you're the only lady here he drank with!" His eyes glittered as he stared at her, willing her to have the answers.

Suddenly the sound of sirens split the air and then there was a loud knocking on the door. Marty stood up as a police officer burst in the doorway, Benny's dark eyes looking over the man's shoulder.

"You all right, Della?" he asked, rushing over to her. He pulled her up to look into her swollen and bleeding face while the police officer put handcuffs on Marty. He growled in his throat at the sight of the bruises already forming on both sides of her face.

Della collapsed into Benny's broad shoulder, sobbing in relief.

"This isn't over, bitch," yelled Marty in frustration as the officer led him away.

"What's going on, Della?" asked Benny.

When she didn't answer, he pulled her to her feet. "Come on, I'm taking you to the hospital. He caught her just as her knees buckled from under her.

Over at The Gilded Lily, Dan and Bess were having a discussion. Bess was bent over the back of Dan's office chair, her jeans and knickers around her knees, her bare bum high in the air. Her knees trembled as she heard his belt slide through the loops of his pants.

"But, Dan," she protested. "I'm sorry, I just forgot to call. It won't happen again, I promise!"

"That's what you said the last time, Bess," he reminded her. "I let you get by with it that time, but not this time." He folded his leather belt double and slapped it against his palm.

Bess's stomach recoiled in dread at the slapping sound of leather on flesh and she hung her head. He was right. He had warned her before. But ohhh...how hard it was to be in this ignominious position! She felt so vulnerable and her unprotected rear broke out in goose bumps, waiting for his belt to lick hotly across her cheeks.

Dan reached out and ran his palm down the cool smooth flesh of her derrière, admiring the firm rounded globes. "You know how I worry about you driving in and out through the outback alone. You don't even have a cell phone in case you break down. The least you can do is call me when you leave so I'll know when to expect you."

"I know, I'm sorry." Her voice was small and ashamed as she remembered her broken promise.

"You will be much sorrier by the time I'm finished," he promised. He raised his arm and brought the belt slapping down, leaving a hot red band across her right cheek.

"Ouch!" Bess yelped. No matter how prepared she was for that first spank, it still always managed to catch her unaware. She cried out again as the second one bit into the left cheek.

"You WILL call me, young lady," he ordered sternly as he strapped her again, right across both cheeks at the same time.

"Yes, sir!" Bess exclaimed, tears springing into her eyes. "I will, Dan, I will!"

"I hope you remember next time!" He landed several more burning stripes across her buttocks while she danced in place and cried out pitifully.

He refused to let her cries deter him from giving her a sound spanking; but after thirty swats, he stopped and re-threaded his belt, leaving her to cry over the chair for a minute.

He then walked over and lifted her up, cradling her against his broad chest as she sobbed.

"You going to remember now?" he asked gently, rubbing her hot bottom cheeks carefully.

"Y...yes," she sobbed. "I'll remember, I p...promise."

"That's my good girl," he soothed, holding her close and loving the feel of her in his arms. "I do love you and I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I know, Dan. I won't forget again," she said, hiccupping into his shirt.

A soft knock sounded at the door.

Dan called out, "Just a minute." He helped her get her knickers and jeans in place and planted a tender kiss on her lips. "Wait here."

He walked to the door and opened it. Sydney was standing there. "Is Bess in here?"

"Yes she is. Come in, Sydney, I have to get back to my customers. I'll see you ladies out front." He sent Bess a loving smile and closed the door.

Seeing Bess blowing her nose and wiping her eyes, Sydney asked with concern, "what's wrong, Bess?"

Bess chuckled tearily and replied, "I forgot to call Dan again before I left Camaroo, and he was reminding me of the fact."

"You mean he..."

"Yes, he spanked me," said Bess, smiling ruefully and rubbing her throbbing bottom.

"Oh," blushed Sydney sympathetically. "I guess you won't do that again huh?"

"Not anytime soon I'm sure, and, I'm going to get a cell phone!"

At the table in the club, Cassie and Ryan were also having a talk. "Something is going on that you guys don't want to tell me Ryan and it's making me angry!" Cassie exclaimed. "It's about Marty isn't it?"

Cassie's bright blue eyes pinned Ryan in a stare and he stared back, wondering how much to tell her.

"It's alright," said Cassie wistfully. "I don't think Marty really wants to see me anymore anyway. He said as much this morning, so I guess he is getting

bored with me." Her face fell woefully and Ryan felt sorry for her.

He cleared his throat. "Well, Cassie, we think that Marty might have been in league with Steve to get the diamonds and that he might have wanted into Camaroo so he could look for clues as to where they might be."

"And you think he was using me to get in don't you?" she whispered.

"I'm afraid so, honey." He watched as Cassie tried desperately to blink back tears. He got up and slid into the booth beside her, taking her in his arms. "You're too good for him, sweetie."

Cassie couldn't hold back the sobs in the shelter of Ryan's protective arms. "I k...know it, but it still h...hurts, Ryan. I thought he really l...liked me."

"Well of course he liked you, honey...what's not to like in a beautiful young girl like you?"

"Y...you think so?" Cassie lifted her head to look Ryan in the face, searching for sincerity.

"Cassie," responded Ryan firmly, taking her chin in his hand. "I know he liked you; too well in fact! He would have used you and tossed you aside. I won't allow that!"

"Maybe he wouldn't have, Ryan," Cassie argued with the innocence of youth. "Maybe he was falling in love with me!"

"Perhaps," agreed Ryan cautiously, not wanting to send her into a teenage snit. "But men like Marty are users honey. They take what they want and move on...can you trust me on this one?"

"He said you didn't want him around me and that's why he was backing off." She stared accusingly at him.

"Well of course I didn't want him around you, I recognized his kind right off the bat."

Ryan wished he had never said anything about Marty liking her now. This wasn't going well. So much for trying to boost a teenage ego! Walking in mine fields would be preferable!

"That's not fair, Ryan, you don't know for sure how Marty feels. He really does like me a lot...and I like him too," she finished defensively. "I wanted Sydney to sell Camaroo and move into Kal so I could see him more often!"

"Cassie," Ryan said firmly, trying to deter her, "we think Marty found a clue to the diamonds this morning in those logs he was reading and that's why he took off so fast."

"He said Red called him!"

"He lied, Cassie."

"You don't know that," she protested, not wanting to believe the worst of Marty. She sat up straight and pulled away from him with a pout. "It might have been different with me!"

Ryan recognized a stubborn young woman when he saw one and his sympathy began to turn to impatience.

"He was seeing other girls, Cassie! Doesn't that give you a clue? If he was in love with you, why would he do that?"

"How do you know?" she asked snottily.

"Watch your tone ,young lady," warned Ryan. "I know because I saw him with one the first night I was in town. I followed Sydney in here and Marty came in with a girl hanging on his arm. He shook her off when he saw Sydney, thinking you might be here obviously; when he realized you weren't, he left with her."

Cassie's face fell, and then turned mulish. "Yes...well...it might have been his sister or something for all you know, did you ask him who she was?"

"Now you're grasping at straws, Cassie, does he have a sister?"

"I don't know, he never said; but it doesn't mean there couldn't be a good explanation for it!"

"You keep thinking that honey. That steadfast devotion will be a great asset when you get married," replied Ryan in sardonic amusement.

"Now you're making fun of me," accused Cassie hotly, her temper flaring.

"Who's making fun of you, Cassie?" asked Sydney, sliding into the other side of the booth. Ryan got up and slid in beside Sydney and Bess sat down gingerly by Cassie.

Cassie stared at Sydney. "I suppose you think Marty was just using me to get into Camaroo too? Ryan says that Marty sees other girls and couldn't care about me at all!"

"That's not quite what I said, Cassie," responded Ryan impatiently, getting tired of her obstinacy. His gray eyes glittered and he felt the urge to do a little explaining with a few well-placed swats to a recalcitrant bottom. "What I said was...I think Marty used you to get inside Camaroo in hopes of finding clues to the diamonds whereabouts, and that he liked you well enough, but was most likely not serious because he sees other women."

"Same thing," said Cassie, sulky and defensive.

"Ryan's right, honey," Bess replied sympathetically. "Dan says Marty comes in with different women all the time, but Friday nights are reserved for you. I'm afraid we all think it has something to do with the diamonds."

"I have to agree Cassie," remarked Sydney carefully, not wanting to hurt her little sister but seeing no point in disguising the truth. She would have to find out sometime and it looked like Ryan must have had a reason to tell Cassie their suspicions.

"I'll just ask him myself tonight," answered Cassie resentfully.

"No, that's the one thing you can't do," said Ryan tersely. "That's exactly why we didn't want to tell you in the first place. We can't let him know we are on to him!"

"I don't care about the dumb old diamonds anyway," protested Cassie, her eyes flashing.

"I guess you'll just have to stay home tonight then won't you," said Ryan sternly. "If we can't trust you, you'll stay behind."

"That's not fair!"

"That's enough, Cassie," rebuked Ryan. "Now eat your lunch and no more arguing."

"Don't tell me what to do!"

Ryan laid his napkin on the table and looked straight into Cassie's defiant eyes. "Would you like to retire to the back room for further discussion about this?"

Bess and Sydney held their breath and glanced at each other.

Cassie understood exactly what he was saying too and she held his gaze bravely for a few seconds, then she flushed and dropped her eyes to her plate. "No," she mumbled, giving in.

"Good," replied Ryan in satisfaction. "Now eat your lunch. We need to get back to Camaroo because I have runs to do this afternoon."

Cassie nibbled on her cheeseburger, wondering just what Sydney saw in Ryan after all. He was a bossy aggravating know it all and she'd show him. Tonight she would ask Marty about the diamonds, just see if she didn't!

Her mind drifted off in daydreams of Marty assuring her he had nothing to do with the diamond scandal and insisting to Ryan that he would see Cassie, despite Ryan's protests. With typical youthful innocence, she didn't think past the rainbow and consider what would happen if her plan backfired!

Red Mason sat at his desk blowing smoke rings in the air. Soon the back entrance to his office opened and Bull slipped silently inside. It always amazed him how quick and quiet the big man could be.

Red had just hung up with the Kalgoorlie police department. Marty had been arrested for beating up Della Winsted. Interesting. He took another

drag and blew a few more circles while Bull stood like a stone behemoth, waiting for Red to speak.

"I have a job for you, Bull."

"I figured as much, boss."

"Go into Kal and make Marty's bail."

"Leamers in jail?" Bull was instantly alert.

"Seems he beat up Della Winsted. Interesting, huh? What do you think?"

"You don't pay me to think boss. You want him in one piece?"

"Yes I do, Bull...for now. Bring him back here so I can have a chat with him, then we'll see about keeping him in one piece." Red smiled.

"How fast you want him?" asked Bull. He'd seen that smile before. It didn't bode well for Marty Leamer.

"Take the chopper," replied Red, waving him out the door. He took another deep drag on his cigarette as Bull slipped out as silently as he had come in. So Marty beat up Della. His mind mulled over that thought.

Marty had been going to spend the day today at Camaroo the last he'd heard. Now suddenly its only mid afternoon and Marty's in jail for beating up a bar manager? And she happens to be the manager of the bar where Steve Anderson was killed! Too much of a coincidence decided Red. Something was going down.

He blew smoke rings in the air again and stared sightlessly at them, his mind at work. Marty must have found out something at Camaroo, it was the only explanation. Otherwise, why beat up Della after all this time? Better yet, why hadn't he called him with the information he had found out? Answer, Marty was hiding something.

Red smiled again. Whatever Marty was hiding, he would soon be telling old Red! Yes, something was going down all right, Red could feel it in the wind. He wanted those diamonds back and Marty better be praying he wasn't standing in the way



when push came to shove. Red didn't like double-crossers, neither did Bull.

Marty yelled in furious panic at the police officer. "What did you call Red for? I didn't tell you to call Red!"

