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HARLEQUIN PRESENTS™

# ROBYN DONALD

## *Tiger, Tiger*



# **TIGER, TIGER**

**Robyn Donald**

Not only opposites attract! When Lecia Spring first spotted Keane Paget, his presence burned like a shining beacon. He was handsome, certainly, and profoundly male, but the face that stared back at her was otherwise her own! Lecia was stunned... hypnotized... and it wasn't just his likeness--an unsettling, wild attraction immediately coursed between them. They say that the greater the resemblance, the happier the relationship. But Lecia's passions had only ever led to heartbreak--and guilt! No, Keane Paget was dangerous. Not only did he have her face, he seemed to see inside her soul! They were too alike for comfort. Resist, resist....

## CHAPTER ONE

'LECIA, look at that man! The tall one walking towards us with the very chic blonde beside him. He could be your twin!'

Lecia Spring's clear green gaze followed her friend's discreet nod towards the man coming up the marked path between the thousands of people who'd decided that watching opera in the Auckland Domain was the perfect way to spend this summer afternoon.

Broad-shouldered in a well-cut shirt, and with legs that seemed to stretch for miles, he strode through the press of people, apparently expecting them to part in front of him and his companion like the sea before Moses. Which was exactly what was happening.

That formidable confidence was something Lecia envied. He stood about six inches taller than her five feet eight inches, and except for a pronounced male toughness his face was the one that looked out from her mirror every morning.

Primitive, superstitious apprehension kicked her in the gut.

'Same bone structure,' Andrea was muttering excitedly. 'Same straight, long nose with the tiniest bump on the bridge and—heavens, yes—the same cleft chin! I can't believe it! You're fairer, but you both have honey- coloured hair. Dark manuka honey in his case, closer to clover in yours! He *must* be related to you.'

'He can't be,' Lecia returned, prickling all over with absurd diffidence. 'I agree, he looks just like Dad, but Dad had no relatives except his parents.'

'Cousins? Everyone has cousins.'

'Not in Dad's family. They were a most unproductive lot. Just one child each generation back as far as anyone remembers—and always a son until I turned up to break the pattern.'

Lecia's glance travelled to the woman beside the unknown man. Slim, with a patrician face, she wore clothes that were exactly right. As befitted the occasion, they were casual, although she'd dressed the outfit up with a gold chain and supple Italian sandals. The floaty silk shirt and trousers, cool, expensive and elegant, suited her. And she knew it.

Repressing a sudden twist to her heart, Lecia concentrated on what she was about to say. 'Anyway, Dad was an Australian and this is New Zealand.'

'What a shame.' Andrea sighed and murmured throatily, 'If he was a relative you could introduce me. Talk about the *it* factor! That woman's staring at him as though she'd eat him if she had the chance.'

Andrea was right. Although nothing but relaxed interest showed in that lovely face, the man's companion couldn't hide the awareness surrounding her like an aura.

Switching her gaze back to the strong bones and hard-honed masculinity that stamped the stranger's face, Lecia observed, 'He'd be a tough mouthful.'

'Those calories I'd really enjoy,' Andrea said suggestively. 'I lo-o-ove the way he walks! As though he expects the whole world to scuttle out of his way. I'll bet he's a tiger in bed.'

Lecia forced a smile into her tone. 'You can tell that by looking at him?'

'And so can every other woman here. You're just obstinately refusing to read the signals.' Andrea put on her sunglasses and assumed what she thought was an English accent. 'Note, my dear Watson, the way those muscles work together, so powerfully smooth and sure. He's coming up the hill without even sweating, so he has stamina.' She growled the final word with comical lasciviousness. 'Terribly important is stamina. And because he's wearing clothes that cost more than half my salary—and we know how rare inherited wealth is in New Zealand—we can deduce that he's not only rich, he's intelligent enough to hold down a very good job. Intelligence, dear Watson, is another vital attribute in a lover.'

Lecia's amusement was diluted by another emotion, a kind of shocked bewilderment. Hypnotised, she gazed at the man, absorbing greedily the cool, commanding presence, the way the sun was imprisoned in the tawny amber hair, the golden hue of his skin.

Beside her, Andrea continued, 'As for passion—well, just take a quick glance at that mouth! It's kept very firmly under restraint, but it's there.' Shuddering enjoy- ably, she pushed her sunglasses onto the top of her head and surveyed the approaching man with bright, intrigued eyes.

Lecia swallowed. 'It's uncanny,' she mumbled, assailed by an odd feeling of connection, a bond forged only by their shared features. 'And very unsettling.'

Reluctantly, Andrea dragged her gaze away to scan Lecia's taut face. 'I suppose it is,' she said slowly. 'Come to think of it, I wouldn't like to meet my double, however gorgeous he was.'

By this time it was plain that the man and his companion were making for the corporate tents on the low hill behind the crowd. All his attention seemed to be on the woman at his side, but when a small child barrelled out in front of him and tripped, he stopped in mid-stride and picked the child up, setting her on her feet with a gentleness at variance with his autocratic air.

The toddler puckered up her face and let out a wail. Immediately the man swung her to his shoulder and turned so that the people in the crowd could see the child. A woman scrambled to her feet and began to shuffle through the blankets and picnics and umbrellas and seated people.

When she reached him the man handed the child over with a few unsmiling words before walking on. Cuddling the toddler, the woman stared with an offended expression after the tall, lean figure. Not until somebody bumped into her did she shrug and make her way back into the crowd.

'I wonder what he said?' Andrea hissed. 'Judging by the frown on the mother's face it wasn't exactly a compliment.'

The child shouldn't have been able to get that far without her noticing,' Lecia said curtly. 'It would be so easy for a little thing to get lost in all this crowd. Her mother should have kept a closer watch on her.'

Andrea laughed. 'That's probably *exactly* what he said. You see, you even think alike.'

The stranger was only a few metres away. For some reason Lecia wanted to hunch down, keep her head low in case he saw her. It was a ridiculous impulse, and one she refused to obey, although she did turn her face away and look across to the stage.

But at the sound of her name her head whipped around, and her gaze collided with that of the stranger.

Something dissolved in her stomach—no, she thought dazedly, in her bones. His dark blue eyes registered astonishment before they hardened into a polished, unreadable sheen.

'Here you are, girls,' came a male voice. 'Eat them quickly because they're already melting.'

Peter Farring looped an arm around Lecia's shoulders and dropped a kiss on the top of her head before she had time to move away. The stranger's burnished gaze flicked over the man beside her. Without breaking stride, he switched it to the path ahead and walked on up the hill.

Shakily Lecia took the proffered ice-cream cone, took a deep breath and produced a smile. 'Thanks very much.'

'My pleasure,' Peter said gallantly.

Between enthusiastic licks, Andrea told him all about the man with Lecia's face. 'Lecia says he looks just like her father,' she finished, 'in spite of the fact that she doesn't have any relatives on her father's side.'

'None?' Peter asked, intrigued. 'But there could have been—ah—well, not all families know exactly who all their relatives are.' His flush made his meaning clear.

Lecia shrugged. 'That's the only possibility, but this man's ancestor must have visited Australia, because I've never heard of a Spring travelling to New Zealand until my mother and I came back after my father died.'

if he's not reasonably closely connected,' Andrea pronounced, 'I'll give up champagne for a year.'

'He must be beautiful.' Peter's tone made it obvious that the compliment was only directed at Lecia.

Andrea gave a little crow of laughter. 'No, although he *is* gorgeous. He has the same features as Lecia but they're completely, arrogantly and very sexily masculine. You know how brothers and sisters often look alike, yet there's no mistaking which is the man and which the woman? Well, Lecia and this guy could be twins. Same physique too—he must be well over six feet. They even walk the same—that smooth, graceful gait with something slightly predatory in it.'

'Oh, good Lord,' Lecia sighed, unusually irritable. 'What an imagination you have!'

'You know what I mean, don't you?' Andrea said to Peter with the stunning lack of tact that occasionally made Lecia wonder why she was still her best friend. 'There's something not quite tamed about Lecia. That's the way this guy looks; golden and lithe and dangerous. Monarch of all he surveys.'

And then, too late, Lecia saw her remember that, although Lecia liked Peter, only a week ago she'd decided not to encourage his pursuit of her.

'I know exactly what you mean,' Peter said with a slow, smiling glance that made Lecia squirm inside.

As Andrea's current lover didn't enjoy opera, she'd proposed that she and Lecia spend the afternoon together. Unfortunately, no sooner had they



settled on their rug beneath the sun umbrella than Peter had seen them and suggested they join forces. There was no reason why they shouldn't—except, Lecia thought with brutal honesty, that it was always disconcerting to meet someone who showed every sign of being in love with you when you couldn't reciprocate.

Consciously unpleating her brows, Lecia said lightly, 'Probably if you saw us side by side we'd only resemble each other very superficially.'

But the impact of that swift, shocking moment when her eyes had linked with the stranger's had left her with a racing pulse and a body awash with adrenalin. She wanted to hide, to make sure he didn't see her again.

Most emphatically she didn't want to discuss him. Andrea, however, hadn't finished with the subject. 'It sounds as though the only possible link must be some sort of illicit liaison.'

Briskly Lecia conceded, 'Almost certainly. According to my mother—one of the few bits of family history she knows—the first Spring came out to Australia from Britain, and apparently he always said he had no relatives.'

'Of course nobody in those days would say anything about kids born on the wrong side of the blanket. He could be a long-lost second cousin several times removed,' Andrea decided. 'You should have made contact with that gorgeous beast, Lecia.'

Lecia shrugged. 'Let sleeping beasts lie,' she said curtly.

Within the space of a heartbeat the stranger had seen her, recognised their similarity, and rejected it.. No way was she going to pursue him.

But she couldn't get him out of her head. It had been so uncanny, that unexpected sight of her own features stamped in a more arrogant mould.

Once her mother had told her an old story of a girl who had looked into a well and seen beside her reflection the face of the man she would eventually marry.

In the hot sunlight Lecia's skin chilled. Now she knew exactly how that girl felt.

'...so Lecia told him that she wasn't going to design a house for a woman she didn't know,' Andrea said, breaking into infectious laughter.

Scandalised, Peter said, 'Lecia, how could you? What did he say?'

Amidst more gurgles, Andrea told him, 'He said he liked a woman with spirit. And then—get this!—and then he asked her out to dinner to meet his wife!'

'Hang on.' Peter frowned. 'You mean he'd commissioned you to design the house and his wife hadn't been consulted?'

'Exactly,' Lecia said somewhat grimly. 'I didn't even realise there was a wife. Mind you, he turned out to be an old sweetie, and his wife actually knew how to manage him perfectly, but all the same it's the first time I've been asked to design a house for a woman without even seeing her. I really thought I'd lost the commission and that he'd stamp out and find another architect.'

'Nonsense,' Andrea said, her tone tinged with mock resignation. 'Like all your other clients, he fell in love with you.'

'Hardly,' Lecia said drily, wishing she could kick her, and skilfully turned the conversation.

After that the afternoon passed pleasantly, and Lecia told herself that the strange sensation between her shoulderblades was simply overreaction. There was no way the man with her face could see her amidst the three hundred and fifty thousand people who had poured into the low-sided crater of the Domain. In company with a third of Auckland's population, she ate and talked and laughed and drank until eventually the sun went down and the concert began.

It was a confection of favourites delivered with verve and *joie de vivre* to the good-humoured crowd, the programme topped off by four songs from the

golden throat of a world-famous soprano. Then came the part most of the children—and many of the adults, Lecia thought, looking at the excited faces around her—had been waiting for.

"The Ride of the Valkyries!" the presenter announced with a flourish. Orchestra and conductor swung into the music, followed almost immediately by green and red lasers creating an unearthly light show. Fireworks soared and burst dramatically into the warm, clear night sky, and from the low rim of the crater more fireworks surrounded the huge crowd with a smoky red glow.

Entranced by the eerie light, Lecia jumped when a battery from the army fired guns beside the stage, but the unleashed thunder satisfied something childlike and primitive in her. Tipping back her head, she admired more sunbursts of flame high in the sky, all to the sound of Wagner at his most dramatic.

And when it was all over she laughed as Andrea said irrepressibly, 'Totally over the top! That's what I call a *climax*!'

Still charmed by the spectacle, they collected together the rugs and sunshades, lifted the insulated boxes that had held their food, and waited a moment for a gap in the crowd making for the various roads around the Domain.

A sharp dig in her ribs made Lecia jump and look round indignantly.

'I knew it,' Andrea muttered. 'Look, over there...'

Coming towards them was the stranger.

Lecia's heart kicked into overdrive. For a second she tried to convince herself that he hadn't seen her—that he was just going home as they were—but the purposefulness in his expression as he cut through the crowd convinced her she was wrong.

She only had time to gulp in a meagre breath before he stopped in front of her, and helplessly she looked up into eyes of a dark, brilliant steel-blue. Her

mouth dried. Behind her she heard Peter speak, but the roaring in her ears prevented his words from registering.

She had no difficulty hearing the stranger, however.

'I think,' he said, in a deep, deliberate voice with an exciting rasp in it like gravel beneath water, 'we must share a gene pool. I'm Keane Paget.'

Subliminally she felt a rearrangement of the atmosphere that meant either Peter or Andrea had recognised the name. It took all of the poise she'd acquired in her twenty-nine years to reply steadily, 'I'm Lecia Spring.'

'So—cousin?' He held out his hand.

Although she put hers into it, she shook her head. 'We can't be. I look like my father, and he looked like his father, and there are no other Spring relatives.'

His handshake was firm, his eyes searching. 'The resemblance is too marked to be coincidental,' he said with aloof assurance. 'Here's my card.'

After a quick, fumbling grope in her bag Lecia found one of her own. Without looking at his she put it into her pocket and said, trying hard to sound brisk and casual, it must be an amazing, accidental fluke. Isn't everyone supposed to have a double?'

Unfortunately the words tumbled out with all the precision and confidence of water babbling from a hose. So much, she thought bitterly, for casual briskness.

'So the old wives say,' Keane Paget said with a brief smile. 'I prefer science to folklore every time.' His gaze sweeping the other two, he nodded and said, 'Good evening.'

And headed back towards the corporate tents.

'Oh, boy!' Andrea sighed, fanning herself with her open hand as her eyes rolled upwards. 'I might faint. That voice sent shivers up and down my

spine. To say nothing of what his eyes did to me! Who is he? You recognised the name, Peter, didn't you?

'I did.' Peter was an investment adviser, and from the tone of his voice Keane Paget came within his area of expertise. 'He owns a company that makes ozone generators.'

'And exactly what,' asked Andrea, who lectured in Art History at the university, 'is an ozone generator?'

'It's a device that uses electricity and air to purify water. They've been around for ever, but the ones Paget's marketing are much more refined than the basic device, as well as cheaper and safer. He's an up-and-coming industrialist, astute and hard-hitting, with his head screwed on the right way.'

'I take that to mean that as well as being tough and clever he's already rich and getting richer,' Andrea said thoughtfully.

Amused, Peter replied, 'Yes. He owns that firm, and he's not going public in the immediate future.' When Andrea opened her mouth he forestalled her with, 'He's not married, although he's been seen out and about with some very beautiful women. And no, I don't know who the woman with him was. I don't move in his circle—haven't the background or the connections.'

Andrea turned to Lecia. 'So you're almost certainly related to a man who's making lots and lots of very nice money,' she said, her eyes gleaming with mock avarice. 'Nice going.'

Shocked by the relief she'd felt when Peter pronounced Keane Paget single, Lecia shrugged. 'I -- we're related. It gives me the creeps to know that someone else is wandering around with my face.'

'Paget's not a wanderer,' Peter said wryly. 'He's a man who knows where he's heading, and he's getting there in a hurry. He's begun exporting to Asia—doing very nicely too—and for all the profits to be made there it's not an easy market. It needs enormous patience, guts and integrity, as well as a good brain and a damned good product.'

A gap in the crowd opened out; they slid into it and made their way the mile or so to Lecia's flat in an old building down by the waterfront. As Peter escorted them all the way, common courtesy forced her to invite him into her sanctuary for a cup of coffee.

Once inside, Andrea asked, 'Why haven't we heard about Keane Paget? I mean, apart from being utterly gorgeous, he sounds the sort of man who turns up as the subject of respectful articles in high-powered magazines and newspapers.'

Peter grinned. 'He is and he does. However, he doesn't seem to indulge in the social round that ends up as photographs in the glossies. I suppose he likes his privacy.'

'What a waste,' Andrea mourned. 'He could be making the lives of all young women—and a good few older ones, I bet—so much brighter if he just smiled at the camera occasionally. We could all practise swooning.'

'Coffee's ready,' Lecia said, cutting into her friend's flight of fancy as she carried the tray across to the low table in front of the sofa.

She steered the conversation away from Keane Paget, away from anything personal, her nerves tightening when Peter admired her flat, congratulating her on her clever design for the conversion of the old factory into apartments. He was amusing and intelligent and often perceptive, but his open desire to know her better sawed across emotions already fretted by the stranger with her face.

With great relief she heard Andrea redeem her earlier tactlessness by jumping to her feet and saying, 'Time to go! Come on, Peter, we'll share a taxi, shall we?'

Reluctantly, after an appealing glance at Lecia, he nodded, trailing behind Andrea as she strode off towards the lift.

Peter, Lecia decided when she'd waved them goodbye and locked the door behind them, looked like becoming a bit of problem. Unfortunately he was really a nice man, and she just didn't have it in her to be rude to nice men.

'Although you should have learned that lesson well and truly...' she muttered, remembering another nice man she hadn't been able to turn down. Poor Barry.

Well, that had been seven years ago. She'd grown up a lot since then, and as soon as possible she'd make sure Peter understood that they had no future together.

After she'd showered off the sunscreen and sweat she pulled on a loose cotton wrap striped in her favourite peach and cream, colours that went so well with her hair and clear ivory skin.

Keane Paget would look good in them too.

Wry amusement softened the wide curves of her mouth as she imagined that very masculine face and form decked out in such gentle, pretty shades.

The amusement faded as she stared at herself in the mirror. He'd cope; he looked as though he could cope with anything! He knew what colours suited him too; he'd been wearing a cream shirt with trousers the same intense dark blue as his eyes.

At the memory of those eyes something hot and tight knotted in the pit of Lecia's stomach. 'You're an idiot,' she told her reflection, slathering on moisturiser before using the hairdryer.

Only then did she go into her bedroom and take his card from her bag.

It was severe, restrained and conventional—a personal one, not a business affair. Keane Paget lived across the harbour bridge in the marine suburb of Takapuna, and from the street name his house probably overlooked Rangitoto, the dormant volcanic island that gave Auckland its distinctive skyline.

Money, she thought, and put the card down.

She was horrified at her disappointment when he didn't ring the next day. Her Christmas and New Year had been so hectically social she'd decided to keep just for herself the January weekend when Auckland celebrated its status as a province of New Zealand.

However, in spite of having looked forward to it for weeks, she found Sunday echoing emptily, with yet another holiday on Monday to live through. The usually busy streets were empty and simmering with heat; everyone who could get there had deserted Auckland for the country or the beach.

Lecia opened every window in the flat, watered her plants and went down into the communal garden in search of inspiration. She'd been asked to supply sketches for a house needed by a vigorous middle-aged woman who'd bought a cross-leased section in the heart of one of the more expensive suburbs.

For such a decisive person, the prospective client had few ideas on what she needed beyond two bedrooms and space close by for a potting shed. Lecia played around with sketches, fitting rough floor plans into the site, knowing that if the woman decided to commission her she'd choose the house that allowed her most scope for a splendid garden and time to spend in it.

Absorbed by the challenge, Lecia spent hours in the lounge beneath the jacaranda, doodling and scribbling.

When she wasn't thinking with a pencil in her hand she cleaned out two cupboards, went to the gym, ate dinner with her godson—a twenty-month-old charmer called Hugh, who spent the night with her—and delivered him to his parents the next morning, brushing aside their thanks for the opportunity to have had a glorious evening on the town.

Keane Paget still didn't contact her.

And she did not ring him.



By the end of the week, Lecia had given up hope of hearing from the man. Not that it *was* hope, she told herself firmly on the too-frequent occasions when she recalled that proud, angular face. No, she certainly wasn't hopeful, just curious, because she'd never previously experienced anything like that moment of obstinate, elemental identification. For a second she'd been wrenched out of time and space, as though she and Keane Paget had fused together.

During the hot, humid days of late summer Lecia tried to persuade herself that the half-hidden, inchoate feeling was a simple sense of kinship—and that the primal recognition, the compulsion of affinity, had not been darkened by a shadowy foreboding that still imprisoned her in a nebulous enthrallment.

Each lazy, sultry evening she thought of Keane Paget as she drifted off to sleep; she woke, tense and aching after nights of restless, urgent dreams, with his name and arrogant face stamped so strongly on her mind that she couldn't banish either.

And sometimes during the day the dreams she couldn't recall resurfaced as fleeting images, clear and bright as miniatures, each erotic glimpse firing her skin and drying her mouth.

The telephone rang early one morning while she was halfway through toast and Earl Grey tea. After swallowing some toast in such a rush it scraped her throat, she said, 'Hello.'

'Lecia, it's Keane Paget. I'd like to take you out to lunch today if that's possible.'

'I'll see,' she said, not even thinking of refusing as she scrabbled through her diary. 'Yes, I can do lunch.'

'Good. Can you manage the South Seas at twelve-thirty?'

She had an appointment at three, so that gave her plenty of time. 'No problem,' she said, and because she must have sounded curt, added, 'I'll look forward to it.'

'I'll see you then,' he said, and hung up.

Short and to the point, she thought, replacing the receiver.

A bubble of—what? Elation? Excitement? Apprehension? No, an unnerving mixture of all three—expanded in her stomach. Lecia looked down at her fingers. Long and tense and—*seeking*—they were curled across the plastic handpiece as though she couldn't bear to break contact.

Only once before in her life had she been so intensely conscious of her physicalness, of the nerves and cells, the atoms and electrons that made up the body she took for granted. Only once before had she been seduced by an inner force that bewitched her with a compulsive siren song, propelling her towards disaster.

Lecia had learned in a hard school that life went much more smoothly if she faced the truth about her emotions. So now she forced herself to accept what the reckless dreams, the constant preoccupation, the sensuous intensity of her feelings all meant.

It was quite simple really. She wanted the man who looked so much like her they could be twins. Except that *wanting* didn't begin to describe what she felt. She couldn't label her emotions; they were so tangled that it was impossible to separate out the strands.

Was she indulging in a pathetic, slightly sinister narcissism? Or was she taking the first step down the twisted, ruinous road to obsession? Obsession she understood. Eight years ago, after freeing herself from a messy relationship with a man who'd turned out to be married, she'd vowed that she'd never again allow it to clutch her in its mindless, greedy, degrading embrace.

Not that she'd learned her lesson properly. As though that humiliating episode with Anthony hadn't been shattering enough, only a year later she'd been too thick to realise that Barry loved her with the same abject adoration she'd given to Anthony.

She'd got over Anthony; once she'd realised he was married, disgust and willpower had transformed her passion into revulsion. But Barry—whose only mistake had been his inability to set limits on his emotions—Barry was still suffering from her stupidity.

So she'd have lunch with Keane Paget just to satisfy her curiosity. If he wanted to take the acquaintanceship further, she'd very politely, very subtly, but very definitely pull away. She wasn't going to fall into that trap again.

As though released from some spell, she stepped back from the telephone and picked up her teacup.

However, that morning she needed all her determination to concentrate on calculating specifications, and she stopped at least an hour before she needed to. With her office at home it would have been easy for her to wear comfortable, casual clothes like shorts and T-shirts, but she was a professional and she dressed accordingly.

A swift glance in the mirror revealed that however professional it was, the neat cotton dress wasn't suitable for lunch at the South Seas, which was both fashionable and noted for its food. After she'd showered, Lecia opened the doors of her wardrobe and stared morosely at the clothes inside.

It annoyed her that she wanted to look her best for Keane Paget. Frightened her too. In fact, she almost put the dress she'd been wearing back on, only to realise that if she did that she'd really be establishing his importance in her mind.

'What would I wear if I was going out to lunch with a client?' she asked the unresponsive air.

Old faithful, of course. Resignedly she took down the silk shift, dressy enough to be elegant, casual enough to be comfortable, in exactly the same clear green as her eyes. She hesitated over her hair; during the day she usually wore it free, but this time, for some reason she wasn't prepared to examine, she wound the straight, glossy hank into a knot high on her head.

With more than normal care she applied lipstick and the lightest touch of eyeshadow in a gold-brown so pale it was a mere emphasis of her natural skin tone, then sprayed herself with her favourite perfume, Joy.

And, avoiding her reflection in the mirror as though they shared a guilty secret, she went out into the brilliant sunlight.

## CHAPTER TWO

SEPARATED from the harbour by a busy road and docks, the apartment block was only a kilometre along the waterfront from the Viaduct Basin, where the South Seas was. Invigorated by the salty air, Lecia set off.

In summer the central city and waterfront was mostly given over to tourists, bright and noisy as a flock of transient birds. Exchanging smiles with several, Lecia passed the refurbished ferry building, still serving its original function between the trendy shops and restaurants that had infiltrated its old galleries. She told herself stoutly that she was looking forward to seeing whether the South Seas was as good as its reputation.

And that was all.

Outside the restaurant, under canopies like sails, people sat talking and eyeing the passers-by, but Keane Paget was waiting in the bar, reading something that looked like business papers.

As Lecia walked through the door he looked up, and in his face she caught a glimpse of the complicated shock she felt whenever she saw him. It vanished as he got to his feet.

Made absurdly self-conscious by his hooded scrutiny, she tried to ignore the swift glances and subdued speculation that followed her across the room. At least they won't assume we're lovers! she thought with mordant amusement, holding her head high.

'With your hair up like that,' Keane said, seating her before resuming his chair, 'the resemblance is even more marked.'

She met his eyes frankly, it's uncanny,' she said. 'Like meeting a *doppelganger*.'

'I know. All the old fairy tales come ominously to life. What do you normally drink?'

'Lime and soda, thank you.'

One dark brow—exactly the same shape as hers— lifted. 'Nothing alcoholic?'

'No. If I drink in the middle of the day I spend the afternoon fighting off sleep.'

He looked across the room. A waiter hurried up and Keane ordered her soda and a light ale for himself, it slows me down too,' he said, with a smile that was oddly unsettling.

Lecia's stomach flipped. Keep cool! she commanded. Stop overreacting. So what if alcohol in the middle of the day turns us both into zombies? That happens to plenty of people—it doesn't signify some sort of cosmic link!

After the waiter left Keane looked at her and said, 'Would you have rung me?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

Made aware by his coolly measuring glance that she wasn't going to get away with an evasion, she said slowly, 'I thought it might be wiser if I didn't.'

'Why?'

She stopped herself from shrugging. Instead, she looked a little blindly around the room. Several people hastily averted their fascinated gazes.

'No logical reason,' she said at last. 'As you said, there's something vaguely ominous about meeting someone with your face.'

'I did wonder whether we were actually half-brother and sister,' he said, tackling the subject head-on, 'but we both resemble our fathers so that isn't an issue.'

'How do you know that?'

He gave her a direct, unsmiling look. 'I had you investigated, of course,' he said, as though it were the most normal thing in the world to do.

Lecia stiffened, 'I see,' she said grittily. 'That explains the past week of silence.' And immediately wished she'd bitten her unruly tongue.

'Yes,' he said, watching her with amused, not unsympathetic eyes.

Fortunately the drinks arrived, giving Lecia time to compose herself. The nerve of him! Unable to swallow, she only touched her lips to the cold, moist glass before putting it down.

'I presume,' she said rigidly, 'that your *investigations* went back as far as my childhood.'

'I know that you're Lecia Spring, born twenty-nine years ago in Australia to an Australian father and New Zealand mother. A year after your parents' marriage in Melbourne your father had a severe fall and never recovered; he died before you were born.'

'Your investigator is good,' she said through her teeth.

'The best. Monica, your mother, moved to New Zealand to be close to her parents, remarried when you were four, and now lives in Gisborne with her second husband, the owner of a very successful food processing business. You're a clever, well-respected architect, with a lucrative practice that you keep small by working alone from your home. Why, incidentally?'

'Because I like to be my own boss,' she snapped, repelled by his dispassionate recital of the facts of her life.

'So,' he said, watching her from half-closed eyes, 'do I. But you could expand, set up your own firm, employ other architects, and still be the boss.'

'I'm not ready for that yet. I need more experience.' It was her standard reason, and before it had always seemed perfectly adequate. It didn't now.

However, he didn't pursue the subject. Scrutinising her with leisurely, infuriating thoroughness, he continued, 'When you were twenty-two you became engaged to another architecture student, but broke it off three months later. What happened?'

'Looking like my brother does not give you any right to pry into my personal life,' Lecia said with bleak, barely controlled precision, cringing at the thought of Keane Paget reading about that tragedy.

'Technically speaking, I think you look like me,' he said calmly. 'I'm six years older than you, which must give me a priority claim on the genes.'

She choked back a reluctant gasp of laughter. 'We're *not* brother and sister,' she observed, 'but we certainly sound like a bickering pair. Have you got any?'

'Brothers and sisters? No. There's just me.'

The heavy lids half hiding his eyes imbued his gaze with a disturbing sensuality that set her nerve-ends jangling. However, nothing could conceal the keen perception in the steel-blue depths.

Trying to shake off her debilitating response so that she could speak objectively, she said, 'We must be related, either through an illegal liaison or a common ancestor back in England before either side emigrated. The Springs have been in Australia for almost a hundred years, which puts any shared ancestor a long way back. And I don't think any of them crossed the Tasman to New Zealand.'

'The Pagets have been here for six generations,' Keane said in a neutral voice. 'I don't know about any cross-Tasman voyaging amongst them, but it's not wholly unlikely. And as we both look like our fathers— and mine looked very like his father—'

'Mine too,' she interpolated. 'I've seen old photographs of my grandfather and great-grandfather, and they all have a very strong family likeness.'



He shrugged. 'There has to be a connection somewhere. I refuse to believe that this uncanny resemblance is just a coincidental arrangement of genes.'

'The waiter came over to say smoothly, 'Your table is ready, Mr Paget.'

After they both got to their feet Keane took Lecia's arm in an automatic grip, as though he did this with every woman he escorted. Old-fashioned manners, she thought, but he carried them off.

He could carry anything off—including most of the women in this room, if their sideways glances were any indication.

When they'd been seated, the menus scanned and their orders given, Keane said, 'I already know quite a lot about you, so what do you want to know about me?'

Everything, she thought hollowly. Aloud she said, 'Are both your parents still alive?'

'No.' His expression didn't alter but she knew she'd hit a nerve. 'They died just before I turned six.'

'I'm sorry.'

He drank some water, then set the glass down and said in a coolly dismissive tone that didn't ring quite true, it happened nearly thirty years ago. I can barely remember them.'

'That would be about the same time my father died.'

'The same year. His accident and its aftermath must have been damned tough on your mother.'

'She doesn't talk about it much, but yes, I think she suffered as much as he did. Still, she managed.' Lecia looked up and met his eyes, her unruly heart-rate accelerating as she admitted, 'I don't really know what I'm doing here.'

'Curiosity,' he told her, his narrow smile not free from self-derision. 'For both of us. However hard reason tries to convince me that we're strangers, we wear our shared pedigree in our faces. Architecture is an unusual profession for a woman, surely?'

She shook her head. 'Not that unusual, although there aren't many of us yet—I think about four per cent of architects are women. Lots more are coming through university now. I love it.'

'Do you design houses or commercial buildings?'

With something close to a snap, she said, 'Surely your dossier tells you all that?'

'I'm asking you,' he said coolly, those perceptive eyes noting her defensiveness.

I'd hate to lie to him, she thought, saying aloud, 'I've worked on several commercial developments, but I do enjoy houses. And shopping centres.' She gave him a set little smile. 'All very feminine.'

'Do you have a problem with that?'

'You sound,' she said evenly, 'like a psychologist.'

Although his brows rose, he said nothing, just sat there surveying her with cool self-assurance.

Lecia sighed. 'Sorry. I'm a bit sensitive, I suppose. Some men—and women too—think that designing domestic buildings is an easy option.'

'I was in one of your houses yesterday,' he said, 'it is charming and serene, and the owner loves it, says she's never going to move and won't have a thing changed.'

Her eyes lit up and she smiled. 'What a lovely compliment!'

'Especially as the house wasn't designed for her. My great-aunt has just moved into it.' He told her the address.

'I remember it.' Her expression sobered, because the woman she'd designed the house for had died six months before. 'I hope your aunt enjoys living there,' she said.

