

## Chapter One

The red dirt airstrip of the Camaroo air cargo station loomed before her as Sydney deftly brought the sturdy little twin engine Cessna in line with the track by visual, its shimmering silver nose up, in preparation for another perfect landing. The plane's engine sputtered and died just as the landing gear came down, forcing the Ladybird to float on air until she gracefully hit the runway and zoomed towards the waiting hangar. Skillfully, Sydney applied the brakes and brought the small cargo plane to a satisfying stop just six feet from the glowering face of fifty-five-year-old Evan Withers.

Evan hated it when she flew low on fuel but Sydney felt she had no choice but to cut corners wherever she could. Flying back to Camaroo from Kalgoorlie with just enough fuel to glide in on fumes was one of those corners she felt skilled enough to risk. Evan would just have to live with it.

With a triumphant smile, she flung open the door and nimbly leaped from the body of the plane, ignoring the steps as usual, her sparkling golden eyes alight with mischief.

"Bloody hell, Syd! How many times have I told you to stop cutting it so close?" Evan snapped the question at her as he ran his hand through his salt and pepper hair. His heart was still in his throat and he wished he had some way to get through to the indomitable brat. If she'd been his daughter, that route would have been via her backside. Sydney was pretty levelheaded, for the most part, but remained stubbornly careless about flying low on fuel, a fact that concerned him deeply.

"Stop grouching so much, Evan," retorted Sydney with a smug grin, eyeing the older man. Evan's weathered face bore a year-round tan, telltale of his many years in the hot Australian sun. "You're a worry wart, you know that?"

"Evan is right, young man." The disembodied voice came from the other side of the plane and Sydney stepped back as a large man with a scowl on his square-jawed face suddenly appeared before her. She stiffened under his appraisal, knowing instinctively that her baseball cap, worn backwards in a facetious manner, would not impress the man. Neither would the smooth boyish cut of her face and the worn bib overalls with the faded red T-shirt. He looked the ultimate professional in his suit that refused to sport a single wrinkle, even in the furnace-like heat. Black eyes narrowed as he barked the question, "How old are you, anyway?"

Sydney flushed, her temper simmering. "Old enough to fly, if it's any of your business," she snapped back.

Evan intervened quickly, his voice holding a note of admonition. "Syd, this is Carter McAllister. His family owns *Karamanda*."

Sydney looked closer at the big man who towered a good foot over her, just managing to hold her tongue.

This must be the brother who left over a family dispute.

Her mind worked quickly as she appraised him, well aware of the warning in Evan's voice. Carter would be about thirty-five, if memory served her correctly.

"Is this the way you usually treat potential customers?" he asked acidly.

"Not usually, but then potential customers don't normally criticize me," she replied evenly, ramming her hands into her bib pockets. She knew she had to be careful to keep a tight rein on her attitude, or risk exposure of her identity. In spite of her instant dislike to this man and his attitude of owning the world around him, she *would* hold her tongue. But his air of authority and obvious expectation that all within his circumference would bow to him made her disdainful.

A man with money and power who doesn't mind letting others know he has it, she thought scornfully.

Thankfully, he mistook her for a boy—and that was just the way she and Evan wanted it—for now, anyway. Evan only called her Syd around customers, thereby promoting her intentional boyish appearance.

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

Sydney willed her face to remain impassive. She refused to back up or show any hint of weakness, nor the desire to run, as she boldly returned stare for stare.

"I want to speak with the manager." Carter's dark gaze finally swung to Evan. "Is that *you*, Evan?" he asked. His voice held just the right touch of mocking derision that left Sydney flushing at the implication it could never be her.

"Yes, I'm the manager," replied Evan, sending Sydney another warning look.

Sydney purposely moved away from Carter and leaned against the plane, her attitude calm and nonchalant. Inside, she was fuming and needing a little breathing space as she fought to maintain her placid demeanor.

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

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

Sydney never heard Evan's reply, but she knew he would take the job himself—provided McCallister hired them. It would be a much-needed break for them to get the job and well worth holding her razor-sharp tongue. Still, she finally gave in to the childish whim and stuck her tongue out at Carter's back, instantly feeling vindicated.

With a disgruntled sigh, she stalked to the dusty red jeep parked next to the low slung, white-washed hangar and curled her slender body into the driver's seat. *Only* the fact that they needed the business had kept her temper in check.

As she pulled out of the dirt parking lot, she couldn't help but admire the blazing colors that streaked along the rim of the western sky. The sun was beginning to set and its orange and red hues painted the drifting clouds in magnificent color. She never tired of the beauty of the heavens and was at peace when she was in the Ladybird, high above the ground, belting out her music or softly crooning a love song.

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

When she and Evan had Camaroo back on its feet, she would be free to study diligently with her music. But for now, she had to settle for correspondence courses from the Uni and singing at The Gilded Lily, an upscale bar in Kalgoorlie, to pay for those courses. *Maybe they would get a break with Carter McCallister*, she thought. Chances were, though, as soon as he heard about the scandal, he would take his business elsewhere. People around these parts had long memories.

Why anyone would believe that her gentle father could have had anything to do with smuggling diamonds, she couldn't imagine. Yet, one by one, their customers had dropped off, until Camaroo had become a shadow of its former self. It had been too much for Al Carstairs to see his life's work falling apart, his reputation sullied by accusation and innuendo. His heart had finally given out.

