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HARLEQUIN PRESENTS

DAPHNÉ CLAIR

Summer Seduction



SUMMER SEDUCTION

Daphne Clair

In the heat of the summer...

Sunny, sensitive and full of life, Blythe Summerfield was adored by everyone--except her mysterious new neighbor.

Jas Tratherne was the antithesis of Blythe's spirit and he seemed determined to keep her at arm's length. But Blythe was equally determined to free the warmth and passion she sensed behind Jas's aloof exterior.

She succeeded--more than a little--but despite her pursuit and their blossoming relationship Blythe still felt that Jas held secrets he refused to share, and that if she pushed him too far what she'd unleash might be more than she could handle....

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS the music that first told Blythe the other house in the gully was occupied again.

When she opened her side door just after sunrise, haunting organ notes reached into the fresh saltiness of the morning, drawing her gaze down and along the gully to the old house, its empty windows burnished to flax-flower orange by the morning sun.

A classic of New Zealand architectural style, the house was a no-nonsense weather-board square, the wide front veranda sheltered by a curve of corrugated iron in need of a coat of paint. The builders had placed it at the narrow end of the pear-shaped gully near the foot of a gentle rise, facing the scrubby hills along the shoreline where they dipped to frame a tiny corner of the limitless Pacific Ocean.

The melody swelled and soared above the wind-bent manuka bushes and tall, broadleaved flax, set the creamy plumes of the toe-toe shivering, and rose to Blythe's white-painted cottage, stubbornly perched on a slope overlooking the gully to one side, the sea to the other.

She was tending seedlings in the plastic-shrouded tunnel house when the music stopped. Its sudden cessation in the middle of a bar made her pause and lift her head, curbing a loose corkscrew of soft russet hair that had escaped from her carelessly fastened ponytail. When the lovely sounds didn't resume, she felt vaguely, irrationally troubled.

Silly. Whoever had been listening to the recording was tired of it and had switched it off.

But in the afternoon she made a batch of biscuits, wrapped a small bunch of dried strawflowers and grasses in a square of dark burgundy tissue and tied it with a bow of yellow-dyed flax fibre. Then she walked to the old house, along the sparse, tough grass growing

between the wheel ruts that formed a rough road along the gully and beyond.

The silvery wood of the veranda steps was smooth under her sneakers. The uncurtained up-and-down windows were freshly cleaned and shining. Blythe kept her eyes from them despite her curiosity about the new occupants, and tapped on the door.

No response, even when she knocked again, and yet she sensed that the house was occupied.

She waited a little longer, then laid the bouquet and the plastic ice-cream container full of biscuits on the doorstep.

She was straightening when the door opened.

Flustered, she pushed back the stubborn curl falling across her eyes. 'I didn't hear you coming!'

The man who faced her was tall enough to make her feel even smaller than her slightly-below-average height, and he hadn't shaved that morning. His hair, dark but not quite black, looked as if he'd been running his fingers through it. Under emphatic brows his eyes were an intriguing deep, deep green with amber flecks about the irises, and an imperious nose jutted above a firm, masculine mouth and inflexible chin. His loose T-shirt echoed the green of his eyes.

'You were listening at the keyhole?' he asked with cool enquiry.

'No, of course not!' Blythe denied, blinking at him. 'I brought you some biscuits and...'

Flowers seemed somehow inappropriate. She dropped her gaze to the pathetic offerings on the step. The reason she hadn't heard his approach on the un- carpeted boards of the wide hallway was that he

was wearing socks but no shoes with the jeans that encased his long legs.

He looked down but didn't move to pick the things up. His head lifted slowly, his eyes taking in her well- worn sneakers, the bare legs emerging from crumpled khaki shorts, and the checked cotton shirt that skimmed her breasts and lay open at her throat.

When he returned his attention to her face he didn't look impressed.

Blythe hurried again into speech. 'I live over there—' she gestured in the direction of the cottage. 'I just wanted to welcome you...your family...'

His expression totally closed down. 'I don't have a family.'

Blythe nodded jerkily. 'I must have been away when you arrived.' Yesterday she'd delivered some of her dried flowers to retailers in Auckland, visited her parents and then caught up with friends over dinner in a city cafe. 'But I heard the music this morning—'

'If it disturbed you—'

'Oh, no!' she assured him. 'I rather liked it. Really. Any way... welcome to Tahawai Gully.' She smiled at him. Her mouth, she'd been told, was made for smiling, its generous contours subtly tucked upward at the ends. 'You'll like it here.' Catching a lift of his eyebrow as if he doubted her capacity to foretell his feelings, she changed tack. 'Um...are you on holiday?' Maybe he wouldn't stay long. She wasn't sure she wanted him for a neighbour.

He said grudgingly, 'I've leased the place for six months.'

'Oh, that's nice. I'm glad it's being used again.' She remembered it as a family home—noisy, untidy but clean and welcoming. She held out her hand. 'My name's Blythe. Blythe Summerfield.'

His mouth twitched at one corner. 'Of course.'

'What?'

Not answering that, he lifted his right hand and engulfed hers in a hard clasp. 'Jas Tratherne.'

'Jazz?' She could hardly imagine a less likely name for this taciturn, held-in man.

'Jas.' He confirmed the pronunciation she'd given it. 'J-a-s.'

'Oh—short for something?'

'My parents saddled me with Jasper,' he said after a pause. 'I didn't care for it.'

Yes, she thought as he released her hand, leaving it tingling from his hold. He wasn't a man who would put up with anything he didn't care for. Including importunate neighbours. He stood in the doorway as if guarding the house from invasion, the hand he'd withdrawn from hers now gripping the jamb, broad shoulders and tapered body giving the impression of filling the space although he wasn't at all overweight—if anything he was probably a bit under the ideal for the size of his frame, which was large but angular.

'The place has been empty so long,' she said. 'If you'd like some help to clean it—'

'I've done it.'

'Oh—good. Um...I suppose you knew there was no phone connection here, but if you need—'

'I have everything I need.'

Go away. He might as well have shouted it.

'Right,' Blythe said with a stirring of indignation. 'Nice to have met you.' Idiotic remark, and a lie too. Meeting him had been distinctly uncomfortable. Turning, she felt his gaze on her back as she went down the steps.

She was walking away when his voice stopped her. 'Thanks,' he said, making her turn again to face him. He had the flowers and the container of biscuits in his hands. 'It was a nice thought.'

But he'd rather she hadn't done it all the same, she guessed. 'That's okay,' she told him, nervously flashing another smile. 'Enjoy them.'

She didn't look back again until she was halfway to her own place. Then her swift glance showed her he'd retreated and shut the door.

An unsettling man. He might be a dangerous man, perhaps even a criminal squatting unauthorised in the house. Quickly she dismissed the thought. If he'd been using the place illegally he would hardly have played his music so loudly, drawing attention, to himself. And he hadn't seemed furtive or threatening— just unwelcoming and somehow withdrawn.

And good-looking, she supposed—in a moody, Heathcliffish sort of way. She could imagine him striding across an English moor with a huge black dog at his heels. Wearing boots, she thought, grinning to herself as she passed the gardens and tunnel house sheltered by the lee of the hill. And breeches. Glowering at everyone in sight.

She climbed the rough, sandy steps to her little side porch, paused at the door to take off her sneakers, and padded inside barefoot. The old kauri dresser that served to divide the kitchen from the dining area had a mirror back. Her hair was as usual trying to fall in curls about her face—the dampness of the sea air made it perpetually unmanageable—and her cheeks were faintly flushed. Her dark eyes,

framed by long, curved lashes, looked large and lustrous, and her soft mouth was still touched by a smile, the dimple she despised just discernible in her cheek.

She ought to be grateful for her looks. A heart-shaped face and natural curls, big brown eyes and an air of youthful innocence were just what many women craved. Sometimes, she knew, she'd got something she wanted or even been favoured unasked over others because she was conventionally pretty.

She hated the word. Being 'pretty' made people jump to conclusions—that she was a brainless bimbo, or that she'd welcome the advances of any halfway presentable male who wanted another notch in his belt.

Jas Tratherne wasn't one of those, anyway. He'd looked at her and dismissed her as of no account. 'Of course,' he'd said when she introduced herself.

Of course, Blythe...

Her name meant carefree, happy. Well, so what? Didn't Jas—she emphasised the hard final sound in her mind—Tratherne approve of happiness?

Or didn't he believe in it?

She lifted her cellphone from where she'd left it on the kitchen bench and called her mother.

'There's someone in the old Delaney place at last,' she said, after the usual greetings. 'A man.'

'Oh—is he nice?'

'He's...polite.'

'Is that all?' Rose Summerfield laughed. 'Well, at least you won't be on your own there any more. Maybe we should come over this weekend and vet him.'

'No!' Blythe said instantly. 'He's very...private.'

'A recluse? How old?'

'Mm, maybe mid-thirties. He looks...'

'What?'

Blythe struggled to explain. 'He isn't happy. And I don't think he eats properly.'

'Men don't when they're on their own,' her mother said sweepingly. 'Do you want to feed him up?'

'He wouldn't thank me for it.' He had barely managed to say thank you for the biscuits. Maybe biscuits were another thing he didn't care for.

'He is all right, I suppose?' Rose worried.

'I don't think he's an axe murderer, Mum.'

'Well, maybe we'll come over anyway,' Rose decided. 'Just to let him know you're not alone in the world.'

'I'd love to see you, but really there's no need—'

'Sunday,' Rose said firmly. 'We'll bring lunch.'

* * *

Early next morning Blythe caught a glimpse of her new neighbour loping at a steady pace past the cottage. He wore lightweight track

pants and a navy T-shirt with running shoes, and looked like a serious jogger.

In the afternoon she went down to the beach to scavenge for pieces of driftwood and beach grasses.

Only four kilometres along the shoreline from Tahawai, although more than ten via the winding, unsealed and boneshaking road, was the popular holiday settlement, Apiata Beach. At low tide it was possible to walk—and clamber—from one to the other, but few people braved the several rock outcrops and stony little bays between the resort and Tahawai, even in the height of summer.

At this time of year, with winter barely giving way to a cool spring, Blythe rarely saw anyone but the occasional lone fisherman or family party of locals on the beach. Sometimes surfers turned up to try the waves, but most of them preferred Apiata.

Jas Tratherne was wearing white sneakers or maybe his running shoes—not boots anyway, she noted—and he didn't have a dog at his heels. But he strode along the sand with a look of preoccupation, his head bent and one hand swinging a crooked driftwood stick, the other tucked into the pocket of a light parka.

He was walking near the water's edge, skirting the white-flecked waves thumping onto the sand in a flurry of foam. As Blythe descended the sandy slope he looked up.

Blythe raised a hand in a half-hearted wave.

He returned the gesture, then resumed his walk.

Okay, she thought. He didn't want company and that was fine. She headed off in the other direction.

That night music drifted in through her barely open bedroom window with the night breeze. As she hovered on the edge of sleep the poignant notes entered into her dreams, and the next morning she had the feeling that the music had gone on for a long time. Hours.

When she drove past the house to the store at Apiata, the detached wooden garage was open, what looked like a station wagon parked inside.

On her return she parked the van in her garage next to the tunnel house and took her paper, mail and milk up the steps and inside.

Sitting with a sandwich and coffee at the long table under the corner windows, she opened the newspaper. It wasn't warm enough today to use the lounge on the high, enclosed deck outside.

After two cups of coffee she folded the paper and fetched her *kete*. She had woven the traditional-style Maori carrier bag herself. Mrs Delaney, matriarch of the large, boisterous family who had grown up in the house now occupied by the solitary and anti-social Jas Tratherne, had taught Blythe along with her own daughters the ancient art of flax-weaving.

She pulled on a hooded red sweatshirt as she left the porch, awkwardly transferring the plaited handles of the *kete* from one hand to the other and starting down the steps before she had fully donned the sweatshirt.

When she looked up she saw Jas Tratherne approaching, his hair stirred by the wind. He wore light- coloured cotton trousers, sneakers and the nylon parka.

Fixing a smile on her face, Blythe paused as she reached the foot of the steps. 'Hi.'

He didn't smile, but nodded. 'Good afternoon—' and with a glance at the *kete* '—Red Riding Hood.'

'Hardly.' She parted the handles. 'No goodies, see?' She saw he'd shaved today, and the planes of his face were more sharply defined, adding to the impression that he'd recently lost weight.

He seemed to be debating whether to continue the conversation. After a moment he said, 'So why are you carrying an empty basket?'

'I'm gathering stuff from the beach.'

'Stuff?'

As they were obviously headed in the same direction they really had no choice but to walk together. 'Leaves, stalks, seedheads, driftwood—'

'Shells?'

'Mm, maybe. It's not a great beach for shells. The surfs too rough, and most of them get pounded to bits. Sometimes I pick up a nice piece of beach glass or some interesting stones.'

They walked on a few steps before he asked, 'So what are you going to do with all this stuff?'

She suspected he wasn't really interested but that he felt obliged to be polite. 'I make notions.'

'Notions?'

'Arrangements of driftwood or flotsam and my own dried flowers. For some of them I weave flax containers or wall hangers.'

'I'd have thought it would be too sandy here for flower-growing.'

'The gully's sheltered from the sea wind, and the soil on the bottom is quite peaty. And,' she added, 'there's plenty of seaweed for mulch and fertiliser. The right flowers do very well.'

'Like...?'

'Strawflowers, statice, lavender—I use some and the rest go directly to florists.'

They went up the little rise between the hills, and the breeze blew strands of hair across Blythe's eyes.

'You're running a business—on your own?'

'Yes".' Half closing her eyes against the wind, she shook back her hair. 'It's all mine.'

'Yours?'

'Why not?'

He studied her smooth skin and wide, questioning eyes. 'You're far too young!'

Blythe laughed and started down the slope. 'I'm twenty-one,' she said. Her lack of height, and the winsome prettiness that nothing she did with her hair or clothes or even make-up could efface, was deceptive.

He frowned, and a tinge of colour entered his cheeks. 'You live alone up there?' He glanced at the cottage behind them.

'Since my grandmother died last year.' A shadow crossed her face. 'I moved in with her after Grandad's death, because she was getting a bit frail and we didn't like her being on her own. I'd been working at a nursery and taking night classes in horticulture, so it was an ideal opportunity to try setting up for myself, and at the same time it helped

Gran.' She lifted a hand to peel wind-blown hair away from her mouth. 'Everyone thought I was crazy, trying to grow things here.'

'Really.' He was looking down at the uneven ground, his hands thrust into the pockets of his parka.

'Too far from the city, they said, and too close to the sea. But it's just over an hour from Auckland, and it's turned out to be ideal. Only...the market for dried flowers is being taken over by the artificial sort. So I'm trying a new crop this year—sunflowers.'

'Sunflowers.' He looked at her and laughed. It was a brief laugh and sounded unpractised.

'Is there something funny about sunflowers?' she demanded, angling her head so that the wind pulled her hair away from her forehead.

'No.' His eyes looked suddenly glazed. 'No— they're very...interesting.'

She'd been going on about her family history and her work, and he was either being gently sarcastic or trying hard to pretend he wasn't bored. 'Well,' she said awkwardly, backing from him, 'I'll...um...see you later.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Uh...good hunting.' And he swung away and strode off along the sand.

Scavenging the tide-line, Blythe kept her eyes on the sea-wrack delivered by the bountiful waves, refusing to allow herself to peek at her unsettling new neighbour.

When she made her way back to the cottage the wind had grown wilder and carried fine, stinging rain with it, and Jas Tratherne had gone.

The rain intensified, thrown against the windows. Blythe lit a fire in the wood stove in a corner of the kitchen-cum-living room, and sat down to sort her new treasures, and wire some of the flowers that she had drying in nets strung from the ceilings of every room.

When the light started to fade she got up from the table. Through the rain-blurred window a glimmer at the other end of the gully drew her eye. She could make out a distant square of light, and a shadow that flickered across it, then returned and stayed.

She lifted a hand, but could discern no answering gesture from the still, obscure figure.

She turned to put on a light and make herself something to eat. While a slice of ham steak and a round of pineapple were grilling she washed a few leaves of lettuce, added fresh herbs and a squeeze of lemon juice, and wondered what her neighbour was having for dinner.

Maybe she should invite him for a meal. It would be a neighbourly thing to do; her grandmother would have done it, first thing.

But he wasn't interested in socialising. No doubt he'd chosen to lease the house because of its relative isolation. He liked his own company, did Jas Tratherne.

That probably wasn't quite true. He didn't relish the company of other people, but he didn't seem particularly comfortable with himself either.

The store at Apiata doubled as service station and postal centre. On Friday, as well as groceries Blythe bought diesel for the generator that provided her electricity. The storekeeper handed over her mail

and said, 'There's a parcel here for Mr Tratherne. In the old Delaney place, isn't he? Came in and said he might be getting mail here.'

'Yes, he is.'

'Doesn't seem to have a phone. I don't s'pose you'd like to deliver it to him? It's sat here a couple of days already, and the weekend's coming up.'

Blythe hesitated, although if it had been for anyone else along her route home she'd have agreed instantly. 'Yes, all right.'

When the storekeeper lugged it out for her and slid it into the back of the van she saw why he was anxious to get rid of the parcel. It was a large carton and obviously not light.

She drove back to Tahawai and stopped in front of the Delaney house. Long ago there had been a fence, but now only a couple of weathered grey corner posts indicated the boundary of the section, and another bearing a single rusted hinge was all that was left of the gateway.

Through the bare window on the left of the door, she saw a big table with a row of books and a neat stack of papers on it, and what looked like a portable computer. The office-type chair behind it was empty.

The front door was ajar, and music poured out of the narrow space, surrounding her as she lifted her hand to knock.

She paused and dropped her hand, hypnotised by the rich, mellow sounds.

But if Jas Tratherne found her loitering on his doorstep he'd have cause to wonder if he'd been right about her listening at keyholes.

She rapped quite hard with her knuckles, and the door swung open onto the broad passageway. To her left the room with the desk looked

otherwise empty except for a shelving unit along one wall, filled with folders and more books, and to her right, through another open door, she saw Jas Tratherne seated with his back to her at an electronic keyboard.

He lifted his hands from the keys and twisted round, his eyes meeting hers before he stood up, his face darkly flushing—with anger? she wondered. Or embarrassment?

He strode towards her across the bare floorboards into the passageway.

Blythe said the first thing that came into her head. 'It wasn't a recording.'

'No.' He stood facing her, his hand on the door as if he contemplated shutting it in her face.

'I'm sorry,' she said, not sure what she was apologising for. 'You play wonderfully,' she told him, driven by her surprise and genuine admiration. 'I don't mean to interrupt.'

He didn't bother to deny it. 'What can I do for you?'

'It's what I can do for you,' she said, stung by this unfriendly reception. 'I have a parcel for you.'

His brows drew together. 'More biscuits?'

'I brought you a postal parcel from Apiata.'

'Do you moonlight as a postal employee?'

'I happened to be collecting my mail and Doug asked if I'd drop it off on my way home.'

'Surely that's against regulations.'

'Very likely, but the locals have a habit of ignoring city-made regulations that don't fit country circumstances. If you don't want it, of course I could always take it back, but I'm probably not going there again until some time next week.'

Her voice had a decided edge, and her eyes no doubt were sparkling with a rare flash of temper. She was doing the man a favour, for heaven's sake, and he wasn't showing much appreciation.

He must have realised it too. 'I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. I guess I'm not used to "country circumstances". Where is the parcel?'

'In the van. I'll help you get it out.'

He looked down at her, making her conscious that her head was barely level with his shoulder. A faint twitch urged the corner of his mouth upward. 'It's that big?'

'That heavy.'

She led the way and opened the back of the van. But when she put a hand on the box he said, 'Leave it to me,' and lifted it into his arms.

She closed the door, and by the time she'd gone to the driver's side he had reached the steps and bent to put the box on the veranda, giving it a shove across the boards before turning to her. 'Thanks,' he said. 'I'll be glad to have them.'

'Them?'

'Books.' A movement of his head indicated the box.

'Oh...books!' Blythe knew how heavy books could be. She put a hand on the open door of the van.

'I never thanked you properly for the biscuits,' he said. Maybe he felt the need to proffer an olive branch after his suspicious reception. 'Home-made.'

It wasn't a question really, but she said, 'Yes. I hope you liked them.'

'They were delicious.'

Signs of a thaw, Blythe noted with relief. 'My parents are coming for lunch on Sunday,' she said impulsively. 'You could join us if you like.'

As she'd expected, he shook his head. 'Thanks, I won't intrude on a family lunch...'

She couldn't help a small grin. 'Actually you're the reason they decided to come—or my mother did.'

'I am?'

'I mentioned you'd moved in and...well, you know, it's pretty isolated here. They worry about me.'

'Understandably.'

He flicked another glance over her and she fought an urge to draw herself up to her full but hardly substantial height. 'I told them there's no need.'

'But they want to inspect your new neighbour?'

'It's all right,' Blythe said. 'I'll say you're too busy to make lunch, and if they suggest a friendly welcoming visit I promise to head them off at the pass.'

He seemed to be thinking that over. 'If they're concerned^ about their daughter's safety I'd better meet them,' he said astonishingly, 'and put their minds at rest. I'll come to lunch.'

CHAPTER TWO

'I've invited the neighbour,' Blythe told her parents when they arrived. 'He's coming over.'

'Not such a recluse, then.' Rose, a petite woman who had passed on her dark eyes and soft feminine mouth to her daughter, was unpacking a bacon and egg pie and fresh bread, cheese muffins and a chocolate cake.

'He's a very private person,' Blythe said anxiously. 'Don't give him the third degree, okay?'

Her parents exchanged a glance. *Who, us?* And then they both focused reprovingly on her. Blythe laughed and gave up. She suspected Jas Tratherne was quite capable of handling unwanted questions anyway.

When he arrived and she opened the door to him, he seemed less aloof, even giving her a smile as he handed over the bottle of wine he carried. She thanked him nicely, smiling back, and he blinked and she saw his eyes darken, become softer. Surprised at the unmistakable tug of attraction, she stared for a moment before stepping back, breaking the tenuous thread as she invited him in. 'Come and meet my parents.'

He asked them to call him Jas, and shared a beer with her father while he enquired how the traffic had been from Auckland, commented on the weather, and showed interest in the headlines of the Sunday paper the Summerfields had bought. He even admired some of Blythe's floral arrangements that she'd removed from the table and laid into open boxes ready for sale, studied samples of her work hanging on the walls and, raising his eyes, noted without comment the drying nets with their delicate, rainbow-coloured burden of flowers.

After they were seated around the table Rose asked what he did for a living.

'Teaching,' he said. 'What about you and Brian?'

'We're farming,' Brian Summerfield told him. 'Out the other side of Auckland, near Wiri. But the land all around is being swallowed up in lifestyle blocks bought by Queen Street farmers—lawyers and accountants farming in their spare time. We're thinking of selling...'

Rose slipped in a remark about the children not being interested in carrying on the farm after Brian retired, and added, 'What do your parents do, Jas?'

'My mother died when I was a teenager. My father's living in a retirement home now.'

Rose managed to elicit the fact that Jas had come from Wellington before he deftly changed the subject again. He helped with the dishes and even accepted another cup of coffee, on the deck built to take advantage of the afternoon sun and the ocean view. And after a while he took his leave with a gracious thank-you for Blythe and handshakes for her parents.

'Seems a decent sort of bloke,' her father said.

'I'm sure we needn't worry about him,' Rose agreed, 'although he isn't very forthcoming about himself.' Looking slyly at Blythe, she added, 'You didn't mention he was dishy.'

Blythe laughed. 'Dad—did you hear that?'

Rose refused to be diverted. 'Don't you think so?'

'Personality is more important than looks.'

'What's wrong with his personality? He was very pleasant, I thought.'

'He was trying to impress you today.' And that was probably not quite fair. He had simply demonstrated ordinary courtesy.

'Do you think so? Why?'

'I told him you worry. That's the only reason he agreed to come to lunch. To...set your minds at rest.'

Brian said, 'Well, that was good of him.'

'Sensitive.' Rose eyed her daughter consideringly.

Blythe cast her a laughing glance, guessing the direction of her mother's thoughts. Of course Blythe had noticed that her new neighbour was quite a handsome man. And today...

If she was totally honest she found Jas Tratherne surprisingly attractive, and for a moment she'd seen a spark of warmth, of desire, in his eyes, despite his seeming determination to repel boarders.

On Monday she took a load of flowers and notions into Auckland, and looked up an old schoolfriend who after a year overseas had just moved into a mixed flat.

Gina's flatmates, a pleasant, casually welcoming crew, invited Blythe to eat with them. She stayed late, drank a few glasses of cheap wine and ended up spending the night on the sofa. While everyone was snatching some kind of breakfast-on-the-run next morning, she issued a general invitation to them to visit her.

On Wednesday morning Blythe donned her red sweatshirt over shorts and shirt, piled sacks into the van, and drove down the short distance to the landward side of the saddle. A stormy night and spring tide had left an abundance of seaweed on the high-water line.

Down on the beach she filled a bag with rapidly drying hanks of brown kelp, tied it with rope, and dragged her harvest back over the sand, ignoring the sand flurries that stung her bare legs.

At the slope the bag snagged on a bit of driftwood almost buried in the sand, and she turned backwards to pull it free, tripped on a tuft of pingao grass and sat down hard, letting out an exasperated swear word.

'What are you doing?'

Jas's voice came from behind her, and then he was at her side, looking down at her.

She lifted her head and squinted up at him against the capricious wind that worried her hair. He was wearing his track pants and running shoes.

'Getting fertiliser.' She tugged again at the bag.

'Give me that.' A lean hand took the rope-end from her, and Jas bent and swung the bag to his shoulder.

Blythe said, 'I can manage—' Already beginning to dry, the seaweed wasn't heavy.

'Sure,' he said, and went on up the slope.

Given no choice, Blythe followed him.

He stowed the bag in the van and looked at the pile of empty sacks. 'You're planning to fill all those?'

'It's not hard. Just time-consuming.'

'Right.' He picked up the pile. 'Let's go.'

She gaped for a moment and then followed him up the slope. 'You don't have to do this.'

'If you really don't want my help you can say so.'

Blythe shook her head. She was actually dangerously delighted. Not only because it would take half the time to gather the seaweed, but because she liked the way the wind whipped Jas's hair over his forehead and then smoothed it back, making him look younger. 'This is nice of you.'

'I can do with the exercise,' he told her as they reached the beach again. 'Besides, I owe you.'

'Owe me?'

'For a very nice meal? And biscuits.'

'You don't owe me anything,' she protested. He'd only come to lunch as some sort of favour to her— or to her then unknown parents.

They didn't talk much. He just filled a bag, working a few yards away from her, and then carried two bags- back to the van while she started another.

'Thank you,' she said, closing the door on the last of them. 'I appreciate this.'

'I'll come along and help you unload.'

She didn't argue, allowing him to climb into the passenger seat as she started the engine. He slammed the door and briefly his shoulder touched hers before he raised a hand to smooth back his wind-tousled hair, and stretched his long legs as far as they'd go in the confined cab. He smelled of salt and seaweed, and so, she supposed, must she.

He helped her stack the bulging bags near the compost bins and eyed the petrol-driven machine standing nearby. 'What's that?'

'A mulcher. I'll put the seaweed through it later and add it to the compost.'

He studied the toolshed, and the huge stainless-steel tank on the rise between the garden area and the cottage, half hidden by leggy kanuka towering above a tangle of smaller native plants. 'Your water supply?'

'A holding tank. I've got three rain-collecting tanks behind that trellis at the back of the house, and the extra water's piped down.'

'That must hold about seven thousand gallons?'

'Mm-mm. It came from a dairy factory that was closing. I had to get a bank loan to buy it.'

He looked at her with what might have been dawning respect. 'You must have invested quite a bit of money...all that fencing, the shade house...'

'My family and some friends helped put up the fences and tunnel house and install the watering system.'

'This is quite an operation for a one-woman band.'

'I'll show you round if you're interested.'

She thought he was going to say no. Maybe he didn't want to hurt her feelings, because he said yes, he was interested, and followed her along the rows of growing plants, the 'everlastings' first, then the sunflower bed, where even the most recently planted row of tiny blind shoots yearned towards the sun climbing up the sky. At noon they would stand straight as soldiers on parade, and by evening would uniformly be leaning westward.

