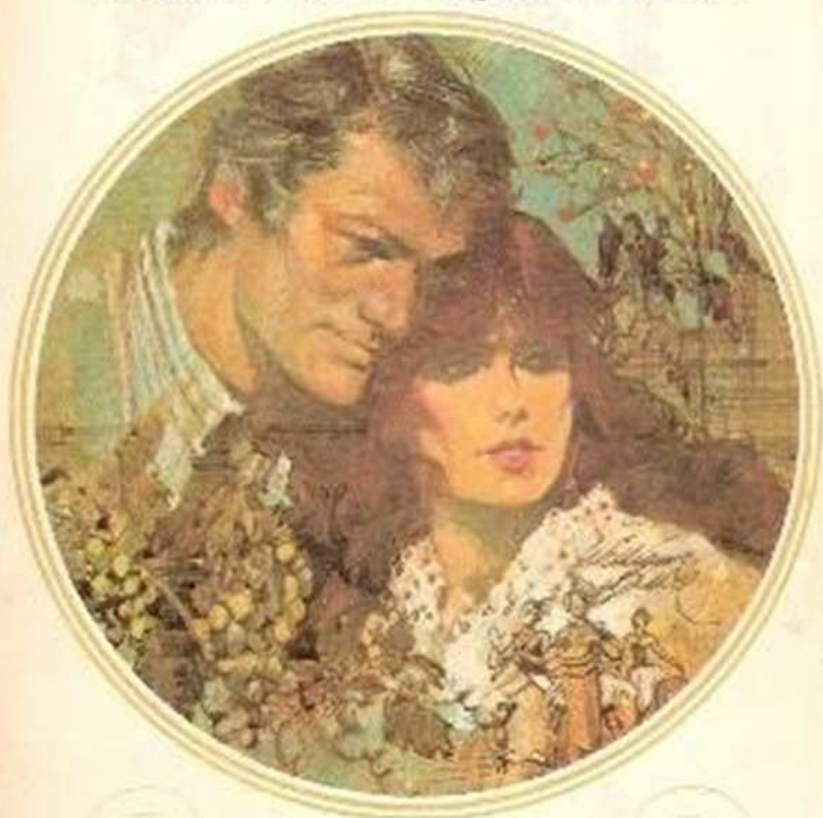




Harlequin Presents...

**HELEN
BIANCHIN**

the vines in splendour



THE VINES IN SPLENDOUR

Helen Bianchin

Instinct warned her to avoid a man like Nick!

But as he was the new owner of the vineyard where Shannon rented a small cottage, their meeting was inevitable.

Life hadn't been easy for Shannon. Supporting her young orphaned niece had left her little time for male friends and someone like Nick was totally beyond her experience. She quickly discovered he had the power to disturb her emotions and she realized the danger of allowing him into her life.

Nick Stanich, however, didn't wait to be invited. He took over, commanding and demanding. And in spite of her best intentions, Shannon soon found herself responding!

CHAPTER ONE

'You look like the cat who's just swallowed the cream,' Beverley stated positively as she placed her tray down on to the table. 'Are you going to tell me, or am I to be kept in suspense?'

Shannon smiled, and it was a happy smile that lit up her attractive features into something quite beautiful. Carefully she emptied a sachet of sugar into her coffee, then stirred it thoughtfully.

'Shannon!'

'I was waiting until you sat down,' she declared musingly, her fine brown eyes lighting with teasing laughter at the other girl's expression.

'For heaven's sake,' Beverley grumbled good-naturedly as she subsided into a chair. 'It must be something out of the ordinary if I can't be trusted to hear it standing on my feet. Now tell, *please!*'

Shannon smoothed a hand over the length of her dark brown hair and regarded her friend with a faintly pensive look. 'I received a letter from Ivan Stanich's lawyer a few days ago.'

'Well?' Beverley urged. 'What did it say?'

Shannon made a slight moue, then smiled. 'Legal phraseology—it tends to confuse rather than clarify. Ivan must have made mention of the fact that I could continue occupying the cottage more or less indefinitely, and now it appears that Ivan's nephew, who has inherited the Vista d'Oro vineyard, has expressed no objection. I have written confirmation that the present low rental won't be increased. Isn't that great?' Her eyes shone with relief. 'Rents are so high these days, and since Ivan's death I've been so worried, wondering whether Kelly and I would have to move. The mere thought of having to make ends meet has been giving me sleepless nights.'

'It was beginning to show,' Beverley professed with friendly concern. 'You've lost weight—something you can't afford, as you're much too slim as it is.'

'Mother-henning me, are you?' Shannon teased lightly, only to have the other girl quip light-heartedly:

'If I don't, who will?'

Shannon smiled across the table at her companion. Beverley was a dear, and they'd been firm friends ever since Shannon literally bumped into her with Kelly in her arms more than four years ago.

There was a companionable silence for a few minutes as they sipped their coffee, then Beverley queried idly:

'Did the letter say when the nephew is due to arrive?'

Shannon frowned slightly on reflection. 'No. But I should imagine it will be soon. A flourishing vineyard can't be left unsupervised for long, even though most of Ivan's regular employees have been kept on.'

'You've met Nick Stanich, haven't you?'

'Twice,' Shannon said bleakly. 'He flew over for Katija's funeral—and again, three months later when Ivan passed away.'

Beverley shivered slightly. 'Funerals!' she sighed ruefully. 'Hardly the most auspicious of occasions at which to form an acquaintance.'

That specific occasion heralded the arrival from Australia of Ivan's brother, Mate, together with his son Nick—tall, powerful men with a forceful presence that Shannon had found overwhelming.

It was on the tip of Shannon's tongue to reveal rather scathingly that she had no desire to renew her brief acquaintance- with Nick Stanich, Ivan's rather awesome nephew. Even now, his image came too readily to mind to taunt her. Dark-haired, slate-grey eyes that held a wealth of living in their depths, the man had projected an aura that was daunting. She hid a slight humourless smile on reflection—her defence mechanism had risen protectively with a speed that bordered on sheer panic!

'I expect he has things to organise before he can take up residence,' Beverley pondered thoughtfully, causing Shannon to hastily abandon her reverie.

'I suppose so,' she commented absently as she watched the queue grow in front of the self-service counter. It was well after midday, and many of the tables in the coffee lounge were occupied.

'Now that he has his own vineyard,' Beverley continued speculatively, 'he won't have to kowtow to an elder brother.'

Shannon couldn't for the life of her imagine Nick Stanich kowtowing to anyone, and quite frankly she was becoming tired of Beverley's preoccupation with the man. 'I really must be on my way,' she declared briskly. 'I've still some shopping to do.' Determinedly she rose to her feet and began collecting her parcels together.

Beverley sighed. 'Back to the grindstone, I guess. My lunch-hour is almost over.' She followed Shannon, and paused on the pavement outside the coffee lounge. 'Same time, next week?'

Shannon gave the girl a quick ready smile. 'Yes. Have a nice weekend,' she said engagingly, then she turned and made her way to the parking area.

Her aged, slightly disreputable Mini stood resting between two vehicles of a more modern vintage, and she spared the bonnet a

conciliatory pat. Unlocking the passenger door, she deposited her parcels on to the back seat before securing the lock again, then set out briskly towards the main entrance into the large shopping mall. There were only a few minor items she had to purchase—zip-fasteners that Mrs Elliott had neglected to provide when she'd left yet another length of material for Shannon to fashion on her sewing machine, some buttons, a few reels of thread, and new ribbons for Kelly's hair.

Some fifteen minutes later Shannon manoeuvred her car into the steadily-moving flow of traffic along Rail- side-Avenue, and muffled a brief curse as the traffic lights changed from green to amber just as she reached the intersection. It really was too bad, when time was of the essence. In little more than an hour she would have to collect Kelly from school, and Sheila Burton was due to arrive at two-forty-five for a fitting. There wouldn't be time to do any baking at all, and with a sigh Shannon relegated that chore to the early evening hours after Kelly was asleep.

The lights changed, and Shannon urged the Mini into motion, only to have the engine give an apologetic cough, then subside in silence. Oh, darn it! She'd forgotten to change gear!

Within seconds there was a hornblast from the rear, to be quickly followed by another. Impatient drivers, she deduced wryly, and almost certainly they would be men—women were usually more sympathetic! In that instant the engine spluttered alive, and she thrust the gear lever forward with more than necessary force. Without doubt it was pure mechanical perversity that caused the car to leap forward with something akin to a kangaroo hop before coming to a halt yet again.

Shannon cursed softly beneath her breath. This really was the limit! 'All right, Angel,' she murmured soothingly, 'I'm truly sorry.* 'Angel' responded in kind, moving smoothly without haste, taking the bend

with dignified pride, and was seemingly oblivious as the car behind pulled out and passed them with a suitably indignant roar.

A Ferrari—Shannon mused speculatively as she spared its sleek lines an admiring glance. 'We're shamelessly outclassed, Angel,' she uttered with an irrepressible grin, then gave a light laugh. Talking to her car —she needed her head read!

Naming the car 'Angel' had begun as an amusing joke some eighteen months ago when Shannon emptied her bank account of carefully-scrimped savings to purchase a car. More to bolster her own misgivings, she had given the thirteen-year-old Mini something of a pep-talk when she brought it to a halt inside the garage adjoining the cottage that fateful day. Certain of her inability to meet any expensive repair bills, she had begged it to be an angel and behave itself. Kelly had dissolved into peals of laughter, and they had since developed the habit of urging dear 'Angel' to transport them safely without mishap whenever they ventured more than two miles distant from home.

Dear Kelly, Shannon mused reflectively. An angelic imp consigned into her care by the hand of fate five and a half years ago. A carefree nineteen, Shannon had been contentedly earning her living as a machinist in one of Auckland's largest fashion boutiques. She had shared a flat with two girls in one of the elite Eastern suburbs, and there had been several young men burning up the telephone wires with invitations to wine and dine her. This idyllic situation had undergone an abrupt change when a perfectly normal weekend assumed cataclysmic proportions and irretrievably altered her life-style. If her sister Bridget hadn't indicated a desire to accompany her husband down to Rotorua for a soccer tournament, and if Shannon hadn't unhesitatingly begged to take care of six-month-old Kelly, perhaps Bridget would be alive today. A fatal car crash on the return journey robbed Shannon of all that remained of her immediate family, and left little Kelly without parents.

That following year had been a difficult one, both financially and emotionally, and if it hadn't been for a kindly real estate agent taking more than the usual interest in Shannon's plight, she might never have managed to keep her head above water. A place to stay where the landlord tolerated a child proved more difficult than she had ever imagined, for with only a few hundred dollars in savings and freshly resigned from her job to look after Kelly, most agents shook their heads and showed her to the door. One, an unassuming quiet man by the name of John Vlasich, had not, and it had been he who persuaded Ivan Stanich to rent Shannon the small cottage on the eastern fringe of his thirty-hectare vineyard. A large, imposing double- storeyed brick house had been built on an acre of ground adjacent to the original cottage some seven years previously when Ivan indulged his wife by building her the house of her dreams.

Ivan and Katija Stanich had taken Shannon and Kelly under their wing, showering them with an affection that was usually reserved for kith and kin, and it was largely due to Katija's influence that Shannon managed to accumulate a modest clientele for her dressmaking talents.

For the past two years life had been exceedingly good, and the only cloud on the horizon had been Katija's sudden death four months previously, followed mere weeks ago by that of Ivan.

Shannon had been incredibly anxious about being able to stay on at the cottage, for without doubt she would have had to pay twice as much in rent anywhere else. Now, thanks to Ivan's generosity, and, she had to concede, his nephew's consent, she could stay indefinitely.

Shannon drove away from the township, crossing a yarrow bridge, urging Angel up a moderate incline where the ground to the left fell away to give view to one of the oldest established vineyards in the area. Lebanese-owned, it had been operating since the turn of the

century. Acre upon acre of vines lay beneath the warmth of the sun, the grapes richly plump and ready for harvesting.

Henderson, and the valley encompassing Oratia, Ranui and Swanson, was scattered with housing estates among orchards and vineyards. For it was here that many early Yugoslav immigrants from the coast of Dalmatia had settled after first working the gumfields in the north of the North Island of New Zealand, hardworking people who tilled the land tirelessly in an effort to make a worthwhile living for themselves and their families.

Shannon followed the main road for some distance before slowing down to bring the car to a halt beside a roadside stall where she purchased some fruit and vegetables. Depositing a large bag of potatoes, some onions, apples and oranges on to the rear seat, she slid in behind the wheel and switched on the ignition, then urged Angel on to the road, gathering speed swiftly.

In less than five minutes she reached the eastern fringe of the Vista d'Oro vineyard, and she couldn't help the feeling of relief that spread through her veins at the sight of the neatly-built white-painted cottage.

Now it would remain her home, and she wouldn't have to relinquish its pleasantly-decorated interior for something less appealing.

Halting the car in the driveway, Shannon began gathering together as many of her parcels as she could carry. With the front door key held firmly between her fingers, she stepped quickly up the path and by adroit manipulation managed to insert the key into the lock without mishap. After unloading her armload on to the kitchen table she moved outside again and was almost to the car when something caught her eye.

A strange car stood in the courtyard adjacent to Ivan's house, and Shannon gave a slight start as she recognised the dark green Ferrari that had swept past her less than ten minutes ago. It had to be the same. 'Let's face it, my girl,' she muttered almost beneath her breath, 'a Ferrari isn't exactly your usual run-of-the-mill car!'

At that moment a tall dark-haired figure emerged from the house and began descending the long flight of steps with something akin to cat-like fluidity.

Nick Stanich himself, she perceived wryly. For even at a distance that broad frame was unmistakable.

Shannon suppressed a slight shiver of apprehension. She had come face to face with Ivan's nephew on just two occasions, and she was unable to view either of those meetings with enthusiasm. Oh, Nick Stanich had been polite—she would even go so far as to add courteous—but something about him sent strange prickles scudding up and down her spine. Now he was here, about to reside a mere hundred yards distant, and no matter how careful she was to avoid him there were bound to be times when they would meet.

Thoroughly cross with herself, she leant inside the Mini and gathered together her remaining parcels, then hurried inside the cottage without so much as a backward glance.

The following hour passed in a flash, and Shannon sped from the cottage with no time to spare. Next week, when Kelly attained her sixth birthday, it was likely that her school-leaving time would be extended to three o'clock. An extra half-hour would make all the difference to Shannon's afternoon, as far as sewing time was concerned.

'Hi there. Did you have a nice day?'

Kelly's face creased into a wide smile, and she glowed with self-importance. 'I've got a picture. I drew it for you.'

'Drew, honey,' Shannon corrected as she scanned the carefully-proffered brightly-coloured drawing. 'A house?' she hazarded quizzically.

'Our cottage,' Kelly confirmed with grave importance. 'That's Ivan's house, the big one on this side.'

'And all these squiggles --'

'Vines, of course.'

What else! Shannon shot her niece an engaging grin. 'You'll have to keep it, and one day when you're a famous artist --'

'I'll sell my pictures for lots of money,' the little imp responded with an irrepressible grin. 'Then we'll buy Vista d'Oro and live here for ever.'

Shannon sobered. 'That's a pie-in-the-sky kind of dream, my lamb. We're lucky that Ivan ensured we could stay on.' With concentrated dedication she eased the Mini out from its parking space and headed home.

'Can we have a barbecue tea tonight? Please, Shannon ! I love sausages cooked on the barbecue.'

'I don't see why not The weather is okay, and if we have tea early,' Shannon acquiesced willingly. 'Hot chipped potatoes as well?'

'And coleslaw,' Kelly added. 'Did you get Tania's present?'

'Relax, imp. It's safely at home, all ready to wrap, and a card.'

'Are you making something to take?'

'A pavlova—two, actually,' Shannon replied absently.

'Shannon! There's a car—over there, in Ivan's driveway. Do you suppose it's *him*?'

Such excitement, Shannon reflected tolerantly. Somehow she had the feeling that Kelly regarded the new owner of Vista d'Oro as some kind of godlike creature who would shower attention and affection upon them both.

'What an absolutely super car!' Kelly enthused with undisguised delight. 'I bet it zooms along ever so fast.'

It does, Shannon endorsed silently, and it's undoubtedly just as powerful as its owner. 'Hey, where are you going?' she cried as Kelly slipped out from the Mini just as soon as it drew to a halt inside the garage.

'I'm going to say hello, and show him my picture.'

'Kelly—no!' But her words echoed emptily, for Kelly was already moving with the speed of light, her small feet scarcely touching the concrete path leading through the rose garden that separated the two houses.

A confrontation with Nick Stanich would happen much sooner than Shannon had anticipated, for there was, little else she could do but follow and retrieve Kelly, and proffer an apology.

It was with a feeling of slight trepidation that she mounted the long flight of steps at the rear of Ivan's house, and just as she reached the uppermost step, Kelly appeared followed by a woman not much older than Shannon herself.

'Nick's in the shower,' Kelly informed her aunt with a measure of childish earnestness. 'I've left the picture for him.'

Shannon shot the casually-attired woman a glance that held exasperation tinged with humour. 'I'm sorry if Kelly disturbed you. She took off before I could stop her.'

A wide smile broadened the other's pleasant features. 'You must be from the cottage.'

Shannon acquiesced, feeling an explanation of sorts was necessary. 'Kelly made this her second home when Katija and Ivan were here. I've already explained that she mustn't --'

'But Nick is part of Ivan's family,' Kelly interrupted with adolescent logic, and Shannon shot her a cautionary glance.

Oh, Kelly, simply being *family* doesn't mean that Nick will be as amenable with his time and affection as Ivan was. In fact, she thought dubiously, Nick Stanich was very much an unknown quantity.

'We have a little girl about your age. I'm sure Anna will be delighted for you to come over tomorrow and make friends.'

Shannon felt a sense of shock—inexplicable, she hastily assured herself. Why should it affect her that Nick Stanich was married? He hadn't *looked* married, but that was no criterion!

'Mrs Burton has just driven up,' Kelly observed, and Shannon, murmured a few hasty words in farewell before shepherding Kelly quickly down the steps.

'You mustn't inflict yourself on them,' she scolded rather severely as they walked towards the path, and Kelly looked up intently.

'Why are you cross?' she asked.

'Kelly --' Shannon began with mild exasperation.

Oh heavens, it wasn't Kelly's fault that Katija and Ivan hadn't been distantly aloof landlords. 'Look, honey,' she hastened to explain, 'Vista d'Oro now belongs to Nick. It's not Ivan's any more, and that means the house is out of bounds—unless we're invited. You mustn't waltz over there any old time as you used to do. Please,' she paused to smile down at the blonde-headed little imp walking sedately alongside. 'Try to remember—okay ?'

'I'll try,' Kelly responded uncertainly. 'Do you suppose ten o'clock in the morning will be too early for me to go over and see Anna?'

'I should think that would be fine,' Shannon smiled as she reached out a hand to ruffle Kelly's hair.

Sheila Burton was waiting by the front steps, looking soignée and incredibly elegant. Shannon suppressed the uncharitable thought that what Sheila probably spent on make-up and appointments at the hairdresser would keep Kelly and herself in clothes for a year. These beautiful black suede knee-length boots alone would buy a month's supply of food!

'I'm already late, and I've scarcely time to try anything on,' Sheila began without preamble as she followed Shannon and Kelly into the cottage. 'I do wish you wouldn't insist on a second fitting—one should be sufficient.'

Irritation was clearly written on her classical features, and Shannon hastily led the way to the small back bedroom where she worked.

In less than five minutes Sheila faced the mirror and stood surveying herself critically. Then, as was usual, she insisted upon a few alterations being made. 'The trim—I want it down another inch towards the hem, and the same applies to the sleeves.'

This was quite to the contrary of her instructions two days ago when she had insisted the trim be lifted, and Shannon tried valiantly to control the desire to tell her so. It really was too bad, she thought vexedly. If it wasn't for the fact that Sheila Burton was one of her most regular clients, following fashion with an almost religious dedication and well able to afford such whims, she would be very tempted to give vent to her feelings. Why did the acquisition of wealth by marriage give the woman the right to contradict and reverse her decisions with shameless disregard for anyone else?

'I'll be here to collect it around midday tomorrow,' Sheila indicated as she ran a hand over her immaculate hair. 'You will have it ready by then, won't you?'

Shannon longed to say no, but Sheila's custom was too valuable. 'Yes,' she said evenly, adding, 'Kelly and I are going out at two o'clock, so please call before then.'

When Sheila had departed in her opulent Mercedes- Benz sports saloon, Shannon retraced her steps into the sewing room. If she unpicked the offending trim now, she could re-sew it after she and Kelly had had their tea.

'Shannon, you've finished my dress!' Kelly enthused, her bright blue eyes shining. 'It's beautiful. Thank you.'

'There's only the hem to finish,' Shannon smiled absently. 'How would you like to write on Tania's birthday card? Then, if you could get some potatoes out from the cupboard for me, and take the sausages from the fridge, I should just about be through unpicking this.'

'Of course. And while you're peeling the potatoes, I'll get the portable barbecue from the garage and take it across beneath the lemon tree,' Kelly answered willingly.

It would have to happen, of course, Shannon thought wretchedly some fifty minutes later. For three years there hadn't been a hint of trouble in getting the charcoal beneath the barbecue grill to light. But tonight of all nights it had to smoke and generally behave like a temperamental prima donna.

The sausages are going to taste all smoky,' Kelly pronounced with childish candour.

'It's the charcoal—it must be damp,' Shannon muttered broodingly, sure in her mind that today in some way was ill-fated.

'Perhaps we should put it out, and cook our tea inside,' Kelly deliberated.

'An excellent suggestion, I would say.'

Shannon peered round the cloudy column of smoke in the direction of that deep dry voice and met a dark, faintly quizzical gaze slanted in her direction. Vista d'Oro's new owner himself, and every bit as overpowering as he'd seemed three weeks ago. The loss of his beard did little to tame his appearance—if anything it merely heightened his rugged good looks.

'You must be Nick,' Kelly concluded engagingly.

'In the flesh.'

His wry amusement immediately put Shannon on the defensive. 'You don't need to worry, Mr Stanich,' she assured him repressively. 'I'm not about to set fire to anything.'

'Not the barbecue, at any rate.' His voice was openly amused, and she was prepared to swear that he was laughing at her.

'We didn't even call Ivan Mr Stanich,' Kelly began, clearly perplexed. 'He's Nick, isn't he?'

'To my friends.'

Of whom I could never be one, Shannon muttered beneath her breath. Bother the man—he would have to catch her at a disadvantage! She was conscious of her hair, carelessly caught together at her nape with a ribbon, a denim skirt that had seen better days, and a T-shirt with tie crazy words 'Love Me' slanting across her breasts.

'Did you get my picture?' Kelly queried anxiously.

'Thank you, it's charming,' Nick answered warmly, giving the little girl - a ready smile, then stepping forward he took the packet of matches from Shannon's nerveless fingers. 'Have you a sheet of newspaper I could use?'

'I'll get some,' Kelly responded in an instant, and promptly disappeared into the garage to emerge seconds later with several in her hand. 'It's a picture of the vineyard,' she explained earnestly as she watched him hold the newspaper directly in front of the charcoal to form a partial shield from the slight breeze.

'Of course. I thought it a remarkable likeness.'

'I'm coming over tomorrow to meet your little girl, I've been invited,' Kelly hastened to explain, casting Shannon a quick glance.

'I'm sure Anna will be delighted to have your company.' He shifted position slightly, gently fanning the flicker of flame that began to curl round the edges of charcoal.

'You've got it going,' Kelly cried delightedly. 'Isn't that marvellous, Shannon? Perhaps you'd like to share our tea—it's only sausages, chips and coleslaw. You're very welcome,' she concluded with

solemn courtesy, and Shannon found herself holding her breath as she waited for his reply.

'Another time, perhaps,' Nick declined with ease, and his eyes as they met Shannon's held sardonic humour. 'Good evening, Shannon Fitzgerald—Kelly.' With a brief nod he turned and moved away with long leisurely strides.

Well, really! Shannon thought crossly as she fixed her attention on the sausages beginning to sizzle merrily on the grill. He had known she hadn't wanted him to stay—known, too, that she was intent on remaining safe behind some elusive protective barrier of her own making. There was a latent sensuality in those dark eyes, a cynicism—that made her want to turn and run. An emotional entanglement with such a man would prove wholly volatile and infinitely dangerous!

'He's nice,' Kelly voiced a trifle dreamily, bringing Shannon's wayward thoughts sharply into focus.

'We're merely his tenants, Kelly,' she, returned matter-of-factly. 'Now, pass the plate and I'll put these sausages on to it—they're done.'

It was a pleasant meal, during which Kelly recounted an amusing episode that day in class that had hilarious repercussions—although certainly not for the teacher, Shannon reflected wryly when her own laughter had subsided.

'You wouldn't have been mad, would you?' Kelly giggled helplessly as Shannon tried to look suitably stern.

'I'd have paddled all of your rear ends with the ruler,' she declared with mock severity.

'You should have seen Miss Richardson's face—it went such a funny colour.'

'So would mine if I came across a mass of creepy- crawlies scattering helter-skelter across the top of my desk!'

'But, Shannon, we only wanted to give the spiders some fresh air,' Kelly revealed. 'We were going to put them all back in their jars—only Miss Richardson came in before we could.'

'Miss Richardson has my full sympathy,' Shannon responded as she began dampening down the charcoal. She collected the few plates and utensils they'd used and took them into the kitchen. The portable barbecue could be dismantled and returned to the garage while Kelly had her bath.

'Are you going to sew tonight?'

Shannon pulled the plug out from the sink and waited until all the water had drained noisily away before answering. 'Fraid so, honey. Mrs Burton wants some alterations done, and I've those pavlovas to make for Tania's party.'

'Do you think Anna will be there?'

'I'm not sure if her parents know the Bartulovic family,' Shannon ventured idly.

'Perhaps I could invite her to come to the beach with us on Sunday,' Kelly deliberated, lost in plans concerned with making the unseen Anna welcome.

'Wait and see,' Shannon cautioned. 'The weather may change.'

'But can she come—if the weather's fine, and her mother says it's okay?'

'Why not? She'll be company for you. Now, bath-time, infant,' Shannon ordered briskly as she gave the child an impulsive hug. 'And afterwards you can watch television for an hour.'

Later, when Kelly was well in the land of dreams, Shannon pulled a well-worn suitcase out from beneath her bed and began sorting through several lengths of material. She hadn't intended making herself a new dress to wear tomorrow afternoon, and to have it finished in time would mean staying up very late, but with feminine intuition that had no rhyme or reason to it, she felt she needed the added confidence of wearing something new—what was more, something smart and fashionable. Mary Bartulovic, Tania's mother, on issuing the invitation had insisted Shannon stay on for dinner after the children's party, and had murmured something about a few of the other parents remaining as well.

Dressmaking was something at which Shannon was accomplished, and besides, she had seen a dress in a shop window that morning that had caught her eye, and it had occurred to her then that she could copy the style without too much effort. With a layered skirt, it had a gathered scooped neckline, short gathered sleeves, and was decidedly gypsyish in design.

It was after midnight when she switched off the sewing machine and hung the finished garment on a hanger. She flexed her aching shoulders, then switched out the light and made her way towards the front of the cottage. Bed had never looked so good.

CHAPTER TWO

'THAT'S the children taken care of—now for the adults,' Mary Bartulovic intimated gaily as she rinsed the last dish and placed it in the dish-rack.

'You're a tiger for punishment.' Shannon picked up the dish and wiped it dry, then smiled in contemplation. 'Two parties in one day! Why didn't you tell me?'

'Because if I'd said that fateful word "party", you wouldn't have agreed to stay,' Mary replied with the hint of a smile in her voice.

'You did say dinner.'

'And that's all it is,' Mary declared easily. 'A get-together for a few friends—not really a party at all.'

'From the number of saucepans simmering on the stove and roasting dishes in the oven, I'd hazard you're catering for more than a few!' Shannon laughed lightly, wrinkling her nose. 'And you've been baking bread—I can smell it.'

'I wanted tonight to be purely traditional fare in honour of an old family friend—one George holds in high regard,' Mary revealed, causing Shannon to query idly:

'I gather he's just returned from overseas?'

'Why, yes. In fact, you've met him, Shannon. It's Nick Stanich.'

No! Oh no, it couldn't be. Shannon felt her stomach muscles tighten suddenly. 'Mary, I hardly know the man. I think it would be best if I took Kelly home.' In fact, I know it would! she breathed silently. She accepted that she would have to see Nick Stanich occasionally, but not socially.

'Shannon, don't be silly,' Mary chided gently, casting her a quick penetrating glance. 'Ivan and Katija regarded both you and Kelly as the nearest thing to family—it's only right that you should be here. Besides,' she urged logically, 'living so close, you'll run into him often. You can hardly expect to remain on a landlord-and-tenant basis, surely ?'

Oh yes, I can. At least, I'm going to try my hardest to keep it that way, Shannon vowed uneasily.

'Unless I'm mistaken, Nick has already arrived,' Mary intimated, straining an ear. 'The children have gone awfully quiet—can't you hear the silence?' She grinned towards Shannon. 'Nick always did have a penchant for fast, foreign cars—I imagine his latest acquisition is holding the tots enthralled.'

Undoubtedly, Shannon thought wryly. 'I didn't see Anna here this afternoon. His daughter,' she hurried on at Mary's puzzled look.

'Anna? Oh, you mean Stefan and Linda's daughter,' Mary laughed, and her eyes twinkled merrily. 'Stefan is Nick's cousin, and here to work in the vineyard. Anna didn't travel very well, and is nursing an upset tummy,' she explained. 'Nick isn't married.'

'Not yet,' came an amused drawl from directly behind Shannon, causing her to tense involuntarily. 'Although judging from George's complacency, perhaps it's to be recommended.'

Mary burst into undisguised laughter, and her lively blue eyes twinkled. 'I hope that's an indirect compliment.'

'Of course. One has only to look at you.'

'Flatterer! Flushed from my exertions over the stove, and six months pregnant into the bargain!'

'The ultimate in both femininity and domesticity— exactly what a doting husband would wish for,' Nick replied musingly, and Shannon bit back a sharp retort. Really, the man was incredibly chauvinistic!

'You've met Shannon, haven't you?' Mary queried, and perforce Shannon had to turn round and face him.

He looked rugged and invincible, attired in an impeccable light grey suit and an expensive silk shirt of pale grey-blue.

'Shannon.' He made a slight mocking bow, and his dark grey eyes lit with laughter. 'Perhaps you don't share my sentiments?'

How did he expect her to answer that? 'I think I'd prefer to pass on that one,' she managed with a tight smile.

'Oh, Shannon's marvellous with children,' Mary told him lightly. 'And a good cook—she made the pavlovas for Tania's party. I've saved one for dessert.'

