



MODERN

LINDSAY ARMSTRONG

The Socialite and the Cattle King



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Аннотация

The awakening of Miss Prim...Prim and proper socialite-turned-journalist Holly Harding is looking for her first big scoop. And what better topic than the infamous cattle king Brett Wyndham? But when Holly meets Brett she notices something inherently dangerous about the enigmatic billionaire, and she quickly finds her professional non-nonsense attitude slipping! When their plane crashes in the middle of the Outback she is forced to rely on Brett for protection. How long can inexperienced Holly deny their sizzling attraction...?

Содержание

The Socialite and the Cattle King	5
Lindsay Armstrong	6
About the Author	7
Chapter One	8
Chapter Two	24
Chapter Three	48
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	51

He bent his head to kiss her.

Holly was taken completely by surprise, but it felt so good she was immediately riveted and all her fears seemed to melt away.

Then some common sense prevailed and she drew away a little.

‘We shouldn’t be doing this,’ she whispered.

‘We’ve been wanting to do it all day,’ he countered.

‘I—’ She swallowed. ‘But the thing is, I’m here to do a job, and I really need to concentrate on that. So...’ She managed to look up at him humorously. ‘Thanks for being here, otherwise I could have really freaked out! But now I’ll say goodnight.’

He released her promptly, although with a crooked little smile. ‘All right. Don’t switch the light on until you’re closed in.’ He turned away and left her.

Holly closed herself into the cabin and stood in the dark for a long moment with her hand to her mouth.

The Socialite and the Cattle King

By

Lindsay Armstrong



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About the Author

LINDSAY ARMSTRONG was born in South Africa, but now lives in Australia with her New Zealand-born husband and their five children. They have lived in nearly every state of Australia, and have tried their hand at some unusual—for them—occupations, such as farming and horse-training—all grist to the mill for a writer! Lindsay started writing romances when their youngest child began school and she was left feeling at a loose end. She is still doing it and loving it.

Recent titles by the same author:

ONE-NIGHT PREGNANCY

THE BILLIONAIRE BOSS'S INNOCENT BRIDE

FROM WAIF TO HIS WIFE

THE RICH MAN'S VIRGIN

Chapter One

HOLLY HARDING had the world at her feet—or she should have had.

The only child of wealthy parents—although her father had died—she could have rested on her laurels and fulfilled her mother's dearest ambition for her, that she settle down and make an appropriate, although of course happy, marriage.

Holly, however, had other ideas. Not that she was against wedlock in general, but she knew she wasn't ready for it. Sometimes she doubted she ever would be, but she went out of her way not to dwell on the reason for that...

Instead, she concentrated on her career. She was a journalist, although occasionally she partook of the social scene so dear to her mother's heart; Sylvia Harding was a well-known socialite. It was on two such occasions that Holly had encountered Brett Wyndham, with disastrous consequences.

'A masked fancy-dress ball and a charity lunch? You must be out of your mind,' Brett Wyndham said to his sister Sue.

He'd just flown in from India, on a delayed flight that had also been diverted, so he was tired and irritable. His sister's plans for his social life did not appear to improve his mood.

'Oh, they're not so bad,' Sue said. She was in her late twenties, dark-haired like her brother, but petite and pretty—quite unlike her brother. She was also looking a bit pale and strained, whilst

trying to strike an enthusiastic note. ‘And it is a good cause—the lunch, anyway. What’s wrong with raising money for animal shelters? I thought that might appeal to you. I mean, I know they may only be cats and dogs...’

Brett said wearily, ‘I can’t stand them. I can’t stand the food, I can’t stand the women—’

‘The women?’ Sue interrupted with a frown. ‘You don’t usually have a problem there. What’s wrong with them?’

Brett opened his mouth to say, *They are usually the most ferociously groomed set of women you’ve ever seen in your life, from their dyed hair, their fake eyelashes, their plucked eyebrows, their fake nails and tans; they’re ghastly.* But he didn’t say it. Although she didn’t have a fake tan or fake eyelashes, his sister was exquisitely groomed and most expensively dressed.

He shrugged. ‘Their perfume alone is enough to give me hay fever,’ he said moodily instead. ‘And, honestly, I have a problem with the concept of turning fund-raising into society events that bring out all the social climbers and publicity seekers.’ He stopped and shook his head.

‘Brett, please!’

But Brett Wyndham was not to be placated. ‘As for masked fancy-dress balls,’ he went on, ‘I can’t stand the fools men make of themselves. And the women; something about being disguised, or thinking they are, seems to bring out the worst in them.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, beloved,’ he said dryly, ‘They develop almost

predator-like tendencies.’ For the first time a glint of humour lit his dark eyes. ‘You need to be particularly careful or you can find yourself shackled, roped and on the way to the altar.’

Sue smiled. ‘I don’t think you would ever have that problem.’

He shrugged. ‘Then there’s Mark and Aria’s wedding coming up shortly—the reason I’m home, anyway.’ Mark was their brother. ‘I’ve no idea what’s planned but I’m sure there’ll be plenty of partying involved.’

Sue’s smile faded as she nodded, and tears came to her eyes.

Brett frowned down at her. ‘Susie? What’s wrong?’

‘I’ve left Brendan.’ Brendan was her husband of three years. ‘I found out he was being unfaithful to me.’

Brett closed his eyes briefly. He could have said, *I told you so*, but he didn’t. He put his arms around his sister instead.

‘You were right about him.’ Sue wept. ‘I think all he was after was my money.’

‘I guess we have to make our own mistakes.’

‘Yes, but I feel so stupid. And—’ she gulped back some tears ‘—I feel everyone must be laughing at me. Apparently it was no big secret. I was the last person to know,’ she said tragically.

‘It’s often the way.’

‘It may be, but it doesn’t make it any easier.’

‘Are you still in love with him?’ Brett queried.

‘No! Well, how could I be?’

Brett smiled absently.

‘But one thing I do know,’ Sue said with utter conviction. ‘I

refuse to go into a decline, I refuse to run away and hide and I refuse to be a laughing stock!’

‘Susie—’

But his sister overrode him, with tears in her eyes still, but determination too. ‘I’m patron of the Animal Shelter Society so I will be at the lunch. The ball is one of the festivities planned for the Winter Racing Carnival; I’m on the committee, so I’ll be there too, and I’ll make sure everyone knows who I am! But—’ she sagged a little against him ‘I—would dearly love some moral support.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Mike Rafferty said to his boss, Brett Wyndham.

They were in Brett’s apartment high above the Brisbane River and the elegant curves of the William Jolly Bridge. Sue, who’d insisted on picking him up from the airport, had just left.