"He's your boss, son," replied the big man. "There didn't seem to be anybody else and he's sent someone to bail you out, so get your carcass outta there and come on."

Marty knew who Red would have sent...Bull! Damn the officer for calling Red anyway, he didn't want to face him right now. He needed time to think...to get his story straight...to have a back up plan! That stupid Benny had called the police on him before he could get Della to confess.

The officer led Marty to where Bull was waiting, the paperwork already finished. The cold beady eyes of the huge man reminded him of a snake waiting to strike. Marty felt a cold sweat on break out on his forehead and he tried to think quickly as Bull took him by the arm and escorted him to the waiting chopper.

"Red wants to talk to you," said Bull quietly. The deadly quiet tones sent a shiver up Marty's spine. He held Marty's arm firmly to make sure he didn't try to run.

"Fine, I'll talk to Red," he replied with as much sneering bravado as he could muster. He got inside the chopper. He knew that trying to run would only make him appear to have something to hide and Marty didn't want to do that. No, he had to face Red, no doubt about it! Staring out the window as the chopper left the ground, his mind began to plot.

Back at Camaroo, the phone rang and Cassie picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Sydney?" asked a raspy voice.

"No, this is Cassie, who is this?" asked Cassie curiously, not recognizing the voice.

"This is Della Winsted...please...I have to talk to Sydney right away!"

"Hang on," replied Cassie. She walked to Sydney's room and knocked on the door. "Telephone, Sydney!"

Sydney opened the door and took the phone from Cassie. "Hello?"

"Sydney, this is Della Winsted. I need to talk to you right away! Can you come back into Kal?"

"I just got home from there a little bit ago, Della, can't we talk on the phone?" asked Sydney, glancing at her watch.

"No, we can't," hissed Della. "It's about the diamonds...I think I know where they are hidden, Sydney, but I don't want to talk about it like this. Can you and your friend come to the hospital as quickly as possible? I'm afraid he will come back and I don't want to tell the police!"

"What are you doing in the hospital? Afraid who will come back?" asked Sydney curiously, her heart beating fast at the mention of the diamonds.

"Marty Leamer beat me up," replied Della hoarsely. "

"Marty beat you up!" exclaimed Sydney in alarm. "Why?"

Cassie's eyes grew round as saucers at Sydney's words and her face turned ashen.

"I'll explain when you get here, just come on...and hurry!" The line went dead and Sydney stared at the phone in her hand, and then looked into Cassie's shocked face.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Marty beat Della up?" quavered Cassie, her voice unbelieving.

"That's what she said," replied Sydney. "Take this." She handed Cassie the phone to put away and did some fast thinking. "She wants me to come to the hospital right away, she says it's about the diamonds!"

"I'm coming with you," Cassie decided, hurrying to put the phone back on the receiver.

"All right, I'll leave a note for Ryan. He is in the air and Evan is gone this afternoon."

She rushed into Ryan's room, scanning the dresser top for a piece of paper and pencil. Spying a manila envelope, she hurried over and picked it up. The top was open and some papers were hanging carelessly out of it. Her heart leapt into her throat when she recognized her father's handwriting.

With shaking fingers, Sydney quickly rifled through the papers, reading her father's letter and then coming across a legal document. She gasped as she realized it was a document remanding custody of Cassie to Paul Roglund if Sydney did not meet the terms her father had laid down for her.

For a few minutes, she was stunned, and then hurt and rage set in. She quickly folded the document and stuffed it into her pants pocket. To hell with leaving Ryan a note! He and his father and her father could all take a long walk off a short pier! No one was taking Cassie away from her! She'd just recover the diamonds by herself, that way she would get the recovery money to do what she needed to do without Ryan's interference. Whether her father liked it or not!

Savagely she tore up the envelope with the rest of the contents and threw it on Ryan's bed. Raw pain ripped through her as she realized the depth of his betrayal, but she shoved it aside. First things first, she had to get to Della.

The two girls were silent as Sydney raced towards Kal, each lost in their own pain and distress. How could Ryan do this to her? He had been planning on taking Cassie all along! And her father...anguish tore through her again, and then fury! She had been so sure her father wanted her to save Camaroo.

How Ryan must have been laughing at her, knowing the ace he had up his sleeve! She wondered why he had even bothered to make that deal with her at all. Maybe he was having fun slumming, she thought bitterly. The big rich man playing pilot to the poor little bush girl!

Pretending to fall in love with her had merely been a bonus! A fun game to play while he was stuck with her and bored to tears! Probably the only reason he had really come was to get his documentary accomplished!

Noticing Cassie's silence suddenly, Sydney glanced sideways at her sister and saw tears trickling down her cheeks. She immediately pulled the car over.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry," she sympathized, putting her arm around Cassie's trembling shoulders. "I know this must be a shock for you, I wasn't thinking." She had been too wrapped up in her own anguish to pay attention to Cassie.

Cassie leaned into Sydney's shoulder, sobbing softly. "Ryan t...tried to warn me, but I wouldn't listen. I just can't believe Marty really hurt Della or that he was really in on something that helped to c...cause Dad's death."

Cassie had loved her father, in spite of not wanting to stay on at Camaroo. To know that the man she fancied herself half in love with was a traitor cut deep into her young psyche.

"I f...feel so used Sydney and...dirty somehow!"

"I didn't know it either, Cassie," Sydney said gruffly. She hugged her sister close. "I know it hurts right now, but there will be others. Next time you will be more cautious."

*And so will I!* She vehemently promised herself.

"Come on now, chin up. We have to get to Della. If we can manage to recover those diamonds, we can move into Kal or do whatever we want, right?"

Cassie's smile wobbled through her tears as she looked at Sydney. "Right! And Ryan will help us get them. It won't be too long before he gets back and finds your note and then he will fly in and meet us there."

Sydney fidgeted uneasily, but decided to tell Cassie the truth. As she pulled back onto the road she said, "I never left him a note after all, Cassie. We'll just find the diamonds ourselves. We don't need him anyway."

Cassie gazed at Sydney's rigid profile and realized for the first time that her sister seemed to be under stress as well. "Why didn't you leave Ryan a note?"

"Its our business," she replied tersely. "I didn't see any point in dragging him into it anymore than he already has been."

"But why, Sydney? He's been right in there with us all along. What changed?"

The muscle in Sydney's smooth jaw line knotted from the force of her tension. "I don't want to talk about it right now, Cassie, okay? I need to concentrate on getting us there as fast as I can...and in one piece!"

"Well, okay," agreed Cassie quietly...too quietly. Sydney could hear the hurt in her voice.

"Look, honey, just trust me for now, okay?" She put her hand over Cassie's and squeezed. "It will all right."

Ryan sat the chopper down to an empty house. He had figured it would be though; Cassie and Sydney would have gone long ago to the club for Sydney's show. He had enough time to get a shower and get something to eat before he headed

on in. Luckily the chopper was a fraction of the time compared to driving into Kal.

He had been thinking long and hard about the clue that Marty had picked up on in the logbooks. His mind kept drifting back to the bar. Della's story rang true and he knew Steve must have planned on meeting a lady there, but who was the lady? Della had said they were friends and more on occasions, but there was no other lady there that Steve had visited regularly. Besides, if there had been, Marty would have known it too. Where had Marty gone today? They had beaten him to the bar obviously, only to discover...nothing.

He pictured the outside of the bar in his mind. The cutouts, a woman on a tequila bottle, the martini glasses, the bottles; they all ran around the bar in an alternating pattern except for the woman on the bottle. To find out that Steve had been up there the night he was killed, working with the lights, had instantly made him suspicious. But it had to have made everyone else suspicious too, yet nothing had come of it.

Slipping the diamonds down inside that hollow cutout of the woman would have been a great hiding place, but apparently it had not been the plan. Although he supposed they would have been discovered by whoever changed the lights or worked on it again.

No, it was too simple.

Besides, the authorities were on the case as soon as Steve was killed, and what he had been doing that night would have been one of the first things to come up.

No, there was something more...something missing.

Ryan froze instantly when he saw the paper mess all over his bed. "What the hell?" he muttered to himself. Quickly crossing the room, he picked up a piece of the envelope, recognizing it instantly. He picked through the remnants, and realized the paper concerning Cassie was gone. He

groaned at the implications. Someone had found it...either Sydney or Cassie. It was a toss up as to which would be worse!

He did a quick sweep of the house and found nothing else out of place or remiss and then got into the shower. He'd skip dinner and head straight for the club.

Bull gripped Marty by the shoulder and shoved him down into the chair in front of Red's desk.

Marty scowled up at Bull, and then faced his boss. "You wanted to see me boss? All you had to do was call and I would have come out here."

Red lazily blew smoke rings in the air again, a feral smile lighting up his gamin features. "Would you now, boy? Be kind of difficult from jail wouldn't it?"

Marty flushed. "I wouldn't have been there long."

"Now that's a matter of opinion. Assault is a pretty serious charge, especially when you put the woman in the hospital."

"Hospital?"

Red leaned up and put the cigarette out in the ashtray. "Yes, the hospital. You knocked her around pretty good. The question is...why?" He stared at Marty intently, looking for any signs of duplicity.

"We had a disagreement," returned Marty smoothly. He had thought about it on the way out here and had decided to bluff it out. Pretend he had known nothing about Steve's plan. He didn't realize he had put Della in the hospital though, that could complicate things.

"Over what?"

"Over the diamonds of course!" Marty leaned forward in his chair. "I found a message from Steve in the logbooks this morning, for me. That idiot blond Courtney screwed up the message, but I know it was a clue. Steve must have been planning on stealing the diamonds all the time, boss, but never said anything about it."

"What was the message, Marty?" asked Red evenly.

"The message was to meet him at the Sunrise at 5:00pm and we'd toss back some tequila with the lady," said Marty triumphantly.

Red cocked his head inquiringly. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning Della Winsted! She must have been in on it with Steve all along, only we didn't know it! She's the only lady he ever drank with at the Sunrise. They've been friends for a long time."

Red leaned back, looking skeptical. "If Steve and Della were in on it together, why did he leave you a message?"

Marty had counted on this question. "Because he and I were friends and if Della were to double-cross him or something, it would be a clue to me as to his killer," he said triumphantly. "I happen to know that Steve was allergic to grenadine, and he would never drink tequila sunrises!"

"So you're saying Della Winsted set up Steve's death? That it was premeditated murder?" Red looked interested finally.

"I think so," returned Marty exultantly. "I think that bitch double crossed Steve and has the diamonds herself, but Benny called the police on me before I could get it out of her."

"So why didn't you call me instead of going straight to her?"

Marty spread his hands apologetically. "I'm sorry about that, boss, I just wasn't thinking. Steve and I were good friends and it burned me to no end to think she had him killed. She's a sly bitch for sure! I just reacted when I read that note and didn't think."

Red studied Marty's face. Maybe Marty had stumbled onto something here. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It did make sense...it could have happened that way. "Well, did she tell you anything?"



"No," replied Marty disgustedly. "She kept insisting she didn't know what I was talking about, but I know she did!" He left out the fact that he had mentioned Red's scam to Della. No point in muddying the waters. If she brought it up herself Marty could say it was proof that she knew about the scam. She would be convicting herself, even if she hadn't known! But Marty was sure she did; she had to have been lying to him all along, it was the only explanation!

He knew Red would want to "visit" with Della as soon as possible, and he would have to go along. He thought he had a pretty good chance though of keeping his own knowledge of the scam hidden. Least he had better hope he did! So far so good!

Red leaned his elbows on his desk, his fingertips touching as he considered his options. It looked like he was going to have to convince Della Winsted to talk to him. Picking up the phone, he dialed the number to the hospital.

"I'd like the number to Della Winsted's room so I can arrange for flowers to be delivered," he said smoothly into the phone. He paused, listening.

"She is being released? In a few hours?" He listened intently. "Why thank you, ma'am, thank you very much for the information." He hung up the phone.

