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HELEN BIANCHIN

Latin Lovers: A Convenient Bridegroom / In the Spaniard's Bed / The Martinez Marriage Revenge

«HarperCollins»

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Latin Lovers: A Convenient Bridegroom / In the Spaniard's Bed / The Martinez Marriage Revenge / H. BIANCHIN — «HarperCollins»,

These hot Latin millionaires are…ConvenientIt was too late for Aysha to back out of marrying Carlo Santangelo, and everyone expected her to be radiant, blissfully entering a marriage of convenience to unite two powerful families… But Aysha desperately loved Carlo and he clearly had no intention of giving up his glamorous mistress!CynicalDiego de Santo is dynamic, sexy and charismatic; he's made millions and he believes everything is for sale… Cassandra Preston-Villiers is beautiful and sophisticated, everything Diego's ever wanted in a woman, so he blackmails her into becoming his mistress!VengefulWhen Shannay's marriage to billionaire Marcello Martinez ended, she returned home carrying a secret… Now, four years later, Marcello has tracked his wife down and discovered she has kept knowledge of his child from him! Marcello vows to make Shannay pay!

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HELEN BIANCHIN was born in New Zealand and travelled to Australia before marrying her Italian-born husband. After three years they moved, returned to New Zealand with their daughter, had two sons and then resettled in Australia.

Encouraged by friends to recount anecdotes of her years as a tobacco sharefarmer's wife living in an Italian community, Helen began setting words on paper and her first novel was published in 1975.

Currently Helen resides in Queensland, the three children now married with children of their own. An animal lover, Helen says her two beautiful Birman cats regard her study as much theirs as hers, choosing to leap onto her desk every afternoon to sit upright between the computer monitor and keyboard as a reminder they need to be fed … like right now!

Latin Lovers

A Convenient Bridegroom

In the Spaniard's Bed

The Martinez Marriage Revenge

Helen Bianchin

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A Convenient Bridegroom

Helen Bianchin

CHAPTER ONE

‘NIGHT, cara. You will be staying over, won’t you?’

Subtle, very subtle, Aysha conceded. It never ceased to amaze that her mother could state a command in the form of a suggestion, and phrase it as a question. As if Aysha had a choice.

For as long as she could remember, her life had been stage-managed. The most exclusive of private schools, extra-curricular private tuition. Holidays abroad, winter resorts. Ballet, riding school, languages ... she spoke fluent Italian and French.

Aysha Benini was a product of her parents’ upbringing. Fashioned, styled and presented as a visual attestation to family wealth and status.

Something which must be upheld at any cost.

Even her chosen career as an interior decorator added to the overall image.

‘Darling?’

Aysha crossed the room and brushed her lips to her mother’s cheek. ‘Probably.’

Teresa Benini allowed one eyebrow to form an elegant arch. ‘Your father and I won’t expect you home.’

Case closed. Aysha checked her evening purse, selected her car key, and turned towards the door. ‘See you later.’

‘Have a good time.’

What did Teresa Benini consider a good time? An exquisitely served meal eaten in a trendy restaurant with Carlo Santangelo, followed by a long night of loving in Carlo’s bed?

Aysha slid in behind the wheel of her black Porsche Carrera, fired the engine, then eased the car down the driveway, cleared the electronic gates, and traversed the quiet tree-lined street towards the main arterial road leading from suburban Vaucluse into the city.

A shaft of sunlight caught the diamond-studded gold band with its magnificent solitaire on the third finger of her left hand. Brilliantly designed, horrendously expensive, it was a befitting symbol representing the intended union of Giuseppe Benini’s daughter to Luigi Santangelo’s son.

Benini-Santangelo, Aysha mused as she joined the flow of city-bound traffic.

Two immigrants from two neighbouring properties in a northern Italian town had travelled in their late teens to Sydney, where they’d worked two jobs every day of the week, saved every cent, and set up a cement business in their mid-twenties.

Forty years on, Benini-Santangelo was a major name in Sydney’s building industry, with a huge plant and a fleet of concrete tankers.

Each man had married a suitable wife, sadly produced only one child apiece; they lived in fine homes, drove expensive cars, and had given their children the best education that money could buy.

Both families had interacted closely on a social and personal level for as long as Aysha could remember. The bond between them was strong, more than friends. Almost family.

The New South Head Road wound down towards Rose Bay, and Aysha took a moment to admire the view.

At six-thirty on a fine late summer’s evening the ocean resembled a sapphire jewel, merging with a sky clear of cloud or pollution. Prime real estate overlooked numerous coves and bays where various sailing craft lay anchored. Tall city buildings rose in differing architectural design, structured towers of glass and steel, providing a splendid backdrop to the Opera House and the wide span of the Harbour Bridge.

Traffic became more dense as she drew close to the city, and there were the inevitable delays at computer-controlled intersections.

Consequently it was almost seven when she drew into the curved entrance of the hotel and consigned her car to valet parking.

She could, should have allowed Carlo to collect her, or at least driven to his apartment. It would have been more practical, sensible.

Except tonight she didn’t feel sensible.

Aysha nodded to the concierge as she entered the lobby, and she hadn’t taken more than three steps towards the bank of sofas and single chairs when a familiar male frame rose to full height and moved forward to greet her.

Carlo Santangelo.

Just the sight of him was enough to send her heart racing to a quickened beat. Her breath caught in her throat, and she forced herself to monitor the rise and fall of her chest.

In his late thirties, he stood three inches over six feet and possessed the broad shoulders and hard-muscled body of a man who coveted physical fitness. Sculpted raw-boned facial features highlighted planes and angles, accenting a powerful jaw, strong chin, and a sensuously moulded mouth. Well-cut thick dark brown hair was stylishly groomed, and his eyes were incredibly dark, almost black.

Aysha had no recollection of witnessing his temper. Yet there could be no doubt he possessed one, for his eyes could darken to obsidian, the mouth thin, and his voice assume the chill of an ice floe.

'Aysha.' He leant down and brushed his mouth against her own, lingered, then he lifted his head and caught both of her hands in his.

Dear God, he was something. The clean male smell of him teased her nostrils, combining with his subtle aftershave.

Her stomach executed a series of somersaults, and her pulse hammered heavily enough to be almost audible. Did she affect him the way he affected her?

Doubtful, she conceded, aware of precisely where she fitted in the scheme of things. Bianca had been his first love, the beautiful young girl he'd married ten years ago, only to lose her in a fatal car accident mere weeks after the honeymoon. Aysha had cried silent tears at the wedding, and wept openly at Bianca's funeral.

Afterwards he'd flung himself into work, earning a reputation in the business arena as a superb strategist, able to negotiate with enviable skill.

He had dated many women, and selectively taken what they offered without thought of replacing the beautiful young girl who had all too briefly shared his name.

Until last year, when he'd focused his attention on Aysha, strengthening the affectionate bond between them into something much more personal, more intimate.

His proposal of marriage had overwhelmed her, for Carlo had been the object of her affection for as long as she could remember, and she could pinpoint the moment when teenage hero-worship had changed and deepened into love.

A one-sided love, for she was under no illusion. The marriage would strengthen the Benini-Santangelo conglomerate and forge it into another generation.

'Hungry?'

At the sound of Carlo's drawled query Aysha offered a winsome smile, and her eyes assumed a teasing sparkle. 'Starving.'

'Then let's go eat, shall we?' Carlo placed an arm round her waist and led her towards a bank of elevators.

The top of her head came level with his shoulder, and her slender frame held a fragility that was in direct contrast to strength of mind and body.

She could, he reflected musingly as he depressed the call button, have turned into a terrible brat. Yet for all the pampering, by an indulgent but fiercely protective mother, Aysha was without guile. Nor did she have an inflated sense of her own importance. Instead, she was a warm, intelligent, witty and very attractive young woman whose smile transformed her features into something quite beautiful.

The restaurant was situated on a high floor offering magnificent views of the city and harbour. Expensive, exclusive, and a personal favourite, for the chef was a true artiste with an expertise and flair that had earned him fame and fortune in several European countries.

The lift doors slid open, and she preceded Carlo into the cubicle, then stood in silence as they were transported with electronic speed.

'That bad, hmm?'

Aysha cast him a quick glance, saw the musing cynicism apparent, and didn't know whether to be amused or resigned that he'd divined her silence and successfully attributed it to a ghastly day.

Was she that transparent? Somehow she didn't think so. At least not with most people. However, Carlo was an entity all on his own, and she'd accepted a long time ago that there was very little she could manage to keep hidden from him.

'Where would you like me to begin?' She wrinkled her nose at him, then she lifted a hand and proceeded to tick off each finger in turn. 'An irate client, an even more irate floor manager, imported fabric caught up in a wharf strike, or the dress fitting from hell?' She rolled her eyes. 'Choose.'

The elevator slid to a halt, and she walked at his side to the restaurant foyer.

'Signor Santangelo, Signorina Benini. Welcome.' The maître d' greeted them with a fulsome smile, and accorded them the deference of valued patrons. He didn't even suggest a table, merely led them to the one they preferred, adjacent the floor-to-ceiling window.

There was, Aysha conceded, a certain advantage in being socially well placed. It afforded impeccable service.

The wine steward appeared the instant they were seated, and Aysha deferred to Carlo's choice of white wine.

'Iced water, please,' she added, then watched as Carlo leaned back in his chair to regard her with interest.

'How is Teresa?'

'Now there's a leading question, if ever there was one,' Aysha declared lightly. 'Perhaps you could be more specific?'

'She's driving you insane.' His faint drawling tones caused the edges of her mouth to tilt upwards in a semblance of wry humour.

'You're good. Very good,' she acknowledged with cynical approval.

One eyebrow rose, and there was gleaming amusement evident. 'Shall I try for excellent and guess the current crisis?' he ventured. 'Or are you going to tell me?'

'The wedding dress.' Visualising the scene earlier in the day brought a return of tension as she vividly recalled Teresa's calculated insistence and the seamstress's restrained politeness. Dammit, it should be so easy. They'd agreed on the style, the material. The fit was perfect. Yet Teresa hadn't been able to leave it alone.

'Problems?' He had no doubt there would be many, most of which would be of Teresa's making.

'The dressmaker is not appreciative of Mother's interference with the design.' Aysha experienced momentary remorse, for the gown was truly beautiful, a vision of silk, satin and lace.

'I see.'

'No,' she corrected. 'You don't.' She paused as the wine steward delivered the wine, and went through the tasting ritual with Carlo, before retreating.

'What don't I see, cara?' Carlo queried lightly. 'That Teresa, like most Italian mammas, wants the perfect wedding for her daughter. The perfect venue, caterers, food, wine, bomboniera, the cake, limousines. And the dress must be outstanding.'

'You've forgotten the flowers,' Aysha reminded him mildly. The florist is at the end of his tether. The caterer is ready to quit because he says his tiramisu is an art form and he will not, not, you understand, use my grandmother's recipe from the Old Country.'

Carlo's mouth formed a humorous twist. 'Teresa is a superb cook,' he complimented blandly.

Teresa was superb at everything; that was the trouble. Consequently, she expected others to be equally superb. The trouble as such, was that while Teresa Benini enjoyed the prestige of employing the best money could buy, she felt bound to check every little detail to ensure it came up to her impossibly high standard.

Retaining household staff had always been a problem for as long as Aysha could remember. They came and left with disturbing rapidity due to her mother's refusal to delegate even the most minor of chores.

The waiter arrived with the menu, and because he was new, and very young, they listened in silence as he explained the intricacies of each dish, gave his considered recommendations, then very solicitously noted their order before retreating with due deference to relay it to the kitchen.

Aysha lifted her glass and took a sip of chilled water, then regarded the man seated opposite over the rim of the stemmed goblet.

'How seriously would you consider an elopement?'

Carlo swirled the wine in his goblet, then lifted it to his lips and savoured the delicate full-bodied flavour.

'Is there any particular reason why you'd want to incur Teresa's wrath by wrecking the social event of the year?'

'It would never do,' she agreed solemnly. 'Although I'm almost inclined to plug for sanity and suffer the wrath.'

One eyebrow slanted, and his dark eyes assumed a quizzical gleam.

The waiter delivered their starters; minestrone and a superb linguini with seafood sauce.

'Two weeks, cara,' Carlo reminded her.

It was a lifetime. One she wasn't sure she'd survive intact.

She should have moved out of home into an apartment of her own. Would have, if Teresa hadn't dismissed the idea as ridiculous when she had a wing in the house all to herself, complete with gym, sauna and entertainment lounge. She had her own car, her own garage, and technically she could come and go as she pleased.

Aysha picked up her fork, deftly wound on a portion of pasta and savoured it. Ambrosia. The sauce was perfecto.

'Good?'

She wound on another portion and held it to his lips. 'Try some.' She hadn't intended it to be an intimate gesture, and her eyes flared slightly as he placed his fingers over hers, guided the fork, and then held her gaze as he slid the pasta into his mouth.

Her stomach jolted, then settled, and she was willing to swear she could hear her own heartbeat thudding in her ears.

He didn't even have to try, and she became caught up with the alchemy that was his alone.

A warm smile curved his lips as he dipped a spoon into his minestrone and lifted it invitingly towards her own. 'Want to try mine?'

She took a small mouthful, then shook her head when he offered her another. Did he realise just how difficult it was for her to retain a measure of sangfroid at moments like these?

'We have a rehearsal at the church tomorrow evening,' Carlo reminded her, and saw her eyes darken.

Aysha replaced her fork, her appetite temporarily diminished. 'Six-thirty,' she concurred evenly. 'After which the wedding party dine together.'

Both sets of parents, the bride and groom to-be, the bridesmaids and their attendants, the flower girls and page boys and their parents.

Followed the next day by a bridal shower. Hardly a casual affair, with just very close friends, a few nibblies and champagne. The guest list numbered fifty, it was being catered, and Teresa had arranged entertainment.

To add to her stress levels, she'd stubbornly refused to begin six weeks' leave of absence from work until a fortnight before the wedding.

On the positive side, it kept her busy, her mind occupied, and minimised the growing tension with her mother. The negative was hours early morning and evening spent at the breathtaking harbourside mansion Carlo had built, overseeing installation of carpets, drapes, selecting furniture, co-ordinating colours. And doing battle with Teresa when their tastes didn't match and Teresa overstretched her advisory capacity. Something which happened fairly frequently.

'Penny for them.'

Aysha glanced across the table and caught Carlo's teasing smile.

'I was thinking about the house.' That much was true. 'It's all coming together very well.'

'You're happy with it?'

'How could I not be?' she countered simply, visualising the modern architectural design with its five sound-proofed self-contained wings converging onto a central courtyard. The interior was

designed for light and space, with a suspended art gallery, a small theatre and games room. A sunken area featured spa and sauna, and a jet pool.

It was a showcase, a place to entertain guests and business associates. Aysha planned to make it a home.

The wine waiter appeared and refilled each goblet, followed closely by the young waiter, who removed their plates prior to serving the main course.

Carlo ate with the enjoyment of a man who consumed nourishment wisely but well, his use of cutlery decisive.

He was the consummate male, sophisticated, dynamic, and possessed of a primitive sensuality that drew women to him like a magnet. Men envied his ruthlessness and charm, and knew the combination to be lethal.

Aysha recognised each and every one of his qualities, and wondered if she was woman enough to hold him.

'Would you care to order dessert, Miss Benini?'

The young waiter's desire to please was almost embarrassing, and she offered him a gentle smile. 'No, thanks, I'll settle for coffee.'

'You've made a conquest,' Carlo drawled as the waiter retreated from their table.

Her eyes danced with latent mischief. 'Ah, you say the nicest things.'

'Should I appear jealous, do you think?'

She wanted to say, only if you are. And since that was unlikely, it became easy to play the game.

'Well, he is young, and good-looking.' She pretended to consider. 'Probably a university student working nights to pay for his education. Which would indicate he has potential.' She held Carlo's dark gleaming gaze and offered him a brilliant smile. 'Do you think he'd give up the room he probably rents, sell his wheels... a Vespa scooter at a guess... and be a kept toy-boy?'

His soft laughter sent shivers over the surface of her skin, raising fine body hairs as all her nerve-endings went haywire.

'I think I should take you home.'

'I came in my own car, remember?' she reminded him, and saw his eyes darken, the gleam intensify.

'A bid for independence, or an indication you're not going to share my bed tonight?'

She summoned a winsome smile, and her eyes shone with wicked humour. 'Teresa is of the opinion catering to your physical needs should definitely be my priority.'

'And Teresa knows best?' His voice was silky-smooth, and she wasn't deceived for a second.

'My mother believes in covering all the bases,' Aysha relayed lightly.

His gaze didn't shift, and she was almost willing to swear he could read her mind. 'As you do?'

Her expression sobered. 'I don't have a hidden agenda.' Did he know she was in love with him? Had loved him for as long as she could remember? She hoped not, for it would afford him an unfair advantage.

'Finish your coffee,' Carlo bade gently. 'Then we'll leave.' He lifted a hand in silent summons, and the waiter appeared with the bill.

Aysha watched as Carlo signed the slip and added a generous tip, then he leaned back in his chair and surveyed her thoughtfully.

She was tense, but covered it well. His eyes narrowed faintly. 'Do we have anything planned next weekend?'

'Mother has something scheduled for every day until the wedding,' she declared with unaccustomed cynicism.

'Have Teresa reorganise her diary.'

Aysha looked at him with interest. 'And if she won't?'

'Tell her I've surprised you with airline tickets and accommodation for a weekend on the Gold Coast.'

'Have you?'

His smile held humour. 'I'll make the call the minute we reach my apartment.'

Her eyes shone, and she broke into light laughter. 'My knight in shining armour.'

Carlo's voice was low, husky, and held amusement. 'Escape,' he accorded. 'Albeit brief.' He stood to his feet and reached out a hand to take hold of hers. His gleaming gaze seared right through to her heart. 'You can thank me later.'