Nick's gaze never wavered from Shannon's expressive features. 'In that case, I must ensure I have some dessert.'

Oh, he was just too much! Shannon decided crossly. 'I hope you enjoy it,' she managed with a semblance of politeness. Secretly she hoped it would choke him, and when she spared a quick glance in his direction his eyes held a mocking gleam, almost as if he could read her thoughts.

Mary linked an arm through each of theirs. 'Let's go into the lounge for a drink. The stove can take care of itself for ten minutes or so.'

It was an incredibly friendly meal, the food superb, the wine—Vista d'Oro, Shannon noticed—an excellent complement. To her intense relief Nick took a seat further down on the opposite side of the table, and throughout the meal she avoided glancing in his direction.

It was at least an hour before they all rose from the table, and the men escaped to a large family room downstairs to talk, smoke, and take yet another glass of wine while the women were left to clear the table, dispense with the dishes, then bed down their various offspring.

Perhaps now, Shannon breathed deeply, she could make some excuse and leave. It was almost nine-thirty, and there was no reason to linger. Certainly she had no desire to make pleasant conversation with her landlord, should he seek her out. Doubtless it would amuse him to parry words with her, and she didn't aim to play mouse to his cat!

'Mary --'

'Oh, Shannon, be an angel and carry these downstairs for me,' Mary urged, holding out two bowls of potato crisps.

'I really must be going,' Shannon declared a trifle desperately, only to have Mary shake her head to the contrary.

'You can't leave now. George intends making a speech to welcome Nick into the community. He'd be disappointed if you left before then, and in any case, Nick brought along some Asti Spumante. It wouldn't be polite not to stay and sample it.'

Oh, fate, where are you now that I need you! Shannon implored silently, sure that everything and everyone was intent on conspiring against her.

'Shannon Fitzgerald,' Nick Stanich murmured as he moved leisurely across the room to join her some twenty minutes later. He looked infinitely formidable, and the epitome of male sophistication—a dark angel, Shannon perceived wryly.

'That's my name,' she acknowledged, albeit sweetly.

'Irish, undoubtedly,' he mocked gently.

'My grandparents emigrated from County Clare.'

He smiled, and his eyes crinkled attractively at the corners. 'Kelly is as blonde as you are dark.'

At once the hackles began to rise. 'Kelly is my niece, Mr Stanich,' she said icily, hating him afresh.

'I wasn't aware of any intended innuendo in that observation,' One eyebrow lifted as he regarded her steadily. 'Your sister Bridget married Peter Soames some seven years ago, and they were blessed with one child—Kelly.'

Shannon swallowed convulsively. 'You're remarkably well-informed,' she said stiffly, and his smile became wholly cynical.

'I make it my business to be.'

'In that case, my life must be an open book, chapter and verse. We obviously have nothing to talk about.' She turned to step away, only to be brought to a halt by his hand on her arm.

'Nothing personal, I assure you.'

'How can you say that?' she retorted angrily, and added with unveiled sarcasm, 'Incidentally, in case your dossier on me doesn't list them, I have three moles too, each in places you'll never get to see!'

His subdued laugh almost proved her undoing, and her fine brown eyes sparked furiously alive.

'You intrigue me.' Grey eyes glittered with amusement, openly challenging.

'Be assured it's quite unintentional,' Shannon declared coldly. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must mingle.'

'I'll permit you to get away with it this time,' Nick asserted mockingly, and she directed him a brittle smile.

'Oh, are we keeping score?'

'You're way out of your depth, Shannon Fitzgerald,' he taunted softly.

'I wouldn't doubt it. To repeat your own words, out of context, of course—"one has only to look at you".'

'My, my,' he drawled silkily—dangerously, Shannon corrected, and felt an icy finger slide down her spine. 'Your eyes should be green, like those of a spitting Kilkenny cat.'

Shannon felt her eyes widen with shock. Rarely had she ever had cause to lose her temper, and never once in her life had she spoken to anyone with such intended sarcasm. It was almost as if the devil himself had hold of her tongue.

'Please let go of my arm,' she faltered shakily, and stepped to the other side of the room as soon as he released her, far away from his disturbing presence.

It took every ounce of effort to listen to George's welcoming speech a short while later, and the wine she sipped almost choked her. As soon as she could she determinedly made good her escape, pleading a headache in answer to Mary's puzzled frown.

Kelly was carefully wrapped in a light blanket and deposited safely on the back seat of the Mini, and it was with a sense of blessed relief that Shannon moved in behind the wheel.

Angel didn't respond. Again and again Shannon twisted the ignition key with no effect. It had to be Nick who accompanied George out of doors to see what was wrong, and after eliminating a few possible causes, the problem was deduced as being a flat battery.

Nick suggested he drive them home, and Shannon perforce had to accept his offer.

They didn't exchange a word by way of conversation on the homeward journey, all ten minutes of it. Shannon expected cynical comment, sarcasm—something. Somehow his silence was much worse.

'Thank you,' she murmured just as soon as the Ferrari slid to a halt in her driveway. 'I'll open the front door, then come back for Kelly.'

'You go on ahead, I'll bring her,' Nick bade brusquely, blandly ignoring her protesting murmur of dissent. 'Which bedroom?'

Shannon stood aside as he moved past her into the lounge. 'The middle one,' she indicated. The cottage had no hallways—one room merely opened on to another.

Kelly remained blissfully asleep, and didn't so much as flutter an eyelash when Nick threw back the covers of the bed, lowered her between the sheets, then tucked the covers back into place.

Shannon moved out towards the front door, aware of a strange prickling sensation at the base of her neck as he followed closely behind. 'Thank you for bringing us home,' she offered with cold politeness.

His slight smile held faint amusement. 'Whatever happened to those sharp claws?' Without warning he bent down and bestowed a brief hard kiss on her unsuspecting lips. 'Goodnight, Shannon Fitzgerald,' he bade with gentle mockery, then he was gone, and the car was already purring down the driveway before she could think of a suitable retort.

'Do you mean to say I had a ride in Nick's car, and never even knew about it?'

Shannon smiled at Kelly's incredulous query.' 'Fraid so, honey. You slept as sound as a babe all the way home.' She took a bite out of her toast as she surveyed her young niece across the breakfast table.

'What will happen about Angel?' Kelly's face fell slightly. 'I guess we can't go to the beach today.'

'George seemed to think it was only the battery,' she said reassuringly. 'He's putting a new one in this morning, and Angel should be back around ten o'clock. George said he would ring if it was anything more serious.'

'Oh, fantastic!' the young imp declared exuberantly.

'Don't get too enthusiastic—it's barely nine now.'

'But George is a mechanic,' Kelly reasoned. 'It must be the battery. I'm going to get my swimsuit out, and a towel, then as soon as George gets here I can go and fetch Anna.'

How remarkably simple everything was to a child, Shannon reflected idly as she sipped the last of her coffee. The price of a new battery would take a slice out of her bank account, but she had had Angel almost eighteen months, and apart from new tyres there had been very little to pay out by way of repair bills.

By nine-thirty there was still no telephone call from George, and with a heartfelt sigh of relief Shannon began to pack the picnic basket. She would buy some freshly-baked bread rolls from the bakery in Henderson as she passed through the township en route to the motorway, and there were plenty of iced biscuits left in the tin. If she added lettuce and tomatoes from the garden, boiled a few eggs, and

grilled some sausages, then with the addition of cordial and some fruit, they would have an appetising meal.

George arrived just before ten, and Kelly ran out to the car and gave him an enormous hug just as soon as he emerged out from behind the wheel.

'This young imp is going to knock the boys for six in a few years' time,' he grinned towards Shannon.

'Cupboard love, George,' she chuckled. 'You've brought Angel back—without which we couldn't get to the beach today.'

'Ah,' he declared with mock disappointment. 'And I thought it was my charm!'

Shannon burst into laughter, and her eyes sparkled across at him. 'I think you're charming and wonderfully kind, even if my niece's reasons are purely superficial. Now, how much do I owe you?'

'Call into the garage when you're passing next,' he dismissed easily. 'Where are you off to?'

'Mairangi Bay. Kelly loves driving over the Harbour Bridge, and the beaches on the North Shore are more suitable for swimming. If you'll wait while I pack everything into the car, I'll drive you home.'

George shook his head. 'I want to see Nick about something, thanks all the same, Shannon. Mary intends prising me away around lunchtime.'

Shannon smiled, and said with grateful sincerity, 'Thanks for fixing the car, and bringing it back. I really do appreciate it. I'll be in town tomorrow, and I'll settle with you then for the battery.'

'No hurry. Have a nice day,' he smiled, and gave a friendly salute before striding across the expanse of lawn towards Nick's house.

Kelly appeared at that moment with Anna in tow, and Shannon hid a tiny smile at the eagerness Kelly was displaying.

'This is Shannon—she's really my aunt, but she's like a mother, too.'

Shannon managed a suitable reply and smiled warmly down at Anna. She was the same height as Kelly, although as dark as Kelly was fair, with a rich olive skin. 'Hop into the back seat, both of you, while I get the picnic basket and lock the cottage.'

'I've brought some chicken,' Anna ventured shyly, handing Shannon a plastic container. 'My mother said you were to have it for the picnic.'

Shannon thanked her solemnly, adding that they were set to have a veritable feast.

In no time at all Angel was travelling at a sedate pace towards Henderson township, and after Shannon had visited the bakery they continued towards the main road that led to the motorway. Its double-laned highway curved gently round an inner bay between two peninsulas on the upper Waitemata Harbour. Auckland city and its suburbs settled on gently rolling hillsides, soft valleys, with the land mass shaped into probing peninsulas and sweeping bays by the wandering Waitemata on the east, and the Manukau on the west. From the sheltering Waitemata lay the vast Pacific Ocean, and west of the Manukau the expanse of the Tasman Sea yawned towards Australia.

Once past the toll gates on the northern side of the Harbour Bridge, Shannon took the main highway north as it swept beyond Birkenhead and Takapuna. There was no need for her to strive at pleasant conversation, for Kelly was managing to keep up a spate of

informative chatter that more than made up for the both of them—she would have had a hard job to get a word in edgeways!

Mairangi Bay was only one of many bays on this fringe of the east coast. From Devonport right up to Long Bay, there was Milford, Castor Bay, Murray's ^v Bay, to name but a few. During the summer months scores of city folk and residents flocked to enjoy the sea and the sun-drenched sands.

.Shannon urged Angel gently down the long sloping hill towards the beach, and slid into a recently-vacated parking space that was handy to the grassed fringe near the foreshore.

It was a pleasantly spent day, all the more so in that Kelly and Anna seemed to delight in each other's company. They swam before lunch, and sunbathed for a while after getting through an enormous quantity of food, then took to the water again. Shannon felt quite contrite at having to' call them in to get changed, but four o'clock was the latest she could leave, especially as she had despatched a message to Anna's mother through Kelly that they would be home between four- thirty and five.

With the motion of the car the two little girls nodded off to sleep almost immediately, and Shannon reflected musingly that after they had both been fed and bathed neither would be very far from their beds.

'Thank you very much for taking me,' Anna declared politely as soon as Angel drew to a halt in the driveway beside the cottage.

'It was a pleasure to have you along,' Shannon responded warmly. 'You must come with us again, mustn't she, Kelly?'

'Oh yes, please. Can we go to Parakai thermal pool at Helensville next time? And there's my birthday party next week—Anna can come,

can't she?' Kelly besought her aunt eagerly, and Shannon burst into unsuppressed laughter.

'Anna's here to stay, honey, not just for a holiday. There'll be lots of opportunities for you to be together —and yes, Anna can come to your birthday party. You can write her name on one of the invitation cards that I bought, and take it across to her mother tomorrow. Okay?'

Kelly's eyes sparkled with delight. 'And school— Anna can come with us, can't she ?'

Shannon looked doubtfully from one to the other. 'I think Anna's mother will have to come the first time, because she'll need to see the Headmaster and enrol Anna.'

'I'd really like to go to school with Kelly, 'cos I don't know anyone else. Do you think you could come and see my mother about it, please?' Anna asked anxiously.

Go over to the house, and chance coming face to face with Nick—after last night? Shannon had secretly burned all day over their verbal parrying, *and* that hard kiss he had subjected her to. He was the last person she wanted to see, but to refuse Anna's request would seem churlish, and in any case she could hardly continue relaying messages through Anna to her mother.

'After tea,' she allowed brightly.

'I'll tell her.' Anna positively glowed. --

'About seven,' Shannon added, not at all sure that she was as calm as she sounded. 'I'll wash your container and bring it with me. You can see Anna home, Kelly, but mind you come back straight away.'

The two girls skipped off hand-in-hand, and Shannon turned her attention to unloading the car of all their picnic paraphernalia. As

soon as Kelly returned she would get her into the bath and wash her hair, then while Kelly viewed television, she could slip beneath the shower. Tonight they would have a simple meal of scrambled eggs on toast, she decided pensively.

Two hours later Shannon smoothed a hand nervously over her hair, and endeavoured to appear relaxed. She had exchanged her sun-frock for a flared denim skirt, Xvith which she wore a short-sleeved knit top in matching blue. She deliberately chose not to wear any makeup, other than a light touch of lipstick.

'I'm off, Kelly,' she said, pausing in the bedroom doorway. 'I won't be long. Read your book, and I'll be back before you know it.'

It was one thing to appear relatively unconcerned while still within the cottage, but walking through the rose garden and across the pebbled courtyard at the base of the long flight of steps leading up to Nick's back door was something else. As she mounted the concrete steps she felt as if each one took her nearer to something she wanted no part of—ridiculous, she mentally chastised herself. He probably isn't even here. He'll be in the Cellar, in the vast adjoining annexe, out inspecting the vines, or in the office downstairs. Anywhere but in the kitchen where these steps led to, and Linda, expecting her to call, would answer the door.

Shannon drew a deep breath and knocked, a ready smile on her lips as she waited for someone to heed her summons.

'Hello again,' Linda greeted warmly. 'Come on in— we're just having coffee. I'll get a cup down for you.'

'Oh, no,' Shannon said quickly. 'I can't stay,' she hastened to explain. 'I've left Kelly on her own.'

'I'll send Anna to fetch her,' Linda assured, her smile widening. 'You can't just stand in the doorway while we make arrangements about

school tomorrow. I won't hear of it,' she concluded firmly, and Shannon heard a deep throaty chuckle from inside the kitchen.

'Come inside, Shannon,' Nick's voice drawled, and it held a slight mocking edge. 'Anna is positively jumping up and down at the prospect of fetching Kelly. Besides, as Linda says, we can't allow you to hover in the doorway.'

I don't want to hover at all—I want to take flight, right back down those steps and into the safety of my own four walls, Shannon grimaced wryly. Without seeming downright rude, she had little option but to accept their invitation.

'Thank you,' she said quietly as she followed Linda inside.

Nick was seated at the table in the company of another man, and he looked even more daunting dressed as he was in casual dark trousers and an equally dark shirt left unbuttoned almost to the waist. Short sleeves revealed an expanse of well-developed muscle and darkly-tanned skin.

Shannon smiled a trifle hesitantly as both men stood to their feet, and she took the chair Nick drew out for her.

'My cousin Stefan, his wife Linda you've already met—Shannon Fitzgerald,' he introduced with an ease born of much practice.

Shannon murmured something appropriate, although quite what she couldn't recall. Stefan was dark, like Nick, but there the resemblance ended, for he was not as tall, and he had a moustache, whereas Nick was clean-shaven.

'Do you take your coffee black, or with milk, Shannon?'

'Black, thank you.'

'A dash of brandy?' Nick quizzed, raising a questioning eyebrow. 'Your Irish ancestors liked it so, surely, and added cream?'

'Whiskey,' Shannon corrected lightly, sure that he had deliberately made the error. She could tell by the gleam in his eyes. 'Thank you, but I prefer it black.'

'Anna hasn't stopped talking about her day at the beach ever since she came home.' Linda joined them, - sitting down opposite Shannon.

'I doubt if they stopped talking all day,' Shannon imparted with a slight grin. 'I'm not sure they were even aware that I was there.'

'It was kind of you to take Anna,' Stefan declared smilingly, then glanced over her shoulder at the sound of childish laughter. 'Here they are now.'

Kelly bounced happily into the kitchen with Anna following close behind. 'Shannon, isn't this nice? Have you decided yet what's happening about school?'

'Not yet. We haven't had a chance,' Linda protested equably. 'What say the two of you go into Anna's bedroom and play for a while?'

'We really can't stay long,' Shannon intervened. 'Kelly has school tomorrow, and she's already had an exciting day.'

'I doubt half an hour or so will make much difference,' Nick declared dryly.

Shannon chose to ignore him. 'I'll be taking Kelly to school in the car. It would be no trouble to take both you and Anna tomorrow. The school bus goes past the corner, but that's almost a mile away.' She could sense Nick's penetrating gaze, and willed herself not to blush. He was deliberately trying to get beneath her skin— that he was partially succeeding infuriated her no end!

'There doesn't seem much sense in two cars going in the same direction each day.' His voice came as a deep sardonic drawl. 'I would suggest one of you takes the girls in the morning, and the other collects them in the afternoon.' He stood to his feet with an easy little movement, and drained the contents of his cup. 'If you'll excuse me? I'll no doubt see you again.'

Linda gave both men a conspiratorial grin. 'Go, both of you. Shannon and I will be able to talk much more easily without you.' At which Stefan gave a subdued snort, and his eyes were frankly teasing.

When they had gone Linda leaned forward and took hold of the coffee pot. 'More coffee?'

'No, really. Thank you,' Shannon said hurriedly. 'I must be off home soon.'

'Before Nick comes back?' Linda queried softly, completely taking the wind out of Shannon's sails. 'He rubs you up the wrong way, doesn't he?'

'I didn't realise it was so obvious.' Shannon managed to pass it off with a shaky laugh. 'Heavens, she'd have to watch herself more carefully!'

'He's a man it takes time to get to know,' Linda cautioned with concern. 'Don't make any snap judgments, Shannon.'

I don't want to get to know him at all—in fact, if I had an ounce of common sense in my head, I'd go at once and find another place to stay—even if it meant paying twenty dollars a week more in rent, she thought wildly. 'I don't imagine I'll have very much to do with him,' she said evenly. 'Apart from the times when I pay the rent, we needn't meet at all.'

'Hmm,' Linda mused speculatively. 'Perhaps—perhaps not.'

Shannon cast her a desperate look. If she didn't get out of here soon, she'd explode! 'It's way past Kelly's bedtime,' she disclosed briskly. 'She was out late last night, and after today, if she doesn't get a reasonable night's sleep she'll fall asleep in class. Shall I take you down to school in the morning, so that you know where it is? After that, we can come to some agreement. Perhaps mornings might suit you better, as you'll probably have afternoon tea to make for some of the staff.'

'Yes, mornings would be best, I think. I'd like us to be friends, Shannon,' Linda ventured sincerely. 'Please feel free to come over at any time. Nick won't be inside the house much during the day,' she added, grinning a little as a blush stole over Shannon's cheeks.

'Thanks, and the same applies to you, too. Now, where are those girls?'

Kelly was reluctant to leave Anna's company, but finally Shannon persuaded her to say goodnight, and it was almost eight o'clock when they entered the cottage.

'Into bed, honey,' Shannon bade her briskly. 'I'm going to do some mending, then knit for a while.'

'No story tonight?'

'Tomorrow—I promise.' Shannon smiled as she leant down and kissed the little girl's cheek. 'Pleasant dreams, my lamb.'

'Night, Shannon. They're nice, aren't they—Anna, her mother and father?' Kelly queried dreamily. 'And Nick—him especially.'

I have reservations about that particular man, Shannon murmured beneath her breath. 'Yes, I'm sure you'll be great friends,' she answered gently, blowing Kelly a kiss as she left the room.

In the lounge she sat down with a tidy pile of hand- sewing and some mending, and when that was finished she picked up the jumper she was knitting for Kelly. The needles clicked furiously as she endeavoured to expend part of her pent-up emotions. It didn't work, and to her chagrin Nick's image rose all too readily to mind to taunt her. Somehow she had the feeling she was being caught up in a whirlwind over which she had no control.

CHAPTER THREE

It was midweek before Shannon saw Nick again, and then she would have avoided him if she had had any say in the matter.

Early Monday morning harvesting of the plump ripe grapes began, and the vineyard fairly bustled with an assortment of noises. The trucks, tractors, the chatter of workers when they stopped for morning and afternoon tea, and at lunchtime. She had been busy sewing, all day and far into the night, for she was intent on making as many doll's clothes for Kelly's new doll, as well as covering a small bassinet and draping it. Such activities had to take place well after Kelly was in bed, otherwise the birthday surprise wouldn't be a surprise. And there was baking to be done for the party on Sunday. With no fewer than sixteen young children attending, it couldn't be left until the day before. So she did a little each day and consigned it to the freezer.

There was no indication that Wednesday would turn out to be any different from the day before, or the day before that. But it did, and Snoopy, their black and white cat, was the indirect cause. Six months old, he hadn't witnessed a grape harvesting, and Shannon^v could only conclude that the constant flow of machinery and people finally scared him silly.

The first she knew of his plight was when Kelly tore into the sewing room almost in tears.

'Shannon, come quickly! It's Snoopy—he's stuck up a tree, and he can't come down!'

'Are you sure he's not just being stubborn, and won't?' Shannon queried anxiously, for cats had a penchant for tree-climbing.

'No, he really can't,' Kelly declared, disconsolate. 'Oh, Shannon, do come. He's miaowing something dreadful!'

'You want me to climb the tree and rescue him?'

'Not the tree, just the ladder. You could reach him with the ladder. Oh, *please* come quickly,' Kelly beseeched. 'He might fall.'

Cats don't fall out of trees, do they? Shannon pondered as she followed Kelly into the garage. The ladder was quite large, and incredibly awkward to carry. Close up, the tree looked even more awesome, for Snoopy was aloft in the uppermost branches.

Well, here goes—Shannon to the rescue! Before she had time for second thoughts she leaned the ladder against the tree and tested its stability. Halfway up, she began to have more than second thoughts about this particular rescue operation. The higher she climbed, the more impossible it seemed to be able to get down again with Snoopy held in her arms. She was almost there, within reaching distance of Mm—if she just placed one foot on the branch above the ladder she would be able to get him.

That was when fate took a hand. The last step did it, and with one foot on the branch the other slipped slightly, knocking against the upper tip of the ladder so that it became unbalanced. For a moment she thought she could steady it, but it tilted crazily, then toppled to the ground. Snoopy, darn him, inched forward on ¹ his branch and rubbed his head against her forehead, then began to purr.

'You're a complete idiot of a cat, do you know that?' she whispered fiercely. 'Oh, for heaven's sake, don't lick me!'

'Shannon, are you all right?'

Shannon looked down, then wished she hadn't 'Kelly, now listen carefully. Go and get Linda, she'll be able to set the ladder upright again.'

'I'll get Nick,' came back from below, and Shannon groaned.

'Linda, Kelly. The men are all busy.'

There was no answer, and Shannon closed her eyes and prayed. Let it be Linda, *please* let it be Linda! Snoopy purred even louder, and began washing himself with blithe unconcern.

'If ever you climb a tree again,' Shannon threatened, 'I shall leave you there, and you'll have to stay out all night!'

Snoopy stopped cleaning himself long enough to bestow a loving lick against her temple, then he put out a paw and began to play with her hair. 'I shan't give you any rations for a week,' she said severely. 'Now stop that, or you'll have the both of us falling through space with an appalling lack of modesty!'

There were noises directly below, and the next minute the ladder hit against the tree trunk with a welcoming thud.

'Enjoying the view, Shannon Fitzgerald?' a deep voice drawled softly from somewhere in the vicinity of her shoulder.

She took a minute to answer, for it took that long to catch hold of her breath. 'Of course. I always climb - trees—it happens every second day.'

'What do you plan on doing for an encore?' Nick queried musingly.

'Get as far away from you as possible,' she whispered fiercely. Thank heaven she was wearing jeans!

'Hand me that wretched animal—I'll restore him to ground level first,' Nick instructed sardonically. 'Can you be trusted to stay exactly where you are?'

'I can manage to get myself down,' she assured him intensely, then gasped incredulously as one muscular arm grasped her waist and

swung her round so that she rested over his shoulder, fireman-fashion. 'What do you think you're doing?'

'You have a real cute little derriere,' he mocked softly, and laughed as she gave a gasp of pure rage. 'Easy now, there's a watching audience of two down below.'

'I could hit you!' she hissed furiously as he began moving down the ladder.

'Do that, and I'll retaliate in kind.'

'*I hate* you,' she flung in a choked whisper, and her eyes were stormy as they met his seconds later when he deposited her down on to the ground.

'One down, one to go,' Nick drawled, then he turned back for Snoopy.

I hope he scratches you, Shannon wished fervently, momentarily closing her eyes.

'Shannon, you look awfully pale. Are you all right?' Kelly queried anxiously, and Shannon blinked rapidly in an attempt to instil some calm over her irrational emotions.

'I'm fine, really,' she assured them.

'We ran as fast as we could,' Anna explained. 'We thought you might fall.'

'Well, I didn't. All cats have nine lives—even Kilkenny cats,' Shannon said obliquely as Nick placed Snoopy into Kelly's outstretched arms.

'Do me a favour, Shannon Fitzgerald,' Nick intoned mildly. 'Next time that animal decides to go skyscraping, fetch me. That ladder is definitely not for little girls.'

There won't be a next time, Shannon decided angrily. Obviously she owed him a measure of gratitude, and she did her best to summon up the semblance of a smile. Thank you.'

His brief nod dismissed her grudging thanks, and there was a devilish gleam in those grey eyes that brought forth all of her former animosity.

'Come on, girls,' she said with an overbright smile. 'Let's take Snoopy inside and give him some warm milk. I'm sure Anna's uncle hasn't any more time to waste.' Without sparing Nick a backward glance, she put a hand on each of the girl's shoulders and led them towards the cottage.

Snoopy positively lapped up both milk and all the loving attention he was bestowed, and seemed disinclined to leave Shannon's side. The girls thought this was highly amusing, and watching the animal's antics kept them occupied right up until teatime.

It was almost midnight when Shannon switched off the sewing machine, and she flexed her shoulders wearily. It would be a relief when Kelly's birthday party was over. She felt so tired, it wasn't funny.

'Shannon, what on earth have you been doing to yourself?'

Shannon glanced across the table in the coffee lounge and gave a wry grimace. 'Sewing late each night, baking,' she revealed. 'It's Kelly's birthday party this Sunday. You know how it is.'

'Well, whatever it is, stop,' Beverley replied with friendly concern. --,

'I shall—on Monday,' Shannon responded with a light laugh. She lifted her coffee cup and sipped its contents with enjoyment. A week ago she had been mildly concerned about confronting Nick Stanich again, and now that she had, there was nothing *mild* about her reaction!

'I hear that Vista d'Oro has its new owner in residence,' Beverley offered tentatively. 'Have you met him yet?'

'You could say that.'

'Is he as dishy as they say?' The query was eager, and Shannon hid an involuntary smile.

'If you happen to like the type. He looks like a buccaneer out of the seventeenth century.'

'Not long hair, surely?' Beverley wailed as her concept of the Australian-born Dalmatian viniculturist fell into shreds, and Shannon burst into hastily stifled laughter.

'Well-groomed, both.'

'That's a relief—you had me imagining him as something out of a biblical epic!'

'There's nothing vaguely biblical about Nicks Stanich,' Shannon replied wryly, and tried to meet Beverley's shrewd glance squarely.

'You sound as if you've had a brush of sorts with the man—have you?'

'You could say that,' Shannon said shortly.

Beverley gave her a keen-eyed glance.

'It might be best to change the subject. Would you be able to make me an evening gown? I've bought-the material and the pattern, although there's no great hurry as the party isn't until the end of the month.'

'Of course. How about coming back with me next Friday? I can take your measurements then,' Shannon suggested, her smile widening as she saw Beverley's - satisfaction. 'You might even catch a glimpse of our exalted vigneron.'

'Oh, I intend to!' the other girl laughed, and her eyes fairly danced. 'In fact, I shall waft into the wine cellar and buy a bottle of his finest Riesling.' She paused, wrinkling her nose a little as Shannon murmured :

'Muller Thurgau Riesling—it's good.'

'Whatever!' Beverley laughed. 'I don't intend to be knowledgeable, dear girl. The whole idea is to plead ignorance, so that I can sample a few wines and thus ensnare him with my subtle feminine charm!'

'You're more likely to have Linda serve you,' Shannon imparted lightly. 'He'll be much too busy to be anywhere near the wholesale bottle shop—except perhaps for an hour or so on a Saturday—at this time of the year, anyway.'

'Then I shall become one of the many who frequent the local vineyard cellars of a Saturday,' Beverley declared. 'What's more, I intend coming each weekend until I do see him!'

'No doubt you'll find him pleasant and charming, and be utterly captivated.'

'Which you are not,' the other girl concluded dryly. 'I don't suppose it's any use my asking you to come to a party next Saturday evening?'

Shannon studied her hands for a moment before raising her eyes. 'Thanks, Beverley, but you know I don't socialise very much. What would I do with Kelly?'

The other girl sighed prodigiously, 'Find a baby-sitter—other people do it. You're almost twenty-six. You can't hide yourself away just because you look after Kelly.'

'I have, occasionally, but I prefer not to unless it's essential.'

'Well, you'll never meet any men if you stay at home sewing all the time, and Kelly will grow up one day and leave you. Then what will you do?' Beverley persisted.

'I'm all Kelly has in the world, and I won't jeopardise her well-being for the sake of my own.' Useless to say that the men she had met over the past few years either assumed she was an unmarried mother, or weren't prepared to include a child in their plans. The only exception was John Vlasich, with whom she maintained a platonic friendship, accepting his infrequent invitations to dinner on occasion.

'It's almost one o'clock,' Beverley grimaced as she hastily checked her watch. 'I'll have to go, Shannon. Same time next Friday?' She got to her feet and slung the strap of her bag over one shoulder.

'Friday will be fine,' Shannon acquiesced. 'I must be on my way, too.'

They left the coffee lounge together, then Shannon crossed over to the car-park. Home to sew some more, she reflected idly, and Sheila Burton was bound to arrive later in the afternoon. That woman had more clothes than sense!

Saturday dawned warm as a summer's day, and Shannon rose early to give the cottage a thorough clean. Today was one day when she didn't intend sewing anything at all, and there was only Kelly's birthday cake to bake and ice, some party games to sort out for tomorrow. She

would have to put her artistic skills to the test and sketch a donkey for the children to pin the tail on, and there was a treasure barrel to fill—heavens, a hundred and one things to do!

