



Anything For Love
darry fraser



an *Australis Island* novel

Anything For Love

by Darry Fraser

ANYTHING FOR LOVE

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Table of Contents

Chapter One	7
Chapter Two	23
Chapter Three	32
Chapter Four	44
Chapter Five	53
Chapter Six	91
Chapter Seven	93
Chapter Eight	98
Chapter Nine	101
Chapter Ten	118
Chapter Eleven	120
Chapter Twelve	142
Chapter Thirteen	153
Chapter Fourteen	159
Also By Darry Fraser	166

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This work is one of my older stories and it may differ in style to my more recent work.

Anything For Love

An Australis Island novel

Australis Island - otherwise known as (the real) Kangaroo Island, South Australia.

CHAPTER ONE

Kent Taylor barked down the phone line. And Tilla Cormack couldn't get an explaining word in edgewise.

So...

Kent Taylor, the managing director of software giant Taylor Corporation, with its head office Adelaide, South Australia and one of Tilla's major clients, should have known better.

This is it, Kent Taylor. You. Are. Pet. Mince.

Inside his building, she headed straight for the lifts, stalked in as an elevator slid open. She jabbed the seventh floor button and tried to loosen the angry set of her mouth. She swiped at a tendril of rebel hair and swished imaginary dust from her suit.

Kent Taylor denigrated each and every one of her temp. staff in the last two weeks - professional personnel who'd been carefully screened for him. The women had fled back to her office swearing they'd never work with him again.

He'll think twice about tackling me because I've had a gutful.

The lift stuck at the third floor.

Oh, great.

She hammered the seventh floor button again. Her stomach dipped as the elevator obeyed and began its ascent once more.

Tilla closed her eyes and spoke aloud. "Wouldn't surprise me if he smoked a dozen packets of cigarettes a day, drank thirty coffees, popped pills to get it up and down and had flaky dandruff. Serves him right."

The damned lift was still on a go-slow. Tilla eyed the ceiling.

A last resort, she'd volunteered her personal assistant Tracy for the job, but the poor girl had squealed in horror the moment Tilla's telephone conversation with Taylor had finished. So, she'd decided to throw herself into the lion's den. There'd been no-one else for the job. Everyone refused to work with him.

And one week only, she'd vowed. One week, that is, if The Man didn't sack her and her agency the moment she'd finished with him.

Tilla had a holiday to take, the first in two years and no one was going to keep her from it. Four lovely weeks on Australis Island off the coast of Adelaide in a far away cottage, a no-phone-no-email-no-internet type of holiday.

She closed her eyes again, breathed deeply and pictured the holiday cabin high on the cliff top over the mouth of the Delaney River. Her vision glided over the azure blue water of Explorer Strait, the tall casuarinas of Cape Morris Conservation Park and the sea eagles cruising on warm thermals. Maybe she'd see a southern Right whale cruising past with its baby this time...

Australis Island. Nothing like it for the soul. So glad her sister Diss had bought the cottage years ago and hired it out. Tilla was able to take it once a year if she had the time.

She couldn't wait to get there.

The elevator chugged to full speed and hurtled skywards, thudding to a halt at the seventh floor. Flung across the lift, Tilla felt the tortoise-shell clips skew in her thick hair, and a shoe slid off her foot.

The lift door glided open and a loud, gruff voice filled the space.

"—And what's more, if you don't tell me who you've got planted here for the competition, I'll call in the po— Who the hell opened that door? Get that lift door closed!"

The door slid shut before Tilla could rearrange herself and move. She scrambled to the controls and punched the 'open' button.

The door slid open.

"So unless you want me to—"

"There is no mole!"

"Who the hell opened that door? I said *no* interruptions."

The lift door closed again.

Tilla slumped for a moment. What on earth was going on? Two men in a shouting match, and the elevator door sliding shut on her each time she tried to get out.

One more time. She reached up and banged the ‘open’ button. The door slid open part way...

“Get that lift back to the bottom floor!”

...Then closed again. The lift plunged the seven floors so swiftly, Tilla stayed where she was until it thunked to the bottom floor. Determined, she crawled back to the controls and kept her finger on the closed button, then punched the seventh floor. Hauling herself up, and bracing against the sudden stop, she prepared to hurtle out the moment the door slid open.

The elevator flew up to the seventh floor, and slammed to a halt shuddering and shaking like an old train. Tilla flew back against the handrail.

She huffed and puffed. One arm wrapped around the hand rail, she draped gracefully just off the floor. Her bare foot stretched for the errant shoe but her wagging toes nudged it out of reach.

Aha! Got it. I’m ready —

The lift doors glided open.

—to throw myself out of the lift—

And out she tumbled, her handbag and laptop bumping along behind her. She’d cleared the elevator! It was time to get off all fours and stand up.

Tilla looked up into the office space. Two male faces stared down at her.

Great. Now that I’m seeing double, I can sue Taylor Corporation on medical grounds.

“Our new temp, I presume.” The rumble from one face descended on her.

“I demand to see Kent Taylor immediately,” she said from the floor. Literally.

The younger looking of the two faces came towards her, an arm bent to her assistance. “I’m not sure you want to see him, actually. It’s me you think is—”

“You have been causing my establishment much undue harassment!”

“I – I think perhaps, yes, but I’m not Ke—”

“Well, let me tell you,” she interrupted again. Hauled herself up the steely rod which happened to be his arm. “I find it a long way short of professional the way you

treat my staff. The tyrant dash oaf style actually went out long before sliced bread—” She snatched her arm from his, steadied herself, tried to locate another AWOL shoe with outstretched toe. “And it appears to be a leftover of the Pleistocene age.” It was a fine tirade, one she’d practised all morning. A strange little wisp of air cooled her chest. That must be how it feels to offload, she thought. Really cool. Even if she didn’t know if humans were even upright in the Pleistocene age. Or even if there were humans.

A muffled noise sounded suspiciously like a chuckle came from the other man. Which proved there was two of them after all and defeated her concussion action before it started. Tilla zeroed in on her prey. “Another thing, if you ever call my staff inept, lazy and barge-arses again, I will personally make sure you can’t lie straight in bed.”

The chuckle spluttered. The other man beat a retreat behind closed doors from where Tilla believed – incredulously – she could hear belly-laughing.

The younger clone started. “I take full responsi—”

“I haven’t finished yet.” Finally, her foot found the shoe. “And when I am done—”

The door to the office through which the other man had disappeared swung open. He emerged, straight-faced, and something charging the air choking Tilla’s voice.

“I should leave you to your fate, Keith. The lady is about to tear you limb from limb in this very office,” he said. “Is this your spy?”

The other man reddened. “There is no—”

“Don’t waste your breath. We’ll soon find out.”

Tilla peered from one to the other. Keith, did he say? She blew hair out of her eyes with a quick whoosh. “He’s Keith?” she asked. “Then you would be ... ?”

Suddenly aware there was an audience, she spied at least eight people who sat at computer terminals, and all seemed to be at a standstill, staring at her over the partitions.

The immediate silence was loud until someone coughed.

Tilla looked back. The Man inclined towards her and she dropped her gaze to his fists, the fists supporting his weight on the desk before her.

Strong fingers curled, knuckles whitened, and springy black hair grew sparingly over the broad backs of his hands. Definitely strong hands. Man's hands.

That's what they are, all right.

The muttering in her head squelched to silence as coal black eyes riveted hers. A tall, dark-suited, dark-haired, living Adonis confronted her. Definitely Adonis. She knew. By instinct. Her nethers told her so. And her mouth dried.

The lazy smile, strong white teeth. The most wonderful face, all angled, and dark-shadowed and – and ... Rich and heady spice drifted indolently, airy wafts of spicy fruit and deep berry wine aroma floated over her.

A lock of hair, wavy, thick and jet black fell over his forehead.

Her heart thudded, palms clammy and a peculiar twinge in her belly wormed its way around and around. The Man breathed in and out oh-so-slowly, his glance dropped from her eyes to her mouth, lingered, then lifted to her eyes again.

A speedy creaking, groaning sound came from within...pretty sure it was her chastity belt flinging open after centuries of lock-down.

Pure mayhem. Unadulterated male. A shiver crept up one side of her body and down the other.

"I am Kent Taylor. For the last ten minutes, you've been berating my very enthusiastic," he emphasised, and turned to the younger man, "over zealous, bombastic, naïve, silly, idiotic young cousin."

A muscle worked in Kent Taylor's jaw. She couldn't take her eyes off it. The silence behind her was deafening. The crowd awaits first blood. The maiden will skip the ravishing and go straight to the chopping block. Oh, wait—perhaps a little ravishing on the way wouldn't hurt ... after all, milord—

"Er, Kent, this is Ms C—"

"I know who it is, thank you, Keith." The rumble was abrupt. Kent Taylor straightened up and towered over her behind the counter.

Keith began again, his face reddening. "You *think* you know—"

"This is *Keith* Taylor," Kent announced flatly to Tilla. "And as you've no doubt made your acquaintance, I'm sure you'd rather not have him stay. So. He was just leaving."

Keith shut up, inhaled. The ensuing moment's silence hung heavily, sapping the room's energy.

Tilla stared at the pair of them, struck by their physical similarities. They had the same facial features, the square jaw line, heavy brow over dark eyes and black lashes, a patrician nose. Yet there was a thinness about Keith's face, a meanness. His lacked the maturity of Kent's face, and when she took time to study the older man, she found the younger also lacked a certain enigma.

A toe-tingling, heart-thudding, caveman enigma.

Oh good one, Tilla, she thought. In a moment of pheromone overload we've now regressed to Neanderthal, entirely skipping a million years of gender co-existence.

Neanderthal. Pleistocene. Whatever.

Keith slipped out of the office, closing the door behind him.

"In here," Kent said her. "Please shut the door behind you." He turned and strode into the office.

Her short, staccato breaths were quiet, barely controlled but she gripped her laptop briefcase and followed Lord Taylor—*Kent* Taylor inside, carefully closing the door.

"There," he ordered, pointing to a chair. He barely looking up.

Tilla sat in front of his desk. Perhaps it'd be better to leap out the window instead. It wasn't hard to tell how angry he was.

"What is it you know about my business that you shouldn't?"

Tilla riled. "I beg your pardon?"

"I have reason to believe that someone has conducted industrial espionage. I can soon bring in the police to investigate."

"I – I'm from the personnel agency," she protested.

"What better front than a personnel agency?"

Astounded into silence, she stood up, clutched her handbag and the laptop, shaking as if from cold. "That sounds delusional. Paranoid perhaps. And I have no idea what you're talking about. If you're in your right mind, you should be ashamed of yourself." Tilla turned her back on him and reached the door.

A beat of time...

"Wait. Please. I'm sorry. I'm not delusional. I am, however, worried."

Tilla turned but remained by the door, ready to bolt if he so much as stepped around that frigging desk...

"And I concede to a little paranoia." Kent rubbed a hand over his face and studied the pile of papers before him. "I have to apologise, Ms..." He floundered for her name, then didn't bother. "It's been a tough couple of weeks negotiating for contracts interstate," he continued, "and I've just come back to a fine example of how one's family members can demolish a carefully nurtured business inside fourteen days."

Something's not right. He just said he'd been away yet she'd sent temps here to work for him. "You've been away?"

He nodded. "I have. And I am the managing director here—"

"I know that—"

"—not him." He thumbed towards the door. "Please, come back and sit down. There's been a misunderstanding, to put it mildly." He waited until she sat. He leaned back in his chair and loosened his tie, still talking. "I take it from your opening remarks that you expected a great deal of trouble out of the person you thought was me."

Suddenly the dark suit and the stark white shirt looked out of place. She could see black curling hair in the open v of his shirt, and suddenly imagined a frolic in the bush with the lord of the castle.

She looked at him, watching that sensuous mouth move.

"I said, Keith, my delightful cousin, has been scaring the living daylights out of my staff, and although they knew who he was they were unsure of his appointment here to disregard his directions. Then he had a great deal of fun fooling the temps, pretending he's me for a fortnight. That's without mentioning the potential clients he might have lost me." He rubbed a hand over his face, held his chin. "I'm sorry about accusing you of being a spy. All a bit dramatic, I know, but someone who shouldn't be is getting sensitive information." He stopped himself and looked at her. "Anyhow, I hope to put an apology to your boss as soon as I can. I trust you are still prepared to work for me? I really need the help. Heavily into damage control at the moment. Besides, I know there's no better temps. than Cormack Personnel's."

Tilla blanched. Her boss? What did he mean? She'd come tearing into his office berating his cousin stuck into the load n with all the finesse of a bull in a china shop and *he* hadn't figured out who *she* was. "Mr Taylor, I think you're making—"

"An assumption, yes. I know, and call me Kent, please. Mr Taylor's my dad," he said. "But you are here and I suspect that after what I heard of Keith's phone call with Ms. Cormack this morning, your being here means I do have one last chance. Her temps are excellent," he continued, sincerity drawing his brows. "And I certainly have no interest in using another company. Will you stay?"

Tilla flushed. Not just at his words but how his eyes softened as he watched her. Then they flickered with a moment's interest to her chest.

"The phone call this morning was Keith?"

Kent Taylor nodded. "He was just finishing his bulldozing of your employer when I walked into my office."

Tilla stared back at him. *That was Keith?* "I don't know what to say."

"I agree. It's an unusual situation."

Tilla still stared, absorbing the apologetic look schooling his gorgeous features. Then, she felt the flush of crimson flood her face as his eyes travelled slowly over the rest of her.

"You haven't answered my question," he said.

"Well. Of course. Um ..."

"Thank you," he said, the coal black eyes on her.

Tilla gripped her laptop case and placed it on his large desk. She opened it, fitted the modem jack, booted it up, withdrew pens, paper for handwritten notes, moved his diary out of her way.

The room seemed much smaller all of a sudden. She glanced up and saw his eyes narrow. The blush crept over her face and neck again.

"Perhaps we could start our salvage operation with coffee," he said.

"Yes, thanks. I'd love one, just black."

He looked steadily at her.

Coffee. She returned his stare. Oh, he expected her to make coffee.

Of course he did. She was just a temp to him, not the managing director of Cormack Personnel. Still, a corporate assistant did not have to make coffee. She used the phone on her desk, punched the console for Reception and ordered espresso for two.

His eyebrows lifted, then his glance settled on her laptop. "You've a pretty good set up there."

"Currently best on the market." Her gaze settled on his lean hips as he swung around, hands still in his pockets. *Oh, my, there's havoc on my insides.*

"Software?" he enquired.

"Not yours," she answered crisply, trying to quell her rising interest in certain parts of his anatomy she suspected were anything but software.

"So not the best at all," he rejoined pleasantly enough.

She looked up as his gaze dropped to her properly attired, business-like chest, where it rested momentarily. She squared her shoulders. "Shall we begin?" she enquired coolly, or hoped she had because she felt decidedly hot under the collar.

"In just a moment."

The throaty resonance touched her as if he'd stroked her cheek and had intimately caressed the nape of her neck. A flush of heat bloomed once again across her features.

What's the matter with the man? He couldn't seem to drag his gaze away from her chest. Other grown men had at least only lingered a moment. If she hadn't known better, she thought he looked almost thoughtful. Odd male reaction to her chest.

A knock sounded on the door. A young lad of about eighteen carried in a tray with two coffee mugs, a pot, a little jug of milk and a bowl of sugar. He nodded at both of them. "Sorry it's late. We had to go to the shop for the real stuff. And find a coffee maker."

His gaze also fixed itself on her chest and he blushed beet-red. He sat the tray on the desk and left.

"The real stuff?" Kent enquired as he looked at her, pouring a cup.

Her pulse beat heavily at the base of her throat. "Certainly. You can't operate on instant."

“I see.”

She waited. And waited. Shifted her weight, rested her hands on the little keyboard. She pushed an imaginary stray hair back into the hair clip. Jiggled the mouse to remove the screen saver. Typed her name. Erased it. Reached across and took her coffee, black, no sugar. She poured a cup for him. “Will we begin?”

He returned her stare, flashing, and hot, and piercing. “Sorry,” he said, curtly. “Mind is elsewhere.”

No doubt on my bloody chest.

He placed his cup down, carefully. “Excuse me a moment,” he said and left the office.

Tilla took the opportunity to familiarise herself with his office. She got as far as neat book shelves, noticing a literature section amidst the technical books.

The door opened again, and a woman entered. One of the secretaries, Tilla assumed.

“Hello, I’m Anne,” she said, and stared directly at Tilla’s chest. “I’m just checking to see that you have everything you need—”

Jeepers, even the women stare around here. “Well, I only just got here so I don’t really know.”

“—and to tell you that you have a button open on your jacket.” She pointed tentatively.

Tilla glanced down. Saw the gape revealing her lace-trimmed underwear. Oh God. Her fingers flew to push the button through the buttonhole. “Thank you,” she breathed, mortified. No wonder everyone stared at her. “Thank you.”

“Don’t worry,” Anne commiserated. “He’s an absolute gentleman. Will never make you feel embarrassed.”

Tilla watched her leave. Obviously the absolute gentleman had sent Anne in.

Kent Taylor appeared a moment later, studying a sheaf of papers in his hand.

“Ready?” he asked. “Let’s get stuck into the load.”

The files were a positive mess. Nothing belonged where Tilla found it and nothing had corresponding invoices and orders attached.

“This has to be completed before you leave today.” He explained the requirements. “And if it takes you into overtime, I expect it to be finished by seven o’clock. I have an appointment at eight. So, work at that desk there. The phone’s for your use, too.”

“I’ll have to call my own office in that case, if you don’t mind,” she said.

“Go ahead.”

Tilla hesitated. How to explain to TC back at her office ...

Kent stared, waiting for her to make the call and get it out of the way.

Tilla punched her office number. “Hi, um, it’s... me. I’m going to be late so please don’t wait— yes. Fill in for me all week ... No. Um. Perhaps. All right. Bye.”

“That’s it?”

She nodded. It wouldn’t hurt to have Tracy run the business for a week or so while she straightened out this job. Very lateral thinking.

She squared her shoulders and set to the task.

Which was nigh on impossible to complete in one afternoon. The filing alone would take her the best part of a day. “How did they get into such disarray?” she asked, rifling through the first folder.

“We were changing from an old software system to the new one. I had manual files to assist in case of problems when a now-past employee accidentally dropped most of the paperwork into the shredder.”

“Not so accidental.”

“Right.”

She eyed the huge pile of mismatched paper-work, and closed her eyes briefly. She was tired, her eyes scratchy, and the morning’s battle lines were beginning to wear on her. Caffeine hadn’t yet kicked in.

They agreed to work through lunch.

While he directed her or spoke to contacts on the phone, his pleasant voice, rich and melodious, was sort of caressing, kind and ...

Push those thoughts aside! She didn’t need him swanning his way around her hormones. She didn’t even want to get to like him.

Besides, she'd have too much to do re-organising her office after Keith's disastrous effect on her staff's morale. One day she'd get a life.

She bent over the pile of paperwork. Why an employee at the level of personal assistant was doing a huge pile of filing, she didn't know. She expected to work on statistics, profit and loss, balance sheets, marketing strategies, his clients quotes and bids, organising and arranging his daily schedule.

When a tray of sandwiches landed on her desk and she glanced up at the young woman who delivered it, seeing friendship in her smile.

The girl looked at Kent. "Oh, Kent, we're so happy to see you back. You've no idea how we all—"

"Thanks, Julie. Good to be back." He glanced up from his diary, and smiled at her.

One of those galactic megawatt smiles meant to oil up the chastity belt and—

Maybe Tilla had been too hasty in her approach. The real Kent Taylor was obviously liked by his staff. She couldn't have known that the person who angered her staff wasn't really him, but his cousin.

Julie floated out the door.

Tilla sighed aloud and Kent lifted his head, looking at her.

"A problem already?"

"Not at all." Not much of a problem, anyway. Just all six feet two of you. She shook her head, munched distractedly as she worked, the silence in the office broken only by the low buzz of his telephone and the ensuing conversations.

She glanced at him from time to time, managing to meet his black eyes on more than one occasion. Tilla shifted her gaze smartly, always before he did, always embarrassed at being caught out. Was it feeling his gaze on her which caused her to glance up and meet the coal black stare?

Nah.

It was her need to feast on the strikingly handsome face just to confirm he really existed. Simple.

And this wasn't just handsome. This was Gandy-Poldark-Jackman.

Tilla ploughed through a mountain of filing, sorting alphabetically, grouping relevant pieces of previously unconnected paper, stacking and restacking as invoices matched purchase orders, delivery dockets, phone messages, remittance advices.

Automatically, she organised his office to suit her work habits – something she thought wryly, that she advised her staff not to do. But arch files wouldn't suit over his head behind his desk—she had to reach over him—they'd have to be nearer the work station ... Now where would she put that? She needed more furniture in here.

She was more than glad to be within the confines of his office. Each time their glances collided, a sharp thrill rocketed to her belly, and her face would flush with heat. She hoped, with her head down and buried in the great pile of paper, Kent Taylor-Poldark wouldn't notice her burning cheeks.

Later, as was her habit on a new assignment, she began a report on the office and its functions, so that her office had a clear record if and when any new staff were required.

She noted staff numbers, location of computer terminals, offices, the management tree, the roles and the duties involved of each of the staff.

Then, at five o'clock, she began to pack up, heartily sick of the menial tasks. Her patience was out.

"These files are in a respectable state now for one of your juniors to handle. I needn't be wasting your time or mine on them." She stood up, tucked her report into the desk drawer and picked up the large pile of ordered paperwork.

He looked up. "You're finished?"

She nodded. He hesitated a second then strode to the door. "Gavin," he called, "get Tim to put these into archival order."

Gavin removed the files from Tilla's arms. She dusted herself off and closed her computer. She was tired and cranky. "I can see I won't be needing my computer if I'm to work on the filing in this office. I can also see that the assistance you need is not the kind you requested from Cormack Personnel. You need a junior for these tasks. Do you still require me tomorrow?"

His brows arched. "Yes, I'll require you tomorrow. And I'll be the one to judge my needs, thank you." His dark eyed gaze swept her from head to foot.

His needs. And as long as her hormones didn't send her pogo-jumping on to his lap, she'd be just fine.

She tidied the last of the loose papers on her desk. The moment's silence had her shoot a quick glance at him.

He gaze was thoughtful. "What are you doing tonight? A major client is hosting a dinner to launch his new offices down town. I'm invited with a guest. Perhaps you'd like to accompany me. I know it's very short notice."

She stared back at him.

A smile played at his mouth. "Little bit of networking, et cetera. Good for your boss, as well."

Et cetera.

Tilla thought quickly. She could very well see the benefit— and the drawback. What if some of her other clients were there? The whole business community would know that Tilla Cormack was working for Kent Taylor. Not a good idea. Especially when Kent Taylor didn't know it.

"Thank you, no."

"I'm sure Ms. Cormack would welcome the idea of you representing her agency this evening, not to mention the added remuneration."

He was right on both points. She lifted her shoulders. "I would have to be home early. I have other work to do."

"I'm sure." He inclined his head, smiled that lazy smile. "Be at the Convention Centre by eight. Wear something black."

Tilla watched as he strode past Gavin and into the elevator.

Finalising her packing up, she admitted the day had drained her. She laughed that her last reserves of strength would be spent with him this evening. She must be mad.

Wear something black, he'd said.

Kent Taylor slumped in the elevator. Cormack Personnel had been holding out on him. Its best worker had been the last girl to arrive. He had a good feeling about this one. How had he possibly thought she was the plant from OneCom, his arch rival in the software game?

What a sight for sore eyes. At one time her backside caught his gaze as she bent to retrieve a dropped file, its neat, firm curves just asking to be grabbed.

What was her name? Tracy something. TC, the office had said she called herself.

And later, as she reached for a large file on the shelf over his desk, her breasts pushed forward only inches from his face. Three little buttons on that jacket ... Ah yes, and one of those little buttons revealed lacy, lavender underwear.

He should have said something much earlier about that open button. He should have. Was morally obligated. But said what exactly?

Good old Anne saved him. Her. Not that he'd minded the lush display. He laughed to himself, glad he hadn't broken into a sweat. It was going to be hard keeping his mind on the job.

He exhaled loudly and strode out of the elevator. He had more significant things to think about. Janet, his almost ex-wife had caused enough problems without his having a new woman in his life.

He strode across the car park. Flicking off the security system on his BMW, he opened the door and threw his briefcase into the back seat, then slid behind the wheel. He started the engine and immediately saw the new temp.

She hurried to her car, breasts bouncing a little, hips wagging to a Saab, parked two bays in front of his. He whistled through his teeth. Interesting. Not bad for a temp.

She pulled at the clips holding her hair in that smarmy roll, and long, glossy chocolate waves floated about her face. She fumbled in her handbag for keys, flicked off the security system, opened the driver's door and bent inside. Long, sleek legs supported her as she placed her bags inside. Her skirt hitched higher as she twisted to drop her laptop over the back seat, revealing the top of her stockings.

His brows rose. His car stalled. Stockings.

He moved awkwardly in his seat. Didn't want to look. Didn't want not to look.

It'd really be something to slide a hand up each of those thighs, snap the clips open, roll down the hosiery and bury—

Yes, sir. He went blank.

She righted herself behind the wheel, slammed the door, started the engine and roared off.

Yes, sir.

CHAPTER TWO

On her way home, Tilla made hasty hands-free calls to Tracy and Marilyn, her own office's temps.

Nothing to report; it was only one day they both reminded her, and nothing was going to happen. Marilyn had previously offered to buy Tilla's business if and when she decided to sell, so, of course it was in good hands.

Home was a tiny cottage in North Adelaide she'd inherited from a doting bachelor uncle. She'd had some renovations done and been quite happy with her interior decorating. Her dab hand at gardening the terrace sized yard surprised her and it was a constant delight to walk in to its calming ambience.

Bippy, her beloved Coolie dog greeted her with the usual happy dance. Tilla fed her and poured herself a small glass of wine to steady her nerves. She must remember to ask the neighbours to take Bippy while she took her break on Australis Island.

She showered and dressed slowly, not wanting to appear at this function flustered and sticky with nerves. Several times she cursed her unsteady hand with the mascara. Every time that handsome, chiselled face appeared before her in the mirror, her hand jolted and a smear of black goop dobbed her cheek, or her browline.

Get a grip. Anyone would think this is your first schoolgirl crush.

It certainly felt like it.

The Convention Room was abuzz with the conversation of men in dinner suits and women in after-five gear. It looked more like a television awards night than a product launch. The glamour of the night so amazed her she was unaware that heads turned to look appreciatively as she passed through the throng. It had been a long while since she'd attended a party this lavish and yet it felt like familiar territory. Her nerves began to settle.

Until her eyes rested on Kent Taylor.

He was speaking with a group of men across the room and in his dinner suit that magnificent body looked illegal. Where were all the women who should have been flocking to his side?

He looked up directly at her as if he'd known she was coming towards him. He smiled that lazy smile, excused himself distractedly and made his way over to her.

Tilla's gaze locked his. When he stopped beside her, she inhaled deeply, quietly, trying to slow her racing pulse. He was tall. Imposing. Powerful. Hers, if she wanted.

His breath fanned her cheek. "Hello."

She clutched her tiny handbag. "Hello," she breathed, and tried a cool smile. He was standing too close to her, inside her space. Unnerving. Intimate. Hot. Any time now she would internally combust, a bit like that old stove of Granmar's. Except she probably wouldn't bring the house down like the stove had.

"You look spectacular. "

"Thank you." She shifted imperceptibly.

Kent ducked his head and dug his hands in his pockets. "Would you like a drink? Champagne?"

She took a moment to answer. "Lovely, thanks."

"Let's go to the bar." His smile was utterly disarming.

Tilla softened a little. *Devil.*

Kent ordered drinks then turned to her as he leaned on the counter. His eyes never left her face, but she would swear he saw every inch of her.

"You do look gorgeous," he said, handing her the champagne. A crackle of electricity snapped between them. He grinned at her suddenly.

Witch.

He wanted to touch her with an urge he almost couldn't tame.

God almighty, she was just about irresistible.

Tilla's heart made little leaps. "This is strictly professional, isn't it?"

Difficult, she thought of her own comment. All she wanted to do was grab him by the lapels and climb on to his hips, hitching the dress around her thighs.

God almighty, he was just about irresistible.

"Of course." He eyed her candidly over the rim of his glass. "It's just that in that dress ..."

"You did say to wear something black."

Kent set his drink on the bar. His gaze idled her glossy red lips. He wondered how it would feel to smear away the colour and rub his thumb against the full flesh of her lower lip.

How would it feel to nip her mouth where his thumb had been, and to stroke that wild-beating pulse he could see at the base of her throat, to run his hand up her thigh and snap the tantalising suspender he knew was there—

Tilla put a hand to her chest, felt her heart thud under her palm. He was too close. Maybe she'd bitten off more than she could chew... But what she wouldn't give to bite ...

He stood there smiling that lazy smile. "So I did," he finally agreed. But Tilla had forgotten what.

A voice called over his shoulder. "Well, well, well, Kent. Where have you been hiding this young lady?"

Kent turned. "Peter. This is my new assistant—"

"TC," Tilla covered quickly, interrupting Kent's introduction. She held out her hand.

Peter shook it and took a closer look at her. "Don't I know you from somewhere? What was your name, again?"

She smiled. "Perhaps we have met somewhere, but I—"

"Could have sworn— Oh well, no matter. Memory's not what it was. Can I get you another drink?"

Kent glanced at her glass, hardly touched. “We’re fine, thanks, Peter. By the way, did you get my message? How are those dates looking?” His hand rested lightly on Tilla’s wrist.

Tilla didn’t move as his fingers ran over her hand. He felt too good. Too sure. Her arm tingled and goose bumps ran the length of her body.

“Fine, fine. No problem. It’s all set up for you from Sunday.”

She eyed the dark hair sprinkled across the back of his hand as it travelled slowly, deliberately up, and down. Up and down.

“You know where the key is. All the gear is there for you as usual.” Peter glanced over his shoulder. “Excuse me. I need to finalise the set up on John’s presentation. I’ll see you later.” He nodded at Tilla and disappeared in the crowd.

Their conversation had been a blur to her. She removed her hand from Kent’s touch, grabbed the stem of her champagne glass. “So, who’s John?”

“John Crofter,” Kent answered. “It’s his show, and he’s launching some new offices two blocks over, using my software and Peter’s hardware. Big contract for us both. Peter’s taking a break next week to brain-storm with him.” He smiled. “Enjoying the champers?”

She nodded. Sipped the champagne slowly. Bubbles were fast-tracking to her brain and she was acutely aware she had to remain on her toes. But it could’ve been bilge water for all she cared. He was so close. His attention never wavered. He was utterly charming. Utterly smooth. Too smooth.

