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MIRANDA LEE

Fantasies & the Future



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HEARTS
OF
FIRE

4

FANTASIES AND THE FUTURE

Miranda Lee

Book 4 - Hearts of Fire

"You've no idea, Ava, just how many bored and neglected women there are around Sydney, and a lot of them look upon men like me as easy meat."

The guy who came to mow the lawns turned out to be as stunning as any of Ava's fantasies, though she soon realized Vince Morelli thought she was just another rich, lonely lady looking for excitement. But, all the same, Vince's arrival meant an end to Ava's narrow, virginal existence.

Life was changing for Gemma, too. But maybe for the worse--those evil rumors that Damian Campbell whispered to her about Nathan couldn't be true...could they?

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THIS BOOK

GEMMA SMITH: On her father's death, Gemma discovered a magnificent black opal worth a small fortune, and an old photograph which casts doubt on her real identity. In search of the truth and a new life, she goes to Sydney where she is seduced by and then married to Nathan Whitmore.

NATHAN WHITMORE: Adopted son of Byron Whitmore, Nathan is a talented playwright. After a troubled childhood and a divorce, Nathan is ruthless and utterly controlled. Will he ever be the loving, caring husband of whom Gemma has dreamed?

AVA WHITMORE: Byron's much younger sister. Sweet-natured and a little naive, Ava has always felt she was hopeless at everything. Now, at nearly thirty, she struggles with her weight and has had little success with men; she also lacks confidence about her hobby —painting. Ava longs to love and be loved. . .

VINCE MORELLI: Of Italian heritage, Vince is the owner of a gardening and construction business. He is keen to marry and have a family, but he is a little cynical since, in his line of work, his charm and good looks attract the attentions of rich, lonely women intent on seducing him. . .

BYRON WHITMORE: Patriarch and head of the Whitmore family, he is a strong, dynamic figure whose unhappy, loveless marriage came tragically to an end.

DAMIAN CAMPBELL: Younger brother of Celeste, head of the Campbell Jewels empire. Damian is sales and marketing manager, and interested only in self-gratification and sexual pleasure. . . He doesn't care whom he hurts in their pursuit. . .

LENORE LANGTRY: Talented stage actress, ex-wife of Nathan Whitmore and mother of Kirsty, Lenore has finally found love with top solicitor Zachary Marsden.

JADE WHITMORE-GAINSFORD: Only daughter of Byron and Irene (nee Campbell), she is married to Kyle Gainsford, Whitmore's marketing head. They are expecting a baby.

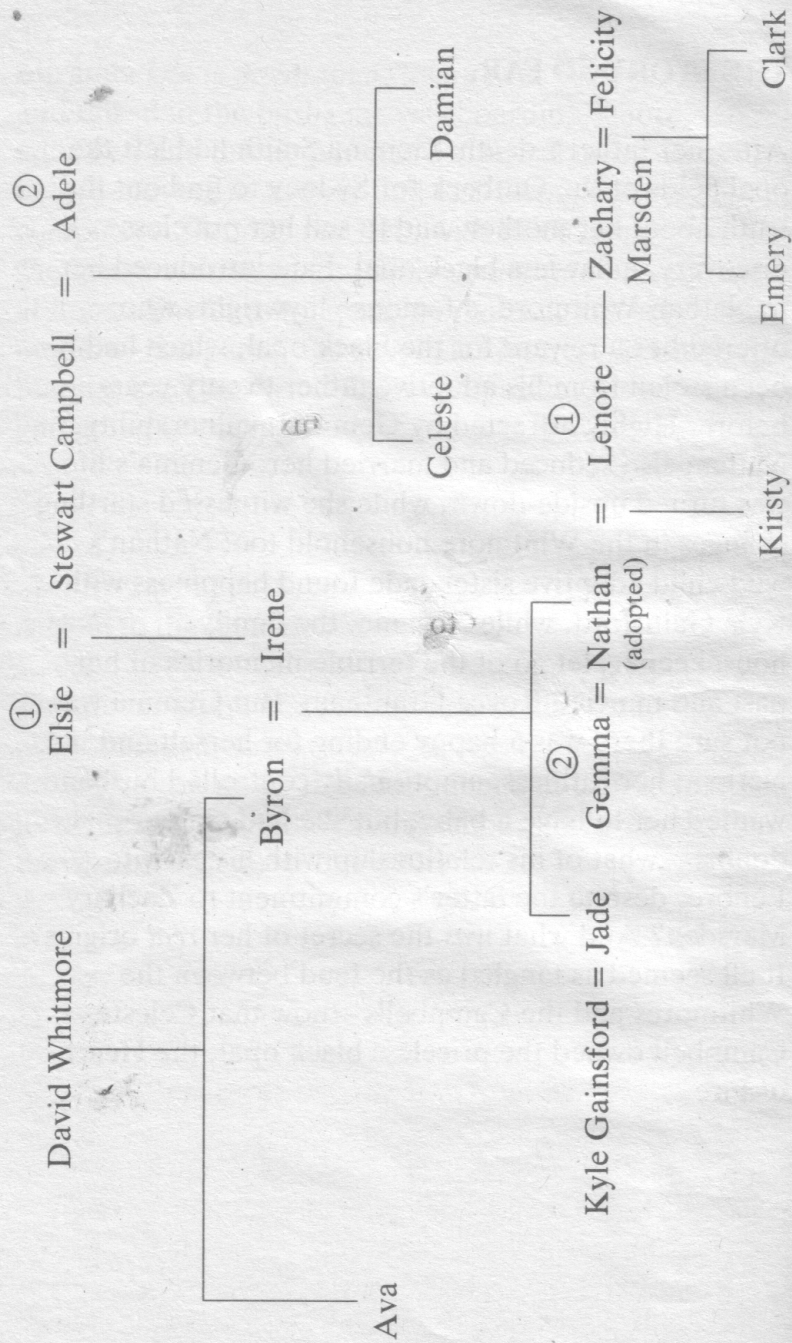
Miranda Lee is Australian, living near Sydney. Born and raised in the bush, she was boarding-school educated and briefly pursued a classical music career before moving to Sydney and embracing the world of computers. Happily married, with three daughters, she began writing when family commitments kept her at home. She likes to create stories that are believable, modern, fast-paced and sexy. Her interests include reading meaty sagas, doing word puzzles, gambling and going to the movies.

A Note to the Reader:

This novel is one of a series of six novels set in the glamorous, cut-throat world of Australian opal dealing. Each novel is independent and can be read on its own. It is the author's suggestion, however, that they be read in the order written.

THE STORY SO FAR. . .

After her father's death, Gemma Smith had left the opal fields of the Outback for Sydney to find out the truth about her mother, and to sell her priceless discovery, a flawless black opal. Fate introduced her to Nathan Whitmore, a famous playwright, who offered her a reward for the black opal, which had been stolen from his adoptive father twenty years before. Highly attracted by Gemma's vulnerability, Nathan also seduced and married her. Gemma's life was turned upside-down, while she witnessed startling changes in the Whitmore household too: Nathan's wild-child adoptive sister Jade found happiness with Kyle Gainsford, while Melanie, the family housekeeper, let go of the terrible memories of her past and married Royce Grantham. But Gemma was not sure there was a happy ending for herself and Nathan; her ruthless, emotionally controlled husband wanted her to have a baby, but she had many doubts — what of his relationship with his ex-wife Lenore, despite the latter's commitment to Zachary Marsden? And what *was* the secret of her *real* origins? It all seemed as tangled as the feud between the Whitmores and the Campbells — now that Celeste Campbell owned the priceless black opal, the Heart of Fire. . .



CHAPTER ONE

AVA was sitting at her easel, paintbrush in hand but her mind a million miles away, when her brother stormed into her studio-cum-sitting-room.

'Ava! I can't find my favourite tux. It's certainly not hanging with my other suits. I've looked damned well everywhere. Would you have any idea where it could be?'

Ava's startled face was quickly filled with a flustered guilt. 'I —er —I took it the dry cleaners a couple of weeks back. Remember, you got a wine stain on it from Jade's wedding?'

'And?' Byron growled ominously.

'I . . . urn. . . forgot to pick it up.'

Byron didn't say a word. He simply glared at her for a second, shook his head in total exasperation, then spun on his heels and stormed out again.

Ava jumped up, her palette sliding from her lap and • crashing to the parquet floor. With a groan of dismay, she dithered, then decided to ignore the palette and raced after her brother. 'I . . . I'm sorry, Byron,' she called after him as he marched along the upstairs hallway. 'It won't happen again. I promise.'

'That's what you said the last time,' he threw back over his shoulder before abruptly grinding to a halt and whirling around to face her. This past six weeks has been nothing but one disaster after another. God knows why I let you talk me into giving you a chance at running this household. I suppose I was swayed by your argument that since there was only the two of us pathetic old Whitmores left living in this great empty barn of a house you could possibly manage. But that was just wishful thinking!'

'You might be pathetic and old,' Ava countered, finding her temper at long last. "But I'm not! I'm only thirty and I think I've done rather well considering I've had no experience with housework. I certainly don't consider a small memory-slip such as forgetting to pick up some dry cleaning a *disaster*! Frankly, Byron, I was hoping you'd be encouraging,

rather than bullying. Melanie assured me you'd changed since the accident, but I can see you're still the same unsympathetic, insensitive chauvinistic tyrant you've always been!"

Her outburst concluded, Ava was on the verge of subsiding into her usual wimpish mush when Byron laughed. His reaction took her by surprise and she simply stared at him.

Laughing, her brother looked a long way from being old and pathetic as well. Though rising fifty, he was a fine figure of a man, his extremely tall, broad-shouldered frame kept in shape with hard sessions in his own private gym downstairs. Admittedly, his wavy black hair was sprinkled liberally with grey, but it was still thick and lustrous. His strongly chiselled face was as handsome as ever, despite a few lines, and his blue eyes, now glittering with a dry amusement, were still holding women in thrall.

Recently, Byron had started dating a divorcee named Catherine who was in her mid-thirties and quite stunning-looking. Ava, however, could not stand the woman, who was a first-class snob and very patronising in her manner. She obviously fancied herself the next Mrs Byron Whitmore —no doubt she was already auditioning for the part since Byron had stayed overnight at her unit a couple of times already —but Ava knew that if such a marriage ever took place she would move out of Bellevue.

Where she would go, she had no idea. She had no real money of her own until she married, Byron having control of her sizeable inheritance till that unlikely event occurred. Meanwhile, all she had was a very modest allowance, though Byron's daughter, Jade, *had* given her all her mother's jewellery to do with as she liked. But it still sat, untouched, in the safe in the library. Ava didn't want anything to do with anything that had belonged to Irene.

'I knew you had some spirit somewhere, Ava,' Byron surprised her by complimenting. 'You are my sister, after all. So Melanie thinks I've changed, does she? That's the pot calling the kettle black, don't you think? I'm still getting over our prim and proper ex-housekeeper being a closet vamp and ensnaring one of the most famous sportsmen in the world! Next thing I'll find out *you've* been having an affair with the chauffeur on the sly!'

'We don't *have* a chauffeur!' Ava retorted. 'Though maybe it would be a good idea if we did. Then you wouldn't have to stay over at ladies' places simply because you've had a few drinks, and I'd have someone to run me around doing all the chores I have to do these days!'

Ava's heart beat faster at such a thought. It had been one of her recurring romantic fantasies over the years, being a beautiful heiress who hired a gorgeous young Italian to be her chauffeur, then fell in love with him. Italians figured largely in all of Ava's fantasies. She found their darkly brooding looks and macho attitude to women very exciting.

Of course nothing too sexy or sordid ever happened in her fantasies. Being a virgin and terribly shy with the opposite sex, Ava had never got beyond picturing herself hugging or kissing a man. Was this perhaps because she could never imagine herself taking her clothes off in front of one? Or his finding pleasure in her short, top-heavy, roly-poly figure?

'Over my dead body!' Byron pronounced quite testily, his amusement fading as quickly as it had come. 'A lot of chauffeurs are sleazy gigolo types on the make. I wouldn't let you within a hundred miles of the sort of good-looking but unscrupulous young creep who usually applies for such a position!'

'As if *any* good-looking young man would look at me twice,' Ava muttered. 'I'm no Celeste Campbell.'

Ava could have bitten her tongue out for having mentioned that dreaded name. Byron's eyes darkened, a muscle twitching along his jawline as he battled to control his temper. There'd been a short time, after the attempted robbery at the ball a couple of months ago, when he had spoken of his scandalous sister-in-law with a certain reluctant admiration. Her defence of herself that night, using her undoubted skills as a martial arts expert, had clearly impressed him. Or maybe, since she'd just bought back the Heart of Fire — the opal that was rumoured to have somehow caused the original feud between the Whitmores and the Campbells — he'd decided to try to let bygones be bygones.

But such was not to be. Celeste had come to the hospital to visit Melanie, who'd accidentally been shot during the drama, with her new chauffeur in

tow. It had quickly become clear to all Melanie's other visitors—which included both Byron and Ava—that the handsome young man was the latest toy-boy lover of the glamorous head of Campbell Jewels. Any hope of reconciliation had been dashed with Byron raving all the way home that the woman was a disgrace to her sex.

'A woman like Celeste can look after herself,' he bit out now. 'Whereas an innocent like you, my dear, would be easy meat to the type of conscienceless young stud *she* eats for breakfast. There will be no chauffeur here at Bellevue. Please do not bring the subject up again!'

I wouldn't dream of it.'

Byron's expression softened at her suddenly depressed tone. 'Poor Ava. . . I'm a beast to you sometimes. I don't mean to be, love. I really don't. You do know I always have your best interests at heart, don't you?' He slipped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to his side. 'Am I forgiven for snapping at • you?'

Ava felt tears pricking at her eyes. 'Yes,' she mumbled.

Then I must go. I'm supposed to be at Catherine's by eight. By the way, don't worry about breakfast for me tomorrow. I'll — er — drive straight to work from there in the morning. You'll be all right on your own, won't you?'

'Of course,' she said stiffly. 'I'm a grown woman, Byron. Why wouldn't I be all right?' His small smile suggested that, while she was a grown woman in years, she wasn't at all in experience.

'In that case I'll be off now. Everything's locked up downstairs. I double checked. See you-tomorrow evening.'

Ava just managed to smother another exasperated retort. Double checked the doors. Truly! 'Goodnight, Byron,' she said with crisp politeness. 'I hope you have a good time.'

'I will.'

Ava's mouth set into a mutinous pout as she watched Byron stride off down the hall. I'll just bet you will, she thought crossly. Everyone in this family's having a good time lately but me. You're having an affair with the coolly beautiful Catherine. Melanie's settled in an English mansion with her dashing racing driver husband. Jade's married her billionaire boyfriend and Nathan —God bless his black heart! —seems to have managed so far to hide his true self from his gloriously innocent child-bride.

Ava's irritation sustained her till Byron disappeared down the stairs and she was faced with the unpalatable thought of actually staying home alone all night in this big barn of a house. The prospect did make her a little nervous, but to have admitted as much would have only confirmed her brother's opinion that she was still a child in a woman's body.

The front door banging confirmed that she was indeed alone, a shiver of nerves running through her. This only irritated her further. Good lord, what did she think could possibly happen? If some mad rapist broke in, he would take one look at her and run for his life!

With a scoffing laugh, Ava whirled and strode back into her empty studio, where she swooped up the palette from the floor and banged it down on the side-table beside the easel. Crossing her arms, she studied the watercolour she'd been working on, finding no satisfaction in the half-finished landscape. Something wasn't right. The balance of shape, or the colours she'd chosen. Or perhaps it was the subject-matter. She'd tried to paint that particular scene many times.

Her dissatisfaction with it grew and soon she was reefing it off the easel and almost throwing it against the far wall with all the other unfinished paintings. Naturally they were turned away so that she didn't have to look at them.

Ava flopped down on her old sofa, punching the cushions with frustration. Dammit! Why can't I ever be a success at anything? I really thought I could handle the running of the house. I really thought I could. . .

Ava's mental haranguing was terminated abruptly by the sound of a door banging somewhere. Her blue eyes flung wide, her heart jumping into her

mouth. Had Byron come back for something? Was there a window open, perhaps? Or was she about to be murdered in her bedroom?

'Auntie Ava!' a female voice sang out. 'Where are you? It's only me. Jade!'

The blood hardly had time to flow back into Ava's face before her exuberant niece popped her highly arresting head into the studio. 'Ah, there you are!' she grinned, dark blue eyes sparkling beneath a shock of spiked white-blond hair, huge golden hoops hanging from her ears.

Jade's grin faded to a puzzled expression as she pushed the door right open and stood there, frowning over at her aunt. 'You do realise your television set isn't on. Auntie, don't you?'

Ava got to her feet with a weary sigh. Jade had that effect on her sometimes, the girl's vibrant energy making her feel old, though she was grateful for the company. 'I was just resting,' she said.

'Aren't you feeling well?' Jade asked worriedly.

'I'm quite well. I'd be even better, however, if your father was a bit easier to please.'

'I know just what you mean. Auntie. I do feel sorry for you. What you need is to find yourself a husband like I did and get out of here.'

Ava had to laugh. *Her*, find a *husband*? 'I'm sure Kyle wouldn't like to think you married him just to move out of home.'

A naughty smile pulled at Jade's generous mouth. 'Oh, I don't think he thinks that.' She patted her gently rounding stomach. 'I married him for other reasons.'

Ava did her best to ignore the unexpected stab of pain and envy in her heart.

'Come and talk to me, Auntie,' Jade went on blithely, 'while I have a look to see if any of the clothes I left behind will fit a mum-to-be.'

They trundled along the hall into Jade's room, where Ava sat on the side of the bed while Jade began rummaging in wardrobes and drawers.

'So how's the housekeeping going?' she asked, folding a huge T-shirt and placing it on a chair. 'You managing OK?'

'Fair enough, but I doubt your father would agree. Of course I can't cook anything too complicated yet so we have a cook come in every night. I make breakfast, though, and I do most of the general housework, though a lady comes in on Mondays and Fridays to do the ironing and the heavy cleaning.'

'I'm impressed, Auntie. After all, you've never been all that domesticated, have you? Not that I'm much better. I have trouble boiling water.'

'Don't exaggerate, Jade. You're a very smart girl. Your father is very proud of you and the way you've turned around Whitmore's. He says you're a born marketing person.'

'Pops said that? Goodness, then I must be good, mustn't I?'

'There are many meanings of the word "good".'

Jade looked over at her po-faced aunt and laughed. 'You're a card, Auntie.' She pulled a very sexy black bra out of a drawer and held it up. 'Hmmm, perhaps I should take this home. I might need to start wearing a bra soon.' She tossed it on to the growing pile on the chair. 'So tell me, what's my dear father been up to that's bugging you besides picking on everything you do or don't do?'

'He's having an affair, for one thing. With that , Catherine person he's been seeing.'

Jade shrugged. 'You can't blame him for that. He's still a relatively young man. What is it about her that you disapprove of so much?'

'She's a snob.'

Jade laughed. 'So's he.'

'Yes, but not the same sort of snob. Byron has class, and. . .and. . .standards.'

'Goodness, I must meet this Catherine. And soon! I think I have the right venue too. Kyle and I want to give Pops a party for his fiftieth birthday. It's next week, you know?'

Ava was stricken with guilt. 'Lord, I forgot!' Her groan was full of self-disgust. 'I forget *everything*. First, I forgot to buy the toilet paper last week, then I didn't give Byron an important telephone message, and then I forgot to collect his favourite suit from the dry cleaners. That's not all, either. Yesterday I went out shopping, forgetting that the lawn-mowing man was due. Naturally, he wasn't able to get in the locked gates and wasted a lot of time waiting around for nothing. He rang up later and was so rude I told him not to come again. Of course I haven't told Byron this last bit yet. I haven't dared. God, no wonder he thinks I'm hopeless,' she finished wretchedly.

'Poppcock!' Jade refuted. 'You're not at all hopeless. Everyone forgets things sometimes, especially when one is new at a job. What you need, Auntie Ava, is to have a little more faith in yourself!'

A little more faith in myself? Ava sighed. When had she ever had that? Had there ever been a time when she'd viewed the future with confidence, when she'd been brimming over with exuberance and optimism, when she *hadn't* taken the line of least resistance?

Not that she could recall.

Why was that? she wondered. She'd been a pretty child, with big baby-blue eyes and bouncing soft brown curls, and not unintelligent. She'd been able to read by the age of three. People had commented on how bright she was. Good at games, too. Goodness, she'd been able to swim like a fish as soon as she could walk. Now, hardly a day went by without her tripping over something. As for swimming. . .her body hadn't seen a swimming costume in years!

She should have turned out so very different from the unprepossessing, overweight, accident-prone, timid creature that she was these days. Where had it all gone wrong?

The reason you think you're hopeless,' Jade resumed, almost as though she had read her aunt's mind, 'is because my darling mother told you so every single day of her life, as she did me. She didn't get the desired result with me because I'm a chip off the old block, so to speak, but you're a real softie, and she hurt you much more than me with her horrid put- downs. But she's gone now, Auntie. She can't hurt you any more. As for Pops. . .he's all bark and no bite. Just ignore him. Look, I have to get a plastic bag to put these in. I won't be long.'

Jade strode confidently from the room, Ava happy to have a few moments to herself. What a whirlwind that girl was. But so smart, and so sure of herself. Ava did so admire the way she'd always stood up for herself, even if some of her antics as a teenager had been hair- . raising. Ava never had the nerve or the courage to be that kind of rebel. Either that or she'd had it knocked out of her very young.

She sighed over the circumstances that had placed her at the age of seven in hands other than her own loving parents. Her father had died of cancer when she'd been five, her mother shortly afterwards of a heart attack, leaving her to be raised by her older brother, Byron, unfortunately at a time when the family company had been facing financial ruin and he'd been working twenty-hour days. Two years later, he had married Irene Campbell.

It had been rumoured right from the start that .Byron had hoped the marriage would merge Campbell Jewels and Whitmore Opals —thereby rescuing Whitmore Opals —but somehow he'd got his wires crossed. Stewart Campbell had left everything, including total control of Campbell's, to his second wife, Adele, who had apparently detested Irene, and was quick to cut her out of the estate in favour of her own children, Celeste and Damian.

Fortunately for the family's fortunes, Whitmore's had rallied —this was during the years before Celeste took control of Campbell's and resurrected the old feud —and in the end it hadn't mattered that Irene Campbell had brought nothing to the marriage but her own sweet self.

Ava's top lip curled up at this description of Irene. Only with Byron had Irene ever been sweet, and even then the word was inadequate. Irene had loved Byron with a love that was sickeningly obsessive. He was her prince,

her god, her reason for living. In his presence, she'd been a totally different creature from the one who inhabited Belleview when he wasn't there. In his absence, she'd given new meaning to the word 'sour'.

Yes, Jade was right, Ava conceded. The deterioration of her self-esteem could be laid directly at Irene Campbell's feet. How insidious that woman had been, with her subtle but relentless sarcasm. Criticisms were delivered with a dry laugh, or a saccharine smile, but the effect had been the same. One was left feeling a failure. While Jade had fought back, *she'd* shrivelled up like a hothouse flower, turning to food for comfort, then retreating into her fantasy world. Worst of all, she had allowed Irene to convince Byron that his sister was a homely little nincompoop who couldn't possibly attract a member of the opposite sex, so of course any chap who showed an interest in her had to be a gold-digger!

The memory of what had happened with James when she'd been twenty was just too painful to recall, perhaps because on that occasion Irene had been crushingly right. After that incident, she'd eaten more cream cakes. And more chocolate bars. And more packets of crisps.

Her life had deteriorated to a perpetual round of useless diets that never lasted and binges that did. Her once very real intention to get a job of some sort had vanished along with what was left of her self-esteem. It was much easier to stay in her room and pretend she was going to become a famous artist one day. Byron had even had the bedroom next to hers converted to a studio so she could pretend with some flair.

And while deep in her subconscious she believed she did have some talent, nothing she ever painted really pleased her. Whenever she got dangerously close to finishing one of her watercolours, something about it would dissatisfy her and she would put it aside. She had never, ever really finished a painting. Not once!

'Here I am again.' Jade hurried back into the room and stuffed the pile of clothes into a large plastic bag. 'I must go, Auntie. I'll talk to Pops tomorrow at work about his party and I'll give you a ring sometime. Whatever, keep Friday week free. If we don't have a party we'll all go out to dinner.'

Ava walked Jade down to the front door, making sure all the doors and the front gates were locked after she left, a look at the lengthening lawns reminding her she would have to do something about them. No matter what Jade said, Ava accepted that she was a bit hopeless sometimes. She shouldn't have forgotten the lawn-mowing man was due yesterday. Her memory was atrocious!

It was to be thanked she couldn't create a similar problem with the gardener. Mr Potts had been with them for years and had his own key, since he lived down the road and came and went at all sorts of odd hours. At a pinch he might mow the lawns once or twice if she asked nicely, but he was getting old and the lawns were extensive. No, she couldn't ask him to do that.

But who?

She'd already searched Melanie's little black book where their former housekeeper had written down all manner of casual helpers she had hired at some time or other. But there wasn't one lawn-mower man among them.

Byron would simply have rung around the neighbours and asked them whom they used. But Ava cringed at doing so herself. They would probably laugh at her behind her back—which they were probably already doing anyway. Poor stupid Ava, trying to run a house. What must Byron be thinking of?

A shudder ran through her.

No, she would just have to look in the *Yellow Pages* and simply take a stab in the dark. What was the worst that could happen? The man might be inefficient or unreliable. If so, she would simply fire him and try again. If at first you don't succeed. . .

Steeling her churning stomach, Ava stood up, squared her shoulders and marched through the family room into the kitchen where the telephone books were kept. Five minutes later Ava was still scanning the pages of the business directory, a frown on her face. She'd never dreamt there were so many lawn-mowing services. She was dithering over which one to choose from, when a boxed ad down in a corner caught her eye. It said:

Morelli's House and Grounds Maintenance Service.

No job too small or too large. Reasonable rates and reliable workmen.

'Morelli's,' she whispered aloud, liking the way the name slid off her tongue.

Now Ava knew an Italian name when she saw one.

She stared down at it for a long time, aware that her heart was beating faster all the while. She knew it was ridiculous to be drawn to an advertisement simply because it carried an Italian name. There again, she had to hire someone. . .

Her hand shook slightly as she dialled, her throat drying as she waited and waited for someone to answer.

'Morelli's House and Grounds Maintenance Service. How may we help you?' said a female voice with a heavy Italian accent.

Thrown slightly by a woman answering, Ava dithered. 'Oh. . .I —er —I. . .'

The woman at the other end sighed heavily. 'If you are one of Vincente's *lady-friends*,' she said caustically, "then let me tell you something. My son is soon to be engaged to a nice Italian girl and will not be sleeping in any of your beds any longer!"

Ava's head snapped back as her lips parted in a gasp. She stared down at the receiver while the sounds of a heated argument — fortunately or unfortunately in Italian — blared forth for all who could decipher it.

Finally, a male voice, very attractive but not carrying a trace of an accent, came on the line.

'Hello. Vince here. Sorry about that. Let me assure you,' he said in a dry tone, 'that I have no fiancée-to- be, Italian or otherwise. Who is this, by the way?'

'Oh! My. . .my name is Ava Whitmore,' she stammered. 'We —er —we need someone to mow our lawns, and I was wondering if. . .if. . .'

'Where do you live?' he interrupted efficiently.

'St Ives.'

'How much lawn is there?'

'Well, they're quite large really.'

'How long does it usually take to do them?'

'Three or four hours at least.'

'That big, eh? We charge twenty dollars an hour.'

'That. . .that's fine.'

'When would you like us to come?'

'M. . .Mondays would be best, I think. The previous man used to come on a Monday.'

'Lawns shouldn't need mowing every week at this time of the year. Let's see now. . . Yes, I can slot you in next Monday at nine.'

'*Next Monday?*'

'Something wrong with next Monday?'

'Well, no, not really, except that the man didn't come *last* Monday, and they really do need doing. If. . .if they're not done soon, Byron will begin to notice and there'll be hell to pay!'

There was a short sharp silence during which Ava regretted running off at the mouth like that. Whatever must Mr Morelli be thinking of her?

'Sounds like an emergency,' he said at long last, and Ava sighed with relief.

'Yes, it is,' she agreed hastily. 'Byron's very particular about things.'

T presume this Byron is your husband?'

'Oh, no, he's my big brother. You —er —know what big brothers can be like,' she added with a nervous little laugh.

'Actually, no,' he drawled. '*I'm* the big brother around here, and it's not an easy job, I can tell you. Now about your lawns, Miss Whitmore, I'm afraid I haven't got anyone available tomorrow. Not unless. . .'

Another short silence seemed to hang in the air. Ava couldn't for the life of her understand why she was holding her breath. All she knew was that she was.

'It's all right, Miss Whitmore,' he resumed crisply. 'I'll come over and do them myself. No trouble. Just give me your address and everything's sweet.'

Ava let out her long-held breath, and told him Belleview's address. Then she added their telephone number in case there were any unforeseen complications. When she hung up a minute later, she stayed staring down at the telephone for ages. Finally, she turned and walked slowly back upstairs to her bedroom, her madly beating heart sinking back to harsh reality when she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror.

What a fool she was. A silly fantasy-filled fool!

Ava sagged down on the side of her bed, but she refused to cry. She simply refused to.

At least the lawns will be mown by the time Byron gets home tomorrow night, she told herself. Things could be worse. And she supposed it would be quite interesting to see an Italian Casanova in the flesh.

Ava went to bed wondering just how many ladies' beds Mr Vincente Morelli had slept in.

CHAPTER TWO

GEMMA let herself into their bayside unit, instantly aware that Nathan was home —then quickly aware he was not alone. The perfume that teased her nostrils was not one she ever used. Since Kirsty didn't go in for exotic scents, Gemma had to discard any hope that the female her husband had brought home with him was his teenage daughter.

Every feminine instinct she owned screamed out that their visitor was none other than Lenore, Nathan's ex- wife. Gemma knew it was impossible to avoid the woman altogether. Even if she weren't Kirsty's mother, Nathan was directing her in the lead role in a play of his at the moment. But did he have to bring her into their apartment when she wasn't there with them?

Marshalling every ounce of composure she owned, Gemma walked across the foyer and opened the double doors that led into the large living area. The scenario that met her eyes might have been perfectly innocent, but Gemma surveyed it with dark jealousy in her heart.

Nathan was sitting next to his ex-wife on one of the blue and white striped sofas that flanked the cedar fireplace, half-drunk glasses of Scotch on the low table in front of them. Though they weren't touching, their body language bespoke an intimacy that made a lie of Nathan's repeated assertions that he felt nothing for Lenore any more. Their knees were pointed towards each other, their heads bent low.

Lenore's wide green eyes jerked up and around at Gemma's sudden entrance, their shimmering suggesting recent tears. Gemma gave Nathan a speculative look as he stood up, but his handsome face was as coolly unreadable as it always was.

'You're home late, darling,' he said, sweeping a blond lock back from his forehead as he came forward to give her a peck on the cheek.

'Not really,' she returned. 'Hello, Lenore.'

Up close, Lenore's eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, indicating a lot of tears. Suspicion turned to guilt as it struck Gemma that something awful might have happened.

'Is. . .is Kirsty all right?' she asked anxiously.

When Gemma had first come to Sydney from Lightning Ridge, Nathan had hired her as his teenage daughter's minder. Kirsty had been going through a difficult time after her parents' divorce, and, while Gemma had been six years older than Kirsty's fourteen, they had become close. Their friendship had been strained, however, when Gemma had married Nathan, and it was only recently that they had been reconciled.

'She's being a typical teenager,' Nathan said drily. 'Can I get you a drink, darling? Some white wine perhaps?'

'What? Oh, yes. . .please. That would be nice. But what has Kirsty done to make Lenore so upset?'

Nathan shot a look at Lenore, who sighed rather theatrically. It reminded Gemma that Nathan's ex-wife was a talented actress, not to mention a very beautiful one, her striking face, glorious red hair and model-slim figure mocking her thirty-four years.

Gemma always felt gauche compared to Lenore's ultra-sophisticated appearance, which was probably understandable since she was only twenty and had been brought up by a rough and tough old miner in a dirt dugout at Lightning Ridge. Hardly finishing-school material.

But she'd rather hoped time might have cured her of feeling inferior. After all, no one could fault her own appearance these days. Her shoulder-length dark brown hair was cut expertly to frame her face. And her once too curvaceous figure had slimmed down to a perfectly acceptable hour-glass. As for her clothes. . . they came from the best Double Bay boutiques.

'Kirsty's found out about my affair with Zachary Marsden,' Lenore confessed. 'She's very angry with me. She. . .she's demanding to be sent to boarding- school.'

Gemma gaped. Nathan had told her ages ago that Lenore was having an affair with a married man, but *Zachary Marsden*? Zachary was Byron's best friend *and* solicitor. He had a pretty little wife, Felicity, and two sons.

The news rocked Gemma's faith in humanity —and men in particular. Could they ever be trusted where sex was concerned? Or women like Lenore, for that matter?

Lenore sighed again. 'I can see Nathan wasn't lying when he assured me he hadn't told you. Look, I know it sounds bad, Gemma, but Zachary and Felicity haven't been happy for years. Felicity was the first to ask for a divorce, too. She'd fallen in love with some man she met in a music shop. Not that I deny having loved Zachary for a long time...' This, with a pained glance Nathan's way.

'We. . .we've all been keeping our relationships secret till Zachary's younger son, Clark, finishes his HSC this year. Then Felicity and Zachary are going to separate officially. Meanwhile, I've been meeting Zachary on the quiet. He. . .he dropped in to rehearsals to see me late this afternoon. Unfortunately, Kirsty had the same idea after school. She —er —walked in on us in one of the dressing-rooms.'