'Perhaps you could go and find out,' he said levelly. 'She likes visitors.'

Lecia froze. It seemed to her that the invitation was significant, as though he'd decided to accept her into his family, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that. After all she had a perfectly good family of her own.

She looked up. Keane Paget was watching her with eyes the colour of the sea beneath a summer cloud. Very steady, those eyes, hard and dispassionate and enigmatic—as unreadable as the rest of his face.

Mesmerised, Lecia listened as he went on, 'She's also the family historian. If anyone Can fathom out the connection between us, Aunt Sophie can. Furthermore, she'll love doing it. She has the finer instincts of a bloodhound. I can't begin to tell you the number of skeletons she's dragged out into the full light of day and displayed with a relish that's definitely mischievous. Her motto is: The only good secret is an exposed secret.'

Captivated, Lecia laughed. 'She sounds like one of the blood-thirstier genealogists.'

'She likes to do things well. When she first became interested in hunting down ancestors she researched every method of organising information before deciding that the only way to do it properly was on a computer. So she bought the latest laptop.'

'How old is she?'

'Almost ninety. The Pagets either die young or live forever.'

'Is she enjoying her computer?'

'She's an expert.'

His wryly affectionate smile slipped through Lecia's defences, reaching some inner part of her that had never been touched before. Uncertainly, she said, 'She sounds fascinating.'

'She's certainly an identity. I'll organise a time for you to meet her.' He spoke confidently, as though it didn't occur to him that his aunt might not want a strange young woman introduced to her.

Lecia said, 'Oh—but—' then stopped, realising she'd been outmanoeuvred by an expert.

'But?'

'Nothing,' she said lamely.

And was assailed by a sensation of having walked through a forbidden door, one that had closed smoothly yet inexorably behind her.

You weren't going to do this, her conscience—backed by the big guns of common sense—wailed. Remember—no further steps down that slippery road to obsession? He's dangerous, and you're behaving like the idiot you were when you first met Anthony.

The waiter arrived with their lunch—scallops in white wine for her, rare beef salad for him—and over it Keane asked, 'Where did you get your pretty name?'

'I think it's come down through the family. At least I didn't get lumbered with the name in all its medieval glory—Laetitia! Or worse, Lettice.'

'It's from the Latin, isn't it?'

'Yes. It means gladness.'

He picked up his water glass. Lecia's gaze followed the lean, strong hand—long-fingered, tanned and confident. Sensation shivered the length of her spine.

'And are you glad?' he asked quietly.

No, *terrified*.

And even worse, excited.

She managed to produce a shrug. 'I'm reasonably optimistic—quite even-tempered,' she said, it probably does describe me.'

'No highs, no lows, just a pleasant state of well- being?'

'Mostly.'

And she'd fought to achieve that state, had spent years struggling towards it. However intriguing this situation—and this man—she refused to risk her contentment.

Gripped by the uncomfortable feeling that she was admitting things, giving herself away, Lecia embarked on another round of silent warnings. Keane himself was no threat to her. What she had to fear was her helpless, headlong response to the forceful masculinity that prowled behind the bars of his will.

'How about you?' she asked, ignoring the secret messages from her body, trying desperately to sound relaxed and calm and only idly curious about this distant cousin. 'Are you a typical tycoon, working all day and into the night?' She glanced at the leather briefcase at his feet.

His smile should be banned, she thought; it was challenging and utterly compelling and a threat to womankind. Humour lurked in it, and danger spiced the hint of arrogance that illuminated his angular features with a special magnetism.

'It sounds as though you've been doing a little research of your own,' he said blandly.

Lecia ate another scallop, appreciating the rich, delicate flavour with less than her usual enjoyment. 'The friend I was with at the opera in the park gave me an article about you from one of the business magazines.' Andrea had tracked it down and faxed it through the day before. Lecia had no intention of telling him she'd read it then thrown it in the rubbish. 'There was a photograph too. It gave me quite a jolt,' she confessed.

'How do you think I felt, seeing my face in the crowd? I wanted to drag you out and ask you what the hell you were doing with it!'

Lecia's brows shot up. 'You didn't move a muscle. I'm sure your—the woman with you didn't notice.'

'No, she didn't.' An edge of mockery sharpened his tone.

She'd been beautiful, the woman in the park, with subtle, clever style when it came to clothes. Well, Lecia thought, she herself wasn't bad-looking—

Whoa, there! This was not a contest, with Keane the prize!

The way her mind was running shocked and bewildered her. All right, she was attracted to Keane Paget; she could cope with that. It wasn't even so surprising. He exuded an innate air of disciplined authority, of uncompromising competence. Allied to his obvious intelligence and unfair, far too potent charm, it made him, she thought shrewdly, a walking, talking summons to most women.

What scared her was the hint of risky decadence that cast a dark shadow across her response. Was part of this unsettling, goaded attraction a prohibited thrill at their close resemblance, the way her features were manifested in his more chiselled, hard-edged face?

Damn it, she thought, pushing the last scallop around her plate, she'd been interested in men before and never felt as though she stood on the brink and one step could fire her into heaven—or drop her straight into hell.

Not even with Anthony, the man she'd once loved so violently, who'd made her feel that all control of her emotions was being wrested from her by forces too strong for her to resist.

Because she'd hated that helplessness, she'd learned from the whole, horrible experience, developing both judgement and the prudence to pull away from danger before she got in too deep. Her eminently satisfactory life was not up for grabs.

Besides, Keane could be another woman's lover. And Lecia never poached.

So she'd call a halt. Tactfully, she'd refuse any invitation to meet his aunt. It wouldn't take long, she thought, avoiding those penetrating eyes, for Keane to get the message.

She found something else to talk about, hoping she'd managed the switch of subject smoothly enough to appear sophisticated, and was relieved when the meal ended. Logic—and pragmatic, boring old common sense—warned her that the more she saw of Keane the more difficult it would be to refuse his invitations, to stop thinking about him—dreaming of him...

Not that he wanted to linger. After she refused a cup of coffee he glanced across the room and almost immediately a waiter headed towards them.

This ability to summon waiters from the void fascinated Lecia. Perhaps it was because Keane was well-known in the restaurant and a good customer.

Perhaps, but she thought wryly that it probably happened whenever Keane Paget looked up. He had presence, the sort of aura that caught people's attention.

Paying for the meal took little time, and when they rose Keane once more took Lecia's arm. Scoffing that the tingle of electricity that leapt from nerve-end to nerve-end when he touched her was not only improbable but a cliché, she allowed herself to be steered across the Italian tiled floor towards the bright sunlight outside.

From somewhere close by a man said something and laughed.

Lecia felt the colour drain from her skin in a clammy rush. Blinking, she forced her gaze in the direction of the voice.

Of course it wasn't Anthony. A perfectly strange man with a blond moustache leaned across a table and lifted a woman's hand to his mouth. Anthony had been dark and sophisticated, and he'd no more have kissed her hand in public than he'd have taken his shoes off.

As she registered the sweet rush of deliverance Lecia realised that it wouldn't have mattered if the stranger *had* been Anthony. She no longer loved him—had never loved the real Anthony, the married man whose mistress she'd been for a few short weeks until someone had told her about his wife.

Without missing a step, she walked on.

'Are you all right?' Keane asked, the sensuously rough timbre in his voice suddenly transmuted to harshness.

Remotely she said, 'I'm fine, thank you.'

But she wasn't, because when he said, 'I'll drop you off,' she nodded and thanked him and went into the parking building with him.

In the car, Keane asked, 'What happened?' He didn't switch on the engine, so the words hung heavily in the dim quietness.

Lecia drew in a painful breath, it was just— I was surprised.'

'Is he the man you were engaged to?'

'No!' And before he could probe further she said aloofly, 'I'm surprised your detective didn't discover that Barry lives in Wellington now.'

Keane ignored that. 'Then who was the man who laughed inside the restaurant?'

'A total stranger. I've never seen him before in my life.'



'But he reminded you of someone you're afraid of.'

'No!' She took a deep breath. 'I'm not afraid of anyone.'

Only of herself. Of this weakness that made her fall in lust with a certain sort of man.

'Do you usually go white so dramatically whenever a man laughs?' Keane touched her cheek. 'You're still cold,' he added judicially, his sharp, perceptive eyes relentless.

His hand slid to the pulse beneath her ear, lingering there for a second. Lecia's breath clogged her throat so that she couldn't breathe, couldn't think above the fast chatter of her heartbeat in her ears.

Clenching her jaw, she froze. What prevented her from seeking comfort by turning her face into that warm, strong hand was not willpower; it was an understanding, based on intuition rather than reason, that Keane Paget would take swift advantage of any surrender, however symbolic.

When he pulled his hand away she felt bereft, cold, aching for something she couldn't even name.

'Clearly whoever you mistook him for was the last person you wanted to see,' Keane said aloofly.

Rallying, Lecia told him, 'He reminded me of someone I disliked.'

Keane must have decided that he didn't want to get any further involved, for he didn't press her.

However, after starting the vehicle and avoiding a car that had stalled in the middle of the road, he said thoughtfully, 'I find it rather difficult to imagine any circumstances that would shock you to that extent. I thought you were going to faint.'

'Hardly. And, like most other people, I have an occasional skeleton walled up in the past.'

'Not entirely forgotten.' Buried beneath the level voice, like hidden rocks in a stream, was anger.

Taken aback, Lecia deliberately stilled her nervous hands and stared out of the side window.

The harbour danced under the summer sun; sails flew above it, white and rainbow-coloured against the low peninsula that ended in the naval base at Devonport. Behind it, separated by a narrow channel, brooded the forest-covered slopes of Rangitoto, the last little volcano to emerge on the isthmus. That had happened only a few hundred years ago, and geologists expected more to thrust up from the hot spot that lurked a hundred kilometres or so beneath Auckland.

Not in her time, Lecia fervently hoped. She felt as though she was sitting over that hot spot right then.

Keane observed, 'I suppose it was an affair.'

'I'm sure that if you had a sister she'd tell you to mind your own business.' She tried to make her voice amused rather than tense, but didn't think she'd succeeded.

He'd come too close to the truth, and she couldn't bear him to learn how stupid and utterly naive she'd once been. Lecia's mouth twisted in derision. She'd never thought she'd be glad of Anthony's sordid discretion, but at least it meant there were no records for anyone to paw through.

'I rather wish you were my sister,' Keane said, halting the car outside the entrance to her block.

Of course—his private detective would have told him where she lived.

The hard angles of Keane's face were much more pronounced, and there was an unsettling watchfulness in the compelling eyes—eyes the colour of the sheen on a gun barrel, Lecia thought suddenly, and shivered, because he'd admitted that she wasn't the only one fighting the dark temptation of desire.

'Yes, you'd be much more comfortable as a brother,' she said quietly, formally. 'Thank you for lunch; I enjoyed it very much.'

Dark brows pulled together. 'I'll come up with you,' he said.

Shaking her head, Lecia opened the door. 'There's no need, I'm perfectly all right. Goodbye.' And she got out, closed the door firmly behind her, and walked across to the entrance of the apartment block without once looking back.

Nevertheless, she knew that Keane waited until she got to the two shallow steps before he drove away.

Lecia headed straight across the foyer and out into the garden, collapsing on a seat beneath the jacaranda tree.

That had been a nasty moment. Odd that although she no longer cared for Anthony at all she couldn't get over this sickening guilt.

Staring at the starry flowers of the summer jasmine that draped itself eagerly over a nearby pergola, inhaling the sweet scent drifting on the humid air, she tried to calm herself with the plant's simple beauty. The flowers blurred and she pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead, holding back a dull throbbing.

However tempting it was to stay there, she had to do something about this headache because she had clients to see in an hour. If she took an aspirin immediately she'd probably be all right.

By the time her clients arrived the headache had dwindled to a drained, dispirited lassitude that made her normal cheerful professionalism difficult to achieve. Fortunately the young couple loved the sketches and the concept, and were very enthusiastic over her cost-saving ideas; although they agreed to think it over and contact her the following day Lecia was almost sure it would be a formality.

She should be celebrating. Instead, she drank a glass of orange juice and gazed blindly at the street below. Because hers was one of the cheapest flats in the development she had no view of the harbour. She didn't miss it. One end of the sitting room looked down onto the visitors' parking area and the street, but from her bedroom and kitchen she could see the garden, and usually that was refreshment enough for her soul.

Not today, however.

She'd made the right decision to cut off any communication with Keane Paget—the only decision! The echo of the past that had seen her glimpse Anthony in the man at the restaurant had reinforced it for her. Keane was the same type as Anthony; both possessed enormous masculine charisma wrapped up in a gorgeously male body, both were powerful men, driven to achieve, clever and tough and more than a little ruthless.

Sourly hoping that Keane had more honour than Anthony, she sat down and began to check through yet another set of specifications.

Much later, the irritating summons of the telephone interrupted her concentration. Blinking, she realised that it was getting dark outside, which meant she'd missed dinner again.

Absently, her mind still full of stress loadings and other figures, she got to her feet, knocking a pile of papers to the floor. The answering machine was on, so she bent to pick up the scattered sheets, aware that it might be Peter.

It was not. Instead, Keane's deep voice said, 'My great-aunt would be delighted to meet you and thank you for her new house. I'll pick you up tomorrow evening at seven.'

Click as he replaced the receiver.

Lecia scrambled to her feet, dumped the papers on the desk and muttered, 'Why didn't you *wait*, for heaven's sake? I'd have got there.'

Damn. Damn, damn, *damn!* Now she'd have to ring him back and tell him she wasn't going.

His card! Where had she put his card?

Five minutes later she knew it hadn't gone into her daily file, and it wasn't in her bag or her diary. Had she thrown it away? She couldn't remember doing so, but she must have.

Quite sensible of her unconscious mind if she had! Sighing in disgust, she pulled out the telephone directory. There were quite a few Pagets, three of whom had the initial K. None of those lived on the North Shore. Setting her chin, she rang Directory Service, only to be told that Keane's number was unlisted.

She couldn't remember what the name of his business was, and it would be crass to ask Peter, who did know. But there was the article Andrea had given her—no, she'd thrown that away too.

Glowing balefully at the telephone, she said, 'Bloody *hell!*' and stamped out into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Unless she found that wretched card soon she was going to have to be ready at seven tomorrow evening.

When the telephone rang again she dropped the knife with which she was eviscerating an avocado, put the fruit on the bench and raced to answer it.

This time it was Peter.

'Hello, Lecia,' he said, cheerfully buoyant. 'How nice to see you last week.'

Resigned, she said, 'We had a super day, didn't we? I especially enjoyed the fireworks.'

'I enjoyed looking at you as you enjoyed them,' he said somewhat ponderously. 'I wondered whether you'd like to come to *Don Giovanni* with me next weekend. I hear it's an excellent production.'

Gently, she said, 'No, I'm sorry, I won't be able to do that.'

His voice altered a fraction. 'Then—dinner?'

'No, thank you,' she said.

Recovering quickly, he chatted for a few minutes and then hung up. She would not, she thought, be hearing from him again, and she hoped he hadn't been building dreams because she hated having to hurt him. He was a nice man.

It was just unfortunate that she seemed attracted to men with an edge to them.

Dangerous men.

Men like Anthony—and like Keane, who was quite possibly having an affair with the lovely woman he'd escorted to the park.

Forbidden men.

Perhaps that was her hang-up. At least she'd learned to stay well away from such men. Never again was she going to endure that guilt and shame and degrading humiliation.

As Keane's card remained obstinately lost, at seven the following evening Lecia was ready, wearing the shades of peach and gold that best flattered her skin and eyes. For some reason—one she didn't plan to explore—she didn't want him to see her apartment; she waited in the garden on a seat skilfully placed so she could see through the vestibule to the main entrance.

And, in spite of the stern talking-to she had given herself, an unwanted, unbidden knot of excitement twisted in her stomach, and she had to keep her hands open because sweat collected in tiny beads on the palms.

As soon as Keane's tall form appeared at the front doors she got to her feet and walked into the vestibule.

Silhouetted against the sunny street outside, he watched her without moving. He was, she realised with a subtle stirring of the senses, a very big man.

Within her, tension tightened a notch into anticipation. Hoping that none of her inner turmoil showed, she smiled as she came up to him.

He said, 'You look almost edible.' A note of mockery in the deep, sensual voice robbed the compliment of sweetness.

'Summer fruits. And I *look* like you,' she retorted, reminding herself as well as him.

His eyes lingered for taut seconds on her face. 'Had a bad day?'

Unwillingly her mouth eased into a wry smile. 'I spent the morning at a building site, arguing with a man who apparently can't read plans or specifications and is convinced no mere woman can either.'

'How did you deal with that?'

'I have this trick.' She could feel some of her irritation fading as she spoke. 'I pick up a nail and a hammer, put the nail into the wood and slam it in with one blow of the hammer. For some reason the fact that I can drive a nail straight and true and right in to its head persuades most men that I know what I'm talking about.'

He laughed. 'How long did you have to practise?'

'A week,' she said, straight-faced.

'There's nothing like a dramatic gesture to get the picture across. What happened this afternoon?'

'Ah, this afternoon I discussed costs with a possible client who thought he'd be able to get a mansion at cottage prices. He also thought that I'd be prepared to sleep with him for the honour of being his architect. He's no longer a possible client.'

Oh, stupid, *stupid!* Why had she told him?

Keane said something under his breath that made her flinch before demanding with harsh distinctness, 'Who is he?'

Lecia shrugged, her gaze never leaving the hard-hewn contours of his face as she said evenly, 'It doesn't—'

Very quietly he repeated, 'Who is he?'

Lecia's throat closed. She stared into eyes as cold and piercing as ice spears, saw his mouth set into a thin, straight line, and the tiny pulse that flicked against his jawbone.

'Don't try to be brotherly.' Her voice sounded strained and unnaturally steady. 'I'm not your sister and I can look after myself.'

'Does it happen often?' His tone was cool, almost impersonal, but she needed only to look at the stark, arrogant line of his jaw to know that he was still dangerously furious.

'Not often,' she said, 'but it does happen. And not only to me—lots of women in business and professional life have to deal with harassment.'

'I want to know who he is.'

She met the fierce glint in his eyes just as fiercely. 'I'm not going to tell you.'

And she saw the leash of his will rein in the killing fury, watched it die down until his face reflected nothing but a flinty, unyielding detachment.

'Very well.' He took her arm and led her around the corner towards the narrow parking lot for guests' cars. 'Come on, we'd better be on our way or Aunt Sophie will think I've forgotten.'

Lecia had to remind herself to breathe. Although she'd sensed that uncompromising temper right from the start, she hadn't understood just how formidable he could be. And yet, in spite of it, just to be with him caused a white-hot anticipation mixed with pleasure of such intensity that she'd already relegated the frustrations of the day to limbo.



And that's how it started last time, she reminded herself grimly as he put her into the front of his large, opulent car. Anthony made you laugh and scrambled your brain until you couldn't think straight. Just remember how you dealt with that!

## CHAPTER THREE

SOPHIE Warburton was tall, elegant and aristocratic, with the same blue eyes as her great-nephew and the nose, cleft chin and cheekbones Lecia shared with them both. She looked at least twenty years younger than her age.

'Good heavens!' she exclaimed after one comprehensive glance at Lecia. 'Oh, yes, you are definitely one of us!'

She was charming, thanking Lecia for the house, showing her around it with pride, and insisting Keane drink a glass of her favourite whisky with her when Lecia decided in favour of sherry.

Only then did she say, 'My dear, since Keane told me about you yesterday I've had a quick look through the records and there's no sign of any link across the Tasman. The logical assumption, of course, is that somebody's illegitimate child is the connection, but I can't see when it could have happened.'

'Neither can I,' Lecia said. 'I don't know much about my father's family, but my mother has told me that as far back as anyone can remember they've only ever had one child a generation, and from photographs I know they all looked like each other. And like Keane,' she said, adding with a half-smile, 'except that they were all bald. Even my father had lost most of his hair when he died.'

'Whereas all of the Pagets have excellent heads of hair,' Aunt Sophie said, nodding.

A teasing smile softened Keane's hard mouth. Hastily Lecia said, 'I assume the pattern goes right back to when the first one emigrated.'

Keane's aunt laughed, in genealogy it never pays to assume,' she said. 'Our ancestors were a formidable and upright lot, but they committed all the sins we do and they lied a lot more about some of them. It's quite possible that a Paget might have paid a visit to Australia— or a Spring to New Zealand—and been reckless. We're going to have to track down all the

documentation and read it with an astute and sceptical mind. And then see if there's anything to be picked up between the lines.'

Clearly the idea filled her with the zeal of a true enthusiast. Lecia exchanged an involuntary glance with Keane, noting the amusement and affection in his eyes.

Oh, hell, she thought despairingly. It was much easier to keep behind her defences when he was being aloof and detached.

'Of course,' Mrs Warburton pursued, 'it could well have been back in England.'

Lecia nodded. 'Although—would the genes predominate through all those generations?'

'They're good, strong genes,' the older woman said, smiling as she looked from Lecia's face to her great-nephew's and then back again. 'What do you know about your forebears?'

Acutely conscious of Keane's speculative, intent regard, Lecia told her what small amount of family history she'd heard, ending, 'I think I can find out more from my mother, although she doesn't know a lot about my father's family.'

'My dear, would you mind? Shall I write to her?'

'No,' Lecia said, making a spur-of-the-moment decision, 'I'll ask her.'

An eager, vital smile, the expression of a woman with a mission, lit up Mrs Warburton's face. 'How exciting to discover a fresh branch of the family! And such a talented one! My dear, you must call me Aunt Sophie.'

Lecia flushed, aware that by accepting the compliment she was making it more and more difficult to keep a sufficient distance between her and Keane. 'Thank you,' she said without looking his way, 'I'd like that.'

She had cousins and uncles on her mother's side, and a big, extended family belonging to her stepfather, but the knowledge that she might have relatives from the Spring line filled a vacuum she'd never acknowledged until then.

Aunt Sophie entertained them for another half-hour before Keane got to his feet and said, 'We have to go, I'm afraid.'

His great-aunt smiled up at him, her expression making it clear that she loved him dearly.

'Thank you for bringing Lecia,' she said, 'I now see whole new fields of endeavour opening out in front of me. I can't wait!'

In the car, Keane asked casually, 'Have you had dinner?'

'I'm not hungry,' Lecia lied.

His mouth tightened as he put the vehicle in gear and directed it down the drive. 'Coward,' he said. 'You can come and watch me eat mine.'

'No, thank you, I have...' Her voice trailed away. She was not good at lying, and he didn't believe her anyway. Her hands moved, caught each other, clung.

'Why are you afraid of me?' he asked.

'I'm not!'

'Afraid of yourself, then?' His swift sideways glance caught the truth. 'Yes, that's it, isn't it? Why?'

'It's got nothing to do with fear,' she said, grabbing desperately at some semblance of calmness, it just makes me feel strange to look at you and see my own face. I feel—invaded. No, cloned. Oh, I don't know what I feel, but I don't like it!'

'If we'd had brothers or sisters we'd be accustomed to it,' he said imperturbably.

'Well, yes, but...' Again her voice faded. She certainly wasn't going to explain that she couldn't control her wildfire, unwanted attraction to him, and that she found it threatening.

Especially as she had no idea what he felt. Curiosity, of course; both he and his great-aunt were intrigued by the discovery of a new member of the family, and Lecia thought that they both liked to get to the bottom of things.

As she did.

Apart from that, his feelings were as suspect as hers. The ugly word 'narcissism' covered that sort of attraction—making her recall the sad legend of the Greek youth who fell in love with his own reflection and died because he couldn't see anyone else more worthy of his love.

Or was this pull between them nothing more than an instinctive recognition of blood ties, a recognition she was mistaking for desire?

Anyway, there was the woman who'd been with him at the opera, who might be his lover. A network of nerves woke to instant heat. Hastily banishing the feverish images that ambushed her from some hidden part of her psyche, Lecia looked around, for a moment not realising where they were.

He was turning the vehicle into the car park of a restaurant perched halfway up one of Auckland's little volcanic cones. 'We'll get used to seeing ourselves in each other's face,' he said, with a confidence that irritated her anew.

So he intended to keep in touch. In spite of her good intentions the prospect lifted her spirits, adding more fuel to the unruly bonfire of emotions that fed her responses.

'I don't think I ever will,' she said neutrally.

As they were shown to their table—one overlooking the city and the sea, of course—he asked with an oblique smile, 'What's your decision?'

'What?' No, her heart wasn't beating faster, nor were her eyes sparkling beneath her lashes. She wouldn't allow herself to be overcome by sexual hunger.

'You appeared to be weighing up two courses of action, neither of which appealed,' Keane said smoothly.

The last of the daylight was fleeing, sinking into swift, sudden darkness. When it became too risky to hold his gaze, Lecia turned her head and concentrated on the view outside. She could just make out the saturated brilliance of bougainvillea flowers tossed over a trellis; within moments the lights in the harbour leapt into prominence and all colour was smothered by the inexorable arrival of night.

She retorted, 'I was mildly annoyed by your calm assumption that I'd go out to dinner with you. I like to be asked.'

A dark eyebrow lifted. 'But as it's in the family...?'

When she shook her head he looked at her with narrowed eyes and said deliberately, 'No, I don't feel related to you either.' Before she could respond to this he went on, 'Tell me, do you have to show every foreman on every building site that you can drive a straight nail?'

'Only the most recalcitrant.' Lecia's gaze drifted down to the crystal vase of lime-green zinnias and gypsophila in the centre of the table, scanned the shining silverware, the white linen napkin in her lap, the way her hands were folded on top of it.

Keane said, 'Obviously sexism is alive and well in the trade.'

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, as though they were under some kind of spell. A little too loudly she said, 'There are still a lot of men—not only on construction sites—who believe that women just naturally don't understand technology. Add to that many builders' distrust of architects, and you get some real diehards.'

'But you manage.'

Her smile was ironic. 'I do a good job, and if they've got any intelligence at all—and most of them have— they realise that soon enough. The others I get heavy with.'

He laughed softly, and her heart clenched. 'Horses for courses.'

'Anything that gets the job done,' she admitted. 'What about your organisation? Do you employ women as executives?'

'I do,' he said. 'All I'm interested in is whether a woman can do the work.'

Lecia nodded, holding his eyes. 'But if one of her children is sick,' she asked, 'what happens then?'

He lifted his brows. 'Some women arrange for work to be sent home, some use the company nurse. We have a set of systems that we use, adapting them to each case.'

'Very advanced,' she said.

He shrugged. 'I run a profitable business, and that means dealing with life as it's lived today, not as it was forty years ago. Women work, so business has to accommodate them and their needs. It applies to men too; the days are long gone when companies expected men to put their welfare before that of their wives and families. I don't work long hours myself—I certainly don't expect my employees to make such sacrifices.'

'And you don't notice any loss of efficiency?'

'As far as I'm concerned, a man who has to work more than eight or nine hours a day is either overworked, in which case we hire someone else to take up the extra, or he's not efficient. If he's not efficient, he gets help. Of course, if he doesn't improve then he doesn't last long.'

Advanced ideas, certainly, but he was tough with them. After they'd ordered they discussed business generally, and his business especially. He made her laugh with some of his stories, and he treated her as a professional equal. As

they talked she kept catching glimpses of compassion and understanding beneath his sharply dynamic intelligence.

He wasn't the sort of man anyone would try to exploit, she thought, but he was obviously a good employer, a man who respected his employees while expecting them to do their jobs properly.

She said something about the generators he made, adding when he raised his eyebrows, 'I have a professional interest in filters, but I read about your company in an article a friend sent me.'

'Was that the friend who gave you an ice cream as I came level with you at the Domain?' Keane's smile hardened swiftly into a challenge. 'The man who kissed you.'

'Did he?' She met his gaze with a cool challenge of her own. 'I don't remember. And no, it wasn't Peter. Andrea, the tall redhead who was also there, faxed me the article.'

'I remember. Very attractive, with excellent bones. She'll make a stunning octogenarian,' he said, adding idly, 'is the ice-cream man your lover?'

Goaded, Lecia retorted sweetly, 'That's another thing I'd have thought your detective would have found out.'

His eyes gleamed blue as the hottest part of a flame. 'According to him you're not in a steady relationship,' he said, the barely noticeable roughness in his deep voice suddenly much more pronounced. 'Was he wrong?'

'No,' she said reluctantly.

'But this Peter wants to be?'

is the woman who was with you at the park your lover?' The words were out before she had a chance to censor them. Horrified, she said hastily, 'I don't want to know that, and I'm not going to tell you—'



He stopped the tumbling words with a smile, enigmatic and unsettling. 'No,' he said. 'She's not my lover. Never has been.'

Lecia said numbly, 'I don't want to talk about this any more.'

He nodded—almost, she thought with a fierce stab of anger, as though granting permission—and said, 'All right. What would you like to talk about?'

'Tell me about these generators, and how you got into manufacturing them.' It was the only thing she could think of.

He gave her a swift, amused grin, but said blandly, 'They clean water, as in swimming pools and spas. They also remove any waterborne diseases of plants, so they're used a lot in crop farming, and they filter bacteria, iron and other contaminants from drinking water.'

'The journalist who wrote that article,' she said, 'was full of praise for both the product and your strategy.'

He surveyed her over the rim of his glass as he drank some wine. 'It's not a one-man band. The marketing team is doing a good job.'

'So is research and production. You're exporting, aren't you?'

'Dabbling our toes,' he said, that bland, indifferent note back in his voice. 'You're talking shop over dinner, Lecia.'

She'd leaned forward, but his comment brought her immediately upright. Sending him a very direct look, she said stiffly, 'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, I enjoy a general discussion of principles,' he said, eyes gleaming. 'I find your conversation very interesting—invigorating and salty, cynical enough to be sensible, and always intelligent.'

It was a precious compliment, one that Lecia didn't know how to deal with. 'Thank you,' she said, wondering just what emotions glimmered in those steel-blue eyes.

Fortunately the food arrived then, giving her time to summon the scattered remnants of her composure. While they ate she found herself being skilfully questioned about her family. She made him laugh with some of their more hair-raising exploits, and enjoyed both food and a glass of wine in a muted way, but her acute, thin-skinned awareness of Keane kept her tense and concentrated on him, so that everything else was dim and shadowy.

Keane and she might be connected somewhere along the branches of the family tree—might even be cousins—but she couldn't think of him as a relative.

If he noticed her withdrawal he didn't give any indication. He had superb manners, she thought reluctantly, and he was an interesting dinner companion, with a wide-ranging intelligence and a somewhat sardonic wit. In spite of her resistance, she found his conversation enormously stimulating.

Nevertheless, when the coffee-cups were drained she told herself that she was relieved. Unfortunately, she felt like Cinderella on the first stroke of twelve.

For heaven's sake, she was a calm, confident businesswoman, with a profession she loved and was good at, a growing practice and—in spite of the mortgage—a reasonably healthy bank balance. The world was hers.

And that world, she thought as Keane escorted her out of the dining room, was not going to include this man. Or only very peripherally.

'The motorway is busy tonight,' she murmured as they merged with the traffic.

'Do I hear a faint trace of the girl from Gisborne?' he asked, a teasing note threading through the words.

She smiled wryly. 'I suppose you do. I remember how surprised I was when I first came to town because so many people were up and about at midnight.'

His laughter was low and understanding. 'And now you're completely integrated. Very cool, serenely sophisticated.'

'I still like the country. I go home for the holidays— although,' she admitted, nerves jumping, 'I'm spending three weeks in Australia soon.'

As they discussed their Pacific neighbour—he'd travelled widely there—Lecia noted how well he drove, lean hands competent on the wheel, the blue eyes as sharp and well-honed as his reactions. She leaned back into the headrest and closed her eyes, seeing against her lids the image of his profile, strong and almost aggressively masculine.

A rough expletive jerked her lashes up. Several cars ahead she saw white backing lights; almost instantly the vehicle directly behind the offender smashed straight into it.

'Oh, God,' she gasped as the second car burst into a huge ball of flames.

Snapping, 'Get the torch out of the glove pocket and wave cars down—and be careful because some of the drivers might be drunk,' Keane pulled the car into the side of the road and leapt out, snatching a small fire extinguisher from the back.

As he ran towards the burning car he yelled back to her, 'Don't come anywhere near!'

Lecia wasted precious seconds scrabbling for the torch, then scrambled out with it, slamming the door behind her. She could hear someone screaming—shrieks that made her shiver and feel violently ill—but she began waving the torch in big circles. Cars had started to slow; several stopped.

'What's happened, what's happened?' a passenger in one shouted, wrenching her door open.