"Looks like we'll just have to go find Della now don't it?" he said to the waiting men. "All right, Bull, warm up the chopper. We got another trip to make tonight." His eyes gleamed as he rose to his feet.

"Oh, and Marty," said Red.

Marty stared up at Red, transfixed at the sudden change in his boss's demeanor. It was menacing...deadly. "Yes, boss?"

"You better hope you have been telling me the truth and none of this is some scam of yours. You understand me?"

"Y...yes, boss," stammered Marty, feeling cold suddenly, " it's not a scam, it's the truth, you'll see for yourself."

Red nodded then and walked to the door. "Coming?" The way he said it was more of an order than a request, and Marty didn't dare say no.

"Coming, boss." The two men left together.

Sydney sat on the side of the bed, holding Della's cold hands in hers. "So Red planned to cheat the insurance company all along?" she asked Della. Della nodded, her short cap of hair waving back and forth along her ear.

"Marty was so furious, he accused me of being in on Steve's scam to mess up Red's scam! He said the lady Steve had to be talking about was me, but it wasn't! I've figured out that clue meant Sydney! It was a clue to tell Marty where the diamonds were going to be."

"Where Della? What does the clue mean?"

Della's eyes were bright and excited. "That cutout of the lady on the bottle is the key. When it's all lit up at night, it shows the lady tossing back shots over and over as it flashes through its cycle. Her glass fills with liquid and she tosses it back. It all fits! She is the lady Steve had to be referring to. He used to joke about matching shots with the lady when he was really down sometimes."

"But I thought you said the cutouts had all been checked?" Sydney looked puzzled.

"They were, but I'll bet they only checked down inside them. There has to be more to it than that, Sydney! I'll bet you money that they are there somewhere.... they have to be. Maybe he hid them down inside the two by six that the cutout is bolted too!"

"But wouldn't that attract a lot of attention? I mean, wouldn't he have to drill holes or something?"

"I'm betting he did what he needed to before that night. He had been up on the ladder several times during the previous two weeks, but I never

paid any attention as to where he was or what he was working on."

"Well, I'm going to go check it out," decided Sydney. "I've got a flashlight in the car." She could barely contain the excitement in her voice. "Where is the ladder kept?"

"No, you can't do that by yourself," protested Della. "I'm due to be released very soon. The doctors decided I don't need an overnight stay. I was going to call Benny, but why don't I just go with you?"

She put her legs over the side of the bed. "Hand me my clothes out of that closet and I'll start getting dressed."

"No Della," protested Sydney. "You're in no shape to get in the middle of this, but she was already handing Della her clothes."

"I'm already in it, and I have a feeling Marty will be back. I don't want to be a sitting duck waiting for him...or Red Mason!"

The doctor walked into the room. Nodding to Sydney and Cassie, he spoke to Della. "I'm letting you out, Miss Winsted, but you are to go home and get some rest. Take Tylenol for the pain if you need it over the next few days and take it easy. You are going to have some terrific looking bruises for awhile."

"Thank you, Doctor," murmured Della, sliding into her knickers even though the man was standing right there.

"My, you are in a hurry aren't you?" he asked, amused. He looked at Sydney. "See that she gets some rest, okay?" He spun on his heel and left the room.

Ryan walked into The Gilded Lily at 8:55 and was met by Bess and Dan.

"Do you know where Sydney is?" asked Bess anxiously.

"She's not here?" Ryan's heart sank even as he asked the question.

"No, they haven't shown up and that's not like Sydney." Dan ran his fingers through his hair.

"Has Marty Leamer shown up?"

"No, Leamer was arrested this afternoon for beating up the manager of the Sunrise. Della Winsted I think her name was," said Dan, "why?"

"Beating up Della?" echoed Ryan, feeling a frisson of alarm. "Is he still in jail? What about Della?"

"Della's in the hospital, but wait just a minute." Dan turned and called to a man sitting a few tables away. "Hey Fred...Leamer still in jail?"

The deputy sheriff named Fred Marantz looked up. "No Dan, Mason's man Bull made his bail two, maybe three hours ago." Seeing the trio of concerned faces, he stood up and came over to them. "Something wrong?"

Quickly Ryan outlined the basics of the day he and Sydney and Cassie had spent and their suspicions about Marty Leamer and Red Mason.

"It's not like Sydney NOT to tell someone where she is going," said Bess worriedly. "Do you suppose they might have broken down on the way in or something?"

"I didn't see any cars along the way Bess, and I was watching as I came in. No, Sydney had her own reasons for not telling anyone, but now is not the time to discuss it." Ryan's face looked grim. He didn't want to talk about the custody papers; there was enough going on at present.

"I'll call the hospital," said Bess, swiftly moving to the bar and picking up the phone. She hung up a few minutes later. "Della has been discharged, and left in the company of two family members according to the hospital, both young women."

Ryan swore softly. "Della must have remembered something and they've gone to see her...without me!"

"What about her home?" asked Dan.

Bess quickly flipped through the phone book and found the number. It rang several times. "No answer," she said.

"I'm going over to the Sunrise," decided Ryan. "If they aren't there, maybe someone can tell me where Della is."

"I'll just go with you," decided Deputy Marantz, his cop instincts on the alert. "Twenty million dollars in diamonds is enough to motivate any man. In fact, I think I'll call for some undercover back up at the bar."

"I'm coming to," replied Dan, following the two men. Bess started to follow them. "You stay here, Bess, if there's any danger, I don't want you in the middle of it."

Bess started to protest, then stopped. He was right she realized. There wasn't much she could do to help. She bit her lip as the three men left, worried about the girls. She hoped they were all right!

Sydney parked around back of the bar and followed Della to the shed out back.

"The ladder is in here," said Della, flipping on the interior light.

"We'll get it," said Sydney. She picked it up and motioned Cassie to take the other end and they all slunk around the side of the bar through the shadows, Della keeping an eye out for anything suspicious coming from the street out front.

Quickly the girls set the ladder up in front and to the far left of the doorway of the bar in the shadows.

"What if we find the diamonds, Sydney?" whispered Cassie, looking fearfully around. "What are we going to do with them? What if Marty comes looking for Della?"

"If we find them, we'll take them to Matthew or the police," hissed Sydney. She didn't answer the second question. She didn't want to think past the job at hand.

Taking the flashlight, she climbed the ladder steps until she was behind the cutout of the lady. Cassie was holding onto the ladder, helping to balance it.

"Do you see anything?" asked Della in a stage whisper.

"Not yet," returned Sydney. "I just got up here!" She held the flashlight and began to look around, pointing its light into the cutout and all around it. "I don't see anything," she whispered back in frustration.

"Look close at the beam," instructed Della excitedly. "There has to be something up there somewhere!"

The girls were too intent on what they were doing to notice the two burly men that eased out of cars and sauntered slowly across the street as if headed for the bar. They silently melted into the tree and night shadows along the edges of the bar. The girls hadn't even seen them.

Sydney peered underneath the beam. Seeing nothing unusual, she stepped up another step so she could look at it from the top. She saw nothing again. Frustrated, she slammed the butt of the flashlight down on the beam. "There's nothing up here, nothing at all," she said impatiently.

"There HAS to be," said Della frantically. "Let me up there. Maybe I can see something you've missed."

"No," replied Sydney, "you are hurt, you can't come up here!"

"Uh ohhh," said Cassie, her voice floating up to Sydney. "Guess who's here Sydney, and he looks awful mad!"

Sydney leaned out to peer around the cutoff. She saw Ryan, Dan and a policeman headed their way, Ryan leading the procession.

Ryan saw Cassie holding the ladder as soon as he pulled up to the bar. Della was standing off to the side; that meant Sydney must be up on top of it! His first reaction was heartfelt relief, his second,

the urge to spank her senseless! There was no sign of Leamer or Mason, thank god!

Ryan strode over to the girls and moved Cassie aside to yell up the ladder. "Sydney Renee Carstairs, you come down here right now!"

"Go to hell, Ryan Roglund, I don't need you," she snarled back, grabbing hold of the beam. She felt an up thrust edge that she hadn't seen before when she had shown the light on it.

"Don't make me come up there after you!"

Dan and Fred looked at each other and grinned. This was turning out to be interesting.

"Go away," came the muffled reply. Sydney was busy shining the light back on the beam. There was an indentation in the wood where the flashlight butt had crashed into it and Sydney picked at the edging that had popped up with her fingernail. "Drat," she muttered, it won't come up." Feeling the ladder bounce she glanced down.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, seeing Ryan's furious face ascending closer and closer. The rat was climbing the ladder! She reached a foot out to kick at him.

"I'm coming up there and so help me, if you kick me, little girl, I will paddle your butt till you can't sit for a week!"

Sydney ignored his threat and kicked out at him, angry to the core. "Leave me alone you...you traitor! Go back to the states and just leave me and Cassie alone, we don't want you here!"

"I am here, I'm not leaving, and you just earned yourself another spanking," he growled grabbing her foot. He held onto it until he climbed past it, and then grunted when she found his ribs. He reached up and smacked the pert bottom right above him. "Stop that!"

Sydney was flattened against the ladder as Ryan came up behind her. "What are you doing up here anyway?" she hissed at him in frustration. She tried to elbow him, but he absorbed the blow, leaning into her and pinning her against the steps.

"What are YOU doing up here is the question," he replied cuttingly. "And why didn't you let me know what you were up to? I've been worried sick!"

"Oh don't give me that worn out routine!" she snapped furiously. "We both know what you intended to do and for your information, I'm looking for the diamonds."

"This is not the place or time to discuss the PRIVATE papers you got into in my room," returned Ryan evenly. "Now why are you looking up here for the diamonds, Della said it had already been checked and rechecked."

"Because I want to find them myself and Della thinks they are here because of something Marty said, that's why."

But since you ARE here, I think I found something," she added snidely, pointing the light at the wooden beam. "Might as well make yourself useful and see if you can get this edge of wood up. It wasn't there until I smashed the flashlight into the beam because I got frustrated. Now it's popped up there."

"Let me see." Ryan took a pocketknife from his pocket and began to pry under the edge of the wood bit. "It looks like this might be something," he said excitedly.

Suddenly the wood bit popped out and Ryan stuck the knife point down into the hole, feeling something hard inside it. He began to dig out the piece bit by bit until he got a hole the size of a penny. With the light shining down inside it, they could both see something silver winking back in the light.

"Look at that," whispered Sydney, her heart beating fast, making her breathless. Was it possible they had found the diamonds after all this time?



## Chapter Sixteen

"I see it," answered Ryan. He stuck his knife-edge under the top edging of the silver object and slowly lifted. At first it resisted, then it began to slide smoothly out until Sydney grasped it with her hand. For the moment, her anger was set aside.

Ryan laid his knife down and took the tube from her. It was about 4 inches long. Pushing his thumb beneath the edge, he popped the top off and held it in the beam of her flashlight.

"Ohhh," it's the diamonds isn't it?" Sydney gasped as she caught the sparkles.

"Yes, I'd say you found the diamonds, at least part of them. I bet there are at least two more tubes hidden in this beam to have twenty million dollars worth."

"You find something up there Ryan?" asked Dan at the foot of the ladder.

"Sure did...here, look for yourself." Ryan popped the lid back down and dropped the tube into Dan's waiting hands. Dan opened the tube and poured some of the diamonds out into his hand while Ryan poked around in the beam, searching for another soft spot with his knife.

"You know, this would be easier if a certain someone wasn't in my way," he teased cautiously.

Sydney stiffened. "I'm always in your way, so that's nothing new. Now that I've found the diamonds though, you don't have to pretend to worry about me anymore. You can go home and forget all about me and Cassie."

"We'll talk about this later," gritted Ryan, bringing the butt of his pocketknife down along the beam. It wasn't long before three more tubes followed the first one down and he couldn't force anything else to pop up. "I guess that's it." He began to climb down the ladder.

From a dark gray sedan in the shadows of the street edge, three pairs of eyes watched the activities with interest.