'I see,' Gemma said, and sank down on the other sofa, a shocked expression on her face.

Lenore took one look at her and laughed. 'No, I don't think you do, love. Maybe one day, but not yet.' She stood up, smoothing down the wrinkles in the tight black skirt she was wearing. Her blouse was cream satin, tucked in at the waist, her whole outfit showing the slender elegance of her tall, willowy figure. Gemma suddenly felt fat, which was ridiculous. She'd lost even more weight recently and was slimmer than she had ever been.

Lenore picked up the black jacket that was draped over the back of the sofa and threw her ex-husband a rather wry smile. Thank you for all your help, Nathan. You've been surprisingly sweet about this. Marriage seems to agree with you. I'll let you know what happens with Kirsty,' she said as she dragged on the jacket.

Nathan came forward, handing Gemma her glass of wine then straightening to address the woman he'd once been married to for twelve years. 'I think you'll find that after Kirsty calms down enough for you to really talk to her and explain the situation she'll change her mind about boarding-school. But if she doesn't, you could always send her to St Brigit's for years eleven and twelve. Jade loved it there for some weird and wonderful reason.'

'Now you've really surprised me,' Lenore said, smiling that sensuous smile of hers. 'I thought you despised boarding-school.'

'I do. . .for eight-year-olds. But two years at this stage in Kirsty's life isn't an eternity.'

'*One* year seems an eternity sometimes,' Lenore said wearily. 'Well, goodbye, you two. Look after Gemma, Nathan. She looks a little tired. Bye, Gemma love.'

'B-bye, Lenore,' Gemma stammered, her insides churning over Nathan's solicitous treatment of this woman whom he'd once claimed could feel love and lust at the same time for different men. Female intuition kept warning Gemma that Lenore was a danger to her marriage. She might love Zachary Marsden, but she had once lusted very much after Nathan. Maybe she still did.

Nathan returned from showing Lenore out with a preoccupied expression on his face. He swept up one of the half-empty glasses of Scotch up and drained it.

Gemma's fingers tightened around her wine. She sipped it with small, untasting swallows. 'How long were you and Lenore here before I got home?' she asked tautly.

For a moment there was a frozen silence, then Nathan said in the coldest voice, 'Are you implying what I think you're implying?'

'I'm not implying anything. I'm simply upset to find that you talk to your ex-wife more than you do to me.'

His sigh was full of exasperation. 'Only about our daughter. Look, I'm sorry if you resent it, but I did give you the chance a few weeks ago to start a baby of our own, and what did you do? Put on a tantrum about my having dared to throw away your pills without asking you, after which you went out and bought some more.'

For a second Gemma felt guilty, but Nathan's choice of the intimidating word *tantrum* brought a flash of rebellious resentment that quickly overpowered any such remorse. 'You just don't see that what you did was wrong, do you, Nathan?' she burst out, slamming the wine glass down on the coffee-table and getting to her feet. 'You *never* see that anything you do is wrong.'

'I wouldn't say that,' he said darkly. 'But my motives are always for the best.'

'Are they, Nathan? I wonder. . .'

When she went to brush past him, his free hand shot out to grab her upper arm. 'What do you mean by that?' he demanded to know, his fingers biting cruelly into her flesh underneath her sleeve.

Gemma winced with pain and tried to pull her arm free but his hold only tightened. For a man who looked the epitome of urbane elegance, he was remarkably strong. 'You're *hurting* me!' she protested.

'Then tell me what you meant by that remark!'

'Nothing. I. . .I meant nothing. I was angry. I say lots of silly things when I'm angry.'

'Don't lie to me, Gemma. Don't ever lie to me!'

'I'm *not* lying. Nathan, stop this! You're. . .you're frightening me.'

'Not as much as you're frightening me, my darling wife.'

'What do you mean?' she rasped.

'I mean precisely this. I wouldn't want ever to find out that you're cheating on me, sweetheart. Because if I ever do, I'd hate to imagine the consequences. If you want out of this marriage, then just say so. Up front!

No sneaking behind my back. No playing me for a fool. Do I make myself clear?' His grip on her arm tightened ever further, and she had to bite her lip to stop the cry of pain.

Suddenly, he released her, his angry face slowly smoothing to a semblance of his usual composure. Gemma's eyes were round upon him, the throbbing in her arm still there to remind her of what had just happened. But it was his *words* that had frightened her the most. He did not expect their marriage to last. He expected her to leave him. He'd expected it right from the start!

Why?

Because he didn't love her? Or because he didn't think she loved him?

Both, she guessed with a madly beating heart. Melanie had spelt it out for her one day when she'd asked the other woman for advice about her marriage. Right from the start Gemma had been worried about their lack of true intimacy or communication. Nathan never talked to her, never told her anything about himself or his writing or what he did when they weren't together. All he ever seemed to want her for was bed. #

Melanie had expressed the opinion that a lot of people married for the wrong reasons. For lust, not love. If it was just lust between them, she'd said, then one day, they would wake up and there'd be nothing there.

Was that what Nathan was expecting? For them to wake up one day and find nothing there any more? The thought appalled her!

'There's a letter for you,' he said, his casual tone belying his violence of a moment before. 'I put it on your dressing-table. I think it's from that old lady out at Lightning Ridge.'

Despite her inner distress and confusion, Gemma felt an instant brightening. 'Ma?'

'Must you call her that?' he ground out. 'She's not your mother.'

'She was more of a mother to me than my real one!'

'True. *She'd* have to get the wooden spoon for motherhood, that's for sure!'

Gemma stared at him. He sounded as if he *knew* her mother. Yet that was impossible! At her behest, Nathan had hired an investigator to try to uncover the identity of the woman who'd given birth to her, and who had subsequently disappeared from the face of the earth. But the mysterious Mary Bell on her birth certificate existed nowhere else but on that document of lies. Neither was her dead father — alias Jon Smith — registered anywhere, except on his illegally obtained driver's licence.

But of course his real name had been Stefan. She'd found that out when she'd discovered that old photograph shortly after his death. Which reminded her.

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'Nathan, you never did give me back my photograph. You know. . .the one of my mother.'

'The one you *think* is your mother, don't you mean? You don't really know one way or the other.'

Gemma frowned at her husband. 'Is there something you haven't told me, Nathan? Did that investigator find out something you don't want me to know?'

'What makes you think that?'

Nathan's evasion of her question with another question rang warning bells in her brain. That was what he always did when he didn't want to answer her.

'I'm not sure,' she said hesitantly, though her heart was racing. 'A hunch, I guess. You do like making decisions for me, don't you? I could well imagine you keeping something from me because you think it's for the best.' My God, could he know who her mother was and hadn't told her?

She stared at him and her voice, when she resumed, was shaking. 'Nathan, you haven't done that, have you? You know how important it is to me to find out my mother's identity, no matter what. . .*don't* you?'

'Yes, of course, darling,' he soothed, putting down his glass and coming forward to draw her into his arms. More warning bells rang. This was plan B when plan A didn't work. Make love to the silly little idiot to shut her up.

'I would never do anything to hurt you, Gemma,' he crooned. 'You know that.'

Those treacherously seductive lips covered hers, and, to her shame, her pulse leapt. But her distress was far greater than her desire to lose herself in that dark erotic world her husband could create so easily, so she pulled her mouth away, sending a deeply resentful glare up into his wickedly handsome face. 'That won't work this time, Nathan. I do not want to make love. I want to know what you've been keeping from me, what you know that I *don't* know.'

His head lifted, his steady gaze showing not even a hint of agitation. 'I know a lot of things that you don't know, Gemma,' he drawled. 'But nothing *you'd* want to know, I assure you.'

'You will swear on your own mother's grave that you don't know the identity of *my* mother?'

There was a tiny twitching at the corner of his .beautiful mouth, but nothing else. 'I do so swear,' he said, and Gemma let out a shuddering sigh of relief.

'Happy now?'

She stared up into his suddenly cold eyes and felt a chill run right through her. He might have told her the truth just now but he didn't always. Of that she was certain.

'I'm going to go and read my letter,' she said stiffly, and, whirling, fled to their bedroom, relieved when Nathan didn't follow her. If he'd come after her and started one of his ruthlessly successful seductions, she wasn't sure

what she would have done. They hadn't made love for over a week, due to her time of the month last week, and she probably would not be able to resist him indefinitely.

Nathan had once vowed to attune her body to his demands, and she couldn't deny he'd done that. And mote! She'd found herself lately getting addicted to his making love to her in a less than gentle fashion. In fact, when she was in the right mood, she found his more aggressive attentions so exciting that she lost all control. Oddly enough, this often coincided with their having an argument. Since their life together lately had become punctuated with verbal spats, this type of lovemaking was happening more and more. She sometimes wondered if Nathan goaded her on purpose to make her more amenable to his savage kisses and caresses, not to mention the more adventurous type of position. She still lacked the courage to take the initiative in the bedroom, but she certainly didn't object to whatever he wanted to do to her.

It was only afterwards that she sometimes worried over what had transpired between them. Was it her own lack of control that bothered her? Or Nathan's? Admittedly, there were times when he seemed beyond reason, beyond ever being told to stop. Still, she never did want him to stop, did she?

Now she glanced nervously at the bedroom, suddenly fearful of Nathan bursting in. But the door remained closed and, finally, Gemma gave a strangled sob which perversely sounded disappointed. God, what was to become of her? She couldn't live with Nathan, and she couldn't live without him!

Remembering Ma's letter, she hurried over to pick up the rather grubby envelope and tear it open. Ma seemed to be her only link with down-to-earth reality these days and the only other female whose advice she could possibly ask. Melanie was no longer around, Ava had no real-life experience, Lenore was definitely not on her list of potential confidantes, which only left Jade, who wasn't much older than herself and was so wrapped up in her new husband that Gemma didn't like to bother her with her own mixed-up troubles.

Besides, she wasn't at all sure Jade would be sympathetic. When Gemma and Nathan had recently attended Jade's small garden wedding at Bellevue, Jade had come up to her afterwards, given her a big hug and told her that if Kyle loved her as much as she knew Nathan loved *his* new wife, then she'd be delirious with joy! Jade might have always had a tendency to exaggerate with her larger-than-life personality but there was no doubt she believed her adoptive brother was truly in love at long last.

Which made her the only one, Gemma realised with bleak bitterness.

Except perhaps Byron. . . Byron seemed to have faith in their marriage. There again, Byron wasn't the most intuitive of men, from what she had seen. Or the most sensitive. Look at the way he treated poor Ava!

Gemma sighed as she thought of Byron's sister. It wasn't *her* fault that the caterer at Jade's wedding had got the number of guests wrong and delivered food for two hundred guests, instead of twenty. But anyone would think it was, the way he'd carried on. The man needed some woman to come along and sort him out, someone like. . . like. . . Celeste Campbell! Now there was a woman who wouldn't be bossed or bullied, who would give as good as she got —and a bit more besides!

But any hope of that happening was pie in the sky, Gemma realised drily. Though a person would have had to be blind not to sense there was something between those two. The night of the Whitmore Opals ball, when Celeste had stunned everyone by showing up, the air had crackled with electricity every time she came within three feet of Byron. As for Byron. . . he hadn't been able to take his eyes off his outrageous but undeniably gorgeous sister-in-law, even if she was his main business rival and supposed deadly enemy.

Gemma would have liked to have been a fly on the wall when whatever had happened between those two had happened. It must have been pretty dramatic, and pretty dreadful, whatever it was!

She'd also have liked to have been a fly on the wall during Nathan's growing-up years. She'd always believed the answer to his secretive and

highly complex personality lay in the past, but he had no more intention of telling her about that than he had of discussing her *own* past with her.

Sighing, Gemma pulled out Ma's letter and started to read. A minute later, she was jumping off the bed and racing out to find Nathan, who was standing at one of the windows, staring out over the darkening waters of Elizabeth Bay, another drink in his hands.

'Nathan, guess what?' she burst out.

Nathan turned slowly, one of his eyebrows lifting in a droll fashion. 'What?'

'You know that man out at Lightning Ridge who assaulted me years ago? The one who scared me to death the day we first met?'

'Yes. .

'He's dead! Got in a fight with another miner, and had a stroke or something. Ma says it's good riddance to bad rubbish!'

Nathan took an idle sip of his drink, his eyes never leaving her face. 'I couldn't agree more. But you seem inordinately pleased. I never took you for a creature who would relish revenge.'

'It's not revenge, Nathan, but relief. Now I can go back without being afraid.'

Nathan's glass stilled mid-way to his lips. 'Go back?'

'To Lightning Ridge. I promised Ma I'd come back' and visit her. Not only that, I always wanted to ask a few questions around town by myself. Not that I wasn't grateful about you hiring that private investigator. But you don't know what Ridge people are like. They wouldn't take kindly to some slick city fellow asking them personal questions. I'd have a much better chance of finding out the truth about my parents if I were alone.'

'You really think so, Gemma?'

'I *know* so. Please. . .don't try to stop me from doing this, Nathan. I've quite made up my mind.'

A few moments passed while Gemma stood, breathlessly waiting, and Nathan lifted the glass to drink once more. Now his eyes were glazed, as though he were thinking about something a long way away. Suddenly, he snapped back to the present.

'When were you thinking of going?' he asked.

Gemma expelled her long-held breath. 'Friday week. I thought I could take the morning flight and come back on the Monday afternoon. That way I'll only have to take two days off work. I haven't been at the shop long enough to ask for real holidays, but if I work some extra Saturdays, then. .

'Good grief, Gemma!' Nathan suddenly snapped. 'You're one of the family. Do you honestly think Byron wouldn't give you some time off? All you have to do is ask. There's no need to grovel around like some silly little salesgirl.'

'I wasn't going to grovel, Nathan,' she countered, hurt by his attitude. 'It's called acting with integrity and consideration, not grovelling. I don't like to take advantage of my position as your wife. Neither do I like to let people down. We're short-staffed right at this moment. Gloria's come down with the chicken pox. Hopefully, by Friday week, she'll be back on deck.'

'You're *too* considerate. Believe me, those girls at the *shop* would stick the knife in your back as quick as look at you.'

'Yes, so you keep telling me, Nathan,' Gemma said wearily. 'But it's me I have to live with, not them. If they do nasty things, that's their problem. I have to be true to myself.'

Nathan exploded with a type of black exasperation.

'God! How on earth did someone like you come out of. . .out of. . .someone like your father? It doesn't make sense!'

'Maybe I'm more like my mother than my father,' Qemma suggested, which brought a harsh laugh from her cynical husband.

'You don't believe that any more than I do, Gemma. She deserted you as a baby, left you with that bastard to bring you up. Would a sweet, kind and caring creature do that? I don't think so.'

'You don't know what circumstances led my mother to do what she did,' Gemma defended, but lamely. Down deep, she thought pretty well the same as Nathan. If she ever came face to face with her mother, she might just slap that face. 'She. . .she probably died soon after I was born.'

'You don't believe that.'

'No. . .no, I don't.'

'Why?'

Gemma shrugged. 'I think it's the way Dad spoke of her, on the rare occasions he did speak of her. He used to say, "She's a slut, your mother". Not. . .she *was* a slut.'

'That's splitting hairs, isn't it?'

'I suppose so, but it's what I feel. Sometimes all one has to go on is what one feels.'

'Yes,' Nathan said, nodding slowly. 'You're right. But sometimes, one feels what one *wants* to feel, not what is real.'

Gemma was still thinking about her mother being alive or dead, when Nathan suddenly materialised in front of her, taking her shoulders in his hands and pulling her hard against him.

'And what is it you can feel right now?' he rasped.

His hungry kiss cut off any answer she might have given, his expertise taking advantage of her slightly disorientated state of mind. With all her

recent doubts tumbling through her mind, she began to battle against what her body instinctively yearned, which was simply to sink against him and let mindless desire take over. Valiantly, she held herself stiffly in his arms, resenting the way her lips automatically fell apart for his silkily seductive tongue, the way her heartbeat revved up in tune with his.

But he was too strong for her, too merciless, too knowledgeable of her body's weakness. She shivered when he trailed an almost tender hand up and down her spine while his other hand caressed her buttocks. Slowly, he pleated her skirt upwards till cool air met the gap between her top of her stockings and her skimpy satin underwear. When his fingers found bare flesh at the top of her thighs, then slipped under the elastic of her panties and began an intimate and highly expert exploration, her defeat was inevitable.

Arousal surged its insidiously heated path along her veins, her memory tempting her with how it felt when it was the full length of his desire invading her, not those tantalising teasing fingers. At long last, she moaned a moan of a total and tortured surrender, and Nathan gave an answering growl of triumph.

Tell me you love me,' he whispered into her trembling mouth.

'I love you,' she said. Obediently. *Blindly*.

'Here, then,' he demanded hoarsely. 'On the floor. . . Now!'

'Yes,' she agreed wildly, even as he was already pulling her down on to the carpet and dragging at her underwear.

But later, as she lay beneath his sprawled body and listened to the desire draining from him in harsh dry gasps, Gemma hated the power Nathan had to make her do and say things like some puppet on a string. Was this love? Or some other dark force? A darkly destructive force that was like a summer storm, full of heat and wild electricity, building and building till it exploded into a sudden and dramatic downpour.

But unlike a summer storm, after which the sun came out and everything was warm and clean and peaceful, Gemma didn't feel warm, or clean, or peaceful at that moment.

Nathan's weight rolled from her and she buried her face into the soft pile of the carpet, cringing when he pulled her clothes back into place.

'I'll run you a bath,' he said from what seemed a long way away. He must have stood up. It sounded as if he was fixing his clothes. A zip was closed abruptly.

'Please don't,' came her muffled protest. 'I. . .I'd rather have a shower.'

'Suit yourself. Call me when dinner's ready. I'll be in my study.'

Gemma flinched at the sound of the door closing firmly behind him. Five minutes later, she was standing under a hot shower, trying to wash every bit of him from her body.

CHAPTER THREE

IN THE end, Ava was glad Byron had stayed the night at Catherine's. It meant he wasn't around to comment on her nervous state the following morning.

Ava didn't try to reason why Vince Morelli's coming to mow their lawns at nine o'clock should be putting her in such a tizz. Her subconscious understood the reason only too well. In fact, her *conscious* brain wasn't confused, either. This was as close as she was ever going to come to one of her fantasies coming true.

She dithered over what she should wear. A glance through her bedroom window showed the beginnings of a pleasant, delightfully mild spring day. Sydney was sometimes at its best in September and the forecast had predicted a top temperature of twenty degrees, with light sea breezes.

Ava pulled out a pair of lightweight black trousers that she had bought recently from her favourite boutique, favourite because it specialised in fashion for big women, clever fashion that flattered and hid faults to perfection.

Ava believed she had a lot of faults to hide, despite her now busier lifestyle's having stripped quite a few pounds from her previously very tubby body without her even trying. She'd had no time for dieting. Not so much time, either, for stuffing herself with all the junk foods she usually craved.

So when she pulled on the black trousers the elastic waist didn't have to nearly expire from stretching to get around her middle. Eyes widening with surprise, she raced to inspect her semi-naked self in the full-length mirror on the back of the wardrobe door, something she hadn't done in donkey's ages.

What she saw startled, then thrilled her. Goodness, she really didn't look too bad. Not exactly svelte, she thought ruefully as she pinched the spare tyre just above her waist. But her hips, bottom and thighs had trimmed down more than she'd realised. Must be all the running up and down stairs she'd been doing!

As for her bust. . .it was actually beginning to look like a *bust*, instead of a mammoth continuation of flesh from her neck to her waist. She cupped her breasts with her hands, lifting them and pressing them together. Now that was a *cleavage*, she thought naughtily. Then dropped them when the oddest physical sensation shot through her. It was almost as though she'd had an electric shock.

Ava's blue eyes widened when she noticed her nipples standing erect, goose-bumps having formed all over the pink circles around them.

She stared at them for ages before the compulsion to touch one finally overpowered her natural shyness. Her finger shook as it approached the taut peak but it would not be denied. Contact brought a sucked-in gasp. Ava wasn't sure if she liked the feeling or not. Her fingertip gently rolled the pebble-like point and Ava felt her whole insides contract.

My God! How could touching something up there make things happen down there? But it did. It definitely did! Her eyes shut and her lips fell softly apart as she touched her nipple a second time. The same thing happened.

What would it feel like if a man did this? she wondered as her heart began to beat faster. Maybe a gorgeous young Italian named Vincente. . .

A shudder of involuntary pleasure ripped through her and Ava's eyes shot open, shame heating her cheeks. She had gone too far. Far too far. She was becoming wicked in her old age. This type of behaviour was something she had never indulged in before. Never! And she wasn't going to start now.

Flushed and flustered, she spun away from the mirror, hurrying to drag on her bra. The confining cotton and lace, however, kept her hotly aware of her still erect nipples, and, much as she tried telling herself she *was* wicked, some secret part of herself revelled in this new-found sensuality. Finding something to team with the black trousers became a battle between her outraged conscience and her baser instincts.

In the end, she realised none of her clothes were sexy anyway, so she settled for a multicoloured jacket- style blouse which had slimming black panels inserted in each side, black lapels and cuffs. The bright design of the rest

was mostly in blues and yellows, with a dash of lime-green. The buttons were black.

Ava had found, since frequenting her favourite boutique and listening to the advice of the salesgirls there, that separates with long-line tops did wonders for her short body, padded shoulders minimising her usual tendency to look top-heavy. She'd also been advised to wear really high heels to give her more height, but Ava thought that was tempting fate. She had enough trouble staying upright in flatties. But she compromised occasionally with mid-height heels. Actually, her habitual clumsiness had improved lately with all the running around and physical tasks she'd been doing. Maybe practice did make perfect.

Finally, Ava's attention turned to her face and hair. She'd had her short brown curly hair streaked a golden blonde for Jade's wedding, and it had seemed to be a hit with everyone, if you could believe their compliments. Razor-cut short at the sides and back, the hairdresser had left it longer on top, a body perm giving her natural curls more controllability. It looked equally well brushed back off her face, or with a softly wavy fringe flopping towards one eye.

Ava chose the former style that morning, then proceeded to make up her face with more attention than she had in years at that hour of the day. Some navy blue eyeshadow around her eyes deepened their bright blue colour to rich sapphire, especially once she stroked layers of black mascara along her long curly lashes.

That was one area of her looks where she had fared as well as Byron, Ava thought. Her eyes. Her mouth was passable as well, though it wouldn't have looked *any* good on a man. It was small, with a bow-shaped top lip and a softly full bottom lip. It was the mouth of a child. Or a southern belle. Slightly pouty. Ava decided for the first time that day that she rather liked it. She glossed it in generously with a deep coral lipstick that had a high lustre.

Her double chin, though, did not find favour, even if it wasn't as jowly as it had been a few weeks ago. Ava turned side on, patting it upwards, but it still drooped down when she stopped. Sighing, she searched through her box of earrings for something that would distract from her jawline without looking

too ridiculous in the daytime. She settled on drops in the same lime-green that was in the jacket.

Her level of nervous excitement precluded breakfast, though she did have a couple of cups of coffee before settling down in front of the television to wait for nine o'clock to come round. The gates were already open and she was beyond housework. There wasn't much to be done anyway, what with Byron having spent the night elsewhere.

Which reminded her. . .

Ava jumped up and hurried out into the kitchen and over to the noticeboard on the wall where Melanie had always jotted down reminder notices and messages. Picking up the attached pen, Ava wrote **PICK UP BYRON'S SUIT FROM THE DRY CLEANERS** in big bold letters.

There, she thought smugly as she slotted the pen back into place. That should do it!

Ava was on her way back to the family-room when she heard the sound of a vehicle crunching to a halt on the gravel driveway at the side of the house. A quick glance at the kitchen showed less than a minute to nine. It seemed Mr Morelli was either habitually punctual, or he wanted to make a good impression on the first day.

Ava didn't care either way. She was simply glad he'd shown up at all! Tradesmen didn't have the best reputation in the world for doing that these days.

Her relief was short-lived, however, quickly replaced by a fluttering stomach and a whirling head. Maybe fantasies were best kept in the imagination. What if Mr Morelli proved to be a dreadful disappointment in the looks department —five feet two inches tall, with a portly belly and a droopy moustache?

Most unlikely, she decided with a ruthless logic that surprised her. Would his mother have reacted as she had on the telephone last night if her son didn't have women throwing themselves at him in droves? No, Vincente

Morelli was going to be good-looking all right. Ava could see him now. Tall, with black wavy hair, flashing black eyes and a cruelly sensual mouth that lifted at the corner when he smiled his coolly seductive smile.

She knew the type. Their glamorous images had filled the screen in all those Italian films she'd gobbled up over the years, the ones with subtitles and darkly handsome heroes —often in period costume—who smouldered at fan-holding heroines across the palatial rooms of white-walled villas overlooking a crystalline blue sea.

Ava sighed. How she adored those movies!

The side doorbell rang, and Ava froze. Oh, God. . .

The doorbell rang a second time eventually and she forced her jelly-like legs to move in the direction of the - sound, to make her way past the laundry and around the corner to the left where the corridor ended abruptly in a white wooden door. Steeling herself, Ava clasped the brass knob, turned it then wrenched open the door.

Ava tried hard not to stare.

The man standing a few feet from the side door wasn't darkly handsome at all.

Because he simply wasn't dark. Other than that, he *as* handsome. Incredibly so.

'M. . .Mr Morelli?' she queried, her still stunned eyes rolling over his light brown wavy hair, golden bronzed skin and velvet-brown eyes.

That's me,' he replied quite curtly, those same velvet eyes hardening for some reason as they flicked over her. 'I take it you're the lady I spoke to last night? Miss Whitmore?'

'Yes. . .yes, I'm Ava Whitmore.'

'God, I should have known better,' he muttered under his breath before sighing a disgruntled sigh then arching his left eyebrow at her.

Ava blinked back at him.

'I suppose you'll want me to call you Ava,' he went on with the most peculiar note in his voice. If she didn't know better she'd think he was being sarcastic. As for the way he was looking at her. . .there was something oddly contemptuous in it.

She frowned her confusion. 'Will I?' she said blankly.

He stared at her for a long moment before frowning himself. Ava found herself noting the details of his face, now that the initial shock of being confronted by such a gorgeous creature was receding.

He had a big face, feature for feature. A man's face, dominated by a stubbornly square chin complete with cleft in the middle. It would have been a hard face if it hadn't been for those incredible eyes and that full, slightly feminine bottom lip which was protruding at the moment in a pensive pout. His blackly brooding expression brought her back to his odd comment.

'You. . .you can call me Miss Whitmore,' she offered tentatively, 'if you'd prefer.'

His smile, when it came, wasn't anything like those mockingly cynical ones her fantasy men always delivered. It was wide and flashing, reaching right up to his eyes which twinkled down at her in some secret amusement. Smiling, he looked about twenty-five, but her guess was that he was a good few years older.

'No. Ava it is. I'm glad we got that sorted out.'

What sorted out? she wondered.

'You were certainly right when you said you had a lot of lawn,' he went on after a brief glance around. 'I'll be lucky to be finished by lunchtime. Well, I'd better get started. Nothing will get done if we stand around chatting all

day. I'll knock when I've finished.' Throwing her a final fleeting smile, he turned and began striding towards the combi-van parked under the elm that shaded that side of the house.

'Mr Morelli,' Ava called out.

He spun round, and she could have sworn a dark wariness clouded his eyes for a second. 'Yes?'

'I . . . I have to go out later for a while. But I should be back before noon. Would you rather I pay you now just in case you finish earlier than you expect?'

T can't see my doing that. Besides, I won't know what to charge till I'm finished. And could we make it Vince? My father was Mr Morelli.'

'Vince,' she repeated, much preferring the romantic-sounding Vincente his mother had called him the previous evening. Yet the name did suit him. It was a strong name. And very male. Just like him.

'Your father's passed on?' she asked gently, not wanting to finish their conversation just yet. Or was it that she didn't want to stop looking at him just yet?

There was certainly plenty to look at in his lawn-mowing garb of chest-hugging white T-shirt and washed-out blue jeans, both of which lovingly followed every contour of his macho and very muscular body.

Not that he was muscle-bound. Just superbly toned and honed. And very watchable.

'Eight years now,' he admitted, if a little reluctantly. 'He was a good man. I miss him.'

When he didn't follow this up with any questions about her own father or family, Ava got the hint. He wanted to get on with his work, not make idle chitchat. She began to feel self-conscious, not to mention a little guilty.

'I'm sure you do,' she murmured. 'Look, I won't hold you up any further. Ring the bell here when you're finished.'

'Right.'

Despite her resolve to dash inside and stop making a potential fool of herself, Ava stayed standing on the doorstep, watching in dry-mouthed fascination while Vince slid open the side-door of the van and lifted out a lawn-mower, then an edger, both heavy items, but both placed on to the grass without undue effort. When he noticed her still there, he threw her a puzzled look. 'Is there something I can do for you?' he asked, that peculiar wariness back in his eyes.

She blushed at the thought that automatically slid into her mind. God, but she was shameless today. Simply shameless!

'I . . . I was just wondering what the ladder was for,' she improvised wildly, indicating the extension ladder roped to the roof. 'I mean. . . how often would you need a ladder to mow lawns?'

'Not ever as I recall. But we Morellis don't just mow lawns.' And he pointed to the sign on the side of the van. '*Morellis House and Grounds Maintenance Service*'. 'We wash windows and clean out gutters and paint roofs and keep swimming pools crystal-clear, as well as all manner of handyman jobs.'

'You do? Oh. . . oh, that's good then, because I'm sure we need most of those things done around here.'

Vince's laugh was dry. 'Well, I can't do them all today. Fact is I can only give you this morning. I've already had to shuffle my normal schedule around like crazy to fit you in because you sounded pretty desperate on the telephone last night. But I'll put you down as a spring-cleaning client and line up one of my brothers to come over and tackle the rest on a regular basis. Will that be all right?'

'I suppose so. . . Why did she have to sound like a little girl whose daddy had just said he couldn't make it home for her birthday?'

'We'll talk about it after I've finished the mowing, OK?' Vince said brusquely. 'I really must get started.'

'Yes. . .yes, of course.'

Ava forced herself to go back inside but almost immediately she dashed upstairs and went round all the windows, seeing which one gave her the best unimpeded view of Vince Morelli mowing. Her own studio won hands down for the back lawn, but she ' would have to venture into Irene's old bedroom once Vince moved round to the front. An intimidating thought, and one she pushed aside since he was thankfully starting on the back lawn.

How utterly gorgeous he was, she sighed as she spied on him through the lace curtains. She could keep looking at him for hours on end. Gradually, her earlier thought about going to pick up Byron's dry cleaning this morning was pushed aside.

The sound of the telephone ringing first startled, then annoyed Ava. It seemed fate didn't even want to allow her the harmless pleasure of just *looking* at a real live fantasy man.

Muttering, she hurried out into the hallway, where they kept an upstairs extension on a marble-topped cedar console that matched the one in the foyer downstairs. She couldn't imagine who it could be ringing her at this early hour.

'Yes?'

'Ava? Is that you?'

'Of course it's me, Byron,' she snapped irritably. 'Who else would it be?'

'Lord only knows. It just didn't sound like you for a moment. You sounded all breathless, as if you'd been running.'

'Maybe I've taken up jogging.'

'Are you being sarcastic? Ava, what's got into you lately?'

'Maybe I'm growing up at long last, Byron,' she returned, pleased with herself for standing up to her domineering brother. 'What is it that you wanted, anyway?'

'What? Oh —er —I wanted to remind you to pick up my suit from the dry cleaners. Catherine and I are going to the opera on Friday night.'

'It's only Wednesday.'

'Yes. well, better safe than sorry, wouldn't you say?' came his dry remark. 'You've got a memory like a sieve.'

Ava bristled. 'I can't go today. I'll go tomorrow.'

'Why can't you go today?' he demanded to know.

Ava was going to invent some white lie but at the last second another spurt of defiance had her deciding to tell the truth —in part. 'I have a man here mowing the lawns,' she stated firmly. 'And when he's finished I want to be here to talk to him about getting some other jobs done that need doing around Bellevue.'

'The man's here mowing the lawns? On a *Wednesday*? Doesn't he always come on a Monday?'

'The last chap did. I got rid of him and hired someone new, someone who's a bit more. . .versatile.' Ava was glad Byron couldn't see the fierce blush that zoomed into her cheeks at that moment, or the amazing thoughts that entered her head. She wondered if 'versatile' had ever had that sort of connotation before.

'You hired someone *new*?' Byron huffed and puffed. 'And you didn't discuss it with me *first*?'

Ava counted to ten before replying. 'Melanie wouldn't have had to discuss such a thing with you. Why should I?'

'Melanie was competent at that type of thing,' he growled. 'Whereas you're. . .you're. . .'

'Just as competent,' Ava argued, though her voice had begun to shake. 'Or I will be soon, if you keep your bib out of things and give me a fair go!'

'Ava!'

'Oh, do stop "Ava"-ing me, Byron! It's beginning to give me the pip.'

'The *pip*?'

'And stop repeating everything I say. Look, I know you think I'm a nincompoop. You've told me often enough. But you're wrong. I'm quite intelligent, really.'

'Well, of course you are. You're a Whitmore!'

'Not to mention your sister,' she reminded him pointedly. If there was one thing Byron could be relied upon, it was standing up for the family name. Nevertheless, Ava decided to change the subject. She was still rather sensitive when it came to his and other people's opinion of her intelligence, not to mention competence.

'Did you have a pleasant evening?' she asked, half fearful of hearing news she didn't want to hear. She knew Byron had been lonely since everyone had married and moved out of Bellevue, but the thought of Catherine as her sister-in-law made Ava want to puke.