'There's a crash up ahead.'

OK, I'm a doctor; I'll see what I can do...' And she pounded down the road.

A man came running up out of the darkness. 'Give me that,' he commanded, grabbing the torch. 'We'll have to keep a lane clear for emergency services.'

He shot across and began to signal the traffic into two lanes. Brakes squealed and cars slowed further, blurry, peering faces at their windows reddened by the flames as they gaped at the accident.

To the sound of that dreadful screaming, Lecia raced back towards the burning car.

Someone yelled, 'No! Keep back!' and snatched at her arm, stopping her with a painful jerk. 'The other car could explode too,' explained the man who held her, a dark figure outlined by the leaping, bobbing fireball behind him.

'Where's Keane?' Lecia asked stupidly, trying to shake off his grip.

'Lady, stay here!' The man who'd grabbed her was breathing heavily, but he wouldn't let her go. 'God, look at them! They've got guts, but you wouldn't catch me over there!'

Lecia's dilated eyes were fixed on the two men so perilously close to the burning car. One was directing a tiny fire extinguisher onto the inferno; the other seemed almost in the flames, pulling something free.

Or trying to. A thin cry burst from Lecia's lips as she realised that it was Keane who struggled against a death so horrible she couldn't bear to think of it.

'No,' the man holding her grunted as his fingers tightened on her arm. 'No, you'll only make things worse!'

He was right. Adrenalin pumped through her, drying her eyes and her mouth as she willed Keane to pull away, to get out of the path of the flames; her fear roared into full-blown panic when she realised he wasn't going to.

Heat beat on her face, and the shrill, tortured screaming from inside the car went on and on and on until she thought she'd do anything to block the sound. Keane looked like a devil, the terrible brilliance of the flames

outlining him as he worked desperately. Oh, God, was that his clothes catching—? No, no, thank God, it was another burst of flame from the car...

When the fire extinguisher sputtered to uselessness the man who'd been holding it flung it away and leaned forward, his silhouette melding with Keane's as both men moved in unison. Lecia's dry sobs resounded harshly in her ears while she strained to see through the intense heat and ferocious, smoky glare.

The screaming stopped, sliced off with a hideous suddenness.

The second man jumped back. Lecia's heart faltered, then leapt with enormous relief when Keane, dragging a horribly inert body, wrenched himself away from the car. Lecia sucked in a lungful of hot, tainted air, then moaned when he immediately relinquished his burden to two men who came running up, and turned back into the flames.

'No,' Lecia called in the high, stark voice of sheer horror. 'No, Keane—'

He moved so fast it was hard to see what he'd done, but as he raced away from the car again, bending low, she saw he was carrying something—a child!

People began to run forward, only to be stopped by a dull thud that came up through the soles of Lecia's feet. Both vehicles were swallowed by a fireball.

As Keane and the men who were carrying the adult pitched forward Lecia pressed her hand over her mouth to silence the guttural noise that broke from her, a primitive outburst of loss. Jerking free from her captor, she rushed towards them, but by the time she got there Keane was already upright again.

'Out of the reach of the flames,' he ordered, his voice rasping but clear.

So authoritative was his tone that people snapped out of the mindless, fearful fascination caused by the explosion and came forward, some to help the half-dazed men who were still sprawled on the ground, some to pick up the body and carry it to the gravel at the side of the road.

'Further away,' Keane directed. 'The road's on fire.'

The whole scene looked like something out of every Puritan's idea of hell. With the acrid stench of burning tar and petrol in her nostrils, Lecia pushed through the crowd to where Keane stood, and demanded, 'Are you all right?'

'A few burns,' he said harshly. 'Nothing serious.'

She stared at his angular face, searching for burns, dimly aware of the babble of voices surrounding them.

'Never seen anything so brave...'

'Could have been killed...'

'Real heroes...'

'Most impressive thing I've seen in my life...'

'I wouldn't have thought anyone'd be able to save one person from that, let alone two!'

Satisfied that—amazingly—Keane hadn't been hurt too badly, Lecia peered at the child in his arms, a little boy in nursery-patterned pyjamas who twisted and wriggled, roaring his fear and bewilderment. The doctor she'd seen earlier came up.

'Let me have a look at him,' she said.

It took her five minutes, during which Keane held the child with wonderful gentleness, and then the doctor said, 'He's all right. A few minor burns, that's all. How about you?'

Lecia reached for the little boy. 'Give him to me.' The child held himself stiffly, then turned his head away and began to cry again as the doctor checked Keane's hands.

'Get them seen to,' she said, 'but you were lucky.' She scooped the child from Lecia's arms. 'The ambulance is on its way.' Over her shoulder she said to Keane, 'You'll be in shock, so don't drive until you've been thoroughly checked over by another doctor.'

In a voice she didn't recognise as her own, Lecia asked, 'Were there any more people in the car?'

Keane's curt reply revealed no emotion. 'The driver in the front one—the one who caused the whole bloody mess—got off scot-free. He was running down the motorway when I saw him. The two in the front of the second car are dead.'

And then, thank God, sirens wailed their comforting proclamation of arriving aid, and within a few seconds more professionals were there, fire-fighters and ambulance crew as well as the police.

Lecia waited beside Keane. Although she had to subdue shivers, he seemed made of stone. He gave the police a quick, concise record of events, turning Lecia's stomach as he described struggling to get the woman free after he and the other man had reduced the force of the flames slightly with the fire extinguisher.

'Any burns, sir?' the woman constable asked.

'Minor ones on my hands and arms. Nothing much.'

She looked him over. 'It would pay to get your burns attended to and not to drive, sir.'

'I'll drive,' Lecia said. 'And I'll make sure someone checks him over.'

The constable smiled. 'Yes, we can't have our heroes passing out in the middle of the motorway. Thank you, sir, for all you did. If she survives, that woman is going to be grateful.'

'I wasn't alone,' Keane said evenly.

'No, but bystanders say you were the first there, and that you forced the door open. And you were the one who got her out of her seat belt. She owes you a lot, she and the little boy both. Goodnight, sir.' She looked across at Lecia. 'Make sure your brother goes to an outpatient clinic,' she said firmly before she left them.

'The keys,' Lecia said, holding out her hand.

He didn't demur. She got into the car and, when a policeman had directed them past the fire-engines, headed carefully down the motorway.

'I live on the North Shore,' he said, 'if you can take me there I'll send you back in a taxi.'

'I'll take you to a clinic first.' She'd seen this coming, it's not really very macho to—'

'Macho be damned,' he said forcefully. 'I'll get the burns seen to by a friend of mine on the way.'

With difficulty, he manoeuvred a cellphone from the glove pocket. 'Geoff? Yes, I know what time it is. I've had a minor contretemps on the motorway—no, you fool, would I be ringing you if I was badly hurt?' Without wasting words, he told the man on the other end what had happened.

'A few burns on my hands and arms, that's all,' he finished. There was a pause. 'No, I'm not driving. I'll see you shortly.'

Once they were across the harbour bridge he directed her through the leafy, sleeping suburbs of the North Shore to his friend's surgery, conveniently tacked onto the side of his house.

As Lecia switched off the engine Geoff came out—a tall, thickset man who looked at Lecia with a hastily banished expression of surprise. He's wondering whether Keane's father had a mistress, she thought grimly as Keane introduced them.



'How do you do,' Geoffrey Brown said, shaking the hand she extended. 'Right, man, let's see what the damage is:'

Lecia expected to be banished to the waiting room, but the doctor wouldn't hear of it. 'No, come on in,' he invited, leading the way. 'Somebody's got to tell me what really happened.'

'Keane knows,' she said, feeling superfluous.

'And Keane won't tell me any more than the bare bones,' his friend told her, grinning. 'Even at school he was close-mouthed. Sit down, man, and let me have a look at those hands.'

Geoffrey Brown positioned himself so that he was between Lecia and Keane. She stood back and said, 'Keane's the hero. All I did was wave a torch and slow the traffic down.'

'Work of vital importance,' the doctor said. 'Well, that's not so bad.'

Setting her jaw, Lecia took three steps around him. Her first sight of the burns on Keane's arms made her suck in her breath, but his friend said callously, 'You've always had the luck of the devil himself. Those will sting for a couple of days, but they won't scar. I'll give you a jab in case they infect. The ones on your hands are a bit worse, but even so there's nothing to worry about.'

Keane said, 'I told you that.'

'And you're always right. It's your most irritating characteristic.' Chatting quickly and pleasantly of nothing much, the doctor disinfected and bandaged the burns.

'You were lucky you had a fire extinguisher,' he said when he'd finished. 'Otherwise you wouldn't have had a hope in Hades of getting anyone out.'

'Luck didn't enter into it,' Keane said crisply. 'I always have an extinguisher in the car.'

Frowning, the doctor looked up and met Keane's eyes. 'Yes, of course you do. All right, I won't badger Lecia into telling me how heroic you were, so stop glaring at me. I'd better give you a sedative, and you'd better take it.'

Keane said tersely, 'No.'

Some intonation in the word caught Lecia's attention. She looked from the doctor's pleasant face to Keane's implacable one.

'It's not an admission of weakness,' the doctor said, turning on the tap over the handbasin and collecting a glass of water. 'Drink this, your throat sounds raw.'

Keane drained the glass, but said as he put it down, 'I don't need a sedative.' He got to his feet. 'I'll ring for a taxi from here. He can drop me off and then take Lecia home.' She probably shouldn't be driving either.'

Geoffrey Brown gave him another keen look as Lecia said, 'I don't mind taking you home. If I do, you won't have to collect your car from here tomorrow.'

'She looks all right to me,' Geoffrey said, swivelling an even sharper look onto Lecia. 'Are you feeling light-headed?'

'Not in the least,' she returned steadily.

'Then that's fine,' the doctor said, sweeping them towards the door. 'I can't drive anyone anywhere as Sue's out and I'm babysitting. When you get to Keane's place, Lecia, make a cup of sweet tea and drink it before you get the taxi.'

Keane's blue eyes were dark and impenetrable. 'All right,' he said curtly. 'Thanks, Geoff.'

'No trouble.' But when Keane had got into the car his friend detained Lecia for a moment and said softly, 'Stay with him. He needs someone. And make sure he has some of that tea, with lots of sugar or honey.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

KEANE lived down a long drive on the seaward side of the road, so from the house there'd be a view of the enclosed waters of the channel and in the distance, always, the sloping outline of Rangitoto Island.

As they approached the garage he pressed the button on the door opener and lights sprang on. A big double door groaned upwards. Lecia drove in and the door closed behind them as she switched off the engine and got out.

'Come on in,' Keane said. Apart from giving her directions he hadn't spoken since they'd left the doctor's house.

Lecia darted him a puzzled glance as she got out of the car. Although he looked exactly the same there was a tension about him, a hint that his unfaltering control was only held in place by sheer, gritty will.

Shock, she thought automatically, and went with him into a small vestibule. When he indicated a door she walked through into the kitchen, where the sudden warmth of lights gleamed on a grey granite bench-top and modern fittings.

'Nice,' she said quietly. 'Who designed the house?'

After a moment, as though he had to concentrate to remember, he told her the name of the architect.

Lecia nodded. 'Yes, he's good. And I'll bet Nancy Everard did this kitchen.'

'She did.' He walked across to the telephone.

Without asking, Lecia filled the kettle and put it on.

'Do you always obey instructions so slavishly?' Keane asked crisply, his brows rising as he pulled a hand back from the telephone.

'Always, when they're given by a doctor. Actually, I'd like a cup of tea, if that's all right with you.' And making and drinking that tea would keep her there, as, she thought with a glimmer of hysteria, the doctor had ordered.

'Of course,' Keane said curtly.

His eagerness to get rid of her hurt, but she was determined to make sure he drank something hot and sweet. Self-consciously she found a teapot and cups, a sugar bowl, milk and teaspoons, and put them all on the tray he pulled out. Keane didn't object, apparently content to watch her, although his eyes were opaque and his expression unreadable.

After the tea was made she lifted the tray and said, 'Where to?'

He gestured towards a door. 'In here.'

The uncurtained sitting room was spacious and elegant, looking out onto a garden, where the dark leaves of shrubs were edged with silver, and across a pool with a placidly glimmering surface that merged into the shining expanse of the sea.

When Keane went to switch on the lights Lecia said, 'Oh, don't. The view is magnificent!'

'Can you see well enough to pour?' He waited until she'd sat down before lowering his tall frame onto the oversized custom-made sofa beside her chair.

'I have good night vision.' She poured the tea, added two teaspoons of sugar, and put the cup and saucer down on the wide coffee-table in front of him.

Smoothly, he said, 'I don't have sugar in my tea.'

'Tonight you do,' she said, steadying her tone so that she sounded, she hoped, neither maternal nor bossy, it mops up the adrenalin.'

She wondered whether he'd refuse point-blank, but he said thoughtfully, 'Then you'll be having it too.'

'Naturally.' She allowed herself to sound faintly surprised as she slid two spoonfuls into her own cup and stirred.

In a pleasant voice, although that undertone of warning ran deep, he said, 'I'm not usually so easy to manipulate.'

Oh, she believed him. 'Some men,' she said coolly, 'are so hung up on being macho that they're inclined to forget they're as human as the rest of us.'

'And you think I'm one of them.'

'No,' she said placidly. 'You aren't so stupid.'

Silence stretched tautly between them until he said silkily, 'I don't need cossetting, Lecia.'

'If making a cup of tea is cossetting you,' she retorted, 'you haven't had much of a life, you poor thing. Cossetting is—at the very least—breakfast in bed. Or having your back scrubbed in the shower.'

And immediately she wished she hadn't used those particular examples.

His smile was a white flash in the darkness, tight and intimidating, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he picked up the cup and saucer she'd put on the table in front of him. The small noise of china rattling against china resounded in the still quietness. Replacing them, Keane muttered a curse that lifted the hair on the back of Lecia's neck.

Quickly she asked, 'Do your burns hurt?'

'Not much.'

She said in her most prosaic tone, it's just shock— not surprising, considering what you did tonight. The sugar will help. Do you want me to hold the cup?'

Her estimation of his character went up several notches when he said through gritted teeth, 'No, I bloody do not, but if I'm going to get this

damned sugar into my system you'll have to, because I certainly can't. Not without slopping tea everywhere.'

Lecia went around the table to sit beside him on the sofa. Although he didn't look at her she could feel his tension like a blow on her skin. Brows drawing together, she lifted the cup to his sculptured mouth. After he'd drunk carefully she put it back in the saucer.

Like feeding a lion, she thought.

Such unwelcome, perilous intimacy fanned the slow smoulder of sexual awareness deep inside her. Gritting her teeth, she held the cup for him until it had been drained.

Then he said, 'My mother died in a fire. At least— she died of burns she received in a fire.'

Oh, God. Lecia said gently, 'I'm sorry. Tonight must have brought back all sorts of appalling memories.'

'Yes.' He was silent for a long time before he continued, 'She'd knocked a candle over and set her clothes alight. I woke up to hear her screaming and men shouting as she raced up the stairs. They couldn't reach her before she got to my door and wrenched it open. I thought I was having a nightmare.'

Without thinking, Lecia put her hand over his. He'd been sitting motionless, but at her touch he turned his palm and held her fingers in a loose clasp. His skin was cold.

'When that woman started screaming tonight,' he said harshly, 'I remembered. Not that I've ever forgotten it, but mostly I manage to wall it off in the past where it belongs. I can still hear my mother—such enormous pain and shock, and unbearable, unfettered terror. Her clothes were on fire—and her hair—'

Lecia couldn't bear it. She looped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him as hard as she could, pressing her cheek against his in mute, anguished

sympathy, trying to give with her warmth some sort of uncomplicated support.

His arms closed around her; Lecia gasped at the sudden bunch and coil of his muscles as he lifted her into his lap and crushed her in a fierce embrace.

'Oddly enough,' he said, his voice detached, almost expressionless, 'I can't recall anything else. I know my father wrapped her in the blankets from my bed, and that she was in hospital for months before she finally died, but that time's just a blank. I stayed with an uncle and aunt, and I suppose they kept me away from it all.'

But he would never forget that last sight of his mother.

'It's all right,' Lecia said softly, hardly aware of the words, knowing only that she had to give him what small comfort she could, it's over now. It's all right...'

How long they stayed linked she never knew. Long enough for her to absorb the faint spicy scent that was Keane's exclusively—long enough for her to realise that she would never forget what it was like to hold this strong man while he fought his memories.

Neither spoke; neither moved. Locked together, they sat in the dark room and listened to the sound of the other's heartbeat.

When Lecia woke she yawned and stretched the stiffness from her bones, not realising until then that she was lying half across a wonderful warmth; a warmth that breathed. As she tried to remember where on earth she was she distinctly separated out two sets of heartbeats from the overload that swamped her senses—her own pulse, thudding fast and yet faster, and another, measured and steady beneath her ear.

Slowly, cautiously, she opened her eyes a narrow slit.

They were sprawled the length of the sofa, heads close together on a cushion. Some time during the night she'd half climbed over Keane, so that now she was lying between him and the back of the sofa, her left side supported by his body, her face nudging his throat. Lean fingers rested on her hip.

Her breath blocked her throat. She'd wake him if she tried to climb over, but—and then it was too late.

In the moment between sleep and consciousness his big body sprang to life. She felt the surge of morning arousal speed through him, and her whole system clamoured to match it, to give him what he so clearly wanted.

Except that his hunger wasn't for her; it was simply the eager passion of a male for the woman in his bed.

Her lashes flew up and she was skewered by a pair of narrowed, dangerous eyes, smouldering and blue.

'Oh, hell,' she said feebly, instinctively trying to lighten a situation that shouted danger. 'My leg's gone to sleep.'

The molten intensity in his gaze cooled slightly. 'What are you doing here?' he asked through lips that barely moved.

'The same as you, I imagine. Thinking that this is the weirdest morning-after I've ever experienced.'

The fingers at her hip flexed, clamping cruelly over the bone, then eased. Keane said roughly, 'I'm getting up.'

Although he had to favour his burnt hands, he got to his feet with a minimum of fuss and a lithe male grace that drove home to some unguarded part of Lecia's heart. As soon as he was standing she followed suit—she was too much at a disadvantage with him towering over her, those searing flame-blue eyes sweeping across her.



'Oh, Lord,' she groaned, pressing both hands into the small of her back and arching against the kinks. 'I may never straighten out again.'

Keane had walked over to the window, his smooth panther stride enviably free from stiffness. At her words he swung around and looked her over with such studied calculation that she automatically straightened her spine and jutted her chin.

'Not one of the most sensible things either of us has done,' he said, biting out the words. 'I'll ring for a taxi to take you home.' He started for the door, but paused long enough to add with cold, implacable courtesy, 'The first room on the right is a bathroom. There are spare toothbrushes and combs in the cupboard, and towels if you want to shower.'

If? Lecia wanted nothing else. But she remained at the window for a few minutes, admiring with determined detachment the skill of the engineer who'd sited the pool so cleverly that, although the house was twenty feet above the level of the beach, the masonry edge melded almost imperceptibly into the pale dawn-silver of the sea.

Keane had chosen his professionals well. The garden was serene yet exotic. Dark green glossy gardenia bushes edged the house, their heavy white flowers glowing in the pearlescent light. The simple beauty of agaves contrasted with the blue rosettes of agapanthus and the satisfying silver spikes of astelia. It was an austere garden; a man's garden.

And, although it was just after sunrise, it was already obvious that it was going to be another February day with the prospect of great heat and humidity.

Away to the north, the low hills and string of beaches that made up the East Coast Bays were covered in houses and trees. More hills rose beyond them—blue- green and slightly hazy—culminating in the bush- covered twin peak of Tamahu some thirty miles away. And against the smiling land gleamed the sea, placid and still in the calmness of dawn, with two yachts sliding gracefully down the channel.

An ache of unfathomable emotion tightened Lecia's throat. Dismissing it, she turned away and walked towards the bathroom.

It was tiled in a warm Italian marble of subdued cream with rose streaks through it and, as with the kitchen, no expense had been spared. Lecia showered, grimaced as she got back into her clothes, and combed her wet hair straight back from her face. Without looking at her reflection, she removed a new toothbrush from its wrappings and cleaned her teeth. After several deep breaths she went back into the sitting room.

The taxi's here,' Keane said from across the room. He'd pushed all the glass doors back so that the front of the house was open to the sea, and in on the fresh air streamed the scent of gardenias, its erotically charged languor moderated by the tang of salt.

'Thanks.' She turned towards the door.

'Lecia.' When she halted he waited for a tense moment before saying, 'Thank you.'

She lifted her shoulders slightly, easing them back into place with the uncomfortable suspicion that the tiny gesture might have revealed more than it was wise to. 'it was nothing,' she said as negligently as she could. 'Will you be all right?'

'Yes, I'm fine. Someone's coming over shortly.'

With a set smile—one that felt as though she'd bared her teeth like a cornered animal—she said, 'Good.' The words tasted bitter in her mouth. 'I'll be on my way. Goodbye.'

He saw her into the taxi, ignored her protests and paid the driver, then lifted a bandaged hand in farewell as the car set off down a drive lined with palms and the cerulean flowers of plumbago bushes.

After an answering wave Lecia kept her head turned resolutely away from the tall figure of the man against the muted, limewashed bulk of the house.

This sudden, heart-gripping pang of desolation was stupid and quite ridiculous.

At home, after another, symbolic, shower she got into fresh clothes and ate a slice of avocado toast, then took her coffee with her to her draughting desk. Sketching swiftly, and with as much concentration as she could summon, she set down ideas for a house to be built on a private beach on one of the Gulf islands for a very rich businessman and his second wife, who'd rung the previous day to make an appointment.

Six months previously the wedding had been in all the papers. The businessman was at least fifty, and his wife looked—and sounded—no older than twenty-four or twenty-five.

'And that is no business of yours,' Lecia told herself sternly, picking up her pencil again.

A couple of hours later she was interrupted by a phone call. She ignored it, but looked up sharply when Keane's great-aunt Sophie's voice came over the answering machine.

'Lecia, my dear,' she said, 'I think I might have found a lead! Would you mind very much asking your mother if she remembers your father or anyone in his family talking about Berkshire?'

Lecia closed her eyes. If her ancestor had been a Paget bastard she and Keane would be half fourth or fifth cousins, always providing there was such a relationship! And if Keane's attitude this morning was anything to go by, he'd soon be discouraging Aunt Sophie from pursuing her investigations.

What had happened? Opening her eyes, she stared sightlessly at the rough sketches on the board. The moment Keane had woken and seen her his eyes had burned with sheer, barely containable fury.

All right, so he'd been startled when he realised she'd spent the night in his arms, but the sensible way to deal with the situation would have been with

laughter, and then the slightly farcical incident could have been relegated to its proper insignificance.

Refusing to listen to the sly voice that asked whether she was ever going to be able to forget what it had been like to wake in Keane's arms, she wondered if perhaps he'd simply been embarrassed by his confession the previous evening.

Did he see it as weakness? Surely not; he seemed strong enough to be able to deal with and understand his grief, and accept that he had every right to feel it. Last night's inferno must have set the whole appalling scenario of his mother's death replaying in his mind, stirring up the anguish he'd never be entirely free from, although time would work its inevitable magic.

Oh, damn the man! Scowling, she blinked hard to clear her vision. She didn't want him getting between her and her work. In fact, Keane Paget was becoming a nuisance, taking up residence in her mind, looking at her from every wretched mirror, monopolising her thoughts and emotions.

Why had he had to go to the opera in the park? If he'd stayed at home her lovely, serene life would still be placid and satisfying.

Instead, she was racked by dark desires and hidden, inchoate needs she'd vowed never to yield to again. And it was all Keane's fault. It was his decision to carry things further than that first burning glance that had got them into this situation.

Gloomily she drew with swift, sure strokes a gardenia flower, shading the petals carefully to indicate the thick, soft texture. The scent was not one of her favourites, thank heavens, because from now on it would remind her of Keane, and last night, and the ferocious, delighted excitement that had seethed through her when she woke sprawled half across his long body and felt it respond to the womanly weight of hers..

Although his response had been entirely involuntary, it didn't make the way she felt any easier to cope with.

Setting her jaw, she tore off the sheet with the drawing on it and settled back to sketching houses and ideas and plans.

That afternoon she rang home, and after the usual cheerful preliminaries asked about her father's family.

'I don't really remember much,' her mother said thoughtfully. 'Why do you want to know?'

Lecia explained.

'How—how odd.' Her mother's voice flattened. '*Who* did you say this man is?'

'Keane Paget.' Even saying his name produced a pulse of forbidden pleasure.

'Oh,' Monica said blankly. 'Well, I certainly don't know whether the Springs had any connections to Berkshire. I can send you your father's birth certificate and a copy of our marriage certificate, if you think this Mrs Warburton would like that.'

'I think she'd be delighted,' Lecia said drily. 'She's thrilled to have something-new to track down.'

'And do you really look alike?'

'Very. Same long nose, same-shaped eyes and brows, even the same cleft chin. His features are more blunt, and more—well, more...'

'Masculine?'

'Yes, that's it.' She made herself laugh. 'Altogether tougher—almost aggressive. Andrea insists his hair is the colour of dark manuka honey—it has tawny lights in it. And his eyes are a very dark blue. But we're both tall, with long arms and legs. We've been taken for brother and sister. And Mrs Warburton—Keane's grandfather's sister—looks like an older version of both of us.'

'How odd,' her mother repeated, her voice still faintly startled, it certainly seems likely that there's a family connection...'

'We both look like our fathers.'

'I'll be interested to hear what Mrs Warburton discovers,' Monica conceded, before reminding Lecia of the sixtieth wedding celebrations for her stepfather's parents.

'I'm sure I answered the invitation,' Lecia said in surprise.

'Oh, you probably have. You know what Gran is like! She'll have used the envelope to save seeds in—with the answer still inside!'

'I wouldn't miss the party for worlds.' Lecia had been welcomed into her stepfather's family with almost uncritical affection, and she loved them very much. The party would be a big clan meeting, one she'd enjoy.

'We'll look forward to seeing you that weekend, then. No chance of you staying longer, I suppose?'

'Not at the moment, Mum—business is too good.'

'Are you still going to Australia?'

'Yes. I've organised my schedule around it—I can afford the three weeks.'

Her mother sighed. 'I know you're perfectly capable of looking after yourself, but I'd like it more if you had somebody to go with.'

'I know,' Lecia said with teasing sympathy, 'but I'll keep in touch, I promise. And you were a lot younger than I am when you went—'

'I went with a friend,' Monica reminded her, but from the tone of her voice she was smiling. 'All right, darling, I do trust you to know what you're doing. See you soon.'

Later that evening Lecia went through her file of important papers and took her birth certificate out to be copied. It might lead to some information Aunt Sophie could use to track down the Spring ancestors.

It was just as well she didn't expect Keane to ring, because he didn't. Lecia wrote him a short note thanking him for dinner and saying she hoped his burns were healing well, and posted it with an odd amalgam of relief and -regret. And through the humid, lazy days of February she worked, ate leisurely meals in gardens with her friends, swam off shimmering beaches, and thought seriously about installing a heat pump to act as air conditioner in summer and heater in winter.

Janine Carpenter, the rich, middle-aged businessman's wife, turned out to be young and enthusiastic about the sketches Lecia had made. 'Very good,' she said, blonde head on one side as she examined one particular one. 'Can you do a proper plan of this?'

'Before I do any serious work, I need to see at least a surveyed site plan. Otherwise,' Lecia told her prospective client, 'all I'm really doing is pretty drawings.'

Janine nodded. She had a fresh, bright charm curbed a little by the worldliness in her dark eyes. 'The surveyors have almost got that finished, but why don't you come up with us to see the island? How would this weekend do?'

Lecia consulted her diary. 'Fine.'

'We'll go in the boat,' Janine said with a swift, almost smug smile. 'Meet us down at Westhaven at nine on Saturday.' She gave careful directions, watched with approval as Lecia wrote them down, and went on, 'Don't bother with food, I'll see to that. We'll show you exactly what the place is like, and we can have a good day out on the Gulf too.'

So the following Saturday Lecia walked along to the boat harbour, pack on her shoulders and suitably armed with sunscreen and hat, a camera,

sketchpad, pencils and measuring tape, and seasick pills just in case the weather turned nasty.

Not that it showed any signs of it. Rarely, for Auckland, there wasn't even a cloud in the sky. She told herself that she was looking forward to a splendid day, with the prospect of a good commission at the end of it.

Today, she thought, walking past the forest of masts in the harbour, listening to gulls mew softly in the glittering clarity of the sky and waves slapping gently against the sea wall, today would be a serene celebration of summer, a pleasant trip to a beautiful place with pleasant people.

Reaching the floating pontoon she'd been directed to, she set off down it, looking for a large white launch called *Lady Janine*. About twenty-five metres ahead a couple of people stood talking. Flicking a look at them, she stiffened as she recognised a particular, arrogant angle of head, a pair of wide shoulders and long, heavily- must-led legs.

Primal delight, aggressive and unyielding, throbbed through every cell in her body, and suddenly the day came alive, all serenity banished in a sensory overload that sharpened the sky to a crystalline bowl, flavoured the air with the wild tang of awareness and tightened Lecia's skin and nerves and sinews.

'Hello,' she said as she came level with the two men. Her tentative smile solidified on her lips when Keane swung around and looked at her with narrowed, arctic eyes.

'Hello, there.' The older man, who had to be Brian Carpenter, her host, eyed her legs with frank appreciation before giving her face a cursory look. His eyes widened. 'Good God,' he said, and stared hard at her before switching his gaze to Keane.

'We haven't discovered the link yet,' Keane told him smoothly, his strong-boned face set in an expression both guarded and watchful, 'but Aunt Sophie's hot on the trail.'

He performed the introductions with a cool aplomb that set Lecia's teeth on edge.



Brian snorted with laughter. 'She'll find it. Welcome aboard, Lecia. Janine's down in the galley putting the food away—she'll show you where to dump your gear.' He went into the cabin and yelled his wife's name, then headed further forward into the wheelhouse.

Janine appeared in the cockpit, her dark eyes flashing swiftly from Keane to Lecia and back again. Lecia knew what she was going to say before she said it, and wondered at the hint of satisfaction in her tone.

'You could be twins, you know!'

Keane's brows lifted. He said to Lecia, 'Perhaps we should get some signs made. "Yes, we know we look alike. No, we're not closely related. We are trying to find out what the connection is, and when we know we'll tell everyone".'

His voice was amused and unhurried, his expression coolly restrained, and yet the put-down was obvious— and unkind.

An angry flush heated Janine's skin, but she retorted, 'You can't blame people for being surprised.'

'Oh, I don't.' His smile was thin and hard. 'Curiosity is, after all, supposed to be one of the characteristics that separates humanity from the lower animals, isn't it?'

Innocuous words, almost submerged by dangerous undercurrents.

Lecia decided to step in. 'Obviously we're related—'

'I'll say.'

Janine's knowing tone compelled Lecia to elaborate. 'Our fathers looked very alike too. We were, believe me, a complete shock to each other.' She stopped then, because Janine's cryptic smile made her realise that whatever was going on here was not being alleviated by her intervention.

I'll bet,' Janine said with relish, flashing a knowing glance at me.  
continuing, 'Come with me and I'll show you where to p

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE cruiser, huge, sleek and white, like something transported from the harbour at Monte Carlo, had been superbly decorated with a lavish disregard for cost.

To Lecia, whose stepfather had once owned a much loved but definitely old-fashioned launch, this one didn't seem like a boat—more like a penthouse in some tropical skyscraper—but it suited Janine, whose delight in the expensive fittings was as open and free from pretension as a child's.

Tour over, her hostess ushered Lecia into one of the cabins, pointed out an adjoining bathroom that was far too opulent to be called a head, and said, 'Come up to the saloon when you're ready.'

After she'd whisked away, Lecia stared at herself in the mirror. The surge of forbidden joy at the sight of Keane had ebbed, leaving her poised perilously on the cusp of excitement and despair. Damn, she thought, damn, damn, damn! She didn't want to spend the day cooped up, even on a boat this big, with Keane.

It was difficult to separate her tangled emotions and sensations, but each time she'd seen him the impact of that first, incredulous recognition had intensified, and she'd hoped she wasn't going to have to deal with it again.

Fate, courtesy of the Carpenters, had decided otherwise. Janine must have noticed her resemblance to Keane at their first meeting, yet she'd said nothing, which was odd.

And none of this, Lecia reminded herself, was any business of hers, unless Janine was holding out the bait of a commission to further some ploy of her own.

A ploy that involved Keane?