Together they made their way through the room to the front desk.

The maître d' was courteously solicitous. 'I'll arrange with the concierge to have your cars brought to the front entrance.'

Both vehicles were waiting when they reached the lobby. Carlo saw her seated behind the wheel of her Porsche, then he crossed to his Mercedes to fire the engine within seconds and ease into the line of traffic.

Aysha followed, sticking close behind him as he traversed the inner city streets heading east towards Rose Bay and his penthouse apartment.

When they reached it she drove down into the underground car park, took the space adjoining his private bay, then walked at his side towards the bank of lifts in companionable silence.

They didn't need a house, she determined minutes later as she stepped into the plush apartment lobby.

The drapes weren't drawn, and the view out over the harbour was magnificent. Fairy lights, she mused as she crossed the lounge to the floor-to-ceiling glass stretching across one entire wall.

City buildings, street lights, brightly coloured neon vying with tall concrete spires and an indigo sky.

Aysha heard him pick up the phone, followed by the sound of his voice as he arranged flights and accommodation for the following weekend.

'We could have easily lived here,' she murmured as he came to stand behind her.

'So we could.' He put his arms around her waist and pulled her back against him.

She felt his chin rest on the top of her head, sensed the warmth of his breath as it teased her hair, and was unable to prevent the slight shiver as his lips sought the vulnerable hollow beneath the lobe of one ear.

She almost closed her eyes and pretended it was real. That love not lust, and need not want, was Carlo's motivation.

A silent groan rose and died in her throat as his mouth travelled to the edge of her neck and nuzzled, his tongue, his lips erotic instruments as he tantalised the rapidly beating pulse.

His hands moved, one to her breast as he sought a sensitive peak, while the other splayed low over her stomach.

She wanted to urge him to quicken the pace, to dispense with her clothes while she feverishly tore every barrier from his body until there was nothing between them.

She wanted to be lifted high in his arms and sink down onto him, then clutch hold of him as he took her for the ride of her life.

Everything about him was too controlled. Even in bed he never lost that control completely, as she did.

There were times when she wanted to cry out that while she could accept Bianca as an important part of his past, she was his future. Except she never said the words. Perhaps because she was afraid of his response.

Now she turned in his arms and reached for him, her mouth seeking his as she gave herself up completely to the heat of passion.

He caught her urgency and effortlessly swept her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

Aysha's fingers worked on his shirt buttons, unfastened the buckle on his belt, then pulled his shirt free.

His nipples were hard, and she savoured each one in turn, then used her teeth to tease, aware that Carlo had deftly removed most of her clothes.

She heard his intake of breath seconds ahead of the soft thud as he discarded one shoe and the other, then dispensed with his trousers.

'Wait.' His voice was low and slightly husky, and she ran her hands over his ribcage, searched the hard plane of his stomach and reached for him.

'So you want to play, hmm?'

CHAPTER TWO

CARLO caught hold of her arms and let his hands slide up to cup her shoulders as he buried his mouth in the vulnerable hollow at the edge of her neck.

Her subtle perfume teased his senses, and he nuzzled the sensitive skin, tasted it, nipped ever so gently with his teeth, and felt the slight spasm of her body's reaction to his touch.

She was a generous lover. Passionate, with a sense of adventure and fun he found endearing.

He trailed his lips down the slope of her breast and suckled one tender peak, savoured, then moved to render a similar supplication to its twin.

Did he know what he did to her? Aysha felt a stab of pain at the thought that his lovemaking might be contrived. A practised set of moves that pushed all the right buttons.

Once, just once she wanted to feel the tremors of need shake his body... for her, only her. To know that she could make him so crazy with desire that he had no restraint.

Was it asking too much to want love? She wore his ring. Soon she would bear his name. It should be enough.

She wanted to mean so much more to him than just a satisfactory bed partner, a charming hostess.

Take what he's prepared to give, and be grateful, a tiny voice prompted. A cup half-full is better than one that is empty.

Her hands linked at his nape and she drew his head down to hers, exulting in the feel of his mouth as he shaped her own.

She let her tongue slide against his, then conducted a slow, sweeping circle before initiating a probing dance that was almost as evocative as the sexual act itself.

His hand shaped her nape and held fast her head, while the other slipped low over one hip, cupped her bottom and drew her close in against him.

She wanted him now, hard and fast, without any preliminaries. To be able to feel the power, the strength, without caution or care. As if he couldn't bear to wait a second longer to effect possession.

The familiar slide of his fingers, the gentle probing exploration as he sought the warm moistness of her feminine core brought a gasping sigh from her lips.

Followed by a despairing groan as he began an evocative stimulation. It wasn't fair that he should have such intimate knowledge and be aware precisely how to wield it to drive a woman wild.

His mouth hardened, and his jaw took control of hers, moving it in rhythm with his own.

She clutched hold of his shoulders and held on as his fingers probed deeper, and just as she thought she could bear it no longer he shifted position.

A cry rose and died in her throat as he slid into her in one long, thrusting movement.

Dear God, that felt good. So good. She murmured her pleasure, then gave a startled gasp as he tumbled her down onto the bed and withdrew.

His mouth left hers, and began a seeking trail down her throat, tasting the vulnerable hollows at the base of her neck, the soft, quivering flesh of each breast, the indentation of her navel.

She knew his intention, and felt the flame lick along every nerve-end, consuming every sensitised nerve-cell until she was close to conflagration.

Her head tossed from one side to the other as sensation took hold of her whole body. Part of her wanted to tell him to stop before it became unbearable, but the husky admonition sounded so low in her throat as to be indistinguishable.

He was skilled, so very highly skilled in giving a woman pleasure. The slight graze of his teeth, the erotic laving of his tongue. He knew just where to touch to urge her towards the edge. And how to hold her there, until she begged for release.

Aysha thought she cried out, and she bit down hard as Carlo feathered light kisses over her quivering stomach, then paused to suckle at her breast,

His mouth closed on hers, and she arched up against him as he entered her in one surging movement, stretching delicate tissues to their utmost capacity.

He began to move, slowly at first, then with increasing depth and strength as she became consumed with the feel of him.

His skin, her own, was warm and slick with sweat, and the blood ran through her veins like quicksilver.

It was more than a physical joining, for she gifted him her heart, her soul, everything. She was his. Only his. At that moment she would have died for him, so complete was her involvement.

Frightening, shattering, she reflected a long time later as she lay curled into the warmth of his body. For it almost destroyed her concept of who and what she had become beneath his tutelage.

The steady rise and fall of his chest was reassuring, the beat of his heart strong. The lazy stroke of his fingers along her spine indicated he wasn't asleep yet, and the slight pressure against the indentations of each vertebrae was soothing. She could feel his lips brush lightly over her hair as she drifted into a peaceful sleep.

It was the soft, hazy aftermath of great lovemaking. A time for whispered avowals of love, Aysha thought as she woke, the affirmation of commitment.

Aysha wanted to utter the words, and hear them in return. Yet she knew she would die a silent death if he didn't respond in kind. She pressed a light butterfly kiss to the muscled ridge of his chest and traced a gentle circle with the tip of her tongue.

He tasted of musk, edged with a faint tang that was wholly male. She nipped the hard flesh with her teeth and bestowed a love-bite, then she soothed it gently before moving close to a sensitive male nipple.

She trailed her fingers over one hip, lingered near his groin, and felt his stomach muscles tense.

'That could prove dangerous,' Carlo warned as she began to caress him with gentle intimacy.

The soft slide of one finger, as fleeting as the tip of a butterfly's wing, in a careful tactile exploration. Incredible how the male organ could engorge and enlarge in size. Almost frightening, its degree of power as instrument to a woman's pleasure.

Aysha had the desire to tantalise him to the brink of madness, and unleash everything that was wild and untamed, until there were no boundaries. Just two people as one, attuned and in perfect accord on every level. Spiritual, mental and physical.

A gasp escaped her throat as he clasped both hands on her waist and swept her to sit astride him.

Excitement spiralled through her body as he arched his hips and sent her tumbling down against his chest.

One hand slid to her nape as he angled her head to his, then his mouth was on hers, all heat and passion as he took possession.

The kiss seared her heart, branding her in a way that made her his...totally. Mind, body, and soul. She had no thought for anything but the man and the storm raging within.

It made anything she'd shared before seem less. Dear Lord, she'd ached for his passion. But this ... this was raw, primitive. Mesmeric. Ravaging.

She met and matched his movements, driven by a hunger so intense she had no recollection of time or place.

Aysha wasn't even aware when he reversed positions, and it was the gentling of his touch, the gradual loss of intensity that intruded on her conscious mind and brought with it a slow return to sanity.

There was a sense of exquisite wonderment, a sensation of wanting desperately to hold onto the moment in case it might fracture and fragment.

She didn't feel the soft warmth of tears as they slid slowly down her cheeks. Nor was she aware of the sexual heat emanating from her skin, or the slight trembling of her body as Carlo used his hands, his lips to bring her down.

He absorbed the dampness on one cheek, then pressed his lips against one closed eyelid, before moving to effect a similar supplication on the other. His hands shifted as he gently rolled onto his back, carrying her with him so she lay cradled against the length of his body.

Slight tremors shook her slim form, and he brought her mouth to his in a soft, evocative joining. His fingers trailed the shape of her, gently exploring the slim supple curves, the slender waist, the soft curve of her buttocks.

It was Carlo who broke contact long minutes later, and she trailed a hand down the edge of his cheek.

'I get first take on the shower. You make the coffee,' she whispered.

His slow smile caused havoc with her pulse-rate. 'We share the shower, then I'll organise coffee while you cook breakfast.'

'Chauvinist,' Aysha commented with musing tolerance.

His lips caressed her breast, and desire arrowed through her body, hot, needy, and wildly wanton. 'We can always miss breakfast and focus on the shower.'

His arousal was a potent force, and her eyes danced with mischief as she contemplated the option. 'As much as the offer attracts me, I need food to charge my energy levels.' She placed the tip of a finger over his lips, then gave a mild yelp as he nipped it with his teeth. 'That calls for revenge.'

Carlo's hands spanned her waist and he shifted her to one side, then he leaned over her. 'Try it.'

She rose to the challenge at once, although the balance of power soon became uneven, and then it hardly seemed to matter any more who won or lost.

Afterwards she had the quickest shower on record, then she dressed, swept her hair into a twist at her nape, added blusher, eye colour and mascara.

She looked, Carlo noted with respect, as if she'd spent thirty minutes on her grooming instead of the five it had taken her.

'Sit down and eat,' he commanded as he slid an omelette onto a plate. 'Coffee's ready.'

'You're a gem among men,' Aysha complimented as she sipped the coffee. Pure nectar on the palate, and the omelette was perfection.

'From chauvinist to gem in the passage of twenty minutes,' he drawled with unruffled ease, and she spared him a wicked grin in between mouthfuls.

'Don't get a swelled head.'

She watched as he poured himself some coffee then joined her at the table. The dark navy towelling robe accented his breadth of shoulder, and dark curling hair showed at the vee of the lapels. Her eyes slid down to the belt tied at his waist, and lingered.

'You don't have time to find out,' he mocked lazily, and she offered a stunning smile.

'It's my last day at work.' She rose to her feet and gulped the last mouthful of coffee. 'But as of tomorrow...'

'Promises,' Carlo taunted, and she reached up to brush her lips to his cheek, except he moved his head and they touched his mouth instead.

'Got to rush,' she said with genuine regret. 'See you tonight.'

Her job was important to her, and she loved the concept of using colour and design to make a house a home. The right furnishings, furniture, fittings, so that it all added up to a beautiful whole

that was both eye-catching and comfortable. She'd earned a reputation for going that extra mile for a client, exploring every avenue in the search to get it right.

However, there were days when phone calls didn't produce the results she wanted, and today was one of them. Added to which she had to run a final check over all the orders that were due to come in while she was away. An awesome task, just on its own.

Then there was lunch with some of her fellow staff, and the presentation of a wedding gift... an exquisite crystal platter. The afternoon seemed to fly on wings, and it was after six when she rode the lift to Carlo's penthouse.

'Ten minutes,' she promised him as she entered the lounge, and she stepped out of heeled pumps en route to the shower.

Aysha was ready in nine, and he snagged her arm as she raced towards the door.

'Slow down,' he directed, and she threw him an urgent glance.

'We're late. We should have left already.' She tugged her hand and made no impression. 'They'll be waiting for us.'

He pulled her close, and lowered his head down to hers. 'So they'll wait a little longer.'

His mouth touched hers with such incredible gentleness her insides began to melt, and she gave a faint despairing groan as her lips parted beneath the pressure of his.

Minutes later he lifted his head and surveyed the languid expression softening those beautiful smoky grey eyes. Better, he noted silently. Some of the tension had ebbed away, and she looked slightly more relaxed.

'OK, let's go.'

'That was deliberate,' Aysha said a trifle ruefully as they rode the lift down to the underground car park, and caught his musing smile.

'Guilty.'

He'd slowed her galloping pace down to a relaxed trot, and she offered a smile in silent thanks as they left the lift and crossed to the Mercedes.

'How was your day?' she queried as she slid into the passenger seat and fastened her belt.

'Assembling quotes, checking computer print-outs, checking a building site. Numerous phone calls.'

'All hands-on stuff, huh?'

The large car sprang into instant life the moment he turned the key, and he spared her a wry smile as they gained street level.

'That about encapsulates it.'

The church was a beautiful old stone building set back from the road among well-tended lawns and gardens. Symmetrically planted trees and their spreading branches added to the portrayed seclusion.

There was an air of peace and grace apparent, meshing with the mystique of blessed holy ground.

Aysha drew a deep breath as she saw the several cars lining the curved driveway. Everyone was here.

Attending someone else's wedding, watching the ceremony on film or television, was a bit different from participating in one's own, albeit this was merely a rehearsal of the real thing.

'I want to carry the basket,' Emily, the youngest flower girl, insisted, and tried to wrest it from Samantha's grasp.

'I don't want to hold a pillow. It looks sissy,' Jonathon, the eldest page boy declared.

Oh, my. If he thought carrying a small satin lace-edged pillow demeaned his boyhood, then just wait until he had to get dressed in a miniature suit, satin waistcoat, buttoned shirt and bow-tie.

'Sissy,' the youngest page boy endorsed.

'You have to,' Emily insisted importantly.

'Don't.'

'Do so.'

Aysha didn't know whether to laugh or cry. 'What if Samantha carries the basket of rose petals, and Emily carries the pillow?'

It was almost possible to see the ensuing mental tussle as each little girl weighed the importance of each task.

'I want the pillow,' Samantha decided. Rings held more value than rose-petals to be strewn over the carpeted aisle.

'You can have the basket.' Emily, too, had done her own calculations.

Teresa rolled her eyes, the girls' respective mothers attempted to pacify, and when that failed they tried bribery.

The four bridesmaids looked tense, for they'd each been assigned a child to care for during the formal ceremony.

- 'OK.' Aysha lifted both hands in a gesture of expressive defeat 'This is how it's going to be. Two baskets, so Emily and Samantha get to carry one each.' She cast both boys a stern look. 'Two pillows.' 'Two?' Teresa queried incredulously, and Aysha inclined her head.

'Two.'

The little girls beamed, and both boys bent their heads in sulky disagreement.

Maybe it would have been wiser not to give the children a rehearsal at all, and simply tell them what to do on the day and hope they'd concentrate so hard there wouldn't be the opportunity for error.

Celestial assistance was obviously going to be needed, Aysha mused as she listened to the priest's instructions.

An hour later they were all seated at a long table in a restaurant nominated as children-friendly. The food was good, the wine did much to relax fraught nerves, and Aysha enjoyed the informality of it all as she leaned back against Carlo's supporting arm.

'Tired?'

She lifted her face to his, and her eyes sparkled with latent intimacy. 'It's been a long day.'

He leaned in close and brushed his lips to her temple. 'You can sleep in in the morning.'

'Generous of you. But I need to be home early to help Teresa with preparations for the bridal shower. Remember?'

It was almost eleven when everyone began to make a move, and a further half-hour before Aysha and Carlo were able to leave, for the bridesmaids lingered and Teresa had last-minute instructions to impart.

The witching hour of midnight struck as she preceded Carlo into the penthouse, and she slipped off her shoes, took the clip from her hair and shook it loose, then she padded through to the kitchen.

'Coffee?'

Aysha sensed rather than heard him move behind her, and she murmured her approval as his hands kneaded tense shoulder muscles.

'Good?'

Oh, yes. So good, she was prepared to beg him to continue. 'Please. Don't stop.' It was bliss, almost heaven, and she closed her eyes as his fingers worked a magic all on their own.

'Any ideas for tomorrow night?'

She heard the lazy quality in his voice and smiled. 'You mean we have a free evening?'

'I can book dinner.'

'Don't,' she said at once. 'I'll pick up something.'

'I could do this much better if you lay down on the bed.'

Her senses were heightened, and her pulse began to quicken. 'That might prove dangerous.'

'Eventually,' Carlo agreed lazily. 'But there are advantages to a full body massage.'

Aysha's blood pressure moved up a notch. 'Are you seducing me?'

His soft laughter sounded deep and husky close to her ear. ‘Am I succeeding?’

‘I’ll let you know,’ she promised with wicked intent. ‘In about an hour from now.’

‘An hour?’

‘The quality of the massage will govern your reward,’ Aysha informed him solemnly, and he laughed as he swept her into his arms and carried her through to the bedroom.

To lay prone on towels as Carlo slowly smoothed aromatic oil over every inch of her body was sensual torture of the sweetest kind.

Whatever had made her think she’d last an hour? After thirty minutes the pleasure was so intense, it was all she could do not to roll onto her back and beg him to take her.

‘I think,’ she said between gritted teeth, ‘that’s enough.’