'You must have planted some of these very early?' Jas touched one of the taller plants. 'It's barely spring.'

'I started the first batch in individual peat pots inside and planted the pots out when the soil warmed up.'

'Why individual pots?'

'Traumatising an immature root system can ruin a good plant,' Blythe explained. 'Sunflowers are hardy but if they're to grow up straight and strong they need tender loving care, just like human children.' She grinned at him and found him still staring at the sturdy young plants.

Then he turned to her and smiled back. 'You'd be good at that.'

She felt herself grow warm at the unexpected gentleness in his voice. Trying not to sound breathless, she answered lightly, 'I certainly hope so. It's my livelihood.'

In the tunnel house she showed him her early- blooming sunflowers in plastic pots, the buds tight in fat green pods but one or two showing tips of yellow.

'How long before they grow to full size?' he asked.

'These are a dwarf variety, meant for pots. I'll take my first trial batch to Auckland tomorrow.'

'Well, good luck.' He moved, preparing to leave.

'I suppose I've been boring you,' Blythe apologised. Not everyone felt about plants the way she did.

'Not at all. I've rather enjoyed myself.'

The faint surprise in his voice assured her he was sincere, and a rush of gladness made her bold. 'After all that exertion the least I can do is offer you a cup of coffee—or a beer. I wouldn't mind one myself.'

'Beer—you?'

'Why not? I'm a big girl.' She grinned at him.

'No, you're not.' He gave her another of those looks that made her conscious of the few centimetres she lacked. His mouth hardly moved, but his eyes smiled at her. She saw the dark centres enlarge, and realised how close she was standing to him. Close enough to see the fine lines by his eyes, and the way his nostrils widened almost imperceptibly as he took a breath.

Then he stepped back and the humour disappeared from his eyes, leaving them bleak again. 'Thanks,' he said, 'but you must have work to do. Maybe another time.'

She didn't press him, but turned and picked up one of the plastic pots. 'Here,' she said quickly, holding it out to him. 'It's called Music Box. All you need to do is give it water when the soil starts drying out, and cut off the spent flowers.'

He took the plant, holding it in both hands. If he couldn't be bothered watering it, she told herself, it was no great tragedy.

'If you want anything from Auckland,' she offered, 'the van will be empty on the return trip.'

'There's nothing, thanks.'

'I could collect your mail with mine if the store's open when I get back. Unless you plan to go yourself.'

He paused. 'If there's mail you could pick it up.'

'Okay.' She smiled at him, relieved that he hadn't snubbed her again.

He nodded, hefted the pot-plant in his hand and said, 'Thank you. I'll take care of it.'

Next morning Blythe saw no sign of Jas as she passed his house. But at the end of the day, when the sun was already touching the seaward hills, she drew up outside and jumped out, a bundle of large envelopes in her hands.

Jas was seated at the desk in the front room, but as she approached he got up to open the door.

She held out the envelopes. 'Your mail.'

'Thanks.' He took them, paused and asked, 'How did the sales trip go?'

Her relief and excitement bubbled over. 'The potted sunflowers sold well. I've got orders for more, and a lot of interest in cut blooms when they're ready.'

'You made a wise decision, moving into sunflowers.'

'I hope so. Now I know I can sell them, I should buy more seed, later varieties. There's one called Autumn Beauty that sounds promising. On the other hand,' she added thoughtfully, 'I guess I shouldn't get too hung up on one crop. I've been striking some lavender cuttings...maybe I could market them directly to retail shops, like the sunflowers.'

She looked at him eagerly, then flushed. He seemed very aloof today, his expression a politely interested mask. She stepped back. 'Sorry, you're busy...'

As she made to turn away, he said, 'No, wait.'

Blythe reluctantly faced him again. 'I was thinking,' he went on slowly, almost as if he'd thought better of it already, 'a walk would be a good idea before it gets dark. I suppose you're too tired to join me?'

Surprised, Blythe gave him a wide smile. 'I'm not tired. I'll put the van away and meet you.'

She parked the van in the garage and waited on the track until Jas came along. There was no wind, and he wore a white T-shirt with jeans and sneakers.

She'd worn jeans today too instead of her usual shorts, with an ochre and rusty-red shirt that she'd thought smart enough for a business trip.

The sound of an engine made them turn. Jas's hand closed about her arm and drew her aside.

A utility truck was lurching along to the beach. Blythe waved and the vehicle drew to a halt, the engine still throbbing as the middle-aged driver rested a brawny brown forearm on the window opening and grinned at her. '*Kia-ora*, Blythe,' he greeted her.

Beside him a boy in his mid-teens leaned forward. 'Hi, Blythe.'

She stepped forward. 'How are you, Tau—and Shawn?'

'Good, good.' The man looked behind her to where Jas still stood at the roadside. 'You'll be the new fella in the Delaney place?'

Blythe introduced them, and Jas came to her side to shake the big, callused hand that Tau offered. 'Tau runs a garage at Apiata,' she explained.

'Fishing's good here,' Tau said. 'You tried it?'

'I'm not a fisherman, I'm afraid.'

'Come along and have a go,' the man suggested.

'How about you, Blythe?' Shawn asked eagerly.

She glanced at Jas. 'We're just going for a walk.'

The boy looked disappointed, and she added, 'We might come and watch for a while.'

'We'll give you some fish,' he promised. 'Eh, Dad?'

'Sure, if we catch any.' Tau had his foot on the accelerator. Winking at Blythe, he murmured, 'Kid's got a crush on you. See you, then,' he added more loudly, including Jas in his glance, and released the handbrake.

As the vehicle continued along the track, Jas said, 'Don't let me stop you joining your friends.'

'Not if you don't want to.'

'I thought we might climb to the headland. But maybe another time...'

'Fine,' she said. 'It's a great view, from there.'

There was a path of sorts between the scrub and scraggly seaside trees, slippery in parts and uneven. Blythe led the way, sure-footed and unflagging on the steep, uneven slope. At the top the vegetation was wind-sheared, and a track led to the very tip of the headland above a thrust of wave-burnished rocks.

The sun shimmered over the trembling water. In the distance Apiata sat washed in soft yellow light.

The two fishermen had reached the rock outcrop at the foot of the headland and were preparing their lines. Shawn looked up and waved. Blythe waved back.

'You'd know everyone around here?' Jas guessed.

'Just about.' Blythe sat on the wiry dry grass at their feet, drawing up her legs and hugging them. 'My brothers and sister and I spent lots of holidays here with my grandparents. Everyone was great to Gran and me after my grandfather died—and since she went the locals have all looked out for me.'

Jas sat with a forearm draped across a raised knee. Below, the fishermen threw out their lines and within ten minutes Tau reeled in a struggling silver fish.

'That didn't take long,' Jas murmured.

They watched Tau and his son bring in more fish, and admired the changing play of the gradually fading sunlight on the ocean, until the dazzling disc had settled on the horizon. Then Blythe stirred. 'We'd better go down before it gets dark.'

Jas offered her his hand, and although she didn't need help she took it, oddly disappointed when he dropped hers immediately afterwards. She wondered if her eyes, like his, reflected the fire of the setting sun.

'Let's go this way,' she suggested.

'Down the cliff face?'

'It's quite safe if you know what you're doing.'

She showed him the almost invisible steps in the cliff, and the handholds she'd known since childhood. Near the foot of the climb she grasped at the branch of an old pohutukawa, and the wood gave

way. She heard Jas give a sharp exclamation, felt herself slide, and came to an ignominious landing on her behind in a rock pool.

Jas was beside her before she'd struggled to her feet, his hands lifting her. 'Are you all right?'

Blythe laughed, despite the sure knowledge that she'd have a thumping bruise by tomorrow. 'I'm okay. Lucky I was nearly down, anyway. Thanks for picking me up.' She pushed a loosened curl from her eyes.

'Nothing bothers you, does it?'

He sounded oddly tense, and she cast him a wary look of surprise. 'A bit of water and a sore behind isn't worth making a fuss about.'

Shawn came bounding towards them across the uneven rock shelf. '*Blythe?* You okay?'

'I'm fine! Really.' Shawn's father was holding two rods and looking anxiously towards her, and she lifted a hand in reassurance. 'Just wet.'

Shawn followed her rueful gaze down at her jeans, soaked from waist to knees, and said cheekily, 'Suits you.' His admiring dark gaze returned to her face, and she gave him a primly reproving look, then spoiled it by laughing when he looked instantly abashed.

'We got some fish for you,' he said.

They picked their way across the rocks, and Tau turned to greet them again. He offered his rod to Jas, and when Jas shook his head, saying he'd no experience of fishing, Shawn cast him a look of teenage scorn, but Tau insisted on teaching him, while Shawn tied a couple of fish together and handed them to Blythe.

Blythe watched Jas's efforts with amused interest, and teased him with exaggerated admiration when he reeled in a respectable schnapper.

Jas grinned rather narrowly at her as he handed back the rod and thanked his tutor.

'Know how to gut it?' Tau asked him.

Jas shook his head. Blythe said, 'I'll do it,' and expertly cleaned and gutted the catch and attached a loop of twine while Jas watched with interest. She handed it to him and rinsed her hands in one of the rock pools, shivering in a gust of wind coming off the sea.

Tau said, 'You're cold. Want to borrow my jacket?' He indicated it, lying on the rocks.

'Mine'd fit better,' Shawn offered eagerly.

'No, we're on our way,' Blythe told them, 'but thanks. And thanks a lot for the fish.'

'No problem,' Tau assured her. 'We'll have to be packing it in soon too.'

Carrying his fish and hers, Jas walked beside her to where they could climb down from the rocks, and she paused to remove her shoes, ready to walk on the soft sand. Jas jumped down and turned to offer his hand. Blythe paused and stared at his palm, marred by a dark, bloody scrape. 'You're hurt!'

'It's nothing.' He transferred the fish to that hand and reached up with the other, gripping her hand.

She climbed down and grabbed his wrist as he swapped the fish back to his uninjured hand. 'That must sting.'

'I said it's nothing.' He pulled away from her.

'You did that coming after me when I fell?'

'It's not your fault.'

'You really didn't need to worry.'

'I wasn't the only one. Your young friend's a bit precocious, isn't he?'

'Shawn?' Blythe smiled. 'I've known him since he was knee-high. He's just being a teenager... practising. I'm sure his parents don't need to worry.'

'Are they worried?'

'He's been running round with an older crowd, boys who've left school. Tau and his wife think they're a bit rough. He's got a great family—he'll come right.'

'You think that will stop him going off the rails?'

'I'm sure it helps. Don't you agree?'

'Oh, yes.' His voice sounded flat. 'A caring family with decent values can make all the difference in the world.' As she glanced at him, he added smoothly, 'Isn't that what all the psychology books say?'

'I haven't read a lot of psychology,' Blythe confessed. 'But it seems plain common sense to me.'

He smiled suddenly, almost indulgently, his eyes warming in a way that made her heart skip a beat. 'And you have a lot of that.'

Blythe hoped it was a compliment.

When they reached the sandy flight of steps to the cottage Jas made to hand over Blythe's fish.

'Come in,' she said, 'and let me see to your hand.'

'There's nothing wrong with it—'

'Yes, there is. And I feel responsible.' She gripped his wrist. 'Come on.'

He could have pulled away, but instead he followed her up to the cottage, depositing the fish on the porch, and let Blythe lead him to the bathroom and switch on the light. She inspected his hand. 'That needs cleaning.'

She ran warm water into the basin and poured in a little disinfectant. But when she made to clean the wound, Jas firmly removed the cloth from her hand and did the job himself.

Blythe found a clean towel and gently blotted the water from his palm, then placed a piece of gauze over it. As she leaned forward to tape it with sticking plaster she felt his breath stir the tendrils of hair at her temples. But there was a resistance emanating from him, as though he hated her touching him.

Not a touchy-feely person, she thought, concentrating on her task.

As soon as she'd finished he stepped back, although there wasn't much room. 'I hope your conscience feels better now,' he said, a touch of irony in his voice.

'You're going to have trouble making a meal. Why don't I cook some of the fish, and we can eat together?'

'Here? You've had a busy day—'

'I have to have dinner anyway.'

After a moment he said, 'All right. Use my fish, and you can put yours in the freezer.'

She let him get the table ready, and while she prepared the meal he sat on the sofa and looked through a pile of library books she'd left on the coffee table—a book on contemporary Maori art, a romantic novel, a thriller and a biography of the painter Raphael.

'You have an eclectic taste,' he commented.

'I like variety.'

'Mm. So I see.'

In a very short time she'd served them fillets dribbled with lemon-and-parsley butter and accompanied by new potatoes and a fresh salad.

'That was very good.' Jas pushed away his plate. 'There's nothing like fish straight from the sea. Do you want a pudding? I can open a can of peaches—'

'No. Thank you.'

'Coffee, then.' Blythe got up to clear the plates.

When she put the cups on the coffee table he moved to the sofa beside her. The cup she'd given him was a hexagon, in alternating bands of green china and shining gold. He turned it interestedly, examining the pattern.

'That was my grandmother's,' she said.

'Tell me about her.'

She looked at him sceptically.

'I never knew my grandparents,' he said. 'Was she like you? Do you take after her?'

'Well...she was very independent...'

'A family trait. And...?'

Beginning hesitantly, she soon launched into family memories, watching his face for signs of boredom. He slipped in occasional questions, and listened with an expression of alert curiosity, like a tourist in a foreign land, curious about the local way of life.

At last she said, 'It's a shame you didn't know your grandparents. They must have died early?'

'My mother's parents did, and I think my father just lost touch with his.'

'That's sad. Do you have brothers and sisters?'

He put down his cup. 'I had two half-brothers,' he said rather curtly. 'I haven't seen them in years.'

'Why?' Her eyes rounded with sympathy.

'We didn't like each other much.' He picked up the Raphael biography and started leafing through it. 'You're interested in Raphael's work?'

Reluctantly, Blythe dropped the subject of his family. 'Art history was my best subject at school.'

'Why didn't you go to university?'

'I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and I was offered a job at the nursery where I'd worked in the school holidays. I'd enjoyed that, so I took it.'

Jas paused at a page, and Blythe leaned forward a little to see what had captured his attention. The illustration was a round design divided symmetrically into panels painted with different designs. She read the caption aloud. "'The Cupola of the Chigi chapel.'"

'It's an intriguing pattern.'

Blythe shifted closer to see, her shoulder brushing against his. 'It must have taken ages,' she murmured. 'And think what a crick in the neck he'd have had!'

Jas's laughter stirred her hair, and she turned to smile at him.

His face was only inches from hers, the laughter in his eyes making them softer, darker, and his mouth curved, creasing his cheeks. For once he looked relaxed and happy, but almost immediately his head went back, his eyes leaving hers and returning to the book in his hands.

He closed it with a snap, and replaced it carefully on the table. Then he stood up. 'Time I left,' he said, although it was still quite early. 'Many thanks for the dinner and coffee. Can I help with the dishes?' He glanced down at the dressing on his hand. 'I could dry.'

Blythe shook her head. 'There's not much. Don't worry about it.' If he wanted to go she wasn't going to make excuses to hold him. She followed him to the door, and watched him descend the steps to the road, and then he lifted a hand and walked away.

* * *

Blythe couldn't have said Jas was an intrusive neighbour. In turn she tried to respect his preference for privacy. Sometimes over the next few weeks they found themselves on the beach together and ended up strolling side by side. He watched her pick hare's-tails and dry grasses and gather up the spiny heads of spinifex blowing along the sand, and helped her sift through the sea-wrack left by the tide, hunting for its hidden treasures. Occasionally he arrived at her door with a piece of driftwood or a bit of sea-worn glass that he thought she might like for her notions.

She had less time for them now. The bigger sunflowers in the open ground were ready for picking, and she had to watch for the right moment, just before the flowers burst from their buds, to harvest them and get them to her markets in Auckland.

One overcast and rain-misted day, Jas knocked on her door.

He held a bundle of envelopes and a large parcel. The clouds had parted on a sliver of blue behind him, but his hair was hazed with tiny droplets of moisture. 'Your mail,' he said. 'Doug said you might want the parcel.'

'Oh, thanks!' A paintbrush in one hand, Blythe took the envelopes from him and stepped back. 'That'll be some craft books I ordered. Come in.'

She thought he was going to refuse, but he looked at the paintbrush she held and stepped inside.

'Where do you want this?'

'On the table,' she said, hastily clearing a space among paints and flowerpots.

He put down the carton and straightened, glancing at the pots she'd decorated with brightly hued patterns—dots, stripes and wavy lines, even bows.

'What do you think?' she asked him.

'Very colourful.'

'I thought plain green pots were a bit boring. The next batch of dwarfs I'm going to slip into these. D'you think they'll sell?'

'I'm not qualified to say.'

'Well, put it this way—would you buy one? With a sunflower in it?'

He picked up one of the pots by the rim, away from the wet paint. She had painted a bright yellow floppy bow on it, with red polka dots. 'I might have...once. Yes.' His voice had deepened, and the skin over his cheekbones seemed to tauten as he swallowed. 'I'm sure they'll sell.'

Blythe put her paintbrush down, reaching across beside him to place it in a jar of water, giving him a little time.

When he replaced the pot and lifted his head she looked at him searchingly but his face gave nothing away.

Then he smiled, a tiny movement of his firm lips. 'You've got a bit of paint on your cheek.'

'Damn, where?' She picked up a paint-stained cloth.

Jas took it from her and gently rubbed at her skin.

Their eyes met and she gazed at him curiously, seeing her own trustingly upturned face reflected in the dark centres as he looked

back at her. His hand had stilled and she was conscious of his thumb resting against her cheekbone.

His eyelids lowered, his narrowed gaze lingering on the soft, involuntary parting of her lips before he stepped back. 'There.' He put the cloth down.

Blythe stood for a moment, savouring a strange, bubbling delight. 'Stay for coffee?'

'You're working.'

He hadn't turned her down flat. 'Time I took a break.' She moved to put on the kettle. 'Want a biscuit?'

'Have you made some?'

'I'm afraid these are out of a packet.' She shook out a circle of ginger biscuits onto a plate.

He watched while she prepared the two coffees and added sugar into his, a splash of milk to her own. She had the feeling he was keeping his mind off something.

'The sun's come out!' she said, turning to the sliding glass doors. 'We could sit on the deck.'

Jas followed her gaze, then looked back at her. 'So it has.'

'Can you put a couple of folding chairs out for us? They're hidden behind the curtain.'

Jas set up the canvas chairs and took his cup from her, and she placed the biscuits on the low wooden table, still damp from the rain.

The sea was deep blue, stippled with white; a few clouds hung raggedly above it. The wet leaves of the nearby trees were glossily shining in the sun.

Blythe breathed in the metallic after-rain smell, stole a look at Jas's hard profile, then sipped at her coffee, cradling the cup in both hands. 'I'm investigating other uses for sunflowers and lavender. Did you know you can make paper from sunflower stalks and dyes from the petals?'

'Are you planning on making paper?'

'Maybe. What do you think of handmade swing tags with my name on, attached to every pot or notion?'

'Sounds good. What do you call yourself?'

'Just B. Summerfield.'

'Shouldn't you use a catchy trade name like...Blythe Blooms or...Summers Fields?'

'You could be right,' Blythe said. 'It didn't seem to matter when my main business was selling dried flowers to florists. But since the notions took off, and now the potted sunflowers... Blythe Blooms.' She gave him a delighted look. 'I like it. I wonder if I should advertise for mail orders and sell direct to the public?'

'Why not?'

'I'll have fun trying it out, anyway.'

'I've no doubt you will.'

Blythe bit her lip. She'd been sounding as if life were a game.

'What's the matter?' Jas asked.

'You think I'm a lightweight person, don't you? With no...depth.'

Jas's brows lifted. 'I think you're a lucky person,' he said slowly, 'who's been loved and cherished all her life. Also a hardworking one, and probably too kind-hearted for your own good.'

It wasn't an unflattering assessment, but it didn't contradict her original assertion, either. 'Weren't you ever loved and cherished?'

Jas didn't react for a moment. 'You're getting into deep waters. I wouldn't advise you to go any further.'

Blythe flushed. 'I had no right to say that. But you started it...'

'You asked.'

So she had. 'I'm sorry.'

'He seemed to be thinking, staring at the limitless view before them. 'I appreciate your concern, Blythe,' he said at last. 'Only I can't...satisfy your need to nurture. Keep that for your plants.'

CHAPTER THREE

HE WAS letting her down lightly. But at the same time leaving her in no doubt that he didn't want her prying into his life.

With a small flash of temper, she said, 'You needn't patronise me!'

'I wasn't. Not intentionally.' He glanced at the cup in his hand. 'Have I outstayed my welcome?'

'No, of course not. Finish your coffee.' She pushed the plate of gingernuts towards him.

He inclined his head, and reached for a biscuit.

Blythe too picked up a biscuit and nibbled it in silence. A breeze dipped over the hill and ruffled the tops of the trees. The clouds were drifting away, leaving more blue sky in their wake. The silvery, moving mass of the sea, breaking into long, uneven rollers near the shore, seemed to absorb all of Jas's attention.

'You have a wider view than I do,' he commented at last. 'But you must be pretty exposed.'

'It depends on which way the wind is blowing. If it's coming straight off the sea it can get pretty fierce. But I enjoy storms.'

He looked at her again. 'They can be destructive.'

'Well, you can't stop a storm from coming.'

'So you might as well get some pleasure from it?'

'Is there anything wrong with that?'

'Nothing at all.' For a few seconds longer he studied her, his gaze a little amused, a little speculative. Then abruptly he turned away. 'Don't you worry about your plants?'

'Of course. I give them good supports and protect them as best I can.'

Jas nodded, as though he was thinking of something else. He finished his coffee and refused another cup. 'I've kept you from your work long enough.' He stood up.

'And you have work to do too,' she guessed, thinking of the computer and the room set up as a study with books, folders and papers. She rose too, looking at him curiously as they moved inside. 'But you're not teaching at the moment, are you?'

'My students study by correspondence.'

She hadn't thought of that. 'Music?' *Could* people study music by mail?

'Not music.' He seemed to be debating whether to expand on that, but as she continued to gaze at him enquiringly he finally said, 'Mathematics.'

Blythe grimaced. 'Maths!'

'Pure mathematics,' he expanded, and added dryly, 'It tends to be a conversation-stopper.'

Yes, it would be. Was that why he hadn't volunteered the information before? 'Maths was my worst subject at school,' she confessed.

'You're not alone, but you probably mean arithmetic. Pure mathematics deals with puzzles and patterns and universal forms. It's full of mystery and magic.'

Blythe blinked disbelievingly. 'Magic?'

'Throughout the ages numbers have been recognised as mystical. Pythagoras founded a secret society dedicated to their study and worship.'

'They worshipped *numbers*?

'Uh-huh.'

'Do *you*?' She slanted him a questioning smile.

'They fascinate me.' His eyes were alight and very green. He glanced at the nets above them, laden with colour. '*You* might appreciate a comparison made by a mathematician called Barry Mazur, who says that number theory effortlessly produces innumerable problems which have a sweet, innocent air about them—like tempting flowers.'

'Flowers?'

'Mm-hmm.' The smile in Jas's eyes deepened, and she felt her heart give an odd little skip. 'He also says that it swarms with bugs waiting to bite the flower- lovers who, once bitten, are inspired to excesses of effort.'

'Flowers,' Blythe repeated. 'I suppose,' she said doubtfully, 'bugs do inspire extra effort in getting rid of them to preserve the flowers.'

'And now you know what a party-pooper a mathematician can be! I really am leaving.'

Halfway to Apiata the following Monday, Blythe came upon Jas's car, the hood raised while he inspected the engine. She drew up beside him. 'Can I help?'

Jas straightened. 'Only if you have spare parts for this thing. I think there's a crack in the carburettor.'

'I could give you a lift to Tau's garage at Apiata.'

'Thanks, that would be very helpful. Just a minute.' He opened the door of the station wagon and brought out his laptop computer and a portable printer, then climbed into the van beside her.

'Do you go everywhere with those?' Blythe enquired curiously. He was wise to remove them from the car before he left it, but she didn't think he'd need to worry about his house being burgled.

'I have a problem. I was told the printer is compatible with the laptop but they seem to have a difference of opinion. I was on my way to the branch supplier in Auckland.'

'Want to hitch a ride, then, after we've seen Tau? I'm on my way to Auckland.'

'That's very kind.'

Tau promised to go out and have a look at the station wagon, and if necessary tow it to the garage for repair. And Jas and Blythe returned to the van.

'Do you work for a correspondence school?' she asked after driving for a time in silence.

'University.'

'Victoria?' He'd told Rose he was from Wellington, and that was the only university she knew of there.

'Yes.'

'Sorry, it's none of my business.'

'It isn't a crime to ask.'

'No?' She raised her brows at him.

Jas looked rueful. 'Am I such an ogre?'

'Of course not,' she said swiftly, but couldn't resist adding, 'You and the Red Queen are entitled to your opinions.'

He looked blank.

'About people minding their own business.' She glanced at him.

A rare grin lightened his features. " 'If everybody minded their own business, the world would go round a deal faster than it does'? I think you'll find it was the Duchess, not the Red Queen, who expressed that *opinion*. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. *The Red and White Queens were in* Through the Looking Glass.'

'Darn! Trust a mathematician to be picky over details. It must be *years* since you read them.'

'Not so many.'

Blythe looked at him again. The grin had died. What had she said to bring back that chill, sealed look? 'Well, I'm sure it was the Red Queen who said, "Speak when you're spoken to!" Maybe I should take her advice.'

'And Alice argued that if everyone obeyed that rule nobody would ever say anything. I can't see you sticking to it, anyhow. Were you fond of Charles Dodgson's books as a child?'

'Dodgson's?'

'Sorry, you'd know him as Lewis Carroll.'

'Of course, he was a mathematician, wasn't he? When I first found that out I was astounded that a dry old mathematics lecturer could write such wonderfully imaginative stories.'

'Quite apart from the slur on my profession, I have to say Charlie was only in his early thirties when he wrote *Alice*, and as one approaching that venerable stage of life I feel bound to protest on his behalf.'

Relieved, Blythe laughed. 'I've revised my opinion of mathematicians since then.' She wasn't surprised that Jas was younger than she'd first thought.

'Have you?' The sudden light in his eyes that she surprised when she turned to him was surely something more than amusement.

She kept the smile on her face and her gaze on the road. But her heart was doing an odd little dance, and she felt slightly light-headed. 'You're not such a humourless lot,' she acknowledged.

'The Alice books have lots of sly little mathematical jokes in them.'

'Really? I must read them again.' She pressed her foot down to urge the van up a winding hill. Made bold by his more approachable mood, she said, 'I didn't realise university staff could work from so far away.'

He didn't answer immediately. 'I'm officially on leave, but I've been marking a few senior assignments and exam papers while I work on a project of my own.'

'A textbook or something?'

'Sort of.'

'I suppose it's highly technical.'

'It deals with advanced mathematical principles.'

Well, that took care of that subject, Blythe decided ruefully.

'Whereabouts is your supplier?' she asked as they neared Auckland.

He gave her an address on the North Shore. 'But drop me anywhere it suits you. I'll find it.'

'It's only a small detour,' she assured him.

When they found the place, Jas said, 'Thanks. Where can I meet you, and when?'

'I'm not sure what time I'll be through. Why don't we find out how long this is likely to take?'

The technician listened to Jas's explanation of the problem, and glanced at the program disks he'd brought along. 'How soon do you need it?' he asked, looking meaningfully at the rows of computer bits and pieces on the shelves of the workroom.

'I need it now.'

'Coupla days?' the man suggested.

'I hoped it might not take long. Perhaps you could just take a look?'

The man shook his head doubtfully. 'Got a service contract job, came in this morning. Can't look at this till at least this afternoon.'

Blythe leaned across the counter to fix pleading eyes on the technician's face. 'Dr Tratherne needs that computer for his work,' she

said earnestly. 'If you could just look at it soon—it might be a five-minute job? We're only in Auckland for the day, you see...'

'Well...I'll look at it as soon as I can,' the technician promised grudgingly. 'Come back this afternoon and I'll let you know.'

Blythe gave him a dazzling smile. 'That would be great. Thank you.'