Setting her shoulders, she walked out of the cabin and made her way to the saloon, where the younger woman waited, short fingers tapping on pale leather upholstery.

'Let's go into the wheelhouse,' she said, her tiny frown disappearing when she saw Lecia. 'We're ready to leave.'

Forward of the saloon and up a couple of steps, the wheelhouse offered more seating as well as a bewildering array of navigational aids and equipment. Lecia sat down on a wide, padded sofa and watched Brian Carpenter start the massive engines.

At exactly the right time Keane fended the boat off from the pontoon, then jumped with lithe grace and split-second timing into the cockpit as the engines picked up and the boat moved away from the pontoon.

Good work,' Brian called out, grinning beneath his peaked cap. He spun the wheel and headed the craft out of the marina and into the harbour proper.

After today, Lecia decided, ignoring the little bubbles of anticipation that fizzed through her bloodstream, she'd make sure she didn't see Keane again. It could be dangerous—hell, who was she kidding? It *would* be dangerous—to let herself fall any further into the pit her hormones were busy digging for her. She'd lived twenty-nine years without knowing he existed, and, provided she took steps to keep him from intruding into her life, she could live another contented twenty-nine.

Her experience with Anthony might have made her slightly paranoid about big, articulate, arrogant men with more than their share of masculine attraction, but that wary instinct for self-protection had kept her safe, and she liked her security. There would, she thought after a swift glance at Keane, be no security with him. He reeked of a disturbing animal magnetism that would make any sensible woman look for her running shoes.

Her mental pep-talk gave her some needed strength of mind, a surge of confidence that evaporated like smoke in the wind when, after Janine left to talk to Brian at the wheel, Keane walked across.

'How are you?' he asked with unsmiling detachment.

'Fine. And you?' She glanced at his lean hands and away again.

'No scars,' he said coolly, 'I heal quickly. I didn't thank you properly for what you did.'

'You did, and don't worry about it,' she returned, keeping her voice light and unwavering. 'Think of it as a cousinly gesture.'

Her gaze had gone no further than that telltale inspection of his hands, but every cell in her body thrummed with expectation, as though this were the first morning of the first summer, as though the world were fresh and new and made just for them.

'A cousinly gesture?' he said deliberately, drawling the words a little. 'Whatever, it was very kind of you. Has your back recovered?'

It was mean of him to refer to the aftermath of that night she'd spent curled along him.

Even to her own ears Lecia's attempt at a carefree laugh sounded shaky, so she cut it short. 'It's fine. How about yours?'

'No problem. Do you know Janine well?'

'I've spoken to her on the telephone once and met her once,' she said. 'I hope she and Brian are going to commission me to design a beach house. Janine seemed to like the preliminary sketches.'

'Oh, I'm sure she did.'

Although his tone didn't alter, there were undercurrents in his voice, and a slight change of body language. I So he too suspected Janine's motivation.

'I gather they're friends of yours,' Lecia probed.

His face hardened. 'Brian is my uncle, my mother's younger brother,' he said aloofly.

And he didn't approve of this second marriage. Trying to remember whether there'd been a divorce, Lecia recalled that Brian Carpenter's first wife had

died a year or so before the wedding. Definitely not a good idea to pursue that subject!

Lecia asked, 'Have you been to the island before?'

'More times than I can remember. I grew up living with Brian and my aunt Zita, and we used to spend our holidays on the island in a little old bach. It's not there any longer; Janine decided it was an eyesore and had it bulldozed and burnt.' Beneath the toneless words Lecia heard cold condemnation. Smoothly he continued, 'How can you produce drawings if you haven't seen the place?'

'Sketches are easy enough; they're really to persuade a client that you understand their brief. I'm here today to see the site. I must say I was surprised to see you.' She knew why it seemed important to establish that fact, and despised herself for caring about his opinion.

'A mutual surprise,' he said smoothly. 'Will a walk around the island give you enough information?'

'No, but it will be a great help in coming up with a concept.' He looked interested so after a moment's hesitation she began to explain how she organised the actual progression of the design, answering his astute questions with a pleasure that increased too rapidly and too acutely.

Almost immediately he sat down beside her, which made it very difficult to concentrate on her profession, and not on the way the sun gilded the muscled strength of his forearms and the arrogant, long-nosed profile with its determined chin and sensual, enigmatic mouth.

Lecia had no idea how long they talked, only that her smouldering excitement was backed and reinforced by an odd tranquillity, as though this was where she was meant to be. Some part of her registered when they rounded North Head, its tiny volcanic cone grass-green in the summer sun, but she was too intent on their conversation to notice much about the harbour or the Gulf.

She was, however, astonished at and worried by her resentment when Janine interrupted, her gaze moving significantly from Lecia's face to Keane's, then back again.

'You know,' she said, 'you're really not as much alike as you seem to be at first. You've got the same features, but your colouring's different, and while Lecia looks serene and charming Keane looks tough and dynamic. But you could be brother and sister.'

'We're not,' Keane said, his inflection turning the flat statement into a warning.

The younger woman's laughter had an edge to it. 'I believe you,' she said, flicking her lashes at him, 'though thousands wouldn't! Now, would you like something to drink? I can make tea or coffee, but there's also juice or soft drinks if you prefer something cold.'

Reluctantly, yet aware that it would be far more sensible to go, Lecia said, 'I'll have tea. Can I come and help you with it?'

'Well, thanks.' Janine flirted a glance towards Keane. 'What would you like?'

'Nothing, thank you,' he said with rigorous courtesy.

Janine waited until they were in the galley before saying with a grimace, 'Not one of my better moves.'

'What?'

'Well, clearly Keane thought I was insinuating that one or other of you could be a bastard, even though it's a reasonable assumption. Brian says Keane's father slept with any woman who'd have him. It didn't do a lot for his marriage.'

Appalled, Lecia opened her mouth to protest, then closed it firmly again. This, she reiterated, has nothing to do with you. Keane made his feelings about you more than obvious when you woke up together—thanks, but no thanks.

Which is exactly how you feel. You're a lousy judge of men, and you know better than to get mixed up with autocratic, aggressive creatures with more sex appeal than kindness.

And who cares if he and his uncle's wife are at daggers drawn?

Janine set the kettle on the gas element and switched it on. She surveyed the tiny blue jets of flame with a wry smile, saying as she turned away, 'Exactly the same colour as Keane's eyes. You'd think I'd learn, but no, when he looks at me as though I'm something slimy that's just crawled out from under his shoe I get all furious, open my mouth and let fly.'

'I'd defy anyone to look at you and think of something slimy!' Lecia said, determined to sound composed.

'Women quite often do.' Janine gave her a saucy grin, which faded as she went on, 'And since I've married Brian quite a few men give me that look. You know, the one that says *I know she can be bought*.' From the wheelhouse above came the sound of masculine laughter. Janine's lush mouth tightened into a determined line. 'Oh, well, they'll learn. Now, would you like something to eat?'

'Not at the moment, thanks.' Lecia too had been guilty of a few cynical thoughts about this autumn-spring marriage, but it appeared there was more to Janine than blonde hair and large dark eyes and that provocative mouth.

Lecia took her tea to a chair some distance away from the two men, and drank it as the big launch sliced through the water. Every person they overtook stared, and not many waved. It was rather off-putting to be so conspicuous. Lecia thought, They're probably calling us a bunch of yuppies, as rich and vulgar as this gin palace.

'That,' Keane said, sitting down beside her, 'is an enigmatic expression.'

Cautiously, reminding herself that she didn't want to get involved, Lecia replied, is it? I was just enjoying the day.'

'Have you sailed much?'



'When we had the bach at Ohope we used to putter round in my stepfather's old launch, but I haven't done any since I came to Auckland beyond the occasional trip in a friend's boat. Do you?'

He shook his head. 'I know the basics, but it's not my favourite sport.'

'What is?' It was amazing how interested in him she was, how she treasured every scrap of information about him.

'Skiing,' he said. 'What's yours?'

Lecia raised her face to the sun, closing her eyes against the strong rays. 'Sitting in the sun,' she said tranquilly. 'If I feel really energetic I might read a book.'

He laughed. 'You sound like a cat.'

'Sensible animals, cats.'

'Do you have one?'

'I like them,' she said dreamily, 'but I've never lived in any place long enough to have a pet. Still, I plan to stay where I am for the next few years, so I might get a cat one of these days.'

'A Siamese,' he said unexpectedly. 'Elegant and aristocratic and self-possessed—like you.'

Lecia's eyes opened with sleepy reluctance. An enormous contentment sabotaged her common sense, lulling her into happiness. 'That's a lovely compliment, but not how I see myself,' she said.

His eyes burned through her. 'How do you see yourself?'

'Hard-working. Cold-blooded. Ambitious, but not driven by it.'

'Cold-blooded?'

Why had that slipped out? 'Well—I prefer to call it being cautious,' she said stiffly.

'Do you regularly get accused of being cold-blooded?' he asked with indolent patience.

Repressing memories of Anthony's fury when she'd refused to continue their affair and the insults he'd flung at her, she admitted, it's happened. I don't lose my head often.'

'No,' he said softly, 'you keep it very well.'

Without looking at him she said, 'Thank you. So do you—another thing we have in common. How's Aunt Sophie?'

'Hot on the trail and enjoying the hunt,' he told her, his voice deep and unhurried.

When Brian called out to him and beckoned, Keane said, 'I'd better go,' and got to his feet, moving across to their host and somehow taking up all the airspace around them, tall and darkly golden and forceful, his open, unadorned masculinity dangerously compelling.

The sun picked out the big trees on the dark bulk of Rangitoto and glinted off the blue-green channel as the *Lady Janine* rounded the point with its little lighthouse and debouched into the wide bay that separated the mainland from the islands. Behind Rangitoto stretched Motutapu, the sacred island, and at right angles to it the long finger of Whangaparaoa Peninsula sheltered the expanse of still water.

The island that Brian and Janine owned was north of the peninsula, one of a group of small, magical, lushly green scraps of land surrounded by the aura that makes all islands places of possible enchantment. Lecia picked up a pair of binoculars from a rack and looked through them at the house on the nearest one, snuggled down amidst a jungle, fronted by a thin white curve of beach.

Almost immediately she was joined by Janine. 'I want our house to look as settled as that one,' she said as she sat down.

'We'll try.'

The younger woman's gaze moved past Keane to settle on her husband. Absently, as though repeating a mantra, she said, 'You have to try. That's what life is about—trying.'

Lecia nodded. 'Yes, I think it is.'

'Well, both of us had better give this house our best shot,' Janine said. She looked up and her voice altered, became almost a challenge, it's my project and it's going to work. I want our kids to be able to run across the floor with sand on their feet.'

The defiance was directed at Keane, who'd come to lean over the side of the boat a few paces away. Straightening up, he smiled at the younger woman, his expression at once oblique and unsettling.

'And colour co-ordinated,' he suggested blandly, 'to go with your hair and eyes?'

Janine's laughter was slightly shrill. 'Don't be silly, Keane,' she said. 'Why don't you take Lecia up onto the flybridge to see if there are any dolphins about?'

Swiftly Lecia said, 'I'd love that. Are we likely to see them here?'

Keane's mouth twisted slightly. 'As likely as we are anywhere,' he said. 'Come on, let's go up.'

The flybridge was considerably higher than the wheel- house and saloon, and much smaller. Once there, Lecia was aware of a sense of isolation that whipped up a slow, expectant heat inside her.

Carefully not looking at Keane, she gazed ahead at the rapidly enlarging islands and the sparkling, limitless sea. 'Glorious,' she breathed.

"Earth has not anything to show more fair", ' he quoted, and met her startled look with a smile even more sardonic than the one he'd bestowed on Janine. 'I am literate,' he said, blue eyes glinting like frost over fire.

Snatching at her composure, Lecia said, 'Anyone who can quote poetry is unusual in this day and age Especially Wordsworth.'

'At boarding school I had an English teacher who firmly believed that the collective wisdom of humanity was enshrined in its poetry. We were force-fed large chunks of it, so I can quote from almost all the major British poets. Where did you learn about Wordsworth?'

'My mother.' Lecia smiled a little at the image of a much younger Keane learning poetry. 'She has a lot in common with your teacher. Other children's parents read them bedtime stories; mine read poetry. It wasn't until she married my stepfather that I discovered there were actually stories written especially for children.'

'No Paddington Bear?' he asked, amusement gleaming in his eyes. 'No Narnia stories? What a deprived childhood!'

Lecia laughed. 'They came later. Oh, look, *look*—dolphins!'

And up they came like silver arrows, the children of the sea, smiling as they frolicked in the bow waves, sleek and sinuous and shining, leaping from the water in the sheer joy of living.

'I wonder why we love them so much,' Lecia murmured, following their antics with laughter and awe.

'Because they seem to like us without reservation?' Keane suggested cynically. 'Or perhaps because they're free to play without worrying about mortgages or road fatalities or world hunger.' He paused before adding in a different voice, 'And because anything beautiful gladdens the heart.'

Startled, Lecia looked up. His gaze was fixed onto her face in a fierce scrutiny that burned through the frail defences of her social persona. Her skin tightened as colour rushed over her in a prickly tide.

'Of course it does, that's why it's beautiful,' she said numbly, using banality to shatter the moment of unnerving, unspoken communion. 'I think I'll go down and see if I can help Janine.'

'Janine doesn't need your help,' he said calmly. 'She's a very dogged, organised woman.'

Still shocked by that moment when she'd thought she could read his mind as clearly as he could hers, Lecia said, 'She might,' and fled.

It was hard to discern what lay behind the saturnine aloofness of his expression, but there had been more than simple dislike in his tone when he spoke of his uncle's wife. Somehow straight disapproval of an unsuitable marriage didn't seem enough to make Keane so angry.

You don't want to know, her common sense protested as she climbed down to the main deck. Remember—you *aren't interested*.

Edgy and tense, she was extremely thankful when the boat finally eased into a bay backed by a beach a couple of hundred metres long, each low headland crowned by pohutukawa trees, the flat area between thickly covered in manuka scrub and other coastal forest. An ugly black patch revealed the site and fate of the small bach that Keane remembered.

Brian brought the big boat to a halt, then lowered the anchor while Keane flipped the large inflatable dinghy into the water.

Beside her, Janine said, 'See that rise on the left? That's where we want to build the house. We can tuck it into the trees—with any luck we shouldn't have to cut even one down.'

it\* the perfect place,' Lecia said, nodding, it looks to the north and west, and it'll scoop in the winter sun all day. I'll need to take a few measurements.'

'We'll help.' Janine gave a small, excited laugh. 'You tell us what you want done, and we'll do it.'

'This is beautiful.' Lecia looked around and smiled. 'I just hope I can do it justice.'

Janine said confidently, 'I'm sure you can.'

They spent the next hour roaming across the site while Lecia made notes, sketched, and directed the men as they took measurements. After half an hour Janine left them and set up lunch in the shade of one of the big trees, summoning them when she was ready.

She was an excellent hostess, and if the food was any indication an equally good cook. Yet low-key tension spoiled a very pleasant meal. Not that there was any overt expression of it; neither Janine nor Keane said anything that could be construed as quarrelsome or pointed.

Nevertheless, Lecia was relieved when Brian and Janine decided to go for a walk around their small domain.

Long legs stretched out, Keane lounged back against the trunk of one of the old trees. A stray beam of sun gilded his hair to an amber glow, outlining the straight dark brows and the cleft in his chin, the chiselled beauty and strength of his mouth. With his casually disposed limbs and half-closed eyes, he should have looked relaxed, but to Lecia's bemused glance he was. an image of focused power.

Was he watching her from beneath those dark lashes? As acutely aware of her as she was of him?

The slight breeze off the sea had died, and heat brooded over them. Even the gulls had given up their constant fight for scraps and sat like small grey and white igloos on the edge of the water, only their sharp red beaks and black eyes revealing their alertness. A trickle of sweat found its way down Lecia's spine.

She said restlessly, 'I'll go and make some more notes.'

'Leave them,' Keane advised with mocking amusement. 'They've only been married six months.'

Her eyes flew to his; in the indigo depths she saw cold, cutting cynicism.

'She's a good cook,' she said inanely.

His smile was narrow and uncompromising. 'I doubt whether she knows how to turn an element on,' he said softly. 'That was food from their local delicatessen.'

'How do you know?'

Indifferently he said, 'I've eaten it before.'

'Why don't you like her?'

'How intuitive of you to notice,' he mocked. 'And it's not a matter of liking; in fact, I respect her for making the most use of her not inconsiderable assets and talents.'

Tentatively, finding her way, Lecia asked, is it any of your business?'

'He is my uncle,' Keane said tonelessly.

'And you're fond of him.'

'I think he's a bloody fool.' With a sardonic intonation that set her teeth on edge, he continued, 'But, yes, I'm fond of him. And sooner or later he's going to need all the friends he can get.'

Because he was looking out to sea, Lecia allowed her eyes to linger on the distinctive profile, with its thin-bridged nose, angular jaw and broad forehead, features at once familiar yet alien because she knew so little about the man who shared them with her.

She wanted to know everything about him, Lecia thought, with a shivery chill of foreboding.

His lashes lifted to reveal intense colour almost obliterated by expanding pupils. Bright and dark, she thought confusedly; she'd never seen such eyes—almost navy blue and yet vivid, smoky and smouldering at the same time.

'You look,' he said unexpectedly, 'as though you'd like to slit my throat.'

He was taunting her, but she didn't have to put up with his sudden, unpredictable mood changes. 'Too dramatic for me,' she said lightly, forcing what she hoped looked like an amused smile. 'I like a quiet life.'

He laughed beneath his breath. 'You have a nice line in repartee,' he said. 'And a beautiful back.'

Nonplussed, she stared at him. 'What?'

'I noticed it before lunch, when you were racing around scribbling notes,' he said lazily, drawling the words. 'Your hair got in the way so you wound it around and tucked it up into your hat. Thereby revealing a beautiful back.'

Mesmerised by the slow, raw sexuality of his tone she swallowed. He was crashing through the barriers they had tacitly agreed to keep intact. There was nothing cousinly about his voice; it purred pure, masculine appreciation buttressed by speculation.

With cool reserve Lecia said, 'Thank you, I think.'

'Don't thank me,' he said ironically, it would have been much better for us both if I hadn't noticed that elegant, slender neck and the way your spine curves gracefully as you move. Or the way you walk—like a young goddess, lithe and confident, with a smoothly seductive sway of your hips to set off those long legs. I think you're well on the way to becoming a damned nuisance, Lecia Spring.'

It was an admission she didn't want to hear. Abruptly, before he could go on, she said, if I'd known you were going to be here today I wouldn't have come, because I'd already decided I wasn't going to see you any more.'



The living colour behind his lashes glittered, then faded to flatness. His mouth hardened. 'Very sensible of you,' he said in a bored tone.

'I've got information for Aunt Sophie, but don't worry,' she said snidely, 'I don't consider myself to be part of your family.'

'You might not,' he said, sliding gracefully down on the rug and closing his eyes, 'but I have a feeling she does. However, that needn't affect us; I have plenty of relatives I never see.'

## CHAPTER SIX

LECIA picked up her sketchbook, I'll go and do some more scribbling. Sleep well.' She got to her feet, furious and hurt by his rebuff yet fighting a piercing excitement because Keane had admitted that he was attracted to her.

You can't deal with that now, you have work to do; wait until you're at home and can bring a modicum of rationality to your thinking, she told herself as she walked along the beach and out onto the rocks beneath the headland.

Choosing a flat, dry, almost comfortable one, she sat down and with frowning concentration began to doodle, trying to fit a structure into the landscape of low hill, trees and sea, a building that would blend with and enhance the spirit of the island—that amalgam of the muted greens of the scrub, the pale semi-circle of sand and the massive, swooping branches of the pohutukawa, all drenched with light from the summer sky.

Banning sly mental pictures of the man who lay apparently asleep along the beach, she flipped through pages, stopping at a sketch Janine had lingered over. Narrowing her eyes to slits, she transferred the image to the land behind the bay, holding it there for a few seconds until it faded. This small talent was very useful to her; she could remember how astonished she'd been when she'd realised it was not a gift shared by everyone.

Yes, that design, those angles and proportions, fitted in well with the landforms and the sea and the potent, evocative contours of vegetation and sea and sky, the salt-laden ambience of the island.

Of course it needed development, but it had set up that resonance in her mind and eyes, invoked that sense of Tightness that meant she could be onto something good.

An hour later she closed her pad and got to her feet, stretching slightly before making her way back. She'd waited until Keane had been joined by his uncle and the two men had strode off into the undergrowth, but even so she had to aggressively ignore the honed knife-edge of anticipation that cut through her composure.

Janine met her halfway along the beach, clad very fetchingly in a string bikini that showed off her curves, and a georgette shirt that half-heartedly concealed them. She was too taut and well-honed to be called voluptuous, and yet there was a glowing aura of abundance about her that made Lecia wonder whether she was pregnant.

'You must be really thirsty,' Janine said now, eyeing the sketchbook. 'Come and have a drink and then we'll go for a swim.'

The last thing Lecia wanted was to parade around in front of Keane in a bathing suit, but she nodded, thinking she'd make some excuse.

However, even after draining a cold drink she was still uncomfortably hot, and as her new togs were a fifties- style bikini with shorts legs and a bra that didn't reveal too much skin, she decided to go in.

She changed clothes in a small, balsam-scented clearing amongst the manuka bushes away from the beach, and by the time she emerged Janine and Brian were playing and calling and laughing together in the water; the other person swimming out towards the launch had to be Keane.

The sea was deliciously warm, almost soupy; Lecia stroked lazily through it, enjoying the silken glide over her parched skin, the heat of the sun beating down on her back and shoulders as she swam along the beach until she was a good distance away from the others.

There should, she thought idly, be reef fish, glittering brilliantly coloured jewels of the sea, and coral, and palm trees. Well, there were palms here. Nikaus stood to attention on the edge of the bush, looking at once familiar and exotic. And the water was crystal clear so that she could see flotillas of tiny silver fish scintillating between her and the bottom. One day, though, she'd go to the tropics, visit the Pacific islands that floated like a dream on the border of every New Zealander's internal landscape.

A sharp pain across the back, like a stab from a rose thorn, jerked her from her playground of images.

'Oh, rats,' she muttered, heading straight back to shore. Once there she ran over the sizzling sand to the shade of the tree they'd picnicked under, and scooped up her towel.

She was drying herself down when a voice asked, 'Are you all right?'

Keane. Her heart sped up. Without looking at him she replied casually, 'Yes, I'm fine.'

'You raced up here like a scalded cat,' he said.

Shrugging, keeping her tone light and steady, she explained, 'I got stung by a jellyfish, and as I have a slight allergy to them I came in quickly.'

'Let me see,' he said incisively.

Unwillingly, she presented her back—the back he'd liked so much, some wicked part of her brain pointed out—for his inspection.

'That's quite an angry welt,' he said, making no attempt to hide his concern.

His hand was cool and wet, yet fire ricocheted from the point where his fingers touched her skin, gathering force as it plummeted through her to converge in the pit of her stomach.

'Have you got something for it?' he demanded.

'No, I'll be fine.' Her voice sounded croaky, so she swallowed to clear her throat. 'It'll just sting and itch for a while and then it'll go away.'

'Poor baby,' he said softly, the slight rasp beneath the words smoothing to velvet. Dropping his hand, he kissed the skin where it had rested.

Lecia's breath clumped into a tight ball in her chest. His lips had touched her for no longer than a fraction of a second, but she could still feel their impression, like a star set on her skin to glow for ever.

She couldn't speak, couldn't move until the world began to spin again, and then she looked over her shoulder, knowing that her widening eyes reflected her grave bewilderment.

'Damn,' Keane said roughly. His expression was fierce and predatory, the skin drawn over the hard bone structure, his big body held under rigid control.

Sensation, bright and hot and reckless, roared through her, swamping common sense and prudence and restraint. She felt it leaping like quicksilver, submerging will and her appalled sense of self-preservation with potent, energy-sapping need.

'Lecia,' he said, his voice low and raw. 'You have skin like heated satin, smooth-grained as ivory, with water running off it like wine. And you shouldn't be looking at me like that, with hunger darkening the green of your eyes into a shadowy promise.'

Fortunately—because she had no idea how to stop this, no control over her wildfire responses—Janine and Brian came towards them from the water and Keane stepped back, the primal lash of his gaze extinguished by austere determination.

Struggling for breath, Lecia turned away and fumbled her towel over her breasts, tucking it in so that only her shoulders and legs were exposed.

Carefully she kept her eyes away from the magnificence that was Keane in dark blue racing briefs, his lean splendour of muscle and sinew and bone cruelly pointing up the imperfections and lack of grace of his uncle.

Neither of the others seemed to notice the tension that clung like forked lightning around their guests. As they talked and towelled off, Lecia's brain slowly unscrambled, thankfully resuming the even pathways of logic and practicality, but beneath her skin nerves stretched, taut and alert, urging her to fight—or to flee.

They decided not to dress until they got back on board, so until then Lecia kept well away from Keane, walking with Janine across the site so that she

could discuss the house she had visualised there and the placement of its rooms. The sting on her back settled down to a sensation of heat; from past experience she knew that it would take several hours for her body to react strongly to it, and by then they'd be on the way home.

Eventually, when the sun was beginning to tilt westwards, they packed up and got on board, and gratefully Lecia went below to shower the salt from her body and hair and get dressed.

She combed her wet hair back, slathered on moisturiser and some lipgloss, then opened the door of the cabin. Two voices were clearly distinguishable above the muted thrum of the engines: Janine and Keane.

'And would you have married me?' Janine was asking curtly.

Lecia froze as Keane laughed. 'Nothing would have made me marry you,' he said, scorn licking like cold fire through his tone.

'Then who the hell are you to blame me for doing what was best for me?'

'Blame you? I don't blame you for wanting to marry rich,' he said, adding mercilessly, 'After all, you're not the first pretty woman from the wrong side of the tracks to capitalise on the assets you were born with. What I blame you for is getting back at me by using Brian.'

'God, you've got a foul tongue! Listen, it's not like that.'

'Don't lie,' he said, sounding bored. 'That's—'

Janine interrupted hotly, 'Keane, however you feel about it, I'm a member of the family now and there's not one damned thing you can do about it. Wherever Brian is, I'm going to be.'

in that case,' Keane said, not even trying to hide the menace in his voice, 'you'd better not set a foot wrong, had you? Because I'll be watching and—'

Rousing from her silent horror, Lecia stepped back into her cabin and closed the door behind her as quietly as though she'd been a willing eavesdropper.

For another five minutes she stayed in the cabin's oppressive luxury, staring unblinkingly out of the porthole.

However valiantly she endeavoured not to think about it, the conversation replayed itself in her mind like a loop of tape, over and over again, until she had to accept that even if she'd misheard or misunderstood, Keane and Janine must have had some sort of relationship.

She swallowed down a metallic taste in her mouth. The icy disgust in Keane's voice made it obvious that his relationship with Janine had been purely sexual—on his part, at least.

Was he like his father, who—according to Janine— had been chronically unfaithful to his wife?

Whether Keane was or not, that snatched conversation had reinforced Lecia's determination to stay well out of his orbit. Hadn't she already proved that she couldn't judge men to save her life? What on earth had made her hope that Keane would be any different? Bitterly accepting that she'd allowed herself to be mesmerised by his uncompromising charisma, she set her jaw and walked out of the cabin, making as much noise as she could.

Apart from the muffled roar of the engines everything was blessedly silent. Once in the saloon, a swift glance revealed that Keane was in the wheelhouse steering. Janine and Brian were nowhere to be seen.

Lecia stood for a moment looking around the expensive furnishings. Was Keane right? Had Janine deliberately chosen Brian because he was Keane's uncle?

I'll never know, Lecia thought, setting her jaw. And I don't really care.

And she knew that she lied. She did care. In fact, she more than cared—the truth had become intensely important to her. Lifting her head, she went up the few steps into the wheelhouse.

Without looking over his shoulder Keane asked casually, 'Do you want to try steering?'

'No, thanks.' Even to her own ears the words sounded stiff and accusing. She tried to soften them by adding, it's so long since I've steered a boat—and my stepfather's *Wainui* was nothing like this huge thing.'

Keane's brows rose. 'Scared?' he asked, narrowed eyes gleaming.

'No.'

'Then what's stopping you?'

And because a fuss about such a simple thing somehow made it seem too important, she said ungraciously, 'Well, all right, I'll give it a go.'

He stood close by—too close, she realised as she gingerly put her hands on the wheel where his had been. Fancifully, she thought she could feel their warmth radiating into her palms.

He said, 'Head for that gap between Tiri and the peninsula.'

'No compass?' she asked lightly, trying to conceal the lethal effect his nearness was having on her.

'The compass is there, but you don't need it when you can see.' He spoke drily, his mouth curling in a half-smile.

Some men, she thought, staring at the gap, had an effortless, personal magnetism that had nothing to do with their character. Perhaps some flaw in her persuaded her to want men like them.

But Keane had fought through danger and fear to rescue the woman and child from the car, even though it had brought back his childhood nightmare. Not for a moment had he thought of his own safety. Whatever lay behind that handsome face, he had raw physical courage. Anthony would never have behaved with such stubborn, unsparing determination.

A couple of days before she'd read an interview in the newspaper in which the woman Keane had saved had hailed him as a hero. Weeping as she recalled how he'd tried to save the two men in the front of the car before



realising they were dead, she'd said she hoped he got a medal, and told the journalist about the exquisite flowers he'd brought when he'd come to see her in the hospital.

Following her train of thought, Lecia said, 'I saw the interview given by the woman you rescued. Poor thing, to lose her husband and her brother like that! I'm so glad she's going to be all right for her little boy.'

'She has guts,' he said. 'She's still in incredible pain, but she'll get there.'

A slightly larger wave hit the boat. Automatically Lecia corrected for it, holding the wheel a moment and then resetting the course.

'You see, you never forget,' Keane commented.

'Apparently.' She couldn't decide whether the pleasure that rippled through her was caused by his implied compliment or her rediscovery of a skill long forgotten. She said, 'Rick, my stepfather, will be pleased to know he taught me so well.'

'How old were you when your mother remarried?'

'Four. I was the flower girl.' It was an innocuous subject so she continued, 'I can remember it vividly. Everyone made the most enormous fuss of me, and then my mother went off without me and I had to stay with my grandmother! I threw a massive kicking and screaming tantrum. I imagine my new family wondered what on earth they'd got!' 'I imagine they made allowances because you were overtired and overexcited,' he said, his smile showing in his tone.

'They've certainly never held it against me.'

'You're fond of them?'

'Oh, very. Gisborne is really like one huge family— everyone knows everyone else. My mother grew up there, and her parents and all the uncles and aunts and cousins just welcomed us back into the family when we arrived there after my father died.'

He nodded, his eyes abstracted. Perhaps he was remembering his own far-from-happy family. Lecia looked around and said, 'There are birds working over there.'

'Do you want to catch some fish?'

From behind, Janine said, 'Sorry, but we can't. Brian and I are going out tonight, and we're cutting it a bit fine as it is.'

She was slightly flushed from the sun, but her pretty face was serene, and the smile she gave Lecia was candid and free of secrets. After a quick glance from Keane's impassive face to hers, Lecia told herself that you'd never know that not very many minutes ago they'd been conducting a savage, painful, argument.

Did Brian know they had once been lovers?

You're jumping to conclusions, she thought. You don't know that they have been. But misery clogged her throat, cast a shadow over the radiant day.

Something fundamental in the balance of her life had been changed when Keane's mouth had marked her skin. The kiss was the sort of gesture a practised flirt would make. Yet he looked too—too *dangerous* to be shallow and lightweight.

Of course Don Juan, she thought grimly, had been neither shallow nor lightweight.

As though in answer to her thoughts, her back began to itch. When Brian came up she relinquished the wheel to him with a smile and walked a little way to press the burning area against the side of the boat, wriggling her shoulderblade a little to rub the inflamed flesh, even though she knew that would make it worse.

And, although she was sure he wasn't even looking at her, colour seeped maddeningly through her skin when Keane said, 'Janine. where's the first-aid box?' 'Why?' Janine asked. 'What have you done?' 'Lecia got

slashed by a jellyfish.' 'Oh, boy, they can hurt. There's an antihistamine cream there,' Brian said. 'Try that.'

'I'll rub it in for you,' Keane said blandly. Lecia suspected that tone of voice, so she replied cheerfully. 'Thanks, but it's all right—I'm not very allergic to them; they just itch for an hour or so.'

