

SHE'S FALLEN FOR A MAN SHE CAN NEVER HAVE

The STATION

OASIS OF THE VOLUME ONE OUTBACK

AUSTRALIAN BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEL A ROWE

The

STATION

OASIS OF THE OUTBACK DUOLOGY

Volume One

MEL A ROWE

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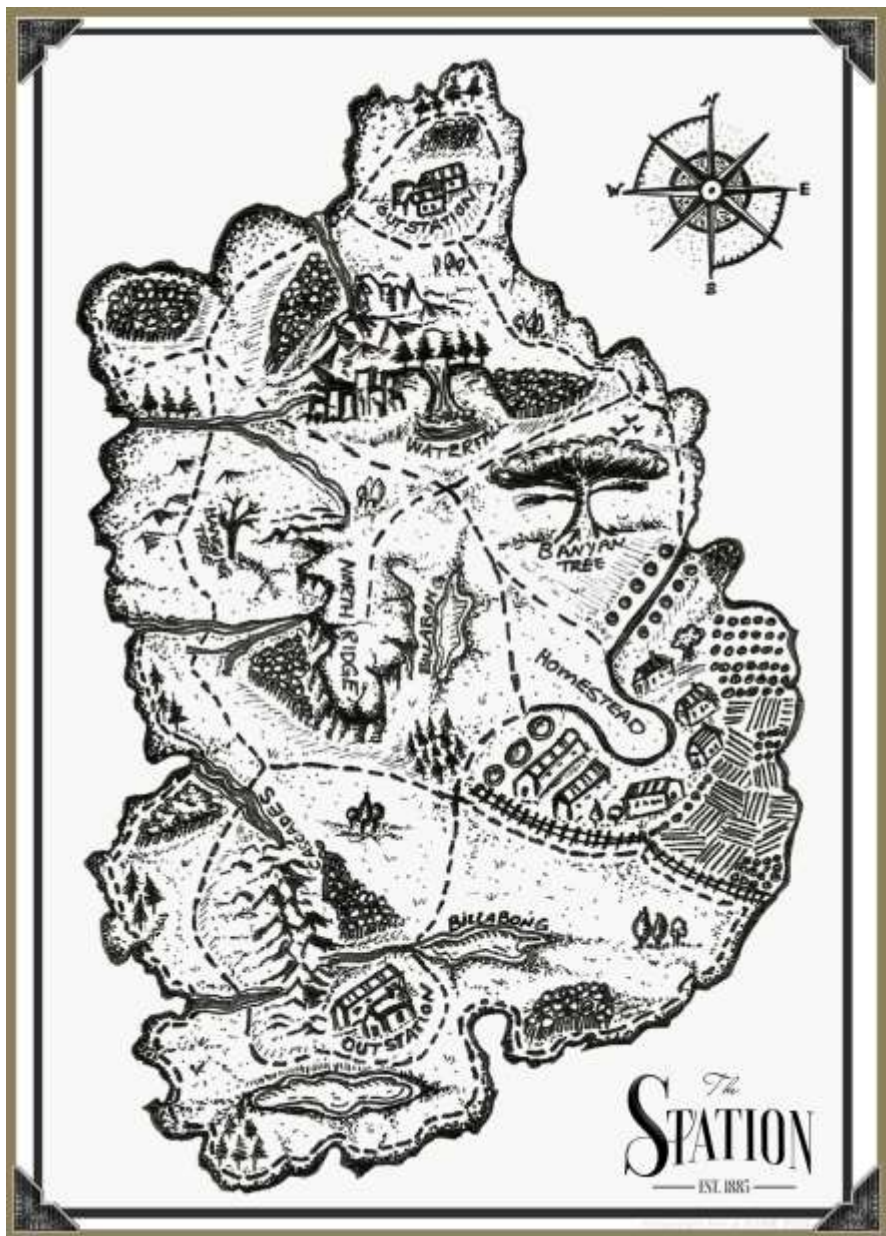
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***Caveat: As a courtesy, since there may be some sparse language choices in this story that may represent an obstacle for the reader, I am offering this warning. Please note this language and cultural references are purely for fictional purposes only and not designed to offend any individual persons, culture, or religions implied.*

The following is written in Australian English



One

'I'm not lost. Please, tell me I'm not lost.' But with no GPS and no signal bars showing on her mobile phone, Sienna had a new and scary appreciation for the phrase *out of range*.