The day progressed with amazing speed, and it was teatime before Shannon had a chance to catch her breath. Kelly was excited as could be, and was definitely in for an early night, Shannon perceived. The little girl chattered practically non-stop, and Shannon tried her best to keep track of everything said. It was difficult to concentrate when she had so much on her own mind, and it was only when Nick's name seemed to get mentioned more than the usual few times that she sat upright and gave Kelly her undivided attention.

'—and Nick said it was nice of me to ask, but perhaps I'd better check with you first.' Kelly came to a halt, then smiled across at her aunt. 'It is all right, isn't it?'

'Is what all right?'

'Well,' Kelly began with long-suffering patience, 'Anna and her mother and father are going out for dinner tomorrow night, so that means Nick will be on his own. I've asked him to come and have tea with us. He went to Tania's party,' she hastened quickly as she caught the expression on Shannon's face.

'But Kelly,' Shannon protested, 'your party finishes at five o'clock. And Nick didn't really go to Tania's party—he was invited to dinner as he's a friend of Tania's parents,' she explained carefully. 'It just happened to be the same day, that's all.'

'Ivan used to come over for dinner sometimes,' Kelly managed, looking quite crestfallen, and Shannon bit her lip as she struggled with her emotions.

'That was different.'

'Why?'

Because Ivan was a lovable old man with whom I could laugh and talk to in a way that I could never do -with his nephew, Shannon admitted silently.

'I asked Nick to come and see all the lovely presents I'll be getting,' Kelly explained. 'Do you really mind?'

What could she say? 'I daresay he was just being polite,' Shannon managed evasively, but Kelly shook her head.

'He would have said if he didn't want to come,' the little girl insisted. 'Please, Shannon. You will tell him it's all right, won't you?'

Oh God, what was she to do? If she refused, Kelly would be incredibly disappointed, but if she agreed ... In a quandary, Shannon glanced across the table at Kelly's anxious face*. 'I'll telephone through to the house later,' she conceded, albeit reluctantly, and her niece positively glowed.

'Tonight?'

'After we've done the dishes.' Let's hope he'll be out for the evening—or else politely decline. Either way, Shannon wished it was a call she didn't have to make.

She had a brief respite in that when she rang, Linda answered and said that Nick was dining out, but a message would be left for him to contact her.

Sure that he wouldn't ring until morning, Shannon was almost startled out of her wits when she answered the telephone's insistent summons almost two hours later to discover Nick at the other end of the line.

'I have a message to ring you,' his deeply modulated voice commented, and she had to gather her thoughts together rapidly.

'It's about tomorrow evening—Kelly tells me she's invited you to tea.'

'And you're ringing to plead that it's inconvenient?'

Oh, she could tell from the amused tone of his voice that he thought this was precisely her intention! 'Not at all,' she answered sweetly, hating him. 'To second my niece's invitation, and arrange a time.'

'Whenever is convenient,' he drawled, adding, 'If you'll tell me what's on the menu, I'll bring the wine.'

Shannon seethed. 'Nothing less than a fatted calf, whole, with all the accompaniments!' His chuckle sounded soft and seductive in her ear. 'Shall we say about six o'clock?'

'I'll look forward to it,' she allowed through gritted teeth.

The birthday party was a great success, exhausting, but successful, and Shannon felt that all the hard work had been worth it just to witness Kelly's round-eyed delight.

'You're the nicest person in the whole world,' the little girl declared, and amidst all the party merriment with her friends looking on, she flung her arms around Shannon's waist and hugged her tightly.

By five-thirty most of the party debris had been tidied away, the dishes done, and there was only the rice to boil towards dinner. If her pride had allowed her to do so, Shannon would have served Nick Stanich with a burnt sausage, some cheese and dry bread, but no matter how infinitely tempting the thought was, she elected to serve sweet and sour pork on a bed of rice, and had pre-cooked the sauce earlier in the day. There was plenty of party fare left with which to make up a passable dessert.

'He's here,' Kelly's voice whispered from behind, just as Shannon was putting the finishing touches to the table, and then promptly disappeared towards the door, leaving Shannon to follow at a more sedate pace.

'Good evening,' Nick greeted solemnly, directing a wide smile down at Kelly before slanting Shannon a quizzical gleam.

'Please come in,' Shannon invited politely, endeavouring to ignore the strange curling sensation that began inside her stomach at the sight of him. He exuded virile masculinity from every nerve and fibre. No man deserved to look as he did, nor to appear as calmly self-assured. Dressed in dark brown suede trousers, and a matching shirt undone at the neck, the long sleeves turned back at the cuff, he looked every inch the successful viniculturist. She wished fervently that the next few hours would fly swiftly, that she could remain an unruffled hostess and carry the evening off with sophisticated aplomb. With that thought uppermost in mind, she had chosen to wear a long, flowing patio dress—its vibrant autumn hues accentuated her dark brown hair and honey-cream skin, and its sophisticated lines lent her a much-needed confidence.

'Happy birthday, infant,' said Nick.

'For me?' Kelly breathed excitedly, her eyes ashine with delight as she took the small gaily-wrapped gift from his outstretched hand. 'May I open it?'

His smile was genuinely warm. 'Of course. What else are presents for?'

Kelly's face ran a gamut of emotions as she carefully undid the wrapping, and even Shannon had to concede that the gift had been chosen with care. A small locket on a delicate chain of gold, it was

exactly what a young girl would wish for, and, if she wasn't mistaken, expensive.

'It's beautiful,' Kelly whispered, overawed. 'Isn't it, Shannon?'

'Very,' Shannon agreed quietly, and successfully hid her amazement as Kelly turned towards Nick with her arms outstretched.

Unhesitantly, he lifted her high and gave a gentle laugh as her lips touched his cheek in a gesture of thanks that was totally without self-consciousness.

'Your face feels bristly,' Kelly pronounced with childish candour, adding in all seriousness—'Do ladies like kissing you?'

'Kelly!' Shannon protested as Nick's deep chuckle sounded in barely-contained amusement, and there was a dark sardonic gleam evident as his eyes met hers.

'That's a question the ladies will have to answer, minx,' he answered lightly, and taking the locket from its bed of velvet, he carefully placed it around the little imp's neck.

'Would you like to see my presents? They're all spread out on my bed.' Kelly turned to Shannon. 'Tea's not ready yet, is it? There's time, isn't there?'

'Ten minutes,' Shannon imparted solemnly. 'I'll call you.'

'These are for you.' Nick held out two bottles, and he shrugged lightly when she raised an enquiring eyebrow. 'The least I can do is contribute the wine,' he slanted tolerantly, causing her to reply a trifle tardy: . 'I haven't prepared a feast.'

'Even the most spartan fare is improved by a glass of wine, don't you think ?'

'I'm well aware of the excellence of everything bearing a Vista d'Oro label,' Shannon responded, and Nick's eyes flared devilishly alive.

'Even its vigneron?'

'I don't have to answer that,' she said evenly as she took the bottles from his outstretched hand, being careful that her fingers didn't encounter his. The slight quirk at the edge of his mouth revealed that he was aware of her efforts to evade him, and she felt unaccountably cross. 'If you'll excuse me, I have things to see to in the kitchen,' she said stiffly, and turned and walked away.

As she stirred rice grains into the rapidly boiling salted water she could hear Kelly's muted chatter merging with Nick's deep voice, and she envied the young girl her lack of restricting inhibitions. But Kelly was only a child, and Nick merely a grown-up displaying an unexpected kindness.

Dinner shouldn't take longer than an hour to consume, and after coffee, Nick would undoubtedly bid her goodnight and leave. Shannon inspected the bottles of wine—a Riesling-Sylvaner, and a Cabernet Sauvignon.

The rice was almost ready when Kelly skipped into the kitchen with Nick following leisurely, dwarfing the confines of the small room with his height, and Shannon, intensely aware of his presence, immediately became all fingers and thumbs.

'Why don't you-both go into the dining-room?' she said tentatively, not daring to look in Nick's direction.

'Perhaps I could uncork the wine while Kelly fetches some glasses?' Nick suggested blandly, and Shannon nodded perfunctorily.

'I expect you're hungry.' Her bald words brought forth a dry chuckle.

'Work has a habit of increasing one's appetite.'

She swung brilliant eyes round to face him, about to utter a tirade of words—what did he think she'd been doing all day, for heaven's sake?

Nick took the bowl of rice from her nerveless fingers, his voice a soft mocking murmur. 'Shh, my Irish beauty—save all that pent-up emotion for a time when I can effectively deal with it.'

Her brown eyes widened perceptibly. 'I have no intention of giving you the opportunity,' she hissed angrily, feeling unaccountably outraged, and swung back towards the stove with her head held high. Damn his teasing arrogance! How she would like to see him at a loss for words—to feel as exposed and rawly vulnerable as he was able to make her feel.

The meal was a success, foodwise, and perhaps it was only Shannon's heightened sensitivity that magnified the stiltedness of her own contribution to the conversation across the dinner table. Kelly chattered incessantly, oblivious of her aunt's inner turmoil, although it was debatable whether Nick was as unaware, despite his mask of bland affability.

'May I be excused, please?'

Shannon glanced at her niece and smiled. 'Of course.'

Kelly scrambled down from her chair and her face was a study of emotions as she looked from one to the other. 'Thank you for my party, Shannon, and thank you, Nick, for coming.' She stifled an ill-contrived yawn. 'I think I'll go straight to bed. There's school tomorrow, and it's quite late now. I'll just get into my pyjamas and sit up in bed with some of my new books before I go to sleep.' She paused and gave Shannon a guileless smile. 'I'll say goodnight now, then you won't need to come in later.'

Had it been anyone other than Nick Stanich sharing their company, Shannon would have burst into good-natured laughter the moment Kelly disappeared from the room, but the little girl's attempt at matchmaking made her incomprehensibly cross.

'I'll make some coffee,' she said stiffly, hardly daring to look at him for fear of glimpsing the sardonic amusement she knew to be evident.

'You haven't finished your wine.'

She did glance at him then, and was able to gather little from his enigmatic expression. 'Nick leaned forward and replenished her glass, smiling as she protested:

'I don't drink very much.'

'Two glasses scarcely constitutes a threat—to your health, or your equilibrium. Besides, there's something I want to discuss with you.' His eyes met hers solemnly. 'How heavily committed are you for the following week or two?'

Shannon looked at him blankly for a moment, unsure of his meaning.

'Linda needs some relieving help in the wholesale wine cellar,' he elaborated. 'She can't be expected to housekeep satisfactorily, and be available in the cellar. The girl Ivan employed left some weeks ago and hasn't been replaced. I've notified an employment agency, and an advertisement will run in the local newspaper tomorrow. In the meantime, I wondered if you'd care to avail yourself. You'd be paid, of course.' He mentioned an hourly rate that was more than satisfactory.

'Precisely what do you have in mind?' she queried cautiously, not at all sure that she wanted to place herself in the position of being both tenant and employee.

'Two and a half hours each day, from eleven in the morning until one-thirty. Saturday, too. Kelly can play with Anna.'

The extra money would come in handy, and besides, it would only be for a week or so. Her sewing could be done around those hours—at least working at home allowed for flexibility. 'Very well,' she agreed.

'Tomorrow?' Nick queried smoothly. 'You're familiar with Vista d'Oro wines—Ivan made mention of the fact that you've worked in the cellar.'

She had, just for a few hours here and there to help Ivan. What was more, she had taken a genuine interest in winemaking and she possessed a fair knowledge of the industry. One couldn't live in close proximity to a thriving vineyard and remain in total ignorance.

'Linda will relieve you in the afternoon,' Nick continued, and Shannon nodded in silent acquiescence.

She sipped at her wine, then set the empty glass down on the table. 'I'll make some coffee,' she declared evenly, hoping he'd take it as a hint to leave.

'What say we get rid of the dishes first?'

'We?' Shannon couldn't help querying incredulously, watching in frank amazement as he began stacking plates together.

'Why so surprised?' he quirked sardonically, and when she refrained from answering, he added wryly, 'Don't judge a book by its cover, Shannon Fitzgerald.'

She looked at him steadily. 'With you, I wouldn't attempt to stand in judgment.'

Fleeting amusement appeared in his eyes, and quirked the edges of his mouth. 'Let's adjourn to the kitchen, shall we?'

'I'll do them, they're my dishes,' she said stoically, hating him for being amused. 'Besides, you're a guest.'

'Such formality,' he stated dryly, 'when I've toted you down from a tree—and,' he paused, then added mockingly, 'dared to kiss you.'

Resentment and antagonism reared up inside, and she burst into angry speech. 'I have the feeling that you'd dare anything, Nick Stanich. In fact,' she continued with asperity, 'it wouldn't surprise me in the least if you weren't deliberately baiting me for the sake of your own amusement.' She saw his eyes harden and felt a momentary clutch of fear.

'Why should I do that?' His voice was silk-smooth and dangerous.

'Because you're used to having any number of females fall all over themselves to gain your attention,' she returned spiritedly. 'That when you come up against one who doesn't, you regard it as a challenge to your irrepressible male ego.' For a moment she thought she had gone too far, and felt appalled at the degree of anger this man seemed to arouse.

'If you don't curb that tongue of yours, I'll take you severely in hand,' Nick threatened softly. 'Left alone, you've all the makings of becoming a shrew.'

'If that's what you think of me,' she spluttered defiantly, 'why did you come?'

'Your niece invited me,' he asserted calmly. 'Besides, your fine fury intrigues me. It's quite to the contrary of everything Ivan related about you. I expected an angel, and instead I find I have a spitting Kilkenney cat on my hands.'

'I'm not *on your hands*, at all,' she cried indignantly.

Nick chose to ignore her outburst, and turned his attention to the stack of dishes on the table. 'Shall we?'

The thought of his disturbing presence at such close quarters in the kitchen was a threat to her composure, and something she wanted to avoid. 'It's all right,' she dismissed evenly, 'I'll do them.'

'You're an incredibly obstinate female, Shannon Fitzgerald, do you know that?'

'And you're an overbearing bully,' she retorted swiftly.

His eyes narrowed slightly. 'Overbearing, I'll allow—but bully? Precisely when during our brief relationship have I bullied you?' he queried with intended sarcasm, and Shannon began to feel like a butterfly whose wings were about to be pinned to the wall.

'We don't have a relationship --'

'Don't we?' he interjected silkily, and his eyes swept over her slim form with mocking deliberation, causing her to splutter into furious speech.

'If you think allowing me to stay here for an inordinately low rent entitles you to—to ...' she faltered into silence.

'To—what?' His eyes held hers, and an icy flame smouldered beneath the surface, giving lie to the deceptive calm of his voice.

'You know what I mean,' she offered a trifle defiantly. Oh, darn her foolish tongue—she should never have been goaded into answering him back!

'Seek your favours?' A voice smooth as a silken thread with all the strength of tensile steel.

Shannon shivered despite the warmth of the late summer evening. 'Nothing about you would surprise me,' she attempted shakily. 'Ivan related with some amusement your success with the opposite sex.'

His eyes narrowed fractionally, and in seemingly slow motion he leant out and caught her shoulders in an ungentle grasp, successfully thwarting her attempts to struggle against him, then his head bent low and his mouth fastened on hers with hard punishing force.

Shannon's cry of protest was lost as he exerted all the masterful expertise at his command, unmercifully invading her senses until she moaned an entreaty, then his touch became disruptively sensual, his lips warm and probing, deliberately awakening emotions she hadn't known she possessed.

When he let her go she stood swaying, completely off balance. Her whole body trembled, and her face felt devoid of any colour.

'Now you have reason to hate me,' Nick evinced hardily, surveying the havoc he had wrought.

Shannon felt as if she would never be able to find her voice—in fact, she was convinced it had suffered some kind of temporary paralysis.

Nick turned towards the sink and began filling it with hot water. The dishes were dispensed with in total silence and by the time the last saucepan had been dried and put away Shannon was a quivering mass of nerves.

'Black or white?' she asked tentatively when the percolator had stopped bubbling and automatically switched itself off.

'Black, two spoons of sugar,' Nick responded, watching as she took down two coffee mugs from the cupboard.

They sat at the dining-room table in silence, one that she found increasingly difficult to break. Where was all her polite conversation now? If only he'd drink his coffee and go home!

'Kelly is thrilled with your present,' Shannon ventured at last, good manners winning the battle with her conscience. 'Thank you.'

His slate-grey eyes kindled with mused exasperation. 'My pleasure. She's a delightful child.'

Meaning that I'm not, Shannon concluded wryly, viewing him circumspectly from beneath long dark lashes as he drained his coffee in a few silent mouthfuls.

Standing to his feet, he drawled, 'My thanks for an enjoyable meal.'

Thank heavens, he was leaving! She even managed a slight smile in polite acknowledgment as she followed his tall frame to the back door. Her 'Goodnight' was little more than a civil murmur that barely hid her relief, and his eyes were faintly cynical as he turned towards her.

A hand reached out as he grasped her chin firmly between thumb and forefinger, then leaning down he brushed her lips with his in a teasing caress that was warm and disruptive.

Straightening, he turned and moved down the steps with lithe ease, pausing to sketch a mocking salute before he reached the path that led through the rose garden, and had disappeared from sight before Shannon had a chance to gather her startled wits.

He really was the most incredible, *impossible* man she'd ever met! She tried to convince herself that she hated him immensely. That

angry kiss he had subjected her to had shocked her to the very core. Never, never had she been kissed quite like that before, and the thought of having the experience repeated was enough to put a short rein on her temper.

Funny, she mused idly as she shut and locked the door—she couldn't remember ever being so antagonistic. Her temperament to date had been an example of placidity, with rarely a cross word to pass her lips. For some unknown reason Nick Stanich brought forth all her latent anger and animosity. A Kilkenny cat, he had mocked—someone who fought tooth and nail to the bitter end. What was he, for die love of heaven—a prowling jungle cat?

CHAPTER FOUR

It seemed months instead of mere weeks since Shannon had been behind the counter in the wine cellar, and as she walked into the cellar's modern interior she felt the customary pleasure of seeing the various Vista d'Oro labelled bottles, carafes and magnums set out on their shelves.

Built adjoining the house on the western side, the cellar had been designed to give easy access to the public and there was a separate driveway and parking space available. Behind wide sliding doors members of the public could come and purchase wine at wholesale prices, and a variety of sample bottles were available for tasting. Ivan hadn't spared himself any expense in the cellar's design, and the mosaic floor tiles, the imported glass panelling, the lighting, all enhanced the cellar's attractive setting. There was an office suite to the left which comprised an annexe where a typewriter and a telephone reposed on a desk, and beyond this, through an attractively wood-panelled door, was Ivan's study—Nick's, Shannon amended hastily. Situated on the ground floor, it had an entrance from the house as well as from the cellar.

Vista d'Oro was something of a showplace, and glossy photographs of the splendid two-storeyed home and the separate architecturally-designed complex which housed the winemaking facilities had graced several magazines and books featuring New Zealand vineyards over the past few years.

Such a large home, Shannon mused idly, for the upper floor comprised a spacious lounge, an enormous formal dining-room, a large family-size kitchen, no fewer than five bedrooms, and two bathrooms. Downstairs there was a huge entertaining area where Ivan and Katija had held many a party, and there was a small adjoining kitchen with a stove, refrigerator, and stainless steel sink unit so that food and dishes didn't have to be carried upstairs. Adjacent to this

was a games room with a billiard table and a circular felt-topped card-table. There was also a bathroom complex and a laundry. Separate garaging for three vehicles was situated on the eastern side, a short distance from the house, across an attractive courtyard tiled with alternate slabs of concrete and cobblestone.

Large, but well-lived-in, for Ivan and Katija were well-known for their gracious hospitality, and there had been frequent visitors from overseas, friends and relatives, who stayed on holiday.

'Good morning.'

Shannon swung round to face Nick as he emerged through the office from his study.

'Hullo,' she greeted cautiously, all too aware of their employer/employee relationship. She had dressed demurely in a knee-length skirt and short-sleeved top, hoping to achieve an appearance of casual elegance.

'In a moment you'll begin addressing me as Mr Stanich,' Nick drawled with wry amusement, and Shannon gave a slight smile.

'Shouldn't I? If you happen to be here when customers are present?'

'I hardly think it's necessary,' he grinned tolerantly. 'Your position here is only temporary.'

'Is there anything else you want me to do, other than sell wine?' Shannon asked politely. 'I can use a typewriter.'

'Tomorrow, perhaps. However, I'm expecting a few replies to that advertisement. If anyone telephones, take their name, a few relevant details, and make an appointment—preferably during the morning between nine and ten o'clock.' He paused, then gave a slight frown. 'Better get their telephone number as well, in case I need to change an

appointment. Twenty minutes should be long enough for each interview, but if you get inundated with calls tell them they'll be contacted and a time confirmed. If you have any urgent queries, I'll be in the annexe.'

Shannon nodded silently. She had only one query, and was about to voice it when Nick deduced her train of thought.

'The cash register is unlocked, and there's an ample amount of change.'

Shannon watched as he turned and strode through the office to disappear behind the study door. Without his disturbing presence in the cellar she could concentrate fully, and the first thing she must do was check the price list. It wasn't likely that there would be any changes, but she'd better make sure.

She was halfway through scanning the list when the telephone rang, and on answering she discovered it to be a business call for Nick. There were five extensions in all, one of which was in the winemaking annexe, and she pressed the appropriate button and waited until Nick answered, then replaced the receiver.

Custom was slow at this time of day, as most of the vineyard's regular customers left it until late afternoon or early evening to buy their wine, and Thursday and Friday evenings were the busiest times, apart from Saturdays, when there was a brisk trade throughout the day.

Vista d'Oro had two retail shops, one of which was in the city, the other situated in Hamilton, over seventy miles further south of Auckland. The vineyard had earned a good reputation for quality wines, and a quantity of grapes were purchased each year from independent growers. Viniculture was a specialised industry, and despite the aids of modern science much depended on the skill of the

individual winemaker. The complexities involved, aside from the hazards of nature, were various.

Shannon glanced over the shelves to see whether she should re-stock, but there seemed to be little needing attention.

An hour later she had sold a dozen bottles of wine, several carafes, taken three messages for Nick, and made appointments with three applicants for the following morning.

At twelve-thirty precisely there was a light tap of feminine footsteps across the tiled floor, and Shannon glanced up with a ready smile.

'What on earth are you doing here?' Sheila Burton queried sharply, her face an angry mask as she stood regarding Shannon.

'I tried to telephone you this morning,' Shannon attempted reasonably. 'But as there was no answer, I couldn't do much else other than leave a note for you on my front door.'

Sheila's eyes snapped. 'Really! When I arrange a time for a fitting I expect you to be waiting for me. Why didn't you tell me on Saturday that you would be here?'

'For the simple reason that I didn't know,' Shannon said quietly, and the other woman gave an impatient sigh.

'I can't possibly wait around—I've a hair appointment at one.'

'I'm here until one-thirty. Perhaps you could come back after you've had your hair done?' One of these days, Shannon thought bleakly, I shall tell Sheila Burton exactly what I think of her!

At that moment the study opened and Linda came through the office bearing a tray on which reposed a cup of steaming coffee and a plate of sandwiches.

'Something to fill an empty space, Shannon,' Linda smiled as she placed the tray down on to a stool behind the counter.

'If you can stop to have that, you can stop long enough for my fitting,' Sheila declared imperiously, and Linda raised a querying eyebrow towards Shannon.

'A client of mine,' Shannon hastened to explain, and Sheila's eyes narrowed.

'I've paid a small fortune in dressmaking fees over the past three years. I think I deserve some consideration.'

Shannon drew a deep breath and attempted a conciliatory apology, only to falter midway as Nick entered the cellar. He would have to walk in now, she cursed silently.

His eyes skimmed over the three women, resting for an instant on Shannon's ruffled expression before settling on Sheila Burton. 'Is there some misunderstanding?' he queried with calm affability. His smile was warm and not without charm.

Sheila's explanation was softly-voiced with only a trace of indignation, and Shannon writhed.

'I've a few things to check over,' Nick revealed easily, indicating the sheaf of papers in his hand. 'Will fifteen minutes be sufficient?'

'Ten,' Sheila affirmed. 'I have a heavy schedule today.'

Shannon uttered her brief thanks, and quickly followed in Sheila's footsteps. There was a further verbal reprimand in store once they were inside the cottage, and it was all Shannon could do to hold her tongue. The temptation to stick a pin, accidentally on purpose, into any part of Sheila's anatomy was almost too much to resist!

It Was almost exactly fifteen minutes later that Shannon crossed the courtyard. Nick looked up from the office desk as she entered the cellar, and feeling an apology was necessary, she offered one, only to have it waved aside.

'Your coffee is cold—I'll have Linda bring you down another,' Nick observed dryly, then he added, 'You're out of breath from hurrying. Am I so formidable an employer?'

'I wasn't hurrying,' Shannon retorted crossly, and he gave a lazy smile as he quirked a silent querying eyebrow.

'Annoyed?'

'I can't afford to become annoyed,' she answered heavily. 'Sheila Burton has an average of two or three garments made each week. She's my most regular and constant client.'

He surveyed her silently for several seconds, his expression enigmatic, then he queried with apparent seriousness, 'How long since you've been out?' Shannon looked at him blankly, and he gave a barely audible sigh of exasperation. 'Dining—in male company,' he explained.

'That's none of your business,' she protested indignantly.

'What if I intend making it my business?' he questioned thoughtfully, surveying her outraged expression with a quizzical gleam.

'I can't see why you'd want to do that—except as an amusing exercise to alleviate your present lack of feminine companionship.'

His subdued laughter proved her undoing, and her eyes sparked furiously alive as she rounded on him, ready to do verbal battle, but the insistent ring of the telephone put a timely stop to any words she might have uttered.

Shannon shot him a vengeful glare, and at his silent indicative nod she crossed to the desk where he was sitting and picked up the receiver.

'Good afternoon. Vista d'Oro vineyard,' she said clearly, and to her chagrin Nick leaned comfortably back in his chair and gave every indication of remaining where he was. His intent regard was deliberate, she felt sure, and she could have picked up the paperweight from the desk and cheerfully thrown it at him!

'I'm enquiring about an advertisement in this morning's paper,' a light feminine voice responded, and Shannon reached out a hand for a notepad and pen.

'Would you like to arrange an appointment with Mr Stanich for an interview?' Shannon queried politely, and winced visibly at the girl's enthusiastic reply. 'Shall we say nine-forty tomorrow morning?' she suggested. 'If you'd care to let me have your name and telephone number, so that you can be contacted should it be necessary.'

'Melissa Johnstone.' There was a light twinkling laugh as the girl gave a local telephone number before hanging up.

Frothily feminine, Shannon deduced wryly, probably blonde, and undoubtedly intrigued by Vista d'Oro's new owner!

'Professionally efficient,' Nick declared mockingly, and she replied tardy:

'I don't imagine you're going to have any difficulty finding female staff. Your reputation seems to have preceded you!'

His expression became entirely cynical. 'Perhaps I'm a reformed rake.'

'Rake, I'll believe,' Shannon confirmed succinctly. 'It's the "reformed" I'm having trouble with!'

'I'll extort penance for that particular remark by insisting you accompany me to dinner tomorrow evening.'

'I can't. Kelly --'

'Can stay overnight with Anna,' he interrupted smoothly.

'No—thank you.'

'I'll collect you at seven.'

The arrival of two customers precluded Shannon from arguing further, and by the time they had sampled, chosen and purchased some wine, Nick had removed his presence from the cellar.

She wouldn't go, and what was more she'd tell him so the very first opportunity she had!

However, by noon the following day Shannon hadn't managed to catch more than a glimpse of him in between interviews with prospective staff. She suspected he was being deliberately elusive, and the thought was maddening!

Also vaguely irritating was the fact that Melissa Johnstone turned out to be exactly as Shannon had visualised—blonde, gorgeous, and possessing an engaging manner. What was more, the girl had positively sparkled when Nick emerged to usher her into his study. The odd surge of emotion Shannon experienced was something she wouldn't contemplate as being *jealousy*, for why should she care?

'How have things been this morning?'

Shannon turned from her task of replenishing a lower shelf with carafes, and glanced round incredulously at Linda. 'It can't be one-thirty already?' she queried in astonishment, and Linda laughed.

'You've been busy,' she concluded. 'By the way, I've been meaning to tell you to send Kelly over for tea tonight. It will give you more time to get ready.'

'But I'm not going,' Shannon denied keenly, and saw Linda's look of complete surprise.

'Have you told Nick? He hasn't said anything about a change of plan,' Linda mused pensively, and Shannon cast her a rueful glance.

'I refused when he asked, but he just dismissed that as being of no consequence!'

'Would I appear rude if I ask why?'

'I don't like being ordered about.' Shannon sighed. 'And we always argue. I don't see the point in spending an evening together.'

'Indomitable dominance,' Linda vouchsafed thoughtfully. 'It's a Stanich failing. If it's any consolation—I hated Stefan on sight, too.'

'Surely not,' Shannon began disbelievingly, only to hear Linda chuckle on reflection.

'The first time I met him, we clashed. I felt as if I'd just been picked up by a giant wave, swept into shore, and then flung face-down on to the sand—rather like a beached whale! It was a feeling I couldn't handle, and I reacted with the only weapon I had—anger.'

Shannon remained silent, and Linda said gently:

'Anna was going to tell Kelly at school today that she's to stay tonight. They'll both be so disappointed.'

'That's subtle blackmail, Linda, and you know it!' Shannon declared wryly.

'Nick had dinner as your guest last Stmday,' the other girl pointed out reasonably. 'He's merely returning your hospitality.'

A car drove in from the road, to be quickly followed by another, and Shannon murmured a hasty farewell as she slipped out the door.

Kelly was as excited as a dog with two tails, and she had a small overnight bag packed with everything she could think of within an hour of arriving home from school.

As far as Shannon was concerned the time was flying past far too quickly. She had washed and set her hair as soon as she had finished at the cellar, but without a hair drier it was taking ages to dry. For the life of her she couldn't understand why she should be in such a dither. It wasn't as if she even *liked* Nick Stanich! Yet here she was behaving like a teenager on a first date.

'I need my head read,' she chastised as seven o'clock drew near, and she tensed involuntarily when she heard a car door slam, followed seconds later by a rapid staccato knock at her front door.

'Good evening,' she said evenly, trying to ignore the way her stomach curled alarmingly at the sight of him. Attired in a fashionable suit of dark blue quality denim he looked undeniably attractive—rugged, she amended silently.

'A punctual female—how pleasant,' Nick accorded easily as his dark grey eyes swept appreciably over her slim figure.

Shannon met his gaze with contrived indifference, determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her blush beneath his appraisal. Her make-up was simple, with only a touch of eye-shadow and mascara to heighten the liquid brown of her eyes, a clear red lipstick outlining the generous lines of her mouth. Her hair fell loose, the lower edges curling slightly, and she revelled in the feel of it floating down past her shoulders. The gown she was wearing had been selected with a great amount of daring, for it was sophisticated in style and quite unlike anything she had ever worn before. Layers of printed sheer organza fell from her waist to a handkerchief hemline several inches below her knee. The bodice was cunningly draped, with slim straps over each shoulder from which were suspended alternate layers of organza falling to the elbow. It had been a gift of sorts from Sheila Burton, for after having Shannon make up the complicated design she then decided the style didn't suit her, and offered it in lieu of payment.