His fingertips smoothed up her thighs and lingered a hair’s breadth away from the apex, then shaped each buttock before settling at her waist.

‘You said an hour,’ Carlo reminded her, and gently rolled her onto her back.

Aysha looked at him from beneath long-fringed lashes. ‘I’ll make you pay,’ she promised as liquid heat spilled through her veins.

He leaned down and took her mouth in a brief hard kiss. ‘I’m counting on it.’

The sweet sorcery of his touch nearly sent her mad, and afterwards it was she who drove him to the brink, aware of those dark eyes watching her with an almost predatory alertness that gradually shifted and changed as she tried to break his control.

Desire, raw and primitive, tore through her body, and she felt bare, exposed, as her own fragile control shredded into a thousand pieces.

Aysha had no recollection of the tears that slowly spilled down each cheek until Carlo cupped her face and erased them with a single movement of his thumb.

His lips brushed hers, gently, back and forth, then angled in sensual possession.

Afterwards he simply held her until her breathing slowed and steadied into a regular beat, then he gently eased her to lie beside him and held her close through the night.

She barely stirred when he rose at eight, and he showered in a spare bathroom, then dressed and made breakfast.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee stirred Aysha’s senses, and she fought through the final mists of sleep into wakefulness.

‘The tousled look suits you,’ Carlo teased as he placed the tray down onto the bedside pedestal. Her cheeks were softly flushed, her eyes slumberous, the dilated pupils making them seem too large for her face.

‘Hi.’ She made an attempt to pull the sheet a little higher, and incurred his husky laughter.

‘Your modesty is adorable, cara.’

‘Breakfast in bed,’ she murmured appreciatively. ‘You’ve excelled yourself.’

He lowered his head and bestowed an open-mouthed kiss to the edge of her throat, teased the tender skin with his teeth, then trailed a path to the gentle swell of her breast.

‘I aim to please.’

Oh, yes, he did that. She retained a very vivid memory of just how well he’d managed to please her. Not that it had been entirely one-sided... She’d managed to take him further towards the edge than before. One of these days... nights, she amended, she planned to tip him over and watch him free-fall.

‘Naturally, your mind is more on food than me at this point, hmm?’

Go much lower, and I won’t get to the food. ‘Of course,’ she offered demurely. ‘I’m going to need stamina to make it through the day.’

‘The bridal shower,’ he mused. His eyes met hers, and she regarded him solemnly.

‘Teresa wants the occasion to be memorable.’

Carlo sank down onto the bed. ‘There’s orange juice, and caffeine to kick-start the day.’

Together with toast, croissants, fruit preserve, cheese, wafer-thin slices of salami and prosciutto. A veritable feast.

Aysha slid up in the bed, paying careful attention to keep the sheet tucked beneath her arms, and took the glass of juice from Carlo's extended hand. Next came the coffee, then a croissant with preserve, followed by a piece of toast folded in half over a layer of cheese and prosciutto.

'More coffee?'

She hesitated, checked the time, then shook her head. 'I said I'd be home around nine.'

Carlo stood to his feet and collected the tray. 'I'll take this downstairs.'

Ten minutes later she had showered, dressed and was ready to face the day. Light blue jeans sheathed her slim legs, hugged her hips, and she wore a fitted top that accentuated the delicate curve of her breasts.

She skirted the servery, reached up and planted a light kiss against the edge of his jaw. 'Thanks for breakfast.'

He caught her close and slanted his mouth over hers with a possession that wreaked havoc with her equilibrium. Then he eased the pressure and brushed his lips over the swollen contours of her own, lingered at one corner, then gently released her.

'I consider myself thanked.'

Her eyes felt too large, and she quickly blinked in an effort to clear her vision. That had been... 'cataclysmic' was a word that came immediately to mind. And passionate, definitely passionate.

Maybe she was beginning to scratch the surface of his control after all.

That thought stayed with her as she took the lift down to the underground car park, and during the few kilometres to her parents' home.

CHAPTER THREE

AYSHA'S four bridesmaids were the first to arrive, followed by Gianna and a few of Teresa's friends. Two aunts, three cousins, and a number of close friends.

There were beautifully wrapped gifts, much laughter, a little wine, some champagne, and the exchange of numerous anecdotes. Entertainment was provided by a gifted magician whose expertise in pulling at least a hundred scarves from his hat and jacket pockets had to be seen to be believed.

Coffee was served at three-thirty, and at four Teresa was summoned to the front door to accept the arrival of an unexpected guest.

The speed with which Lianna, Aysha' chief bridesmaid, joined Teresa aroused suspicion, and there was much laughter as a good-looking young man entered the lounge.

'You didn't—' Aysha began, and one look at Lianna, Arianne, Suzanne and Tessa was sufficient to determine that her four bridesmaids were as guilty as sin.

A portable tape-recorder was set on a coffee table, and when the music began he went into a series of choreographed movements as he began to strip.

It was a tastefully orchestrated act, as such acts went. The young man certainly had the frame, the body, the muscles to execute the traditional bump-and-grind routine.

'You refused to let us give you a ladies' night out, so we had to do something,' Lianna confided with an impish grin as everyone began to leave.

'Fiend,' Aysha chastised with affectionate remonstrance. 'Wait until it's your turn.'

'What'll you do to top it, Aysha? Hire a group of male strippers?'

'Don't put thoughts into my head,' she threatened direly.

The caterers tidied and cleaned up, then left fifteen minutes later, and Aysha crossed to the table where a selection of gifts were on display.

From the intensely practical to the highly decorative, they were all beautiful and reflected the giver's personality. A smile curved her lips. Lianna's gift of a male stripper had been the wackiest.

'You had no idea of Lianna's surprise?' Teresa queried as she crossed to her side.

'None,' Aysha answered truthfully, and curved an arm around her mother's waist. 'Thanks, Mamma, for a lovely afternoon.'

'My pleasure.'

Aysha grinned unashamedly. 'Even the stripper?' she teased, and glimpsed the faint pink colour in her mother's cheeks.

'No comment.'

She began to laugh. 'All right, let's change the subject. What shall we do with these gifts?'

They set them on a table in one of the rooms Teresa had organised for displaying the wedding presents, and when that was done Aysha went upstairs and changed into tailored trousers and matching silk top.

It was after six when she entered Carlo's penthouse apartment, and she crossed directly into the kitchen to deposit the carry-sack containing a selection of Chinese takeaways she'd collected en route from home.

'Let me guess. Chinese, Thai, Malaysian?' Carlo drawled as he entered the kitchen, and she directed him a winsome smile.

'Chinese. And I picked up some videos.'

'You have plans to spend a quiet night?'

She opened cupboards and extracted two plates, then collected cutlery. 'I think I've had enough excitement for the day.' And through last night.

'Care to elaborate on the afternoon?'

Her eyes sparkled with hidden devilry. 'Lianna ordered a male stripper.' She decided to tease him a little. 'He was young, built, and gorgeous.' She wrinkled her nose at him. 'Ask Gianna; she was there.'

'Indeed?' His eyes speared hers. 'Perhaps I need to hear more about this gorgeous hunk.'

Carlo had her heart, her soul. It never ceased to hurt that she didn't have his.

'Well...' She deliberated. 'There was the body to die for.' She ticked off each attribute with teasing relish. 'Longish hair, tied in this cute little ponytail, and when he let it free... wow, so sexy. No apparent body hair.' Her eyes sparkled with devilish humour. 'Waxing must be a pain... literally. And he had the cutest butt.'

Carlo's eyes narrowed fractionally, and she gave him an irrepressible grin. 'He stripped down to a thong bikini brief.'

'I imagine Teresa and Gianna were relieved.'

She tried hard not to laugh, and failed as a chuckle emerged. 'They appeared to enjoy the show.'

His lips twitched. 'An unexpected show, unless I'm mistaken.'

'Totally,' she agreed, and viewed the various cartons she'd deposited on the servery. 'Let's be really decadent,' she suggested lightly. 'And watch a video while we eat.'

The first was a thriller, the acting sufficiently superb to bring an audience to the edge of their seats, and the second was a comedy about a wedding where everything that could go wrong, did. It was funny, slapstick, and over the top, but in amongst the frivolity was a degree of reality Aysha could identify with.

In between videos she'd tidied cartons and rinsed plates, made coffee, and now she carried the cups through to the kitchen.

She felt pleasantly tired as she ascended the stairs to the main bedroom, and after a quick shower she slid between the sheets to curl comfortably in the circle of Carlo's arms with her head pillowed against his chest.

Within minutes she fell asleep, and she was unaware of the light touch as Carlo's lips brushed the top of her head, or the feather-light trail of his fingers as they smoothed a path over the surface of her skin.

They woke late, lingered over breakfast, then took Giuseppe's cabin cruiser for a day trip up the Hawkesbury River. They returned as the sun set in a glorious flare of fading colour and the cityscape sprang to life with a myriad of pin-prick lights.

Magic, Aysha reflected, as the wonder of nature and manmade technology overwhelmed her.

Tomorrow the shopping would begin in earnest as Teresa initiated the first of her many lists of Things to Do.

'Mamma, is this really necessary?'

As shopping went, it had been a profitable day with regard to acquisitions. Teresa, it appeared, was bent on spending money . . . Serious money.

'You're the only child I have,' Teresa said simply. 'Don't deny me the pleasure of giving my daughter the best wedding I can provide.'

Aysha tucked her hand through her mother's arm and hugged it close. 'Don't rain on my parade, huh?'

'Exactly.'

'OK. The dress, if you insist. But...' She paused, and cast Teresa a stern look. 'That's it,' she admonished.

'For today.'

They joined the exodus of traffic battling to exit choked city streets, and made it to Vaucluse at five-thirty, leaving very little time to shower, change and be ready to leave the house at six thirty.

'You go on ahead,' Teresa suggested. 'I'll put these in the room next to yours. We can sort through them tomorrow.'

Aysha raced upstairs to her bedroom, then discarded her clothes and made for the shower. Minutes later she wound a towel round her slim curves, removed the excess moisture from her hair and wielded the hairdrier to good effect.

Basic make-up followed, then she crossed to the walk-in robe, cast a quick discerning eye over the carefully co-ordinated contents, and extracted a figure-hugging gown in black.

The hemline rested at mid-thigh, the overall length extended slightly by a wide border of scalloped lace. The design was sleeveless, backless, and cunningly styled to show a modest amount of cleavage. Thin shoulder straps ensured the gown stayed in place.

Sheer black pantyhose? Or should she settle for bare legs and almost non-existent thong bikini briefs? And very high stiletto-heeled pumps?

Minimum jewellery, she decided, and she'd sweep her hair into a casual knot atop her head.

Half an hour later she descended the stairs to the lower floor and entered the lounge. Teresa and Giuseppe were grouped together sharing a light aperitif.

Her father turned towards her, his expression a comedic mix of parental pride and male appreciation. Any hint of paternal remonstrance was absent, doubtless on the grounds that his beloved daughter was safely spoken for, on the verge of marriage, and therefore he had absolutely nothing to worry about.

Teresa, however, was something else. One glance was all it took for those dark eyes to narrow fractionally and the lips to thin. Appearance was everything, and tonight Aysha did not fit her mother's required image.

'Don't you think that's a little...?' Teresa paused delicately. 'Bold, darling?'

'Perhaps,' Aysha conceded, and directed her father a teasing glance. 'Papà?'

Giuseppe was well versed in the ways of mother and daughter, and sought a diplomatic response. 'I'm sure Carlo will be most appreciative.' He gestured towards a crystal decanter. 'Can I fix you a spritzer?'

She hadn't eaten much throughout the day, just nibbled on fresh fruit, sipped several glasses of water, and taken three cups of long black coffee. Alcohol would go straight to her head. 'I stopped by the kitchen when I arrived home and fixed some juice,' she declined gently. 'I'm fine.'

'Unless I'm mistaken, that's Carlo now.'

The light crunch of car tires, the faint clunk of a door closing, followed by the distant sound of melodic door chimes heralded his arrival, and within seconds their live-in housekeeper ushered him into the lounge.

Aysha crossed the room and caught hold of his hand, then offered her cheek for his kiss. It was a natural gesture, one that was expected, and only she heard the light teasing murmur close to her ear. 'Stunning.'

His arm curved round the back of her waist and he drew her with him as he moved to accept Teresa's greeting.

'A drink, Carlo?'

'I'll wait until dinner.'

It would be easy to lean in against him, and for a moment she almost did. Except there was no one to impress, and the evening lay ahead.

Giuseppe swallowed the remainder of his wine, and placed his glass down onto the tray. 'In that case, perhaps we should be on our way. Teresa?'

At that moment the phone rang, and Teresa frowned in disapproval. 'I hope that's not going to make us late.'

Not unless the call heralded something of dire consequence; there wasn't a chance. Aysha bit back on the mockery, and sensed her mother's words even before they were uttered.

'You and Carlo go on ahead. We won't be far behind you.'

Sliding into the passenger seat of the car was achieved with greater decorum than she expected, and she was in the process of fastening her seatbelt when Carlo moved behind the wheel.

A deft flick of his wrist and the engine purred to life. Almost a minute later they had traversed the curved driveway and were heading towards the city.

'Am I correct in assuming the dress is a desire to shock?'

Aysha heard the drawling voice, sensed the underlying cynicism tinged with humour, and turned to look at him. 'Does it succeed?'

She was supremely conscious of the amount of bare thigh showing, and she fought against the temptation to take hold of the hemline and attempt to tug it down.

He turned slightly towards her, and in that second she was acutely aware of the darkness of his eyes, the faint curve of his mouth, the gleam of white teeth.

'Teresa didn't approve.'

'You know her so well,' she indicated wryly. 'Papà seemed to think you'd be appreciative.'

'Oh, I am,' Carlo declared. 'As I'm sure every other man in the room will be.'

She directed him a stunning smile. 'You say the nicest things.'

'Careful you don't overdo it, cara.'

'I'm aiming for brilliance.'

For one brief second her eyes held the faintest shadow, then it was gone. He lifted a hand and brushed light fingers down her cheek.

'A few hours, four at the most. Then we can leave.'

Yes, she thought sadly. And tomorrow it will start all over again. The shopping, fittings, social obligations. Each day it seemed to get worse. Fulfilling her mother's expectations, having her own opinions waved aside, the increasing tension. If only Teresa wasn't bent on turning everything into such a production.

Suburban Point Piper was a neighbouring suburb and took only minutes to reach.

Carlo turned between ornate wrought-iron gates and parked behind a stylish Jaguar. Four, no, five cars lined the curved driveway, and Aysha experienced a moment's hesitation as she moved towards the few steps leading to the main entrance.

There had been countless precedents of an evening such as this, Aysha reflected as she accepted a light wine and exchanged pleasantries with fellow guests.

Beautiful home, gracious host and hostess. The requisite mingling over drinks for thirty minutes before dinner. Any number between ten to twenty guests, a splendid table. An exquisite floral centre-piece. The guests carefully selected to complement each other.

'Carlo, darling.'

Aysha heard the greeting, recognised the sultry feminine purr, and turned slowly to face one of several women who had worked hard to win Carlo's affection.

Now that the wedding was imminent, most had retired gracefully from the hunt. With the exception of Nina di Salvo.

The tall, svelte fashion consultant was a femme fatale, wealthy, widowed, and selectively seeking a husband of equal wealth and social standing.

Nina was admired, even adored, by men. For her style, beauty and wit. Women recognised the predatory element existent, and reacted accordingly.

'Aysha,' Nina acknowledged. 'You look...' The pause was deliberate. 'A little tired. All the preparations getting to you, darling?'

Aysha summoned a winsome smile and honed the proverbial dart. 'Carlo doesn't permit me enough sleep.'

Nina's eyes narrowed fractionally, then she leaned towards Carlo, brushed her lips against his cheek, and lingered a fraction too long. 'How are you, caro?'

'Nina.' Carlo was too skilful a strategist to give anything away, and too much the gentleman to do other than observe the social niceties.

He handled Nina's overt affection with practised ease and minimum body contact. Although Nina more than made up for his reticence, Aysha noted, wondering just how he regarded the glamorous brunette's attention.

She saw his smile, heard his laughter, and felt the tender care of his touch. Yet how much was a facade?

'Do get me a drink, caro,' Nina commanded lightly. 'You know what I like.'

Oh, my, Aysha determined as Carlo excused himself and made his way to the bar. This could turn into one hell of an evening.

'I hope you don't expect fidelity, darling,' Nina warned quietly. 'Carlo has...' she paused fractionally '... certain needs not every woman would be happy to fulfil.'

Cut straight to the chase, a tiny voice prompted. 'Really, Nina? I'll broach that with him.'

'What will you broach, and with whom?'

Speak of the devil... Aysha turned towards him as he handed Nina a slim flute of champagne.

Quite deliberately she tilted her chin and gazed into his dark gleaming eyes with amused serenity. She'd had plenty of smile practice, and she proffered one of pseudo-sincerity. 'Nina expressed her concern regarding my ability to fulfil your needs.'

Carlo's expression didn't change, and Aysha dimly registered that as a poker player he would be almost without equal.

'Really?'

It seemed difficult to comprehend a single word could hold such a wealth of meaning. Or the quiet tone convey such a degree of cold anger.

The tension was evident, although Carlo hadn't moved so much as a muscle. Anyone viewing the scene would assume the three of them were engaged in pleasant conversation.

'Perhaps Nina and I should get together and compare notes,' Aysha declared with wicked humour.

Nina lifted the flute to her lips and took a delicate sip. 'What for, darling? My notes are bound to be far more extensive than yours.'

Wasn't that the truth? She caught a glimpse of aqua silk and saw Teresa and Giuseppe enter the room, and wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed at their appearance.

Her mother would assess Nina's presence in an instant, and seek to break up their happy little threesome.