‘You heard,’ Brett replied shortly.

‘Well, I thought I did. You asked me to make a note of the fact that you were going to a charity lunch tomorrow and a masked fancy-dress ball on Friday night. I just couldn’t believe my ears.’

‘Don’t make too big a thing of this, Mike,’ Brett warned. ‘I’m not in the mood.’

‘Of course not. They could even be—quite enjoyable.’

Brett cast him a dark glance and got up to walk over to the window with his familiar long-legged prowl. With his short, ruffled dark hair, blue shadows on his jaw, a kind of eagle intensity about his dark eyes, his cargo pants and black

sweatshirt, his height and broad shoulders, he could have been anything.

What did come to mind was a trained-to-perfection daredevil member of a SWAT team.

In fact, Brett Wyndham was a vet and he specialized in saving endangered species, the more dangerous the better, such as the black rhino, elephants and tigers.

He dropped out of helicopters with tranquilizer guns, he parachuted into jungles—all in a day's work. He also managed the family fortunes that included some huge cattle-stations, and since he'd taken over the reins of the Wyndham empire he'd tripled that fortune so he was now a billionaire, although a very reclusive one. He did not give interviews but word of his work had filtered out and he'd captured the public's imagination.

As Brett's PA, it fell to Mike Rafferty to ensure his privacy here in Brisbane, amongst other duties at Haywire—one of the cattle stations in Far North Queensland the Wyndham dynasty called home—and at Palm Cove where they owned a resort.

'So will you be saying anything to the press?' he queried. 'There's bound to be some coverage of the lunch tomorrow, even if you'll be incognito at the ball.'

'No. I'm not saying anything to anyone although, according to my sister, my presence alone will invest the proceedings with quite some clout.' He grimaced.

'It probably will,' Mike agreed. 'And what will you be going to the masked ball as?'

‘I have no idea. I’ll leave that up to you—but something discreet, Mike,’ Brett growled. ‘No monkey suit, no toga and laurel wreath, no Tarzan or *anything* like that.’ He stopped and yawned. ‘And now I’m going to bed.’

‘Mum,’ Holly said to her mother the next morning, ‘I’m not sure about this outfit. Isn’t the lunch supposed to be a fundraiser?’ She glanced down at herself. She wore a fitted little black jacket with a low vee-neck over a very short black-and-white skirt. Black high-heeled sandals exposed newly painted pink toenails, matching her fingernails. She wore her mother’s pearl choker and matching pendant earrings.

‘It certainly is,’ Sylvia replied. ‘And a very exclusive one. The tickets cost a fortune, although of course they are tax deductible,’ she assured her daughter. ‘But you look stunning, darling!’

Holly grimaced and twirled in front of the mirror. They were in her bedroom in the family home, a lovely old house high on a hill in Balmoral. She still lived at home, or rather had moved back in after her father had died to keep her mother company. There were plenty of advantages to this arrangement that Holly was most appreciative of, which was why she humoured her mother now and then and attended these kinds of function.

Quite how she’d got roped into going to a charity lunch and a masked fancy-dress ball within a few days of each other she wasn’t sure, but she knew it did give her mother a lot of pleasure to have her company. It also gave her a lot of pleasure to dress her daughter up to the nines.

Holly was quite tall and very slim, two things that lent themselves to wearing clothes well, although when left to her own devices she favoured 'very casual'. She herself thought her looks were unexceptional, although she did have deep-blue eyes and a thick cloud of fair but hard-to-manage hair.

Today her hair was up in an elaborate chignon, and sprayed and pinned within an inch of its life to stay that way. Sylvia's hairdresser, who made house calls, had also done their nails.

Sylvia herself was resplendent in diamonds and a fuchsia linen suit.

Despite her mother's preoccupation with the social scene, Holly loved Sylvia and felt for her in her loneliness now she was a widow. But the most formative person in Holly's life had been her father, imbuing her not only with his love of the different but his love of writing.

Richard Harding, had he been born in another era, would have been a Dr Livingstone or Mr Stanley. He'd inherited considerable means and had loved nothing better than to travel, to explore out-of-the-way places and different cultures, and to write about them. The fact that he'd married someone almost the exact opposite had been something of a mystery to Holly, yet when they'd been together her parents had been happy.

But it was Holly who Richard had taken more and more on his expeditions. Amongst the results for Holly had been a well-rounded informal education alongside her formal one and fluency in French, plus some Spanish and a smattering of

Swahili.

All of it had contributed towards Holly's present job. She was a travel reporter for an upmarket magazine but with a slight difference: hard-to-get-to places were her speciality. As a consequence, to bring to life her destinations, she'd used bad-tempered camels, stubborn donkeys, dangerous-looking vehicles driven by manic individuals and overcrowded ferries.

According to her editor, Glenn Shepherd, she might look as if a good puff of wind would blow her away but she had a hint of inner steel. She had to, to have coped with some of the situations she'd landed herself in.

She'd shrugged when he'd said this to her and had responded, 'Oh, I don't know. Sometimes looking and playing dumb works wonders.'

He'd grinned at her. 'What about the sheikh fellow who introduced you to all his wives with a view to you joining the clan? Or the Mexican bandit who wanted to marry you?'

'Ah, that required a bit of ingenuity. I actually had to steal his vehicle,' Holly had confessed. 'But I did have it returned to him. Glenn, I've been doing travel for a couple of years now—any chance of a change?'

'Thought you loved it?'

'I do, but I also want to spread my wings journalistically. I'd love to be given something I could *investigate* or someone I could get the definitive interview from.'

Glenn had sat forward. 'Holly, I'm not saying you're not

capable of it, but you are only twenty-four; some kinds of—insight, I guess, take a bit longer than that to develop. It will come, but keep up the good work in the meantime. More and more people out there are getting to love your pieces. Also, re the definitive interview, we have a policy; any of our staff can try for one, so long as they pull it off ethically, and if it's good enough we'll publish it. But I must warn you, it has to be outstanding.'

'As in?'

'Mostly as in, well, surprise factor.' He'd shrugged. 'Brett Wyndham, for example.'

Holly had grimaced. 'That's like asking for the moon.'

Holly came back to the present and took one last look at herself. 'If you're sure,' she said to her mother, 'We're not terribly over-dressed?'

'We're not,' Sylvia said simply.