'You're unusually quiet tonight,' Nick observed dryly as he eased the Ferrari to a halt at a set of inner-city traffic lights.

Oh, what on earth was the matter with her! Each of his comments had been met with a monosyllabic reply, for in truth she couldn't think of anything to say. Shannon attempted a smile and failed miserably to inject any warmth into it at all. 'We inevitably argue whenever we're alone together,' she offered quietly.

'My dear Shannon,' he began musingly as he changed gears and set the car moving forward, 'if I didn't know you better, I'd suspect you were endeavouring to behave like a nicely-brought-up child.'

'You don't know me at all,' she retorted, immeasurably hurt by his amusement.

'Better perhaps than you realise,' Nick rejoined wryly.

They progressed through three more sets of traffic lights, then Nick veered to the left and joined a queue of cars waiting to enter a downtown parking building.

'You didn't say where we're going,' Shannon began tentatively, more for the sake of something to say than anything else. The silence was enervating, and she was supremely conscious of every breath she took.

'A charming restaurant I happened to discover the last time I visited this city—its name is vaguely Russian. You've been there?'

Shannon shook her head. If only she could go home! In a moment she would become so tongue-tied, her voice would refuse to utter. The thought of sitting opposite this devilish man in an intimate restaurant setting was alarming, and she cursed herself afresh for coming.

'Relax, Shannon,' Nick bade wryly as he locked the car, then he moved round and lightly grasped her elbow.

'I'm perfectly relaxed,' she retaliated, all the more put out as she caught sight of the slight twist of humour at the edges of that firm mouth, and perversely she edged away from him.

'I'm not a toddler you must hold by the hand,' she breathed in a furious undertone, and was utterly infuriated by his subdued laughter. 'Will you please take me home? This evening can be nothing less than a fiasco!'

They stood facing each other in the centre of the pavement, oblivious to the curious stares of passers-by. Shannon's glare of resentment was met with sardonic amusement.

'Let's eat first,' Nick suggested appeasingly, and Shannon snapped peevishly:

'I'm sure you could have found some other female to accompany you tonight.'

'Undoubtedly.'

'You gave me no choice --'

'None at all.'

'Why?' Shannon wailed despairingly.

'I'm not in the habit of explaining my motives, Shannon,' Nick said wryly, and she grimaced.

'You can't expect me to believe that it's because you enjoy my company.'

'Ah, but I do,' he offered smoothly. 'Why else would I invite you?'

She shot him an extremely doubtful look, and declined to answer. It was on the tip of her tongue to retort that she was sure he regarded her as little more than a silly mouse he found enjoyable to tease.

In silence she walked beside him, and apart from a tight little smile when they entered the restaurant her expression alluded towards quiet constraint.

'An aperitif, I think,' Nick declared dryly as soon as they were seated, and proceeded to order Campari from the wine waiter.

Shannon pretended an interest in the menu, and tried valiantly to ignore the discreetly-printed price opposite each selection. A tiny devil within tempted her to order the most expensive of dishes, but the temptation was only momentary.

'Are you going to be stubbornly feministic and order separately, or might I be trusted to choose for you?'

Shannon looked across the table and met Nick's mocking gaze. Damn him! Her smile was sweet and deliberately innocent. 'Surprise me. I'm curious to discover what you think I'd enjoy.' Her choice of words was unfortunate, she knew, the moment they were uttered.

His eyes lit with hidden laughter as a delicate blush rose over her cheeks, and she lifted the large menu so that he was totally obscured from view.

'You have no particular dislikes?'

Shannon almost choked, then managed a cool detached reply. 'Not with regard to food, no.'

'Lobster mornay, some Bluff oysters, and salad,' Nick essayed blandly to the hovering waiter. 'With prawn cocktail as a starter. And may I see the wine list?'

'Not Vista d'Oro?' Shannon queried lightly, some minutes later.

'An Australian vintage, one I think you'll enjoy,' Nick replied urbanely, and when both glasses were filled he raised his, then offered a mockingly-voiced— '*Salute.*'

Shannon found the prawn cocktail delectable, and it wasn't until she had savoured the lobster that she attempted to offer anything by way of conversation.

'Have you managed to engage anyone for the cellar?'

'Melissa Johnstone—she's due to begin tomorrow morning,' Nick enlightened her. 'If you could continue for a further week—just to offer some assistance until she becomes familiar with everything?'

'Of course.' Shannon's heart slipped a beat. Miss Melissa Johnstone had been the successful applicant, after all!

'Dessert?'

Shannon cast him a startled glance. 'No—thank you.'

The coffee when it came was strong and black, and she declined milk or cream, adding only sugar. Her head felt rather light—a condition that could no doubt be attributed to the wine!

'The grape-picking will be finished towards the end of next week,' Nick began idly as he viewed her expressive features over the top of his brandy glass. 'As you're aware, it's customary for the vigneron to provide some end-of-season festivities. Which is why I've decided to continue Ivan's tradition with a vineyard barbecue, on Sunday of next week. You'll come, of course.'

It wasn't a request, merely a statement of fact, and Shannon felt the stirrings of resentment begin. 'I've already made arrangements to take Kelly out,' she stated evenly, meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

'Postpone it,' he directed with quiet deliberation. 'I expect you to be there.'

'I may not be able to come,' Shannon excused herself in a slightly strangled tone.

'I insist.'

'Is that a threat?'

'Consider it any way you choose,' Nick drawled hardily, to which she retorted angrily :

'What if I disregard your order?'

'I wouldn't advise it. You wouldn't like the consequences.'

Shannon cast him a baleful glare that had no effect whatsoever. He really was the limit! Without further thought she stood to her feet and collected her evening bag.

'Where do you think you're going?'

'I should have thought that was obvious—I'm going to catch a bus home!' She moved quickly towards the foyer, unaware and uncaring of the few interested eyes that followed her progress.

Without a word Nick drained his brandy, stood to his feet, then followed her unhurriedly towards the front entrance.

Shannon smiled rather fixedly at the cashier as she swept past, and she took the short flight of steps down to street level in record time. The bus terminal was on the other side of Queen Street, and a fair step distant. It wasn't much past ten o'clock, and already there was a steady stream of patrons vacating two nearby hotels. To bypass them she would have to cross the street. She hovered uncertainly at the kerb, and had just stepped forward when a hand grasped her arm. Thinking it was Nick, she wrenched angrily away and swung round to come face to face with a stranger. 'Oh!' Her gasp of fright was very real. He didn't look at all friendly, or chivalrous.

'All alone, honey?'

With as much dignity as she could muster she said icily, 'I'm waiting for a friend.'

'Sure,' he chorded. 'Where is he, then?'

'Right here,' Nick said quietly from behind. 'Shannon?' He stretched out a hand, and she took it unhesitatingly.

He didn't say a word until they reached the Ferrari and were seated inside its luxurious interior.

'Have you no conception of the hazards awaiting any attractive girl who dares to venture out alone on to the streets at night?' His query was silk-smooth and dangerous, and Shannon shivered. -

'You were being insufferably arrogant,' she offered shakily, interminable minutes later. She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. 'You don't ask—you demand.'

'We'll continue this argument at home, I think,' Nick declared dryly.

Shannon risked a quick glance at the saturnine countenance not twelve inches away. In the dim light he looked infinitely formidable. 'There's nothing to continue.'

'I beg to differ,' he indicated silkily, and with a deft flick of his wrist the engine sprang to life.

Neither ventured so much as a word during the twenty minutes it took to reach the outskirts of Henderson, and Shannon had become a mass of nerves by the time Nick turned the car into the driveway outside the cottage.

No sooner had it drawn to a halt than she pressed the door-clasp and slid hurriedly out. 'Thank you for . dinner.' The polite platitude passed her hps, and without a backward glance she closed the door and all but ran up the path to the front of the cottage.

The wretched key proved elusive, and she was visibly shaking by the time she retrieved it from the depths of her evening bag. It slipped from her fingers and fell down on to the mat. She cursed beneath her breath. Damn, *damn*—oh, where was it, for heaven's sake!

'Lost something?'

'Of course not!' Shannon answered waspishly. 'I always pay homage on my knees before entering my front door.'

'I'll fetch a torch,' Nick commented wryly, disappearing towards the car to return within seconds.

He found it, of course, just as she knew he would, and before she could gather her wits together he unlocked the door and ushered her inside.

'Coffee?' he suggested dryly as he took in her flustered expression and the brightness of her eyes. 'I had to forgo mine, if you remember?'

'I don't entertain men this late at night.'

One eyebrow quirked in silent sardonic query. 'That has ominous overtones. What manner of entertainment do you usually provide?'

Shannon flinched beneath his close scrutiny, then coloured a delicate pink.

'Go and make some coffee, Shannon,' Nick ordered quietly. 'You have nothing to fear from me.'

She escaped with undue haste, and in the kitchen filled the percolator and set it on the stove, then with the movement of an automaton began to set out two cups and saucers, some sugar. A teaspoon clattered to the floor, and the sound seemed unnecessarily loud.

Foolish tears clouded her vision as she bent down to retrieve it, and as she stood upright she felt one solitary tear spill and trickle slowly down her cheek. What a prize idiot she was making of herself!

'That coffee smells delicious.'

Shannon jumped at the sudden sound of Nick's voice immediately behind, and involuntarily her shoulders stiffened as she sought for some measure of control.

A hand reached out and turned the switch down to a lesser heat, and when the coffee had perked satisfactorily, Nick poured the steaming liquid into cups.

'If I ask nicely, will you please grace us with your presence at the vineyard barbecue? Linda would be grateful for your help and moral support.'

Another tear followed the first. Shannon kept her head averted, and gave a slight nod.

'Shannon?' Hands curled over her shoulders and forced her round to face him, then firm fingers lifted her chin until amber-flecked brown eyes met those of darkening grey.

He looked long into those misty depths, then gave a slight smile. 'A man could drown in those eyes, do you know that?' His head descended; and he pressed each eyelid closed with a gentle kiss. 'Life isn't quite fair, is it?' he murmured softly.

'I came to terms with myself long ago,' Shannon answered shakily, hardly daring to breathe. Being close to him like this was having the strangest effect, making her feel quite lightheaded.

'Your devotion to Kelly is admirable,' Nick commended gently, and his eyes were warm. 'But isn't it time you allowed a man into your life?'

She swallowed convulsively. 'I'm not sure I like men all that much—men society deems eligible, that is.' She paused, and her teeth worried her lower lip. 'They're usually sceptical about Kelly's

parentage, and make it quite plain they wouldn't accept the responsibility of someone else's child. I'd rather remain an old maid!'

'That you'll never be,' Nick vouchsafed with wry humour, and Shannon gave a slight grimace.

'I'm totally realistic—I gave up on girlish dreams long ago.'

'Do I detect a trace of cynicism?'

'I think we should have that coffee,' she stated slowly, and Nick smiled.

'Changing the subject?'

Shannon didn't answer, and the hands that took the cups from the bench weren't quite steady. Resolutely she crossed to the dining-room and deposited the coffee down on to the table.

Nick seated himself comfortably, and began stirring the contents of his cup. 'I'm driving down to Hamilton tomorrow,' he told her. 'I'd like you to come with me.'

Shannon's eyebrows shot up with surprise. 'Hamilton?' she echoed in a slightly incredulous voice, and his eyes gleamed with amusement.

'Yes—Hamilton,' he confirmed lazily. 'I've yet to make myself known to the management staff at Hamilton's Vista d'Oro retail outlet.'

Shannon's brow cleared. 'Oh, of course.'

'Shall we say about eight-thirty?'

'You're forgetting something—I'm supposed to be working in the cellar tomorrow,' she pointed out. 'Besides, there's Kelly.'

'Who better to give you the day off than the boss himself?'

Shannon met those quizzical grey eyes and almost relented. Almost, but not quite. 'I don't think so,' she said calmly. 'You must set a precedent, after all, and if you give one employee a day off without sufficient cause, then you'll be expected to do the same for others.'

Nick broke into soft laughter, and it lightened his rugged features measurably. 'Oh, Shannon,' he reprimanded with faint mockery, 'you really are a perverse little baggage! Your working hours tomorrow will be extended from two and a half, to eight, for which you will be duly recompensed, and as your employer I request you accompany me on a business trip—the locality of which I'm unsure, never having visited there.'

Shannon eyed him doubtfully. 'There are road maps. You won't get lost.'

Nick drained his coffee and blandly ignored her last remark. He stood to his feet, his eyes faintly quizzical as he regarded her uncertainty. 'Bring Kelly across to the house in the morning—Linda will be responsible for transporting the girls both to and from school tomorrow, and Kelly can stay with Anna until we arrive home.'

'You're not only overbearing, you're autocratic as well!' Shannon exclaimed, sorely tried. 'Don't you ever take no for an answer?'

'With very few exceptions,' he responded tolerantly, and she gave an exasperated sigh.

'Why should I query your positively dogmatic determination? Although *why* you should insist that I come is a complete mystery!'

Nick sighed sardonically, 'for a moment I thought you'd taken pity on me.'

'Please go home,' Shannon implored, unaccountably cross. 'I'm tired, and I want to go to bed.'

He stood regarding her silently for several long seconds, then he murmured with gentle mockery, 'What a pity it should have to be alone.'

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, and was about to begin a verbal attack when he caught her close against him. There was little else she could do but remain still, and she shut her eyes against the inevitable onslaught.

It never came. Instead his lips trailed across the delicate planes of her face, touched each eyelid briefly, then settled a soft caress against the corner of her mouth.

'Goodnight, sweet Shannon,' he bade softly, then without so much as a backward glance he moved towards the front door, and it wasn't until Shannon heard the barely-audible purr of the car's engine that she stirred herself sufficiently to attend to the prosaic task of making ready for bed.

CHAPTER FIVE

'You have no need to consider paying me for today,' Shannon began tentatively, casting Nick a speculative glance as the Ferrari moved swiftly along the southern motorway. Its speed was in excess of the legal limit, she was sure. Apart from a brief 'Good morning', they hadn't exchanged a word, and during the past half-hour each successive minute had seemed like at least ten!

'We settled that particular argument last night,' Nick rejoined smoothly, not taking his eyes from the road, and Shannon stiffened slightly in her seat.

'I won't accept money for what is merely a joyride,' she stated evenly, determined to adhere to her convictions.

'Admire the scenery, Shannon,' he bade her sardonically. 'Save any recriminations until such time as I can give them my undivided attention.'

Shannon was stung into silence. Why on earth had she allowed herself to be persuaded to come today? She must be mad to consider spending the entire day with this hateful man! Nick Stanich in small doses was too much for her to handle, and with the prospect of seven or eight hours in his constant company was positively daunting. She should have stayed at home, bent over her sewing machine! It wasn't as if she didn't have enough work to do—Kelly had arrived home yesterday with no less than a huge bag filled with material offcuts, together with a note expressing appreciation following an earlier verbal request that Shannon contribute towards the clothing and novelty stall for the school's fund-raising Fair the following Saturday morning. Two pairs of hands and several thirty-six-hour working days were definitely indicated.

Once past the Wiri turn-off the traffic-flow became increasingly less, and neatly-fenced paddocks began to spring up in profusion between housing estates. Before long they would be in open country, and once past the Bombay hills the rolling countryside would reveal grazing cattle and sheep. The long hot summer months were almost over, and the once-lush green pasture was in need of rain.

Shannon pretended an interest in the swiftly passing scenery, admiring the tall poplar trees that lined the paddocks parallel to the road for some distance, the various farmhouses of differing architecture. It was a singularly cloudless day, the sky a clear azure, and there was a warmth in the sun's rays, even at this relatively early hour.

They passed through the coalmining town of Huntly, only momentarily checking speed, then followed the willow-lined Waikato river for several miles. Its still depths were deceptive, for in winter swelled with an incessant rainfall it became a swiftly-flowing torrent, often rising to encompass the road in parts. Now it merely looked peaceful, but hidden beneath its surface were innumerable dead trees, branches that caught and snagged.

Shannon reflected idly that she should extol some of the local folklore, point out that Ngaruawahia, through which they were now passing, was one of several places in the North Island where the first Maori canoes landed from Polynesia several centuries ago.

As they reached the outskirts of Hamilton Nick spared her swift all-encompassing glance. 'I didn't intend you to remain in total silence,' he commented wryly, and Shannon retorted, albeit meekly:

'You instructed me to admire the scenery. I didn't imagine you wished to indulge in polite conversation.'

'Touche,' he acknowledged quizzically. 'Now, we shall endeavour to park the car.'

The main city street was alive with traffic, but with an adroitness Shannon could only admire Nick soon slid the Ferrari into the kerb.

'Shall I stay in the car?' she queried doubtfully, unsure whether he would want her to be present at what was after all strictly a business meeting. However, his expression was sufficient for her to slip from the passenger seat and stand silently on the pavement while he attended to locking the car.

'Come along,' Nick bade a trifle brusquely, taking her arm in a firm grasp, and immediately resentment flared at his proprietorial air.

'I'm not a recalcitrant child,' she declared ruefully. 'I shan't run away.'

'With you, I've come to expect the unexpected,' he indicated, causing her to retort sharply:

'Look who's talking!'

'After we've been to the wine shop,' Nick said with remarkable calm, 'We shall have lunch.'

'Coffee and a sandwich will be adequate, thank you.' She walked beside him, all too aware of the hand at her elbow and his close proximity.

'You may eat like a sparrow if you wish, but I intend doing full justice to a steak, with all the usual accompaniments, plus a glass or two of wine.'

Shannon didn't deign to answer. If she kept silent, there wouldn't be the opportunity for them to argue. Nick Stanich was no doubt used to having his female companions docile and ready to fall in with his

every wish! Perhaps she should emulate them, just for today —sheath her claws, as it were!

The wine shop was reached a few minutes later, and inside the well-stocked interior Shannon allowed her eyes to roam at will over the luxurious appointments. She was introduced as 'a friend, and while Nick made a brief inspection of the premises she wandered idly around the large room admiring the well-set-out shelves. Spodessly clean, it was a credit to the management staff.

'Shannon.'

She looked up and met Nick's dark eyes regarding her thoughtfully. She didn't say anything, just gave him a querying smile.

'Come and share a drink,' Nick invited, covering the distance between them in easy lithe strides, and her quiet murmur of assent drew forth a quizzical gleam.

Vista d'Oro, of course—an Asti Spumatate, of excellent vintage, and reserved, Shannon felt sure, for special occasions.

The talk between the two men centred around the business of selling wine, the prospect of the season's harvest, and various techniques with respect to wine- making that were somewhat above Shannon's head. She felt quite content to sit in silence and listen, and didn't feel in the least neglected at not being included in the conversation. Her thoughts strayed a little, for despite giving the appearance of being a successful businessman Nick possessed a raw masculinity that associated itself with close contact to the glowing earth from which things grew. His broad frame was hard and sinewy, and he appeared equally at ease within the confines of a restaurant as he was among his vines beneath the heat of the sun. Truly a man's man, she mused idly.

It seemed that they were about to leave, for Nick had risen to his feet and was viewing her with musing indulgence. She sipped the last of her wine, then replaced the glass, smiling politely as Nick made their farewells.

'Lunch,' Nick concluded as they made their way on to the main street, and Shannon suppressed a smile.

'Steak, I think you said?'

'Changed your mind about joining me? It's a woman's prerogative, I believe.'

'So it is,' she agreed sunnily. 'And I shall.'

Nick glanced down at her, then raised his eyes towards the bright sun high in the sky. 'Are you feeling quite well?'

Shannon laughed—a light bubbly sound that held genuine amusement. 'You seem surprised.'

'You usually offer an argument at every turn,' he enlightened thoughtfully. 'To find you quiescent is somewhat unusual.'

'Put it down to the day, the city, and,' she paused in light amusement, 'perhaps the company.'

Nick shot her a quizzical glance. 'A much more likely explanation is that the wine has gone a little to your head.'

Shannon wrinkled her nose at him. 'Not at all. Although I will have you know that I am not accustomed to consuming alcohol before midday.'

'Lunch—definitely,' he chuckled, and taking her hand in his, he led her along the pavement.

Shannon felt strangely content, almost happy in his company. Seated in the restaurant, with a glass of light Moselle held to her lips, she reflected warmly that Nick Stanich possessed all of the social graces. The thought came unbidden to mind that it would be nice to be cherished. Lord, the wine *must* be going straight to her head! For the sake of something to say, she queried with what she hoped was casual interest, 'You come from a family of winemakers, I believe?'

'Polite conversation, Shannon Fitzgerald, or a means to discover more about me?' he queried mockingly.

She smiled a little, head to one side as she considered his words. 'Hmm—both, I think.'

'Ask, and I'll endeavour to answer,' he intoned laconically as he surveyed her over the rim of his glass. His eyes gleamed with ill-disguised laughter, and she felt like poking her tongue at him.

'Suppose you give me a resume,' she suggested idly. 'You might consider my questions impertinent.'

Nick's eyebrows rose a fraction in sardonic amusement. 'My dear Shannon, what were you thinking of asking?'

'You're baiting me again,' she sighed, feeling strangely hurt.

'Not at all'

She sat in silence, concentrating on cutting the succulent steak on her plate into bite-size chunks, then idly speared a piece of lettuce with her fork. If she placed it in her mouth, she'd choke!

Nick smiled across at her downbent head. 'I think you are already aware that Ivan and my father left Dalmatia when they were both in their teens. Ironically enough, they unintentionally chose different destinations—my father arrived in Australia to work several years

with a machete, cutting cane in Queensland. Ivan came on to New Zealand to dig kauri gum several miles north of Auckland. However, with a tradition of winemaking behind them, they took the first opportunity to purchase land suitable for growing vines, and by hard work both managed to make a successful living.'

His eyes took on a quizzical gleam as he met her interested gaze. 'After completing our formal education, my elder brother and I attended Roseworthy Agricultural College in South Australia, for it was never in doubt that either of us should do anything other than follow in our father's footsteps. At the end of my sojourn at college I spent two years here at Vista d'Oro, then returned to the Barossa Valley to assist my father and my brother. Ivan kept meticulous records regarding the running of his vineyard—soil conditions, climatic changes,' he elaborated easily, then his eyes twinkled with devilish merriment as he continued, 'There was a lighter side to my existence, of course. In between all the hard work and the study, I did manage to lead a satisfactory social life.'

'Of course!' Shannon commented with wry cynicism, and was disconcerted by his husky laughter. Oh, when would she cease to be a source of amusement to him! It was utterly galling—and infuriating.

'Would you have had me lead a celibate existence, Shannon?' he queried mockingly, and she kept her gaze level, meeting those quizzical grey eyes with what amounted to nothing less than sheer courage.

'Yet you've never married,' she countered with mock seriousness. 'Could it be that you set impossibly high standards? One doesn't doubt, of course, that there's a long line of perfectly lovely females just waiting for so much as a nod to be cast in their direction!'

'Ah, those claws again!' His teeth showed white and strongly even. 'I shall succeed in clipping them yet!'

'Most unlikely,' Shannon retorted sweetly. 'You'd have to catch me first.'

'You doubt that I could?'

'I wasn't referring to physical superiority,' she indicated evenly. 'More a contest of mental wills!'

Nick smiled wryly. 'You're hardly a contender for Women's Liberation, Shannon.'

'And you, Nick Stanich, are too chauvinistic for words!'

'Because I consider a woman's role in marriage to be that of caring for her husband and their children? It should be her prime interest, don't you think?'

Shannon didn't answer. Instead, she forked the last morsel of food into her mouth and deliberately took her time with it. That way, she was spared from speaking!

'No comment?' Nick mocked. 'Dare I take it that you agree with me?'

'I shan't give you that satisfaction,' she parried mildly, and he chuckled, his eyes agleam with laughter as he pushed his plate to one side.

'I'm honour-bound to attend a dinner party on Friday evening,' he told her some minutes later. 'I'd like you to come.'

Shannon looked at him solemnly. 'Are you asking, or telling me?'

His cynical smile did little to encourage her. 'Must I spell it out? I'm sure you're aware how an eligible bachelor is regarded among the community.' One eyebrow lifted in sardonic amusement. 'I shall be duly presented with a selection of attractive young females of

marriageable age, then watched like a hawk at various social gatherings by numerous fond mamas over the next few weeks to discover which particular girl attracts my eye!"

'You don't expect me to believe that you need me along to hold your hand? I imagine you're quite adept at dealing with such incidences,' she concluded wryly.

'Shall we say—a smoke-screen ?'

'I really can't. I've committed my sewing services in aid of Kelly's school Fair.' She even managed a sweet smile in supposed regret.

He appeared unperturbed. 'Surely one evening won't affect your contribution by much? I'll call for you at seven.'

'You won't! I have no intention of coming.'

'Not even to protect me from the designing mamas?'

Shannon barely managed to withhold a derisive snort. 'If anyone needs protection, it will be their daughters!'

'Ah, Shannon, you feel no sympathy for me at all?' he queried mockingly, and his gentle laughter when she emphatically shook her head brought a dormant shaft of antagonism to the surface.

'Not in the least,' she replied evenly, hating him afresh.

'What if I deem it an assignment by virtue of your employment?'

'Now you're being ridiculous,' she retorted heatedly. 'You can't expect to get away with that sort of argument a second time. Besides, I dislike being used, just because it happens to suit your purpose.' She straightened her shoulders and looked at him squarely.

Nick said smoothly, 'If you've finished, we'll get away.'

'Aren't we going die wrong way?' Shannon felt compelled to query some five minutes later when the Ferrari swung south instead of north.

'I have friends in Cambridge,' Nick advised tolerantly, almost as if he were talking to a refractory child, Shannon fumed silently.

'I thought we were going straight back to Auckland,' she managed quietly as they negotiated a busy intersection.

'There's no urgency, surely? Kelly will be collected from school, and will stay with Linda until such time as we return.'

Shannon held her tongue with difficulty. 'Will we be back in time for dinner?'

'Possibly—possibly not,' Nick revealed, sparing her a glance. 'Worried about Kelly? You needn't be.'

'Kelly's my responsibility,' she retorted in a tight little voice. 'You have no right to foist her on to Linda.'

'It was at Linda's suggestion that Kelly be consigned to her care for the day,' he intimated wryly. 'The girls spend most of their waking hours together, either at the house or at the cottage,' he continued reasonably. 'You've taken Anna on a picnic outing, and had her as a guest at Kelly's birthday party. To permit Linda to return some of your hospitality is surely fair?'

Shannon swallowed, unsure of her response. 'I should have been told that we mightn't be back, then I could have told Kelly myself.'

'For that, I must apologise.'

An apology from Nick Stanich? Shannon doubted its sincerity, for there was an element of amused cynicism in his voice that belied his words. Thoroughly vexed, she gazed out the window and didn't venture so much as a word to break the silence during the drive to their destination.

The Ferrari turned off the main road and covered several miles before slowing to a halt by a set of double gates that barred entry to a gravel driveway winding towards a picturesque colonial-style residence set well back from the road. There were several acres of pasture surrounding the house, although at first glance it was difficult to detect the nature of farming as the home paddocks were empty.

Shannon watched idly as he slipped open the gates, unable to stop her quickening heartbeat. The memory of his mouth on hers was so vivid as to be almost a reality, and she shivered slightly. This wouldn't do at all! She *hated* him—hated his male dominance, the sheer physical magnetism he exuded. He bossed her around, displaying calm reason to her every refusal, and he always seemed so *amused* by her retaliatory reaction! Why, oh, why did she have to take such exception to almost every word he said?

Whether or not they were expected, she was unsure, but their reception was spontaneous and friendly almost to the point of exuberance.

'Veda and Tony Sumich—Shannon Fitzgerald,' Nick introduced easily, and his eyes gleamed at Shannon's apparent shyness.

'Have you eaten?' Veda queried, her expressive face alive with pleasure, while Tony's smile swept from Nick to Shannon with unconcealed delight.

'We have, thanks,' Nick responded amiably, and Veda promptly invited them to stay to dinner, declaring she wouldn't take no for an answer.

'I'll let Shannon make that decision,' Nick declared, and his eyes sparkled wickedly as he witnessed her confusion.

'Nick, you have mellowed!' This from Tony, accompanied by a friendly grin, and Nick laughed.

'He hasn't at all,' Shannon ventured, shooting Nick a dark look. 'He merely wants to ensure that I have no call to' argue with him.'

'I don't believe it,' Tony managed with mock incredulity. 'You look as soft and as gentle as a kitten.'

'Believe it or not, my friend,' Nick declared mockingly, 'Shannon finds my company abrasive.'

'Stop it, both of you! You're embarrassing the girl.' Veda turned twinkling eyes towards Shannon. 'Come inside—later you can decide whether or not you'll stay. We'll share a glass of wine, and talk.'

Wine again? My, oh, my—she'd already consumed two glasses today!

The afternoon seemed to slip by in a flash, and they did stay for dinner, there was chicken stew, Dalmatian style, with potatoes, onions and tomatoes, served with pasta and an accompanying salad. Fresh bread rolls reposed in a napkin-lined wicker basket, and there was the inevitable carafe of wine.

A little after eight o'clock Nick declared they must leave, and soon they were driving, heading homeward. Shannon leaned well back in her seat, watching the evening's dusk veil the passing countryside. There was a strange peace pervading the air as the sun sank gently

below the horizon, and there was no need to offer aimless conversation to fill the empty void of silence. Perhaps the wine lulled her into a light doze, for it seemed no time at all before they were driving along the southern motorway on the outskirts of Auckland.

Shannon blinked rapidly, then moved her legs as she uncrossed her ankles, stretching them slightly.

'Pleasant dreams, I trust?'

'I'm sorry,' she offered. 'I don't even remember closing my eyes.'

'No need to apologise,' Nick assured her mildly. 'The combination of wine and car travel usually has a somnolent effect. I'm pleased that you could relax sufficiently to indulge it.'

'Is it very late?'

'A few minutes after nine.' He reached into his shirt pocket and extracted a packet of cigarettes, easing one out and placing it between his lips before depressing the car's console cigarette lighter.

'I hope Kelly hasn't been any trouble,' she began, in an attempt to make light conversation. She ran a hand over the length of her hair, then moistened her lips a little.

'I imagine she's well asleep by now.'

After a short silence, she queried slowly, 'The new girl—Melissa. She began work today, didn't she?'

'You sound anxious,' Nick commented solemnly, and immediately she sprang in defence.

'I was merely curious as to how she's managed, that's all.'

'You'll find out very soon,' he assured her, easing the car through the inner city traffic.

'I shan't stay—I'll just collect Kelly, then go on home.'