Aysha began a silent countdown... Three minutes to greet their hosts, another three to acknowledge a few friends.

'There you are, darling.'

Right on cue. Aysha turned towards her mother and proffered an affectionate smile. 'Mamma. You weren't held up too long, after all.' She indicated the tall brunette. 'You remember Nina?'

Teresa eyes sharpened, although her features bore a charming smile. 'Of course. How nice to see you again.'

A lie, if ever there was one. Polite society, Aysha mused. Good manners hid a multitude of sins. If she were to obey her base instincts, she'd tell Nina precisely where to go and how to complete the journey.

There was an inherent need to show her claws, but this wasn't the time or place.

'Shall we go in to dinner?'

A respite, Aysha determined with a sense of relief. Unless their hostess had chosen unwisely and placed Nina in close proximity.

The dining room was large, the focal point being the perfectly set table positioned beneath a sparkling crystal chandelier of exquisite design.

The scene resembled a photograph lifted out of the social pages of a glossy magazine. It seemed almost a sacrilege for guests to spoil the splendid placement precision.

Although there were, she noted, a waiter and waitress present to serve allotted food portions at prearranged intervals. Likewise the imported wine would flow, but not at a rate that was considered too free.

Respectability, decorum, an adherence to exemplary good manners, with carefully orchestrated conversational topics guaranteed to stimulate the guests' interest.

Aysha caught Nina's gleam of silent mockery, and had an insane desire to disrupt it. A little, just a little.

Nothing overt, she decided as she selected a spoon and dipped it into the part-filled bowl of mushroom soup.

The antipasto offered a superb selection, and the serving of linguini with its delicate cream and mushroom sauce couldn't be faulted.

'Could you have the waiter pour me some wine, darling?' Aysha cast Carlo a stunning smile. She rarely drank alcohol, and he knew it. However, she figured she had sufficient food in her stomach to filter the effect if she sipped it slowly.

Her request resulted in a slanted eyebrow, and she offered him the sweetest smile. 'Please.'

If he hesitated, or attempted to censure her in any way, she'd kill him.

A glance was all it took for the waiter to fill her glass, and seconds later she lifted the crystal flute to her lips and savoured the superb Chablis.

Giuseppe smiled, and lifted his own glass in a silent salute.

A few glasses of fine wine, good food, pleasant company. It took little to please her father. He was a man of simple tastes. He had worked hard all his life, achieved more than most men; he owned a beautiful home, had chosen a good woman as his wife, and together they had raised a wonderful daughter who was soon to be married to the son of his best friend and business partner. His life was good. Very good.

Dear Papà, Aysha thought fondly as the wine began to have a mellowing effect. He was everything a father should be, and more. A man who had managed to blend the best of the Old

Country with the best of the new. The result was a miscible blend of wisdom and warmth tempered with pride and passion.

The main course was served... tender breast of chicken in a delicate basil sauce with an assortment of vegetables.

Her elbow touched Carlo's arm, and she lowered her hand to her lap as she unconsciously toyed with her napkin. His thigh was close to her own. Very close.

Slowly, very slowly, she moved her leg until it rested against his. It would be so easy to glide her foot over his. With extreme care, she cautioned silently. Stiletto heels as fine as hers should almost be registered as a dangerous weapon. The idea was to arouse his attention, not cause him an injury.

Gently she positioned the toe of her shoe against his ankle, then inched it slowly back and forth without moving her heel, thereby making it impossible for anyone to detect what she was doing.

This could be fun, she determined as she let her fingers slide towards his thigh. A butterfly touch, fleeting.

Should she be more daring? Perhaps run the tip of her manicured fingernail down the outer seam of the trousered leg so close to her own? Maybe even...

Ah, that brought a reaction. Slight, but evident, nonetheless. And the slight but warning squeeze of his fingers as they caught hold of her own.

Aysha met his gaze fearlessly as he turned towards her, and she glimpsed the musing indolence apparent beneath the gleaming warmth of those dark brown depths.

Without missing a beat, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed each finger in turn, watching the way her eyes dilated in startled surprise. Then he returned her hand to rest on his thigh, tracing a slow pattern over the fine bones, aware of her slight tremor as he deliberately forestalled her effort to pull free.

It was fortunate they were between courses. Aysha looked at the remaining wine in her glass, and opted for chilled water. Wisdom decreed the need for a clear head. Each brush of his fingers sent flame licking through her veins, and she clenched her hand, then dug her nails into hard thigh muscle in silent entreaty.

She experienced momentary relief when Carlo released her hand, only to suppress a faint gasp as she felt his fingers close over her thigh.

CHAPTER FOUR

AYSHA reached for her glass and took a sip of iced water, and cast the table's occupants a quick, encompassing glance.

Her eyes rested briefly on Nina, witnessed her hard, calculating glance before it was quickly masked, and felt a shiver glide down the length of her spine.

Malevolence, no matter how fleeting, was disconcerting. Envy and jealousy in others were unenviable traits, and something she'd learned to deal with from a young age. It had accelerated with her engagement to Carlo. Doubtless it would continue long after the marriage.

She wanted love... desperately. But she'd settle for fidelity. Even the thought that he might look seriously at another woman made it feel as if a hand took hold of her heart and squeezed until it bled.

'What do you think, Aysha?'

Oh, hell. It wasn't wise to allow distraction to interfere with the thread of social conversation. Especially not when you were a guest of honour.

She looked at Carlo with a silent plea for help, and met his humorous gaze.

'Luisa doesn't agree I should keep our honeymoon destination a surprise.'

A second was all it took to summon a warm smile.

'I need to pack warm clothes.' Her eyes gleamed and a soft laugh escaped her lips. 'That's all I know.'

'Europe. The snowfields?' The older woman's eyes twinkled. 'Maybe North America. Canada?'

'I really have no idea,' Aysha declared.

Dessert comprised individual caramelised baskets filled with segments of fresh fruit served with brandied cream.

'Sinful,' Aysha declared quietly as she savoured a delectable mouthful.

'I shouldn't, but I will,' Luisa uttered ruefully. 'Tomorrow I'll compensate with fresh juice for breakfast and double my gym workout.'

Teresa, she noted, carefully removed the cream, speared a few segments of fruit, and left the candied basket. As mother of the bride, she couldn't afford to add even a fraction of a kilo to her svelte figure.

It was half an hour before the hostess requested they move into the lounge for coffee.

Aysha declined the very strong espresso brew and opted for a much milder blend with milk. The men took it short and sweet, added grappa, and converged together to exchange opinions on anything from bocce to the state of the government.

Argue, Aysha amended fondly, all too aware that familiar company, good food, fine wine all combined to loosen the male Italian tongue and encourage reminiscence.

She loved to listen to the cadence of their voices as they lapsed into the language of their birth. It was expressive, accompanied by the philosophical shrug of masculine shoulders, the hand movements to emphasise a given point.

'Giuseppe is in his element.'

Aysha mentally prepared herself as she turned to face Nina. One glance was all it took to determine Nina's manner was the antithesis of friendly.

'Is there any reason why he shouldn't be?'

'The wedding is a major coup.' The smile didn't reach her eyes. 'Congratulations, darling. I should have known you'd pull it off.'

Aysha inclined her head. 'Thank you, Nina. I'll take that as a compliment.'

There was no one close enough to overhear the quiet exchange. Which was a pity. It merely offered Nina the opportunity to aim another poisoned dart.

'How does it feel to be second-best? And know your inherited share in the family firm is the sole reason for the marriage?'

'Considering Carlo is due to inherit his share in the family firm, perhaps you should ask him the same question.'

Successfully fielded. Nina didn't like it. Her eyes narrowed, and the smile moved up a notch in artificial brilliance.

'You're the one who has to compete with Bianca's ghost,' Nina offered silkily, and Aysha waited for the punchline. 'All cats are alike in the dark, darling. Didn't you know?'

Oh, my. This was getting dirty. 'Really?' Her cheeks hurt from keeping a smile pinned in place. 'Perhaps you should try it with the lights on, some time.'

As scores went, it hardly rated a mention. And the victory was short-lived, for it was doubtful Nina would allow anyone to gain an upper hand for long.

'Aysha.' Luisa appeared at her side. 'Teresa has just been telling me about the flowers for the church. Orchids make a lovely display, and the colour combination will be exquisite.'

She was a guest of honour, the focus her wedding day. It was easy to slip into animated mode and discuss details. Only the wedding dress and the cake were taboo.

Except talking and answering questions merely reinforced how much there still was to do, and how essential the liaison with the wedding organiser Teresa had chosen to co-ordinate everything.

The invitation responses were all in, the seating arrangements were in their final planning stage. According to Teresa, any one of the two little flower girls and two page boys could fall victim to a malicious virus, or contract mumps, measles or chicken pox. Alternately, one or all could become paralysed with fright on the day and freeze half-way down the aisle.

At ages three and four, anything was possible.

'My flower girl scattered rose petals down the aisle perfectly at rehearsal, only to take three steps forward on the day, tip the entire contents of the basket on the carpet, and run crying to her mother,' recalled one of the guests.

Aysha remembered the incident, and another wedding where the page boy had carried the satin ring-cushion with such pride and care, then refused to give it up at the appropriate moment. A tussle had ensued, followed by tears and a tantrum.

It had been amusing at the time, and she really didn't care if one of the children made a mistake, or missed their cue. It was a wedding, not a movie which relied on talented actors to perform a part.

Her mother, she knew, didn't hold the same view.

Aysha glanced towards Carlo, and felt the familiar pull of her senses. Dark, well-groomed hair, a strong shaped head. Broad shoulders accentuated by perfect tailoring.

A slight inclination of his head brought his profile into focus. The wide, sculpted bone structure, the strong jaw. Well-defined cheekbones, and the glimpse of his mouth.

Fascinated, she watched each movement, her eyes clinging to the shape of him, aware just how he felt without the constriction of clothes. She was familiar with his body's musculature, the feel and scent of his skin.

At this precise moment she would have given anything to cross to his side and have his arm curve round her waist. She could lean in against him, and savour the anticipation of what would happen when they were alone.

He was fond of her, she knew. There were occasions when he completely disconcerted her by appearing to read her mind. But that special empathy between two lovers wasn't there. No matter how desperately she wanted it to be.

Did he know she could tell the moment he entered a room? She didn't have to see him, or hear his voice. A developed sixth sense alerted her of his presence, and her body reacted as if he'd reached out and touched her.

All the fine hairs moved on the surface of her skin, and the back of her neck tingled in recognition.

Damnable, she cursed silently.

It was after eleven when the first of the guests took their leave, and almost midnight when Teresa and Giuseppe indicated an intention to depart.

Aysha thanked their hosts, smiled until her face hurt, and quivered slightly when Carlo caught hold of her hand as they followed her parents down the steps to their respective cars.

'Goodnight, darling.' Teresa leaned forward and brushed her daughter's cheek.

Aysha stood as Carlo unlocked the car, then she slid into the passenger seat, secured her belt, and leaned back against the headrest as Carlo fired the engine.

'Tired?'

She was conscious of his discerning glance seconds before he set the car in motion.

'A little.' She closed her eyes, and let the vehicle's movement and the quietness of the night seep into her bones.

'Do you want me to take you home?'

A silent sigh escaped her lips, and she effected a rueful smile. 'Now there's a question. Which home are you talking about? Yours, mine or ours?'

'The choice is yours.'

Was it? The new house was completely furnished, and awaiting only the final finishing touches. Her own bedroom beckoned, but that was fraught with implication Teresa would query in the morning.

Besides, she coveted the touch of his hands, the feel of his body, his mouth devastating her own.

Then she could pretend that good lovemaking was a substitute for love. That no one was meant to have it all, and in Carlo, their future together, she had more than her share.

'The penthouse.'

Carlo didn't comment, and she wondered if it would have made any difference if she'd said home.

An ache started up in the pit of her stomach, and intensified until it became a tangible pain as he slowed the car, de-activated the security system guarding entrance to the luxury apartment building, then eased down into the underground car park and brought the vehicle to a halt in his allotted space.

They rode the lift to the top floor in silence, and inside the apartment Aysha went willingly into his arms, his bed, an eager supplicant to anything he chose to bestow.

It was just after nine when Aysha eased the Porsche into an empty space in an inner city car park building, and within minutes she stepped off the escalator and emerged onto the pavement.

It was a beautiful day, the sky a clear azure with hardly a cloud in sight, and the sun's warmth bathed all beneath it with a balmy summer brilliance. Her needs were few, the purchases confined to four boutiques, three of which were within three blocks of each other.

Two hours, tops, she calculated, then she'd meet her bridesmaids for lunch. At two she had a hair appointment, followed by a manicure, and tonight she was attending an invitation-only preview of the first in a series of foreign films scheduled to appear over the next month.

Each evening there was something filling their social engagement diary. Although last night when Carlo had suggested dining out she'd insisted they eat in... and somehow the decision hadn't got made one way or the other. She retained a vivid recollection of why, and a secret smile curved her lips as she slid her sunglasses into place.

Selecting clothes was something she enjoyed, and she possessed a natural flair for colour, fashion and design.

Aysha had three hours before she was due to join her bridesmaids for lunch, and she intended to utilise that time to its fullest potential.

It was nice to be able to take time, instead of having to rush in a limited lunch-hour. Selective shopping was fun, and she gradually added to a growing collection of glossy carry-bags.

Bags she should really dispense with before meeting the girls... which meant a walk back to the car park to deposit her purchases in the boot of her car.

Lianna, Arianne, Suzanne and Tessa were already seated when Aysha joined them. Two brunettes, a redhead, and a blonde. They'd attended school together, suffered through piano and ballet lessons, and, although their characters were quite different from each other, they shared an empathy that had firmed over the years as an unbreakable bond.

'You're late, but we forgive you,' Lianna began before Aysha was able to say a word. 'Of course, we do understand.' She offered one of her irrepressible smiles. 'You have serious shopping on the agenda.' She leaned forward. 'And your penance is to relay every little detail.'

'Let me order a drink first,' Aysha protested, and gave her order to a hovering waiter. 'Mineral water, slice of lemon, plenty of ice.'

'What did you buy to change into after the wedding?' Arianne quizzed, and Lianna pulled a face.

'Sweetheart, she won't need anything to wear after the wedding except skin.'

'Sure. But she should have something sheer and sexy to start off with,' Suzanne interceded.

'Honest, girls, can you see Carlo helping Aysha out of the wedding gown and into a nightgown? Come on, let's get real here!'

'Are you done?' Aysha queried, trying to repress a threatening laugh.

'Not yet,' Lianna declared blithely. 'You need to suffer a little pain for all the trouble we're going to for you.' She began counting them off on each finger. 'Dress fittings, shoe shopping, church rehearsals, child chaperoning, in church and out of it, organising the bridal shower, not to mention make-up sessions and hair stylists practising on our hair.' Her eyes sparkled with devilish laughter. 'For all of which our only reward is to kiss the groom.'

'Who said you get to do that?' Aysha queried with mock seriousness. 'Married men don't kiss other women.'

'No kiss, we decorate the wedding car,' Lianna threatened.

'Are you ladies ready to order?'

'Yes,' they agreed in unison, and proceeded to completely confuse the poor young man who'd been assigned to their table.

'You're incorrigible,' Aysha chastised as soon as he'd disappeared towards the kitchen, and Lianna gave a conciliatory shrug.

'This is a feel-good moment, darling. The last of the great single-women luncheons. Saturday week you join the ranks of married ladies, while we, poor darlings, languish on the sideline searching for the perfect man. Of which, believe me, there are very few.' She paused to draw breath. 'If they look good, they sound terrible, or have disgusting habits, or verge towards violence, or, worst of all, have no money.'

Suzanne shook her head. 'Cynical, way too cynical.'

They ordered another round of drinks, then their food arrived.

'So, tell us, darling,' Lianna cajoled. 'Is Carlo as gorgeous in bed as he is out of it?'

'That's a bit below the belt,' Arianne protested, and Lianna grinned.

'Got it in one. Hey, if Aysha ditches him, I'm next in line.' She cast Aysha a wicked wink. 'Aren't you glad I'm your best friend?'

'Yes,' she responded simply. Loyalty and integrity mattered, and Lianna possessed both, even if she was an irrepressible motor-mouth. The fun, the generous smile hid a childhood marred by tragedy.

'You haven't told us what you bought this morning.'

'You didn't give me a chance.'

'I'm giving it to you now,' Lianna insisted magnanimously, and Aysha laughed.

She needed the levity, and it was good, so good to relax and unwind among friends.

'What social event is scheduled for tonight? Dinner with family, the theatre, ballet, party? Or do you just get to stay home and go to bed with Carlo?'

'You have the cheek of old Nick,' Aysha declared, and caught Lianna's wicked smile.

'You didn't answer the question.'

'There's a foreign film festival on at the Arts Centre.'

'Ah, eclectic entertainment,' Arianne sighed wistfully. 'What are you going to wear?'

'Something utterly gorgeous,' Lianna declared, her eyes narrowing speculatively. 'Long black evening trousers or skirt, matching top, shoestring straps, and that exquisite beaded evening jacket you picked up in Hong Kong. Minimum jewellery.'

'OK.'

'OK? I'm in fashion, darling. What I've just described is considerably higher on the scale of gorgeous than just OK.'

'All right, I'll wear it,' Aysha conceded peaceably.

They skipped dessert, ordered coffee, and Aysha barely made her hair appointment on time.

'No dinner for me, Mamma. I'll just pick up some fruit. I had a late lunch,' she relayed via the mobile phone prior to driving home. With the way traffic was moving, it would be six before she reached Vaucluse. Which would leave her just under an hour to shower, dress, tend to her hair and make-up, and be at Carlo's apartment by seven-fifteen.

'Bella,' he complimented warmly as she used her key barely minutes after the appointed time.