'Quite pleasant, thank you.'

Ava wasn't sure if her brother's stiff reply was a reluctance to admit, even to his sister, that he was sleeping with that woman, or evidence that the evening had not gone all that well. She prayed the latter was the case. Doubtful, though, since they were off to the opera together in two days.

'Now look, Ava,' Byron resumed abruptly. 'About this new fellow you hired to work around the place. What do you know about him? I mean, how did you find him?'

'He came highly recommended,' Ava lied outrageously. 'Please give me credit for some common sense.'

Silence from the other end.

'I must go, Byron. I think Mr Morelli's finished out the back and I want to make sure he trims the weeds around the terrace before he starts on the front.'

'You. . .you certainly seem to have everything in hand.'

'I do. Goodbye, Byron.'

'B-bye. . .'

Ava smiled as she hung up, never having heard Byron sound so hesitant when speaking to her.

She was still smiling when she walked downstairs and made her way out through the sliding glass doors of the family-room to the back terrace, intent on doing exactly what she'd told Byron she was going to do.

Perhaps she wasn't watching where she was going. Her eyes *were* searching for her fantasy man. Perhaps it was the unaccustomed heels that were her undoing. Whatever, she caught her heel in something, lurched forward, then totally lost her balance.

Her fall might have been relatively harmless if it hadn't been for the heavy wooden outdoor furniture just in front of her. As she went down her head connected with a sharp corner of the table. She sprawled down on to the cobblestones, totally winded yet seemingly otherwise OK. But as she lifted her head, blood began to pour forth from her forehead in large drops.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Ava stared down at the growing red puddle. It was only when she straightened and it began to run down into her eyes that she screamed.

CHAPTER FOUR

'GOOD God, what happened? *Hell!*'

Ava couldn't really see. But she could hear the shock in Vince Morelli's voice. Suddenly, something soft was being pressed hard against her forehead and her knees were crumpling. Yet she didn't strike ground this time. Strong arms scooped her up and gently laid her down on some nearby freshly mown grass.

'You're lucky I heard you scream,' he muttered. *I wouldn't have if the mower had been going, but I'd stopped it to do some of the edges. Put your hand here while I mop some of this blood out of your eyes.'

He placed her hand over the mound of soft material that he'd pressed against her forehead. 'Keep it firm,' he advised. 'It'll stop the bleeding.'

He began dabbing gently around her eyes. She blinked madly to find Vince leaning over her, a bloodstained handkerchief in his hand, a concerned look on his face, and not a stitch on above the waist. His white T-shirt was, at that moment, pressed against her forehead, but it took a few dry-mouthed moments for Ava's -befuddled brain to reach this conclusion, but once she did. she gasped, her fingers lifting.

'Your shirt! It'll be ruined.'

'Stuff the shirt. Keep pressing hard for a little longer,' he insisted, covering her hand with his and exerting gentle but firm pressure. Ava could feel the calluses on his palm against the back of her hand and oddly it was this awareness more than his beautiful bare chest that sent a shudder reverberating right through her.

'What happened?' he asked. 'Did you trip over something?'

Ava's whole chest contracted as a huge wave of dismay flooded in. Of course she had tripped. *And* fallen. *And* hit her head. Clumsy-clot Ava strikes again!

Tears filled her eyes.

'Hey! Don't cry. You'll be all right. Head wounds always bleed like mad. You should have seen me one day when a bloke dropped a brick on my head. I thought I was a goner by the amount of blood, but when it was all cleaned away the actual damage was quite small. I'll bet you've only got a little nick. Still, I think I'd better carry you inside. You're awfully pale. Shock, probably. Is there anyone else at home?'

'No. No one.'

He picked her up as if she were a feather, Ava blinking up at him in awe as he carried her through the sliding glass doors that led from the back terrace into the family-room. He lowered her carefully on to the • largest of the leather loungers. 'There we are. Now, no fainting on me.'

'No,' she croaked.

'Good girl.' His gentle hand on her shoulder plus his soothing smile did amazing things to her already squelchy stomach. Sighing, she closed her eyes.

'Do you want me to call your doctor?' he asked.

The thought of old Dr Handcock tut-tutting over yet another of her accidents filled Ava with dismay. Her shudder must have betrayed her reluctance for Vince said, 'You probably don't need one. As I said before, you'll be surprised how small that cut will turn out to be. Still, I think you could do with a nip of brandy,' he said firmly. 'Where should I look, Ava? You must have some brandy around here somewhere.'

Her eyes fluttered open. There. . .there's some in the drawing-room.'

He glanced around the huge family-room with its several exits. 'Which way's the drawing-room?'

'Out there.' She pointed to the door leading out into the main downstairs hall. 'Turn right and it's the second door along on the right. There's a large rosewood drinks cabinet over against the far wall. You. . .you can't miss it.'

'Right. You stay right there, madam. No doing the fandango while I'm gone either.'

This brought some low laughter from her lips. But no sooner had Vince disappeared than the tears started anew; rolling softly down her cheeks. He was probably right about her being in shock. Suddenly, she just couldn't stop crying, no matter how hard she tried.

'Now what's all this about?' Vince cajoled gently when he returned to sit beside her, a half-filled glass in his left hand, i left you laughing and I come back to find you crying again. Just as well I brought you a hefty slug of brandy. You obviously need it.' Sliding a large palm underneath her neck, he tenderly tilted her head upwards till her quivering bottom lip found the edge of the glass. 'Open up, Ava, and take a good gulp.'

She did exactly as she was told, though it made her splutter a bit.

'Another.' he ordered.

This time, the brandy slid down smoothly.

'Again. . .'

Her wet lashes fluttered surprise up at him and his returning look was reproachful.

'Ava, you bad girl,' he rebuked, though with humour in his voice. 'If I wanted to have my wicked way with you, I certainly wouldn't pick now, would I?'

Or any other time for that matter, Ava thought bleakly. He was just being funny, trying to cheer her up. But instead of being cheered, a depression settled deep in her heart. A man as stunningly good-looking as Vince would never want to have his wicked way, or any *other* way, with someone like her. Not in a million years.

Suddenly, she became very conscious of his large strong hand cradling the back of her head, of his half- naked body leaning over her. He was so close and so overwhelmingly male that Ava's heart automatically began to beat madly in her chest.

She found her schoolgirl reaction humiliating in the extreme. What a fool she was, a silly stupid fat fool!

But she couldn't seem to help her rising pulse-rate any more than she could help all the futile fantasies this man had evoked since the moment she'd called him the previous evening. In desperation, she gulped down some more brandy, hoping that would bring if not total composure, then some Dutch courage with which to handle this highly embarrassing situation.

'I think you've had enough,' he warned when she went to drink some more. 'No point in getting tipsy now that you've got your colour back in your face.'

Ava didn't doubt it. Her cheeks felt as if they were burning up. *She* felt like she was burning up.

Vince placed the near-empty glass down on the coffee-table then turned back with a serious look gathering on his handsome face. 'I think it's time I had a look at what you've done to this head of yours. . . Yes, just lie back, close your eyes and try to relax. . . I'm sure it's nothing too bad. . .'

Ava's eye-closing had nothing to do with Vince's advice and everything to do with not wanting to look upon his naked chest any longer. Never had she seen a man's shape so perfect, both in structure and proportion. His handsome face was distracting enough. His body was sheer male beauty, compelling her to wonder what it might be like to possess such a man, to be able to touch him at will. And have him touch her. . .

Ava had no personal experience to fall back on — only a mind full of images from movies she had seen and books she had read —but she was positive that making love with Vince would be a magical experience. Not that that magical experience would ever be hers.

A strangled sob punched from her throat just as he gingerly lifted the rolled-up T-shirt from her head.

'What is it? Did I hurt you?'

Her eyes flung wide open and when she saw his concern it struck Ava what a self-pitying self-absorbed selfish creature she was turning into. Here was this man. being so sweet and kind and generous, and what was she doing? Mooning over some pathetic fantasy which was so far out of whack from reality that it wasn't worth even *thinking* about, let alone getting upset over. If every plump, homely woman succumbed to tears and a crippling depression every time a gorgeous man wasn't attracted to her, then the world would have ground to a halt years ago.

Get real, Ava, she berated herself sternly. And pull yourself together!

Self-disgust had her finding some inner steel at long last.

'Not really,' she said with an apologetic smile. 'I'm just a big baby.'

'Aren't we all at times like this?' he teased gently. 'My mother says I'm a-dreadful patient. I never catch a simple cold. I'm always dying with the flu!'

Ava's heart flipped over at his engaging grin. She soothed herself with the knowledge that no woman could be completely immune to charm like this, let alone a love-starved spinster like herself.

'Let's see now,' Vince was saying. 'Yes, just as I suspected. Not too bad at all. I don't think it'll need stitches. Fortunately, it's behind your hairline so there won't be any visible scar. Still, some disinfecting wouldn't go astray. You'd better direct me to your medicine cabinet. As opposed to the drinks one this time,' he added with another of his heart-stopping smiles.

Ava swallowed before finding a relatively calm voice. 'Melanie kept a first-aid kit in the kitchen somewhere, • but I'm not sure exactly where. . .'

'Who's Melanie? Your sister?'

'No, I don't have any sisters. There's just my brother and me. Melanie was our previous housekeeper.'

'Previous, as in passed away?' he asked tentatively.

'Goodness, no. She left to get married a few weeks ago. I've been trying to do her job ever since. Not altogether successfully, in my big brother's opinion,' she finished with a weary sigh.

'Much as I have sympathy for big brothers, Ava — being one of the poor misunderstood brigade myself— yours does sound a right pain in the neck. I have a feeling he and I wouldn't get along too well. Still, I doubt we'll have to worry about that, will we? Now, where else but "somewhere in the kitchen" do you keep disinfectant in this palace?'

There's some in my bathroom upstairs, but it. . . it's.

'Upstairs,' he finished drily before grinning again. 'No trouble. Upstairs we go!' Vince jumped to his feet, scooped her up into his arms and began carrying her in the right direction. 'I know where the stairs are,' he explained blithely. 'Saw them on my journey to the drawing-room.'

'You can't carry me all that way!' Ava protested breathlessly. 'The stairs go on forever, and my rooms are right at the back of the house, and I. . . I'm too heavy!'

Vince's expression was startled. 'You? *Heavy*? Good grief, Ava, you're a tiny little thing.'

'In height maybe,' she muttered miserably. 'But not in weight.'

'So you're not anorexic. Believe me, that's a pleasant change these days. Besides, Italian men like their women nicely rounded, didn't you know that?' He looked down at her, brown eyes twinkling.

Ava stiffened in his arms, knowing he was just being polite and hating the way her silly heart had leapt with his cavalier though patently false flattery. If she wasn't careful here, she might stupidly start thinking there was more

behind Vince's words than mere kindness, which was surely the way to a broken heart.

Vince made his way carefully up the sweeping marble staircase without appearing to notice her emotional discomfort, his apparent ease of carrying her making her concede that she certainly couldn't be as fat as she once was. But she was still carrying far too many pounds. She knew it and nothing he could say would change the truth.

'You said your room was down the back here?' he asked when they were-halfway down the upstairs hall. 'Which door?'

The last on the right.'

Amazingly, he supported her with one arm while he turned the knob and pushed open the door to her studio.

'Just put me on that divan over there,' she suggested, shuddering with relief as his arms finally slid out from under her. When he rolled his shoulders on straightening, flexing one of his hands, she knew the effort of carrying her upstairs and opening that door without dropping her had been far greater than he'd made it look, the mortifying realisation making her shrink inside.

Yet at the same time something hardened within her, a new iron-clad determination finally to do something about her weight and body. She would not only lose a good few *more* pounds, she would exercise and tone up all the flabby flesh she'd abused and neglected over the years. Byron's gym downstairs had everything she needed. It was just a matter of application and discipline. Come tomorrow she would start!

But she would not do it for any man, came her second astonishing resolution, not even Vince. She would do it for herself! Never again was she going to feel as rotten as she did at this moment. For now, however, all she wanted was for him to go, so that she wouldn't have to endure any more of his bittersweet pity.

'I'm sure I'll be all right now,' she began shakily. 'I can get the disinfectant myself. Thank you for all your help, Vince. You've been most kind but you. . .you'd better get back to your mowing..'

'Don't be ridiculous, Ava. I couldn't possibly do that. I'd worry all the time that you were passed out on the floor up here. No, the mowing can wait a while longer. The lawns aren't going anywhere. I'll do them later.'

'But. . .but you said you could only give me this morning?'

'That was before your accident. Accidents force people to rearrange their priorities, and you, Ava, have become priority number one for me today. I'll ring up and cancel what I had on this afternoon so that I can stay here and look after you till you're fit to look after yourself.'

'But. . .but. . .'

'Don't argue with an Italian man, Ava. It leads to nothing but a sore throat and total frustration. We're well known for being as stubborn as mules, especially when we know we're right. Come now,' he continued with a drily amused note in his voice. 'You wouldn't really expect me to leave you to fend for yourself in this death-trap, would you?'

'D-death trap?'

'God. yes. Never been in a house with so many things to knock into or so many slippery floors, not to mention all those atrocious marble stairs. They're downright dangerous.'

'It's *Italian* marble,' she pointed out, not sure if she was thrilled that someone else found the house an accident waiting to happen, or piqued that he was criticising Bellevue, which was considered one of the finest homes in Sydney. 'Italian marble is the best in the world!'

'Quite a lot of things Italian are the best in the world,' he said with a wicked glitter in his eyes, 'but that doesn't mean they can't be dangerous if used incorrectly.'

'Most people don't have trouble with the stairs,' she mumbled. 'Only me. . .'

'What do you mean, only you? I had the devil of trouble keeping my footing.'

'Only because you were carrying me.'

Her disgruntled tone brought a dark glance and she would have given anything to know what he was thinking. 'Now look here, Ava,' he said after a few seconds' black silence. 'If I say the stairs are damned dangerous then they are! Look, why don't you have a carpet strip run up the middle and along that hallway outside? A deep blue would go nicely with all the grey and white. Match those pretty blue eyes of yours too,' • he added, looking straight in those eyes with something close to admiration.

Ava gulped in an attempt to control her over-the-top pleasure at this new compliment which she couldn't entirely dismiss. Sht *did* have pretty blue eyes. Her view of her appearance was not so jaundiced that she refused to acknowledge her one good asset. But surely pretty blue eyes weren't enough to attract a man like Vince.

Confusion reigned supreme in her heart till she reasoned that even if Vince didn't *look* like a typical Italian lover-boy, he was quite capable of acting like one. No doubt flattery for females flowed from his lips quite easily, and without great thought to their effect. Still, she couldn't help pinking with pleasure at his comment, which brought another sharp glance. Clearly, Vince Morelli wasn't used to women blushing at his tossed-off lines.

'I . . . I don't think Byron would approve of my changing the decor around here,' she said lamely.

That brother of yours is beginning to sound like an ogre! But enough of him for now. If we don't clean and disinfect that cut soon, it will form a scab. Where's the bathroom you told me about?'

'Through that door.'

Ten minutes later, Ava's wound had been gently but expertly administered to, she had taken two aspirin Vince had also found in the bathroom cabinet

and was lying back on the roomy old divan resting, while Vince was out in the hallway, making a couple of phone calls. Any further protests over the time he was wasting on her had been ruthlessly dismissed and Ava finally decided to wallow in this one-time experience of being cosseted by the sort of man who had previously only existed for her in a movie or in her mind.

She was not foolish enough to think there was anything behind it but a quirk of fate. And she knew that when today was over their time spent together was going to be nothing but a pleasant memory. Vince had already told her that this was the one and only time he'd be mowing her lawns. In future, one of his younger brothers would be mowing them, as well as any of the other chores she needed doing around Belleview. But he *was* going to finish mowing her lawns later today. He'd promised. Meanwhile for the rest of the morning he seemed prepared to pander to her every whim.

Everything's fine,' he announced on returning to the studio. 'I'm free for the entire day.'

'You shouldn't be putting yourself out so much,' she said, though not meaning a word of it. 'I could have called Byron. He'd have come home to look after me. Or sent someone round. . .'

'Don't be silly. I'm rather enjoying playing Good Samaritan. It's not my usual role, I can assure you.'

'Oh? What's your usual role?'

He laughed. God, he had a beautiful laugh. And a beautiful smile. And a beautiful everything. Sometimes life could be so unfair, Ava thought with a sudden stab of pain.

'Probably something akin to your Byron,' he said ruefully. 'My family says I've become a tyrant in the years since Dad died. They think the power has gone to my head.'

Ava frowned. 'The power? What power? What do they mean?'

He shrugged. 'Being head of the family, I suppose. Having to be responsible. To make decisions. Whatever. By the way, since I'm going to be here for a few hours, you wouldn't have a T-shirt I could borrow, would you?'

Ava couldn't very well tell him that she would much rather he stay exactly as he was. With his request, her eyes automatically went to his bare chest, one last hungry glance encompassing everything from the glorious bronzed colour to the rippling muscles to the arrow of golden curls that directed her gaze down to the flat planes of his stomach, not to mention the cheeky navel peeping above the waistband of his almost indecently tight jeans.

Ava stopped her wandering eyes right there, but she could not stop her imagination, or the heat creeping up her neck and into her face. 'Of course,' she said hurriedly, hoping Vince was interpreting her high colour as embarrassment and not what it really was.

'I'm sorry,' she went on hastily. 'I didn't think. I should have offered you something to put on before. I'm really sorry. . .'

'No, *I'm*-the one who's sorry. I've embarrassed you by bringing your attention to my half-dressed state.' His sigh showed regret, his expression similarly apologetic. 'You're a genuine lady, Ava Whitmore, and you make me feel a heel.'

'A. . .a heel?'

'For the way I spoke to you when I first arrived, not to mention the things I thought.'

'What did you think?' Ava asked, both puzzled and intrigued.

'Damn, but it's hard to explain without sounding incredibly arrogant. . .' he groaned at the bewildered look on her face. 'One look at those innocent eyes should have told me the truth but I guess I've become cynical over the years. And you *did* waylay me with one of the usually reliable warning signs.'

Warning signs? Warning signs for what?

Her eyes widened further.

'I jumped to conclusions and I damned well shouldn't have. I'm really sorry.'

Ava's confusion and curiosity made her speak out with a most uncharacteristic impatience. 'Vince! For pity's sake, stop apologising and just tell me the truth, whatever it is.'

'All right, all right, I'm simply trying not to shock or offend you, that's all. I can see how far off the mark I was now. I guess I'm a little rusty at recognising the truth now that I'm not mowing lawns any more.'

He wasn't? Ava wondered what he was doing here, then, but she didn't like to distract him at this moment by asking. There were far more important things to find out.

'You've got no idea, Ava,' he continued with a grimace of distaste, 'just how many bored and neglected rich women there are around Sydney, and a lot of them look upon men like me as easy meat.'

'Easy meat?' she repeated with a suddenly dry mouth.

'There must be a type of grapevine among some of them,' he swept on, ignoring her raspy murmur. 'These women find out which of the tradesmen working in their area are young and reasonably attractive, then they deliberately go out of their way to hire you. The first sign you have that your primary function in being there is *not* to fix the taps or mow the lawns or clean the pool is when they answer the door first thing in the morning all glammed up. Full make-up, jewellery, perfume, sexy clothes, the works!'

Ava's mouth went dry when she thought of her attention to her appearance that morning, and the way Vince had looked her over when she'd answered the door. She recalled the coldness that had come into his eyes, then his later flashes of wariness. My God, he actually had thought for a while that she. . .that she. . .

'Then,' he stated with a contemptuous curl of his top lip, they purr at you to call them by their first names, they hang around so that you're within view

all the time and finally, when you're finished, they try to get you to come inside or stay longer on some thinly veiled pretext. They offer you a cool drink, or the use of the shower. I've even had them suggest a refreshing dip in their pool. But believe me, you're not expected to do any of those things alone, and if you're stupid enough to fall for one of those lines then you've *crossed* an invisible line, and you're not expected to leave till the lady of the house is well satisfied with your services. If you do leave, you lose that client pretty damned quickly!

'R-really?' Ava croaked out, not sure if she was shocked or fascinated that there were women in this world who actually made their fantasies come true. Of course, she didn't condone such tacky and immoral behaviour, but it did have a certain appalling appeal.

'Really,' he confirmed. 'Which is why when you answered the door looking so smart at nine o'clock this morning, I thought. . .' He broke off with a shrug. 'Yes, well, I've already apologised for what I thought and now that you understand why I thought what I thought, I think we'll finish with that unfortunate topic, don't you?'

All he could do was nod.

His smile seemed relieved, as though he was glad to get that off his chest, his still deliciously bare chest. Ava started wondering if he'd ever accepted any of those women's offers, if he'd ever crossed that line, but she didn't dare ask him. His derision over their behaviour suggested that he hadn't, but when that scathing remark of his mother's popped back into her head Ava had second thoughts. What ladies' beds had Mrs Morelli been referring to? Regular girlfriends, or some of his rich-bitch women employers?

Ava's gaze focused once more on Vince's semi-nude male body and she swallowed convulsively. Clearly, it was in the interests of her sanity if he put something on. *Pronto!*

She sat up, swinging her feet over the side of-the divan.

'What in hell do you think you're doing?' Vince growled, rushing over to pick up her sandalled feet and place them back where they came from.

'You're not ready to get up yet. Lie back down. And you shouldn't have these still on. . . '

Ava froze when he started removing her sandals, gritting her teeth each time his fingers brushed against her flesh.

'There's blood on this one,' he said brusquely. 'I'll wash it for you.' He glanced up at her, eyes narrowing. There are some spots of blood on your top too. We'd better get it off as well and I'll soak it in cold water. Blood can be the devil to get out if you let it set in for too long. I'll just go and find you something to change into.'

'Oh, but you can't! I mean. . .I. . .I. . . '

He sighed at her obvious fluster, her reaction seeming to exasperate him mildly. 'Really, Ava, I realise you might not be keen on my rifling through your drawers but this is no time for excessive modesty. Agreed? Not only that, I have to find something for myself. I presume you have some of those one-size-fits- all T-shirts among your clothes?'She was back to nodding. Her T-shirts would easily go around his broad shoulders and chest.

'Good. That is your bedroom on the other side of the bathroom, isn't it?'

Another nod.

'I thought as much. You just lie here and rest. I'll be back shortly. You won't jump up the moment I turn my back, will you?'

She shook her head.

'Lost your voice, have you?' he teased softly.

Her smile was pained. She had an awful feeling she'd lost more than her voice. She just might have lost her heart as well.

'When I get back we'll see if we can find it again. I want to know all about you, Ava Whitmore,' he said warningly, beautiful brown eyes glancing around the studio. 'You're a very intriguing lady. But most of all I want to

know what's behind those mysterious damned canvasses stacked up against that wall over there!

CHAPTER FIVE

A COMBINATION of cold common sense and healthy cynicism came to the rescue of Ava's heart while Vince was absent from the room. This wasn't love, she told herself sternly. It was fascination. Infatuation. Desperation and frustration. Not only was Vince Morelli a walking dreamboat, a fantasy in the flesh, a real live Latin lover, he was also the first man in years to be this nice to her. So of course she was smitten by him. Any idiot woman would have been, but especially *her* brand of idiot who was already besotted with Italians anyway.

So Ava lay there on the divan, bravely determined not to harbour any false hopes where Vince's excessive attentions were concerned. She was well aware that her unfortunate — or was it fortunate? — accident had sparked an uncharacteristic Sir Galahad instinct in him which he was unexpectedly enjoying. Hadn't he virtually said as much? But it wouldn't last. Dreams never, did. Neither did fantasies. There always came that awful moment when one woke up and reality returned.

Her stomach curled over when Vince reappeared. Her black T-shirts had never looked anything like that on *her*.

'This do for you?' he asked, holding out a thankfully slimming black and white striped shirt that had been one of the mainstays in her casual wardrobe for years.

'Fine,' she said, taking it from his outstretched hand. 'Could you —er —turn away while I change?' The thought of him seeing what she was hiding under her clever clothes made her shudder inside.

'Of course,' he agreed, though Ava thought she detected a hint of dry amusement in his eyes as he turned away. No doubt not too many of the women he knew wanted his eyes averted from their bodies. And neither would she. . .if she felt for a moment he could look upon her semi-bared flesh with admiration and not revulsion.

Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of her jacket and she almost swore at her clumsiness in doing such a simple task as removing one top and putting

on another. Her eyes kept darting to Vince's broad back. So nervous was she that he might turn around before she was finished that when he did make a sudden move, she gasped. But he kept his back to her as he walked across the studio floor towards the stack of unfinished, turned-around paintings leaning against the far wall. 'Do you mind if I have a look at these?' he threw back over his shoulder.

She did. But if she said so, he might stop and turn around and she was only just now struggling into the black and white blouse. In her defence, it wasn't easy undressing and dressing half lying down and she hadn't done the buttons up yet. 'Not at all,' she said breathlessly 'But none of them is properly finished and they're not very good.'

He didn't say a word to that, simply picked up the first and turned it around to stare down at it. Gradually, he turned them all around, spreading them along the wall till Ava's watercolours formed a highly original if embarrassing border.

I told you they weren't very good,' she murmured uncomfortably when his silence continued. His head twisted round to throw her a frowning look. 'And who the hell told you that?' he said sharply, before sighing his irritation. 'No don't tell me. I can guess. Dear old Byron —'

'No!' she protested, quite fiercely, feeling guilty that somehow she had given Vince the wrong idea about Byron. Her brother might occasionally be a pain, as Vince had suggested, but he was never deliberately cruel. He'd actively encouraged her in her painting, told her she was very talented. Her not really believing him was not *his* fault! 'Byron has always praised my paintings,' she defended staunchly.

'Then who?' Vince demanded to know. 'Who was ignorant enough, or mean enough, to criticise your work to such an extent that you've never finished even one of these truly glorious pictures?'

'G-glorious?'

'Yes, *glorious*!' He snatched one up and strode back over towards the divan. 'Take this one for instance. Look at the light you've captured. . .the sense of peace and utter stillness. *Look* at it, woman! This is sheer exquisite beauty!'

Ava stared, wide-eyed, at the gentle landscape of the valley in the national park behind Belleview, painted in the soft greys and blues of a pre-dawn light. It was the closest she had ever come to really finishing one of her paintings, only a small patch in one corner needing some work to be complete. Ava recalled she had been especially happy with this one. Happy enough to maybe show it to someone. Till Irene had come in one day, taken a quick look and made a scoffing sound.

'Good God, Ava,' she'd said, that horridly scornful note in her voice, 'when are you going to try painting something other than these pathetic little bush scenes? It's not as though you ever finish any of them. Still, I suppose you've got nothing else to do and it's not as though anyone other than the family ever sees them. Just as well, eh?' she'd laughed, then swanned out of the room and off to one of her charity luncheons.

All the optimistic joy had drained out of Ava and she had put down her paintbrush, stood up and carried the painting over to where she'd put all her other unfinished canvasses. Vince was the first person to have looked at it since.

Now she stared at it again herself and, while her eyes told her it *was* rather good, something deep inside her refused to believe it. Surely Vince was exaggerating. He'd been flattering her all day. A bitter resentment flared, making her snap at him.

'Please don't patronise me. It's not necessary. That picture is sheer unadulterated rubbish. Why don't you just say so? I can take the truth.'

His straight brown brows lifted in surprise then drew together. '*Can* you?'

'Yes,' she retorted, her small rounded chin lifting indignantly.

Not that I can see." he countered. 'I've just *told* you the truth.'

'Oh, for pity's sake!'

His searching gaze grew more thoughtful on her face 'You really think this painting is rubbish, do you?'

Yes. of course it is. I just said so, didn't I?'

And all these others?' His free arm swept round in a circle to encompass the rest of her work.

'Those, even more so!' she spat contemptuously.

'Then why haven't you got rid of them?' he persisted with merciless logic. 'Why would you want to keep a motley collection of unfinished rubbish? Any reasonable person would have thrown them away. Or is it that you need a constant reminder that you're an artistic failure?' he threw at her with sudden harshness. 'That you have no talent at all!'

His sneering words launched Ava on to her feet, her blue eyes blazing. 'I *do* have talent!' she burst out, hating him for making her admit it, hating him for making her face the unfaceable, that she had allowed Irene to destroy her confidence and faith in that talent, had allowed that horrid woman to spoil the artistic future she might otherwise have had.

'Yes, you damned well do!' Vince reiterated strongly. 'So why *haven't* you finished any of these? What in hell's the matter with you, Ava Whitmore? Are you a coward or simply a fool, to believe whoever it was who told you differently?'

Ava plopped back down in the divan, stunned by her own outburst as well as Vince's relentless inquisition. The unexpected surge of angry defiance that had propelled her to her feet flowed out of her as quickly - as it had come, replaced by a bleak misery. 'Both,' she sobbed. 'Both. . .' And her head dropped down into her hands.

Yet no tears came. Perhaps she was beyond tears, beyond anything. God, what a hopeless mess she'd made of her life.

'Go away,' she croaked out. 'Oh, please just go away. . .'

Vaguely, she heard Vince mutter something that sounded suspiciously like a four-letter word. Then he was squatting before her, taking her hands away and forcing her dry-eyed but haunted face out of hiding.

'I'm sorry,' he said gently. 'I'm an insensitive blithering idiot, going at you hammer and tongs like that. But I'm not sorry for what I said. I meant every word. And at least you admitted you *do* have talent. Believe me, Ava, when I tell you that I do not patronise people. Or flatter them. I'm far too egocentric for such niceties. If you doubt me, ask my mother. Or my sister. Or even my brothers! They'll vouch for my nasty side.'

'You could never be nasty,' she husked, shaking her head from side to side.

His laughter was low. 'You'd better believe it. I can be a real mean son of a bitch when I want to be. But you seem to bring out the best in me. I hope I can also bring out the best in you.'

He^ eyes lifted, long lashes blinking. 'What. . .what do you mean?'

'I mean I hope I can restore the confidence in your talent that that bastard — whoever he is — destroyed so thoughtlessly.'

'Bitch,' she muttered bitterly. 'She was a bitch, not a bastard.'

Vince's sigh was expressive. 'Of course. I should have guessed. A woman. A jealous bitch of a woman.' He sounded even more vehement in his condemnation than Ava. 'And does this bitch have a name?'

'Irene.' she whispered, as though just saying her name might conjure her up like a bad spirit.

'Irene. . .' Vince came up off his haunches and sat down on the sofa beside her, still holding her hands.

'Tell me about this Irene. Who she is and what she did to you.'

Later, Ava was to wonder how she could have told a virtual stranger so many personal details, but at the time she would have told him anything. Maybe the brandy on an empty stomach had loosened her tongue, or maybe it was having a sympathetic listener at long last. Whatever, she must have spoken for over twenty minutes, telling Vince quite a lot about her growing-up years, but especially the part Irene played in forming the person she was today.

'But surely Byron must have known that his own wife was a wicked witch?' he asked, frowning. 'You make it sound as if he was ignorant of her true nature.'

'He was, in a way. She was so clever, Vince, so very clever. Byron never witnessed her real wickednesses, only her occasional black mood. But then, Byron made allowances for her moods, because of her being diagnosed a manic depressive.'

'Manic depressive, my foot! The woman was just a jealous vindictive bitch.'

'Jealous? But what did she have to be jealous of with me? Irene was a highly intelligent and beautiful woman- whereas I'm. . .' She broke off, shaking her head. 'That doesn't make sense, Vince. She couldn't have been jealous of me. And surely not of her own daughter! Remember, she was just as mean to little Jade as me.'

'Maybe jealous is the wrong word. Maybe warped and twisted better describes her. Who knows what makes some women sour on life, Ava? But I've known quite a few who are. They seem scared that other people might find the happiness they think they've been cheated out of, so they make sure everyone around them is as miserable as they are. Reading between the lines, I would say your brother did not love his wife, Ava. Not as she wanted to be loved. But I would say *she* loved *him* obsessively. Tell me, was Byron a faithful husband?'

'Oh, yes! Byron would never commit adultery. Never! He's very strict on that kind of thing.'

'Even in those last years, when his wife was away a lot in those rest-homes you told me about? You did say she was in there for weeks sometimes.'

'Yes, she was. . .' Ava's confidence in Byron's celibacy wavered in the knowledge of his present affair with Catherine. She'd been rather shocked that her almost prudish brother had launched into such an open sexual liaison. There again, he had changed since Irene's death. Loosened up quite a bit. Look how he'd accepted Jade becoming pregnant to Kyle before they were married.

'What about this Melanie you mentioned?' Vince asked. 'Your previous housekeeper. Could he have been having an affair with her?'

'Lord, no!' She laughed her incredulity at such a thought. 'No. no, you're quite wrong there. Besides, Melanie was only with us for a couple of years. We had another woman before that. A Mrs. . . um. . . Parkes...' Ava's voice trailed away as she recalled the abruptness with which Byron had despatched Mrs Parkes. Had he been caught out in an indiscretion with her? Beverley Parkes had not been an unattractive woman. . .

'I can see you're having second thoughts about your brother's moral rectitude,' Vince said somewhat drily. 'Believe me, Ava, when it comes to sex there aren't many men who can resist temptation, especially if they're frustrated at the time and an attractive woman offers herself to them on a silver platter.'

Ava stared at Vince, her mind jumping to all those rich woman who had propositioned him. Had he slept with any of them? Surely not. He'd been contemptuous of such women earlier. Why be contemptuous if he'd accommodated their wishes?

'Let's not talk about Byron any more,' she said, keen to change the subject. 'Or Irene for that matter. She's dead. If I'm still a failure then I have no one to blame but myself.'

'Dead right,' Vince agreed, making Ava's head jerk back in shock at his bluntness. His smile, however, was soothing. 'You've just had your first and

last therapy session. Now it's time to change, madam. No more excuses. So what's the first thing you're going to do?"