'You won't. You'll come in for coffee,' Nick declared in a voice that brooked no argument. 'As for Kelly, she'd be better left where she is until morning.'

'In that case, you can drop me off at the cottage,' Shannon choked fiercely, and became utterly incensed when he reached out a hand to touch her cheek.

'Behave, infant,' he drawled musingly, to which she retorted with sheer perversity:

'I am behaving—in fact, I'm displaying remarkable restraint!'

'Perhaps it's Auckland that has an adverse effect on you,' Nick declared cynically, sparing her a slightly quizzical glance as he paused at a set of traffic lights.

'It's not Auckland—it's *you*!'

'What do you suggest I do about it?' he queried mildly.

'Leave me alone,' she answered waspishly. 'The only other alternative is for me to look for somewhere else to live.'

'You've overlooked one possibility—you could marry me.'

Shannon caught her breath, unable to assimilate those last few words with any clarity, then blind anger prevailed. 'I find your sense of humour singularly kicking,' she flung frigidly. 'You'd find yourself in a fine predicament if I called your bluff!'

Nick didn't say a word as he swung the car on to the northern motorway, and after what seemed an interminable silence Shannon offered with controlled vehemence :

'Rest assured, Nick Stanich, I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth!'

His jaw tightened, making his expression darkly formidable, and Shannon sat in silence, glaring fixedly out the window.

As soon as the Ferrari whispered to a halt in Nick's driveway, Shannon released the door-clasp and slid out, pausing only fractionally before moving quickly towards the steps. However, her plan to collect Kelly before Nick could intervene proved fruitless, for just as she reached the uppermost step he appeared from behind to grasp her arm. Thus when Linda opened the door it was to confront them both, side by side.

More than a little flustered, Shannon blurted out the first words that came into her head. 'I didn't know we were going to be so late. If I could just collect Kelly --'

'Coffee first, I think,' Nick declared smoothly, leading her inside.

If it hadn't have been for Linda's presence, Shannon would have wrenched her arm and flatly refused.

'Why not leave Kelly where she is for the night?' Linda suggested, casting a quick glance from one to the other, sensing an atmosphere.

'It's very kind of you,' Shannon managed, trying to smile. 'But I'd prefer to take her home. Thanks for looking after her—I appreciate it.'

'She's been no trouble,' Linda declared blithely. 'I've hardly known she's been here. Feel free to leave her any time.'

'I don't lead much of a social life,' Shannon explained lightly, adding for Nick's benefit, 'from choice. But thanks for the offer. I'd be pleased to look after Anna whenever you and Stefan want to go out,' she concluded sincerely.

'I'll make coffee,' Linda intimated, and Nick murmured that he could well do with some.

'Sit down, Shannon,' he ordered somewhat brusquely, and when she did not comply he shot her a dark compelling look that made her knees shake.

'I'd prefer to get home,' she managed stoically, casting Linda a pleading glance. 'It's been a long day, the driving—I have a headache,' she finished miserably, and it was no less than the truth, for her head was pounding with nervous reaction!

'In that case, I'll get Kelly,' Nick drawled, suiting words to action, and as soon as he had disappeared from the kitchen Linda arched a querying eyebrow.

'Dare I ask?'

'Don't,' Shannon responded wearily, and her eyes clouded momentarily.

'You really do have a headache,' Linda voiced with concern, and Shannon nodded briefly, unwilling to speak at that precise moment, for Nick had re-entered the room with Kelly in his arms.

'If you're ready?'

Shannon murmured a few words in thanks, then preceded him out the door and down the steps. Inside the cottage, she switched on the lights and stood aside so that he could take Kelly to her room. When he emerged, she stood still, uncertain of his intention.

'Thank you for bringing Kelly home.' How polite and quiet she sounded!

'Goodnight, my Kilkenny cat,' he drawled enigmatically, and without pausing he moved past her with lithe ease to disappear from sight in the evening's darkness.

There was a strange empty feeling in the pit of her stomach, and her heart was one miserable ache. Likewise her head! Nick seemed to be able to charge her emotions to new dimensions each time they met, and trying to cope was turning her into an emotional wreck.

CHAPTER SIX

SHANNON spent an extremely restless night, waking frequently between fitful dreams in which Nick Stanich seemed to dominate. Twice she awoke with a start, her skin drenched with sweat, her body aching. Consequently the following morning her reflection in the bathroom mirror revealed a pale, hollow-eyed wraith of a girl. Even her hair seemed limp and lifeless.

After delivering Kelly and Anna to school, she sat down at her sewing machine—more from force of habit than anything else, for truth to tell, she felt about as much like sewing as flying over the moon!

At ten-fifty-five precisely she closed the cottage door and walked briskly across to the cellar. There was a bright red Mini parked on the grass verge, which she assumed must belong to Melissa Johnstone.

'Good morning.' How falsely bright she sounded! No wonder the other girl looked momentarily startled!

'Hi—you must be Shannon Fitzgerald.'

'None other,' Shannon smiled, then winced at the pain in her head.

'Are you okay? You look --'

'I not only look, I feel,' Shannon responded ruefully. 'However, I shall survive, I daresay. How are you managing?'

'Like a breeze,' the curvaceous blonde replied gaily —too gaily, for her voice seemed to echo through Shannon's head. 'Nick has given me some dictation, which I've typed, for there haven't been many customers so far.'

So it *was* Nick, was it? Shannon deduced that Melissa wasn't the sort of girl to bother with the triviality of observing protocol with her new boss— especially when said boss was an eminently eligible bachelor!

'Are you familiar with the wine? Is there anything you'd like to know?'

'I don't think so, thanks. There is a price-list, and Nick has explained the different qualities of the reds, the whites, the sherries—as well as the sparkling wines,' Melissa informed her with remarkable efficiency. 'Nick has offered to lend me some books on winemaking so that I can become more conversant.'

'That's fine,' Shannon managed brightly. Nick, Nick, *Nick*! Her head seemed to pound unmercifully with the sound of his name. She cast an experienced eye over the shelves, noting that many needed replenishing. 'I'll begin re-stocking.'

Melissa wandered in Shannon's wake, watching idly as she lifted carafes, replaced bottles, and ran a duster over the shelves.

'I guess I should have done that yesterday,' Melissa began apologetically.

'Well, it is best to keep the shelves re-stocked,' Shannon murmured, intent on her task. A few customers entered, and it was almost half an hour before the cellar became quiet again. It was nearly time for lunch, and she was in desperate need of a hot drink.

Melissa moved across to the desk to answer the telephone, and Shannon put out a hand to a carafe of rose with the intention of moving it round so that the label was easily visible. Quite how it happened she never knew, but the next moment there was a heavy crash as the glass container slipped from her fingers to crack open on the paved floor. Light-coloured red wine flowed in several different directions, carrying pieces and splinters of glass in its path.

'What the devil --?' That was Nick's voice, deep, muted, and undeniably explosive.

Shannon lifted her gaze from the floor and swung shocked eyes to where he was standing just inside the office. 'It slipped through my fingers,' she offered in hesitant explanation, and unable to bear the darkness in his eyes she bent down to pick up some of the glass. Seconds later she gave a gasp as a piece of glass pierced her finger, and Nick bit off a husky oath as he closed the distance between them.

'Leave it, for heaven's sake!' he commanded brusquely, and Melissa put in with quiet efficiency:

'I'll get the brush and dustpan.'

Shannon just looked at him, then wished she hadn't. He looked so fierce—so *angry*, she almost felt afraid.

'Melissa can deal with the debris,' Nick declared curtly, pulling her to her feet. 'Upstairs with you— that cut needs attention.'

He led her upstairs, down the hall and into the bathroom, then without so much as a word he filled the basin, poured in a generous quantity of disinfectant and unceremoniously plunged in her hand.

It stung abominably, and she was on the verge of tears through the ensuing few minutes while he probed and cleaned the cut. When he was satisfied there was no glass left inside, he dried her hand and applied a strip of adhesive tape, then he stood back and subjected her to an unwavering scrutiny.

'You look --'

'I know what I look like,' she snapped, blinking fast.

'All eyes, pale as a ghost, and if I'm not mistaken, there's an edge of pain tightening that pretty mouth. What is it—a headache ?'

'And practically no sleep,' she muttered, too tired to be bothered trying to be polite.

'Go home and rest—take some aspirin,' he commanded quietly. 'If you haven't any, ask Linda.'

'I don't finish for another hour and a half, then I've more sewing to do.'

He bit off an angry expletive. 'Dear Lord in heaven, you are the most stubborn, obstinate female—I don't want to see you for the rest of the day—go home, Shannon. That's an order!'

'You don't need to shout,' she protested, wincing as she pressed fingers to each temple.

'I am not shouting,' he said with controlled violence. 'Anyone with half an eye can see that you're ill. If you won't go willingly, I'll put you to bed myself.'

Tears clouded her vision, and spilled over to run slowly down her cheeks. 'All right, I'll go. Just stop yelling at me.'

The oath wasn't exactly muted, nor was it exactly of a bland variety, and Shannon felt momentarily stricken that he should be so sorely tried.

'Can I trust you not to sit at that confounded sewing machine?'

'I have so much to do,' she murmured, and heard his sigh of utter exasperation.

'In that case, you'll stay here. The house is big enough—you won't be disturbed.' He scooped her into his arms with effortless ease, then

strode down the hall to pause fractionally as he opened a door. He moved into the room and deposited her on to the bed, then he straightened as he withdrew a light blanket and covered her with it.

'I can't stay here,' Shannon protested, looking at the signs of obvious occupation. 'This is someone's room.'

'Mine,' Nick vouchsafed dryly, his eyes hardening as she struggled upright. 'Don't look so alarmed. I've no intention of ravishing you—I don't take advantage of little girls.'

'I'm not a ---'

'Aren't you?' he mocked gently, turning away to close the drapes at the window, then he swung back to face her. 'I'll send Linda in with something for that headache, then you must sleep. No one will disturb you.' He moved out the door and closed it gently behind him.

When Linda crept in a few minutes later, Shannon took the tablets and swallowed them down with some water, feeling slightly foolish and wanting to make some apologetic explanation, but Linda waved her into silence.

'Sleep, Shannon. Come down to the kitchen when you wake.' She paused, then gave a slight grin. 'Not before three o'clock, otherwise Nick will be after your blood, and mine!'

Surprisingly, Shannon did sleep, and woke feeling refreshed and headache-free. Realisation dawned as she recognised her surroundings, and she looked up with a start as the door opened to reveal a tall frame silhouetted in the doorway.

'I'm awake,' she indicated, sliding herself up into a sitting position.

'But only just,' Nick declared, coming into the room and sitting down on the edge of the bed.

His close proximity sent goosebumps scudding up her spine, and she said in a strangled whisper:

'I must get up—I shouldn't be here.'

'In my bed?' he mused quizzically. 'That's debatable.'

'It isn't,' Shannon choked indignantly, and she blinked uncertainly as he reached out an idle hand to trail gentle fingers across her forehead.

'Headache gone?'

She nodded silently, and her eyes felt incredibly large as she took in the softened planes of his face. 'What's the time?' she queried in an odd little rush. If only he would move away so that she could get up from the bed! To remain like this was having the strangest effect on her emotions.

'Four o'clock. Linda is holding Kelly at bay in the kitchen.' He smiled at her obvious consternation. 'However, before you go racing out there --' He didn't move, so that she was forced to stay exactly where she was or invite an undignified struggle in which he would undoubtedly emerge the victor. 'I want you to give me your word that you won't attempt to sew tonight,' he declared quietly. 'I'm giving you a week's wages in lieu of notice. Melissa is more than competent, and well able to cope with the cellar. So, as from now, your position as a Vista d'Oro employee is terminated.'

Shannon opened her mouth, then closed it again. 'I'm sorry about the carafe—it *was* an accident,' she assured him hesitantly, and was unprepared for his anger.

'The hell with that,' he dismissed forcefully. 'I could have beaten you when I saw the state you were in.'

'I wasn't in any state,' she protested unevenly.

'No?' He stood to his feet, looking down at her for an interminable length of time, then he thrust both hands into his trouser pockets and moved towards the door. 'I'll pick you up around six tomorrow evening.'

'But I'm not --'

'I insist,' he asserted dangerously. 'Look upon it as a therapeutic exercise.'

Therapeutic! Shannon gave a sigh of sheer exasperation as he left the room. He really was the most overbearingly *forceful* man she'd ever had contact with! She slid off the bed and straightened the counterpane, folded and replaced the blanket at the foot of the bed, then she drew the drapes and ran a hand through her hair. She felt much better—alive, and almost human again.

Nick wasn't in the kitchen, and Linda told her that he had returned to the winemaking annexe. Persuading Kelly that she was all right took several minutes, and after a cup of hot tea shared with Linda, Shannon took her leave.

Contrary to Nick's instructions, she did sew for a few hours, but after dinner she gave in to temptation and viewed television for a while, then elected to have an early night.

The next day, being Friday and market day, was busy, for Shannon met Beverley in Henderson for lunch, then brought her back to the cottage so that she could take her measurements for the evening gown she had promised to make.

'Ten minutes before I leave,' Beverley intimated with a cheeky grin towards Shannon as they stood in the sewing room, 'I'm going to pay a visit to the cellar to purchase a bottle of wine, in the hope of catching a glimpse of the mighty Nick Stanich!'

'Lucky you,' Shannon responded wryly, and Beverley laughed.

'You're the one who's lucky—going out to dinner with him tonight! Half your luck,' she said a trifle enviously.

'You haven't even met him, so reserve your judgment,' Shannon bade.

'I shall, but I have met him—well, almost,' Beverley declared with an impish smile. 'He came into the bank at the beginning of the week, and he happened to be standing beside me as I waited to arrange some overseas funds. I distinctly heard him addressed as "Mr Stanich", and I had the chance to observe him undetected. He really is a gorgeous, masterful-looking man,' she essayed dreamily, and was quite oblivious to Shannon's inaudible snort.

'If you intend going over to the cellar, you'd better hurry,' Shannon directed cynically. 'It'll take five minutes to get back into Henderson, which leaves you less than five minutes to ensnare him with your charm—if he's there.'

'Nothing ventured, nothing gained,' Beverley laughed, unabashed, as she flew out the door.

Shannon began unfolding the pattern that the other girl had chosen. It was one of those incredibly simple-looking designs that were a dressmaker's nightmare, and to make matters worse, the material Beverley had bought was a jersey-knit fabric, soft, and incredibly difficult to handle. She was still pondering over the pattern when Beverley returned.

'Sylvaner-Riesling,' she indicated with a smile, her voice an imitative sparkle. 'Just right to serve with the chicken dinner I'm supposedly giving tonight.'

Shannon looked up expectantly. 'He wasn't there.'

'Ah, but he was,' Beverley returned gaily. 'Not that I received his personal attention—he left that to the blonde bombshell. However, I smiled bewitchingly, and it is to be hoped that I made an impression.'

'Which you intend following up,' Shannon declared wickedly, and the other girl burst into undisguised laughter.

'Definitely—tomorrow afternoon, no less! Care to invite me for dinner tomorrow night? I can then use the excuse of purchasing a bottle of wine to accompany the meal.'

'You're impossible,' Shannon grinned. 'But who am I to upset your plans ?'

'Lovely. The least, I can do is provide some of the food,' Beverley enthused. 'I'll bring the main course, if you'll make one of those fabulous pavlovas—agreed?'

'Agreed. Now, out to the car with you, or I'll never get you back to work on time.'

Two hours later Shannon again slid behind the wheel of the Mini, this time to collect Kelly and Anna from school. It had been a productive few hours, for she had cut out Beverley's evening gown and deciphered the intricacies of the pattern. All she had to do towards the evening was to shower and wash her hair, then feed Kelly.

It was almost four o'clock when she slipped beneath the shower, and there was no time to set her hair so that it would dry in time. If she left it loose it would dry quickly, especially if she sat outside in the late afternoon sun for half an hour. Besides, she could wind its length into a sophisticated chignon, leaving a few wisps to fall free in tiny curls beside each ear. She had chosen a dress of soft amber-coloured silk, something she hadn't worn for some time. It gave her dark hair a faint auburn tint, and lent her skin a golden creamy glow.

Shannon was almost ready when Nick called, and a perverse little imp urged her to dally over the final stages of her make-up while he waited. Hence it was ten minutes past six when she emerged into the lounge to find him patiently waiting, looking casually elegant in a light beige suit beneath which he wore a dark brown shirt left casually unbuttoned at the neck.

His scrutiny was intent, and she felt a faint tinge of pink colour her cheeks.

'You didn't mention at whose place we're to have dinner,' she murmured as she preceded him out the door.

'You know them well,' Nick told her, and he waited until he had reversed the Ferrari down the drive before continuing, 'They were very close friends of Ivan and Katija.'

'Peter and Marija Katavic,' Shannon deduced knowingly. 'In that case, there's bound to be quite a crowd for dinner.'

'Something like thirty, I believe.'

'You *are* receiving the V.I.P. treatment,' she grinned irrepressibly. 'I predict there'll be at least seven eligible daughters present, possibly more.'

'Interesting.'

'But of course! I shall watch you most carefully, as will everyone else, to detect which girl gains your attention.'

'Hmm,' he smiled, and his eyes gleamed wickedly across the space between them. 'This promises to be entertaining. What, pray, will you do if I choose to direct most of my attention towards you?'

'Ah, but I'm the smoke-screen,' Shannon laughed. 'You said as much, and if I'm to be at all effective, you'll have to pay me some attention—otherwise all will be lost!'

'I don't suppose you could act a little proprietorial?' he queried mockingly, and she shook her head emphatically.

'You're all on your own, Nick Stanich. I shall just be a casual observer!'

A long low brick home stood in landscaped grounds surrounded by acres of orchard, and as the Ferrari slid to a halt the front door opened to emit Peter Katavic himself. There were several cars lining the driveway, and it was probable there were more guests due to arrive.

They were welcomed with jovial exuberance, and when the introductions were performed there was wine in fine-stemmed glasses, small dishes of savouries passed among the guests, and Nick displayed a sophisticated urbanity as he circulated around the room. Once or twice he caught Shannon's eye across the room, and the gleam he directed her was devilishly wicked.

At dinner, Shannon found to her amazement that she had been placed opposite him. It was a friendly meal, with no less than four courses, and wine aplenty. Fortunately, she knew everyone present, and her heart went out to eighteen-year-old Ada, who was painfully shy at any time, but tonight it was apparent that Nick's presence had rendered her into a state of near speechlessness. In two hours, all Shannon managed to get from her were a few desultory monosyllabic words. It was something of a relief when everyone moved away from the dining-room, although Ada lingered behind with Shannon to assist Marija clear the table.

'Dishes—they're the worst part of a dinner party,' Marija sighed, and two of the older women agreed with her wholeheartedly.

'Go into the lounge, Ada,' her mother bade firmly, shaking her head as Ada demurred. 'Go—there are enough of us here to cope with the dishes. Teatowels, Marija—Shannon, Zeta and I will dry.'

Very efficient was Ada's mother, Shannon mused, noting that she had been relegated to kitchen duties rather than be let loose in the lounge. It was amusing, really, to think that they might consider her a threat to any one of their daughter's chances!

It was almost an hour before Shannon moved into the lounge, and she scarcely had time to look round before Peter appeared at her side with a glass of wine in his hand.

'You must be needing this,' he smiled genially, handing her the glass.

'Thanks, Peter,' she accepted graciously, and when she had taken a few sips she glanced up at him. 'It's at times like these that I miss Ivan and Katija. They loved entertaining.'

'It is a good feeling to be surrounded by friends,' her host rejoined. 'To talk & little, drink,' he indicated his glass with a knowing smile, 'a little. To work hard all the time is no good—now and then we need to unwind, no?'

Shannon made a suitable comment, laughing a little as he emptied his glass and reached to replenish it.

'Nick, he is a good man. You like him?' Peter queried, then he shrugged philosophically. 'But of course! Otherwise why would you come together?' He glanced across the room towards that familiar dark head bent with studied interest 'He is enjoying himself.'

'What man wouldn't, surrounded by several beautiful young women?' Shannon responded lightly, and at that moment Nick lifted his head and glanced towards her. She watched with a kind of mesmerised

fascination as he disengaged himself and began weaving his way across the room.

'Ah, Nick,' Peter greeted, his eyes alight with humour. 'This wine is excellent. Ivan himself could not have bettered it.'

'It's an Australian vintage,' Nick answered tolerantly. 'I brought a few cases over with me.'

'You have come to rescue Shannon?' Peter queried.

'I shall leave you, and not play gooseberry.'

When he had moved away Nick leaned down slightly and queried mockingly, 'Enjoying yourself?'

'Are you?' Shannon countered, then essayed with wry impudence, 'For my money, I'd choose Louise, Zeta's daughter. She's very beautiful—surely you've noticed? And she's talented—extremely good in the house, too.'

'I don't intend selecting a wife merely by her domestic capabilities,' Nick said dryly, and Shannon turned sparkling eyes up several inches to meet his sardonic gaze.

'No? I thought you were sufficiently chauvinistic to place that high on your list.'

His eyes gleamed wickedly, and his mouth curved into a cynical smile'. 'Ah, Shannon,' he taunted softly, 'there are other considerations.'

She held his gaze with difficulty, and was unable to stop the tinge of pink that crept over her cheeks. 'One wouldn't doubt it,' she choked, chastened, and he laughed gently.

'Now you're embarrassed.'

She swallowed, and made an attempt at nonchalance. 'Not at all. I don't have my head buried in the sand.'

'Yet beneath the bravado, you're rather a timid young thing—hence the claws,' he concluded quizzically. 'Another drink? You seem to have finished that one.'

'I am rather thirsty,' Shannon acquiesced. 'However, I'd prefer lemonade. I need a clear head,' she added with a touch of impishness. 'When you've fetched it for me, you must circulate. If you don't, I shall be on the receiving end of some rather pointed glances!' She smiled at him sweetly. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must speak with Louise and endorse her illusion that you're a most fascinating man!'

'Remind me to spank you,' Nick remarked solemnly, but she only laughed, her eyes twinkling pools of liquid brown as she glided graciously away from his side.

True, she did experience a sense of apprehension once she was seated beside him in the car some hours later, and when he followed her inside the cottage voicing his intention to have some coffee, she felt distinctly on edge and jittery.

'Come fishing with me, day after tomorrow ?'

Shannon looked at him over the rim of her cup. 'Fishing?'

'Don't sound so incredulous,' Nick chided musingly. 'Fish—those aquatic vertebrates you catch with bait on a hook at the end of a line.'

'Oh.' Comprehension did little to still the nervous pulse beat at her throat.

'I've hired a Landrover from George Bartulovic for the weekend. The tide is right, and I fancy trying my hand at some of those king-size schnapper that abound thirty-odd miles north of Muriwai, near the lagoon.'

'Kelly --'

'Can come, along with Anna. They'll be excellent chaperones.'

Shannon opened her mouth, then closed it again— something of a habit she had developed lately!/

'You didn't bite,' Nick observed dryly.

'I wouldn't dare.'

'We'll aim to leave shortly after nine in the morning, and we'll take a picnic lunch. We won't be back until late afternoon—later, if we get a good catch, because then we'll set up the portable barbecue and grill them for an evening meal.'

'I wasn't aware that I'd agreed to come,' she declared with quiet dignity, and was instantly devastated by his ready warm smile.

'I've never met so much opposition in a woman!' Nick teased musingly, whereupon Shannon retorted:

'It's about time *one* woman proved how resistible you are.'

'Ah, but experience with women has taught me never to believe every word they say,' he mocked.

'And that would be considerable!'

'My experience, or the number of women?'

'Both,' Shannon declared with asperity, and was totally disconcerted when he began to chuckle. 'You find that amusing?' she queried chillingly.

'Your opinion of my so-called rakish misdemeanours,' he corrected with intended irony.

'In that case, I apologise for appearing prudish,' she said icily, deliberately not meeting his glance.

'I would have said "shy",' he corrected quietly, and draining the contents of his cup he stood to his feet.

Shannon eyed him warily. He was predictably unpredictable, and she was unsure of his intention as he stood viewing her with a lazy indolence that was alternatively exhilarating and frightening!

'Goodnight, Shannon.'

'Goodnight,' she echoed with a degree of timidity as she followed his broad back towards the door, then she paused several feet distant as he turned to face her.

'Such politeness,' Nick mocked lightly, and his eyes fit With devilish humour as he queried softly, 'Poised for flight?'

'I'm not afraid of you.' Not much! Inside, she was a shivering mass of sheer nerves!

He smiled slightly, and her eyes widened into huge pools of incredulity as he leant out a hand and trailed his fingers gently down her cheek, then without a word he turned and moved quickly down the steps.

After she had closed and locked the door she wondered why she should feel so strangely disappointed that he had made no attempt to

kiss her. She had expected him to—in fact, she had been secretly dreading the moment all evening!

Nick Stanich was an enigma—totally unlike any man she had ever met before. To be honest, she mused idly as she discarded her clothes some few minutes later, all men paled into insignificance by comparison! The reason why wasn't something she was prepared to pursue.

'When are we going to be there?'

Shannon turned slightly in her seat and surveyed the two young girls with indulgence. 'Not much longer, I shouldn't think.'

'Ten minutes,' Nick vouchsafed laughingly, shooting Shannon a wide grin. 'No doubt by the end of the day they'll be so tired that they'll sleep all the way home.'

The sand stretched out in front of them in a seemingly endless carpet of grey. The heat of the sun's rays made the air shimmer above the damp sand, and the outgoing tide looked peacefully calm with only the merest ripple on its smooth surface. The thirty-odd miles of beach from the Muriwai rocks to the lagoon was classed by local authority for use as a public road, and the long stretch of iron-sand was only negotiable from two hours after high tide up until three hours after the tide turned. Quite safe for vehicles to traverse, it was nonetheless wisest to use four-wheel-drive, as in the past numerous vehicles had become bogged down in the shifting sand and had to be abandoned to the destructive incoming tide. One particular area was sonorous that it was locally referred to as the 'graveyard', and not even local residents were willing to hazard the number of vehicles that had been lost there over the years. On the west coast, the sea was unpredictable at best, and inexperienced swimmers were advised to stay well

inshore. Lifeguards patrolled a half-mile stretch adjacent to Fishermen's Rock, and the huge rolling breakers there were popular with surfers both summer and winter.

Shannon risked a sideways glance at the dark rugged profile within touching distance behind the driving wheel. Gone was the faintly cynical expression usually evident on that well-chiselled countenance. Today he appeared intent on getting the maximum enjoyment from the day's planned activities, and from the company in which he had chosen to share them. That he was a firm favourite with Anna was all too apparent, and Kelly had been completely under his spell from the very first day—little more than two weeks ago! Perhaps he was endeavouring to have Shannon succumb to his undoubted charisma as well! Not if she could help it—never, she amended resolutely.

The Landrover began to slow down, circling round to halt several yards from the water's edge.

'Out, infants,' Nick bade genially as he slid from behind the wheel with ease. He chuckled at the speed with which Anna and Kelly scrambled down on to the sand from the rear door.

Shannon opened her door and stepped down, feeling the cramped muscles in her legs from sitting on the hard seat for more than an hour. Most of it could be attributed to the fact that she had sat thoroughly tensed throughout the entire drive. Nick Stanich seemed to have that effect on her!

'Can we make a sandcastle, Shannon?'

She looked down at the blonde-headed little imp that was her niece, and smiled. 'Of course. How about a drink first, before we start?'

'And a piece of cake, too?'

'Just one,' she cautioned. 'Lunch is only an hour away.'

There seemed to be enough food to cater for at least a dozen hungry people, Shannon decided as she rummaged in the picnic hamper. As well as the cold chicken, fresh lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber, bread rolls, hardboiled eggs, sliced ham, almost half a fruit cake, and several apples that Linda had provided, there was a large bacon and egg pie Shannon had made yesterday, as well as the apple shortcake and a generous quantity of iced gingerbread cookies.

'If we get stranded, there's little chance we'll run short of food,' Nick observed from close behind, and Shannon jumped involuntarily. If he noticed he gave no sign, and she almost held her breath as he leaned forward and reached into the cake tin. His arm brushed her shoulder, making her wholly aware of him, and it was all she could do not to flinch away.

'It's amazing how the sea air increases one's appetite,' she managed evenly.

'Indeed it does.' His voice was a quiet sardonic drawl and succeeded in bringing a rush of colour to her cheeks.

Oh, he was impossible! 'An iced drink?' she queried sweetly, deliberately, and was disconcerted by his soft chuckle.

'Sheath your claws, Shannon,' he ordered musingly, whereupon she was goaded into commenting snappishly:

'I'm quite aware that I'm a source of amusement to you. I can only hope you'll soon find other female companionship, and thus leave me alone! I—I dislike being used,' she finished shakily.

'My, my,' Nick murmured cynically. 'You are a bundle of spitting fury! I wonder what it would take to make you purr.'

Shannon sensed the leashed anger beneath the surface of his control, and felt prickles of alarm tingle along her spine. Almost of its own volition some devil imp was goading her into behaving in a way she hadn't thought herself capable of. With determined effort she turned her attention to the matter at hand, glancing round to see where the two children had disappeared to, and discovered they were immersed in gathering sand with which to make a sandcastle with their buckets and spades.

'I'll take the girls something to eat,' she declared with quiet emphasis, then felt obliged to add, 'If you'll tell me what time you'd like to have lunch, I'll get it ready.'

His eyes darkened formidably, and there was a tautness around his mouth that twisted his slight smile into something quite grim. 'I didn't bring you along to play the role of maid, Shannon. Whenever the girls feel hungry, then we'll eat.'

'Very well.' She gave a muffled gasp as her arm was taken in an ungentle grasp.

'One more servile platitude,' Nick threatened softly, 'and so help me, I'll make you wish you'd never been born.'

'Oh? Do you beat your women as well?'

'Something much more subtle,' he implied ominously. 'Go and play with the children, before I'm tempted to bring my hand into hurtful contact with your diminutive derriere!'

'You wouldn't dare!'

'Try me.'

Shannon knew it was no idle threat, and mindful of the two little girls playing out of earshot a short distance away she collected a piece of

cake and an apple each, as well as a can of lemonade and two paper cups. Without a word she turned and walked away from the Landrover and the hateful dynamic man who seemed to have the power to disturb her emotions from one extreme to the other with very little effort.

It was difficult to remain cool, but she managed to maintain an apparently unruffled composure throughout the remainder of the day, achieving it by deliberately seeking the girls' company. They went searching the high tide line for shells and pieces of driftwood, sketched lines in the sand so that they could play hopscotch. Then later in the afternoon they had running races, and played catches with a rubber ball. Nick joined in their games from time to time, and it was evident from both Anna and Kelly's expression of happy adoration that he was a firm favourite. Whenever he landed a fish they were the first to run and see what it was, watching intrigued as the hook was removed and re-baited.