Aysha could have said the same, for he looked devastatingly attractive attired in a dark evening suit, snowy white cotton shirt, and black bow tie. Arresting, she added, aware of her body's reaction to his appreciative appraisal. Heat flooded her veins, activating all her nerve-ends, as she felt the magnetic pull of the senses. It would be so easy just to hold out her arms and walk into his, then lift her face for his kiss. She wanted to, badly.

'Would you like a drink before we leave?'

Alcohol on a near-empty stomach wasn't a good idea, and she shook her head. 'No. Thanks.'

'How was lunch with the girls?'

A smile lifted the edges of her mouth, and her eyes gleamed with remembered pleasure. 'Great. Really great.'

Carlo caught hold of her hand and lifted it to his lips. 'I imagine Lianna was at her irrepressible best?'

'It was nice just to sit, relax and laugh a little.' Her smile widened, and her eyes searched his. 'Lianna is looking forward to kissing the groom.'

Carlo pulled back the cuff of his jacket and checked his watch. 'Perhaps we should be on our way. Traffic will be heavy, and parking probably a problem.'

It was a gala evening, and a few of the city's social scions numbered among the guests. The female contingent wore a small fortune in jewels and French designer gowns vied with those by their Italian equivalent.

Aysha mingled with fellow guests, nibbled from a proffered tray of hors d'oeuvres, and sipped orange juice with an added dash of champagne.

'Sorry I'm a little late. Parking was chaotic.'

Aysha recognised the light feminine voice and turned to greet its owner. 'Hello, Nina.'

The brunette let her gaze trail down to the tips of Aysha's shoes, then slowly back again in a deliberately provocative assessment. 'Aysha, how—pretty, you look. Although black is a little stark, darling, on one as fair as you.'

She turned towards Carlo, and her smile alone could have lit up the entire auditorium. 'Caro, I really need a drink. Do you think you could organise one for me?'

Very good, Aysha silently applauded. Wait for the second Carlo is out of earshot, and... any minute now—

'I doubt you'll satisfy him for long.'

Aysha met that piercing gaze and held it. She even managed a faint smile. 'I'll give it my best shot.'

'There are distinct advantages in having the wedding ring, I guess.'

'I get to sleep with him?'

Nina's eyes glittered. 'I'd rather be his mistress than his wife, darling. That way I get most of the pleasure, all of the perks, while you do the time.'

The temptation to throw the contents of her glass in Nina's face was almost irresistible.

'Champagne?' Carlo drawled, handing Nina a slim flute.

The electronic tone summoning the audience to take their seats came as a welcome intrusion, and she made her way into the theatre at Carlo's side, all too aware of Nina's presence as the usherette pointed them in the direction of their seats.

Now why wasn't she surprised when Nina's seat allocation adjoined theirs? Hardly coincidence, and Aysha gritted her teeth when Nina very cleverly ensured Carlo took the centre seat. Grr.

The lights dimmed, and her fingers stiffened as Carlo covered her hand with his own. Worse was the soothing movement of his thumb against the inside of her wrist.

So he sensed her tension. Good. He'd sense a lot more before the evening was over!

The theatre lights went out, technicolor images filled the screen, and the previews of forthcoming movies showed in relatively quick sequence. The main feature was set in Paris, the French dubbed into English, and it was a dark movie, noir, with subjective nuances, no comedy whatsoever. Aysha found it depressing, despite the script, directorship and acting having won several awards.

The final scene climaxed with particular violence, and when the credits faded and the lights came on she saw Nina withdraw a hand from Carlo's forearm.

Aysha threw her an icy glare, glimpsed the glittering satisfaction evident, and wanted to scream.

She turned towards the aisle and moved with the flow of exiting patrons, aware, as if she was a disembodied spectator, that Nina took full advantage of the crowd situation to press as close to Carlo as decently possible.

They reached the auditorium foyer, and Aysha had to stand with a polite smile pinned to her face as the patrons were served coffee, offered cheese and biscuits or minuscule pieces of cake.

'Why don't we go on to a nightclub?' Nina suggested. 'It's not late.'

And watch you attempt to dance and play kissy-face with Carlo? Aysha demanded silently. Not if I have anything to do with it!

'Don't let us stop you,' Carlo declined smoothly as he curved an arm along the back of Aysha's waist. Tense, definitely tense. He wanted to bend his head and place a placating kiss to the curve of her neck, then look deep into those smoky grey eyes and silently assure her she had nothing whatsoever to worry about.

A slight smile curved his lips. Nina saw it, and misinterpreted its source.

'The music is incredible.' She tucked her hand through his arm, and cajoled with the guile of a temptress. 'You'll enjoy it.'

'No,' he declined in a silky voice as he carefully disengaged her hand. 'I won't.'

Nina recognised defeat when she saw it, and she lifted her shoulders with an elegant shrug. 'If you must miss out...'

His raised eyebrow signalled her departure, and she swept him a deep sultry glance. 'Another time, maybe.'

Aysha drew a deep breath, then released it slowly. Of all the nerve! She lifted her cup and took a sip of ruinously strong coffee. It would probably keep her awake half the night, but right at this precise moment she didn't give a damn.

'Carlo, come stai?'

A business acquaintance, whose presence she welcomed with considerable enthusiasm. The man looked mildly stunned as she enquired about his wife, his children, their schooling and their achievements.

'You overwhelmed him,' Carlo declared with deceptive indolence, and she fixed him with a brilliant smile.

'His arrival was timely,' she assured him sweetly. 'I was about to hit you.'

'In public?'

She drew in a deep breath, and studied his features for several long seconds. 'This is not a time for levity.'

'Nina bothers you?'

Aysha forced herself to hold his gaze. 'She never misses an opportunity to be wherever we happen to go.'

His eyes narrowed fractionally. 'You think I don't know that?'

'Were you ever lovers?' she demanded, and a faint chill feathered across the surface of her skin as she waited for his response.

'No.'

The words tripped out before she could stop them. 'You're quite sure about that?'

Carlo was silent for several seconds, then he ventured silkily, 'I've never been indiscriminate with the few women who've shared my bed. Believe me, Nina didn't number among them.' He took her cup and placed it together with his own on a nearby table. 'Shall we leave?'

He was angry, but then so was she, and she swept him a glittering look from beneath mascaraed lashes. 'Let's do that.'

Their passage to the car wasn't swift as they paused momentarily to chat to fellow patrons whom they knew or were acquainted with.

'Your silence is ominous,' Carlo remarked with droll humour as he eased the Mercedes into the flow of traffic.

'I'm going with the saying... if you can't find anything nice to say, it's better to say nothing at all.'

'I see.'

No, you don't. You couldn't possibly know how terrified I am of not being able to hold your interest. Petrified that one day you'll find someone else, and I'll be left a broken shell of my former self.

The drive from the city to Rose Bay was achieved in a relatively short space of time, and Carlo cleared security at his apartment underground car park, then manoeuvred the car into his allotted space.

Aysha released the door-clasp, slid to her feet, closed the door, and moved the few steps to her car.

'What are you doing?'

'I would have thought that was obvious. I'm going home.'

'Your keys are in the apartment,' Carlo said mildly.

Dammit, so they were. 'In that case, I'll go get them.'

She turned and stalked towards the bank of lifts, stabbed the call button, and barely contained her impatience as she waited for it to arrive.

'Don't you think you're overreacting?'

There was something in his voice she failed to recognise, although some deep, inner sixth sense did and sent out a red alert. 'Not really.'

The doors slid open and she stepped into the cubicle, jabbed the top panel button, and stood in icy silence as they were transported to the uppermost floor.

Carlo unlocked the apartment door, and she swept in ahead of him, located the keys where she'd put them on a table in the foyer, and collected them.

'Your parents aren't expecting you back tonight.'

It didn't help that he was right. 'So I'll ring them.'

He noted the proud tilt of her chin, the firm set of her mouth. 'Stay.'

Her eyes flared. 'I'd prefer to go home.' Nina's vitriolic words had provided too vivid an image to easily dispel.

'I'll drive you.'

The inflexibility evident in his voice sent chills scudding down the length of her spine. 'The hell you will.'

His features hardened, and a muscle tensed at the side of his jaw. 'Try to walk out of this apartment, and see how far you get.'

Aysha allowed her gaze to travel the length of his body, and back again. He had the height, the sheer strength to overcome any evasive tactics she might employ.

'Brute force, Carlo? Isn't that a little drastic?'

'Not when your well-being and safety are at stake.'

Her chin tilted in a gesture of defiance. 'Somehow that doesn't quite add up, does it?' She held up her hand as he began to speak. 'Don't.' Her eyes held a brilliant sheen that was a mixture of anger, pride, and pain. 'At least let there be honesty between us.'

'I have never been dishonest with you.'

She felt sick inside, a dreadful gnawing emptiness that ripped away any illusions she might have had that affection and caring on his part were enough.

Without a further word she turned and walked towards the front door, released the locking mechanism, then took the few steps necessary to reach the bank of lifts.

Please, please let there be one waiting, she silently begged as she depressed the call button.

The following twenty seconds were among the longest in her life, and she gave an audible sigh of relief when the heavy stainless steel doors slid open.

Aysha stepped inside and turned to jab the appropriate floor panel, only to gasp with outraged indignation as Carlo stepped into the cubicle.

'Get out'

Dark eyes lanced hers, mercilessly hard and resolute. 'I can drive you, or follow behind in my car.' The ruthlessness intensified. 'Choose.'

The lift doors slid closed, and the cubicle moved swiftly down towards the car park.

'Go to hell.'

His smile held little humour. 'That wasn't an option.'

'Unfortunately.'

The flippant response served to tighten his expression into a grim mask, and his anger was a palpable entity.

'Believe you wouldn't want me to take you there.' His drawl held a silky threat that sent shivers scudding down the length of her spine.

The doors whispered open, and without a word she preceded him into the huge concrete cavern. Her car was parked next to his, and she widened the distance between them, conscious of her heels clicking against the concrete floor.

Carlo crossed to the Mercedes, unlocked the passenger door, and held it open. 'Get in.'

Damned if she'd obey his dictum. 'I'll need my car in the morning.'

His expression remained unchanged. 'I'll collect you.'

Aysha felt like stamping her foot. 'Or I can have Teresa drop me, or take a cab, or any one of a few other options.' Her eyes were fiery with rebellion. 'Don't patronise me, dammit!'

It had been a long night, fraught with moments of sheer anger, disillusionment, and introspective rationalisation. None of which had done much to ease the heartache or the sense of betrayal. Each of which she'd examined in detail, only to silently castigate herself for having too high an expectation of a union based solely in reality.

Worse, for allowing Nina's deviousness to undermine her own ambivalent emotions. Nina's success focused on Aysha's insecurity, and it irked unbearably.

Carlo watched the fleeting emotions chase across her expressive features and divined each and every one of them.

'Get in the car, cara.'

His gentle tone was almost her undoing, and she fought against the sudden prick of tears. Damn him. She wanted to maintain her anger. Lash out, verbally and physically, until the rage was spent.

Conversely, she needed his touch, the soothing quality of those strong hands softly brushing her skin, the feel of his mouth on hers as the sensual magic wove its own spell.

She wanted to re-enter the lift and have it transport them back to his apartment. Most of all, she wanted to lose herself in his loving, then fall asleep in his arms with the steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek.

Yet pride prevented her from taking that essential step, just as it locked the voice in her throat. She felt raw, and emotionally at odds.

Did most brides suffer this awful ambivalence? Get real, a tiny voice reminded her. You don't represent most brides, and while you have the groom's affection, it's doubtful he'll ever gift you his unconditional love.

With a gesture indicating silent acquiescence she slid into the passenger seat, reached for the safety belt as Carlo closed the door, and fastened it as he crossed in front of the vehicle. Seconds later he fired the engine and cruised up the ramp leading to street level.

'Call your parents.'

Aysha reached into her purse and extracted the small mobile phone, and keyed in the appropriate digits.

Giuseppe answered on the third ring. 'Aysha? Something is wrong?'

'No, Papà. I'll be home in about fifteen minutes. Can you fix security?'

Thank heavens it wasn't Teresa who'd answered, for her mother would have fired off a string of questions to rival the Spanish Inquisition.

Aysha ignored Carlo's brief encompassing glance as the car whispered along the suburban street, and she closed her eyes against the image of her mother slipping on a robe in preparation for a maternal chat the instant Aysha entered the house.

A silent laugh rose and died in her throat. At this precise moment she didn't know which scenario she preferred... The emotive discussion she'd just had with Carlo, or the one she was about to have with Teresa.

Aysha had no sooner stepped inside the door than her mother launched into a series of questions, and it was easier to fabricate than spell out her own insecurities.

She justified her transgression by qualifying Teresa had enough on her plate, and nothing could be achieved by the confidence.

'Are you sure there is nothing bothering you?' Teresa persisted.

'No, Mamma.' Inspiration was the mother of invention, and she used it shamelessly. 'I forgot to take the samples I need to match up the shoes tomorrow, so I thought I'd come home.'

'You didn't quarrel with Carlo?'

Quarrel wasn't exactly the word she would have chosen to describe their altercation. 'Why would I do that?' Aysha countered.

'I'll make coffee.'

All she wanted to do was go to bed. 'Don't bother making it for me.'

'You're going upstairs now?'

'Goodnight, Mamma,' she bade gently. 'I'll see you in the morning.'

'Gianna and I will meet you for lunch tomorrow.' She mentioned a restaurant. 'I'll book a table for one o'clock.'

She leaned forward and brushed lips to her mother's cheek. 'That sounds nice.'

Without a further word she turned and made for the stairs, and in her room she slowly removed her clothes, cleansed her face of make-up, then slid in between the sheets.

CHAPTER FIVE

'I'LL be there in half an hour,' Carlo declared as Aysha took his call early next morning. 'Don't argue,' he added before she had a chance to say a word.

Conscious that Teresa sat within hearing distance as they shared breakfast she found it difficult to give anything other than a warm and friendly response.

'Thanks,' she managed brightly. 'I'll be ready.' She replaced the receiver, then drained the rest of her coffee. 'That was Carlo,' she relayed. 'I'll go change.'

'Will you come back here, or go straight into the city?'

'The city. I need to choose crockery and cutlery for the house.' Pots and pans, roasting dishes. Each day she tried to accumulate some of the necessities required in setting up house. 'I may as well make an early start.'

In her room, she quickly shed shorts and top and selected a smart straight skirt in ivory linen, added a silk print shirt and matching jacket, slid her feet into slim-heeled pumps, tended to her hair and make-up, and was downstairs waiting when Carlo's Mercedes slid to a halt outside the front door.

Aysha drew a calming breath, then she walked out to the car and slipped into the passenger seat. 'There was no need for you to collect me,' she assured him, conscious of the look of him, the faint aroma of his cologne.

'There was every need,' he drawled silkily as he sent the car forward.

'I don't want to fight with you,' she said ingenuously, and he spared her a swift glance.

'Then don't.'

A disbelieving laugh escaped her throat. 'Suddenly it doesn't seem that easy.'

'Nina is a woman who thrives on intrigue and innuendo.' Carlo's voice was hard, his expression an inscrutable mask.

Oh, yes, Aysha silently agreed. And she's so very good at it. 'She wants you.'

'I'm already spoken for, remember?'

'Ah, now there's the thing. Nina abides by the credo of all being fair in love and war.'

'And this is shaping up as war?'

You'd better believe it! 'You're the prize, darling,' she mocked, and incurred his dark glance.

'Yours.'

'You have no idea how gratifying it is to hear you say that.'

'Cynicism doesn't suit you.' Carlo slanted her a slight smile, and she raised one eyebrow in mocking acquiescence.

'Shall we change the subject?'

He negotiated an intersection, then turned into Rose Bay.

'I've booked a table for dinner tonight. I'll collect you at six.'

They'd had tickets for tonight's première performance by the Russian corps de ballet for a month. How could she not have remembered?

The remainder of the short drive was achieved in silence, and Carlo deposited her beside her car, then left as she slid in behind the wheel of the Porsche.

City traffic was horrific at this hour of the morning, and it was after nine when Aysha emerged onto the inner city street.

First stop was a major department store two blocks distant, and she'd walked less than half a block when her mobile phone rang.

She automatically retrieved the unit from her bag and heard Teresa's voice, pitched high in distress.

'Aysha? I've just had a call from the bridal boutique. Your headpiece has arrived from Paris, but it's the wrong one!'

She closed her eyes, then opened them again. It had taken a day of deliberation before making the final choice... How long ago? A month? Now the order had been mixed up. Great. 'OK, Mamma. Let's not panic.'

Her mother's voice escalated. 'It was perfect, just perfect. There wasn't another to compare with it.'

'I'll go sort it out.' A phone call from the boutique to the manufacturer in Paris, and the use of a courier service should see a successful result.

Aysha should have known it couldn't be that simple.

'I've already done that,' the boutique owner relayed. 'No joy, unfortunately. They don't have another in stock. The design is intricate, the seed pearls needed are held up heaven knows where, and the gist of it is, we need to choose something else.'

'OK, let's do it.' It took an hour to select, ascertain the order could be filled and couriered within the week.

'That's definite,' the vendeuse promised.

Now why didn't that reassure her? Possibly because she'd heard the same words before.

An hour later she had to concede there were diverse gremlins at work, for the white embroidered stockings ordered hadn't arrived. The lace suspender belt had, but it didn't match the garter belt, as it was supposed to do.

Teresa would consider it a catastrophe. Aysha merely drew in a deep breath, ascertained the order might be correctly filled in time, decided might wasn't good enough, and opted to select something else with a guaranteed delivery.

It was after midday when she collected the last carry-bag and added it to the collection she held in each hand. Shoes? Did she have time if she was to meet Teresa and Gianna at Double Bay for lunch at one? She could always phone and say she'd be ten or fifteen minutes late.

With that thought in mind she entered the Queen Victoria building and made her way towards the shoe shop.