Janine said, 'Come on down with me, I'll put some cream on. No sense in suffering if you don't have to.' In the saloon she examined Lecia's back and said, 'Oh, yes, it does look sore. Have you got stuff for it at home?'

Lecia sighed with relief as the cream soothed coolness into her skin. 'No, but—' 'Take this, then.'

'And leave you without any? No, I'll hop up to the duty chemist and get something for it.'

'Probably a good idea.' Janine screwed the top back onto the tube. 'It looks as though it might be a bit more than this can deal with.'

'I've had them before, and they always follow the same pattern—a sting, then a few hours' wait before it itches like crazy. When it's just about driven me mad, it goes away. Thanks,' Lecia said, pulling her T-shirt down, 'that feels much better.'

Janine put the cream away in the first-aid box, her movements slow and precise. She clicked the lid down and said in a rush, 'You don't know Keane well, do you?'

'No.' Most emphatically Lecia did not want to hear what she sensed was coming, but even as she opened her mouth to stop it Janine hurried on.

'He's a hard man and a dangerous one. Very sexy. Women chase after him, and he sometimes uses that sexual glamour like a weapon.' Her eyes slid to focus past Lecia; after a tiny hesitation she continued in a completely different voice, 'I think you should get something else from the chemist. That's starting to look angry.'

Lecia wasn't surprised when Keane said from the doorway, 'Don't worry, I'll see that she does.'

The cream helped, but by the time they pulled up at the marina the streak on her back was once more extremely itchy. Worse, and unusually, it was beginning to throb. Lecia tried to ignore it, but had the uncomfortable feeling that Keane for one was not taken in by her determined offhandedness.

'Did you come by car?' Brian asked as Keane wound the heavy rope around a bollard.

'No,' she said, 'I walked. It's not far.'

Keane looked up from the jetty. 'I'll take her home,' he said. 'We'll call in at the chemist's on the way.'

Brian nodded. 'Good thinking.'

Lecia waited until they were all heading for the car park before saying, 'Keane, you don't need to bother; it's in the wrong direction for you. Drop me off at home, and if it gets any worse I'll drive myself to the pharmacy.'

He looked at her with a grim smile and blue, uncompromising eyes. 'Do you think I can't tell that you're in pain? If it gets worse you might not be able to drive. It'll only take me an extra ten minutes to go with you, so stop being silly and get in the car. Or shall I carry you?'

'No, you will not. I'm quite capable of walking! And I despise men who think their strength makes them superior,' she said curtly, despising herself for the secret little thrill that washed through her at the thought of being in his arms again.

'Hardly superior. Being stronger, however, can come in handy when dealing with recalcitrant women.' Although he sounded amused she took one look at his flat, ruthless gaze and realised that he intended to have his own way.

And because the sting on her back was sore, and her thoughts moved slowly around her buzzing head, she said, 'Well—all right. But not because you threatened me—only because...'

'Because it's the sensible thing to do,' he said crisply. 'Come on, let's get going.'

By the time they reached the pharmacy she was feeling distinctly strange. Without any prompting, Keane helped her out of the car and slipped his arm around her waist to support her while they walked into the shop.

The chemist took one look at her back and said, 'Yes, I've got cream that will help, but you'd better have a pill too.'

A few moments after she got into the car again the pill took effect; Lecia felt hazy, as though she were floating in thick clouds. She sat upright, staring rather desperately out through the window of the car.

'How do you feel?' Keane asked.

'Horrible,' she said dispassionately. 'Fuzzy and stupid. I hate it.'

'Out of control.' His voice was thoughtful, almost measuring. 'Yes, I understand that.'

'I imagine you do.' It was probably the pill that made her conclude, 'We are alike in some ways.'

'Apart from our bone structure?' he said, pulling up in a hurry as some idiot roared through a red light. Keane had swift reflexes, and although his mouth hardened he didn't waste time swearing at the person with the death wish.

'Apart from that,' she agreed. 'Control is important to you, isn't it?'

'Oh, very.' His smile was humourless. 'And to you, or you wouldn't be working from home, keeping your practice small so that you have complete command over each project.'

'I do have to allow the client some say,' she said, yawning. 'Lots, actually. That's the challenge—to give them a house that delights them and satisfies me. Are you an autocrat at work?'

'I don't think so,' he said, sounding surprised.

'Only in your private life.' She yawned again.

'Who told you that?' he asked, swinging into the guest car park outside the apartments.

'I'm intuitive,' she said, and gave a sleepy little giggle. 'Hijacking me is just one example.'

The car drew to a halt. Switching off the engine he said into the sudden hot silence, if you're talking about my suggestion to carry you, it was an offer rather than a threat. However, I'll admit that I do what I think is best.'

'But sometimes what you think is best is not...' She stumbled over the words and sighed, giving up the battle to produce sense from her drowsy brain. 'I can't think. Thank you for bringing me home. Goodbye, Keane.'

'I'll come up with you,' he said with calm authority, reaching over her to open the door at the moment she leaned forward to do it herself.

His thumb brushed her breast. Still as a hunted animal, Lecia thought how strange it was that such a light touch could explode through her with the all-out power of a heatwave. For a perilous second she was tempted to let that vehement languor rob her of volition and common sense.

But her sense of self-preservation, ever alert, shouted loudly enough to force her out of the car and away from temptation. Straightening up, she watched as Keane pulled her bag from the back seat before getting out and locking the door. The sun beat down on her head, dancing across her lashes, drying her throat and mouth.

Andrea had been right. He moved with the smooth coiled grace of some large, patient, dangerous predator.

'Come on,' he said, bag still in hand, 'I'll take you up.'

Lecia shook her head, wishing it didn't weigh so much, wishing her eyelids weren't so sticky. 'No.'

'You can hardly stand up,' he said shortly.

'No,' she repeated, clinging to the word. 'I'm fine, I really am. I don't need you, Keane.'

His gaze darkened and a muscle clenched in his jaw. He looked electric with anger, so charged with it that it streamed from him in invisible, vibrating rays. For the first time, Lecia felt defenceless against that hard scrutiny. 'I know,' he said, through lips that barely moved.

And then she saw him reimpose control, masking frustration with aloofness.

He said evenly, 'I'll take you up to your door and leave you there.'

And that, she understood,\* was as far as he'd back down. Nodding, she turned towards the vestibule. Thank heavens for the lift; she wasn't sure she'd have been able to make it up the stairs.

At her door he waited while she unlocked, then handed her the bag. 'Goodbye,' he said, and smiled tightly, tigerishly.

She nodded. 'Thank you,' she murmured, and went inside and locked the door behind her.

Of course she couldn't hear his footsteps as he strode out of her life; she'd designed the apartments to be as soundproof as possible. And she certainly wasn't going to walk across so that she could see him from the window. She stood inside her tiny entrance hall, the bag clutched protectively to her chest, and waited for long minutes, her eyes gradually filling with tears.

It was the wretched pill. It had to be. As she got out of her salty clothes and showered, as she pulled on her loosest and oldest T-shirt before obeying the

dictates of the drug and crawling into bed, the tears slid slowly down her face. She didn't sob; she simply couldn't stop her eyes from overflowing.

Next morning the bite woke her, fiery and hot and itchy as hell—and just out of her reach. It took her several highly uncomfortable minutes to work out a system to get the ointment on her skin, and even after she'd accomplished that, by tying cotton wool onto her wooden spoon and saturating the fluff with the ointment, her skin continued to itch relentlessly.

Keane rang just after nine. 'How is it?' he asked, his voice crisp and dark and emotionless.

it's fine, thanks,' she said with reserve. 'I feel much better.'

'Did you have a good night's sleep?'

'Heavens, yes, the antihistamine knocked me out completely.' Once more she licked lips made dry by the residue of the drug. In the tiny silence she heard someone at the other end say something. A woman.

Her fingers tightened on the receiver. Brightly, her voice ringing with assurance, she said, 'Thanks for calling, Keane. See you around.'

'Goodbye.'

God, she thought, replacing the receiver with studied care, Lecia Spring, you're *jealous*! Eaten up with it, furious and hurt, and savagely, bitterly envious of the woman who was with him.

And the whole thing was completely ridiculous, because why should she be so astonished, so outraged at the thought of Keane with a woman?

Left listless by the drug, she spent the morning on her long daybed, reading and dozing. At lunchtime she roused enough to eat a salad, following it with a cup of strong coffee which revived her sufficiently to accept the invitation of friends to an impromptu barbecue in their backyard.



But the evening, pleasant though it was, passed lounging in the shade of a huge magnolia and chatting, didn't make much difference to her grey mood, and when, a week later, the sting finally stopped itching and she could only see the faintest of red dots on the smooth ivory skin of her back, she had to admit that she could no longer blame the antihistamine.

She was missing Keane with an intensity that ate into her composure, stripping her of all contentment. And that was even more foolish than her jealousy, because she'd never had him to miss.

A feverish shiver raced the length of her spine at the double meaning of the words. On several mornings she'd woken with fragments of heated dreams still circulating through her brain, dreams in which she and Keane had come to know each other very well. Stupid!

Oh, she'd had erotic dreams before, but always the man—the other—had been faceless, without personality, a figment conjured by her unconscious for whatever inscrutable reason.

But this dark lover had been Keane. 'Frustration,' she told her reflection. 'You're ready for a lover. Keane just happened along at the wrong time, so you're using him as material for your fantasies.'

She wound her hair into a knot high on the back of her head. No appointments today; she was going to look around a couple of new kitchenware shops, go through a plumbing warehouse with a fine-tooth comb, meet Andrea for lunch and then check out some new Italian ceramic tiles that had just arrived in the country, before calling in to see the woman who drew up her plans and working drawings.

A good day. The sort of day she'd always enjoyed, even though a sultry weather system from the tropics .till casting its hot, clammy pall across the city, now reluctantly back at work after the holidays.

So in spite of the weather and Keane Paget, she didn't know well enough to love, she was going to enjoy this day too!

## CHAPTER SEVEN

IT DIDN'T exactly turn out that way.

To begin with, just before she reached the plumbing store in Newmarket, she ran into Janine Carpenter, sexy and fresh as a fifties starlet.

'Hi,' the younger woman said, smiling. 'That was a nice letter you wrote to thank us for the day on the boat! Come and have a cup of coffee with me.'

Not without misgivings, Lecia agreed. Shockingly, during the previous week she'd come very close to passing up the possible commission from the Carpenters— so close that she'd had to talk very sternly to herself.

Settling into a chair in the upmarket coffee shop she'd chosen, Janine looked around with a satisfied smile, 'I really like this place. It's got lots of style.'

She ordered fruit juice, and chose a modest pastry before looking enviously at Lecia. 'I wish I was six inches taller,' she said, patting one hip. 'It'd give me something to come and go on instead of having to watch every ounce I eat.' Her mouth curved in a slow smile that went beyond satisfaction almost to smugness.

When she didn't elaborate further, Lecia steered the subject towards houses—more specifically the house Janine wanted to build on the island. Janine knew exactly what she wanted, although she was prepared to consider Lecia's suggestions.

'The kitchen's really important,' she said. 'I plan to have several kids—Brian didn't have any in his first marriage so he's really rapt at the idea.' Again that swift glory of a smile. 'So it'll need to be practical, but at the same time I want to be able to whip up a gourmet meal in half an hour. It can be done—the woman I'm taking lesson<sup>^</sup> from says so. And then I won't have to rely on our friendly neighbourhood delicatessen for picnics!'

So Keane had been right. How well *did* he know her?

Dismissing the sly little thought, Lecia plunged into further discussions, her respect for the younger woman growing as they finished their coffee and came to some decisions about the prospective house.

All in all, Janine promised to be the perfect client, Lecia thought an hour later as she made her way to the plumbing warehouse. She should be delighted, instead of wondering why Janine and Keane hated each other so much. Oh, she could understand Keane's worry about his uncle's happiness, but there had been too much emotion in the angry exchange on the boat for that to be the whole story.

Cheered by Andrea's ebullience during lunch, Lecia's mood lifted even further as she examined the shipment of mouth-watering Italian tiles afterwards. By the time she reached her draughtswoman's house she'd almost forgotten the slow apprehension that had crept into her life like fog from the sea.

She arrived home to find the telephone blinking its little red light. Mesmerised, she stared at it while the gingernut she'd eaten with her cup of tea congealed in her stomach.

'Don't be a twit!' she told herself, and pressed the button.

Aunt Sophie's voice said, 'My dear, your answering machine message sounds very businesslike! Would you like to come and see me at seven tonight? I've discovered something I find very interesting. I'll be out until six-thirty, so if I don't find a message from you when I get home I'll assume you're coming.' There was a wicked little chuckle. 'I should tell you what I've found, but I do like to see people's faces when I surprise them!'

Lecia rewound the tape and stood for several moments staring out of the window at the traffic below. Would Keane be at his aunt's?

Why should he be?

But before Lecia left that evening she changed into a favourite green silk shirt and darker green linen trousers, wound a scarf of greens highlighted by gold and peach around her hair and applied lipstick very carefully.

That secret bubble of excitement didn't collapse until Sophie Warburton opened the door and drew her into her house, saying, 'I did ask Keane if he'd like to come, but he's going out tonight. Come on in, my dear, and look at this while I pour you a sherry.'

*This* was a sheet of paper, a photocopied birth certificate of Laetitia Evadne Bolsover who'd been born in England almost a hundred and fifty years before.

'Laetitia,' Aunt Sophie said with relish, putting a small glass of golden liquid at Lecia's elbow, 'whose pet name might have been Lecia! I wonder whether somehow the name has been passed down on your side of the family—you see, she married Bernard Paget and had five sons by him, any of whom could have been the link between your side and ours!'

Feeling oddly light-headed, Lecia put the paper down, 'it's possible,' she admitted, 'but the name would have had to pass through several generations of men, none of whom had daughters as far as we know. Do you really think they'd remember it?'

The older woman twinkled at her. 'I'll admit it does seem highly unlikely! Men are darlings, but I find they forget almost everything except the issues that are important to them. Not Keane, of course. Sometimes I must admit I wish he didn't have such a good memory, because he has a habit of reminding me of things I'd rather not remember, like doctor's appointments and trips to the dentist and the optician. Not only does he remind me, he's quite capable of making sure I go!'

'He sounds very responsible,' Lecia said woodenly.

'Oh, indeed, from the time he was a child, poor boy! He had to be the reliable one in the family, unfortunately.'

Lecia would have liked to know more, but Sophie moved smoothly on. 'I do think this is a definite clue. Not that I'm going to get too excited about it—I've had promising leads fizzle into nothingness so often that I've become wise to the pitfalls of anticipation! I suggest you ask your mother

where she got your name from. If it came from your father's side of the family, then I think we may allow ourselves a little cautious optimism.'

'I'll ring her tonight and let you know what she says.'

'Good. Now, bring your sherry with you and come and see a rose that's flowering in the garden. It reminded me of your hair—that glorious blend of honey colours. And the scent is different too—unusual and subtle, with a tang to it.'

An hour later a slightly bemused Lecia drove out of the gate and headed home. Sophie Warburton was a darling, and she knew just how to keep Lecia bubbling on a hidden rill of laughter. With the bit well and truly between her teeth, she was as determined in her own way as her great-nephew.

'Well, yes,' her mother said slowly when Lecia asked her, 'your father did say that if we ever had a daughter he wanted her called Lecia. He even spelled it out for me.'

'Was it his mother's name?'

'No, she was Betty. He said it was a Spring family name. I didn't mind—I thought it was lovely—so when you were born that's what I registered you as.' She paused, then said, 'How strange it all is. Do you like these people, Lecia?'

'Very much,' Lecia said promptly. 'You would too. Mrs Warburton is a darling—sweet, with a nice little touch of lemon—and Keane looks just like me only bigger in every way!'

She was rather proud of her tone; she sounded a little wry and a lot amused.

'Tell me about them,' her mother urged.

So she chatted, making her mother laugh, and all the time she kept her voice light and all the time she lied, because when she thought of Keane it was

with a longing that was sharp and fierce and as brutally elemental as the inevitability of life and death.

After saying goodbye to her mother she walked across to the window and looked out into the hazy dusk. Where was Keane now? Who was he with—some woman who touched his arm and called him darling, and thrilled at the promise of those steel-hot eyes? The woman who'd been with him that Sunday morning when he'd called to see how the jellyfish sting was—the woman who, perhaps, had stayed on Saturday night?

When Aunt Sophie had told her that Keane was going out that evening, Lecia had flinched, forced to realise that her tactic of calling her feelings something tepid and ordinary like attraction didn't work. She'd been using the banal term in the hope that it would render the underlying emotion equally lukewarm.

This wasn't a simple sexual attraction.

Oh, she wanted him, and the wanting was like nothing she'd experienced before—not even the passion she'd felt for Anthony all those years ago—but, although longing tormented her night and day, she'd committed an even greater folly.

She'd managed to fall more than half in love with Keane Paget.

Need gripped her with sensual talons, confining her in a prison of her own making, and yet in spite of her hunger she was acutely, avidly alive, in a state of heightened awareness that left her naked and defenceless.

And that was terrifying, because it didn't seem as though Keane felt any more for her than an easy, sexual attraction, the normal desire of a potent man for a nubile woman.

And his silence made it plain that he wasn't going to follow up on it.

Caught in a giddy merry-go-round of uncontrollable emotions, as exhilarating as they were frightening, Lecia leaned forward and pressed a

hot cheek against the cool glass of the window, closing her eyes in an attempt to summon a calm serenity. It evaded her.

Biting her lip, she drew away from the window and rang Aunt Sophie, smiling at the older woman's delight when she said, with the excitement of a treasure hunter confronted with a map, 'Then that's where I'm going to start my search. It could well be one of the sons.'

'You may never find out which one, though,' Lecia felt compelled to say.

'My dear, the two family lines *must* converge somewhere. The information you gave me about your father will set me on the way. As for never discovering—well, that may be true, but half the fun is in the trying.'

Aunt Sophie and Janine had quite a lot in common, Lecia mused as she hung up.

She got into shorts and a T-shirt, packed a skirt and top into her bag with her towel, and went off to the gym. An hour of hard effort might make her forget the man whose face she saw every time she looked into the mirror.

It didn't, but at least it made her tired. Because she was still restless when she got back she had a bath, soaking in-water scented with the lavender oil a cousin had given her for Christmas, before shrugging into a thin cotton shift and dressing gown.

The unexpected summons of the intercom made her jump.

'Keane,' he said crisply. 'I need to see you.'

She froze, wondering whether to lie low and pretend to be out. That, however, would be cowardly. 'All right,' she said, and pressed the release before dashing away to get into jeans and a shirt.

The doorbell rang as she came out of her bedroom, fastening the last button. Odd, she thought dizzily, pressing her knuckles to the cleft between her breasts, that the mere sound of a man's voice could make her heart speed up unbearably.

She opened the door and looked up, caught in the endless shimmer of light in his eyes, the dense, dark blueness that lured her beyond the colour and into infinity.

A shiver iced down her spine, 'Is anything wrong? It's late.'

'It's only just after ten.' His voice was curt, his face unreadable. 'No, nothing's wrong.'

Clutching at her composure, Lecia said with a set smile, 'I don't mean to be inhospitable, but that's reasonably late for me. I'm usually in bed by eleven.'

'So am I,' he said absently, as though something else was on his mind. 'I've been talking to Aunt Sophie.'

'Oh, yes, the name. She's quite excited.' Lecia swallowed. 'Would you like to sit down?'

He said roughly, it seemed sensible not to be at her place this evening.'

Lecia's gaze widened. Silence stretched between them, each second lengthening excruciatingly, until she said, it was.'

He was smiling, but there was no humour, no softness in it. 'Was it?'

More than anything she wanted to clear her throat. Huskily she said, 'Well, yes. You were going out.'

'I lied.' He walked across to the window and looked down at the garden, the autocratic bone structure of his face a proclamation of character.

Lecia thought that she would never be able to stand there again without remembering this moment, the heavy pounding of her heart in her throat, the swift, eager pulse of blood throughout her body, the way her eyes lingered, heavy-lidded, on his face.



For the first time she didn't see herself in his features; this was not the other, the *doppelganger*, or even a possible cousin linked through the generations by tenuous bloodlines.

This was Keane, and she was terribly, shatteringly afraid that for her all options had run out; she'd fallen in love with him.

'But staying away was the hardest thing I've ever had to do,' he said silkily, swinging to face her, 'because without even trying you've managed to turn my life upside down.'

Lecia's head stayed high, her eyes fearless, while he paced noiselessly towards her. She refused to back away when he came to a halt on those last ironic words.

'You haven't shown any signs of it,' she said, a swift snap in the words.

'You don't know me very well.' His smile was edged and sharp as a blade, the sardonic inflection intensifying to the border of brutality. 'Of the two people who know me best. Aunt Sophie says it's about time, and my secretary at work has taken to giving me nice, motherly advice about taking vitamins and meditating to lower my stress level.'

But when he reached for her there was no love in his eyes—nothing but a hard, hungry urgency as great and as overwhelming as hers.

Lecia didn't struggle, yet neither did she respond when his mouth came down on hers. She simply stood resistless while he kissed her with masterly skill, controlling his passion to gentle her into acceptance.

His remorseless patience worked. Suddenly yielding, she sighed and softened, and surrendered to the driving imperative of her own desire.

Yes, her heart said exultantly, yes and yes and yes...

Ever since you saw him in the Domain this has been building, ever since you heard his voice...

And then she couldn't think. She was overwhelmed by the sheer physical presence of this man, stabbed in the heart by the faint yet intensely potent scent of him, the heat of his body, the strength in his arms, the pressure of alien muscles and skin and bones against her body, the sweetness and fire of his mouth on hers, the taste of him, sharp and masculine on her tongue, the taste of paradise.

'I wasn't going to do this,' he said, lifting his mouth a fraction. 'I told myself I wasn't going to rush into anything, because although I'd recognise your lightest footprint if I were buried ten feet down we're still strangers.'

His slow voice rasped across her flesh, tightening her skin, sending electric shudders through her.

She had to swallow before she could say, 'You've been fighting it all the way. What changed your mind?'

He ran his hand up her back, into her hair and pulled gently backwards until her face was tilted for his scrutiny. The steel-hard sheen of his gaze made it impossible to read his thoughts. Lecia felt like a sacrifice on the altar of desire.

His smile was set and savage. 'Seeing you at Aunt Sophie's would have been quite safe; she's a good chaperon. But when I rang her to say that I was on my way, you'd already gone. I thought. She could get killed on the way home and I'd never know what it was like to kiss her. And I realised I'd search through eternity for you if I died without remembering how your mouth feels against mine.'

The sombre words stopped her heart. 'No,' she said quickly, pointedly.

His pupils expanded until all she could see was darkness rimmed with blue fire. Very quietly he said, 'It's the truth.'

'And if you died I'd go down to death with you,' she said, the stark truth terrifying her.

'No,' he said in turn, pulling her back into the lean tautness of his body, against the warm, heavy beat of his heart.

She kissed his throat. 'Yes. Keane, I'm scared,' she whispered, inhaling the complex man-scent of him, listening to her emotions clamouring and baying at the gates of her will. 'I've never felt anything like this before.'

'I know,' he said deeply. 'Why do you think I fought so hard to prevent you from seeing what you were doing to me? I feel the same—struggling against a torrent of emotions I can't control and don't understand.'

Desperately, Lecia wanted to take off her clothes and strip him of his and walk into her bedroom and make love, but the hungers that clawed at her were so violent she couldn't deal with them.

'It's too soon,' she said, picking her way through her tumbling, scattered thoughts. 'I—we need to take things slowly.'

Bending his head, he kissed the soft hollow beneath her ear, the tenderness of his tongue and lips sending shudders of delight through her. 'Then we stop this,' he said, and bit the lobe with exquisite, focused expertise.

Lecia had read about the existence of localities in the body where a mere touch created sensual pleasure, tiny places of intense responsiveness; she didn't know whether this was one or whether it was because Keane touched her that every cell in her body leapt in answer, acutely receptive, eager and acceptant.

She whispered, 'Right *now* you'd better stop it!'

Keane groaned beneath his breath, but he let her go and stepped away. 'How's your back?'

Walking blindly, she made her way into the kitchen where she automatically filled the kettle with water and turned it on. it itched like fury for a week, and I had to tie cotton wool onto a wooden spoon to get the ointment on it, but it's fine now.'

A car hooted on the street below. As Lecia jumped Keane said roughly, 'I hated leaving you, but I had to. I was a coward. I didn't know what the hell was going on and I needed time to think, to work out what was happening to me.'

'So did I. I didn't want you to stay.'

She could hear his frown in his voice. 'You made that more than obvious.'

They stood in silence while the kettle boiled. She was making tea when he said, 'According to the dossier I have on you, you haven't had any real relationships for some years. Not since your engagement, in fact.'

Lecia stiffened. Without looking at him she reached into the cupboard and got down two mugs. 'What about you?'

'There have been women, but I've never met anyone I wanted to marry,' he said coolly.

'What about the woman who was with you when you rang on Sunday morning?'

He gave her a wry smile. 'Sue—Geoff Brown's wife. He's the doctor who dressed my hands, remember? She and two of the children came around after church to give me some peaches. I hoped you'd hear her and misunderstand.'

Lecia sent him an uncompromising glare, slightly mollified when he admitted, 'I was grabbing at straws.'

'Why?'

He hesitated, then said slowly, 'Because I knew that once I gave in to this attraction I wasn't going to be able to control it.'

'And that is really important to you.' It wasn't a question.

'Yes.' He was standing with his head slightly bent, looking at the brilliant glow of a jar of nasturtiums. 'Probably because I grew up despising my father for having so little self-control. He was unfaithful to my mother from the time they got married—probably before. I can remember thinking when I was about eighteen, and in the throes of my first passionate love affair, that I was never going to allow desire to become my master the way it had with him.'

It made sense; oh, it made very good sense. So he'd leashed his feelings under the iron discipline of his will, never allowing himself to respond fully in case he became truly his father's son. Until he'd met her...

Lecia was not able to savour this admission to the full because he commanded gently, implacably, Tell me about the man you were engaged to.'

'I needed a refuge,' she said, choosing her words with care. 'However, I hurt him badly, and inflicting pain doesn't do anything good for the self-image. I came out of the experience with my self-esteem dragging on the ground. In the end I hated and despised myself for using Barry.'

'Using him?' His voice was quick and uncompromising.

'I fell in love with the wrong man.' Not looking at him, she opened the fridge door and took out a jug of milk.

'Not this Barry, I gather?' He couldn't be jealous, but there was a hint of territorial possessiveness in his tone. After a moment, he said, 'Ah, the man you thought you saw at the restaurant that day we had lunch together. You loved him before you met Barry.'

'You don't miss much, do you?' Still keeping her eyes averted, she poured milk into the two cups. 'Yes. I used Barry to get me out of a hole I'd dug for myself. He paid for my selfishness, and is still paying for it.'

'Pour the tea,' Keane suggested, 'and let's sit down.'

She set the tray down on the coffee-table in her sitting room and poured tea. then sipped some of hers. Keane sat opposite, long legs relaxed, his face impassive. Fear clutched her entrails. Would he despise her as much as she despised herself?

Whatever, he had to be told.

Putting the mug down, she said steadily, 'When I was twenty-one I thought I was quite sophisticated. Then I met a man.' She looked at Keane, tall and hard-edged and compelling, dominating her room with his effortless power and authority. 'A man like you,' she said tautly, picking up the mug again.

He lifted his brows at her. 'Looks? Size? Colouring?'

'None of those. He held the world in his hand.' Derision darkened the words. 'He was clever and amusing and loaded with magnetism, and he wanted me.'

'And?'

it sounds silly, but he swept me off my feet. I didn't know where I was or what I was doing.' She stared down at her tea, noting the way its surface shimmered as her hand shook. 'I became utterly obsessed with him,' she said bitterly.

Keane watched her with unfaltering concentration.

'And when I was so tangled up in what I thought was happiness that I'd have followed him to hell, I found that he was married.'

There was silence. Noiselessly she set her mug down and said with unflinching self-derision, 'Happily married, at that. He had no intention of giving up his wife and his children. He wanted us both and he couldn't see why he shouldn't have us both.'

'So you cut and ran.'

She swallowed. 'I refused to see him again, but I was scared. I wanted him—' She shrugged again, struggling for the right words before giving up.

'I already knew Barry. He was everything Anthony wasn't—kind, considerate, honest. He thought I was the most wonderful woman in the world. At first I wouldn't go out with him but he just kept coming back, and after a while I gave in. Six months later, like an idiot, I let myself be talked into getting engaged to him.'

'Did he know about this bastard you'd been seeing?' Keane's voice was coolly critical.

Lecia nodded, keeping her eyes downcast. 'I did try to do the decent thing; I turned Barry down a couple of times. But he was so kind, and he was—he was...'

'You thought that if you married him you'd stay faithful to him and wouldn't be tempted to sleep with the other man.'

She winced at his merciless summing up of the situation. but said, 'Yes, that was exactly it.'

'What changed your mind?'

She bit her lip. 'A fortnight before the wedding I realised what I was doing,' she said, almost soundlessly, 'I knew I could never love Barry so I cancelled the wedding. It broke his heart. He had a nervous breakdown and had to leave university. He had great promise as an architect; now he's a draughtsman in Wellington.'

Keane said, 'I'm not going to come across and comfort you because I don't trust myself to stop at comforting, but, although you behaved badly, you were very young and obviously naive.'

'You don't understand—' she began, but he cut her short with a crisp detachment that chilled her.

'I understand that you still feel some sort of obligation towards this Barry, and that you're also swamped in guilt.'

Defensively she said, 'He had a future and I ruined it.'

Frowning, Keane put his mug down on the table and stated, 'No one *causes* a nervous breakdown. If it hadn't been you, someone or something else would probably have triggered it.'

'That's very hard.'

'I *am* hard.' He looked at her. 'Was he emotionally unstable?'

Recalling a shattering meeting with Barry's mother, Lecia shivered. 'I think he might have been. His mother certainly was. But I can't just shrug it off, Keane. If I hadn't met Anthony, hadn't got engaged to Barry—'

'He'd have probably still had a breakdown the first time he couldn't get what he wanted. Almost certainly you were just the catalyst,' he interrupted curtly.

The brutal words jarred Lecia, but one swift glance at his face told her that she had no chance of changing his mind. Unable to speak, she shook her head.

Quietly, implacably, Keane said, 'So since then you've steered clear of men?'

'I hated it—losing control so stupidly, wanting a man who was only playing with me, and then using Barry... I decided I'd never get into that situation again, so every time anyone got serious I just—cooled it. And after a while they drifted away.'

'And because no one ever got close to you, you were never hurt. And you didn't hurt anyone.'

'Yes.' In silence Lecia drank the rest of her tea and set her mug down.

Eyes half closed, Keane was looking across the room at the picture above the sofa—a bright, breezy oil she'd seen in an exhibition, very Auckland with the sea and headlands triangulated by the roofs of old kauri villas. Vivid hibiscus flowers blazed from the bottom left-hand corner.

Swiftly, before she lost courage, she said, 'Why do you dislike Janine so much?'



Not a muscle moved in his face as he said, 'Because she's a clever, money-hungry, social-climbing little bitch. And I'm afraid she's going to squeeze Brian dry and then leave him. He's so besotted with her it would kill him.'

It was an absolute condemnation delivered with the icy objectivity of a judge. Shock tightened Lecia's skin, but she said, 'That's a pretty blanket judgement.'

He transferred his gaze to her, chilling her afresh. 'I've known her for three years. She was my secretary,' he said, ignoring the dismay written across her face, 'and a damned good one.'

Lecia set her jaw; she needed to know. 'Were you lovers?' she asked.

His eyes narrowed but his voice remained unyielding and steady. 'No. When we were away on a business trip once she got into my bed. I threw her out and sacked her, so she decided that Brian would do just as well. The poor devil didn't have a chance. And she's really enjoying the money and the power he gives her.'

And that, Lecia thought, was all she was going to hear about it.

She was mistaken. Without intonation he said, 'She's a fact of my life. I'm just damned sorry that it was through me she met Brian.'

'When did all this happen?' she asked.

'Over a year and a half ago,' he said indifferently. 'Just after Aunt Zita died. He was shattered and lonely and vulnerable.'

Lecia searched his face, but could see nothing there except cold self-condemnation. She asked carefully, 'Does your uncle know—what she tried to do to you?'

He shrugged. 'I doubt it. She made certain I couldn't tell him—I didn't even know they were seeing each other. They were married while I was away on a month- long trip to Asia.'