Shortly after three o'clock they packed everything into the Landrover, and the drive back along the beach didn't seem to take nearly as long as it had earlier in the day. Off the sand and on to the gravel road leading up to the reserve parking area Nick drew the vehicle to a halt, disappearing into the store to return with icecream in cones for each of them. Then he drove into the camping area, declaring that they would set up the portable barbecue he had brought along.

'We'll grill a couple of fish for tea,' he announced with satisfaction. 'There's enough salad to go with it, and plenty of bread rolls left.'

'Oh, good,' Anna declared contentedly. 'I hoped we'd stay here for tea. You did say we could if you caught enough fish.'

Nick leaned forward and ruffled her hair. 'We'll lock up and go for a walk, first. It's too early to begin cooking yet.' He took a coin from his trouser pocket and tossed it into the air. 'What shall it be—a walk

along the beach, or shall we investigate the local pottery and craft shop further along the main road?'

'Heads, the beach—tails, the craft shop,' Anna replied promptly, laughing delightedly when the coin turned up tails.

'Start walking,' he ordered easily. 'I'll catch up in a few minutes.'

Shannon took each little girl by the hand as they moved towards the main road, and she couldn't help smiling at their excited chatter. When Nick joined them he swung Anna up high to perch astride his broad shoulders, slanting a laughing directive down to Kelly that it would be her turn on the way back.

The thought chased unbidden through Shannon's mind that he would make a wonderful father—inflexible with his sons, tolerant with his daughters. And as a husband? Didn't they say a reformed rake invariably became a model of fidelity? That was something she was never likely to find out—not that she wanted to ! The very thought of Nick Stanich in the role of *husband* wasn't something she cared to contemplate !

There were a few people browsing idly when Shannon followed Kelly's excited little figure into the pottery shop. The works displayed were expertly crafted, and Shannon suppressed a momentary wish that she had brought more money with her so that she could purchase one of the clay pots. In her mind's eye she could see it hanging in a macrame holder, suspended from her kitchen wall, bedded with a brilliantly-coloured cyclamen, perhaps, or a nest of trailing fern.

Anna had been lowered from Nick's shoulders just prior to entering the shop, and both she and Kelly wandered on ahead, leaving Shannon to stroll in their wake with Nick following far too closely behind.

'See anything that appeals to you?'

The casually voiced query sent her into polite speech. 'They're all attractive. It would depend whether your taste verged towards the larger ones, or preferred something smaller.'

'All very evasive,' Nick mused, and Kelly took it upon herself to be more informative.

'Any one of those down there,' she declared with an impish grin, pointing to a cluster of pots on the floor. 'We saw some just like that in Henderson, but Shannon said she couldn't afford one.'

Shannon shot her niece a reproving glance, and saw that it had no effect whatever, for Kelly continued blithely :

'And those things over there, for herbs—but I can't remember what they're called.'

'Ah,' Nick smiled down on to Kelly's undaunted head, 'I rather fancy those myself. Shall we reward Linda and Shannon with one of each?'

'No,' Shannon broke in quickly, then added a polite, 'Thank you, all the same.'

Nevertheless, it seemed her refusal had been ignored, for when they left the shop Nick carried a box that held no fewer than five assorted clay pots, all carefully wrapped.

Freshly-caught barbecued schnapper was a delight to the taste buds, and the delicately-flavoured white flesh just melted in the mouth. Nick presided as chef.

and very efficiently too, Shannon had to concede. The girls enjoyed every morsel, and when the portable barbecue had been damped down, the picnic fare packed away, the Landrover was once again locked as they headed down towards the beach.

There was something intoxicating about strolling the sandy foreshore in the early evening—or perhaps it was the company, Shannon mused. The sky was a light blue, but smudged a little near the horizon, giving a hint of impending dusk, and the air was still with only the merest breath of a breeze that teased the length of her hair. There was a faint mist rising from the surf, and more than once she tasted salt on her lips. The two girls skipped on ahead, looking for anything that caught their attention, and spent much of their time running back and forth to display their finds. Nick was relaxed and completely at ease as he walked in companionable silence at her side, although he made no attempt to catch hold of her hand or in any way make touching contact. It was quite strange, but for one infinitesimal minute she had the oddest longing to feel that strong arm curve round her shoulders and pull her close against his side. He didn't, of course, and there was little she could do to ignore the ache that began beneath her ribs. Mad, she mentally chastised herself—I'm utterly mad even to think about him in that way!

As Nick had predicted, both Kelly and Anna dozed off to sleep on the drive home, for the Landrover had scarcely covered more than five miles before the girls settled down comfortably on the rear seats. The homeward journey didn't take nearly as long, and it seemed in no time at all they were turning off the motorway and heading towards Henderson.

'I'll carry Kelly,' Nick determined just as soon as the vehicle drew to a halt at the end of the driveway, and Shannon's refusal of his help was met with a dark probing glance.

'Take care of the picnic gear, Shannon, if you must,' he responded evenly. 'But leave Kelly to me.'

Further argument was of necessity postponed, for Stefan was moving quickly down the steps, closely followed by Linda.

'Dead to the world,' Nick grinned towards his cousin, and the two men laughed softly in easy companionship as they unloaded the Landrover. Linda was suitably impressed with the catch, and murmured with enjoyment the methods of cooking it.

'You've had tea, obviously,' she declared. 'I guessed as much, when you didn't arrive home by six o'clock.' She began to chuckle as her husband leaned inside to collect Anna. 'Look at that, will you? It'll be a quick wash and straight into bed with her, and I doubt she'll even stir!'

'Likewise Kelly,' Shannon smiled. 'They've had a wonderful day. We all have,' she added, not glancing towards Nick.

'Come inside and have some coffee, Shannon,' Linda invited, but Shannon shook her head.

'Thanks, Linda,' she declined politely. 'But I really must sew tonight, as I haven't been able to make much of an impression on the work I promised to do towards the school Fair.'

'Another time,' Linda dismissed smilingly, and Shannon nodded wordlessly before turning and following Nick's broad back towards the cottage.

Inside, he moved towards Kelly's room and deposited her sleeping form on to the bed, then he straightened and stepped out into the kitchen where Shannon was unpacking the picnic gear.

She turned and spared him a quick glance, glimpsing as she did so the faint mockery that lifted the edges of his mouth. 'Thank you for taking us today,' she voiced politely, her tone dismissing, and he stood regarding her silently for what seemed an absolute age, then he reached out, grasping her shoulders as he drew her relentlessly forward.

Shannon made an effort to resist him, but even as her hands made contact with that hard muscular chest she was pulled against him and his mouth was on hers, hard and totally merciless as he forced her lips apart. What came next was nothing less than a total invasion of her senses, and there were tears, of humiliation glistening on her lashes when he finally lifted his head.

'I consider you deserved that,' Nick said hardily, his eyes dark and unfathomable as she lifted shaky fingers to touch her bruised swollen lips.

'I think you'd better go,' she managed shakily, and his eyes hardened to resemble icy green flints.

'I endorse that,' he asserted, and his voice held a hint of savagery that frightened her. 'If I don't, I'm liable to do something I'll regret.' Without a further word he turned and strode from the room.

It took several minutes before Shannon was capable of gathering herself together sufficiently to continue sorting out the plastic picnic-ware, and after Kelly had been washed, changed into pyjamas and returned between the sheets, Shannon ensconced herself at the sewing machine to sew until almost midnight in an attempt to blot out the events of the early evening.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DURING the following few days Shannon saw little of Nick, and then only fleetingly from a distance. It was almost as if he was deliberately avoiding her, and she was at odds with herself to understand why the thought should upset her as much as it did. She kept telling herself that she hated him, hated the way he regarded her as little more than an amusing diversion. But she had only to catch a glimpse of that tall frame to bring rapidly to mind the way his Hps moved on hers, the touch of his hands on her body as he held her close. It was a haunting madness that kept her awake nights, long after she had slipped into bed aching and exhausted from long hours bent over the sewing machine.

When John Vlasich telephoned with an invitation to dinner on Wednesday evening, she accepted with alacrity, particularly as the invitation included Kelly. Occasionally they would dine out, leaving Kelly in the care of his mother, or mostly they simply shared a leisurely family meal, then listened to music or viewed television. John was the most uncomplicated man she knew. His father and Ivan had been friends of long standing, and she enjoyed accepting the Vlasichs' hospitality.

All in all, it was a relaxing evening, and she returned home more at peace with herself than she had felt in weeks—since Nick Stanich's arrival, in fact!

On Thursday Kelly took matters into her own hands, inviting Nick, with a childish lack of reserve, to share their barbecue tea. Shannon experienced a mix-tare of exasperation and apprehension, wanting to chastise the little girl for not checking first, but unwilling to spoil the obvious pleasure Kelly displayed over Nick's acceptance.

His arrival set a feeling of apprehension feathering down Shannon's spine, and she forced a smile to her lips as she murmured a greeting.

'Good evening.' His manner was carefully bland, his expression enigmatic as he moved close, and Shannon directed her attention to the third button of his immaculate dark shirt.

'Would you mind being chef?' she queried politely, not lifting her gaze. 'I've left the salad and other dishes inside. Kelly, will you help me bring them out?'

'Am I early?' Nick quirked an eyebrow in what she felt sure was sardonic amusement, but she wasn't willing to lift her eyes to determine his expression.

'Not at all,' she responded evenly. 'However, you're much better with barbecues than I am—my last attempt,' she explained wryly, 'had you investigating the possibility of fire damage.'

'Ah, yes.'

Besides, she told herself, I'm so darn nervous I'll probably succeed in burning the steak, or myself—or both!

Foodwise, the meal was a success, but the conversation between them was so polite as to be amusing, if one could contrive to find humour in the situation. Shannon thought wildly that if it wasn't for Kelly's incessant chatter, the whole thing would have assumed disastrous proportions!

When the portable barbecue had been dampened down, they carried the plates and utensils into the kitchen, and while Shannon washed Kelly took the plates Nick dried and carefully placed them away.

'Shannon's nice, isn't she?' Kelly sought guilelessly of Nick, who smiled slightly and inclined his head by way of reply. 'She sews beautifully, and she can cook, too. Why don't you marry her?'

Shannon felt as if the room were swirling round, and she prayed that the floor would miraculously open so that she might slip out of sight.

'Kelly!' she began chidingly, shooting her niece a very reproving look that had no effect whatever, for Kelly seemed wholly engrossed in searching Nick's features for some sign of approval. 'I'm sorry,' she offered, not quite sure whether to laugh or cry. Somehow she expected him to resort to mockery, or veiled cynicism, but he remained silent—a silence that was unnerving, and in a rush she found herself uttering a splutter of words by way of apology. 'She's only a child --'

'I'm not sure she would have me,' Nick stated solemnly, ignoring Shannon completely.

'I think she would,' Kelly surmised with childish candour. She glanced up at him, then broke into a singularly sweet smile. 'You're very kind, and if Shannon married you, she wouldn't have to sew for people any more. Sometimes her shoulders ache so much she can't sleep. I know, 'cause one time she was crying with pain.'

'Kelly!'

'It's true,' the little girl asserted, becoming upset. 'And I don't care how much money Mrs Burton pays you—I don't like her one little bit! She's nasty to you,' she concluded, almost in tears.

'That's quite enough, Kelly,' Shannon remonstrated sternly.

'Well, it's true!'

'That's not the point,' she stated firmly. 'I won't allow you to talk like that.'

'You're cross,' Kelly declared, nonplussed.

'Yes, I am.'

'Perhaps I'd better go to my room.'

Oh dear, Shannon sighed. Kelly was close to tears. 'It's nearly time for bed,' she said gently as she knelt down and impulsively hugged the little girl close. 'I'll come and read you a story when you've changed into your pyjamas.'

Kelly nodded silently, rubbing a hand across her eyes as she looked up at Nick, and her bottom lip began to tremble. 'Are you cross with me, too?'

He leant down and swung her up into his arms. 'Not in the least,' he assured her lightly, ruffling her hair, and Kelly flung her arms around his neck and buried her face against him.

'I wish you would marry Shannon,' came the softly- muffled voice. 'Then we could live here for ever and ever.'

'I've no intention of turning you out,' Nick assured her gently.

In less than an hour Kelly was fast asleep, having been told a story by Shannon, followed by another from Nick. Quite what Nick's tale had been about she had no idea, but from the number of chuckles and unrestrained giggles that reached her ears it seemed to be highly amusing.

Shannon had just turned the percolator down when she heard Kelly's bedroom door close, and she immediately began busying herself with refilling the sugar bowl, setting out the cups and saucers—anything to delay having to turn round and face him.

'Would you prefer to have your coffee in the dining- room, or in the lounge?' she questioned quietly. If she ignored Kelly's unfortunate

outburst, then it was possible he would make no reference to it—she hoped!

'I'm the guest—remember?' His soft mockery put her on the defensive, making her answer quickly:

'It's your cottage.'

His sigh of exasperation was audible. 'You're legally in possession, which makes it as much yours as it is mine. However, if you insist on being so doggedly independent, I'll make the decision and choose the lounge.'

Shannon followed his broad frame, and sat down on the very edge of the settee, as far away from him as possible.

'Afraid I'll pounce?'

She ignored the wry cynicism in his voice, and deigned not to answer.

The look he flicked her was openly sardonic. 'You're about as relaxed as a country driver caught up in city peak-hour traffic!' he mocked softly.

Oh, he was hateful! 'Kelly——' she began.

'Ah, yes. Kelly.'

If only he wouldn't sit there looking at her like that —like a spider at the edge of his web, waiting for the fly to enter!

'She's only a child.' Shannon cleared her throat, then added, 'She didn't realise what she was saying.'

Nick quirked an eyebrow. 'No? I don't agree with you. Kelly knows exactly what she wants, and takes the shortest, most uncomplicated path towards achieving it.'

Shannon couldn't think of a thing to say, and remained temporarily speechless.

'I'm seriously considering following her example.' He looked at her solemnly for all of two minutes, then questioned significantly, '*Will* you marry me, Shannon Fitzgerald?'

Shannon stared at him in silence, then returning reason brought a measure of anger. 'If you're seriously considering marriage, there's any number of eminently suitable girls who would jump at the chance. You've met several, already,' she finished bleakly.

'That's true,' Nick agreed blandly, and she shot him a wrathful look that had no effect whatever.

'I imagine all you'll have to do is choose your bride—I doubt you'll receive a refusal!'

'Then you accept?'

Shannon opened her mouth to utter a furious, 'No!' Her fine brown eyes flashed angrily, and she barely had hold of her temper.

'Ah, but you implied that all I had to do was to choose a wife,' he drawled musingly.

'Tell me,' she began biting, meeting the soft mockery evident in those dark grey eyes, 'am I supposed to be grateful that the handsome, dynamic Nick Stanich should deign to look my way?' Her voice became slightly bitter as she fixed her eyes on the coffee table in front of her. 'I don't need your charity.' She stood carefully to her feet and

looked at him, then wished she hadn't, for icy anger etched his face into taut lines that made her suddenly afraid.

With fearful fascination she watched as he stood slowly to his feet, and as he moved towards her she sought to escape. Hard hands grasped her arms, effectively halting her flight, and even as she struggled it was apparent she would not be able to evade him.

His mouth was hard on hers, punishing in a way she wouldn't have believed possible as iron-hard arms held her bound against him, one hand cradling her head so that she was entirely at his mercy.

Just as she began to think it might go on for ever, the relentless pressure eased, and his mouth began to move. back and forth with deliberate sensual expertise, insistently seeking her response as his lips became warm and probing. It was like drowning, slowly, and she clung to him in an attempt to hold on to something tangible. When at last he released her, she stood silent and shaking, endeavouring to control the errant quivering of her lower lip and hating the single tear that rolled slowly down towards her chin.

Nick reached out and trailed gentle fingers over her bruised lips, then brushed across her cheek, removing traces of that solitary tear.

Shannon couldn't bear to look at him. 'Please—just go.' Her voice was a low whisper and almost inaudible.

He stood there silent for several interminable seconds, then he leant forward and touched his lips briefly to the corner of her mouth.

Long after he had left the cottage, Shannon remained where she was, and only the sound of Snoopy miaowing at the door roused her from immobility.

Saturday, the day of Kelly's school Fair, dawned warm and clear, with not a cloud on the horizon. The early morning was a mad rush, for Shannon had elected to deliver her sewing to the school—what was more, in a moment of madness, she had volunteered to serve behind the stall.

Linda and Anna were due to arrive around ten, when the Fair began, but Shannon presented herself an hour earlier to help set up the stalls. The funds raised would go towards an adventure playground for the children, and from the amount of goods displayed it seemed that every parent had contributed generously.

As early as nine-thirty, people began filling the school grounds, and an hour later Shannon became so busy that she didn't have time to take much notice of anything. Linda, bless her, had taken Kelly under her wing, and both she and Anna appeared from time to time, offering sweets, a drink—anything they thought Shannon might need.

'The price seems to have been left off this particular item,' a familiar voice declared, and Shannon looked up to meet Nick's quizzical gaze.

'What are you doing here?' she queried, caught off balance by his sudden, unexpected appearance.

'As a local resident, with a niece attending the school, I felt I should contribute something to what is obviously a worthy cause,' he responded tolerantly. 'Now, how much is this?'

'A potholder?' Shannon questioned incredulously, and his eyes gleamed with hidden laughter.

'For Linda,' he revealed, handing her a ten-dollar note. 'Keep the change as a donation.'

'That's a mighty expensive potholder,' she said wryly. 'Are you sure there's nothing else you want?'

'Well, you could have dinner with me tonight,' he mused amiably, deliberately misunderstanding her, and she shook her head.

'I insist,' he said quietly, uncaring of the three women' waiting impatiently to be served.

'I can't talk to you now,' Shannon uttered quickly, and was chagrined when he smiled rather wickedly.

'Then accept, and I'll go away.'

'I don't --'

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' one of the women interrupted impatiently, 'are you here to serve, or conduct conversation with your friends?'

Nick raised a querying eyebrow, and merely wanting him out of the way Shannon acquiesced, albeit a trifle unwillingly.

She didn't see a sign of him after that, and it was almost midday when he strolled across the grass to her stall. Only two items remained to be sold, for trade had been brisk.

'You look tired and flustered,' he commented, and she replied waspishly:

'So would you be, if——'

'Tally up your takings, my Kilkenny cat,' he directed dryly. 'I'm taking you home.'

'I haven't finished --' she began crossly, watching as he examined both articles before tossing down sufficient money to cover their cost.

'You have now.'

'You can't --'

His smile was entirely cynical. 'I just have. Now, deliver that money to whoever is responsible for its collection, and we can go home.'

'I have my own car,' she managed evenly.

'So you have,' Nick returned. 'However, you won't go far with two flat tyres.'

Her eyes widened in disbelief.

'The work, I suspect, of idle juvenile hands,' he enlightened wryly. 'After depositing you home, I'll come back and take them down to the garage.'

'Thank you,' she murmured politely after a measurable silence.

Kelly and Anna were already seated in the Ferrari, plus their bounty of balloons, candyfloss, and nameless trinkets. Of Linda and Stefan there was no sign, and Nick explained that they had left some fifteen minutes previously.

Within five minutes they were home, and Shannon slid out and held forward the seat so that Kelly and Anna could alight. Her hastily-murmured thanks brought a gleam of amusement to his eyes.

'Your car keys, Shannon,' he requested, holding out his hand, and fumbling somewhat, she retrieved them from the depths of her shoulder-bag, unhooking the cottage front door key before handing them to him.

'I'll drop them back later,' Nick directed, and with a sketchy wave he put the car into gear and reversed down the driveway.

'Come on, infants,' Shannon bade with false briskness. 'We'll attend to those sticky hands, then have lunch.'

'Can Anna stay?' Kelly cajoled, and Shannon smiled.

'Of course—but she must ask her mother first. Shall I dial the number for you?'

Lunch was sandwiches and fresh fruit, easy to assemble and equally easy to clear away afterwards. Shannon made it into a picnic, and they ate it beneath the shade of the lemon tree.

There was time to attend to a few household chores before secluding herself in the sewing room, for Sheila Burton was due to arrive at two-thirty for a fitting and Shannon had yet to join the basic seams together.

She had no sooner sat down at the machine when there was a knock at the back door, and when she opened it Nick stood on the uppermost step.

'Your keys,' he volunteered, handing diem to her, and she eyed him uncertainly as she politely voiced her thanks.

'If you'll let me know how much I owe you,' she added, turning slightly with the intention of fetching her purse, but he forestalled her.

'It was nothing more serious than a loss of air,' he drawled, and his eyes hardened slightly as she persisted --

'But your time—and petrol --'

'Must you be so shockingly independent? Consider it my good deed for the day.'

'I --'

His exasperation was evident. 'Your company at dinner this evening will be just recompense.'

'I should sew,' Shannon frowned doubtfully, unsure whether she should go. Much as she would enjoy an evening out, to spend it in Nick's company was akin to participating in a verbal fencing match, and she wasn't at all sure such a venture was wise. He seemed to have the upper hand in everything, and she was fast becoming suspicious of the fact that when she appeared to get the better of him, it was only because it amused him to let her do so. It was also rather galling to know that he possessed the uncanny knack of being able to read her thoughts—rather too often for her peace of mind!

'You shouldn't frown,' Nick gibed lightly, smoothing the furrowed lines from her forehead.

'You shouldn't tease,' she retorted severely. 'I don't find it particularly amusing.'

'Always on the defensive, Shannon,' he chided mockingly. 'When you *do* smile, the effect is quite dazzling.'

Shannon shot him a dark look, then deliberately walked around his tall frame and escaped into the sewing room.

'Have dinner with me—I insist,' he commanded, not at all deterred, and he stood leaning against the door- jamb with the assurance of Old Nick himself.

'You can insist all you like,' she retaliated, and switching on her machine, she set it whirring furiously.

'A lesser man would be sufficiently cowed, and retreat,' Nick mused tolerantly, not a whit disturbed, and she bit her lower lip in exasperation.

'Look, I have a client due any minute for a fitting, and knowing her as I do, she'll expect me to have it finished by tomorrow.'

'I trust you charge an additional amount for working such extraordinary hours?'

'A flat rate, Mr Stanich, if you must know,' she answered coolly.

""*Mr Stanich*""?' Nick drawled sardonically. 'I thought we'd progressed way past that.'

To which she retorted balefully, 'A few kisses don't entitle you to run my life!'

'Your claws are showing.'

'You continually bring out the worst in me,' she brooded, not deigning to look at him. Carefully she snipped a thread, then gathered more material beneath the machine.

'I had noticed,' he revealed somewhat dryly.

'You don't observe any rules whatsoever!'

'Ah—your rules, or mine ?'

'Oh! Go away, Nick, and leave me be!'

'I'll pick you up at seven,' he advised, adding, 'Kelly can stay overnight with Anna.'

Thoroughly vexed, Shannon took her foot off the control and sat back in her chair. 'I --'

However, anything else she might have added was interrupted by a knock at the door. Nick, darn him, didn't budge, and his faintly quizzical expression did little to dampen Shannon's indignation.

Sheila, as was usual, bustled in with little or no time to spare, and complained in no uncertain terms when she discovered her dress wasn't quite ready for a fitting.

'I've only one seam to sew,' Shannon offered, shooting Nick a dark glance. 'I've been held up.'

'My fault,' Nick intervened laconically, giving Sheila a lazy smile. 'I've been endeavouring to get Shannon to accompany me to dinner this evening.'

'She can't,' Sheila declared positively. 'I need that dress before lunch, tomorrow.' She didn't see the dangerous glint appear in Nick's eyes, nor did she heed the silkiness of his tone.

'Really? I'm aware Shannon sews for a living, but not, I fancy, under such demanding conditions.'

Cool blue eyes met those of slate grey. 'Are you implying that I *demand*? Let me assure you that I give Shannon more work than anyone else.'

'That doesn't entitle you to expect slave labour,' he retorted smoothly.

'Shannon hasn't complained,' Sheila expounded coldly.

'Then she should have done.'

Shannon looked from one to the other, and swiftly intervened. 'Your dress will be finished, Sheila, and if you'll be patient for just a few minutes, I'll have it ready for a fitting.'

Nick fixed her with a hard implacable stare. 'You won't be sewing tonight, Shannon. I won't allow it.'

Sheila's gasp was no less loud than Shannon's at his soft drawling injunction. ' *You* won't allow it?'

Shannon was speechless. 'You have no right!' she spluttered at last, and he grimaced wryly.

'I'm beginning to think that particular needle is stuck in a groove.'

'I can find another dressmaker who'll meet my requirements,' Sheila threatened, to which Nick replied blandly:

'I suggest you do that. As I intend marrying Shannon at the earliest opportunity, her days as a seamstress are over.'

Sheila gave an outraged gasp, then turned on Shannon in fury. 'Finish that dress without a fitting! I'll collect it Monday morning, and if it isn't right I shan't pay you. Be assured you won't see me here again!' With that, she turned and stalked out in a fine temper, slamming the door of her car and reversing down the driveway with incautious speed.

With remarkable control, Shannon met Nick's inscrutable expression, then took a deep breath. She needed it, otherwise she'd explode! 'You've just lost me the best paying client I ever had.'

Nick didn't say a word. He just stood there, silent and compelling—a silence that was more condemning than any words could have been. It seemed an age before he spoke, drawling silkily, 'Sheila Burton is an inveterate snob.'

√ 'However objectionable, her money is as good as that of anyone else,' Shannon declared loudly—too loudly, for she was fast losing her temper.

'She has no right to expect you to drop everything at her slightest whim.'

'*Right?*' Shannon exploded, her eyes furiously alive. 'What about *my* rights? You come in here and positively demand that I have dinner with you—what's more you won't even take no for an answer!' She paused to breathe in deeply. 'You're just as bad as she is, *and* just as arrogant!'

'Have you finished?'

'No. *No!*' She glared at him, and was so furious that she could have resorted to physical violence.

'Be ready at seven,' he cautioned softly. 'I have no qualms at all over giving you a helping hand with your dressing, should it be necessary.'

'I'll lock the door!'

'Quite useless—I have a spare key.'

'I hate you,' she said distinctly, hating the hard cynicism evident in his eyes.

'I believe you—some of the time,' he mocked, then sketching a salute, he turned and left.

Shannon seethed for the remainder of the afternoon, and even Kelly cast rather anxious looks in her aunt's direction. At six-thirty she collected her overnight bag, stood on tiptoe and bade her aunt goodnight, then took Anna by the hand.

Shannon had showered before giving Kelly her tea, so that all she had to do was to apply make-up, dress and fix her hair. Despite assuring herself that she wouldn't go this evening, she hadn't the slightest doubt that Nick would carry out his threat, and there was no way that

she would give him the opportunity. Besides, she had every intention of being chillingly civil, and after a short while he would become so exasperated that would bring her home!

However, like all well-laid plans, it didn't go strictly as she intended. They didn't dine at a restaurant, but at the home of one of Ivan's friends—a fellow vigneron. Shannon knew everyone present, was acquainted with four of the daughters—paraded, she felt sure, to gain Nick's attention—and because they all knew for the sunny-tempered companionable girl she had hitherto been, she could hardly present a facade of cool indifference !

Nick remained deliberately bland, charming, with a measure of sophisticated urbanity that brought smiles to every face in the room, except Shannon's. Her lips moved in polite semblance, but there was no humour in her expressive brown eyes.

To his credit, Nick did not monopolise her attention, although every time she sneaked a glimpse in his direction he seemed to be aware of it. Once, he placed a light hand on her shoulder, and it took all her courage not to twist away. Hatefully, aware of her inner conflict, he removed it only to encircle her waist. It was scarcely more than momentary, but the gesture was sufficiently proprietorial, and after that there were eyes watching their every move—tolerant matchmaking matrons together with the amused resignation of their husbands.

The time to leave couldn't come quickly enough, and at long last they bade everyone goodnight, expressing their appreciation for a pleasantly-spent evening.

'You're fairly spitting with pent-up fury,' Nick drawled as the Ferrari turned the street and headed homeward. 'I don't fancy a blow-by-blow verbal slanging match while my attention is taken up with driving. If

the explosion can't wait until we get home—tell me, and I'll stop the car.'

'I have absolutely nothing whatever to say to you,' Shannon said between clenched teeth. She sat very straight, and very still.

'I'm disappointed.'

'You can remain disappointed,' she replied civilly, hating his sardonic amusement.

They 'didn't exchange a further word, although she could have sworn he was silently laughing, darn him!

With remarkable civility, she thanked him for a pleasant evening and bade him goodnight the instant the car halted in her driveway. She didn't bargain for the swiftness with which he forestalled her flight, and it seemed she had no sooner reached for the door-clasp than his hand caught hers in a painful grip. He leaned forward, and there was little she could do about the hard kiss he bestowed on her resisting mouth.

There were angry tears aching at the back of her eyes as she let herself into the cottage, and she closed the door behind her without so much as a backward glance.

Preparations for the end-of-season barbecue began early next morning, and immediately after breakfast Shannon joined Linda in the large kitchen upstairs, for there were countless lettuces to wash, salads to prepare —two pairs of hands scarcely seemed sufficient! They worked diligently side by side throughout the day, stopping only briefly at midday to feed the men, Anna and Kelly, and sip a much-needed cup of coffee.

All too soon it was four o'clock and time to slip home for a shower and change of clothes. Everything was ready, the food assembled on trestles downstairs waiting to be carried out, and Nick and Stefan were attending to several revolving roasting spits outdoors. The rain had held off, although the movement of cloud suggested that it would not be for long, a day or two at most. Summer was almost at an end, and it was a blessed relief that the grape harvesting had been completed in time, for as with all agricultural pursuits the elements played a vital role in successful cultivation.

Shannon dressed casually in a full gathered skirt that reached an inch or two below her knees, a gold knit top that matched the tiny flowers printed on her skirt, and caught a light woollen shawl about her shoulders. Kelly looked delightful in a matching outfit, and together they walked the distance down to the expanse of lawn at the rear of the house.

Shannon willingly assisted Linda, gaining a measure of confidence from the other girl's sparkling manner. Of Nick she saw little—he was merely a face in the distance, busily engaged in tending the roasting spits, and setting up casks of wine.

Around five-thirty the guests began arriving, and soon there seemed to be people everywhere. A group of musicians from the local Dalmatian Club struck up a gay melody on piano accordion, guitar and fiddle, and as they followed one traditional melody with another they were joined by a team of dancers in traditional colourful dress to dance the *kolo*. The celebration of a grape harvest was adhered to in the strictest tradition by several Dalmatian-orientated vigneron, for it was a time to rejoice with friends, and for the older folk among them it brought back memories of their own country and remembered harvests.