It was a beautiful old building, historically preserved, and undoubtedly heritage-listed. Aysha loved the ambience, the blend of old and modern, and she admired a shop display as she rode the escalator to the first floor.

She'd only walked a few steps when an exquisite bracelet showcased in a jeweller's window caught her eye, and she paused to admire it. The gold links were of an unusual design, and each link held a half-carat diamond.

'I'm sure you'll only have to purr prettily in Carlo's ear, and he'll buy it for you.'

Aysha recognised the voice and turned slowly to face the young woman at her side. 'Nina,' she acknowledged with a polite smile, and watched as Nina's expression became positively feline.

She took in the numerous carry-bags and their various emblazoned logos. 'Been shopping?'

Aysha effected a faint shrug. 'A few things I needed to collect.'

'I was going to ring and invite you to share a coffee with me. Can you manage a few minutes now?'

The last thing she wanted was a tête-à-tête with Nina... with or without the coffee. 'I really don't have time. I'm meeting Teresa and Gianna for lunch.'

'In that case...' She slid open her attaché case, extracted a large square envelope and slipped it into one of Aysha's carry-bags. 'Have fun with these. I'm sure you'll find them enlightening.' Closing the case, she proffered a distinctly feline smile. 'Ciao. See you tomorrow night at the sculpture exhibition.'

Given the social circle in which they both moved, their attendance at the same functions was inevitable. Aysha entertained the fleeting desire to give the evening exhibition a miss, then dismissed the idea. Bruno would never forgive their absence.

Aysha caught the time on one of the clocks featured in the jeweller's window, and hurriedly made for the bank of escalators.

Five minutes later she joined the flow of traffic and negotiated a series of one-way streets before hitting the main arterial one that would join with another leading to Double Bay.

Teresa and Gianna were already seated at a table when she entered the restaurant, and she greeted them both warmly, then sank into a chair.

'Shall we order?'

'You were able to sort everything out with the bridal boutique?'

It was easier to agree. Afterwards she could go into detail, but right now, here, she didn't want Teresa to launch into a long diatribe. 'Yes.'

'Bene.' Her mother paused sufficiently long for the waiter to take their order. 'You managed to collect everything?'

'Except shoes, and I'm sure I'll find something I like in one of the shops here.' Double Bay held a number of exclusive shops and boutiques. 'I'll have a look when we've finished lunch.'

It was almost two when they emerged onto the pavement, and Aysha left both women to complete their shopping while she tended to the last few items on her list.

A rueful smile played at the edges of her mouth. In a little over a weeek all the planning, the shopping, the organising... it would all be over. Life could begin to return to normal. She'd be Aysha Santangelo, mistress of her own home, with a husband's needs to care for.

Just thinking about those needs was enough to send warmth coursing through her veins, and put wickedly sensuous thoughts in her head.

During the next two hours she added to the number of carry-bags filling the boot of her car. The envelope Nina had slid into one of them drew her attention, and she pulled it free, examined it, then, curious as to its contents, she undid the flap.

Not papers, she discovered. Photographs. Several of them. She looked at the first, and saw a man and a woman embracing in the foyer of a hotel.

Not any man. Carlo. And the woman was Nina.

Aysha's insides twisted and began to churn as she put it aside and looked at the next one, depicting the exterior and name of a Melbourne hotel, the one where Carlo had stayed three weeks ago when he'd been there for a few days on business. Supposedly business, for the following shot showed Carlo and Nina entering a lift together.

Aysha's fingers shook as she kept flipping the photographs over, one by one. Nina and Carlo pausing outside a numbered door. About to embrace. Kissing.

The evidence was clear enough. Carlo was having an affair... with Nina.

Her legs suddenly felt boneless, and her limbs began to shake. How dared he abuse her trust, her love... everything she'd entrusted in him?

If he thought she'd condone a mistress, he had another think coming!

Anger rose like newly ignited flame, and she thrust the photographs back into the envelope, closed the boot, then slid in behind the wheel of her car.

There were many ways to hurt someone, but betrayal was right up there. She wanted to march into his office and instigate a confrontation. Now.

Except she knew she'd yell, and say things it would be preferable for no one else to overhear.

Wait, an inner voice cautioned as she negotiated peak hour traffic travelling the main east suburban road leading towards Vaucluse.

The car in front braked suddenly, and only a split-second reaction saved her from running into the back of it.

All her fine anger erupted in a stream of language that was both graphic and unladylike. Horns blared in rapid succession, car doors slammed, and there were voices raised in conflict.

Traffic banked up behind her, and it was ten minutes before she could ease her car forward and slowly clear an intersection clogged with police car, ambulance, tow-truck.

Consequently it was after five when she parked the car out front of her parents' home, and she'd no sooner entered the house than Teresa called her into the kitchen.

'I'll be there in a few minutes,' Aysha responded. 'After I've taken everything up to my room.'

A momentary stay of execution, she reflected as she made her way up the curved staircase. The carry-bags could be unpacked later. The photographs were private, very private, and she tucked them beneath her pillow.

She took a few minutes to freshen up, then she retraced her steps to the foyer. The kitchen was redolent with the smell of herbs and garlic, and a small saucepan held simmering contents on the ceramic hotplate.

Teresa stood, spoon in hand, as she added a little wine, a little water, before turning to face her daughter.

'You didn't tell me what happened at the bridal boutique.'

Aysha relayed the details, then waited for her mother's anticipated reaction. She wasn't disappointed.

'Why weren't they couriered out? Why weren't we told before this there might be a problem? I'll never use that boutique again!'

'You won't have to,' Aysha said drily. 'Believe me, I've no intention of doing a repeat performance in this lifetime.'

'We should have used someone else.'

'As most of the bridal boutiques get all their supplies from the same source, I doubt it would have made a difference.'

'You don't know that,' Teresa responded sharply. 'I should have dealt with it myself. Can't they get anything right? Now we learn the wedding lingerie doesn't match.'

'I'm sure Carlo won't even notice.'

Teresa gave her a look which spoke volumes. 'It doesn't matter whether he notices or not. You'll know. I'll know. And so will everyone else when you lift your dress and he removes the garter.' The volume of her voice increased. 'We spent hours selecting each individual item. Now nothing matches.'

'Mother.' Mother was bad. Its use forewarned of frazzled nerves, and a temper stretched close to breaking point. 'Calm down.' One look at Teresa's face was sufficient to tell a verbal explosion was imminent, and she took a deep breath and released it slowly. 'I'm just as disappointed as you are, but we have to be practical.' Assertiveness probably wasn't a good option at this precise moment. 'I've already chosen something I'm happy with and they've guaranteed delivery within days.'

'I'll check it out in the morning.'

'There's no need to do that.'

'Of course there is, Aysha.' Teresa was adamant. 'We've put a great deal of business their way.'

If she stayed another minute, she'd spit the dummy and they'd have a full-scale row. 'I haven't got time to discuss it now. I have to shower and change, and meet Carlo in less than an hour.'

It was a cop-out, albeit a diplomatic one, she decided as she quickly ascended the stairs. Differences of opinion were one thing. All-out war was another. Teresa was Teresa, and she was unlikely to change.

Damn Nina and her Mission. She was a bitch of the first order. Desperate, and dangerous.

The worst kind, Aysha determined viciously as she stripped off her clothes and stepped beneath the cascade of water.

Five minutes later she emerged, wound a towel around her slender curves and crossed into the bedroom bent on selecting something mind-blowing to wear.

Dressed to kill. What a marvellous analogy, she decided. One look at her mirrored reflection revealed a slender young woman in a black beaded gown that was strapless, backless, with a hemline that fell to her ankles. A long chiffon scarf lay sprawled across the bed and she draped it round her neck so both ends trailed down her back.

Make-up was, she determined, a little overstated. Somehow it seemed appropriate. Warriors painted themselves before they went into battle, didn't they? And there would be a battle fought before the night was over. She could personally guarantee it.

Teresa was setting the table in the dining room. 'Mamma, I'm on my way.'

Was it something in her voice that caused her mother to cast her a sharp glance? When it came to maternal instincts, Teresa's were second to none. 'Have a good time.'

That was entirely debatable. Dinner à deux followed by an evening at the ballet had definitely lost its appeal. 'Thanks.'

Fifteen minutes later she garaged her car in the underground car park, then rode the lift to Carlo's apartment. The envelope containing the photographs was in her hand, and the portrayed images on celluloid almost scorched her fingers.

He opened the door within seconds, and she saw his pupils widen in gleaming male appreciation. A shaft of intense satisfaction flared, and she took in the immaculate cut of his dark suit, the startling white cotton shirt, the splendid tie.

The perfectly groomed, wildly attractive fiancé. Loving, too, she added a trifle viciously as he drew her close and nuzzled the sensitive curve of her neck.

The right touch, the expert moves. It was almost too much to expect him to be faithful as well. His love, she knew, would never be hers to have. But fidelity... That was something she intended to insist on.

'What's wrong?'

Add intuitive, Aysha accorded. At least some of his senses were on track. She moved back a step, away from the traitorous temptation of his arms. It would be far too easy to lean in against him and offer her mouth for his kiss. But then she'd kiss him back, and that wouldn't do at all.

'What makes you think that?' she queried with deliberate calm, and saw his eyes narrow.

'We've never played guessing games, and we're not going to start now.'

Games, subterfuge, deception. They were one and the same thing. 'Really?'

His expression sharpened, accentuating the broad facial bone structure with its strong angles and planes. 'Spit it out, Aysha. I'm listening.'

Aysha rang the tip of one fingernail along the edge of the envelope. Eyes like crystallised smoke burned with a fiery heat as she thrust the envelope at him. 'You've got it wrong. You talk. I get to listen.'

He caught the envelope, and a puzzled frown creased his forehead. 'What the hell is this about?'

'Hell is a pretty good description. Open the damned thing. I think you'll get the picture.' She certainly had!

His fingers freed the flap and she watched him carefully as he extracted the sheaf of photos and examined them one by one.

His expression barely altered, and she had to hand it to him... He had tremendous control. Somehow his icy discipline had more effect than anger.

'Illuminating, wouldn't you agree?'

His gaze speared hers, dark, dangerous and as hard as granite. 'Very.'

Her eyes held his fearlessly. 'I think I deserve an explanation.'

'I stayed in that hotel, and, yes, Nina was there. But without any prior knowledge or invitation on my part.'

How could she believe him when Nina continued to drip poison at every turn?

'That's it?' She was so cool it was a wonder the blood didn't freeze in her veins.

'As far as I'm concerned.'

'I guess Nina just happened to be standing outside your room?' She swept his features mercilessly. 'I don't buy it.'

'It happens to be the truth.' His voice was inflexible, and Aysha's eyes were fearless as she met his.

'I'm fully aware our impending marriage has its base in mutual convenience,' she stated with restrained anger. 'But I insist on your fidelity.'

Carlo's eyes narrowed and became chillingly calm. There was a leashed stillness apparent she knew she'd be wise to heed.

Except she was past wisdom, beyond any form of rationale. Did he have any conception of what she'd felt like when she'd sighted those photos? It was as if the tip of a sword pierced her heart, poised there, then thrust in to the hilt.

'My fidelity isn't in question.'

'Isn't it?'

'Would you care to rephrase that?'

'Why?' Aysha countered baldly. 'What part didn't you understand?'

'I heard the words. It's the motive I find difficult to comprehend.'

With admirable detachment she raked his large frame from head to toe, and back again. 'It's simple. In this marriage, there's only room for two of us.' She was so angry, she felt she might self-destruct. 'There's no way I'll turn a blind eye to you having a mistress on the side.'

'Why would I want a mistress?' Carlo queried with icy calm.

Her eyes flashed, a brilliant translucent grey that had the clarity and purity of a rare pearl. 'To complement my presence in the marital bed?'

His gaze didn't waver, and she fought against being trapped by the depth, the intensity. It was almost hypnotic, and she had the most uncanny sensation he was intent on dispensing with the layers that guarded her soul, like a surgeon using a scalpel with delicate precision.

'Nina has done a hatchet job, hasn't she?' Carlo offered in a voice that sounded like silk being razed by tempered steel. 'Sufficiently damaging, that any assurance I give you to the contrary will be viewed with scepticism?' He reached out a hand and caught hold of her chin between thumb and forefinger. 'What we share together,' he prompted. 'What would you call that?'

She was breaking up inside, slowly shattering into a thousand pieces. Special, a tiny voice taunted. So special, the mere thought of him sharing his body with someone else caused her physical pain.

'Good sex?' Carlo persisted dangerously.

Her stance altered slightly, and her eyes assumed a new depth and intensity. 'Presumably not good enough.' she declared bravely.

It was possible to see the anger build, and she watched with detached fascination as the fingers of each hand clenched into fists, watched the muscles bunch at the edge of his jaw, the slight flaring of nostrils, and the darkening of his eyes.

He uttered a husky oath, and she said with deliberate facetiousness, 'Flattery isn't appropriate.'

Something moved in the depths of his eyes. An emotion she didn't care to define.

'Nina,' Carlo vented emotively, 'has a lot to answer for.'

Didn't she just! 'On that, at least, we agree.'

'Let's get this quite clear,' he said with dangerous quietness. 'You have my vow of fidelity, just as I have yours. Understood?'

She wanted to lash out, then pick up something and smash it. The satisfaction would be immensely gratifying.

'Aysha?' he prompted with deadly quietness, and she forced herself to respond.

'Even given that Nina is a first-class bitch, I find it a bit too much of a coincidence for you both to be in Melbourne at the same time, staying in the same hotel, the same floor.' Aysha drew in a deep breath. 'Photographic proof bears considerable weight, don't you think?'

He could have shaken her within an inch of her life. For having so little faith in him. So little trust.

'Did it not occur to you to consider it strange that a photographer just happened to be in the hotel lobby at the time Nina and I entered it... coincidentally together? Or that her suite and mine were very conveniently sited opposite each other?' It hadn't taken much pressure to discover Nina had bribed the booking receptionist to reshuffle bookings. 'Perhaps a little too convenient the same photographer was perfectly positioned to take a shot Nina had very carefully orchestrated?'

'You were kissing her!'

'Correction,' he drawled with deliberate cynicism. 'She was kissing me.'

Nina's words rose to the forefront of Aysha's mind. Vicious, damaging, and incredibly pervasive. 'Really? There didn't seem a marked degree of distinction to me.'

He extended his hands as if to catch hold of her shoulders, only to let them fall to his sides. 'A few seconds either way of that perfectly timed shot, and the truth would have been clearly evident.'

'According to Nina,' Aysha relayed bitterly, 'you represent the ultimate prize in the most suitable husband quest. Rich, handsome, and, as reputation has it...a lover to die for.' Her smile was a mere facsimile. 'Her words, not mine.'

Something fleeting darkened his eyes. A quality that was infinitely ruthless.

'An empty compliment, considering it's completely false.'

The celluloid print of that kiss rose up to haunt her. ‘A willing, voluptuous female well-versed in every sexual trick in the book.’ Her eyes swept his features, then focused on the unwavering depth of those dark eyes. ‘You mean to say you refused what was so blatantly offered?’ It took considerable effort to keep her voice steady. ‘How noble.’

Carlo reached forward and caught hold of her chin, increasing the pressure as she attempted to twist out of his grasp.

‘Why would I participate in a quick sexual coupling with a woman who means nothing to me?’

He was almost hurting her, and her eyes widened as he slid a hand to her nape and held it fast.

‘A moment’s aberration when your libido took precedence?’ she sallied, hating the way his cologne teased her nostrils and began playing havoc with her equilibrium.

Oh, God, she didn’t know anything any more. There were conflicting emotions warring inside her head, some of which hardly made any sense.

‘Aysha?’

Her eyes searched his, wide, angry, and incredibly hurt. ‘How would you feel if the situation were reversed?’

A muscle bunched at the side of his jaw, and something hot and terrifyingly ruthless darkened his eyes.

‘I’d kill him.’

His voice was deadly quiet, yet it held the quality of tempered steel, and she felt as if a hand took hold of her throat and squeezed until it choked off her breath.

Her chest tightened and her heart seemed to beat loud, the sound a heavy, distant thud that seemed to reverberate inside her ears.

‘A little extreme, surely?’ Aysha managed after several long seconds.

‘You think so?’

‘That sort of action would get you long service, perhaps even life, in gaol.’

‘Not for the sort of death I have in mind.’ His features assumed a pitiless mask.

He had the power, the influence, to financially ruin an adversary. And he would do it without the slightest qualm.

A light shivery sensation feathered over the surface of her skin. She needed time out from all the madness that surrounded her. Somewhere she could gain solitude in which to think. A place where she had an element of choice.

‘I’m going to move into the house for a few days.’ The words emerged almost of their own accord, and she saw his eyes narrow fractionally.

‘It’s the house, or a hotel,’ Aysha insisted, meaning every word.

He wanted to shake her. Paramount was the desire to wring Nina’s neck. Anger, frustration, irritation... each rose to the fore, and he banked them all down in an effort to conciliate.

‘If that’s what it takes.’

‘Thank you.’

She was so icily polite, so remote. Pain twisted his gut, and he swore beneath his breath.

‘We’re due at the ballet in an hour.’

‘Go alone, or don’t go at all, Carlo. I really don’t care.’

Aysha walked into the bedroom and caught up a few essentials from drawers, the wardrobe, aware that Carlo stood watching her every move from the doorway.

For one tragic second she felt adrift, homeless. Which was ridiculous. The thought made her angry, and she closed the holdall, then slung the strap over one shoulder.

‘Aysha.’

She’d taken only a token assortment of clothing. That fact should have been reassuring, yet he’d never felt less assured in his life.

Clear grey eyes met his, unwavering in their clarity. ‘Right now, there isn’t a word you can say that will make a difference.’