She took Jas's arm and they left the shop before he said, 'Dr Tratherne?'

Blythe gazed at him innocently. 'You don't have a doctorate?'

'As a matter of fact, yes, I do.'

'All I did was give you your proper title.' Blythe wrinkled her nose. 'You don't want to hang about here,' she said. 'Unless you've got other things to do nearby?'

He studied her. 'I have nothing to do in Auckland now. Could I be any help if I came with you?'

'You can carry stuff, and make sure the van doesn't get pinched or towed away while I'm talking to my retailers. I've thought it might be useful to have an assistant on these selling trips, but I can't afford it.'

'Consider me your assistant for the day,' he said. 'I owe you a favour, anyway.'

'You're very into repaying favours, aren't you? It isn't always necessary, you know.'

'Not with you, perhaps.' He cast her a glance as they reached the van. 'But not everyone is as genuinely happy to help others.'

'I'm sure most people are.'

'Fine, you go on believing that.'

He turned out to be useful, handy at carrying trays of potted plants, patiently holding them if necessary while she made her sales pitch or while the shop owner cleared a space. She introduced him to her regular clients as 'my neighbour, who's helping me out today'. And exchanged a glance of amused exasperation with him when the male proprietor of an upmarket new shop she'd decided to target presumed they were partners and addressed all his remarks to Jas.

'You'd better talk to Ms Summerfield,' Jas suggested at last. 'I'm—um—just her assistant.' And he affected a look of such stoic simple-mindedness that it was all Blythe could do not to laugh aloud.

Jas muttered as they left, 'Do you often have to put up with that kind of stuff?'

'I don't usually have a man with me,' Blythe pointed out. 'I have to put up with all kinds of stuff—like men trying to hit on me, or people thinking I'm too young to run a business.'

'That's below the belt, Blythe.' He gave her a rueful smile.

She grinned. 'I don't let it bother me. Life's too short.'

'An admirable philosophy.'

'Ooh!' Blythe assumed a wide-eyed wonder. 'You talk just like a professor!'

The smile vanished, the aloof, shuttered expression that she'd come to dread returning to his face. 'I suppose so,' he said curtly. 'I don't mean to patronise... again.'

'I was joking,' Blythe assured him anxiously. 'Actually I like the way you talk—when you do.'

He looked as though he didn't believe her, the brief curl of his lip more indicative of sarcasm than forgiveness.

'Are you starved?' she asked him. 'I know a good cafe just two blocks away, and I can park near there.'

The cafe was filled with pop music and office workers, and when they entered Jas seemed a little fazed by the noise level, blinking as he looked about them. Blythe always enjoyed eating here, alone or with friends—the food was good and she found the total contrast to the quiet of Tahawai stimulating—but now she wondered if she should have chosen somewhere else.

They couldn't talk much, but she noticed Jas watching the people around them with silent interest, and tapping his fingers in time to the music while they waited for their meal to arrive.

As they sipped coffee afterwards the music became a bit quieter, and she asked, 'Do you hate it—this place?'

Jas looked surprised. 'Why should I hate it? The food was fine and the atmosphere is...interesting.' He studied her. 'I do wonder, though, if you don't sometimes feel isolated at the beach.'

'I love it there, and I get into the city often enough. Are you missing Wellington?' 'No. But then I'm not like you.'

'How do you know what I'm like?' she challenged him.

He looked down at her and then laughed. 'It's all there in your lovely flower-face, Blythe. Everything you are, everything you feel. You can't hide it any more than a sunflower can hide from the day. You draw people to you without even trying, and they can't help but respond to your warmth, your generosity, that innocent willingness to be friends with everyone, to open your heart without giving a thought to the possibility that you might get hurt.' He gave a faint, unexpected

grin. 'I bet your parents were tearing their hair trying to get through to you about stranger-danger when you were a child.'

She almost winced, supposing her chagrin at his hitting at least one nail squarely on the head was probably evident in her expression now. 'Yeah, well, thanks for the character reference,' she muttered, not at all sure she liked the portrait he'd painted of her, 'but has it occurred to you there could be more to me than meets your rather jaundiced eye?'

'Oh, yes,' he conceded quietly. 'You're also brave and gutsy and surprisingly efficient.' When her head lifted he added, 'No, strike the "surprisingly". I admit that was unfair. And you'd throw yourself headlong into a risky situation to save someone you're fond of. Or a stranger who needed help.' He paused. 'Even if the stranger had told you to mind your own business.'

'That,' she said, looking at him levelly, 'would depend on circumstances.'

'Like...?'

'I hope I wouldn't let someone drown or throw themselves from a building just because they told me to eff off.'

'Not even if they were convinced they'd prefer not to be helped by you?'

Blythe thought about it, then shook her head. 'Ninety per cent of suicide survivors had changed their minds after it was too late to stop the attempt.'

Jas raised his brows sceptically. 'Who told you that?'

'I read it somewhere. I don't believe you'd stand by and watch anyone hurt themselves either.'

'Exactly my point,' he said enigmatically, and met her puzzled stare with a short laugh. 'Hadn't we better be getting on?' He pushed back his chair and over her protest insisted on paying for them both.

It took her until they got back to the van to work out what he'd meant by his last remark, and as she started the engine her cheeks burned. He'd said that she'd rush into a situation without thinking of the possible dangers. And agreed that he wouldn't stand by and watch someone hurt themselves. He'd been warning her off. *Don't get close to me; I'll hurt you.*

He wasn't a cruel man. He'd been kind despite his determined distance from the world about him. He'd volunteered to meet her parents because he realised they'd worry about her, offered his help collecting seaweed when he scarcely knew her, been thoughtful enough to scavenge on her behalf when he took his lonely beach walks. And today he'd been really useful, and a good companion. But clearly he didn't mean to get involved.

At the computer repair shop the technician explained how he'd found a software problem and reprogrammed the set-up. 'You'll be okay now, Doc.'

Blythe avoided Jas's eyes as he paid the man and picked up his gear.

Back in Apiata Tau said apologetically that he'd brought in the station wagon but would have to wait for a part to come from Auckland before he could fix it. 'Tomorrow,' he promised. 'Should be ready about five.'

Jas climbed back in the van and Blythe drove the rest of the way to the gully.

'Thanks,' Jas said when Blythe stopped the van at his house. 'I'm grateful.'

'I was g—' She stopped herself using the word 'glad' and substituted lamely, 'going in anyway. Let me know if you want a lift back to the garage to pick up your car.'

'Thank you again.' He paused, with his hand on the door handle, for once looking indecisive. 'Can I offer you a drink? A return of hospitality is due, I think.'

'There's no need.'

'I didn't mean to make it sound like a duty thing. I don't feel like starting work now. And I could do with a drink. Will you join me?'

She turned off the engine and followed him to the house. When she stepped past him into the hall he said, 'I'm afraid the furnishings are minimal—I'm not set up for entertaining.'

He ushered her into the room where the keyboard was. 'I have some quite good white wine, and a few cans of beer—or would you rather stick with coffee?'

'Wine would be nice.'

'Sit down,' Jas invited her, and went off towards the kitchen.

The only seating was a dark blue sofa facing a long, low table standing on an oriental mat. The table held a crystal prism, the sun hanging over the hills striking the glass facets and throwing rainbow-coloured lights on the bare walls. Beside it lay an open book.

Sitting down, Blythe picked up the crystal, and watched the colours dance about the room as she turned it in her hands. Replacing it, she

glanced at the book, saw a complex-looking diagram, and passed an uncomprehending eye over the calculations on the facing page.

Turning her attention to the wedge of blue sea at the other end of the gully, she reflected that Jas had been right about the view, although she'd never particularly noticed before—it was beautiful and symmetrically pleasing, but limited.

Jas came in carrying an opened bottle, one wineglass, and a plain tumbler. He put them on the table and poured the wine, taking the tumbler and handing her the stemmed glass as he sat beside her.

He hadn't been kidding when he said he wasn't set up for entertaining. Blythe pictured him drinking wine from his one and only real wineglass with a solitary meal. But he did seem to have put on a little weight since coming here—his face was no longer verging on gaunt, his shoulders tautly muscular rather than bony.

Afraid of being caught staring at him, she hastily removed her gaze to look round her.

'I told you it was minimal,' he apologised.

'I quite like the room this way.' There was a simple elegance about the sparse furniture and the uncovered windows. 'And the prism's lovely.'

'Here's to sunflowers.' He leaned back into a corner of the sofa. 'The painted pots were going like hot cakes today. They must take a lot of time, though.'

'Not too much, and I—'

'You enjoy it.'

'Yes, I do. But if I'm going into cut flowers I'll have to travel into Auckland more often. I hope when I add up my costs in time and

petrol that it's going to be worth it. Maybe I should investigate other ways to get deliveries to the shops—bus or courier...'

'It wouldn't be as effective.'

'Why not?'

Jas looked amused. 'I've seen you in action, remember. Not too many people can resist appealing big brown eyes in a flower-face.'

Blythe's cheeks flushed hotly and her temples drummed. 'You think I trade on my looks to make a sale?'

'I didn't say—'

'I'm a businesswoman, and I make my sales on the merits of my products and my reputation for reliability and quality. I don't get them by...by batting my eyelashes at people!'

'That isn't what I meant.'

'What the hell *did* you mean, then?' Blythe snapped.

He stared at her as if she were a daisy that had suddenly displayed fangs. 'It was a compliment.'

'No, it wasn't! It was a condescending, demeaning sort of comment that—'

'Believe me, I don't go round demeaning people—women.' 'You just did!'

'Then I'm sorry. Put it down to...'

'To what?' Blythe demanded suspiciously, slightly mollified but still bristling.

'Never mind. I apologise.'

'To what?' Blythe insisted. 'Don't back off again!'

He shook his head. 'I suppose I was trying in an indirect way to say that you're a very attractive... girl.'

Blythe gritted her teeth. 'Woman,' she corrected him. 'Attractive...to you?'

He gave her an ironic little smile, his gaze slipping over her with veiled appreciation. 'You can't be unaware of how pretty you are.'

That word again. 'Thank you... I guess. But I'd just as soon be spared empty compliments.'

'Empty? If you mean insincere—'

'I just don't think that...' She swallowed, then managed to spit out the word. 'That *prettiness* is grounds for praise or congratulation. It's an accident that I'm stuck with whether I like it or not. Not something I've worked to achieve.'

Jas regarded her silently, and nodded. 'I see. I have apologised.'

Maybe he did see. Blythe gulped down some wine.

Her eyes lit on the open book before her, and the jumble of intersecting lines within a five-sided shape. 'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'It's a star!'

Jas followed her gaze. 'A star within a pentagon. The mystic symbol of the Pythagorean order.'

'Yes?' She waited. 'What's mystic about it?'

He shook his head. 'You're not really interested.'

'You mean I'm too dim-witted to follow,' Blythe said, resigned. It could be true.

'Not at all! If you really want to know...' He seemed nonplussed, searching her face.

'Yes, I do. Please.'

'Hang on a minute.' Jas put down his glass to go into the room across the hall, and came back with a pencil, handing it to her. His fingers, briefly touching hers, were warm, giving her an unexpected little leap of pleasure. 'Here.' He sat down, close enough for her to pick up his masculine scent, clean and slightly musky.

As he bent to point at the diagram before them, his sleeve brushed her bare arm. 'You see how the centre of the five-pointed star forms another pentagon?'

Blythe pulled her gaze from the way his hair had fallen across his forehead, and studied the picture. 'Yes. But it's upside down from the first one.'

'Draw a line from any corner to an opposite corner.'

Blythe put down her glass. 'In the book?' She looked at him, distracted by his closeness, noticing how dark his eyes seemed, alive and glowing. She saw a muscle in his cheek momentarily tauten, before he looked away from her and nodded.

She turned to the book on the table and did as he'd instructed, using the pencil lightly.

'Now across to the next opposite corner,' Jas said quietly. 'And again...keep going, that's right.'

She had drawn another star within the central pentagon—with another pentagon inside it. If she repeated the exercise in the smaller pentagon again... 'You could go on doing it for ever!' she realised.

He'd moved back into the corner of the sofa again, the liquid in his glass glowing pale amber in the fading sunlight. 'To infinity,' he agreed.

'Infinity,' Blythe repeated. 'It *is* mystical!'

'It's an illustration of the Golden Section.'

Blythe directed a quizzical look at him. 'Um... yes?'

Jas laughed, and she felt a small thrill of elation. 'Each time you divide a segment, the ratio or proportion of the whole thing to the larger section is the same as the ratio of the larger part to the smaller one. The height of the Parthenon in Athens in relation to the width is in that proportion. And the height and exactly half the width of the Great Pyramid at Giza.'

'The ancient Egyptians knew about this Golden thingy?' Blythe was fascinated.

'They wrote about a sacred ratio.' Jas drank some more wine and crooked his elbow on the back of the sofa to sit half facing her. 'Even today there's a society dedicated to the proposition that the "Divine Ratio" is God's gift to the world. The Fibonacci sequence—'

'The what?'

'Fibonacci was a thirteenth-century Italian who came up with a sequence of numbers relating to the Golden Section.' Jas paused. 'Your sunflowers conform to Fibonacci's numbers.'

Blythe blinked. 'They do?'

'The seed florets in a sunflower head are arranged in interlocking clockwise and anticlockwise spirals, right?'

'Mm-hmm. When they're small and tight you can see the pattern quite clearly. Sometimes they seem to go one way, and sometimes the other.'

'If the number of spirals one way is thirty-four, which it often is, the number in the other direction will usually be fifty-five.'

Blythe's brow knitted doubtfully. 'Wouldn't they be the same?'

'Trust me, they're not. Or it could be fifty-five and eighty-nine, or eighty-nine and a hundred and forty-four—all consecutive numbers in Fibonacci's sequence.'

'You've lost me,' Blythe confessed.

'The sequence is one, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one and so on.' His eyes intent on her face, he waited.

Blythe thought hard for a few seconds, then suggested uncertainly, 'You add two consecutive numbers to get the next one?'

'Top of the class.' Jas smiled at her. 'You're a bright girl. Woman,' he amended. 'The further the sequence goes, the more closely the ratio of the last number and the one behind it approaches 1 to 1.618...and innumerable decimal points—the Golden Ratio or Section.'

'But if you keep adding numbers, they'd pass it!'

Jas shook his head. Blythe was struck by the difference in him—the rigidly controlled, reticent manner replaced by enthusiasm and excitement and a patient willingness to share his knowledge with her. 'With minor fluctuations the ratio between the Fibonacci numbers

moves towards the Golden Section and then it remains more or less constant.'

'It does?'

Jas indicated the Pythagorean diagram. 'You saw for yourself, if you kept drawing stars within the pentagons there would very quickly be little actual difference between the size of the smallest drawings.'

It wasn't easy to grasp. 'You mean, even though the Fibonacci numbers get bigger, the difference in *proportion* between later numbers gets smaller—until there's practically no difference at all?'

'Right. Beyond the twentieth number, dividing a number in the Fibonacci series by the previous one will always give a result of 1.618.'

'Uh-huh.' Blythe nodded wisely, and Jas laughed again. She smiled back, a bubble of laughter rising in her own throat.

'You can do it on a calculator,' he said, 'if you don't believe me.' He finished his wine and poured himself some more, silently querying if she wanted a top-up, but she shook her head. 'Anyway, I didn't invite you in here for a lesson in mathematical theory.'

'But it's interesting!' Blythe admitted with surprise. 'What did you do with the sunflower plant I gave you?'

'It's on my bedroom windowsill. Living up to its reputation.'

'Reputation?'

""...the sunflower turns on her god, when he sets, the same look which she turn'd when he rose." My music teacher was surprisingly fond of sentimental Irish songs.'

'Surprisingly?'

'She was a stern lady, didn't appear to have a sentimental bone in her body.'

She wasn't the only one, Blythe thought. 'I have a feeling you don't approve of sentiment.'

'I'm sure it has its place.'

It was a lukewarm endorsement. Blythe finished her wine. 'I'd better be going.' It was the first time he'd invited her in, and she didn't want to stay too long and make him regret it. 'Let me know when you want a lift into Apiata to pick up your car.'

'Next time you go in will do. Just give me a toot.'

'Okay. Thank you for the wine—and the maths lesson. I'll go and count some sunflower florets.'

She left it late the next day to collect her mail, and picked Jas up on the way. Despite the rapport she thought they had established, he seemed as distant as ever, responding to her effort at conversation with polite but minimal, uninformative replies. He thanked her for the lift, collected his car and went to the store to pick up his own mail, and was gone before she'd finished chatting with Tau.

She didn't think she'd misread the signs. Jas did find her attractive—if in a detached sort of way—he'd even obliquely admitted it. But he wasn't going to do anything about it.

Why?

There could be any number of reasons. Maybe he was married. Now there was a goody, for starters. If so it was an odd kind of marriage. Perhaps he was separated, and still raw. A distinct possibility, she thought with a sinking feeling in her stomach. Men who were neither married nor unmarried, but in that limbo state when a divorce might or might not follow, were bad news. She'd be crazy to get involved with one of those.

For all their rather tentative rapport, she still knew almost nothing about him.

Well, maybe she could remedy that.

Next time she saw Jas go down to the beach Blythe stripped off her gardening gloves and followed, joining him as he strolled along the sand.

He greeted her with a slightly absent smile as she fell into step silently beside him.

Jas stooped to pick up a short piece of whitened driftwood. 'You don't want it, do you?' he asked her. It was a fairly uninteresting bit of flotsam.

Blythe shook her head.

He drew back his arm and hurled the stick into the waves. It landed beyond a tossing line of foam, and bobbed on the water, drifting seawards.

'It might end up in South America,' Blythe said. 'I suppose you could calculate the currents and work out the odds.'

'Oceanography isn't my field.'

'Did you always want to be a mathematician?'

He shrugged. 'I'm not sure when it dawned on me that I could earn a living from numbers.'

'Did you ever think of earning a living with your music?'

'I prefer to keep that for...private moments.'

Because he was reluctant to display the passion that he put into it? If he were to mount a concert stage and play as powerfully as he did when he thought himself alone with his keyboard, he'd be revealing that part of himself that he seemed so determined to hide beneath a steely facade.

He lapsed again into seemingly preoccupied silence.

'Is something wrong?' Blythe enquired at last.

'I've been wrestling with a rather tricky problem. That's why I came here, to be away from... distractions.' He gave her a rueful glance, and for no reason she could discern followed it with a small laugh.

'Shall I go away?'

'No!' He actually put out a hand and grasped her arm as she made to turn from him, then dropped it immediately. 'I meant, that's why I came to stay at Tahawai.'

'Can I help?' she offered diffidently.

'It's a mathematical problem.'

Crestfallen, Blythe was silenced.

Perhaps he noticed. After a long moment he said, 'I'm working on proving a complex theorem that could lead to something mathematicians have been trying to solve for many years. I'd be grateful if you don't tell people about that.'

'Is it a secret?'

'I don't want everyone in the mathematical community to know I've tried...and failed.'

Blythe glanced at him sideways, guessing that he'd hate that. 'Have you failed?' she asked bluntly.

'Actually I think I'm finding my way towards success, but I can't see the next step.'

'What is a theorem, exactly?' Blythe knew now that he wouldn't laugh at her, no matter how elementary the question.

'A mathematical statement. A proposition.'

'One plus one equals two?'

'Basically yes.' He smiled, making her heart do its now familiar little flip-flop. 'It's relatively easy to provide proof of that.'

'I suppose your theorem is too complicated to explain to me?'

'It would take some time and bore you to tears.'

He meant she wouldn't understand. Well, he was probably right.

A receding wave left in its wake something small and gleaming. Blythe veered to pick up a perfect, intact fan-shaped shell, delicately pink and edged with purple. Enchanted, she stood with it on her palm for him to admire, her back to the water.

'Watch out!' Jas lifted a hand and dragged her forward. A wave foamed round her ankles and calves, and she bumped against Jas, a hand momentarily on his chest as she steadied herself.

'Thanks! Even if it was a bit late.' She grinned up at him.

His hands tightened momentarily, but he released her without comment, and turned away to keep on walking. Blythe looked after him for a second or two, then pocketed the shell and caught him up, wondering what she'd done or said to make him withdraw again. Maybe he found her silly and feckless, falling into rock pools, standing with her back to the sea, not caring about the odd wetting.

Anxious not to make another blunder, she walked at his side in silence. After a while she dared to peek at him.

Jas was looking back at her. 'What is it?'

'I didn't say anything,' she protested.

'You look as though you're dying to.'

Blythe shook her head. 'I just thought...'

'What?'

'That I was annoying you.'

'You're not annoying me. I'm not very good company, I know. But that's nothing to do with you.'

'I'm not complaining.'

He stared curiously down at her. 'I have the feeling you seldom do.'

'I may look like Pollyanna,' she said tartly, 'but you shouldn't judge people by appearances.'

'I suppose I must plead partially guilty. I did think you were a teenager at first.'

'Well, now you know I'm a grown woman.' She looked at him with deliberate challenge.

He stopped walking, and his eyes suddenly blazed, his face going taut and dangerous. 'Did you think I hadn't noticed?' he asked softly.

CHAPTER FOUR

BLYTHE had to stop too, caught by the unmistakable glint in his eyes.

She blinked, her lips parting hopefully in involuntary response.

And then he jerked his head backwards and swung round to walk away from her. He picked up a piece of driftwood lying on the sand, and hurled it into the water, watching it splash in a hail of golden droplets and then bob away.

He jammed one hand into his pocket and turned to her. 'Coming?' he asked. 'Or have you had enough?'

Maybe she had imagined that split second of searing sexual awareness, when his eyes had unwittingly revealed what he was so determined to hide. 'No,' she said, keeping her gaze guilelessly on his face. 'I...don't mind going further. Unless you want to turn back?'

She couldn't see the expression in his eyes any more. He was too far away and the light was dimming.

Jas didn't answer, but shook his head and waited for her to rejoin him.

When she reached him there was nothing in his expression but mild impatience. Not wanting him to read her disappointment in her face, Blythe stooped to pick up a small piece of pink seaweed resembling a miniature, lacy tree. 'You were right about the sun-flower heads. I counted some.' She smoothed the salty, wet tendrils absently against her palm.

'The world is full of numbers—or at least natural phenomena that can be expressed and described as numbers. That seaweed, maybe.'

'This?'

One lean finger traced the centre stem of the piece in her hand, and a tiny shiver of pleasure warmed her. 'See how the branchlets are spaced down the stem—the ratio between the spaces may match Fibonacci's sequence.'

A few weeks ago she would have regarded that as the remark of a man with the heart of a calculator. 'Is that how you see the world?' she asked thoughtfully. 'As a...a series of number systems?'

'Numbers are symbols—just like words. Where a writer describes the world in terms of words, a mathematician uses numbers.'

'Because numbers are more...precise?'

'Perhaps.' He shot her a look. 'I think I took to mathematics because I wanted to impose order on my world. But in nature the order already exists. All I do is try to define it.'

Softly she asked, 'Why do you feel order is important?'

He glanced at her again, and then lifted his gaze to the wide sea—deep indigo now, turning translucent green as it broke into curling waves and raced towards the sand. 'I'm sure you had a happy, secure childhood. Mine wasn't like that.' His voice had gone flat and emotionless.

'I'm sorry. How...how bad was it?'

She turned a troubled gaze on him, but his eyes met hers only momentarily. He shrugged. 'Others have fared much worse.'

'That doesn't help you, though, does it?' she guessed. 'If you want to talk about it...'

'The last thing I want to do is talk about it! I don't see any point in picking at old wounds. What are you planning to do with that seaweed?' he asked her. 'Make it part of your craft work?'

Blythe had forgotten she still held it. 'It would just wither and die. I picked it up because it's pretty, but I don't really have a use for it.' Regretfully, she let it drop back to the sand, and dusted damp grains from her hands.

'You gained some pleasure from it.'

'For a minute.'

'All human pleasures are transient. Some more so than others.'

Blythe considered the idea. 'I suppose you're right.'

And he had successfully deflected her from the subject of himself. Again. He was awfully good at that. 'How long have you been at Victoria?' she asked him, returning to the attack.

'Seven years.'

He was back to his usual taciturn self, probably regretting that he'd confided in her.

'How did you hear about the Delaney place?' she asked.

'Through a rental agency.'

The trouble was, Blythe reflected, that his apparently obliging but minimal answers forced her to keep asking questions, and that made her sound like an inquisitor.

She said, 'Mrs Delaney went to live with her daughter up north, but I know she didn't want to sell.'

I suppose the family thought they might as well get some rent for it.' She slanted a look at him. 'You must find it awfully quiet after living in Wellington.'

'I find it very peaceful.'

'It's that, all right. You must miss your friends.' She supposed he was used to moving in clever, sophisticated circles.

'I've never found it necessary to surround myself with people.'

'Well...neither do I. I've lived here on my own for over a year,' she reminded him. 'But it's nice to know there are people who care about you, and to be with them sometimes.'

Jas smiled slightly. 'I'm sure it is.'

Blythe was shocked into silence. He spoke as if he didn't know what that meant. She tried to imagine being without family or friends, and was horrified at the picture that was conjured up.

The following Saturday a battered car with a couple of surfboards tied to the roof came lurching along the track to her cottage.

'We got the wrong house at first,' Gina said, giving her a hug as her flatmates tumbled out of the car, laughing.

'The guy didn't look too thrilled,' one of the young men added. 'I don't know if he even believed we were friends of yours.'

Blythe looked towards the old house and saw Jas standing on the veranda. She waved, and after a moment he went inside and shut the door.

Had he been checking that her visitors were welcome? She wasn't sure whether to be touched, or annoyed.

Blythe dug more surfboards out of the basement and the group braved the waves. Later Blythe lit the wood stove and made soup and toast and scones, and they played Scrabble and told silly jokes until after midnight.

By Sunday the weather had turned windy, the sky a steely sheet of cloud. Blythe and her friends enjoyed the high, unpredictable waves for a while, then had a disorganised game of beach cricket to warm up. At low tide they all dug for pipis, taking the shellfish back to the cottage to make into fritters.

It was dark before the group departed, tooting the horn several times in raucous farewell as the car shook and rattled its way along the gully, while hands waved from the open windows.

Blythe hadn't seen Jas all weekend, though a couple of times she'd heard music emanating from the old house.

Near the end of the week, when she handed over some mail she'd collected for Jas, he took the envelopes with a cool word of thanks and said, 'You have more visitors. It's becoming a regular weekend occurrence.'

'Twice doesn't make it regular,' she argued mildly. 'But I'm not expecting anyone. Do you know who they are?' She couldn't see a car.

'A trio of...young men. They seem to know you. One of them came over and asked me if I knew how long you'd be gone. I could come home with you if you like.'

'Thanks, but I'm sure it's all right. If I have a problem I'll scream. Loudly.' She grinned at him.

'Do that.' He didn't smile back.

When she drove to her garage she found a rainbow-painted station wagon parked cheekily beside it, and suspected the identity of her guests even before she found her unmarried brother Micky ensconced in the cottage with two of his friends from university, eating fish and chips that they'd presumably bought in Apiata.

One was a cousin, but she had never met the lanky, ruggedly good-looking young man who rose to offer his hand.

'This is Chuck.' Micky waved a casual hand as hers was enfolded in a warm clasp. 'He owns the chariot out there.'

'Charles Middleton Holden,' the young man said, and released her hand to brush back an auburn curl of his thick, shoulder-length hair.

'You're American?' Blythe guessed.

'Guilty. I'm on an exchange scholarship.'

'I told the guys you wouldn't mind us bunking down in the spare room,' Micky said. 'We thought we'd get in a weekend of surfing.'

'Of course I don't mind.' Blythe took a chip from the grease-stained brown bag her brother offered. 'Are you skipping lectures tomorrow?'

'Nah. Well, only one. Tried to phone you.'

'I must have been out of the van. I've just come back from a sales trip.'

Micky swallowed a piece of fish. 'Thought that was Mondays?'

'I go to Auckland twice a week now—building up a market for the sunflowers. I hear you've been bothering my neighbour.'

'Hoped he might know how long you'd be away. Suspicious sort, isn't he?'

'He's just cautious.' And maybe tired of being interrupted by people looking for her.

'Mum said someone was living there. She reckoned he was okay. Nice, she said.'

'He is okay. Mum thinks everyone's nice—even you.'