Tilla shifted, felt herself smoulder. Maybe these were early onset hot flushes or something, nothing to do with hunky Lord Taylor. She glanced at him lounging nonchalantly against the bar. Her throat jagged. Physically, he was everything she looked for in a man. The broad chest, his height, the jet black hair, strong features.

The smouldering could easily become flames and she’d get her fingers burned... get everything burned. Scorched. She shivered again.

He glanced at her. “Are you all right?”

Tilla smiled uneasily. “Cold drink,” she explained and shifted in her seat again as his eyes met hers. “So, you have another big contract coming up? Something on Sunday?” She set her glass on the counter for fear she’d take a huge swallow, gulping it down, aiding and abetting her overactive hormones.

“No, that’s holiday time. Few weeks away from the mad house. I need it.” He lowered his head self-consciously. “I get a little jumpy when the pressure’s been on for too long.”

“But you won’t be leaving Keith in control again, I take it.”

He snorted. “Absolutely not. I do have another option, thankfully.”

Tilla nodded, her eyes on his face. Good. She hoped Keith would never be left in charge again.

Kent took her arm gently. “Let’s go in for dinner. It’ll already be crowded with the who’s who and we have to find our table.”

His warm grip on her arm was intimate and possessive, and as they weaved their way through the dining area heads turned in their direction, and Tilla thought everyone was wondering who was with Kent Taylor.

Her mouth suddenly dry, she swallowed, hoping no one had recognised her. She should’ve told Kent straight away—

“Here we are,” he whispered, and smiled as he guided her to her seat.

She breathed a sigh of relief. She’d made it without slipping head first into someone’s vichyssoise.

Get a grip.

He ordered another champagne for her, and a scotch and water for himself. He leaned back in his chair. “I hope this won’t be too boring. It’ll mostly be computer-speak.”

“There’s not much that goes over my head,” she said pointedly and sat down. Oh, that sounded so-o smarmy. At least when her bottom hit the chair hard underneath it, her nerves stilled.

Kent looked at her. “I didn’t intend that to sound condescending.” He cleared his throat. “Er – tell me, do you have much to do with the placements from your office?”

“I generally work behind the scenes.”

“That would explain why you’ve not been on my payroll before.”

“Yes. I suppose. Look, Kent, I have to tell you—”

“Let’s order dinner. You wouldn’t have met these people,” he said and swivelled in his seat to introduce her.

She was in the company of self made, high powered executives of multi-corporate companies, some of whom had hired her staff in the past.

Their conversation was witty and complex and full of computer language she struggled to keep up with, but when discussion turned to business administration, she participated intensely.

Kent Taylor's eyebrows arched. She knows her stuff, he thought. It gets better and better. She holds an extremely forthright, knowledgeable conversation. He glanced over his shoulder. Has that single bloke – that exec from Downtown Software drooling over her, has impressed John and his wife and is leading the charge on the new superannuation rules.

With great cleavage.

The presentation began but Tilla hardly noticed. She tried to concentrate. Couldn't. Near exhaustion, nerves and the sleeplessness of the last few nights were catching up with her. Not to mention the divinely wicked Mr. Taylor...

She stifled a laugh. Divinely wicked ... The champagne was getting to her.

John Crofter droned on, expounding the virtues of his team of architects and builders, glowing in his terms of reference for his computer wizards and generally clapping himself on the back.

Dinner was served soon after. She pushed the salad around her plate, and as the champagne kept coming, she forced herself to eat despite her lack of appetite. She nursed her third drink through the night. It would not do to be tiddly. Or majorly smashed.

Kent Taylor was a charming dinner companion and by the time the main course was over, she began to wonder if the preceding days had ever happened at all.

Here was a devastatingly handsome, confident and successful male being very attentive indeed.

Step carefully, Tilla Cormack, she thought tiredly. She was in no shape to resist this powerful male if he started the charm in earnest. She had to remember she worked for him - and that he probably eats women like her for breakfast.

Watch the word play, Tilla. Down, girl.

By dessert and coffee, which Tilla refused, Kent leaned towards her. "It's eleven o'clock. You wanted to leave early. I'll drive you home."

Warning bells clanged distantly in her head. "Thank you, but I can—"

Steel crept into his voice. "I'll drive you."

They excused themselves and Kent offered congratulations to John Crofter once again before they left the building.

The parking attendant had the gleaming BMW waiting for them. Kent held the passenger door open.

"Where to?" he asked as he settled in the driver's seat.

"North Adelaide." She gave her address.

Barely ten minutes later and a smattering of idle chat, he parked smoothly outside her home.

"Thank you for an interesting night," she said, and reached for the door handle. "I'll see you at the office tomorrow."

"I'll walk you in."

Her breath quickened and she licked her lips. "No need," she said, lightly. "Really." But she didn't move.

He smiled his lazy smile. A hand curled gently behind her head and he drew her to him. His lips touched hers lightly, playfully, savouring the taste of her mouth. He broke away and gazed at her, running a finger down her cheek. He held her chin and grazed her lower lip with his thumb.

She didn't want to move.

He kissed her again, thoroughly, coasting over her mouth as if he were her long time lover.

And she kissed him right back. Her arm slid around his neck all by itself, the damn thing—

But her brain engaged in a hurry. “Nice,” she breathed and pushed hard on his chest, pressing herself against the door as far from him as possible. “But not a good beginning to the professional relationship.” She pulled at her dress. She was way beyond having a quickie in the front seat of a car. Or so she hoped.

Making love to Kent Taylor was not going to solve her problem of Kent Taylor.

He hauled himself back into the driver’s seat, took a deep breath and swiped a hand through his hair. He looked at her.

Her face felt flushed, and she knew her glossy red lipstick was long gone. Her mouth tingled with a memory.

“We’re adults. Was just a kiss, TC.” He shrugged lightly.

“Adults with a very long week in front of them. Goodnight.” She stepped quickly out of the car, still clutching the errant strap of her dress. Then ducked back inside the car to retrieve her little hand-bag.

Kent stepped outside the car. “I’ll walk with you.”

“Not necessary,” she said, barely audibly as she tottered on to the pavement.

Hands in pockets, he sauntered alongside while she found door keys in her purse. “Perhaps a coffee?” he enquired as they stood on her porch.

The night chill seeped through the previous warmth of the evening. Her nipples thrust against the light, cool fabric of her dress and she knew the effect on him. She saw him close his eyes briefly.

“No.” She unlocked the door and slipped inside. “Thank you for tonight. It was very ... interesting,” she repeated from behind her screen door. “Good night.”

“Good night,” he answered, hands still in pockets.

Bippy launched at her before she could close the heavy door. She turned the deadlock, heard him walk away, and listened as the car drove off.

She bent to ruffle her dog. “Close call, Bips. I nearly romped on his big lap in his big BMW at the end of the driveway.” Some sense prevailed, but not much.

She shivered as she stood in the foyer, Bippy doing round ‘n’ rounds about her legs. Tilla wanted to throw caution to the wind, to enjoy what was so obviously on his mind. And hers.

But she didn’t want to be a one night stand.

She shook her head, went straight to the bathroom, stripped and climbed under a hot shower. She would not think of him again tonight.

Much.

Very cool, and very hot.

Kent slid into the driver's seat and drove home, his mouth a grim line. A grown man should have control. Then he laughed. Control should've started a lot earlier than in the car tonight.

It wouldn't be in his best interests to act like a slobbering caveman all over an employee.

But he liked her. Really liked – it went beyond just wanting that wonderful package under her clothes. He wanted her, all right. The whole package, not just the body. And he'd have to tread carefully to have it.

And 'it' was not a roll in the hay, he decided. Oh no. Certainly not a session fooling around in the front seat. When she'd put a stop to that, it was more than just frustration. He'd felt bereft of her touch. Empty. As if a door had opened for him and yet the way through remained just out of his reach.

Must be going soft.

He turned into his driveway. He'd have to toughen up. He'd have to yell, and bark and grumble. Was the only way to stop her affecting him. If she hated him, he wouldn't get anywhere near her. And that'd save him from himself, and this dumb feeling of loss.

Inside his home, a rambling bungalow on a green acre close to the city, he poured a scotch. He sipped, recalled a fleeting, tantalising swell of soft breast as she leaned back into the car to grab her bag.

A shower. He needed a shower. He downed the scotch in one swallow, stripped and stepped under the fierce needles of hot water.

CHAPTER THREE

“You’re late,” he barked.

Tilla glanced at her watch. Late by a minute and a half. The damned lift stuck on the third floor again.

“If your lifts worked properly I’d have made it on time.”

“They’re the last of my problems at the moment. But they should be fixed today.”

If the night before was even a memory for him, she couldn’t tell. Half way expecting a sly smile on his face this morning, she’d slept badly. What little sleep she’d had was fraught with dreams of romping with this delicious creature and she’d woken halfway through the night in frustration, wondering how she’d cope with the day ahead.

But there was no indication from him that anything had occurred at all. Thank heavens. Well, really, nothing *had* happened.

And why should she worry? She’d done the only thing she could’ve done under the circumstances. Mr High-and-Mighty Taylor was not going to push her around in the office or in his BMW. But she couldn’t deny he was getting under her skin in more ways than one.

All day she checked to make sure her jacket buttons were done up properly.

He launched into a barrow load of work, dictating at least a dozen letters in the first hour, rattling out the content with speed.

She matched him on her little computer, fingers flashing over the keyboard in a blur. Her speed was as good as any of her temps, she made sure she’d kept it up, but she couldn’t vouch for her accuracy this morning. She’d proof the letters later. Champagne and the late night had left her a little foggy. Not to mention the heady feeling of his touch on her body.

At the furious pace he set, she didn’t have time to feel as shaky as she had on her way to work.

Business-like, cold and calculating, he cracked orders at the staff, yet each one who came to him received his full attention, his concentration complete, totally absorbed with the issues at hand.

He pushed them, yes, but no more than was asked of any team in any environment. Only their best. Tilla admitted his ethic was exemplary yet wondered how lucky he was to have any staff left after Keith's handling of the business. Kent was very efficient, obviously. His success proved it.

She remembered last night. She tapped away furiously as he dictated the umpteenth letter, but at every chance she studied him from under her brows, unable to resist.

A lock of hair would fall over his forehead and he'd brush it away with a pencil. His frown deepened as he searched for the right way to express himself, then his voice would rumble out the next few lines of dictation. His lips moved and she stared.

Distracted and upset with herself failing to hear his next words, she wondered how she would manage not to disgrace herself in the next four days.

"Where's that letter to John Crofter?" he demanded, late afternoon.

"Just being printed right now." She pulled it from the printer and handed it to him.

He grunted satisfaction, signed it with a flourish. "Get it in the post immediately."

She took the letter, addressed an envelope and put it in the mail bag.

"I meant, get it away to the post, now. Not with the mail bag."

She glared back. Gone totally was the familiarity of last night, and the charm. She called for one of the girls to mail the letter straight away. "That's what juniors are for," she rounded on him. "Not your senior staff who should be too valuable to waste their time posting the mail."

His eyes cleared, the frown immediately lifted from his brows. "No. Of course not. You're quite right." He turned away, intent on the next task, then turned back again, the frown once more in place. "But let's get on with it—I'm not done by a long shot. Thank you for reminding me of your position here."

White hot spots appeared before her eyes. With a grand effort, she checked her temper, reminded herself of the dollars his account was worth. Not to mention her business's reputation if it circulated that she couldn't provide good, well-behaved staff. Especially when the hired staff from Cormack Personnel was its boss.

He worked her like a navvy, the pace never let up. Tilla had her lunch again on the run, and noted thankfully by mid afternoon that she was once more clear-headed.

Returning from the printer in a tearing hurry, she collided with him in the door way, ruining the letter sandwiched between them.

“One of us is clumsy,” he muttered, mildly amused as he headed back to his office.

She bit back a clever retort and hurriedly reprinted the page. She must be waning under the pressure—she should have snapped him back into place.

And if she were clumsy, it took two to tangle. The moment of contact when her body pressed against his ... She was sure he bumped her deliberately. The full body contact might have been vertical, but she felt the weight and heat of it as if she'd been tackled horizontally by a rugby team.

Ooh. The thought.

Steam rose from her collar.

Gavin caught her eye. “End of Day Two,” he murmured. “Only three after this one. We’ve got our money on you.” He glanced over his shoulder as soft laughter rose from the office. “He’s not really a bad guy. He’s got a lot on his plate and Keith’s certainly made it hard for him.” His gaze was sincere behind the impossibly thick lenses. He held out his hand. “Gavin Prescott.”

“And Keith was worse than this?” Tilla asked, shaking his hand. Then could’ve bitten her tongue. She must’ve been tired to let such an unprofessional comment slip out. But how on earth did the staff put up with two such grouches?

Gavin must have read her mind. “You know, I have to tell you, Kent is a spot-on, top boss. He’s a hard worker, he’s ruthless, he’s a genius. But you know what? He can’t run an office for nuts.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No, I mean it. He can’t run an office, I’m telling you. He put Keith in here to do it, convinced his cousin had the knowhow and whammo, nothing.” Gavin bent closer to her, then looked over his shoulder. “Keith is a hundred times worse than Kent could ever be. And now Kent has to fix up what his cousin almost destroyed. And believe me, that’s a big task, though you didn’t hear that from me.” He lifted a shoulder. “Kent’s not all bad.”

Which part's not bad, she wondered.

"He's actually shunted Keith off to do some management courses, you know, so he hasn't exactly sacked him, just let him cool his heels a bit. Like for six months at uni."

Tilla gave a little grin. "That's not bad?"

"Yeah, all right. When he's good, he's great. But when he's bad, he's rotten. You heard of those types?"

He flashed a grin at her, and his googly eyes made her laugh.

"Could say the same about me."

"Look, I think you do all right. After all, you've lasted so far. A whole day and a half." Gavin's thick Buddy Holly spectacles, though fashionable, made him appear older than he was.

"You've been working here a while."

"We all have. Mostly, he found us in dead-end jobs and gave us the chance of a lifetime. Kind of the Good Samaritan. We all like him a lot." He waved his hand over the staff still at their terminals. "He's very good to us. Mind you, we have to work hard. He won't tolerate any slackers. It's very exciting when things start to hot up around here. Kent's good, the best at what he does, and we're all grateful he keeps us employed. But take it from me, there is another side to it, and, um, it's not my place to ..." He shrugged and let his voice drift.

"I understand. And thanks, Gavin. It makes working here a whole lot easier."

He laughed. "You'll be fine. He likes you."

It was her turn to laugh even as her heart missed a beat.

Kent likes me.

She made a note of Gavin's interesting piece of company history in her report file on Taylor Corp. It might help to soften the hard-line description she'd made of him and the company in her previous days scribbling. She tucked it away in her desk drawer.

Perhaps Kent Taylor had a heart after all.

Each night she collapsed into bed, exhausted. She'd have no chance to wind down for her holiday if the pace continued like this.

The thought of Australis Island dangled in front of her, kept her going. She would not let him drag her spirits down.

Gone forever, it seemed, Kent's pleasant and charming side of the night of the dinner. Even the rogue in him was more bearable than the bear-like grouchiness of these last days. He never let up on her with his barking and bad temper, day after day. How could she possibly have felt warm and fuzzy about him? He was Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde.

It dawned Friday. Wonderful, delightful, gorgeous Friday. And the last day with him.

She managed to bounce cheerily into his office only to be greeted with an even darker scowl and a worse temper than before. He left the office at one that afternoon and didn't return. Everyone was relieved, though the pace in the office was just as furious. She rightly guessed he wouldn't leave his staff idle for a second, even while he was not present.

But Gavin was right about him. Tilla had seen Kent more than once bending over a terminal, interested in a program dilemma, and discussing solutions with one of the staff. She was surprised to hear his murmurs of encouragement, or a softly spoken word of advice, see a congratulatory pat on the back. Why was it then he didn't relax with her?

Perhaps she'd not been working with him long enough. She shrugged. It wouldn't matter after tonight. And strangely, Tilla didn't like the way that felt at all.

Angry with herself, she packed up his desk, closed down her computer, left him with downloaded flash drives and hard copies of all her letters. She'd probably worked harder for this man than she'd ever worked for anyone before, and was glad it was over. Finally.

She frowned, glanced at her watch. She expected a 'thank you', at least expected he'd be here to see her leave, or send a note, or a text. Something. Anything.

She surveyed all the work she'd put together in the last five days. There was a mountain of it. It'd taken her last reserves of energy and restraint. Yet not a word of thanks. Of all the boorish, arrogant, low down things for him to do, this was the pits, she declared to herself.

She was exhausted.

And cranky as hell.

And forgot all about her report file sitting in the desk drawer.

Kent stepped into the elevator on the ground floor of his office building and loosened his tie. Weary was an understatement. Knackered nearly cut it.

Finally done. The closing deal a great weight off his mind. Thankfully, with clever diplomacy, Kent had salvaged the deal Keith had nearly destroyed.

He leaned against the cool metal wall and pressed the button for his floor. Now he'd ask TC to have dinner with him tonight to celebrate. To explain the week of pressure. To ask her to take up a permanent position with his new company. To apologise for his behaviour.

Kent noted her angry flashes and winced inwardly as his arrogant barbs hit home. Then forgave himself. She has a temper, this cool lady, yet was totally professional. He'd glanced, against his better judgement, at her chest, the abundance of which was not lost under the firm and straight-laced business jacket. Idly, an unbidden thought of lavender half-cup bra entered his mind. He shook his head.

I'll go down on bended knee and beg forgiveness ...

He had to admire her for the last week. She'd certainly put up with the worst of him and he was grateful she was such a professional. He couldn't have come through this last five days without her.

Not to mention that she was becoming more to him than just a good, future employee. She hadn't spotted him sneaking long and slow looks at her when she bent over his desk, or directed his staff from the office door. That beautiful profile, that lovely face... Her mocha-chocolada hair enticed him to bury his face in it, he wanted to inhale the scent of her—

He closed his eyes briefly and her fresh face popped into his tired brain. He visualised her discussing the finer points of a program to prospective clients, or leaning over reports, pointing out to him the merits of new markets... Her perfume floated over him like a soft, misty memory.

Smiling, he felt the weariness lift. Admitted he liked her more than he should.

He slapped his forehead. Should've bought flowers. Then shrugged. Later.

The elevator stopped at his floor and he stepped out. She was waiting to go down, her face set as if she were about to command a great clap of thunder.

His heart raced. "Are you going already? I want to talk to you ... we still have work to do—there's some urgent emails to be sent and—"

"I'm leaving."

"What?"

"I've just finished my work and I'm going home. I won't need to be back in this office again. I'm sorry there's more work to do but I can't stay. If you wish to make a complaint, take it up with Cormack Personnel." She marched into the elevator, punched the console, stared straight ahead as the doors glided shut in his face.

He stared.

Dinner on your own again tonight, Taylor.

There it was. Australis Island. A huge sprawl of land just a few minutes flight from Adelaide. A glorious haven for wildlife, wilderness and Tilla's very precious piece of mind.

The little nine seat twin engine bumped to a halt on the dirt strip at the island's tiny, serviceable airport at Regency. She clambered out of her seat clutching a tote-bag stuffed with bits and pieces hastily thrown in at the last moment.

The caretaker of her holiday cottage and an old friend of the family, Jim Briggs was at the terminal to meet her and deliver her to the coastal paradise she'd reserved. He took her bags, loaded them into the vehicle and they drove off. She couldn't wait to get to the cabin and stay there, out of sight and alone for four weeks. Four glorious, untroubled weeks.

"You look totally worn out," Jim commented as they took one of the few sealed roads west.

"I am. I really am."

"Where you're going there won't be any interruptions, that's for sure. You won't want them, I guess." He took a sidelong glance at her.

She smiled back. "I've been waiting for this for ages. I'm so looking forward to all that delightful solitude."

Jim frowned slightly then, and Tilla decided he was only being paternal, probably didn't think it was a good idea for her to be out here alone. She shrugged. He knew she enjoyed it.

"Have you heard from Radisson, lately?" Jim asked. "Last I heard, she was in Darwin visiting friends."

Tilla agreed. "Yes, Diss is just there for a holiday, then she's due back here at the end of the month."

"More writing?"

"She's getting her name out there, Jim and it's great. What better place to write than here?"

He shook his head. "Too isolated. Where you're going, there's barely satellite coverage for your phone."

"Diss uses the house between paying clients, Jim. It's good for her. But she needs a break in town, too, sometimes."

Jim harrumphed. "She needs a bloke, Tilla. Good you've got one."

"I do not." Heat suffused her cheeks. What on earth was he talking about?

"Well, it seems like you're half way there," he grumbled and shot a look at her.

"Er, no."

He frowned, stared straight ahead and they drove in silence.

She dozed for an hour or so until his vehicle hit the dirt road, and she knew she was on the home stretch. Down through the farming estates and on to the smaller parcels of private land, they bumped over the track until the ocean came into view.

Jim stopped the vehicle right outside the cabin door. He unloaded her bags whilst she stood on the edge of the cliff and inhaled deeply.

"Heaven," she said.

He agreed. "I'll call on you in two weeks, then I'll call back to pick you up two weeks after that. All right?"

"Yes, Jim, thanks. As always." She pecked his cheek. Wonderful he was an old friend of the family's.

He dipped his head. "Will you be all right?" he asked, looking at her from under his bushy brows.

"Of course I will, Jim. You know I love it here."

"Yes, but it's the first time you've brought—" He shrugged, then smiled a sheepish smile. "—that I've thought you look so tired."

"Oh, Jim, thanks for your concern. I'll be fine in a few days."

"All right. Well, bye for now."

And then she was alone.

Alone. No office, no phones, no faxes, no bills, no nothing ... And no Kent Taylor. She pushed him out of her head.

Tilla stood for a moment savouring the solitude, waited until the sound of Jim's vehicle had receded behind the hill. She retrieved the key, hidden under a paving rock by the back door, pushed it into the lock and threw open the door.

The warmth of the little cabin welcomed her. Stepping inside, she almost tripped over loads of cartons of food and idly wondered at the large amount. It seemed far too much for her, definitely almost double what Peter and Helen Wilson, Diss's booking agency, usually provided.

Oh, well. It wasn't her worry. It was paid for.

But the two dozen bottles of very expensive red and white wines really surprised her. She only ever kept a few bottles for the duration of her stay, and her choices were in another box near the fridge.

She shrugged again. I'll stack the excess in a corner. It's probably something to do with Helen's other visitors.

Tilla left everything where it was. Her suitcase could wait to be unpacked tomorrow, her tote-bag and her supplies would wait until then, too. She left them in the middle of the floor, delighted to suit herself.

All she did was put a match to the little log fire which had been prepared for her, checked that the gas fridge and freezer were working and went to sit at the large dining room table.

She surveyed her little area. All hers for four luxurious weeks of quiet walks in the

bush or down the little gully to the tiny beach, of hours reading her favourite authors, sleeping or preparing and eating a meal when she felt like it.

And not thinking of Kent Taylor. She pushed the thought away.

Nothing had changed in the house in two years. The bedroom was tiny but open, the bed filling it almost wall to wall. It faced the ocean and was screened from the dining room by a short wall. Behind that was the only bathroom.

The neat kitchen was all anyone needed, with a gas stove and cooktop. The lounge room was also open, a settee for two and a coffee table its only furniture, in front of a small combustion heater. A small loft which stored spares was high over the room, accessed by a wooden ladder.

The north face of the cabin was all windows, tinted glass to dull the glare of sun on ocean. The three surrounding walls were treated timber, natural and warm. She had a small veranda, and when the weather warmed she would sit out there and watch the sun go down.

Once she'd seen whales in the Strait, a mother and calf on their way to warmer waters.

She breathed deeply. Oh it was so good to be here. She could forget everything. Everything.

Kent Taylor popped into her head. Out he went.

She sat for a little while longer staring out to sea. She rummaged around for a jacket and stepped out into the veranda. The salt air hit her with full force and she laughed delightedly as the wind whipped her hair and stung her face with tiny beads of sand.

She was in for a windy day and night, she thought. But it didn't matter. She didn't care. She was here, at last.

Pottering about for an hour or so, Tilla decided against taking a walk, and stepped back inside. She made coffee, drank savouring its flavour then settled back for an afternoon nap.

There were no dreams of the scowling face, just of the brilliant, lazy smile. And he refused to leave her dreams, refused to go away. The searing heat of his touch

lingered over her when she woke at dusk. She shook herself awake properly. Perhaps the heat was from the last rays of the sun through the window before it dropped over the horizon.

Rousing off the settee, she made a plate of cheese and fruit for her evening meal, then stripped and showered. The last confrontation with Kent Taylor slipped into her mind for the seven thousandth time. He'd appeared at the open lift genuinely pleased to see her.

For a tiny moment she felt guilty at the way she'd verbally lashed him. Maybe she'd misjudged him.

No, no, no. She soaped up furiously and pushed him out of her head. He was arrogant, and overbearing and – and she wanted nothing more to do with him. Her temper flared that he could intrude on her thoughts, totally unbidden.

Tilla towelled off and padded naked to the bedroom, slipped into bed and fell asleep after gazing at the clear night sky.

Nothing would keep her awake tonight, not the long afternoon nap, and especially not the coal black eyes flashing at her as the deep voice barked out rapid commands.

Her dream was a loud one. There was stumbling and cursing, unlike any of her dreams before, but she was reluctant to come awake ... too tired. She tossed and moaned her protest, but when she heard the crash of a dozen bottles of wine she bolted upright, wide awake, heart hammering and her throat constricted as if a steely band were across it.

She clutched the bed-clothes to her chin, gulped in great breaths of air. Tried to shake herself fully awake.

The cursing and snarling continued, the bottles crashing and clanging on the slate floor.

Terror struck deep.

There was a drunk in her little haven.

Oh no, oh no ...

She couldn't see a thing—it was pitch outside, no moon. She slipped out of the bed dragging the sheet with her and groped in the dark for her clothes. Where were her

clothes—? Oh God—in the bathroom ... how'd she defend herself?

Another curse and then another. “What the fucking hell—?”

Stopped her frantic panic, covered her mouth with one hand. She knew that voice. It was unmistakable. Tilla shook herself. It couldn't be. She must still be asleep ... It just couldn't be. Her heart pounded.

“Who the fuck put that there?” the gravelly voice boomed.

She tried to distil the solid block of fear which weighed on her chest like a sack of potatoes.

There was no mistaking that voice. No mistaking it at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kent Taylor tripped over a handbag, shone the torch into it and rummaged around for some clue as to whose it was. He peered at the ID cards in his hand and groaned at the name.

Of all the rotten bloody luck. He was in this cabin with Tilla Cormack, the MD of Cormack Personnel. The woman who'd sent so many temps to his office only to have them annihilated by his cousin. Well, all except the last one of course.

He snorted. He'd be likely to get a mouthful all night from the old dragon. How the hell had this happened?

But he hadn't reckoned on the vision which floated into view.

"Yowwh!" He jumped against the wall, completely taken by surprise as the light flashed on her face. "TC?" His mouth dropped open, her credit cards in his hands.

Tilla squinted into the torchlight, her hand up against the glare. "Kent Taylor?"

"Tee...Cee." He glanced once more at the cards before dropping the little collection of plastic back into her handbag.

"You nearly frightened me to death." She clutched the sheet high up close to her throat. She was dragging in great gulps of air, and not noticing the lazy wanderings of the torch light.

"That makes two of us." He aimed the torch back at her face. Kent stared at her in the light. He couldn't believe his eyes. The sight of her in the sheet, naked underneath, the outline of her long legs, the shadow at their apex, the rosy darkening of her nipples. This was Tilla Cormack. He shook his head.

"Would you ... would you please let me pass, my clothes are in the bathroom."

Kent hesitated then stepped aside. She disappeared into the bathroom her soft scent lingering as she brushed past.

He backed on to the wall and let the torch slide to the floor. How had he made a mistake like this? How had he managed to let Tilla Cormack get past him at his own office? He shook his head again, dazed. What was going on?

She returned, tousled, in her rumpled jeans and shirt and wide awake. He retrieved the torch from the floor and the light wavered as he stood upright. He stared for long seconds before he regained his senses, then spun back to the kitchen, yanking open a kitchen drawer. He fumbled in the semi dark for matches, found a dozen candles. “Don’t say a word. I want lights on and then I want an explanation. Please, sit down.”

“You might explain yourself as well,” she retorted, yanking out a chair and sitting with a thud.

“I’m really looking forward to getting to the bottom of this one.” Kent’s hand shook as the match struck half a dozen wicks, little flickers of flame lighting the small room. “Now, you start. What are you doing here?” His own heart rate was slowing, but his head had started to thump. He should’ve known the beers he’d consumed at the Murphy pub on the way from the airport would’ve been too much in his present, overworked state of mind.

Tilla sniffed, drummed her fingers on the table. “What are you doing here?” she countered. “I come here every year at this time, or very nearly every year. How did you find me? And why did you come here?”

He gave a shout of laughter. “Find you? I wasn’t looking for you. I come here every year, too, only mostly during winter.” His glance fell on her open shirt and the swell of a well rounded breast underneath it, buttons done up hastily and in the wrong buttonholes. She has a problem with buttonholes.

Whoa. Could a man believe it? Here she is, and she’s Tilla Cormack, who’s definitely not some overweight, bespectacled matron. Had he got it wrong or was there some reason she wanted to keep her identity a secret? Maybe the mole, after all ... no, no, no, not possible. She’s too—

He looked at her. She was tired, worn out. Her hair was down around her shoulders and dishevelled with sleep. In the candle light it glowed a liquid dark mocha and he automatically reached out to touch it.

Tilla recoiled. “Don’t.”

He threw his arms up. “What do you think I’m going to do - attack? I came here for some peace and quiet - Lord knows, I need it - and here you are, the self-proclaimed PA from hell.” Kent watched her closely. “I just wanted to make sure you were real and not some figment of my imagination.”

She stared at him. In the low glow of the candles, his dark features burned wickedly over the tiny flickering flames. His hair was messed, his shirt open to the waist and wiry tendrils of thick, black hair matting his chest, spiralled down to his navel and beyond. Lordy-lordy Taylor.

Wow. This was like some dream. She licked her lips and her gaze travelled further.

“Well?”

“Well what?” she countered, finding her wits again. “I was here first.”

“Oh, you were here first. Right.” He angled his watch to the light. “Eleven-thirty. Maybe Helen and Peter haven’t left yet. I’ll ring them and they can send Jim back for you.” It was the last thing he intended to have happen.

“What?”

“You’re not staying here.”

“I am so staying. You’re the one who’s got to go.”