She walked to the doorway, stepped past him, and made her way through the apartment to the front door. She half expected him to stop her, but he didn’t.

The lift arrived swiftly, and she rode it down to the car park, unlocked her car, then drove it up onto the road.

Carlo leaned his back against the wall and stared sightlessly out of the wide plate-glass window. After a few tense minutes, he picked up the receiver, keyed in a series of digits, then waited for it to connect.

The private detective was one of the best, and with modern technology he should have the answer Carlo needed within days.

He made three more calls, offered an obscene amount of money to ensure that his requests... orders, he amended with grim cynicism, were met within a specified time-frame.

Now, he had to wait. And continue to endure Aysha’s farcical pretence for a few days. Then there would be no more room for confusion.

He moved away from the wall, prowled the lounge, then in a restless movement he lifted a hand and raked fingers through his hair.

Yet strength wasn’t the answer. Only proof, irrefutable proof.

In business, it was essential to cover all the bases, and provide back-up. He saw no reason why it wouldn’t work in his personal life.

CHAPTER SIX

AYSHA was hardly aware of the night, the flash of headlights from nearby vehicles, as she traversed the streets and negotiated the Harbour Bridge. She handled the car with the movements of an automaton, and it was something of a minor miracle she reached suburban Clontarf.

Celestial guidance, she decided wryly as she activated the wrought-iron gates guarding. entrance to the architectural masterpiece Carlo had built

Remote-controlled lights sprang on as she reached the garage doors, and she checked the alarm system before entering the house.

It was so quiet, so still, and she crossed into the lounge to switch on the television, then cast a glance around the perfectly furnished room.

Beautiful home, luxuriously appointed, every detail perfect, she reflected; except for the relationship of the man and woman who were to due to inhabit it.

A weary sigh escaped her lips. Was she being foolish seeking a temporary escape? What, after all, was it going to achieve?

Damn. Damn Nina and the seeds she’d deliberately planted.

A slight shiver shook her slender frame, and she resolutely made her way to the linen closet. It was late, she was tired, and all she had to do was fetch fresh linen, make up the bed, and slip between the sheets.

She looked at the array of linen in their neat piles, and her fingers hovered, then shifted to a nearby stack.

Not the main bedroom. The bed was too large, and she couldn’t face the thought of sleeping in it alone.

A guest bedroom? Heaven knew there were enough of them! She determinedly made her way towards the first of four, and within minutes she’d completed the task.

In a bid to court sleep she opted for a leisurely warm shower. Towelled dry, she caught up a cotton nightshirt and slid into bed to lie staring into the darkness as her mind swayed every which way but loose.

Carlo. Was he in bed, unable to sleep? Or had he opted to attend the ballet, after all?

What if Nina was also there? The wretched woman would be in her element when she discovered Carlo alone. Oh, for heaven's sake! Be sensible.

Except she didn't feel sensible. And sleep was never more distant.

Perhaps she did fall into a fitful doze, although it seemed as if she'd been awake all night when dawn filtered through the drapes and gradually lightened the room.

She lifted her left wrist and checked the time. A few minutes past six. There was no reason for her to rise this early, but she couldn't just lie in bed.

Aysha thrust aside the covers and padded barefoot to the kitchen. The refrigerator held a half-empty bottle of fruit juice, a partly eaten sandwich, and an apple.

Not exactly required sustenance to jump-start the day, she decided wryly. So, she'd go shopping, stop off at a café for breakfast, then come back, change, and prepare to meet Teresa at ten. Meantime she'd try out the pool.

It was almost seven when she emerged, and she blotted off the excess moisture, then wrapped the towel sarong-wise and re-entered the house.

Within minutes the phone rang, and she reached for it automatically.

'You slept well?'

Aysha drew in a deep breath at the sound of that familiar voice. 'Did you expect me not to?'

There was a faint pause. 'Don't push it too far, cara,' Carlo drawled in husky warning.

'I'm trembling,' she evinced sweetly.

'So you should be.' His voice tightened, and acquired a depth that sent goosebumps scudding over the surface of her skin.

'Intimidation isn't on my list.'

'Nor is false accusation on mine.'

With just the slightest lack of care, this could easily digress into something they both might regret.

With considerable effort she banked down the anger, and aimed for politeness. 'Is there a purpose to your call, other than to enquire if I got any sleep?' She thought she managed quite well. 'I have a host of things to do.'

'Grazie.'

She winced at the intended sarcasm. 'Prego,' she concluded graciously, and disconnected the phone.

On reflection, it wasn't the best of days, but nor was it the worst. Teresa was in fine form, and so consumed with her list of Things to Do, Aysha doubted her own preoccupation was even noticed. Which was just as well, for she couldn't have borne the string of inevitable questions her mother would deem it necessary to ask.

'You're looking a little peaky, darling. You're not coming down with something, are you?'

'A headache, Mamma.' It wasn't too far from the truth.

Teresa frowned with concern. 'Take some tablets, and get some rest.'

As if rest was the panacea for everything! 'Carlo and I are attending the sculpture exhibition at the Gallery tonight.'

'It's just as well Carlo is whisking you away to the Coast for the weekend. The break will do you good.'

Somehow Aysha doubted it.

The Gallery held a diverse mix of invited guests, some of whom attended solely to be seen and hopefully make the social pages. Others came to admire, with a view to adding to their collection.

Carlo and Aysha fell into a separate category. A close friend was one of the exhibiting artists and they wanted to add their support.

'Ciao, bella,' a male voice greeted, and Aysha turned to face the extraordinarily handsome young man who'd sent his personal invitation.

'Bruno!' She flung her arms wide and gave him an enthusiastic hug. 'How are you?'

'The better for seeing you.' He lowered his head and bestowed a kiss to each cheek in turn. 'Damn Carlo for snaring you first.' He withdrew gently and looked deeply into those smoky grey eyes, then he turned towards Carlo and lifted one eyebrow in silent query. 'Carlo, amici. Come stai?'

Something passed between both men. Aysha glimpsed it, and sought to avert any swing in the territorial parameters by tucking one hand through Carlo's arm.

'Come show us your exhibits.'

For the next half-hour they wandered the large room, pausing to examine and comment, or converse with a few of the fellow guests.

Aysha moved towards a neighbouring exhibit as Carlo was temporarily waylaid by a business acquaintance.

'Your lips curve wide with a generous smile, yet your eyes are sad,' said Bruno. 'Why?'

The wedding is a week tomorrow.' She gave a graceful shrug. 'Teresa and I have been shopping together every day, and nearly every night Carlo and I have been out.'

'Sad, cara,' Bruno reiterated. 'I didn't say tired. If Carlo isn't taking care of you, he will answer to me.'

She summoned a wicked smile and her eyes sparkled with hidden laughter. 'Swords at dawn? Or should that be pistols?'

'I would take pleasure in breaking his nose.'

She turned to check on the subject of their discussion, and stiffened. Bruno, acutely perceptive, shifted his head and followed her gaze. 'Ah, the infamous Nina.'

The statuesque brunette looked stunning in red, the soft material hugging every curve like a well-fitting glove.

Bruno leant down and said close to Aysha's ear, 'Shall we go break it up?'

'Let's do that.' The smile she proffered didn't reach her eyes, and her heart hammered a little in her chest as she drew close.

Nina's tapered red-lacquered nails rested on Carlo's forearm, and Aysha watched those nails conduct a gentle caressing movement back and forth over a small area of his tailored jacket.

Nina's make-up was superb, her mouth a perfect glossy red bow.

'Want me to charm her?' Bruno murmured, and Aysha responded equally quietly.

'Thanks, but I can fight my own battles.'

'Take care, cara. You're dealing with a dangerous cat.' He paused as they reached Carlo's side. 'Your most precious possession,' Bruno said lightly, and inclined his head with deliberate mockery, 'Nina.' Then he smiled, and moved through the crowd.

Wise man, Aysha accorded silently, wishing she could do the same.

'Darling, do get me a drink. You know what I like.'

Aysha began a mental countdown the moment Carlo left to find a waitress.

'I imagine you've checked the photographs?' Nina raised one eyebrow and raked Aysha's slender frame. 'Caused a little grief, did they?'

'Wasn't that your purpose?' Aysha was cold, despite the warmth of the summer evening.

'How clever of you,' Nina approved. 'Have you decided to condone his transgressions? I do hope so.' Her smile was seductively sultry. 'I would hate to have to give him up.'

Her heart felt as if it was encased in ice. 'You've missed your vocation,' she said steadily.

'What makes you say that, darling?'

She needed the might of a sword, but a verbal punch-line was better than nothing. 'You should have been an actress.' A smile cost her almost every resource she had, but she managed one beautifully, then she turned and threaded her way towards one of Bruno's sculptures.

'Who won?'

Bruno could always be counted on, and she cast him a wry smile. 'You noticed.'

'Ah, but I was looking out for you.' He curved an arm around the back of her waist. 'Now, tell me what you think about this piece.'

She examined it carefully. 'Interesting,' she conceded. 'If I say it resembles my idea of an African fertility god, would it offend you?'

'Not at all, because that's exactly what it is.'

'You're just saying that to make me feel good.'

He placed a hand over his heart. 'I swear.'

She began to laugh, and he smiled down at her. 'Why not me, cara?' he queried softly, and hugged her close. 'I'd treat you like the finest porcelain.'

'I know,' she said gently, and with a degree of very real regret.

'You love him, don't you?'

'Is it that obvious?'

'Only to me,' he assured her quietly. 'I just hope Carlo knows how fortunate he is to have you.'

'He does.'

Aysha heard that deep musing drawl, glimpsed the latent darkness in his eyes, and gently extricated herself from Bruno's grasp. 'I was admiring Bruno's sculpture.'

Carlo cast her a glittering look that set her nerves on edge. How dared he look at her like that when he'd been playing up close and personal with Nina?

'Don't play games, cara,' Carlo warned as soon as Bruno was out of earshot.

'Practise what you preach, darling,' she said sweetly. 'And please get me a drink. It'll give Nina another opportunity to waylay you.'

He bit off a husky oath. 'We can leave peaceably, or not,' he said with deceptive quietness. 'Your choice.' He meant every word.

'Bruno will be disappointed.'

'He'll get over it.'

'I could make a scene,' Aysha threatened, and his expression hardened.

'It wouldn't make any difference.'

It would, however, give Nina the utmost pleasure to witness their dissension. 'I guess we get to say goodnight,' she capitulated with minimum grace.

Ten minutes later she was seated in the Mercedes as it purred across the Harbour Bridge towards suburban Clontarf.

She didn't utter a word during the drive, and she reached for the door-clasp the instant Carlo drew the car to a halt. It would be fruitless to tell him not to follow her indoors, so she didn't even try.

'Bruno is a friend A good friend,' she qualified, enraged at his high-handedness. 'Which is more than I can say for Nina.'

'Neither Bruno nor Nina are an issue.'

Her chin tilted as she glared up at him. 'Then what the hell is the issue?'

'We are,' he vouchsafed succinctly.

'Well, now,' Aysha declared. 'There's the thing. Nina is quite happy for you to marry me, just as long as she gets to remain your mistress.'

His eyes filled with chilling intensity. 'Nina has one hell of an imagination.'

She'd had enough. 'Go home, Carlo.' Her eyes blazed with fury. 'If you don't, I'll be tempted to do something I might regret.'

She wasn't prepared for the restrained savagery evident as his mouth fastened on hers, forcing it open and controlling it as his tongue pillaged the inner sweetness. It was a deliberate ravishment of her senses. Claim-staking, punishing. She lost all sensation of time as one hand slid through her hair to hold fast her head, while the other curved low down her back.

Then the pressure eased, and the punishing quality changed to passion, gradually dissipating to a sensuous gentleness that curled round her inner core and tugged at her emotions, seducing until she was weak-willed and malleable.

From somewhere deep inside she dredged sufficient strength to tear her mouth free, and her body trembled as he traced the edge of his thumb across the swollen contours of her lips.

'Nina is nothing to me, do you understand? She never has been. Never will be.'

She didn't say a word. She just looked at him, glimpsed the faint edge of regret, and was incapable of moving.

He pulled her close and buried her head in the curve of his shoulder, then he pressed his lips to her hair.

Aysha could feel the power in that large body, the strength, and she felt strangely ambivalent. 'I don't want you to stay.'

'Because you'll only hate me in the morning?'

She drew a shaky breath. 'I'll hate myself even more.'

All he had to do was kiss her, and she'd change her mind. Part of her wanted him so much it was an impossible ache. Yet if she succumbed she'd be lost, and that wouldn't achieve a thing.

He held her for what seemed an age, then he turned her face to his and brushed his lips across her own, lingered at one corner and angled his mouth into hers in a kiss that was so incredibly evocative it dispensed with almost all her doubts.

Almost, but not quite. He sensed die faint barrier, and gently put her at arm's length.

'I'll pick you up at seven, OK?'

It was easy to simply nod her head, and she watched as he turned and walked to the door. Seconds later she heard his car's engine start, and she checked the lock, then activated security before crossing to her room.

Sleep seemed a distant entity, and she switched on the television in the hope of discovering something which would occupy her interest Except channel-hopping provided nothing she wanted to watch, and she retired to her bedroom, then lay staring at the ceiling for what seemed hours before finally slipping into a restless slumber in which vivid dreams assumed nightmarish proportion as Nina took the role of vamp.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AYSHA woke early, padded barefoot to the kitchen, poured herself some fresh orange juice, then headed outdoors to swim several laps of the pool.

After fifteen minutes or so she emerged, towelled off the excess moisture, then retreated indoors to change and make breakfast.

The ambivalence of the previous evening had disappeared, and in the clear light of day it seemed advantageous for she and Carlo to spend the weekend apart.

With that thought in mind she crossed to the phone and punched in his number. The answering machine picked up, and she replaced the receiver down onto the handset.

He was probably in the shower, or, she determined with a glance at her watch, he could easily have left. She keyed in the digits that connected with his mobile, and got voicemail.

Damn. It would have been less confrontational to cancel via the phone than deal with him in person.

It was almost seven when Carlo walked into the kitchen, and his eyes narrowed at the sight of her in cut-off denims and skimpy top.

'You're not ready.'

'No.' Her response was matter-of-fact. 'I think we both need the weekend apart.'

His expression was implacable. 'I disagree. Go change and get your holdall. We don't have much time.'

‘Give me one reason why I should go?’ she demanded, tilting her chin at him in a way that drove him crazy, for he wanted to kiss her until all that fine anger melted into something he could deal with.

‘I can give you several But right now you’re wasting valuable time.’

Without a word he strode through the lounge and ascended the stairs. She followed after him, watching as he entered the bedroom, opened a cupboard, extracted a leather holdall and tossed it down onto the bed, then he riffled through her clothes, selected, discarded, then opened drawers and took a handful of delicate underwear and dumped it in the holdall.

‘What in hell do you think you’re doing?’

A pair of heeled pumps followed sandals.

‘I would have thought it was obvious.’

He moved into the en suite bathroom, collected toiletries and make-up, and swept them into a cosmetic case. He lifted his head long enough to spare her a searching look.

‘You might want to change.’

Her eyes flashed fire. ‘I might not,’ she retaliated swiftly.

He shrugged his shoulders, pressed everything into the holdall, then closed the zip fastener.

‘OK, let’s go.’

‘Don’t you listen?’ His implacability brought her to a state of rage. ‘I am not going anywhere.’

Carlo was dangerously calm. Too calm. ‘We’ve already done this scene.’

Aysha was too angry to apply any caution. ‘Well, hell. Let’s do it again.’

‘No.’ He slung the holdall straps over one shoulder, then he curved an arm round her waist and hoisted her over one shoulder with an ease that brought forth a gasp of outrage.

‘You fiend! What do you think you’re doing?’

‘Abducting you.’

‘In the name of God... Why?’

Carlo strode out of the room and began descending the short flight of stairs. ‘Because we’re flying to the Coast, as planned.’

She struggled, and made no impression. In sheer frustration she pummelled both hands against his back. ‘Put me down!’

He didn’t alter stride as he negotiated the stairs, and she aimed for his ribs, his kidneys, anywhere that might cause him pain. All to no avail, for he didn’t so much as grunt when each punch connected.

‘If you don’t put me down this instant, I’ll have you arrested for attempted kidnapping, assault, and anything else I can think of!’

Carlo reached the impressive foyer, took three more steps, then lowered her to stand in front of him.

‘No, you won’t.’

He was bigger, broader, taller than her, yet she refused to be intimidated. ‘Want to bet?’

‘Cool it, cara.’

‘I am not your darling.’

His mouth curved with amusement, and she poked him several times in the chest.

‘Don’t you dare laugh!’

He curled his hands over her shoulders and held her still. ‘What would you have me do? Kiss you? Haul you across one knee and spank your deliciously soft derrière?’

‘Soft?’ She worked out, and while her butt might be curved, it was tight

‘If you keep opposing me, I’ll be driven to effect one or the other.’

‘Lay a hand on me, and I’ll—’

He was much too swift, and any further words she might have uttered were lost as his mouth closed over hers in a deep, punishing kiss which took hold of her anger and turned it into passion.

Aysha wasn't conscious when it changed, only that it did, and the fists she lashed him with gradually uncurled and crept up to his nape to cling as emotion wrought havoc and fragmented all her senses.

Carlo slowly eased the heat, and his mouth softened as he gently caressed the swollen contours of her lips, then pressed light butterfly kisses along the tender curve to one corner and back again.

When he lifted his head she could only look at him with drenched eyes, and he traced a forefinger down the slope of her nose.

'Now that I have your full attention... A weekend at the Coast will remove us from all the madness. No pressures, no demands, no social engagements.'

And no chance of accidentally bumping into Nina.

'Last call, Aysha,' Carlo indicated with a touch of mockery. 'Stay, or go. Which is it to be?'

It wasn't the time for deliberation. 'Go,' she said decisively, and heard his husky laughter.