She checked her hatchback's side mirror, which showcased the large plume of red dust trailing her. The landscape of condensed scrublands opened to a wide grassy plain, and it was just Sienna, in her fondly named toy-car, alone on a long dirt track in the middle of nowhere. She was nothing more than an insignificant speck amidst a mammoth wilderness.

Her fingers tried to tap on the steering wheel in time with the music coming from the many playlists loaded onto her phone, but her rhythm was as rapid as her pulse.

Was she lost?

Well, more lost than normal?

Who could she call?

How?

Sienna stopped the car, swallowing down her fear as her stomach squeezed into a rock. She snatched up the hand-drawn map, re-checking her directions against the more detailed road map that covered her passenger seat. Amidst the half-eaten packet of lollies and strewn food wrappers lay her empty travel mug. Right now, even the century-old, regurgitated roadhouse coffee would be liquid gold—but that was over three hundred kilometres behind her.

But it was all too quiet.

Barely a breeze whispered across yellowed grassland that was divided by the sunburnt-red dusty track where her tiny red car waited beneath an endless sapphire sky.

Was she doing the right thing?

Was it too late to turn around?

Sienna scrolled through her phone, until she found the email, opened the attachment, and hit play. Right now, she needed the voice of reason to stop the force of fear preaching in her head.

'Hi, honey.'

Sienna sighed with a slow smile at the soothing sounds of Rhonda's nasally twang carrying over the speakers. Her friend always managed to make her feel better.

'Thanks for doing this for me, I sooo needed a holiday,' crooned Rhonda. 'Anyway, honey, I thought I'd tell you about the place and the people you'll be workin' for. You'll be the relief cook. Workin' six or seven days a week. You may have to visit some of the outstations with the lads, Danbunnan Station's got 'em scattered across its two and a half million hectares—they reckon it's bigger than Greenland ...'

Sienna wound down her window. The sea of golden grasses rippled like waves under the breeze, but there was nothing green out there. It made her shoulders tighten with fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of—

'... Just stick to the mud map I sent ya and you'll be right, luv,' soothed Rhonda's taped influence.

'I knew there was a reason I kept this.' Sienna stretched her neck to loosen the tension, before continuing along the track. The fear passing as Sienna drove further through the pasture. Or was it called a paddock?

'Danbunnan Station breeds Brahman cattle and stock horses, and they produce feed hay. I don't know the technicalities, 'cos I'm a

cook, not a pastoralist. The place is now managed by Jake Cullen. We call him Boss.'

'Yes, sir. Boss, sir.' Sienna saluted.

'His dad, the ex-cattle king, Robert—Bob—Cullen, is still here. Retired, I think. Jess is the boss's sister. She's divorced and got her young twins, Kate and Aaron, runnin' amok up at the homestead. They're not sure about hiring another governess for the kids. Not when the last one slept with half the ringers from a past muster; it caused all sorts of problems. And that's one of the rules, honey, *no sleeping with the staff*. Hey, if it happens, be discreet. Not that any of the men round 'ere would reach your standards, considering I had to find my bloke over the internet. Can you believe it? He's paying for me to go on a cruise with him. *Me*—and at my age.'

Sienna grinned at Rhonda's giggly excitement.

'Now, where was I? Besides the Cullen crew, there's stockmen, station hands, a jackaroo and a jillaroo, a station mechanic, and their wives who are the cleaners. With the muster happenin' we've got an extra twenty ringers, a coupla road-train drivers and some cheeky chopper pilots makin' up the mob. It's been a long time since we've had big numbers in men and cattle ... Hey, if you spy a lot of dust stormin' at you, get right off the track, honey. It'd be one of those road trains, loaded with cattle. It takes a ton of time for 'em to stop, especially on dirt, so I wouldn't want 'em squashing that pimple you call a toy-car.'

'Point taken.' Sienna peered at the massive sky above an endless snake-like track, void of any rising dust, except for the stalking dust cloud created by her car.

'Anyway, honey, let's pretend I'm one of 'em fancy HR girls in them huge companies, so consider this your orientation on the basics and the rules.'

Sienna had never had a job induction like it, with another unique set of work-related terminologies to learn. As for rules, well ...

'Even though I said no sleeping with staff, there's no harm in havin' a fling. Which might be just what you need, considerin' what you've been through. Still can't believe that bastard did that to you.'