Sydney turned the jeep into the dusty red track that led to the homestead and pulled up behind the house. Her feet took her sadly to the small cemetery out back, as they always did at the end of the day. Finally, she stopped and stood gazing down at the matching stones that sat side by side—her father and her mother. Alan Dale Carstairs had refused to ever leave Camaroo station.

She dropped to her knees, the tears misting her eyes as her slim fingers stroked the delicate Stuart Desert Pea that grew alongside the graves. She loved and missed her mother, but she deeply mourned her father. Al Carstairs had been her anchor. He had taught her to fly, against her mother's heated objections, and had fiercely encouraged her to go after her dream of a singing career.

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

"I know, Cass," replied Sydney, standing up. "I was just checking up on Dad."

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

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

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

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

"Put me down, Evan," she laughed, gasping for breath. "Oh, I'm so glad! I was hoping he might hire us, but it's been such a bad run the last two years, I never thought he would."

"He almost didn't!" replied Evan grimly. "He was *not* impressed with that stunt you pulled, Sydney."

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

"You never know when something will happen and delay your air time, Sydney," argued Evan anxiously. "And it could be anything—a bad break in the weather, an overshoot of the runway, anything at all."

Evan knew Sydney flew by the seat of her pants most of the time. She had learned how to fly into Kalgoorlie and back with just enough fuel to avoid having to fill up in town. She was trying desperately to conserve money and wanted to use the reserves her father had stored instead of having to pay for fuel. But with thirty more years of airtime under his belt than she had, he knew all too well that anything could go wrong at any time.

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

"I don't deny the fact that you're a bloody good pilot," Evan fumed. "But this is just plain foolhardy and it's *got* to stop, Sydney Renee Carstairs!"

"I'll do what I think is necessary to rebuild Camaroo Air Cargo," warned Sydney, her eyes glinting as she struggled to rein in her temper. This was Evan, her father's lifelong friend, and she had great respect for him. He'd been like a favorite uncle all these years, but he couldn't tell her what to do—she *owned* Camaroo.

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

"You do and I'll fire you," retorted Sydney, her eyes flashing. Her voice was laced with warning as she returned his glare. He had a lot of nerve, threatening her like that. Her own father had never raised a hand to her and she wasn't about to let someone else do it.

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

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

He landed another harsh slap on her rounded bottom outlined in the bib covering, and this time, she squealed.

"Ow! Dammit, Evan, that hurt! Stop it," she raged.

"I better be hearing an apology and a promise not to do that again, or I'm going to wear your rear end out!" In for a penny, in for a pound, he decided.

"All right, *fine!* I'm *sorry!* Now let me up," she demanded. She didn't really think he would follow through, but she supposed she shouldn't have threatened to fire her loyal old friend. He deserved better than that.

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

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

"I know, Evan. I really am sorry," she replied softly. She put her arms around him and gave him a gentle hug. "Thank you for getting the Karamanda account. We do need to talk about it, but right now, I have to get changed and get to Kalgoorlie." She motioned to Cassie, who was still standing with her mouth open at the sight of Sydney getting swatted by Evan.

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

The girls disappeared into the house and Evan smiled at Cassie's antics. It wasn't until he was on his way to his own home that it occurred to him that Syd had not actually promised never to fly low on fuel again. "Bloody hell," he bit out to no one in particular. "That girl needs someone to take her in hand, or mark my words, she *is* going to end up in real trouble!"

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ryan eyed his parent doubtfully and then looked down to peruse the letter in his hand.

Hello, Paul,

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

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

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

My girl, Sydney, loves Camaroo and although she's been told to sell it upon my death, she rarely ever does what she is told. A condition I've not had much control over, I'm afraid. She's so like her mother. I've not been able to bring myself to discipline her, as I should have. She's a good girl, but used to having her own way and bloody stubborn. She will do all she can to keep Camaroo station and the air cargo business, but that's not what I want. I don't want her doing anything wild or that would keep her from pursuing her own goals. If she sells the house and business, or at least the business, then she can move into the city with her younger sister, Cassie, and they will be fine. But knowing Sydney, she will fight tooth and nail to keep it all, and Lord knows what kind of crazy scheme she will come up with.

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

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

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

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

Your old friend,

Al Carstairs

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

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

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

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

"Sydney obviously needs some leverage if she hasn't obeyed her father," muttered Ryan, scowling at his grinning parent. The old man was enjoying this way too much.

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

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

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

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

"Aw, come on, Dad," she wheedled as she dragged her feet to the appointed spot. "I was only twenty minutes late last night."

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

"But Ryan is here!"

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

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

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

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

Ryan peered into the envelope and reached inside for the photos.

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

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

Ryan looked at the picture he held in his hand, curiously studying the faces of two young girls. They had their arms around each other and were laughing into the camera. The taller girl had eyes that looked like rare golden topaz, curly auburn hair to her shoulders, and a dusting of freckles across her nose. She was not classically beautiful, but she had a determined air about her that lent character to her face and her lips turned up at the corners in a charming gamin grin.

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

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

"No, Dad, wait!" pleaded Dana.

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



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

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

The loud smack of the paddle and the anguished—"ow"—of his sister rang in his ears as Ryan closed the study door. He bet Dana wouldn't be late very often in the future, by the time his father was through with her.

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

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