Holly saw that she was right when she took her place in the upmarket Milton restaurant that had been turned into a tropical greenhouse. She was amidst a noisy throng of very upmarket-looking guests. Almost without exception, the women were exquisitely groomed, expensively dressed and their jewellery flashed beneath the overhead lighting; many of them wore hats. Not only that, a lot of them seemed to know each other, so it was a convivial gathering helped along by the wine that started to flow. Recent cruises, skiing holidays and tropical islands featured in the snippets of conversation Holly heard around her, as well as the difficulties attached to finding really good housekeepers.

There were men present but they were rather out-numbered. One of them took his place beside Holly.

Goodness, gracious me! was Holly's first, startled reaction.

The man who sat down beside her was tall and beautifully proportioned; he was dark and satanic looking. He had a suppressed air of vitality combined with an arrogance that was repressed, but nevertheless you couldn't help but know it was there in the tilt of his head and the set of his mouth. All in all he made the little hairs on her arms stand up in a way that made her blink.

He was casually dressed in khaki trousers, a sports jacket and a navy-blue shirt. He looked out moodily over the assembled throng then concentrated on the first speaker of the day.

The patron of the shelter society introduced herself as Sue Murray. She was petite and dark, and clearly under some strain, as she stumbled a couple of times, then looked straight at the man beside Holly, drew a deep breath, and continued her speech smoothly. She gave a short résumé of the shelter society's activities and plans for the future, then she thanked everyone for coming. There was loud applause as she stepped down.

'Poor thing,' Sylvia whispered into Holly's ear. 'Her husband's been playing around. Darling, would you mind if I popped over to another table? I've just spied an old friend I haven't seen for ages. I'll be back when they start serving lunch.'

'Of course not,' Holly whispered back, and turned automatically to the man beside her as she unfolded her napkin.

The seat on the other side of him was empty too, so they were like a little island in the throng. ‘How do you do?’

‘How do you do?’ he replied coolly and studied all he could see of her, from her upswept hair, her pearls, the vee between her breasts exposed by her jacket and her slim waist. But it was worse than that. She got the distinct feeling he was viewing her without her clothes and with a view to assessing her potential as a partner in his bed.

She lowered her lashes swiftly as her blue eyes blazed at the sheer insolence of this unexpected appraisal, and at the inexplicable reaction it aroused in her. A wholly unexpected ripple of awareness touched her nerve ends.

Her lips parted on a stinging retort, but before she could frame it he smiled slightly, a lethally insolent twisting of his lips as if he was quite aware of his effect on her, and posed a question to her with an air of patent scepticism.

‘Are you a great supporter of animal shelters?’

Holly looked taken aback for a moment but she recovered swiftly and said, ‘No—not that I’m against them.’ She shrugged. ‘But that’s not why I’m here.’

His eyes left her face briefly and she realized he was keeping tabs on the progress of Sue Murray as she moved from table to table introducing herself to everyone. When his gaze came back to her, he posed another question. ‘Why *are* you here?’

‘I came with my mother.’

A glint of amusement lit his dark eyes. ‘That sounds as if

it came from a list of excuses the Department of Transport publishes occasionally: “my mother told me to hurry up, that’s why I was exceeding the speed limit”.’

If she hadn’t been so annoyed, if it hadn’t been so apt, Holly would have seen the humour of this.

‘Clever,’ she said coldly. ‘But I have to tell you, I’m already regretting it. And, for your further information, I don’t approve of this kind of fund-raising.’

He lifted a lazy eyebrow. ‘Strange, that. You look so very much the part.’

‘What *part*?’ she asked arctically.

He shrugged. ‘The professional, serial socialite. The embodiment of conspicuous philanthropy in order to climb the social ladder.’ He glanced at her left hand, which happened to be bare of rings. ‘Maybe even in the market for a rich husband?’ he added with soft but lethal irony.

Holly gasped, and gasped again, as his gaze flickered over her and came back to rest squarely on her décolletage; she had no doubt that he was mentally undressing her.

Then she clenched her teeth as it crossed her mind that she should have stuck to her guns. She should not be sitting there all dolled up to the nines, with her hair strangled up and starting to give her a headache, all to support a cause but giving off the wrong messages entirely. Obviously!

On the other hand, she thought swiftly, that did not give this man the right to insult her.

‘If you’ll forgive me for saying so,’ she retorted, ‘I think your manners are atrocious.’

‘Oh. In what way?’

‘How or why I’m here has nothing whatsoever to do with you and if you mentally undress me once more who knows what I might be prompted to do? I am,’ she added, ‘quite able to take care of myself, and I’m not wet behind the ears.’

‘Fighting words,’ he murmured. ‘But there is this—’

‘I know what you’re going to say,’ she broke in. ‘It’s chemistry.’ She looked at him scornfully. ‘That is such an old, dead one! Even my Mexican bandit didn’t use that one although, come to think of it, the sheikh did. Well, I think that’s what he was saying.’ She tipped her hand as if to say, ‘you win some, you lose some’.

He blinked. ‘Sounds as if you have an interesting life.’

‘I do.’

‘You’re not making it all up?’

‘No.’ Holly folded her arms and waited.

‘What?’ he queried after a moment, with utterly false trepidation.

‘I thought an apology might be appropriate.’

He said nothing, just gazed at her, and after a pensive moment on her part they were exchanging a long, telling look which came as quite a surprise to Holly. The luncheon and its environs receded and it was if there was only the two of them...

Whatever was happening for him, for Holly it became a drawing-in, not only visually but through her pores, of the

essence of this man and the acknowledgement that his physical properties were extremely fine. He was not only tall, he was tanned, and he looked exceedingly fit, as if sitting at charity luncheons did not come naturally to him. His hands were long and well-shaped. His dark hair was crisp and short, and the lines and angles of his face were interesting but not easy to read.

In fact, she summarized to herself, there was something inherently dangerous but dynamically attractive about him that made you think of him having his hands on your body, his exciting, expert, mind-blowing way with you.

That's ridiculous, she told herself as a strange little thrill ran through her. *That's such a girlish fantasy!*

Nevertheless, it continued to do strange things to her.

It altered the rate of her breathing, for example. It caused a little pulse to beat rather wildly at the base of her throat so that her pearls jumped. To her amazement, it even caused her nipples to become sensitive and make the lace of her black bra feel almost intolerably scratchy.

Her lips parted, then she made a concerted attempt to gather her composure as his dark gaze raked her again, but he broke the spell.

He said very quietly, 'I don't know about the bandit or the sheikh, ma'am, but I can't help thinking chemistry is actually alive and well—between us.'

Holly came back to earth with a thud and rose to her feet. 'I'm leaving,' she said baldly.

He sat back and shrugged. 'Please don't on my account. I'll say no more. Anyway, what about your mother?' he queried with just a shadow of disbelief.