“Not on your nelly, sweetheart. I’m not spending my leave anywhere but here and if you don’t go, too bad for you.” He reached for his phone. “It’s dead,” he said, turning to her, truly surprised.

“New service coverage doesn’t quite make it here yet.”

“How’s a person supposed to do any business without a phone?” he ground out. He glared back at her. “I just don’t believe it.” He threw open the fridge door and grabbed a bottle of wine, rummaged in a kitchen drawer for a corkscrew. He removed the cork and poured two glasses, pushed one towards her, downed his in one swallow and refilled his glass. “I should have poured a double scotch. Drink,” he ordered.

“We just have to work it out like adults, Kent. We’re adults, remember?” Tilla calmly took a sip. Yes. Like adults. Like adults of the opposite sex who can’t wait to tear each other apart one way or the other.

Kent eyed her briefly. He pushed the candle aside. “There’s something different about you.”

Tilla didn’t like the sudden gleam in his eyes. “Is there? There’s nothing different about you. Same old same old.”

“You’re different - you’re not like the usual stuck up personal assistant.” His eyes glowered over the rim of his glass. “It’s a pleasant change. You could be someone else completely.” He smiled that smile slowly.

Tilla didn’t want to see that smile. She sipped her wine again and wondered if he’d been drinking before he arrived. What would she do if he decided to—

He was watching her face. “Worried we have to share some space?”

“No. We will not be sharing space.” She stood up and placed her barely touched glass on the table. “It’s late, and I’m tired. I don’t have to have anything to do with you out here. I don’t work for you now.”

His eyebrows shot up. “I wouldn’t be too hasty. I contacted your office by email - when I get back to work I’ve a lot more for you to do. And only you. The ... er ... other temps are just not in your league. So you see,” he held up both hands and smiled, “technically you still do work for me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m sure Tilla Cormack, your director will remind herself of the size of my account. I don’t think I’ll hear any protests.”

“Don’t bet on that,” she snapped. Tilla Cormack wants to crack the bottle of wine over your head, sonny-jim. Tilla Cormack wants to see you strung up by your kohunas over Earth’s deepest ravine. Tilla Cormack wants you to know that she wouldn’t work for you if you were the last person on earth.

Tilla Cormack also wants terribly to clutch your hair and drag your mouth over hers, kiss you until you can’t stand up, have your big hands on her arse and—which would make life a whole lot more pleasant right now.

His dark eyes twinkled wickedly over the candlelight. “Oh ho. The mouse roars.”

“Are you drunk? Because if you are—”

“I’m not drunk. Yet. But I had intended to be, and by myself.”

He was hypnotic, magnetic. He was all male, and ... and large. Confident.

He stood up, and her heart rate jumped again. She closed her eyes. Her mouth went dry. A curl unfolded deep within her belly. She was more wary of her own reaction to him, than the other way around.

He reached over and slowly took a lock of her hair in his fingers.

In the flickering candle light Kent could see delightful freckles sprinkled across her nose, could count them all. The silky strands of her hair in his fingers were...

What?

He wouldn't be able to behave, not now, not here with this beautiful, intelligent woman, and so far from civilisation. No one to interrupt ...

Restraint. Have some restraint.

He let the lock of hair drop. Picked up his glass of wine and wandered around to her side of the table. He sat on the edge of it, stared at her.

Tilla didn't know what to do. Tired beyond measure, agitated, magnetised, enthralled. What to do, what to do ...

He bent and kissed her upturned, parted mouth.

For a tiny moment Tilla revelled in the rough scraping of beard stubble on her mouth and cheek. Transported to another time ... after the dinner at John Crofter's launch when she could easily have—

He moved, a hand about to close over the back of her neck.

She shoved her chair back as hard as she could and stood up. "No. Don't think you can try that on me again." She pointed her finger. "You didn't have the decency to speak civilly to me after the last time. I'm not about to be used up by some self-opinionated chauvinist just because you think you're in the middle of nowhere."

Kent's brows rose. His gaze flickered over her face. "Tell me you don't want me to touch you, and I won't."

"What part of 'no' didn't you get?" Tilla met his glower as best she could, but the sudden heat of him ... She shivered, unable to stop it, and her nipples strained against the fabric of her shirt. Just plain begging for his hand, dammit.

His gaze dropped to her chest. "Guess that's the part," he said, pointed, then met her eyes again.

She folded her arms tightly.

He smiled that smile. Took her face gently in his hands and waited the merest second for the right signal. Then he kissed her.

A searing heat shot through her, and something else about him fit snug and insistent against her belly. Her hands held his wrists, making sure he wouldn't stop kissing her, making sure she wouldn't fall completely over.

He broke away from her mouth. "Delightful," he murmured, gently scratching her pale skin as he scraped his chin up and down.

She shivered again and Resistance Was Useless. Her hands slid along his forearms, not so steely, but warm and muscly.

His eyes danced and twinkled close to her face. He touched her nose with his and encircled her waist with strong arms. "Shall we take up where we left off?"

For long, deliciously wicked moments his strength hummed through her, a curling, languid heat heading straight for hormone-central.

A healthy male appetite pressed to her belly, the rest of him heating her from top to toe. Oh, she wanted him. Wanted him more than she cared to admit. Needed a man like Kent Taylor in her life to balance it. To share it. She looked up at his face, ready to ...

The knowing smile on his lips stopped her raging hormones cold. "Let me go."

"That's not quite what I had in mind," he said.

It was a moment or two before she let go of his wrists and then he dropped his arms.

Tilla struggled. Her heart thudded like a hammer on a drum. Her eyes were dry and sand-paperish with fatigue. Her energy flagged, she felt washed out, drained, yet at the same time, she was wanted and wanted it and—

She steadied herself with a hand on the table. Oh damn, everything was so jumbled up.

"Game's over. " His arm snaked out and a hand gripped her wrist. He pulled her towards the bedroom.

"You—" she erupted, dragging behind him.

He half pulled, half pushed her the few paces to the other room. "You're going to bed," he said and she let out a shriek. "Stop that," he thundered. "I'm not going to—"

“Let me go,” Tilla raged as they swung into the bedroom, her rumpled sheets an invitation. She stared for long seconds in horror as the bed loomed under her.

“Certainly.” He dumped her ungracefully on the big bed, retrieved the sheet, found a blanket, and threw them at her. “I may be a little drunk, but I’ve never had to fight a woman for what I want. And it looked as if you very much wanted it, as much as me. I was mistaken, I’m sorry.” He bent over her. “I certainly don’t intend to fight with a cold and waspish thing like you.”

Her mouth dropped open as he marched out of the room.

Cold?

Her raging fever was anything but cold. She spun around wildly on the bed, grabbed the pillows and slipped quickly under the quilt, fully clothed.

Cold? Cold?

The flickering light after she heard him huff out the candles. He cursed again as he stumbled over another box on the floor. She heard a zipper open, boots thud on the floor, then nothing for a moment or two but a whoosh of cool air...

The mattress dipped.

He slipped in beside her. Naked. Powerful. Warm and all male.

Oh, no.

He lay on his back, not touching her at all. She knew he was naked, all right.

Nay-ked.

Naked male at less than one hundred millimetres.

Her teeth were clenched. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not peeling potatoes. Are you cold? You still sound it.”

“No.” The last thing she could’ve resisted was Kent Taylor warming her up.

“Good,” he said and dragged the extra blanket over himself. “I am.”

“There’s a swag in the loft, why don’t you use it?” She maintained rigid distance in case his warmth should encourage her to—

“Because I like it here. It’s not like the bed’s tiny. It’s a bloody king-size.” He loomed over her on one elbow, his face close to hers as she involuntarily rolled towards him. “Perhaps you’d prefer the swag.”

To get out of bed she would have to climb over him, or crawl out the end of the bed under the quilt. Either way, she didn't dare move. The thought of crawling over his body sent wild and naughty flutters through her. The idea of crawling under the quilt to the end of the bed left her particularly breathless.

She would have to slide over warm, hard male flesh, glide out of strong male arms, slink over long male legs, agitate a lot of testosterone...

That big body was too close. Warm beside her, so nay-ked, and his chest covered in coarse black hair that pitched down to his—to that...

Her chest constricted with a thrill. Oh.

With a curt nod, he lay down and settled on to his back, not touching her.

His breathing slowed. She sank back on the pillow. He would have to leave tomorrow. He'd have to.

Otherwise she'd never control herself.

She waited until his breathing evened out, until his body relaxed. She was sure he was asleep but she stayed completely still, not daring to touch the broad back or the warm skin in case he turned back to her and ravaged her for the night. The whole night!

If she drifted off to sleep, she might accidentally touch him and ignite the whole thing... she couldn't sleep. She had to stay awake.

His soft, even breathing lulled her. Hypnotic...and he wasn't even awake! He moved a little, one leg rested against hers. And she held her breath.

Warmth. Hair. Muscle.

He moved again and she inched back just a little to keep from ... well, snuggling. No, no snuggling. Snuggling is out.

His weight in the bed meant she had a struggle to keep from sliding towards him. She was tired but wired – how the hell was she going to manage this?

Tilla made herself become still, listened to the rhythmic, beautiful sound of a man breathing beside her, asleep – and not snoring – and completely in a zone which excluded her. On the inside at least.

She would perch on the edge of the bed and be careful not to slip into the middle space.

A girl should just get up and go sleep on the lounge thingy, but then there was the issue of having to crawl over him ... no...

She'd just have to stay awake, aware, and *not* drift off... which she wasn't about to do—

Just go to sleep, old mate, Kent thought. Just drift off to the Land of Nod and ignore that luscious, ripe body not more than a breath from you. Ignore the sweet perfume floating over you. Forget about the soft flesh of that full breast you had in your hand, and that silky thigh. Shake your head and forget the warmth of her body over you.

Tilla Cormack was TC. In this bed and this cabin for at least the next few days if not longer. He closed his eyes and stifled a groan. He should just roll over, let her tear his clothes off. There she was. In the same bed. And he was more than ready.

The few drinks had begun to let up on him, and his thoughts were crystal clear. Yet he lay there fighting to control his deepest urge. He just couldn't go there. Could he resist?

Don't think about it ... Think about playing along with the game. Think about how interesting it might turn out to be. And right here in this isolated hideaway.

Think cool thoughts. Don't think of her ... Don't touch her ...

He rolled over, his erection cramped under him. He breathed steadily, inducing the sleep he knew would come.

Tomorrow would be a better day.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tilla popped awake, only to find she was alone in the bed, across it diagonally with the sheet tangled about her legs.

He must have left the bed some time earlier, but she hadn't woken when he did. She kicked off the covers, sat on the edge of the bed, groggy.

She checked the open space at the foot of the bed and the vista of ocean stretching before her. Breathed deeply. Stretched.

Coffee was brewing.

She grabbed clean clothes, stepped into the living area on her way to the bathroom and stopped. He wore only a towel as he stood at the breakfast bench.

"Good morning." He smiled at her.

Staring at his black hair, wet from the shower and slicked back over his head, she clutched her towel. Remembering the smooth, muscly warmth of him the night before heat bloomed across her face.

"Morning," she croaked, and felt decidedly sleep-yuk in her rumpled clothes.

"Juice?" he offered and held out a glass.

She shook her head. And watched as the muscles rippled and waved over his chest. Her toes tingled as the heat burned its way down to her feet.

"Bathroom's free." He gestured towards the open door.

She moved before that glint in his eye flickered over her one more time. Showering fast to save water, she frothed shampoo through her hair, soaped up and rinsed from head to toe. Stepped out, dried off, brushed her teeth, and climbed into clean jeans and a loose shirt.

When she emerged from the steamy bathroom Kent was sorting through the boxes of food.

She looked around for her bags. "Um—where are all my...?"

"They're in the bedroom," he said, watching her.

Tilla dragged her gaze from his face, turned then stopped at what had been the open entrance to the little bedroom. While she showered, he'd pinned a rug over the doorway. She looked back at him.

He shrugged. "Some privacy for you," he said. "I may have been a little bit... over the top last night, but I can assure you I am perfectly safe to be around."

Tilla doubted it. Not for her. But it was at the very least some sort of apology and the almost sheepish look on his face counted for much. Her heart thumped. "Thanks."

She licked her lips and wondered idly where she'd put that new perfume. She padded back to the room, ducked under the rug and saw he'd made the bed and had stacked her bags neatly at the foot of it.

It looked as if he were trying to make amends. Things would be better today.

Rummaging through her toiletries, she found the new perfume and sprayed a quick mist of floral scent under the collar of her shirt and stepped into the living room.

Dragging fingers through her wet hair, she tried not to meet his dark eyes. It was useless. Hers were drawn to his like bees are drawn to pollen.

Irresistibly. Naturally. As if her life depended on it.

He adjusted the towel. "I think there's a solution." He leaned over the bench and looked at her, his voice conciliatory.

Honeyed, she thought. That sent a peculiar little wave through her belly. She stilled it instantly. There'd be none of that. This was not good regardless of how stunning he looked in that towel.

"Oh? Are you leaving this morning?" Her sting was impulsive. Suddenly defensive. The black eyes glittered and her hormones somersaulted.

"No, I'm not. I can't. I'm on foot, just like you are. How long are you booked here for?"

"Four weeks."

"So, we have four weeks. Together." He spread his hands. "We should be able to act like adults."

"Can you?" She sounded cooler than she felt. Steam was surely coming from her ears. Her chest. Her undies.

“So, the frosty TC is back.”

“Remember you said I was a cold wimp.”

“Wasp,” he corrected, taking a long swallow of juice.

Tilla watched his Adam’s apple bob up and down and her insides bobbed with it. The steam previously curling from her ears had condensed and was now snaking down her back in rivulets.

Kent looked at her. “I’ve been wondering this morning, while you were snoring, about how a personal assistant can afford this place for four weeks of the year. It isn’t cheap.”

“That’s not your business.”

“Not to mention the Saab,” he continued.

“How do you know what car I drive?” Tilla should’ve swallowed the hot retort. How was she going to manage four weeks if this bickering would continue – as well as the inevitable running around the kitchen table? Well, that wasn’t exactly what she had in mind when she thought of Kent Taylor. It certainly had nothing to do with the kitchen table. Certainly not. Then again, it could have, she supposed, maybe at least once ... She inhaled sharply. “I don’t have to prove anything.”

“Perhaps someone foots the bill.”

“I pay for it,” she bit back. “With my own salary. I pay for my car. And I assure you, I pay for the holiday house.” It wasn’t actually a lie, just not all of the truth. Her sister didn’t charge her, but she did pay for the supplies. The truth was her managing director’s salary could adequately cover six months in a place like this. And the car repayments.

“A thousand a week rental is a lot of money for an office girl. Why didn’t you go to Bali or another resort island?”

“You’re patronising.”

“You haven’t answered the question.”

She sighed dramatically. “I like the solitude.”

He made some derogatory noise. “No contact with anyone? Why?”

“Why what? I like the solitude,” Tilla repeated, angry she felt compelled to defend herself. “I’m entitled to have the holiday I want. What fool wants to invite work on a holiday?” *Oh. Whoops.*

“I see.” He straightened. “Were you intending to meet someone?”

“What?”

“Some lover?”

“Where’d that come from? Honestly, and what business is it of yours?” Surely he was joking. A lover? She wished. There hadn’t been a real man in her life for an age. Perhaps she did need someone. Like Kent Taylor. She laughed aloud at the audacious thought.

Kent’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll see who laughs loudest in four weeks. If this is the same deal you have with Jim, there won’t be any relief from each other for the next two weeks until he comes to drop off more supplies. Speaking of Jim,” he mused. “I wonder why he didn’t mention to me you were here?”

Tilla shrugged. Why, indeed. “Jim is old school. A gentleman,” she remarked pointedly. “Very discreet. Even if he thought it was out of the ordinary, he wouldn’t have said anything.” She remembered Jim’s momentary frown in the vehicle on the way out here. Maybe he’d known that Kent Taylor was also booked in.

“You’re right. And I’m afraid I don’t remember too much of the conversation with Jim.”

The towel drifted and Tilla struggled to keep her gaze from drifting with it. Concentrate on his chest. No – shoulders. No – navel. Big no-no. Up. Up! Upper body. Anything but the towel.

“We’re adults, we’ve established that much at least,” he said. “And we’re not walking hormones. I propose we both stay and have the holiday we intended to have. A pleasant one. Separately together.”

He leaned on the bench and folded his arms across his chest, that broad chest covered in a mat of black, springy hair. A hum throbbed in hormone-central.

“And have you got as far as the sleeping arrangements?” Oh, there wasn’t anything on her mind, was there?

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Certainly. There’s only one bed.”

“Don’t be funny.”

“I’ll toss a coin.”

“Fine. Then toss away,” she said, grabbing her bang and scrummaging into its depths. She dug out a dollar coin and tossed it to him. “Heads, I get the bed.”

He snatched it from the air, flipped the coin and slapped it on his wrist. Stared. “Damn. Two out of three,” he insisted.

She won, two out of three. He made a noise, maybe a grunt, she decided.

Pleased with herself, she took the five paces to the little bedroom and unpacked her gear, only to find wherever she wanted to put her stuff, he had his. He’d done a lot of work making himself at home whilst she showered.

Made it look really cosy.

He leaned casually on the doorway to the bedroom, the heavy rug held up by a powerful arm.

So much for her privacy, she thought. Don’t look at the towel.

“I see your boss generously loaned her luggage.”

“What?” Of course. Her name – Tilla Cormack – was plastered all over the bags. “Oh yes,” she said. “She’s great like that.”

“She’s great?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I thought she’d be an old battle-axe.”

“Really? You haven’t even met her.”

“Not sure I’d like to. I might tell her what I think of her.”

And she, you, mate.

“Known her long?” he asked, resting on the door jamb, studying his fingers.

“Oh, forever, really.” Don’t look at the towel.

“She married?”

“No.”

“Boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Anyhow, how old would she be – forty, forty-five? And no man by now?”

Tilla bridled. “Around thirty or so. And men probably don’t know what’s good for them.”

“Probably got six cats.”

“One dog.” Wonderful Bippy.

“Well, I’ll meet the old battle-axe one day, I suppose. I’ll make a point of it. Tell her exactly how I feel about her staff crashing my holiday.” Kent turned and undid the knot of his towel. “I’m going fishing. See you when I get back.”

Tilla didn’t resist the chance to stare at him when his back was turned. He hadn’t quite reached the bathroom when the towel slid from his body and she was rewarded with an eyeful of bunching, rippling, taut, male flesh. Delightfully tight bum cheeks...

Oh man.

She steadied herself with a hand on the wall. He hadn’t bothered to close the bathroom door as he dragged on his undies, then shorts, then he stretched into a t-shirt, un-ironed. It was the most marvellous sight she’d seen in years.

I’ll just keel over and die with my leg in the air if he catches me looking at him.

She watched from the bedroom window as he disappeared with a large fishing rod down the little gully.

Her shoulders sagged. Peace at last. She whooped in a great breath of air, felt her lungs expand painfully.

Peace? You’ll get no peace. You got a close look at that tight backside, the broad, heavily muscled back. You’ve seen how he switches on the charm— And last night? You wouldn’t have resisted for one minute if he ever got serious... What would he feel like with your legs wrapped around his hips as he—

Peace? You’re joking. If he ever got serious ...

If he ever got serious ... He hadn’t tried to take advantage of the situation the night before – even outside her home the night of the dinner, when he could’ve dragged her off by the straps of her dress. And last night, he resisted throwing himself over her as she lay beside him.

Which was highly commendable, in a damnable sort of way. How had she resisted him?

We were both on edge last night.

However restrained they'd managed to be, civil behaviour wouldn't last long. She would have little power to combat a determined effort on his part. Or her part if she couldn't keep herself under control.

She shivered in delicious anticipation, then shook herself. She was dealing with fire and her charred remains would be left smoking in a little pile of useless ash.

And she should've come clean on her real identity. He wouldn't like being played the fool ... She shivered again. To feel this naughty was simply divine.

Tilla had heard him on the telephone in his office, wheeling and dealing and totally ruthless. He always got what he wanted there. The contracts fell into his lap as he negotiated hard, cutting the throats of the opposition. He was a workaholic, charged with adrenalin, a sharp intelligence astutely guided him day by day. He had everything he wanted. Took what he wanted. Would not gladly suffer deceit such as hers at all.

She'd have to be on her guard. And for all sorts of reasons, none the least because she wanted him. Only one thing sustained the last shred of her resistance, held her back from giving everything.

She knew nothing about him. Was there a wife? A girlfriend? A man like Kent Taylor would not be a man who lived without a woman somewhere in his life.

And if she gave in to her need of him, where would it leave her in the end?

Kent cast his line into azure blue water at the base of the cliff.

She was Tilla Cormack. TC, not Tracy. How had he got that message wrong? He could have sworn she'd said...

He shrugged. No use going over and over it again.

When he stumbled over – into her handbag last night and found her credit cards, he wasn't quick enough in his stupor to question her. It didn't matter. He'd like to see how far she'd take the little charade.

This morning, early, Kent stood by the bed as she slept. He looked at the tantalising swell of breast encased in her loose shirt, her arm flung over her head as she slept. He wanted to unbutton the shirt, stroke her skin, cup her breast in his hand and lower his lips to a pert, rosy nipple...

Tilla Cormack. This was the woman he wanted to work for him in the new operation.

He wanted her for more than just work.

He let the line dangle as waves lapped the rocky shore beneath his feet.

The deal had all but closed and he and Peter Wilson would be ready to begin one of the biggest takeovers he was ever likely to be involved in. He needed good people by him and Tilla Cormack was one of the best. He'd heard she was a hard head in business, but never thought more of it. They moved in completely different corporate circles. And he'd previously thought Tilla Cormack to be in her late forties and well married. Certainly not the creature he'd watched sail into his office last week, almost literally as she draped the floor of the lift, then knock his eyes out.

Not only had he met her as temp. staff, but she was inexplicably here, for four weeks in this wonderful hideaway, and he had her all to himself.

How was he going to convince Tilla Cormack to work for him? Or anything else for that matter.

The line tugged and he reeled in a small fish. Mullet. He threw it back.

He'd wanted to wake her, whisper softly as she roused, and hug into her warmth. He'd wanted to draw her close before she woke, wanted the kisses she'd offer as she reached sleepily for him. His erection had been immediate and strong. He headed straight for the shower before she could wake screaming at his no-mistaking-what-I-want morning thing.

He smiled as he remembered breakfast. Little ol' Tilla Cormack had been just a wee bit breathless as she climbed out of bed.

Their bed, he thought. He'd have to make good use of it soon. What better way to clinch a deal with a woman than make love to her and tell her he needed her in his life.

He laughed out loud. What was he thinking? He was throwing himself from the pot to the fire. Wasn't Janet, his soon-to-be ex-wife enough to turn a man off women for good?

Clearly not.

He studied the thought. Tilla Cormack in his life. From now on. In his business and his bed. What would be so bad? She had independent means, was beautiful, intelligent, could hold a conversation with his peers. Her peers. And he liked her.

It had to stop. No, he could do it.

Kent, mate, you're digging a hole.

It was nearly dusk before he emerged from the gully.

Tilla sat on the front veranda, watching a wallaby and her joey fossick about for young shoots of new grass. They skittered away, the joey diving head-first into its mother's pouch, its paws and legs akimbo as she hopped away laden with her offspring.

He stopped a few metres from her and stared after the wallaby. "Wouldn't have thought they'd come out this early," he commented idly.

"Why not?"

"They're mostly nocturnal." He looked at her. "You'd have known that."

She shrugged. "Never gave it much thought. They're often out here at this time."

"There's lots of activity after dark, as well."

She turned her head back to the setting sun. Of course there's lots of activity after dark. Don't start on me now, she thought. "I usually have alfalfa pellets out for them. Encourages them to stay around the house. I like seeing wildlife around. Outside."

He came closer. Tilla took a long sip of cool wine, concentrated on the sun's glow rather than the shine of his sun-laden skin. He was windswept, wild and magnificent. When her heart did little maniacal leaps. She made a mental note to get a heart monitor when she got back. There was something wrong with her.

"Looks good," Kent said indicating her long glass and the bottle of wine at her feet. "Mind if I join you?" He didn't wait for an answer, disappeared inside the cabin to return with a glass of his own. He squatted beside her chair, helping himself to a generous amount of wine. He sipped and his brows rose in appreciation. He eyed the label on the bottle. "I see your salary also stretches to the finest wines in the state."

Tilla sucked in her cheeks. Another bout of jousting. "I am very good at what I do, and so I get paid very well."

"I'm sure. Tell me, what is a good assistant worth these days? An hourly rate?"

"You don't know?" she fenced. "Don't you sign the cheque?"

"Humour me." His gaze slid over her face in the fading light.

"Depends on their skills, speed, accuracy. Their experience. Anywhere up to a hundred dollars an hour and more for the best." Tilla let out a small breath. Surely he knew that.

Kent saluted her with his glass. "Then you must be one of the best."

"You said so yourself last week," she tacked and refilled her glass.

The sun bobbed for an instant above the horizon then dropped dramatically, with an almost audible sigh as it sunk from view, only the orange glow of its presence lighting the low western sky.

The silence between them lengthened. First he would sip his wine, then she.

Tilla wished it could have been a companionable silence, but it wasn't. It was stiff and formal, accentuating the bouts of points scored. Uncomfortable, she wished she'd gone inside earlier.

He let his legs slip out from under him sat on the veranda pavement beside her chair, his salt sprayed head of hair at her elbow. The smell of the sea on him teased her, tightened her belly and she absently licked her lips, wanting to taste hot skin.

"There's something so peaceful about this place." He stared at the sun bobbing low on the horizon. "I can hear the ocean, I can see the river and nothing can reach me. Nothing. It's kind of special to be out here, and with no one else." He hesitated. "I mean, without the madding crowd."

She, too had wanted to be alone, to purge herself of the pressures of work. To relax, sleeping and dreaming comfortably without fear of being disturbed. Now he was here and he wasn't going to go. Paradise spoiled.

Or was it just Paradise?

Tilla reviewed her dream of total solitude. Suddenly it looked awry, empty and cockeyed. She closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair, her elbow brushing his hair.

Was it empty before and she was too busy to notice? Was she just hiding from the world, setting the pace for her hectic work schedule so she wouldn't have to face the fact she had no other life?

She'd lose herself in her books, her daydreams, her walks. But there was no one to share with, and no one to hold.

She pursed her lips. Silly female.

"I'm going in." He hauled himself to his feet. "Got a little sun today and now I'm feeling chilly. Cool breeze on hot skin."

Exactly how his breath would feel on her. Tilla sucked her lips. She turned in her chair and watched as he padded inside and went to the bathroom, emerging a minute or two later still without a shirt. Her heart rattled loudly as he sauntered across to the prepared lantern and lit it, very much at home.

Of course he was, he'd probably been coming here for as long as she had. She wondered if Diss had met him, but didn't think so. She'd have told her about Kent Taylor, for sure.

He took a candle with him and went back to the bathroom. She heard the shower rush on.

He'd be trouble, no question about it. Tilla Cormack could not risk devouring him here and then being rejected by him back in Adelaide.

The bathroom door slipped ajar, but it revealed nothing too dangerous – broad back, strong, long legs, interesting bare bum.

Interesting?

She turned away, tried to keep her mouth closed.

Tilla picked up the half empty bottle of wine and walked inside. It was warmer in, not that she needed it, but her skin was cool after the twilight air. She knelt and lit the little fire she'd set earlier, watching its flames leap greedily over the kindling.

She retrieved her book, settled on the settee in front of the fire and tried to concentrate at her bookmarked page.

Ludicrous. She couldn't focus on the words when her mind's eye was on his butt. His back ... the imagined sight of his front—

It's night time again, her head sing-songed. She'd only had a glass and a half. A delicious thrill rocketed down her spine as thoughts of frenzied nights crowded her brain.

She could spend the most idyllic four weeks of her life if she worked this the right way. She could forget that she worked for him, forget the anger that lay between them. And was it anger or the basic need for sex and the excitement of suppressing it? Lust in the dust.

She'd be gentle with him, draw out that deliciously wicked side of him which had emerged subtly at Crofter's launch. Soften him up a little, Tilla. Better with sugar than vinegar.

Tilla laughed at herself. She was hardly the one in control. But if she was clever, she could enjoy herself here, and not waste her holiday at all.

Kent emerged from the bathroom, respectable in a clean pair of shorts. He rummaged in his bags and came up with a clean shirt, throwing it over his head and shoulders. He opened a cupboard and retrieved a second tilly lamp, lit it and set it on the stove.

"Have you eaten?" he asked, and smiled at her.

"Yes," she replied. "Thanks, anyway." She smiled back, needing to be friendly and warm. Suddenly, it ached inside to be friendly and warm.

Tilla watched as he prepared himself something to eat. He must've been ravenous – he'd been out since breakfast and the only thing she'd seen him have was the orange juice.

"You didn't catch any fish?"

"Heaps, all mullet. Threw them back. I'd die of starvation in the wild." He grinned.

Tilla doubted that. She closed her book, more than curious about him. "I've been wondering how it is you're able to leave work for four weeks at a time. You don't have a manager, and the place is certainly busy every minute. Aren't you worried after Keith's episode that it won't survive without you?"

His face twisted momentarily. "It's in good hands." He glanced at her. "I once had a full time partner and she ... graciously offers to look after the place while I'm away. She also gets well paid." His sarcasm was heavy.

“Who is she?”

“My wife.”

The thud in Tilla’s chest reverberated off the walls around her. It must have. It roared loud in her ears.

His wife. He had a wife. Well, that’s fixed that. Stable those hormones, girl. He’s outta bounds. “You – you come away for four weeks at a time to this lonely spot without your wife?”

“Wait, wait, wait. Don’t go thinking I’m some sort of complete arse. I should’ve said, my soon-to-be ex-wife.”

Yeah, like she believed that one.

“It’s a long, boring story,” he continued and busied himself with a plate of food, sat beside her in front of the fire. “Want some?” he offered. It was a plate of cheese and fruit, just what she’d had.

“No, thank you.”

“Then why is your mouth open?” He popped a strawberry on to her tongue and gently closed her mouth with his hand.

Tilla shifted to make more space between them. Her tongue reacted sharply to the sweet strawberry and her eyes watered.

My wife. Soon-to-be ex or not, it could be just another tack.

“I won’t bite,” he said, softly. “Not tonight, anyway. So tell me,” he settled beside her. “How did you discover this place?”

She chewed and swallowed. “My sister...” *Oops.* “...knows Helen, the agent for the house – I met Helen at an office party, once. Someone asked her along to one of work’s Christmas breakups, thought she could use some temps. Helen and Peter, her husband run a busy computer hardware ...” She looked at him. “Isn’t your friend Peter, the one I met at John Crofter’s, into computer hardware?”