'That's because I am.' Micky grinned.

'Huh! So give me a bit of that fish you're hogging, why don't you?'

Micky and his friends crawled out of bed at mid- morning, and made for the surf. On Saturday Blythe commandeered their cheerful help to adjust some plant supports and spread compost over the flowerbeds, and in the afternoon she joined them on the beach.

Chuck was a better surfer than any of them, and undertook to coach Blythe in some of the finer points. He wore a wetsuit but Blythe had merely donned a one-piece swimsuit. When he realised she was getting goose-flesh he urged her out of the water and folded a towel around her, apologising all the while.

'It's not your fault,' she told him. 'I should have come out sooner.' She was colder than she'd realised—shivering. 'I'd better go home and get dressed,' she admitted.

'I'll come with you,' he insisted. Waving to the other two still in the water, he hurried her across the beach with a warm arm about her shoulders.

Descending the other side of the saddle, Blythe saw Jas coming towards them. He seemed to hesitate at the sight of them, but then walked forward, giving her a curt nod as they drew close.

'Jas,' she said quickly, 'this is—' She turned to her companion and with a small grin went on, 'Charles Middleton Holden. Jas Tratherne.' She completed the introduction. 'My neighbour.'

'Hi,' Chuck said, briefly flashing his splendid American teeth. 'Sort of met yesterday, didn't we? Excuse us—this girl needs warming up.' He turned the smile to Blythe, rubbing her shoulders through the enveloping towel with his big hands. 'Catch you later.'

Jas looked sharply at Blythe. 'Is something wrong?'

'I just stayed in the water a bit too long.'

'My fault,' Chuck said remorsefully.

Blythe tried to forestall a new round of apologies. 'No, I was having fun.'

'Well, we'd better get you inside.' He nodded to Jas and urged her along the track.

Turning, she saw Jas looking after them, but then he swung round and proceeded on his way to the beach.

By the time the other two trudged back to the cottage she'd had a warm shower and, in jeans and a sweater, was curled up on her sofa, drinking hot cocoa brewed by Chuck. On Sunday she declined to go with them, spending the day painting pots, but she fed them whenever they reappeared, and made them soup and a stack of pancakes before they departed at dusk with much tooting of the horn and shouts of farewell competing with pop music blasting from the car's stereo system.

That night Jas played an entire concerto on the keyboard, full of great crashing chords and torrential melodies. Lying in bed listening, Blythe wondered what had made him so angry.

* * *

Over the next couple of weeks Jas seemed more elusive and preoccupied than ever.

Telling herself there was no point in mooning over a man who was patently not interested in anything more than the most distant friendship, Blythe determined to pursue her social life elsewhere. A couple of times she stayed overnight in Auckland with friends or family, even a whole weekend. And when the weather became milder and summery, she issued invitations to a beach party.

She went across the gully to knock on Jas's door and tell him, 'Saturday I'm having a barbecue on the beach. You're welcome to come along.'

'That's kind of you, but I don't think so, thanks.'

'Why not?' It wasn't as though he could say he had a previous engagement, surely—he never went anywhere,' or had any visitors of his own.

'You'll have your friends.'

'I want to be friends with *you*!' It sounded childish, she realised with chagrin. 'I thought we were.'

'I wouldn't fit in.'

'You don't even know who's going to come. My friends are actually quite nice!'

'I wasn't suggesting there's anything wrong with them. You must have noticed I'm not good with people. I've managed to offend even you more than once.'

Blythe's brow creased. 'You'll never be good with people if you don't meet them. Anyway, you were perfectly fine with my mum and dad. They liked you.'

'They said so?'

'Yes. I like you too.' She stared at him defiantly.

'But then,' he said gently, 'you like everyone, don't you?' It wasn't quite true, but it was certainly rare for her to dislike anyone unless they'd given her good reason. 'I wish you'd come,' she said. 'You might enjoy it.'

Late on Saturday a procession of cars bumped along the uneven track, and a train of Blythe's friends and relatives trooped over the ridge to the beach carrying an assortment of food and barbecue tools, blankets and guitars, and a ghetto blaster.

A few hardy souls went swimming or surfing while the water still held the warmth of the day, and the fire, fed by driftwood enthusiastically collected, blazed well for a while. When it died to a red glow everyone tucked into grilled sausages and steaks with a variety of salads, and potatoes cooked in the embers.

Blythe tried to stop herself from hopefully scanning the sandy slope for Jas's tall figure. When he appeared over the ridge she jumped up from the sand where she'd been sitting between Micky and Chuck and ran to meet him.

'Thank you for coming!' She seized his hand, afraid he'd change his mind, and led him over to the group about the fire. 'This is Jas,' she told them. 'You've met—'

'Charles,' he interrupted, nodding to the young American. 'Yes, we've met.'

'And my brother Micky, and this is Gina...and Chris...' She added more names and said, 'You won't remember them all, but come and sit down.'

Micky made room, and handed Jas a can of beer.

'So you're Blythe's brother?' Jas commented.

'Didn't I say?'

'I'm not.' Chuck hung a casual arm about Blythe's shoulders and grinned hopefully, wagging his eyebrows.

Blythe was an expert at dealing with that sort of thing. She'd never wanted the complication of an involvement with one of her brothers' friends. Smiling, she casually disengaged herself and got up to balance some more sausages on the makeshift grill over the fire. Before sitting down again, she sent Chuck a meaningful look, and he returned a sheepish, good-humoured grimace.

Micky was telling Jas about his university courses, and after a few minutes someone called to Blythe, asking if there was any tomato sauce. She found it, rescued some sausages from burning, and handed one wrapped in a bread roll to Jas. But now a girl was sitting in the place beside him, chatting to Chuck, and another yell of, 'Hey, Blythe!' sent her to the far side of the fire.

Joining a good-natured dispute on the merits of several pop groups, all she could do was smile across the fire at Jas now and then and

hope he was enjoying himself. He didn't seem to be talking much, but was watching the other guests intently, and every so often he would send her a barely perceptible smile, as if to reassure her that he was having a good time.

As dusk fell the struggling stars were obscured by cloud, and when the darkness deepened people piled more driftwood onto the fire and sat huddled around it, singing and talking.

Micky got up to get himself some more food and she slipped into his place. 'You seem to get on with my brother,' she murmured to Jas.

'He's a friendly young man. It must run in the family.'

His shoulder was against hers, and she resisted an urge to snuggle closer. Instead she wrapped her arms around upraised knees and asked, 'Are you glad you came?'

'Yes, I suppose I am.' He paused and added, 'That sounds ungracious. Right now—' he smiled down at her although his voice was grave '—I'm very glad.'

Blythe tipped her head, her eyes wide and enquiring. 'Are you flirting with me?' she asked him hopefully.

For a moment he seemed taken aback. Then he laughed a little and shook his head. 'I don't flirt.'

'Maybe you should try it,' Blythe advised him. 'It can be fun.'

The strangest expression flitted over his face. 'I suppose so.'

Behind her Chuck laughed, and a girl's laughter joined his—young, carefree.

Jas's eyes left hers for a moment and looked beyond her, then returned to her face, his own a little stern. His voice lowered to a deep purr that sent a small, warm shiver through her. 'Would you like me to flirt with you, Blythe?'

She stared back at him, thinking that she *would* like it, but not if he didn't mean it. Not if there wasn't any real feeling behind it. 'Maybe.'

'It, could be risky,' he warned.

'How?' *Why?* she meant. Why wouldn't he allow this fitful, glimmering attraction between them the chance to flower?

Tjh not a suitable subject for experimentation,' he said.

Experimentation? Blythe blinked at him indignantly. 'That wasn't what I—'

And then without warning huge drops of rain began to fall.

Jas stood up, whipped the blanket they'd been sitting on around Blythe's shoulders and set to work with the others gathering up plates and bottles and other things. Everyone scrambled to rescue the gear, and scampered to the cars. By that time they were all wet, and Blythe suggested hot drinks at the cottage.

They crowded into the main room, and while Micky, with Chuck's fascinated help, lit the fire in the stove Blythe produced a stack of towels, then put on the kettle. Spare beer, wine and soft drinks had been salvaged, and soon people were sitting on every chair and sprawled on the floor.

Jas wasn't there. He must have taken the chance to slip off back to his own place.

The party continued into the small hours and some couples even tried to dance in what remained of the floor space. The rain pelted on the roof, but the noise level inside the crowded cottage negated the sound.

Chuck had drunk more than he'd meant to and was very happy, but when he stood up his legs wouldn't hold him. 'That New Zealand beer packs a punch,' he admitted as Micky steered him towards a bunk in the spare room.

When the guests reluctantly left it was obvious that Chuck was going nowhere tonight. His passengers were distributed to the other cars with drivers who had limited their alcohol intake, and they all left with toots and cheers and waves.

In the morning Blythe made breakfast for the overstayer and sent him blearily on his way. She was waving the car off when she saw Jas emerge onto his veranda and start down the steps. He paused on the overgrown path as the car lurched and groaned towards him, allowing it to pass before he swung onto the track.

Ready to climb back to the cottage, Blythe hesitated and waited for him.

'Thanks for the party,' he said formally.

'You left early.'

'Your place is small for a crowd. I didn't think I'd be missed.'

'One more wouldn't have made a difference. I hope we didn't make too much noise.'

'Don't worry about it.' He nodded to her and went on his way.

She wondered if Jas had enjoyed himself at all— or simply thought her and her friends shallow and frivolous.

He wasn't an easy man to get to know. Yet now and again she'd caught a glimpse of warmth, of enthusiasm, even excitement dammed up behind that wall of detachment. And of an unwanted sexual attraction—to her.

Her cheeks grew hot and a prickling sensation ran over her skin. Surely she'd thrown out enough hints to Jas—even told him point-blank that she liked him. He'd turned that aside with a generalisation and walked away.

He hadn't even said he liked her in return. A tremor of doubt shook her. Maybe he found her a nuisance —offering to do things for him, collecting mail, running errands, issuing unwanted invitations...even inviting him to flirt with her. She'd never done that before.

But there was that rarely glimpsed glitter in his eyes that he couldn't hide, the unspoken but unmistakable male-to-female message: *I find you desirable*.

Despite that, he'd made it patently clear that he didn't want to get involved. So if she got her fingers burned she had only herself to blame.

While she was having lunch a couple of days later a storm warning was broadcast on the radio. A cyclone sweeping across the Pacific from the Islands had veered towards New Zealand and was expected to come howling down the coast during the night. It had lost some of its force and the eye would probably be well out to sea, but winds of up to a hundred kilometres an hour were forecast.

She'd need to cut all the flowers she could and make sure the rest were as secure as possible.

She 'was already working in the garden when it occurred to her that Jas might not have heard the radio warning. Did he even have a radio? Blythe wasn't sure. She hesitated only a moment or two before pulling off her gloves and going down to his house.

His door was open, and at her knock he emerged from the kitchen at the rear, a tea-towel in his hands. 'Hello.'

'Hi.' She tried to gauge his expression, and decided it was wary. 'Um...have you heard the cyclone warning?'

'Cyclone?'

'They said on the radio the edge of it's supposed to hit us some time tonight.'

'Well, as you told me once, there's not a lot we can do about it.'

'You should probably make sure your windows are secure, and...you don't have outdoor furniture or anything that's likely to be picked up and thrown through a window, do you?'

'No, but I'll check around the place for anything loose.'

'Well...I'll leave you to it.'

'Thanks for telling me.' As she turned and started down the steps, he said, 'Blythe?'

'Yes?' She stopped to face him.

'Will you need any help to prepare for this? Your flowers won't stand cyclone winds, will they?'

She couldn't keep a note of worry from her voice. 'I'm going to pick as many as I can today and put them into drums of water.'

'Your tunnel house—it's only plastic.'

'It's on the sheltered side of the hill and sturdier than it looks. I just have to cross my fingers and hope.'

'I'll come and help you pick.'

'But you're busy.'

'Not too busy to help out a friend.'

A friend. She was so glad to hear him say that, she flashed him a brilliant smile. 'Thank you. But are you sure—?'

'Give me fifteen minutes and I'll be there.'

CHAPTER FIVE

BLYTHE showed Jas how to cut the stalks of the budding sunflowers at an angle. They worked quickly, gathering the stems into bundles and plunging them into the big drums that Blythe had prepared with a mixture of water and a treatment agent.

Several people phoned to check she'd heard the warning, and asking if she needed help. She thanked them and told them she had help already. Micky offered to bring some friends along but she assured him everything was under control.

As she laid down the phone Jas thrust another bundle of sunflowers into a drum. 'Had you thought of putting them in the garage?' he asked her, glancing dubiously at the white plastic overhead.

'They'd wilt in there.' The garage was corrugated iron and the day was still deceptively sunny and hot.

Blythe had found a straw stetson that her father sometimes used and made Jas put it on. She wore a wide hat herself, and a loose sleeveless shirt over her shorts. Each time she took more blooms to the tunnel house she splashed a little cool water on her face and under her arms from the tap outside, but she could feel sweat gathering between her breasts.

Jas was sweating too, the back of his T-shirt darkened and damp. At one point he straightened, removed the hat to wipe his forehead with his hand, and said incredulously, 'You normally do this on your own?' 'I don't usually harvest so many at once. And I pick in the evening or early morning.'

When a little later Jas stripped off his shirt and used it to wipe his forehead again before tossing the shirt to the ground, Blythe took out the tube of sunscreen she always kept in the back pocket of her shorts and handed it to him.

Jas gave her a quizzical look but spread the cream on his arms and chest while she pretended to be occupied tying a bundle of stems together.

He had a nice chest, not too hairy. There was no spare flesh on him, but his upper arms were quite muscular for a man with a sedentary occupation. Maybe he lifted weights. Or books, she thought, smiling inwardly as she knotted the binding about the thick stems of the sunflowers. He had plenty of those to heft around.

As she straightened he replaced the cap on the tube and gave the sunscreen back to her. 'Thanks.'

'Turn around,' she said briskly, unscrewing the cap again. He couldn't have reached his back.

He didn't do it immediately, and she repeated, 'Turn around. It's your back that's most likely to get burnt.'

Jas turned, and stood with his hands on his hips while she squeezed white goo onto her palm and spread it quickly across the firm, warm flesh. She had to stop her hand from lingering, her thumb from exploring the intriguing groove of his spine. It was done in seconds and she stepped back. 'There.'

Jas's shoulders moved as he took a breath. 'Thanks,' he repeated, his voice muffled. Without looking at her he returned to cutting the sunflowers.

When they'd picked all those that were close to flowering, they checked the ones that couldn't be harvested yet, making sure their supports were secure. Blythe brought out a roll of fine netting from the tunnel house and they made a tent over some of the more vulnerable plants. A whippy wind had sprung up, maybe the first hint of what was to come, and they had some trouble getting the net secured.

'Thank you.' Blythe removed her hat to smooth damp curls from her forehead. 'I'm really grateful.'

Jas had picked up his shirt, but held it bundled in his fist, and as she watched he absently wiped his chest. 'No problem,' he said. 'What about your house?' He looked up at the cottage, frowning. 'You're very vulnerable.' Beyond the hill a low, sooty sheet of cloud threatened the sun.

Blythe wrenched her gaze to his face again. 'I'll be all right.'

A gust of wind came racing down the hill, bending the tops of the trees, and flipped the hat from Jas's head, sending it spinning into the air before it fell. He grabbed for it and missed, and then they both went after it as it scudded away. They reached it at the same time, their spread hands encountering each other's as they dived forward and held the brim flat to the ground.

Jas's fingers lay over hers for a second, and their heads were so close together that when she lifted her eyes she could see the length of his lashes, and the shape of his mouth, firm and well-defined.

His eyes kindled and his gaze lowered to her own mouth. Her lips parted on a soft breath.

Then he moved back and his warm fingers left hers. 'It's your hat,' he said.

Blythe picked up the hat and straightened. 'Are you married?' she asked baldly.

She thought he almost winced. His eyes darkened and he looked away, just as the boiling cloud reached out and buried the sun, and a shiver passed over Blythe.

'I was,' he said.

She probably should never have asked, but in for a penny, in for a pound. Her heart thumping erratically, she kept her gaze on him until he looked back at her. 'What happened?'

His voice was harsh when he answered her, his face locked in a mask that gave nothing away. 'She's dead.'

Oh, God. Blythe swallowed, castigating herself for not taking heed of his obvious reluctance. 'I'm so sorry,' she said inadequately. 'I really am sorry. I should never have asked.'

'You were entitled to ask.' It was a tacit acknowledgement that she hadn't been the only one affected by that momentary physical closeness. 'I'm not...likely to marry again.'

He said it almost offhandedly, but she knew he was warning her. 'Was it...is it recent?' she asked him.

'Over a year.'

And clearly he hadn't recovered from it. Maybe he never would. He must think that he wouldn't, if he'd decided against another marriage.

'You might...change your mind?' she suggested.

She hoped it wasn't compassion that stirred in his eyes then. 'I doubt it,' he said. 'Most women wouldn't put up with me.'

It was the tired old joke of every unmarried man, and she searched his face to see if he believed it, but he deflected her gaze with a wry smile.

Presumably his wife had put up with him all right. *Till death us do part*. And death had parted them. His wife couldn't have been very old, in her twenties probably. It must have been a horrible time for

him, and clearly he had loved her very much. To wish that he hadn't was a mean, unworthy sentiment.

'Let me give you a meal,' Blythe said. 'After all your help it's the least I can do.'

'I'm filthy and sweaty. Besides, you must be tired. Another time, maybe.'

Again the wind gusted down the hillside. The trees rustled and blown leaves scurried across the garden.

Jas squinted up at the sky. 'Looks like it's on its way. Are you sure you'll be okay here on your own?'

If he came to dinner he might stay. Blythe stilled the wayward thought. She wouldn't pretend to be afraid just so she could have his company, trap him into a situation he didn't want. 'I'm sure. Thanks.'

'Right.' He swung the bunched-up shirt in his hand, looking down at it. 'I'll come over tomorrow, make sure you're all right.'

'That...would be a friendly thing to do.'

He gave her a brief, jerky smile and strode away. She stood for a minute staring after him, but he never looked back.

She made herself a quick meal, then put on a jacket and returned to the garden and tunnel house to check that there was no more she could do to keep her plants safe.

Her mother phoned, having just heard the storm warning. 'Maybe you should come to us until it's over.'

'I don't want to leave the place.'

'Well, batten down the hatches—and what about your flowers?'

'I heard the warning at lunchtime, so we've been picking all afternoon. Jas came over.'

'Oh, that was nice of him. I suppose if anything does happen you could call on Jas for help.'

'I'll be fine,' Blythe reiterated.

Feeling restless and tense, she walked to the beach, even though dusk was falling and the wind had risen.

The boom and roar of the waves filled her ears. The sea was a mass of turbulent white-tossed water, and the increasing wind drove gobbets of foam from the wavetips to send them skimming along the beach.

Blythe shook her wind-tossed hair from her eyes and ran onto the sand, the salty spray in the air dampening her face, and little whirlwinds of sand salting her legs.

She stood in the water and allowed the incoming waves to foam about her ankles, keeping a wary eye out for bigger breakers.

Swathes of brown kelp were already being swished in by the lathering sea, spreading in long tresses, some sucked back with the receding waves, others left in wet, glistening heaps on the sand. She dragged some of them up to the low dunes well beyond the high tide mark. Tomorrow she would come down and bundle them into sacks. She had bent to take hold of another hank at the water's edge when Jas's voice made her jump.

'What the devil are you doing?' he yelled almost in her ear.

'What does it look like?' she shouted back against the thunder of the waves and the force of the increasing wind. 'Waste not, want not!' Her

hair whipped across her eyes and she pushed it away. Jas's hair was wind-blown too, and the wind buffeted his nylon jacket.

'You're crazy! Coming down here now—'

'So what are *you* doing here?' She laughed up at him, her face cold and tingling and her hair flowing into the wind.

'Looking for you. You weren't home, so—'

'You came visiting?'

'There were no lights at your place. I thought maybe your generator had packed up or something.'

It was getting dark. Normally she would have had a light on by now. Did he watch for it every night? 'I just came down for a walk,' she explained.

Unseen, a wave was rushing onshore, and Jas shot out a hand and grabbed her arm, pulling her further up the sand. 'In this?'

'I told you I like storms! It's not a cyclone yet— just a bit of wind.'

'Just a howling gale!' he argued loudly.

As if to reinforce his view, a stronger gust swept along just as Blythe turned to rescue the seaweed she'd been trying to snatch from the water. The wind tipped her off balance and she felt herself stagger, the seaweed sliding back into the waves. Then a hard hand closed about her shoulder, steadying her.

Jas said roughly, 'Time to go home, Blythe.'

'Yes,' she gasped. Her cheeks were almost numb and her eyes were watering. 'But it's magnificent, isn't it?' She looked at him eagerly,

and then at the rapidly dimming seascape before them, wanting him to share her relish in the boisterousness of the wind and waves.

'Yes,' he said, watching her.

He still had his hand on her arm, and even through the jacket she wore she felt the strength and warmth of his fingers. When she looked up at him the wind teased her hair again, flinging it over her eyes so she had to close them. Before she could lift a hand, she felt Jas's fingers drawing the volatile strands away, his touch lingering on her cheek.

She opened her eyes and stared straight into the sudden shocking blaze of his, and then his hand slipped to her nape, his head bent until his mouth touched hers, and she burst into bright, desperate flame inside, her lips parting, her body yearning of its own accord into the bowed curve of his, her arms twined about his neck. And when she felt the hard support of his other arm go about her waist she leaned on it trustfully and let him tip her head further and explore her mouth fully.

He kissed with the intensity of a man starved, like a desert traveller finding water after long days and nights without it. And Blythe kissed him back with all the generosity she was capable of. Kissed him as if it was all she had ever wanted to do. As if she could heal every hurt he'd ever suffered, assuage all the grief and pain she'd sensed in him from the beginning.

He didn't lift his head until another wave came crashing in, slapping coldly around their legs, and then he broke the kiss abruptly, cursed, and held her tight as the water swirled about them and then was sucked back into the ocean while their feet sank into the sand.

Blythe laughed, and Jas brought both hands to her face and stroked her wind-blown hair away from it again. 'Blythe...Blythe.'

He looked...stricken. Her laughter died, and when he removed his hands to take one of hers and tug her towards the drier sand she followed him, the delight and excitement of the kiss fading.

Jas dropped her hand and she wanted to whimper a protest, instead silently walking beside him until they reached the other side of the saddle, where the wind was less powerful and the sound of the waves less intrusive.

Without stopping, without even looking at her, he said, 'I didn't mean to do that.'

Blythe said, 'We're both consenting adults.' He couldn't have mistaken her response.

'You don't understand!' The glance he threw her was full of rage and chagrin. He hadn't stopped walking, and she had to hurry to keep up. 'It was an impulse. I shouldn't have touched you.'

'I'm not objecting.'

'Well, you should be!' He stumbled in the darkness on a tuft of grass and vented his feelings with a sharp word. 'Or don't you mind being used?'

'Used?' Her chest felt tight. He was walking much too fast. It hadn't felt as though he was using her—it had felt as though he needed her.

'I haven't had—haven't made love to anyone since...for a very long time,' he ground out. 'Then you come along with your pansy eyes and your rose-petal mouth and your sunflower smile and those smooth-as-honey legs emerging from your everlasting shorts...' He pulled a long breath into his lungs, and shook his head angrily. 'I thought they were bad enough, but the day you wore jeans and climbed up the headland in front of me...and then you got the bloody things soaked—'

'I had no idea...' Blythe stared at him, but he presented a rigid profile.

'Well, I finally lost it. It can't be the first time for you. Any man would react the same way.'

'I don't react that way to any man,' Blythe stubbornly told him.

He stopped at the foot of her path and hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. 'Dammit, Blythe, don't you understand what I'm trying to say?'

She did, and it hurt horribly. She made her mouth resist the quiver that threatened it, and stood squarely facing him. Her voice was husky but even. 'You're trying to say it meant nothing to you. Well, that's okay, Jas, I didn't ask you to declare your intentions. I understand. And it's all right. So...are we still friends?'

She held out her hand, and after a couple of seconds of just staring at her he pulled his from the depths of his pocket and gave it to her. 'Yes,' he muttered. He seemed reluctant to let her hand go, scanning her face frowningly as if dreading what he might find there.

Blythe smiled serenely, hoping it was too dark now for him to see her eyes clearly, and gave a slight tug on the hand he held. He dropped it as if it burned. Then he stepped back, shoving his hand into his pocket again. 'I'll see you tomorrow,' he grunted, swinging away.

Standing at the window facing the sea, Blythe could see nothing but blackness punctuated with flashes of moving white as the waves were whipped about. She stood there for a long time, thinking. Was it true that Jas had just been reacting to a long deprivation, and the proximity of a nubile woman?

It could be. Since his wife died he must have missed the closeness of lovemaking. Did he feel guilty that his sexuality had refused to die with her? And was sexual attraction all he was feeling when he'd

hauled Blythe into his arms and kissed her with that desperate passion tonight?

She didn't believe it. With all her heart she didn't *want* to believe it.

The wind rose to a violent squall and rain splattered . against the firmly closed windows. Blythe rinsed sand from her legs and brushed her teeth and pulled on the long T-shirt she wore to bed, and all the while the breakers on the beach kept up their wild thunder. She turned off the generator and called her mother briefly. Then she lay in bed, anxious about her plants, but enjoying the cosiness of the cottage while nature raved and ranted outside.

Just as she was about to doze off a sharp, loud crackling nearby brought her eyes flying open. By the sound of it a tree had gone down.

The windows rattled, and the wind whined around the corners of the deck and the lean-to that held the generator. Something thumped against the bedroom window, making her jump. She got up and peered out into the darkness but could see nothing. Perhaps a torn-off branchlet. Vaguely she made out the tossing trees outlined against the ghostly white of the foaming sea.

She found her bedside torch, padded through the living room, and cautiously opened the back door to check on the tunnel house. Sheltered by the porch, she peered down the hill and was reassured by the dimly discernible white igloo shape. In the distance she could just make out a steady light, intermittently visible through the driving rain. Was Jas still up?

Icy rain and a flurry of sodden leaves threw themselves at her and she retreated hastily inside.

A sort of muted howling made the back of her neck prickle with apprehension, and the house began to shake, all the windows rattling in their frames. She heard the crack and crash of another tree going,

and much closer came a horrendous screeching, tearing noise, followed by a loud bang, and then another.

Her ears ringing, Blythe let out a small scream, although there was no one to hear her, and instinctively crouched against the living-room wall.

The tearing and screeching and banging noises continued for perhaps a minute, and then stopped. The rain now seemed louder and closer. *Inside.*

Carefully she stood up and looked about, then directed the torch beam upwards. Several droplets of water had found their way through the ceiling and the nets of dried flowers and were dripping onto the carpet. It took her shocked mind a few seconds to figure out what must have happened. Part of the roof had been torn off.

She put a bucket under the first leak, and then had to find another and her stock pot to cope with more that had already appeared. Obviously it was a losing battle.

She rushed to the bathroom and unhooked the shower curtain to drape it over her grandmother's dresser, hoping to save the soft, satiny patina of the old varnish. Frantically sorting through a cupboard for other waterproof material, she was interrupted by a hammering on the door and Jas's voice calling her name.

He didn't wait for her to get to the door, but barged in, big and bulky in a waterproof jacket, his hair streaming in the wavering light of her torch, his face leached bloodless.

He had a flashlight too, dazzling her with it before he said hoarsely, 'You're all right?'

'I'm not hurt. I've lost some roofing iron, though.'

'I heard it.' He put a hand on her shoulder, running it down her arm as if he had to assure himself she was telling the truth. 'Are you really okay?'

'Not a scratch. I'm trying to find some coverings to protect my furniture and things.'

'Have you switched off the electricity? There could be exposed wires.'

'It's off.'

'How good are the foundations of this place?'

'It stood up to Cyclone Bola.' Years ago Bola had cut a swathe of destruction through the island and was still used as a basis for comparisons.

'I was going to take you back to my place, but there are sheets of iron and all kinds of things flying about outside. It could be safer here if the foundations hold. You'd better get dressed, though, in case we have to run for it. You'll need shoes, warm clothes and a jacket. That red thing with the hood and something waterproof to wear over it.' He urged her towards her bedroom.