'Er —finish that painting?'

'That and all the others! And then?'

'Then?' she repeated blankly.

'Then you're going to *do* something with them, aren't you?'

'Am I?'

'For pity's sake, must I hold your hand the whole way?'

Ava flushed furiously, and Vince groaned. 'God, I've done it again. Badgered you shamelessly when really it's none of my business. But dammit, Ava. I hate to see a nice sweet lady like you suffering from having been put down so cruelly all her life. I think if that Irene wasn't already dead and gone, I'd strangle her myself!'

Ava didn't doubt it. When annoyed at something, Vince was all volatile temperament, like most Italians. Maybe that was why she'd always found them so enormously attractive, because they embodied everything she wasn't. Outgoing.. Passionate. Highly emotional. Being the wife of a man like Vince would be very exciting, she imagined. Both in bed and out. . .

'I'm going to give you the name of someone, Ava, whom I want you to promise me you'll make an appointment to see.'

'Who?' '

'A Mr Giuseppe Belcomo. He's a very successful artist in his own right and an exceptional teacher. Owns a small gallery in Gordon where he holds exhibitions of his students' work from time to time. I'm sure he'll take you on when he sees what you've already accomplished on your own.'

'You really think so?' she asked, sounding and feeling unsure.

T know so. But you'll have to watch him. He'll try to seduce you. He always tries to seduce his attractive female students. Not that you should worry about it unduly. He's seventy-three next birthday.'

Her laughter was rather dry. She didn't think she would Have to worry, even if he'd been thirty-three.

And what does that mean?' Vince immediately pounced, his handsome features distorted by a disgruntled frown. He slanted her a suspicious look. 'I'm not sure I can trust you to call Giuseppe, do you know that? I think I'll contact him myself and have him drop by. Yes. that's a much better idea. He can see all your work without your having to cart it over to his place. What night would be the best night for him to call round?'

'Can't. . .can't he come during the day?' Ava asked, knowing she had no hope of deflecting Vince from this but worrying about Byron's reaction. Much as she claimed her brother was enthusiastic about her artistic talent, she wasn't at all sure about putting his support to the test.

'Nope. I'm coming too to make sure you don't fob Giuseppe off. And to make sure he behaves himself! But I can't come during the day for the rest of this week. My days are full. They'll be even fuller after today,' he finished ruefully.

Ava felt dreadful at this reminder of Vince's wasted time. 'I told you not to stay,' she pointed out in a pained voice. 'Look, Vince, I'm not sure any of this is such a good idea. I mean. . .I. . .I. . .'

One look at his face had her voice drifting to nothingness. 'All right,' she amended with a resigned sigh. 'Call your friend. But Friday night is the only night that suits.'

'I didn't realise you were such a social butterfly,' he said on a puzzled note. 'From what you'd told me, I got the impression you lived a rather quiet life.'

Ava now regretted the extent of her confessions to Vince.

'I do,' she admitted stiffly. 'It's just that I'd rather Byron not be here when you come.'

'And you say he's not an ogre,' Vince muttered.

'He's not! He's just. . .*difficult*. . .sometimes.'

That's a euphemism for ogre if ever I've heard one. But it's your life, Ava, and I wouldn't dream of causing you any unnecessary hassle. I'll bring Giuseppe over Friday night, if he's free. If he's not, I'll call you and we'll find some other time your saintly sibling is absent. I'll be calling you tomorrow anyway to see how your head is faring. Have you got a headache now? You're frowning at me.'

'No. No, I haven't,' she realised with some surprise. To be honest, she'd almost forgotten about the accident. It was hard to concentrate on anything with Vince making such astonishing statements. Why on earth was he bothering to be so sweet to her?

'Good!' he pronounced. 'Look, I think I'll pop down the road and buy us both some lunch. I'm hungry and so must you be. Is there anything special you like to eat for lunch?'

'Not really,' Ava said, amazed at this next realisation that she hadn't given food a thought all day. If this kept up, she would indeed lose some weight. 'A salad sandwich?' she suggested.

'Done! And I'll get us some juice to drink. Is there anything else you'd like me to do for you while I'm down at the shops?'

'Er — which shops are you planning on visiting?'

The shopping centre just a few blocks down the road. You must know the one I mean.'

"Yes. I do.' Byron's suit was there. 'Do you think you could pick up some dry cleaning for me?'

'Sure.'

'It's not too much trouble?'

He gave her an exasperated look. 'For pity's sake, woman, the way you carry on, I'm beginning to think no one's ever done anything for you in your life!' He flashed her a frowning look before muttering something and shaking his head. 'What's the big deal, anyway? I'll already be down there, won't I?'

'Yes, I suppose so. . .'

'Then just give me the ticket and stop arguing. *God!!*'

'I'll have to get off this divan to get it.'

'Can't I get it for you?'

'No,' she said weakly, cringing inside.

'Whyever not?'

'Because I . . . I can't remember where I put it. It's downstairs s. . .s. . .somewhere,' she stammered as she always did when she felt stupid.

Vince raised his eyebrows to the ceiling. 'You artistic types are all alike. Absent-minded and airy-fairy.' His sudden grin disarmed the rapidly gathering feelings of inadequacy and stupidity. 'But where would the world be without its artists? It'd be pretty dull filled up with just us physical types, wouldn't it?'

'Oh, I don't know,' Ava murmured, when, as she attempted to stand, Vince slid a helping arm around her. She wasn't sure if her light-headedness was due to the bump on her head or Vince's touch. A couple of fingertips were brushing the underside of her left breast. Whatever, a dizzy spell struck and her knees went from under her. Once again, she found herself swept up into those big strong arms, her own arms automatically snaking around his solid neck for extra support. Her fingers contacted some soft wavy ends, Vince's hair being rather long at the back.

'This. . .this is getting to be a habit,' she croaked on their way downstairs.

His eyes dropped to hers. 'Well don't get used to it. I only do this on Wednesdays, and only during the first week of spring.'

'Oh. .

'Of course. . .all rules are meant to be broken,' he said as he stepped carefully on to the foyer floor.

Ava stared back up at him, her lips parting slightly as her heart jolted into a gallop. For a second his stride faltered completely, an odd cloud darkening his warm brown eyes. Ava's senses swam under their narrowed gaze and she could have sworn his arms tightened around her, lifting her slightly closer to his mouth. The thought that he was going to kiss her brought a widening of her eyes and a mad acceleration to her already pounding heartbeat.

But she was deluding herself, as usual, his next words indicating he'd only been rearranging his cumbersome load after the hazardous walk down the elongated marble staircase.

'I thought this house was dangerous before,' he muttered quite testily. 'I didn't know just how dangerous.'

Ava's disappointment was acute, as was her embarrassment. Why on earth would a man like Vince want to kiss her? She had to be losing her mind! 'I. . .I'll buy some carpet for those stairs as soon as I can,' she promised for something to say to cover her shame.

'What? Oh. yes. . .the carpet. You do that, Ava. And if you need someone to install it for you, Morelli's Maintenance employ an excellent man who's a dab hand at that kind of job. His name's Roger White.'

'I. .I'd rather have you, Vince,' she said, not wanting another stranger around the house. He was going to send over one of his brothers next Monday for the lawns. 'Don't you do that sort of thing?'

He hesitated, then smiled. It was a most peculiar smile. 'No. . .no, I don't do that sort of thing.'

When his face assumed a closed look Ava didn't like to persist, but she was left with the odd impression that he wasn't talking about installing carpet.

'I'll send Roger out to do the lawns next Monday as well,' Vince said abruptly, his legs resuming their long stride as he crossed the foyer.

'But I thought you were going to send one of your brothers?'

'I was. . .but I think Roger will suit you better all round. He's a good man. Yes, a very good man.' Vince carried Ava through the family-room and out into the kitchen where he frowned at the wall clock. 'Good God, is that the time? One o'clock? We'll have to get a move on here. Now where do you think you might have put that infernal ticket?'

CHAPTER SIX

GEMMA glanced at her watch. One o'clock. At long last, she thought with a weary sigh. Lunch.

Normally, time at work flew for Gemma. She loved showing customers the beautiful designer opals that Whitmore's had for sale in this particular shop. Being in the foyer of the exclusive Regency Hotel, the range of jewellery they kept there was very upmarket, much more so than their other Sydney store down at the Rocks whose clientele was mostly made up of the less affluent tourists wanting to buy a simple opal ring or pendant to take home.

The sort of person who came into the Regency store was more interested in purchasing an opal that would serve as both an item of jewellery and an investment. Over fifty per cent of their customers were wealthy Japanese, which was why Gemma had had to learn Japanese before Byron had allowed her to work there. She'd had to study very hard to become even passably fluent in the language at her time of starting as a sales assistant a few months back, but since then constant use had improved her fluency in leaps and bounds. Gemma felt great satisfaction in this and was usually keen to serve as many Japanese customers as possible.

Any other day she would have been pleased when a large group of Japanese walked in, as had happened a couple of hours back. Today, however, Gemma hadn't felt like smiling politely all the time and having to concentrate on what was being asked of her. She'd been at screaming point by the time they'd all finally trundled out, not even the extent of her sales making up for the stress of the long and demanding encounter. At least now she'd be able to escape and go for a quiet walk, away from people and noise, to somewhere she could just sit and think..

Turning from the counter, she signalled the manager that she was off to lunch, then walked quickly through the curtain into the back room where she lifted her cream woollen blazer off the coat rack and drew it on over her classically simple forest-green dress. Her shoulder-length hair, she noticed in the mirror on the wall, was still tidy, its clever cut making it curve naturally around her face in soft bangs. Her make-up needed a touch-up and

after doing that she automatically sprayed on some of the Arpege perfume she kept in her bag at all times.

Her grooming complete, she looped the long strap of her tan handbag over her shoulder and left the shop, mouthing a smiling farewell to Peta and Graham, who were both busy with customers. Her long legs moved her tense body swiftly across the hotel foyer, out through the revolving doors and down the ramp to spring sunshine and fresh air.

Gemma stood for a second and breathed deeply, till she caught a strong whiff of the carbon monoxide from the steady stream of taxi exhausts as they pulled up and left the hotel. Wrinkling her already pert nose, she shuddered, then determined not to breathe too deeply again till she reached the really fresh air of the Botanic Gardens. In five minutes, she'd be there, provided the lights were kind.

She walked quickly, head down, unaware of the man who'd followed her out of the hotel, and was still following her, an intense look on his strikingly handsome face. When Gemma had to stop at a set of lights, he momentarily fell back into a nearby doorway, his narrowed gaze never leaving her.

Her inner agitation had been clear to him from the moment she came out of the shop door. Hopefully, this meant that her marriage to Nathan Whitmore was as rocky as his information suggested it was. He hadn't wanted a woman this much in years, hadn't *waited* for one for this long. Ever. But waiting, he was finding, could be an extremely strong aphrodisiac. And he could do with one these days.

Simple sex with a woman was beginning to pall. It was all too damned easy for a man like himself. Amazing what a combination of good looks, wealth and reputation could achieve without any real effort on his part. Women seemed very keen to accommodate him in just about whatever way he fancied. Well. . .a certain type of woman did.

Only he didn't fancy that type any longer. Where was the challenge in that? There was no sense of triumph in a gold-digging slut coming across on the first date. Or in laying a whip across the bare buttocks of an amateur whore. Even his affairs with the wives of the businessmen he met in his position as

sales and marketing manager for Campbell Jewels were beginning to bore him.

Bu: what if he could possess Nathan Whitmore's lovely young bride. . .?

It had always piqued him that he'd never been able to seduce that bastard's previous wife. Lenore was a beauty too, but unfortunately too streetwise to fall for his lines of approach. Damian's hatred of Nathan Whitmore had grown with his lack of success with Lenore, but he had no intention of failing this time. Gemma Whitmore was no Lenore. How could she be at only twenty?

He could still recall the first moment he'd seen her at the ball in that exquisite dress, looking incredibly sensual yet sweetly innocent at the same time. There was no doubting that that lush body of hers had never experienced anything like what he wanted to make it experience. The thought of Nathan Whitmore capturing such a delicious virgin for himself rankled. Where had he found such a prize? From talking to her later at the ball, Damian had seen first-hand just how innocent she was, how sweetly trusting and naive.

His loins contracted fiercely as he imagined what it would be like to have her at his mercy, in hearing her whimpering cries, be they either of pleasure or pain. God, yes, he'd give anything for that. . .

The lights turned green and Gemma stepped off the kerb, only to have someone tread heavily on her heel from behind so that she stumbled and sprawled on to her knees on the pedestrian crossing. A couple of people asked if she was all right, one man stopping to put a supporting arm around her waist as he helped her back on to shaky legs. When he picked up her bag which had slipped from her shoulder, then went to hand it back to her, she found herself looking up into a pair of incredibly beautiful and familiar black eyes. They rounded immediately with the same 'startled recognition as her own.

'Mrs Whitmore!'

'Damian.' His name escaped her lips on a shocked whisper, her eyes wide upon the man her husband had warned her never to speak to again, under any circumstances.

Damian was Damian Campbell, younger brother of Celeste Campbell, the scandalous woman head of Campbell Jewels. In his late, twenties, he was as handsome as the devil and supposedly as wicked, if Nathan and her in-laws were to be believed. But when Gemma had met him for the first time at the Whitmore Opals ball two months ago she'd seen no evidence of that wickedness.

OK, so he probably shouldn't have approached her on the sly the way he had, or told her Nathan didn't really love her, that he'd married her for one thing and one thing only. But she couldn't deny the sincerity of his concern for her, or his offer of friendship, if and when she might need it. While she had hotly denied his assertions about Nathan at the time —had literally run away from the disturbing claims —she now worried that he might be right.

Gemma had been married to Nathan for nearly six months and their relationship hadn't grown in any way except sexually. Maybe *he* was satisfied with the way he'd turned her into his sexual puppet, pulling her strings this way and that, but *she* wasn't. Lately, he'd focused their relationship on the physical more than ever, their lovemaking having taken on a dangerous edge by his choice of time and place, not to mention position.

But where in the early months of their marriage Gemma had always felt wonderful after they'd made love, sometimes now she was left feeling awful. Nathan could be quite cold to her afterwards, as though he almost despised her for having responded as wildly as she had. Was that the way a man really in love acted?

The sounds of horns honking had Damian urging her back on to the pavement, a speeding taxi just missing her. He shook an angry fist after the driver. 'Have a bit of common decency., you impatient bastard!' he shouted before turning worried eyes upon a trembling Gemma. 'Are you all right, Mrs Whitmore? God, you're shaking and you look awfully pale. Let me take you somewhere where you can sit down.'

She was incapable of stopping him from taking her arm and guiding her into a nearby coffee lounge, solicitously seeing her seated at a small table for two against the far wall before sitting down opposite. A waitress materialised by his side almost immediately and Damian ordered two coffees plus a plate of mixed sandwiches.

Seeing the way the attractive young waitress was visually gobbling up her extraordinarily handsome male customer, plus a fleeting glimpse at the way Damian momentarily eyed *her* up and down, sent some of Nathan's warnings tumbling back into Gemma's mind.

The man is a rake. . .no conscience. . .decadent. . . shocking reputation. . .a home-wrecker. . .have nothing to do with him. Ever!

Nathan would undeniably contend that this was a contrived meeting. But if Damian Campbell had evil intentions towards her, then why had he waited nearly two months to put those evil intentions into action?

Still. . .she supposed it *was* possible. He might have followed her, deliberately trodden on her heel, pretended to be surprised on seeing her. . .With the waitress's departure, Damian swung still concerned eyes upon her, his anxious gaze raking her face before bestowing a relieved smile upon her. 'You're looking better already. I hope you like coffee. I can easily change it to tea if you' prefer. And I ordered us some sandwiches. I was just about to buy myself some lunch when I ran into you, but I'm afraid I have to be back at the office in. . .' he glanced at his wristwatch '. . .half an hour.'

Damian's open relaxed chatter flooded her with relief. At the same time, irritation that she'd begun to think like Nathan welled up inside her. Did she honestly want to be like her husband, looking upon everything with a world-weary cynicism? He denigrated every single man who even so much as looked sideways at her. In his opinion, the whole male sex was wickedly waiting in the wings for her to give them the slightest cue or come-on before launching into a ruthless seduction.

Seeing Damian in the flesh again was a reassurance in itself. His extraordinary handsomeness was not to Gemma's personal taste, but still, here was a man who could have just about any single woman who took his

fancy. Why would he be bothered chasing after a married woman who, even if she was being besieged with doubts about her husband's love, was still very much in love with that same husband?

'You haven't bolted yet.' he suddenly teased, black eyes twinkling with a wry amusement.

'No,' she admitted.

'Don't tell me. The boss is out of town this week and you can't get caught.'

A guilty colour slashed across her high cheekbones.

'Not at all,' she denied. But it was true, in a way. It was Wednesday, and because of a matinee performance at the theatre where *A Woman in Black* was to be staged, rehearsal today was being held at a small theatre out in the suburbs. There was no chance of Nathan dropping in at the shop unexpectedly this afternoon, or of her being caught drinking coffee with Damian Campbell. 'I don't like you talking about Nathan like that,' she reproached. 'It's not nice.'

'Sorry.'

Gemma looked over at him. He didn't sound or look at all sorry, and his boyish grin was very disarming. She found herself smiling back at him.

'I think you might be as naughty as everyone says you are,' she said, her voice shaking a little. *She* was shaking a little, as though it were *her* behaviour that was naughty. But why shouldn't she have coffee with a man? she thought mutinously. Nathan had more than damned coffee with Lenore!

Damian laughed at her remark. 'I've been called a lot of things, but never naughty. At least, not since kindergarten.' Sparkling black eyes caressed hers across the table, Gemma feeling slightly discomfited by the feeling of intimacy he'd managed to convey so quickly. There was something about Damian's eyes that was very magnetic. Once they locked on to you, you couldn't seem to look away.

Gemma had to make a real effort to drop hers down to the white tablecloth.

'Nathan found out about us, didn't he?' Damian said.

Her chin snapped up. 'There is no *us*, Damian,' she protested huskily.

He said nothing for a few seconds, that hypnotic black gaze boring into her till she felt almost light-headed. When his eyes finally slid away, an odd shudder rippled through her, almost as if she'd been physically released from some hidden force-field.

'No, of course not,' he said coolly, 'I only meant that he'd found out I'd spoken to you privately at the ball.' Now his gaze returned, penetrating and unsmiling. 'I'll bet he gave you an earful about me. . .

'Yet you're still sitting here,' he added slowly and with a sardonic arch to one of his straight black brows. 'Why is that, I wonder? Could it be that little Gemma doesn't quite believe everything her husband dishes out to her these days? Has she decided to buck the hand that feeds her? And dresses her? And *undresses* her. . .?'

Gemma shot to her feet just as the waitress arrived with their order on a tray. Under the other girl's startled look, she sank back down into her chair, deciding to depart in a more decorous fashion once the girl had gone. But during the time it took for the waitress to place the sandwiches and coffee on the table, then ask coyly if the gentleman wanted anything else, her anger dissipated somewhat.

Besides, she was rather curious about Damian's antagonism towards Nathan, and vice versa. Was it simply an extension of that old feud between the Campbells and the Whitmores? Or something more personal? It reminded her of the bitter enmity between Celeste Campbell and Byron. No one seeing them together could believe their mutual hatred was solely based on an argument their fathers had had over forty years before. It was too spiteful, too intense.

'I'm sorry,' Damian apologised again once they were alone. And he seemed to mean it this time. 'I shouldn't have said that.'

'No,' she agreed. 'You shouldn't have.'

'I just get mad when I think of a lovely young lady like you married to a man like Nathan Whitmore. Do you take sugar in your coffee?' he asked, holding the small silver tongs out to her after gently dropping a couple of cubes into his cup.

She took them and dropped one cube in, all the while wanting to ask further questions about Nathan but worrying over the wisdom of listening to things about her husband from an obvious enemy. Damian might lie. She wanted facts, not malevolent or exaggerated gossip.

'You have a habit of making nasty cracks about the sort of man my husband is,' she said while stirring her drink. 'But you don't really know him, do you?'

His laughter was harsh and dry. 'I know him a damned sight better than you do.'

She stiffened. 'I find that hard to believe. I'm his wife!' How odd, she thought, that as soon as someone else deigned to criticise Nathan she immediately leapt to his defence.

'You think because you've been married to the man a few measly months that you know him? Lenore was married to Nathan for over a decade and she never got to know him.'

'How do you know that?'

'With a few drinks under her belt, Lenore has a habit of using the nearest listener as a substitute therapist. I happened to have been by her side at a few parties over the years and I heard quite a lot about Nathan's failings, as a husband. Not in the bedroom, mind. I concede he's well versed in boudoir skills. Which is only reasonable, given his —er —colourful. . . upbringing.'

'Meaning?'

Damian's black eyes glittered as they travelled over her frowning face. 'Surely you know about his mother, don't you?'

'I know she was a drug-addict, and that she died when Nathan was sixteen.'

'Is that all he's told you?'

'I . . . I know she never married Nathan's father. . . '

Damian chuckled darkly. 'My dear, she didn't even know who Nathan's father *was*, from what I've heard.'

'Who have you *heard* these things from?' she gasped.

'From a reliable source, I can assure you.'

'Are. . . are you talking about Lenore?'

'No.'

'Who, then?'

'Does it matter?'

'I think it does, if you expect me to believe you.'

'I see. . . Well, I certainly do expect you to believe me, Gemma my sweet. In fact, I'm counting on it.' He picked up his coffee and took a sip, holding her gaze over the rim of the cup. 'Irene told me.'

'I . . . Irene?' Shock made Gemma sound vague.

'You "don't know who I'm talking about?" Damian seemed surprised. 'Goodness, the Whitmore clan has certainly kept you in the dark, haven't they?'

'Of course I know who Irene was,' Gemma bit out. 'She was Byron's wife.'

'And my half-sister.'

'Oh. Oh, yes, I forgot.'

'So have most people, but Irene and I always did have a certain. . . rapport. Mother never could stand her, and neither could Celeste. Frankly, she was an incredible bitch with them, but she was always a sweetie to me. I could understand her, you see. Maybe we shared some similar genes from dear old Papa.'

When Damian stopped for a moment, his face deep in thought, Gemma also fell silent, her thoughts revolving. She was quite intrigued by these revelations about the woman who would have been her mother-in-law, had she not been accidentally killed in a boating accident last year. But no one around Bellevue ever spoke of Irene Whitmore, except very briefly in passing and not at all kindly.

'Irene always told me everything,' Damian continued after sipping some more coffee. 'Believe me when I say I know a hell of a lot about your beloved Nathan.'

'From Irene's point of view, you mean,' Gemma inserted with another sharp frown. 'Let's face it, Damian, from what I've heard, Irene was not the nicest person in the world. Ava told me she could be very jealous and vindictive.'

'Ava *would*,' he laughed drily. 'Poor old Ava! Still. . . she's quite right, to a degree. Irene *was* given to moments of vengeance: some called for, some not. But she loved that bastard Byron Whitmore, and didn't deserve to be kicked in the guts the way he kicked her. I don't blame her one bit for going to bed with his golden-haired boy.'

Gemma stared at him, her face paling.

'Have I shocked you again?' he said in a darkly dry voice. 'Poor Gemma. . . you really don't know anything, do you? Hasn't anyone told you of your Nathan's ingrained penchant for older women? When Byron found him after his mother's death, he was the live-in lover of some ancient old actress who boasted openly of her young lover's sexual prowess and stamina.'

Gemma's hand lifted to her clammy forehead as Damian droned on and on. She could hear what he was saying, but the room seemed to be receding, her stomach rolling over and over.

'Given Byron's adultery with a certain relative of Irene's who shall remain nameless, who could blame her for having a little fling with the gorgeous young Nathan? He .was, as I've already explained, well trained in meeting the needs of more mature ladies. Irene certainly gave him a ten when she was telling me all about their sneaky nocturnal romps.'

Damian watched a green-gilled Gemma race for the ladies' room, knowing that he'd just delayed his chances of any imminent seduction in favour of a more immediate pleasure. But how he'd adored seeing those innocent eyes widen with revulsion and horror. And who knew? Perhaps his revelations might achieve the other end as well? Maybe they would give her the impetus to leave that bastard. If she crossed that high moral line he pretended to live by.

I'll offer her a position in one of our stores, Damian planned. And accommodation in one of the many blocks of units Campbell's own. At a reduced rent, of course. Something she can afford but which won't make her suspicious of my intentions. A girl not long left Lightning Ridge wouldn't have any idea of the rents in Sydney.

All might not be lost after all, he mused as he watched her come back to the table, white-faced and shaken.

'I . . . I can't stay,' she blurted out. 'I just can't. . . '

He picked up one of her limp hands, holding it fast against her rather weak struggle to free herself. 'Yes, you can,' he said firmly. 'You can do anything you want to do. You are a beautiful person, Gemma. And a good one. You deserve better than the life you're living. Get out before it destroys you, before *Whitmore* destroys you!'

She wrenched her hand away, snatched up her bag and bolted for the door, not looking back.

Damian's sigh was frustrated. Perhaps he'd overplayed his hand. Laid it on too thick. It was always difficult to know how far to carry a lie.

Not that everything he'd said was a lie. Not by a long shot. Nathan Whitmore was a corrupt bastard all right. And a cruel one. What he'd done to Irene had been unforgivable. Blackmail was the lowest of the low. Even he had never stooped to such tactics.

Though it could have a certain appeal in certain circumstances. Yes, he would give the matter some further thought. . .

'Has the lady left already, sir?' the pretty waitress asked huskily. 'She didn't drink her coffee.'

Damian looked up and into her eager blue eyes.

Not much of a challenge. But the encounter with the delectable Gemma had aroused him. Besides, the thought of going back to that bloody office this afternoon was untenable. Celeste was in a foul mood, and he wasn't exactly in her good books since she'd found out about his bribing those Japanese tour guides. But dammit, he had to get some extra money somehow. He'd had a dreadful run at poker lately.

Yes, there were plenty of better ways to spend the afternoon than putting up with his bitch of a sister hauling him over the coals again, or asking him about that stupid opal she'd bought. How would *he* know how, when, where and why the damned thing had turned up again?

Focusing his magnetic black eyes upon the waitress, he flashed her a winning smile. 'What time do you finish here, darlin'?'

CHAPTER SEVEN

AVA was still in a daze of delight when the telephone rang. Vince had not long left, after spending the entire day looking after her every whim and want, yet still completing the lawns and edges. His promise to call her the following day and let her know about Giuseppe's proposed visit on the Friday evening had still been ringing in her ears when the cook arrived to prepare the evening meal. The woman had given Ava a frowning look when she'd asked her what she wanted cooked that evening and Ava had said, 'Any old thing. I'm really not hungry.'

Ava had ignored the woman's mutterings and was swanning up the stairs when the jangling sound of the telephone had cut into her rampant fantasies about her blossoming romance with the most gorgeous, sexiest, sweetest, kindest man who ever drew breath.

'Damn and blast,' she muttered irritably, hating having to abandon the mental image of Vince partnering her to next year's opal ball. She'd be divinely slim and svelte by then —in her mind —wearing a figure-hugging black gown and quite taking everyone's breath away with her slender elegance and astonishingly handsome companion.

The imaginary scenario dismissed, Ava had a moment of dithering as she tried to make up her mind whether to go back downstairs to the extension in the foyer or to keep on going to the one in the upstairs hall. Further irritation descended with the unpalatable realisation that such a simple decision was rattling her. Even her making up her mind to keep going upstairs didn't make her feel any better.

Did someone as weak-willed as herself possess the fortitude and stick-at-it-ness to put into action all these new resolutions Vince had sparked in her today — exercises to be done, paintings to be finished, classes to be taken?

'And carpet to be put on these infernal stairs!' she grumbled aloud when her foot almost shot out from under her on the top step. Frustration launched her into potentially reckless strides which brought her with surprisingly safe

swiftness down the corridor to the hall telephone. Glaring at the nuisance of a thing, she snatched the receiver up to her ear. 'Yes?'

'Ava?' The female voice on the other end sounded very unsure.

'Yes," Ava snapped. 'Who is this?'

'It's —er —Gemma. Have I caught you at a bad time?'

Guilt consumed Ava. What was wrong with her, snapping like that? Gemma must think she was dreadfully rude. But with her forcible return to reality, Ava had had to face that her silly dreams about Vince were just that: dreams. They would never come true. And this time, reality had made her angry as well as depressed.

'I'm sorry, Gemma,' she apologised. 'I didn't mean to bite your head off. I . . .I'm a bit off today. I —er — fell over this morning on the back terrace and cut my head open. Isn't that just like me?'

'Oh, dear, that sounds nasty. Are you all right? Did you get the doctor? Would you like me to come over? I've just got home from work and Nathan's not home yet but I could quite easily leave him a note and drive over.'

Ava's guilt increased, if anything. She hadn't been trying to gain sympathy by telling Gemma about her mishap, just trying to find an excuse for her bad manners. But what a sweetie that girl was. She'd endeared herself to everyone at Bellevue from the first moment she'd set foot in the place. Never had Ava known such a kind, generous, soft-hearted girl. She was far too good for the likes of Nathan!

'No, no,' she blurted out. 'I wouldn't dream of making you come all this way when you've just got home from work. I'm fine. Really. It didn't even need stitches. I'm just mad at myself for being so clumsy all the time. But what about you, Gemma? You don't usually telephone for nothing. Is there something wrong?'

'Oh —er —not really. I . . .urn. . .I wanted to ask you a few things, but if you're not feeling well then I think perhaps I . . .I —'

'I'm feeling perfectly well,' Ava cut in firmly. 'You'll make me feel terrible if you hang up without asking me what you wanted to ask me. I'll worry and you wouldn't want that, would you?'

'No. .

'Ask away, then.'

'It's rather awkward, really. . .'

Ava knew she was not the most intuitive person when it came to tuning into other people's emotions. She'd lived her life far too much as a dreamy outsider. But suddenly, Gemma's smothered distress communicated itself to her and her chest tightened with instant concern. Yet oddly enough, she felt flattered too. Someone was turning to her for advice, and help. She determined to do her very best to soothe this sweet girl's fears, if she could.

'It's about Nathan,' Gemma went on hesitantly.

Well, of course it was, Ava thought ruefully. She should have realised that immediately.

'And. . .and Irene. . .'

Ava blinked her shock. Nathan and *Irene*! Good God, did the girl mean what she thought she meant?

'I. . .I'm not sure I understand what you mean,' she said, hoping against hope she was getting the wrong vibes here.

'Please, Ava, I don't want you to protect me from the awful truth. Someone told me today that Nathan and Irene were once lovers. I was hoping you might be able to tell me if it's true or not. Please tell me if you do. It. . .it's important.'

'Good lord, Gemma, I. . .I'm speechless! Nathan and Irene. . .*lovers*! Whoever said such a scandalous thing to you?'

'Never mind who said it. Is it *true*? You once told me that Nathan had bewitched every woman at Bellevue at one time or another. Just who were you referring to?'

'Heavens. I was exaggerating! I didn't mean literally even one. A few of our cleaners over the years have gone ga-ga over him. I myself developed a schoolgirl crush at one time. And so did Jade.'

'I know about Jade.'

Do you? Ava wondered, her very good memory providing a picture of a half-naked Jade in Nathan's arms by the pool less than a year ago. Still, that was before Nathan had met Gemma. To give the man credit, he did seem to be crazy about his young wife, as she was crazy about him.

'It's Nathan's relationship with Irene that concerns me,' Gemma added tautly.

'Then let me assure you it was a very cool one. Irene and Nathan barely tolerated each other at best. Irene barely tolerated *most* people.'

'I see. . . Then you have no evidence or suspicions that anything of a sexual nature happened between Nathan and Irene? I'm talking about not long after Nathan came to live with you all at Bellevue, when he was quite young.'

'I've never heard of anything so disgusting!' Not that Nathan wasn't capable of having an affair with an older woman, Ava conceded with a silent ruefulness. She'd long known about his being the live-in lover of some actress in her forties when he'd been barely seventeen.

But he hadn't had an affair with Irene. She was sure of it. Irene had, if anything, always been a little afraid of Nathan, who had a way of looking at you back then that was quite frightening. Byron used to excuse his protegee's remote coldness as perfectly normal for a lad of his background. And maybe he had been right. But Ava herself had often felt uneasy in his presence. There were dark layers to Nathan's character that she believed no one had ever seen, which was perhaps just as well.

But nothing would be served by telling Gemma that.

Gemma had asked if she had any hard evidence of Irene and Nathan being lovers and that was the question she was answering.

'It's a lie,' she said convincingly. 'Truly, Gemma, I'm shocked that anyone would even suggest such a thing. Who is making such a scurrilous claim?'

'I . . . I can't tell you that.'

'Why not?'

'I just can't,' the girl said in such a wretched voice that Ava became very worried. Who could it be?

An inspiration struck. Could Irene have told this vicious lie to someone at some stage in order to make trouble? Irene had hated seeing anyone happy. Had she perhaps told Lenore while she was still married to Nathan, thereby putting the nail into the coffin of that already rocky relationship? But if that was so, what on earth was Lenore doing telling Gemma? Surely she wasn't trying to get Nathan back, was she? She didn't love him. No, that couldn't be it. Who, then?

Anger at this malicious snake in the grass fuelled Ava to speak sternly.

'Don't believe anything Irene might have told anyone, Gemma. That woman couldn't lie straight in bed at night. She was evil. *Evil*, I tell you!'