Sienna sat back, gripping the wheel harder to glance out the window as if avoiding her friend's recorded speech. After all, she'd left everything behind and somehow ended up here. Wherever the hell *here* was.

All she knew was it was the outback, and that, somehow, she'd been sweet-talked into taking this job because there was a debt to be paid.

'Sorry, um ... oh yeah, the rules—drinking grog is minimal and within moderation. No drugs, unless prescribed, and no stealing. It's instant dismissal if ya get busted. We had this lad once, who'd tried to grow a stash of dope out 'ere and got cranky when the cattle ate it. They had to quarantine all these happy cows who had this bad case of the munchies.'

Sienna pictured Rhonda with her head back, laughing so loud, she had to smile herself.

'Just 'cos it's remote doesn't make us savages. And we've got the same set of rules you'd get in any town. They're a good mob out 'ere or I'd have left years ago and never allowed your visit.'

'Thanks, I appreciate it.' Her own voice sounded odd, talking to a recording.

'And the other main rule is you've gotta shut the gates. You find a gate open, or a broken fence, you've gotta close it and tell one of the stockmen in case some of the cattle are loose. Also, be careful, some of them fences are live with electricity.'

Sienna couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a fence, let alone a gate. Was she on the right path?

'And keep an' eye out for the cattle and horses crossin' the tracks, and the dingoes, feral pigs, camels, wallabies, and donkeys. Um, it might be best if you avoid the roads at dusk 'n' dawn 'cos that's our

peak hour.'

'Ah huh.' She grinned at rush-hour traffic being described in a whole new way when she hadn't seen another car for hours.

'Oh, and be water-wise, honey. We've got man-eating crocodiles in the rivers and waterholes. And the usual snakes, scorpions, spiders, and all the other wonderful wild stuff you share livin' space with in the Northern Territory.'

'Great.' Was she on a wildlife safari? If so, where was her tour guide?

'May as well talk water,' said Rhonda.

Fascinating, not. Yet, with all of this dry landscape surrounding her, what would happen if her vehicle broke down? With mere litres of water on hand, rolling around on the passenger floor, where was the nearest watering hole that wasn't infested with man-eating crocodiles?

'You'll find none of that fancy bottled water here, honey.'

'You don't say.' Not helping herself she licked her lips, suddenly thirsty.

'We're not on any of the water restrictions them farmers down south have gotta deal with. We've got plenty from the rivers, bores, billabongs, and natural springs and other waterholes. You'll find our water is ten times better than any fancy bottled stuff. We had a good wet season this year. Near record-breaking rains where the road to town got cut off twice from the floods, but that's normal.'

Sienna blinked at the desert of dust. What happened when the roads were flooded?

At least they wouldn't be thirsty.

'Anyway, honey, I can't thank you enough for doing this for me. I know you'll change the menu; these boys could do with an eatin' makeover.'

'Me too.' Sienna couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed a home-cooked meal.

‘Money’s not that moon-jumpin’ great. But out ‘ere there’s nowhere to spend it and I know you’re doin’ this for me more than the money ...’

It was the *only* reason Sienna was here. For Rhonda. As there was a life debt to be repaid.

‘Anyway, honey, there’s lots more to tell you, and I know I said drinking is minimal, but I’ve gotta coupla bottles of cheap bubbly waitin’ in the fridge. Now, don’t veer off the track and stick to the mud map I sent you. Shut every gate you open. And remember, we’re not part of the rat-race and the track is not a rally race, so drive safe, and I’ll see you soon.’

Silence descended, broken only by the low rumble of her small car as it led a trail of billowing dust. Her smile grew as she considered Rhonda’s last comment, because rally racing was on Sienna’s *to-live list*, and there was no better time than the present to practise. She pressed on the accelerator, the dials on the dash swung, and her modified toy-car growled with power as the scenery flew by.

‘What am I doing out here?’ Her question forced her to sit up and review her new environment—and speed.

Recently her life had been zooming along just as quick. She’d hung up her chef’s apron a while ago, determined to be on the other side of functions as a guest—not as the staff—indulging in an endless stream of parties and organised functions, with a constant gruelling work schedule between boardroom meetings and negotiations. She’d loved chasing down that addictive adrenaline rush, moving from one project to the next, deadline after deadline, until it all crumbled into utter catastrophe.