Holly looked around a little wildly. 'I'll take her with me. Yes!' And she strode away from the table.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' Holly said as she clutched the steering wheel and started to drive them home. Her mother still looked stunned. 'But he was—impossible, the man sitting next to me! Talk about making a pass!' she marvelled.

'Brett Wyndham made a pass at you?' Sylvia said in faint accents as she clutched the arm rest. 'Holly, slow down, darling!'

Holly did more, she stamped on the brakes then pulled off the road. 'Brett Wyndham,' she repeated incredulously. '*That* was Brett Wyndham?'

'Yes. Sue Murray's his sister. We can only assume that's why he's there. I told you, she's having husband troubles, and perhaps he's providing moral support or something like that. I've never seen him at such a function before, or any kind of function for that matter.'

Holly released the wheel and clutched her head, then she started shedding hairpins haphazardly into her lap. 'If only I'd known! But would I have done anything differently? He was exceedingly—he was—That's why he was watching her.'

'Who?'

'His sister. In between watching me,' Holly said bitterly. 'On the other hand, I could maybe have seen the funny side of it. I

could have deflected him humorously and—who knows?’

‘If I had the faintest idea what you were talking about I might be able to agree or disagree,’ her mother said plaintively.

Holly turned to her then hugged her. ‘I am sorry. On all counts. And don’t mind me; it’s just that an interview with Brett Wyndham could have been the real boost my career needs.’

Chapter Two

A COUPLE of days later, Holly found she couldn't get out of the masked fancy-dress ball she'd agreed to attend with her mother, much as she would have loved to.

When she raised the matter, Sylvia pointed out that it would make the table numbers uneven, for one thing, and for another wasn't her costume inspired—especially for a girl called Holly?

'So, who are we going with?' Holly queried.

'Two married couples and a gentleman friend of mind, plus his son: a nice table of eight,' Sylvia said contentedly.

Holly had met the gentleman friend, a widower, but not the son. In answer to her query on that subject, she received the news that the son was only twenty-one but a very nice, mature boy. Holly digested this information with inward scepticism. 'Mature and twenty-one' in young men did not always go together, in her opinion, but then she consoled herself with the thought that her mother couldn't have any expectations of a twenty-one-year-old as in husband material for Holly, surely?

Still, she wasn't brimming with keenness to go—but she remembered how she'd probably embarrassed the life out of her mother a few days ago, and she decided to bite the bullet.

Unfortunately, the memory of the lunch brought Brett Wyndham back to mind and demonstrated to her that she didn't have an unequivocal stance on the memory. Yes, she'd been

outraged at his approach at the time—who wouldn't have been? He'd accused her of being a serial socialite and a gold-digger.

Of course, there'd been an intrinsic undercurrent to that in his own fairly obvious distaste for the lunch and all it stood for. Why else would he challenge her motives for being there? But—another but—how did that fit in with his sister being the patron of the shelter society?

Ironic, however, was the fact that two things had chipped away at her absolute outrage, making it not quite so severe: the undoubted frisson he'd aroused in her being one. Put simply, it translated into the fact that he'd been the first man to excite her physically since, well, in quite a long time...

She looked into the distance and shivered before bringing herself back to the present and forcing herself to face the second factor that had slightly lessened her outrage. Had she mucked up a golden opportunity to get the interview that would have boosted her career?

Yes, she answered herself, well and truly mucked it up. But there was no way she would have done anything differently so she just had to live with it!

All the same, militant as she felt on the subject of Brett Wyndham on one hand, on the other she had an impulse, one that actually made her fingers itch—to look him up on the Internet.

She shook her head and fought it but it was a fight she lost, and her fingers flew over the keys of her laptop, only to find that not a lot personal came to light. He was thirty-five, the oldest

of three. There was a brother between him and his sister Sue, a brother who was getting married shortly. In fact, there was more about this brother Mark, his fiancée Aria and Sue Murray than there was about Brett Wyndham, so far as personal lives went.

She dug a bit further and established that the Wyndhams had been pioneers in the savannah country of Far North Queensland where they'd established their cattle stations. She learnt that Haywire, situated between Georgetown and Croydon, was the station they called home. And she learnt that the red-basalt soil in the area produced grass that cattle thrived upon—quite beside the point. Well, the treacherous little thought crept into her mind, not so much beside the point if she ever got to interview the man!

She also learnt that Brett Wyndham was a powerful figure in other ways. The empire was no longer based solely on pastoralism. He had mining interests in the area, marble from Chillagoe, zinc and transport companies. He employed a significant amount of people in these enterprises, and he was respected for his environmental views, as well as views on endangered species.

Then she turned up gold, from her point of view—a rather bitchy little article about one Natasha Hewson, who was described as extraordinarily beautiful and extremely talented. Apparently she ran an agency that specialized in organizing events and functions down to the last exquisite detail for the rich and famous. But, the article went on to say, if Natasha had hoped to be last in the long line of beautiful women Brett Wyndham

had squired when they'd got engaged, her hopes had been dashed when they'd broken off the engagement recently...

Holly checked the date and saw that it was only nine months ago.

She sat back and tapped her teeth with the end of her pen. She had to admit that he'd got to her in a way that had reawakened her from a couple of years of mental and physical celibacy—but had she wanted to be reawakened? Not by a man who could have any woman he wanted, and had had a long line of them, she thought swiftly.

Mind you—she smiled a rueful smile—there was no hope of her getting an interview with him anyway, so it was best just to forget it all.

Brett Wyndham wondered how soon he'd be able to leave the ball. He'd come partnerless—well, he'd come with his sister. True to her word, she was looking stunning in a lavender crinoline, but otherwise apart from her tiny mask was quite recognizable as Sue Murray. Moreover she was putting a brave face on even if her heart was breaking and, whether it was his presence or not, no-one appeared to be making a laughing stock of her.

He watched her dance past—he'd left their table and was standing at the bar—and he found himself pondering the nature of love. Sue felt she shouldn't be able to love Brendan Murray now but was that all it took in matters of the heart? Dictating to yourself what you should or should not feel?

Which led him in turn to ponder his own love life. The nature of his life seemed to ensure that the women in it were only passing companions, but there had been no shortage of them. The problem was, he couldn't seem to drum up much enthusiasm for any of them.

Not only that, perhaps it was the inability of those partners to disguise their expectations that he was getting tired of, he reflected. Or the fact that none of them ever said 'no.' Well, one had quite recently, now he came to think of it. His lips twisted with amusement at the memory.

He shrugged and turned to watch the passing parade.