Jas was right, Blythe knew. A wind strong enough to tear the roof off might well push the cottage from its foundations. She'd known it to happen to others.

Fumblingly she pulled on a pair of track pants and the red hooded sweatshirt over the big T-shirt she'd worn to bed, and found her waterproof parka. She picked up her phone. Should she call her parents? But they'd only worry, or endanger themselves trying to get to her.

Emerging from her room, she told Jas, 'My sneakers are by the back door.' Then she gave a start as another piece of roof tore from its fastenings.

Jas said, 'I'll get them. Shove a few clothes into something in case we have to evacuate. But hurry.'

She grabbed a plastic shopping bag and threw in some undies and jeans, a couple of shirts, and was burying the phone in among them when Jas returned with the sneakers in his hand. She scooped a couple of framed photos from her dressing table into the bag, and looked at the books on the shelf under her bedside cabinet.

'Come on.' Jas took the bag from her, hauled her into the other room and stowed the bag in the corner under the old wooden table.

'I've got rolls of plastic in the shed and the tunnel house,' Blythe said as she tied her shoes, looking at her "unprotected furniture.

'Going down there you could be hit by a flying branch or sliced in half by a piece of corrugated iron.'

They found towels and an old raincoat and sheets, and did their best to protect the furniture.

'It seems to be mostly at the back,' Blythe noticed. 'Funny—the part facing the wind is holding.'

'The wind riding up the slope creates a vacuum that lifts the roof on the other side,' Jas explained tersely.

More drips were falling from the ceiling. Ominously, Jas's torch showed that one panel had begun to sag, almost touching the net of flowers beneath it.

He took Blythe's arm. 'Under the table. If the ceiling comes down we don't want it falling on us with the weight of all that water behind it. Just a minute.'

He went into her bedroom and came out carrying the duvet. 'Where's your phone?'

'In the bag with my clothes.'

'Okay. Come on.'

They crouched side by side under the solid table, switching off the torches. Everything went black.

'Are you all right?' he murmured.

'In the circumstances, as all right as I can expect.'

He gave a little laugh. 'We'll sit it out.'

With her back against the wall, Blythe couldn't see Jas, but she fancied she could feel the warmth of him, though they both wore at least two layers of clothing.

One sheet of roofing iron was loosened but refused to let go, shuddering and clanging continuously. The wind whined around the exposed beams, and rain hurtled against the windows.

Then the house shook again, everything loose rattling and jiggling, and Blythe drew in a shuddering breath, clamping her mouth shut on a whimper of fear. Jas's arm pulled her into the curve of his shoulder. 'It's all right,' he murmured against her hair.

They both knew it wasn't, but it was comforting to hear him say it.

Blythe shivered. 'I don't think I'm enjoying this much,' she confessed.

'What, no more Pollyanna?' He adjusted the duvet over their knees.

'Not tonight. This could wreck my business.'

'Try not to think about it. Maybe it won't be so bad.'

He was unwittingly giving her something else to think about. Like how good it felt to have his arm holding her, his breath stirring the curls at her temple when he spoke, his quiet voice setting up a sort of pleasurable resonance deep inside her.

She swallowed, and lifted her head a little from its resting place. 'Is your house okay?'

'It was when I left. The wind is less fierce down there.'

'That's good.'

'If we have to run, at least we'll have somewhere to run to.'

'For the first time I'm glad my grandmother isn't here,' Blythe said sadly. 'She'd have hated seeing her home torn up like this.'

He gave a little grunt—perhaps of sympathy, Blythe thought, shivering as a gust of wind eddied into their hiding place. Or perhaps she'd been sounding "like Pollyanna again. She bit her lip.

The wind suddenly increased its velocity. The wall behind them and the floor they sat on shuddered. Jas tightened his arm about Blythe, saying something sharp under his breath.

It lasted only a couple of seconds. Blythe discovered she was clutching at a fold of Jas's parka, and deliberately relaxed her fingers. 'It's okay,' she said with relief.

'I hope so.' He switched on the flashlight and shone it out into the room, up at the ceiling. 'That's going to go.'

Even as he spoke, a bulging section of the ceiling gave way in a cascade of dark water, crashing down and carrying the netting and the flowers it held to the floor.

A blast of cold air followed, spinning flowers through the room and bringing slanting rain with it.

'Oh, God!' Blythe whispered. Water spread across the carpet, and she felt it creeping round and even underneath her. The wind howled into the room, lifting the inadequate coverings from the furniture and blowing rain, stray leaves and grit into Blythe's face. Shivering, she huddled against Jas's rock-solid chest. A damp chill seeped through her clothing.

Jas touched her cheek, then her hand. 'You're cold,' he said, and curled his fingers around hers.

'A bit.' She locked her teeth together to stop them from chattering.

He put down the torch, switching it off, and wrapped the duvet about her.

'No, don't!' she protested, resisting. 'You need it as much as I do.'

'I'm not shivering like you.' He pulled the billowing cloth about her again but she pushed it away.

'It's big enough for two,' she insisted. 'What would I do if you developed hypothermia? I might need you to get me out of here when the damned ceiling's finished falling down.' She felt his silent laughter. 'All right,' he said, and allowed her to help arrange the duvet around them both.

Blythe snuggled into the warmth of his body and he gave a little half-grunt, half-moan.

'What's the matter?' She lifted her head, but couldn't see his face in the darkness. She wondered if she'd dug her elbow into him accidentally.

'Nothing.' Jas's voice seemed strained. 'Do you think you could sleep?'

'In this?' She choked on semi-hysterical laughter. 'You're joking!'

'Not really.' He sounded grim.

'We should talk or something to keep our minds off what's happening.'

'Great idea.'

'You needn't be facetious.'

'Believe me, I'm not.'

'Well...tell me some more about mathematics.'

He laughed then. 'That would put you to sleep, all right.'

'No, I like listening to you. Talking about your work is the only thing that makes you come alive. That and your music, I guess.'

He was silent, and she said, 'Have I offended you?'

'No. Until recently that was probably true.'

'Recently?' Her heart gave a small, hopeful thud.

'I think you know what I mean.'

'When you kissed me...?'

His voice was deep and slow, with a hint of mockery. 'I'm sure you weren't in any doubt that I was alive then.'

'Do you want to kiss me again?'

Several breathless seconds went by. He was very still, and Blythe was aware of his breathing, the tenseness of his arms holding her, the rigidity of his entire body. Finally he said, 'As a means of passing the time?'

As much more than that, Blythe thought. But she wouldn't back down. 'If you like.'

He sucked in a breath. 'Don't you have any sense?' he asked roughly.

'I'm not stupid. And I'm not a child.'

'So you won't mind if I don't stop at kisses? Do you want to have sex with me here, in the middle of a storm, on a wet carpet under a table? Does the idea turn you on, sunflower-face?'

CHAPTER SIX

BLYTHE closed her eyes, trembling with shame and rejection. He had turned her open-hearted, ingenuous invitation into something sordid and meaningless. 'I don't want to have sex,' she muttered against his jacket, feeling suddenly suffocated by the embrace that had been so comforting—and so warmly arousing. She had wanted to be close to him, to experience again the emotions she had felt on the beach, the feeling of reaching out to something in him that in turn yearned for her. What she wanted might have led further, in time—not to 'having sex' but to making love.

'That's what I thought,' he said flatly. 'So don't invite what you know damn well you don't really want.'

Shocked, Blythe remained dumb. He thought she was a tease. A shaft of anger hit her. 'You're not being fair.' She tried to pull back from him, but he held her in a steely grip inside the duvet.

'Since when were relationships between men and women fair?'

'Since when were you an expert?' Blythe flashed.

There was a curious silence. 'Are *you*?' Jas countered unkindly.

Blythe opened her mouth to reply, and was stopped by a screech from the loose piece of iron that still clung to its fastening. She stifled a small shriek and automatically ducked her head.

'It's all right,' Jas said. 'So far.'

She held her breath until the screeching returned to a more subdued level.

It was silly to be fighting when they were physically so close. And when they might be fighting for their lives any minute. Casting round for a safe subject, she tried, 'Where did you learn music?'

She was afraid he wasn't going to reply. But after a while he said slowly, 'When I was a kid there was a woman living across our back fence. She had a piano and I used to listen to her play. Sometimes I climbed over and peeked through her window. Gave her a hell of a fright when she caught me.'

'What did she do?' Blythe had visions of Jas as a young boy hauled to the police station, accused of being a juvenile pervert.

'After giving me a royal tongue-lashing she realised I was telling the truth when I said I just wanted to watch her play. Next time I sneaked over there she was about to go out—to practise on the organ at her church. She played there every Sunday. I persuaded her to take me along, and...I'll never forget it. I was blown away by the magnificence of the instrument. It was a real, old-fashioned pipe organ, and if you put your hand on the pipes you could feel the music... A little while after that she offered me music lessons in return for mowing her lawn. I jumped at the chance.'

'I've read that mathematical ability and musicianship often occur together.'

'So they say. The Pythagoreans believed that the whole of heaven was numbers and music.'

The Pythagoreans. He'd told her so much about them, so little about himself.

'Why don't you like your half-brothers?' she asked.

'It was mutual,' he said after a moment, into the darkness about them. 'They resented their mother marrying my father, and quite naturally when I was born they resented me too.'

'How old were you when your mother died?'

'Fourteen. Social Welfare put me into foster care and my half-brothers left home.'

'Why couldn't you stay with your father?'

She felt the movement of his shoulder as he shrugged. 'He was a long-distance driver. Away a lot.'

It crossed her mind that he could have changed his job, but perhaps that might not have been easy. 'What was he like? Did you get your mathematical ability from him, or your mother?'

'Neither, as far as I know. He did play a guitar occasionally but he had no time for classical music.'

'He didn't mind you having lessons, though?'

'As long as it didn't cost him anything he didn't care one way or the other. He thought it was useless and a bit sissy, but typical.'

'Typical?' What did he mean by that?

Jas explained on a note of cynicism. 'He'd have liked a son who played rugby and could stick up for himself. I never enjoyed fighting particularly—my half-brothers always won anyway.'

'They must have been bigger than you!' Blythe said indignantly, tipping back her head and trying in vain to see Ms face in the darkness. 'What did your parents do about it?'

'They didn't believe in interfering in sibling quarrels unless the noise level irritated them.'

Blythe ached with sympathy. His family life seemed a stark contrast to her own loving home. If Jas found it hard to express his feelings, perhaps it was an inherited trait. 'Still,' she said, 'he sent you to university?'

The sound he made might have been a crack of laughter, but the banging and scratching of loose bits of roof made it difficult to be certain. 'I got a scholarship. The head of mathematics at my secondary school and Miss Paige—my music teacher—arranged an application. I have reason to be grateful to her.'

'Do you keep in touch?'

'She died a few years back.'

The cottage shook again and something creaked. Jas switched on the torch as another piece of ceiling tore away from the beams to hang dangling in the sweep of light. He waited for a few minutes, then switched it off again. 'Don't want to waste the battery.'

There was another question burning in Blythe's mind, and but for the dark and the extraordinary circumstances she'd never have dared ask it. 'What was your wife like? Where did you meet her?'

He was silent for a long time, and then he said carefully, 'We met at university. Shelley was vivacious and pretty, and very popular. I couldn't believe that she was actually attracted to me.' He paused. 'She told me later I intrigued her because I didn't seem interested.'

'Were you?'

Again she felt the hunching of his shoulder. 'Of course I was interested. I had no experience of women but my hormones were as active as any young man's. And she was...well, as I said...'

'So...' He'd fallen in love. Blythe tried to dismiss the hollow feeling around her heart. She felt chilled and oddly tired. 'We weren't taking the same courses, but somehow we often bumped into each other. She made a point of teasing me, even when she was with someone else. Flirting. I thought I amused her. When she practically asked me to make love to her I assumed she was setting me up for something, so I turned down her...offer, the first time.' He moved his hand and Blythe felt the duvet slip, but he quickly pulled it back over her. 'I didn't hold out for long. Three months later she was pregnant, and when I asked her to marry me she surprised me again.'

'Surprised you?'

'She said yes.'

Blythe swallowed. She supposed he'd been thrilled. And it was futile and mean-minded to be jealous of a dead woman. 'I hope—'

Before she could choke out the words 'I hope you were very happy' the section of roof that had been flapping for ages finally tore loose, making her gasp, and the floor vibrated.

Then the sound of the wind became muted, as though it might have had enough for a while. Even the rain stopped driving into the room. Blythe lifted her face, trying to sense the storm's intensity through the darkness. She was shivering less, but still cold.

Jas switched on his torch just as another section of the ceiling peeled away and hung into the room. 'If we stay here much longer we won't be able to get out in a hurry. I'm not sure the foundations are holding, and it's getting very cold.'

'The wind seems to have died down a bit.'

'They said we're supposed to be at the edge of the cyclone, didn't they—not the eye?'

'Mm.'

'Are you all right?' Jas touched her face and hands again. 'Talking of hypothermia,' he muttered, and started rubbing one of her hands. 'We'll have to risk it. We're getting out now.' He helped Blythe up and grabbed the plastic bag.

The wind hit them as they struggled out through the door and it slammed shut behind them.

Down on the gully floor it wasn't so bad, but still she was glad of Jas's arm about her, holding her relatively steady as they battled with the wind that tried to push them from their feet. The ground was soggy, and when Jas finally ushered her into his darkened hallway and forced the door shut, she shone her torchlight down on her muddy, wet sneakers and said, 'Sorry, I've dirtied your floor.'

'That's the least of our troubles.' He shoved back a hank of wet hair as she raised the beam. 'You'd better have a hot drink and a bath. You can sleep in my bed. I'll kip on the sofa.'

'I'm much smaller than you. You couldn't possibly sleep on the sofa.' She bent and pulled tiredly at the laces of her shoes. Her fingers were numb.

'I don't sleep much anyway.' Jas knelt on the floor and tugged off her shoes for her.

'Is that why you play your keyboard at night?'

Jas was slipping his jacket off. Under it he wore jeans and a T-shirt. 'I'll get you a towel. Come into the kitchen.'

In the big bare kitchen he hauled two towels out of the warming cupboard, handing one to her before lighting a kerosene lamp. He rubbed his face and hair with the other towel, then slung it round his neck.

Blythe ducked her head and began rubbing her own hair. She felt warmer already. Jas had left the old wood range burning.

'I'll run a bath for you,' he said.

'That would be lovely,' she admitted, 'but I can't take your bed.'

Although he argued, there was no gainsaying the fact that she would be far more comfortable on the sofa than he. In the end she had her way.

Blythe woke to light and the subdued sound of birds. She opened her eyes and remembered with dismay where she was and why. The rain had stopped, but outside the window a tree shivered in the wind.

Tossing off the sheet and cosy wool blanket Jas had found for her while she warmed up in his bath, she hurried to the window.

Her cottage was still there, squatting on the side of the hill under a grey, ragged sky, but half of the roof was gone. The roof—

'Oh, no!' she wailed aloud, her hands going to her cheeks. And then, on a quieter note, 'Oh, no.'

From the doorway Jas said, 'It's a mess, I'm afraid.'

She turned to look at him. 'The tunnel house!' she said tragically. 'The roof—' Some of the missing sheets of roofing had landed on the tunnel house, slicing through the plastic and leaving torn, jagged holes and twisted supports.

'I saw it when I got up.' He came across the room, and put an arm about her shoulders.

Last night seemed like a bad dream. Gratefully Blythe turned into his embrace, her head against his chest. 'Oh, damn! Why did they have to fall there?'

Jas put a hand on her tousled hair. 'Why does anything in this crazy world happen? One thing I know—you don't deserve this.'

Tears pricked at her eyes, but she kept them at bay with an effort of will. Crying wouldn't help. She sighed, and reluctantly eased away from him. He was willing to be nice to her, to offer comfort, but he didn't want a clinging woman. 'Thanks,' she said huskily. 'Well, I suppose it could be worse.'

'You're alive and unhurt,' he agreed. 'Last night I was afraid...'

He'd been worried about her. The glow of warmth she felt was unwarranted, she told herself sternly, especially in the light of his later rejection.

But she recalled the stark fear in his face when he'd pushed open her door. 'Did your wife die in an accident?' she asked quietly.

His answer, when it came, was curt. 'A car crash, yes.'

'Were you...with her?' If he'd been driving would he blame himself?

Jas's expression took on the familiar icy aloofness. 'No. I wasn't there.' He stirred, shoving a hand through his hair. 'I'm making

breakfast. Is beans on toast all right? If you don't like them I'll rustle up something else.'

'Anything's okay.' Obviously confidence time was over. Not that he'd told her much.

She used the bathroom and put on jeans and a shirt. In her haste last night she hadn't thought to grab a comb but, looking around the spartan but spotlessly tidy bathroom, she saw one lying on the age-crazed porcelain basin.

'I hope you don't mind,' she said, emerging into the kitchen, 'I used your comb.'

'Feel free. Let me know if there's anything else you need.'

'I will. Thank you.'

He was being very kind to her this morning. Did he regret his verbal savaging of her last night?

Blythe went into the front room to call her parents. After she'd reassured herself that they'd suffered only the loss of a couple of trees, she told them what had happened.

'We'll be right over,' her shocked mother promised. 'As soon as we can.'

She wasn't sure if she could eat breakfast, not without knowing exactly how much damage had been done to her home. On the other hand one part of her wanted to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

Back in the kitchen, she sat as Jas directed at the table in one corner. 'What about you?' she asked. He had given her the only chair.

'Don't worry.' He left the room and wheeled his typing chair down the passageway and set it at right angles to hers.

Going to the stove, Jas spooned some baked beans in tomato sauce onto a piece of toast and slid the plate over to her, then did the same for himself.

She couldn't quite finish the meal, pushing it away apologetically.

'You don't like it?'

'I usually just have toast and a spread.'

'How do you do physical work on that?'

'It's not so physical. I have a rotary hoe and automatic watering system. At least I did...'

'We'll go and have a look,' he promised. 'Coffee first?'

Miserably, Blythe shook her head. 'No, thanks.'

'All right.' He swallowed a last mouthful and then shoved back his chair and stood up, holding out his hand. 'You might as well know the worst.'

Dreading what she might find, Blythe took his hand and clung to it all the way back along the gully. The wind worried at them in nasty little spurts, but the fearsome force of last night was spent.

One end of the tunnel house was misshapen and badly torn, and two sheets of corrugated iron had gone through the plastic to land on the growing plants inside. But other plants had survived, and most of the drums of newly cut blooms were still in good shape.

Blythe's van and expensive machinery were intact, and although the garden had taken a beating, and one piece of the roof had crushed the part that she and Jas had so carefully covered with netting, the majority of the plants, Blythe thought, would recover.

'You have insurance?' Jas asked.

'Yes, of course. I'll have to get on to the insurance company right away. I'd better see how bad it is inside the cottage.'

'You're not going in there on your own. You have no idea if it's safe or not.'

'I'll be careful.'

But Jas insisted on checking the foundations, and even then he went inside first, testing the floorboards before they clambered over the debris of the ruined ceiling, mixed with netting and sodden flowers. Blythe winced. 'All those will have to be thrown away.'

'You can't redry them?'

'They'd get mildew, for sure. I suppose I can compost them.'

The telephone rang several times. Tau and his wife came over, having sent a reluctant and glowering Shawn, Tau said with a chuckle, off to school. Jas, Tau and a couple of other locals were fixing temporary plastic roofing when her parents arrived and her mother gave her a comforting hug.

When the other volunteers had left, with promises to return if there was anything more they could do after the insurance assessor had been, Blythe's father shook Jas's hand. 'Thanks for helping our girl.'

Rose beamed a smile in his direction. 'Yes, how lucky she is that you were here!'

'I couldn't have left her in a roofless house.'

The insurance assessor inspected the damage, poked through the debris, and crawled about the foundations.

'They could do with a bit of reinforcing here and there,' he informed them, 'but it's a soundly built little place. Get quotes for repairs, and you can go ahead. As long as it's not too far from our assessment you should have no trouble with a claim.'

'It's not really habitable,' Rose said when the man had gone. 'You'd better come home with us.'

'I can't. I have a business to run.'

Jas turned from helping her father shift some pieces of ceiling. 'Blythe could stay with me.'

Blythe's mouth dropped. Her father cast a shrewd look at him, obviously trying to sum up his trustworthiness, and Rose too seemed a little dubious.

'Until her house is fixed.' Jas was speaking to Brian. 'I have a spare room. If your bed has survived—' he looked at Blythe '—your father and I could shift it in.'

'You don't want a boarder,' Blythe objected. Jas guarded his privacy so zealously, he couldn't relish the thought of having her in his home any longer.

'You won't be a boarder. You're a neighbour who needs a bed for a few nights.'

Rose turned to Brian and raised her brows very slightly in a silent question. His answer wasn't discernible to anyone but her, but she must have been satisfied with it. 'That's settled, then.' She beamed,

turning to Blythe. 'Your father and I will be much happier if you're with Jas.'

'We might as well shift that bed now.' Brian moved purposefully towards her bedroom.

Rose said, 'The mattress is soaked—we've put it out on the deck. I don't think it will be dry by tonight. It might be ruined for good.'

'Then I guess it's the sofa again,' Jas said, looking at Blythe.

'There's a mattress on one of the lower bunks that seems dry,' Rose said brightly. 'You could use that.'

Blythe tried again. 'I can't trouble Jas to—'

'It's no trouble,' Jas said politely.

Rose gave him another smile. 'That's nice of you, Jas. Will a mattress on the floor do, Blythe?'

'It would do fine, but Jas doesn't want—'

No one listened. Brian said, 'Right, we'll get the mattress over there, shall we, Jas?'

As the men disappeared into the bedroom Rose put a hand on her daughter's arm. 'Don't throw his offer back in his face, dear. It's very kind of him—'

'I know, but—'

'Just say thank you nicely and be a considerate house guest.'

Mentally Blythe threw up her hands. Her mother, for all her sweet face and gentle manner, was very good at getting what she wanted.

Not that she was selfish. Her most determined efforts were directed at helping other people. Giving in, Blythe said, 'He won't even know I'm there.'

Rose volunteered to phone for quotes, while willing helpers cleaned up the mess, and Blythe loaded what was left of the cut flowers into the van with Jas's assistance.

'You've spent enough time here,' she told him when he offered to accompany her. 'I feel guilty taking you away from your work.'

She managed to offload her flowers in Auckland, the last few bundles very cheaply, but by the time she headed back to Tahawai the afternoon was elderly.

Her parents had gone home for a late milking, and she spent the short time until dusk sorting through the wrecked plants in the damaged part of the tunnel house for any that could be saved.

'I'll fix the meals while I'm here,' she told Jas, after making up her bed on the mattress in his spare room. 'It's the least I can do considering all the time you've lost helping me out.'

'It's not necessary.'

'I don't want to impose. It will make me feel better.'

He shrugged. 'All right. But don't bother about lunch. I'll get myself something when I'm hungry.'

She'd brought a couple of boxes of food with her, and stowed the perishables in his refrigerator. There was plenty of room, and when she remarked on it he muttered vaguely, 'I suppose it's time I got some supplies. There's still some tinned food.'

Blythe opened a cupboard and found more tins of baked beans, spaghetti, fish and some fruit salad. 'Have you been living on this stuff?' she demanded.

'It's handy when I don't want to cook.'

She made a chicken casserole with rice and was rewarded by watching him demolish two helpings.

'I'll wash the dishes,' she said. 'I can't do any more at home now it's dark.'

'You must be exhausted.'

'Keeps my mind off it.' Blythe started removing the plates.

But he insisted on drying. Hanging up the tea-towel, he said, 'I'll be in my workroom.'

'I'll have an early night, I think. Maybe read for a while in bed. Um...do you have any books that aren't about advanced mathematics?' Some of her favourites had, she thanked God, survived, but the few that remained unread were beyond saving.

Jas laughed. 'In my bedroom. Help yourself.'

Jas's bed was a single one with no headboard, made up with military precision—sheets, two pillows, and a duvet with a geometric design in black, grey and dark blue.

A chest of drawers against one wall had a small oblong mirror hanging over it. The built-in wardrobe was firmly closed. Near the bed stood another set of drawers doubling as a night table, bearing a functional reading lamp and a paperback book lying open with its cover upward.

The walls were bare except for a large map of the world, yellowed with age and held by four rusted drawing pins. It was a safe bet that it had been there for years. The only hint of Jas's personal stamp on the room was the design of the duvet—and the bookshelves under the window.

A green plastic flower pot stood on top of the bookcase, bearing one bright yellow bloom turned to the sun.

Blythe went and touched its petals, put a finger to the moist earth around the base of the plant. She could see where several dead blooms had been snipped off. Jas had looked after it well. Feeling for some reason lighter and happier than she had all day, she stooped to the bookcase.

Even here almost half the books were obviously mathematical, philosophical or scientific. But there were also a couple of best-selling thrillers, some *National Geographic* magazines, several well-reviewed New Zealand novels, and a popular book on relationships.

She chose a magazine that promised an article on marine animals, and one of the thrillers. That should keep her mind off things.

But she found it difficult to concentrate. Outside, the sea was hushed by distance, and a lone more pork called mournfully from somewhere behind the house.

Later, muted organ music filtered through from the sitting room, and she resisted the urge to go and join Jas. After switching off the room light she lay wakeful, until the music ceased and she heard soft footfalls and then the hurry-hush of running water, and a few minutes afterwards the sound of Jas's bedroom door quietly closing.

She sighed, turned over and went to sleep.

Once the initial clean-up was accomplished, builders arrived in a loud flurry of truck engines, transistor radios and cheerful banter, and set to work. A carpeting firm removed sodden floor coverings and took measurements for new ones. Other workmen started to patch the ripped skin of the tunnel house.

It could have been much worse, Blythe told herself, throwing a bundle of sodden gardening magazines into a bag for composting.

Her parents had brought sandwiches and a flask of coffee, and they all picnicked along with the workmen at lunchtime, sitting on the deck.

The foreman, a burly, tanned and fit man with a ready smile and bold blue eyes, seemed to think that Blythe would need cheering up, and made it his mission. She was laughing at one of his steady stream of jokes when Jas appeared in the doorway.

'I'm sorry if I'm intruding,' he said stiffly. 'I did knock but—'

'It's all right.' Blythe stood up, a half-eaten sandwich in her hand. 'We're just having lunch.'

'Then I'm a bit late. I was going to suggest you might like to bring your parents down to the house for it.'

'We brought a picnic,' Rose explained, 'but that was a nice thought.' She held out a plastic container. 'Have a sandwich, Jas. Salmon on this side, tomato and ham over there.'

'Thanks, but I won't stay. I've got things to do.'

Rose looked disappointed. 'Oh. You will eat, though, won't you? You shouldn't skip meals, you know.'

Jas seemed faintly startled, as though it surprised him that anyone was concerned for his welfare.

'There's plenty here,' Rose coaxed, 'and it'll save you making something for yourself.'

He gave in, moving onto the deck and taking a sandwich. 'Thank you.'

Rose gave him her sweetest smile. 'You need feeding up. Blythe was right.'

Blythe nearly choked on her salmon sandwich. 'I never said that!'

'Well, something like it,' her mother insisted serenely. 'She's a good cook. You should take advantage of her while she's with you.'

Brian said in amused tones, 'Maybe you'd like to rephrase that, Rose.'

She cast her husband a reproving look. 'Jas knows what I mean. Don't you, Jas?'

Jas was looking at her fixedly, but he nodded and said, 'I believe so. Actually, Blythe's already offered...'

'To do the cooking,' Blythe put in hastily as he paused there. Her cheeks flaring, she glanced at him and saw his mouth quirk slightly while his eyes held hers.

Rose said, 'Yes, of course, dear.'

Jas was still looking at Blythe, and she saw an odd expression cross his face, a hint of surprise followed by resolution, as though he'd just made a decision of some sort. He said, 'I'll be getting supplies from Apiata this afternoon, so I'll pick up your mail, and if there's anything I can bring back for you...?'

Blythe considered for a moment. 'I don't think so, but thinks.'

Brian said, 'Blythe, pass me a piece of that fruit cake, will you?'