‘No more tears. I’m on an adventure.’ She flicked the music back on, turning it up loud enough to block out all thoughts, and focused on the road ahead.

She drove past massive white-ant mounds that mimicked miniature red-mud cathedrals, scattered amongst vast arid flood

plains of wild rice and grasses.

She wound through tree-covered ranges, shadowed by monumental limestone peaks. Crossing over dry rocky creek beds, she passed paddocks of burnt tree trunks, peeling paperbark thickets, to weave through pink-flowered turkey bush that added another layer to the diverse native scrublands.

'Holy roasted coffee beans!'

The tyres skidded to a stop as she slammed on the brakes, and the car filled with dust. She coughed, waving her hand at the choking dust. 'Future note to self: keep windows up.'

Outside the car the dust storm settled like sheets of red rain to reveal a double gate. A rusty tin sign hung precariously overhead; its faded letters read: *Danbunnan Station*.

Thank the gods of coffee! She wasn't lost after all.

Sienna craned her neck up at the tin sign, its creaking swings echoing an eerie ghost-town tune. Would it hold or hit the next unsuspecting vehicle that dared to cross the steel cattle grid, embedded into the soil like a rectangular drain.

'Gate time.' She hoped there weren't too many to open because the chest-height gate looked heavy. She gingerly stepped over the cattle grid's hoof-breaking steel girders. Flicked back the rusty latch, and pushed it open.

The gate screamed, echoing its protest as if unopened in centuries. It seemed to ring forever in the air.

Back in her car, she was forced to clench her teeth as her car's tyres rolled over the cattle grid. It was as if each, singular, horizontal, steel, rail, bump, was jarring to her spine.

She parked beneath the shady avenue of trees, that seemed a separate species compared to the native melaleucas and lilly pillies that blended into the landscape.

The dirt driveway disappeared over the hill where a large banyan tree stood. Its twisted trunk and aerial tendrils were hidden

within its lush green canopy that proudly dominated the hill surrounded by dry grassland.

‘Remember the rules.’ Her sandals kicked up small dust clouds with every step, as she went back to the gate and gave it a hard shove, preparing for its squeal. Instead, it slammed shut with a shudder propelling up the poles to the overhead sign rattling on its hinges. It hung on—barely. *Was that a good sign?*

Her first sign of civilisation was a row of trees, a fence, a rusty sign, and a gate that screamed.

Pity, it was too late to back out now.

Two

Sienna pulled up to a large, dusty, horseshoe-shaped compound. On the right, starting at the far end stood some fenced holding yards that led to a row of corrugated sheds where a group of men, wearing assorted cowboy hats, were overshadowed by heavy machinery.

Two women, with half-folded linen in hands, watched her from the clothes line, where sheets gently waved in the breeze. It stood near the group of sheds that rested at the bottom concave of the horseshoe.

On the other side, situated on a small hill, stood a grand stone house with a huge roof and deep wrap-around verandahs. By the front door, a petite woman stood in the shadows while two young children broke away to jump the stone steps and run towards Sienna.

'Wow, no sneaking in here.'

'*Sienna.*' Rhonda's silver curls bounced as she rushed down the wooden steps from the decking of a squat wooden building near the sheds. She was followed by a young guy, as more men with hats stood in the double doorway. 'You're here,' squealed Rhonda with her wide smile, as big as her generous heart, enveloping Sienna in a warm hug.

'You look wonderful as always.'

'I wanna be at my best for my date.' Rhonda patted her silver curls. 'And you look ... better?'

'The drive worked for me.' Sienna grinned at her car covered in

dust. 'Just look at my poor toy-car.'

'It's a cute car,' said the young guy, wearing a tea towel draped over one shoulder and with an apron tied around his waist. Beside him, the two children peeked through the toy-car's tinted windows.

'Is something wrong with my toy-car?' Sienna asked.

'Everyone has utes or large four-wheel drives,' said the young guy. 'Not like this modern compact piece of machinery that's rather stylish.'

'Did I forget the memo about dress and car code preferences, Rhonda?' Everyone's style seemed to be denim jeans, long-sleeved shirts, hats and boots, while Sienna wore a cotton dress and sandals.

'You'll be fine,' said Rhonda. 'Cuppa? I've got the billy on in the kitchen.' Rhonda pointed to the wooden building with wide wooden steps where a black-and-grey cattle dog stood guarding the double screen doors.

'What about my car?' It stood in the middle of nowhere, but it was her lifeline, like a handbag you'd never leave behind.