"Well, well," murmured Red, "it appears they found something. He peered through the binoculars again, trying to see what was in Dan's hands.

"It must be the diamonds," said Marty plaintively.

"Want me to get 'em, boss?" asked Bull from the back seat.

"Not right now, Bull," Red replied. "There are six people out there, plus a bystander or two. He turned cold eyes to Marty. "You may have just lost me twenty million dollars, Leamer."

"How the hell was I supposed to know Della would turn them over to Sydney Carstairs?" growled Marty, looked decidedly disgruntled with a slight sheen of sweat on his upper lip.

"I'm not so sure you were telling me the truth," mused Red, staring Marty down as if to dissect his brain and find his answers. "There wouldn't be any reason for her to do that after all this time. I'm thinking that clue in the logbooks must of meant more to Della than it did to you and she let people know about it."

Red lit up a cigarette, as he was prone to do when he was thinking. "Which leads me to wonder, how much does she know about you and me? Or were you in on it with Steve after all and that's why he left you the message?"

Red pointed to the neon sign where the lady was tossing back tequila. "Looks to me like he told you exactly where the diamonds were hidden, you just didn't figure it out before she did."

Marty gulped realizing he had blown it by telling Della about Red's scam. But he had been so sure Steve must have brought Della in on it! Apparently he hadn't since Della had led Sydney right to them! Either that or she was trying to save her own skin!

"She HAD to have been in on it, otherwise why didn't she get them before now?" Marty queried desperately, trying to make sense of it all.

"I don't think she knew about it at all," replied Red silkily. "I think you and Steve were in it

together and he was telling you where they were hid but you were too stupid to figure it out. Della figured it out bloody quick after you opened your big mouth...and she did something about it!"

"No boss, i...it wasn't like that," insisted Marty. They were interrupted in their argument by the sound of sirens as they split the night air and the car was surrounded within seconds by police vehicles flashing blue and red lights.

"You better keep your mouth shut, Leamer," said Red, his voice full of deadly menace as the police stood behind the police car doors with their guns pointed. "Just let me handle this."

Frank Marantz shooed Dan, Ryan and the girls all to the shadows beside the bar as the sirens blared and the police cars came to a screeching halt sideways in the street. From the wooded shallows, the two burly men ran out, guns aimed at a gray sedan.

"Don't you worry, Miss Winsted," Frank told Della. "It looks like Mike and Pete have it under control. I'll need you to come down to the station though and talk to the detectives who have been working on this case for the last 18 months. They will need your testimony against Leamer and Mason to wrap it up."

Della nodded and heaved a sigh of relief. At least now she could feel safe in her home tonight; it looked like Frank was taking care of things now. She eyed the tall deputy.

Della wondered how it was that she hadn't noticed him before? She liked his take-charge attitude and she was glad she had confided in him. The way he was eying her in return convinced her she might be seeing more of Frank Marantz in the future; an anticipatory smile curved her rosebud lips.

It was late by the time details were wrapped up, and Sydney was looking forward to lying back in one of Martha's soft beds and relaxing. The

diamonds were in police custody, Marty and Red were under arrest and Della was safe.

She had pointedly ignored Ryan ever since they had come down from the ladder and he hadn't pushed her...so far. She tried not to think of his duplicity and betrayal, freezing off the emotions associated with it. She was trying hard to keep her state of mind numb and blank until she could be alone.

Sydney had also made sure that Cassie was in the connecting room to her this time and not Ryan; she hadn't forgot what happened the last time she and Ryan had stayed at the Frontiersman!

She was just coming out of the bathroom when a light knock sounded on her door. She went to answer it, her stomach coiling in dread. "Who is it?"

"It's me," answered Ryan through the crack in the door. "We need to talk, Sydney."

She hesitated, and then opened the door fully. Might as well let him have his say, he wouldn't leave her alone until he did. He had proved his tenacity in the past!

She stood silently aside and allowed him to come into the room, and then walked over to a chair and sat down facing him, still not speaking.

Ryan watched her, knowing this was not going to be easy. "What were you doing in my room?" he began without preamble.

"I was going to leave you a note when Della called. I was looking for paper and a pencil when I saw my father's handwriting on one of the papers sticking out of the envelope. The rest, as they say, is history!" She finished on a sarcastic note, her golden eyes filled with the bitter knowledge of betrayal.

"You had no business going through my papers," he said quietly, walking over to stand in front of her.

"If it concerns me, then it is my business." She stared up at him, the light shining off his black hair,

his brown arms folded across his broad chest. Her breath caught in her throat and her traitorous breasts perked up as usual. She mentally cursed them when his knowing glance slid to her clinging knit tee.

"Sydney, your father did what he thought was best for you girls. He knew you wouldn't comply with his wishes, that's why he did what he did," he explained impatiently.

"I don't care," she argued. "I am beyond hurt that he would do this to me and he's not the man I thought he was!" Her eyes flashed golden fire at him. "And you're more than happy to carry out his sentence aren't you?" she asked accusingly. "I don't know why you bothered to make that deal with me in the first place, unless you were enjoying the cat and mouse game?" Her tone became bitter. "You were just waiting for me to fail so you could drop the hammer."

"It's not like that, Sydney," he said heatedly running his hands through his hair, resisting the urge to kiss her senseless until she stopped talking this way.

Sydney stood up, feeling at a distinct disadvantage with him towering so far above her. "Just how is it then, Ryan?" She tossed in a snide comment. "Couldn't resist slumming for awhile, is that it?"

"Damn it," he snarled grabbing her arm and taking the chair she had just vacated. That taunt was so far from the truth he was instantly angry. "Why are you so hardheaded and stubborn?" He yanked her across his lap and raised his arm.

Sydney gave a furious twist and rolled off his lap, even as his left hand grabbed at her hip to keep her on his knees. When he reached for her, she crabbed backwards a few feet and held her hand up to ward him off. "Don't!" she said between clenched teeth. "If you touch me, I swear I will NEVER speak to you again!"

Ryan realized he was furious and he shouldn't have attempted to spank her like that so he backed down, her gray gaze raking across her deadly earnest face.

Sydney continued. "Just leave, Ryan, go away. I'm going to sell Camaroo to Evan, so that should make everyone happy."

His heart sank at the resignation and disillusionment on her lovely face.

She went on bitterly, "you and my father win; I'll keep the house and take care of Cassie. I won't allow you to take her away from me. Just go back to the states and report to your father that your mission is successfully accomplished." Her eyes shone with unshed tears and she desperately wanted him to leave. She felt so brittle that if he touched her again, she was sure she would splinter into a thousand shards.

Ryan studied her for a moment, his heart filling with anguish. He so badly wanted to take her in his arms, but he knew she would only reject him.

He realized he shouldn't have tried to spank her, it had been the last straw and now she truly must hate him. How he wished he had torn up that stupid document while he had the chance! Now he had no way to prove he wouldn't have used it.

"I promised Cassie a birthday in Perth," he said quietly. "I always keep my promises, but after that, if you still want me to go, I'll leave." He stood up and walked to the door.

"For what it's worth, Sydney, I had already decided I could never use that document. Not after I fell in love with you." He closed the door behind him, leaving Sydney sitting on the floor, her arms around her knees. The silent tears slid down her face and she wished with all her heart she could believe him!

Sunday morning dawned and Sydney stood staring at the ocean, the wind gently lifting her auburn tresses, burnished by the rising morning sun. The smell of the salt air and the sound of the

surf lapping against the rocks made her feel more relaxed than she had since Friday night. She felt the sand running away from her bare toes in the surf and the gulls cried overhead, a hollow lonely sound on the wind.

She hadn't wanted to come to the beach with Ryan and Cassie, but there was no way she could spoil her sister's birthday, so she had ask Bess and Dan to come as well. She had put on a false front, pretending to enjoy everything, but inside, her heart was breaking.

Sydney felt a hand on her shoulder and she turned her head to see Bess.

"Good morning, Sydney," said Bess softly. "This is beautiful, so peaceful and calming. Thank you for inviting Dan and I."

Sydney hugged her arms around her waist, the sea air a bit nippy. "You're welcome, Bess, and yes...it is beautiful."

After a brief pause, Bess said, "would you like to talk about it?"

Sydney glanced sideways at her, hesitating. "What makes you think anything is wrong?"

"Well, the fact that you and Ryan have hardly spoken two words between you is a good indicator."

Sydney's first instinct was to say no, but then realized she really would like to talk to someone. With a deep sigh, she haltingly began. When she finished, she turned to Bess, the tears shimmering in her eyes. "How can I ever trust him, Bess? He says he loves me, but how can I forget his betrayal?"

"Are you so sure he would have taken Cassie?" Bess asked softly.

"What else could he do?" asked Sydney bitterly. "His father sent him here to fulfill Dad's last wishes. Boy was I a fool, thinking Dad really wanted me to clear his name and put Camaroo back on its feet. I feel used twice over!"

"You are not a fool, Sydney," remonstrated Bess. "But I do think that perhaps you are being

too hard on yourself...and on Ryan, because you are afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?" Sydney looked perplexed.

"Afraid of yourself," she replied, smoothing Sydney's hair back behind her small ear. "You are in love with Ryan and you are afraid to give yourself over to him, afraid of the future...afraid of him spanking you...afraid of a lot of things that perhaps you just aren't ready for yet."

Sydney was silent as she pondered Bess's words.

"You know Sydney, you can leave Cassie with Dan and me for her last year of high school. She has never been to public school, she might enjoy it and it would help prepare her for college.

Why don't you get started on your music career, go on the road with Gordon. You know you want to and have been putting it off for Cassie's sake."

Bess went on. "If fact, if you really think about it, Cassie might even have enjoyed spending a year in the states while you pursue your career. Did you think of asking her?" Bess smiled at the alarm in Sydney's eyes.

"I don't want Cassie to be separated from me, we are family!"

"But. Sydney, children grow up and leave home...family is still family. Cassie will be seventeen on Tuesday; she is not a child anymore. Perhaps you should ask her what she wants to do. Maybe you will find out its not quite the traumatic situation you are envisioning."

Sydney faced the sea again, her thoughts in turmoil. Was she afraid of Ryan? She knew she didn't like being spanked but she hadn't really considered herself afraid of him. Was she being too hard on him? She really felt like he had betrayed her! And she wasn't so sure he WAS in love with her, in spite of what he said. She was just a nuisance to him, an obligation, a duty to be performed!



Sydney knew SHE was in love with Ryan, but between his and her father's betrayal, she felt used and cast aside. As if all she had tried to do for her father and Cassie was never appreciated; the sacrifices she had made, the hard work she had done. It was all for naught. In the end, her father had just wanted to control her, not trusting her to take care of Cassie or reclaim his reputation. These feelings cut deeply into her heart and made her unsure if she could trust Ryan in the future. And if she couldn't trust him, what future did they have together?

Her heart felt heavy as she turned to face Bess. "I'll think about it," she said with a sad smile.

Bess hugged her then, wishing she could take away her pain, but knowing Sydney would have to work it out for herself. She was a very obstinate headstrong girl, but she had a good heart and would come to the realizations herself eventually. She just hoped they didn't come too late for her and Ryan.

Cassie was spreading some Vegemite on her toast when a knock sounded at the kitchen door. Taking a bite, she peeked through the curtain and a handsome cheerful face smiled at her and then waved, motioning for her to open the door.

Hastily she dropped the curtain and set the toast on the counter, and then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Running her hands down the sides of her denim cutoffs, she opened the door.

"Hi! I'm Duncan," rumbled the deep tones of the brown-eyed boy standing in front of her. "Aunt Frannie sent me to make sure you had everything you needed." He eagerly drank in the sight of her slender figure with two inches of brown tummy showing and returned to her pretty face. "You must be Cassie! Aunt Frannie told me about you, but she never told me how gorgeous you were."