Shannon glanced through the crowd in the hope of catching a glimpse of Kelly and Anna. It was almost dark now, and although the

coloured lights strung through the trees provided ample visibility, she was becoming anxious as to the girl's whereabouts.

The fires beneath the roasting spits had been extinguished, the suckling pig and tender young lamb long since removed, along with the numerous chickens, and what was left of the feast had been set aside on one of the far trestles. Casks of wine were replaced with amazing regularity, and it was apparent that Nick was intent on following Ivan's example in extending generous hospitality to friends and workers.

'Enjoying yourself ?'

Shannon slowly turned her head towards the owner of that deep drawling voice. 'Of course,' she replied evenly, and determinedly ignored the curling sensation that began somewhere inside her at the sight of him. 'It's a perfectly splendid gathering.'

Nick eyed her mockingly, and gave a quizzical lift of one eyebrow. 'You sound faintly cynical, Shannon. Any reason why it shouldn't be a successful evening?'

'None at all.'

'Ah, I begin to suspect it's only your remarkably good manners that permit you to speak to me at all,' he commented sardonically, and she sighed.

What was the use? He was quite relentless—ruthless, she amended silently. If for some form of sadistic enjoyment he meant to seek her out, then he would do so no matter where she went among his guests.

'You haven't forgiven me yet, have you?'

Shannon looked up at him, then wished she hadn't. The mere sight of those patrician features, that sensuously-moulded mouth, was enough to heighten her senses in a most alarming fashion.

'If you're referring to your conversation with Sheila Burton yesterday afternoon—no,' she managed with remarkable calm.

He reached out and took hold of her arm—a firm clasp that wasn't ungente, but she knew instinctively that if she tried to escape his fingers would tighten unmercifully.

'I refuse to stand silently by while that incredible woman treated you with disrespect,' Nick declared with soft emphasis, and Shannon's eyes flashed angrily.

'*You* refuse? What gives you the idea that you have the right to interfere—supposedly on my behalf?'

'Supposedly?'

'You lost me my most consistent client,' she argued tightly. 'You also indulged in a fabrication—one she'll delight in spreading with varied embellishments!'

'And that worries you?'

'Of course it worries me! How am I going to explain it to Kelly, should it reach her ears?' she queried bitterly.

'What are you going to explain to me?'

Shannon stifled a gasp at the sound of Kelly's curious voice. How long had she been standing there?

'Is something wrong?' Kelly queried anxiously, looking from one to the other.

'Not a thing,' Nick assured her easily, and leaning down he ruffled the little girl's hair.

'Then why is Shannon upset?'

'A difference of opinion,' he offered with a slow smile.

'You won,' the little imp declared with remarkable sureness. 'Shannon's not very good at winning arguments.'

'Kelly!'

Blandly ignoring Shannon, Nick placed an arm around Kelly's waist and lifted her to sit comfortably on his shoulder. 'How would you like it if I were to marry your aunt?' he questioned lightly.

'I'd like it just fine,' Kelly responded quickly. 'Are you going to?'

'Definitely.'

'I'm glad,' Kelly smiled beautifully from one to the other as Shannon burst into incredulous speech,

'I'm *not* marrying anybody!' Well, really! Someone had to maintain a vestige of sanity, she thought wildly, and almost stamped her foot in rage when Nick merely shook his head in mild rebuke.

'You've just been overruled—two against one.' There was cynical amusement evident in his tone that further infuriated her.

But wouldn't you like to be Mrs Stanich? a tiny voice whispered inside her brain. No! Shannon reiterated furiously beneath her breath.

'Did you say something?'

She looked up at Nick with masked asperity. 'Would it have any effect if I did ?'

'Not in the slightest.'

Angrily she sought to escape, and found that his light clasp on her arm had become a steel band.

Oh, dear God! This was like something out of a bad dream—nightmare, she amended desperately, as in a daze she registered a loud flamboyant swirl of sound from the piano-accordion, and realised that Nick must have given the band a prearranged signal.

His voice was well pitched, and it was doubtful that anyone missed so much as a word. A speech of sorts was expected of him, but to conclude it with an announcement of his intention to marry soon must have come as something of a surprise to most. Although some of the older folk were nodding their heads sagely in silent approval, almost as if they had already decided the marriage was a logical outcome.

It appeared everyone sanctioned the union—everyone except Shannon herself! And she stood quietly at Nick's side, accepting the voiced congratulations in total bemusement. Kelly slipped down to the ground, bestowed an affectionate kiss to first Nick's cheek, then to that of her aunt, and taking Anna by the hand she promptly disappeared among the crowd.

Shannon shivered suddenly as the enormity of it all threatened to overwhelm her.

'Scared?' Nick queried gently. 'Don't be, Shannon. Once you recover from the initial shock, you'll begin to look forward to becoming a blushing bride.'

'I won't—ever!' she declared vehemently, and took a backward step at the sudden gleam he directed down on to her undaunted head.

'You want me to use subtle persuasion?' He leaned down towards her, and she was powerless to move away. His lips brushed her cheek, then trailed across to tease the lobe of her ear.

'Please,' she implored desperately, noticing the smiling glances they were receiving.

'You sound as shocked as if I were attempting to make love to you in public,' Nick mused idly, and when he caught the slight tremble of her lips his expression softened. 'Sweet Shannon, you have rather a lot to learn about me, haven't you?'

'I'm not sure that I want to,' she answered shakily, and was bewitched by his smile.

'Let's take one day at a time,' he suggested tolerantly. 'We'll circulate now, I think, then dance.'

'Together?'

'Together,' Nick affirmed, slanting her a sudden wry smile.

Somehow Shannon managed to get through the evening—and the ensuing early morning hours, for few guests seemed to show an inclination to depart much before two a.m., and it was almost three-thirty before the last car swung down the drive. Most of the empty casks and flagons had been neatly stacked to one side, glassware dispensed into the kitchen downstairs to be dealt with by the automatic dishwasher in daylight hours, and most of the party debris seemed to have miraculously disappeared. Kelly had opted to stay overnight with Anna, and that seemed to make good sense—hourly checks were easier if both of them were sleeping in the same house.

'It went off successfully, don't you think?' Nick queried amiably as he cast a searching glance around the now*empty area.

'Very well,' Linda agreed as she hid a prodigious yawn.

'Bed, my dear wife,' Stefan grinned, and ran an affectionate hand beneath the long curtain of hair that covered her nape. 'You can gossip over coffee tomorrow —today,' he amended.

'Sleep well, Shannon,' said Linda, smiling. 'Although I don't expect you will, after tonight's excitement.'

Shannon felt as if she needed matchsticks to hold open her eyes. She half-turned towards Nick, her lips parted to bid him goodnight, but he forestalled her.

'No need for an early start,' he told Linda with an easy smile, and to Stefan, 'Take care of the lights— I'll be in, later.'

'I can see myself home,' Shannon protested as Nick turned in the direction of the cottage.

'No doubt you could.'

'There's no need for you to display such gallantry,' she said quietly. 'You must be tired—it's been quite a day.'

'I haven't quite got one foot in the grave, despite my thirty-five years,' he evinced wryly. 'When I'm a doting grandparent I'll permit you to remind me of my health.'

Shannon fell silent, for she couldn't summon sufficient energy to think of a scintillating reply. 'Thank you,' she offered politely when they reached the cottage, and placing her key in the lock she swung open the door, then turned to face him.

'Aren't you going to offer me coffee?' he queried musingly, and she eyed him uncertainly.

'I—don't think you should come in.'

His eyes took on a quizzical gleam. 'Left on the doorstep? Shame on you, Shannon!'

'It's very late.'

'I won't promise not to take a kiss or two,' he stated mockingly. 'But you're quite safe from seduction.'

Shannon moved into the kitchen, not really caring whether he followed her or not, and began busying herself with filling the electric kettle.

'Black—two sugars,' he reminded her some few minutes later from close behind—too close, Shannon thought. If she swayed back a little, she'd touch him. She poured boiling water into the two cups, sugared them both, then carried them to the dining-room table.

'How long do you expect me to participate in this charade?' she queried almost out of desperation, and saw his slight smile.

'Why must it be a charade?'

'What else? It amazes me that you've allowed yourself to be prevailed upon in such a way!' She rushed on regardless: 'I find it difficult to comprehend.'

He levelled his gaze at her, and offered seriously, 'I want a family of my own, a son to whom I can gift this inheritance—a wife by my side, to share my life, my bed.'

'That's logical,' she all but choked, embarrassed. 'But not me.'

One eyebrow rose quizzically. 'Why not?'

'I can't match your sophistication,' she said slowly, swallowing painfully.

'A man doesn't select a wife quite in the same manner he chooses a transient bedmate.'

'Of which you've had many!'

'Without doubt.'

Shannon felt her hand begin to shake, and she hastily replaced the cup down on to its saucer before the contents spilled. 'I'm very tired,' she said stiltedly, fixing her attention on the table. 'I'd like you to leave.'

'Everything in black and white, with no shades of grey? That's not very realistic,' Nick reproved gently, and she remained silent, unable to lift her eyes to meet the cynicism she felt sure to be evident in his gaze.

'Can you be ready to go into the city at eleven o'clock tomorrow—tills morning?' he queried, unperturbed. In fact, she was positive he was all but laughing at her!

'What for?' She'd never sounded so ungracious in her life!

'It's usual to present one's fiancée with a ring,' Nick returned evenly. 'I thought we might have lunch together afterwards, just the two of us.'

'I don't want a ring,' she determined steadily.

'You'll accept one, Shannon,' he ordered inflexibly. . 'Oh! You don't take notice of anything I say,' she flung incautiously. 'You're nothing less than a tyrant— no woman in her right mind would live with you. It would be an impossible existence!'

'You think so?'

Oh, how she would love to hit him! He sounded so cynical—so *amused*. Never in her entire life had she been roused to such a degree of anger—violence! she amended wryly.

'You belong out there in the jungle, roaming at will,' she declared, and was utterly infuriated when he began to laugh. That proved to be the final straw, and with undue haste she scrambled to her feet, intent on getting as far away from this disturbing hateful man as her legs would carry her.

She hadn't gone more than three steps when hard hands caught her shoulders, and her struggles became ineffectual against his sheer brute strength.

'That's enough!'

Shannon stood still, quiescent and thoroughly spent. She felt him draw her close, and was strangely content to remain resting against that broad chest.

'Bed, child,' Nick bade gently some interminable minutes later, and she stirred reluctantly. 'Linda will get the girls off to school—so indulge yourself a little by sleeping in.'

'Is that an order?' she murmured, loath to move away.

'Consider it friendly advice,' -he rejoined tolerantly, releasing her, then he placed an encircling arm about her waist and moved towards the back door.

Shannon was suddenly at a loss for words, and started visibly when he leant down and planted a brief hard kiss on her trembling lips. Then he smiled and drew her close, moulding her slim frame to his as his lips descended again.

This time there was a seducing quality in his touch as he trailed fire across the delicate planes of her face, the sweet hollows at the base of her throat, before claiming her mouth with a sensual expertise that had her clinging to him unashamedly.

When at last he lifted his head, she was totally bemused. '

'Sweet dreams,' he said softly, then stepped quickly through the doorway and was almost out of sight before Shannon came to her senses sufficiently to close the door behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'You look flustered,' Nick observed when Shannon opened the door at eleven o'clock precisely in response to his swift staccato knock.

'I won't be a moment,' she murmured hesitantly. 'I'll just fetch my bag.'

'Sheila Burton,' he deduced thoughtfully. 'I take it she arrived this morning?'

'She did.'

'And?'

'I hadn't been able to finish her dress,' Shannon revealed slowly. 'I'm afraid we exchanged a few heated words.'

'I should have been here,' Nick declared, watching as she made a rueful grimace.

'I managed quite well on my own,' she assured him, and he smiled a trifle quizzically.

'I imagine you did.'

Shannon reflected with remembered satisfaction the manner in which she had coolly handed Sheila the unfinished dress, refusing to accept a fee for the work she had already done before Sheila had a chance to get in a word. Afterwards, the coolness evaporated somewhat, for some of the things Sheila said were nothing less than hurtfully cruel. However, Shannon added a few well-chosen words of her own, and the other woman departed in what could only be described as a huff.

On arriving in Henderson Nick parked the Ferrari, and shepherded a protesting Shannon towards the shopping mall. There was a subtle

silent war over the choice of an engagement ring, although Nick won in the end, and Shannon suppressed a feeling of awe for the magnificent diamond solitaire that rested on the third finger of her left hand. Undeterred, he chose wedding rings, and presented her with an expensive gold watch, stilling her slightly scandalised refusal to accept the gift by kissing her soundly in front of the salesman.

'That seems to be the only effective way to deal with you,' Nick murmured softly as he released her, and Shannon blushed from the tips of her toes to the roots of her dark shining hair.

He was quite the most impossible man she'd ever met, and she said as much. Not that it did any good, for he merely smiled, and his eyes lit with wicked humour as he fastened the watch to her wrist.

'I shall see that you thank me properly at a more appropriate time,' he murmured devilishly, and laughed softly when she wrinkled her nose at him. 'Lunch, Shannon—we'll toast our future together with champagne.'

'I need reviving,' she responded, openly admiring her ring. 'And insuring—no wonder the salesman was smiling! I think I'll use adhesive tape in case I lose it.'

'You'll do no such thing,' he remonstrated laconically.

They shared a leisurely lunch at the Palomino restaurant, sipped champagne, and Shannon tended to view the reality of her engagement to Nick with almost total-bemusement. She had the strangest feeling that it was all a dream from which she would awaken, and she cast him a querying look when he shook his head at her in silent reproof.

'You look not unlike the fairytale princess—asleep and dreamlike,' he mused gently. 'It's no dream, Shannon. I mean to marry you, and it's

only fair to warn you that I don't intend waiting very long—a few weeks, at most.'

'I don't remember saying that I would—marry you, I mean,' she murmured. 'I have the strangest feeling that I've been very effectively manipulated, and I can't imagine why.'

'Can't you?' Nick mocked gently. 'Remind me to tell you.'

'Why not now?' she queried, but he shook his head, smiling slightly at her expression of disappointment.

'Drink your champagne,'- he bade her gently.

The rest of the day held an unreal quality, and it wasn't until Shannon was in bed and on the borderline of sleep that she remembered a luncheon date for the following, day with Mrs Vlasich. She was all too aware of the emphasis John's mother placed on their friendship, and tomorrow's meeting was bound to be uncomfortable for both of them.

The diamond ring on her finger was spotted almost immediately, and Shannon felt a faint pang of remorse as she glimpsed Mrs Vlasich's disappointment. John was a good friend, but their relationship had remained platonic by mutual consent. No matter how she tried, she couldn't rid herself of the feeling that Mrs Vlasich considered she had somehow let John down, and the thought niggled her all the way back to the parking area.

To top it all off, Angel elected to be perverse by refusing to start, and nothing Shannon did made the slightest bit of difference. Resigned, she locked the car, then telephoned through to George Bartulovich's garage. When the mechanic arrived some thirty minutes 'later, the news wasn't heartening, for Angel needed at least three hours' work spent on her engine to get her running smoothly again.

It surely wasn't turning out to be her day at all! And it was her turn to collect the girls from school. Well, there was nothing else for it but to ring Linda and explain.

The call made, Shannon set out briskly, determined to walk the distance home. That it was slightly more than two miles didn't deter her in the least. The exercise and the fresh air would do her the world of good.

Halfway home, the darkening clouds gave way to a light drizzle that rapidly increased in volume, wetting her clothes with blithe unconcern. Her hair soon became a soaking mess, and rivulets of water trickled unchecked from her chin. Then just as suddenly the rain stopped and the sun came out.

She was cursing beneath her breath and muttering all kinds of derogatory comments about the weather when a car slid to a halt not three feet away.

'For heaven's sake, girl,' a brusque, familiar voice commanded impatiently, 'get in the car—you look like a drowned rat!'

It would have to be Nick, wouldn't it? 'I'm too wet,' she dismissed perfunctorily. 'I'll only dampen your upholstery.'

'Get inside, Shannon.' Cool, hard, with not a trace of sympathy in his voice, and she felt the beginnings of anger stir at his high-handed manner.

'It's not raining any more—even if it were, I couldn't get much wetter than I already am!' She began walking on, and didn't pause when she heard the car door slam.

A hand clamped itself over her shoulder, bringing her to a halt, swinging her round to face him. Nick's face was a furious mask, and the expression in his eyes only served to strengthen her anger.

Who did he think he was, for heaven's sake? 'Take your hand off me!' she hissed, her eyes sparking furiously alive as he increased the pressure to a point where it hurt abominably.

'I'll lay my hand on another part of your anatomy in a moment,' he threatened tersely. 'It wouldn't cross your independent mind to telephone and ask to be collected—you have to walk, and in the pouring rain! Is it any wonder I have difficulty in controlling my temper?'

'I'm no authority on the weather,' Shannon declared heatedly.

'Get in the car, Shannon,' he ordered cursorily, and when she didn't budge he lifted her bodily into his arms.

'Put me down! Oh,' she flung helplessly, 'you're the most incredible bully I've ever had the misfortune to meet!' She was thrust unceremoniously into the front seat of the Ferrari, and she sat there fuming as he slammed the door and strode round to the other side.

'Are you in the habit of abducting females?' she queried icily as he slid in behind the wheel.

'Not often.'

Shannon sat in silence, staring straight ahead as the ear whispered along the wet bitumen. If she hadn't been certain of the injuries involved in doing so, she would have released the door-clasp and escaped, regardless of the consequences. However, it was a fine thing to be in a furious temper, but quite another to allow it to rear its ugly head by resorting to foolhardiness.

The instant they halted outside the cottage she slid from the car. 'Thank you.' Her voice was chilly and severe, and totally belied the expressed gratitude.

'Inside with you at once,' Nick directed, and slipping from behind the wheel he took her arm and led her, protesting fiercely, to her front door.

The key was taken from her fingers just as soon as she extracted it from her bag, and she was hustled unceremoniously inside the cottage.

'I've already said thank you,' she uttered resentfully. 'What are you waiting for?'

'To see you into a hot bath,' he responded, unperturbed by her scandalous expression.

'You won't, you know!'

'Not literally,' he replied hardily. 'Although if you don't get a move on and remove those wet clothes, I'll give you a helping hand.' ,

Her furious brown eyes met his, then wavered slightly. He looked purposefully and thoroughly capable of carrying out his hateful threat. 'I'll run the bath.' In some cases it was wisest to admit defeat.

'Sensible of you,' he declared dryly. 'By the time you emerge, I'll have a hot drink waiting.'

Shannon positively glared at him. 'I'm not a child— I'm quite capable of making myself something to drink.'

'You could have fooled me. Now, move, Shannon,' he bade silkily.

She left, but not before she'd flung him a wrathful look that would have quailed a lesser man. No doubt it scarcely skimmed the surface of his unconscionably thick skin!

With a sense of defiance, Shannon soaked in the bath for what seemed an interminably long time. She washed her hair and towelled it almost dry, then she relaxed in the hot soapy water. It would serve him right if she stayed here for an hour !

'Whatever act of defiance is keeping you there, let me warn you that I have no scruples about coming in and fishing you out,' Nick's hateful voice sounded from the other side of the door.

Shannon made waves as she reached hurriedly for a protective towel. 'You wouldn't dare!'

'Try me. Five minutes, Shannon.'

The water gurgled from the bath as she stepped hastily out, and in no time at all she was shrugging her arms into a towelling robe. In her bedroom, she exchanged it for fresh underwear, and hurriedly stepped into jeans before pulling a knit top over her head. Her hair she simply covered with a towel and wound it on top of her head, turbanwise, then moved out towards the kitchen, coming to an abrupt halt at the sight of Nick leaning negligently against the sink.

'Your coffee.' He slid a steaming cup of aromatic liquid towards her, and there was a distinct gleam in the depths of those dark grey eyes as she raised defiant eyes to his.

'There's no need for you to play nursemaid,' she declared coldly. 'Nor do you need to threaten me.'

'You don't take anything kindly, do you, my Kilkenny cat?' Nick queried with silky tolerance.

'Not from you.'

'Ah, I'm beginning to wonder why,' he accorded blandly.

'You ride roughshod over everything I say, you won't take no for an answer,' Shannon reiterated fiercely. 'And you never ask—you command, *and* demand!'

His muted, deep-seated laughter only served to infuriate her further, and she attacked him with flailing fists. Not that it did the slightest good, for he merely caught her hands and held her captive.

'My, my—such a temper,' he murmured quizzically, then bent his head down to hers.

There was no way she could escape those teasing lips, and after a pitiful struggle she didn't even try.

'Want to tell me about it?' Shannon lifted her eyes to meet his tolerant gaze. She felt slightly bemused, for his kisses had that effect, and to think clearly was quite impossible!

'You were fighting mad before I happened on the scene,' Nick elaborated musingly, and she grimaced a little.

'You weren't exactly peaceable yourself! '

'An unsatisfactory lunch?'

Shannon sighed. 'You could say that. Mrs Vlasich had fond hopes that John and I --'

'John?'

She risked a glimpse upwards and saw his eyes darken fractionally. Nick, jealous? She didn't believe it 'A friend—a very kind one,' she explained. 'It was he who persuaded Ivan to let me rent the cottage.'

'And?'

'We meet occasionally—perhaps half a dozen times in a year, for dinner. However, his mother made more of the friendship than she should, and when she saw my ring today --' Shannon trailed off expressively, and Nick traced her lips with a gentle finger, smiling a little as he felt them tremble beneath his touch.

'She was upset that another man had claimed you first,' he concluded softly. He lowered his head, trailing his lips across her forehead, resting on each eyelid then moving slowly down to the edge of her mouth to wreak havoc with her heightened emotions. She returned kiss for kiss, becoming lost in a tumultuous tide that succeeded in wiping out all reason, and gave a murmur of dissent when he began breaking free of the embrace. His eyes seemed incredibly dark as he put her gently from him.

'I think you'd better drink that coffee.' He ran a hand through his hair, then surveyed her quivering lips with a faint smile. 'Much as I'd like to continue such a pleasurable pursuit, there is an element of danger in doing so—it would be all too easy to pass the point of no return.'

Shannon felt the tell-tale tide of colour sweep over her cheeks as she swallowed painfully. 'I ---' Her voice was stilled as he bestowed a brief hard kiss.

'Drink your coffee,' he ordered, and in something of a daze she did just that, pulling a face at the taste of spirits.

'What did you put in this?'

'Brandy—it'll warm you, and keep a chill at bay,' Nick replied easily. 'Where did you leave your car— with George?'

Shannon nodded abstractedly. 'It needs a few mechanical replacements—a distributor, a condenser coil, and something else that's too technical for me to comprehend.'

'I'll give him a call .and arrange to have your car delivered when it's ready. In the meantime, let me know if you should need transport,' he instructed, then leant out a hand and trailed a gentle finger down her cheek.

His smile did strange things to her equilibrium. 'I think you'd better go,' she said shakily, and stood there feeling totally bemused long after he had left the cottage.

It was all of thirty minutes before she stirred herself sufficiently to set about the prosaic task of preparing fruit towards the apple pie she intended for dessert, and when that was safely in the oven she turned to the telephone with the intention of ascertaining just how long it would be before Angel would be ready.

'You haven't found anything else wrong with it, have you?' Shannon queried worriedly on being informed that her car wouldn't be available until Thursday.

'Not exactly. However, Nick asked me to give it a complete overhaul and replace anything that was needed.'

'*Nick* told you to do that?' she questioned incredulously, and George chuckled.

'Didn't he tell you?'

'No,' she replied succinctly, to which George responded soothingly:

'Angel has been going on a prayer, Shannon. You'd never have passed your next warrant of fitness test without substantial work being done.'

But the bill? she queried silently. Her bank account wouldn't stand anything like the repairs George was outlining.

As soon as she had replaced the receiver she set out across the lawn, passing through the rose garden on her way to confront Nick—wherever he happened to be! This time he'd gone too far!

Melissa looked up and smiled, and at Shannon's query, indicated that Nick was in the study.

'Shall I tell him you're here?'

'Don't bother,' Shannon returned calmly. 'I'll tell him myself.' So saying, she crossed the tiled floor and gave a few sharp knocks to the panelled door.

'Your eyes are twin daggers,' Nick accorded sardonically by way of a greeting, and Shannon met his musing smile with exasperation.

'I've just been talking to George,' she began without preamble as he closed the door behind her and moved across to lean against the edge of his desk.

'And?'

'I want to know why you told him to take Angel to pieces and put her back together again!'

Nick seemed to be having difficulty controlling his laughter.

'It's not funny!'

His eyes became faintly cynical. 'My dear Shannon, I agree. There's nothing remotely funny about you driving that unreliable vehicle. It needs replacing.'

'Hah! Pigs might fly,' she uttered inelegantly.

His lips twitched slightly. 'Doubtful. I must let you try your hand at the wheel of my car.'

Her eyes widened. 'The Ferrari?'

'I'm not entirely selfish. I've no objection to my wife driving it'

'But I'm not your wife,' she began heatedly. 'And I'm not sure that I want to be.'

'Perhaps you need persuading,' Nick declared, smiling wickedly as he began moving towards her, and he laughed softly when Shannon began backing away.

'Just because I don't find your kisses repulsive, it doesn't necessarily mean I should marry you. Besides,' she reasserted firmly, 'that's got nothing to do with you going over my head by telling George what to do with my car.'

His eyes twinkled with hidden humour. 'I'll gift you a new Mini as a wedding present, but until then you'll allow me peace of mind by driving something reliable.'

'Am I never going to win an argument?' she cried, chagrined, and he leant out a hand and let his fingers trail gently down her cheek.

'Sometimes—when you've won me over with a gamut of feminine guile.' He bent his head, but she moved swiftly out of his reach—only because he allowed her to, of that she was sure.

'Did George give you an estimate?' she asked hesitantly,. and Nick gave a negligible shrug.'

'I'll take care of the account, Shannon,'

'You won't!' She was quite emphatic, and her fine brown eyes sparkled with determination. 'I won't let you.'

He surveyed her lazily. 'How do you propose to stop me?'

'My bills are *my* responsibility,' she wailed desperately.

'This fierce independence of yours is something you're going to have to curb,' he said easily, although there was a hint of steel beneath the surface. 'You'll be interested to know that I consulted the local priest this afternoon, and arrangements have been made for him to marry us—two weeks from this Saturday.'

Shannon felt her face drain of colour. 'You're not serious! I thought --'

'*What* did you think, Shannon?'

'That we'd be engaged for some time,' she articulated huskily.

'Yet when I announced our engagement, I distinctly stated we would be marrying soon. I don't see the necessity of delaying the inevitable,' Nick declared smoothly.

'But it *isn't* inevitable!' Shannon cried, upset. 'An engagement is meant to be a sort of trial, one that isn't binding. One,' she continued desperately, 'that either party can rescind.'

'I don't agree. The acceptance of an engagement ring is an agreement to marry. I've no intention of allowing you to back out now.'

Shannon looked at those implacable features so close to her own, and was unable to control an involuntary shiver of apprehension.

'There's only one way you can know me better,' he drawled tolerantly as he glimpsed the fleeting emotions chase over her expressive features.

'Sex isn't everything,' she ventured with great temerity, and the edge of his mouth lifted quizzically.

'Nor should it be dismissed as of little consequence.'

The thought of sharing his bed was something she daren't give much thought. His kisses had the effect of rendering her to a jelly. The intimacies that came with marriage scared her silly—more from a lack of experience, she had to admit.

The sound of a telephone ringing on his desk was a welcome intrusion, and ignoring his summons to stay, Shannon chose to take the opportunity to escape.

While she was in the kitchen preparing the vegetables for tea, Shannon glimpsed Anna leading a very subdued Kelly by the hand. That all was not well was obvious.

'What's the matter, honey?' she queried anxiously as soon as they came inside. 'Don't you feel well?'

'My tummy—it hurts,' Kelly complained, her face pinched with pain, and Shannon put a hand to the little girl's forehead. 'I've been sick, too.'

It was hot, and her eyes were bright—too bright, Shannon deduced worriedly. There was no doubt the child was running a temperature. On the face of it, this seemed to be more than a simple gastric attack.

'I think I'd better get you to the doctor,' Shannon voiced gently.

Kelly's bottom Up began to quiver, and Anna reached out a conciliatory hand.

'He'll give you some medicine that will make you better. Won't he, Shannon?'

Shannon nodded abstractedly as a tiny fear took hold —dear heaven, pray that it wasn't appendicitis!

The doctor's receptionist said Kelly could be seen without an appointment, and advised Shannon to bring her immediately to the surgery. It was only then she realised she didn't have a car at her disposal.

'Uncle Nick isn't home,' Anna declared helplessly.

'Neither is my father. They went into Henderson just a little while ago.'

'I'll ring for a taxi,' Shannon decided, and lost no time in telephoning for one.

The next hour was anxiety-plagued, for the doctor confirmed Shannon's worst fears, and from his surgery a hurried trip by ambulance was made to Auckland Hospital, where the waiting seemed interminable before news was relayed that Kelly was being prepared for surgery.

Shannon sat out in the waiting room and tried to concentrate on the contents of the magazine she had selected from the pile nearby, but the pages flipped unseen before her eyes. The possibility, the fear that something might go wrong, remained uppermost in her mind, clouding her vision. There was a lump in her throat that made swallowing difficult. Oh, dear God, Kelly was so young—such a little girl. Her future was in hands over which she had no control. If anything should happen --

'Shannon.'

She stared sightlessly up at the owner of that voice, and her lips opened and closed soundlessly. 'What are you doing here?' she queried at last in a strangled whisper that Nick had to bend to catch.

'Both Linda and Anna gave me the details just as soon as I arrived home,' Nick told her quietly, although his eyes had darkened formidably at the forlorn picture she presented, sitting there looking so alone, so vulnerable. 'I stopped long enough to make the few necessary telephone calls to determine to which hospital Kelly had been admitted. There's no news yet, I take it?'

Shannon shook her head. 'They took her away ages ago,' she offered shakily, and of its own volition one tear welled and threatened to overflow. Lord above, this would never do! She blinked rapidly, willing the tears to cease, and was scarcely aware of Nick sitting down close beside her until she felt her hand caught in his.

'Kelly's so tiny—so young,' she managed some minutes later. Nick's presence was reassuring, and it was almost as if some of his strength throbbed through her veins, giving her coinage.

'I'll enquire at the desk,' Nick declared gently, disengaging his hand, and Shannon gazed after his powerfully-built frame as he measured the distance in long easy strides. He was back within minutes to say that they would be advised just as soon as Kelly emerged from theatre.

'She's been there so long,' Shannon said worriedly, and Nick soothed placatingly:

'It only seems that way. At times like this, each minute becomes an hour.' He glanced up as the telephone rang at the desk, then rose to his feet as the nurse signalled them. Shannon followed close on his heels, and was grateful for the casual arm he placed about her waist. She stood in petrified silence as the nurse relayed the news that Kelly was out of surgery and in the recovery room.