Kent frowned. “Of course – Helen’s his wife. We were talking about the dates of my holiday at the show. They’re one and the same couple.” He shook his head. “Something must’ve gone wrong, unlike them to mix things up. They work as agents for this house for a Radisson Shaw. Know him?”

Tilla shook her head, stunned by the series of coincidences which had brought them together on the island. Radisson Shaw was and not a 'him'. She was Tilla's sister. Radisson Shaw, or Diss as she was known had married young and become a widow not long after. Robert Shaw had died in a boating accident.

And no wonder Peter had asked Tilla if they'd met before; they had met once, very briefly when Helen said her goodbyes at the office party. Peter had come to pick her up.

While the mention of a wife had been a dousing of iced water, it unfortunately only lasted as long as the dousing. In the dull glow of the fire she ordered her hormones down. Down, she repeated to herself.

"How did you start at the agency?" he asked, refilling his glass.

"Answered an ad," she said, shortly.

"Never want to go into business for yourself?" He settled beside her again.

She shot him a wary glance. "I have been."

"Seems you have the experience," he mused.

Tilla shrugged. Her heart was pounding again. If she didn't change the subject she'd have to lie. And she hated lying. Even if it was to him. "And you? You seem to have the cut-throat qualities it takes to succeed."

"Ah yes, the ruthless Kent Taylor. If I wasn't, I'd be down the gurgler. I've had everything I own taken from me once and it won't happen again. These days, I make sure I get what I want on my terms and then I make sure I keep it." He snorted. "Except for the slip up with Keith, that is. Family." He shook his head. "And, of course the business with information leaving my office."

His voice had hardened, and for a minute, Kent Taylor Executive Director was back in their midst.

Not that espionage stuff again, she thought. Next he'll accuse me of being here to spy on him.

He took a large swallow of wine and set his glass down. "Ah, it feels good to relax." He threw his hands behind his head.

Tilla straightened. Now would come the casual creeping of the arm along the back of the settee. Then the unobtrusive dropping of one hand on the shoulder, then the playing with her hair.

Did he think she was a school girl fresh out of class? She closed her book and stood up. "I'm going for a shower, then I'm going to bed."

"Early, isn't it?" He threw a look over her.

His voice was deep and husky, and warm... think thick, chocolate syrup over hot, moist cake ... She rallied, took a couple of candles and stalked into the bathroom, slamming the door shut to make sure it was definitely closed – unlike Mr Kent Taylor's efforts earlier.

She stepped under the shower, conscious the water might not stay hot for too long. Didn't matter, her internal combustion would heat the Snowy River. She soaped up generously and stood under the steaming water until the suds disappeared, then turned the water off, flicked the excess from her skin, stepped from the recess and cast about for her towel.

Her towel.

Oh no, she groaned inwardly. It was still in the bedroom.

She eyed her days' grubby clothes, reluctant to have to climb back into them, especially wet.

His towel hung on the back of the door. She wrapped herself in it, muttering about man-germs. Not the best, but for a two second dash to her room to get her own towel and back again to the bathroom, it would have to do. She'd wash his.

Luckily it was a huge bath sheet, almost a dressing-gown on her. She hitched it up so she wouldn't trip over, wrapped it around her like a sarong, then grabbed the door handle.

The door wouldn't budge. She yanked again. Still nothing.

She jiggled it furiously, first with one hand, then with the other as she clutched the towel around her. A sudden rage welled inside. She shook the door handle with both hands and all her might and with one enormous yank, it came free, sending her sprawling on to the floor, the towel dropping inelegantly around her feet.

And there he was. In the open doorway, his hand outstretched as if he'd been about to help. Lantern light flickered sweetly behind him.

He looked at her, mild surprised lifting his features. "Can I help?" He leaned on the door jamb, folding his arms across his chest and eying her form from head to ... He sucked in his cheeks. "Seems you have a habit of throwing yourself around, in and out of elevators, bathrooms."

Tilla dragged herself back into the towel, trying to cover up completely.

Kent gazed at her sprawling before him. He stifled a grin. "Maybe I shouldn't help. There isn't a lot I could do right now without risking a smack in the face."

Tilla grappled with the thick towel. "What the hell are you laughing at?" She stood up awkwardly, her skin hot and prickly. "And no, you can't help. Don't help," she snapped.

She regained her balance despite stepping on the huge bath sheet and thwarting all her own efforts to stand upright.

Kent's arm lashed out and grabbed the towel wrapped around her, his fingers curling over the thick fold just allowing a peep of cleavage. "Do let me help you."

Just a little off her feet, Tilla's heart hammered as she clutched at his wrists, his warm breath fanning her face. "Put me down."

He shook his head. "Not until I'm sure you're able to stand up without losing the towel." He held her entrapped in it.

"I am perfectly capable of standing up." Her breath came in short, staccato bursts.

If the towel slipped just an inch, one boob would be there in all its glory, right over the palm of his hand. She could already feel the heat of his skin, and her nipple responded in delicious anticipation, anxious for his touch.

His free hand planted itself on her backside, and he pulled her close. "But without the towel, I won't be able to keep my hands off you."

A short, soft breath escaped her before she could stop it, and his mouth on hers effectively preventing a reply. Resistance melted away.

It was tantalising and hungry all at once. Her real need tugged low in her body, an ache she knew how to fix ... oh how well she knew to fix this...

My wife. The cold splash of the words showered her senses. She pushed back, only to stand on the end of the towel at the same time. The result was an almighty wrenching away from him.

Clearly, he did not enjoy that.

“Oh,” she breathed, and clutched the towel in front of her, trying to step off it before she fell over. “I didn’t—”

“You’re not concentrating,” he drawled, a dark gleam of annoyance flickered across his features.

“It’s – it’s the damned towel, it—” Her voice dropped in her throat. “I—”

He tugged her out of the bathroom, and herded her the five paces to the bedroom, flung aside the heavy rug. “Here we go again.”

“Kent.”

He swung her around the end of the bed and allowed her to drop. “Hurry up and get dressed. I told you, I’m not into games.” He stalked off.

Tilla wrenched into her largest t-shirt, pulled on some undies and her track pants, scraped loose hair from her face, rubbed her eyes.

Damn him. He made her want to press her naked body to his, to feel his skin on hers – but she’d have to be crazy. Oh yes, soon-to-be-not-married crap ... or was it just my-wife-doesn’t-understand-me crap?

Or was it just that’s-a-good-excuse-not-to-give-in crap?

Her mouth went dry. Games. Her cheeks flared again. And just whose games were they? He was just as horrible here as he was at the office. But here, she wouldn’t tolerate it. She just would not. There had to be other rules.

She marched out to the lounge room and confronted him at the little fire. “I admit I am not always clear about—”

“Oh, have a drink. Might relax you.” He waved a hand dismissively at her. “You’re strung out.”

Her stomach dropped, and the fight suddenly left her. First a wasp, then game-playing, now strung out. Who said strung out these days? What did he mean, strung out? As if he couldn’t get it through his thick head that she didn’t want to be chased around the kitchen table. Was that her fault? Tilla stared at his face, his features arranged almost carefully.

“Utter bastard,” she muttered and retrieved her book and retreated to the bedroom dived under the covers of the bed. Angry and angry and angry ... and confused.

Kent held his breath. He felt like an utter bastard. What the hell was wrong with him? He let out a whoosh, and stood with his hands outstretched against a wall, his head hanging between. The sight of her, naked and within his grasp sent him mad. Yet, still he waited for her invitation. He must be going crazy. Any other woman and he'd have been all over her. Would've flung her to the floor and—

Tilla buried her face in the pillow. Oh, go away, go away, go away.

She wanted to wipe that cold smirk off his face. She wanted to throw that glass of wine at him. She wanted to—

Her heart thumped. She knew perfectly well what she wanted to do. And if she did, she'd fall hook, line and sinker.

Strung out, was she? The words hurled about in her brain. Strung out. Tilla Cormack, strung out. Can you believe that?

She turned on her side.

She wasn't strung out, she was wired, hot for his body. She squeezed her eyes shut.

My wife.

Soon-to-be-ex.

She tossed, and the t-shirt wrapped itself uncomfortably around her waist. She much preferred cool sheets against her naked skin, but she didn't want to be stark naked if he came into the bed again tonight. Didn't want to give him a completely open invitation. In any case, the thin cotton fabric would be like a brick wall between them if he even attempted ...

Who was she fooling? It'd simply fall away like a mist and he'd find her warm body easily and manipulate her with his clever hands. She drifted off, aware only of her exhaustion as sleep invaded her body.

Sometime during the night, the mattress dipped and he swung himself into the bed. She didn't move, pretended she hadn't woken. Was more frightened of her reaction to him than she was of anything else on this earth.

Tilla thought of the bargain they'd struck – she was to have the bed, and he was to have found somewhere else to sleep. She wasn't going to challenge him, now. Obviously, if a man like Kent Taylor couldn't keep his end of the deal, what use would it be talking to him about it in the dead of night, in the same bed, alone, nearly naked—

She noted with a silent harrumph he hadn't attempted to touch her.

“Sleep well?”

Tilla stood at the threshold of the kitchen. “Like a log. I wasn't at all disturbed last night.” But I'm disturbed this morning, she thought. He wasn't wearing a shirt again, and his shorts drooped lazily around his flat stomach.

He smiled that smile. His eyes glittered. “You weren't disturbed? How interesting. I could've sworn you froze like an Ingham chook when I climbed in.”

“Yep, that's me, frozen solid. Worse than strung out.”

He lifted an eyebrow.

Tilla watched silently as he downed a glass of orange juice. This morning, she noted, he wasn't offering any.

“Thank you, I won't have breakfast,” she said, sweetly. Sweetly like Lady Macbeth would've been sweetly.

“Looks like we're in for a nasty weather change.” He indicated the view from the window.

Tilla glanced outside. Rolling up from the north-west huge clouds billowed, darkening the sky and threatening the ocean. Waves crested in white peaks and the roll of the water was disturbed and menacing.

She forgot her pique. She went to the window and stood staring out to sea. “It's magnificent, isn't it? The change here is so quick, so—”

He was behind her, standing so close the warmth of his breath on her neck was as intimate as if he'd kissed her there.

“It'd be spectacular at the mouth of the river, now. Why don't you come down there with me?”

Tilla felt the vibration of his lips on her skin. He must be that close ... After a moment, she shrugged and turned to look at him. "All right."

He grinned with surprise and her heart crumpled in her chest. Any wonder she wanted to jump on him and cuddle him.

Did one cuddle a number one alpha male?

He grabbed a huge aran knit jumper draped over a breakfast stool and tossed it on, slipped his feet into a pair of well worn leather boaties.

If he looked any better she'd have died and gone to heaven.

Tilla tried her best to casually slip back to the little bedroom. Once inside, she frantically shucked her bike shorts and dragged on a pair of track pants, slipped into her own pair of boaties and climbed into a loose, long, windcheater.

They met at the door to the veranda. He smiled a megawatt smile and beneath the dazzling light, her mind bellowed Wife Wife Wife.

He touched her hand. "I'm sorry about last night."

She didn't pull away but nodded, wordlessly. His light caress seared a delicious welt over her. Where was his cave? She was ready. She'd even club herself over the head and climb on to his shoulder...

Married.

He opened the door and she glided past, careful not to look at him or touch him. She was hot all over, and longed for a cool splash of common sense.

The chill wind did that for her. The gentle breeze of overnight had whipped itself into a stiff blast which stung her cheeks and flicked her hair back and forth across her face.

They wound their way down the little gully to the river mouth. She slipped on some rocks a couple of times, but he offered nothing more than a glance to check she was still upright.

Reaching the beach she found on a boulder to sit and watch breakers crash into the shallow mouth of the Delaney River. He stood not far from her, and the long line of his body under that very inviting pullover was like a still shot from a movie. She'd love right now to slip her arms under that jumper and smooch up into his warmth,

run her hands over that flat, furry stomach, upwards to his smooth muscled chest and over his strong neck to stroke the hard jaw.

Whoa.

Dark hair whipped from his face by the full force of the north-westerly, and she watched as he threw his head back and opened his arms wide. “Great, isn’t it?” He shouted above the din of roaring wind.

Why didn’t she simply launch herself at him and be done with it? Land on top of him like a beached whale and throw him to the ground at her utter mercy.

She eyed the cliff just beyond. Better not. She might drive them – *whoosh* – over the cliff. Terrible mistake.

“This is what I came for,” he yelled. “What about you?”

His broad grin took her by surprise. Tilla looked out to the ocean whipping up a frenzy as the weather struck. “Oh, yes. The wildness in it is magnificent...” Her voice trailed off. *Wildness.*

The weather worsened as they stood there. Tilla longed to step closer to him, to stand under his arm and be protected by the wonderful big body before her. He looked as if he belonged, all invigorating man. *Wildness.*

Everything tingled. Everything was on high alert. She. Just. Wanted. Him. Inside. Her.

Too much. They’d drown out here.

“I’m going back to the house,” she shouted. *Forces of mother nature and all that, but I’m not getting pneumonia for anything.*

She made a dash up the rocky slope as the first sharp, heavy pelt of rain came down, and slipped. “Awwk...”

She turned and grabbed a small shrub as her backside hit the ground heavily just a split second before he crashed into her, lost his footing and sprawled over her when she fell.

“Sorry, slipped... and I can’t get any traction...” He scrambled to get off her.

Great splashes of rainwater rushed in her open mouth. She sputtered. “I can’t move. Get off me.” Her backside on the rocks underneath were not as compatible as his hips were on hers.

“No way,” he yelled over the noise of the sudden rainstorm. “Think of it as adventure. Let’s stay and get wet and wild, right here...” He pressed chilled lips against her ear. “Better close your mouth.”

His voice vibrated through her as rain pelted on to her face. She blinked rapidly, tried to keep it out of her nose, desperate not to drown on dry land. Wet land, she corrected herself. Her squinty gaze fixed on that mouth hovering above hers and warmth flooded her even as the chill of rainwater seeped through her clothes.

He shouldn’t have pushed his hips on hers. He shouldn’t be pressing his body just over that tormented area of hers.

He shouldn’t kiss her just that way, demanding responses, demanding...

Her arms wound around his neck. Survival, she told herself. That’s all it is. I could drown if I don’t hang on to him. If I kiss him back I’ll be saved—

Driving rain pounded and ran like a torrent over them both. The slope greedily absorbed the torrent from above and she yelped as they inched, slid, towards the rocks below.

“Don’t worry,” he shouted above the din. “I’ve dug in.”

A dark and romantic end to Tilla’s life flashed before her as they slipped again towards the small cliff edge, locked together from head to toe. A boom of thunder bellowed two metres above and she yelled with fright in his ear.

“Ssh,” Kent soothed, close again. “Only thunder.”

His hand irresponsibly lost its grip on a secure rocky outcrop to bury itself in her wet hair and drag her face closer to his. Then it left her hair, scraped over her cheek, held her chin. It slipped under her heavy, wet windcheater and shivered a trail over her ribs, brushed over a wet bra-encased breast.

He was supposed to be saving them from death by rock slide and drowning!

Maybe she’d already drowned and gone to heaven. The swirly heat within, urgent and demanding spilled through her as the palm of his hand slid behind her, pressed on her back and drew her to him. Her arms around his neck had no reason to move even though needles of freezing water trickled between them and chilled her bare skin.

Tilla barely noticed the rain sneaking under her clothes and saturating her legs. Her hands curled in his wet hair as a tingle of pleasure curled in her belly.

They slipped again and he cursed, raising his head to check their position on the slope. Icy cold pelting rain stung her neck, and this time she gasped in shock.

“I don’t want to slide into the bloody ocean!” She had to shout above the roar of wind-driven rain and the fierce waves ten metres below.

His legs moved solidly against the rocky slope. “It’s all right ... I’m up against a ledge.”

“What?” She was hanging on to him for dear life.

“I’ll try to stand us up,” he shouted in her ear.

“No!” Tilla gripped his arms fiercely.

“All right, I won’t try. We’re all right, I’ve wedged my foot against a rock. It’ll pass soon.” His lips were close to her ear, warm and soothing.

Still clutching his arms, she felt the earth, wet from the deluge slide out from under her. Her eyes met his as he shouted something.

A bolt of lightning pierced the sky and sliced into the hill opposite on the other side of the river.

She screamed in fright.

Kent shushed her again, his face close to hers, his cheek pressed hers.

“Five more minutes and it’ll pass,” he murmured in her ear.

Kent knew she was terrified—hell, he was terrified—but he knew it’d dissipate quickly. Australis Island’s storms rarely lasted long enough to have a good cup of coffee. Or two. Besides, he found himself enjoying the terror of this one and not really wanting to move at all.

He slipped again, scraped around the outcrop for another foothold and found one, but not before Tilla’s arms had wrapped more tightly around his. Her feet had dug in, too.

He breathed a sigh of relief and she looked up at him, blinking rapidly as rain pelted on her face.

“...not hail.”

He grinned at her and nodded. Thankfully, it wasn't hail. And thankfully she hadn't thought to try and crack him over the head for his little exploratory diversion under her clothes a moment ago.

God save him, he couldn't help himself.

The storm lashed the slope for an interminable period of time, minutes and minutes. Tilla's feet were jammed against a rock embedded in the hillside and so was Kent's foot. She struggled to be more comfortable under him, and with every move, he made her more uncomfortable. Especially where his weight dropped over her thighs.

His grinning face above hers was irreverent. Another crack of thunder, close but not overhead had her gripping his arms tightly and she pressed her face into his neck.

And then, she put her mouth to his skin. He smelled of the damp earth around him, of sea salt and of the faint spicy, woody scent of his aftershave. Her tongue tasted the salt on him, and the cool fresh water.

God save her, she couldn't help herself.

He looked down at her, smiled his slow smile and covered her mouth with his.

Tilla sighed, nipped and sucked his lower lip. His erection snug against her reminded her he was intent on his prize, a very healthy male out for a mate. Two nights ago she'd have smacked his face. Now, she should smack her own face. A big loud wallop. She was encouraging a married man, knowingly. Lovingly. Loving it ...

Rain pattered to a halt, threw a few teasing drops on to them as they assessed the situation, then it halted altogether. She licked sweet water from her lips, and tasted him.

Kent thought he would burst, mainly because of the pressure in his jocks. Here they were, half drowned, sliding into geographical oblivion and all he could think of—feel—was his raging ... He grunted. He'd have to get her back inside.

“Are you all right?” he asked as Tilla squirmed out from under him, almost knocking him senseless as her hips slid along his erection. He took a deep breath to steady himself.

“I think so. My feet are killing me.”

His feet weren't killing him.

They organised themselves into a sitting position and brushed ridiculously at sodden clothing. Kent had mud everywhere. Tilla had it caked in her hair.

He looked about them, watched as the weakening rivulets of water rushed by. “It’ll be tricky standing up – try to grab hold of something.” He stood tentatively. “And before that breaks over our heads.” They both watched as the swirling black clouds only a few hundred metres out to sea billowed towards them. “All right, let’s go.” He took one of her hands and they hauled themselves up the slope, grabbing shrubs and small tree branches as they went, slipping, sliding and finally laughing.

Tilla had taken his hand, a simple gesture. His touch was anything but simple for her, a rush of unspoken wants and needs. As she clambered up, his fingers curled more tightly around her hand.

He let her go as soon as she steadied herself, then they dashed back to the veranda.

The rain smashed down again, stinging their faces and dripping, bouncing off their heads. Tilla laughed as water lashed them under the veranda, suddenly glad all over again that she was here.

“I like it when you smile.” He stood close.

“I like smiling.” She pushed wet hair from her face, and shook the water from her legs. “I’m going in.” She kicked off her boaties, left them in a heap by the sliding door and padded inside.

She headed for the bedroom to grab fresh clothes – and her towel – then to the bathroom. Peeled off the sodden, muddy trackies and jumper and shoved them into the washer. She stepped under the shower to warm up and wash the mud out of her hair. When done, she dried off and climbed into fresh undies, clean jeans and a soft chambray shirt.

All too aware of that smile of his, and that heat which came from him, burning the air around her skin... let alone the merry glint in his eyes, she’d gotten out of his reach as fast as possible to settle those topsy-turvy hormones.

She had to set things straight.

Tilla found him rekindling the fire in the lounge-room. She had full intentions of telling him, that isolated or not, he was married and she wanted no part of an affair with a married man, soon-to-be-ex or not. She'd be there faster than a speeding bullet the moment he was fully ex'd, but she wouldn't say that.

She opened her mouth then closed it. Her body ached. So did her head.

He'd removed his wet jumper, shirt and pants and slung them by the fire to dry. Wet shorts clung to his body and the shape of his backside was clear through the fabric, the smooth honey-coloured skin most tempting beneath.

Her mouth went dry. She was still staring when he turned around. Graceful, his skin lightly tanned, healthy and glowing, and the broad chest naked, she longed to touch him. The memory of his body on hers...

She knew she needed water. Not for drinking, she decided suddenly, but for being dunked in, like a cold bath, or like that ocean out there. Again.

"Shouldn't take long to warm the place up," he said. "Coffee?"

"I'll make it."

"Great. I'll get into some dry clothes." He headed for the bedroom and emerged moments later in a pair of faded jeans and a t-shirt.

Almost nothing stopped her launching herself bodily at him and taking precious hours making love and ... Except— he was *Married and Misunderstood*. At least that's the handy excuse of the moment, anyway.

And whose handy excuse was it again?

Coffee, she concentrated. They both had theirs black. That part was easy. Her hands shook. For God's sake. It's broad daylight, barely midday. Get a grip, Tilla Cormack.

She'd poured two cups of rich, strong plunger when he came up behind her. Tall, powerful and a whisker away.

"That was great fun."

"Bit scary."

"So, your boss comes out here, too?" he asked, reaching over her shoulder for his cup. He breathed in the aroma of roasted espresso, then lifted a lock of damp hair from her neck.

All there was in the universe was his warm hand on her cool flesh. “Who? Oh. Yes. Gets away from it all, you know, can’t plug in a laptop, can’t use the phone, that sort of thing.”

“She been coming here for a while?”

His fingers tidied more loose hair beginning to curl at her neck. The brush of his hand on her shoulder electrified her. “Oh, about five years.”

“I see.” His fingertips ghosted the nape of her neck.

Tilla turned and looked at him. That was as far as she wanted the conversation to go. She backed a step away and then turned and took another. Walking from the kitchen with her cup, she retrieved her previously discarded book and sat at the dining table, her back to him.

He moved into her space again, sat beside her at the table, cupping his coffee mug with both hands, close. “What time of year does she generally come here?”

Talking about herself in the third person was unnerving. “About this time, actually, most years.” She opened her book shakily, fumbling with the bookmark.

“Oh? And she’s gone somewhere else this year?”

“Well—er, she mentioned something. I was called in to do your job last minute, and I didn’t really have much time to catch up.”

“What does she look like?”

Tilla shifted in her seat. This was uncomfortable. “Oh, you know.” She shrugged.

“You said she’s about thirty. Let me guess—she’s dumpy, wears old fashioned specs, has a big nose, a big bum and doesn’t like men.”

“Certainly not. She likes men. And they, um, seem to like her. She’s just discerning, chooses carefully. Doesn’t seem to go for the overbearing types. You know the ones.”

“Very funny. And what do you do when you’re not slaving for the discerning Ms Cormack?”

She glanced up at the window, and watched the weather howling about the little cabin. The clouds had completely obliterated the sea except for a tiny strip she could see over the cliff top.

Suddenly she was adrift, landless. What did she do? “I read, watch movies, check out the live shows, lunch with the girls.”

“No boyfriend? No man to take you out to dinner?”

“That’s my business.”

“On the contrary. I like to know what my staff do in their free time. You never know when it can interfere with work.”

She swallowed some hot coffee, too hot and it scalded a little on the way down. Her face flushed with heat. He’d rummaged around on her chest like he owned the place yet he worried about what his staff got up to.

“If they’re professional, their personal life won’t interfere. And I’m not part of your staff.”

He drummed the table top with his fingers. “You’ll be back working for me after the break.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

Both his brows shot up. “Not interested in working for me full time?”

He was very close. Tilla squared her shoulders. “I thought I’d made that clear last Friday afternoon. I have other assignments after my break. Your application to have me returned to your office hasn’t been approved—”

“How do you know?”

“—And besides, I don’t want to work full time for anyone...else.” He was too close.

“If I offered Ms Cormack over and above the percentage she already gets, I’m sure she would persuade you to take up my offer.”

Tilla shook her head. “It would be my decision, totally.”

“I’ll make a personal appointment to discuss it with her when I get back, just to be on the safe side. It’s high time I met her, anyway.” He smiled again, and leaned back in his chair.

Tilla went back to her book. A few moments passed. “Look. I don’t want to talk about work. It’s the very thing I came to get away from.”

“Workaholic, is that it? Definitely no time for the boyfriends. No time to go romping between the sheets because life’s too serious temping?” The lazy smile was crooked.

She looked away. “Are you so bored that we have to do twenty questions?”

He swallowed the last of his coffee, shrugged his shoulders loosely. “Not bored at all. Is there something else you’d like to do?”

Her heart ran wild, thudding a deep tattoo. “There’s always Scrabble.”

“I don’t think so.”

The tattoo stepped up. There was no need for this assault—she’d already fallen for him, unable to take her eyes off his body or her mind off the dream of wicked delights he’d inflict on her. Had inflicted on her out there, where instead he should have been thinking of life and death...

Yet if she let her inhibitions go, there’d be no turning back. She’d knowingly step on to the road to destruction. And fall heavily.

Heat flamed through her in a rush. Next she’d break out in a sweat. Or hives, God forbid.

He reached out and took her coffee cup, set aside the book. He toyed with her hand, rubbed her palm. “Scrabble is certainly not nearly as much fun as other stuff.”

The gauntlet. Finally the challenge. She could pick it up and run with it if she wanted. Right now. Right here. So what was stopping her? What’d stopped her the other night? She knew perfectly well.

“You’re still married,” she blurted suddenly, a defence of her weakness.

He flinched, let go of her hand. “I thought I said ‘soon-to-be-ex-wife’. I’m not out to fool you.” He sat back. “She didn’t like the workaholic in me—thought I’d no time for her. Seems she didn’t like quite a bit about me and that was just a handy excuse. So she found someone else, actually a couple of someone else’s. I need her at the business a little while longer. But she is definitely ex.”

His was icy control. He’d just admitted that his wife cheated on him—on him, *he* with the black temper of Zeus and the physical strength of Titan and the sensational face of Adonis—and she cheated on him? What was the woman thinking?

“She’s covering for me while I’m on holidays and then she’ll get her complete cut,” he continued. “I might add, she’s doing very well out of it, like most of her type. So I wouldn’t technically be ‘cheating’ *on my wife*.”

Bright with embarrassment, Tilla started. "I didn't mean—" Because she did. She wanted him free of anyone else, free to take enormous, sensual pleasure from every tiny moment of intimacy with him. She glanced at those clinging, soft shorts again. There wasn't anything soft underneath, though.

"You did." He sighed. "Look, I needed the break. After the divorce, and this break, there's no one skilled enough to cover for me. I'll be a long time between holidays, and she's not getting any part of my next new projects, that's for bloody sure. She's getting a good deal. But I'll be snowed under later. I had thought of training Keith, but I can forget that for a while." He lowered his head over the table, hands clasped in front of him. "So she was it for the moment. Then in a few week's time she's out of my life for good." He glanced across at her. "Believe me or not. There's no reason for me to lie."

She softened. "Sorry."

"Don't be. My fault. I should've seen it coming." He smiled suddenly. "Besides, it was set up a long time ago and now the decree nisi is only a few weeks off. So, I am already divorced, just haven't got the paperwork. Which for me is good enough. And it's another chapter closed. I certainly won't be making the mistake of marrying again."

A thud in her stomach. *Hey, why should I care if he never marries again?*

"What about you?" he asked. "You said there were no boyfriends."

What had she said? Tilla couldn't remember, shook her head.

He raised an eyebrow. "So, neither of us has anyone. Here we are in the wilderness, the wind howling and lashing around us, out here all alone and trapped. With each other. There's nothing to stop us now."

Tilla watched his mouth move, hardly hearing his words. She glanced at the traces of mud on his cheek and wanted to brush them away.

"We've nothing and no-one to worry about," he was saying. "Shouldn't be too hard to come to some arrangement for the duration."

A moment passed as she stared at him. "For the duration." A low rumble of thunder echoed in the distance, and her heart answered with a soft beat of its own.

"Why not? What have we got to lose?"

A howling wind lashed the few scraggly trees at the front of the cabin. Her breath caught in her throat before she tossed her answer at him. “But afterwards ...”

There was a moment or two of calm, then the ocean lashed waves on to the shore beyond. Rain slashed at the windows again.

“Live for the day,” he said. “No strings. No inter-office relationships. I wouldn’t ask it of my staff if I’m not prepared to live by it myself.”

Thunder crashed overhead, the cabin walls shook.

Purely a holiday fling. Seriously, did he think she’d just fall into his great, big arms for these four weeks then cut herself off at the end of it and wave him goodbye like a good little trooper with not a backward glance?

Well – what the hell did she *think* she was gonna do now he’d said he was divorced? How the *hell* was she going to resist him now?

Was he out of his mind? Just for four weeks?

Was she?

A lump throbbed in her throat. “I wouldn’t waste my time for just four weeks.” She stood up and backed away from the table. “With you or anybody else.” She swiped hair away from her face. “Even if I was interested.”

Lightning flashed somewhere off to the west. Another storm moved about the horizon, bearing down on the coast and their wind-lashed little haven.

He looked at her, an amused twist on his lips. “I see. So, if I were to tell you now that it’d be a long and meaningful relationship after we leave here, you’d then kindly oblige me for the next four weeks?”

Her mouth dropped open.

He stood up, a twinkle in his eye and a cocky grin on his face. “Then I should swear undying love.”

Rumbling in turbulent clouds above, a darkening of the midday sky shadowed the cabin.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re not.”

He shrugged. “I am.”

“Seriously kidding.” His suggestion – so open, honest, so appealing. So downright dangerous. So *not* going to happen.

So *not*.

She couldn’t have just four weeks and walk away unscathed.

Just have a bit of fun, no strings. Would anyone in their right mind do that?

Absolutely. People do it all the time.

Her heart belted loudly from every pulse point. He drew closer, his gaze on her face. Compelling. Dark and smoky. Depthless.

Another booming crack of thunder.

Her stomach fluttered. She wanted him, no question about it.

He reached out and stroked her cheek gently with one hand, fingertips feather-light on her face.

