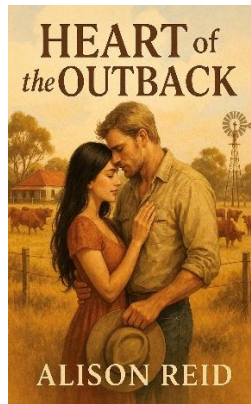


# Heart of the Outback

by Alison Reid



Ben Callahan strode toward the house, boots thudding against the dry earth, jaw clenched tighter than it needed to be.

She was beautiful.

And he hated that it was the first thing he'd noticed.

Not her qualifications. Not her references. Not her tone or her so-called suitability for the job. No, what had slammed into him like a gut punch was the sight of her—petite and slim, skin flushed from the heat, long black hair pulled into a braid that fell like a ribbon of ink down her back. She looked like she belonged on a film set, not dusty boots on a cattle station.

He didn't know whether to offer her a contract or ask her what in God's name she was doing all the way out here. And those eyes. Striking, vivid green, set in a face that had no right looking that composed after a drive across the bloody outback.

Natural beauty. The kind that didn't need a damn thing to enhance it. No makeup, no pretence. Just her.

And that was the problem.

He'd hired a nanny, not a complication. Not someone who'd knock the air out of his lungs with a glance and make him feel like he was standing too close

to something he shouldn't touch. It wasn't just attraction—it was the danger that came with it. The distraction. The memories of another woman who'd smiled sweetly and carved out every soft part of him with a scalpel.

He'd expected someone older. Maybe tired looking. The kind of woman who wore practical shoes and didn't care much for idle chatter. What he got instead was... her. All calm poise and soft confidence, standing in front of his homestead like it was hers to claim.

Ben let out a breath, hot and sharp, and scrubbed a hand down his face.

This was exactly why he didn't want strangers on his property. Especially not women. Especially not ones with eyes like that and a mouth that curved at the edges like it held more stories than she was willing to tell.

It wasn't fair. He knew that. She hadn't done anything wrong. Hell, she'd shown up early, had the decency to bring books for his daughter, and didn't flinch under pressure. But that only made it worse. Because she wasn't flighty or false. She wasn't some city girl looking for outback adventure. She was here to do the job.

And he was already reacting like a fool.

He'd seen it in Brad's face too—the barely concealed grin when he'd come to announce that the gorgeous new nanny had arrived. Jemma Prescott had walked onto the property for less than five minutes, and already the air felt different. Charged. Like something had shifted.

Ben didn't like shifts.

He liked order. Quiet. Predictability. He'd spent years building walls around this place, around himself. Jemma Prescott was a crack in the plaster—and the last time he'd let someone past his defences; it had nearly destroyed him.

His hands curled into fists.

This wasn't about her looks. It couldn't be. He wouldn't allow it to be. He had a daughter to raise, a station to run, and no time for distractions wrapped in green eyes and sun-kissed skin.

She's here to do a job, he reminded himself grimly. That's all.

But even as he reached the verandah steps and pushed open the screen door, the image of her standing beside her dust-covered car lingered.

Backlit by the late afternoon sun.

Eyes wide.

Lips parted in quiet awe.

Beautiful.

Damn it.

Ben shoved the thought away, locking it down tight, the same way he had every dangerous thing that had ever threatened his peace.

She'd learn the routine. Do her work. Keep to herself.

And he'd keep his distance.

He had to.

Because if he didn't...

Well.

That road only led to wreckage.

And he'd already walked it once.

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