'I see,' Gemma said, still sounding upset. 'But just say it *did* happen. I mean. . . if Nathan did go to bed with her, it probably wasn't his fault. He. . . he was very young at the time, with Irene the older party. If the situation was reversed, and it was a man with a much younger adopted daughter, then people would blame him, wouldn't they? They wouldn't blame the girl. . . '

Ava's heart went out to Gemma. Oh, how that girl loved that man. Why, she was prepared to forgive him *anything*! But she shouldn't have to forgive something that hadn't happened.

'Gemma,' Ava advised firmly, 'you have to forget what this person has told you. I can assure you that it is not true! I can only think that he or she is

trying to make trouble between you and Nathan, for whatever reason. And I certainly wouldn't be bringing this matter up with Nathan. He'll only deny it, and rightly so. But where would that leave you? He'd be furious to think you'd been discussing him behind his back. You know what he's like.'

'Yes,' Gemma sighed. 'I do. . .'

Ava frowned. 'Aren't you happy with him, dear?'

She found Gemma's reluctance to answer very telling. So that was how the land was lying, was it? Well she couldn't say she was surprised. Good husband material Nathan wasn't. It just showed you that all the good looks and sex appeal in the world couldn't make up for other things.

Ava stiffened slightly when her mind unexpectedly filled with an image of Vince. Now why, she asked herself, would thinking about Nathan make her think of Vince? They were not at all alike. Vince wasn't just a good-looking hunk. He was a genuinely warm-hearted and decent man. He and Nathan were as different as chalk and cheese.

'Marriage is never easy, Gemma,' she said, not from experience but from observation.

Gemma laughed. 'Oh, I know that, Ava. *Now*. Yet I thought when I married Nathan that all my dreams had come true.'

'And it's more like a nightmare?'

'I wouldn't go that far. . .'

Much as I'm not your husband's biggest fan, Gemma, I think there's much in his past to explain the man he is today. That mother of his was a shocker, from what I've heard.'

'Yes, I realise that,' the girl sighed, 'I just wish he'd tell me about his past himself. . .'

Ava didn't think Nathan was ever going to do that.

'I . . I love my husband very much,' Gemma went on, a catch in her voice, 'but I think he has a lot of problems he has never faced.'

Ava had to agree. 'Men have great difficulty facing their shortcomings, my dear. Be patient. Nathan is not all bad. If anyone can teach Nathan to love, it's you.'

'I hope so, Ava. Anyway, thank you for giving me what I think is some very good advice. I'll try to be more patient and understanding.'

'Thank you for asking me. Not too many people ask silly old Ava for anything.'

'You're not silly or old at all!'

Ava smiled at how surprised Gemma sounded at her own words.

'Er —how are things going with the housekeeping?'

'I have my ups and downs. Literally,' she added drily.

Gemma laughed. 'Oh, you *are* funny.'

'Funny? *Me?*'

'Yes. You have a delightfully dry sense of humour. I must go Nathan's just come in. Look after yourself, and thank you again.'

Gemma replaced the receiver and looked up, staring straight into a pair of beautiful but cool grey eyes.

'Who were you talking to?'

Gemma tried not to bristle, but did Nathan have to sound so suspicious?

'Ava.' came her succinct reply.

'Ava? And you think she has a delightfully dry sense of humour? Come on, now. Who were you *really* talking to?'

Gemma clenched her teeth hard in her jaw. It was one thing to promise patience, another to practise it.

'I was talking to Ava. If you don't believe me, call Bellevue and ask her yourself.'

He kept surveying her in that same cool fashion, his face not betraying any of the frustration she knew must be bubbling over in hers. But she did so wish he wouldn't do things like this. All her earlier sympathy and understanding was vanishing in the face of his unjust suspicion.

'I believe you, darling. Is there any reason I shouldn't?' He turned away and strode across the foyer into the living-room. 'It's just that it's not like Ava to ring,' he threw back over his shoulder as he continued on over to the bar. 'Is there anything wrong at Bellevue?'

'She had a fall today.'

'God, not another one. Is she hurt?'

Gemma hovered in the open doorway, anxious now to escape Nathan and any further inquisition. 'She pretended she wasn't. Look, I must —'

'Did she want you to go over?' Nathan cut in.

'No.'

Then why did she ring?'

Gemma sighed. 'Just to talk.'

Nathan's glance was sardonic. 'Ava never does. She spends her whole life in that fantasy world of hers.'

The family's attitude to Ava had long irked Gemma.

'Well, if she does, then who could blame her?' she snapped. 'Byron puts her down all the time and you're not much better. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Ava's a nice lady, and not at all as stupid as you make her out to be. Byron is particularly patronising. Look at the way he made her feel small about that mistake over the catering at Jade's wedding. It wasn't all Ava's fault yet she got the total blame. One day, she'll rebel and shock the life out of all you Whitmores, you wait and see!'

'You're a Whitmore too,' Nathan said wryly. Or had you forgotten?'

She glared at him across the room. 'Am I supposed to read some hidden meaning in that remark?'

'Not at all.' His face was bland as he picked up his drink. 'Can I get you something to drink? You look like you could do with one.' 'No, thanks. I was just about to run myself a bath.' 'What a good idea. You certainly need something to relax you. You're very uptight. Ava's little chat doesn't seem to have put you in a very good mood.'

Gemma swung away before she made another revealing retort. She hurried into her bedroom where she stripped off her jacket and dress, muttering while she hung them up in her wardrobe. Why did he have to make that sort of double-meaning remark all the time? Why did he have to make it *obvious* he didn't trust her any more? What had she ever done to inspire a lack of trust in her love?

The memory of her meeting with Damian Campbell at lunch today slid into her mind and she bit her bottom lip. Nathan would not believe that she'd run into him by accident. Even if he did, he would still be furious with her for having stayed and listened to what Damian had to say.

God, she wished she hadn't. She'd been terribly upset for the rest of the day, finding it hard to concentrate at work. Her phone call to Ava had been made out of desperation to find someone who could deny Damian's appalling claim about Nathan and Irene. To be honest, Ava had surprised her with her firmness and sound advice. The woman was not at all the absent-minded eccentric she'd imagined her to be.

But despite Ava's reassurances, there still lurked within Gemma's mind the slim possibility that Nathan might have been seduced by Irene. As for his having openly lived with some woman old enough to be his mother. . . Gemma found that thought both repulsive and disturbing.

'Mmm. Nice slip, that.'

Gemma whirled to find Nathan leaning against the doorjamb, lazily surveying her body in its ivory satin petticoat. He lifted his drink to his lips, his narrowed gaze continuing to take in the curves of her womanly body as he emptied the glass.

Gemma swallowed, not wanting Nathan to start anything with her right now. She was still having #trouble dealing with what she'd found out about him today.

'You've lost weight lately,' he remarked as he continued his slow appraisal of her body. 'Aren't you eating properly during the day?'

She flushed guiltily at the reminder that she'd had no lunch at all that day. 'I. . .I thought I could do with losing a few pounds.'

'Don't.'

'Don't what?' she countered sharply. 'Don't think?'

'No, don't lose any more weight. In fact, I want you to put some back on. I liked you the way you were.'

'Yes, sir. I'll get to it right away.'

She could feel his eyes upon her a? she kicked off her shoes and started to roll down her tights.

'Are you spoiling for a fight, Gemma?'

'No, of course not,' she muttered, recalling how their arguing always ended the same way lately, with Nathan intent on proving that there was one area

where she never argued with him. That was the last thing she wanted. 'It's. . .it's been a long day,' she went on, not looking up. 'We're short-staffed at the shop and every man and his dog seemed to want to not only buy opals today but to see everything we had in the place.'

'Poor darling. . . Maybe you'll need someone to wash your back for you, if you're that tired. . .and a glass of your favourite wine. I'll go and get you some.'

Gemma's head jerked up, her mouth opening to protest, but Nathan was gone. Groaning, she went into the bathroom, put in the plug, turned on the water and poured in a whole stack of bubble-bath. If she had to endure Nathan coming in while she was naked in the bath, she was going to make sure he couldn't see a thing. Stripping off, she lowered herself carefully into the rising water and was well covered by rapidly, multiplying bubbles when Nathan showed up with a tall glass of chilled Riesling.

'Thank you.' she said as he handed it over. 'Don't worry about my back. I'm going to soak.'

'So I see." He leant back on the corner vanity, arms crossed. 'Are you all set for your trip back to Lightning Ridge?'

Gemma found herself growing tenser by the second. 'I've booked the flights. And I've written to Ma.'

'You haven't got you hopes up, have you? You do realise you probably won't find out anything.'

'Yes, but I have to try. And I'm going to keep trying,' she insisted.

'You're wasting your-time,' he muttered. 'Just as I'm also wasting mine in here. I think I'll go order us some food from our favourite Thai restaurant. Clearly you're too tired for anything tonight, even cooking.' And he stalked from the room.

Gemma didn't know whether to feel relieved, or perturbed. Nathan was like a pendulum. Push him and he invariably came back to knock one off one's feet. Gemma had a feeling that she might have just pushed a little too hard.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AVA said not a single word to Byron that Wednesday night about either her fall or Vince, knowing both subjects would inspire critical and condescending comments that she just didn't want to hear. When she combed her hair with a fringe, it completely covered the cut, so there was nothing to notice. Not that her brother ever really looked at her. He did say grudgingly in passing that the new man seemed to have done a good job with the lawns, then was unflatteringly surprised to find that his suit had been collected from the dry cleaners.

AVA was content to spend the evening quietly with her memories of the most remarkable day she had ever spent. Not to mention the most remarkable man.

If it hadn't been for Vince's promise to bring his art- teacher friend by in a couple of days, Ava would have swiftly slotted Vince into the section of her mind reserved for fantasy men. But his impending visit on the following Friday night kept him right in the realms of real live men.

And real live men had real live eyes, she was forced to accept by the time she went to bed. Her meagre weight loss of late had not transformed her from an ugly duckling into a graceful swan. She had a long way to go before she would be really pleased with what she saw in her mirror. But dammit, she aimed to give it her best shot this time. Not with a silly crash diet either. That never worked. She had to tackle her weight problem another way.

Ava fell off to sleep that night full of determination, waking the next morning with her new optimism still intact. As soon as Byron went to work, she was down in his gym, working out on just about everything she could manage. A few minutes on the exercise bike, then on the step walking machine, then on the trampoline. She even did some chest and leg presses. If it had been warmer, she might have jumped into the pool for a few laps. But it wasn't. Not that the pool was in a fit state to be swum in. That was another of the jobs that had to be seen to before too long.

Ava felt so exhilarated after her hour of exercises that she went through the housework like a whiz, *and* without knocking into a thing. Breakfast was a

sensible plate of muesli with fresh fruit, followed by black coffee and no sugar. She winced at the bitter taste but drank it anyway, telling herself she would get used to it in time. Ten-thirty saw her about to dash out to visit her favourite boutique for fatties when the telephone rang. Normally, she regarded the intrusive sound with irritation, but this time, she raced to answer it with a suddenly fluttering heart.

It might be Vince. He'd promised to ring some time today.

But it wasn't Vince. It was Nathan.

'Hi, there, Ava,' he said in that smoothly elegant voice of his. 'I wanted to find out if you were all right.'

'All right?' she repeated blankly, thrown by Nathan telephoning her. He'd never done so before.

'Didn't you have an accident yesterday? Wasn't it you on the telephone to Gemma when I came home last night?'

'Yes. . .yes, that was me. And yes, I did have a small fall.'

'Gemma and I were concerned about you, love. We would have come over if you'd needed us, you know.'

Ava was at a loss for words. This wasn't like Nathan at all. She wondered if she'd missed something along the line.

'Ava? Are you still there?'

'Yes, Nathan. I guess I'm a bit speechless. I'm not used to the male members of my family making solicitous phone calls, or enquiring about my well-being.'

Nathan laughed. 'Gemma said you had a dry sense of humour. I'm beginning to see what she means.'

'Gemma is sweet.'

'Not like her husband, eh?' he drawled.

'You *can* be nice, Nathan. When it suits your purposes.'

'How calculating you make me sound.'

'If the cap fits. . .'

There was a short sharp silence, during which Ava had a few moments to ponder this surprising new side of herself. Normally, she would never dare to speak to anyone like this, let alone Nathan. What was happening to her?

'You've never liked me much, have you?' he finally said in his usual cool fashion.

Not true, Ava thought. There was a time when I was madly infatuated with you. But that was a long, long time ago.

'It's hard to like someone you don't really know.'

'You know me pretty well.'

'No one knows you, Nathan.'

His low chuckle sounded bitter. 'My, my, now you've really surprised me, Ava. You have hidden depths.'

'Not as hidden as yours.'

She heard him suck in a sharp breath, but when he spoke again, his voice was chilling. 'I think we might leave this conversation-right there, Ava. Clearly your bang on the head hasn't in any way impaired your brain-power. Though perhaps a word of warning might be in order. . .

'Don't ever presume to meddle in my affairs, especially my relationship with Gemma. I wouldn't like you to think you would tell her anything that might be misconstrued. Do I make myself clear?'

'Are you threatening me, Nathan?' Ava was astonished to find that her voice was quite calm, even though her heart was beating madly.

'Advising you, that's all.'

'Then let me give you a piece of return advice. I've had it up to my ears with other people telling me what to think and say and do. I will do as I please from now on. Do *I* make myself clear?'

She hung up before he could say another word. And even though she was trembling from head to toe Ava felt highly satisfied with herself. Finally, she hadn't quivered in her boots when someone had shot at her. She'd shot right back, and done it with style!

Yet once her sense of personal triumph faded, Ava was left worrying about Gemma. That marriage was doomed, as any marriage to Nathan was doomed.

Ava might have brooded over Nathan and his marriage to Gemma for ages if the telephone hadn't rung again. Nevertheless, her hand reached to lift down the receiver in a somewhat distracted fashion and her 'hello' was a mite vague.

'Is that the answer of a confident, up-and-coming artist?' demanded a gruff male voice.

'Vince!'

'Right in one. How's the head this morning?'

'Oh —er. . .' For a second she was tempted to claim a splitting headache. It would be nice to hear soothing sympathetic words, to have Vince fussing over her again, even if it was only over the telephone. But a deeply ingrained honesty waylaid her before her tongue could put the temptation into action.

'It's fine,' she said with a sigh.

'Are you sure? You're not just saying that?'

She laughed. 'No, Vince, I'm definitely not just saying that.'

'In that case why aren't you up there in that studio of yours, finishing some of those paintings?'

'Goodness, what a slave-driver you are!'

'Well, you don't become successful in life sitting on your bum. Up and at it, Ava. When I get there tomorrow night, I want to see at least my painting finished and ready for framing. You know the one I mean. I want to buy that one.'

'You want to *buy* it?'

How else am I going to get it? I wouldn't expect you to give it to me for nothing. Or isn't it for sale?'

'I . . . I hadn't thought about it. I guess it is.'

'Good. How much?'

'How much? I . . . I have no idea. How much do you think it's worth?'

'Good God, woman, is that any way to get a fair price for your pain, sweat and tears? Look, how about you ask Giuseppe to put a price on it and I'll pay whatever he says it's worth. Fair enough?'

'He'll probably say it's worth nothing,' she muttered. But I don't understand, Vince. Won't you be here when Giuseppe's here?'

'Afraid not. He refuses to look at an artist's work at night. So he's dropping by Friday afternoon instead, if that's all right with you.'

'Yes, of course it is,' she said with much more confidence than she was feeling at showing her work to an expert. He'd probably take one look at her paintings and want to throw up.

'Good. Can't stay and chat. I'm ringing you from my car phone and I'm just turning into the building site now.'

'What building site?'

'The one I'm working on at the moment. I'll see you tomorrow night around seven. That's not too early, is it?'

'Seven will be fine.' she said, her heart fluttering when she suddenly realised she would be alone with him again.

'You're very accommodating, do you know that? But I like it. See you then, Ava, and promise me you won't go running down those damned stairs.'

'I promise.'

'Have you ordered the carpet yet?'

'No.'

'Do it today.'

'Yes, Vince.'

Bye. See you tomorrow night.'

'Bye, Vince, and. . .thanks. . .'

He didn't hear her thanks because he'd already hung up. Ava took some time to hang up herself. It was as though by keeping the telephone to her ear she might pick up some lingering vibrations of Vince's amazing energy and drive. His enthusiasm and confidence were catching when she was actually talking to him, but as soon as she hung up the old insecure Ava raised her ugly head again. Her head began spinning with all she had to do that day. There were clothes to buy, paintings to finish, carpet to order, more exercises to be done, fat-free dinner menus to plan. . .

She took a revitalising breath then picked up her car keys and headed for the garages. One step at a time, Ava, she kept telling herself. One step at a time.

The following morning —Friday —Ava could hardly take even one step. She woke to find that every muscle in her body had seized up, like an old car engine without any oil. Getting out of bed was agony. In the end she rolled out, groaning aloud as she put her full weight on to knees that refused to straighten.

A long Radox bath achieved a measure of mobility, as did some gentle stretching. By mid-morning, Ava felt almost human. A representative from the carpet manufacturer she'd contacted the previous day came in person to show her a wide selection of samples. She picked one, a subtle grey, not the royal blue Vince had suggested, telling the man that she would place the order on the following Monday after her handyman told her how much she would need.

Of course, she would eventually have to mention what she was doing to Byron —even Melanie would not have installed new carpet without consulting him — but she would put off the inevitable for a few days yet. If the worst came to the worst, and he vetoed carpet on the stairs, she would use it to carpet her studio. She was rather fed up with the polished floor in there too.

Friday noon saw her sitting at her easel, staring at the painting Vince had so admired. A few dabs of sky in one corner and it would be finished. The paint was mixed, her brush was ready, but every time the brush approached the picture-her hand began to shake. It was incredible!

Finally, she had no choice but to put the brush down and abandon the idea. Vince would be so mad with her, but better not to finish it than ruin it completely. Maybe she was suffering from a crisis in confidence. Maybe she was nervous about what this Giuseppe person was going to say about her work. A real artist would surely see faults Vince would not even begin to see. There again, perhaps her nerves had nothing to do with her painting. Perhaps they were due to the prospect of seeing Vince again that night, but for undeniably the last time.

For what was to keep him coming back after tonight? Absolutely nothing. Men like him didn't date women like herself, no matter how accommodating they were, she thought bitterly. Or how hard they worked to make • themselves look as good as they could.

Her mind turned to the new outfit she'd purchased yesterday, a silk trouser suit in a bronze colour. The loose-legged culottes and cleverly cut jacket top flattered her figure, the colour complementing her golden- blonde hair colour. She'd also purchased drop earrings in the same gold that rimmed the self-covered buttons of the jacket, as well as low-heeled bronze shoes. Most of this month's allowance had been reduced to zero in one fell swoop.

Still, it had been worth it if she could face Vince tonight looking as good as she possibly could. She'd need all the confidence she could muster, Ava reckoned, after Giuseppe's visit this afternoon. Lord, whatever had possessed her to put her so-called talent on the line like this?

Seven-twenty that night saw a primped, preened and perfumed Ava sitting stiffly in an armchair in the family- room, her eyes on the flickering television screen but her ears straining to hear the sounds of a car arriving on the gravel driveway. She'd deliberately turned the volume down so that she could hear more easily. Minutes ticked away, her tension increasing with each silent second, dismay only a heartbeat away. Was he simply late, or had he decided not to come? Surely he would have rung if he couldn't make it? Surely he. . .?

What was that?

A shudder of relief reverberated through Ava as she recognised the crunching of a vehicle coming to a halt outside the front steps. She jumped up and began to run, stopping only when she encountered the slippery marble on the foyer floor. The prospect of sliding on her bottom over to the front door filled her with horror. But it was her sudden vision of her flushed, excited face in the mirror on the wall that really brought her up with a jolt.

Get a hold of yourself, you stupid fool. Where is your pride? Since Vince has been kind enough to come back a second time, the least you can do is present yourself with some dignity, not like some flustered over-exuberant schoolgirl.

Tempering her face into what she hoped was an elegantly cool expression, Ava had just enough time for her galloping pulse-rate to calm to a respectable trot when the front doorbell rang. Swallowing down the last persistent symptom of her nerves, she walked regally over to the front door, opening it with what she hoped was a smooth flourish.

'Sorry I'm late, Ava;' Vince said as he strode in, a frustrated scowl on his handsome face. 'I had a small problem with my car, which meant I had to drive one of the trucks.' He waved an impatient hand at the battered utility parked in front of the house. 'Damned thing ran out of petrol in the middle of the Pacific Highway. I'm going to kill whatever brother of mine is responsible when I get home.'

'But isn't it your fault if your car ran out of petrol?' Ava asked, rather confused by his outburst.

'It wasn't *my* car that ran out of petrol!' he explained frustratedly. 'One of my brothers borrowed that for the night. Probably Marc, now that I come to think of it. Presumably to impress the latest fluffy-headed female he's taking out. That boy has no taste! Naturally, with a hot date on his mind, he wouldn't have had his brain in gear when he finished for the day and 'forgot to fill up the petrol tanks as he's supposed to at the end of the week in readiness for the following Monday.'

Vince pushed up the sleeves of the black sweatshirt he was wearing and propped his hands on his hips, drawing Ava's gaze to his jeans-clad legs. Not the same tight blue ones he was wearing the other day. These were a faded grey, but just as tight.

'Once I realised my car was missing,' he grumbled, 'and I was running late, I just jumped into the first vehicle I could find and took off, not looking at the gauge. I nearly blew a gasket when it put-putted to a stop in the middle of an intersection.'

'So I can see. But all's well that ends well, Vince. You're here safe and sound and you're not too late, so calm down,' she soothed. 'It's not worth getting so het up about, is it?'

Vince glared at her for a moment, before a wry smile tugged at his lovely mouth. 'You're so right, Ava. I guess I'm a bit stressed out tonight. Today's been hell at work and I was worried that you might think I wasn't coming. So tell me. . .what did Giuseppe say?'

Ava's lips began to twitch with a sudden unexpected sense of mischief. 'Well, first of all he wanted to know why you hadn't told him what a fine-looking woman I was. . . '

That randy old devil! I knew I shouldn't have let him come here without me!'

'And then he asked me if I'd be interested in modelling for his anatomy classes. . . '

'Good God, is there no stopping that man? You do realise his models pose in the nude, don't you? What did you tell him?'

Ava's laughter was incredulous. 'No, of course.'

'Thank God for that. Can't have you posing nude.'

Ava bristled. 'And why not, pray tell?'

'Why not? What do you mean, why not? Because I'd worry my guts out about you, that's why not! Who knows what one of those male students might do after ogling you all night? You might get crudely propositioned, or raped, or worse!'

'Oh, truly, Vince,' she dismissed scornfully. 'Do you really think some man is going to go into a lust-induced rampage after seeing me in the nude?'

Those beautiful brown eyes of his blazed with angry lights as they raked over her. 'Why not? As Giuseppe said, you're a damned fine-looking woman. Don't underestimate your attractions, Ava. There's a lot of men out

there who like a well-rounded female. Italians are especially partial to voluptuous curves.'

Maybe so, but not the one standing in front of me.

His sudden grin distracted her from imminent depression. 'Look, why are we arguing about a hypothetical situation? You've already said no to the modelling offer. What I want to know now is what Giuseppe said about your *paintings!*'

Ava's soul flooded with the same emotion she'd felt when Giuseppe had pronounced his considered opinion.

'Oh, that. . .'

She turned away to close the front door, only turning back to face Vince when the hot wave of remembered pleasure was firmly under control. The temptation to grin fatuously was incredibly strong. Instead, she looked Vince straight in the eye and smiled an under-' stated smile.

'He loved them. He wants to give me an exhibition.'

CHAPTER NINE '

AVA had anticipated that Vince would be pleased. Giuseppe's opinion had, after all, validated his own. Men always liked to be proven right. What she hadn't anticipated was that his pleasure would take such a physical expression. Clearly, she had underestimated his Italian heritage and the highly emotional and demonstrative nature it had planted firmly within his macho body.

'I knew it!' he exclaimed, and, with an excited whoop, picked her up bodily and whirled her around the foyer, which was thankfully spacious or they might have come to a sticky end. By the time he finished the whirling around by planting her down and giving her a bear-hug, Ava was left extremely breathless and just a little on the warm side.

'What fantastic news!' He pulled back from the hug to grin down at her, his large hands still curled around her upper arms. 'And what am I up for to buy my painting? What has that old rogue demanded that I pay?'

"Nothing," she said, her voice a little shaky.

Vince's hands dropped away and Ava breathed a sigh of relief.

'Nothing!' That doesn't make any sense! Giuseppe's no fool. If he wants to give you an exhibition it's because he thinks you're going to be very successful, especially in a commercial sense. People will want to buy your paintings in droves, Ava. You can count on it.'

Ava found herself flushing with pleasure. How wonderful it was to have people believe in you, she realised. And what a difference it made to one's confidence. After Giuseppe had left she'd sat right down and finished the painting Vince especially liked, then gained nothing but total satisfaction from looking at it. All those imagined faults had been just that. Imagined.

'If I am ever successful, Vince. . .' she began.

'When you're successful, Ava,' he corrected. 'There is no if about it.'

She smiled her surrender to his single-minded confidence. 'OK. *When* I'm successful, I'll always remember who started me on my way. None of this would ever have happened without you.'

'Rubbish!' he denied, though she thought he looked pleased by her words.

'You don't know what your faith and support has meant to me. I would never have had the courage to show anyone my work on my own. Which is why I didn't ask Giuseppe to put a price on your painting. I want to give it to you, as a token of my gratitude. Please. . .don't say no. . .'

Ava choked up at this point. Perhaps because of all that had happened to her today, or because her offer had the sounds of goodbye attached. She wasn't sure which. But the renewed realisation that their friendship was swiftly drawing to an end might have had something to do with the lump filling her throat.

'I wouldn't dream of saying no,' Vince said with gentle softness, bending to press a tender but totally unloverlike kiss on her forehead. 'Thank you, Ava. It will have pride of place in my collection.'

Ava was forced to clear her throat and to blink rapidly. 'Your. . .collection?' she asked, dragging up a blandly curious expression from somewhere.

'Yes. I've purchased something from every one of Giuseppe's student exhibitions over the past few years. I'm no expert but I know what I like. And I value Giuseppe's opinion. I have no doubt that in years to come my collection will be extremely valuable. Meanwhile, it gives me enormous pleasure.'

'I'm sure it does. Goodness, what are we doing still standing here in the foyer?' she exclaimed before she burst into tears. 'You must think me a simply dreadful hostess. Come along into the drawing-room and I'll get you a drink. Or some coffee, if you'd prefer.'

'I would prefer coffee, but not the drawing-room. That room's only fit for musical soirees. I much prefer the kitchen.'

'Whatever you say,' Ava shrugged.

'Are you going to take lessons from Giuseppe?' Vince asked on their way through the family-room.

'Definitely. He's going to teach me oils too. I've always wanted to learn oils.'

'When do you start?'

'In a couple of weeks.'

And when will the exhibition be?'

Not for quite a while. I have to finish all those paintings and do a few more, he says. Perhaps early in the New Year.*

Once they arrived in the kitchen, Ava astounded herself by being able to make coffee and talk at the same time. Normally, she needed total concentration for such tasks to be completed without mishap, though at least this time she did not have to arrange things on a tray or carry that tray anywhere. All she had to do was set up cups and saucers on the breakfast counter where Vince was already perched.

It was the rotten telephone ringing that was her undoing. Ava jumped at the sound, coffee beans spilling from the spoon she was holding. She stared down at the brown stain spreading on the white counter. Groaning, she lifted mortified eyes to Vince without thinking, her personal agony at her clumsiness there for him to see. He was off his stool in a jiffy, quickly coming round to take the still trembling spoon out of her hand.

'Isn't it just like an artist not to be house-trained!' he teased gently, already cleaning up the spill with a sponge from the sink. 'Heads in the clouds, all of them. You need someone to look after you.'

When he smiled over at her, Ava found herself staring deeply into those velvet-brown eyes, her heart squeezing tight. What a wonderfully warm person he was. Despite his claim that he'd been acting out of character last Wednesday, Ava suspected that he was always a kind-hearted man,

generous with his time and his friendship, quick to help someone out when they were in trouble or in need.

'Aren't you going to answer the phone?'

Ava flushed her embarrassment. 'Yes, of course,' she mumbled, and turned away to lift the receiver down from the wall.

'Hello,' she said tautly.

'Hi, there, Auntie.'

'Jade!'

'Don't sound so surprised!. I did say I'd ring you. About Papa's fiftieth, remember?'

'Yes. . .yes, of course. What did you decide?'

'Well, believe it or not, I've talked him into the idea of a party, after promising faithfully that it won't be too large or too formal. Kyle and I are going to have it here on our houseboat. I'll organise some buffet-style food and Kyle will have plenty of champers on hand.'

'And Byron's really agreed to this?'

'Reluctantly. I think he hates being reminded that he's fifty but we couldn't very well let his half-century go by without celebrating it, could we? Anyway, he's agreed to come and he's going to bring darling Catherine. Frankly, I'm dying to meet her.'

'You might die *after* meeting her.'

'Brrr. Do I detect a little chilliness there? What's wrong with her besides her being a snob? Is she a right bitch, is that it?'

'I think I'll let you judge for yourself on that score.'

Jade laughed. 'That's sitting on the fence, but I won't press. Now I want you —plus a partner, please, Auntie —to be here next Friday night and no arguing. If you don't know anyone you can ask, then hire yourself an escort.'

'Hire myself an *escort*?' Ava repeated in a shocked voice before remembering there were other ears in the room. "Jade, don't be ridiculous," she hissed. 'I . . .I'll just come alone.'

*Oh. Auntie. . .'

'What time do you want me there?' Ava asked crisply.

Jade sighed. 'Any time after eight will do, but really, Auntie, you're going to spoil my numbers. Everyone will be here with someone.'

'Well, that's just too bad. Since it's not a sit-down dinner, who's going to notice? Now I must go. I have a. . . ' She just bit back the word visitor and finished with ' . . .I have coffee getting cold. See you next Friday night, Jade.'

'Oh, all right,' her niece said in a dispirited voice. 'But if you can think of someone, Auntie, do please bring him.'

Ava hung up and turned a falsely bright smile Vince's way. 'Sorry about that. Family problems.'

'Yes, so I gathered. How do you take your coffee?' he asked, having busied himself while she was talking.

'Black, with no sugar.'

His glance over his shoulder was sharp. 'Didn't you take it white on Wednesday?'

'Oh —er —sometimes I take it white and sometimes I take it black.'

His narrow-eyed glance carried suspicion. 'Mmm. I hope that's right and you're not on some stupid diet.'

'I don't diet any more,' she defended staunchly. 'I've given it up.'

'Why would you ever want to diet anyway?' Vince muttered. 'As I said before you have a very attractive, womanly body. There's far too many skinny women around these days.'

Ava laughed. 'I'll bet the woman you date are all slim.'

'The woman I choose to date are all people. They have minds and personalities as well as bodies.'

He glared over at her and she glared right back. 'Sure, Vince. But I'll bet they just happen to have beautiful slim bodies as well.'

'You're a fool, Ava Whitmore,' he bit out. 'A damned fool.'

'So I've been told often enough.'

Vince winced at this, closing his eyes with a low groan. When he opened them again, their expression was disgruntled. 'Here,' he said, pushing her cup of coffee towards her. 'Thanks.'

The cup was up to her mouth when his next words were delivered, making her hand tremble uncontrollably.

'I'll take you to wherever you have to go.'

Ava lowered her coffee carefully to the counter before she spilt it all down her front.

'What's the occasion?' he went on coolly.

Ava had to admit her own voice sounded just as cool, 'but inside she was shaking. 'Byron's fiftieth birthday party. His daughter and her husband are holding it. She wants everyone to bring someone, but I . . .um. . .'

'You're between boyfriends at the moment,' Vince finished for her.

Ava stared at him. Vince knew damned well that she didn't have a boyfriend from all she'd told him on the Wednesday. OK. so she hadn't told him about her humiliation with Byron despatching all her potential admirers by calling them gold-diggers, the last one justifiably so. But she'd said enough for him to read between the lines and conclude she didn't have men friends queueing at the door to ask her out!

'Actually, I'm between girlfriends myself at the moment,' Vince elaborated casually, 'so taking you is no trouble. I know what it's like, arriving alone when you're supposed to have a partner. Damned embarrassing.'

Ava could not for the life of her imagine Vince ever being at a loss for a partner. There would have to be any number of women in his life who would jump at the chance to go out with him.

No. . .he was just playing Good Samaritan again. And this time, she couldn't bear it.

'What's wrong?' he asked sharply when she didn't answer. 'Won't I do?'

She almost laughed. But no. . .actually, he *wouldn't* do. Aside from the fact she hated being the object of pity, everyone's eyes would fall out of their heads if she walked in with someone as gorgeous as he was. Jade would presume she *had* hired him and Byron would look upon him with outright suspicion, assuming Vince had his eye on Ava's inheritance. As for the rest. . . Ava could imagine their reactions would all be somewhere between Jade's mercenary assumption and Byron's cynicism.

'I would be proud to take you *anywhere*, Vince,' she said in an emotion-charged voice. 'But that is not the issue here. The issue is that I'd rather go alone than feel you were taking me out of charity. Or pity.'

'*Pity!*' Vince exploded. 'Of all the stupid. . . pathetic. . .stubborn. . .' His hands shot out to grab Ava by the shoulders, shaking her good and proper. 'I do not take women out out of *pity!* I take them out because I like them, damn it, and don't you forget it. *Pity.* . .' His lovely mouth twisted with scorn as he dragged her against him and kissed her quite savagely, his lips ravaging hers before he released her rather roughly, leaving Ava wide-eyed and breathless.

'God, I'm sorry,' he muttered, raking agitated hands back through his hair. 'I didn't hurt you, did I? I didn't mean to do that, believe me. I don't know what came over me.'