He'd come, courtesy of Mike Rafferty, as a masked Spanish aristocrat with a dark cropped jacket, dark, trousers, soft boots and white, frilled shirt, complete with scarlet cummerbund and black felt hat.

Dinner was over and the serious part of the evening under way—the serious dancing, that was. They were all there, strutting their stuff to the powerful beat of the music under the chandelier: the Cleopatras, the Marie Antoinettes, the belly dancers, the harem girls, the Lone Rangers, the Lawrences of Arabia, the three Elvises, a Joan of Arc and a Lady Godiva in a body stocking who looked as if she was regretting her choice of costume.

Some of them he recognized despite the masks and towering wigs. All of them, he reflected, bored him to tears.

He was just about to turn away when one girl he didn't recognize danced past in the arms of an eager pirate complete

with eye patch, one gold earring and a stuffed macaw on his shoulder.

She was quite tall, very slim and dressed almost all in black. Something about her, probably her outfit, stirred something in his memory, but he couldn't pin it down.

'Who's she supposed to be?' he enquired of an elderly milkmaid standing beside him. He indicated the girl in black.

The milkmaid beamed. 'Isn't she perfect? So different. Of course, it's Holly Golightly—don't you remember? Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. That gorgeous black hat with the wide, downturned brim and the light, floaty hat-band; the earrings, the classic little black dress and gloves—even the alligator shoes. And to think of using her sunglasses as a mask!'

'Ah. Yes, she is rather perfect. You wouldn't happen to know who she is in real life?'

The milkmaid had no idea and Brett watched Holly Golightly dance past again.

She looked cool and detached, even slightly superior, but that could be because the pirate was having trouble containing his enthusiasm for her.

In fact, as he watched she detached herself from her partner as he attempted to maul her, swung on her heel and swept away towards the ballroom balcony with a hand to her hat.

The pirate looked so crestfallen, Brett could only assume he was either very young or very drunk.

Without giving it much thought, he took a fresh glass of

champagne off the bar and followed the girl onto the balcony.

She was leaning against the balustrade, breathing deeply.

‘Maybe this’ll help to remove the taste of the pirate?’ he suggested and offered the champagne to her.

Holly straightened and wondered if she was imagining things. She’d been rather darkly contemplating the fact that she’d been right about very young men such as the pirate who was the son of her mother’s friend; he hadn’t been able to keep his hands off her!

But could this tall, arrogant-looking Spaniard be who she thought he was? Could you ever forget Brett Wyndham’s voice, or his athletic build? Or the pass he’d made at her? More importantly, did she want to be recognized? As a serious journalist, perhaps, but like this? As a *serial socialite*...?

In a lightning decision that she did not want to be recognized, she lowered her voice a notch and assumed a French accent. ‘*Merci*. I was of a mind to punch his parrot.’

Brett laughed then narrowed his eyes behind the mask. ‘You sound as if you’ve just stepped out of France.’

‘Not France, Tahiti.’ It wasn’t exactly a lie. She’d returned from her last travel assignment, Papeete, a bare week ago.

‘So, a Tahitian Holly Golightly?’

‘You may say so.’ Holly sipped some champagne. ‘What have we with you? An Aussie *señor*?’

He looked down at his attire. ‘You could say so. Are you into horses, Miss Golightly?’

Holly gazed at him blankly.

‘It is the kick-off to the Winter Racing Carnival, this ball,’ he elaborated.

‘Of course! But no, you could say not, although I have done some riding in my time. Generally, though, on inferior beasts such as asses and camels.’

Brett’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Camels? In Tahiti? How come?’

‘Not, naturally, Tahiti,’ Holly denied regally. ‘But I have a fondness for some out-of-the-way places you cannot get to by *other* means.’ She gave the word “other” a tremendous French twist.

‘So do I,’ he murmured and frowned again as his masked gaze roamed over her.

Holly waited with some trepidation. Would he recognize her beneath the Holly Golightly outfit, the wide, downturned hat-brim and the French accent? She’d recognized him almost immediately, but that deep, mesmerizing voice would be hard to disguise. For that matter, so were those wide shoulders and lean hips.

Then it occurred to her that she was once again being summed up in that inimitable way of his.

The slender line of her neck, the outline of her figure beneath the little black dress, the smooth skin of her arms above her gloves, her trim ankles—they all received his critical assessment. And they all traitorously reacted accordingly, which was to say he might as well have been running his hands over her body.

‘Actually,’ she said airily—not a true reflection of her

emotions as she was battling to stay cool and striving to take a humorous view of proceedings, ‘You make a *trés* arrogant Spaniard.’

‘I do?’

‘*Oui*. Summing up perfectly strange women with a view to ownership is what I would call arrogant. Could it be that there is little difference between you and the pirate with the parrot, *monsieur*?’

‘Ownership?’ he queried.

‘Of their bodies,’ she explained. ‘Tell me this was not so a moment ago?’ She tilted her chin at him.

He pushed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. ‘It’s a failing most men succumb to. But unlike the pirate I would never attempt to maul you, Miss Golightly.’

He paused and allowed his dark, masked gaze to travel over her again. ‘On the contrary, I would make your skin feel like warm silk and I would celebrate your lovely, slim body in a way that would be entirely satisfactory—for both of us.’

Holly stifled a tremor of utmost sensuousness that threatened to engulf her down the length of her body—at least stifled the outward appearance of it, by the narrowest of margins.

All the same, she went hot and cold and had to wonder how he did it. How did he engender a state of mind that could even have her wondering what it would be like to be Brett Wyndham’s woman. How dared he?

Despite his arrogance, did that dark, swashbuckling presence

do it to most women he came in contact with?

Her mind swooped on this point. Would it be a relief to think she was just one of a crowd when it came to Brett Wyndham? Or would it make it worse?

She came to her senses abruptly to find him studying her intently now and rather differently. 'You have a problem, *señor*?'

'No. Well, I just have the feeling I've met you before, Miss Golightly.'

Holly took the bit between her teeth and contrived a quizzical little smile. 'Many men have that problem. It is a very—how do you say it?—unoriginal approach.'

'You feel I'm making a pass at you?' he enquired lazily.

'I am convinced of it.' She presented him her half empty champagne glass. 'Thus, I will return to my party. *Au revoir*.'

But he said, 'Were you riding a camel when your sheikh propositioned you?'

Holly, in the act of sweeping inside, stopped as if shot.

'Or a donkey, when the Mexican approached you?' he added softly.

'You knew!' she accused.

'The accent and the outfit threw me for a while, but I'm not blind or deaf. Is it *all* made up? And, if so, why?'