They made the flight with ten minutes to spare, and touched down at Coolangatta Airport just over an hour later. It was almost ten when they checked into the hotel, and within minutes of entering into their suite Aysha crossed to the floor-to-ceiling glass window fronting the Broadwater, and released the sliding door.

She could hear the muted sound of traffic, voices drifting up from the pool area. Adjacent was an enclosed man-made beach with a secluded cave and waterfall.

In the distance she could see the architecturally designed roof resembling a collection of sails atop an exclusive shopping centre fronting a marina and connected by a walkway bridge to an exclusive ocean-front hotel.

A few minutes later she sensed rather than heard him move to stand behind her.

'Peaceful.'

It was, and she said so. 'Yes.'

His arms curved round her waist and he pulled her close. 'What do you want to do with the day?'

There was a desperate need to get out of the hotel suite, and lose herself among the crowds. 'A theme park?' She said the first one that came into her head. 'Dreamworld.'

He hid a wry smile. 'I'll organise it.'

'Just like that?'

'We can hire a car and drive into the mountains, take any one of several cruises.' His shoulders shifted as he effected a lazy shrug. 'You get to choose.'

'For today?'

'All weekend,' he said solemnly.

'Give me too much power, and it might go to my head,' Aysha teased, suddenly feeling more in control.

'I doubt it.'

He knew her too well. 'After dinner we go to the Casino, then tomorrow we do Movieworld.' Crowds, lots of people. Which left only the hours between midnight or later and dawn spent in this beautiful suite, with its very large, prominently positioned bed.

Dreamworld was fun. They played tourist and took a bus there, went on several rides, ate hot dogs and chips as they wandered among the crowd. Aysha laughed at the white tigers' antics, viewed the Tower of Terror and voiced an emphatic no to Carlo's suggestion they take the ride.

It was almost six when the bus deposited them outside the hotel.

'I'll have first take on the shower,' Aysha indicated as they rode the lift to their designated floor.

'We could share.'

'I don't think that's a good idea,' she said evenly. Just remembering how many showers they'd shared and their inevitable outcome set all her fine body hairs on edge.

The lift slid to a stop and she turned in the direction of their suite.

Inside, she collected fresh underwear and entered the large bathroom. The water was warm and she adjusted the dial, undressed, then stepped into the tiled stall.

Seconds later the door slid open and her eyes widened as Carlo joined her.

'What do you think you're doing?'

'Sharing a shower isn't necessarily an invitation to have sex,' he said calmly, and took the soap from her nerveless fingers.

He was too close, but there was no further room to move.

'Want me to shampoo your hair?'

'I can do it,' she managed in a muffled voice, and she missed his slight smile as he uncapped the courtesy bottle and slowly worked the gel into her hair.

His fingers began a gentle massage, and she closed her eyes, taking care to stifle a despairing groan as he rinsed off the foam.

Not content, he palmed the soap and proceeded to smooth it over her back, her buttocks, thighs, before tending to her breasts, then her stomach.

'Don't,' Aysha begged as he travelled lower, and she shook her head in mute denial when he placed the soap in her hand, then guided it over his chest.

Her fingers scraped the curling hair there, and she felt the tautness of his stomach, then consciously held her breath as he'd traversed lower.

His arousal was a potent force, and she began to shake with the need for his possession. It would be so easy to let the soap slip from her hand and reach for him. To lift her face to his, and invite his mouth down to hers.

Then he turned and his voice emerged as a silky drawl. 'Do my back, cara.'

She thrust the soap onto its stand, and slid open the door. 'Do it yourself.'

Aysha escaped, only because he let her, she was sure, and she caught up a towel, clutched hold of her underwear, and moved into the bedroom.

It was galling to discover her hands were trembling, and she quickly towelled herself dry, then wound the towel turban-wise round her head.

By the time Carlo emerged she was dressed, and she re-entered the bathroom to utilise the hairdrier, then tend to her make-up.

White silk evening trousers, a gold-patterned white top, minimum jewellery, and white strapped heeled pumps made for a matching outfit.

Black trousers and a white chambray shirt emphasised his dark hair and tanned skin. He'd shaved, and his cologne teased her nostrils, creating a havoc all its own with her senses.

'Ready?'

They caught a taxi to the Casino, enjoyed a leisurely meal, then entered the gambling area.

Aysha's luck ran fickle, while Carlo's held, but she refused to use his accumulated winnings, choosing instead to watch him at the blackjack table. Each selection was calculated, his expression impossible to read. Much like the man himself, she acknowledged silently.

It was after one when they returned to the hotel. Aysha felt pleasantly tired, and in their suite she slipped out of her clothes, cleansed her face of make-up, then slid into bed to lie quietly with her eyes closed, pretending sleep.

Moments later she felt the mattress depress as Carlo joined her, and she measured her breathing into a slow, steady rise and fall. Grateful, she told herself, that Carlo's breathing gradually acquired a similar pattern.

Why was it that when you didn't want something, you felt cheated when you didn't receive it? Aysha queried silently. The size of the bed precluded any chance of accidentally touching, and she didn't feel inclined to instigate the contrived kind...

'Come on, sleepyhead, rise and shine.'

Aysha heard the voice and opened her eyes to brilliant sunshine and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. It was morning already?

'Breakfast,' Carlo announced. 'You have three quarters of an hour to eat, shower and dress before we need to take the bus to Movieworld.'

What had happened to the night? You slept right through it, a tiny voice taunted. Wasn't that what you wanted?

They boarded the bus with a few minutes to spare, and there were thrills and spills and fun and laughter as the actors went through their paces. The various stuntmen and women earned Aysha's respect and admiration as more than once a scene made her catch her breath in awe of the sensitive degree of timing and expertise involved.

They caught the early evening-flight out of Coolangatta Airport, and arrived in Sydney after nine. Carlo collected the car, then headed towards the city.

For one brief moment Aysha was tempted to choose the apartment, except Carlo pre-empted any decision by driving to Clontarf.

She told herself fiercely that she wasn't disappointed as he checked the house and re-set the alarm.

His kiss was brief, a soft butterfly caress that left her aching for more. Then he turned and retraced his steps to the car.

Half an hour later Carlo crossed to the phone and punched in a series of digits, within minutes of entering his apartment.

Samuel Sloane, a legal eagle of some note, picked up on the seventh ring, and almost winced at the grim tone of the man who'd chosen to call him at such an hour on a Sunday evening at home. He listened, counselled and advised, and wasn't in the least surprised when he was ignored.

'I don't give a damn for the what-if's and maybes protecting my investments, my interests. I'm not consulting you for advice. I'm instructing you what to do. Draw up that document. I'll be in your office just before five tomorrow. Now, do we understand each other?'

The impulse to slam the receiver down onto the handset was uppermost, and Carlo barely avoided the temptation to do so.

Aysha spent the morning organising the final soft furnishing items she'd ordered several weeks previously. A message alerting her of their arrival had been on her answering machine when she'd checked it on her return from the Coast.

At midday she stood back and surveyed the results, and was well pleased with the effect. It was perfect, and just as she'd envisaged the overall look.

It was amazing how a few cushions, draped pelmets in matching fabric really set the final touch to a room.

All it needed, she decided with a critical eye, was a superbly fashioned terracotta urn in one corner to complete the image she wanted. Maybe she'd have time to locate the urn before she was due to meet Teresa at one.

Aysha made it with minutes to spare, and together they spent the next few hours with the dressmaker, checked a few minor details with the wedding organiser, then took time to relax over coffee.

'You haven't forgotten we're dining with Gianna and Luigi tonight?'

Aysha uttered a silent scream in sheer frustration. She didn't want to play the part of soon-to-be-married adoring fiancée. Nor did she want to dine beneath the watchful eyes of their respective parents.

When she arrived at the house she checked the answering machine and discovered a message from Carlo indicating he'd collect her at six. An identical message was recorded on her mobile phone.

Her fingers hovered over the telephone handset as she contemplated returning his call and cancelling out, only to retreat in the knowledge that she had no choice but to see the evening through.

A shower did little to ease the tension, and she deliberately chose black silk evening trousers and matching halter-necked top, added stiletto pumps, twisted her hair into a simple knot atop her head, and kept make-up to a minimum.

She was ready when security alerted her that the front gate had been activated, and she opened the front door seconds ahead of Carlo's arrival.

He was a superb male animal, she conceded as she caught her first glimpse of him. Tall, broad frame, honed musculature, and he exuded a primitive alchemy that was positively lethal.

Expensively tailored black trousers, dark blue shirt left unbuttoned at the neck, and a black jacket lent a sophistication she could only admire. 'Shall we leave?' Aysha asked coolly, and saw those dark eyes narrow.

'Not yet'

Her stomach executed a slow somersault, and she tensed involuntarily. 'We don't want to be late.'

He was standing too close, and she suppressed the need to take a backward step. She didn't need him close. It just made it more difficult to maintain a mental distance. And she needed to, badly.

He brushed his fingers across one cheek and pressed a thumb to the corner of her mouth. 'You're pale.'

She almost swayed towards him, drawn as if by a magnetic force. Dammit, how could she love him, yet hate him at the same time? It was almost as if her body was detached from the dictates of her brain.

'A headache,' she responded evenly, and his expression became intensely watchful.

'I'll ring and cancel.'

It was easier to handle him when he was angry. At least then she could rage in return. Now, she merely felt helpless, and it irked her that he knew.

'That isn't an option, and you know it,' she refuted, and lifted a hand in expressive negation.

'You've taken something for it?'

'Yes.'

'Povera piccola,' he declared gently as he lowered his head and brushed his lips against her temple.

Sensation curled inside her stomach as his mouth trailed down to the edge of her mouth, and she turned her head slightly, her lips parting in denial, only to have his mouth close over hers.

He caught her head between both hands, and his tongue explored the inner tissues at will, savouring the sweetness with such erotic sensuousness that all rational thought temporarily fled.

His touch was sheer magic, exotic, intoxicating, and left her wanting more. Much more.

It's just a kiss, she assured herself mentally, and knew she was wrong. This was seductive claim-staking at its most dangerous.

Aysha pushed against his shoulders and tore her mouth from his, her eyes wide and luminous as they caught the darkness reflected in his. Her mouth tingled, and her lips felt slightly swollen.

'Let's go.' Was that her voice? It sounded husky, and her mouth shook slightly as she moved away from him and caught up her evening bag.

In the car she leaned her head back against the cushioned rest, and stared sightlessly out of the window.

Summer daylight saving meant warm sunshine at six in the evening, and peak-hour traffic crossing the Harbour Bridge had diminished, ensuring a relatively smooth drive to suburban Vaucluse.

Aysha didn't offer anything by way of conversation, and she was somewhat relieved when Carlo brought the Mercedes to a halt behind Teresa and Giuseppe's car in the driveway of his parents' home.

'Showtime.'

'Don't overdo it, cara,' he warned quizzically, and she offered him a particularly direct look.

Did he know just how much she hurt deep inside? Somehow she doubted it. ‘Don’t patronise me.’

She saw one eyebrow lift. ‘Not guilty,’ Carlo responded, then added drily, ‘on any count.’

Now there was a double entendre if ever there was one. ‘You underestimate yourself.’

His eyes hardened fractionally. ‘Take care, Aysha.’

She reached for the door-clasp. ‘If we stay here much longer, our parents will think we’re arguing.’

‘And we’re not?’

‘Now you’re being facetious.’ She opened the door and stood to her feet, then summoned a warm smile as he crossed to her side.

Gianna Santangelo’s affectionate greeting did much to soothe Aysha’s unsettled nerves. This was family, although she was under no illusions, and knew that both mothers were attuned to the slightest nuance that might give hint to any dissension.

Dinner was an informal meal, although Gianna had gone to considerable trouble, preparing gnocchi in a delicious sauce, followed by chicken pieces roasted in wine with rosemary herbs and accompanied by a variety of vegetables.

Gianna was a superb cook, with many speciality dishes in her culinary repertoire. Even Teresa had the grace to offer a genuine compliment.

‘Buona, Gianna. You have a flair for gnocchi that is unsurpassed by anyone I know.’

‘Grazie. I shall give Aysha the recipe.’

Ah, now there was the thing. Teresa’s recipe versus that of Gianna. Tricky, Aysha concluded. Very tricky. She’d have to vary the sauce accordingly whenever either or both sets of parents came to dinner. Or perhaps not serve it at all? Maybe she could initiate a whole new range of Italian cuisine? Or select a provincial dish that differed from Trevisian specialities?

‘I won’t have time for much preparation except at the weekends.’ She knew it was a foolish statement the moment the words left her mouth, as both Teresa and Gianna’s heads rose in unison, although it was her mother who voiced the query.

‘Why ever not, cara?’

Aysha took a sip of wine, then replaced her glass down onto the table. ‘Because I’ll be at work, Mamma.’

‘But you have finished work.’

‘I’m taking a six-week break, then I’ll be going back.’

‘Part-time, of course.’

‘Full-time.’

Teresa stated the obvious. ‘There is no need for you to work at all. What happens when you fall pregnant?’

‘I don’t plan on having children for a few years.’

Teresa turned towards Carlo. ‘You agree with this?’

It could have been a major scandal they were discussing, not a personal decision belonging to two people.

‘It’s Aysha’s choice.’ He turned to look at her, his smile infinitely warm and sensual as he took hold of her hand and brushed his lips to each finger in turn. His eyes gleamed with sensual promise. ‘We both want a large family.’

Bastard, she fumed silently. He’d really set the cat among the pigeons now. Teresa wouldn’t be able to leave it alone, and she’d receive endless lectures about caring for a husband’s needs, maintaining an immaculate house, an excellent table.

Aysha leaned forward, and traced the vertical crease slashing Carlo’s cheek. His eyes flared, but she ignored the warning gleam. ‘Cute, plump little dark-haired boys,’ she teased as her own eyes danced with silent laughter. ‘I’ve seen your baby pictures, remember?’

'Don't forget I babysat you and changed your nappies, cara.'

Her first memory of Carlo was herself as a four-year-old being carried round on his shoulders, laughing and squealing as she gripped hold of his hair for dear life. She'd loved him then with the innocence of a child.

Adoration, admiration, respect had undergone a subtle change in those early teenage years, as raging female hormones had labelled intense desire as sexual attraction, infatuation, lust.

He'd been her best friend, confidant, big brother, all rolled into one. Then he'd become another girl's husband, and it had broken her heart.

Now she was going to marry him, have his children, and to all intents and purposes live the fairy tale dream of happy-ever-after.

Except she didn't have his heart. That belonged to Bianca, who lay buried beneath an elaborate bed of marble high on a hill outside the country town in which she'd been born.

Aysha had wanted to hate her, but she couldn't, for Bianca had been one of those rare human beings who was so genuinely kind, so nice, she was impossible to dislike.

Carlo caught each fleeting expression and correctly divined every one of them. His mouth softened as he leant forward and brushed his lips to her temple.

She blinked rapidly, and forced herself to smile. 'Hands-on practice, huh? You do know you're going to have to help with the diapering?'

'I wouldn't miss it for the world.'

Aysha almost believed him.

'I'll serve the cannoli,' Gianna declared. 'And afterwards we have coffee.'

'You women have the cannoli,' Luigi dismissed with the wave of one hand. 'Giuseppe, come with me. We'll have a brandy. With the coffee, we'll have grappa.' He turned towards his son. 'Carlo?'

Women had their work to do, and it was work which didn't involve men. Old traditions died hard, and the further they lived away from the Old Country, Aysha recognised ruefully, the longer it took those traditions to die.

Carlo rose to his feet and followed the two older men from the room.

Aysha braced herself for the moment Teresa would pounce. Gianna, she knew, would be more circumspect.

'You cannot be serious about returning to work after the honeymoon.'

Ten seconds. She knew, because she'd counted them off. 'I enjoy working, Mamma. I'm very good at what I do.'

'Indeed,' Gianna complimented her. 'You've done a wonderful job with the house.'

'Ecco,' Teresa agreed, and Aysha tried to control a silent sigh.

Her mother invariably lapsed into Italian whenever she became passionate about something. Aysha sank back in her chair and prepared for a lengthy harangue.

She wasn't disappointed. The use of Italian became more frequent, as if needed to emphasise a point. And even Gianna's gentle intervention did little to stem the flow.

'If you had to work, I could understand,' Teresa concluded. 'But you don't. There are hundreds, thousands,' she corrected, 'without work, and taking money from the government.'

Aysha gave a mental groan. Politics. They were in for the long haul. She cast a pleading glance at Carlo's mother, and received a philosophical shrug in response.

'I'll make coffee,' Gianna declared, and Aysha stood to her feet with alacrity.

'I'll help with the dishes.'

It was only a momentary diversion, for the debate merely shifted location from the dining room to the kitchen.

Aysha's head began to throb.

'Zia Natalina has finished crocheting all the baskets needed for the bomboniera,' Gianna interceded in a bid to change the subject. 'Tomorrow she'll count out all the sugared almonds and

tie them into tulle circles. Her daughter Giovanna will bring them to the house early on the day of the wedding.'

'Grazie, Gianna. I want to place them on the tables myself.'

'Giovanna and I can do it, if it will help. You will have so much more to do.'

Teresa inclined her head. 'Carlo has the wedding rings? Annalisa has sewn the ring pillow, but the rings need to be tied onto it.' A frown furrowed her brow. 'I must phone and see if she has the ribbon ready.' She gathered cups and saucers together onto the tray while Gianna set some almond biscuits onto a plate.

'The men won't touch them, but if I don't put a plate down with something Luigi will complain.' She lifted a hand and let it fall to her side. 'Yet when I produce it, he'll say they don't want biscuits with coffee.' Her humour was wry. 'Men. Who can understand them?' She cast a practised eye over the tray. 'We have everything. Let's join them, shall we?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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