It took Ava a few seconds to*collect herself enough to provide an answer to his confusion.

Anger.

He'd lost his temper at being accused of something he wasn't guilty of. That kiss had been an act of outrage, not passion. His kindness had been called pity and he'd reacted with typically Italian over-the-top emotion.

'No,' she said tautly. 'You didn't hurt me.' Not physically. . .

'What time shall I pick you up?'

Ava's breath caught. He really meant to go through with it* then?

'Don't give me any more lip, Ava,' Vince warned. 'I'm taking you and that's that.'

Ava's new sense of self warred with her pride. She didn't like the thought of Vince taking her simply because he'd backed himself into a corner. Neither did she like the image of herself turning up at that party alone.

'What time. Ava?'" Vince prompted curtly.

'Yes. yes. Would —er —eight be too early for you?' Byron would be long gone by then, if he had to go over and pick up Catherine at her beachside apartment at Palm Beach. He might not even come home at all after work, just go straight from the city to Palm Beach.

God, was this really happening? Was she actually going to walk into Byron's party with Vince on her arm?

'Eight will be fine,' he gruffed. 'Is this do formal or casual?'

'Dressy, but not formal. Wear a suit or a jacket.'

'Right.' He scooped up his coffee-cup and drained it. 'Now I think I'd better get out of here before I do or say something further I might regret.'

Ava was offended but tried not to show it. 'I . . . I have to get your painting for you. It's upstairs.'

'In that case I'll wait at the front door while you get it.'

'Oh. . . Very well. . . If you like. . .'

'I don't like but it's what I'm going to do.'

'Must you talk in riddles?'

'It's the fact that you think I'm talking in riddles that makes it a necessity.'

Ava threw her hands up in the air. 'You might as well be talking Greek.'

'Don't you mean Italian?'

For a second they glared at each other, till simultaneous laughter erupted from both of them.

'I don't know what I'm laughing at,' she managed at last, hugging herself.

'Neither do I,' he responded, a wry grin on his face. 'But does it matter? Life can't have too much laughter in it.'

Ava stared at him. God, no wonder she loved Italians. She'd never felt so alive as she did at this moment. Suddenly, she didn't care what her family thought next Friday night. To hell with them all!

Not only that, it was slowly coming to Ava that next Friday might not be the end of things where Vince was concerned. Since she was going to become one of Giuseppe's students, and Vince was obviously a close friend of his, then she might see some more of him. Who knew? Maybe he'd also come

back to mow her lawns if and when this Roger person was indisposed. Romance didn't figure in her thoughts —when it came to reality, Ava was a realist —but she would settle for anything where this man was concerned. Absolutely anything!

'I'll go get that painting,' she tripped happily, and turned to hurry off, returning with it to find Vince already out on the porch, the front door open. 'Here it is,' she said; and handed it to him all rolled up. 'I finished it for you.'

He unrolled the canvas and stared at it silently for a few moments, before rerolling it and looking back up again. 'This is a most generous gift. I'll treasure it always. Now I must go, Ava. See you at eight next Friday night,' he said, then whirled to hurry down the steps, giving an oddly frowning look as he climbed in behind the wheel. The engine of the ancient utility shuddered into life and he was off, his sudden acceleration sending a spray of gravel out behind him.

Ava stared at the empty driveway long after the car had gone. Very slowly she turned and went inside, pressing the button on the wall to close the gates. What had Vince been thinking when he'd frowned at her just now? Had he been comparing her to the other women r e d dated over the years? Was he going to be slightly ashamed to be seen with her? Did he regret offering to take her to Byron's party?

Maybe all three, she accepted bravely. But she refused to let it get her down. There were seven days before next Friday night. Seven days and seven nights. Surely some considerable improvement in her appearance could be accomplished in that time if she were determined and dedicated enough.

If Vince was generous enough to take her to Byron's party then she was going to make sure he was proud to be with her. With a bit of luck, at the same time, she might just be proud of herself!

CHAPTER TEN

GEMMA and Nathan stood silently together, waiting for the boarding announcement for the flight to Lightning Ridge. Outside the terminal a cool breeze was blowing, the sun not yet up. Inside, it was comfortably air-conditioned, but Gemma was experiencing her own inner chill. She'd never flown before and she was very nervous.

There's nothing to be nervous about,' Nathan surprised her by saying. She hadn't mentioned her nerves for fear of giving Nathan an excuse for her not to go at all. 'Driving's more dangerous than flying. Take a few deep breaths and try to relax your muscles and limbs.'

She did so and did, indeed, feel better. But her thoughts were still tense, returning to the semi-argument they'd had the night before and which remained unresolved in her mind. She must have made some sort of worried sound, for Nathan threw her an exasperated look and said, 'What's wrong now?'

'I just wish you'd told me about Byron's party tonight/ she said unhappily. 'If Jade hadn't dropped into the shop yesterday I'd never have known. I think she was put out that you hadn't told her I wouldn't be there.'

'Don't worry about Jade, Gemma,' came her husband's firm reply. 'She'll survive. I wasn't going to let you put off your trip for the sake of a last-minute idea of Jade's. Byron doesn't even *want* a party and he fully understands why you won't be there. I explained the situation.'

Gemma suppressed a sigh. When was Nathan going to realise that she had the right to make her own decisions about things like this? But no. . .he kept keeping things from her because he still thought he knew best. Perhaps that was one of the main reasons she was going to Lightning Ridge to make her own enquiries about her background, because underneath she was afraid Nathan knew something, and was keeping it from her.

Yet now that the moment was at hand she wondered what on earth she thought she was going to achieve. Her assertion that Lightning Ridge people would talk to her more openly than a city detective might be true, if there

was anyone who knew something in the first place. Ma didn't, and she'd been her neighbour for years. The only possible person Gemma could think of was old Mr Gunther, and he was as close-mouthed as a clam.

'I'm probably wasting my time, anyway,' she muttered dispiritedly.

'I think so,' Nathan agreed. 'But hopefully it we'll get this obsession about your mother out of your system once and for all.'

Gemma automatically bristled, but said nothing this time for fear of another argument. Really, Nathan had been surprisingly good about this trip. She'd expected him to object, to find a million reasons why she couldn't fly off on her own. Even this morning, she'd been half expecting him to announce at the last minute that he would come with her, party or no party. But he hadn't and for that she was grateful. She could do with a few days On her own, away from him.

She'd been under a lot of stress since the day she'd run into Damian Campbell. Much as she'd tried to be patient with Nathan —as Ava had suggested — the various claims Damian had made about him kept gnawing away inside her. She longed to ask Nathan straight out about them, longed for him to confide in her, longed for him to prove his love for her by trusting her with his past.

But she knew he was never going to do that. Not voluntarily. He was going to keep doing what he'd always done, pretending he was a perfectly well-adjusted man with no dark secrets, using that cool facade of his to hide all the hell that had to be buried deep inside. She'd glimpsed that hell occasionally, especially in moments when his emotional guard was down, as it was when he was furious with her, or sexually frustrated. Then, the devils would be momentarily unleashed from his soul, making him a volatile yet at the same time touchingly vulnerable human being.

Gemma frowned at this last thought. Maybe that was what she'd been doing subconsciously of late, trying to make Nathan angry so that he would explode into that more vulnerable being. Instead, he'd been remarkably tolerant of her behaviour, either ignoring her inflammatory remarks or just not reacting to situations that would normally have annoyed him. In a way,

this uncharacteristic tolerance was beginning to bother Gemma, especially when it came to Nathan's response to her avoiding sex lately. The Nathan of a couple of weeks ago certainly wouldn't have mildly accepted her excuses and walked away. He would have forced the issue. Didn't he want her any more? Was that it? Or was he using some sort of reverse psychology?

'Are you sure that old lady friend will be there at the airport to meet you?' Nathan asked, breaking into her muddled thoughts. His worried tone was so much like the old overprotective Nathan she knew and loved that Gemma smiled a type of relief at him.

'Yes, of course she will. Ma's very reliable. Gosh, it'll be so good to see her again. Good to see the old home town again too.'

Nathan gave her an incredulous look. 'Surely you haven't been homesick for Lightning Ridge, and that awful dugout you used to live in!'

'Hardly, but it'll be nice to go back, visit old places.'

'You do realise it will be very hot compared to Sydney? You haven't taken all winter clothes, have you?'

Gemma laughed. 'Nathan, what an old fusspot you can be sometimes. Do you think I didn't think of that? I've been looking after myself for years, you know.'

'In a fashion,' he conceded, though grudgingly, which brought an exasperated sigh from Gemma.

'Now don't take offence, darling,' he drawled, sliding his arms around her waist and drawing her close, 'I enjoy fussing over you, just as I enjoy buying you things. Both are my way of showing you how much I love you. All I want is for you to be happy, Gemma. Always remember that. . .' His head dipped to sip softly at her lips.

It had been so long since Nathan had kissed her like this, so softly and tenderly, that Gemma was startled by her immediate and very fierce response. An electrical current raced through her veins, accompanied by a

charge of emotion that brought home to Gemma that her own feelings for Nathan would never change. She loved him. She would *always* love him, no matter what.

Her arms snaked around his neck, her fingers splaying up into his hair, her tongue tip darting past her softly parting lips to contact *his* lips in an inviting and seductive gesture. Nathan groaned and swept her hard against him, deepening the kiss so that soon they were swirling away in a whirlpool of passion that made them both oblivious of where they were.

Till the words 'Lightning Ridge' spoken over the intercom filtered through to Gemma's brain.

She reeled out of Nathan's torrid embrace, her face hot, her head still spinning, 'I . . . I have to go,' she choked out breathlessly.

'No, you don't,' he ground back. 'You can stay with me. Forget Lightning Ridge! We'll drive up to Avoca, spend the next four days alone together at the beach- house, have a second honeymoon.'

'I can't, Nathan,' she said, shaken by how much she was tempted. 'Ma's waiting for me. And what about your rehearsals for the play, not to mention Byron's birthday party tonight?'

'To hell with the play, and to hell with Byron's birthday party!'

She laid a quivering hand against his frustrated face. 'You don't mean that. . .'

He dragged in then expelled a shuddering sigh. 'No, I suppose not. Go, then. Leave me to my misery and loneliness.'

Her laughter was low but full of satisfaction. Nathan did love her. They were going to be all right.

'When I get back we'll plan a weekend away together,' she promised. 'Meanwhile, why don't you throw yourself back into some writing over the weekend? Drag out that play you put aside.'

'Yes. . .yes, I might do that.'

'I must go, Nathan. . . I love you. . .'

'And I love you too, darling. See you Monday.' He waved as she moved off through the gate with the small line of people.

She waved back once, then walked on, her spirits low. Monday was four days away. Four lonely days.

God, I don't want to go!

The sudden impulse to run back was so strong she halted and glanced back over her shoulder.

But Nathan wasn't there. He'd already left. With a resigned sigh, she kept on going.

Ava was a nervous wreck by the time Friday evening came. She had never felt so excited about something in all her life, yet at the same time agitated.

A brutal inspection in the dressing-room mirror that morning had confirmed she hadn't worked wonders over the previous week. She'd worked a darned *miracle!*

Ava had resisted looking at herself too closely all week, though she'd noticed her face getting thinner, and had sensed a great change beneath her increasingly baggy clothes. But the full-length mirror revealing that literally *pounds* had dropped away in some places and she actually had a *shape!* Of course she'd almost killed herself with working out, and she'd been ruthless in her eating habits, sticking to fresh fruit, grilled meat, steamed vegetables and high-fibre breads with no added margarine.

Nothing sweet had passed her lips. Every time she had a craving —which was often —she would mentally picture Vince arriving to pick her up for the

party, and the craving would be resisted. A man was great motivation, she'd found. At least. . .-a man like Vince was.

Ava had left the buying of an outfit till the Friday morning, not going to her boutique for biggies this time, but an ordinary boutique which also had a wide range of lingerie. She still wasn't model material —not by a long shot—but with the aid of a figure-shaping corset in stretch cream satin, she looked very well in a deep coral suit whose semi-fitted jacket and slimline skirt made the most of her still buxom figure. The jacket had a low, heart-shaped neckline which showed quite a bit of cleavage, and when Ava had said she would fill it up with a necklace the sales assistant had shaken her head in disapproval.

'Why distract from your best asset?' the girl floored Ava by complimenting. 'If you've got it, flaunt it!'

Ava had left the shop in a state of elation, her next port of call being her hairdresser, who had oohed and aahed, not just over the clothes, but over her client's much slimmer figure. She'd assumed Ava had been to an expensive health farm, expressing wide-eyed admiration. When Ava said she'd done it all by herself at home.

Ava had returned from her shopping and hairdressing expedition with her confidence high but her bank balance in the red. If she kept this up she would definitely have to sell some of Irene's jewellery to make ends meet. After all, none of her clothes fitted her very well any more. In another week or two, she would have to buy a whole new wardrobe. What an exciting thought!

Her happiness, however, was replaced by apprehension as the time to get ready approached. In deference to her nerves, she started early. Unfortunately, her agitated state tended to make her quicker—or maybe she moved faster these days. Whatever, by seven-thirty she was putting in her gold drop earrings and slipping her feet into a pair of strappy gold sandals which hadn't seen the light of day for years but which had never gone out of fashion.

Nevertheless, they were quite high, and Ava figured she could use her spare half-hour getting used to them. What else was there to do? Byron's birthday gift was wrapped, his card written on. There was no one in the house to talk to or show off to — Cook had been given the night off and Byron, as expected, hadn't come home after work, choosing to go straight to Catherine's.

Ava made sure the gates were open then spent the time walking carefully around the house, practising being elegant and smiling fatuously at herself where- ever she could see her reflection. God, but she did look good! She still couldn't believe it.

What would Vince say? she wondered breathlessly. Would he be surprised? Pleased? Or wouldn't he even notice the change?

Byron hadn't all week. There again, she did go round the house in sloppy clothes, so she couldn't really blame him. He should see some difference tonight, though. So should every other member of her family.

What would *they* say? Maybe they'd be too busy gawking at Vince to really notice the difference in her.

She wondered what Vince would wear. Having never seen him in anything other than jeans, she was rather looking forward to seeing what he looked like dressed more formally. Still, he would look fantastic in anything.

Her feelings of excited anticipation grew with each passing second, her eyes constantly returning to one of the many clocks around the house. But clocks were like watched pots, Ava found out that evening. They never seemed to get a move on. Every time she checked the' grandfather clock in the hall, the hands had hardly moved. She paced up and down, up and down, till she was so darned competent in those high heels she could have done the tango across the marble foyer and not missed her footing once.

The doorbell ringing out of the blue almost gave Ava a heart attack. The moment was at hand at last. Dear God, please let him like how I look. Please don't let him say anything critical. And please, stop me from *shaking*!

Ava soon realised that all her shaking was inside, for she managed to make it to the door and open it with surprising panache. Vince's back was to her at first. He must have turned to admire the front gardens, which looked-'spectacular at night when the lights marking out the circular driveway were on, as they were at that moment. The pond in the centre looked especially enchanting, with its water lilies beginning to bud.

'You're right on time,' she said, her polite smile freezing on her lips when Vince turned, something happening inside her chest when he looked straight at her. It felt like a vice had suddenly been clamped around her heart. She gulped and dropped her eyes from that too handsome face and those too beautiful brown eyes.

His clothes, she noted after a couple of blank seconds, could have been put together from the pages of a style magazine for men. Tailored beige trousers covered his long muscular legs, a tan leather belt marking out his trim hips. A smart cream linen sports jacket made his broad shoulders look broader, underneath which lay a dark brown shirt in a very sexy silky material. The two top buttons were undone and Ava's eyes were irrevocably drawn to the smattering of golden curls at the centre of that well-remembered bronzed chest.

In jeans, Vince had been a handsome hunk. In these clothes he was something different entirely, suave and sophisticated, with a more subtle sexy appeal which still evoked in Ava yearnings impossible to control. She tried to stop her eyes from filling with raw hunger as she looked him over but she was doomed to failure. Her only consolation was that he seemed too busy, staring at *her* to notice her appallingly revealing inspection. Was that admiration in his eyes, or exasperation?

'My God, Ava, what have you been doing to yourself?' he exclaimed at last.

'Doing?' she repeated. My God, her heart was pounding so hard she was sure she was going to faint. Thank the lord she was holding on to the side of the doorway. 'What. . .what do you mean?'

'You know damned well what I mean, woman. You've either been on one of those fool crash diets or you've been deceiving me all along by wearing clothes a couple of sizes too big.'

'Oh. . .oh, you mean my weight loss,' she returned, her inner agitation increasing. Why was he angry with her? 'Well, actually, I —er —haven't been on a diet at all. I've been working out.'

'Working out?' he repeated, still scowling.

'Yes. You know. Sit-ups and things.'

'Sit-ups and things?'

Vince's attitude finally got to Ava, her inner agitation suddenly bursting forth into open frustration. 'Truly, Vince, must you repeat everything I say?' she exclaimed irritably. 'And why sound so puzzled? I'm sure you know what sit-ups are. What's the matter? Don't you like the way I look?'

His narrowed gaze raked over her from head to toe again before he gave a dismissive shrug. 'What's not to like? You look gorgeous and you know it.'

Ava was taken aback. What an odd way to give a compliment! It was not at all what she had hoped for. *Nothing* he had said since she had opened the door was what she had hoped for.

'Gee whiz, thanks,' she said, her voice sharp with hurt and disappointment. 'You scrub up pretty well yourself. Amazing what the right clothes can do, isn't it?'

Vince cocked his head on one side, his thoughtful expression slowly being replaced by a rueful smile. 'Amazing what the loss of a few pounds can do to a woman's personality. I hope you're not going to turn into one of those rich bitches, Ava. If you are, then I suggest you turn back the clock. I much prefer the woman I first met.'

Ava was so startled by this remark that she just stood there, her thoughts whirling. How could he possibly have preferred that blimp?

'Tell me, Ava,' he went on with a quiet ruthlessness, 'is there anything you should tell me about this party tonight? I have an awful feeling there's some hidden agenda I don't know about.'

Ava frowned her confusion. 'Why on earth would you say that?'

'I'm not sure. But you must have had a mighty powerful reason for the agony you've obviously put yourself through this past week.'

Ava stared straight into Vince's eyes and battled hard to keep her composure. Oh, Vince. . . Don't you know? Can't you see? I love you. I wanted you to be proud to be with me. . .

Shock at having finally admitted she loved Vince — even to herself—had Ava sucking sharply inwards. Immediately, Vince's gaze narrowed on her face and she had to struggle even harder to keep her equilibrium. Letting out her breath slowly, she was quite proud of the cool dignity of her answer.

'Perhaps I was simply tired of the way my family perceived me, Vince. But, more importantly, I was' tired of the way I perceived myself. There comes a time when one has to stop blaming others for what you have become, especially when that person is dead. Irene has no power over my life now. You and Giuseppe have given me back my confidence over my painting, but I have set out this past week to get back my confidence as a woman. What you're seeing is a brand-new Ava who wants to be everything she can be, who wants to live life to the full. Hopefully, she'll never become a bitch, but she won't be walked over any more either. I'm only sorry you don't seem to find her to your liking.'

Vince gave a dry chuckle, a sardonic smile lifting one corner of his mouth. 'Not to my liking. . . Oh, Ava. . . what rubbish you talk sometimes. You've always been to my liking. And you always will. Don't you know that?'

Ava was still blinking her utter astonishment when Vince took her quite firmly by the upper arms and lifted her right off her feet, earring her back inside the foyer where he kicked the door shut and lowered her back to the floor.

'Not to my liking. . He laughed again before releasing her only long enough to sweep his arms around her waist, drawing her hard against his body while his mouth bent to cover hers in a very thorough and blisteringly hungry kiss.

A low moan punched from Ava's lungs as the reality of what was happening to her took hold. This was no fantasy. This was for real. Vince's arms around her were real; his kissing her was real; his tongue, which at that moment was doing incredible things, was very real.

It only took Ava a few mind-blowing seconds to recognise that reality was far better than any fantasy, especially when that reality was Vince.

Another highly sensual moan fluttered from deep within her throat which had the wonderful effect of making Vince gather her to him even closer, if that were possible. They already seemed glued together. Ava decided dimly that she must have died and gone to heaven.

When Vince's mouth finally broke from hers, she gazed dazedly up into his flushed face, at eyes glittering with naked desire, lips still apart and panting heavily. Having never encountered rampant male passion at close range before, she wasn't sure what to think, or do. All she knew was she wanted him to kiss her again, wanted him to keep holding her, touching her. . .

'You should never look at a man like that, Ava,' he growled.

'Like what?' she asked breathlessly.

'Like you want him to ravage you.'

'Maybe I *do* want you to ravage me,' she whispered shakily.

My God, had she just said that? Had she really?

Her lips fell apart in shock at her own boldness. Falling in love had made her go mad! Or was it Vince's kiss that had done that; had driven her to a place where common sense and decorum no longer mattered, only what one wanted deep within one's soul, *and* one's body?

He glared down at her, eyes narrowing. 'Have you been drinking?'

'No.'

'Little girls shouldn't play with fire,' he warned darkly.

His condescension sparked some healthy fire and spirit. 'You kissed me first,' she reminded him accusingly. 'And I'm *not* a little girl! I'm a grown woman.'

His eyes dropped to her cleavage. 'Mmm. You're certainly right there.'

Ava gasped when his fingers followed his gaze and he started undoing the top button on her suit jacket.

'What. . .what are you doing?'

'Undressing you,' he muttered thickly. 'It's very hard to ravage a woman with her clothes on.'

'But. . .but you can't! I mean. . .not here. Not like this!'

He stopped, a frown momentarily clouding the intensity of his concentration. 'Why not? Aren't we alone? God, don't tell me the ogre's somewhere around!'

'No, Byron's not here.'

'That's a relief. But you're 'right,' he pronounced, glancing around. 'We can't make love down here. Nothing but marble for miles. Such an event calls for comfort.'

Ava gasped again when he bent to slide an arm around her knees and another round her waist, scooping her firmly up into his arms. 'We shall retire to your bedroom.'

'But we can't!' she squawked, even while her pulse- rate went haywire at the thought. 'We have to go to Byron's party!'

'We will go to Byron's party,' he reassured her. 'Eventually/ And began carrying her upstairs two steps at a time without the slightest hesitation on the supposedly slippery stairs.

Panic made Ava say the one thing she thought might stop him in his tracks. 'You do realise I'm a virgin, don't you? At *thirty!*' she added with a lashing of self- contempt in her voice.

Vince didn't flinch an inch, or miss a single beat as he strode masterfully down the hallway. 'Is that so? Then we haven't a moment to lose, have we? Can't have this smashing new Ava ending up a dried-up old maid, can we?'

With that, he swept through her open bedroom door and over to the bed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AVA'S heart began thudding madly when he laid her down on the bed. She wanted him to make love to her. But she was so afraid. . .of everything. . .

His leaning over to snap on one of her bedside lamps had her lurching up into a sitting position, a horrified look on her face. My God, she didn't want him to be able to *see* her. Not without her clothes on!

'Vince, I. . .'

'Hush,' he whispered, sitting down on the side of the bed and cradling her face with his large strong hands. 'I'm not going to hurt you.'

'But the light,' she groaned.

'You want it off?'

'Please. . .'

'Your wish is my command.' He leant over and switched it off again. A gentle light was still filtering in through the open doorway but the room was large and her bed was against the far wall.

His hands refound her face in the semi-darkness, his palms gentle around her throat while his thumbs caressed the corners of her mouth. 'I've been thinking about doing this all week,' he murmured, his thumbs moving to stroke her cheeks while he kissed her.

Ava's thoughts tumbled into turmoil. He'd been thinking about doing this all *week*? That would mean he'd been wanting to make love to the Ava she had been, not just the Ava she was tonight.

'No!' she cried, and wrenched away from his mouth.

'No,' he echoed, disbelief in his voice.

'You. . .you couldn't have wanted to make love to *her*,' she insisted shakily.
'You *couldn't*!

'Who?' He sounded totally perplexed.

'Me. A week ago. No man could have.'

His fingers had frozen on her face and she could feel his eyes boring into her. His sigh, when it came, was full of exasperation. 'Oh, Ava. . .Ava. . .what nonsense you talk sometimes. How many times do I have to tell you that a few pounds here and there doesn't make a woman unattractive? I was attracted to you the first moment I laid eyes on you. I had the devil of a job keeping my hands off you that day.'

'You did? Honestly?' Ava could hardly believe what she was hearing. Yet why would he lie?

'Hell, yes. There I was with you in my arms all the time and wanting to kiss you like crazy. I only held back 'because I'd vowed not to get involved with a woman again till I didn't have so much work on my plate. My last relationship broke up because of my lack of leisure time. On top of that, you seemed to be the sort of woman a man has to marry, not have a convenient affair with.'

This last remark had Ava coming down to earth with a thud. 'And now you think I'm the sort of woman a man *can* have a convenient affair with?'

'I think you answered that question downstairs. You're a grown woman who wants to be all she can be, who wants to live life to the full. I, for one, have never subscribed to the theory that a woman should remain a virgin till she marries, however unltalian that might sound. It's unnatural. You want me to make love to you, Ava. No, you *need* me to make love to you. Don't deny it.'

Her blush betrayed her shyness, as well as her arousal. Vince bent to kiss her till she was clutching at him and moaning softly in her throat.

'God knows how you reached the ripe old age of thirty without being whisked off to bed,' he rasped, drawing back to run a tantalising finger over

her softly swollen lips. 'Surely there must have been some man along the line. . .'

'There. . .there was a young man named James,' she confessed breathlessly, 'when I was twenty. He said he wanted me, but we. . .we split up before anything could come of it.'

'What happened?'

Ava shrank back at the memory. 'He only wanted me because of my money. He was poor, you see, and I inherit quite a fortune if and when I ever marry. Irene always said that —'

'Enough said!' Vince cut in savagely. 'I don't want to hear another word if you're going to tell me you let that bitch Irene convince you no man would ever want you for anything other than your money. Do you think I'm here because I want your money? Good God, woman, I'm not at all interested in your damned money. I have an adequate amount of my own, thank you very much. All I'm interested in is your body!'

While Ava gaped, Vince groaned, smacking himself on the forehead. 'God, that sounded dreadful, and it's not strictly true either. I like you very much, Ava. You must know that. I think you're a lovely person and I adore just being with you. But I have no time for anything other than a part-time relationship with any woman. Neither am I emotionally equipped at the moment for anything more. What with my family responsibilities and my workload, sometimes I haven't time to scratch myself. There, that's cold hard honesty for you. I'm offering you nothing but a night here and a night there. If that's not acceptable, you'd better say so now before we go any further!'

'You mean you'd stop if I asked you to?'

'Are you asking me to?'

'God, no.'

He laughed and bent to kiss her startled mouth. 'You're delightful, do you know that?' He kissed her again. 'And delicious. . .' Another kiss. 'And desirable. . .' He pushed her back on to the pillows. 'And dangerous. . .'

A muffled but very passionate groan rumbled in his throat, his hands no longer holding her face but busy on her clothes. Not that he stopped kissing her. Only once did his mouth leave hers and that was when he sat her up to take her jacket right off. Lord knew where he put it. Ava didn't know and she didn't care. By then she was drunk on his kisses, the blood in her veins as intoxicated as though she'd consumed a whole bottle of wine on her own. She'd even stopped worrying what he thought of her body.

A second abandonment of her mouth was accompanied by the ridding her of her skirt and shoes, which left her lying on top of her bed in nothing but her cream satin corset and stockings. When he returned to her side, he didn't kiss her on the mouth. Instead, he pressed heated lips to the base of her throat while he pushed the shoestring straps off her shoulders. When he began to peel the satin garment downwards, his mouth followed, trailing a damp path of kisses over her skin.

Goose-bumps erupted on her arms, Ava shivering with nervous anticipation as his mouth got closer and closer to her nipples. At last the pained peaks were released from their satin imprisonment, bursting upwards in ripe supplication for his waiting lips.

'Oh,' Ava moaned softly when Vince licked over each one in turn, running his tongue around and over them till they were like little river pebbles, all hard and slippery.

'Oh, God,' she whimpered when he started a twin torment, sucking one nipple deep into his mouth while rolling the other between thumb and forefinger. His tugging mouth set up another tugging deep inside her, bringing with it a tension that was both exciting and excruciating.

When he stopped briefly to peel the undergarment right down to her waist, then to undo the snap fasteners between her legs, Ava's eyes flung open. She gasped when his mouth returned to capture a still wet nipple, but her gasp was not in response to this, but to the hand that had stayed between her

thighs and was busy showing her that nipples ran a poor second when it came to instruments of erotic torture.

She squirmed beneath his ministrations, panting her excitement as he took her closer and closer to she knew not what. Everything was chaos in her mind. All she knew was that she wanted his fingers to stay inside her, to keep doing what they were doing. When her flesh started pulsating against him, he abruptly withdrew, making her cry out in dismay.

'It'll be all right,' he soothed, pressing a brief kiss to her anguished mouth. 'I'll just be a few moments.' The mattress squeaked a little as he swung his legs over the side and stood up.

He didn't take all that long. But it felt like an eternity. She trembled when he pressed his stunningly naked body against the full length of her, then eased her legs wide to accommodate his own. When his hips dug sharply into her thighs she found her knees automatically lifting, her legs finding a natural comfort wrapped high around his waist. His groan of pleasure was music to her ears. She had done something right: without being told, without being shown.

'Are you sure you haven't done this before?' he rasped, propping himself up on his elbows.

'Not even in my dreams,' she whispered.

She could feel his eyes upon her even though she couldn't see them properly. 'I shouldn't be this glad about that, Ava. It goes against everything I told you earlier. But I am. Hopelessly. God, I hope I'm doing the right thing here.'

'Yes, you are,' she insisted wildly, and pressed impassioned lips to his shoulder. 'God, I love you. I. . .oh, please, Vince. . .don't stop!'

'I don't think I could at this point, but for pity's sake, don't start confusing this with love, Ava. This isn't love. It's sex, and it's been bringing men and women together like this for centuries.'

Ava's heart contracted in rejection of this till he started rubbing his body against hers and everything inside her went haywire. Maybe he was right. She'd had little enough experience with love, after all. Maybe it *was* just sex that was making her head spin and her body explode with pleasure.

'I don't care if it *is* only sex,' she rasped. 'It feels fantastic and I want it. I want *you*.'

'And I want you, sweet Ava.'

'Then just do it. Don't be gentle. Just do it!' And she arched her back, pressing the moistened valley of her flesh against his throbbing desire.

'God, yes,' he groaned and drove that same desire home, Ava's eyes flinging wide as any momentary pain was far surpassed by the most incredibly strong wave of emotional and personal satisfaction. At last, she was a real woman with a real lover, not a fantasy one. At last. . .

Ava murmured Vince's name, her hands sliding down his back to splay across his taut buttocks. When she pulled him ever deeper inside her, a tortured gasp punched from his lungs.

'Did. . .did I hurt you?' she whispered.

'Did *you* hurt *me*?' he rasped disbelievingly. 'Haven't you got that the wrong way round?'

'No.' She made a sensuous little circle with her hips. 'I feel fine.'

'You certainly do,' he growled. 'God knows what's in store for me once you get the hang of this, Ava.'

'Do you like your women to move, Vince?'

'I like it when *you* move, Ava. Let's forget my other women for tonight, shall we?'

'Whatever you say.' She smiled in the darkness, happy that she compared well with his previous lovers. Certainly, all her usual clumsiness seemed to have disappeared now she was lying down. She aimed to adopt this position as often as possible, smiling her satisfaction as she arched voluptuously into him.

'I think you should leave most of the moving up to me this first time,' he muttered. 'You're too damned good at it and I'm only human.'

Ava was starkly reminded just how much man Vince was when he did move, each powerful thrust making the breath leave her lungs in gasp after gasp of startled pleasure.

'I'm not hurting you, am I?' he asked thickly.

'No. . .'

'Good,' he said, and actually picked up what was already a powerful rhythm. 'God, I could get addicted to this,' he muttered thickly. 'I can almost understand why virgins are so prized. At least. . .ones like you are. . . Oh, God. . .'

Ava was incapable of speech. All she could do was cling to him, digging her nails into his buttocks as an intolerable pressure built up within her body. His urging her not to move was ignored as she searched for release, all her insides squeezing tight as her back arched, her hips revolving against his.

When Ava suddenly tumbled over the edge, her mouth gasped wide, her head twisting from side to side on the pillow as a succession of violently pleasurable contractions seized her, their force compelling Vince into an explosive climax that had him shuddering into her for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, with a raw groan of utter satiation, he slumped between her breasts.

Ava lay beneath his sagging weight, stunned by the experience, her limbs going limp as a curious wave of exhaustion washed through her. They stayed that way for ages, till Vince startled her by lifting his head to send a wet tongue down the valley between her breasts, then trailing it over to

slowly encircle a nipple. It immediately strained upwards, her breath catching.

'You are the most deliciously responsive woman,' he murmured. 'And you have the most luscious breasts. I adore them. Don't you let Giuseppe ever talk you into modelling for him. I won't have my girlfriend parading around naked for other men's eyes. You're for my eyes only, do you hear me?'

Vince's proprietorial possessiveness, plus his calling her his girlfriend, thrilled Ava. Any concern that their affair might be a very short one was pushed firmly aside. 'Yes, Vince,' she agreed meekly.

'Good,' he said, and settled back down on to her body, his face resting between her breasts, his warm breath fanning her right nipple. Ava was shocked by her immediate and very intense desire to have him make love to her again, only a glance at her bedside clock radio distracting her from her desire.

'Vince. . .' She gently shook him on the shoulder.

'Mmm?'