Now was not the time to wonder why he had been asked out on the boat that day, and it certainly wasn't the time to tell him that Janine had warned her about him. In spite of wanting to black her eyes, Lecia liked the other woman, and didn't think that Keane was right when he implied she felt nothing for Brian.

'Are you going to accept the commission?' Keane asked, watching her with an enigmatic expression.

"Yes. if they offer it' She thought she'd managed to conceal the faint note of defiance, but he gave her a probing look that cut through to her bones.

'I can't say I like it,' he said without inflection, 'but I have absolutely no right to ask you not to take it, and I wouldn't anyway.'

'It does complicate things,' Lecia said, lapped in a rising tide of exhaustion. Why couldn't she have fallen in love with some nice man, an easy man? A man like Barry.

Why did she go to extremes, living like a nun for years and then crashing into an intense, ambiguous relationship with the most dangerous man she'd ever met?

Keane said objectively, 'People don't get to our ages without having pasts.' His tone altered, became deeper and more forceful. 'I'm more interested in the future.'

'So am I,' she said quietly, unable to pin down any emotion other than a grey tiredness. Baring one's soul might be cathartic, but it certainly took the ginger out of her.

'And you're exhausted.' He got to his feet and came across, pulling her gently into his arms.

Although she could feel the taut desire vibrating through him he held her with enormous tenderness, one long hand splayed across her back, the other on her hip so that he cradled her, supporting her suddenly lax bones.

She rested her head on his shoulder and they stayed like that for precious moments, until finally he said, not trying to hide the reluctance in his voice, 'I have to go.'

'Yes,' she said in a subdued voice.

He kissed her hairline and one brow. 'I'll ring you tomorrow and we'll go out to dinner.'

'Yes,' she said.

His chest lifted. 'Are you always going to be this amenable?'

'No,' she murmured.

His laughter was free and unforced. 'Good,' he said with satisfaction. 'I like spirited women.'

Lecia showed him a threatening face, eyes gleaming beneath her lashes. 'Stop right there,' she said, her mouth quirking in spite of herself.

He hugged her, then just before the world began to spin kissed her hard and fast and let her go. It took all of her willpower not to walk back into his arms, not to give in to the sweet hunger that set her nerves aflame, but he was breathing quickly, and there was a glitter of colour beneath his eyelids that warned her not to go too close.

'Goodnight,' he said abruptly, and left.

After locking the door behind him she went light-headedly across the room to collect the teacups. They had a future. This wild passion was not just one-sided— but she'd always, she admitted, known that. She just hadn't wanted to accept it.

And, even though something rash and impetuous in her wanted far more than a sedate evening spent eating good food, she was thankful that she'd insisted they take things slowly—and that he'd agreed.

But, oh, it was going to be difficult leashing this incredible, alarming desire.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

LECIA sent a rapid glance around the small, sparsely furnished restaurant, with its uncompromising black iron chairs a stark contrast to white walls and heavy white linen tablecloths. She was still astounded at how long she'd dithered over her wardrobe, trying on and discarding clothes until she had to make a decision.

But then going out to dinner had never mattered quite so much before.

Anthony had taken her to small, out-of-the-way places to eat too. Yet this wasn't like the places she'd gone to with him; they had all been furnished with a heavy emphasis on seductive ambience.

And Anthony had never watched her with such disturbing intentness as did the man who sat opposite her now.

For the past seven years she'd believed that any capacity for passionate emotion had been burnt out of her. Traumatized at the havoc she'd made of Barry's life, she'd protected herself from repeating the pattern by retreating behind the barricades of shame and remorse.

It was Keane's startling resemblance to her that had made those barriers redundant; intrigued and startled, she'd ventured out from her fortress and let him get too close. And now she was a timid traveller in a region that had only ever brought her despair.

Folding her nervous hands in the silken lap of her dress, she scanned the shadowy pattern of the material with a fierce concentration, following the peachy-salmon swirls as they darkened and faded into mysterious, drifting warmth.

Keane was nothing like Anthony. He hadn't chosen this place because he didn't want to be seen by anyone who mattered. He had no wife, no small children—this was no forbidden love.

She had to trust that instinctive knowledge as though it were a compass.

'Are you ready to order?' he asked. He was watching her, his eyes dark and inscrutable. 'Don't worry,' he said drily. 'We'll work it out together.'

Some time later Lecia realised that one of the reasons he'd chosen this restaurant was the food. Gazing at the entree, a superbly arranged dish of tiger-striped prawns in a sauce too subtly shaded to be green, she asked, 'Where do these magnificent things come from?'

'Australia,' Keane told her, amusement lurking in both his tone and his expression.

In the corners of her vision she recognised a couple of faces that normally beamed out from the pages of magazines devoted to cuisine. A famous wine expert was watching the waiter pour while his companion, the right size and shape to be a cookery writer, eyed the menu with interest.

Across the way, trying to look modestly insignificant in spite of his flashy magnetism, was an actor from the current hit soap opera, at least six inches shorter than Lecia had expected him to be, and the man with the very blonde woman in a black dress that left absolutely nothing to the imagination had just given a concert in the Aotea- Centre. The review had said he was one of the finest pianists in the world.

is this going to be the next seriously fashionable restaurant?' she asked, a little quizzically.

'The food's good enough to warrant it, but I've been following this cook around for years,' Keane said, answering her unspoken question. 'I went to school with her brother.'

He'd ordered soup, a chilled concoction that looked so tasty it almost made Lecia regret her virile prawns.

They were delicious. But then, she thought, rinsing her fingers, anything would taste delicious tonight. She was in a state of augmented perception, where the mundane was translated by her emotions into the spectacular.

And the cause of it all was the man who sat opposite her—very much in control, watching her with a faint indulgence she might have found irritating if she hadn't sensed the heat that smouldered behind it. Instead of damping down her responses this enforced emotional moratorium was stoking them, so that every little thing Keane did—even the way he said her name—assumed an enormous significance.

And where would that take her? Lecia still distrusted such an intensity of awareness. Although her passion for Anthony had collapsed into ashes when she'd starved it of sustenance, intuition warned her that this time she wouldn't escape so easily.

Anthony had dazzled her with the promise of her own sexuality, but she was in love with Keane. Whether or not she'd learn to *love* him—to surrender herself and her future to that implicit promise of "all love, all liking, all delight"—was something else again.

And she didn't know what he felt for her. Oh, he wanted her—his desire played about her like a force field—but was that male hunger based on anything deeper?

They spent the evening engrossed in each other, finding they had much in common and an equal amount that was not at all in common, yet Lecia sensed that he was only showing her a mask. Beneath the façade of a polished, urbane man with broad interests and a desire to help the world and himself by producing filters that would make water safe for drinking, were other, well-guarded layers of personality.

Keane hid his inner self very effectively, revealing only glimpses of the strength and hard-working toughness, the concentrated, disciplined authority that he had to possess. And that, she thought shrewdly, was only where his business was concerned.

Frustration gnawed at her, but there would be time enough to discover what lay behind his formidable sophistication.

'How,' she asked, knowing and not caring that she sounded a little abrupt, 'did you end up making ozone generators?'

He gave her an ironic glance. 'I was interested in both science and business—my father was a businessman— so I took a double degree, then worked for a firm in Wellington until a friend came to me with a proposition. He's a genius as well as an ardent conservationist, and he'd made a technical breakthrough by using titanium and a much lower voltage. His generator was safer, and it could be marketed at an economic cost.'

'Why did he come to you?'

'I think it was because I stopped people from bullying him in the third form,' he said, straight-faced. 'Marketing is not his forte, and he thought I might like to do it.'

'And he was right.' He was also a shrewd man, because Keane was the perfect person for the job.

He leaned back, giving her an ironic smile. 'Been doing more research?' he asked.

The smile grew as her cheeks heated, because a few days before she'd gone to the library and looked him up in the magazine section.

'Oh, of course, you think everyone you meet should be researched,' she returned, a slight snap in her voice. 'If you can call employing a spy *research!*'

'He didn't spy. He went through legally available documents and interviewed a few people. As well, I got my secretary to find me every architecture and lifestyle magazine where your name was mentioned, and I've read them all.' And while she went an even brighter pink with pleasure he said, 'For someone your age, you've appeared in a lot of them.'

'Thank you.'

'You're damned good at what you do.' A deep note in his voice set off small explosions throughout her nerves. 'There wasn't one of those houses I didn't like.'



It was a compliment she savoured throughout the rest of the evening, hugging it to her like a hot brick on a cold night.

When he took her home they sat for several minutes in the car outside her home, talking quietly of nothing much. Lecia tamped down the tide of excitement and anticipation that had been slowly rising during the evening.

'I have to go to a business dinner tomorrow night,' Keane said. 'I'll ring you before seven.'

'I'd like that.' She was tense, her eyes wide in the soft, warm darkness, so conscious of him she felt strung on wires.

Deliberately he said, 'I don't know that this policy of restraint and caution is going to work.'

'Me neither,' she confessed, 'but I think it's important.'

When he leaned back against the car headrest she glanced sideways. Her gaze lingered on the arrogant tilt of his jaw, the long straight nose, the sharply cut mouth, and her stomach dropped away.

He said thoughtfully, 'We jumped right into intimacy. I think we're alike in lots of ways—we need the safety of those barriers, at least for a while.'

Lecia nodded, and to hide the ravenous attack of desire she pretended to yawn. 'I think it's time for me to go up.'

'I'm not going to kiss you in the car, and I'm not going to come up with you, but I'll walk with you in the garden.'

She was shaking, she realised. How strange. She'd made love to one man, kissed quite a few more, yet the thought of being kissed by Keane in the scented shadows of the garden sent her emotions into turmoil.

'Yes,' she said inadequately, trying to regain some sort of control while he got out and came around and opened her door. Not that there was any danger

on the street—empty except for a solitary jogger—but it was an indication of his protective instinct that he did it.

And an indicator of how far she had accepted his right to feel like that, she thought as she got out and he closed the door behind her, that she acceded to such a small, outdated courtesy.

In the deserted garden they stopped close by the jasmine-wreathed pergola, inhaling the heavy, evocative scent that saturated the humid air. Without a word Keane turned her into his arms and looked down, as though searching for something in her face. The dark glitter in his eyes was matched by the starving, desperate desire with which he kissed her.

It lasted too long—it didn't last long enough. Although he managed to curb that first ferocious onslaught, a swift satisfaction ripped through her when she felt his big body tremble.

'That's an unusual smile,' he said jaggedly against her lips.

'It's only fair that you should be just as—affected by this as I am.' She hoped she sounded cool and tranquil, but she could feel the heat of his kiss right through her taut body.

'Are you a tease?'

After a moment's thought she shook her head. 'Teases don't, do they? Feel, I mean. They get their kicks from driving the other person crazy while they stay in complete control.'

'Then you still want to go along as we are?'

'Yes.'

His laughter was a raw combination of frustration and reluctant admiration. 'Even though it's going to drive us crazy?'

'I let—this—rule me once before.' She lifted her hand and showed him the fragile wrist where her pulse throbbed like a tiny trip-hammer. 'I hated it.'

Long fingers enclosed her wrist and took it to his mouth, where he kissed that small betrayer, and she knew her knees buckled. Jerkily, she pulled her hand away, but she relented immediately and touched the side of his neck where one of the great arteries in his body ran unprotected on its way to his heart.

Fiercely pleased by the turbulent drumming of his pulse, she muttered, 'I don't dare risk it again. It causes so much pain if you get it wrong.'

'Is this how you felt for him?' His voice was cool, almost dispassionate, but she knew him better now, and beneath the restraint she sensed jealousy.

Frowning, she took her hand away and rested it on his chest. 'No,' she said evenly, because she wanted only the truth to be spoken between them. 'But although I'm not the same person I was then, I don't know anything more about attraction, or love, or desire. I've never had the courage to abandon myself like that again.'

'You're scared.' Only the note of aggression in his voice revealed something of his inner thoughts.

'Yes.'

'I'm afraid too.' His voice was reflective. 'My most formative years were spent in a house where my father seemed to think it was his right to be unfaithful and then to torment my mother with it.'

'Why did she stay?'

He shrugged. 'God knows. There was no happiness for her there, but I was too young when they died to be able to understand.'

And then you went to live with Brian and—?'

The stern lines of his face relaxed. 'Aunt Zita. Yes, they took me in and loved me and let me make my own mistakes, and gave me another—much healthier—standard to judge marriage by. But early lessons are learnt well.'

Lecia hugged him. 'I'm glad you had those years.'

His arms tightened around her. 'Are you feeling sorry for me?' he asked, his voice amused.

'Sorry for the little boy you were, and very happy that Brian and his wife loved you.' She smothered a real yawn with her hand. 'And I'd better go in.'

'Goodnight, then.'

Before he stood back he traced the soft contours of her mouth with intent absorption, as though nothing could be more important to him than the momentary impact of his finger against her sensitive skin. The tiny caress sent her pulse rate rocketing. Passion she understood and accepted; it shocked her to realise that tenderness totally unmanned her.

He didn't kiss her again. Disappointed, Lecia admired him for respecting her wishes, even though he had to know that if he pressured her she'd probably give in.

After he'd gone she wandered dreamily into the lift and then to her apartment. Smiling, she leaned back against the door, her heart thumping as though she'd raced up the stairs, until something compelled her across to the window overlooking the street.

Keane was still standing by his car. When he saw her he lifted a hand, got into the vehicle and drove off.

Dazzled by a happiness so crystalline she didn't dare move in case it shattered, Lecia thought, I love him. I love him so much I can't even envisage limits to it.

No matter that he mightn't yet love her. He would.

And even if he didn't, she thought, still exalted by the purity of her emotions, love was never wasted—it was truly its own reward. Oh, she'd hurt when it was over, but loving Keane would be enough.

Turning, she let the curtain drop.

\* \* \*

The next day turned out to be doomed. A dentist's appointment card arrived in the mail, the builder on one of her houses rang up to tell her that the special bench sent up from Christchurch had arrived in three pieces and the client was hopping mad, the builder at another told her that the roof she'd designed simply wouldn't go onto the house, and her mother rang to remind her that she was due down the weekend after next for Rick's parents' sixtieth wedding anniversary.

'I'm flying down,' she said, her exasperation evaporating. And because she couldn't help herself, she added almost shyly, 'I might bring someone.'

Her mother said, 'One bedroom or two?'

'Must you be so prosaic?' Lecia asked, laughing through her surprise.

'Nowadays you have to be. I've offended enough people, believe me!'

'Two bedrooms,' Lecia said, but something in her voice must have alerted Monica's maternal instincts.

In a different tone she asked, 'Do we know him?'

'I've told you about him—Keane Paget.'

The silence seemed unnaturally loud and too long.

Lecia said, 'I haven't asked him yet, so if you don't want him...'

'No, I must admit to some curiosity,' Monica said. Then she laughed, and warmth and colouring flowed back into her voice. 'Well, that's wrong. I've been *very* curious about him! I just wondered—what exactly is your relationship?'

'We're seeing each other,' Lecia said cautiously.

Another silence.

Lecia said, 'You don't approve.'

'I don't know him, Lecia—but is it wise?'

'Why shouldn't it be?' Irritated by her immediate defensiveness, Lecia asked the question more abruptly than she wanted to.

'I read in a magazine that this sort of thing often happens with adoptees,' Monica said calmly. 'They meet members of their birth family, and because they're often so alike there's a strong attraction.'

While Lecia was digesting this her mother finished, 'And because they haven't been brought up together there isn't that strict psychological and mental ban.'

It was a distasteful thought. Lecia said, 'I don't think it's that—but we're taking things very slowly, Mum.'

'An excellent idea,' her mother said. 'My sensible Lecia.'

'Usually,' she said.

'Everyone makes mistakes,' Monica said firmly. 'The trick is to learn from them and you have—too well on occasion. If Keane Paget wants to come down we'll certainly roll out the fatted calf.'

'And kill the red carpet?'

Monica laughed. 'Yes, that too. I have to go. Goodbye, love.'

Cheered, Lecia worked her way through the other disasters, blessing the carrier who'd insisted on checking the bench at the city depot and who was prepared to swear that the unit had been smashed when he picked it up. Further enquiry at the depot revealed that a new hand there had driven a forklift he wasn't meant to touch straight into the crate, destroying thousands of dollars' worth of granite and skill and hard work.

The roof was more tricky, as there were men's egos to deal with. Summoning all her tact, Lecia was so careful as she pointed out where the foreman had misread the plans that he ended up thinking it was the sort of mistake anyone could have made.

That night on the telephone she told Keane about it all, enjoying his acerbic reaction. She also plucked up an inordinate amount of courage to say, 'I have to go down to my stepfather's parents' sixtieth wedding anniversary the weekend after next. I wondered if you'd like to come.'

'Very much,' he said. 'I'll just check my diary—yes, that'll be fine.' After they'd discussed the arrangements he said, 'What else happened to upset you?'

'Nothing,' she said, hearing once more that defensive undertone in the word.

He said softly, 'When I can't see you to get lost in the clear, cool green of your eyes, or become waylaid by your mouth and the way it responds so ardently to mine, I'm able to concentrate on your voice. Which at the moment has a certain amount of reservation in it.'

Flustered, she said, it's nothing.'

'One day,' he said unhurriedly, 'you'll feel able to tell me anything.'

She hesitated, then said, 'I don't know that I'll ever tell anyone everything. I'm an essentially private person.'

'And you don't trust me yet. Given your history, I suppose it's inevitable. But you will, Lecia.'

And he'd trust her too, she thought, smiling as she replaced the receiver because suddenly it all seemed so easy. She'd just relax, and let it happen.

Humming, she went into the sitting room. Anthony had stolen her confidence from her, her trust in the future; her behaviour towards Barry had robbed her of self-esteem. She was rapidly regaining both, and that was almost entirely due to Keane's astringent common sense.

'I love you,' she murmured, then said it louder, the words she hadn't spoken for seven years sounding fresh and new and exciting, as though they'd been minted specially for her and Keane.

During the following fortnight they went out together often: to a concert given by the symphony orchestra and a couple of films—a gloomy, brilliantly acted French drama and a comedy—both highly enjoyable. They ate dinner together in restaurants, both aware that it would not be sensible—or easy on their nerves—to eat at home.

They attended the opening of an art gallery and left after half an hour, laughing at pretentious criticism of pretentious exhibits, and spent the rest of the night in a small bar where they could talk uninterrupted.

During the weekend they cruised in the moonlight on a yacht belonging to friends of Keane's, where they ate a magnificently catered dinner and watched fireworks over the harbour—a superb display that was spoiled for Lecia when she saw in the flaring light that Keane's expression was bleak, every emotion tightly reined.

Something like this must remind him of the circumstances of his mother's death.

She slipped her hand into his. At first he ignored her tentative offer of comfort. Although Lecia had turned her head and was ostensibly watching the exploding lights over the harbour, she felt that rejection like a blow to her heart, a blow that vanished without a bruise when his fingers suddenly gripped hers.

They disembarked at Westhaven Marina, and as they walked back to her apartment Keane said calmly, 'Thank you for holding my hand.'

'You've got amazing guts,' she surprised herself by saying.

'I'm not afraid of fire or of fireworks.' He paused before adding reluctantly, 'it's just that they bring back memories.'



'Wouldn't it be easier to stay at home?'

His brief smile was directed at himself. 'And let them win?'

'I don't think the skyrockets realise they're fighting,' she said.

He laughed, and took her hand again, holding it in his warm grip. 'I refuse to give in to anything, even a phantom in my own mind.'

The night before they left for Gisborne she and Keane went to a party at Andrea's house. Keane fitted in well with her friends, partly due to the intelligent, authoritative charm that attracted eyes and interest wherever he went, and partly because the force and power radiating from him was as exciting as it was intimidating.

Although 'fitting in well' didn't exactly describe the effect he had on one particular woman, Lecia thought sourly, gazing at the opulently built redhead who was flirting with him.

'I want to talk to you,' Andrea muttered, heading past her towards the kitchen with an empty tray.

Lecia followed. 'About what?' she asked casually, tipping savoury snacks into bowls.

Opening the fridge door, Andrea took down two plates of food and set them onto the bench. Carefully she began to pull off plastic film. 'You'd better go and rescue your gorgeous Keane from Damien's girlfriend.' She gave a snort of laughter. 'Although she's bitten off a bit more than she can chew there. Not that he's giving anything away, but I'll swear I caught a glint of amusement in those astonishing eyes—and he wasn't laughing *with* the woman! But Damien is furious, and he's been drinking ever since you got here. He could try to take a swing at your Keane.'

'I'll take those—'

'You will not,' Andrea said, slapping her hands away. 'Go on, enjoy yourself. Everyone else seems to be, thank God!'

Especially Keane. Lecia watched the lushly endowed redhead move a little, thrusting her breasts forward and upward. Body language indeed! Damien's girlfriend couldn't have been more blatant about it if she'd hung a placard around her neck.

As though Lecia's thoughts reached Keane he looked up. The amusement in his eyes died, to be replaced by sheer, potent hunger, direct and unadorned. He said something to the redhead and left her, making his way through the talking, dancing, noisy throng with only one destination in mind—Lecia.

He is not like his father, she thought, her body clenching with a feverish anticipation. Nor is he anything like Anthony. Just keep that in mind. He's never given you reason to mistrust him.

A male voice from behind startled her. 'Can I get you a drink?'

'No,' Keane said, somehow managing to infuse antagonism into the simple word. 'I have one for her.'

He handed her a glass, but his eyes were fixed on the other man's face in an age-old challenge that thoroughly intimidated the unknown man who had offered the drink.

'No offence, mate,' he said, and disappeared.

Lecia said bluntly, 'You didn't need to indulge in such macho posturing. He was only being polite—and even if he wasn't, I'm more than capable of dealing with the situation myself.'

She'd expected to make Keane angry, but he confounded her by laughing and bending down to kiss her, swift and fierce, on the mouth.

'I was staking a claim,' he said. Although there was humour and a certain self-mocking tone in his voice, his eyes burned blue and bright and hard.

'You can't be jealous!'

'I think I must be. I don't think I've ever been jealous in my life before, and, frankly, if this is it I don't like it.'

He linked his hand to hers and pulled her a little closer. An electric connection raced from one to the other, pulsing and so potent it eroded willpower and thought, leaving her defenceless against the savage force of his need.

And her own.

He lowered his head to say into her ear, if wanting to drag you out of here and make violent love to you until we're both too exhausted to lift our heads is jealousy, then I'm jealous.'

Lecia's breath passed shallowly across her dry lips.

She licked them, realising as his gaze fixed on the small movement that it was an incitement. Flames leapt high in his eyes, smouldering through the fragile protection of her composure until she could feel it crumbling at her feet.

'That sounds more like frustrated lust to me,' she said huskily.

'I think you're right.' The slight roughness that gave his voice depth and sexuality increased. 'Jealousy must be the desire to throttle any man who comes too close to you, and the urge to lock you away in my heart and put "No Entry" signs all over the door so no one dares come near.'

She looked up through her lashes, smiling, showing her teeth. 'Not even ample redheads with grasping ways and enough curves for a switchback?'

'You need to worry about redheads with switchback curves as much as I need to worry about the man who offered you a drink.' He glowered around the room, demanding with barely leashed impatience, 'Do we have to stay?'

if we go everyone will think they know why.' Her smile faded. She said abruptly, 'I realise my—my need to take things slowly is putting a lot of pressure on you, Keane.'

'That's all right, provided it's putting as much on you.' Her answering glance produced a soft, dangerous laugh. 'Yes, I thought so. And, just for the record, I don't sleep with every woman I take out.'

Lecia couldn't stop the quick, molten question, is that what I am—a woman you take out?'

'What do you think?'

His voice was cold and deliberate, but she didn't make the mistake of thinking he wasn't angry. No longer worried about revealing just how vulnerable she was, she answered slowly, 'I hope not.'

They were standing so closely she could feel the taut strength, the heat of his body beneath the informal, beautifully cut clothes—and the tide of passion, pulling with a seductive song, tempting her to forget their pact, to yield and let her desire take her completely.

'No,' he said through lips that hardly moved, his voice pitched for her ears alone, 'you're not a woman I'm taking out. You're the woman I've fallen in love with—the woman I want with a ferocity that scares the hell out of me.'

## CHAPTER NINE

AND no longer curbing his emotions, he took her in his arms.

They pretended to dance, but that was merely an excuse. In spite of the noise and thump of the stereo in the background Lecia heard nothing, felt nothing but the thud of their hearts beating, the two rhythms intertwining in a rich, complex harmony.

Soberly, not caring that it was surrender, she said, 'Let's go.'

Five minutes later they were in his car, its powerful engine purring as they drove through silent suburbs where street lights poured their artificial brightness onto the road, stealing glamour from the moon and stars.

'I want to take you home,' Keane said levelly. 'My home.'

She hesitated, then said, 'Yes.'

But almost immediately Lecia began to panic—it was too soon, she felt too much, she needed to control this. Keane reached out a hand and closed it over hers as they writhed together in her lap, holding them in a warm, strong clasp.

As though his touch were magic her jittery nervousness subsided into acceptance. Keane sent her a swift, sideways glance. His face was intent and grave, but she could feel the fierce, almost predatory intensity consuming him because it was doing the same to her—melting her bones, scrambling her brain so that she couldn't think, couldn't produce any coherent ideas beyond the knowledge, somehow etched into every cell, that this was the moment and this the man.

'I'm all right,' she said, stumbling a little over the words.

Releasing his grip, he asked, 'Are you on the pill?'

'No.' Her hands felt chilly and stiff.

He nodded. 'Is a condom sufficient protection? If it's not, I can wait.'

Such studied pragmatism should have repelled her, broken the romantic spell he'd cast with his declaration of love, but by now Lecia understood him well enough not to make the mistake of calling him cold-blooded.

And, although the thought of having his baby made her heart flutter with all sorts of unknown emotions, she knew that now was not the time to court pregnancy, 'It's enough. Anyway, I—I'll be getting my period any day now.'

Quietly, soberly, he said, 'I understand how both those poor devils felt—the one who was married and the one who rushed you into an engagement even though he knew you didn't love him. Because I'd do the same— take you under any circumstance.'

Lecia's heart leapt, then slowed. Every bit as quietly she said, 'I wanted you from the moment I saw you, but I knew I loved you when we came back home after our first dinner and I looked out of the window and you were standing beside your car looking up.'

His wry derision didn't hide the eager passion behind it. 'Like a troubadour standing beneath a tower and singing to his love,' he said. 'I told myself that I needed to know you were safe, but in my heart I was waiting for a rose and a promise.'

'I wish I'd had a rose,' she said, unbearably touched. 'I gave you the promise, though, even if you didn't know it.'

'You shouldn't pander to my fantasies.'

Lecia settled back in her seat, feeling the blood flow in an abundant tide through her. 'Oh, I'd like to pander to a few of them,' she said demurely.

He didn't answer until they were in his house, in the big sitting room that overlooked the sea. There the moon lay across the furniture in sheets of silver and the air was cool and salt-smoked from someone's neighbourhood barbecue.

Glad that he didn't turn the lights on, Lecia placed her bag on a table.

'Do you want anything to drink?' he asked.

She laughed a little, but cut it short when she heard the nervous note in her voice. 'No.'

'You're already fulfilling one of my fantasies,' he said, not touching her. 'Ever since I woke up after that night we spent on this sofa, I've wondered how you'd look with moonlight tangled in your hair.'

'And now I'm here,' she said.

'Yes.' He came across to her and said harshly, 'Smile for me, Lecia. Smile as though you've spent all your life waiting for me. When you smile I believe in paradise.'

She smiled at him, and stepped forward into the arms that closed around her.

'Yes,' he said, and kissed her, crushing her mouth beneath his.

They had kissed each night, standing in the garden while the scents of summer ravished their senses—careful, tender kisses, nicely judged to warm and delight, but not to excite too much. Lecia had thought she was beginning to understand the nuances of Keane's hunger; now she realised just how restrained those previous embraces had been. Tonight they'd moved into a new dimension.

The driving force of his masculine need awakened some wild thing inside her, and she responded with the same direct, uncomplicated desire, relinquishing command to the white-hot lick of passion. Everything was happening too fast, yet instinct urged her headlong down this dark, secret road of turbulence and runaway emotions, of relentless sexuality. He kissed the exquisitely sensitive spot beneath her ear, then bit gently down the ivory length of her throat until he reached the pulse throbbing in the delicate hollow at the base. His slow, ardent expertise sapped her strength and melted her bones; the consuming heat of her response altered in quality, flowing in a

molten haste through her veins. No longer capable of thought, she yielded to the lash of merciless pleasure.

When his hand pushed back the neck of her dress she groaned, turning to kiss the palm then curl her tongue into it.

His chest lifted; he said deeply, 'Unless you want this to be over far more quickly than I hope, you'd better stop that sort of thing right now.'

'Do you just want a doll, someone who'll lie back and think of England?' She'd meant to tease, but the slow, slurred sound of her voice shocked her.

His eyes narrowed. 'No, by God, I do not, but I'd seriously underestimated the effect you have on me.' Urgent desire robbed his smile of humour. 'Ah, what the hell! We can always laugh about our first time together.' Releasing her, he spread out his arms, regarding her with a twisted smile. 'Do what you want to.'

Stunned by Keane's complete confidence in her, Lecia kissed his throat above the heavy, rapid pulse, and found the point where his neck met his shoulder and kissed him there, opening her mouth so that she could savour him while her fingers unfastened his shirt buttons.

Sensations assailed her—his taste, the heated silk of his skin, the faint potency of his particular scent, the smoothness of the round buttons against the cotton material of his shirt, the thunder of his heart.

He said, 'Take down your hair.'

'What?'

'Take it down. I want to feel it across my skin.'

Eyes holding his, Lecia slipped the clips out and shook her head swiftly, shaking the tangles free. Like cool silk it fell about her face, pooled onto her shoulders.



'Yes,' he said thickly, his eyes glittering and fierce as he ran his hands through the flowing mass of it. 'Lecia by moonlight.'

Elation sizzled through her, giving her the confidence to pull his shirt back. Her eyes dilated as she saw his sleek hide beneath, gleaming a primitive copper in the suave light of the moon. Her finger traced out the pattern of the widening scroll of hair that formed a purely masculine texture on his broad chest.

'How did you develop muscles like these? I thought all businessmen only went to the gym three times a week,' she said huskily, because she wanted to kiss him, wanted to run her tongue along the swell of muscle and feel his reaction.

'I swim a lot,' he said indifferently as he shrugged free of the shirt. 'And, like you, I have good strong bones.'

For a moment unease shivered across her skin, but she couldn't drag her eyes from him. A little worried, she realised she'd forgotten how very big he was beneath the well-cut clothes. It was a fleeting thought, soon forgotten as she flexed her fingers against his chest, shivering at the force and power that surged through her hands.

Almost inaudibly she said, 'You're so magnificent, you—you awe me.'

'I'm a man,' he said deliberately, 'that's all. A man who wants you rather more than he wants to breathe. Are you going to fulfil another of my fantasies, Lecia?'

'Which one?'

The one where you undress in front of me.'

She looked up into gleaming, heavy-lidded eyes. Lecia was discovering in herself a well-spring of inspiration, but she said now, 'That one's as old as the harem.'

'Are we going to discuss political correctness?'

Laughing, she kissed him and said against his mouth, 'Not now, anyway.'

Slowly, with as much provocation as she could summon, she slid her hands down her sides, stooping until they reached the hem of her dress. Equally slowly she straightened, holding the blue flames of Keane's eyes with her own while she brought the skirt up with her.

'Don't stop,' he said gutturally.

A swift pang of shyness hastened her final movements. She whisked the dress over her head and let it drop from her fingers onto a chair.

Because the dress was lined she wore beneath it only a bra and a pair of briefs in ivory satin, and because she wore sandals she had no stockings on. The heavy, warm beads of her amber necklace rested against her sensitive skin.

'Yes,' Keane said, his voice splintering roughly through the silent room, 'that's how I've imagined you ever since we woke up together on this sofa. Like that, tall and elegant, strong as a goddess...'

His hands on her shoulders were weighty and deliberate, but no more than she could bear. In the moon- striped room they faced each other like antagonists until Keane said unevenly, 'I've never felt like this before.'

Lecia was no longer afraid. With fingers that shook only slightly she undipped her bra, hoping that she looked as sexy and inviting as she felt. Her breasts tingled, acutely sensitive to the wash of cool night air.

A swift, slanted glance revealed that although Keane hadn't moved, his eyes were incandescent slivers beneath half-closed lids. The wildness in her grew, sharpening its claws on her restraint, flexing sinuously in the jungle of her heart and body. Instead of stepping out of her briefs she reached out and found the buckle of his belt.