She obliged, and offered Jas a piece that he declined. Soon afterwards he left.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BLYTHE spent the rest of the day tying up wind- damaged plants and discarding those that were beyond help, putting aside any parts that might be useful. Maybe she could use the stalks from some of her ruined sunflowers to make paper.

Late in the afternoon she made her way back along the gully to the house. Entering the passageway, she hesitated at the open door of Jas's workroom.

'When I've cleaned up I'll cook us a meal,' she promised. 'I'll call you when it's ready.'

Pushing away her plate, Blythe asked, 'Coffee?'

'I'll fix it.' Jas made a staying gesture.

She watched him do it, covertly admiring the economy and efficiency of his movements.

He turned with two steaming mugs in his hands. 'Here? Or we could go outside on the veranda. There aren't any seats, though.'

'I don't mind.'

'Okay.' He led the way, leaving the door open behind them as they settled on the steps.

The air was warm but pleasantly fresh. Through the gap in the hills the sea had turned a silvery pewter, the waves so lazy and demure one would have thought they'd never seen a cyclone. The pale evening sky shivered through the moving tops of the trees, and near the house the long grass curved and straightened, seedheads brushing against each other.

Jas handed Blythe a mug, as both leaned against the veranda posts.

'There's a lot of seaweed on the beach,' Jas commented.

'I hope it won't all wash away before I have a chance to gather some.'

'It's not quite dark yet. If you have the energy we could go and fetch some now. Or I could get a few bags by myself. I haven't had much exercise today.'

'You've had plenty since the storm. I'm really grateful, Jas.'

'Glad I was able to help.'

Blythe ventured a faint grin. 'That's *my* line!'

He smiled. 'I just borrowed it, okay?'

Jas was welcome to borrow anything of hers, especially when he smiled at her like that. To keep it, if he wanted. Even her heart...

No use denying it, she was in love with the man. And he didn't want to know.

'What is it?'

She looked back at him, slightly bemused by the revelation she'd just made to herself. 'It's been a pretty tough couple of days,' she said. 'I wouldn't mind going down to the beach to collect seaweed.'

Blythe held the sacks open while he scooped up armloads of the tangled, sandy weed and crammed them in. After stowing the bags at her place, they walked' back in the growing darkness to his.

'We should have brought a torch,' Jas said.

'I can see all right.' But almost immediately she stumbled on an unseen stone and lurched into him.

His hands closed on her shoulders, and her cheek was against the warmth of his shirt. 'Yeah?' he murmured.

'Sorry.' Her heart was pounding in a quite ridiculous way and she was breathless. She tried a small, airy laugh. 'I seem to make a habit of throwing myself at you, one way or another.'

His voice low, he said, 'But is it only me?'

'What?' Blythe lifted her head to stare at him.

'Forget it,' he said abruptly, and released her, moving on. 'It's none of my business.'

'*What?*' she demanded of his retreating back. '*Jas!*' She hurried after him.

He glanced round and waited for her, but as soon as she caught up he kept on walking. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Well, it might help if I knew what you're apologising for!' She forgot to keep her eyes on the ground before her and caught her toe on a tussock of grass. '*Damn!*'

Jas thrust out his hand and took hers, holding it in a tight, warm clasp.

Damn again, she thought despairingly. The shiver of delight that his simple touch gave her was enough to scatter her thoughts entirely. Determinedly gathering them into some sort of order, she said, 'Were you insinuating that I throw myself at men regularly?'

'I didn't mean to imply that.'

'Well, then, why say it?'

'I've apologised. Can't we just leave it?'

Blythe thought about it for two seconds. 'No,' she decided. 'I don't think so. There must have been some reason behind a remark like that.'

'I'd have thought you'd have guessed at the reason,' Jas muttered grittily. 'You're surely not so naive you don't recognise simple jealousy.'

Jealousy. *Jealousy*? 'I don't believe it,' she said flatly.

He shrugged.

'I don't believe it,' Blythe repeated, beginning to feel a simmering anger. 'You don't have any *cause* to be jealous.'

'You mean I don't have any right. I'm well aware of that.'

She wouldn't have minded giving him the right, only he didn't want it. 'You mean, that would make you a dog in the manger.'

He gave a bitter little laugh. 'That just about hits the nail on the head, I guess.'

Blythe pondered for half a minute. 'Even if you did have the right,' she said as they neared the house and passed the decaying fence-post that had once marked the gateway, 'I still don't see what would have made you say—imply—that I'm promiscuous.'

He turned, one foot already on the lower step. The moon had risen, and in its faint, colourless light his eyes seemed sunken, his mouth a thin dark line, so that his face looked almost like a Pierrot mask. 'I never suggested that.'

Not for the first time while having a conversation with him, Blythe felt like stamping her foot. Instead she counted to five and kept her voice, at least, calm and reasonable. 'Then what were you suggesting?'

Dragging the words out, he finally said, 'After your party...'

'Yes?' she prompted as he halted there. If the hurricane damage put her out of business, she thought, she could apply for a job with anyone who wanted blood extracted from stones. Compared with this it should be a doddle.

'One of your guests stayed the night.'

Blythe blinked, her mouth dropping.

'Your American...friend,' Jas said doggedly. 'I thought... maybe...'

Indignation bloomed like a red cactus flower in her chest. 'You thought...you *assumed*...!'

'No!'

Blythe drew a deep, painful breath. 'Aren't mathematicians supposed to require *proof* for their theories?' she asked scornfully.

'I may be a mathematician, but I'm a man, not a machine! I do have feelings, like other people!'

He sounded goaded. Yet he still held himself in.

She could feel the fight for control in the tension of his fingers gripping hers. Losing patience, she said, 'Well, if you have feelings, for God's sake why don't you let them *show*?'

'Is that what you want?' The words came through clenched teeth, as if uttered against his will, and Blythe guessed his stubborn mastery of his emotions was reaching breaking point.

She felt a leap of exhilaration, similar to the mixture of fear and excitement and heady stimulation she had often experienced during a rousing storm. She could push him over the edge, she knew it, and for one moment she hesitated, knowing too that what she unleashed might be more than she could handle.

But she'd never backed down from the challenges life threw her. 'Yes,' she said, and looked straight into his eyes, her face upturned to the moon's illumination so that he could see she meant it. *'Yes!'*

She heard the breath suck into his lungs, and then his face changed, became fierce and aroused, and his free hand curved about her waist and jerked her towards him. His mouth came down on hers with a punishing ferocity, tipping her head back, parting her lips and aggressively demanding her response.

Which she just as aggressively gave. He wasn't the only one who was angry, and hurt. All their fury and frustration, with its sexual undertones, went into the kiss, translated to passion and mutual desire.

He still held her hand tightly in his, his knuckles pressing against the side of her breast, making her heart triple its beat. Then he released her fingers and slid his hand over the softness he'd found, and covered it, and she moaned in her throat and clutched at his shoulder to keep her balance, because her knees were giving way and she was dizzy.

Jas must have recognised the response she couldn't hide. He broke the kiss off abruptly, leaving her mouth bereft and stinging, but his hand didn't move from where it felt so possessive and so exciting. 'You should slap my face,' he said, his voice harsh and uneven.

'I should,' she agreed huskily.

'Do you want to do it?'

'No.'

'Should I apologise again?'

'No.' The time for apologies was over.

'Good.' He bent his head and kissed her again, quite differently.

It was just as passionate, but this was a sweet and gentle exploration, a question and a promise, and deeply, deeply satisfying. Except that she wanted more. Not to stop.

When he did pause she had both arms locked about his neck, and his hands had found their way inside her shirt, one splayed on her back and the other curved under her breast, his thumb intruding inside her bra to caress the bare skin. She had snuggled so close to him that she could feel his arousal, increasing the hot melting of her own yearning for him that overwhelmed the tiny, alarmed voice of caution.

He moved his thumb one inch further, and she involuntarily arched her back, her lips parting on a breathy moan of delight, her eyes half closing.

'You're gorgeous—lovely!' His voice was low and raspy. 'Blythe...am I giving you pleasure?'

'You know you are!' Did he need her confirmation?

His mouth met hers again, urgently, open and sensual—seeking, giving, partaking.

She leaned into him and joyously returned the kiss, ardent and honest, letting him have her mouth, the warmth and softness of her body, her very heart.

Jas shifted his hands and picked her up like a baby, carrying her up the steps and into the dim passageway, his mouth briefly leaving hers as he kicked the door shut and carried her to his room.

On the bed he kissed her again, and undressed her, touched her, his hands stroking and his lips branding hot, devouring kisses on her skin, his teeth making tiny nibbles at her earlobes, her shoulders, breasts, toes. She was both nervous and unbearably aroused.

'You,' she whispered, tugging at his clothes in turn.

'Yes.' He let her pull off his shirt, then impatiently shucked his jeans and underpants himself. She felt suddenly cold—he wasn't touching her, his warm, hard body withdrawn. A worrying thought intruded. She heard Jas open a drawer, and in the darkness she found his thigh, with its intriguing wiry curls of hair, and stroked it dreamily.

He returned to her side and reciprocated the caress. 'Blythe, my sunflower girl...'

She smiled and put her arms about him again and kissed his shoulder. 'You knew this would happen?'

'Only in my dreams. But...in case dreams came true...I told myself I was crazy to even think it... Maybe I was... If I'm dreaming again, please don't wake me...'

'This isn't a dream.' She moved against his roving hand, and let out a luxurious, shuddering sigh. 'Please, Jas...'

'You're ready for me, sunflower girl?'

'Oh, yes,' she moaned. 'Yes, now...please.'

When he first entered her she caught her breath, then deliberately relaxed, her body welcoming him, accommodating him. He paused, whispered, 'All right?'

'Yes,' she whispered back. 'Yes, I want...all of it. I want you, Jas.'

Then he gave himself to her so gently and fully, she lost any residual anxiety and sighed again with the sheer blissfulness of it. He held her securely in his arms and she wrapped herself around him so that they were no longer two people but one entity, his pleasure hers, and hers his, neither of them knowing where he ended and she began.

It was wonder, it was excitement, it was ecstasy, and at the end it was the annihilation of self into the other, a blinding eclipse with dazzling edges.

Afterwards they lay in each other's arms, exhausted by the cataclysm of their lovemaking.

'I didn't sleep with Charles,' she said, turning her head slightly, loving the feel of his cheek against hers, the faint rasp of it on her skin. 'I've never slept with him. He'd had a couple too many beers and we made him go to bed rather than drive home. He's my brother's friend, that's all.'

His fingers idly caressed her hair. 'I've been stupidly tormenting myself ever since I saw him drive away, and you smiling after him.'

'You could have asked.'

'No, I couldn't. I had no claim on you. You'd have thought I was setting myself up as a guardian of public morals.'

She kissed the angle of his jaw, and the pulse beat at the base of his throat, damp and salty. 'You don't look much like one now.'

His chest shook with silent laughter, and she smiled and kissed him there too, then turned her fascinated attention to his nipples.

'Blythe...' he gasped, and, as she took no notice, groaned quietly. 'Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?'

Blythe hooked a leg across both of his and said, 'I think so.'

He grabbed her hair and turned her over, his thigh wedged between hers, and looked down at her face. 'This bed isn't really big enough.'

'It is,' she argued, 'if we just stay close to each other.'

'I don't mind doing that,' he answered her, 'if you don't.'

She moved against his leg, slowly. 'Is this close enough?'

'No.' He dipped his head and kissed her again. 'Not nearly close enough,' he said, trailing his lips down her throat and across her shoulder. 'Is it?'

'You're right,' Blythe agreed. 'What are the mathematical chances of repeating what we just did ten minutes ago?'

'They're infinite,' he replied, and proceeded to prove the hypothesis.

Blythe was woken by the sound of a truck passing the house. Her eyes flying open, she found herself looking at Jas's sleeping face. One of his arms was underneath her, and the other hand rested on her hip.

She studied him, saw how long his lashes were, and how the bones beneath his skin defined his features. His cheeks were fuzzed by morning stubble, and his mouth had softened in sleep, the lips slightly parted. Unable to resist, she put her lips to his and slid her tongue between them.

For a moment there was no reaction. Then his arms tightened and he drew her tongue fully into his mouth and his hand glided to her behind, hauling her close. His eyes hadn't opened.

She removed her mouth from his to ask him, 'Do you know who you're kissing?'

'A sunflower,' he mumbled, and opened his eyes. 'Yes, I knew it.'

Blythe smiled. 'I have to get up,' she said regretfully. 'The workmen are arriving.'

He looked at her in a slightly bemused way. 'I didn't dream last night, then.'

'Are you asking?'

He nuzzled her cheek, inhaled. 'You're real. You smell like a flower. Look like a flower, feel like a flower. You're a miracle.'

'I have to get up,' she said again, not very convincingly.

'Blythe...' He looked troubled suddenly. 'Have you done this before?'

She kept her voice light. 'How did you guess?'

He searched her face until she had to drop her eyes before the stern, enquiring gaze.

'My guess,' he said heavily, 'is that you haven't.'

She'd led a pretty active life. She didn't think there was any physical evidence. But she wouldn't lie to him. 'I told you I never slept with Charles,' she said, and raised her eyes to him. 'Actually I've never slept with anyone.'

Jas closed his eyes. 'Your parents trusted me.'

'They trusted you not to attack me. Last night was my choice. I don't need their permission.'

He opened his eyes and propped himself on one elbow, looking down at her. Smoothing her hair away from her face, he muttered, 'You look so damned young. It's difficult to believe you know what you're doing.'

'I know what I'm doing,' Blythe assured him firmly.

His eyes were still troubled. 'You're too...trusting. You know almost nothing about me.'

'So tell me,' she urged.

Another vehicle came rumbling down the track. Jas raised his head, listening. A pop tune blared in the distance and someone began hammering. 'The world's a busy place. You're right, we'd better get up.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

BLYTHE worked with a song in her heart, wondering if Jas was as distracted as she was. The damage to her home—even the setback to her livelihood—seemed somehow less important this morning.

The day was warm, as if summer had really come at last. At lunchtime she went back to Jas's house, and he looked up through the open window before him and smiled.

He met her in the doorway.

'I didn't mean to disturb you.'

'I've come to a dead stop anyway.' He stood looking at her but not touching, as if he didn't yet quite believe she was real. But his lips were curved in a hint of a smile.

'Have lunch with me, then.'

They carried sandwiches and coffee to the veranda and sat side by side, the sandwiches between them.

'I thought you'd be lunching with your builder friends.' Jas bit into a sandwich.

'Couldn't keep away from you.' She slanted him a smile before she too began to eat.

He swallowed and smiled back. 'Oh, yeah.' His voice was gently mocking. 'What have you been doing?'

'Chopping up seaweed, and the plants that were ruined by the storm. What about you?'

'Just a lot of calculations.'

'Can't computers do it all now?'

He smiled. 'Number-crunching. Original theories have to be checked pretty much the old-fashioned way.'

Blythe finished her coffee, put down the cup and plucked a dog daisy growing by the step, twirled the flower back and forth between finger and thumb, and decided to try a new tactic. 'So what actual use are mathematical systems?' she asked, deliberately provocative.

'You use them all the time.'

'I do?'

'Ever heard of Karl Friedrich Gauss?'

Blythe shook her head. 'Who's he?'

'Was.' Jas sipped at his coffee. 'Possibly the greatest mathematician who ever lived.' Directing a grin at her, he added, 'Gauss said that what is important is not notations, but notions.'

Blythe looked suspicious. 'Not the kind of notions I make!'

'It isn't so different. When you design your arrangements, you don't just grab a handful of flowers and shove them all in as they come, do you?'

'Of course not. I choose them and place them very carefully.'

'Exactly. Until you create a pattern that pleases you. Do you plan how it should look before you begin?'

'Sometimes, but that can change as I go along.'

'So you experiment with different effects.'

'Mm.' She cocked her head to the side, intrigued.

'You hardly ever use two or four flowers of the same colour. You use three and five a lot.'

He'd noticed that? Yes, she thought, smiling inwardly. He'd have counted them. 'Odd numbers give a better balance.'

'And you cut some stems shorter than others?'

'They have to be in proportion...'

Jas smiled. 'And if the design doesn't live up to your concept, you discard flowers that don't fit and try something else. It's exactly what I do with numbers when I'm testing a hypothesis.'

Blythe's eyes widened. 'Mathematical theory is like flower arranging?' she asked incredulously.

'And arranging flowers is an exercise in mathematics—numbers and proportions and patterns.'

'Good heavens!'

He smiled at her and then glanced away. 'It's a mistake to start me on that.'

'I told you, I like listening to you.' It was the only subject on which he was eloquent. The rest of the time he might have been a close relative of an oyster.

A seagull had settled on the solitary gatepost, eyeing them expectantly. Jas tossed a crust onto the grass, and the bird scooped it up. 'Women usually find it the most boring subject on earth.'

'Haven't there been women mathematicians?' Blythe felt bound to defend her gender.

'Very good ones,' Jas admitted. 'Sophie Germain was born in the eighteenth century and she's still remembered for her theories on acoustics and electricity. Without her and other mathematicians radio, TV, your cellphone, might never have been invented.' Jas pushed the sandwich plate towards her. There was one left.

'I don't need any more.'

'Sure?' He hesitated, then picked it up.

'*Your* notions are going to last a lot longer than mine,' she commented, resting her chin on one hand as she leaned forward and turned her head to him. 'If you crack this theorem of yours, will you be famous?'

Jas gave a small laugh. 'Perhaps, among my colleagues, present and future. That doesn't make yours unimportant. I don't think mathematics has yet found a way to measure the value of transient human pleasure.'

'Or of emotions?'

He smiled, and reached out his hand to tuck a stray curl behind her ear, his fingers lingering against her skin. 'Right.'

Blythe tilted her head so that her cheek nestled into his open palm, and placed her own hand over his. 'You weren't doing mathematical calculations in your head last night?'

Jas laughed again and shook his head. 'Were you planning a floral arrangement?' He moved his hand to tip her chin and bring her towards him as he leaned over and lowered his mouth to hers.

It was a brief kiss, but full of promise and expectation. When he drew away Blythe felt warm and sparkly all over, and knew it showed in her eyes. 'I suppose I'd better get back,' she said regretfully. 'There's lots still to be done.'

'Do you need help?' Her parents hadn't come today; she'd told them she could manage now.

It was tempting to say yes, just to have him by her side. He even looked quite hopeful, she thought. But she had no right to take him from his own work. 'I'm getting there,' she told him. 'You go on solving the riddles of the universe.' She leaned across and kissed his cheek, where an intriguing little crease had briefly appeared, then got up to collect cups and the plate.

'I'll do those,' he said.

'What would you like for dinner?'

'Whatever you want to cook is fine by me.'

'You're an easy man to please.'

'I am,' he said, squinting up at her, his gaze slipping over her with an intimacy that brought a faint flush to her cheeks, 'when it's you doing the pleasing.'

Blythe laughed at him and went away.

Before going back to Jas's house that evening Blythe went to pick grasses on the beach. As she was leaving a couple of motorbikes came noisily down the track.

The riders wore black helmets and leathers, and one had a pillion passenger. Blythe kept walking, lifting a casual hand as they approached.

The bikes suddenly swung from the track, circling her, and she stopped dead, apprehension rising in her throat. One skidded to a halt in front of her, and the other bike was behind her when the engine was cut.

'Hi, Blythe.'

She swung round, saw the pillion rider getting off, removing his helmet, and almost choked with relief. 'Shawn! You guys scared me!'

He gave her a sheepish grin. His companion kicked the stand of his bike into place and swung his legs to the ground, leaning on the machine as he pulled off his helmet. He looked a couple of years older than Shawn, broader and stocky, and Blythe stiffened and flushed under his insolently sexual stare. Instinctively she glanced at the other rider, still astride his machine. Through the visor that darkened his face she could feel his gaze, hot and predatory.

Her head went up. 'Introduce me to your friends, Shawn,' she suggested.

Looking bothered, he muttered, 'Vince,' indicating the one beside him. 'And Bruiser.'

Bruiser. Great.

Vince hung his helmet on the handlebar. 'Shawn says you live up there.' He jerked his head. 'On your own.'

The back of her neck prickled. Cautiously she said, 'Not at the moment. It was damaged in the cyclone.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'Reckons you're his girlfriend.'

'He—' *What?* 'Shawn?' She looked at him.

Shawn gave her a sickly grin, his eyes pleading.

Oh, lord. How to get out of this without humiliating the silly boy? Taking a quick breath, she said briskly, 'Well, that's our business. I'm working tonight, I'm afraid. I'll see you another time, Shawn,' she added, warning him this wasn't the end of it.

Purposefully she made to walk past, but Bruiser stood up and stepped in front of her.

She froze, standing her ground but frightened. Then the first rider joined his friend, shoulder to leather-clad shoulder. 'What's the hurry? You could come with us,' Vince invited, grinning down at her.

'No, thanks.'

'Aw, come on.' Vince's closed, tattooed fist rubbed against her cheek. 'We could have a good time.'

She forced herself not to flinch. 'No.'

'Hey, guys...' Shawn said uncertainly.

Vince looked past her. 'We're your mates, Shawn.'

'Yeah... but—'

'Mates share,' Vince said flatly.

Blythe went cold all over. She heard Shawn say something, and then felt his hand on her shoulder, his arm about her. He was trembling. '*No!*' he said, his voice cracking. 'No, you can't—'

'Is there a problem here?' Jas's deep calm voice broke in. 'Blythe?'

Vince and his companion swung round. Shawn fell back a step, taking Blythe with him.

'Any of your business?' Vince demanded.

'Possibly.' Jas stood a few feet away, his hands in the pockets of his parka. He looked even taller than usual, his shoulders wider. 'Blythe?'

His eyes beckoned her, and she slipped out of Shawn's slackening hold and walked towards him.

Vince moved, and Jas took his hands from his pockets. He met Vince's eyes with a steady stare until the younger man dropped his gaze and shuffled aside, allowing Blythe to pass between him and his friend.

She reached Jas, her heart thumping, and he laid a light hold on her arm.

'Shawn—' Blythe turned, not wanting to leave him with these thugs.

He hesitated, straightened his shoulders and brushed past his erstwhile friends, ignoring Vince's sneer.

'Hadn't you two better be on your way?' Jas suggested with cool authority. 'There's nothing for you to do here.'

He waited until the two had swaggered with empty bravado back to their bikes and set off with a roar back the way they came. Then he said, 'Come on, Shawn.' And, with an arm about Blythe, he led them back to the house.

Blythe never knew what he said to Shawn behind the closed door of his study while she phoned the boy's father. But before a grim-faced

Tau turned up to take his son home, the boy apologised to Blythe and said, 'I didn't know they were like that. I'm not hanging out with those guys any more.'

'He was stupid,' Jas said later, still looking slightly austere. 'But he's basically a good kid.'

'He was brave, though. I told him that. How did you do it?' she asked him. 'Face those two down.'

Jas seemed surprised that she had to ask. 'I learned survival skills early in life.' Wryly he added, 'They're younger than some of my students. I'm used to dealing with stropky teenagers.'

When Blythe's cottage was ready she asked Jas to come for dinner on her first night home, and afterwards they ended up in her bed. In the morning he used her bathroom and said he was going to jog down to the beach and go for a swim.

'Can I come?' Blythe asked him.

'Sure, if you like.'

They ran side by side over the ridge of the saddle, and along the beach. The morning air was sharp and cool, but the sun promised a hot day to follow.

When they reached the high rock outcrop that bounded the beach Blythe turned and leaned back on the hard, wave-worn surface, panting. 'I'm not used to this.'

'You don't need it like I do.' Jas leaned his hands on either side of her and grinned down at her flushed face. 'Your work gives you enough exercise.'

'Do you jog in Wellington?'

'When I can. It's pretty well proven now that keeping a fit body helps to oil the wheels of your mind. I try to keep in condition.'

'Do you do sports?'

'Tennis and squash, sometimes.'

'Singles,' she said involuntarily.

'Yes.' He looked at her. 'Witch.'

Blythe smiled. It fitted. He'd be competitive, but not a team player. 'There are tennis courts at the motor camp near the store. You can hire a court by the hour.'

Jas cocked his head. 'Want a game some time? I don't have my racquet with me but I could buy one.'

'There are some at the cottage.' After her grandmother's death she and Rose had left the basement cupboard almost untouched, the tennis racquets and baseball bats, board games, card packs and jigsaw puzzles, a legacy of family holidays, kept in trust for the next generation. 'We used to walk to Apiata along the sand sometimes when the tide was right.'

'And then play tennis and walk back?'

'Unless we could persuade Dad to come and fetch us,' she agreed. 'They were good times.'

He stared at her broodingly. 'You were lucky.'

She gazed up at him and raised a hand to his face, her thumb stroking the morning roughness of his skin. 'What happened to you?'

He looked away.

'Jas? You said I hardly know you... How can I if you don't tell me about yourself?'

He took a breath and let his eyes meet hers. She thought he gave an infinitesimal nod. 'My mother married a second time because I was on the way. And regretted it. Her first marriage hadn't been successful, and hpr second was no improvement. And I was the root cause.'

It didn't sound like a happy situation. 'But she must have loved you...?'

Jas gave a short, harsh laugh. 'You can't imagine a mother who doesn't love her child, can you?' he asked almost indulgently. 'If she ever did she never showed it. She would have liked a girl, but when I turned out to be another boy she wished she'd got rid of me.'

'She *told* you that?' Blythe was horrified.

'Several times. Abortion was illegal back then but she'd have found someone, she said.'

Tentatively, she suggested, 'When people are angry they often say things they don't mean.'

Jas shook his head, something that wasn't a smile making his mouth curl. 'When she was angry she had much worse things to say...and do.'

Blythe's breath momentarily paused, her temples throbbing. 'Did she *beat* you?'

'I learned to dodge. There's no permanent damage.'

Her blood chilled. 'She must have been mentally unstable!'

'Because she hated me?' He smiled bitterly. 'She'd been trapped into marrying a man she came to despise, who left her to raise his child and her own two alone most of the time and wasn't faithful to her. He was hardly ever there so she took out her frustration on me.'

'Oh, Jas.' Blythe slid her arms about his waist.

He dropped his hands from the rock and held her, his cheek against her temple. 'I survived,' he said. 'I've always survived.' He lowered his head further to kiss her. 'Are we going for a swim?'

They stripped to the bathing things they'd worn under their clothes, and ran into the cold chill of the water. It soon warmed, and she teased him and splashed water at him until he came after her. They played about, laughing, then waded out hand in hand.

Jas stooped to pick up their clothes, lying in a heap together on the sand.

Blythe pushed back her wet hair. 'Race you to the saddle.'

She broke into a run, taking an unfair start, but he soon sprinted ahead and easily won.

It was childish, but then he'd never had a proper childhood. Gasping for breath, she caught up and collapsed against him. She felt the deep rise and fall of his chest, and the rhythm of his heart thudding through the thin wet fabric of her swimsuit. 'You have longer legs than I do,' she complained.

They walked along the track with their arms about each other, and he kissed her again before he left to go back to his house.

When she tried to bring up the subject of his early life again—while they were lying together in her bed—he deflected her careful

questioning, saying it was all in the past and he saw no point in talking about it.

'Well, I hope your wife loved you *a lot*,' she said fiercely. 'I hope she made you very, very happy!'

Once she'd been jealous of the woman he mourned. But now she just wanted Jas to have had some of the loving and cherishing he'd been denied in childhood.

'You are the most extraordinary woman,' Jas said, and his hands cradled her head as he kissed her almost violently. She wound her arms about him and kissed him back, and there was no more talking.

In the morning she woke snuggled against him, while his hand stroked her hair. She turned her head slightly and dropped a kiss on his shoulder. 'It's December already,' she said. 'We have Christmas lunch at my parents' place. My sister will be there with her husband and kids, and my other brother with his wife and *their* children. And Micky, of course.' She looked up at Jas, kissed his chin. 'Will you come? Meet the rest of my family?'

He didn't move and yet she felt everything in him withdraw, as though his skin was shrinking over his bones. Before he spoke she knew he was going to turn her down. 'I have other plans,' he said. 'Sorry.'

'That's...all right.' She swallowed disappointment. 'I'll probably fly down to Wellington.'

Probably. He didn't have any firm plans, but was seizing the excuse not to spend the holiday with her family. Embarrassed, she shifted away from him, laying her head on the pillow. Did he think she was trying to push him into some kind of commitment?