Cassie blushed and flipped her dark hair behind her shoulder. "Well, thank you, Duncan. Yes, I'm Cassie and it's nice to meet you." She smiled and

extended her hand, which he took gallantly and leaned over it in a kiss.

"The pleasure is all mine fair Cassie," he imitated in Shakespearean style. "Your smile is like the sun, your eyes like deep pools of azure, your hair..."

"Oh good grief," giggled Cassie. "You must be angling for some toast, right? You better come on in Romeo."

"Why thank you fair Juliet. Yes, I am perishing for want of sustenance." His brown eyes twinkled as he walked in the door. "So, do you like Shakespeare?" he asked curiously as she dropped two more slices of toast in the toaster. His rangy frame lounged comfortably against the counter, watching her.

"I've read Romeo and Juliet if that's what you mean, not sure how much I liked it. I thought Juliet was kind of dippy to kill herself over a guy, you know?" She found herself immediately comfortable with Frannie's nephew and it felt good to laugh again. She giggled at his affronted expression.

"I'm a drama major myself, a sophomore at the Uni, so of course I love Shakespeare!" he said. "How about you?"

"I'm home schooled and will be a senior this year," she replied. "Next year I'll be ready for Uni though and I want to be a teacher." The two young people smiled at each other, hitting it off instantly.

"How long are you staying here for?" he asked, taking a bite of the toast she had prepared.

"I'll be here until Wednesday. Tuesday is my birthday and I'll be seventeen."

"Seventeen huh? That means 18 birthday spanks. Can I come to the party?" he teased.

"How do you get eighteen spanks out of seventeen?" protested Cassie, laughing again at his good-natured grin.

"Seventeen for each year and one extra hard one to grow on of course. Didn't you ever get a birthday spanking?" He looked curiously at her.

"No, my parents never did that."

"Well, its time you learned all about it!" He gave her a wolfish leer. "Wanna practice?"

"Practice what?" asked a deep voice.

Two heads swiveled around to see Ryan coming into the kitchen. His eyes narrowed as he inspected Duncan from head to foot.

Duncan took the inspection good-naturedly and grinned at Ryan. "G'day mate, I'm Duncan Standish. Frannie is my Aunt and she sent me around to make sure you folks had everything you needed. I was just explaining to Cassie here about birthday spankings. Looks like she's never had one."

Cassie grinned dryly at Ryan. "And I'm not in any hurry to embrace the experience either," she said, thinking of the hard swats Ryan had landed on her tender bottom.

"Well, you have to have a birthday spanking Cassie, its tradition," said Ryan, pouring himself a cup of coffee and nodding to Duncan. "But it doesn't hurt...much," he added, grinning wickedly at her.

Duncan looked at his watch. "Oh hey, I have to go, but would you like to go swimming this afternoon, Cassie?" He looked hopefully at her then glanced at Ryan. "That is, if it's okay with you?"

"I'm sure we'll all be going swimming this afternoon Duncan and you are welcome to join us as long as Cassie wishes it," Ryan responded before Cassie could answer.

"Uh...yeah...that would be great, Duncan," she replied, rolling her eyes where Ryan couldn't see her.

"Okay," he grinned cheerfully. "I'll see you around 1:00pm then!" He turned and left and Cassie faced Ryan.

"I really don't need your permission to date, Ryan," she said to him, her expression serious.

Ryan considered her for a moment, and then answered. "No, I don't suppose you do. It's just a

habit of mine from years of looking out for my younger sisters." He walked over to her and tipped her small chin up with his lean fingers. "You feeling better?"

Cassie hesitated, and then replied, "Yeah...I am. It was such a shock at first...to find out Marty was capable of that kind of criminal activity. I thought I knew him so well..." she trailed off. She gulped hard and took a deep quavering breath. "It's okay, I'll get over it."

Ryan hugged her close, knowing that she would get over it...eventually. Being young and her first crush, it would probably be easier than she thought. Finding her laughing and joking with another young man had been a good thing as far as he was concerned. It meant she wasn't hurting too badly.

Sydney on the other hand, hadn't given him the time of day since Friday morning. He missed her desperately and wished he could do something to bring back the warmth behind her brittle smile. But as long as she refused to forgive him or trust him, there wasn't much he could do.

He thought about his promise to leave after Cassie's birthday trip. It looked like she would be holding him to that; she didn't show any signs of relenting so far. He had explained himself, told her that he loved her and that he would never have taken Cassie from her. If she couldn't bring herself to believe in him then...well...he wondered how long it take for him to "get over it".

"I'm going to go for a walk," he told Cassie, releasing her. "The beach is just a few blocks from here, so I think I'll head that way, you want to come?"

"Not just yet," yawned Cassie. "I'm still a bit tired and I want to unpack. Then I want to go shopping before lunch. But I will be ready for swimming this afternoon."

"I bet you will, brat," laughed Ryan. "A good looking date is something to look forward to isn't it?"

"Well sure," responded Cassie, her eyes twinkling. "Just wait until YOU see Sydney in a bikini," she teased. "Your tongue will be dragging on the sand and it will be my turn to laugh then."

"Is that right?" Ryan turned away then and headed for the kitchen door. "I'll certainly look forward to that." He sent her a quick smile as he closed the door behind him, but not before Cassie saw the hurt that flashed across his face.

She pondered that for a moment and wondered what was going on. Come to think of it, Ryan and Sydney had barely spoken to one another since Friday night. She had been so wrapped up in her own misery; she hadn't paid much attention to anyone else. Was something wrong between Ryan and her sister? She remembered that Sydney had not left a note for Ryan that day...and then wouldn't talk about it. Poor Sydney, her own sister had overlooked her troubles!

Cassie cleaned up after herself and rinsed Ryan's coffee cup out in the sink and stuck it in the dishwasher. She looked up when she heard the kitchen door open again. It was Bess.

"Good morning, Cassie," smiled Bess. "It was a truly gorgeous sunrise on the beach this morning. You missed it by sleeping in."

"That's okay, I'm not much of a morning person," said Cassie. She hesitated. "Bess? What's wrong between Sydney and Ryan?"

"I think you better ask Sydney that," replied Bess gently. "She's not too far behind me, she was watching the sunrise too."

"I was going to go unpack, but maybe I'll just wait and go find her," she said worriedly gnawing her lip. "I'll see you later." Cassie heard Dan's deep tones greeting Bess as she slipped out the kitchen door.

Frannie's house was located a few blocks from the beach on the outskirts of town and Cassie enjoyed the walk. She paused at the sand's edge, looking for her sister. She didn't see her, although there

were a few other people walking around and near the edge of the surf.

Some people were already setting up umbrellas and hauling coolers out of the back of trucks, getting ready for a sun filled day on Perth's legendary beaches.

Disappointed, she turned to go back to Frannie's home. She would just have to talk to Sydney later, but she would talk to her! She was just rounding the corner of the first block when she saw Sydney standing just inside an open shop door.

"Sydney!" she yelled and waved as Sydney walked out of the shop and turned down the street.

Sydney paused as she heard her name being called and turned around to see Cassie headed towards her looking grim and determined. What's up now, she wondered.

As Cassie jogged up to her sister, she blurted out, "Tell me what's wrong between you and Ryan...please?"

## Chapter Seventeen

It was almost a year later and Paul Roglund was in Ryan's home rifling through his son's CD storage when he came upon Sydney's CD. He rubbed his chin. It just confirmed to him that his son was still carrying a candle for young Sydney.

He sighed and shook his head. Maybe he should try to talk to him again...but Ryan was very stubborn. After a brief explanation to his father when he returned, he had closed the door on Australia and didn't want to talk about it. But he had never dated another woman more than a few times that Paul knew of.

He walked into the kitchen to fix himself a cup of coffee while he waited for Ryan to get out of the shower. They were going to pick up his mother and his sister and go to dinner.

The afternoon mail was lying on the cabinet and Paul noticed an envelope with a return address from Australia. Were they communicating now?

Curiously he picked it up and beneath it was a graduation invitation. Flipping it open, he realized it was an announcement of Cassie's high school graduation.

"Snooping, Dad?" grinned Ryan coming in buckling his belt.

"You going to go to Cassie's graduation?" he countered curiously.

"I'm thinking about it, but I'm not sure if I will. I hate to miss it...Cassie's a good kid."

His face took on that same closed look Paul had become familiar with every time anything to do with Sydney was mentioned.

"How much longer are you going to let her pout?"

"I don't follow you." Ryan looked at his father with a question in his eyes.

Paul studied his son, mentally calculating the words that would put a fire under him. "Just what I

said, how much longer are you going to let Sydney pout? Because that's all she's doing you know."

"I think it goes a little deeper than that, Dad," answered Ryan sardonically.

"Nonsense," huffed Paul. "Unless there is something you're not telling me, it seems to me she is playing the drama queen pretty heavily. So she had to face the fact that her father really did not want her to restore the business, so what? And she had to face the fact that her father was prepared to make sure she did what he said...probably for the first time in her life!"

He looked hard at his son with the same steel gray eyes that were staring at him. "You just got caught in the middle and she's taking it out on you...and you are letting her! I'm surprised there's not a ring in your nose!"

Ryan's dark brows drew together in a frown. "That's enough, Dad!"

"No, its not enough," his father went on. "You are in love with this girl and you said you thought she was in love with you, yet you walk away from her. What you should be doing is talking it out and then putting her over your knee for a long hard spanking for being such a prima donna!"

For a moment, Ryan was nonplussed. He stared at his parent, mulling over what he had just said.

"You've given her enough space to get her career going. She is doing well with it...her sister is graduating from high school and it's been almost a year since you gave her freedom to decide what she wanted. Now go get her!"

Ryan laughed incredulously. "Just like that, huh? Just go over there, turn her over my knee and tell her how its going to be from now on, is that right? Or am I misunderstanding something here?"

Paul walked over and put his hand on his son's shoulder and looked him seriously in the face. "Your mother led me on a merry chase, much like this one that Sydney is leading you on. But in the end, I went to her and told her I was tired of this



dithering...that I loved her and we were going to get married, come hell or high water because I knew she loved me too!"

"And what did she say?"

"Hell son, what do you think she said? We're married aren't we? Thirty two years this year!" His eyes twinkled knowingly.

"What was her problem?" asked Ryan curiously.

"She said she needed to "find herself", to figure out who she was and a bunch of other stuff, which I could respect to a certain point. But after that, she had to realize that my wife was a part of who she was supposed to be and I made that clear after waiting eight long lonely months!"

"Over your knee...."

"Exactly!" His father grinned. "Don't tell her I told you that...it would be embarrassing for her."

Ryan shook his head. "I don't know Dad, Sydney thinks I would have taken Cassie from her. How can I fight that? She doesn't trust me or believe in me."

"Rubbish!" His father's eyes spit sparks. "That's just an excuse! Sure, you would have done what you had to, whatever that might have been. But the girl was living in a fantasy world and reality came down hard, that's all. It wasn't your fault and if she's half the woman I think my son would fall in love with, she will have realized that by now but pride keeps her from contacting you."

"Huh!" grunted Ryan, not sure what to think of these revelations. Had he been too wimpy? Just gone away and given up under the brunt of Sydney's accusations? After all, it hadn't been him who had created the custody paper; he had just been chosen to execute it. If Sydney really loved him, why couldn't she believe in him? Why couldn't she have just taken his word that he wouldn't have done it? Why should he have to prove anything?

Paul was secretly congratulating himself. He could see the stubborn look he recognized coming

back to Ryan's face. Maybe a few home truths hadn't come amiss after all!

The more Ryan thought about it, the more he came to believe his father was right! Or if not right, than close enough to it warrant a trip to Australia! He'd just go to Cassie's graduation and demand an explanation from Sydney on why she couldn't trust him! She owed him that...didn't she?

Besides, he did still owe her a spanking for trying to kick him off that ladder and he always kept his promises, however late they might be in getting carried out!

Ryan suddenly felt lighter than he had in months and he put his shoulders back, the gleam of battle shining in his eyes.