As his body sprang to life beneath her fingers he said her name with a fierce and elemental passion. Leaning forward, Lecia tasted the skin stretched taut

over the smooth swell of muscle on his shoulder, startled at the pleasure she felt when her hair flowed across him.

His hands clenched for an unbearable moment, then dropped to his sides. He said through his teeth, 'I want you so much I'm afraid I might not be able to control myself.' He hesitated before ending starkly, 'I'm afraid I might be rough—even hurt you.'

'You couldn't hurt me,' she said quietly, her voice smokily persuasive. 'I'm your other half, the person most like you in the whole world. Nothing you could do would hurt me.'

He held out his hands. Like hers, the long, strong fingers shook slightly. 'Look at these. It's all I can do to keep myself from ripping that scrap of satin off you and taking you without any preliminaries.'

Her laughter was a ghost in the room. 'What preliminaries do we need, for heaven's sake? Touching you is enough to burn me up.'

Her words broke the bars of the cage he'd fashioned for his emotions. With a muttered curse that should have horrified her, he pulled his trousers off so fast he blurred before her startled eyes. When she went to remove her briefs he rasped, 'No, not yet.'

Surprised, she glanced down his body.

Oh, Lord, she thought, alarmed into wondering whether her words of a few seconds ago had been premature, even a little too optimistic.

Looking up, she saw the white glimmer of teeth, eyes dark with consuming hunger, and a jaw tightening as he fought for control. The reckless need in Lecia rebelled. She was no virgin, to be wooed with tender finesse. That could come later. At this moment she was so ready for him that if they didn't make love she'd die of frustration.

So she slipped her arms around him and offered herself blatantly, her smile touched with savage provocation. And she rejoiced when the blue brilliance ignited in his eyes and his control shattered.

Ignoring her gasp, he picked her up and carried her through the hall to his bedroom, where the windows scooped up more moonlight, pouring it in a silver flood onto the huge bed. When he put her down on the coverlet she reached for him, but he slid her briefs down, and while he kissed her his fingers followed the upward line of her inner leg and found at last the heated, clinging folds that awaited his touch.

Lecia choked back an exclamation, and as though it had been a signal he moved over her and accepted that unspoken challenge, entering her in a primal, taut silence.

Stretched almost intolerably, yet eagerly acceptant, ravenous for the sensuous experience only he could give her, Lecia gasped. His weight pinned her helplessly to the sheet, held her prisoner.

And then he thrust home, and she realised just how much energy an untamed force of nature could expend. The merciless rhythm of their lovemaking set up a fierce resonance through her every cell, building and goading, so relentless that she could feel nothing but the hard strength of his body, his unleashed power as he made himself master of her responses and held her writhing body beneath him with ruthless passion.

Closing her eyes, Lecia matched each stroke with an equal twist of her hips and gripped him with her resolute inner muscles, her arms tight around his wide, slick back.

Such reckless sensory overload couldn't last. Almost immediately she climaxed, dazed by the ferocious vitality that poured through her as she hurtled into an unknown dimension of pure feeling.

But when he slowed she muttered, 'No,' and grabbed him by the hips, pulling him into her, arching to take more of him, to test him as he was testing her, to find that secret place again and lose herself in him and with him.

And once more the shocking energy of his body, the feral, unyielding compulsion, sent her skyrocketing into rapture and beyond it, so that she cried out his name and wept as she began to come down, because it was like nothing she had ever experienced, and he wasn't stopping and she knew she

couldn't bear such ecstasy again—it would kill her, she would die of pleasure, her bursting heart and straining, demanding body tortured by exaltation...

He said something—she never knew what—and in spite of that unendurable delight she sensed a change in him. Lecia managed to force open her eyes so that she could see the sweat-slicked shoulders tense and bunch, his head flung back to show the arrogant line of his jaw as he thrust once more and continued driving on to his culmination, blazing eyes and taut features revealing just how much bliss she was giving him.

The sight of his climax added to the elemental, consuming power of hers; once more she convulsed beneath him and around him, her fingers biting into the iron muscles across his back.

A long time later, when she'd begun to slip down the path to the everyday, to the normal, he said gravely, 'That has never happened to me before.'

'What?' She shivered.

He turned, pulled the sheet and duvet over them, and held her so that she was snuggled against the heat of his body.

'Total meltdown,' he said steadily. His hand cupped the point of her shoulder, stroked from there to her hip, and she shivered again, although this time she wasn't cold.

How on earth could you go that far and still want more? Addictive, she thought. He's addictive.

'Me neither,' she said, kissing the very centre of his chest, just above his heart.

'Never?'

He sounded a little startled and she said quickly, 'Nothing like that. I'm not very experienced.' Should she tell him she'd only ever made love with one

man? No, not now; to introduce the fiasco that was Anthony would spoil this perfect moment.

His laugh was lazily predatory. 'For some reason, probably not unconnected with my ego, I'm pleased.'

Unworried by this most politically incorrect statement, she admitted, 'So am I. It seems fitting, somehow.'

His hand lingered on her hip, smoothing over the bone, cupping it, caressing with stimulating tenderness until the skin took fire beneath his touch.

'Like riding lightning,' he said. 'Like making love to a storm. Until now I've always been so careful not to lose control—' He stopped. 'I shouldn't be talking about other lovers.'

'I don't care,' she said. A yawn split her face. 'They're in the past.' She held her breath, unsure of exactly what answer she wanted, but knowing she craved reassurance.

'Very much so,' he said, a note so starkly territorial, so primitively possessive in his voice that she struggled up onto one elbow and surveyed him.

'Chauvinist,' she said amiably, her desire for reassurance more than satisfied.

'I hope not,' he said, his eyes gleaming. 'I try very hard not to be, but you're not going to overcome hundreds of thousands of years of conditioning quite so easily.'

'That,' she said, snuggling down, 'is a cop-out, but I'm too tired to discuss it now. And,' she added, concealing a tiny pang, 'I should go home.'

They were flying down to Gisborne the following morning, and although she'd already packed it would be easier if she spent the night in her flat.

'I suppose so.' He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. 'Will you live with me when we come back?'

Panic clogged Lecia's brain, froze her tongue. 'I don't know.' Her reply didn't seem enough, and yet this was a decision that would need a considerable amount of thought.

Keane's smile was tinged with irony. 'We'll discuss it when we get back.'

She nodded. 'And while we're away,' she said, 'perhaps you should remember that I run my business from the flat.'

He tilted her chin with his finger, an odd, twisted smile curving his mouth. 'New rules?' he said, and laughed beneath his breath and kissed her. 'Yes, of course, new rules. But you could rent your apartment out and cover your mortgage that way. There's a flat over the garage here that would make a good set of professional rooms for you.'

'You think of everything,' she said, not sure that she liked the way this was going.

'I'm selfish. I want you here because I'm only happy when I'm with you. But I know it would mean a lot of adjusting. Don't worry about it now.'

He didn't try to persuade her to stay, or join her in the shower, and when they reached her apartment he kissed her with such gentleness that she told herself as she opened the door and went inside, It's going to be all right.

He rang while she was still in bed the next morning, and for a moment she was assailed by a sick disappointment.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'I'm fine.'

'I'll see you in an hour then.'

Of course he hadn't been going to say he couldn't come! Her heart flipped the right way up and joy suffused her, a honeyed tide of relief that wasn't

quite enough to sweeten her concern. He'd said he loved her, and she believed him, but he'd asked her to live with him, not marry him.

Frowning, she punched the pillow. From what she'd heard of his parents' marriage it would be entirely understandable if he was wary of marriage.

Well, if that was so she'd move into the house beside the beach with him. She loved him too much to deny him anything, and if he didn't want to marry she wouldn't care.

She had time, she thought staunchly as she buckled the straps around her bag, on her side.

On the way to the airport he said, 'Sophie rang this morning. She wants me to collect a box of photographs that belonged to my father.'

Cautiously Lecia responded, 'Why did she have them?'

'Because I don't want them,' he said brusquely. 'I told her to burn them years ago.'

Lecia noticed the way his long fingers tightened onto the wheel for a second. With delicate care she asked, 'Why, Keane?'

'A few photographs are not going to change my mind about him. I don't know how old I was when I understood that he was a bastard. It was well before my mother died.'

She blinked. His voice was so icily dispassionate that it sent shivers scudding the length of her spine. Thinking it through, she said, 'I'm sure Aunt Sophie wouldn't want you to have them unless she felt it was important.'

'She's a genealogist,' he said implacably. 'Any record of the past is important to her.'

'You may have children who agree with her.'



When he didn't say anything she thought that perhaps she should have kept out of it. However, after a few seconds he angled a quick, hard glance sideways. 'I'll pick them up on Sunday night.'

Instinct kept Lecia silent. When they were almost at the airport she reached across and touched his nearest hand. 'I wonder how she's getting on with her search for our common ancestor.'

if he's discoverable,' he said, the corner of his mouth tucking into a smile, 'Sophie will find him. She has all the instincts of a sniffer dog, backed by a bloodhound's persistence.'

Warmed by the affection in his voice, Lecia smiled too. In fact, it was difficult to stop smiling. She even smiled at the woman at the check-in counter who looked at Keane with such overt interest, and smiled again as she sat across the aisle from him in the narrow Metroliner that flew them to the lonely little city behind its ramparts of hills.

As they banked over the bay she gazed out at the white cliffs of Young Nick's Head to the south and the bulk of Kaiti Hill to the north, the two guardians of the fertile plains behind Gisborne. Her heart swelled. Although she would never live here again, this would always be home.

She looked across at Keane, who was also watching through his window, and cherished the way his hair grew at the back of his neck, flushing as she remembered how she'd run her fingers through it the previous night. That led to other memories; with hot cheeks and startled eyes she was recalling the scratches she'd somehow inflicted on his back when the plane landed and she was jolted into the present again.

Her mother and stepfather waited for them, hiding their wariness and that first moment of shock when they looked from one to the other. However, it soon became obvious that the two men had conceived a liking for each other.

Monica was more reserved, but that would be because she was worried. Although Lecia knew that her past history didn't exactly inspire confidence in her ability to choose partners well, she hoped Monica wasn't going to take a dislike to Keane.

It would make things difficult if her mother did, she thought as he took her hand in the back of the car, but Monica was not unreasonable and she'd soon understand why Lecia loved him.

After all, her first husband had looked just like Keane!

While Rick asked Monica a question about the preparations for the party Lecia sent Keane a swift, sideways glance, her heart constricting when he smiled at her.

Of course Monica had prepared separate bedrooms for them. Lecia hesitated when her mother showed Keane further down the hall, but decided not to make any comment.

Later, when she was showing him around the garden, he said, 'I gather you'd rather not sleep with me in your parents' house.'

They'd stopped in the dark shade of a huge old magnolia, heavily laden with white, lemon-scented flowers the texture of the finest suede and the size of soup plates.

Nodding, she said wryly, 'Yes, although it must seem silly.'

He laughed and kissed her, holding her close for a heated moment. 'No, it seems sweet and rather virginal.'

She looked up at him, her face composed. 'I'm not a virgin.'

'Neither am I,' he said, smoothing a tress of honey- coloured hair back from her face, it doesn't matter, and neither does the fact that we're going to sleep in separate rooms while we're here. We have time, darling heart. And I love you.'

That night Lecia wore a silk dress in a shade of peach that gave a luminous blush to her ivory skin and made her green eyes gleam like jewels. In spite of the dress and the carefully applied cosmetics it was, she knew, happiness that made her fleetingly beautiful—happiness and the look in Keane's eyes when he saw her.

The party was wonderful. Rick's parents liked Keane, and cousins and friends fell like ninepins before his authority and personal charm. After he had danced to old-fashioned tunes with her mother and her grandmother, he held Lecia in his arms and learned the steps to ballroom dances with names like the Maxina and Valeta, the Military Two-step and Gay Gordons.

He was a superb dancer, and Lecia floated, dazed with delight, the last bastions of mistrust crumbling like ashes in the wind.

After the enormous supper she sat down beside Rick's mother and talked. 'Even the men think he's a decent chap,' Gran Blythe said, watching with a shrewd blue gaze as Keane laughed with a group over by the door. She shifted her gaze to Lecia. 'Worried, were you?'

'Not about the family,' Lecia said. 'I have a horrid suspicion that Mum doesn't like him much.'

'She's been a bit worried too.' The older woman eyed her daughter-in-law, stunning in scarlet and black, 'I don't think she dislikes him, though. She's just holding back until she sees whether he's worthy of her daughter.'

Lecia laughed. 'I suppose all mothers are like that.'

'The good ones are.'

'And I haven't exactly chosen wisely in the past.'

'Ah, you were growing up,' Gran Blythe said. 'Do you ever see anything of that boy you were engaged to?'

'No. He lives in Wellington.'

'And you still feel guilty.'

'Yes.'

'Well—and I promise this is the only time I'm going to presume on my age—I'll drop a pearl of wisdom in your ear. I've discovered that all you can

do is manage your own life; you can support others and you can hurt them, but in the end they have to take responsibility for how they deal with the hand God's given them.'

Plain speaking which should have comforted Lecia, yet through all that lovely golden weekend, with its laughter and tears and honest sentiment, she couldn't shake off a sense of apprehension—a darkness that crept in so stealthily she never knew when she first realised that she was afraid. She felt as though something was not quite right; as though a balance had been disturbed and not corrected.

Over late breakfast on Sunday morning a distant cousin, noted for her mischief-making, fluttered her long lashes at Keane and murmured, 'You know, it just seems *so* strange that Monica's first husband and your father looked *so* alike.'

'According to the received wisdom of the centuries, everybody has a double,' Monica said, as bored as Lecia was with the whole family exclaiming and surmising.

The cousin gave her a surprised look, but went on to say, 'The most amazing coincidence, when you think of it. Did Lecia's father have the cleft chin too?'

'I'll get a photograph of him,' Monica said sweetly, and left the room.

The cousin looked through her lashes at Rick. 'You don't mind?' she asked, too late.

'Not in the least,' he said placidly.

Monica reappeared with a photograph and laid it down with a flourish before the cousin, who said, 'Oh, your wedding photo!' She turned it over and looked at the back. 'Melbourne. What were you doing in Australia, Monica?'

'I was enjoying a working holiday,' she said, scraping butter from a piece of toast.

'I'm surprised you didn't come back home to get married.'

'We didn't have the money for the fares. My parents came across and we had a lovely, quiet little wedding in Melbourne.'

After turning the photograph over again, so that she could survey it, the cousin looked up at Keane. 'Goodness, yes, apart from the fact that he's going bald he looks just like you! It's almost Freudian.' Smiling, she handed the photograph to him.

Although he scrutinised it without any expression on his face, Lecia sensed undertones, all the more powerful for being kept on such a tight leash.

'He was fairer," Monica said, spreading honey over her toast. 'And not quite so tall.'

Rick got to his feet and bent to kiss her. 'Poor man.' he said. 'A real tragedy.'

Monica touched his cheek with an affectionate hand. 'Yes, it was,' she said quietly.

'OK,' Rick said, straightening, 'who's coming to help me pick apricots? We have to strip that tree before the parakeets get the lot.'

A couple of hours before Lecia and Keane were due to leave for the airport, Lecia confronted her mother. Accepting a cup of tea, she looked across the verandah and over the green lawns to the creeper-hung fences around the tennis court, where Keane and Rick and two younger cousins were playing a vicious game. It was utterly peaceful; it should have been the perfect end to a perfect weekend.

Transferring her gaze to her mother, she asked bluntly, 'Don't you like Keane?'

Monica drank some tea before setting her cup down with a little crash. 'Very much,' she said.

'That's all?' Lecia said drily.

Her mother laughed. 'All right, he's gorgeous, as of course you are well aware, and he has that—oh, that compelling authority, that air of complete confidence and strength—of competence—that both women and men find so desperately appealing. You can tell just by looking at him that he'd know what to do in any situation!'

Lecia lifted her brows and regarded her steadily. 'But?'

'He's very attractive,' her mother began again.

Lecia said swiftly, 'He's nothing like Anthony Parkinson. Nothing at all!'

'I'm glad,' her mother said, and picked up her cup again. Monica hadn't ever met Anthony, but she'd heard of the episode years later when Lecia had felt able to confide in her.

Lecia said, is that all?'

'Yes,' Monica said tranquilly. 'Why? Did you want to pick a fight?'

Lecia glowered at her, then laughed. 'No, of course I don't. You'll see, Mum. He's so different from Anthony he—well, he is. Totally.'

Her mother nodded as the tennis players, hot and sweaty and cheerful, came around the fence and headed towards them. In the chatter that followed Lecia forgot the conversation, but it came back to her as they flew home to Auckland.

In spite of her initial reservations, she knew that there was no comparison between Keane and Anthony. They shared a superficial similarity, that was all.

But perhaps the real reason for her mother's reservation was simply that Keane reminded her so much of the man she had married and tragically lost. It must have been uncanny to look up and see his face—almost as though he'd been brought back from the dead.

## CHAPTER TEN

IN AUCKLAND Keane made the detour to Aunt Sophie's where, after greeting them with her usual enthusiastic charm, she gestured towards a small box. 'There they are.'

'I won't thank you for them,' he said, making no move to pick up the container.

'They were your father's.' She gave him a straight look. 'They were found in his effects after his death. Those photographs are about all you have left of him.'

'What's in them?' His mouth twisted. 'No pictures of my mother, I assume.'

'I don't know—I've never looked. And,' Aunt Sophie said firmly, 'Stuart loved your mother—at least at first. They should never have married, but the fault wasn't all on his side, you know. It wasn't just a guilty conscience that made him shoot himself after she died.'

Lecia's throat closed up for a moment. Oh, God— poor little boy, poor Keane! Without thinking she reached out and touched his arm. His other hand came over hers and gripped hard.

'I'll defer to your superior knowledge,' he said with a sardonic lack of emphasis, hooded eyes surveying the older woman. 'You've kept those snaps for almost thirty years—why hand them over now?'

Without a glance at the darkly masculine hand almost covering Lecia's paler, more slender one, Aunt Sophie said warmly and serenely, 'I think you're probably ready to deal with them.'

Colour stole up Lecia's throat. Keane lifted her hand and kissed it, then let her go, saying with a smile that held a touch of dryness, 'You're right—as always.'

'It's time you came to terms with your father, Keane; Brian and Zita couldn't have been better surrogate parents, but they looked at Stuart through your

mother's eyes. I'm sure they were not deliberately unfair, but they were not impartial either.'

Lecia looked from one to the other, her attention caught by a steely note in his aunt's voice.

'I know what my father was,' Keane said inflexibly.

Sadly, Sophie Warburton said, 'You only knew one side of him. Anyway, those are yours and I do hope that you'll look at them before you burn them—if you burn them.'

He bent and kissed his aunt's cheek. 'Perhaps I will, but only because you want me to.'

Back in the car Lecia leaned into the comfortable seat and gazed at Auckland as it flashed by, wrapped in the dusty weariness that indicated another weekend over and gone, and Monday's imminence.

Soon it would be autumn, and then winter; she loved both seasons, but the end of summer was always tinged with the subtle melancholy that spring, in spite of its often appalling weather, never had.

'Your place or mine?' Keane asked, his mouth curling in dry amusement as he parroted the cliché.

'I should go home—I've a lot of work to get through tomorrow.'

'I can stay, or drop you off tomorrow morning on my way to the office.'

Her tongue felt too large and clumsy. 'I've got my period,' she said.

'So?' He looked at her with a sternness she found reassuring. 'I might want you so much that I get aroused just walking through a room you've been in, but it's not a simple matter of lust. If all you want to do is sleep I'll hold you, and count myself lucky to be able to do that.'



That was when Lecia allowed herself to hope. Falling in love was easy—when romantic attraction was combined with hungry, unsated desire, they formed a glamorous, glittering bauble as fragile as it was alluring, a bauble that could shatter as soon as it was grasped.

Tenderness was a different story. It had staying power and the promise of a future.

Blinking back tears, she said, 'That's probably the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.'

'I hope not,' he said, some splintering emotion making his voice harsh. 'What about the man you were engaged to? Barry Whoever-he-was.'

Shaken, she admitted, 'He put me on a pedestal; I always felt that he didn't actually see me, he saw some—oh, some adored priestess, someone he could worship, not a person he actually loved.'

'You didn't sleep with him,' Keane said evenly.

She shook her head.

'Is he married?'

'Not when I last spoke to him.'

'Are you still in contact?' His voice was controlled and deliberate, but there was an undernote that lifted the hairs on Lecia's neck.

Coolly she said, 'He rings up from time to time. It's important to him that we be friends.'

it doesn't sound as though he sees you as a friend. If he needs someone to adore he can find another goddess,' he said with brusque authority. 'You've been burdened with him for far too long. At least you had the sense to realise that marriage on the rebound would be a disaster.'

Lecia looked sideways at a profile carved in adamantine lines and angles. He was only saying what others had told her, what she believed herself, but from Keane it sounded hard and uncompromising.

And why that should worry her, she didn't know, because she'd accepted that the man she loved *was* hard and uncompromising. Only he was so much more, she thought dreamily. Kind and amusing and intelligent and thoughtful and—

'So what do you want to do tonight?' he asked.

She said, 'I really don't feel well. Drop me off at the flat and I'll take a pill and go to bed.'

He swung the car off the motorway and through the streets to the waterfront, stopping outside her apartment block. This time he came in, bullied her into taking a painkiller and made her tea, which he drank with her. Then he picked her up and held her in his lap and kissed her until her eyelids drooped and her mouth was soft and seeking.

'Do you want me to stay?' he asked, his voice roughly tender. 'Poor baby, you look tired and miserable.'

'I've got mild cramps,' she admitted, 'but I'm OK, truly. When I wake up in the morning I'll be fine—I always am.'

He rested his cheek against the top of her head, his heart thudding steadily into her breast, then swung her onto the floor. 'Go to bed,' he ordered.

Smiling, she went into the bathroom, letting the warm shower stream over her, over the body he'd made such passionate love to. Her hands slipped past her sensitive breasts to her hips and she shivered, remembering...

Dried and dressed in a nightgown, she was unpacking her bag when Keane appeared at the door of the bedroom.

'Into bed,' he commanded.

She yawned. 'All right, I'll leave the rest for the morning.'

Although his smile was slightly twisted his voice was purposeful, 'If you'd feel better without me here I'll go home, but I'd like to stay.'

Sudden, stupid tears ached behind her eyes. Swallowing, she said, 'I'd like you to stay too.'

He picked up the suitcase he must have got from his car, came into the room, and unpacked a sponge bag. 'I don't wear pyjamas,' he remarked.

Lecia laughed breathlessly. 'That's all right.'

He grumbled about her bed—queen size compared to his huge one—but he sprawled across it in naked splendour and sheltered her in the warm fortress of his arms until she relaxed enough to drift into sleep.

If she dreamed, her unconscious locked the images in the recesses of her brain. Next morning, feeling bright and perfectly normal, she turned lazily and kissed his unshaven jaw, thinking exultantly, At last I can see the future, shining like a sun within my reach. I love this man so much, and he loves me...

Waking like this was all new to her and all delightful—Keane's raspy early-morning voice, the way he stretched until his joints popped, the lazy, contented villainy of his smile, the slow excitement of his kisses— even the confusion in the bathroom and the stronger coffee he preferred.

She sang softly while they made breakfast—poached eggs for him with orange juice and coffee, toast and tomatoes for her. I'll never forget this, she thought, smiling at him as they sat down at the table.

'You look like a summer morning,' he told her, his indolent voice at odds with the burning blue of his eyes. Picking up her hand, he kissed the palm, 'I hate to leave you, but if I want to get to my first meeting of the day on time I have to go now.'

The apartment was lonely without him, but Lecia hugged the memory of their night together like a small, precious keepsake. Even the usual dose of misery in the newspaper couldn't change her mood, and as she went into her office she was smiling.

The rest of the day was equally promising. A few minutes before lunch Janine rang up to confirm that she and Brian had made a definite decision. 'We love that final plan,' she said. 'Absolutely. And I'm dying to get things started.'

'Then I'll send it out for tenders. Have you any builders in mind?'

'We've chosen one, a man Brian's worked with before. We've decided to do it labour only,' Janine told her.

Lecia said cautiously, 'Who's going to oversee it?' Labour only meant that someone would have to organise the whole job, from ordering the materials to paying all the bills. It was a big job for an inexperienced person.

'I am,' Janine said firmly, 'I haven't told anyone except Brian yet, but I'm pregnant, and a project like this is just what I need to keep me busy.'

'It'll certainly do that,' Lecia said, carefully keeping her voice expressionless.

'I'll cope,' Janine said, confidence radiating through the telephone. 'However, I'd like to know that you'll be close by in case I need help.'

'Of course. I'll get that put into the contract. I'm going to Australia for three weeks soon—' Unless she cancelled. Three weeks away from Keane sounded like eternity! 'But that shouldn't affect your plans at all. Who's the builder?'

Ten minutes later Lecia hung up, smiling wryly. That house would be exactly as Janine wanted it, and brought in under budget to boot.

As she settled back to work she wondered why Keane hadn't, called. Not that she'd expected him to—he worked very hard, and they'd made no plans for the evening.

However, he had rung after she'd been stung by the jellyfish...

'Having a period is perfectly normal,' she told herself. 'There's no reason for him to ring!'

That night she called him, only to get his answering machine. She said steadily, 'It's Lecia, Keane. I just wanted to say hello.'

But she couldn't shake that shadowy dread, growing stronger each minute...

When she eventually drifted into unconsciousness she slept so heavily that her first sensation in the morning was the dull throb of a headache behind her eyes. Not even the day—crisp and serenely beautiful, Auckland's mild pollution blown away by a light wind from the sea so that the air smelt of flowers and salt—could ease the thick weariness that clouded her mind.

To banish it she walked briskly to the gym, where she worked out with a ferocity that had more than a little to do with her irritation that Keane hadn't contacted her.

Only it wasn't irritation. The emotion that clung around her was fear—a baseless, panicky anxiety that grew with each minute that passed.

Lecia was unlocking the street door into the apartment block when a taxi drew up against the footpath. To her astonishment, she heard her mother's voice call her name.

Turning, laughing in surprise, she exclaimed, 'Mum, what are you doing here? Is Rick with you?'

Without answering, Monica paid the driver. As the taxi drove away another car pulled in and stopped in its place. From it emerged Keane, tall and forbidding, the sun striking tawny sparks from his hair.

Panic clutched Lecia in the stomach, robbing her of breath. She froze, hand still on the door, while they came up the steps together. Neither looked at the other.

'What's going on?' Lecia asked in a voice she didn't recognise.

'We need to be private,' Keane said, each word clear and cold as a pebble.

Lecia shot him a quick glance. Unable to read anything in the forceful, angular features, she transferred her gaze back to her mother, who looked exhausted, her eyes emphasised by great dark circles. 'Mum?'

She said only, 'Let us in, Lecia.'

After a silent trip up in the lift Lecia opened the door into her apartment. Once they were inside she hid her choking apprehension by saying shortly, 'Sit down and tell me what this is all about.'

Monica sat down, but Keane said, 'I'll stand, thanks.'

'Keane?' Lecia said, hating the note of uncertainty in her voice, so close to pleading.

He took a photograph from his breast pocket and flicked it at her. 'I found this in the box Aunt Sophie gave me.'

Lecia looked down. Although the snap had been burned around the edges at some time, the two people in it were clearly discernible. Arm in arm, they stood on a street somewhere, the woman dressed in clothes that put the period in the sixties. Behind them waves curled in a line so regular it looked artificial. Both were smiling, although there was an unusual quality to the woman's smile—.it looked like the one just before tears.

Frowning, Lecia said, 'My mother and father?'

'Take a look at his hair. He's not bald. It's your mother and *my* father.' His voice was flat and emotionless—deadly. Before Lecia had time to assimilate this he said, 'They were on holiday in Queensland together— thirty years ago.'

Lecia swivelled to stare at her mother. Grey-faced and taut, Monica looked silently back at her.

I will not panic, Lecia thought desperately. I refuse to panic. In a harsh voice she said, 'Will one of you please tell me what the hell is going on?'

Monica began to speak but Keane overrode her, his voice filled with a lethal contempt that turned Lecia's stomach, it appears,' he said formally, 'that you and I are half-brother and sister.'

White-lipped, Monica said, 'No!'

Lecia looked at Keane, tall and ominous, his emotions reined in with such intensity that the air around him vibrated. In that level, passionless tone he said, 'I don't believe you. You slept with him.'

'Yes,' Monica said evenly, 'I slept with him.'

'No,' Lecia whispered. 'No—'

'*Listen* to me.' Monica glared at Keane. 'Lecia is not Stuart's daughter!'

'Oh, for God's sake,' he said roughly. 'Why keep on lying? Can't you see what you're doing to Lecia? You took us both in completely,' he said, his tone so icily sardonic that it broke Lecia's heart. 'Unfortunately—or fortunately—my father must have kept that photograph as a trophy.'

'Lecia is not his child,' Monica said, each wooden syllable carefully articulated.

'And can you prove that?' Lecia asked, forcing the words past the huge obstruction in her throat so that they came out strained and hoarse.

Keane reached out a hand, then dropped it as though he didn't dare touch her. He said, 'I'll go.'

'You'll stay here and listen,' Monica commanded.

'Why?' he demanded, eyes like glacial fire in the hard, autocratic angles of his face. 'Do you honestly think I want to listen to you explain why you

committed adultery? I heard enough of that when I was a kid. My father was an expert at excuses.'

Monica flinched. 'Yes, I committed adultery, and I'm not proud of it, but you and Lecia are not related any more closely than the very distant cousins you must be. Lecia was born twelve months after I last saw your father.'

'How can you prove that?' he asked indifferently.

'I'll get my passport,' Lecia said, nausea clutching her. 'it's got my birth date in it.'

Keane said silkily, 'That proves nothing.'

Momentarily closing her shadowed green eyes, Monica insisted, 'Lecia is my husband's child.'

'Why should we believe you?' Keane asked with damning courtesy. 'You can't prove that she isn't my father's daughter. For all we know you and he could have conducted an affair for months. He used to go to Australia frequently on business.'

Monica flashed, 'What sort of woman do you think I am? I knew who you were—it's sick to think I'd have kept quiet if you and Lecia were brother and sister!'

'Just as sick as a woman who slept with a man because he looked like her husband?' Such black rage glittered in his eyes that Lecia scrambled between them. With merciless gentleness Keane put her to one side and finished, 'A husband who spent virtually the last year and a half of his life in a wheelchair? Which makes it unlikely that he was able to father a child.'

'But he did.' Monica pressed her lips together, then said steadily, 'I'll tell you exactly what happened. A year after Denis's accident I got 'flu that I couldn't shake off. I was exhausted. An organisation paid for him to go into a nursing home so I could have a holiday. It was freezing in Melbourne that spring, and they sent me to Queensland to get warm again. I met Stuart Paget on my first day there.'



Lecia glanced at Keane. He was watching her mother with a gaze as ferociously focused as a laser. Hastily, her heart breaking, she said, 'You don't need to tell us this.'

'I do.' She drew in a deep, painful breath. 'The contrast was so striking; Denis was—utterly depressed. He wouldn't get up, he wouldn't talk except to say that he wanted to die. And Stuart—was so full of life, like Denis used to be. I knew it was wrong, I knew it was wicked, but I—'

Softly, taking her mother's hand, Lecia interrupted, 'Don't, please.'

Monica swallowed, clutching Lecia's hand for a moment. 'Stuart told me that he'd been on a business trip to Sydney, and he'd come to Surfers' Paradise because that's where the bikini girls were. I knew right from the start that he wasn't like Denis, who was—his mother called him a love, and that's what he was. My love.'

Now she looked at Keane. 'You were right when you said I slept with your father because he looked like Denis. I didn't get to know him very well, but it didn't take me long to realise that he couldn't hold a candle to my husband.'

'So that's why—' Lecia stopped.

'Yes, that's why I was worried when you told me about Keane. I thought he might be like his father.'

'Like him or not, you slept with him,' Keane said implacably.

Monica nodded. 'I don't suppose you can understand, but Denis and I had only been married a year when he had the accident, and I loved him so much. Then he changed completely.' Her hand clung to Lecia's but she kept her gaze on Keane's austere face. 'When I was with your father I could pretend for a little while that everything was all right again. I didn't know he was married. He said he wasn't.'

Keane shook his head, his mouth straight and unforgiving. 'He lied—but that was quite normal for him.'

Very softly Monica went on, 'Afterwards I hated myself. I went home early.'

'All this is very affecting, but there's still no proof,' Keane said remotely.