After breakfast she went off to the garden and attacked the task of weeding the beds with unusual ferocity, still smarting from what she couldn't help feeling was a rebuff. For the first time she wondered if she'd made a mistake in becoming Jas Tratherne's lover.

Her parents had brought her up to respect her body and to appreciate the power of her sexuality, and they'd given her the example of a long and faithful marriage. She'd always had plenty of good friends of both sexes, and an inner conviction that one day she would meet the man who would share his life with her.

Was Jas that man? Sitting back on her heels, she put down her garden fork, removed one glove and wiped her forehead with her hand.

She wanted Jas to be the man she'd waited for. Blythe had opened her heart, her mind, her body to him, hoping to melt away the outer shell that she was certain concealed a warm, loving personality. But he had not reciprocated.

Firming her mouth, she put the glove back on and attacked the weeds with renewed vigour.

She worked late that day, and while she was washing her hands by the tunnel house Jas came looking for her.

Her heart gave a little skip of surprise and delight when she saw him.

'I thought it's time I gave you dinner,' he said. 'I'm no great cook, but I could go and get us some fish and chips from Apiata. What do you fancy?'

'Scallops,' she said. 'But do you really want to go all that way and back? There is a restaurant at the takeaway shop, although it's a bit noisy sometimes.'

'If you'd prefer that,' he said, but he sounded distinctly unenthusiastic.

'No,' Blythe denied hastily. 'And you'd still have to drive there and back. Shall I come with you?'

'If you want. We could try the tennis court and buy our dinner after that. And maybe take togs for swimming—we'll need to cool off after a game. Or are you too tired?'

'I'd like that. Great!' She was tired, but just seeing him had brought her singingly to life.

While Jas went home to change into shorts for tennis, Blythe fished in the basement for racquets and balls. Then she had a shower, brushed her hair and tied it in a ponytail, and donned shorts and a white top before digging her tennis shoes out of the bottom of her wardrobe. She did them up and straightened, glancing at herself in the mirror.

The delicate flush on her cheeks might be the result of bending to tie her shoes. But that didn't account for the soft brilliance of her eyes, or the unmistakable, expectant curve of her lips.

She looked like a woman going to meet her lover. She wished her face wouldn't so clearly betray her emotions—it wasn't fair when Jas was so very good at concealing his.

Jas was a careful and competent driver, avoiding the biggest ruts and making the ride as comfortable as possible. Once they reached the sealed road he drove just on the speed limit.

After purchasing a ticket at the motor camp office they had to wait for what looked like a family foursome—two adults, two teenagers—to finish their time on one of the courts. Jas and Blythe played three sets and he beat her six-one, five-seven and six-love.

'I'm not good enough for you,' she said as they left the court. 'You let me win that second one, didn't you?'

'You're good enough.' He took her hand in his, swinging it lightly. 'Men are generally physically stronger. You were playing at a disadvantage.'

Yes, I am, Blythe thought—and not only in this game, but in our relationship. She curled her fingers about his. 'Why do they call a nought "love" in tennis?' she asked idly. 'You know about figures.'

'It's from the French *l'oeuf*. A corruption.'

'The egg?'

'For the shape, I guess.'

'Hmm, I suppose a nought is roughly egg-shaped.'

I'd forgotten that tennis was derived from a French game.'

They stowed the tennis gear in the back of the car, joined the swimmers in the water for a while, and after drying off and changing strolled to the takeaway.

'We'll wait outside,' Jas said after ordering, pushing the screen door open for her. It was stuffy and crowded in the small shop.

The bench seat against the wall was occupied by three teenage boys wearing baseball caps and baggy shorts, joshing each other and giggling. Across the road a wide grassy bank rose above the beach.

'Let's wait over there,' Blythe said.

They stood on the bank, watching windsurfers skim the waves, and several swimmers nearer to the shore.

A man came from the water and walked up the beach holding the hand of a chubby little girl of about seven or eight wearing a frilly red

bathing suit. Her two wet ponytails flicked water over him as she shook her head, and she laughed up at him.

A woman reclining on a towel just in front of Blythe and Jas put down a magazine, sat up and waved, and the girl waved back, her plump hand flapping up and down as she stumped towards her mother with a huge smile.

The child had Down's syndrome, Blythe realised with a pang, noting the small features and toddler-like gait.

The little girl hurried forward, proclaiming, 'Mum, I thwim!'

And her mother held out her arms and said extravagantly, 'I *saw!* What a *clever* girl!'

The ponytails bobbed. 'Yeth. Clever.' She raised one small fist, tipping back her head in a sort of silent laugh at her father as he joined them.

Blythe smiled at the girl's pride in her accomplishment, and glanced at Jas to share her feelings.

His mouth was drawn tight and his brows were low over his eyes. Even his skin seemed to have paled.

'Jas?'

He didn't respond, staring at the family below.

'Jas?' Such an intense scrutiny was beyond the bounds of politeness. The father looked up, and Blythe began to feel uncomfortable. 'Jas.'

'What?' Jas made a slight, jerky movement of his head, and then turned to her.

She searched his face and was quite unable to read what was in his eyes. 'What's wrong?' she asked.

'There's nothing wrong,' he muttered. She saw his eyes slide sideways as if he couldn't help taking another covert peek. Then they flickered quickly away and he swung round and took a hasty step towards the road. 'We'd better see if our fish is ready.'

It was much too soon, but Blythe didn't argue. She was disturbed by his reaction to the family on the beach. He'd stared and then...ran.

There was nothing ugly about the little girl's blue eyes, button of a nose, and happy smile. And surely he'd seen children like her before?

The shop was full but the teenagers had vacated the seat outside. 'Wait here,' Jas said. Til get it.'

Blythe sat down and tried to put the incident out of her mind. Perhaps Jas had been mentally working out some mathematical problem, not even noticing the family on the beach.

Wanting to seek the reassurance of his smile, his closeness, she stood up. Her reflection looked back at her from the window of the shop.

She paused, taking a long, critical look at herself. She might yearn for manageable hair, for a few more centimetres of height, for a face that was classically oval and serene rather than heart-shaped and dimpled and conventionally pretty, but she knew perfectly well that many people found her looks everything a girl could wish for, everything a man could desire.

But did she have any attraction for a man like Jas apart from a pretty face and the fact that she was willing to listen to him expound on his favourite subject? Would he have desired her at all if she hadn't conformed to society's view of female attractiveness?

She shivered despite the warmth of the day, and then Jas came out, the screen door flapping shut behind him, and smiled at her.

CHAPTER NINE

JAS hooked an arm about her waist, heading for the car.

'We could eat on the beach,' Blythe suggested, 'while the food's hot and fresh.'

'In ten minutes we can be home. It's crowded here.'

She held the parcel of fish and chips while he drove, the heat penetrating through the paper strangely comforting. After they had cleared the town she said carefully, 'The little girl on the beach—'

'What little girl?'

'The one with Down's syndrome.'

A tiny muscle in his cheek flickered. 'What about her?'

'Did she bother you?'

'What do you mean?' He sounded almost aggressive.

'The way you looked at her—you were staring.'

He frowned, and his hands tightened on the steering wheel so that his knuckles showed white. 'I was thinking about something else.'

Light dawned. He'd seen a happy family—a loving father, a mother who hugged and praised her child for small accomplishments, a child who was secure and happy and surrounded by affection and pride. And the fact that she had been born 'different' was irrelevant. What he had seen was not an abnormal child but a loved child—like all the children he must have envied in his own unloved childhood.

She looked at his harsh, enigmatic profile, and stretched out her hand to take one of his from the steering wheel into her warm clasp.

For a moment his fingers resisted. Then they curled about hers and clung as if she'd offered him a lifeline. They were almost home before he relaxed his grip.

Jas tipped the food onto plates and they took them outside. Indoors it was quite muggy, but on his veranda the air was very pleasant.

Blythe scorned a knife and fork, saying that was no way to eat fish and chips. When she'd finished she said, 'I'd better go and wipe my fingers,' but Jas caught her wrist and made her laugh by licking the grease away. Then he began kissing her fingers and her palm, and the laughter died as her eyelids grew heavy with passion.

In his bedroom she said, 'It's too hot in here.'

'You want to go back to the veranda?' he queried. 'If anyone came along the road...'

'Out the back, then? No one will see us there.'

He made a bed for them in the long, soft grass, spreading blankets under the old plum tree that Blythe remembered from her childhood. The grass beneath cushioned their naked bodies and the tall, pale standing stalks curtained them.

The moon rose beyond the branches of the plum tree and cast a pattern of shadows. Blythe's skin felt cool and extra-sensitive in the open air, every nerve responding to the lightest touch of Jas's fingers as he traced the contours of her breasts, a hip, a thigh.

Her head on a white pillow, she looked up and saw Jas, his shoulders limned with moonlight.

His wandering hand reached her foot, and he knelt to kiss the arch of her instep, making her laugh softly. One finger smoothed along the length of her leg. 'You have such beautiful legs,' he said.

'I always wanted them to be longer.'

'Why?' His hand shaped her hip, and his thumb found the little indentation of her navel, making her catch her breath. 'You're perfectly proportioned. I bet,' he said, 'if I measured your height and compared it with the height of your navel, it would be in the Golden Ratio.'

Blythe giggled; she couldn't help it. 'Whatever made you think of that?'

Jas shifted his hand to her breast, leaning over her. There was a smile in his voice. 'An imaginative member of the Fibonacci Society suggested the men in the group should test it on their wives.'

'We must try it later! But if I don't measure up will you be disappointed?'

'Never.' His voice was muffled against the heated skin of her throat. 'You couldn't disappoint me.'

She touched his hair, and his shoulder, ran her hand down his arm and guided his hand to where she wanted it, letting out a sigh of contentment as he obeyed her silent signal. She saw the gleam of his brief smile, and then he shifted closer and his head bent towards her.

'I love you!' she whispered, just before his mouth came down on hers, tender and fierce at the same time, waiting for her response to him

before he deepened the kiss, eager and hot and mind-shattering, his tongue and his fingers bringing her to a breathtaking delight.

She came to a climax so quickly she had no time to warn him, and he kept kissing her and holding her until her little gasping cries died and she lay quiescent in his arms, her face hidden against his shoulder.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

'Sorry?' His hand moved over her hair. 'Why?'

'I...I couldn't wait for you.' •

'Don't be silly. It was wonderful. Knowing I had done that for you was exciting for me. Feel that.' He gently took her hand and closed it about his velvety hardness. 'Or on second thoughts,' he muttered, 'maybe you'd better not.'

She felt him surge against her palm, and smiled. 'If you can do it for me...'

'No,' he said. 'I'd rather be inside your sweet body...if that's all right with you.'

'It's all right,' she said, parting her thighs for him to rest between them. 'It's always all right.'

She hadn't expected to reach the crest again, but when he got there she was right with him, while the stars spun down from the sky and the world dropped away to dark space where they had only each other to cling to while they floated slowly back to reality.

It was a time of wonder, of shared delight in their physical world. They walked barefoot on the beach, letting the sea wash over their

toes. With sand-coated feet, carelessly rolled trousers dampened by the waves, his hand curled about Blythe's and his eyes smiling "into hers, Jas was a different person.

They dug for pipis at low tide and Blythe taught Jas how to eat them raw from the shell. They fished from the rocks and barbecued their catch on the beach. She persuaded him to play for her...lilting melodies, passionate sonatas, even light love songs and the old Irish ballads that his music teacher had been fond of. She'd curl up on the sofa, resting her chin on her arm along the back of it, playing with the crystal prism, and entranced by the music and by the tilt of his head, the movements of his hands, and the way the muscles in his back rippled under his shirt.

Flicking through some of his books, she found beautiful diagrams that she adapted for the decorations on her pots. And if Jas struck a mental wall and needed to clear his head, he worked with her in the garden.

He helped her repair her rotary hoe, and she said with respect, 'You're pretty handy, aren't you?'

He grinned at her. 'You thought I was a geek. I know my way about this kind of machinery pretty well. When I was a kid I had a lawnmowing round.'

'Miss Paige's was the first?'

'You have a good memory. She recommended me to a couple of people and it grew from there.'

'You never mow your lawn here.'

'I like the grass.' He gave her a laughing look of enquiry. 'I thought you did too,' he said softly. 'Do you want me to cut it?'

'I never said that. It just seems...surprising.'

'For me?' He reached out with a damp hand to her tumbled hair, watching a curl spring free and gently wrap his finger. 'I want to understand nature, not tame it. Although...if I succeed in proving my theorem, eventually we may be able to predict and even alter the course of natural disasters.' His gaze shifted to the gleaming new roof of her home. 'Like cyclones.'

A small black butterfly floated between them, briefly lighted on Blythe's shoulder and waved its orange and white spotted wings.

Jas gave a soft laugh. 'It thinks you're a flower.'

Blythe laughed too, squinting after the butterfly as it left her, dancing and dipping in the soft summer air. 'It's confused.'

'I know the feeling. It was a natural mistake.' Jas followed her gaze. 'Can you believe that it—or one of its relatives—may have caused our cyclone?'

'What?' Blythe's bemused gaze returned to his face.

'The effect of a butterfly's wings on air currents might begin the process that ultimately builds up to a hurricane—perhaps on the other side of the world. It's a proposition that crops up in chaos theory.'

'That's a theory that there's no logic in nature?'

'Not at all. Chaos describes *apparently* patternless behaviour. Everything has its own logic, its pattern, if we could see it and measure it.'

Adjusting the wide-meshed horizontal nets supporting the stalks of her bigger plants, Jas asked, 'Some of these have so many flowerheads—will you cull them?'

'Oh, no. The ones that are left miss their siblings. They'd sicken or even end up malformed.'

He regarded the plant with sharp interest. 'I wonder why?'

Blythe laughed. 'The story of your life?' she teased him.

'I told you they were very interesting flowers. There are scientific journals and conferences entirely devoted to studying them.'

'I thought you were being sarcastic.'

He caught her about the waist with both hands. 'Not to you. It would be like pulling petals off a flower.'

Blythe looked into his eyes and saw desire there, but also something disquieting, something intense and almost frightening.

Uneasy, she stirred in his hold. 'Let go,' she said huskily. 'I'm all dirty.' She was wearing her gloves and they were covered in soil, her clothes smudged with it and probably her face too.

'I don't care.' Jas hauled her close, kissing her so fiercely that her mouth felt bruised.

When he released her Blythe stepped back with her hand to her lips, her heart pounding and her eyes indignant as they met the glazed expression in his. • He closed them and shook his head slightly before opening them again. 'I'm sorry,' he said. He reached out a hand to touch her face, then withdrew it, grimacing. 'I'm filthy too.'

She took another step back and he winced. 'Blythe...I'm a crass, thoughtless swine. Next time I'll remember how soft and tender your mouth is...promise.'

'It's all right. I forgive you.'

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. 'You shouldn't, but thank you.'

The sound of a car disturbed them. Blythe turned, shading her eyes. 'It's Mum and Dad!'

'I'll go away,' Jas said instantly.

'No—they'd like to see you.' Other times they'd been around since the storm he hadn't been here, but in his own house. He must have seen their car, and she assumed if he'd wanted to meet them again he'd have come over. But she wasn't allowing him to escape now.

She stripped off her gloves and took his hand and led him over to the car, not letting go until she went forward to hug her parents.

Rose cast her daughter a smiling look of speculation, and Brian directed a penetrating glance at Jas. Later, as they sat on the deck with cups of coffee and slices of the cake Rose had brought, Rose asked Jas what his Christmas plans were, adding that he was welcome to join their family for the celebration.

Blythe clutched her coffee cup and kept her eyes on the faint steam rising from it, willing Jas to accept now that he had a direct invitation from her mother.

'Thank you,' he said, 'but I've made my plans.'

Blythe said, 'Jas is going to Wellington.'

Rose nodded. 'Oh, your father's there, I suppose. You couldn't disappoint him.'

Perhaps Blythe was the only one who noticed that Jas didn't answer. Instead, he reached for a second piece of cake and made some comment on how nice it was.

The Summerfields' Christmas was the usual organised chaos. A stranger would have been hard put to see the pattern that the family understood by instinct. They all knew which special dish they were expected to provide and how to get the meal onto the table— and that lunch would begin half an hour later than the time specified, after which the presents would be opened by excited children scattering wrappings all over the floor, and her father would have a postprandial nap before playing noisy games with his grandchildren, while the rest of the adults caught up with family news.

It was all predictable while appearing to be random.

On Boxing Day the family travelled *en masse* to Tahawai and spent the day at the beach. And when they left, three of the children stayed behind, ecstatic at the idea of a holiday with their favourite aunt. Felix was eight, his sister Lisi and cousin Tess both six.

Each day they enthusiastically helped in the garden, mostly pulling weeds, and after an hour or two raced to the beach to build sandcastles, slide down the dunes and splash about in the shallows, or explore the rock pools on the headland. At lunchtime Blythe took them home until the sun was less fierce, and then they'd take another trek to the beach. When the air cooled in the evening she'd return to the garden while the children played in the gully, within sight.

On the third evening there was a tap on the door, and Jas called, 'Blythe? Are you home?'

The children were quiet for once, hoeing into the sausages-in-blankets that she'd served them. The three of them turned to stare, their cheeks bulging. Blythe stood by the table with a bottle of tomato sauce in one hand.

The door opened and Jas stepped into the room, dressed in jeans and a chambray shirt with rolled sleeves. He stopped short when he saw the visitors, and Blythe saw the fleeting shock on his face before he managed to conceal it behind a stiff mask.

She put the sauce on the table and said, 'Jas...meet my nephew and nieces. Lisi, Felix, Tess—this is Mr Tratherne.'

Felix swallowed his mouthful of bread and sausage and said politely, 'Hello, Mr Tratherne.'

She thought Jas was going to ignore the boy, but he tore his attention from her and nodded curtly. 'Hello.'

'We've been to your house,' Tess informed him.

Felix chipped in. 'Only the outside. Auntie Blythe said we had to stay on the veranda.'

She'd checked on the house each day, taking the children along, of course—they were too young to be left. 'Everything's fine,' she assured him. 'There've only been a few people on the beach since Christmas. Welcome home, Jas.' She walked over to lift her face and kiss his lips.

They were unresponsive, and she stepped back. Maybe he was embarrassed by the presence of the children.

Of course a full-blown sexual kiss wasn't appropriate, but he could at least have made a token gesture of reciprocation. She smiled at him and took his hand to draw him forward. 'Stay and eat with us?'

'No.' He tugged his hand from her grasp. 'Thanks. How long are they going to be here?'

'Until New Year. They're having a wonderful time. Come to the beach with us tomorrow?'

Jas shook his head. 'I've lost enough time. Keep them away from my house, will you?'

It was as if he'd thrown cold water in her face. Disconcerted, she simply gaped at him.

He turned to wrench open the door.

'Jas!' Blythe went after him before he could shut it. She pulled it almost to behind her, closing them out off the darkened porch, and caught at his arm. 'By nine o'clock I'll have the children in bed,' she said in a low voice. 'Will you come back later?'

'To share yours?'

She hesitated. 'To talk, at least.'

He moved and her hand fell from his arm. 'I do need to get back to work. And obviously your hands are full. How can you manage your business with them around?'

'They're quite helpful. They're good kids, Jas.'

'I don't doubt it,' he said politely.

'And there's not much happening between Christmas and New Year. I'm taking a break from deliveries.' Dismayed, she asked, 'Don't you like children?'

'It has nothing to do with not liking them,' he said edgily. 'I told you—'

'You're busy. Well, we'll try not to disturb you.'

She sounded more than a trifle snappy, Blythe knew.

'Thank you.' He paused, put a hand under her chin and lifted her face, kissing her with a peculiar kind of controlled ferocity. Without another word he was gone.

She waited up until eleven, but he didn't come back.

Next day she was on the beach with the children, inspecting a jellyfish they'd found washed up on the sand and counting the dark red spots in its transparent body, when she looked up and saw Jas at the top of the saddle. She straightened and lifted her hand to wave and invite him to join them, but before she could do so he wheeled and disappeared back the way he'd come.

Blythe stood disbelieving, her hand half in the air.

'Aunty Blythe!' Lisi tugged at her shorts.

Blythe dragged her gaze from the spot where Jas had been, and turned her attention to her niece.

'Aunty Blythe, can we take it home?'

'No,' she said. 'We'll put it back in the sea where it belongs.'

'Is it alive?' Felix asked her.

'I don't know,' she admitted, 'but if it is, taking it away will kill it, and if it's dead it will go stinky. Get your bucket, Tess, and we'll put it back.'

When the children had gone to bed she stood on her porch and stared frustratedly along the night-shadowed gully to Jas's house. She

couldn't leave the children alone. Maybe he would come up tonight? But even as she tried to reassure herself, she knew it was a false hope.

Bewilderment and resentment built into a simmering anger. Did he think he could just pick up and discard her at will? Was he tired of her? Had he met someone else in Wellington...an old flame, perhaps?

Common sense and her knowledge of him told her how unlikely that was. He'd come knocking on her door as soon as he got back, after all. He'd kissed her with passion, if only briefly. If only he'd had a phone, she could have rung him and demanded an explanation. It was ridiculous the way he kept himself so isolated from the world, and from everyone in it. Except her.

She'd thought that made her so special...

Like a worm wriggling into the heart of a rose, a thought—a memory—intruded. Jas, only minutes after he'd first kissed her, asking harshly, 'Don't you mind being used?'

She had told him she understood. Understood that the kiss had meant nothing, that he was in no way committed. And later that night, at the height of the cyclone, she'd invited him to kiss her again, incurring his brutal rejection.

Why hadn't she learned her lesson then? She'd goaded him until he admitted his jealousy—the jealousy he had no right to bear—and still it hadn't been enough. She'd pushed him to the wall, flung a brazen challenge at him—practically dared him to make love to her.

And he had. She closed her eyes, remembering the passion and the sweet violence of it, her fear and excitement and the crescendo of feeling that had ended in blinding, white-hot ecstasy.

All that she'd asked for, he'd given her. And she *had* asked for it. If he had used her—if he wanted only sex from her, not love or

permanence or the minor inconvenience of having to be nice to her family or of being normally sociable to her guests—she had only herself to blame. Because she'd ignored every warning, every refusal. He'd have had to be superhuman to keep sending her away when she was so determined to rush headlong to her own destruction.

After she'd finally gone to bed, she heard the music, distant and barely audible in the still night air. A few clear notes, then a bar or two that sounded lost, lonely, like her own mood.

On the children's last morning Lisi came into Blythe's room, leaning on the dressing table where Blythe kept pictures of her grandparents.

'That's Great-Grandma. I remember her.'

They studied the photograph together. Blythe wondered what her grandmother would have made of Jas. In her day sex outside marriage had been frowned on. Maybe there was something to be said for that. If she hadn't become so intimately involved with him,

Blythe might not have been feeling quite so keenly this sick dread, this tearing ache in her heart.

After the children's parents had picked them up only pride and a mixture of resentment and fear prevented her from running along the track to Jas's place and throwing herself into his arms. Instead she pottered about tidying the cottage for half an hour and then went to the beach. Sooner or later he would come.

When he did, she stood up from where she'd been drawing aimless patterns in the sand under the fragmented shade of an overhanging pohutukawa tree, and waited for him to join her.

As he approached she looked at him gravely and he stopped before her, leaned closer and kissed her cheek. She stood very still, but didn't offer to kiss him back.

Jas stepped back. 'Are you angry with me?'

'No.' She had gone past anger, into a state of numbed dread. She wanted to ask him questions, but was afraid of the answers.

'Then let's walk,' he suggested, and held out his hand to her.

She hesitated for a moment before placing her fingers in his.

'Did you see your father?' she asked him.

'Yes.'

'How is he?'

'Neither of us enjoyed it much. I don't want to talk about that, okay?'

'What do you want to talk about, then? Apart from mathematics.'

His whole body stiffened. 'I know I can be tedious on that subject—'

'I didn't mean that! It's just that...you never do talk—I mean really *talk*—about anything else.'

'We've talked about a lot of things,' he argued. 'Your flowers, music...'

'Those aren't real, personal things,' Blythe insisted.

'I described my childhood traumas to you, Blythe.' His voice was full of self-mockery. 'I've never done that before. What more do you want?'

Your love, she thought. Sometimes she'd thought she had that, although he'd never said it in so many words. But even if he did love her, could she be happy with a man who would deny her children?

There were plenty of very happy childless couples in the world. Blythe knew that, only she hadn't envisaged being a part of one. And she was very fond of her nieces and nephews. There was no way she could cut herself off from her family; it would be like culling blooms from a sunflower stem, a perversion of nature. Would Jas expect her to do that? Try to isolate her with him in his own private, closed-in world?

That was taking a lot for granted, she realised. How could she ask him to spell out how he felt about having a family when he had never suggested that their relationship had any permanence? What right did she have to challenge his refusal to have anything to do with children who were precious to her but nothing at all to him?

She hadn't answered his question. What did she want of him? There was no answer she could give without begging for something she was afraid he could never give her. He tugged her close and turned her face up, looking into her troubled eyes. 'Anyway,' he said, 'I don't want to talk. I have a much better idea.'

His kiss was gentle, yet compelling, and she found herself giving in to him, temporarily drowning her misgivings in a tide of feeling, kissing him back as if they'd been separated for months rather than days.

Reluctantly relinquishing her mouth at last, he gave a sigh against her cheek and said huskily, 'It's been too long.'

'It needn't have been.'

Blythe felt his withdrawal before he physically moved away from her. She saw his closed, austere expression. Damn it, she couldn't just let it go. 'Are you scared of children?' she demanded.

He blinked once, almost as though flinching. 'Scared?' he asked warily.

'I don't suppose you've had much to do with them,' she guessed. 'They're just people, Jas—' Remembering that he'd admitted he wasn't 'good' with people, she hastened on. 'You might enjoy being around them—'

'Enjoy—' It was like a snarl. 'Shut up, Blythe!' he said roughly.

She drew in a shocked, choking breath. '*What?*'

He made an impatient movement and raised his eyes as., though looking for inspiration, then returned them to her face. 'That was rude. I beg your pardon.'

'Yes, it was! And I don't see—'

'No, you don't!' he interrupted. Sucking in a breath, -.he added, 'Why should you? God, you're hardly more than a child yourself.'

'I take exception to that!' she snapped.

'You want *another* apology?' he asked wearily.

'All right, you've got it. Now can we talk about something else?'

He took her hand and began walking along the beach. Angry and exasperated, she stalked alongside him in silence.

They reached the rocky outcrop that marked the end of the sand, and instead of turning back Blythe let go of Jas's hand and clambered up the side to the relatively flat hard surface, still wet from the receding tide.

'Feeling adventurous?' Jas had followed her, and was looking down at her with an edgy smile. • Not smiling back, Blythe started across the slippery, uneven plateau, skirting rock pools filled with seaweed and anemones and lurking crabs.

'Be careful,' Jas warned as she jumped across one of the bigger pools. But she landed safely and went on until she stood at the steep edge of the rock, watching the incoming sea swirl and foam at its base, tasting the salty spray that left dark spots on her T-shirt and shorts.

Great swathes of brown seaweed were tugged into the receding waves, only to slap back against the rock when the next incoming wave hit. There they remained stubbornly fastened to the land, even while yearning towards the sea.

Strong arms wound about her from behind and Jas said in her ear, 'You're too close to the edge.' He stepped back, taking her with him.

Too late, Blythe thought bleakly. She had already gone over the edge and fallen headlong in love with a man who was wrong for her in every way.

She put her hands on his and prised them apart, slipped out of his hold, then went away from him back the way they had come. Her eyes stung, and a couple of tears mingled with the salt droplets of spray on her face. She shook them away impatiently and climbed down to the sand.

When Jas joined her he put an arm about her shoulders. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

She turned to him without looking into his eyes. 'Of course.'

But when they reached the steps up to the cottage she pulled away and said, 'Goodnight, Jas.'

'Goodnight?'

She looked at him fleetingly, then dragged her gaze away. 'It's been a hectic week.'

'Are you punishing me?'

Shocked, she looked at him again. 'Of course not!' But she needed to think, without his distracting presence to muddle her mind.

He was regarding her with a sombre, thoughtful gaze. 'All right,' he said, and put a hand behind her head, kissing her fully on the lips, his mouth questing.

