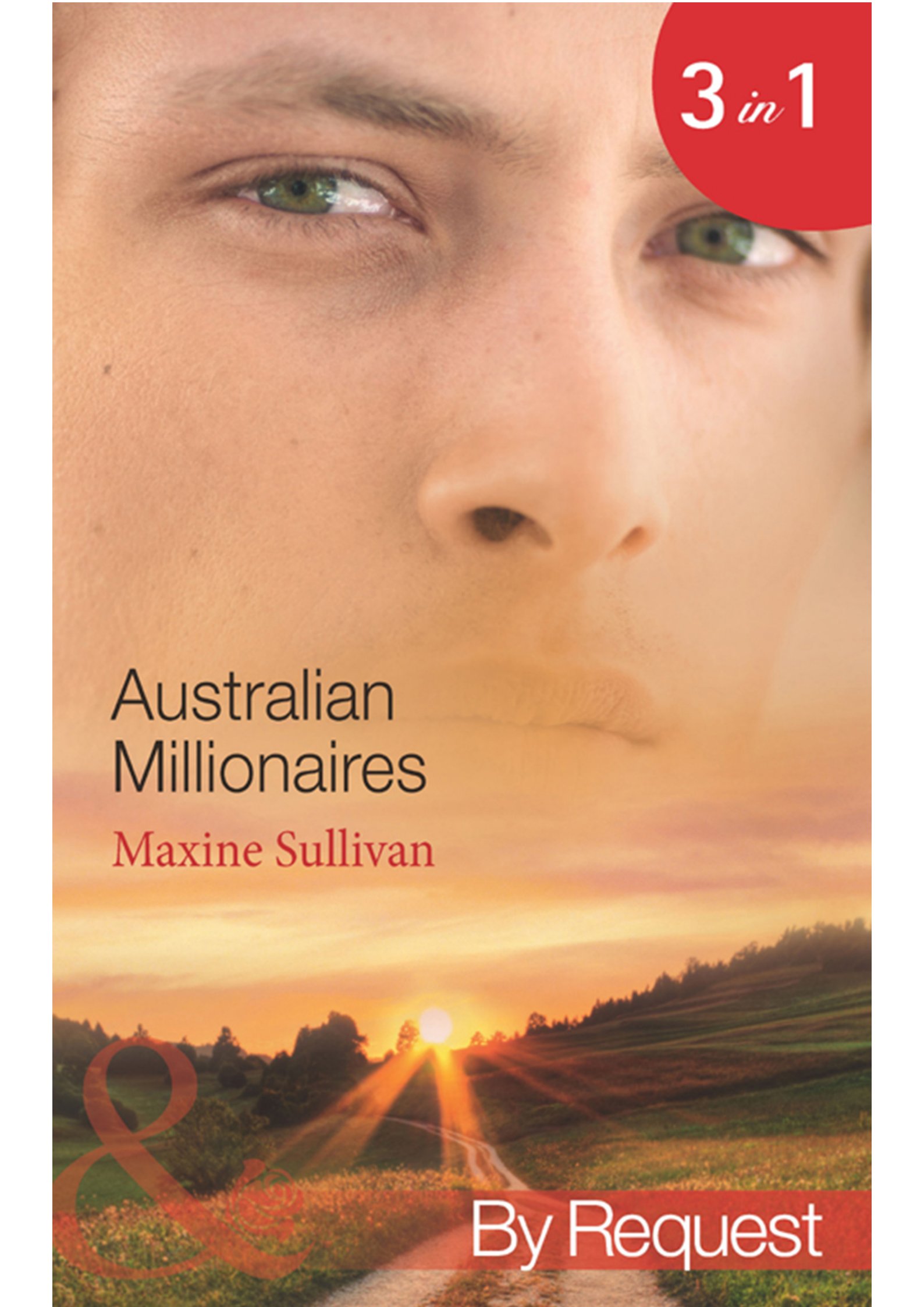




3 *in* 1

Australian
Millionaires

Maxine Sullivan

By Request

Maxine Sullivan

**Australian Millionaires: The
Millionaire's Seductive Revenge**

«HarperCollins»