"I believe I will go that that graduation, Dad. Maybe it is time Sydney and I had a discussion about this."

Paul clapped Ryan heartily on the shoulder. "That's my boy! I knew you had it in you! Good luck, son!"

He neglected to tell his son that his mother had punched him in the jaw when he let her up all those years ago! Let him work out things with his own spitfire! He grinned to himself at the memory from those long ago years. Yes, Ryan's mother had been quite the handful...and he had loved every minute of it!

Sydney stared morosely at the television screen in front her. She didn't even know what was on; it was just there. Gawd...she was tired of hotel rooms! It would be so good to go home for a while and see Cassie again.

She wondered for the millionth time what Ryan was doing. Her thoughts were never far from him. Sydney's gaze strayed to the phone on the desk and she thought for the millionth time she would like to call him, but she knew she wouldn't.

She had memorized his phone number in the states but she had never gotten the nerve to use it. She knew that Cassie had a few times and she

listened with feigned lack of interest when her sister mentioned him, but she had hung on every word.

After having time to work things out in her mind, Sydney had realized that perhaps Bess had been right and she had been too hard on Ryan...and on herself. There were other ways things could have been worked out without his taking Cassie from her and she finally admitted to herself that he probably wouldn't have done it.

But darn it, why hadn't he stayed? This question had eaten at her for the last year and the only conclusion she had come to was that he just didn't love her after all, in spite of his avowal to the contrary. If fact, he had probably been glad to leave; he had certainly put up no protest at all!

He hadn't even spanked her, she thought contrarily. Not that she had wanted him to, but he seemed to pride himself on keeping his promises. Her bottom lip dropped into a pout...again. He hadn't kept his promise to HER!

Gordon watched the play of emotions across Sydney's expressive face and knew she was thinking of Ryan Roglund again. She had never confided in him what had happened and Gordon had been happy enough to let sleeping dogs lie once he had Sydney on the road.

Lately though, Sydney had seemed more unsettled than usual...more pensive, distracted. It was obvious to him that she was in love with the man, but she always avoided the subject.

It came out in her songs though...that secret woman yearning for her man emotion that made songs great. It made her performances outstanding!

*Demons in The Dark* and *First Love* had been almost instant hits and they had worked hard this last year, promoting those and other songs he and Sydney had put together in an album, which had launched a month ago. The sales were pouring in and forty five year old Gordon was a happy man. But his prize star was not.

"What's the matter, little love?" His amazing light blue eyes studied her as she sat in the chair, her long legs tucked up under her.

"Oh...nothing, Gordon," she replied unhappily, heaving a deep sigh. It was her usual pat answer.

But this time Gordon persisted. "Still carrying a candle for Roglund?"

Sydney flushed at his words. Was she so transparent then? "I'm fine Gordon...really."

Gordon was unconvinced. He got up and walked over to sit in the chair in front her and look her in the face. "No...you aren't. You have been unhappy ever since he left Australia and although you have worked damn hard, it still shows, honey."

He reached out and ran a finger down her smooth cheek and tipped her chin up to look at him. "Have you tried talking to him?"

Unshed tears shimmered in the golden depths as Sydney responded to his concern. "I can't, Gordon," she whispered. "It's my fault he left and he didn't love me enough to stay anyway...so there's nothing to talk about."

"Well, tomorrow we'll be in Kalgoorlie and you are taking some time off after Cassie's graduation," he ordered. You need a break."

"We'll see."

"No we'll see to it," growled Gordon. "You are getting a bit brittle and losing some of your enthusiasm. I think you should call Roglund and have it out with him."

Sydney's eyes hardened and her chin jutted defiantly. "No, Gordon...I will NOT call the man!"

"Then at least tell me what happened...get it off your chest." He smiled encouragingly at her when she hesitated.

"You really want to know?"

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't," he returned evenly. "Now talk!"

Sydney began to tell Gordon all that had happened. They talked long into the night and when she was finished, Gordon knew more than

ever that she needed to talk to Ryan. But if she did, and they got back together...things would certainly change a lot! She might not even need him as an agent anymore; Roglund might take over the job himself!

He stood up and pulled Sydney up. "Good night, love." He planted a gentle kiss on her forehead and turned to go. "Get some sleep," he slung over his shoulder.

"Good night, Gordon...and thanks." She smiled as he turned at the door.

"You're welcome."

Back in his own room, Gordon made a note of the time changes and made some phone calls. Soon the phone was ringing in Ryan's California home. When it went to the answering machine he swore in frustration. Well, he wouldn't leave a message, but he would keep trying. Those two had to get together for Sydney's sake and at least talk. It was painfully obvious to him that a certain stubborn little Sheila would never take the first step! What she needed was taken over a knee! Little did he know, that was one of the things Sydney was afraid of! And little did he know also, that Ryan was already landing on Australian soil.

"Guess what, Sydney?" chattered Cassie to her older sister as they climbed into Bess's car.

Bess and Cassie had come to the airport to pick up Sydney and Cassie had talked her ear off ever since she got off the plane. She had been delighted to see her sister however and listened happily.

"What, Cassie?"

"Ryan is coming to my graduation, isn't that great?" Her eyes were shining with excitement as she dropped the bombshell. Although Sydney had never really explained what had happened between her and Ryan, Cassie had never given up hope that they might get back together some day. Her sister had just said that they didn't quite hit it off after all and neither one of them would say more than that.

Cassie had been very disappointed when Ryan left Australia, but she had also been very excited at the new changes in her life and so had not pursued the subject. She waited eagerly for Sydney's response.

"Ryan is coming here?" squeaked Sydney. Her heart began a rapid tattoo and she glanced sideways at Bess who was driving.

"Yes he is," rattled Cassie from the back seat. "And I can't wait! Can you?"

Sydney murmured something unintelligible, trying to absorb the news. She was reeling with shock at the idea of seeing Ryan once again.

"And guess what else?" Cassie was bursting with excitement now.

"What?" croaked Sydney.

"Duncan has asked me to marry him! Isn't that the most wonderful thing you ever heard?"

"M...marry?" Sydney stared at Cassie, then stared at Bess's acknowledging grin.

"It just happened last night! I'm sooo excited! Of course we won't get married right away, but we are going to be engaged. I want to go to school too and we'll be married students maybe...in a few years," crowed Cassie. "We are going to pick out an engagement ring for my birthday tomorrow."

Sydney could barely take in all this news at once. She knew Duncan had transferred up to the University in Kalgoorlie from Perth so he could be near Cassie, but she hadn't quite expected this so soon!

"I...I don't know what to say, Cassie," laughed Sydney weakly. "This is all such a surprise."

"Aren't you happy for me?" asked Cassie doubtfully.

"Well of course I'm happy for you...its just that...well.... you two are so young!"

"I'll be eighteen tomorrow, remember? We are having a party for graduation and my birthday? Hellooooo!" Cassie giggled at Sydney's thunderstruck expression. "I guess it is a bit much

all at once, but I just had to tell you right away! Besides, Duncan is twenty-one, that's not too young. Lots of people get married at our ages."

"I guess maybe they do," agreed Sydney numbly. She licked her lips and thought about the other bombshell Cassie had dropped.

"So when is Ryan coming in?" she asked nonchalantly.

"Oh he'll be here sometime in the next few days. He was stopping in Perth and he is going to stay at The Frontiersman while he is here this time." Cassie waved offhandedly. "He should be here for graduation tomorrow, but I'm not sure when he will get in."

"Welcome home, Sydney," laughed Bess. "You look slightly shell shocked, but we're glad to have you here." She smiled warmly at Sydney. "Want to stop at the club for a drink and say hello to Dan?"

"Sure, I'd love to," agreed Sydney. She could use a drink about now, even if she wasn't a drinker!

"Sydney!" greeted Dan enthusiastically, enveloping her in a huge bear hug. He slid into the booth beside Bess and ordered drinks all around except for Cassie.

"Oh come on, Dan," wheedled Cassie, "I'll be eighteen tomorrow, can't I have a drink to celebrate my graduation?"

Dan's bushy brows drew together in a frown. "Certainly not, young lady! Not at the club anyway. Maybe a glass of Champaign after your graduation might be in order, but only at home under our supervision."

Cassie pouted at Dan's directive and he frowned at her. "One of these days, Duncan is going to cure you of that pouting, little miss!"

"Duncan? Don't make me laugh," chuckled Cassie. "He is way too sweet to be mean. He is the best," she said with a satisfied smile.

"Just the same, even the "best" can lose their patience when a young lady gets too bratty," warned Dan.

"Not Duncan," replied Cassie confidently. "I've even tested him, he is always patient and sweet." She remembered Ryan's hard hand and wanted to make sure Duncan hadn't shown any such tendencies!

Duncan overheard Cassie's remarks as he was coming up to the booth and didn't like it...not one little bit! "You've been testing me?" he asked smoothly as he slid into the booth beside her and Sydney. "That's not a very nice thing to do, Cassie." His normally cheerful face looked somber suddenly, the good humor missing in his eyes.

"Oh hi, darling," crowed Cassie, not the slightest bit worried about his attitude. "I was just telling them how wonderfully sweet and understanding you are." She batted her eyelashes at him and he grinned ruefully when she reached up and kissed his chin.

The blue-eyed, alluring Cassie had captivated Duncan and he had fallen almost instantly in love with her. He knew he could forgive her anything, but lately, she had seemed to be awfully bratty and impetuous. She had gotten a speeding ticket and been ticketed for not wearing her seatbelt. She was late quite often, leaving him cooling his heels in Dan and Bess's living room for thirty minutes sometimes.

Occasionally she would blow off their prearranged date to go to the mall at the last minute with a girlfriend or other such shenanigans, and it was starting to bother him. He had wondered if she was getting bored with casual dating and so had asked her to marry him a little sooner than he had really planned. He didn't want her coming to Uni and taking up with someone else; he wanted HIS ring on her finger!

To find out she had been testing him made him feel a bit nonplussed. Just what was she testing him for? The limit to his patience? If so, she was rapidly approaching it!



"What are you testing me for?" grumbled Duncan good-naturedly. His casual manner belied his keen interest to hear the answer to this question.

Dan chuckled. "I think what she is wondering, Duncan, is if you will ever get irked enough with her to put her over your knee and paddle her bottom."

"Oh he would never do that," rushed in Cassie, blushing fiercely. She turned to look him in the eye. "Would you, darling?"

So that's what this was about! Duncan eyed her speculatively. He wondered what she would think if he said he had thought about it several times in past few months! He had never actually spanked a girl, but he had been sorely tempted in Cassie's case!

"I might...if I thought you deserved it," he answered cautiously. He waited for her reaction.

Cassie stared at him...speechless.

"For once, she has nothing to say," joked Dan.

"You...you..." spluttered Cassie indignantly. "You better not!"

"This is a discussion best left to another setting," murmured Duncan, his brown eyes snapping at her heated order. He looked across at Sydney and smiled his good-natured welcoming smile. "Welcome home, Sydney."

Ryan was frustrated. Repeated delays were cutting into his time schedule and he was arriving in Kalgoorlie with barely enough time to check into the hotel and get to Cassie's graduation.

He walked up to the desk, smiling at Martha.

"Well, well, look who's back!" exclaimed Martha, her eyes twinkling. "You here for Cassie's graduation?"

"Hi, Martha," replied Ryan, grinning widely, "its good to see you again. Yes, I am here for her graduation, but I'm running late because of unexpected delays. Is my room ready?" He took out his credit card and handed it to her.

"Of course its ready," replied Martha, handing him a key. "You go on and get ready and we can handle the billing arrangements later. She waved him on and he nodded gratefully to her as he hurried upstairs.

A short while later, he was standing at the doorway to the gymnasium, looking for Sydney he knew, when he spied her with Bess and Dan. As if magnetized, Sydney's eyes flew to his and he headed towards her.