Her response was stiff. She was afraid her emotions might overwhelm her common sense.

Jas drew back, looking frustrated and angry. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

CHAPTER TEN

BLYTHE was rather glad she had a sales trip the next day, giving her something to concentrate on other than her relationship with Jas. On her return she left the van in her garage, took a deep breath, and went along the gully to knock on Jas's door.

He was unshaven again and looked as though he'd been asleep, his eyes reddened, his hair ruffled. Trying to smooth it with one hand, he said, 'Come in.'

'What have you been doing?'

'Doing?'

'You look awful,' Blythe told him. But when she looked again she could see that his bloodshot eyes held a glitter of hidden excitement.

'I didn't get to bed last night. I've been catching up on some sleep.' He led the way into the front room and vaguely waved in the direction of the couch.

'You worked all night?' Blythe didn't sit down.

'It was worth it.' Jas blinked. 'What time is it?'

'After five.'

'In the evening...' He rubbed a hand over his eyes. 'I need a shower,' he said. 'Wait for me.'

He disappeared, and Blythe looked about the room, then went to the keyboard against the wall, tentatively trying a few notes, then picking out a tune.

Jas came in, freshly shaved and with his hair damp.

Blythe turned and said on impulse, 'Would you play for me?'

'Now?'

'Please,' she begged.

Jas hesitated. 'All right.'

He sat down at the keyboard and launched into an exuberant rendering of old hit tunes, ending with 'Fly Me To The Moon', before segueing into Beethoven's 'Song of Joy', the sublime, repeated phrases finally building to a triumphant climax.

Blythe quietly moved to the window, while the music swelled about her and filled the room. She could feel it vibrate through her body as she looked from the man at the keyboard to the distant white waves rolling ceaselessly to shore.

The last magnificent chords died away, and Jas swivelled on the stool, facing her across the room.

'Thank you.' Blythe's voice was hushed. 'That was wonderful.' A man who played like that couldn't possibly lack real emotions, deep feelings. Could he?

Jas inclined his head. 'Thank *you*.'

Delaying the moment of truth, Blythe asked, 'What happened today?'

'Today?'

'Last night. You've had a mathematical breakthrough?'

Jas stared at her, and a tinge of colour darkened his cheeks. 'You *are* a witch.'

'I can always tell what mood you're in from what you play—and how you play it.'

'Tirt>e damned!' he muttered. 'Actually, you're right.' He was trying to sound calm and casual, but she caught the fire in his eyes, the bottled-up elation in the way he held himself, the tell-tale crease in his cheek that denoted a hidden smile. 'If my colleagues agree with my proofs, then I've done what I came here to do.'

'That's wonderful, Jas.' Her voice sounded oddly hollow in her own ears.

He came over to join her at the window. His hands fell on her shoulders, but in the act of drawing her to him he paused, a frown appearing between his glittering eyes. 'What's the matter?'

Blythe touched her tongue to her lips. 'Nothing.' She couldn't bring herself to spoil his success. For a little time she could pretend. 'I'm really happy for you. You must feel great.' She managed a convincing smile. Meaning to give him a quick, congratulatory peck, she reached up to kiss him, but the instant their lips met his arms came about her and his mouth parted over hers, coaxing her to open up to him, allowing her no chance to withdraw.

Blythe closed her eyes tightly against threatening tears and sighed into his mouth, her arms sliding about his neck. Her treacherous body was warm and singing, even while her heart tore apart inside her, and when he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bedroom she told herself that one more time wouldn't do any harm, that she could give him this much in his hour of triumph.

He came to her like a conquering hero, his love- making infused with a new, sizzling exhilaration, overwhelming her with sweet excitement.

And she returned it in full measure, wanting to make this a night to remember—for him as well as for herself. It might be the last such night they had.

It was quite dark by the time she eased herself away from his sleeping form and gathered up her clothes, quietly slipping into them.

The moon was high and round and coldly merciless when she made her way along the ghostly-lit track to her cottage.

She didn't even try to sleep, spending the rest of the night on her deck, watching the stars' remote scintillations, and the moon's pale patina on the restless sea, and trying to persuade herself that one broken heart didn't mean the end of the world.

The stars would still be there tomorrow night, and the moon would wax and wane, and when the sun appeared each morning the rows of sunflowers in the garden would turn their faces to it and follow its progress across the sky to its resting place in the west, and then fold their petals until the cycle began all over again.

To every thing there is a season... A time to love...

And a time to weep. There were no tears in her eyes, but inside she was crying, her heart a huge aching void.

At dawn she got up stiffly from the lounging chair in which she'd at last dozed off, and went down to the beach.

Jas found her there, sitting on the soft, cool sand with her knees raised and her arms wrapped around her bare legs. Blythe knew when he approached, and when he sat down beside her, but she kept her gaze on the white-edged waves racing to the shore. She'd been compulsively counting them, trying to discern the pattern in their apparent chaos.

Somewhere she had read that love was the chaos theory of human emotions. So there must be some kind of, logical inevitability in her relationship with Jas, some pattern set up at their first meeting that had brought them to this point.

'I missed you,' Jas said. He touched her hair, winding a curl about one finger. 'What are you thinking about?'

'I'm thinking about us...and chaos theory. And how science hasn't found a way to measure human emotions.'

'And?' The curl unravelled from his finger as he removed his hand and lowered it to the sand to steady himself. He raised his knees and laid his other arm on them, twisting to look at her.

Blythe took a quick breath. 'You said once that all pleasures are transient. You never expected this to last, did you?'

. 'No,' he said, after what seemed like an eternity. 'No, I didn't.'

You asked for this, she berated herself, clenching her teeth against a cry of protest. Until this moment she hadn't realised how much she'd hoped he would contradict her, say he couldn't leave her, tell her that he loved her.

It solved one problem, she told herself with savage irony. The question of children needn't have concerned her at all.

She gave a small, fierce nod. 'Yes, well...it's been...' She started to say 'nice' but substituted, 'fun.' And despised herself for the feeble effort at preserving her pride.

'Fun,' Jas echoed. 'Yes.'

Blythe swallowed, hurting her throat. 'So when...are you leaving?'

Again there was a pause before he answered. When he said at last, 'Can't wait to see the back of me?' his tone was bitterly amused, with an underlying rasp.

She gave him a look of outraged anger, saw his face stiffen with shock, and without thinking shot to her feet, taking a couple of steps away from him before she rounded on him even as he stood up. 'What do you think?' she demanded hotly. 'Of course I can't wait to see you go! I only *love* you!' She gulped, hearing herself shout it at him when she hadn't meant to say it at all, knowing he didn't want her love, that he had never reciprocated it. Hadn't even pretended, except with the tender light that sometimes showed in his eyes, the gentleness of his hands, the passion of his lovemaking... He had never said he loved her.

Horried at herself, she backed from him, saying hurriedly, 'And if you think I'm going to sleep with you until you're ready to go, you can damn well think again!'

She turned, bolting across the sand, knowing she'd failed miserably to hold onto any dignity at all, longing to get home and shut herself in and never, never come out. At least, not until Jas was long gone.

'Blythe—*Blythe!*'

He'd caught her arm. She pulled violently away, wanting only to take her hurt and humiliation well out of his sight. But he grabbed her, wrapping his arms about her and trapping hers while he said in her ear, 'Blythe, listen—'

She thought of all the times she'd been willing and eager to listen—and she'd had to drag every unwilling word from him. 'No!' she panted. 'Damn you!'

Kicking at him, she bruised her bare foot on his hard shin, and unbalanced them both so that they fell on the yielding sand. She was

sprawled on top of him, but he rolled over and pinned her beneath him, and when she fought her hands free he seized her wrists and grappled them back to the sand.

They were both breathing hard. Blythe could feel the rapid rise and fall of his chest against her breasts, and his legs were tangled about hers, keeping her prisoner.

There were tears on her cheeks, but she'd stopped crying now, and glared at him with hot, furious eyes.

Jas looked back, his gaze dark and troubled. 'I didn't mean to hurt you,' he said.

She said through her teeth, 'Then get off me! You're heavy.'

'You didn't complain last night.' He moved, taking some of his weight on an elbow, but not releasing her. 'Blythe...what you yelled at me just now...?' • That she loved him. 'I've said it before,' she reminded him resentfully.

'While we were making love. I couldn't believe you really meant it.'

'Well, you don't have to believe it now,' she said sulkily. If he wasn't able to return the sentiment why should she bare her bruised and bleeding heart to him?

'I just thought that...'

'*What* did you think?' she snapped as he paused.

His voice was low and his lips hardly moved. 'That...loving is easy for you...'

In an instant, white-hot rage consumed her. She regarded him with fierce, wounded eyes, shaking with aroused temper. 'You don't believe you were the first, either?'

His brows drew together. 'Of course I believe *that!* What I can't believe is that I'll be the last.' He said jerkily, 'I should never have allowed it to happen. If I'd realised you were a virgin before it was too late... And maybe it wouldn't have stopped me,' he admitted. 'I could no more resist the chance to have you in my arms, in my bed, than I could resist the sunrise. But I never expected you to love me.'

Blythe bit on her lower lip and looked away from him again. 'Don't let it bother you. I'll get over it.'

'Then you're luckier than I am.' His voice had turned grim. 'I'll never get over you, sunflower-face.'

Her gaze returned to meet his, her eyes narrowed and distrustful.

Jas said, 'You brought warmth and colour back into my life—at least for a season. If I never see you again, I'll remember you for the rest of my days.'

Oh, that's nice, she thought bitterly. He'd cherish the memory—when he could have had the real live woman.

'I'd never met anyone like you,' Jas said. 'So honest and open and bright, like a flower that had just unfolded its petals to the morning. Pretty and perfect and confident of being liked...loved. And you kept...coming back—even when I tried to stay away, send you away—with your smile and your trusting eyes and that wondrous look you get when you discover something new, some little thing you didn't know before.'

Blythe winced. 'Like an unwanted puppy,' she muttered, resentfully.

A flare of surprise entered his eyes. 'Not at all like that! Of course I wanted you! The sun came out whenever you were around.' He bent his head and his face shadowed hers, and instinctively she closed her eyes, shuddering as his lips gathered the spent tears from her skin.

'Don't!' she choked.

Jas murmured something, and he lifted his head briefly, made a small, gruff sound, and kissed her, at first with heart-stopping tenderness and then fiery passion. He released her hands to gather her to him, his thigh pressing between hers, and she brought her freed arms around him and clung despairingly, until he felt the renewed tears on her face and pulled away. 'Shh,' he said. 'Blythe, don't...please.'

She tried to dash the tears away, and Jas turned onto his back, still holding her, raking his fingers gently into her hair and letting her hide her face against his shoulder.

Blythe sniffed and said belligerently, the words muffled in the folds of his shirt, 'I don't want you feeling sorry for me!' This time when she pushed against him he allowed her to sit up and face away from him. Sniffing again, she wiped her eyes with the back of one hand, gazing out to where the blue sky met the sea in a line of indigo.

'I'm only sorry for hurting you,' he said. 'And...stunned that you care so much.'

'Yes, well...you've never taken me seriously.' She stared down at the sand, still smarting from his belittling of her feelings. 'Why start now?'

'That isn't true,' he said. 'I take you very seriously, but...I always knew that some day you'd move on to some more exciting lover.'

'What *is* it with you?' Blythe said crossly, throwing him a scowling glance. 'Do you think I'm too brainless to be interested in a man of your intellect?'

'No—'

'I might not be able to follow all your mathematical formulas—formulae,' she corrected herself punctiliously, 'but if anyone's bored, surely it was you, trying to explain complicated principles so that an idiot like me could follow.'

'You're not an idiot!' he said forcefully. 'You're intelligent and brave and determined, and achingly pretty—' Ignoring her irritated snort, he went on, 'And I couldn't believe you'd ever look twice at someone like me.'

'Well, I did!' she snarled at him.

He frowned and pressed his hands together and stared down at his interlocked fingers. 'Yes, you did. I'm sorry, Blythe,' he said. 'I never thought it would go this far. I had no right to let you love me.'

'No, you didn't!' she cried. 'Not if you can't love me back!'

He looked up again, and shook his head. 'You don't understand.'

'So *make* me understand! You owe me that much at least!'

He looked startled, and then he gave a slow nod and said fumblingly, 'I never meant to...act on my feelings for you. I knew it wouldn't be fair. I tried my damndest to keep away. Only...when you reached out to me, I felt as though I'd been living in darkness and suddenly the sun had appeared and filled my world with light. Only one other person has ever made me feel like that.'

'Your wife.' She had always known deep down that he still grieved his loss. How could she have thought to replace his first and only love?

'No.' He took a breath, paused, and said as if the words were dragged from him, 'My daughter.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BLYTHE had the oddest feeling, as if she was briefly weightless and spinning in space. 'Your...*daughter!*' He had a child?

'Her name was Donna,' he said abruptly. His voice harsh, he added, 'She was in the car with Shelley...with my wife...when a drunken driver crossed the median on the motorway and smashed into them.'

Blythe listened, unable to speak.

'Shelley was killed instantly.' He turned from her, presenting a rigid, expressionless profile. 'Donna died a few days later, in my arms.' He heaved more air into his lungs, his eyes unblinkingly fixed on the horizon. 'Some people tried to tell me it was for the best.'

Blythe made a small exclamation. 'Because she was so badly hurt?'

'No.' After a long pause he went on. 'Donna was born with Down's syndrome. Of course that shocked us. But when I held her for the first time...my daughter, my flesh and blood...so tiny, and so...flawed...I loved her from that moment.'

A tight band of dread that had been closed about Blythe's heart for days began to unlock its grip. She hardly dared breathe.

Jas passed a hand over his face, kneading the bridge of his nose for a second. His voice became flat and very even. 'Shelley couldn't bring herself to look at the baby at first. She didn't want to feed her. She said we should put her in an institution, try again for a normal child, because the doctors could see no reason for us not to be able to do that. But I...couldn't abandon our baby.'

'She must have changed her mind?' Blythe ventured when the silence lengthened.

'People talked with us, told us how much help was available and...I had my way—we took the baby home.'

Blythe swallowed. 'And your wife...?'

'At first I think she was angry that we'd produced a baby that wasn't perfect in every way, and angry that I hadn't agreed we should forget we'd ever had her.' He dropped his frowning glance from the horizon. 'I never meant to tell you all this.'

He'd never felt close enough to her, she thought bleakly. She had been a distraction, light relief, someone to turn to as respite from the rigour of his profession, perhaps to help him forget for a time the tragedy in his past. Not someone to whom he could open the deepest recesses of his heart, with whom he could share the pain of his loss. 'Go on,' she said softly.

'Are you sure you want to...?'

'Go on!'

'Once she got over the initial...resentment,' he said jerkily, 'Shelley did wonders with Donna. She expected a bit much, I thought sometimes, but she was used to getting what she wanted from people—and with Donna she was remarkably patient. By the time Donna was six she could dress herself and toilet herself and was only a couple of years behind "normal" children. She was...' He paused, and cleared his throat. 'She was a happy child with a great smile, and very affectionate. We both loved our daughter.'

It must have brought them even closer together, Blythe thought.

'I think making a success of a...a difficult child became Shelley's way of compensating.'

'Compensating for what?' What was he talking about?

'For the fact that she was disappointed in her choice of husband.'

Blythe's breath stopped. 'Disappointed? She had *you* and she was disappointed?' ' He gave a wry near-smile. 'Perhaps if you'd lived with me for a few years you'd be fed up to the back teeth with me and my obsession with numbers too.'

Blythe stiffened. 'She said that?'

'Often. My conversational ability is limited—you know that. My home hadn't been one where children were encouraged to have opinions. I'd retreated into the world of numbers, and that's of interest to hardly anyone.'

'That's not true!' She was sure that her own family, whose lively curiosity and eagerness for new ideas or experiences had always been fostered, would be as fascinated by Jas's view of the world as she was. 'And you *loved* her!' How could Shelley have been so cruel?

He sat unmoving, as though he hadn't heard, for several seconds. 'I admired Shelley. You couldn't help admiring her. When we met, I didn't know what love was.' He dug a bare toe at the sand. 'She was the first person who had ever told me she loved me.'

And he'd been starved of love. He would have reached out eagerly to anyone who offered it, or an approximation of it.

Jas dipped his head, rubbing a hand over his hair. 'A couple of my classmates got high-powered corporate jobs soon after graduating, and Shelley expected I'd do the same. The academic life—lecturing, writing papers for fellow mathematicians and reading theirs, getting excited over a new theory—that was all deadly dull for her, and so was I.'

Blythe opened her mouth to hotly dispute that, but he was already continuing. 'She kept up with her more successful friends, people

who'd moved into the business world, public relations, even entertainment. God knows she deserved a social life, something to take her away from the strain of caring for Donna.'

'And you?'

'Usually I stayed home to look after Donna. Shelley didn't mind—when we did go anywhere together, or she had people round to our home, she'd warn me not to bore everyone about my work.'

'You're not a bore!' Blythe burst out. 'You've never bored me for an instant!'

He looked at her searchingly, a sardonic twist on his lips. 'Last night...?'

'Last night?' When he had made love to her so triumphantly? *'In bed?'*

'Not-- then. Before... when I told you about my breakthrough in number theory. It seemed you had to force yourself to pretend enthusiasm. After we kissed, you were so giving and so...loving...I persuaded myself I'd-imagined it. But this morning, you'd left—'

'Jas...'

He didn't seem to be listening. 'Shelley often said my work was more important to me than she was.'

And...in a way she was right. I did find more satisfaction in it. I *wanted* to care—to love. I envied lovers. For years I watched other couples, families, to see what love was all about...I read books about it. But I thought maybe—because of my upbringing, I supposed—I wasn't capable of real love, only of sexual passion. And that didn't last. Not for either of us. Shelley, I think, found that with other men. Perhaps a measure of love too. I didn't really grudge it to her. I'd tried to love her, and failed.'

'But you loved Donna,' she reminded him.

He looked at her again, a spark of animation coming into the starkness of his expression. 'I would have done anything for her.'

'Would you have given up your work?'

He answered instantly. 'If it could have helped, *yes!* In a minute. I offered to stay home if Shelley wanted to make herself a career, but she—'

'What?'

'She thought I was trying to get out of providing financially for her and Donna, to make her the breadwinner.'

Blythe made a small, disbelieving sound.

His eyes had a faraway, saddened look. 'And besides, she'd made a career of mothering Donna. She threw all her energy and dedication into making her child as normal as she could be. I think in a twisted sort of way she felt I was trying to take that away from her, as I'd taken everything else. She'd never forgiven me.'

'Forgiven you? For taking Donna home? But...'

'She felt trapped. The trap, by then, was her love for Donna. We didn't have a good marriage, but neither of us could leave our child. And then...'

Then the accident happened. Blythe felt hot tears blurring her eyes. 'I wish I could do something...' She wanted desperately to comfort him, although she knew there was no way to make up for his daughter's death, for a marriage that had not fulfilled his hopes for love and happiness, for all the cruelties of an uncaring fate.

'You have.' Jas turned to her. 'You taught me that I'm capable of genuine sexual love. Not just passion and desire—but all that's in the song.'

'The song?' He'd lost her now. 'What song?'

'Believe me, if all those endearing young charms,' he quoted softly, not singing it.

*'Which I gaze on so fondly today,
Were to change by tomorrow, and fleet in my arms,
Like fairy gifts fading away!
Thou wouldst still be ador'd as this moment thou art,
Let thy loveliness fade as it will,
And, around the dear ruin, each wish of my heart
Would entwine itself verdantly still.'*

He paused. 'Old-fashioned sentiment,' he admitted wryly, 'but it says it better than I ever could.'

Blythe fixed her gaze painfully on his face. 'Jas... Are you saying you love me?'

He hesitated, and her involuntary movement towards him halted, doubt creating fear.

He said soberly, 'The sun rises and sets with you.'

A cliché, yet the words sounded like a simple, immutable truth spoken straight from his heart.

Blythe held her breath. Inside her something warm and wonderful was slowly unfolding, like a new, tender bud sensing the coming of spring.

Jas said, 'I swore to myself I wouldn't try to hold you...' He stopped there and seemed unable to continue.

'Why?'

'Because tying you to me would be like keeping a sunflower in a dark, cold room.'

'Jas, that's nonsense! What could make you think that?'

'I had all this...baggage in my past. And...I thought I didn't know how to love a woman, that I'd never be any good at it. I didn't want to dim your brightness.'

'Oh, Jas!'

'I've never been able to open up to people the way you do. When you hardly knew me I made you sad just mentioning that I didn't have a real relationship with my half-brothers. You understood more about me than I did myself. I know you grieved for your grandparents, that you're not immune to sorrow, but you were still... Blythe. Sunny and warm and loving. And I had no right to burden you with my grief and pain and rage—'

'Rage?'

'I had so much of it—even anger at the innocent. I used to look at children and think, Why *my* child? Why Donna and not one of them?'

Her lips parted in horror.

Harshly he said, 'I'm not proud of it.'

'It's all right, I understand.' She breathed in quickly. 'Is that why you...why you didn't want to see my nieces and nephew?' He cast her a dark glance, turned aside and said, 'I've got over that.'

His mouth closed firmly, and she felt him going away from her again, although he'd hardly moved. Her hands tightly knotting together, Blythe prayed for him to come back. 'Why, then?'

One shoulder rose briefly. 'It's stupid.'

'I need to know, Jas,' she insisted. 'Please...'

'That day we went to Apiata,' he ground out. 'The little girl...'

'I remember.' The Down's syndrome child. 'It must have been painful for you.'

'I was so *envious* of those people...blackly jealous. I know that's...contemptible.'

Blythe scooted across the small space between them and put a hand on his shoulder. 'Jas—they would have understood.'

'She was...so happy...so lovable...and sweet, wasn't she?'

'Yes.' Blythe laid her cheek against his.

'I thought about her a lot that night after we'd made love. You'd been so beautiful to me, and I felt...so blessed to have found you, and loved you—even though I knew one day you'd go away from me, like a butterfly that alights briefly and moves on. It had still been worth it. And having Donna, loving her, had been worth the pain of losing her. I think that's when I began to stop being angry...hating other people whose families were well and alive.'

Blythe's teeth sank into her lower lip. 'But...'

'I know. When you asked me to join your family for Christmas, I felt as though someone had cracked open the gate to heaven, was inviting me in. But then I panicked.'

'What about?'

'About being around kids, partly. I wasn't sure how I'd react—how they'd affect me. And also...I was still kidding myself that I'd survive breaking up with you. And I knew that getting to know your family would make it much harder.'

'So seeing your father was just an excuse.'

'Hearing about your Christmas made me feel guilty, wonder if he'd be hurt if I didn't turn up. I still don't know if it made a difference. I just wanted to come back to you, and then I barged into your cottage and found those children...looking at me with their bright eyes and innocent faces—do you know how much the dark little girl looks like you? I hadn't expected it and...'

'And...?' she whispered, lifting her face away from him to see his.

Jas closed his eyes tightly, and sucked in a loud, shuddering breath. 'It was all I could do not to break down and howl.'

Light burst in her brain. '*That's* why...?'

'I'm sorry, I know you were hurt. I was deathly afraid of making a total fool of myself. And probably scaring them silly. The next day when I saw you all go down to the beach, I followed. But just looking at you with them...I didn't dare go further.'

Her smile was dazzling through residual tears, and her arms went around him. 'Oh, *Jas!* I was afraid you hated them!'

With suppressed violence he said, 'How could I hate anyone who belongs to *you?*' He lifted his hand, closing a fist about her hair.

'Why didn't you *say*...?' But he had never meant to tell her all this, of course. Because of some silly idea that she needed to be protected

from even second-hand knowledge of tragedy. 'You could have told me before,' she reproached him. 'And as for burdening me—you said I was a sunflower, not a bloody African violet! Sunflowers are strong!'

He gave a strange, choking parody of a laugh. 'I suppose deep down I was afraid you'd despise me.'

'I'd *never*—'

'I know. I know it, really. And intellectually of course I know too that crying is a healthy emotional outlet. But in my...family, tears were a sign of weakness, and weakness was an invitation to violence. I learned early never to cry.'

'Yes,' Blythe said. 'I see.' Gravely she added, 'Thank you for trusting me.' She realised it hadn't been easy for him, even now. 'And Jas...'

'Yes?'

She drew in a deep breath. She knew now it was safe, if only she could convince him. 'I lied when I said I'd get over loving you. I never will. You taught me what infinity is—I understand it now perfectly. It's my love for you...for ever and beyond, with no limits.'

He was very still for a long time. Then he touched her cheek with his hand and looked into her eyes. 'I told the truth when I said I'd never get over you.' He shifted both his hands and held her face between them. 'If you really do love me...that way...could you stand being married to me, do you think?'

Her smile was enough to warm the world. 'Yes! Oh, yes!'

He caught her shoulders. His voice was unsteady. 'Blythe—you have to be sure about this. I'm not very good husband material.'

'You are *wonderful* husband material—and father material. I can't wait to marry you, and have your children. I've never been more sure of anything in all my life.' She hesitated. 'You do want children, don't you? I mean...I know you had Donna, but...'

'I would *love* you to have my children, Blythe. If you promise to do that I'll be delighted to meet all your nieces and nephews properly—in fact I can't wait. And I'll be much too happy to weep over them.'

She hung her arms about his neck, and he smoothed back her hair and let his hands settle at her waist.

'You'll have to go back to Wellington, won't you?' she asked him. 'To present your theorem. That's why I asked when you were leaving—not because I *wanted* you to go.' She shot him an indignant look.

'Well, what was I supposed to think?' he asked reasonably, 'when you said you'd been thinking about us, and then hit me with, "You never expected this to last, did you?" I thought you were getting ready to break it off. I don't have to go anywhere yet. All I need is a cellphone and I can contact my colleagues worldwide by e-mail on the computer.'

Blythe felt foolish. She hadn't thought of that. 'You're not actually against having a phone?'

'Of course not. There just didn't seem any point in incurring the expense when I didn't want interruptions and there was no one I needed to talk to. Now it's different.'

'But eventually? You have a job down in Wellington.'

'I'll have to go back there for a while, yes. And you can't leave your flowers, I know. Let's not worry about it yet. I could look for a job in

Auckland. Or.. .if you want a partner in the business—'He'd worked at her side, off and on, for weeks. But was he serious? 'You could still work at your theories, in between weeding and killing bugs and picking flowers?' The idea was attractive, but she was doubtful.

'With modern technology anything's possible. I may be able to split my time between here and a university. All I know is somehow I'm going to be with you.'

He tugged her to him and she tumbled into his arms. His mouth descended, but she put up her hand and placed it over his parted lips. 'Jas?'

His tongue was making little darting movements in the cup of her palm, and she felt her pulses quicken. 'Mm?' he mumbled.

'You do know how to love.'

His eyes alight with tender passion, he gently removed her hand. 'I know how to love *you*.' This time he brought his lips all the way to hers and kissed her until she was dizzy and breathless. When he lifted his head at last she touched her lips to his cheek, his chin, and ran her fingers through his hair, and pressed a kiss into his hand and rested her head against his shoulder.

He said unsteadily, 'I want to make love to you.'

'What if someone comes along?'

'Does' it matter?'

'Mm, I guess so.'

He sighed and nuzzled her hair. 'Your place or mine?'

Blythe smiled, demurred, teasing him a little. 'I have flowers to attend to.'

'So do I. One flower, anyway. A sunflower.'

Blythe laughed. 'My place,' she capitulated. 'It's closer.'

But when he'd helped her to her feet she broke away from him, ran down the beach to where the sand was firm and damp, and bent to trace something with her finger on the smooth surface, then stepped back to survey her handiwork.

Smiling, puzzled, Jas strolled over to join her, looping his arms about her from behind and breathing in the scent of her hair.

'I have a new theorem for you,' she said, leaning back.

Jas looked down at what she had drawn, and threw back his head in joyous laughter, then pulled her close against him. He said, 'I'll spend the rest of my life proving it.'

'No need,' she promised him, turning in his arms and kissing his chin. 'I know it's true.'

He smoothed back her hair and smiled into her eager, laughing face. 'Yes, you're right, Sunflower,' he said. 'It's true. It will always be true.'

Etched in the sand she had written:

$$1 + 1 = 0$$

One plus one equals love.