Monica looked at Lecia. 'That happened in September, a year before you were born.'

'I don't know the dates my father went to Australia.' Keane spoke with calm clarity, his eyes as depthless as the infinity of space. 'I do know he shot himself three months before Lecia was born, four months after my mother died.'

Very carefully, no sign of anger in her tone, Monica said, 'And you won't believe me when I say that Lecia is not your sister?'

He closed his eyes for a moment. 'I don't dare,' he said in a harsh, constricted voice.

Lecia knew how he felt. Oh, she trusted her mother completely, but unless they could somehow find the dates of Stuart Paget's last trip to Australia Keane would never be able to overcome his suspicion.

As though she'd said something he flung his head back, the hard-edged bones beneath the golden skin starkly prominent. 'I have to know,' he said violently, his whole attention bent on Lecia. 'Do you understand?'

'Yes, I understand.'

Relinquishing her mother's hand, she went to stand beside the window. Down below was Keane's car. She remembered when he'd stood beside it looking up at her window, and how he'd told her he'd been looking for a promise and a rose. Tears ached behind her eyes, stung her throat.

Almost soundlessly she said, 'We're never going to be able to prove it, are we? Not to your satisfaction, anyway.'

'Would you be prepared to take the risk?' he asked, his voice as quiet as hers.

Lecia said, 'I know my mother.'

'All I know is a woman who slept with my father because he looked like the husband who was lost to her.'

'I'm sorry,' Monica said hopelessly.

'I'm sure you are,' he said with unsparing politeness. 'Not, however, as sorry as Lecia and I. There's nothing more to be gained from this. I'll go.'

Lecia closed her eyes so that she didn't see him leave.

After the door had shut behind him Monica wiped a shaking hand over her face and said, 'Oh, God, Lecia, I wish—I wish I'd—'

'Don't.' He'll check things out, Lecia thought with a wild, irrational hope. That's how his mind works; he'll make sure Mum's story fits, and when he's convinced he'll come back.

And knew even as she thought it that the odds of finding that information after thirty years were almost impossible. Keane would never come back, and she'd have to live the rest of her life mourning him. If only...

Because those were the two most futile words in the language, she said, 'I don't know about you, but I could do with a cup of tea.'

'Lecia...' her mother said tentatively.

'It's all right.'

'No, it's not.' Monica looked down at her hands, at Rick's wedding and engagement rings glittering in the airy, light-filled room. 'You were conceived because your father managed to drag himself out of his depression, and we both desperately wanted a baby. A few weeks later he suffered an aneurism and died in my arms.' She dragged in a painful breath, it was agony.'

'Oh, Mum—'

But Monica straightened her back. 'Even though we didn't know, we were both sure I was pregnant. He was thrilled, almost exalted about it.'

She looked at Lecia. 'I've never really understood what the Bible means when it talks about the sins of the parents being visited on their children, but I do now. I can't reverse what I did all those years ago, but I can swear that you are *not* Stuart's child.'

A swift glance revealed exactly what Monica was thinking. Lecia sat down beside her and gave her a quick, fierce hug. 'Don't even say it!' she warned. 'Who the hell am I to throw stones? We all make mistakes, and as far as I'm concerned you're the best mother anyone could ever have.'

Monica's mouth trembled. 'You do believe me, don't you?'

Lecia held a comforting hand up to her mother's cheek. 'Yes,' she said simply, 'I believe you. I've known you a long time and I can't ever remember you lying to me.'

'I haven't always told you the whole truth, though,' Monica said bitterly. 'Oh, God, if I had my life to live over again I'd change so many things!'

'Wouldn't we all? Don't cry, Mum, or I'll start too and we'll flood the place.'

Later, after they'd drunk the tea and talked a little, Lecia asked, 'When did Keane ring you?'

Monica gave her a long, altogether-too-perceptive look. 'Last night. He said that you'd need me and I'd better get up here on the first plane this morning.'

'Does Rick know?'

'About Stuart and me? Oh, yes, I told him when he asked me to marry him. He understood. I had a really hard job convincing him not to come here with me, but even he, protective as he is, realised that the fewer people around the better. He's waiting for me to ring.' Her eyes filled but she said sturdily, 'I'd better do it now.'

Lecia went and washed her face while her mother spoke to Rick on the telephone. 'He wants you to come back down and stay with us,' she said when Lecia reappeared. 'And so do I, Lecia.'

Shaking her head, she said, 'I can't just run away, Mum. I've got a lot to do before I leave for Australia.'

'Will Keane come back?' her mother asked.

if he can prove that you and his father didn't have a chance to sleep together nine months before I was born then yes, he probably will.' The words were flat and curt.

Monica closed her eyes, opening them to say with aching regret, 'You're in love with him.'

'I'll get over it.'

But even as the words left her mouth the pent-up anguish and shock broke down the barriers and she began to cry, the silent, unbidden tears slipping down her cheeks. Monica held her and patted her back until the bout passed and Lecia was hiccupping and blowing her nose, chilled by an infinite desolation.

Then Monica said reflectively, 'You do get over things, you know. Oh, it hurts for a long time, and somehow any other love is never quite the same, but time does heal. I love Rick just as much as I loved your father, but differently. And, darling, although it's agony now, I'm glad Keane woke you up from your sleep. I was afraid that you'd stay immured in your tower for ever, afraid to come out in case you hurt another man. Don't retreat into it again. One of the good things about love is that it's never wasted, if we'll only accept that pain is an inevitable part of it.'

During the appalling days that followed Lecia clung to that thought, using it to comfort her in the dark reaches of the night when she couldn't sleep and

she and Monica would make tea and drink it and talk of anything but Keane Paget.

After a week her mother went home. Lecia missed her unobtrusive support, but forced herself out again—visiting friends, entertaining, being entertained, working hard enough to darken the skin under her eyes.

At night she'd walk the floor, barely holding herself together, until exhaustion drove her back to bed and into an unconsciousness as deep and unrefreshing as a blow on the head.

One day Janine rang and said, 'Right, everything's ready to go—Brian and I signed the papers today. Come for dinner tonight and we'll drink champagne and celebrate.'

Instinctively Lecia said, 'No, sorry, not for dinner.'

'Then come to lunch tomorrow.'

Lecia hesitated, but of course Keane wouldn't be there. 'That would be lovely, thanks.'

It was, too. Janine had clearly gone to a lot of trouble to make the occasion as festive as she could. And she had good taste when it came to wine—the very best French champagne, which she didn't touch. Lecia, mindful that she had to pack that evening, only drank one glass and forced herself to eat as much as she could in spite of the great lump that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in her throat.

Towards the end of the meal Janine said casually, 'I suppose you agree with Keane that I'm a conniving little bitch with dollar signs in my eyes?'

Lecia managed to say, 'No, I've seen the way you look at Brian.'

Incredibly Janine blushed. 'Thank you,' she said in an oddly uncertain tone. She sent Lecia a sideways glance, then said quickly, 'I have an apology to make. When I was told that Keane had had lunch with someone who had to be his half-sister, I found out who you were and offered the commission for

the house as bait. I wanted to embarrass Keane with his father's infidelity—that's why I suggested the boat trip. I didn't think about how you'd feel, and afterwards I felt awful, especially when I found out you weren't Stuart Paget's daughter after all. But when I saw the plans I knew you'd get the job. I behaved badly, though.'

'It's all right,' Lecia said, with brittle self-control.

Janine shook her head. 'Keane had good reason for not trusting me, but he made me so mad—he treated me with such freezing politeness that it cut right through me, and he despised me. Has he told you—? Yes, I see that he has.' Without waiting for any comment she continued, 'I fell for him, and I thought he fancied me too.'

'You don't have to tell me this,' Lecia said gently.

'I want to. Of course he sacked me. I was clearing my desk out and crying when Brian walked in. I'd met him before and felt sorry for him because his wife had died and he was sort of lost, but that's how it all started. Keane, of course, thought I got together with his uncle for revenge.'

Lecia said, 'This is not really any of my business.'

Janine looked defiantly at her. 'At first I did go out with Brian to get back at Keane, but it didn't take me long to realise that Brian's just what I need and want—he's kind and easy-going, as well as being a damned good businessman. And money is important to me; I won't deny it.'

'I suppose it's important to all of us,' Lecia said, trying to work out some way of stopping this conversation without making it obvious how she felt.

'Well, for me more than most, perhaps.' She shrugged. 'I intend to stay married to Brian and give him kids and make him enjoy life. And it's going to be easier for me—and Brian—if the family accept me. Keane, especially, because he's really important to Brian.'

Lecia said, 'If I were you I'd tell Keane what you've just told me.'

Janine looked uncomfortable. 'I thought *you* might.'

Choosing each word with extreme care, Lecia responded, 'I can't, because we're not seeing each other any more.'

The younger woman put her coffee-cup down on its saucer. 'I thought you looked pale,' she said. 'Hell, I'm sorry! What happened?'

With any other woman Lecia would have kept silent, but Janine's frankness must have freed some mental block. Later she'd probably be horrified, but she found herself telling Janine in short, concise sentences exactly why she wasn't seeing Keane any more.

'Oh, my God,' Janine breathed when she'd fallen silent. 'Oh, hell! What a bloody awful thing to happen! Lecia, I'm sorry. I thought you looked so good together! Do you mind if I tell Brian? I won't tell anyone else.'

'No, tell Brian,' Lecia said wearily. 'I know Keane's been pretty awful to you, but he did love his aunt.'

'Yes, I know. She sounds as though she was a nice lady. They couldn't have any children, you know—that's one of the reasons they took Keane.'

By the time she got home Lecia was wondering why she'd been so uncharacteristically forthcoming. One glass of champagne shouldn't have released the floodgates.

Still, she didn't regret it; she trusted Janine when she said she wouldn't tell anyone other than her husband. Perhaps Brian could forgive Keane for his attitude towards Janine and give his nephew some support. If Keane would accept it...

Keane hadn't rung. Of course, she hadn't expected him to, but every time she came into the flat she looked hopefully across at the little red light on her answering machine.



It was surprising how physical grief was, how it ached through her bones and greyed her vision, turning her inwards so that everyone she met seemed wraithlike and formless, drifting, distant ghosts in a sullen world.

Thank heavens in only two more days she'd fly across the Tasman to visit the land where her father had been born and died, that great red continent of strange birds and even stranger animals. She'd made all the arrangements before she met Keane; now she was running away from the tension of living in the same city as him. Every time she saw a tall man with broad shoulders her heart leapt in hopeless delight that was invariably replaced by emptiness.

Later that evening, when she'd packed her suitcase and reassured herself that her passport and tickets were still in the safe, the intercom crackled and Keane's voice said, 'Lecia, I have to see you.'

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

DRAGGING in a shattered breath, Lecia said, 'All right,' and released the lock.

While she waited for him to come up she had to fight the driving urge to bite her nails, a habit she'd weaned herself from before she turned eight. Within her, a wild mixture of hunger and anticipation warred with resigned foreboding.

And when she met his first encompassing glance she knew she had reason to be afraid, because merciless detachment robbed those steel-coloured eyes of their density of colour. Almost immediately he demanded, 'Haven't you been sleeping?'

'Not so's you'd notice,' she returned. 'Sit down. Is everything all right?'

it depends on your point of view,' he said bleakly, not moving. 'I'm having trouble in Malaysia with a joint venture—I'm on my way to the airport now. But I've found out that you and I are not brother and sister.'

The cold remoteness in his eyes and tone stifled her delighted relief. 'How do you know?' she asked in a muted voice.

'Aunt Sophie and Brian came to see me an hour ago.'

Lecia's guilty colour quickly ebbed, leaving her fighting a bone-deep shiver. 'Why?'

'I believe you told Janine that we were no longer seeing each other. And why.'

There was no condemnation in his tone, but Lecia lifted her hands, then dropped them again, clenching her writhing fingers together until the knuckles turned white. 'Yes. I'm sorry if you didn't want her to know—'

'It doesn't matter.' A savagely mocking smile distorted his mouth, in fact, she's heaped coals of fire on my head, which no doubt serves me right. She told Brian, of course, and he got in touch with Aunt Sophie. They came to

tell me that he and Aunt Zita were at the house the night of the fire.' He spoke levelly, the deep voice entirely without emotion.

Lecia licked dry lips, 'I don't understand—'

'Apparently my mother had organised a welcome home dinner for my father—he'd arrived back from Australia that day. There were candles on the dinner table. Brian said that just as he and my aunt got there my mother came running down the stairs with a couple of photographs.'

'The ones with my mother?' she whispered, clutched by sheer horror.

Keane nodded. 'She held them into the candles to burn them; she was completely hysterical. My father wrestled them off her, but her clothes had already caught alight. Brian said she was wearing some-sort of scarf that floated around her. He and my father tried to put out the flames but she broke away and ran screaming up the stairs to my bedroom.'

Lecia stood motionless, wondering at the mentality of a woman who would seek refuge in her son's bedroom. Perhaps, she thought compassionately, because Keane was the only male who had never hurt her?

But oh, what a ghastly legacy she'd left.

Steadily, his voice smooth and precise and hard, he continued, 'It took her five months to die. Aunt Sophie insists that my father stayed with them all that time—he didn't even go to work, let alone Australia. He lived with them until my mother's estate had been organised and my future established, and then he shot himself. So there's no way you could be my sister.'

Lecia walked across and held him, saying over and over again, 'It's all right, it's all right, it's all right...' until the stiffness in his body eased and his arms tightened around her.

But even as she felt his warmth and strength, even as his beloved scent calmed her and excited her, Lecia knew it was no use. Keane's words—and the level monotone they were delivered in, the grey flatness of extreme emotion—told her there was no hope.

Indirectly Monica had been the cause of his mother's appalling death, and whenever he looked at Lecia he'd see that tragic, screaming figure, the source of a thousand nightmares.

'I have to go,' he said, his voice deliberate and inflexible.

'Yes. Take care.' Her hands dropped to her sides; she stepped back and watched him leave her.

Dry-eyed, she stood at the window, saw him walk to his car and then, almost as though unable to prevent himself, look up and wave.

A fitting farewell, she thought, waving back as pain squeezed her in a giant fist. No forbidden love theirs— simply one with too much stacked against it to survive.

For Keane, anyway. She would love him until he died, as her mother had loved her father.

Three weeks later Lecia was walking down the main street in Noosa, a small, chic resort north of Brisbane in Australia that hummed with holiday-clad tourists. She wore shorts and a T-shirt, and normally she'd have enjoyed the scene: the smartly casual shops, the palms and the beach, the unmistakable atmosphere of a place where people were having fun.

But then, normally she didn't suffer from a broken heart.

It still surprised her that she could feel it in her chest, a heavy weight that somehow managed to cloud the skies and rob her of appetite and strip all enthusiasm and laughter from her life.

She'd get over it, she told herself stoutly. She'd have to; this desolation, this wasteland of the spirit was too intense to last.

She hoped.

From behind her a voice said, 'Lecia.'

Her pulses skidded to a stop. Slowly, holding her neck and spine so straight she could feel the tension right down to her toes, she turned around.

Keane looked tired yet vibrant, all emotions well leashed beneath the dynamic, uncompromising exterior. Women were sending him interested glances, but his burnished blue gaze didn't move from her face.

Her heart pumping noisily again, Lecia essayed a smile, then wondered if it had looked as ghastly as it felt. 'Hello, Keane,' she said with careful composure. 'What are you doing here?'

'I need to talk to you,' he said abruptly.

A flare of anger and despair sparked from nerve-end to nerve-end. 'You said everything when we met last.'

His mouth tightened, nostrils flaring slightly. He looked dangerous, a man to be wary of. 'Obviously not,' he said with hard-edged impatience, 'or you wouldn't be looking at me as though I were the devil incarnate.'

Clinging to her anger because it was less painful than the ache of renewed hope, Lecia said, 'I suppose we could have a drink.'

'I know a good place,' he said surprisingly.

He didn't, however, take her to a cafe or a bar. Instead he walked her along the street beneath palms and lush greenery to the entrance of a very upmarket building right on the beautiful beach. As Noosa forbade constructions over three storeys high, the luxurious buildings were in proportion to the landscape and in keeping with the laid-back, sub-tropical atmosphere.

Lecia stopped. 'What's this?'

'I'm staying in one of the apartments. It'll be private.'

Half reluctantly, she nodded and went with him along the path towards the big doors. She too had been haunted by a sense of incomplete closure, as though they needed to give their love the honour of a decent burial. And for that this neutral territory would serve as well as any other.

Hibiscus flowers, gaudy in saturated colours, flamed in a hedge beside Keane, accentuating the hard, resolute angles and planes of his face. 'Where are you staying?' he asked.

'I've booked into a backpackers' hostel.'

'I'll take you there when we've finished talking.'

At this prospect of dismissal the last hidden, furtive hope in Lecia's heart crumpled in bitter grief and died. The tiled vestibule bore unmistakable signs of a talented architect and designer, but she ignored it beyond the most cursory of glances, going numbly with Keane when he ushered her up the flight of stairs and along a wide corridor.

Although she was unnaturally alert, her sense of self-preservation kept her emotions rigidly controlled. Yet, in spite of the pain that she was feeling again, she knew it was better than the dull, cold fog she'd existed in since last she saw him.

The apartment was well furnished with rattan chairs and tables, the clear, gelato colours of the upholstery echoing the brilliance of the sea and the pallor of the sand beneath. A balcony with pergola and sunshade, tables and loungers and chairs, looked out over Laguna Bay.

'Sit down,' Keane said. 'I'll get you a drink.'

'I didn't expect to see you here.' The words had a bite she made no effort to hide.

'I asked your mother not to tell you I was looking for you because I had the feeling that if she did, you'd slam those defences down so quickly I'd break bones on them.'

'I'm surprised she gave in.' But she wasn't, not really. Not even her mother would be a match for Keane when he'd made up his mind he wanted something.

His smile held comprehension but no humour. 'Monica and I came to an understanding. What would you like to drink?'

It would give her something to fiddle with. 'Anything long and cold and non-alcoholic, please.'

He brought her a glass of some pinkish juice that was delicious, although Lecia could do no more than touch her lips to it before putting it down. To still her shaking hands she clasped them in her lap and took a deep, calming breath. 'What do you want to talk about?' she asked bluntly.

He walked across to the wall of windows and stood looking out for a moment, a solid darkness against the radiance outside, then turned and said harshly, 'A lot of things, but somehow it all boils down to the fact that I'm here because I miss you—it's been like having half of me torn away. I can't eat, I can't sleep, and it's only when I work that I can forget you. Even then I look up from a paper and find myself remembering the way you walk, with that unconscious little sway of your hips, and your smile—and my whole being clenches and I curse myself for behaving like a fool.'

'It won't work,' Lecia whispered, shaking her head. 'It can't—I do understand why you went—'

'Listen to me,' he interrupted, hard and fast as the crack of a whip. 'I owe you this, Lecia. Afterwards you can tell me to go to hell, if you want to, but at least let me get this out first. When I realised that it was those damned photographs that were responsible for my mother's death I felt as though by loving you I'd betrayed her.'

'I know,' she said, shaken to the core.

'I've talked to both Brian and to Aunt Sophie, and although from what they've said she was neurotic and cold—she was still my mother. She made me a confidant; I always knew that my father went with other women.' His

mouth thinned. 'I didn't know what that meant, but I understood damned well the effect it had on her.'

'She must have been bitterly unhappy, but she robbed you of your childhood,' Lecia said sadly.

He frowned, then gave a short, reluctant nod. 'Yes. She needed someone to talk to, but it shouldn't have been me. I thought I'd got over it, but when I realised that you and Monica were mixed up with that recurring nightmare I slipped straight back to childhood.'

'I know. I understand. It doesn't matter.'

He said in a raw voice, 'Are you just going to forgive me for insulting your mother and putting you through hell, then walking away as though it meant nothing?'

'You idiot!' she said loudly, almost shouting, 'I love you, so of course I'm going to forgive you if you think it's necessary.'

'Lecia,' he said, and came across the room in two giant strides, pulling her from the chair and into his arms, his strong arms, 'my lovely angel, my heart's delight. I thought you might leave me to suffer the results of my stupidity.'

'You weren't being stupid. I didn't see how you could ever get over it,' she muttered, leaning her head on his shoulder, filling herself with the familiar scent, the immensely satisfying friction of iron muscles against her breasts, the primal, untamed masculinity that was Keane. 'Seeing your mother like that—when you told me, my blood ran cold. It's more than any child should have to bear.' Silent tears ran down her face.

'Don't cry,' he said, his voice a harsh contrast to the gentleness of his arms, of his touch. 'Darling, don't cry, please...'

Swallowing vigorously, she took the handkerchief he offered and wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Then, lifting her eyes to his, she said steadily, 'My



mother is still responsible for causing your mother's death. Nothing can change the past.'

He didn't move away. A muscle flicked against the hard line of his jaw. 'When I was in Malaysia, missing you so much that I hurt with every breath I took, it didn't take me long to realise that I had a choice. I could live in the past, or in the present and the future. And as you are my present and my future it was no choice at all.'

Such simple words for what must have been a difficult decision. Lecia turned her face into his throat, kissing the warm skin, her heart filled with an enormous, speechless gratitude.

He said, 'Monica wasn't responsible for my father's actions, and neither was she responsible for my mother's hysteria. And she brought me you.' His arms tightened around her. Into her hair he said on a hard note, if I'd had any doubts about loving you, I'd have been convinced by my panic when I found that no one, not even your mother, knew exactly where you were.'

'So you went to Gisborne and harassed her,' she said wryly, imagining the scene.

'How well you know me,' he said, his lips lingering on the smooth skin at her temple. 'She didn't let me off the hook too easily, but eventually she told me you'd be in Noosa today, so I booked this apartment and flew in. Then I waited.'

'And if you hadn't found me wandering down the street like all the other tourists?'

'I had that organised too,' he said, with the cool confidence she found at once irritating and fascinating. 'You're going to ring Monica tonight; she agreed to get your address, and once I had that I was going to sit at your door like a suppliant.'

'Ha!' she said, laughter lighting the green depths of her eyes. 'I can't see you as a suppliant. Like a troubadour demanding a rose and a promise, perhaps.'

'Will you give them to me?' he asked, and now there was no amusement in his tone, just naked need and the burning, triumphant exultation of a man for whom the answer held no fears.

'I already have.'

'The rose of your love, and the promise of our future.' After a silent moment he laughed softly. 'Love makes bad poets of us all, it seems, but there it is. I love you and you love me, and that's all I'll ever need for as long as I live.'

Lecia knew he loved her. She'd always known, she thought with a flash of insight, even before he told her that first time. But to hear him say it like this—as though his heart depended on it, as though he couldn't breathe without her—oh, that was delight, that was rapture! 'I don't deserve you,' she said, all her unspoken emotions aching in her voice.

'Oh, God, if we're to talk of deserving...! I don't think you realise how heartbreakingly beautiful you are,' he said thickly, pushing her chin up so that he could look into her eyes. 'And that must sound bloody pretentious when we could be taken for twins. But I don't see my face in yours any more—I see the person, the woman behind the eyes. The woman who understood why I had to leave her even though I love her with all my heart, the woman who is clever and funny and spirited. And kind.'

Spiralling into an utter, intense blueness that tore the soul from her, she whispered, 'Is it going to bother you that all our lives people are going to assume we're brother and sister? Whenever we hold hands they're going to look sideways and—'

'Why should I worry? It's never bothered me. Anyway, as soon as we have kids they'll know we aren't related,' he said. She went very still, and he said roughly, 'Are we going to have children?'

if we can,' she said, wondering if you could suffer from an overdose of happiness.

He said thoughtfully, 'Fifteen minutes ago when I saw you walking down the street in front of me, so immersed in being a tourist that you didn't even see

the men who were ogling your long legs and your serene face and that fall of honey-blond hair, so graceful that you made every other woman seem clumsy, I gave up all my driving insistence on being in control and admitted that life without you isn't an option. I need you.'

'And I need you,' she said, making it less of an offer than a simple statement of fact.

He kissed her, and it was nourishment after hunger, joy after long grieving, and yet it was merely the first step in the elaborate, intricate dance of the senses. This time, she thought dazedly as the demand of his mouth overrode her thoughts, there'd be no pulling away, no pain to follow.

The bedroom was big, with a massive bed that overlooked the shimmering bay. When Keane went across to draw the curtains she said impulsively, 'No, leave them. Let's make love in the sun.'

He gave her a penetrating glance, understanding the complex reasons behind her suggestion. 'All right,' he said, and came back to her, his face intent and serious, the only sign of emotion the lick of flame in his eyes. 'You gladden my heart,' he said. He didn't reach for her, just stood looking at her.

'I love you.' She cupped his cheek and jaw, her fingers exquisitely excited by the rough silk texture of his skin.

They kissed, body to body, and kissed again, and slowly found their way to the bed, dappled with the shadows of the palms outside. In the bright, sunny room, on that wide bed, Keane showed her how restrained he could be, with what leisurely skill he could reduce her to an elemental hunger, the past forgotten as tides of •sweet fire poured through them and around them, linking them in an unbreakable union.

He worshipped her breasts with his mouth and his fingers and his words, he encouraged her to run her hands over his fine sleek skin, through his hair, to make herself so familiar with the hard swell of his muscles, the long, thoroughbred lines of his body, that from now on she'd be able to recognise him by touch alone.

Joyously, Lecia rediscovered his particular taste: salty, with a secret flavour that was the mysterious component in his scent, the flavour of love, she thought as she bit delicately along his collarbone.

Desire worked its powerful enchantment within her until her breath caught in her throat and she whimpered, unable to tell him what she wanted, so lost to time and place that all she ever retained of those moments was the sun and the way it delineated the lean, powerful body with strokes of tawny fire, of gold and bronze, and the smooth polish of good health.

And the flame that burned within her, demanding, perilously consuming...

His hand touched her waist, the shallow indentation of her navel, slid across the slight curve of her stomach and at last found the eager, anticipating centre of her hunger.

Sensation streaked through her; gasping, she arched against that remorseless hand, and he said deeply, 'Yes, that's it... Mine and mine and mine, for ever. Just as I'm yours—completely, with no self-serving caveats, no defences, no conditions.'

Mighty in his readiness, he moved over her, and with one thrust united them, following her slick pathway home. For a fraction of time Lecia balanced on the edge of pain, but it vanished, fled to the limbo of the past, and she took him into her, enfolding him, enclosing him in her loving heat.

Until then they had both been careful—almost respectful—in their caresses, even while the unbearable pressure was building. But, as though that joining were some password to a realm of pure sensation, from then on they forgot caution.

Keane withdrew and drove into her again, and Lecia responded in kind, her hands gripping his back to hold him close, her body rising to meet and match the force of his, every cell in her a thrill with a feeling that grew and grew, tightening to a pitch of anticipation until at last she reached the destination she'd been striving for and was thrown into orbit, waves of incredible delight spreading out through her, carrying her, breaking over her...

Almost immediately Keane too found that place, and flung his head back, his big body made rigid by taut, consuming passion as he reached ecstasy and poured himself into her.

Coming down slowly, gently, they lay in silent bliss. Lecia lifted a lax finger to push a strand of sweat-darkened hair back from his brow. He held her hand against his mouth and kissed it.

As their breathing quietened the noises of the beach returned—the soft purring of the waves, laughter, a husky susurrant that was the wind rubbing the palm fronds together.

She looked down at their bodies, still joined, and smiled. In an exhausted voice she said, 'We look like tigers, sunstriped and bright.'

'My own personal tigress.' The rough undertone in his voice had relaxed to a purr. 'Wait a minute,' he said, and rolled over, managing it so well that they were still joined but now she was on top of him.

The smile that touched his mouth was definitely tigerish. 'You look so cool, so in command of yourself, with your clear green eyes and that air of self-sufficiency. I like to know that I can make you lose it all, because that's what you do to me.' He stopped. 'And that's why I didn't use any protection. I'm sorry—I know it's no excuse. Would you mind if we got pregnant now?'

It was too important a question to answer hurriedly and without thought, so she considered it carefully. 'I'd rather not, actually, at this time. I believe that it takes people a year or so to mesh their lives after they move in together. Still, if we are, we'll manage.'

She kissed his cheek and the autocratic line of his jaw as he said with the arrogance that was an integral part of his character, 'When are you going to marry me?'

He must have mistaken her silence for objection, because before she could say anything he drawled, 'I'm sorry if you have philosophical objections to the institution, but I don't think my nerves would stand a life without it. I

need to know you're mine, and I'll feel much happier if we do it in the conventional way, with rings and marriage lines.'

'What if I want to keep my maiden name?' she asked, only slightly teasing. He was a naturally dominant man; she couldn't let him get away with too much.

He held her chin, looking at her with a hooded, dangerous look. 'If you want to,' he said calmly.

Laughing, she complained, 'You're no fun. I don't mind in the least being Mrs Paget.'

'Good,' he said, but absently, as though something else had occurred to him. His hand drifted up to cup the soft curve of her breast and within a few seconds she was drawn once more into the lazy incandescence of his lovemaking.

Later—much later—she yawned, and said, 'Conventional, hmm? My mother will have an enormous amount of fun with a wedding.'

They were married in Gisborne; given two months to organise it, Monica pulled out all the stops, enjoying herself enormously.

As did everyone else. It was a big, noisy wedding with children laughing and dancing and running around while their families looked on indulgently and made their own, quieter fun.

And as bride and groom were waiting for the car to take them to the airport a beaming Aunt Sophie said, 'Oh, by the way, my darlings, I've found the link! It appears that one of the original Laetitia's sons had an affair with his sister's governess, who was Julia Spring. I think it must have been a true love match, for although he never married her he didn't marry anyone else either. Their son was the one who went to Australia.'

Hours later, in the warm radiance of a tropical island, Keane lifted Lecia's hand to his mouth and said, if I'd been that Paget I wouldn't have sent my son off to the other side of the world.'

'If you'd been that Paget,' Lecia said, cupping her fingers around his jaw, 'you'd have married Julia Spring and to hell with Victorian propriety. Anyway, perhaps their son wanted to go. After all, your ancestral Pagets came out to the other side of the world too. Wanderlust must have been in the family.'

'I feel a little bit of it myself,' he said, turning her so that she could see through the elegantly curved trunks of coconut palms the white glimmer of the coral sand beach and the smooth stretch of the lagoon, robbed of colour by the warm darkness. All around them in the black infinity of the sky throbbed stars, huge and multicoloured.

'Wanderlust? But it's perfect here...' In partnership with two other friends Keane owned the island, separated from the main island of Fiji by several kilometres of encircling lagoon. On it was what held good claim to be the smallest hotel in the world: six high-roofed tropical *bures*, or chief's houses, with every modern convenience neatly and inconspicuously tucked inside their wooden walls. Paths through scented gardens, suitably wild and exotic, led to each house from a central block of buildings with a bar and a kitchen where a chef cooked meals—for the restaurant, if anyone wanted to dine there, or to be carried by smiling, barefooted waiters to the *bures*.

Keane and Lecia had eaten a light meal on the terrace of the shadowy, open living room, a meal ambrosial in its perfection, then gone for a walk along the beach. No other person had interrupted them; hand in hand they had walked along the soft, clinging coral sand, listening to the tiny waves on the shore and saying little.

'But up in the *bure*,' Keane said, amusement colouring his voice and not quite hiding the deepening note of passion there, 'is a bed. And you are tired, aren't you? It's been a long day.'

Laughing, Lecia agreed, 'Yes, it's been a long day. But a good one.'

'Tomorrow will be even better, and all the other tomorrows after it. We aren't going to repeat the mistakes of the past. There'll be problems, but if we tackle them together we'll deal with them.'

'I envy you that confidence,' she said a little wistfully.

'Don't you believe me?'

'I believe you.' A little ambiguously she murmured, 'On roadsides in Northland there are roses that have been growing there for over a hundred years. They struggle, but dust and drought and washouts just seem to make them stronger, tougher, more determined to survive. In Noosa you said that the rose the troubadour in you had been searching for was my love, but I think it's our love combined. And that's the promise too.'

His smile transformed his face. He'd never be anything other than autocratic and tough, she thought, as she gave him her hand and turned with him towards their *bure*. He was who he was, and his love didn't soften him, just as hers didn't change her personality. But she wouldn't alter him, not for anything.

The two weeks ahead were going to be a precious time out of time. Soaking in the sensuous idleness of the tropics, they'd forge new strength in their bond until together they'd vanquish all doubts and fears.

Hands joined, as their lives and their happiness were united, they walked up the path beneath the palms and into a future stretching out before them fair and full of promise, a life linked by and built on the sturdy, everlasting foundations of love.