Sydney saw Ryan as soon as he appeared in the doorway. She had been watching for him, although she would never have admitted it to anyone. Her heart leapt when his dark head showed up above most of the crowd and it was suddenly difficult to breath normally.

As he neared them, her tummy melted inside and her recalcitrant breasts once again stood at attention as if signaling her that HE was here. Time to sit up and take notice! He was devastating in the light gray jacket and pants with a maroon shirt and matching tie. The lights glinted off his raven head and his dark gray eyes held her gaze like a deer caught in the headlights. She couldn't look away.

Ryan devoured Sydney's slender figure hungrily, taking in the sleeveless white dress that was form fitted to the waist and then fell in soft swirls to just above her knees, her shapely calves leading on down to slim feet in matching sandals. She was fresh and lovely and he mentally groaned at the effect she had on him, glad he had worn a jacket that could be buttoned if need be to hide certain areas of his anatomy that always seemed to be effected by her nearness.

He wasn't sure of his reception from her however, so he approached with caution. Looking down at her he murmured, "Hello, Sydney." He drank in her lovely expressive face and golden eyes. Those eyes haunted him sometimes at night, the tears that were there when he had spanked her, the love he had seen shining in them, and then the

aloofness he had seen after she had discovered the custody papers. Now they were wary and guarded, giving nothing away as to her true state of mind.

"Hello, Ryan," she replied huskily. "Thank you for coming to Cassie's graduation, it was important to her."

"I wouldn't miss it," he returned, wondering if it was important to her! He turned to acknowledge Bess and Dan's hearty greetings and the music began to herald the graduation commencement. They sat down and Ryan slid an arm behind Sydney to rest on her chair. Well, at least she didn't shrink away! He set his mind to the graduation exercises then, watching for Cassie while Sydney took out her digital camera to begin taping.

At one point in time, Sydney stood up to get a better view and Ryan's eyes slid to the lovely curves of her bottom beneath the white dress. His pants began to get slightly uncomfortable as a picture of those same firm globes outlined in the light blue of her bikini bottom popped into his mind.

He mentally perused the picture he carried in his wallet of her on the beach that day in Perth, dressed in a light blue bikini, her luscious tanned curves exciting to his senses.

Cassie had been right then, he reflected. His tongue had been proverbially dragging on the sand as she had predicted. He had casually snapped the picture, knowing she was unaware of it, but wanting a memory of her to take with him. In fact, he had snapped more than one with his digital. He had a whole collage of pictures in his desk drawer of her from those few days in Perth!

Dragging his thoughts away, he tried to concentrate on the graduation exercises. Soon it was over and Cassie was rushing up to them, Duncan in tow.

"Ryan!" she squealed excitedly, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him.

"Hello, brat," Ryan teased, drawing her in close in an affectionate hug. "Congratulations and happy birthday!"

Cassie's blue eyes sparkled up at him. "You have something else to congratulate me for now," she said mischievously. She held her hand up for him to see the engagement ring she and Duncan had spent the morning shopping for. "Duncan and I are engaged!"

## Chapter Eighteen

Ryan, Evan and Dan were sitting on the back deck of Dan's Kalgoorlie home in the twilight, watching with amusement as Duncan tried to give Cassie a birthday spanking.

Ryan had been floored when Cassie had baldly announced her engagement at the graduation, but he liked Duncan and knew they had been dating for a while.

After spending some time with him earlier, he understood Duncan's feelings in wanting to keep Cassie to himself, but he wasn't quite sure it was the right thing to do. Cassie was young and hadn't had much experience with real life yet and he hoped the young couple wasn't rushing into anything they would regret later. His mind flashed a mental reminder of the conversation they had had together.

"I know, Ryan," Duncan argued. "I suppose I should be unselfish and let her date other guys, but I fell in love that little brat almost right away and I'm sure she is love with me too. What more do we need than that?"

What indeed, Ryan wondered? Was it really that simple?

"Well, I feel kind of responsible for her and Sydney," Ryan went on, "and Cassie is pretty young. But she certainly seems positive that this is what she wants, so I wish you both the best."

"Uhh...Ryan," Duncan stammered, and then flushed. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

Curious, Ryan nodded his assent.

"Have you ever spanked a girl...I mean for real...like you know...for being a brat...or something..." his voice had trailed off and he looked embarrassed.

Ryan was flattered that Duncan had elected him to ask such a serious question, and he hesitated a moment before he had answered.

At his hesitation, Duncan's words tumbled out, "I guess its wrong huh? I'm sorry I ask, don't worry about it."

"No, no Duncan. It's not wrong. At least I don't believe it's wrong. But it's between you and Cassie as to how you will handle that; whether or not it will be a part of your lives.

For me, it's an important part of the relationship with the woman I plan to marry and she will have to accept that. I do believe in putting someone I care about over my knee if I think she deserves it, but that's just me. It may not be for everyone. That's a decision you will have to make."

He studied Duncan, and then added. "It IS a very important decision, Duncan, you both have to be on the same page. If it's vital to you in your life, then you need to think seriously before you marry someone who won't accept it. It's best to find out before you get married. You and Cassie have time ahead of you to continue to date and explore each other, now is the time to find out these things."

Duncan flushed again. "I already know Cassie needs it, but I also know she doesn't want it!"

Ryan laughed. "Well, they never want it, but some recognize that they need it and will accept it.... then again, some won't. Cassie has never had a serious spanking in her life, as I'm sure you know already. I paddled her little butt once for an object lesson, but it was only a few swats."

"You did?" replied Duncan, amazed. Cassie had never told him that!

"Yes," nodded Ryan. "Landed a swipe across her bum with a switch once for throwing a glass at me too," he added, "and she didn't like it, but she did respect me after that. I've never had anymore trouble with her disobeying me or losing her temper."

Duncan gaped at Ryan, at a loss for words. Finally he spoke. "Well, well...she certainly never said anything about any of this."

"Well, she probably won't," replied Ryan amusedly. "She would be too afraid you might follow suit."

Duncan nodded then, as if something had occurred to him and he smiled a wolfish smile. "Thanks for the talk, I appreciate it."

"Anytime."

Ryan flashed back to the present as Dan clapped him on the shoulder. "Looks like he might succeed in this birthday spanking after all," he chortled, pointing to Cassie and Duncan.

Duncan's face was fiercely triumphant. He finally had the laughing, protesting Cassie across his left knee and her legs pinned with his right leg. Instinct had led him to this decision when Cassie had refused to go quietly to her fate.

Last year at Cassie's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday party in Perth, Ryan had spanked her. Cassie had allowed him to draw her across his lap, giggling and protesting lightly, but she had accepted the 18 birthday swats Ryan had delivered without fighting him.

This was a different story! He didn't quite engender the same respect she had accorded Ryan! "Hold still!" he growled at her, landing the first swat on her squirming buttocks.

"Why should I?" giggled Cassie, trying to put her hands back.

"Because I said so!" replied Duncan landing another swat on the other cheek. It wasn't a hard swat but he grinned when she yelped.

"Ouch! Not so hard!"

"That's not hard," scoffed Duncan swatting her a couple of more times. "One of these days, I'll show you hard!" He swatted her twice more. He was up to six now and thoroughly enjoying himself.

"You better not!" protested Cassie, not sure whether to believe him or not. She succeeded in getting her hands in the way and she stared back at him, as if daring him to do something about it.

"Need some help there, Duncan," laughed Dan, seeing his predicament.

"You want me and Evan to hold her down?" chuckled Ryan.

"I can handle it," replied Duncan taking her wrists in one hand and pinning them to the small of her back. Then he began in earnest.

Swat! Swat! Swat! Swat! "Seven, eight, nine, ten," he announced triumphantly.

"Ohhh," squealed Cassie. She tried to kick her legs, but he had her secure. She laughed and threatened him. "I am sooo going to get you, Duncan Standish!"

"Don't threaten me, little girl," laughed Duncan. He continued to spank.

Swat! Swat! Swat! Swat! Swat! Swat! Three on each side made sixteen.

"Ouch! Ow! Ohhh...you beast!" Cassie looked back at Duncan's broad grin. "You are enjoying this aren't you?" Her laughing eyes said she was too and Duncan was glad to see that. He was feeling somewhat excited by this and he could feel the tightness between his legs. He wished he could take her skirt up and her panties down and see if her pale buttocks were turning pink. That thought excited him even more. It occurred to him that they might need to get married sooner than he had planned!

"Of course, you're right where you belong," he said, the words coming out impromptu. But as soon as he said it, it felt right.

Spank! "Seventeen!" *Spank!* "Eighteen! Anndddddd..." he drew out the last one, his arm high in the air.

"Ohh," Cassie squealed again and looked back...this was the hard one! She scrunched up her bottom, waiting for the last spank to fall.

**SPANKKKK!!** "Nineteen!" Announced Duncan with relish, landing the last spank with a sharp swat to her rounded bottom. He wanted to make sure she felt that one beneath the dress and panties.



"Yeowch!" squeaked Cassie. "Oh, Duncan, you are mean!" She pouted as he pulled her upright and sat her on his knee.

He laughed and hugged her in close, then tipped her head back to kiss the pouting lips. "I love you," he whispered against her mouth.

She melted then, even though that last spank burned through her dress and kissed him back. "I love you too."

Sydney watched from the kitchen window where she was helping Bess with more finger food, envying her sister's easy camaraderie with Ryan and Duncan. The party had been a great success and Cassie's friends were starting to drift off now, leaving mostly family.

Ryan had been very polite and solicitous around her so far, but had showed no signs of pining away with love for her. She felt disconsolate and figured she had been right, he really hadn't loved her after all. If she had needed anymore proof, his aloofness was more than enough. She had thanked him again for coming and he had just smiled and said he wouldn't have missed it...platitudes, repeated twice over now.

She desperately felt the need to get up into the sky. It had been so long now since she had had the opportunity to go flying and she missed it terribly. It always soothed her soul and made her feel better.

When Cassie came in the kitchen door, she turned to her with a pensive smile. "Well, little sis, I'm going to head out to Camaroo now. It's getting late and I'm really tired."

Cassie's face fell. "Aren't you going to stay around and play games with us?"

"Not tonight, hon, I have plenty of time to do that later. Gordon insisted I take a couple of weeks off, so I'll be here." She hugged her sister.

Cassie saw the shadows under Sydney's eyes and didn't protest. "You could stay here," she added hopefully.

"I know," replied Sydney. "But I want to get out to Camaroo...I've missed it. And this way I can go to bed and sleep in as long as I want tomorrow. Beside, I've missed flying and Evan left the Ladybird for me to come home in. I really want to go home."

Cassie didn't miss the catch in Sydney's voice and she wondered if Ryan had anything to do with it. She didn't pry though. Sydney was very private and she would tell her when she was ready. They would have plenty of time for heart to hearts over the next few weeks.

She relented and smiled. "Okay, you go ahead. I love you, sis." She hugged Sydney again. "And I'm super proud of you in case you didn't know it."

"Thank you, honey, I'm super proud of you too!" Sydney smiled and slipped out the front door. Her suitcases were still in the rental car.

Forty-five minutes later, she was airborne and winging her way towards Camaroo.

"So what ever happened to Marty Leamer and Red Mason?" Ryan questioned Evan and Dan.

"It's still pending trial," grunted Evan, disgustedly. "You know how long this stuff takes."

"There are all kinds of accusations and such floating around, they are all blaming each other and no one has any real proof of anything, so who knows how it will all turn out." Dan leaned back in his deck chair. "Right now, it looks like they are blaming it all on Steve! He's dead, so that's convenient. And it looks like Red and Marty may come out clean, in spite of Della's testimony."

"Yeah, Leamer is denying Red had a scam at all now and said he just threw that out to catch Della, so who knows?" said Evan with a yawn. "The only good thing to come out of all of it is that Al's name is cleared and the recovery money for the diamonds has helped put Camaroo back on its feet."