'When will I be able to see her?' The query was out before Shannon had time to think of voicing it, and the nurse glanced at Nick.

'It's doubtful she'll wake fully for at least three hours, and then she'll receive further medication.' The nurse shook her head doubtfully. 'It really would be wiser if you went on home, and came back tomorrow.'

Shannon made an involuntary sound, and Nick rejoined smoothly with undoubted charm:

'I'm sure there won't be any objection if we wait? Kelly will be reassured to see her aunt, no matter how briefly.'

'You'll have to discuss that with the ward Sister. We don't encourage young children to receive visitors immediately after surgery, as it usually upsets them.'

'In some cases it might be upsetting if they don't,' Nick commented dryly, and the nurse pursed her lips.

'The decision will rest with the ward Sister,' she said coolly. 'If you'll return to your seats, I'll call you when your niece has been transferred from the recovery room to the ward.'

'If you do settle the account with George,' Shannon began tentatively a short while later, 'I insist that I pay you back.'

'I fully intend that you shall.' Nick's light chuckle only served to heighten her embarrassment, and she tinged a delicate rosy pink.

'You're impossible!' she choked, and would have snatched back her hand had he not held it firmly so that escape was out of the question.

'Ah, Shannon, you do bite so easily—teasing you is something I find difficult to resist.'

'It's unfair,' she uttered obliquely. 'I must be out of my mind!'

'To marry me? But you will, Shannon. Much as it may surprise you, I predict we'll be extremely happy.'

She glanced up at him squarely. 'You're more of an optimist than I am. Arguing as much as we do, I can't see that our future together will be anything but bleak.'

'I'll remind you of that in a few weeks' time,' Nick slanted mockingly, and Shannon was saved from making a reply as a uniformed staff nurse moved towards them from the desk.

Kelly was now in the ward, and if they would care to wait in the small annexe adjoining the ward they would be summoned just as soon as Kelly was fully recovered from the anaesthetic.

The doctor emerged to explain a few minor technical details, assuring her that the operation had been straightforward, and Kelly would need to remain in hospital for seven or eight days.

It was another hour before they were fetched from the annexe, and Shannon gave a heartfelt sigh of relief as she caught sight of the pale little figure in its hospital garb.

Kelly's rather wobbly smile was no less wobbly than that of her aunt, and it was only Nick's teasing admonition that they'd both be in tears any minute that saved the day.

They weren't permitted long, and Shannon gave the little girl a gentle hug when the ward Sister declared it to be time for Kelly's medication.

'We'll be in again tomorrow afternoon, imp,' Nick advised as he bent low to bestow a fleeting kiss to her brow.

'I'm going to be spoiled,' Kelly murmured sleepily, and he chuckled.

'Horribly.'

'You're nice.'

'So are you,' he answered gently. 'Sweet dreams, pet.'

In the car, he turned slightly towards Shannon, stating, 'You obviously haven't eaten, and neither have I. We'll find a restaurant, then telephone Linda.'

Her eyes widened perceptibly. 'But I'm not dressed.'

'You look fine to me,' he dismissed blandly.

'I'm not in the least hungry,' she protested. 'All I feel like is coffee, and I can get that at home.'

'Then you shall have coffee, while I do justice to something more substantial. I told Linda not to save dinner,' he explained, and Shannon gave a sigh of resignation.

'I'll have dinner with you. I seem to have lost the urge to argue.'

His smile was faintly quizzical. 'I don't believe it,' he mocked gently.

CHAPTER NINE

KELLY was in hospital for eight days—days that passed all too quickly. Shannon visited each afternoon, and Nick insisted on accompanying her in the evenings, taking the little girl a gift on each occasion that made her bright blue eyes positively glow with excited anticipation.

Consequently, there was not much time for Shannon to give the approaching wedding too much thought. The whole matter seemed to have been taken entirely out of her hands, for Nick organised everything, then merely informed her—much to her chagrin. Even in the matter of her wedding gown she was overruled. They had argued over that—not that it made much difference, for in the end she had to concede that she would not have sufficient time to make it herself with Kelly convalescing at home.

At Shannon's suggestion, Linda was chosen to be matron-of-honour, Beverley as bridesmaid, with Kelly and Anna as flower-girls. The bridal boutique in Henderson was commissioned to make all the gowns, and both Shannon and Linda spent several hours poring over designs and swatches of material before arriving at a decision.

It had been decided that the wedding reception would be held at Vista d'Oro, and replies to despatched invitations had already been received. It all seemed to gain momentum with each passing hour, and Kelly's exuberance over the coming event was beginning to tear Shannon's rather shaky nerves to shreds. The day Shannon went into Henderson to have a final fitting for her gown seemed to accentuate her indecision to a point where she felt a need to escape. The wedding, Nick—everything suddenly assumed dismaying proportion, and maintaining a vestige of calm took all her energy as she accompanied Linda into yet another shop—the fifth in less than forty minutes.

'Coffee?' Linda queried as they emerged, and Shannon gave a rueful smile.

'Definitely. We more than deserve it, and besides, we've almost finished, haven't we?'

'We've ordered enough food to feed an army!' Linda declared laughingly. 'Thank heaven it will all be delivered. To have it cooked and served after the style of the vineyard's end-of-season barbecue will be ideal, as all the preparations can be dispensed with by mid-morning, and the spits can easily be tended during our absence at the church—no fewer than ten men have volunteered!'

'I still don't see that it's necessary to have such a large wedding,' Shannon frowned, faintly perplexed, only to see Linda burst into unrestrained laughter.

'Shannon! Haven't you yet learned that Nick doesn't do things by halves?' She sobered slightly. 'Besides, a wedding is quite an occasion—especially that of a well- to-do vigneron. It's only right that Nick should want to share his new-found happiness with a large gathering of friends and fellow-growers.'

Shannon was silent. Was Nick happy? It was impossible to tell. Contented—or perhaps, *resigned*, to a marriage that would provide him with a suitable wife to mother his sons. He seemed a whole sophisticated world apart, and the mere thought of his sensual expertise was enough to render her into a treacherous state of near-breathlessness.

'Second thoughts?'

Startled, Shannon collected her wayward thoughts together, and lifted her gaze to meet Linda's understanding features. 'And doubts,' she offered slowly. 'I find it hard to understand why he chose me.'

'You make it sound as if Nick went "eeny, meeny, miny, mo" from a mental line-up of suitable females,' Linda chided, and when Shannon didn't contradict her, she queried, 'You can't seriously think that, surely?'

Shannon said slowly, 'Any romantic illusions I might have had went out the window some time ago.'

'I've known Nick far too long to be under any misapprehension regarding his motives for marriage,' Linda proclaimed emphatically.

'He's very convincing,' Shannon offered quietly. •

'Oh, rubbish! You're not fooling me at all—in fact, the only one fooled is yourself,' Linda asserted, but Shannon shook her head.

'No,' she denied sadly. 'I'm going away—tomorrow --' she began hastily, desperately. 'Just a few days—I need some time alone. The wedding—it's too close, and the break will do Kelly the world of good. We won't go far—anywhere will do, just so long as it's away,' she babbled. Oh God, none of this made any sense!

Linda looked at her curiously. 'Does Nick know?'

'That I'm going? No. I'll tell him tonight. He won't mind.'

'I think he will,' Linda asserted softly, meeting Shannon's raised eyebrows.

For once Linda was wrong. Nick didn't so much as bat an eyelid.

'When do you want to leave?' he asked.

'Why?' Shannon asked blandly, feeling slightly disappointed that he was offering no objection.

Patiently, as if she were a child for whom things must be simplified, he explained, 'Wherever it is you intend going, I'll take you.'

'But I don't know,' she wailed, exasperated, and his musing smile did little to help her temper.

'Ah, I see. It's to be a means of escape.' His eyes gleamed quizzically. 'Running away won't solve anything, Shannon.'

Anger rose to the surface, then erupted. 'I'm *not* running away,' she flung furiously. 'How can I, with you taking me?'

'I was thinking of Kelly's welfare,' Nick stated calmly. 'In the Ferrari, she can be transported in the minimum of time with the maximum of comfort.'

'My car is quite reliable—you ensured that.'

'When do you want to leave—tomorrow?'

Oh, he really was the limit! 'Yes, tomorrow—at nine o'clock,' she said recklessly.

'If you'll tell me where, I'll arrange a place for you to stay.'

'Anywhere—I don't care!'

'Pauanui,' he suggested thoughtfully. 'Somewhere warm and Sunny—it might improve your disposition.'

'There's nothing -wrong with my disposition!'

'You need bedding, my Kilkenny cat,' Nick declared deliberately, and there was a dangerous edge of steel evident as he warned, 'Try my patience much further, and you'll get more than you bargained for.'

It was no idle threat, and Shannon felt the stirrings of fear feather her spine. There wasn't one coherent thing she could say, for her voice seemed locked in a painful vice. What was the matter with her? Marriage to Nick was the most sensible course to take—what was more, it was all arranged. Why, suddenly, did she have to be besieged with doubts?

Her silence seemed to reverberate around the room, and it seemed ages before he spoke.

'I'll look in on Kelly for a few minutes—she's not asleep yet?'

Shannon shook her head. 'She's been waiting for you.' Her voice came out in a faintly cracked, subdued whisper.

It was almost a quarter of an hour before he entered the kitchen again,—and Shannon stood still, inwardly restless but afraid to move. 'There's really no need for you to take us,' she offered quickly as his eyes raked her slowly from head to toe, and somehow his silence was more eloquent than words could ever have been.

'Ivan has a holiday bach at Pauanui, on the Coromandel Peninsula,' Nick said sardonically. 'I'll take you there for a few days—unless you have any objection?'

Shannon met his querying, faintly quizzical gaze, and shook her head.

'No? In that case, I'll bid you goodnight.'

As soon as he was gone, she locked the door and went in to settle Kelly for the night. Contrarily, now that the decision had been made to go, she found any number of , reasons to stay. There were a hundred and one things that needed attending to—packing, clearing out cupboards, to name but a few. She must be mad to consider absenting herself from the cottage for two or three days!

There was little sleep to be had that night, and in the morning Shannon woke unrefreshed and full of misgivings. Kelly, on the other hand, was excited at the prospect of having a few days' holiday near the beach.

Nick seemed deliberately bland—something that angered Shannon beyond measure. She felt goaded into forcing a showdown between them, even though the outcome and his subsequent anger would be frightening to behold. Anything was better than being treated like a recalcitrant child!

The inconsequential chapter they occupied themselves with for the two and a half hours it took to reach their destination was casually contrived to appear pleasant for Kelly's benefit, and the closer they came to Pauanui the more Shannon felt like crying out for Nick to turn round and take them home.

'When will you be back?' Kelly queried anxiously of Nick just as soon as he had unloaded their overnight bags into the bach.

He bent down and ruffled her hair. 'Thursday afternoon about four o'clock.'

'I wish you could stay,' Kelly voiced forlornly, her eyes large and rather sad.

'Next time,' Nick affirmed affectionately. 'Now, be careful—not too much activity, or you won't be able to see the day out on Saturday, and we can't have you missing any of the wedding festivities, can we?'

Kelly shook her head solemnly, then reached up to circle his neck as he lifted her into his arms. 'Bye, Nick. I love you.' She planted a shy kiss on his cheek, then gave him a quick hug before he set her gently down on to her feet.

Shannon stood still, unwilling to make the gesture that was expected of her, and was left in no doubt that it was only Kelly's presence that prevented him from forcibly kissing her. It was there in his eyes, and she unconsciously shivered. Retribution would follow, and soon. Nick Stanich was not a man to be treated lightly, and she was behaving abominably.

The lips that brushed her cheek were cool and hard. There was no gentle affection, or even regret, and Shannon felt her eyes ache with remorse.

*

'He's here—Nick's here!'

Shannon jerked spasmodically at the sound of Kelly's excited voice. Oh, dear heaven, if only she could collect her fractured thoughts together into some semblance of calm! She had slept hardly at all, and all morning she had been in a state of suspended trepidation for the time when she would need to confront him again. If only she could reach out and touch him, *say* that she was sorry for being so idiotically foolish—but the words choked in her throat.

He looked invincible—so strong and vital. How could he appear so deadly calm, so unruffled? If he had held out his arms, she would have run to him on winged feet to pour out all her fears and uncertainties against that rock-like chest. And whispered how much she loved him. That much she had discovered during her absence.

His greeting was laughingly warm as Kelly opened the door, but his eyes as they met Shannon's over the little girl's head were enigmatic, making it impossible to gauge his mood.

'Well, imp,' Nick grinned down at Kelly, 'tell me all about it, before you burst at the seams.'

'We went for walks along the beach, collected shells and some driftwood. And yesterday,' Kelly enlightened him enthusiastically, 'Shannon let me stay up really late, until I fell asleep—I think she forgot to tell me to go to bed.' Kelly grinned irrepressibly towards her aunt. 'And this morning we sat on the beach and had a picnic lunch, then we went for a long walk again.'

'Plenty of fresh air and exercise, I see,' he twinkled with amusement. 'I've brought the portable barbecue, some thick steaks, and Linda despatched a ready-to-serve salad.'

'We can have it on the beach,' Kelly enthused. 'Now we won't have to leave straight away, will we?'

'Just before dark,' Nick affirmed solemnly, swinging his gaze back to Shannon.

'You haven't kissed Shannon yet,' Kelly declared, slightly puzzled. 'Aren't you going to?'

'Don't be silly, Kelly,' Shannon remonstrated quickly—too quickly, for Nick's eyes narrowed slightly.

'Well, I'm going to the shop for an icecream,' Kelly remarked happily as she picked up her purse from the table. 'I'll probably stay and talk to Rosemary, so I won't be back for a while.'

Devious little monkey, Shannon thought wretchedly, and was further embarrassed when the imp offered guilelessly:

'I think Shannon missed you—she was awfully quiet and dreamy. I had to say things twice over!'

When Kelly had gone, Shannon addressed the wall next to Nick's tall frame. 'I expect you'd like something to drink. Shall I make some coffee?'

His silence seemed deliberate, although it lasted only seconds. 'Beer would be preferable,' he drawled sardonically. 'I brought a few cans with me—I'll fetch them in.'

When he returned, Shannon was busying herself at the bench with slices of bread, some ham and cheese.

'I'm making a few sandwiches—you must be hungry,' she murmured indistinctly over one shoulder, and heard the hissing snap as he pulled back a beer-can tab.

'Not particularly.'

'I'll put it away, then,' she choked, hurt by his indifference. The knife slipped from her nerveless fingers and clattered into the sink.

'You're more of a tangled mass of nerves than when you left.'

She jumped at the sound of his voice so close behind her. 'You don't need to sound so—so *cynical* V she responded bitterly.

'The sooner we're married, the better,' Nick drawled in mild exasperation.

'Why? It can only prove disastrous!'

'I beg to differ.'

'How do you work that out?' she cried, then blushed furiously beneath his dark gleaming eyes. 'Oh! I --' her voice stopped suddenly as his mouth closed down on hers, and it was no gentle possession. There was a passionate hunger in his touch that ignited the fuse of her own emotions, sending her clinging to him and responding in a way that frightened her.

When Kelly returned they set up the barbecue on the sand, far distant from the incoming tide, and their shared meal was an enjoyable one. Shannon felt more relaxed than she had been for days—bemused, she amended with a slight smile.

'Only one more day,' Kelly declared happily as she settled down comfortably on the back seat of the Ferrari some two hours later, causing Shannon to grimace ruefully.

'Tomorrow is going to be hectic! There's the gowns to be collected, the florist, the --'

'Spare me,' Nick drawled laughingly, and Shannon wrinkled her nose at him as she slid into the car.

'Home, you impossible man.' She stretched her arms slightly, then smiled. 'It'll be good to sleep in any own bed tonight.'

'Make the most of it,' he grinned, sparing her a dark gleaming glance as he switched on the engine, and her blush was met with a quizzical smile.

'It would serve you right if I follow Kelly's example and sleep all the way home,' she choked, only to feel the touch of his fingers against her cheek. His smile did strange things to her stomach, and she was incapable of uttering so much as a word.

She did doze, despite her intention not to, and wakened to darkness and the stillness of the car's engine.

'Two sleeping children, returned safely home,' Nick declared softly, and the kiss he bestowed some minutes later after depositing Kelly into her bed was brief and hard.

Friday dawned bright and clear, and Shannon rose soon after the sun's rays fingered warmth on to the ground below. She made a list, and

crossed off each item as it was completed. As soon as she had settled Kelly with a book after lunch, she slipped behind the wheel of her car and steered Angel towards Henderson to collect her wedding gown.

Ah, there was a parking space—convenient, too, as it was directly outside the bridal boutique. She slipped out from behind the wheel, locked the door, then turned, to come face to face with none other than Sheila Burton. Damn! This was a coincidence she could well do without. Out of politeness she offered a monosyllabic greeting.

'I've been waiting for an opportunity to see you,' Sheila began without preamble, and Shannon felt the beginnings of unease.

'Have you?' she managed calmly. 'I can't imagine why. I was under the impression you'd said everything there was to say some two weeks ago.'

Sheila's face twisted into a slightly bitter smile. 'I suppose you think you've come up in the world, having snared a particularly eligible male?'

'Not at all.' Oh dear, this was going to be worse than she feared.

'He certainly seems to be the dominating type,' the other girl laughed. 'Rather you than me, my dear. He'll boss you unbearably.' She ran her eyes over Shannon's slim form. 'Rather quick, this marriage. Perhaps you're not such a goody-two-shoes, after all. The cottage is not too far distant for .a few nocturnal visits, and you are reasonably attractive.'

'Have you nothing better to do with your time?' Shannon queried, feeling sick at the other girl's invective.

'Of course, everyone knows it's a marriage of convenience. The old man was remarkably fond of you. Dangfing Vista d'Oro in front of his nephew's nose was no mean matchmaking feat—after all, what man would be fool enough to refuse?' Sheila patted her immaculate hair,

then smiled 'And you, sweetheart, wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, would you? I mean, the number of men who would take on someone else's child aren't exactly numerous. Dear little Kelly—so nice to have someone take over the burden of raising her.' She paused to brush a non-existent speck of dust from her skirt. 'I shan't wish you everlasting happiness, as it's something you haven't a hope of achieving. However, he *is a* good catch financially, and money is a remarkable salve. I can personally vouch for it! Goodbye, sweetheart.'

Shannon felt an icy hand grip hold of her heart as she watched Sheila walk away, and there was a lump in her throat that made it difficult for her to swallow. That the other girl had deliberately set out to hurt was obvious, but it was bitter gall that there was an element of truth in those hateful words. It made the enormity of what she was doing seem so cold-blooded. She suffered doubts as it was, and her nerves were bad enough without Sheila stirring them into an even more tangled state.

The past two weeks had been terrible as she had tossed and turned over whether she was doing the right thing. She kept assuring herself that she wasn't fool enough to believe that Nick's caresses were anything more than practised sensual expertise, although the danger of being lulled into a state of euphoric inertia was all too easy. The secret fear that he would find her lacking and bitterly regret the union was something that kept her awake night after night.

She was a fool, a *fool*. Distractedly, she stepped into the boutique to collect the gowns, smiling woodenly as the assistant helped her lay them on to the back seat of the car. At the sight of her wedding dress she became filled with an icy resolve. She wouldn't go through with it—she *couldn't*! She'd have to move, of course. That would be heartbreaking, for she loved the cottage and its spacious grounds. Kelly would be upset, but that was something she would have to face.

In a daze Shannon locked the car, then walked through the arcade and on to the main road where John Vlasich had his real estate office. He was in, and successfully hid his surprise as she besought him to find her another place to rent. Anything reasonable would do—the sooner, the better. Today, if possible. She ignored his questioning look, and escaped almost immediately.

Right up until she halted her car in the driveway outside the cottage everything seemed for the best, then the thought of having to leave brought a prick of tears behind her eyes.

Resolutely she set about unpacking her purchases, putting them away with unnecessary care. The rather mundane chore of unpegging the washing was given her full attention, and she ironed the entire basketful with a dedication hitherto unknown. When Anna rushed in from school to see Kelly, she was overbright to a point where her perceptive niece enquired with the curiosity of the young:

'What's the matter, Shannon?' Kelly peered at her aunt intently. 'You look as if you've been crying—have you?'

Oh heavens! 'No, of course not. I must have something in my eye,' Shannon answered quietly, then changing the subject, she asked with false briskness, 'Milk and cookies, anyone?'

That took care of a nasty moment, but just before the girls went into Kelly's bedroom to play, Kelly turned back and gave her aunt an impulsive hug.

'I wish it was this time tomorrow. I can't wait,' she declared, then as a seed of doubt seemed to worry her brain, she queried anxiously, 'You are going to marry Nick, aren't you?'

Unbidden, the tears welled up in Shannon's eyes, and she quickly bent down and kissed Kelly's cheek. 'Go and play with Anna. If you promise you'll be quiet and not run around, you can go over to Anna's

place for a while,' she said huskily. 'I must clean out the kitchen cupboards.' It was the first thing that came into her head.

'But you did them last week,' Kelly began, clearly puzzled.

'I spilt some golden syrup this morning,' Shannon invented quickly. 'We don't want to have ants everywhere, do we?'

Kelly didn't seem entirely convinced as she turned and caught hold of Anna's hand, and when they had left the kitchen Shannon put a shaky hand to her head.

Oh dear God, she would have to stop this terrible urge to burst into tears. Well, she had declared a necessity to dean out the kitchen cupboards, and that was precisely what she would do! It didn't help at all, because every time she put something back she was forced to recognise that she would only have to take everything out again, and soon.

Ten minutes later she was still no closer to finishing the task at hand, and when the back door clicked shut she put on a spurt of activity.

'Kelly?' Shannon frowned slightly. It wasn't like Kelly not to answer. She turned, then almost choked. 'What—I thought it was Kelly,' she stammered. 'You usually knock.'

'So I do,' Nick drawled slowly.

'What do you want?' she studiously returned her attention to the assortment of tins close by, and began replacing diem with concentrated, dedication.

'I'd rather conduct this conversation face to face. Shall I crouch down, or will you stand up?'

There was a strange breathlessness tightening her chest as she reached for yet another tin. 'I'm rather busy, as you can see,' she said to the inside of the cupboard.

There was an infinitesimal silence, then his voice, dry and decidedly silky, commanded: 'Shannon.'

It wasn't the sort of tone one dallied with, and with a sigh that was a mixture of exasperation and dread, Shannon sat back on her heels and looked up at him. That was a mistake, for he loomed much too large and indomitable for her peace of mind.

Large strong hands grasped her arms and lifted her upright, and that wasn't any better, for she was much too close to him.

'I have to finish this, then begin cooking dinner,' she protested to the third button of his immaculate cream shirt, then she uttered a startled yelp as her chin was gripped between an ungente thumb and forefinger.

Dark penetrating grey eyes riveted hers, examining and analytical, missing nothing. Shannon ran her tongue nervously along her lower lip, and tried to stop the shaky trembling that seemed to have invaded her lower limbs.

'Haven't you something to tell me?' Nick queried. with dangerous softness.

Shannon shut her eyes momentarily. This wasn't going to be easy, but it had to be got over with, and the sooner the better. 'I—I can't marry you.' There, it was said.

He was silent for so long that Shannon began to feel afraid. 'I've just had an interesting telephone call from John Vlasich,' he revealed silkily.

'I thought I could, for Kelly's sake,' she whispered at last, a trembling mass of nerves. 'But I can't—I just can't!' she cried shakily.

Nick's eyes glittered dangerously. 'I could spank you, do you know that?'

One solitary tear spilled over to trickle slowly down her cheek. 'I should never have agreed.'

'As I recall, I didn't give you much choice.'

'Ivan --'

'Just what, precisely,' Nick intervened, 'is it that you consider my late uncle to be guilty of?'

Shannon closed her eyes, and the grip on her chin tightened unmercifully, so that she cried out in anguish, 'You're hurting me!'

'Believe me,' he vouchsafed softly, 'I'm showing a remarkable amount of restraint!'

'You're a cruel, overbearing bully!' she flung incautiously.

'Answer me, Shannon,' he ordered hardily as she lifted a trembling hand and drew it first across one damp cheek, then the other.

'I thought Ivan wanted me to stay simply because he was fond of me, and Kelly.'

'He was.'

'Then why did he make my position here intolerable?' she beseeched, adding bitterly, 'I would have vacated the cottage immediately had I known he was attempting a matchmaking campaign!'

'Ivan's will, bequeathing me Vista d'Oro, was dated some fifteen years ago,' Nick explained dryly. 'Long before he knew you. It's doubtful you were out of the schoolroom.'

'But he put it in writing that I could stay.'

'He would have done, had he known he was to follow Katija so closely.'

Shannon eyed his incredulously. 'The letter from his lawyer --'

'Correction,' Nick intervened enigmatically. 'You had a letter from *my* lawyer. A slight anticipation— Ivan wouldn't have wanted you to feel forced to find other accommodation.'

'*You* were responsible? *Why?*'

'Because it was the only way I could be sure that you would stay. I didn't imagine I was capable of falling in love—being a somewhat hardened cynic regarding women,' he revealed sardonically. 'I thought if I could manipulate you into an engagement, you might get used to the idea of marriage. *Afterwards*, I'd have been able to dispel any doubts you might have had,' he assured deliberately, watching the delicate pink colour her cheeks. 'However,' he mused softly, pulling her against him, 'I hadn't reckoned on your rather pigheaded stubbornness—' He began to laugh gently as she cast him an indignant glare. 'Oh, yes, my little Irish beauty— pigheaded, and gloriously stubborn. You imagined all kinds of nonsense, listened to misguided gossip, and didn't for a minute heed your own heart—or mine. If you had, you would have been spared most of your self-inflicted anguish.'

'You could have, said something, Shannon whispered, feeling immeasurably hurt.

'I doubt that you would have believed me,' he drawled tolerantly, shaking her gently. 'Besides, I imagined I was employing methods more convincing than mere words.' His smile was curiously tender as a blush stole over her cheeks.

'I thought that was expertise born from long experience,' she owned tremulously, and saw his eyes darken fractionally.

'Did you, indeed? I'm not sure I shouldn't punish you for that remark. For the record, I don't make a habit of going around kissing girls in quite the manner I reserve for you,' he admonished severely.

'Not ever?' Shannon dared, and was kissed nearly breathless for her impudence.

'I'm thirty-five, minx. I won't admit to a monkish past.'

'It shows,' she allowed quizzically, and began to laugh as he bent his head once more.

'You bewitched me from the very first moment I saw you,' Nick declared huskily as he teased her lips with his. 'So proud, and yet so vulnerable. At Ivan's funeral, each time the opportunity presented itself for me to get anywhere near you'—he paused, chuckling at the memory—'away you would dart, escaping into the kitchen on the pretext of fixing more sandwiches, or making coffee. I'm afraid you didn't stand a chance once I returned to Vista d'Oro to stay.'

'I recognised you were trouble—even dressed so soberly. Especially with that beard!' Shannon laughed, her eyes alight and mischievous. 'You were a formidable sight.'

'You make me sound like some nefarious pirate with a beard reaching down to his chest—whereas mine was extremely short and well-clipped.'

'Quite dynamic!'

Nick began to chuckle, his eyes agleam with devilish laughter. 'If it had that effect on you, I'll grow it again.'

'You're quite charismatic enough as it is,' she declared with mock-severity.

'And you will marry me?'

Shannon sobered quickly, looking up into those well-etched features and revelling in the hint of possessive-ness evident in his voice, the passion darkening his eyes—for *her*. Somehow, it seemed too incredible. 'Yes,' she acknowledged softly.

'You won't regret it,' Nick vowed gently, and she lifted an involuntary hand to touch his cheek.

'I love you.' It was scarcely more than a whisper on her lips, and she felt him tremble slightly. That he could be so emotionally affected was so overwhelming that she was close to tears. Tears of joy, and happiness.

His mouth closed on hers, moving back and forth, insistent and disruptively sensual, and as if words were needed, he added those too, in a manner that left her in no doubt of his love.

It was some considerable time before he raised his head, and the picture she made gazing up at him sent his heart thudding against his ribs. 'God willing, there'll be a lifetime ahead of us,' he breathed softly.

'I hope so, too.'

'Kelly!' Shannon-gasped with surprise. 'How long have you been standing there?'

Kelly's grin was as cheeky as they came. 'Long enough,' she declared nonchalantly, and laughed with delight as Nick leant down and scooped her high against his chest.

'Imp! You're supposed to cough discreetly,' he grinned, unabashed.

'Shannon, you're blushing,' Kelly said on close scrutiny of her aunt's features.

'Blame Nick,' Shannon choked.

'Vista d'Oro,' Kelly enthused dreamily. 'Babies— married people have babies, don't they?'

Nick glanced at Shannon, and chuckled wickedly. 'At least two.' He ruffled Kelly's hair and bestowed a gentle kiss. 'You shall be appointed babysitter-in-chief. How's that?'

Kelly wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him. 'I wished so hard, twice each day, and in between times as well. Now it's all come true.'

'I hate to break this up—but this is the kitchen,' Shannon chided laughingly. 'And there's tins all over the floor, and dinner not even started.'

'If ever there was a hint to be gone, that's it,' Nick sighed mockingly. 'Come on, Kelly, let's go and inspect the cellar. There's some fine champagne Ivan put down over twenty years ago. I was saving it for tomorrow, but I think Ivan would agree that today is just cause for the sampling of a bottle.'

Later, when Kelly was in bed, Shannon walked with Nick along the narrow bitumen road leading down to the vines. It was so quiet, and in the moonlight the vines stretched out like ethereal fingers, Linking in elusive symmetry, their foliage dew-kissed.

'Vista d'Oro—it has a magic all of its own,' Shannon sighed contentedly, and she felt Nick's arm tighten about her shoulders.

'I'm beginning to wonder if you're marrying me, or the vineyard,' he declared quizzically, and Shannon laughed.

'Both,' she insisted succinctly. 'Although, on giving the matter some thought,' she paused teasingly, 'perhaps you have priority!'

For that she was pulled close against him and thoroughly kissed until she was left gasping for breath.

'Tomorrow can't come too quickly,' Nick said huskily.

There was a certain amount of naked passion, leashed and in tight control, that set her nerves on fire and gave her a sense of power. In a way, it was quite frightening.

'I haven't any experience to draw from,' she ventured quietly, gazing up at him with candid brown eyes. 'I'm afraid I'll disappoint you.'

He kissed her gently, holding her close as his lips trailed fire across a delicate cheekbone then hovered at the edge of her mouth.

'My darling innocent,' he chided softly, 'making love is a mutual delight. Sharing, discovering—something that is spread throughout a whole lifetime of nights, and days. Tomorrow is merely the beginning.'