Holly walked back to him and retrieved her champagne. 'I've got the feeling I might need this,' she said darkly and took a good sip. 'No, well, Tahiti was true—a bit. I've just come back so it seemed like a good idea to—' she gestured airily '—to...' But she

couldn't think of a suitable way to cloak it.

'Help pull the wool over my eyes?' he suggested.

Holly choked slightly on a second sip of champagne but made a swift recovery. 'Why would I want to be recognized by you? All you ever do is query my motives, accuse me of appalling posturing and make passes at me!'

'You have to admit it all sounds highly unlikely,' he drawled. 'Are you here with your mother?'

Holly opened her mouth but closed it and stamped her foot. 'Don't you dare make fun of my mother! She—'

A flash of pale colour registered in her peripheral vision and she turned to see her mother coming out onto the balcony. Her mother was dressed as Eliza Doolittle at the races, complete with huge hat and parasol. 'We might as well both reprise Audrey Hepburn roles,' Sylvia had said upon presenting the idea to her daughter.

'Mum!' Holly said. 'What—'

But her mother interrupted her. 'There you are, darling! And I see you've met Mr Wyndham.' Sylvia turned to Brett. 'How do you do? I'm Sylvia Harding, Holly's mother—yes, her real name is Holly, that's why we thought of Holly Golightly!' Sylvia paused and took a very deep breath. 'But I feel sure there was some misunderstanding at the shelter lunch, and she didn't have the opportunity to tell you that she's a journalist and would love to interview you.'

There was dead silence on the balcony but Sylvia went on,

apparently oblivious to the undercurrents. 'I also know she'd do a great job; she's not her father's daughter for nothing. He was Richard Harding, incidentally—perhaps you've heard of him?'

'Yes, I have. How do you do, Mrs Harding?' Brett said courteously.

'I'm fine, thank you. You may be wondering how I recognized you, but as soon as I saw you with Sue it clicked. She's such a lovely person, your sister. Well, I'll leave you two together.' She hesitated then walked back inside.

Holly let out a long breath then finished the champagne with a gulp. 'Don't say a word,' she warned Brett, once again presented him with her glass. 'I did not arrange that, and anyway I don't believe leopards change their spots, so I have no desire to interview you.'

'Leopards?' he queried gravely but she could see he was struggling not to laugh. 'On top of camels, asses, Mexicans and sheikhs?'

'Yes,' she said through her teeth. 'I believe they can be cunning, highly dangerous and thoroughly bad-minded into the bargain. If anyone should know that, you should.'

'I do,' he agreed. 'Uh—where is this analogy leading?'

'I have no faith in you *not* making any more passes at me, that's where.'

'I'd be demolished,' he said. 'But I'm pretty sure it isn't all one-sided.'

Another deadly little silence enveloped the balcony.

Holly opened her mouth but had to close it as no inspiration came to her. In all honesty, how could she deny the claim? On the other hand, every bit of good sense she possessed told her that to acknowledge it would be foolhardy in the extreme.

So, in the end, she did the only thing available to her: she swung on her heel and walked away from him.

‘How was the ball?’ Mike Rafferty enquired of his boss the next morning.

Brett lay back in his chair and appeared to meditate for a moment. ‘Interesting,’ he said at last.

‘Well, that’s got to be better than you expected,’ Mike replied and placed some papers on the desk. ‘The lead up to the wedding,’ he said simply.

Brett grimaced and pulled the details of Mark’s pre-wedding festivities towards him. ‘I just hope it’s not a three-ring circus. Oh hell, another ball!’

‘But this one’s just a normal ball,’ Mike pointed out.

Brett did not look mollified as he read on. ‘A soirée, a beach barbecue, a trip to the reef—da-da, da-da.’ Brett waved a hand. ‘All right. I presume they’ve got someone in to organize it all properly?’

Mike hesitated and then coughed nervously.

Brett stared narrowly at him. ‘Who? Not...? Not Natasha?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

Brett swore.

‘She is the best—at this kind of thing,’ Mike offered.

‘But I believe they had someone else to start with who made a real hash of things, so they called on Ms Hewson and she saved the day, apparently. She and Aria are friends,’ he added.

‘I see.’ Brett drummed his fingers on the desk then looked to have made a decision. ‘Mike, find out all you can about a girl called Holly Harding. She’s Richard Harding’s daughter—the well-known writer—and I believe she’s a journalist herself. Do it now, please.’

Mike stared at his boss for a moment as he tried to tie this in with Mark Wyndham’s wedding.

‘What?’ Brett queried.

‘Nothing,’ Mike said hastily. ‘Just going.’

On Monday afternoon Glenn Shepherd called Holly into his office, and hugged her. ‘You’re such a clever girl,’ he enthused. ‘I might have known I was laying down the gauntlet to you when I mentioned his name, but how on earth did you pull it off? And why keep it such a secret?’ He released her and went back behind his desk.

Holly, looking dazed and confused, sank into a chair across the desk. ‘What are you talking about, Glenn?’

‘Getting an interview with Brett Wyndham, of course. What else?’

Holly stared at him, transfixed, then she cleared her throat. ‘I —wasn’t aware that I had.’

Glenn gestured. ‘Well, there are a few details he wants to sort out with you before he gives his final consent, so I made an

appointment for you with him for five-thirty this afternoon.’ He passed a slip of paper to her over the desk. ‘If you’ve got anything on, cancel it. This could be your big break, Holly, and it won’t do *us* any harm, either. Uh—there may be some travel involved.’

‘Travel?’

‘I’ll let him tell you about it but of course we’d foot the bill where necessary.’

‘Glenn...’ Holly said.

But he interrupted her and stood up. ‘Go get it, girl! And now I’ve got to run.’

At five-twenty that afternoon, Holly glanced at the piece of paper Glenn had given her and frowned. Southbank was a lovely precinct on the Brisbane river, opposite the tall towers of the CBD. It was made up of restaurants, a swimming lagoon and gardens set around the civic theatre and the art gallery. It was not exactly where she would have expected to conduct a business meeting with Brett Wyndham.

Then again, that was the last thing she’d expected to be doing this Monday afternoon, or any afternoon, so why quibble at the venue?

She parked her car, gathered her tote bag and for a moment wished she was dressed more formally. But that would have involved rushing home to change, and anyway, she didn’t want him to think she’d gone to any trouble with her appearance on his behalf, did she?

No, she answered herself, so why even think it?

Because she might have felt more mature, or something like that, if she wasn't dressed as she usually was for work.