Sydney refused to take any of the money for herself, but put it all back into Camaroo before she sold it to me." He shook his head. "Stubborn little girl that one. She practically gave it away, but I

couldn't change her mind. Its like she wanted nothing more to do with it."

Dan and Ryan glanced at each other. Ryan knew what motivated Sydney, and he assumed Dan probably knew too. Speaking of which, it was time to go find his recalcitrant ladylove. They had things to discuss and it was plain she wasn't going to come find him!

He stood up and grabbed Cassie's hand as she walked by. "Where's your sister?"

"Oh, Sydney left about thirty minutes ago. She was really tired and decided to fly on out to Camaroo and get in a nice long sleep." Cassie looked inquisitively at him. "Didn't she come and tell you?"

"No...she didn't," growled Ryan. Looked like Sydney was on the run...just like the first time he had come to Australia!

"Look, hon, I'm going to. It's been a long trip for me and I barely made it to the graduation on time." He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "Happy birthday and congratulations."

Cassie put her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Ryan, for coming and everything. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

After Ryan said his good nights to everyone, he headed for the heliports. Good thing he had called ahead and had a chopper waiting on him. He grinned to himself. Miss Sydney Renee Carstairs was NOT going to be sleeping just yet. They had a discussion scheduled, although she didn't know it, and Ryan intended to follow through with it!

A peaceful feeling stole over Sydney as the stars danced around her in the night sky and she began to sing, pouring her heart out. Silent tears slid down her cheeks as Demons in The Dark flowed from her lips and she thought of Ryan. It really was over.

She realized she had maintained a small spark of hope in her heart that he would come for her someday, but it hadn't happened. He had come for

Cassie, not for her. He had all but ignored her all evening. She didn't need any further proof that he hadn't loved her after all.

With acceptance came a sort of resignation, and the inevitable pain of heartbreak. But she would heal; it would just take time. She wondered how long it would take for her to fall in love with someone else. Right now, her heart told her it would never happen, but the sensible part of her told her maybe...some day...a long time from now.

She sighed as she stepped inside the door of Camaroo and switched on the lights. Bess had been out earlier in the week and aired the place out and stocked the fridge. She was so tired!

Normally Sydney was very fastidious, but tonight, she didn't care. She dropped her suitcases at the door and began to strip on her way to the bedroom, dropping things as she went. She was totally naked as she hit the bed; face down, not even bothering to turn down the covers. Exhaustion and mental anguish had finally taken its toll and she was out in 10 seconds, sound asleep...home.

Ryan knocked lightly on the door. The light was on in the living room but no sounds came from inside. He glanced at his watch...12: 30pm. He knocked again, but still no answer. Finally he tried the doorknob and it turned easily in his hand. She hadn't locked the door!

Growling to himself he walked inside, surprised at the trail of clothing he saw on the floor leading to Sydney's bedroom. He grinned when he saw the lacy scrap of white panties lying on the floor outside her door. Down to the last item she might have had on!

Cautiously, he knocked lightly. No answer. He knocked again, a little bit louder. Still no answer. Turning a doorknob again, he peeked inside.

His breath caught in his throat as he saw the golden body gleaming in the moonlight that was streaming in between the filmy curtains. She was

totally naked and her pert buttocks peeked up at him, inviting his caressing palm.

He walked on silent feet to stand beside the bed, gazing down at her. His heart swelled with love and he felt something else swelling too. He removed his jacket and laid it over the back of her rocking chair, then laid his palm on her warm bottom, gently rubbing.

"Sydney," he said throatily. "Wake up, Sydney."

Sydney was dreaming. She could hear Ryan calling to her but she couldn't get to him. Suddenly he was there, his hand sliding over her buttocks, which were somehow naked. She groaned and slid her arms up around his neck waiting breathlessly for his kiss.

He gazed down at her, his gray gaze brooding as he whispered her name. "Sydney, wake up Sydney."

Suddenly her eyes popped open and she was disoriented at first. She was lying face down and a window with filmy curtains blowing in the night breeze was in her line of vision. She felt a warm hand caressing her buttocks. Suddenly it clicked into place...she was at home...but who was touching her?

Gasping she rolled over and looked up into...Ryan's face!

"Wha..what are you doing here?" she said shakily, sitting up. She tried to cover her breasts with her arms as she spoke, her face flooding with embarrassment.

Ryan stared down at her flushed face, his gaze dark and enigmatic in the moonlight. "Running down my little sky singer again it would seem," he replied gravely.

"I..I'm not your anything," she said biting, but she couldn't keep the longing out of her voice. "Just go away, I don't want you here."

"You're lying, little love," said Ryan, grasping her hands and pulling her to her feet. "Don't cover

yourself, you are beautiful and I love you just the way you are."

"Leave me alone, Ryan," hissed Sydney. "Don't play games with me! I know you're not in love with me and never have been. I was just a toy to play with while you were here on a boring mission. Once the mission was completed, you left and never looked back. So don't go pretending you love me...what are you doing here anyway? How did you get in here?" Sydney was becoming distraught and Ryan was losing his patience...again!

What did he have to do to get through to this stubborn woman? His Dad's words flashed into his mind and he stared grimly at her. So be it! Gentleness and avowals of love weren't working...let's try it Dad's way! He sat down on the bed and pulled her unceremoniously across his lap.

"What are you doing...let go of me!" screeched Sydney indignantly. Her arms flailed and her legs kicked as he began to spank her without preamble, his hard hand burning a message into her wiggling, protesting buttocks.

"I love you, Sydney Renee Carstairs," he ground out between burning spans. "I have loved you since I saw your picture when I was still in California and I still love you.

You are the most stubborn...SMACKKK...exasperating....  
SMACKKKK...woman I have ever...SMACKKK!!!!...came across and I'm going to...SMACKKK!...spank your butt until you admit...SMACK!...that you love me to!"

He continued to swat her unmercifully while she howled and kicked and tried to swing her hips out of the way, but her efforts were in vain.

"I love youuuuu," she finally wailed, slumping in defeat over his lap. Heart wrenching sobs tore through her as she admitted to this hard-handed man that she did indeed love him!

"Finally," he sighed, gathering her in close to his heart. "I love you so much, Sydney, that I can't

begin to describe how I feel. I would never have left except I thought you could never forgive me. I was afraid I had hurt you too deeply and you would never trust me."

"You only c...came back because of...C...Cassie," she sobbed brokenly.

"Haven't I convinced you yet?" he asked exasperatedly. He tipped her chin up to look into her beautiful golden eyes drenched with tears. "I love YOU...I came back for YOU!" He went on. "You know, Sydney, you are not the only one with pride here.

When you turned away from me, I thought you didn't love me enough to trust me, so we could never make it together. I had given up hope that you would ever call me, so I decided to follow my Dad's advice and just came anyway."

Sydney stared at him, realizing he was right. She had pushed him away with her mistrust. Here he was, telling her he loved her...wasn't that good enough for her? What more could she ask from him? If she wasn't willing to believe in him, he was right...they had no future together.

Finally setting her stubborn pride aside, she humbly apologized. "I'm sorry, Ryan, you are right. I was blaming you I think because of my father. I was hurt that he would do this to me and I felt like a sentimental fool, to fight so hard for something he didn't even want after all."

She took a few last hiccupping breaths and smiled at him. "It wasn't your fault, yet I blamed you for being willing to take Cassie. I should have known you wouldn't, but I didn't really believe you could love me in that short a time and if you didn't love me, then you were only waiting to fulfill the terms of the will. When you left, to me that was proof you didn't love me enough to stay."

Ryan groaned. "We have wasted almost a year by both of us being stubborn," he whispered into her hair. "We are NOT wasting anymore time. We

are getting married as soon as I can make the arrangements."

"Aren't you even going to ask me?" replied Sydney indignantly.

"No, I'm telling you!" he stated forcefully. At her mulish look, he relented and stood her on his feet. Then he knelt on one knee in front of her. "Sydney, will you marry me, darling?" He held her small hands in both of his and waited for her reply.

Sydney pulled him to his feet and melted into his arms. "Of course I'll marry you, you aggravating man, how can I not? I love you to pieces."

Ryan groaned and crushed her to his chest, his lips finding hers and he drank the sweet nectar of her willing mouth. His hands roamed free then, up and down the silky skin, reveling in the contours of her back that melted into the smooth rounds of her warm buttocks. "I want you," he said huskily against her mouth.

"I want you to," she returned, her breathing heavy. She began to slip the buttons of his shirt out of their holes and slide her hands inside, loving the feel of his hard muscles in contrast to her own soft skin. Her peaked breasts pushed up against his chest as she slid the shirt off his broad shoulders.

He let her undress him, enjoying her explorations and when he was finally naked, he picked her up and laid her on the bed. His wandering lips caught the saucy nipples in his mouth, suckling and tasting them while she writhed in delight beneath him.

Slowly they enjoyed the delights of one another's body, building to a feverish pitch until she cried out for him to take her, thrusting her hips up against him...yearning for him to fill her.

Slowly he entered her, knowing it was her first time and he watched her expressive face for signs of discomfort.

Sydney's eyes grew wide as she felt his hard shaft probing at her womanhood and she felt her



body stretching to accommodate his thick girth. It felt like he was splitting her in two when he thrust in quickly past the small barrier and pain shot through her. She gasped but he held her still, waiting for her to get used to the feeling of him filling her. Slowly she adjusted and he began to move. The ardor that had been quenched began to build again and she moaned in pleasure, beginning to move with him.

Ryan held himself back as much as he could, waiting for her too build heat and desire again. He could feel the trembling of her body signaling her orgasm beginning and he drove in hard, bringing them both over the top and she cried out his name as she climaxed. It was one of the sweetest things he had ever heard and he adored her all over again.

"You are so beautiful, I love you, Sydney," he breathed against her mouth, waiting for their hearts to stop racing and their breathing to slow down.

"I love you too," she whispered almost shyly, loving the feeling of him still inside her and she pulled him down to her where she could feel his long length totally against her body.

"I'm really proud of you, Sydney, and what you've accomplished with your singing career," he said in her ear as he snuggled her in close.

"How is that going to work?" asked Sydney sleepily, yawning. "Our careers I mean."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," he promised, "right after I spank you."

She lifted her head. "Spank me? Why? You just spanked me!"

"That was for being difficult. Your spanking tomorrow will be for trying to kick me off that ladder, just like I promised." He paused and looked into her eyes. "I always keep my promises, Sydney. You can trust me, my little sky singer."

She smiled then. "I can't say I'm happy about another spanking, but I do realize I can trust you. I think I always knew it, I was just stubborn."

"I have ways of fixing that too," he promised.

Sydney groaned. She knew what it was too! "I can see I'm going to have to be careful around you or I'm going to spend all my time over your lap."

"That's fine by me," grinned Ryan. "I like you there."

"Well, I don't like being there, not like that anyway," she grouched.

"Hush up and go to sleep now, or I'll have to spank you for sassing," teased Ryan.

"Maybe I don't want to go to sleep," she said contrarily.

"Uh oh...disobedience...yep, it looks you are going to be spending a lot of time over my lap all right. Turn your butt up here, we might as well get started."

"Nooooo," protested Sydney, not sure if he was serious or not. She laughed at his outraged expression.

"NOW, young lady," he insisted.

"Ryannnn!" She slowly turned over, not sure how serious he was, but not wanting to risk another spanking at this late date.

"Lift your tummy," he instructed.

When she lifted her tummy, he slipped a pillow beneath her hips, elevating her buttocks. "Now I'm going to show you another kind of spanking," he said huskily, caressing the warm cheeks and moving her thighs slightly apart.

It was much later when they finally fell exhausted into each other's arms to drift off to sleep.

"I love you, darling," murmured Ryan as they went under. He held her next to his heart.

"I love you too," she murmured faintly. "I'll always love you."

"We're getting married...immediately!"

"Yes, darling," she murmured drowsily, "getting married."

And they did...and they stayed married...for the next thirty-two years! And then some...