What didn’t she want him to do? She wanted to be made love to, so badly the need of him was a tangible throb. Hormone-central was quite so busy.

Dammit.

Rain pelted on to the veranda, smashing each great drop against the windows.

He leaned over. He stroked her cheek again. His other arm rested behind her chair closing her in, his cool scent.

She tingled all the way to her toes. “This is silly, Kent.”

He bent to her mouth. “You mean this?”

One gentle kiss. His lips brushed hers, the scrape of his beard stubble a caress. No demands. Tilla’s heart thundered, and a heat throbbed between her legs.

“Or this?” His tongue slid along her throat, his bearded chin scratchy, shooting erotic shivers down her spine as it eased over her neck.

Rain slid down the windows in great washing floods, a river pouring from above.

“Or this?” He cupped her chin with one hand and his mouth closed over hers. He pulled her close, hands clamped over her backside. “I want this, and it’s anything but silly.”

Her arms wrapped about his neck. “Maybe.” Who was she kidding? She was almost blinded by the hormones racing south.

Kent lifted her on to his hips, pressed hard against her, his erection snug and possessive between her legs. “Tell me you want it.”

“I want it.” She really did. She really *really* did.

“There is a god.” He stood them up, and whirled her in quick strides to the bedroom.

She wanted that oh-so-wicked body. Had to have his skin on hers, touching her from mouth to toes and everywhere in-between. Especially in-between.

When he stopped at the foot of the bed, she pressed against him. “Don’t stop now.”

He gathered her up and sank to the bed underneath her. His stubbly chin rasped along her neck. His mouth hot on the swell of her breast, then at the hollow at her throat, and his hair smelled of salt, his skin of sunshine and rain.

She fell back and flicked at the buttons on her shirt, threw it off, reached behind and undid her bra, pulling it away.

A moment of calm as he stared at her, then he lowered his head. Hot mouth found a nipple, tugged on it.

Tilla closed her eyes. Hot spirals of pleasure rippled deep in her belly...

His lazy tongue swiped warm, moist trails from nipple to nipple.

He worked at the zipper on her jeans. He pushed the denim down and his hand settled between her legs. She squirmed into it.

“You want as much as me?” His voice was a low murmur vibrating against her ear. He pulled off her jeans, one leg then the other. He drew her close, gripped her backside landed her back on top of him.

She mumbled, fumbled with the belt at his waist, scowled as she fumbled, couldn’t undo it, tore the zip down instead—

“That much?” He stilled her hand quickly, firmly.

“I can’t speak it.” She clutched at his hand on hers. “I have to show you.”

“Wait. Wait.” His nose nudged her breast, hardening a bud under his touch. His nose nudged again then his lips closed over it.

The swirling tongue stopped and she staggered at the loss, of more delays. Sweet heaven, the torture was too much. She pushed her hips hard against him.

“Do something,” she ground out.

“Don’t move.” He moved instead, stood up and got naked in a hurry.

He flung his jeans away, ran his hands possessively over her thighs, across the neat dark hair nestled underneath her lacy briefs. His gaze lingered over her body, naked except for that wisp of white lace. And then he lowered her to her back.

His breathing steadied. “Gorgeous.” His finger lazily tugged aside the lacy fabric then, he bent to her thighs.

She was on a slow road to heaven ... “Kent.”

“Mmh?”

He clearly wasn’t up to conversation. Tilla tugged at his hair.

Reluctantly he brought his face up. “What?”

Tilla closed her eyes. “I—”

“It’s fine, we’ll be protected. I’ve got something somewhere...”

“Yes—no. I mean ...”

“What?”

“I can’t do this for just four—”

“Ssh.”

“—weeks.”

“’Course not.”

His hot mouth descended on a hardened nipple. Sparks of unbearable pleasure ripped through her.

Her hips pushed his. He slid a lazy finger inside her, grazed the tiny bud at the juncture of her legs with his thumb.

Thrills of pleasure tightened deep inside her. She gripped his arms in exquisite shock until finally, she gasped his name in short, sharp bursts over and over, and tossed wildly under him.

Her body danced rhythmically ... He rose quickly, tore the lace out of his way, plunged inside her, filling her, Sharp, shooting sparks of pleasure darted through her, on to her thighs, deep into her belly then stroked powerfully to her nipples.

When she cried out, he gasped, plunged deeper, called her name. Tilla clung to him, rolling on the waves of pleasure that spiralled through her and down and down she fell, her soft collapse aching, lovingly slow.

His powerful heart thumped close to her ear as he rested on her. She smelled the muskiness of him, kissed his head, whispered his name.

He nuzzled her, slid off her warm, damp body. "Mmh, all mine," he said. He lifted her under the quilt, slipping alongside her.

Tilla closed her eyes, her body tucked in beside his. She pressed her lips to his chest again and again. He ruffled her hair and she sighed, she could feel herself drifting off.

Funny, she thought. I could've sworn he called me Tilla over and over again.

Kent watched her. What a tiger – all revved up and rarin' to go. And he'd called her strung out. How wrong could a bloke be?

And that line about only wanting a fling for the four weeks duration ... who was he kidding? But at least it was a start with her. He could fix the rest later.

He ran a finger lightly over her nose and traced the side of her cheek. Tilla Cormack, you are one hell of a surprise package.

He leaned on one elbow as she snuggled sleepily into his warmth.

The quilt partly covered one breast, its nipple still puckered from their lovemaking, taut and dark. He bent and put his lips to it, nibbling gently. The muscles in his groin stirred. She opened an eye and smiled at him, curved her arm around his neck and drew him close. Her kiss was long and languorous, an open invitation.

He broke away gently and his mouth found her other nipple. She ran her fingers through his hair as he nuzzled her. She groaned, sleepily, then turned away from him.

Kent smiled. Her tight bottom fitted neatly into his groin and her soft skin stirred him further. He slipped between her legs, into the wet place he'd already claimed as his, and moved gently inside her again.

He buried his face in the curve of her neck, cupped both generous breasts in his hands and kneaded gently, moved inside her powerfully, controlled.

She came awake fully, breathed his name huskily, her arm thrown behind her holding his head.

It was going to be a long afternoon.

Tilla rolled over conscious of a delicious warmth on her back and she snuggled up into it. A large hand around her waist huddled her closer to a big warmth, hard and smooth and a scratchy chin rested in the nape of her neck.

Her bottom tucked neatly into a male groin and it moved slowly against her.

Her eyes flew open. And a warm glow emanated from inside her despite the turmoil which pushed into her brain.

She didn't dare move.

I made wild, abandoned love to Kent Taylor.

I'm a big girl, she reminded herself. Why should I worry?

Because your heart will break.

But my heart will mend in the end, she told herself. Still, she squirmed at the thought and felt his arms tighten around her.

Perhaps it wouldn't break. Perhaps he'd fall in love with her, and they'd return and carry on a passionate love affair and be with each other forever. That sounded suspiciously like happy ever after.

She turned her head and gazed out over the ocean, watched the sun ready to set deep in the west. The storm had blown itself out and clear skies shone over the calm, sparkling waters of Explorer Strait.

Tilla was too old for fairy tales. She'd made her decision. She accepted the condition and would abide by it. She wasn't the type to hang on when she wasn't wanted, and she wasn't about to change now. I'll depart with great dignity, she decided, and he'd never know my heart is breaking.

Tilla hoped he hadn't taken any notice of her last minute plea for longer than four weeks, even though he'd answered her.

Quick tears came and she blinked rapidly. This is no way to begin, she chided herself smartly. Forget the end—think of the now, revel in it, fall in love, feel the delight, and the happiness. Take it now with both hands and let it roll over you.

She wriggled again and he growled, nuzzled closer. His now very scratchy beard sent thrills up and down her spine and she shivered.

Tilla glanced at him. Black hair fell across his forehead covering his brow where usually an angry frown creased. Maybe he'd change his mind, she wondered idly. Maybe if they had a wonderful few weeks in this glorious wilderness he'd discover he couldn't do without her.

Maybe ... maybe.

Tilla watched the sun drop under the horizon. Her heart sank with it.

She'd locked herself into this and would suffer the consequences of her passion and her weakness. She'd love him then let him leave. His terms.

Surely Tilla Cormack could handle it. Surely the self-made businesswoman wouldn't let a light-hearted love affair tear her apart—wasn't she made of better stuff...of steel? Or was it that Tilla Cormack would do anything for love?

Tilla Cormack was putty in this man's hands.

So she must never let him know she was in love with him. Never.

He stirred beside her, stretched long and hard, growled contentedly.

She faced him, a smile on her face. "I'm starving."

He gathered her into the crook of his arm, touched her face with his hand. "Me, too," he said, a glint in his eye. "But stomachs can wait."

He kissed her softly, gently. Made love to her again, whispered sweet things when they fell, spent and happy.

They showered, feasted on chicken he cooked in a pan, ate a salad and some fruit, drank a bottle of Australis Island sauvignon blanc.

Night came. Kent Taylor's big arms wrapped around her. She snuggled into them, suddenly safe, secure if only for a short while, but hopelessly in love.

CHAPTER SIX

“Peter, what did you say?” Helen Wilson couldn’t believe her ears.

“What did I say about what?” her husband asked over the phone. He was calling from John Crofter’s holiday house at Mannum on the river Murray where he’d gone to brainstorm for Crofter’s new development.

“What did you say about the cabin at Delaney River on Australis?”

“I said that Kent must have his phone turned off. I can’t get a hold of him. Unusual for him not to have access to the phone.”

“Kent—? You mean Kent Taylor is down there?”

“Yes, of course he’s down there. It’s his allocation. You knew that.”

“No, I did not. If I had, why would I have sent Tilla Cormack down there?” Helen was horrified.

“Oh, dear.”

“That means they’re both there together. What’ll we do?” Helen was thinking what it would be like to share your only holiday with an unexpected guest, that gorgeous boy, Kent Taylor.

“I don’t know... Radisson will kill us.” Peter’s voice dropped away. “But how lucky that Taylor having an unexpected lady holiday guest in Tilla Cormack.”

“Not funny, Peter.” Though Helen could imagine the toe curling.

“No, ‘course not. One of us should go see if we can fix it,” Peter continued. “I can’t though, I’m stuck here with John.”

“I can’t either ... Maybe we can rouse Jim and get him to go a week earlier.”

“No. Jim is off Island until the day before he’s due to check on Kent.” There was a moments’ silence. “Helen, this is a terrible mistake.”

“We’ll just have to go down there. You’ll have to come away now and we’ll go down together.”

Peter inhaled audibly down the line. "Could mean two of our very best clients drop us like hot potatoes."

"*Two* of our clients? Do you know who Tilla Cormack is? It's Radisson's sister."

"Jeez, no! All right. I'll take three days off. Meet you in Regency tomorrow."

"Peter, you don't think that—that— What I mean is, they've been there a couple of days, already, together."

"Darling, they're two adult people. Very capable and responsible. I'm sure they're behaving as civilised adults and getting along famously. Besides, from what I understand Tilla could do with a man like Kent, and Kent could well do with a decent woman right now. You never know, perhaps we've done them a favour. And on second thoughts—"

"Oh, no you don't, Peter Wilson. You be at Regency tomorrow with a four wheel drive and we'll sort this out together. And leave behind the paternal stuff. We're already in enough trouble."

"Yes, ma'am." He chuckled and rang off.

Helen chewed her lip, thought of that gorgeous boy, Kent. Good heavens above. How lucky could that Tilla girl get?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tilla woke early, showered and dressed before he stirred. She wanted to make the most of rising before him to set her thoughts straight.

She slipped on her shoes and went down to the beach via the little gully. It was a place she'd often visited, taken her book and sat for hours in the morning shade, listening to the sounds of the ocean and the birds.

Today, her book held no interest for her. She hadn't even thought of it. She sat above one of the rock pools and allowed the cool morning breeze to prick her skin. The sun hadn't yet come up over the hills behind her, and the ocean was dark and calm.

I wish I felt calm, she thought. I wish I'd walked the eighty kilometres back to the airport the moment I saw him here.

She tucked her knees under the great, loose wind-cheater she'd thrown on, her hair fluttering about her face in the light westerly breeze.

She came for her usual peace and quiet and found herself hopelessly frenzied by a strong, male animal who stepped straight into her life and took over.

Tilla shivered involuntarily. From the cold, she said to herself watching the goose bumps slide up her arms. She pulled the sleeves of the wind-cheater down to her wrists and rubbed her forearms.

She thought of the afternoon and night before and goose bumps ran riot all over her. She smiled in spite of herself. It was wonderful. He was wonderful.

An eagle soared above the cliff-tops a few metres across the mouth of the Delaney. Tilla studied him as he dived for prey in the shallow water. Magnificent in his world, he climbed away, high above the cliffs, a wriggling fish caught in his great talons.

"I'm not going to be that wriggling fish," she said aloud and took a deep breath. "I know what I'm getting myself into. And I'm the one who's going to have to toe the line. I'm going to have to play by the rules. I'll have to beat him at his own game. I'm going to be tough and survive." She stopped talking. Certainly tougher than I am right now, she thought, and refused to allow tears.

She looked skywards again. The eagle soared once more, circled as the first rays of brilliant sunlight streaked out through the break in the hills behind her. He circled lower and lower, searching for more fish. He aimed and dived again, majestic wings spread as he made his watery grab, outstretched talons hardly making a splash as they slipped under water.

Away he climbed, another fish well secured in those big claws. She followed his flight until he disappeared over the cliff-tops.

She sighed. This is my holiday, too, she thought. I have to enjoy this break as much as I can—it's my last for another twelve months. Twelve months of six days a week and then some, from six in the morning until eight in the evening. Bookwork, interviews, letters, placements, introductions, advertising—

The list went on. For Tilla it never stopped. She had no time for rest or for men friends. Even her girlfriends were hard pressed to understand why she worked as hard as she did. She was forging ahead, had a highly respected employment agency and was making a big name for herself. She needed to work at that pace and equally needed to have a break of the kind she wanted.

Until now. Even so, she needed to rest. To take a break.

Kent Taylor changed all that.

She exhaled slowly and closed her eyes. There he was again, so compelling, magnetic. So addictive.

She saw that smile, that lazy, crooked wide smile which melted her armour every time. She saw the long leanness of him, the wide shoulders and the broad chest, wiry black hair across it, down to his navel and beyond. Saw his eyes, dark and smoky, sensuous, inviting.

And he wasn't afraid of her.

She laughed then. Of course he wasn't afraid of her. He thought she was little secretary who happened to be a wee bit pompous, albeit very efficient.

She smiled again. If he'd known who she really was, would he have come on so strong? Would he have flexed those muscles if he knew that she was Tilla Cormack, Managing Director?

Could he really be as cold as he'd accused Tilla of being?

But it wasn't Tilla he accused. It was his temp., his employee.

She would have to tell him who she was... Oh, no sense telling him now—he probably wouldn't believe her and then there would be World War III on her hands.

A splash.

The eagle dropped his last fish and eerily, as he glided past her, his dark eyes watched her carefully. His wings flapped in front of her and as he rose to soar to the cliff-tops, she felt his slipstream fan her face.

"Beautiful, isn't he?"

She jumped. "Oh!"

"Sorry." Kent picked his way over the rocks behind her. "Thought you'd have heard me a mile off."

Tilla looked up at him, sunlight streaming over his shoulders. She squinted, put a hand up to shield her eyes. Adonis and the blinding light he brought with him. "No, I didn't. I was engrossed." Her heart rocketed around, and it was a struggle to stay calm.

Kent sat down beside her, his bare legs dangling over the little rocky ledge close to the water.

Though they weren't touching, his warmth spread through her like a molten glow. She smiled but looked away, aching suddenly to curl her fingers around his, to lay her hand on his arm, to rest her head on his shoulder.

"I'm going to take a long walk through the bush today—try to blow out the last of the work cobwebs. Thought you might like to accompany me." He reached across and touched her arm.

Tilla would've liked nothing better than to walk through this magnificent wilderness, no others within cooee, but she was resolved. Had to toughen up, princess. Start as she meant to continue

She shook her head. "Oh, no, thank you." She drew her arms across her body, shiver as if cold. "I'm going to do some reading and perhaps take a walk by myself." She smiled at him, though it felt a bit wobbly. "Let's just get on with our own holiday each the way we intended, regardless of our ... arrangement."

He studied his hands then, his face inscrutable.

A beat passed. Another.

“Cold feet?”

“No. Just keeping things on an even keel.”

He inhaled. “Suit yourself.” He sprang to his feet. “I’ll be back later this afternoon. I presume you’ll be in the cabin before dark?”

“Oh yes.” She looked up brightly at him. “Of course.”

“Good. I wouldn’t enjoy having to look for you around here in the dead of night. Besides, I look forward to our ...arrangement. Very entertaining. Keep you to it.”

The inane smile froze on her face. She saw the scowl on his.

He turned on his heels.

Her breath came in short, angry gasps, as if punched from her lungs. She watched as he climbed out of sight, and silently cursed him as she blinked back rapid, stinging tears.

Well, if she played his game, these were the rules.

Didn’t matter. Anger propelled her up to the house after him and rational thought fled out the window in its wake. By the time stomped her way up the little gully and flung open the back door, he was gone.

What she wouldn’t give to have a brick bat right now. She’d give him an arrangement, all right. Right around the bloody kitchen.

Tilla whirled about the cabin, huffing and puffing. The stupid *arrangement* wasn’t her idea – she was just going along because it suited her. Because she would get just a little taste of something wonderful in her life, even if it was only for four weeks if she was careful with herself.

It was her holiday, and be damned if he was going to spoil it. If she didn’t want to spend every waking hour with him then she damned well wouldn’t.

She threw her hands in the air.

Oh, great! She couldn’t even lie to herself convincingly.

Tilla found her knapsack and dumped a book in it, along with some sunscreen, a pillow and towel, and a bottle of water. She plonked a hat on her head, donned her

sunglasses and marched to the kitchen. Flinging open the fridge door she found some leftover chicken and salad from their meal last night. She grabbed it with bare hands and pushed it into a plastic container, rinsing her hands under the tap after she'd secured the lid.

She dropped the tub carelessly into her knapsack and headed for the door.

She stopped. The loft. There was a swag in the loft – she'd take the swag, a little extra food and she'd sleep out for the night.

That's what I'll do. Arrangement, be damned.

She ran for the bedroom and rummaged around her tote-bag, found a notepad and with a black felt-tip pen, stroked out a message in large, plain, fierce block print.

“I've changed my arrangements for the evening. Don't bother to look for me.”
She slashed four big black lines under 'arrangements' and left the note on the kitchen bench.

Tilla dumped her bags and climbed the ladder to the loft. The swag was there in the corner, more than likely right where she'd left it the last time. She threw it to the floor and got down the ladder.

She knew a beaut spot a few hundred metres from the cabin. It gave her a chance to feel really isolated, yet secure in the knowledge that she wasn't far from the cabin. She'd not ever been the type to simply brave the wild and go trooping off into the wilderness alone.

It was a great spot, and it'd give her the solitude she needed.

She hoped it would annoy the hell out of Kent Taylor.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kent marched off into the bush, grabbing his fishing rod as he went. The little smart aleck thought she could fob him off now the deed was done. Playing his game, was she?

He'd seen right through her.

Yeah, right. That's why her rejection kicked you in the guts.

He'd heard her rise and take a quick shower, believing she wanted some time alone. Then he followed her down to the little gully, could almost read her thoughts as she watched the eagle.

But he hadn't expected her cool reaction of just a few moments ago. He thought he'd done a pretty good job softening her up, thought she'd fall neatly into his arms the moment he showed up.

He scoffed at himself. Arrogance, is right, Taylor. Softened her up? Obviously not. Just who's softening who around here?

He wanted much more. He marched on, pushing the memory of her pliant body out of his mind.

And that's where he'd end up if he didn't take stock of this: out of his mind.

But Christ, she was beautiful when she smiled. When she whispered his name. When she cried out as she burst into heaven. When she snuggled sleepily into his arms, and kissed his chest over and over.

He closed his eyes as the memory of her body burned. He wasn't sure he was able to stick to his own rules. How was he going to see her every day here, and then afterwards back at the office, and not want to take her as his own?

He shrugged. You're going soft all right, old mate.

He'd dug himself in, and she'd taken his smart-mouth quip exactly the way he hoped. It sure wiped off that cool smile.

But the stunned hurt on her beautiful face stabbed him a beauty. He threw the fishing rod aside and sat on a large outcrop of sandstone. He'd made a mess of that little episode.

He glanced back at the cabin through the thin cover of drooping sheoak, and caught sight of Tilla marching into the little house, slamming the door.

A short bark of laughter escaped. She wouldn't find him inside to clobber with that fist she was shaking.

But the smile slid from his face when a few moments later she emerged, half dragging, half carrying a swag. He stood up and peered through his cover, watching as she struggled up the gentle slope, tugging her burden behind her.

What the hell is she doing?

She disappeared up the trail and suddenly he knew. She was going to that little clearing a few hundred metres from the cabin. He raised an eyebrow. She was going to brave the wilds tonight. A very bad idea came to mind. He retrieved his fishing rod and set off to the river, whistling a little tune as his brain ticked over.

Plenty of time for fun yet, old mate.

"Hello—helloooo." Peter poked his head inside the cabin door. "There's nobody here," he said over his shoulder.

"You didn't give it much of a chance." Helen stood on her tiptoes. "Go inside – someone might be asleep in there."

"At midday?"

"Don't make me go red. They're on holidays," she hissed and pushed him through the door.

"Exactly why I don't want to barge in." He took another tentative step. "Anyone home?"

Helen waited only a moment and satisfied they weren't about to interrupt anything, she pointed to the loft ladder. "See if anyone is sleeping up there."

Peter climbed three or four rungs and peered into the loft. "Nope, but the swag's gone. Maybe one of them decided to sleep in the scrub."

“Peter, look at this,” Helen whispered, standing at the threshold of the bedroom, ducking under the temporary curtain.

Peter descended and stood beside his wife. Two sets of clothes hung neatly from the one rail. Male and female shoes were in a heap on the floor and a discarded man’s jumper lay thrown on the bed alongside a ladies shirt.

“Well. They’re either getting along pretty good as strangers or they must’ve known each other before,” Peter remarked.

Helen pursed her lips and looked around. “You said Kent had some girl with him at John’s office launch. Who was that?”

“He said her name was ‘Terry’ or ‘Teresa’ or something. I can’t remember, but she did look vaguely familiar.”

“I’ll bet it was Tilla Cormack.” Helen looked at the suitcases stacked by the wall. “You’d know Tilla if you saw her, wouldn’t you?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure I would.”

“If your memory were better we wouldn’t be creeping around out here.”

“All right. I made a mistake. And what makes you think he was with Tilla Cormack at the launch?”

“Intuition plus,” she said, her eyes on the labels of the feminine luggage.

He whistled through his teeth. “It looks to me as if they have rather a cosy little holiday happening here despite our gargantuan boo-boo.”

Helen tugged on his sleeve. “All of a sudden I don’t feel comfortable in here. Let’s drop the extra supplies and leave. I get the feeling it could be far worse if we stay to sort it out.”

Peter nodded, surveying what looked to him to be a wonderful hideaway for two. “I’ll leave a note to say we’ve been and that Jim’ll come in three weeks time.”

They both took a last, little bit wistful look at the cabin and left.

CHAPTER NINE

Tilla stretched and yawned in the fading afternoon light. She licked her fingers, savouring the last of her meagre meal then wiped them on her towel. In her haste to leave the cabin, she'd forgotten to pack some of the niceties of outdoor dining – the moist towelettes for cleaning ones fingers after munching Viking style on legs of cold chicken, and leftover salad.

The air was cooling and she snuggled into her oversized windcheater, tucking her book into the tote-bag. No more light for reading, it'd be dark in forty-five minutes.

She'd spend a fresh air evening looking at the stars until she fell asleep, pushing the ever intrusive, insistent Kent Taylor from her mind.

Put him in a compartment. That's what men do – put things in compartments. She'd give him one of his own, felt sure that would work. Any time soon.

She sat up on the swag and combed her hair out with her fingers. This was the life – fresh air, ocean breeze, salt on your skin, clean and refreshing.

Stretching again, she inhaled deeply and opened her arms wide. The cool evening air goose-bumped her skin and she shivered. Wow, it's fresh all right.

Tilla checked her watch. Eight-thirty. He'd be well back at the cabin by now. She dragged off her shorts. Time to tuck in before the temperature drops too much.

Sliding into the swag, she shook her head to free herself of lingering thoughts of Kent Taylor. Oh heavens, she'd sleep well tonight – without that maniac of a man to torment her, to torment her body...

Her tummy somersaulted and a delightful tingle between her legs reminded her of that torment, that special, irresistible type of torment.

She chewed her lips and looked distractedly towards the cabin in the fading light, then tapped herself on the head.

Too bad for him, she thought. Hope he suffers, too.

Kent settled himself close by.

He checked his watch, its night-light enabling him to see the time clearly. Eight-forty. Absolute dark in twenty minutes.

He watched as she snuggled into the swag, had seen her self-satisfied grin in the fading light and suppressed a chuckle. All he had to do was wait until she fell asleep.

Tilla opened one eye. Something was at the foot of her swag.

She craned her neck and peered into the darkness.

A wallaby. She sighed with relief. Just a wallaby. She felt the pressure on her feet as the little animal foraged close by.

Laying down again, she remained still so not to frighten it away. She focussed on the brilliant stars overhead, made out the Southern Cross, the Pointers...

Another wallaby at her head. And another couple by her tote-bag.

Ooof. One of the little devils jumped on her stomach and bounded off.

She sat up and the noise of wallabies scurrying for cover let her know there were more than just the odd couple of marsupials out for their nocturnal forage. There must have been a dozen. Or more.

She lay down again and closed her eyes. Surely they wouldn't be back.

Her thoughts drifted off...

Sthlap. Sthlap. Sthlap.

What on earth... ?

A wallaby munching on something at her pillow.

Oh, for heaven's sake. "Shoo," she hissed and heard it skitter away. "Go home. I'll get no sleep at this rate," she said aloud into the darkness. Tilla settled back into the swag, took one last look at the Cross and closed her eyes.

No such luck. Wallabies were everywhere.

Tilla sat up again, slowly. In the low glow of the moonlight, her eyes adjusted easily and she could make out at least twenty wallabies, all very busy around her little camp. She could hear more in the distance. And they were so close.

A phenomena.

She wished she'd brought her torch to see what they were so intent on because she hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary as she laid out the swag.

Tilla shivered suddenly and the closest wallabies jumped away, hissing and spitting as they knocked each other in fright.

Great, she thought. A bloody million wallabies munching God-knows-what while I'm trying to sleep. "With you lot and Kent Taylor, I doubt I'll ever get to sleep," she whispered grumpily into the night. A few more wallabies bolted away. "Just shoo, go on, go away—"

Tilla heard something else. A snort ... or a cough. What was it? She strained her ears. There were wild pigs out this way ... and goats. Were they nocturnal as well? She couldn't remember.

There it was again. To the left of her.

What now?

She sat rigid with fear. The noise was closer, scuffling and scrambling in the dirt as it came towards her.

Tilla peered at the wallabies. All still there. What could it be? She wanted to watch for it but couldn't convince herself to sit upright any longer, vulnerable if something leapt at her out of the night. She lay down with a thud. Perhaps whatever it was would just walk right over her...

A snort. Then a full bellowed series of grunts and snorts and squeals, loud and close by and deafening in the still night.

She flung herself up and screamed.

Kent bolted upright. Mobilised by the terrifying yodel in the pitch of night, he grabbed the torch and leapt to his feet, crashing through the few metres of scrub which separated him from Tilla.

Heartbeat hammering in her mouth, Tilla heard a great animal thrashing around in the bush, heading straight for her, slipping over the casuarina nuts and swearing...

Wallabies skittering away, hissing and...

Swearing?

Then she was suddenly landed on by a great, warm body—

“*Oof.*” Kent tripped over the swag and sprawled headlong on top of her.

“Ohh ...”

“*Ugggh*—Dammit. I can’t see a thing ... sorry, wait until I get the torch on ...”

They lay together for a milli-second, long enough for Tilla to inhale him, to absorb the heat of him ... Long enough to gather her wits and shove at him with all her might. “Get off me. What do you think you’re doing?” She was whispering. She hadn’t budged him and could feel his warm breath on her face. He smelled of mint, and aftershave. Clean. Healthy. “You keep jumping on me.”

But her toes tingled. Torchlight beamed skywards, illuminating the devilish features of Kent Taylor. Tilla’s heart pumped furiously as his eyes glinted at her from above.

“Well, hello. Fancy meeting you here. Out camping, are we?”

“What are you doing here?” She was loud this time. Wallabies crashed away into the scrub.

He pushed himself reluctantly off her and knelt, knees straddling the swag. “You screamed. Tarzan to the rescue.” He thumped his chest. “You Jane,” he said, stabbing her chest with his forefinger, shining the torchlight on her face.

Tilla gritted her teeth. “I heard a pig.”

“A pig.”

“You’re not deaf, Kent Taylor. A pig. Coming straight at me.” She narrowed her eyes. “Or was that you? You certainly got here quick enough.” She pushed the light away.

He chuckled. “You heard a pig and you think it was me. Very funny. I didn’t hear a pig.”

“There was a pig.”

Still kneeling over the swag he swung the torch light around. “No sign of any pig.” He stopped.

She followed the torch light, struggled to sit up under his legs. And there was the most gorgeous looking ball of fur with a snub-nose and big fluffy saucer-like ears, its beady red eyes reflected by the torch light. “A koala.”

Kent aimed the light away from the little fellow’s face. “There’s your pig.”

“It’s a koala.”

“They make a noise like a pig, especially when the males are looking for a mate. But he’s a long way from familiar territory. Not the sort of trees here he likes to eat.”

Concentrating on the koala, Kent relaxed, dropping his weight over Tilla’s hips.

“Can you please get off me?” She was struggling to stay up on her elbows.

“In a minute.” Distracted, Kent shone the light just off the koala’s face. “I think perhaps he’s sick. Or lost his way.”

“Should we help?”

“No. He’s a wild animal.”

“But ...”

“He’s going.” The torch illuminated the koala’s ambling gait as he turned back for the bush. He snorted once or twice and Kent shone the light back to Tilla’s face. “Sound like a pig?”

She fell back on to the swag. “Will you get off me?”

Kent settled the light on the ground beside the swag and lowered himself over her again, forearms supporting his weight. “If you let me apologise.”

A lock of shiny hair had fallen over his forehead. He was so-o close. Her heart rate climbed. How could she not forgive him? How could she not accept what he was offering – she’d been without for such a long time. Besides, a tiny voice said, when this is over he’ll be a long time gone.