'We'll drive over to our room shortly. Now, lemme introduce you to Elliott. He'll be your right-hand man.'

The young man who had been checking out her car, flicked the hair out of his chocolate-coloured eyes. 'Hey. Hi. Um, yeah ...'

Sienna guessed he'd be about nineteen, shaking hands like a limp fish. 'My right hand, huh?'

'Kind of. I hang around the homestead helping the ladies with the gardens and stuff.'

'Right.' Did that include the weedy wasteland of a vegetable patch that sat next to what Sienna assumed was the kitchen? The only other greenery was the jungle by the main farmhouse on the hill. While everything else seemed covered in peeling paint with an ingrained layer of red dust.

'If you've got time,' Rhonda explained to Sienna, 'or have the need, there's always plenty of gardening and cleaning, honey. We're

not expectin' it from you, being the relief cook 'n all. But there's always something to do. Now, that's the main farmhouse.' Rhonda pointed to the grand house with its walls made of rich red and cream river rocks.

'You kids, your mum's callin' ya.' Rhonda pointed towards a female shouting out from the house stairs as she said to Sienna, 'That's the twins, Kate and Aaron, and their mum, Jess, who takes care of the Cullen crew. We do the evening meal for the family and deliver 'em through the kitchen door only. We never go through the front door, honey.'

Sienna arched her eyebrow. 'Back door, huh?'

'It's just the way it is.'

'So, I cook for everyone?'

'Yep, in the muster room's kitchen. Don't worry, they're trained to eat anything, honey.'

'Where do I stay?' She doubted it'd be the grand house on the hill, where the curtain by the front door moved. Was that the wind? Or was someone else spying on her?

'You'll be staying in my room, the cook's quarters.' Rhonda pointed to the gap on the other side of the compound. 'It's the cabin at the end.'

The cook's quarters stood separated from everything, on the edge of the wilderness. It had a small porch with a lean-to carport, overshadowed by a large water tank. The only thing that shone on the building were the roof's solar panels. It seemed so far from everything else within this dry horseshoe area called the homestead. Or was that the compound? And what was a muster room?

'You'll appreciate the space too, honey, because we don't hear the rest of the crew 'cos of our hours. It's early starts. I hope you're ready for it.'

'I'm sure, once I'm over the shock, I'll survive.' She needed to do something more than wander through her days in a numbed state,

gripping on to her steering wheel.

'That's the spirit. Anyway, honey, the building next door is the laundry shed, that's where Pina and Lyn are gawking at us.' Rhonda waved at the women with folded laundry, who eagerly waved back with wide smiles. 'They're the wives and cleaners who help out if you wanna day off.'

'Hey?' Elliott cleared his throat.

Rhonda patted the boy's slim shoulder. 'Elliott's your unofficial apprentice.'

'I'm just not ...' Elliott winced, shoving hands into his pockets.

'You'll get there, just don't count your eggs before you find 'em, honey.'

'Wherever the chooks are laying.'

'I thought you were fixing that?'

'On top of everything else I've been doing, with my latest role-play as your dashing luggage handler.'

Rhonda grinned, pointing to the red car crammed full of belongings. 'You can help Sienna with hers later.'

'I'll be fine, thanks, Elliott.' Sienna said.

His response was a relieved grin.

'Anyhow, honey, next to the laundry shed, that group of demountables, is the stockmen's quarters where the rest of the crew camps. Behind that you have the cottages.'

'How many cottages?'

'Three. For the married couples, and Tom's got one. He's been here forever; he came with his dad. Tom's the second in charge. That's him at the muster room, which is the dining room, kitchen, lounge room, mailroom, and hangout for the men.' Rhonda pointed to the man with a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, wearing a sun-hardened, no-nonsense glare, standing beside the scary guard dog.

'The 2IC ... Does he have a proper business title?' Sienna asked.

'Head stockman. Tom's tough, but a total sweetheart

underneath, although he rarely shows it.'

'Like never,' said Elliott.

'Now you be nice about your uncle.' Rhonda flicked her hand at Elliott, making him duck. 'Anyhow, honey, that's our dear sweet Josh and his little friend, Annie, sneaking up behind Tom. They're the jackaroo and jillaroo. They're good enough kids.'

Kids? They looked more like young adults to Sienna.

'So, do you want to unpack, catch up, have a cuppa?'