She looked down at her jeans, the pink singlet top she wore under a rather beloved jacket and her brown, short boots. This was the kind of clothes she felt comfortable in when she was traveling, as well as at work.

As for her hair, she'd left it to its own devices that morning and the result was a mass of untamed curls.

There could be little or no resemblance to the girl at the shelter lunch or Holly Golightly, she reasoned, which should be a good thing.

But, she also reasoned, really her clothes and hair were nothing compared to her absolute shock and disbelief at this move Brett Wyndham had made. What was behind it?

She shook her head, locked her car and went to find him.

It took a moment for Brett Wyndham to recognize Holly Harding. He noticed a tall girl in denims and a pink singlet with a leather tote hanging from her shoulder, wandering down the path from the car park. He noted that she looked completely natural, with no make-up, from her wild, fair curls to her boots, as well as looking young and leggy. Then it suddenly dawned on him who she was.

He saw her look around the restaurant terrace—their designated meeting place—and he raised a hand. He thought she hesitated briefly, then she came over.

He stood up and offered her a chair. 'Good day,' he murmured

as they both sat down. ‘Yet another incarnation of Holly Harding?’

‘This is the real me,’ Holly said dryly, and studied him briefly. He wore a black sweater, olive-canvas trousers and thick-soled black-leather shoes. His short, dark hair was ruffled; while he might have made a perfect Spanish aristocrat a few nights ago, today he looked tough, inscrutable and potentially dangerous.

‘Would you like a drink?’

‘Just a soft one, thank you. I never mix business with pleasure,’ Holly replied.

He ordered a fruit juice for her and beer for himself, ignoring her rather pointed comment. ‘If this is the real you,’ he said, ‘What makes you moonlight as a social butterfly?’

‘My mother. Please don’t make any smart remarks,’ she warned, and explained the situation to him in a nutshell.

‘Very commendable.’ He paused as his beer was served, along with a silver dish of olives and a fruit-laden glass of juice topped by a pink parasol for Holly.

‘But a bit trying at times,’ Holly revealed, allowing her hostilities to lapse for a moment. ‘I think I would have preferred standing on a street corner with a collection box rather than that lunch, but perhaps I shouldn’t say that in deference to your sister.’ She eyed him curiously then stared out over the gardens towards the river. The sun was setting and the quality of light was warm and vivid.

He watched her thoughtfully. ‘Each to his own method, but

we seem to have a few things in common.'

'Not really,' Holly disagreed, going back to clearly hostile, and turned to look straight at him. 'Why have you done this?'

He countered with a question, 'Did you or did you not tell your mother you would love to interview me?'

'I...' Holly paused. 'I told her an interview with you could provide the boost my career needed. I told her that I'd had no idea who you were, but if there'd ever been any chance of an interview I'd blown it.'

'Only, being a mother, she didn't believe you,' he said wryly. 'Well, it is on, on certain conditions.'

'So I hear.' She glanced at him coolly, as if she was highly suspicious of his conditions—which she was. 'What are they?'

'I'm a bit pressed for time. I need to be in Cairns—Palm Cove, precisely. I have an important meeting. And I need to be out at Haywire the following day for a few days. It's the only free time I have before my brother gets married, and anyway—' he looked at her over the rim of his glass '—it will set the scene for you.'

'You—want me to come to Palm Cove and then on to this Haywire place with you?' she queried a little jaggedly.

He nodded. 'Not only am I pressed for time, but logistically it makes sense. The best way to get you to Haywire is for you to fly out there with me from Cairns.'

'Do I,' Holly gestured, 'actually have to see this Haywire place?'

'Yes.'

‘Why?’

He sat back and shoved his hands into his pockets with a slight frown. ‘That doesn’t sound like a dedicated journalist. Why wouldn’t you want to see it?’

‘Mr Wyndham,’ she said carefully, ‘You have not only accused me of being a serial socialite and a gold-digger, you’ve mentally undressed me often enough to make me *seriously* wary of being stuck somewhere out beyond the black stump with you!’

Like lightning, a crooked grin creased his face which didn’t impress Holly at all.

‘I apologize,’ he said then. ‘I was—’ he paused to consider ‘—not in a very good mood—not at the lunch, anyway. However, you’d be quite safe at Haywire. There’s staff up there, and I’m not in the habit of forcing myself on unwilling women.’

Holly chewed her lip then said finally, ‘What are the other conditions?’

‘I mainly want to talk about the work I do—so nothing personal, unless it’s ancient history. And I want to vet it before it gets published.’

Holly blinked several times, then she said frustratedly, ‘Why me?’

He shrugged. ‘Why not? Not only are you a journalist, but you’re interesting.’ He looked amused. ‘I’ve never been walked-out on before, as you did at the lunch. I’ve never been told I was making a pass in a French accent. And I’ve *never* been accused of being as bad-minded as a leopard.’

Holly realized she'd been staring at him openmouthed. She shut it hastily and watched him twirl his beer bottle in his long fingers before pouring the last of it into his glass.

'But what really decided me,' he continued, 'was your mother.'

'My mother?' Holly repeated in dazed tones. 'How come?'

'I thought what she did was quite brave. Maybe it's mistaken maternal faith—we'll see, I guess—but I liked her for it.'

Holly was seized by strong emotion and had to turn away to hide it as her eyes blazed. If it killed her, she would dearly love to prove to Brett Wyndham that her mother's faith in her was not *mistakenly maternal*, even if it meant spending some days with him at Palm Cove and beyond the black stump...

After all, there was bound to be staff at the station, and Palm Cove was highly civilized, wasn't it? It was not as if she'd be stranded in some jungle with him. It would actually be quite difficult to be stalked by him up there, as predator and prey, and she was no silly girl to be seduced by palm trees and mango daiquiris.

Was that all there was to it, however? Was simply to be in his company seductive? Was he just that kind of man? She couldn't deny he'd had a powerful effect on her a couple of times—without even trying too hard, she thought a little bitterly. But surely that was in *her* power to control? Well, if not control, ignore.

After all, was she not getting gold in return for a little self-discipline?

She opened her mouth, looked frustrated and said, ‘You never give interviews. So I’m having a little difficulty with that.’

‘I’m branching out in a new direction that I was going to publicize anyway. I’ve read some of your pieces, you have your father’s touch and I thought you could do justice to it.’

Holly’s lips parted and he could see the quickening of interest drowning the doubt and suspicion in her eyes. ‘Am I allowed to know what it is?’

He shook his head. ‘Not yet. But it’s the very good reason for you to see Haywire.’

Holly looked unamused. ‘I find you extremely—annoying at times,’ she told him.