She felt his weight settle. Shift. Resettle.

Getting comfortable.

“Kent.”

“I’m sorry, TC. I didn’t mean what I said. It was unfair.” He rubbed her nose again and his lips pressed hers. “I mean, of course you’re entertaining, but not like I know it sounded.”

“Kent.”

“I am the boss, you know. Let me unzip the swag. I’m climbing in.”

“Kent Taylor.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nestled alongside her, hard legs pressed against hers, warm and strong. He gathered her in his arms, cradled her head on his shoulder, kissed her forehead. Her cheeks. Her nose. His free hand slipped over her tummy and under the big windcheater. “Mmh, you’re as warm as toast. Do you forgive me?”

The cool chill in her soul warmed with a rush of seductive balmy breeze and she warmed with it, revelling in the hardness of his body, the heat of his big hand as it rested on her bare flesh, his lips on her face. Mouth.

She kissed him back.

He pulled away to slip the jumper from her body. Slid her t-shirt over her head. Kissed her mouth. Nipped her lips.

“I take it that means yes.”

One tug at her bra and it snapped, came away in his hand.

His mouth closed over the hard bud of a nipple. Oh that was warm and tugging and there were bits of her responding to his touch that she’d forgotten about until now...

And it was too late to stop. They made love again, a new tenderness between them. His gentle demands touched her heart and she knew he meant what he’d said. Even if it was only for the few weeks of the holiday.

A little while after they were still, she moved slightly under him. He panted into her neck and moaned softly. “Don’t,” he whispered, out of breath. “I think you’ll kill me.”

She laughed spontaneously.

He groaned. “That was an evil thing to do.”

“Sorry.” She wrapped her arms around him, kissing his face. “You make me do the damndest things, Kent Taylor.”

“Do I?” he mumbled, nuzzling her neck.

“Mmh.” She looked at the night sky as he settled himself close to her body, his lips resting on a taut nipple, still engorged after her climax. “Yowwr,” she purred, and he nuzzled against her breast. She sighed deeply. “That’s one way of getting rid of the wallabies.”

His head came up and he kissed her. "I somehow think they'll be back."

He gathered her to his chest, her head nestled on his shoulder.

"So, this is what they were after last night." Tilla stood with her hands on her hips, her bare feet pushing at mounds of alfalfa pellets.

Kent looked up at her from the swag, rubbing his face, and stretching. "You were asleep, purring so prettily, all alone in your little camp. I just dumped a couple of kilos around you and snuck off, waited for the fun." He stretched again. "It was the scream that curdled my blood, though. I'd nearly nodded off."

"You knew where I was?"

"I watched you from down there in that thicket of casuarinas." He pointed to his vantage spot. "Then, when I went inside and read your note – that polite little invitation to visit you—"

"It was definitely not an invitation."

Kent shrugged. "I put two and two together."

"Is nothing sacred?"

"Luckily I found you before that killer koala. He'd have eaten you up before you could say 'shoo'."

He'd followed her. Her heart thumped merrily. Tilla Cormack, you've been got hook, line and sinker. She would savour every minute of this precious time with him.

"Come on, let's go down for breakfast, and a shower." He stood up, naked, staring at her. "What are you looking at, TC?"

Her face flushed, and she smiled at him. "I'm looking at you, Kent Taylor." She scooped up his clothes and ran laughing all the way to the cabin, his protesting shouts following closely behind.

It wasn't until after they'd showered, which had taken them some time and much use of soap and precious water, they noticed the extra boxes of supplies stacked neatly in the kitchen.

Tilla saw Kent pick up a note. “What’s that?” she asked, throwing on a woolly jumper.

“Looks like we had company yesterday and didn’t know it.” Kent handed her the note from Helen and Peter.

“Seems our faux pas has been taken in hand and you’ve forgiven our sins. Have left extra supplies and will inform Jim not to disturb you until the end of the month. Helen and Peter,” Tilla read aloud. “Yesterday’s date, at lunchtime, it says. They missed us by minutes.”

He looked at her, a grin on his face. “They’ve assumed we don’t mind being stuck here together. How do you feel about not being disturbed for another three weeks or so?”

Tilla shook her hands through her hair wet. “I feel all right about it.” She touched his face gently. “What do you say we have a great nosh up and sit on the veranda with some champagne?”

Kent swung an arm about her waist and hugged her against his chest, smacked a great kiss on her mouth. “Sounds just fine to me.”

Tilla’s heart warmed as he helped prepare their brunch. He chopped and sliced a huge bowl of fresh salad, lightly grilled tomatoes and onions as she roasted lamb medallions. He sniffed appreciatively over her shoulder as she laced the succulent lamb with fresh rosemary and garlic, then he hung on to her shirt tail as she moved the meat from pan to plate, followed her about the little kitchen landing quick kisses on her neck.

She laughed as he played, struggled lightly as he helped her chop and fix the vegetables, his arms over her shoulders.

He took every chance he could to touch her, and she returned his affection happily.

Tilla felt good. It was going to be a great few weeks. She was determined about that.

Kent felt bloody fantastic.

For the umpteenth time in two idyllic weeks, he watched fascinated as she pinned her hair high on her head. Then as usual, she smiled across the bed at him. His heart strings tugged.

Kent knew he'd have to re-draw the game plan now. He was in love with this woman, couldn't let her go. He wanted much more, but she hadn't indicated any such thing. Perhaps she was better at this game than he thought he was.

How was he going to change the rules? He wasn't ready to offer marriage—just barely divorced.

He shrugged. I'll just carry on and see what happens. "So. Have you thought more about coming to work for me?"

Tilla winced inwardly. The dreaded words were out. After nearly two weeks, he'd finally mentioned the unmentionable. She'd foolishly thought he wouldn't speak of work until the last few days on the island. She glanced at him.

His face, now so familiar and lovable was inscrutable. The wall had come down. Kent Taylor, Taylor Corporation was back.

The thud in her chest was dull, but she was ready for it. Had steeled herself against the inevitable.

She shook her head, and looked away. "I have thought about it, and no."

A second's silence. "Why not?"

"I don't want to discuss this now. It's been such a lovely couple of weeks and—"

"You led me to believe you would."

"I did no such thing." She climbed off the bed.

"I thought sleeping with me all this time seemed a fairly good indication."

Tilla's mouth dropped open. "What has sleeping with you got to do with work? It's not as if I am sleeping my way to the top."

He stood up, ran his hands through his hair as if deciding what to do. "I know I said that we should keep—"

"Don't say any more. I remember the rules."

"I don't think you understand."

Tilla burned red with embarrassment. "Please. Please don't ruin this. Let's leave it just as you said. I don't want to talk about it any more." Was that shattering noise her heart breaking? Had it all come to a halt now? No – no, it was much too early.

“I need to know—”

“I won’t come and work for you. Certainly not after this. We agreed to keep it the way you said. Just a – a holiday fling.” Her throat closed up. “Excuse me,” she whispered and pushed past him to the bathroom. The only room she could lock him out of.

Kent followed her, bewildered. So, she really didn’t want anything more. And wasn’t going to be convinced, either. No. He couldn’t believe that. Women just don’t make love and give what Tilla had given him only to walk away.

“TC.” He rapped hard knuckles on the bathroom door. “Come out here.”

Inside the bathroom Tilla fumed, and angry tears coursed down her cheeks as she sat on the closed lid of the toilet. This is impossible.

“Open the door.”

Tilla swiped at her face, brushed away the trails of her frustration. These next two weeks would now be unbearable. How could she have let this happen? Why did she talk herself into thinking she could handle this situation? She was an adult, a, self-made, responsible woman...

“If you don’t open this door on the count of three – “

Oh you’ve certainly been responsible, a voice hissed. Well done. Just give him everything he wants, why don’t you, that’s really responsible. Her chin wobbled.

“—I’m going to open it myself.”

D’uh, no kidding.

Really smart move you made, Tilla Cormack, thinking you could handle a holiday affair and come out of it unscathed ...

“One—”

...With just a few happy memories and nothing else. No battle scars, no broken heart, no nothing from him.

“Two—”

He’s going to walk away from all this without so much as turning a hair. You watch. When the time comes, he’ll just walk right on out...

“Three.”

...and you'll be left without a backward glance. He won't even know your name by the end of next month—

“Open this bloody door!” he shouted.

She harrumphed, pressed the button on the loo, threw open the bathroom door and nearly fell over him. “Excuse me,” she said again, and picked her way around him.

She marched to the bedroom, gathered fresh clothes and marched back to the shower.

“I want to talk to you,” he bellowed.

“Then you'll just have to talk to me through this door again, because I'm going for a shower,” she bellowed back.

They stared at each other for a split second.

“Don't forget your towel this time,” he said.

She marched back to the bedroom and grabbed her towel.

“Best leave the door open a tad just in case it gets stuck again.”

She slammed the door as hard as she could.

Under the hot water she soaped up rapidly, scrubbing every inch of her body as if she were trying to rub him out of it.

She lathered shampoo in her hair. I'm angry at him, I'm angry at myself and I'm angry at everything else. He's in my head, in my heart—I see him every waking moment and yet I know he's using me for sport and will dump me on my head the moment we leave this Island, if not before.

What should I do? What *can* I do?

It's an eighty kilometre walk back to Regency—maybe I could hitchhike ... She shuddered at the thought and turned on more hot water, enjoying the sudden rush of heat over her scalp.

However, mindful of the water shortage, she closed the shower off as soon as possible. She towelled off, dressed, dragged a comb through her tangled hair.

Tilla checked the tiny mirror for her reflection. Her face, freshly scrubbed, shone, light freckles dusting over her nose and cheeks. She peered at her eyes. They were

clear, green and intelligent. She was intelligent. Why then was she making such stupid mistakes?

She took a deep breath, gathered her old clothes and stepped out of the bathroom. At least the door hadn't stuck this time. But she nearly walked straight into him.

Kent leaned on the door frame, arms folded across his chest, eyes on hers, mouth set.

She shivered involuntarily as he refused to move aside. "I'd like some time by myself today." She could be cool. She could. She knew it. She was.

His dark brows knitted in a heavy scowl. "You're not going to get it."

She remained silent, her gaze riveted on the kitchen bench behind him. No man was going to be her undoing. Especially Kent Taylor.

"So tell me, what is it to be today? Shall we take the beach? Go fishing? A long walk? Spend the day in bed?"

She looked at him. "Why don't you take no for an answer?" She was acutely aware of a muscle flickering in his jaw.

"You didn't say no. You seemed all hot and bothered," he stormed on. "But you didn't say no. And it was hot, wasn't it?" he continued. "Did I call you cold and waspish a couple of weeks ago? I was very mistaken. You were jumping for it, have been ever since."

She turned away. Her need had been obvious and was so obvious now. She wouldn't resist if he came closer—she wanted to put her hand on his chest, to feel that beating heart, strong and insistent under her palm. Not be angry and shouting.

He came up behind her and his cool breath fanned the back of her neck. "And so have I. It's not something either of us can fight."

He was right. She couldn't fight the way she felt about him any more than he could fight the way he felt about her. But he was a man, and he'd already let her know his interest was all lust. And hers? Well, hers was really – the other 'L' word.

She turned and looked up, past that wonderful, crooked nose and into his dark eyes, liquid, burning. "I hate fishing."

He closed his eyes a moment. "Let's take a walk, then," he suggested, breathing steadily. He brushed a tendril of hair from her face.

Tilla nodded. The heat of his hand warmed her. She kissed the palm as it lightly caressed her cheek. It slid to her throat and she closed her eyes as his tender mouth pressed softly to hers, soothing away the anger and the hurt.

“I feel totally relaxed for the first time since we’ve been here. And how many days is that?” He shoved all the pillows behind his back and propped himself up.

“I don’t know ... I haven’t been counting,” she answered truthfully. She hadn’t wanted to count the days gone, or the days left. But she knew. She knew.

“And I think we’re housebound for the next twenty-four hours.” He glanced at the sheeting rain pouring down the windows. “We should find something to occupy ourselves, don’t you think – maybe some Scrabble?” He smiled at her.

They’d never managed a full game of Scrabble yet. A lazy thrill curled in her stomach. She wouldn’t have cared if they occupied themselves on a bed of nails in a monsoon, as long as he was with her.

Their loving was full of affection and warmth. He slept deeply that afternoon, and she curled up beside him on the bed with her book. At last she could read a few pages. At last she must be relaxing, too.

Tilla glanced at his sleeping face. To think he was hers for nearly two weeks longer. She bent over and kissed his nose, gently. If only it was for years ...

She settled back to rethink, to regroup. There was the unresolved problem of facing him again after the holiday and then the major problem of her real identity. That would be the worst part. And the fact she’d kept it from him even now, even after their new found closeness.

There’d be some way to get around all this, some way to clear up the misunderstanding, some way she would prevent her heart from breaking, and her pride falling completely. There would be some way.

The storm had passed, the clouds outside were breaking up, and sunlight streaked through, casting a glare over the puddles of water on the veranda. The cabin glowed as if a huge light had been turned on, and she blinked as sunshine burst into the room.

She sat up and stretched. Then heard a vehicle pull up, its wheels skewing on soft ground as it came to a sliding halt outside the window.

She shot off the bed.

It was a four wheel drive, a man sat at the steering wheel. She blinked to clear her eyes of the sun spots. It didn't look like Jim Clayton, nor was it his vehicle.

Peter Wilson climbed out of the car. Tilla's hand covered her mouth as she gasped in shock.

Now what?

She woke Kent, shaking his shoulder. "Kent. It's Peter Wilson. He's here."

Kent sat up, groggily. "Here?" He rubbed his hands hard over his face. "I slept like the dead."

A knock hammered on the back door.

"At the door."

"Right."

Tilla watched as he got to his feet, fighting sleep. She stayed in the bedroom. Heard the men greet each other, and Kent wandering about the kitchen apologising for his stupor, his shorts, but—

"I think you'll wake up soon enough. I had a call from your office today—yes, it's all right, I let them know I was coming over here... I ... er ... by the way, I take it all's well with the—?"

Tilla imagined Kent nodding. "Everything's fine," he answered shortly.

"Seems your office minder has gone a little mad. She, er ..."

"Peter, it's all right. The lady here is well aware of the small misunderstanding about the shack, and of the minder in my office and is fine with it all. There's no need to pussyfoot around. What's the problem?"

Tilla peeked around the wall.

Peter had his back to her, and Kent had come fully awake, arms folded across his big bare chest and a surly expression on his face. The monster Taylor had returned.

Peter ducked his head. "Gavin rang early this morning. Seems Janet is stirring the pot with our prize client, Johnny Crofter. She's also sent two of your best staff packing, and rearranged the office. Then, after she'd gone, Gavin found a file on

your company, locked away in some drawer. Pretty sensitive stuff, apparently. Gavin wanted you to know. ‘Course, he was scared to death not to tell you somehow. Was almost prepared to fly over himself ... The poor guy rang me as soon as he got rid of Janet.”

Tilla leaned on the wall. Her heart pounded, and a peculiar tightening in her chest threatened to squeeze the breath out of her. Kent would have to go back to the office.

“I see. Looks like cut my holiday short.”

Oh no. No.

“I thought you’d want that—I could’ve waited to get a message to you but the signal is so dodgy here. I knew you’d want to leave straight away.”

Tilla heard the silence, was sure her heart had stopped altogether. She wasn’t breathing ... He was going to leave. She wouldn’t have even four weeks. It was all over now. Today.

“Pete, I’ll just grab some clothes. Jim can get the rest of my gear later.”

“No worries. I’ll... um... wait in the car.”

Kent took a deep breath. He didn’t have time to talk to her. If she gave him one indication... If there are at least tears, he’d know, and it’d all be all right.

Tilla heard Peter leave the cabin, could see the car door open, could see him climb into it. She closed her eyes, hoping to stave off the inevitable. She would not cry. She would not cave under the pressure and ditch her side of the bargain.

When she opened her eyes, Kent Taylor stood there before her, Kent Taylor of Taylor Corporation. He didn’t speak. His mouth set hard, his eyes burned dark, his brow quirked as if daring her to speak.

The end had come unexpectedly.

Tilla’s feet were lead-like, her brain empty of thought and action. She did nothing but stare back at him. She couldn’t speak, her voice was caught in her throat by the effort not to cry.

He looked away from her, picked up his overnight bag, stuffed his jacket and a few personal things into it. He grabbed his wallet, threw a pair of jeans on over his shorts, shrugged into a jumper, shoved his feet into the old boaties.

“So. That’s the way it goes,” he said, lightly. “I should’ve known it was too good to last.”

Tilla’s heart missed a beat or two.

“But she had to have one last grab at me, one last dig to put the wind up me. She had to spoil something of mine to get her own back.” He went to the bathroom where she heard him packing up his shaving gear.

Tilla was held fast by her own sinking feelings. A lump lodged itself in her throat and she couldn’t speak, it would choke her.

Please leave quickly, she thought, her throat constricting painfully. I don’t want to prolong the pain of keeping myself together.

But this was it. This was the no-go zone. The finish. All too soon.

Her breathing quickened as she fought off the tears.

He slammed the bathroom door. He stood a moment and glared at her, then spread his hands. “Well. Guess I’ll see you later.” And the back door thundered shut against the wall of the cabin.

Her heart slid and the peculiar drop in her belly was like speeding over the crest of a hill. She turned her head – the only part of her brave enough to move – and saw him climb into Peter Wilson’s car. Watched him leave.

He’d burst into her life and now thrust himself out of it. She didn’t have the four weeks he’d promised her, that she’d promised herself.

I’ll see you later ... As if he were going to the shops, or out for a bike ride. As if he were going to pop back in an hour’s time.

As if there were nothing squeezing her heart, nothing piercing the numbness in her head, nothing screaming through her body and shattering the sudden ice in her veins into a million tiny, sharp pieces.

Tilla took a couple of very deep breaths. She stumbled back to the edge of the bed, and sat, her head in her hands.

He had gone, back to work, back to that other life. Out of her life.

He'd not given one inch he hadn't taken back right then, only moments ago. He meant what he'd said, that this time was only holiday time, nothing more. There'd been no final kiss, no soothing words, no talk of tomorrow or next week, no nothing. Just as he said.

The drone of Peter's vehicle died away. She wondered idly, stupidly if he'd come back, grab her and her belongings and take her with him.

Of course he wouldn't. "Damn him," she whispered.

The tears finally released the pain in her heart. *Damn him.*

CHAPTER TEN

Peter Wilson let Kent's silence fill the car. A man had a lot to think about. But where was this Tilla? She must have been inside somewhere. He'll let me know soon enough, he thought.

Kent closed his eyes momentarily. Tilla's tight expression puzzled him. She hadn't said a word. Just stared. Hadn't kissed him, or held out her arms to say goodbye. Simply hadn't reacted.

No tears.

His heart lurched in his chest so he turned his thoughts elsewhere.

Bloody Janet and her meddling. He knew she'd done whatever it was because he'd taken the break. Had he been off on a sale interstate, making more money for her, she'd happily have held the fort. Without the interference. But because he was on a holiday, of course she had to spoil it for him.

The *decree nisi* couldn't come through soon enough. Not that it wasn't all final, said and done anyway, just that they wouldn't have to pretend anymore. He was sick to death of the mind games and the competition, when really – it wasn't a competition..

He glanced at Peter. "We've got to keep this other project close to the ground, Pete. If Janet gets wind of it, she'll blow it sky high. I don't know how much she can hold things up now."

Peter nodded. "Haven't mentioned a word, but I had a feeling she might've picked up on something. Good thing all the papers are at my office."

"Right, especially the file Gavin found. I'll be very interested to see that." Kent slumped in the seat. If Janet knew of the deal they were about to close, and the new company set to take over OneCom, she'd come clawing back like a cornered vixen. Or maybe she already had ... was she the spy he'd accused Tilla of being?

He slapped his forehead. Why hadn't he thought of it before? You idiot, he berated himself. Janet trying to cripple his business now she was out of it was obvious.

He silently thanked his solicitor for protecting future earnings from his ex-wife by adding a clause, which she signed, waiving her claim to anything else of his from the date of the divorce. She probably figured she'd have everything by then anyway.

But when was a divorce finally a divorce?

His thoughts returned to Tilla and he couldn't push them away. Was she so cold, so unfeeling? Why hadn't she said something to him? Anything. Why hadn't she yelled? Why had she given him that cold glare and let him go without so much as a peck on the cheek? Maybe he'd done too good a job on her – ensuring she got the message about no ties, no relationship after the holiday.

He'd done a good job, all right. The only person it hadn't worked on was him. He wanted Tilla Cormack for a hell of a lot longer than just four weeks. He'd known that from the beginning, but he just had to play the smart arse to test the waters. He tested, all right. It had blown up in his face.

Now there was nothing between them but a mountain of unfinished business and unanswered questions. He would see her again, and soon, though judging by what Peter told him about his company, it might be a long while before he could fully concentrate on her.

He'd just about have to rebuild his business, not to mention the office. Janet could almost have almost ruined everything. Again. At least he'd removed Keith, one of his earlier major problems. It was all very well to send a cousin on his merry way, but a soon-to-be ex-wife might prove more difficult.

Kent looked out the window as Peter's vehicle sped over the pastures. The ocean disappeared from view.

He imagined that maybe if he turned around now and went to back get her, she would come with him.

Of course she wouldn't. She'd been able to stick to the rules. His rules. He closed his eyes.

It hurt to think how well she played the game.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The days dragged on.

Tilla read all her books, took long walks on the beach, rested in the shadow on the rocks watching the sea eagle. She wandered aimlessly at times, restless and unsettled.

Everything reminded her of him.

Once in the middle of the night she dreamed the phone had rung. She'd reached across and grabbed it only to hear silence.

But would he try to ring? She'd lain awake the rest of that night deciding that yes, he would have. Then no, he wouldn't. Yes, he would, no, he wouldn't ... She went over and over their conversations for any hint, any clue he'd given her about his thoughts, but knew it was futile. He was only interested in the few weeks at the cabin, nothing more. She had to accept that.

And she wasn't looking forward to going back to work. Kent fully expected to see her at his office when she returned. Otherwise he would come to the agency demanding of Tilla Cormack why his requested PA was not in his office.

She wasn't looking forward to that either.

First thing on her return, she would talk to Marilyn about the business again. To ask if she was still interested in buying it. At least she'd then be able to have a real holiday if it sold, and go far away from all this heartache. From Kent Taylor.

When Jim Clayton came for her, she took a last look at the cabin, locked the door and left.

She'd go far away.

Especially far from Kent Taylor.

Tilla sat in her office at nine o'clock. Her desk and chair, the neat shelves of files, the sight of her staff barely settled nerves which had jangled for the last two weeks.

Yes, she told Tracey Carter and the rest of her team, the holiday was fine. Yes, very relaxing. Really? I've lost weight? Oh well. And no, she didn't want to be back, but here she was.

Marilyn had departed leaving umpteen messages for her, but the office was spotless. The work reports of the last month piled neatly on top of her desk so she could catch up on the placements made whilst she was away. Marilyn had also begun a recruitment drive, and Tilla noted with mild surprise that more than fifty people had been screened, interviewed and placed in the last four weeks. Not bad.

Tracy brought a cup of coffee for her and took an hour or so to run over the workload past and present.

Tilla sighed in relief that she hadn't mention Kent Taylor. At least she wouldn't have to deal with him today. She'd be able to cope, and the longer he left his demand to have 'TC' working for him, the better she'd be.

"Do me a favour, Trace. Don't offer your name when you answer the phone for the next few days."

Tracy blinked at her. "You mean that black-hearted grump of a client still thinks you're me?"

Tilla nodded. "Long story, but it would only complicate things if he knew ... oh, you know what I mean. And if he asks after 'you', say that you were posted interstate. Better yet, overseas."

Tracy shrugged. "All right. Where did I go?"

"Make it somewhere extremely exotic."

"Jodie said he was really horrible."

"The man Jodie dealt with was really horrible. Really." Tilla thought fleetingly of Keith. "Are you sure he hasn't contacted this office while I've been away?"

Tracy frowned. "Well, there was an email demanding that you go back and work for him from next Thursday, but we answered saying that you were on another assignment at that time. And, that being on holidays we weren't able to contact you."

"Good. That should do it." Tilla rubbed scratchy eyes. Sleep deprivation was catching up with her.

“He also wanted another couple of temps so we placed some of the juniors. He said that’s all he required until you returned.”

So he still wanted her back there. Messy.

“Marilyn’s placed over thirty people,” Tilla commented as she flicked through the messages.

“Oh, yes. Some big company. OneCom Computers.”

“I see.” She rubbed her eyes again, blinked owlishly at the sheaf of papers in her hands.

“Er, don’t get me wrong, boss, but you don’t look as if the holiday did you much good this time.”

“Oh, it did. After the first two weeks or so, it was very relaxing. I had a lot of time to read and walk.” Pity she didn’t sleep too well.

Her private line flashed on the console. Inwardly, she groaned, then pointed to the light. “Who could that be?”

Tracy shook her head. “Not a clue.”

Tilla stabbed the button, expecting the worst. “Tilla Cormack.”

“Ms Cormack. I want to know when TC is back on line.” Kent Taylor flung the gauntlet down the line.

She hadn’t expected the electric shock of his voice as it crackled down the line. Her heart banged and her face flushed. “How did you get this number?”

“I’ve had a few conversations with Marilyn. She seemed to think that my particular requirements need your direct attention. I don’t like going through your assistant – you might be permanently out to lunch if you knew it was me on the phone.”

Arrogance he had plenty of. “I’m sorry, this is—?” She remembered that Tilla Cormack had not met the indomitable Kent Taylor.

“I think we’ve had this conversation before.”

“Ah, Mr Taylor.”

“Very good, Ms Cormack.”

So-o smarmy. Ms Cormack with the big bum and the big nose, she grumbled to herself. “I believe you were informed that TC is on another assignment.” She tucked the receiver under her chin, struggling out of her jacket. The room had become unbearably hot.

“Ms Cormack, I don’t need to remind you of the size of my account.”

Oh you money-grubbing—

“But if TC isn’t in my office at nine o’clock tomorrow morning, I will close my account and shift to Dickens Personnel. Now, I’m sure you don’t want me to do that.”

Tilla imagined he thought he was talking to some little lady who’d jump at his every command. She was highly tempted to tell him to go to hell, but knew she wouldn’t. “Of course not. I will do everything I can to ensure that TC is there tomorrow morning.”

“I want confirmation within the hour that you’ve secured her. Call me,” he said and hung up.

Tilla stared at the dead receiver. He’d done it again.

Tracy Carter couldn’t believe her ears. “You have to do what?”

“I’ll tell him as soon as I get there tomorrow.” Tilla held her head in her hands. “I’ve tried to save this account and simply messed it up altogether. Well, it looks like we’ll lose him anyhow.”

“It’s a very good account,” Tracy noted, protesting Tilla’s lack of heart. “And it really wasn’t your fault that you—”

“Pulled the wool over his eyes. I don’t think Kent Taylor is going to enjoy knowing he’s been fooled.” She sat up straight. “I’ll just have to tell him that he exhausted my supply of excellent temps and I was the last resort. Just an oversight that I forgot to mention I was me.”

Tracy looked at Tilla a moment and then went back to her work.

Tuesday loomed large with every passing minute and every second was interrupted and disjointed. It bothered her all day. Every time she blinked, there he was, sometimes on the beach with the wind in his hair, sometimes on their bed ... She had hoped to be much further past her infatuation, as she called it, by now.

She was dreading Tuesday morning.

Tilla placed the call to his receptionist advising she had indeed secured his much requested temp.

She left her office late evening, drove home, prepared a light meal, ate in front of the tele with Bippy at her feet. Tilla had missed the little dog and her homecoming had been a joyous affair.

She fell asleep by eleven, only to wake in the middle of the night, dreading her encounter in the morning.

She'd tell him first thing. She'd close his office door and tell him straight away, so if he was going to yell she'd be sacked immediately and not have the pain prolonged. That's what she would do.

Tilla woke long before the alarm. She dressed in trackies, walked Bippy, fed her and put her outside for the day.

Skipping breakfast, she showered, dressed carefully, twisted her hair up in clips. Her makeup was faultless, but the dark shadows under her eyes betrayed her restless night and the restless previous two weeks.

She chose an emerald coloured suit, deep red lipstick, sheer hose and plain buff heels. Prepared for business, she'd conduct herself in her usual manner—professionally and efficiently. Dressed to be sacked.

Made sure all her buttons were done up.

She strode purposefully into the office building even though her feet felt funny, and announced herself to the same secretary she'd seen on the first day.

The girl raised her eyebrows. "Wow," she breathed. "If you came back, he must think you're good."

Silly girl, of course she was good. She was the best, Mister Bloody Kent Bloody Taylor said so. Her spirits rose.

In the elevator, which for once functioned properly, she straightened her suit. It clung smartly to her curves, cut to perfection. She would simply stun him with her good looks and cool – *cold* efficiency and hope that he wouldn't refer to their island relationship. She wouldn't be able to hold the facade for very long if he did.

The elevator opened at his floor. Long seconds went by and the doors began to close before Tilla forced herself out. She glanced at her watch. Five minutes before nine.

Eight faces looked up at her. None were smiling. Gavin quickly shook his head as if to say that things were not good. She glanced at Kent's office, the door firmly closed. For a moment she was at a loss.

Where was she to work? She spread her hands at Gavin and he shrugged, beckoning her across the office.

"The boss is fuming. Seems Janet, that's his ex-wife, has really thrown the cat amongst the pigeons. She sacked the couple of the engineers working on that big project, and I found a report we think she was compiling on all the staff and operations here. Don't know what it's all about, but it's been hell in here for two and a half weeks. Don't like your chances of coming out alive this time."

Tilla was about to retort when Kent Taylor's door was thrown open. It banged on the wall behind him and she spun around, facing him.

She breathed out slowly, lessening the pain. The thud in her stomach was hard and unkind. There he was, suited again, a darkly brooding monster, scowling as if his last sacrificial lamb had escaped him.

He looked at her, eyes flashing. He tossed his head indicating to Gavin that he should get on with his work. "In here," he barked at her. "Close the door."

She'd have to say something immediately. This was not the man she left on Australis Island just over two weeks ago. This was the other man, the terror, the angry man who, even so, elicited such passionate responses from her.

This was the man she loved.

He turned to face her as she placed her briefcase on his desk. She looked up at him, heart thudding but her face composed and expressionless. "Hello, Kent."

He launched. "I expect one hundred and ten percent. I expect overtime, and weekends. Is that understood?" His brows knitted in a deep frown.

She nodded curtly, turned away as she opened her briefcase and pulled out the laptop. Mimicking him, she mouthed, *I expect one hundred and ten percent*. Her lip curled.