'We have to go to Byron's party. . .'

'Soon,' he said, stunning her when he started licking the nearby nipple, making it glisteningly hard in seconds. 'Parties don't start till ten at least.'

'But it's nearly nine. Vince, please. . .'

Her stomach curled over when he did the same to her other nipple before glancing up at her. She stared up at his moistened mouth and ached to have it all over her.

'Your wish is my command,' he sighed. 'Mind if I use the bathroom first?'

He was gone in a flash, scooping up his clothes on the way. Ava was left lying there feeling oddly empty.

Vince's withdrawal from her body had reminded her that he'd used protection, with nothing of him remaining inside her. Stupid as it seemed, she didn't like the feeling. Was it that it echoed how she would feel after their affair ended, as it inevitably would. . .?

When depression hovered, she brushed it ruthlessly aside. Ava had no patience with such feelings tonight. Tonight she had become a real woman. Tonight she had started really living. Tonight she refused to be anything but happy.

Swinging her feet over the side of the bed, she encountered a reflection of herself in the dressing-table mirror that she would never in her wildest dreams have imagined encountering. Semi-naked body, tousled hair, puffy mouth, wet swollen nipples, and an ache between her thighs that was a mixture of having been ravaged and wanting to be ravaged some more.

But it was her perception of that semi-naked body that surprised her the most. Suddenly she saw her full breasts as lush, not heavy, her rounded stomach as feminine, not flabby, her whole shape as quite desirable, not repulsive.

Who had changed her perception? Vince. . .

She had so much to be grateful to him for. So much.

Her chest contracted with the realisation that she did love him, no matter what he said about her feelings being only sexual. But she would not say she loved him again. She suspected their affair would be very short if she persisted with that tack.

Her one consolation to the inevitability of a broken heart was that there would be no going back to the timid unfulfilled female she had once been. No one would look at her with pity in future, as though she were a naive little fool who knew nothing of life and love, who'd been nowhere and done nothing. She was going to make Vince show her everything he knew about life and about sex, she decided. Every single thing!

The sound of the shower gushing forth sent a sudden thought to her mind. Automatically, she shrank from being so bold, till another glance in that mirror reminded her of all she had just resolved. Gathering every ounce of courage she owned, she stripped off all her clothes, then went bravely but somewhat breathlessly into the bathroom.

CHAPTER TWELVE

'I've ordered that carpet for the stairs,' Ava said as they walked hand in hand down the marble steps just as the grandfather clock donged nine-thirty.

'That's good,' Vince said. 'When it comes, we'll have to christen it.'

Ava stopped and stared at him. 'Do you mean what I think you mean?'

'You don't fancy making love on a staircase?'

Heat zoomed into her cheeks at the image he was evoking. 'Wouldn't it be rather uncomfortable?'

'I'd work something out.'

No doubt he would, she gulped. Hadn't he just shown her that making love did not have to happen in a bed, or necessarily with intercourse as a finale? When she'd dared to join him in the shower, she hadn't known exactly what to expect. A burst of renewed nerves had almost made her turn and run at one stage, but she had steeled herself and taken the plunge.

Vince had been delighted, quickly dashing any worry that he might not find her lush curves so desirable when she was standing up. He seemed to revel in the fullness of her breasts and hips, delighting in soaping up her whole body before inviting her to do the same to him. She'd been a little shy at first till having free rein to touch him at will brought an excited arousal that had her doing things that hadn't featured in any of her fantasies.

Vince had happily abandoned himself to her attentions, leaning back against the tiles while she unwittingly but quite shamelessly brought him to climax, after which he'd willingly returned the favour. A shiver ran down her spine at the memory of her gasping shuddering release, her legs apart, Vince between them. She would never be able to go into that shower again without recalling her utter abandonment, or Vince's expertise.

She licked suddenly dry lips and felt a surge of renewed desire. His assertion that her feelings for him were strictly sexual began to take on a disturbing

element of truth. It was all she could think of when she looked at him, all that she seemed to want now.

'We. . .we must go, Vince,' she said, a hunted look coming into her eyes.

'I suppose so,' he agreed reluctantly. 'But only if you kiss me first.'

She groaned but did as he asked, opening her lips to his demands, moaning softly when he crushed her to him. Suddenly, he put her aside, his expression almost angry. 'I always said this house was dangerous. I'm beginning to think it's more dangerous than even I realised.'

'What. . .what do you mean?'

'Nothing,' he muttered. 'Let's go.'

Ava was glad of the cool night air in her heated face, though she ground to a startled halt when she saw the sleek red sports car in the driveway. It looked very expensive.

'Is this *your* car?'

'Something wrong with it?'

'No, it's just that I thought. . .I mean. . .'

'You thought I was a poor lawn-mowing man with dirt under my nails, nothing between my ears and no prospects.'

'I did not!' she protested. 'You're very intelligent and I'm sure you have great prospects!'

'Such blind faith. But you happen to be right. I do have excellent prospects. The car's leased, by the way. I write the rental off as a tax deduction against the family company. I often use it for business calls. You've no idea how it impresses a certain type of woman client.'

Ava shook her head at him. 'You're a wicked man.'

He hauled her to him and kissed her again. Quite savagely. 'You'd better believe it, honey,' he ground out. T *can* be wicked where women are concerned. Don't you ever make the mistake of falling in love with me, do you hear? All I'm good for where you're concerned is what I've just given you, so take it while it's going and when I'm gone say thank heavens for small mercies! Then find yourself a nice man who'll marry you and give you kids and never a moment's worry. There's no future with me.'

Ava swallowed and looked him straight in the eye. That sounds awfully boring, Vince. I think I'll take what's going with you if you don't mind, and to hell with the future for now.'

He glared at her for a few seconds then grinned that sexy grin of his. 'A woman after my own heart. Let's go, lover. The ogre awaits!'

They both piled into the Mazda RX7, Ava giving Vince directions to Jade's and Kyle's houseboat — about a twenty-minute trip at this time of night. It would be ten by the time they got there, which would no doubt bring mutters of criticism all round. But Ava rather suspected her being late would be the least of her family's worries once they saw Vince.

Before he'd arrived tonight, she'd been terribly nervous over what they would think. But Vince's lovemaking and the discovery of her own uninhibited sexuality had sparked a recklessly rebellious spirit in her that was as exhilarating as it was a little crazy. When Vince turned from Belleview's driveway and accelerated away with a rush of speed, she threw back her head and laughed.

'What are you laughing at?'

'I'm thinking of the look on Byron's face when I walk in with you.'

'Oh? And what will that look be like, pray tell?'

She did her best to imitate a shocked, disapproving and suspicious scowl.

'That bad, eh? I presume he'll think I'm after you for your money?'

'Indubitably.'

'More fool him. I've a good mind to let him think it, just to teach him a lesson.'

'You won't have to *let* him think it, Vince,' Ava said, drily. 'He'll do it of his own accord.'

'But *why*?'

'I didn't always look as presentable as I look tonight, Vince. A little while ago I was much fatter. I was a frump.'

'God, not that again, Ava. You really do have a complex about your weight, you know that?'

'I could show you photographs, if you don't believe me.'

He sighed. 'You would *still* have been a very pretty woman. Besides, a lot of men like women with a bit of flesh on them.'

'Maybe. . .'

'No maybe about it. Your brother must be as blind as a bat if he thinks no man would want his little sister for reasons other than money. Now look, you're the one who said you're a new woman. In that case, then throw away all those old ideas about your inability to attract a man. Hell, you're one of the sexiest women I've ever met. Lord knows how you remained a virgin till thirty. Not that I'm complaining mind. I aim to take full advantage of your steam-cooker sexuality.'

'My *what*?'

'You heard me. You need sex, Ava, and plenty of it. Now don't go giving me one of those reproachful looks. You know I'm right.'

Was he? Ava didn't feel happy about reducing her feelings for Vince to sex. She was sure there was more to it than that. Never in a million years could

she imagine doing what she had done tonight with any other man. Love had to play a very large part.

But to say as much to Vince would court disaster. He would run a mile. And she couldn't face losing him just yet.

A rueful smile played on her lips. 'You're a scoundrel, Vince Morelli. But a rather nice scoundrel. And very talented in certain areas.'

'I have an equally talented partner,' he drawled. 'Speaking of talent, I had your painting framed and it's now hanging in a setting befitting its beauty.'

'You did? Where?'

'Not telling. I'd rather show you.'

'When?' she asked excitedly.

'Soon.'

'Oh, you're a tease!'

He smiled. 'Not usually. But I think I could get to like teasing you.'

'If you don't tell me I'll accept Giuseppe's modelling offer,' she tried bluffing.

'No, you won't. I can see that now. You'd be too shy.'

'True,' she sighed.

By the way, Giuseppe said to tell he wants you to drop by the gallery next Monday. I think he wants to show it off to you.'

'He's sweet.'

'He's an old rogue.'

'You like him.'

'Yes,' Vince sighed. 'I do.'

'How did you two become friends?'

'I used to mow his lawns. One day he asked me to change some light bulbs in the gallery. The ceilings are very high and you need a good ladder to reach the light fittings. Anyway, he was having an exhibition at the time and I was really struck by the paintings. I'd never been interested in art much before but I couldn't stop looking at this chap's work. It was so real! I can't stand paintings where you don't know which way is up. Not that I think they should look like photographs either. But I do like to know what I'm looking at. Anyway, I raked up the money to buy one. That started me on my collection and my friendship with Giuseppe.'

'I'd love to see your collection, Vince.'

'You will. Don't worry.'

'When?'

'Soon.'

She sighed her exasperation at him. 'I can see a change of subject is called for. How old are you?'

'Old enough.'

'Vince!'

'Thirty-two.'

'You look younger. How many brothers and sisters do you have?'

'Three brothers and one sister.'

'And how old are they?'

'Let's see. . . Marco's twenty-five, Pietro's twenty- three, Paolo's twenty-one, and Giovanni and Claudia are nineteen. They're twins.'

'So they're all grown up, really.'

'Says who?' he growled. 'They're all complete idiots! If I wasn't around to look after them, they'd be in all sorts of trouble.'

'You sound just like Byron when he talks to me. I think big brothers develop a superiority complex that prevents them from seeing their siblings as adults.'

'Could be, Ava. Could be.' He looked over at her and gave a dry laugh. 'But at least such inadequacies of judgement are not transferable. I can assure you, I think of you very much as an adult.'

His eyes went to her breasts and Ava felt her nipples harden immediately. 'Don't. . .don't look at me like that,' she said shakily.

'Why not?'

'You know why not,' she whispered, and turned her face away.

Vince said nothing, and an odd tension developed in the car which was both sexual and something else. Vince remained silent, and Ava was left to wonder what he was thinking about.

'What other relatives of yours will be at this party tonight?' he said at long last.

Relieved to be talking again, Ava launched into telling Vince all about Jade and Kyle, about their romance and their recent marriage, complete with a baby on the way, after which she moved on to Nathan and Gemma, telling him all about them in as unbiased a fashion as she could. Naturally this meant disclosing quite a bit more about the family in general as well as the family opal business, though Ava stuck to bland facts. Vince wouldn't want to know family gossip.

'I doubt Nathan's daughter Kirsty will be there,' she finished up. 'She's only fifteen. The rest will be made up of Byron's friends and business associates. No more than twenty to twenty-five people in all, Jade said. The houseboat wouldn't cope comfortably with any more guests.'

'It still must be a damned big houseboat.'

'Oh, it's not one that moves. It's quite stationary, parked at the end of a pier. More like a real house sitting on a barge. Hey, slow down! You have to take the next street on the left.'

The Mazda cornered beautifully and soon brought them safely down the winding road to the small bay and the marina where they discovered all of the parking spots along the foreshore seemed to be filled. They crawled along, looking for a space.

'That's Nathan's car,' she said, indicating the navy Mercedes.

Vince braked to a halt. 'Do you think he'll be leaving the party early?'

'Not as early as we're going to.'

This brought a sharp look from Vince. 'Is that a threat or a promise?'

'A fact.'

He glanced over at her. 'You're nervous,' he accused.

'It seems so.'

He reached over and covered her hand with his, squeezing it while he gave her a reassuring smile. 'Don't worry. I'll be by your side.'

That's what's worrying me, she groaned silently.

'I'll park behind the Merc.'

'You can't do that!'

'Why not? I'm not blocking anyone else and you just said the owner won't be leaving early. Lighten up, Ava.'

Ava grimaced, then laughed. If this kept up she'd lighten up a hell of a lot. She felt so queasy in her stomach that eating was out of the question. A drink was in order, though. Maybe several after Byron met Vince. Dear God, whose dumb idea was this?

Vince took her arm for the rather long walk along the pier towards the houseboat which was well lit around the verandas with coloured lights. No one had wandered outside, however. A fresh breeze was blowing off the water and muffled music drifted towards them.'

'Pretty spot,' Vince remarked as they walked up the ramp on to the front veranda. 'But expensive. Do we go straight in?'

The houseboat had large windows on three sides but not the side facing the pier. A solid wooden door presented itself to Vince and Ava, who took a deep steadying breath and said, 'I think we'll just go straight in.'

'Right.' Vince turned the knob and opened the door on to louder music, lively chatter and a haze of smoke. He waved Ava ahead of him, stopping briefly to close the door behind her. Before Ava could look properly around the crowded room, Jade came rushing forward, looking her usual outrageous self in a black flared mini dress which hid her pregnancy well but not her never-ending legs.

'Auntie Ava, you made it! We were all beginning to worry you might have had car trouble. But don't you look smashing. And you're so slim! Oh, I'm jealous,' Jade's sapphire-blue eyes twinkled as she looked over her aunt's shoulder straight at Vince. 'I see you took my advice, Auntie,' she whispered so that only Ava could hear. 'God, he's gorgeous.'

'And free,' Ava countered just as softly, but quite firmly.

Jade frowned at her aunt.

Ava turned to slide a tense hand through Vince's arm, bringing him forward. 'Vince, meet my niece, Jade.'

'Hi, Jade,' he said, flashing her one of his winning smiles. 'Sorry we're a little late. We lost track of time, something that always seems to happen when we're together.'

Ava had to control the urge to laugh at the look on Jade's face. Kyle's arrival at his wife's elbow helped pull herself together.

'Ava,' Kyle greeted, nodding to her in his usual cool fashion. His impeccable manners meant that he would not dream of commenting on her weight loss. 'That colour looks superb on you. And you *did* bring a friend. Jade was worried you might come alone. I'm Kyle Gainsford, Jade's husband,' he said, extending a hand towards Vince.

'Vince Morelli.'

'Glad you could come.' He turned back towards Ava, a wry smile lurking in those intelligent dark eyes of his. 'Byron was just wondering where you'd got to, Ava. I'm sure he'll be relieved to know you've come to no harm/

This brought a rolling-eyed glance from Jade, a wide smile from Vince and a spluttering from Ava. Suddenly, all four of them were grinning at each other.

'Oh, my God, here comes Byron,' Ava muttered.

'Don't forget to wish him a happy birthday,' Jade reminded her.

'Byron's present!' she gasped, looking up at Vince. 'I . . . I left it in the car. . . '

'I'll get it,' he said, and was gone before she could say Jack Robinson.

'Ava!' Byron boomed. 'Where on earth have you been? I rang the house a while back and —' He broke off suddenly and simply stared at her. 'Good lord, Ava, is that really you?'

'I think so, Byron.'

'But where's the rest of you?'

'Pop's, for pity's sake!' Jade groaned.

'Never mind, Jade,' Ava sighed. 'I don't think he even knows he's being rude. I left the rest of me on the floor of your gym, Byron,' she said drily. 'I was wondering when you were going to notice the difference.'

'This is incredible. And I certainly *don't* mean to be rude. But you look so stunningly lovely and so. . . so. . . ' He seemed at a loss to find an appropriate word.

'Sexy?' Jade suggested, which brought an instant glare from her father.

'Truly, Jade, must you?'

'Must I what? Tell the truth? Auntie looks very sexy tonight. I'm sure Vince thinks so too.'

Byron frowned. 'Who the hell is Vince?'

'My date,' Ava supplied. 'He's gone back to the car to get your present. I left it on the back seat. Which reminds me. Happy birthday, Byron.' She kissed her brother on the cheek, aware that her heart was beating madly with nerves. She wished Byron's opinion weren't important to her but it seemed it was, after all. She was pleased by his reaction to her improved appearance but it was his attitude to Vince that was crucial.

'Might I ask where you met this Vince person?' Byron demanded immediately. 'You've never mentioned him before.'

'He's a friend of Giuseppe's,' Ava said, deliberately side-tracking the truth about her meeting Vince. 'Giuseppe's my new art-teacher,' she explained to her bewildered-looking brother. 'And my patron. He's going to give me an exhibition.'

'An exhibition!' Jade squealed. 'Oh, how exciting! Congratulations, Auntie!' And she gave her a hug.

'Yes, congratulations, Ava,' Kyle added warmly.

'Thank you.'

Byron was still shaking his head. 'I don't understand any of this but I think I need a drink.'

'Good idea,' Kyle said. 'Take Ava and Byron back to the bar, Jade, and I'll wait here for Vince.'

'Whatever you say, o lord and master,' Jade quipped with a wicked grin at her husband, curling her right arm through Byron's elbow and her left through Ava's. 'Time we rescued Nathan and Lenore from Catherine, anyway.'

'Now who's being rude?' Byron grumbled. 'I don't understand why you don't like Catherine. She's a very nice lady.'

'Did you say Nathan and Lenore?' Ava asked Jade. 'Where's Gemma?'

'Seems she went back to Lightning Ridge for a few days. To visit that old lady friend of hers. Nathan says she was a bit homesick.'

'Really?' Ava didn't believe that. Gemma had hated her life at Lightning Ridge. 'But that doesn't explain why Lenore's here. Did you invite her, Jade?'

'No. Nathan brought her. It appears they were working late on the play and Lenore didn't want to go home to an empty house. Kirsty's gone on a camping excursion with classmates for the school holidays. Won't be back for two weeks.'

'I see,' Ava murmured, hoping that she didn't see what she thought she was seeing.

Still frowning her concern, she looked up and met Nathan's cool grey eyes across the room. It took a few seconds for her to realise that the surprised look that came into his face was to do with her revamped appearance. Lenore was standing next to him, looking absolutely stunning in figure-hugging emerald-green. Her hand was on Nathan's arm and they looked very cosy indeed. Poor Gemma. . .

Ava's gaze slid over to Catherine, who was standing on the other side of Nathan with a glass of champagne in her hand and a haughty look on her face. Always smart and elegant, tonight she was dressed in a cool ice-blue sheath that matched her eyes and was a perfect foil for her glossy dark hair.

'Everyone,' Jade announced brightly as she dragged Ava and Byron over to the threesome at the bar, 'look what Auntie Ava's been up to. She's become all slim and gorgeous.' Catherine and Lenore, who had not been watching Ava across the room as Nathan had, both looked round at once. Lenore, to give her credit, seemed delighted by Ava's new appearance. Catherine was stony-faced, lifting one of her plucked eyebrows in a gesture of droll boredom. Not a word of comment or praise passed her lips.

At least Lenore was not that rude. 'I'm impressed, Ava,' she said. 'I know how hard it is to lose weight. And I just adore that suit. Where did you buy it?'

Trite conversation flowed till Catherine's sharply indrawn breath had everyone's eyes snapping her way.

'What is it, Catherine?' Byron asked. 'Something wrong with your drink?'

That man,' she rasped. 'The one talking to Kyle. What's he doing here?'

Heads swivelled and Ava saw at once she meant Vince, whom Kyle was gradually guiding their way.

'Why?' she demanded to know, her heart racing. 'What's wrong with his being here?'

Catherine looked most disconcerted. 'He. . . used to mow my lawns,' she said shakily. 'He. . . he made a pass at me one day and I had to fire him. It. . . it all became rather ugly.'

'How awful!' Lenore exclaimed.

Ava saw her brother scowl his disgust over at Vince and h r heart dropped to the ground. For a split- second, she had believed Catherine —perhaps because she wasn't a liar herself—but then her faith in Vince's personal integrity came to the fore and she saw Catherine's lie for what it was: the desperate attempt of a woman scorned to save face and have her revenge.

For Vince would never make an unwanted pass at a woman. He would never have to. The odds were it was the other way around. Catherine made a pass at him and when Vince rejected her she fired him out of spite. He'd more or less told her such things had happened to him.

'What the devil *is* he doing here, then?' Byron ground out. 'Who brought him?'

Ava swallowed then lifted her chin, catching a glimpse of Jade's sympathetic face as she did so. 'I did,' she said bravely. 'He's my date.'

'Your *date*?' Byron looked ready to explode. His eyes widened then narrowed with a slowly dawning realisation. 'My God, you hired a new lawn-mowing man the other week, didn't you? Is that him?'

'Not exactly.'

'What do you mean, not exactly?'

'It's hard to explain.'

'Try,' he bit out.

'Not *now*,' she retorted so sharply that Byron's head snapped back. 'He'll be over here in a minute and if any of my family are rude to him I will never speak to them again as long as I live.' Ava faced Catherine with fun in her

heart and determination in her mind. She wasn't going to let the bitch get away with spoiling things for her. No way. 'I don't believe what you just said about Vince, Catherine. I know him very well and he would not do what you've just accused him of. I would suggest you refrain from making such slanderous remarks and treat Vince with the respect and courtesy he deserves as my boyfriend. Do I make myself clear?'

A stunned silence descended upon the group with Catherine paling noticeably. 'I will not be forced to be polite to that man.'

'In that case, Byron, you have a choice,' Ava stated firmly, though her voice was shaking. *She* was shaking. 'Either she leaves this party or I do. Which is it to be?'

'Ava, don't be ridiculous. Let's discuss this like adults.'

'Choose!'

'This is crazy! I shouldn't have to make such a choice.'

'What choice?' Kyle asked, smiling at everyone as he joined them with Vince by his side.

'It. . .it's all right,' Catherine said tautly, but with a vicious look Ava's way. 'I'll do it.'

Ava felt a real surge of triumph. The bitch had backed down. It rather confirmed Vince's innocence, she thought.

Or Catherine's ambition to become the second Mrs Whitmore, added another darker voice. Ava's stomach began to churn again.

'Do introduce Ava's friend, Kyle,' Nathan drawled. 'We're all dying to meet him.'

To Ava the next few minutes were the longest and most difficult in her life. An excruciating tension invaded her during the whole procedure, especially when Catherine and Vince exchanged the coolest of greetings. It was

obvious something had happened between the two of them, with Ava's confidence in Vince's innocence wavering in the face of his manner.

'And what do you do for a living, Mr Morelli?' Byron asked pointedly at one stage.

Ava glared at her brother. She'd had enough of this. 'He builds things,' she stated firmly, evoking a startled look from Vince. 'Other than that, his job is to make me happy, isn't it, Vince?'

Vince gave the expectant faces staring at him a slow survey, a sardonic smile coming to his beautiful mouth. '*Si, mia amore.*' And blew her a kiss in a very Giuseppe-like gesture. 'Your wish is my command, as they say.'

Then I wish to dance,' she said, not sure if she was angry or amused at his antics. It was obvious everyone thought he was little more than an Italian gigolo.

'Your sister's present, Mr Whitmore,' Vince pronounced, plonking the prettily packaged box of golf-balls in Byron's startled hands before whirling Ava towards the small dance-floor that had been cleared in the middle of the huge room.

'Vince, how could you?' Ava berated breathlessly when he drew her close and set up a slow rhythm that was disturbingly sensuous.

'How could I what?' he said with mock innocence.

'Let them think you are a man of easy virtue.'

He laughed softly. 'You started it.'

'Is. . .is it true you once mowed Catherine's lawns?' she asked tentatively.

'Yes.'

'She says you made a pass at her. . .and that she had to fire you. . .'

'And did you believe her?'

'No. . .'

'You don't sound so sure.'

'Well, she is very beautiful. . .'

Vince snorted. 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. She's ugly to my eye. And she's the one who made the pass, if you call standing naked before me a simple pass.'

'She *didn't*!'

'She damned well did.'

'And you rejected her, the way you did all the others who tried to seduce you? You know. . .the ones you told me about?'

'No.'

Ava froze in his arms, her eyes flinging wide. '*No?*'

He shook his head. 'You misunderstand me. I didn't touch that bitch. But there *was* one woman I didn't knock back. She was much cleverer with her seduction than all the others, much more devious.'

'Oh?' Ava was so glad he hadn't slept with Catherine that she could almost bear some unknown stranger from the past. Though she couldn't help feeling jealous of this creature who had captured Vince's interest with the sort of womanly wiles she herself had only ever dreamt about. 'Who was she, do you mind my asking?'

His eyes locked on to hers. 'Not at all. She's standing right in front of me.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'OH!' AVA cried, her cheeks flushing with shocked pleasure first, then a fierce embarrassment. 'But I didn't!' she protested. 'I mean. . .I did find you very attractive. . .but I didn't do anything. . . I mean. . . other than trying to look nice. I. . .I wouldn't have even known how. . .'

His eyes were gentle and teasing as they caressed her flustered face. 'You knew how, sweet Ava, without having to know how. I think you're an instinctive vamp.'

'Me? A *vamp*? Vince, please don't tease me. I hate being teased.'

'I rather like it myself. Put your arms around my neck. I want you closer. . .'
His arms snaked further around her waist and he moulded her against him, one large hand resting firmly in the small of her back, the other stroking possessively over her bottom. By exerting a firm but gentle pressure, her breasts were slowly pressed flat against the hard expanse of his chest, the soft swell of her stomach a convenient cushion for that part of his body which definitely wasn't soft. As he rocked her gently to the music, all sorts of tingling sensations began shooting through Ava. She shivered at the feel of that roving hand on her buttocks, stunned by the thought that she didn't care what he did with it or how he touched her, even in full view of everyone.

'Let's get out of here,' Vince whispered after a couple of minutes' erotic torture.

Ava couldn't believe how fast her heart was beating. 'Where. . .where would we go?' s 'Somewhere private.'

The temptation was acute. Not only was she incredibly excited at the thought of being 'somewhere private' with Vince, but the prospect of staying here at this party and having to parry caustic comments from Catherine or put up with shocked looks from hypocrites like Nathan had little appeal.

Her mind was made up with a swiftness that almost surprised her. Till she finally accepted that the old wishy-washy Ava was no more.

'Yes, I'd like that,' she said firmly. 'Let's go.'

Vince seemed slightly taken aback by her decisiveness. 'Shouldn't you say goodbye to the host and hostess? Or at least the guest of honour?'

'Probably. But I'm not going to. Do them good to see a different side to silly old Aunt Ava,' she said a touch bitterly.

Vince's eyes carried a shocked look. 'Is that how they really perceived you?'

'You'd better believe it.'

He continued to stare down at her, a steely expression slowly replacing his astonishment. 'In that case you're dead right. They deserve no special consideration. Let's go.' Taking her hand, he pulled her past Nathan and Lenore, who had just walked on to the improvised dance-floor together. Ava got a fleeting impression of Nathan sending a worried look after her.

He has every reason to worry, she thought savagely. If she wanted to, she could cause his marriage a lot of trouble. Gemma would not put up with her husband being unfaithful.

'Ava!' came the sharp call when they were halfway along the pier.

Ava ground to a halt and whirled, though still holding Vince's hand. Nathan stood at the other end of the pier, looking as cool and arrogant as he always did. Lenore was nowhere in sight. Clearly he had left her inside while he followed them out here.

'Where the hell do you think you're going?' he shouted. 'We're about to toast Byron's birthday.'

'I'm not stopping you,' she retorted.

'You're not going off with that bloke, are you? After what Catherine said about him? Surely you're not *that* desperate.'

Vince's hold on her hand tightened. 'Shall I dump him in the water for you, Ava?' he muttered.

While Ava had a healthy respect for Vince's physical strength she also suspected that Nathan was a lot tougher than he looked. He was no stranger to solid workouts in Byron's gym, his tall elegant body having not an ounce of extra flesh on it. If it came to a fight, Vince might just have his hands full.

'No,' she whispered. 'Let me handle this. I'm going to enjoy it.'

Ava let Vince's hand go and walked back towards Nathan. She stopped halfway between the two men, schooling her face into a coolly assertive expression that had Nathan frowning.

'Yes, I am going off with Vince, Nathan. But no, I'm not that desperate. We already made love a couple of times before coming here tonight so I'm actually feeling quite relaxed in that regard. It's having to be around my *loving* family that makes me tense and unhappy. You're all so damned insensitive. Not to mention snobbish. Tell me, Nathan, why is it that Catherine's word is automatically believed whereas Vince's isn't? He tells me she lied about him making a pass at her. He says it was the other way around.'

'And you blindly believe him?' Nathan scoffed.

'Take a good look at Vince, Nathan. Do you honestly think he would need to force himself on a woman? I would have thought that you, of all men, would know there are some males in this world who have no trouble attracting the opposite sex. Females flock to them like moths to a flame. Some women are even stupid enough to come back for seconds, even after they've been burnt.'

She gave him a few seconds for that to sink in.

'I won't tell Gemma what I've seen here tonight, Nathan,' she lashed out. 'But someone else might and I hope she dumps you, you unfaithful bastard!'

'I am not unfaithful to Gemma,' he snapped back. 'God-damn you, Ava, I warned you about trying to make trouble in my marriage.'

She laughed. 'Do you honestly think your marriage isn't in trouble already? I'm just sorry a sweet girl like Gemma ever had to fall for that superficial charm of yours. You're a fake, Nathan Whitmore! But one day that coolly glamorous façade you hide behind is going to break down and the real Nathan Whitmore is going to emerge. God help the woman you're with when that happens. I just hope it's not Gemma!'

Emotion running high, Ava whirled and stalked back to Vince, who had the common sense not to say a word but simply joined her in her angry march back along the pier. He didn't speak till they were back in the car and had travelled a reasonable distance.

'You sure socked him between the eyes, Ava,' he commented quietly. 'Is he really as bad as all that?'

Ava dragged in a deep breath then let it out in a long slow shuddering sigh. 'I'm not sure. Maybe. Probably. God, Vince, I don't really know. No one knows the real Nathan. No one.'

That's rather frightening.'

'Nathan *is* frightening.'

'He seemed very cool back at the houseboat. Not so cool a moment ago, however.'

'He's like a rumbling volcano lately. One day he's going to erupt.'

'Mmm. He won't erupt all over you, will he?'

'No. I won't be the cause of his eruption.'

'You *do* sound sure of that. Yet he got pretty mad at you back there.'

'It'll take more than a few barbs from me to crack that man open. No, he'll cool down and come out smiling tomorrow. And he'll find a whole lot of smooth lies to tell that pretty little wife of his when she gets back from Lightning Ridge. And she'll believe him, silly fool that she is.'

'Yet you spoke of her in glowing terms when you told me about her earlier. You made her sound a very strong and courageous individual.'

'She is, but she's young and trusting too. And she loves Nathan to death.'

'She sounds like she's headed for trouble.'

'Yes. . .'

'Hey, don't start getting depressed. You can't live everyone else's life for them, Ava. All you can do is lend a helping hand whenever you can.'

'Is that so? Somehow I don't think you practise what you preach, Vince. You're still trying to live your brothers' and sister's lives for them, from what I've heard. Time to let each one of them stand on their own two feet, don't you think? Believe me, you're not doing them any favours by watching over their every move and giving them unwanted advice all the time. They have to learn by their mistakes.'

His sideways glance was sharp. 'Is that the voice of experience talking?'

'I think I qualify to speak on the subject of being overprotected, don't you?'

'Perhaps. And am I one of the mistakes *you're* learning by?'

Ava blinked wide eyes his way, shock quickly giving way to a justifiable anger. 'Why on earth would you say such a horrible thing? You know how I feel about you. I *told* you! Oh, I know you think I'm a silly naive fool who's mixing up love and sex but you're wrong. I might have lived the last thirty years hiding away in that mausoleum I call home, but I've seen plenty of life within those walls. I've seen love and hate and sex and lust, and, believe me, I know the differences. I also know the difference between what is fantasy and what is real. I love you, Vince, with a love that is *not* blind. I love you and I'm going to be your lover for as long as you want me.'

Ava was unaware of the tears filling her eyes till a couple started trickling down her cheeks. She dashed them away impatiently. She hated women who

cried at the drop of a hat, or to get sympathy, or their own way. Irene had used tears on Byron all the time.

'Are you crying?' Vince asked anxiously.

'No, of course not,' she denied hurriedly. 'What is there to cry over? You never lied to me or conned me, you told me the truth from the start. You have affairs with women. You don't have time for love or commitment. You don't even have time for romance or a long- term relationship.'

'My, don't I sound like a right prize! Don't say any more, Ava, for pity's sake, or I might turn this car round right now and take you home where you belong.'

'Where I belong, Vince, is where I want to be. And right now I want to be with you.'

Narrowed brown eyes slanted her way. That sounds like the words of a very grown-up and independent woman.'

Ava's chin lifted as she eyed him back without blinking. 'I think so.'

'Then you don't want to call a halt to our. . .affair?'

'Not for all the tea in China.'

'That's a lot of tea.'

'You're a lot of man.'

Vince sucked in a startled breath, the red Mazda losing its line for a second. 'Good God, Ava, you shouldn't say things like that.'

'Why not?'

'Dammit, but you're beginning to confuse me as well.'

'As well as what?'

'I think you know, you teasing witch.'

'Oh. . .that. . .'

'Yes, *that*. Now shut up while I get us to where we're going.'

* * *

Where they were going was Kirribilli, pulling up in front of a very tall darkened block of flats which was not quite finished, if all the building materials left on site were anything to go by.

'Where on earth are you taking me?' she asked when he took her hand and helped her out of the car.

'To my hideaway.'

'Your hideaway. . .'