Brett Wyndham’s lips twisted; he wondered what she’d say if he told her how annoyed he’d been when they’d first met. He’d been annoyed at the lunch; he’d arrived annoyed, then got further annoyed at finding himself feeling a niggle of attraction towards the kind of girl he’d castigated to himself so thoroughly. When she’d walked out, the niggle had become tinged with a grudging kind of admiration—that had also annoyed him.

Then her Holly Golightly hauteur had claimed his attention, and on discovering it was the same girl his annoyance had turned to intrigue. He was still intrigued by this version of Holly Harding—even more intrigued because he was quite sure he’d stirred some response in her...

Still, he reflected, these were improbable lengths to go to over a smattering of intrigue to do with a woman, particularly for

him. But he had liked her fresh, slightly zany style in the pieces he'd read, he reminded himself, and he had even considered the possibility of offering her some publicity work for his new venture.

‘So?’ He lifted an eyebrow at her.

Holly meditated for a moment then replied quite candidly. ‘I’d love to say no, because you’ve pressed a few wrong buttons with me, Mr Wyndham. But—’ she flipped her hand ‘—you’ve also pressed a few right ones. My mother was an inspired one, in more ways than one.’ She cast him a strange little look from beneath her lashes. ‘Then there’s my editor. How I would explain to him I’ve knocked back this opportunity, I can’t even begin to think.’

She paused to take several breaths.

‘There’s more?’ he queried with some irony.

‘A bit more. You’ve got to be interesting—you’ve certainly captured the public’s imagination—so, on a purely professional level, I can’t turn it down.’

‘Am I expected to be flattered?’

Holly searched his eyes and could just detect the wicked amusement in their dark depths. ‘Yes,’ she said baldly. ‘I’m usually no pushover.’

‘OK, take it as read that I’m flattered.’ He stopped, flagged a passing waiter and ordered a bottle of champagne.

‘Oh. No!’ Holly protested. ‘I didn’t mean...’

‘You don’t think we should celebrate?’ He looked offended. ‘I do. It’s not every day I score a coup like this. Besides, I thought

you liked champagne.'

'You're making fun of me,' she accused.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'Well, yes and no. You can be quite an impressive twenty-four-year-old. Thanks,' he said to the waiter who delivered the champagne and carefully poured two glasses.

He handed one to Holly and held up his own. 'Cheers!'

Holly reluctantly raised her glass to his. 'Cheers,' she echoed. 'But I'm only having one glass. On top of everything else, I'm driving.'

'That's fine,' he said idly.

'Isn't that a waste of champagne? Or are you going to drink it all?'

'No. I'm meeting someone else here shortly. She also likes champagne.'

Holly took a hurried gulp. 'Well, the sooner I get going the better.'

'No need to rush; she's my sister.'

Holly looked embarrassed. 'Oh. I thought...' She tailed off.

'You thought she was a girlfriend?'

'Yes. Sorry. Not that it matters to me one way or the other.'

'Naturally not,' he murmured.

She eyed him over her glass. 'You know, I can't quite make you out.'

He allowed his dark gaze to drift over her in a way that caused her skin to shiver of its own accord. She'd been inwardly congratulating herself on *not* having this happen to her during

this encounter—an involuntary physical response to this man—but now it had.

‘The same goes for me,’ he said quietly. ‘Can’t quite make you out.’

Holly made an effort to rescue herself, to stop the flow of messages bombarding her senses. How could it happen like this? she wondered a little wildly. Out of the blue across a little glass-topped table on a terrace in the fading light of day.

But her rather tortured reflections were broken by a canine yelp, a squeal then howls of pain as, limping badly, a dog skittered across the terrace and disappeared into the shrubbery.

Chapter Three

HOLLY jumped to her feet but Brett Wyndham was even quicker.

He plunged into the shrubbery, issuing a terse warning to her over his shoulder to be careful because the dog, in its pain, could bite.

The next few minutes were chaotic as Brett captured then subdued the terrified dog, a black-and-white border collie. How, Holly had no idea, but he did, and a lot of people milled around. None of them was its owner, or had any idea where it had come from, other than it must have got loose from somewhere and possibly got run over as it had crossed the road.

‘OK.’ Brett pulled his phone out and tossed it to Holly. ‘Find the nearest vet surgery.’ He pulled out his car keys and tossed them to her. ‘And drive my car down here as close as you can get. It’s the silver BMW.’

Holly grabbed her tote and did so, and ended up driving the four-wheel-drive so Brett could attend to the dog on the way to the surgery. He was staunching a deep cut on its leg with his handkerchief and she heard him say, ‘You’re going to be all right, mate.’

She found the surgery with the aid of the GPS and helped carry the dog in. ‘Is he really going to be all right?’ she asked fearfully as they handed it over.

‘I reckon so.’ He scanned her briefly then looked more closely. ‘You better sit down; you look a bit pale. I’m going in for a few minutes.’ He turned to the receptionist, who was hovering. ‘Could you get her a glass of water?’

‘Of course. Sit down, ma’am.’

Holly was only too glad to do so. A mobile phone with an unfamiliar ring sounded in her tote. She blinked, remembered it must be Brett’s phone and after a moment’s hesitation answered it.

‘Brett Wyndham’s phone.’

‘Where is he and who are you?’ an irate female voice said down the line.

Holly explained and added, ‘Can I give him a message?’

‘Oh.’ The voice sounded mollified. ‘Yes, if you wouldn’t mind. It’s his sister, Sue. I’m waiting for him at Southbank, but I’m going out to dinner so I won’t wait any longer. Could you tell him I’ll catch up with him tomorrow?’

Ten minutes later Brett reappeared and held his hand out to Holly. ‘Let’s go. He’s got a broken leg, as well as the cut, but he’ll be fine. He’s in good hands, and he’s got a microchip so they’ll be able to track down his owner.’

‘Thank heavens.’ She got to her feet.

‘How are you?’ he queried.

‘OK.’

He studied her narrowly. ‘You don’t altogether look it.’

‘I...I once lost a dog in an accident. He was also a border

collie. I called him Oliver, because as a puppy he was always looking for more food. He was run over, but he died. It just took me back a bit.'

Brett released her hand and put an arm around her shoulder. He didn't say anything, but Holly discovered herself to be comforted. Comforted and then something else—acutely conscious of Brett Wyndham.

She breathed in his essence—pure man—and she felt the long, strong lines of his body. She was reminded of how quick and light on his feet he'd been, how he'd used the power of his personality and expertise to calm the dog—but above all how he'd impressed her on a mental level, and now on a physical one.

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