“Of course,” she said and as she turned back, she composed herself, patted a stray hair into place. “Totally. Absolutely.” She opened her briefcase and retrieved the notebook computer. “But I have—”

“I also expect nothing but total professionalism.”

Well, she wasn’t some flighty teenager ready to launch herself at him the moment he glanced at her. “As always.”

Her level voice surprised her. She was in control. She was cool and unruffled, though her insides were jelly. Her feet still felt peculiar. She was in a bad way.

“Some of the major files have disappeared. I had backups and copies done long ago, but I don’t want them given to just anybody. The staff have enough to do after my – after Janet managed to wreck everything with very neat precision. We’ll have to get them back into the system before everything else fails. I also need you to locate the two lads she fired. Understood?”

She nodded, understanding only that there was some heavy duty work about to land on her with a great thud. “If I might say something—”

He glowered at her, daring her to speak.

Her resolve shook and she thought better of presenting Tilla Cormack. Was it so important for him to know that she wasn’t who she said she was? Would it matter? It was only for two weeks, Tracy could handle the office if —

“Well?”

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

“Another thing.” He reached into the desk drawer and slapped a manila file on his desk. “Seen this before?”

It was just a manila folder. She shook her head. “What’s in it?”

He opened it. “Handwritten notes on my company. My ex-wife says they’re not hers. And I should know her handwriting by now.”

Tilla glanced at the pages she’d written on his office, so many weeks ago. “Yes. They’re mine. Why?”

“Would you mind explaining what the hell they’re about?”

“I always take notes. Always. It helps to remind me where things are, who’s who—”

“Left conveniently in an unlocked drawer?”

“In your office which should be secure enough. Have you read them? It’s hardly espionage.”

“And nothing to do with reporting to another company?”

Tilla squared up. “I don’t know why you’d even asked me that.” She straightened her back. “You know perfectly well that I’d do nothing of the sort.” Her chin hadn’t trembled, and she was thankful for that, but the accusation again, after all they’d shared... Her spine was rigid, but her stomach was hollow, and weak.

He considered her long and hard, then nodded curtly. “I’ll need you for longer than I booked. And I want you to consider that permanent position here.”

“I can’t,” she said meeting his glare. “I wouldn’t. And certainly not now,” she finished nodding towards her handwritten pages.

“I’m offering a hundred and sixty thousand a year.”

She blinked. A sub-executive’s salary. “What do you want me to do – run the place?” Tilla Cormack had surprisingly showed herself.

“Yes. I need more than a personal assistant. I know you know nothing about software, but you do know about marketing, and accounting and staff.”

“You don’t—”

“I want an answer immediately. Otherwise you needn’t unpack your briefcase.” The crackle in his voice whipped across the office and stung her.

“I’ve given you my answer. I drop everything to come to your beck and call but I won’t be hounded into changing my mind. Especially now.” She rose to her full height again. “You either want your professional temp assistant or you don’t. I have other things to do with my time.” She angrily swiped a stray hair back into place.

They glared at each other. He stood with his arms folded, his face like stone. Tilla leaned on the desk, her palms supporting her weight. “I suggest you point me in the right direction so we can start to get back on track,” she snapped, Tilla Cormack in total control.

He rocked on his heels.

Her face flushed. “You made your intentions perfectly clear and I intend to make you stick to your own rules.” She’d wanted to say that so desperately. “I don’t expect to be chased around this office.”

“I wouldn’t want a smack in the face for my efforts,” he said.

She ignored that, her heart thumping. “Same rules as before. You have your professional personal assistant, nothing else.”

“Perfectly understood.”

She took herself off her hands and rubbed them to dull the pressure. Get a hold of yourself, she thought. He has you jumping sky high. And right into his lap if you don’t watch it.

“We have work to do,” he stated flatly.

He handed her file after file, letter after letter, dictated email after email, gave her no time to absorb what she was typing. Her fingers flew over the little keyboard whilst he dictated. Under his direction, she took his calls, organised his appointments, set up graphs and reports. She flew out to Gavin and had the staff meet her requirements – the year’s books, the reports of previous quarters, staff records and files. She compiled lists of previous clients, worked with his long neglected database, updated the information.

All the while throughout, he made, and took, several calls from his solicitors.

Tilla toiled into the night and when he said he was leaving for the evening, she simply grabbed her handbag and left ahead of him.

“Eight tomorrow,” he growled as she flew into the elevator whilst he turned on the security lights. She didn’t want to be in such close proximity any longer.

She drove home without thinking another thing, her head was so full of Kent Taylor and his demands.

Bippy greeted her delightedly and led Tilla to the food bowl just to be on the safe side. Tilla scratched the dog’s ear, grateful for her simple distractions.

She rang Tracy apologising for the late hour and received an update on her own office.

“Everything’s cool,” Tracy chirped. “No problems. You’ve got the only problem this office has ever had – Kent Taylor.”

Tilla agreed. And it had only just begun. “He wants me full time,” she groaned to her secretary.

“Yes, I know. He rang and left a message for you today.”

“What?”

“You know, for Tilla Cormack. Boy, is this getting confusing. You obviously didn’t tell him.”

“I’ll tell him tomorrow.”

“Yeah, right, boss.”

Tilla rang off. She’d let the situation get out of hand, she’d landed herself in this hot water. She better tell him tomorrow or life wasn’t going to be worth living.

She bent down to kick off her shoes. No wonder she’d had funny feet all day. She’d put on a mismatched pair.

At eight the following day she was already bent over huge, manual spreadsheets, poring over figures and collating the information he’d left her, ready for transcribing to computer.

“The accountant wants these today,” he said, flipping hand scrawled sheets of paper in front of her. “The wages, manually. Before we went on the system. No one has been able to balance them, and they have to be done.”

“Today?”

“Too much work?”

She bit back a snappy retort. “And which has priority – the wages for your accountant or these documents for your solicitor?” There was obviously something major happening but she hadn’t yet been privy to the information.

“Just get it done. We don’t leave today until you do.”

“Kent, there’s something I must—”

“I’ll be out for lunch. I’m sure you’ll have made good in-roads by the time I return.” He turned, and that big broad back disappeared.

She looked at the wages, fuming. And made a decision. If he wanted a personal assistant, she’d do things her way. She would organise a list of duties, and someone

from the floor could get this done. She called Gavin in. "Who's the least busy right now?"

"Paula. She's just finished her project, and I've got her helping Matt."

"I need her to do this for me, today."

Gavin looked at her, myopically. "You mean, real office work?"

"Yes. Why?"

"He doesn't like any of us doing any office work, even though we've offered."

"From now on, I don't give a damn what he likes and doesn't like. Who can assist?"

Gavin blinked. "We could all lend a hand. He thinks all we're good for is the keyboard ... Not that we mind, we know how over-worked he is."

Tilla laughed shortly. "Over-worked is right, but I'm not sure it's him. Can Paula do this?"

"Easy," he said. "We're all just housekeeping right now, anyway. Give us what you can."

Tilla smiled at him. A light at the end of the tunnel.

Four of them worked feverishly for hours under Tilla's direction. She plotted, graphed, databased, poured forth the budgets and spreadsheets. Paula came up with a balanced manual wage book.

"Have we a software package for wages?" Tilla asked.

"Oh yes. It's on our accounts package, but he won't let us use it."

"Why ever not?" Tilla asked, studying the wasted talent before her.

"Too busy building his empire," Gavin muttered and the others looked at him.

"That's disloyal," someone said.

"No, it's not," he replied defensively. "He's never had time to teach anyone. He hates office work, hasn't got the time for all this. That's why he needs a manager. Thankfully he's found you, TC."

She blanched. Oh, she'd have to come clean, soon. "We'll use the wages package immediately. Start loading the data, Paula. And by the way, we'll be in overtime for quite a while."

The collective groan was only half-hearted.

Someone brought lunch up for her. One by one they came for instructions. She was careful they attended their own work as well as hers and gradually, the huge task he'd set became manageable and a comprehensive set of procedures was finally put in place.

Kent had not returned from his lunch appointment by seven p.m. She shrugged. It was the boss' prerogative. Besides, in his present frame of mind, it was best for all of them if he were out of the way.

Especially me, she thought and a peculiar shiver ran up and down her spine as she packed up and left the office.

At home once again to Bippy, she rang Tracy who informed her there were no dramatic developments during the day. Marilyn had wholeheartedly agreed to work part-time in Tilla's place until this whole thing could be resolved. She was busy with the recruitment drive.

The pressure was off. Marilyn would handle everything, and the accounts and wages. All Tilla would have to do was race across town for the paperwork to do the internet banking.

Marilyn once again asked Tilla to discuss the sale of the business. Tilla, her mind in turmoil, her body worn out, murmured over the phone agreeing that the time had come for a serious talk about the business.

By Friday morning, the pressure at Taylor Corporation was lifting. Tilla could feel an air of enthusiasm amongst the staff, and the workload Kent left for the staff in the morning before he left for the day was more than taken care.

He would disappear at eleven each morning and not return until the following day. The staff speculated he was having heavy duty meetings with solicitors and occasionally, his wife's name would enter the conversation.

It seemed Kent and Janet had not been together for quite some time, years in fact. That little knowledge gave Tilla some relief, but the fact that Janet was still on the scene made her uncomfortable. An angry wife, ex or not, could spot another

interested party a mile off. She would have to be very careful if Janet ever appeared at the office.

She organised four of the more experienced staffers to work on Saturday. Together, they rearranged their work space, allocated office procedural jobs to each member of staff, visited the PC area to determine greater efficiency of time and productivity. It was there she met his other twelve staff. She'd been too busy to think about where they might have been working.

Gavin proved to be an avid student of management. Tilla gave him all of the accounting work. He was also the best software engineer Kent had. And she discovered Taylor Corporation paid well for the best staff.

"You know," Gavin continued, explaining. "If we perform – which we all do, us long termers, anyhow – me, for instance, this will be my third trip overseas compliments of Taylor Corporation. Trudy over there—" he pointed to a software consultant. "Is on her second trip. Going to New Zealand this time."

Tilla stared at him. "Kent does that for his employees?"

Gavin hardly noticed her reaction. "I know I'm speaking out of turn, but Janet, his wife, is the one who's really done the damage to this office. And to him. He wasn't always so angry, but no one is game enough to stand up to him when he gets in these moods. Except you, of course." He grinned at her.

Tilla laughed. "Courage of the ignorant. Come on, let's get this done and we can all go home." She pondered about the side of Kent Taylor she'd glimpsed but forgotten.

By Monday morning, the boss had a fresh pile of work to get through. He merely raised an eyebrow at the change in the office set up, nodded his approval at the far more efficient system she'd devised and actually spent a moment laughing and chatting with Gavin.

He shut the door on his office and dictated a number of letters. He was distant, cool and Tilla longed for Friday. Her work here would be finished. Thankfully, as usual, he left to keep an appointment.

Kent leaned on the wall inside the elevator. It was harder on him than he expected. Tilla was no fly by night for him and he'd have to do something about it soon. He

thought fleetingly about grabbing the nearest woman and flinging her into bed, but he couldn't be bothered with all the nonsense before and after. He smiled ruefully. Good thing nobody could hear what he was thinking.

He closed his eyes. The turnaround in his office had been a magnificent effort on her part. He'd use it as an excuse to take her to dinner. Then he really would get down on bended knee.

Tilla had managed to save a week of work by delegating duties to the staff. Everyone knew how to properly use the filing systems, the accounts packages and the databases, thanks to Gavin's instruction, and to manage their time for their own software projects more efficiently. Two of the juniors were also instructed on how to receive incoming calls and take messages correctly.

By five on Friday afternoon, Tilla sat back and surveyed her work. She'd done well. Kent Taylor's office now ran efficiently and professionally. As long as Gavin was able to keep ahead of the office work, Taylor Corporation was going to be a very well organised business, no longer managed by crisis.

Tilla checked her watch. Time to leave.

She pressed the elevator button and the door opened immediately. Kent Taylor stepped out.

"Just finished?" he asked, a tired smile on his face.

She nodded. "Everything's locked away and most of it is under control." She looked at him. His appointment with the solicitor must have been a rough one. His tie was loose, his suit crumpled. Tilla wanted to reach out and touch his face, soothe his brow, but she didn't. He wanted professionalism.

He smiled crookedly. "I was hoping to catch you," he said, his voice low and flat. "Johnny Crofter has another of his shows tonight – a dinner at the Playford to thank everyone who backed him. Would you join me?"

Her heart gathered speed. It was all she could do not to jump when he snapped his fingers, and now he was asking pleasantly for her company.

"I don't think—"

"TC, I know it's been pretty rough around here since ..." He stopped. "Let me at least take you to dinner – to show you some appreciation for all your hard work..."

Kent's voice drifted. He exhaled and ran a hand through his hair. "You may have misunderstood my intentions at the cabin, my, er, efforts to keep our relationship on a, ah, professional basis."

Tilla flared. "I didn't think anything more than what you told me to expect. I took that at face value. I really don't wish to discuss it any further."

"I understand that, but at least let me thank you for all your hard work here and – and your patience."

Tilla gripped her briefcase tightly. She hesitated, her heart and soul wanting to take up his offer.

"I'll pick you up at seven," he said, and when she nodded he left her standing at the elevator.

Kent Taylor silently berated himself. She was making an issue of that stupid condition he gave her in the cabin. She still thought he only wanted a fling with someone who'd been within easy reach...

Well, hadn't he? Yes, yes, but that had changed. Changed the very night he carried her off to bed. Besides, she was driving him crazy.

Tilla, and the new venture. He was dividing his energy, and he couldn't keep that up for long. She had to be by his side when this thing started to move.

She had to be. He would see to it.

Tilla dressed carefully. The little red dress slid over her body, the lining silky and cool on her skin.

By six that evening, she had checked her appearance seven hundred times. Bippy thought she'd looked okay the first time.

She adjusted her hair, applied her makeup carefully, subtly. Lips she painted with deep, red lipstick, aware her colouring would allow it.

A last splash with her favourite cologne and she stood once again in front of the mirror.

The dress accentuated her full bosom, small waist and generous hips, all in proportion. A woman's body. Youthful and pleasant yet womanly. It belonged to a woman who wanted to be taken to the heights he had taken her.

A woman who faced a hopeless situation of unrequited love, who wore her heart on her sleeve, pining after a man she couldn't have, who was head over heels in love with nary a hint of that love being returned.

Unrequited. How spinsterish.

A woman who could very easily make a fool of herself tonight.

I can't do it ... I can't go out with him.

She couldn't sit at some fancy reception and pretend her heart wasn't breaking. She wished she could just accept being near to him, but not able to have him, and be done with that. She couldn't risk the humiliation of further rejection.

She stood up and paced the room. She had to make a clean break. She had to be strong. Tilla looked at her watch. Six thirty. She had half an hour.

Her heart rate climbed, and she checked herself in the mirror again. Nervous eyes looked back at her, the red lipstick awry on her face as her lips pursed in concentration.

Bippy was tracking back and forth with her.

Why should I worry? I hadn't said I'd go out with him. He just expected it. I could hide away here, under the settee perhaps, or in the pantry ...

Reluctant laughter brought tears to her eyes and she wiped away smudges of mascara.

Bippy did a little worried dance. Round and round.

When the doorbell sounded a minute or two later, she told herself she was calm and controlled.

Bippy was very excited, but as usual, Coolies don't often make a sound. When Tilla pulled the door open, her stomach bounced. And the dog pounced.

"Hello," he managed as Bippy leaped into his arms.

"Bippy." Tilla introduced the dog and took her from him. Even the dog couldn't resist leaping at him.

So there he was, one hand brushing down his jacket of dog hair, the other clutching a flamboyant bunch of red roses. With that lazy smile he lolled in the door way and looked at her.

Kent Taylor. How could she possibly ever resist him? Ever think she could run away and hide from him?

He didn't move. "I wasn't entirely sure you'd come out with me."

Irresistible. A magnet. He was barely inches from her, just leaning there in the door way in his dinner suit, smelling of his woody after-shave. Waiting for her to come to him, she knew.

He handed her the roses. Bippy sat at his feet, staring up. Man-person.

How would Tilla survive the night if he looked at her the way he did now?

And she couldn't possibly avoid the night ahead. There was no getting out of it. Would she tell him she loved him? She didn't have the courage.

"Hadn't we better get them in water?"

Tilla collected herself. "Oh, thank you. They're beautiful. I—I —"

"Ready when you are," he said and the glint in his eye forbade resistance.

Tilla found a large vase and filled it with water. Red, chaotic, wildly exuberant roses. She pushed them into the crystal, grabbed her handbag, slipped her feet into shoes, chucked Bippy under her furry chin and told her to be good, locked the door and walked with him to his car.

She sat quietly in the front seat of his sleek vehicle, not brave enough to look him in the eye. "Before we leave," she started, toying with her handbag. "I have something to say."

"That is?"

"I can't come to work for you. I am—"

"I assure you I have the money to pay for your more than excellent services."

"Money is not the issue." She looked at him squarely. "It's impossible," she stated. "For the other reasons. I can't do it."

"You can," he said, leaning on the steering wheel before turning the key in the ignition. "You could sell up, Tilla Cormack, and come work with me."

She went cold. Chills swept through her were telltale.

He reached across and gripped her hand, toyed with her fingers. "I've known from the very first night at the cabin."

"No."

"I might have been a bit under the weather, but when I tripped over your bags, everything spilled out of your purse. And there were your credit cards, your drivers licence, health care card. I thought I'd stumbled across the indomitable Tilla Cormack of the big bum variety. I admit I got more than a little shock when I saw your face, and the rest of you under the torch light."

She looked at him dry-mouthed. "You knew all that time?"

He nodded, unrepentant.

"That whole time?" she asked, angrily. "The whole time you knew who I was – you didn't say a thing? Not even the day you left."

He nodded. "I had other things on my mind then." Spread his hands as if he'd had no other option. "Besides, I'd actually forgotten about it. What did it matter?"

Tilla looked away, cheeks flaming. Her temper paled quickly. "You might've said something."

"You didn't." He started the engine and pulled away from the curb. "It didn't matter, really. I knew and I just forgot I knew."

"It was never meant to be anything more than just for the week," she insisted, her mind running on, her words hurried. "I mean, the week of temp work in your office. Things were getting so muddled. You – I mean, Keith had really gone through all my very best staff and when no one else was available, I thought I'd just—"

"Masquerade?"

"Of course not. I almost told you right at the door when I first walked in. I was very tired – I hadn't had a break for two years and I wasn't thinking clearly, things just got away from me. It wasn't intentional. But I knew I could do your job for the week and save myself a lot more headaches. I had intended to say who I was, but things just got so carried away and then there was Keith who wasn't really you and then you thought I was this damned spy person—"

“Whoa, stop. It really doesn’t matter. And you managed to side step it very neatly at the cabin.”

She put a hand to her head.

He smiled across at her. “I thought it turned out quite nicely. Nothing to be worried about.”

“It hasn’t turned out nicely at all,” she blurted. “And you kept ringing the office asking for me, for – for TC when you knew I was me all along.”

“Just had to stretch the game out ... put some pressure on you.” He chuckled, then smiled that lazy smile. Once again her heart took maniacal leaps under her rib cage. Heat stirred inside her, his proximity did nothing to retard her internal combustion.

“It worked. It was a pretty mean trick.”

He shrugged. “All’s fair.”

Tilla thought better than to challenge him on love and war. “Well, there can’t be any more ‘temp’ work from me. I have my own business to run. I’m just very sorry that you’ve been inconvenienced. And I don’t have any other temp staff who are prepared to work for you. I mean, Keith. And you.” She shook her head to clear it.

“You will come and work with me.”

“No, I can’t.” Her hands clutched the little black bag on her lap. “There are other circumstances.”

“Something I should know about?” He turned the car into the city traffic.

The only circumstance was that she loved him. And that was her best way out – to tell him. No man would hang around after being told that, especially after his rules and regulations at the cabin. He’d dump her so fast she could smell the rubber burning.

She could do it. She could tell him. Tilla opened her mouth, but couldn’t find her voice. She sighed, shook her head as he glanced at her. The BMW swung into North Terrace and their silence lengthened.

“Tilla, this has started all cockeyed and messed up. There’s nothing I’d like more than to straighten things out, but I have a business to run, too, and I run it as I know best. That is, until I saw the way you run it. Now,” he glanced across at her again.

“I can’t do without that sort of management any more. Forget about the thing on the island if it embarrasses you. It has nothing to do with this. This is professional.”

She flushed darkly, her heart dropping.

“Perhaps you might consider a partnership in Taylor Corporation. Would that interest you?”

Oh, the gorgeous fool. Did he have no idea what he was doing to her? Would a partnership interest her? Yes, it would, but he wasn’t offering the kind she wanted.

She sat woodenly. If she moved, she would break into little jagged pieces and scatter splinters about the car.

“Tilla?”

“I don’t think this is really a good time to talk about that. My own business is just as important to me as Taylor Corporation is to you, and I’ve let it run down in the last few weeks.”

He glanced out the window. “Of course it’s important to you.”

“Then don’t patronise me.” His quick intake of breath should have warned her. Instead she marched on. “You’ve totally disregarded my business.” She threw her hands in the air. “I don’t want to discuss it now. For the sake of the evening—”

“What’s left of it,” he grumbled.

“—I would prefer we didn’t speak of it again.”

She slewed sideways in the seat as he hauled the car into the curb, a squeal of tyres on the gutter.

“What you prefer and what I want are at loggerheads.” His eyes bored into hers. “You should be aware by now that I get what I want, regardless of how stubborn the opposition is. You have two weeks to give me your answer. After that, I’ll recruit someone else. But you’re right about one thing, now is not the time to discuss it.”

Kent steadied himself at the wheel, then pulled off the curb.

The coming evening looked gloomier. Tilla brought her chin up and looked out at the night. She would have to act smart from now on, and not like the lovesick teenager of the past couple of days. Weeks.

Restore some dignity, girl. Get a hold of yourself and stop being so weak-kneed. He's only a man.

After all.

Kent pushed aside his glass of scotch, reached across the table and took her hand in his.

"I know this hasn't been a pleasant night for you. If you'd like me to take you home now, believe me I could think of nothing better."

Being at the function had made Tilla ill. Kent's ex-wife had been there all night throwing daggers at him as he sat by Tilla's side. The only good thing to have come out of the evening was that Helen had taken Tilla aside to express her regret at the unfortunate mix-up and to offer to make amends. There was a two week slot at the cabin in the near future, which Tilla could have if she wanted.

Tilla glanced at Kent. "I thought this was important to you."

He pursed his lips. "Let's just say the shine has gone out of it. Johnny Crofter won't miss me too much. Besides, he knows where to get me on Monday. Coming?"

They walked out of the elegant hotel to his car in silence. He opened the door for her and as he slid inside, he took her hand, pressed it to his lips. "I'm sorry I put you through that," he said quietly and turned the key in the ignition.

It wasn't over yet. Tilla had to tell him that her decision was final, that she would not be working for Taylor Corporation. Would there ever be a better time than the present? Yet she let the minutes tick by.

"Your place?" he asked as they left the city venue.

"Yes, please," she said, suddenly weary. She would tell him before she left the car and then would say goodnight. And that would be that.

The BMW stopped at her driveway. He turned the key in the ignition and the big motor purred to a halt.

Tilla folded her hands in her lap. "There are a number of things bothering me."

Kent nodded. "One: you're worried about the current situation. Two: you're unsure of my motives. Three: you're tangling with the idea of selling up. And four: you don't want me to come inside, tonight."

“Gee. That about covers it.”

He placed a large, warm hand over both of hers, and the heat shot through her like a scolding iron. “Tilla, just tell me the truth. Why won’t you come work with me”

He used her name so tenderly. She inhaled deeply. “I cannot in all conscience come to work for you. Even if I could, I ...”

“You what?”

“I don’t—” She swallowed with difficulty. “I don’t want to see you again.”

Tilla fumbled with the door handle and clambered inelegantly on to the footpath. She should have shut the door without seeing him one last time, but she couldn’t. He was watching her without expression and when their eyes met, he smiled that smile.

“Goodnight,” he said. As if he hadn’t heard her cowardly words at all.

She couldn’t hold back the tears as she tottered towards her door. There. It was done. Whatever it was she had intended to do, she’d done it, all right.

Hadn’t she? He had heard her, hadn’t he?

Oh, why was this so difficult?

Kent waited with his heart hammering. The look on her face was utter torment. What had he done? She didn’t want to see him – had he been like a bull in a china shop again? She was telling him this was it. *Finito*. The end.

He’d wanted to sweeten the fire between them again, to coax her back into his bed and make love to her. To tell her—

She didn’t want anything to do with him. Was that why she was so silent when he left the cabin? Did she have a heart of steel after all? Inwardly, he shook. Think, man. Think what to do next. Nothing. Let her go. Regroup and start again another day. Take a chance another day.

Grimly, he gunned the motor and sped away. She’s not the only one with steel.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Tracy, why haven’t we placed people for the Redden contract?”

Tracy Carter looked up from her desk, glanced at the papers in Tilla’s hand. “Boss, we don’t have any spares right now.” She stared at Tilla’s mad-woman’s hair.

“Why not? We’ve got over fifty available staff on the books.” Tilla could not believe what she was hearing. She swiped a hand over her head, trying to control the unruly mop as tendrils cascaded about her shoulders.

Tracy pursed her lips. “Not any more, TC. Taylor Corporation. The MD has booked all our temps.” She threw her hands in the air. “Oh, this is getting more weird – the MD of TC has got all TC’s temps and that’s coming from me, Tracy Carter, TC of TC Personnel.”

“What?” Tilla squinted at her assistant.

Tracy knew she hadn’t heard a thing. “Same as he did last week,” she explained carefully. “He’s booked all our temps. Apparently he’s in on the OneCom thing.” Tracy glanced at her boss’s bare feet.

It all went right over Tilla’s head. “What does he do with them? He can’t be using them all.”

Kent Taylor had effectively left her without placements for other clients. She’d managed to scratch around and come up with halfway decent staff but she needed her supply of regular people.

“I don’t know what he’s doing, himself, personally,” Tracy answered, pointedly. “But some bloke named Gavin is handling all the staff.”

Tilla frowned. “What will I do about the Redden contract?”

Tracy shrugged. “Maybe you could go work for them for a while,” she began, until she saw the look on her employer’s face. “Sorry. Well, there’s no one else. I’ve screened the people from Centrelink Unemployment, and there’s really not a typist amongst them, not up to our standards, anyway. Uh, you’ve buttoned your jacket up the wrong way ...”

Tilla hadn't heard.

Kent Taylor.

For seven days now, he'd done nothing but annoy her from a distance. He'd never once rung and spoken to her about his requirements, professional or otherwise.

And why should he? a voice piped up. *You practically told him to take a long walk off a short pier.*

He persisted in this hiring of all her temp staff, draining her resources. At this rate, her business would plummet. If she couldn't supply staff to her regular clients she may as well close up shop.

And she knew it was deliberate. She knew he was goading her. She could just imagine that smile – that smile – on his face each time Gavin ordered more staff. And what on earth were they doing with them? Where were they placing these people?

She paced up and down in front of Tracy's desk, then marched back to her office. Tilla closed the door, angrily puffing tendrils of hair out of her eyes.

She rummaged through the invoices. Each one for Taylor Corporation had been paid in advance.

She slumped at her desk, head in her hands.

The printer spat out another e-request. Biox Constructions. They required three people to assist for a month in the accounts section.

Tilla tore the page from the machine. In total, seven people she needed to place immediately. And she didn't have them. Couldn't get them. Maybe she could cross-hire from Dickens—

All of hers were contract bound to Taylor Corporation and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

She looked at the printer. For both the Redden and the Biox contracts she needed the best people and Kent Taylor had them all.

Her hand lingered on the telephone. She'd have to ring his office and ask to have ten of her temps released to give her a couple of extras up her sleeve.

Was it only an excuse, the likes of which she'd resisted for days now?

She could easily place an advertisement over the radio and madly screen staff as they came pouring in, risking second rate people slipping through in the panic, or she could ring Gavin and ask him to release the staff she needed.

She removed her hand from the phone. Kent would've won again. But what did it matter? If she didn't ring, her business would suffer.

First, she punched the intercom. "Tracy, start placing ads on seek.com for staff, urgently required ... you know the text. Let me know when the first calls come through."

"Straight away, Tilla."

Tilla leaned back in her chair. She'd start to screen more staff. In the meantime, she needed ten staff now, seven of them yesterday.

She punched out Taylor Corporation's telephone number, her heart a lump under her ribs.

"Taylor Corp, Gavin Prescott speaking," came the voice, obviously on hands-free.

Tilla gritted her teeth. He should never answer the phone hands-free and never abbreviate the name of his company.

"Gavin, it's Tilla Cormack, Cormack Personnel."

There was a silence, then a click as the receiver was lifted. "Hello. Sorry," he replied after some furious whispering to someone else. "We're a bit distracted – the workload is enormous."

Tilla dispensed with pleasantries. "Gavin, I need some staff returned, straight away, for other placements. What can you do for me?"

"Er, just a second ... just a second ..."

It was Kent Taylor's voice she could hear in the background, and she figured he didn't care if she could overhear. Gavin's hand on the mouthpiece was not the best soundproofing.

Gavin came back to her. "Sorry, should've put you on hold. We can't help right now, Ms Cormack. We really are flat out. Sorry," he repeated.

"Gavin, please put Kent on. I know he's there."

There was a second or two when she thought the line had dropped out.

“Kent Taylor.”

Tilla inhaled sharply. “Kent, I need you to release ten of my staff.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“For obvious reasons. I need them.”

“You have more than forty-eight people in two weeks and you need all of them?”

“I might remind you that you’ve been paid in advance for their services.”

“Yes, but—”

“I need these people and as long as they are in my employ, there’s nothing you can do about it. Read your own contract - it’s all in there. I told you money was no object, Tilla. I didn’t come this far in business by pussyfooting around. If you wish to observe just where your people are, and why I cannot release them, be at this office by two o’clock this afternoon. If not, please don’t waste my time.”

He hung up.

Tilla looked at the receiver, then replaced it gently. *Please don’t waste my time.* Don’t waste his time.

The printer whirled into action again. Tilla groaned. Another request for staff.

“Tracy,” she pressed her intercom. “How are you going with that seek.com ad?”

“No problem, Tilla. We got urgent status – should load up in about an hour.”

Excellent, Tilla thought. Even though she’d pay through the nose for the ad there’d be some relief soon.

She telephoned every company explaining there would be a day or two delay in placements. One or two of her older clients grumbled but were happy to wait. They knew her staff could not be bested. The short delay wouldn’t prove too inconvenient.