Vince guided her over to a gate in the high wire- meshed fence that ran around the perimeter of the property, where he produced a set of keys and let them in, locking the gate behind them. Ava assumed this must be the building site he'd been working on lately, but she felt uneasy about what they were doing.

'Won't you get into trouble if we're caught, Vince?' she whispered.

'Who's to catch us?'

'Surely these places are patrolled by security guards at night, aren't they?'

'I certainly hope so,' came his dry reply. 'I pay them enough. Don't worry, I'll give them a call when I get inside and tell them I'm spending the night in the penthouse. Ava, do stop frowning at me. Look, didn't you see the sign on the fence? It says "Morelli Constructions". I own this building. I can do with it what I damned well I like.'

'You own this building,' she repeated in a curiously flat tone, the result of her brain going on strike. She hadn't seen the sign. Neither would she have known what to make of it if she had.

Vince was eyeing her confusion with a confusion of his own. 'Ava, you're the one who told your brother back at the party that I built things. I thought that meant you'd found out I was Morelli Constructions. I assumed Giuseppe must have told you.'

Ava shook her head which was already spinning. 'I've never heard of Morelli Constructions.'

'Then why did you say I built things?'

'Because when you rang me the other day, you said you were just turning into a building site. I thought you must have been doing some handyman work there, or some labouring.'

'You thought I was a builder's labourer. .

"Well, yes. . . I suppose I did. I mean, you did say you weren't mowing lawns any more.'

He laughed and drew her into his arms. 'Oh, Ava. . . Ava. . .you are one special person/

'What *are* you, then?'

'I'm an engineer.'

'You mean with a degree and everything?'

His smile was wry. I don't know about the everything but I do have a degree. Took me a few years longer to get it than I originally planned, however. Dad's sudden death put a spanner in the works for a while. He was a good builder, you see, but not a good businessman. Left the family in all sorts of financial trouble. I had to leave university and earn money any way I could, so I started a lawn-mowing and handyman business with my brothers. Had

to finish my degree part-time at night. Once I was qualified, Giuseppe had enough faith in me to lend me some money and I started buying land, building blocks of units and selling them. Giuseppe quickly got his money back and I've subsequently done very well for myself.'

'But. . .but why didn't you tell me any of this before?'

He shrugged. 'I guess it just didn't seem to fit naturally into the conversation without sounding as if I was bragging.'

Ava's heart was filled to overflowing with admiration and love for this man. Not only was he strong and warm and kind, he was charmingly modest. If only he could see that there *was* room in his big heart —and his busy life—for a real relationship with a woman. If only he could see that she would do anything, make any sacrifice to become a permanent part of his life, however small that part might be.

'Look, I didn't bring you here to stand outside in the cold and play true confessions,' he grumbled. 'Let's go inside and be comfortable, at least. Besides, I have something I want to show you.'

Inside, the building was virtually finished, except perhaps for a lot of dust. Vince rang the security firm from one of the red phones on the wall in the foyer and informed them that they should ignore lights in the penthouse, after which they rode the lift up to the top floor. Once there, Vince inserted a special key, the doors whooshing back to reveal a most eerie sight.

A watery moonlight was streaming through the large uncurtained windows of the huge, open-plan, split-level apartment, casting shadows across the floors and walls of the starkly empty rooms.

'I think some lights are called for,' Vince said, and reached for a switch. Immediately, a myriad wall-lights snapped on, *en masse* giving the bare rooms a softly warm glow, but each one directing rays of light on to a painting hanging on the wall underneath it.

Ava quickly realised she was looking at Vince's art collection.

'Come and tell me what you think,' he said with quiet satisfaction in his voice and a hand on her elbow.

Ava allowed herself to be guided across the concrete floors, through the rooms, down various steps and a long wide corridors, taking her time to inspect each painting as they ambled through the unfurnished penthouse. Most of the paintings were landscapes, with the occasional still-life thrown in. What they all had in common was an atmosphere of beauty and peace, as well as a delicacy in the colours and brushwork that had a soothing, calming effect. It was a collection designed to relax.

Ava loved it.

After she'd viewed more than a dozen works she broke her silence, turning her admiration to the man whose eyes had chosen them even though there wasn't one by an artist of any note. They were all unknowns, all worth comparatively little at this present time.

'You have marvellous taste, Vince,' she said with warm sincerity. 'You must get an enormous amount of pleasure out of looking at these.'

'I do, now that I've found the right place to put them. I'm going to come and stay here when things get hectic at home. That's why I call it my hideaway.'

'What about furniture? You're going to need something to sit in occasionally, aren't you?'

'I have all the furniture I need for now.'

'You have?' Her head swivelled as she glanced around. 'From what I can see, you haven't any?'

'Oh, yes, I have. There's one room you haven't seen yet. Come. . .'

He led her down a hallway and into the master bedroom where she could do nothing but stare at the huge bed with a deep wine velvet throwover bedspread and a semicircular black lacquered bed-head complete with

built-in accoutrements. She'd never seen so lavish- looking a bed, despite its resting on a bare floor.

'What more could I possibly want?' Vince said. 'I can even lie in bed and look at the stars through here.' He waved at the glass wall which opened out on to a balcony overlooking Sydney harbour.

'Come and try it,' he said, walking over to sit on the bed and pat the quilt. 'It's very soft.'

Ava hesitated, then decided not to be so silly. She went over and sat down on the opposite side, still feeling rather awkward.

'No, no,' Vince said. 'Take your shoes off and lie down properly.'

Ava shrugged and did as she was told, glancing rather nervously up at Vince. If he wanted to take her to bed this was a rather obscure way of going about it.

'Now look across the foot of the bed at that wall,' he smiled.

She did, immediately gasping upright into a sitting position. For it was *her* painting on the wall. Framed exquisitely in gold, it was lit with not one but two wall brackets which threw a delicate glow upon its surface, bringing out the gentle colours and making it look as she had never dreamt it could ever look. Silent tears of joy and gratitude pricked at her eyes, a lump filling her throat.

'Oh, Vince,' she choked out. 'It's so beautiful. . .'

He came up behind her, holding her shoulders and kissing her seductively on the neck. 'Not as beautiful as the lady who painted it. . .'

Ava shivered underneath his kisses, her eyes still on the painting but her mind and body already responding to Vince's touch. 'Stay the night with me,' he said thickly, his lips moving up her throat and along her jawline. 'Don't ask me to take you home. . .'

He removed her right earring and covered the ear with his mouth, blowing warm air, inside, then sliding his tongue into the well. Ava shivered convulsively, and tried to turn her head away, but he cupped her chin and kept it still, driving her mad till, with a tortured cry, she twisted round and gave her mouth to his in total surrender.

'God, you don't know what you do to me,' he groaned as he pushed her back into the pillows and started undoing her jacket. 'I can see I'm going to be rearranging a lot of schedules for you.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GEMMA couldn't sleep. She lay back in the motel bed, staring up at the ceiling and wondering if Nathan was enjoying Byron's party. God, but she was missing him. Terribly. She'd felt bereft from the moment she'd climbed on to the plane this morning. Not even seeing Ma at the other end had lightened her spirits. Then had come the shock when Ma had taken her back to visit the place where she'd spent most of her growing up years.

Had it always been so appallingly primitive, so *dirty*?'

Admittedly, Ma did not keep the dugout in the same condition she had done, but still. . .

Gemma shuddered just thinking about it. What kind of father had hers been who would bring up a child in such conditions? Gemma had become so distressed this morning even *sitting* in the place that she had found the first excuse she could think of to get out of there. She told Ma she wanted to see Mr Gunther while he was sober—he usually started drinking around noon.

Ma had driven her back to Lightning Ridge and Mr Gunther's ramshackle house, at the side of which was a garage which served as Mr Gunther's workshop. He made a meagre living by buying small uncut opals, then cutting and polishing them and reselling them to the shops around town. Her father had always sold his opals to Mr Gunther rather than deal with Byron Whitmore, claiming city dealers were crooks and would cheat you blind. This was ironic, since Mr Gunther was widely thought of as a mean old skinflint who wouldn't pay a fair price for an opal to his own grandmother.

The meeting with Mr Gunther had been as unrewarding as she'd thought it might be. The old grouch had been uncooperative and .unforthcoming. He claimed he knew nothing about her father before he came to live at Lightning Ridge. When confronted with the old photograph of her parents, he'd growled at her that he didn't recognise the woman and he'd always known her father as Jon Smith, not Stefan, and that Jon had never spoken to him about his past or her mother.

'And that's all I told that other chap as well!' he'd finally flung at her. 'Now get out of here and leave me in peace. I don't want any trouble.'

Gemma had mulled over this last statement while she had lunch with Ma in the same cafe in town she'd once worked in, wondering if the old man was keeping some secret which might get him in trouble with the law if he revealed it. She told Ma of her suspicion but Ma seemed to think he was so paranoid by nature that any questioning would make him react guiltily. He'd been extra secretive lately, Ma had added. Rumour had it he'd bought some new equipment and was probably afraid the tax people might get wind of it and want to know where the money had come from. Like Gemma's father, Mr Gunther never paid taxes, claiming he never made enough money out of opals to be taxed.

Gemma had spent the afternoon in the bar of the Diggers' Rest Hotel speaking to any of the miners who had known her father, but no one could tell her anything about her missing mother or where her father had lived before Lightning Ridge. One miner had assured her that she definitely hadn't come to Lightning Ridge from White Cliffs, since he'd mined in that area regularly for the last thirty years and he knew everyone around that town. He suggested, however, that she might try asking around the opal fields in Queensland and South Australia, or maybe the gold fields in Western Australia, his idea being that maybe her father had been mining somewhere else before coming to Lightning Ridge. Once a miner, always a miner, he'd reckoned.

Gemma thought it was worth a try and resolved to ask Nathan if his investigator had done that. Who knew? Maybe he hadn't. Anyway, she would discuss it with Nathan as soon as she got back home. Which couldn't come soon enough. God, what was she doing way out here anyway, when her life was back in Sydney?

Gemma sighed. She'd grown away from Lightning Ridge. Ma had seen it and said so in her usual blunt fashion at dinner tonight.

'You're a city girl now, love,' she'd said. Through and through. But then. . . maybe you always were. . .'

When asked what she meant by that Ma had shrugged and said she supposed she meant Gemma's mother must have been a city girl and she'd passed that on to her daughter.

'You're nothin' like Jon,' she'd finished up saying. 'Not even in nature.'

Gemma lay in her motel room now and felt a degree of satisfaction that she wasn't like her father. Who would want to be cruel and mean? Whatever good genes she had, had to have been inherited from her mother. . .whoever she was. . .

When depression threatened again —thinking about her mother always depressed Gemma —she swung her thoughts to Nathan and how sweet he'd been to her that morning. Which didn't really make her feel any better.

Perversely, she'd chosen to stay in the same room in the same motel where she had first met Nathan. A silly thing to do when she was missing him so much. Yet in a way it was good to have her memory prompted, to look back and remember why she had fallen in love with him in the first place.

How kind he had been to her that day. And how gallant. Her father had not long died and she had come here to sell some small opals for pocket money, thinking she'd be doing business with Byron Whitmore. But it had been his adopted son who had opened the door to her, looking so handsome and so very, very different from any of the men she'd known around Lightning Ridge. He'd been deputising for Byron as buyer for the family business while Byron recovered from the boating accident that had killed his wife, Irene.

Gemma recognised now that her fate had been sealed from the moment Nathan had ushered her into this room. She'd been his from that moment, even if it had been several weeks before Nathan had consummated their love for each other.

She groaned when she realised they could have been up at the beach-house at Avoca at this very moment, making love. Instead, she was lying here alone hundreds of miles away, feeling frustrated and lonely.

Gemma rolled over and stared at the bedside clock.

Eleven-thirty. Nathan would still be at Byron's birthday party. She wished she were with him.

The idea to telephone him there came out of the blue. What more natural thing than to call, wish Byron a happy birthday then have a chat with her husband? Nathan had told her not to bother to call —he hated telephone conversations at any time —but she didn't think he'd mind this one.

Besides, Monday was such a long way away. . .

Feelings excited at the thought of even hearing his voice, Gemma snapped on the light, sat up and dialled direct to Jade's number.

The telephone rang several times at the other end before it was answered, a slightly husky female voice saying, 'Hello.'

Gemma stiffened with instant recognition. Lenore. It was *Lenore!*

'Hello?' Lenore repeated.

'I'd like to speak to Nathan, please,' Gemma said, without acknowledging her husband's ex-wife. 'Is he there?'

'I'll get him for you. . .'

Gemma's head whirled. *Lenore* was at Byron's party? Why? There was no love lost between those two. Gemma was pretty sure Jade would not have invited her. Then how come she was there?

Surely Lenore wouldn't have dared come openly with Zachary Marsden, would she? She wasn't supposed to be seen with him till after his divorce came through. If she had been so bold, then why didn't she acknowledge Gemma on the other end of the line? Why just slink off to get Nathan without saying hello. Unless she hadn't recognised Gemma's voice. The party sounded quite noisy with music and chatter in the background.

'Gemma?' Nathan said brusquely.

Gemma's heart sank. Lenore *had* recognised her voice. How else would he have known who was on the line? The possibility that Nathaqa had brought Lenore to the party made Gemma feel sick to her stomach.

'Is there something wrong?' he went on. 'You're all right, aren't you? Lenore said you sounded upset.'

Gemma's imminent distress was sidetracked by Nathan making no attempt to hide Lenore's presence at the party. Would a guilty man do that?

'No,' she said, feeling confused now. 'I . . . I just thought I'd ring and wish Byron a happy birthday.'

'Oh, is that all? I thought you must have found out something about your mother.'

Gemma sighed. 'I'm afraid not. Er —what's Lenore doing at the party, anyway?'

'I brought her. She was awfully depressed about Kirsty going away on some school excursion for a couple of weeks. I thought it would do her good to get out the house and have some company.'

'I thought that was Zachary Marsden's job,' Gemma said tartly.

'Now, Gemma, don't be catty. The poor woman was lonely.'

So am I, she longed to say. Instead, she bit her tongue and tried to be charitable. 'Yes, I suppose so,' she sighed. 'I do wish you were here with me, Nathan. Do you realise I'm staying in the same motel room we met in? It has this big bed in it. Much too big for one. . .'

'God, Gemma, don't do this to me. Come home, darling. Tomorrow.'

Her heart started to beat faster, which was crazy since he was hundreds of miles away. 'I wish I could,' she groaned. 'But I can't. There's no flight over the weekend.'

'Damn.'

She laughed in an effort to break the tension he was engendering within her. 'You'll just have to write over the weekend, won't you?'

'Bitch,' he said, but softly. . .seductively. . .

Gemma swallowed. 'I think I'd better talk to Byron. You're getting me all hot and bothered.'

'He's busy.'

'Doing what?'

'Dancing with Catherine.'

'Oh?' She'd heard he had a new girlfriend, but not much about her. 'What's she like?'

'Good-looking. Rich. Sexy.'

'I hate her.'

'You're not the only one.'

'What does that mean?'

'I'll tell you when you get home.'

'Na-than!'

'Curiosity kills the cat. Promised information brings her back.'

'You're a conniving manipulative devil.'

'Of course. Is there any other way with you?'

She lay down with the phone at her ear, feeling part dazed and awfully aroused. 'I'll ring you tomorrow,' she promised breathlessly.

'Don't.'

His sharp tone made her sit up. 'Why not?'

'I'll be writing.'

'God! Why did I ever suggest such a stupid thing?'

'I have no idea. Why did you? I know you hate it when I write.'

She sighed. 'I guess I wanted to keep you busy. You're far too good-looking to be left on your own for the whole weekend.'

He laughed. 'And what about you?'

'If you'd seen some of the men I spent this afternoon with I don't think you'd worry, whereas you're down there with a whole roomful of beautiful sexy women.'

'The only beautiful sexy woman I want is you, Gemma.'

She hugged the fierce emotion of his words to her heart. 'Oh, Nathan, I do so love you. . .'

'Enough to have my baby yet?'

Gemma's heart lurched then filled to overflowing. 'I'll stop taking my pills immediately,' she promised faithfully. Lord, how could she have ever thought he didn't love her, that his feelings encompassed nothing but lust?

That would make me very happy,' he said with something like relief in his voice. 'I'll be waiting at the airport for you on Monday, darling. Don't miss your flight/

'Wild horses wouldn't stop me getting on it.'

'Bye. Be good.'

'You too.'

Gemma had hung up before she realised she hadn't told Nathan about what that miner had suggested. She shrugged. It would wait till Monday. A lot better than she would.

Still, her heart was at peace as she snapped off the lamp and lay back down. A baby, she started thinking, a soft smile pulling at her mouth in the darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AVA woke to sunshine streaming through the glass doors and on to the bed. For a few minutes she lay there, wondering what it would be like to wake up every morning like this, with Vince by her side and a feeling of utter peace coursing through her veins. Closing her eyes, she smiled her pleasure at such a scenario.

But that's just a fantasy, the new Ava reminded herself ruthlessly. Just a dream. Vince doesn't want anything more than what we shared together last night.

Sighing her resignation to the bittersweet reality of their relationship, Ava slipped out of the bed to make an essential visit to the connecting bathroom. On her return, she began picking up their clothes from where they were scattered on the floor, slipping Vince's brown silk shirt over her nakedness in lieu of a robe and placing the rest in a neat pile on the foot of the bed. '

With a loving glance at Vince's still sleeping form, she padded out into the kitchen, which was quite finished and very well equipped, even to having food essentials in the cupboards. Five minutes later she was standing at the large plate-glass window in the main living area, sipping black coffee from a mug while she admired the panorama before her eyes. Sydney harbour had never looked so beautiful, she thought. Nor the sun so bright. Nor the sky so blue.

Was it perhaps that everything would look sharper to her from now on? Had the experience of love honed her senses to a level of sensitivity that she had previously dulled with her dreamlike fantasies? Ava knew she would settle for a few nights with Vince rather than a lifetime of such fantasies. Even the memory of the pleasure he had already given her was enough to set her nerves a-tingle and her heart racing.

Luckily, Ava glimpsed Vince's reflection in the glass as he approached or when he put his arms around her she might have spilt her coffee. As it was, she gave a small shudder as he pulled her back against his splendidly naked body.

'Your wearing my shirt does things to me that are positively indecent,' he whispered, slipping his hands underneath it.

'Vince, I'm going to spill this coffee,' she warned shakily.

'Put it down and come into the shower with me.'

'The shower?'

'Uh-huh. I'm afraid we'll have to be leaving soon. It's nearly ten and I'm due home for a family gathering today. Since I have to take you back to Bellevue first, we'll have to shake a leg.'

Ava thought she hid her disappointment quite well, having hoped they might spend the day together. The prospect of Vince dropping her off with an 'I'll call you some time' farewell sent her heart plummeting to the ground. 'I — er — don't think having a shower together's a very good idea.'

'Why not?'

'You don't behave in showers.'

'I promise not to lay a single hand on you.'

She gasped as his roving hands became very intimate.

'And what do you think you are doing at the moment?' she asked tautly.

'I said I wouldn't lay a *single* hand, not two hands.'

'Oh. God. . .stop it, Vince. . .'

'Are you coming into the shower with me or not?'

She groaned. 'You're wicked.'

'Tell me something new.'

It was ten-thirty before they were dressed and ready to leave, Ava feeling somewhat alarmed at how quickly depression could follow physical ecstasy. Was this all she had to look forward to in future, see-sawing emotions plus an inability to control her own body?

'You're very quiet,' Vince commented on the way down in the lift.

'Oh?' Her swift smile had a decided edge to it. "Maybe I'm exhausted.'

'In that case you won't want to go out with me tonight. . .'

Ava hated herself for the obvious joy that must have lit her face, till she became resigned to the fact that this was what being in love could be like. It could hurt like hell, but it could also be incredibly wonderful.

'You know I would,' she said eagerly, not bothering to think that she was being far too accommodating, as usual. Still, Vince seemed to like her that way. He was certainly looking at her with amused affection in his eyes.

'Where would you like to go?' he asked indulgently.

'You choose. I don't care.'

'In that case I'll take you out to dinner, then a movie, then back here for the night.'

Ava's eyes blinked wide. God, whatever would she tell Byron?

'Does that present a problem?'

'No, she said, bolstering herself up with the thought that she was a grown-up woman of thirty. Why should she have to answer to her brother? 'No problem at all.'

They chatted together all the way back' to Belleview, about all sorts of things. Ava had never thought of herself as a good conversationalist, but with Vince the words seemed just to flow. Neither did she ever feel that what

she said was stupid, perhaps because he was a good listener, as well as an incorrigible flatterer.

'I can't get over how many movies you've seen,' he said at one set of lights, 'or how knowledgeable you are about them.'

Ava didn't enlighten him that watching movies had been the mainstay of her sanity over the years. She hugged his compliments to her heart and babbled on. It was only when they approached Belview that Vince turned serious.

'Will your brother say anything about your not coming home last night?'

'No. He won't have gone home himself. He won't have come home this morning, either. He'll have gone straight to golf for the day.'

'I see. Is he serious about Catherine, do you think?'

'I hope not.'

'I hope not too, for *his* sake.'

Vince swung the Mazda into the driveway where Ava was startled to see the gates of Belview already open, even though she hadn't pressed the remote control gizmo in her handbag.

'Oh, God,' she groaned. 'Byron must be home.' Her instant panic belied her belief that she had become a grown-up woman with the right to do as she believed. Suddenly, she was a bundle of nerves.

'Don't worry,' Vince said firmly. 'Leave this up to me.' And he shot through the gates, whipping around the semicircular driveway and grinding to a bone-crunching halt at the bottom of the steps. Immediately one of the front doors opened and Byron stepped out on to the patio, looking murderous.

Not only murderous but surprisingly unshaven. He was also still wearing the same clothes he'd been wearing at the party, a dark blue suit. His tie, however, was missing, and the top button of his shirt was undone. His hair looked greyer than usual and he didn't seem to have combed it.

Ava could not help staring at this most uncharacteristic sloppiness. Byron was usually most particular over how he presented himself, even around the house. When Ava and Vince didn't get out of the car straight away he stormed down the steps and wrenched open the passenger door.

'You get yourself out of there immediately,' he roared at her.

'Stay right where you are, Ava,' Vince said in so* cool, collected and commanding a voice that Ava was in no doubt whom she was going to obey. 'I would like to have a word with you, Mr Whitmore,' he added, already getting out of the car.

'You've got a bloody hide, Morelli, keeping my sister out all night then breezing in here like you've done nothing wrong.'

'I haven't done anything wrong. Unless you think making love to an adult woman who wants you to make love to her is wrong. In that case, look to yourself, Mr Whitmore. I doubt you've only been sipping coffee at night with Catherine Gateshead.'

An angry red slashed across Byron's cheekbones. 'You're nothing but a bloody gigolo, Morelli, taking advantage of lonely women who've had the misfortune to hire you to work around their homes.'

'Is that what Catherine told you? I'd take anything she says with a grain of salt, if I were you.'

'Once I've had you checked out, you won't be so cocky,* Byron threatened.

'You think not? Go ahead. Make my day.'

Byron's top lip curled. 'Very funny. You won't be cracking jokes when I can show my sister in black and white just what a cad she's got mixed up with. I've done a bit of checking up on you myself already and even your own mother told me you're engaged to an nice little Italian girl.'

Ava couldn't help it. She giggled.

Byron responded by grabbing her arm and hauling her out of the car, his face dark with fury. 'What in hell's happened to you?' he snarled. 'Has this bastard corrupted you so much that you've lost all sense of decency? Don't you care he's going to marry another woman, or that he's got the morals of an alley-cat? I hope you don't think he loves you. Men like him make silly women like you *pay* for the privilege of their professional expertise. It won't be long before he starts asking you for money, you mark my words!'

Byron never saw the blow coming. Vince's fist was like greased lightning and a second later Byron was a crumpled mess on the gravel. Ava gasped and dropped to her knees beside her brother, her hands frantic on his face. 'You've killed him,' she cried.

'Not quite,' Vince said, rubbing at his reddened knuckles as Byron made a moaning sound. 'But I'd have liked to. God, what a pompous puritanical pain your brother is. How you turned out so sensible and broad-minded, I have no idea. You must take after another branch of the family.'

'But I like him,' he suddenly grinned, making Ava gasp with surprise. 'I would have done exactly the same if you'd been *my* sister. The ogre cares about you, Ava, and that speaks for a lot in my book. Here, help me get him up over my shoulder and I'll take him inside. He'll be coming round shortly. And stop worrying. He might have a sore jaw later and a bit of a headache but no lasting damage.'

'Hell, but he's a big bloke,' he muttered as he carried Byron inside and laid him down on the very same leather sofa he'd put Ava on that first day. 'Perhaps you'd better get him some ice to put on his jaw, Ava. A couple of painkillers and a drink of water might be in order too.'

When a groggy Byron started coming round a minute later and saw Vince sitting in a chair opposite him, he went to sit up, only to groan and slump back down on the pillows.

'Good idea,' Vince pronounced sternly. 'Now lie there and listen. First, let's get a few things straight. One. . . I did not make a pass at Catherine Gateshead; neither have I slept with any female except a discreet number of girlfriends who all knew the score. Secondly, I no longer mow lawns.'

Mowing Ava's lawn was a one- off thing. When she rang to hire someone for the following day there was no one free, but she sounded such a nice lady and so worried sick that her big oge of a brother might start belly-aching over the bloody lawns, that I did her a special favour.'

Byron made a scoffing sound.

'Shut up and listen for once!' Vince commanded.

An impressed Ava used this short break in proceedings to hand Byron a tea-towel wrapped around some ice cubes. 'Put this on your chin,' she whispered. 'It's beginning to swell. . .'

His doing as she suggested in a rather dazed, almost bewildered fashion moved her to pity. Poor Byron, he really doesn't know what's hit him, either with Vince or her own changed self.

'That's how Ava and I met,' Vince explained, thankfully not mentioning her fall that day. 'We hit it off straight away. I did not seduce her. She did not proposition me. We became friends first. I recognised her artistic ability and introduced her to Giuseppe Belcomo, who's a master at recognising and fostering true talent. You can check him out too, if you like. Last night was the first time Ava and I made love. The *first* time,' he hit home. 'I respect and admire your sister very much, Byron. I'm sorry I slugged you but I could not stand by and have you belittle her. Or me for that matter, for when you belittle me, you belittle her.'

Ava squeezed her eyes tightly shut against the wave of emotion crashing through her. She had never had anyone stand up for her like this and it was. . . incredible.

'Finally, I do not need or want your sister's money. I have enough of my own and if you don't believe me, then by all means check up on that too. I'm a qualified engineer. I own and run Morelli Constructions, which specialises in building quality apartment blocks all over Sydney. We've been so busy and successful this past year that I haven't even been out with a woman in months!

'Last but not least, let me give you a word of warning about Catherine Gateshead. She is a coldly ambitious evil bitch who will do anything to get what she wants. But she is at her most dangerous when crossed. Her vicious lies after I knocked her back caused our family company to lose many clients. I'm not saying she isn't beautiful, but, before you even think of marrying her, check out her other three husbands.'

'Three?' Byron gasped. 'I thought she'd only had the one.'

'There've been three. Believe me.'

'Good lord. . .' He appeared to mull over this information before decidedly sharper blue eyes snapped up again. 'What about your being engaged?'

Vince sighed. 'My mother has a problem with the way I conduct my private life. Lately, she's been telling any girl who rings me that I'm either engaged or about to become engaged to a nice little Italian girl. Obviously, she's started saying the same to their brothers.'

'I see. . .' He glanced over at Ava, who was perched on the arm of a chair near by, doing her best to remain composed under a whole range of emotions. 'I. . . I only ever had your best interests at heart, love, but I can see now I've been a very misguided brother as well as a highly inadequate guardian. I'm sorry. Forgive me?' he asked, his voice breaking.

Ava came forward and squatted down next to the sofa, smiling at him through suddenly blurred eyes. 'I always knew you loved me,' she said. 'We'll put the past behind us and go forward.'

A type of puzzlement filled Byron's eyes. 'You've changed so much. I can hardly believe it's my little Ava I'm talking to.'

'It's me all right.'

Vince tapped her on the shoulder. 'Ava, why don't you go and freshen up? Change into something a little more casual. I'd like to take you home with me. If you'd like to come, that is. . .'

Ava turned, eyes blinking with surprise. 'You want me to meet your family?'

'Yes, I do.'

She wanted to ask if he took home all the women he slept with him but decided not to push her luck. 'OK,' she said brightly. 'I'll go freshen up.'

Byron watched his sister leave, then frowned at this man who'd worked this miraculous transformation. 'She loves you. You do know that, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'And what are your feelings for her?'

Vince frowned and sat back down. 'Well, it's like this, Byron. . .'

Ava tripped back downstairs, having happily found that her clever clothes for biggies were so clever that they looked good on not-so-biggies too. The elastic waists shrank to fit, the jackets even more slimming when they hung a little more loosely. But she was looking forward to buying herself a pair of jeans in the near future. And who knew? Maybe one day she'd squeeze into a bodysuit. But for now she was wearing the outfit Vince had first seen her in.

Vince and Byron were sitting together having coffee when she returned to the family-room, looking for all the world like the best of friends. Ava was astonished and must have looked as much when she entered, for Byron threw her a reassuring smile.

'Don't worry, love,' he said. 'No pistols at dawn. Vince and I have come to an understanding.'

Her laugh was slightly nervous. 'You mean I won't be told not to darken this doorstep again?'

'Of course not. You make me sound like an ogre!'

Ava was trying not to laugh while Vince guided her from the house and saw her into the passenger seat of the Mazda, though behind her suppressed humour was a type of shock.

'I think that knock on the jaw must have rattled Byron's brain,' she commented as Vince climbed in behind the wheel. 'I just can't understand his attitude towards you. I mean. . .his accepting his little sister's lover so quickly and warmly is just not *Byron!*'

'Well, there is an explanation for that,' Vince said.

Ava frowned back at him. 'Would you mind sharing it with me?'

His glance carried an irony Ava found totally confusing.

'Remember last night when you said you would be my lover for as long as I wanted you?' he asked quietly.

'Yes. . .' Everything inside her squeezed tight. So this was it. He was going to say he didn't want her any more.

'Did you mean it?'

'What?'

He swivelled in the seat to face her, his own face surprisingly strained. 'Did you mean it?' he ground out.

'Of course I meant it! I don't say things I don't mean. What are you trying to say?'

'What I'm trying to say, Ava, is that I do want you. . .for forever. . .'

'For forever?' she repeated blankly.

'Yes. I want to marry you.'

Ava's stunned silence brought a frown after a short while.

'You don't want to marry me?' he said in a pained voice.

'Yes. No. I mean I. . . I —'

'Look, I know I said I didn't have the time for a commitment or even a real relationship,' he cut in forcefully, 'but that was before I realised I loved you.'

'You love me,' she whispered, her face on the verge of crumpling.

His eyes melted all over her. 'Madly.'

'Oh,' she squeaked, her whole vocal cords having seemed to seize up.

'I was worried all along that I was falling in love with you, but last night when Nathan was being appalling to you, and then this morning when Byron started on at you. . . well, I just knew I loved you, Ava, because I wanted to kill him with my bare hands.'

'You love me,' she said again, still dazed and disbelieving.

'God, yes. How could I help but love you? You're so special. And your brand of loving is so special. I know I'll never find its equal anywhere in this world and if I let you go I'd be the biggest fool in this world. I thought of asking you to live with me, but I realised I was right the first time. You're the sort of woman a man has to marry because nothing less is worthy of the beautiful person you are.'

"But. . . but you said you didn't have the time. . . '

'I'll *make* time. To hell with being a multi-millionaire. I'll have to settle for being a simple millionaire. I'll build you a house, darling. Any house you want.'

'But I. . . I wouldn't mind living in the penthouse for a while.'

'Done! You can have *carte blanche* on the decor and the furnishings. You can even convert part of it to a studio, if you'd like. You can have anything you want!'

Ava bit both her lips in an effort not to cry. 'I've only ever really wanted you.'
And she burst into tears.

Vince groaned and gathered her in, holding her and stroking her hair. 'Oh, God, darling, you make me feel so humble. I've been such a bloody fool. All those things I said to you. I'm not really wicked with women. Well, not lately. . .except with you, of course. . . You bring out the worst —and perhaps the best —in me.'

He kissed away her tears and Ava thought she would die from happiness.

'So you will marry me?' he murmured.

She nodded and he kissed her again.

'Shouldn't we go back inside and tell Byron?' Ava asked some time later. 'He might be relieved you're going to make an honest woman out of his sister.'

He already knows,' Vince astonished her by saying. 'While you were upstairs, I asked him for your hand in marriage. He said to tell you that he wishes you every happiness and he'll pay for the wedding.'

'Oh, my goodness. Byron said that?'

'He did. Of course he didn't realise what he was agreeing to. Even a *half*-Italian wedding is enough to set the father of the bride —or substitute —back a pretty penny. I live in terror of my sister making a similar announcement."

'Don't worry, Vince, Byron can afford it. He recently sold an opal for two million dollars.'

'No kidding! I didn't realise opals were that expensive.'

'This one was. It was called the Heart of Fire.'

'Aren't opals supposed to be unlucky?'

'That's an old wives' tale, though that particular one has a long history of scandals and secrets behind it.'

'You'll have to tell me the whole story one day, but as of now I think we should make tracks for the Morelli residence. You're about to make my mother's day,'

'Even though I'm not a nice little Italian girl?' Ava remarked a little nervously.

Vince's smile was so tender, Ava almost burst into tears again. 'My mother is going to adore you,' he murmured. 'My whole family is going to adore you, because you're simply adorable, don't you know that? Now let's get going. Our future awaits!'