How the hell would she survive out here? With sun-hardened men and scary-looking guard dogs, she felt every bit the outsider.

One by one the stockmen headed for the muster room, carrying dusted cowboy hats like women carried their handbags. And they all gawked at the new girl like she was some shiny new toy standing amongst the rugged outback dust.

'Do you have to cook tonight?' Did she have to go inside the muster room, that was a slightly elevated building. Its long wooden steps led to the wooden deck that ran along the front and disappeared on the left. There was a path that ran past the weedy vegetable garden and through to the cook's quarters.

'Dinner's done. Elliott will do supper and clean up. Won't you, lad?'

'I'd better get a wriggle on with that incoming crowd.' Elliott rushed for the steps.

Rhonda arched her eyebrow at the line of men. 'I reckon we'll get you settled in, honey, and talk away from those pryin' ears.'

'Sounds like a good idea to me.' Sienna could feel all eyes on her.

'Don't worry, the men have been told to not go past the kitchen bench and get under our feet in the muster room.' Rhonda pointed to the building where Elliott had disappeared. 'Oh, on the side is another door, to the storeroom, and Sally's area.'

'Who?'

'Ol' Sal, the dog.'

‘Great ...’ The blue dog that stood between them and the muster room. ‘Hold on—I’m feeding dogs, too?’ Great, was sheep shearing part of her duties too? *Wait, do they keep sheep on this cattle station?*

‘You only have to feed ol’ Sally, who’s no bother, even if she is a cranky cow. Don’t give her any hugs and pats unless you like wearing teeth marks. She sleeps under the old bench seat by the kitchen door. She doesn’t go anywhere else.’

With a grumble and a groan, the blue cattle dog made her way down the steps with her toenails clicking against the wooden planks. She then stopped and frowned at Sienna.

‘I know nothing about dogs. Is she old?’ The grey stood out amongst the dog’s blue-black coat, but the pair of untrusting eyes seemed sharp.

‘Sally’s ancient in dog years. She’s an ex-working dog who just hangs around. By rights she should’ve gone with her owner ...’ Rhonda’s smile fell with sorrow softening the crinkles around her eyes.

‘Why?’ Feeling like a six-year-old with her questions.

‘It’s just the way it is out ‘ere.’ Rhonda inhaled deeply, slipping on a smile, to give Sienna another warm hug. ‘But you’re here now, and that’s what matters.’

But did she really want to be here?

Three

Jake steered his ute into the compound with his yakking passengers, Tyson and Chris, squeezed along the front seat. Jake had to drop them off, then race the daylight to finish his other jobs before he could call it a day. He was already running late.

Tyson, seated in the middle, pointed to a tiny red car parked in the compound. 'Check that out, I've never seen a car that small on this station.'

'It looks European,' Chris said by the passenger door.

Jake was surprised something that small had made it through the bulldust to get here.

'Whoa—check out the blonde,' said Tyson, removing his sunglasses.

Chris leaned closer to the dash. 'That can't be Rhonda's mate?'

Jake shrugged. He'd left the kitchen stuff to Rhonda. It was the worst time for his station cook to go on a holiday, but Rhonda had sworn to him that her friend was an excellent short-term replacement.

As long as her cooking kept the men happy that's all that mattered to Jake.

But as he drew close to the fancy car, it was the slender woman who made him slow down even more. She had a fair complexion, with a smile that made him want to just stop and stare at her. *Damn.*

'I was expecting some ol' sheila and was gonna see who wanted

to play with a cougar. But look out, lads, we've got ourselves something sweet.' Chris grinned wide, as if he'd won the lottery.

'I'm gonna enjoy tucker times,' said Tyson, nodding at Chris.

'You can drop us off right next to 'em, Boss. I wanna introduce myself to our cute new cook,' said Chris, brushing the dust off his shirt.

'No worries.' If only Jake had time to stop and meet her, too, but he was running late as it was. He'd do it later.

But then again, why bother when staff came and went all the time. Would this newcomer last? Because not everyone was cut out for station life.

But the closer he approached the small car, the deeper his frown got. The woman's silky fair hair trailed down her back, all glossy from the setting sun. She wore a dress that skimmed her curves, highlighting a set of luscious legs.

She was stunning.

Damn. He did not need something that pretty on this station! Not when they were about to hit their peak of the mustering season.

Was it too late to talk Rhonda into staying?

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