Cormack Personnel’s good reputation was well founded.

Tilla ate lunch between phone calls. She brushed hair from her face, loosened a button on her suit jacket. The advertisement had gone to air twenty minutes ago.

Tracy knocked and walked in. “The first wave,” she said and placed a neatly typed appointment schedule in front of her employer. “Everyone claiming at least sixty words per minute, most with good levels of accuracy. You might be keen on this

one,” she pointed to a name. “And this one. They have high level skills, so they say. But your taxi’s waiting, so I’ve put all appointments off until tomorrow.”

“What taxi?”

“Didn’t you call a taxi? Debbie downstairs says there’s a car for you.”

Tilla frowned and glanced at her watch. Ten minutes to two. Of all the gall. But she would go, despite all. She stood up, slipped her feet back into her shoes and grabbed her handbag.

“Er ... are you going to fix your hair?” Tracy stared pointedly at Tilla’s unruly locks.

“What? Oh, do I need a tidy up?” Tilla dropped her bag and put both hands to her hair.

“Maybe a few more pins, and maybe some lipstick. You better check it out.” She watched as Tilla rummaged in her bag for her makeup purse and comb. “Where are you going?”

“Into the lion’s den,” Tilla muttered dryly, squeezing pins into her thick hair, then deftly applying lipstick without a mirror.

“Oh, not the lion, not again,” Tracy said and pulled a face. Then she frowned. “Which lion?”

“There’s only one at the moment.”

“Oh. Kent Bloody Taylor.”

“How do I look now?”

“Fine, except—”

Tilla marched out the door.

“Do your jacket up right,” Tracy called after her frantically, and watched quietly amused as Tilla struggled with the buttons as she stood in front of the elevator.

Tilla Cormack left Kent’s taxi and headed for the foyer.

The place was frantic, people everywhere, swarming, as if there were some emergency at hand.

She stood at the reception desk and waited until the girl finished a telephone call. “Good afternoon. Tilla Cormack for Kent—”

“Oh yes,” said the receptionist, a new girl. “Please go up. He’s expecting you.”

Of course he is. Tilla thanked her, but the girl was already on another call. Heading for the lift, she stopped another woman, striding in the same direction. “Excuse me. What’s going on here? This place is frantic.”

“Company takeover and our first day all in the one building. You know Mr Wilson and Mr Taylor? They moved on OneCom Corporation a day ago. Very hurried, and hostile, but very exciting, wouldn’t you say?”

What?

They entered the available lift together.

“What’s OneCom?” Tilla asked. It sounded like a new pimple-buster.

“Computer software. Taylor Corporation’s biggest competitor. Didn’t you know?”

“I don’t work here.” But something jagged her memory.

“Oh. Well, maybe you should, it’s the fastest growing company in the city.”

“What is it you do here?” Tilla asked, trying to keep up.

“I’m a temp with Cormack Personnel.”

Tilla blanched. Under normal circumstances she would’ve known all her staff, however temporary. She was slipping. This woman must have been one of Marilyn’s new acquisitions.

“There’s quite a few of us working to bring things under control,” the woman continued. “I wouldn’t mind a permanent job here. It’s been so exciting. And the new boss, Kent Taylor – he’s really gorgeous.”

“Is that so?”

Gavin looked up as Tilla stepped on to the floor. His tie was loose, hair dishevelled and perspiration shone on his forehead. “TC. How are you?”

“Hello, Gavin. I’m fine. Except I’m not TC. I’m Tilla Cormack.”

“Yeah we know.”

Tilla exhaled. “Right. Well, you look a little under pressure.”

Gavin peered at her. “So do you. Are you all right?”

“Of course I’m all right.”

Gavin shrugged. “It’s been hell, here. The boss is screwed to the ceiling and Mr Wilson is not far behind him. Seems the new girl in your place—”

Tilla bristled.

“—couldn’t go the distance, and the whole office is a mess. We just can’t keep up, us old computer bods. The paperwork is incredible. Ever been in a hostile takeover before?”

“No. But I can imagine how hostile it is if Kent Taylor has anything to do with it.”

Gavin’s face abruptly set like stone as his gaze shifted just over her shoulder. He mumbled an apology and brushed past her.

A peculiar wave of heat rushed through her body, coming from behind. She turned and hit a solid wall. Kent Taylor. Her chest constricted painfully.

His hair was ruffled, unkempt. His face carried dark stubble of unshaven beard and his eyes flashed at her. Arms folded across his chest, he stared at her.

“You might have told me,” she said in a voice she didn’t recognise as her own. She blew a stray hair out of her eyes.

“Told you what? It required the utmost security. And you made it plain you didn’t want to be involved.” He reached out and stroked the stray hair back into place.

“That’s not fair.”

“Tough.” Busy people jostled them. “Come in here.” He took Tilla’s arm and led her into his office, now piled high with papers and books, legal documents and computer disks. “This place is a mess,” he muttered and swung her into a chair. He stared at her. “I need you here.”

“Well, I’m here. And so are all my staff members.”

“That’s right, running backwards and forwards doing everything that’s required for a new and busy multi-national corporation. But without the proper management.” He sat wearily at his desk. “I inherited thirty staff and I needed more.”

She longed to reach across the desk and smooth his cheek. "You need nearly eighty staff? And more? You could have told me somehow. You can't manage that many people—"

"I know *I* can't," he grumbled. "And why tell you? You made your feelings quite clear. You didn't want to see me again. Besides, I couldn't tell anyone for fear Janet would find out and delay the divorce somehow. As it is we just scraped the courts and got the *decree nisi* before the takeover hit the share market. We've gone public, and thankfully she can't touch us."

Tilla's heart thumped merrily for a moment or two, then slowed to its weary beat. He now had the decree nisi, but he'd said oh-so-long ago that he wouldn't marry again. He'd still be out of reach, and he'd never feel for her the way she did for him. In that moment, she knew it was stupid to hope.

"Why did you want me to see all this?"

He rubbed his eyes, stifled a yawn. "Sorry," he apologised. "Haven't had any sleep for two days. I want you to see what you'll be missing. I want you to know how important a job it is you'll be passing up. I want you to see what sort of responsibility you'd have if you were involved in this corporation. With me."

Tilla watched his face. Her mind worked. She would have to sell Cormack Personnel to work here. And that would mean she'd be close to him.

"I can see you're thinking about what it entails."

She'd lose everything if it didn't work out.

"Tilla, you don't fool me. And I'm not offering just a job any longer. I'm offering a partnership. I've said so before."

"My skills are in demand, you mean," she said.

He didn't hesitate. "Exactly."

"Other partners?"

"Only Peter and Helen Wilson. Johnny Crofter is a big client waiting in the wings. There is a possibility he will join ranks some time in the near future, once this furore dies down." He leaned over his desk, hands clasped in front of him. "Think about it again. I need someone like you, with your level of competency."

She winced. Competency.

He stood up and came around the desk. "I'm going to catch a few hours nap in here." He pointed to a foldaway bed in the far corner of his office. "Why don't I call you at home tonight and we can discuss it further?"

"I'm not sure there's much to discuss."

"I am."

She stood up. "Then on a professional level, of course." Tilla pushed a stray lock of hair from her face.

"What else?" he returned wearily, then squinted at her. "You look a little battle drawn, yourself," he said, not unkindly. "Are you all right?" He gently touched her face with the lightest brush of a finger.

"I'm fine," she answered, pulling away. She wished she'd taken more care with her makeup.

He shrugged and turned for the stretcher bed.

Her face burned where his finger had touched it. She left him without another word, shutting the office door behind her.

She had to wait for ages for a return taxi which doubled her irritation.

Back in her office, Tracy told her the ads were quite successful. Another three sheets of appointments were neatly formatted and on her computer's diary, but before she had time to sit down and read through them, there was a knock at her door.

Marilyn stood in the doorway, clutching a briefcase. "Hi. How's it going?"

"Bit sticky right now, but under control. What brings you away from baby Blair this afternoon?"

Marilyn came into the office and sat down opposite Tilla. "It's time to get serious, Tilla."

"What do you mean?"

Marilyn stared at her friend and part-time employer. "What have you done to your hair?" she asked, then waved her hand. "Never mind that. I mean Charlie has finally agreed I should make you an offer."

“What?” Tilla fiddled with her hair, pushing clips and pins uselessly into places they’d never stay.

“For the Agency.”

“What?” Her hair tumbled to her collar and cascaded unevenly around her shoulders.

“You know I’ve been interested for ages, and during the month you were away, I so thoroughly enjoyed myself, I told him I just have to have it.” Marilyn smiled, and tossed her short, dark hair triumphantly. “What do you say to that?”

“What?”

“Tilla, I know you can say more than just ‘what’.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Tilla held two coffee cups suspended in mid air. A jumble of thoughts tumbled around in her brain, each jostling for priority position. “You’re ready to make me an offer?” she repeated as she put the cups down on her desk. “Coffee?”

Marilyn nodded, then shook her head. She laid her briefcase on the desk as Tilla sat down opposite, removed a sheet of typed written paper and handed it across the desk. “Yes, an offer. No thanks, not coffee. It’s a proposal for you. Would you look at it tonight? We could have lunch tomorrow.”

Tilla looked at the sheet of paper somewhat dazed. The figures jumped all over the page and there was a strange ringing in her ears.

“Are you all right, Tilla?”

“Oh, yes, sorry. It’s been a very interesting week. I’ve been made another offer, you see —”

“Oh.” Marilyn exclaimed, disappointed.

“Oh, no, no. Not for the business. For me to work somewhere else. So, it means I have to put some serious thinking into—”

“So you’ll consider this? I mean, every other time I’ve approached you to talk about it, I’ve not had the finances in place. But now I have.” Marilyn was excited.

Tilla glanced at her friend. “Of course I’ll look at it.”

“Charlie and I have a few things worked out – we know we can cope. Oh, Tilla – I do hope we can come to some agreement. I’m so excited about this.”

Tilla looked at her friend. "I promise I'll read this thoroughly tonight. Where will we have lunch tomorrow?"

"At Mondis. About one?"

Tilla nodded.

"Great. I've got to fly – don't worry about the coffee, we'll break out the champers. See you tomorrow." Marilyn sailed out the door.

Tilla looked at the sheet of paper in her hand.

Could it be this easy? Do I want it to be this easy?

With the sale of Cormack Personnel, she could buy in to Kent's company and be a full partner. She retrieved Marilyn's offer again, re-read it, then picked up the phone and called her accountant.

She discussed certain points at length and when satisfied, rang off.

Tilla had to think carefully about her next steps. If she sold to Marilyn and if she bought into Taylor Corporation, where would that leave her poor old battered heart? Still cringing in the wings, waiting to be gloriously mended by Kent Taylor himself. Should she even think of her feelings? No, she shouldn't. She should be hard headed in business and think of her future.

She suspected she'd be no better off - in fact, a lot worse than right now. He had made it clear that there was nothing further.

Forget that thing on the island ...

It would be better to think only of the business angle. Kent had.

Tilla left Tracy to close the office and made an early day of it. She'd have to be back in the office by eight the next morning to prepare for the gruelling interviews. She could afford to have a few hours at home. Thinking. And she hadn't forgotten Kent Taylor said he'd call.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tilla's eyes were scratchy. She'd showered, changing into loose fitting pants and a cool sleeveless top.

She sat in her lounge-room reading Marilyn's proposal over and over.

Bippy lay quietly at her feet, snoring and gurgling in some rabbit-dreaming.

There was nothing wrong with the contract. The time frame was suitable, walk-in-walk-out as soon as the papers were signed, the offer was acceptable and it was an unconditional sale. No encumbrances, no what-ifs.

The only what-ifs were hers. What if Kent Taylor changed his mind?

What if he didn't call?

What if she sold up and the offer with Taylor Corporation was no longer there, what would she do? She had financial commitments to keep, and being out of work in the current corporate climate would do her no good at all. She would have to have another position to take up straight away. That was imperative.

"So what are my options?" she asked herself, then took a sip of icy Sauvignon Blanc. "At present, I can keep my company and carry on. Then again, I have a perfectly good offer from a genuine buyer for my business, at the right price." She toyed with the next thought. "If I sell, I could take another holiday and prepare myself to come back and tramp the boards and look for another position." She pursed her lips. "Or I could take up Kent Taylor's offer and buy into OneComPimpleBomb or whatever it is."

That was another thing she'd have to do – research this takeover and the companies now under Taylor Corporation's umbrella. She would really have to order her thoughts... That's what she should do first. She scribbled a note on the back of Marilyn's offer.

Another glance at her watch. Nine-thirty. He wasn't going to ring.

The phone rang. She jumped. "Hello, this is Tilla."

"Tilla, it's Helen Wilson."

“Hi, Helen.” Her heart slowed to normal.

“Look, remember at John Crofter’s last party I told you there was a chance the house on Australis would come available soon? Well, it did, just fifteen minutes ago. Only for a fortnight, but both Peter and I are desperate to make up that horrible mess to you. We were hoping you’d like to take another couple of weeks off.”

Tilla laughed aloud. “Oh, Helen. You really are thoughtful, but I don’t think I can get away so soon. And it wasn’t really a horrible mess.”

“No matter how civilised it might have been, it was an awful thing to have happened, and it was our fault. This is our way of making it up to you, we’d foot all the supplies. It’s not available for another couple of weeks – perhaps you could swing something by then?”

Tilla glanced at Marilyn’s proposal again. It seemed there were carrots dangling everywhere in front of her face. “A couple of weeks?”

“Yes, at the very earliest. Why don’t you think about it a day or two. Let me know as soon as you decide, you know Diss won’t mind.”

Tilla smiled as she hung up. Not only a great job and partnership offer, but a firm offer on her business and another holiday to boot, her supplies for two weeks paid for by the agents. It just kept getting better and better. Things might work out for her if she ran with the wind. She could accept Marilyn’s offer after signing a contract with Taylor Corporation, then take a break and be really ready for work when she returned. What a great set of events.

How easily everything fell into place.

Too easily.

The phone rang again.

“Tilla, Kent Taylor.”

Her heart thundered. “Hello.”

“I thought we’d discuss the deal we spoke of earlier. I’m outside in the car. Can I come in?”

Tilla went to the door and opened it. Kent was already half way up her drive. Bippy shot out to greet him delightedly.

"I wasn't expecting you to be here," Tilla said, taking Bippy's collar.

"I know. But I thought it was better discussed face to face than over the telephone. And I didn't come empty-handed." He showed her a bottle of champagne, the smile broad on his face. Under his other arm was a thick envelope.

"Something to celebrate?" she asked.

"There may well be. Are you going to let me in?"

"Oh, of course." She and Bippy stepped aside, then followed him as he made his way through to her kitchen. He was dressed in jeans, and pale grey, short sleeved, loose t-shirt and boaties on his feet. He looked good, as usual, in anything. Out of anything.

Bippy clearly thought the same.

"Let's have a glass now, okay?" He began to tear the wrapping from the champagne.

"I have a bottle of Sauv Blanc already opened. It'd be a shame to waste champagne over a simple business discussion."

Kent raised his eyebrows, and put the champagne down. "Sauv blanc will be fine." His gaze lingered on her face. "Whatever you say."

He followed her to the kitchen. So did Bippy, who wasn't taking her eyes off Man-person.

Tilla would be lost if she went to work with him. There'd be no escaping the torture she'd put herself through if she had to see him every day and not touch him, not run her hands across his shoulders, down his chest, lovingly ...

She reached into the fridge for her open wine bottle, poured a glass and handed it to him.

"Let's go into the lounge," he said. "I have the necessary documents if you'd like to see them."

Tilla nodded and headed back to the lounge room, Bippy in tow. "I would."

Kent glanced at her as she tucked her legs under her bottom in the chair opposite. "I also thought you'd like to research as much of my business as you can before making any decisions. I took the liberty of bringing you the financials, our bio's and the company profile, memorandums etcetera." He slapped the thick ream of paper encased in the envelope on to the coffee table.

“Of course,” she replied.

“I should’ve done that for you long before now, I know.” A muscle jumped in his jaw. He reached for his wine and took a long swallow. “So, where does all this leave us?”

She stared at him. Did he mean ‘us’ or did he mean us? “Sorry?”

“Have you given my offer any further thought, Tilla?”

Calling Tilla Cormack. “I’ve had an offer which I’m considering.” She shifted in her seat.

“Another offer?” Kent sat forward, his black eyes intent.

“I have to think carefully about what I’m going to do. I haven’t made any decisions yet.”

“Another offer from whom?”

“Tell me about the position.”

“Your *partnership* would be a thirty three and a third per cent share, full voting rights, full responsibility. We’d manage it, Helen and Peter are silent partners. We’d continue to sell to our top clients and recruit new ones. And the place would need qualified staff trainers. That would be your first main role.”

“And your role?”

“The same as now. And you know what I do. I’ll still need to travel and so will you. Firstly, we need experienced and competent people in the main office in Adelaide. And that’s where you come in. I know you have the skills we need to set it up. Then we recruit someone else and put you to better use.” He took another long swallow of wine, helped himself from the kitchen and refilled his glass.

There was that word again. Skills. “You mean, I’d be responsible for staff training and selling the merchandise as well as you?”

“At first, though not ‘merchandise’. Ideas. Programs, intellectual property – you’d have to learn a lot about software packages, a little about engineering. And you’d be accompanying me. I know a lot about writing the programs, but I’m not a whiz at typing up contracts.”

“A glorified secretary?” She lifted a shoulder. “I have the privilege of buying into this OneCom or whatever so that you can have a speedy and accurate typist?”

He glowered but only for a moment. “You’d be in training as well, initially. But to get things off and moving, we have to be quick.” He shifted in his seat, relaxed, and put his hands behind his head. “Tell me of this other offer.”

She shook her head. “It’s not necessary at this stage. The salary?”

“The same as I offered before. Plus your director’s dividend, of course.”

The stare he gave her was unnerving. If she didn’t remain under control, she’d leap into his lap and squish her face against his chest.

He continued to stare, and she felt the flush quicken over her face. Her ears rang with the rush of blood and she suddenly needed a great gulp of something cool. She resisted the urge to swallow the wine in her glass in one mouthful.

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Why? You’ve had time.”

“More time. It’s a big move for me, because I have my business to think about.”

“Sell it. I know you have someone interested.”

Marilyn.

He laced his hands in front of him. The intensity of his glare softened. “Tilla, I don’t know quite how to put this—”

Oh no. He’s going to refer to the cabin, she just knew it. Her heart clamoured and she fidgeted on the seat, tucking her legs around the other way. She flicked stray hair behind her ear and toyed with her glass.

“—on Australis Island, you might have taken me the wrong way.”

She reddened. “You’ve said that before, and I told you. I didn’t take anything the wrong way. Please don’t bring it up. Let’s just forget it.”

He shook his head and spread his hands. “Tilla, I—”

“Please,” she said and rose to her feet. “I think you’ve done enough talking, tonight. I’ll have a good think about what I’m to do and once I’ve worked it out, I call you with my answer.”

He’s got the gall to look chastised, she thought angrily. He’s only managed to stomp over the last remaining vestige of my pride. And stupid me, I even considered working with him.

He stood. "I think you still misunderstand me." He dug his hands into his jeans pockets, ducking his head.

"I think I understand very well," she retorted.

He erupted suddenly. "You make something which should be so bloody easy so damned difficult. Why don't you take the time to figure out what I'm trying to say?"

"I told you. I understand very well, and since we were on the island. Strictly professional."

"No need to yell," he yelled. Kent shook his head and ran a hand through his hair.

The heat of him swamped her. She should just reach out and touch him, place her palm on his chest and slide it over the broad expanse of muscle. She dropped her gaze. It wouldn't do her any good.

"I don't think there's anything else to say at this point." She headed for the door.

"Really? There is one last thing," he said, following her.

Bippy followed him, her eye on Man-person going somewhere.

"You have less than a week to make up your mind and that's final. Five days. As a matter of fact, I'll start looking for another person right now," he said, his face like thunder as she turned to look at him. "That way if you decide against my offer, I'll have others ready to recruit."

She pursed her lips. "No need to yell, yourself," she said quietly, opened the door then closed it behind him.

Bippy looked disappointed. She nudged Tilla's hand a couple of times.

Tilla leaned on the cool timber of the door and frowned when she heard the great roar of his BMW ploughing away into the night.

She tossed and turned in her bed, barely sleeping a wink. And in her sleepless state, she made her decision. It seemed crystal clear. But she was no happier, no more relieved in the morning despite her solution. It weighed heavily on her. But it was time for a clean break. She couldn't go on like this.

She had a lunch to attend tomorrow.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She looked up at her old office building one last time.

Well, that's that.

The taxi truck pulled away into traffic carrying the last few boxes from her office. She followed behind in the Saab, overtook it to guide it to her house.

She'd sold Cormack Personnel. Walk in, walk out. It was all over.

Everything she built up over the years, all the blood, sweat and tears she poured into it were now behind its new owner, Marilyn Scott. And Marilyn had been with her today sorting through all the files, ready for her first days' trading on Monday.

What a relief.

And that damned Kent Taylor had not called her once. Had not even rung to remind her that the deadline was fast approaching.

She hadn't really expected him to. What did it matter? It had taken all of her determination not to call him. She wanted him of her mind. For once and for all.

On Sunday she'd be taking off again for Australis Island. Her peaceful haven. She'd extracted a sworn statement from Helen and Peter that the shack was hers alone for the two weeks – no surprises.

Once home, the taxi driver helped unload the boxes on to her veranda, and then he was gone. She was alone. It felt very peculiar indeed. She pushed the key into the lock, and swung open her front door.

Bippy raced down the hallway and they did their little dance.

Her suitcase and tote-bag stood where she'd left them ready for any last minute additions. A reminder also, that her life was at a watershed, and that she'd return to begin all over again.

She dragged the boxes inside, promising herself she would go through them as soon as she returned to Adelaide.

Along with relief was a vast emptiness. It appeared under her feet and rose up to engulf her. That's what it felt like to let go of the agency, her lifeline for so long.

She shrugged off the feelings of gloom. Only last night at farewell drinks she felt on top of the world, and earlier today had felt heady relief. She'd felt free and excited by the prospect of change.

Not the dismals she felt now.

But, she reminded herself, she'd been successful in her business. That counted for much. There were vast opportunities for her out there besides the very neat package Kent Taylor offered.

She took a light meal and fed Bippy too, ate in front of the television and ran a scolding bath. As she sank in its heat, she willed his handsome face from her mind.

She towelled off vigorously and climbed into bed, determined to drift into a dreamless slumber.

But since meeting him, her sleep hadn't ever been dreamless.

Tilla woke early. By eight fifteen, she was dressed, a big jumper thrown over the her long sleeved t-shirt and jeans, bags ready and waiting by the front door. She peered out the window. No sign of the taxi yet. She sat on her suitcase and gazed at her hands. Bippy had already gone next door to her neighbour, Jill.

How strange after all this time to be free. The prospect of job hunting was daunting, but after a restful holiday, she'd regain her exuberance and would be back on top of the world. She was sure of it.

Besides, she'd almost paid off her house. The car payments were well in advance. She had few other debts to worry about. But no income. It didn't matter how healthy her financial situation was, she still needed a job. Well, good thing this break was on the house, so to speak. She'd wondered at times whether or not it was a good idea to go back to the cabin so soon after she and Kent—

She had to be practical. She needed sleep, needed to shore up her dollars, and needed space to think.

Obviously Kent Taylor had found someone else to fill the position he'd offered. Why else wouldn't he have rung?

She shrugged. The painful decision-making amounted to three simple facts: no job, no debts, no Kent Taylor.

Just great.

A car honked its horn outside. She threw open the door and the cab was waiting, its driver giving a friendly wave. She acknowledged him and turned back inside for her bags, juggling things as best she could.

She hoped the cabbie was patient ... this was taking ages ...

She reached the veranda with the suitcase in one hand, tote-bag and toiletry bag in the other when she looked up and saw the cab had taken off.

“Hey,” she shouted, bewildered.

And her heart stopped. Then thundered into life. Fire flamed her cheeks and the breath caught in her throat. She dropped her bags.

Kent Taylor leaned on his car in her driveway. He waited a moment or two then strode up the drive.

Tilla absorbed every minute detail of him.

“Hello,” he said, and smiled that lazy smile, not a metre from her.

Her breath was still stuck somewhere between lungs and throat. There was no voice anywhere. Her mouth was slightly open and her lips dry.

He glanced her up and down, looked happy to see her. “Thought we could talk while we go to the airport.”

“The taxi,” she croaked.

“I gave him a fifty. It’s all right. Let me take your bags.” He lifted them easily under one arm and took her hand with the other, guiding her to his car. “I figured that as I missed your acceptance of my offer – which no doubt is waiting for me by email in my office – I thought I’d get it from you personally, instead.” He smiled again as he opened the car door for her. “Great to have you on the team. Welcome aboard.”

He was doing it again. Pre-empting.

“Caught you by surprise, I see,” he said. He tossed her bags in the back.

Her chin wobbled and her voice found an escape. “Kent, this is not a very good idea of yours. It’s not very good.”

“What’s not good?” He brushed a stray tendril of hair away from her face and gently cupped her chin in his hand.

He was just too close, too close ... the warmth emanating from him was all enveloping ... it was all she could do to resist leaning against him.

He cupped her face and kissed her eyelids. "Tilla, tell me what's not very good."

She sniffed and swallowed. "I want to say..."

"Yes?" He was so gentle. he touched her face, as he pressed his lips to hers, then her eyes.

She sucked her bottom lip. "I've been miserable since..."

"Since?" He leaned on the car and gathered her to his chest. "Since selling Cormack Personnel?"

She shook her head.

"Since finishing at my office?"

She shook her head again.

"Since the last time you were on the island?"

She hesitated.

He put his arms around her waist and hugged her. "I've been miserable since you told me you didn't want to see me again. I've been miserable since I realised I'd said a stupid thing to you on the island and didn't retract it when I should have. Especially the very moment I left the island."

Tilla's voice was a large lump in her throat. She rested her head on that lovely, broad chest.

"When the deal for OneCom went through, I was so preoccupied with the divorce, the takeover, the new offices and the staff, I barely had time to think of how I'd try to win you back. But I was going to. Always. Somehow."

She hugged a bit closer.

"I tried enticing you to come work for me and when you refused, I thought I'd offer you a partnership. I should've done that in the first place." He kissed her nose. "You looked so gorgeous that first night I took you out to Johnny Crofter's." He kissed the top of her head. "All I wanted to do was drag you off to the nearest bed. And then, best of all, when I discovered you in my little haven, out there on the island, all to myself, looking totally delicious in that bed sheet ..." He bent and kissed her mouth.

She kissed him back then snuggled closer to his chest. His heartbeat hammered against her ear. Her own quickened and she wanted this moment to go on forever.

Oh well, she'd miss the plane. *Ho hum.*

His arms closed around her. "I just didn't know how to keep you close. I tried but then this OneCom thing was well under way and my time was running out."

She nodded into his chest.

"Then I had to give you a deadline to make sure you'd take it up. The company still needs a partner. You."

Tilla frowned, her face hidden in the warmth of his chest. He was still talking business. Even now.

What about me?

"I had to come and get you. I don't want you to be out of work and looking for a job when you come back."

She lifted her head from his chest. "How did you know I'd be going away today?"

"I asked after you at your office. Marilyn was only too happy to tell me all the news, and so I rang and checked with Helen. She ordered me not to show up – without an invitation, at least."

She didn't care the girls had ratted on her. Tilla wanted to stay in his arms forever, never wanted to let this moment go. But she had to. "I have a plane to catch," she said, pushing away from him, reluctantly.

"Me, too," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"Well, as Helen said Radisson's place was definitely booked, I had to rent Jeremy's shack next door. The house further up the river."

"For how long?"

"For as long as you're in the shack. Though I was hoping for that invitation."

Her heart thudded as she looked away again.

"Tilla, I need you on board. I meant every word. I certainly wouldn't like my competition to get hold of you. I had to come and get you. Do you understand?"

Still just a business deal. Her heart sank. She was too tired to think about this battle any more. "I think so. You need a partner."

"I do, as well as the new company." He brushed away loose tendrils of her hair. "Don't look so surprised. I tried to say as much at your place last week, but it got all ballsed up as usual and we both got angry. I don't do this sort of thing well." He ducked his head again. "Even while we were still on Australis, I knew I could never be without you."

She just wanted to stare at his gorgeous face forever.

"I knew that when Peter came to get me that day, the last thing I wanted was to leave our cabin without you. That you'd become the most important person in the world to me."

Tilla shone inwardly.

He kissed her, tentatively. Kissed her again. "When I last looked at your face ... I thought—" A shadow crossed his dark features.

"What?"

"That we were really, finally over even before we'd begun." He hugged her tighter. "I wanted so much to turn Peter's car around and come back for you."

"Why didn't you? I was hoping you would. I'd have leapt in naked."

"And given Peter a heart attack." Kent gazed at her face. "There could be a lifetime together."

"Are you sure it's the personal me – or the business me?"

"It's both, but the 'personal me' is more important." He bent and his lips lingered on hers until she fell against his chest. "Come work with me. I need you there."

She hesitated only for a second, then nodded. "Yes, all right." Her heartache had gone. In its place was a warm glow, trusting and deep. Her soul was soothed, and her hurt healed.

"Good," he said, deeply satisfied. The rest of his message came with easy candour. "I love you, Tilla. I want us to be a partnership. A life's partnership."

Oh, how she wanted this man to be hers. How she wanted the love she could feel coming from him.

“Now tell me you love me,” he demanded softly. “Tilla,” he said between kisses, waiting for her response. “Tilla, marry me. Tell me you’ll be by my side.”

“I love you. Yes, I will. I will.”

A lazy finger circled her nose. “Should I cancel my stay at Jeremy’s?” he asked.

“Definitely.”

“Good. I hadn’t really booked it, anyway.” He threw his hands up in mock defence at her playful swipe. Then he wrapped her tightly in a fierce hug. “I never want to be apart from you again. There’ll never be separate holidays, or separate houses. Do you understand? And no more wasting time ... no more stalling.”

She snuggled closer. “I got it.”

“I expect one hundred and ten percent. I expect overtime, and weekends. Is that understood? And don’t mimic me this time.”

“You saw me do that?”

“I don’t miss much about you, and I can prove my point.”

“But we’ve got a plane to catch.”

“It won’t take a minute. That great big gorgeous jumper you’re wearing?”

“You like my jumper?”

“I love everything you wear, from lacy half bras to bath towels to undone jackets to mismatched shoes. Even this jumper, which you’ve got on inside out.”

He dragged it off over her head and kissed her as the sun rose in the morning sky.

THE END

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