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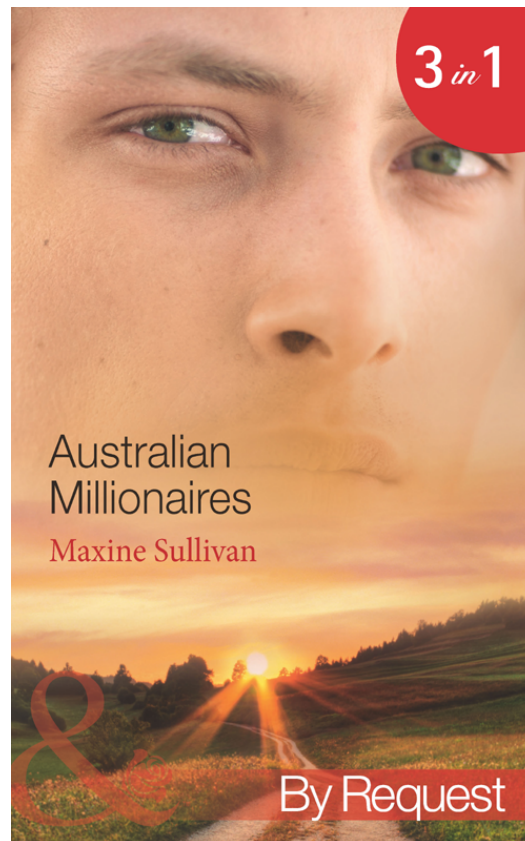
The Millionaire's Seductive Revenge
Millionaire Brant Matthews's desire for his secretary only fully ignited when she became engaged to his business partner. Brant knew Kia was not in love with the other man and set out to discover what game she was playing. But Kia had severely underestimated how much Brant wanted her and the revenge he would extract when he discovered her ruse.
The Tycoon's Blackmailed Mistress
What better revenge for betrayal than taking possession of the betrayer's wife? Rich, powerful Flynn Donovan knew Danielle Ford would have no other means of settling her late husband's debt, so he blackmailed her into becoming his mistress. Then he discovered Danielle was pregnant...
The Executive's Vengeful Seduction
Australian businessman Damien Trent's time for revenge was at hand. Gabrielle Kane had dared to leave his bed years ago without a word...but now she needed him if she was to save her family's company. And Damien would lend his help...but his price was Gabrielle's hand in marriage.

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Содержание

About the Author	6
Australian Millionaires	7
One	8
Two	15
Three	22
Four	28
Five	36
Six	43
Seven	51
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	57



About the Author

MAXINE SULLIVAN credits her mother for her lifelong love of romance novels, so it was a natural extension to want to write her own romances that she and others could enjoy. She's very excited about seeing her work in print, and she's thrilled to be the second Australian to write for the Desire line.

Maxine lives in Melbourne, Australia, but over the years has travelled to New Zealand, the UK and the US. In her own backyard, her husband's job ensured they saw the diversity of the countryside, including spending many years in Darwin in the tropical north where some of her books are set. She is married to Geoff, who has proven his hero status many times over the years. They have two handsome sons and an assortment of much-loved previously abandoned animals.

Maxine would love to hear from you, and she can be contacted through her website at www.maxinesullivan.com

Australian Millionaires
The Millionaire's Seductive Revenge
The Tycoon's Blackmailed Mistress
The Executive's Vengeful Seduction
Maxine Sullivan



www.millsandboon.co.uk

The Millionaire's Seductive Revenge

Dear Reader,

I'm thoroughly delighted to say that this is my first book, and, like any firstborn, it's very special to me. It's an unbelievable feeling holding my "baby" in my hands and knowing it will be read by romance readers around the world. There's nothing more thrilling to me than being able to share this very first book with others who will appreciate it.

My story is set in Darwin, in the tropical north of Australia, where I lived for many years. Writing the book allowed me to revisit a city that holds treasured memories for me and my family, so it was only natural I chose such an exotic place for my characters to fall in love. No handsome hero will be able to resist a beautiful heroine once those mesmerizing sunsets start to work their magic.

With such a perfect setting for love, is it any wonder I used Darwin as the setting for a further two books?

Happy reading!

Maxine

For Andrea Johnston, Suzanne Barrett and
Nolene Jenkinson, Critique Partners,
Mentors and Friends

One

Every man in the room was staring at Kia Benton. And Brant Matthews was one of them. He'd seen many beautiful women in his life but none who affected him like the woman who'd entered the ballroom of Darwin's Shangri-La Hotel. Australia's most northerly city may possess a tropical lifestyle that was the envy of the rest of the country, but it still didn't hold a candle to this woman's beauty.

Dressed for an evening that promised glitz and glamour, Kia looked stunning tonight, with her ash-blond hair pulled back in a stylish chignon, her perfectly made-up features accentuated by the black liner circling her eyes.

The eyes of a seductress, Brant mused, his gaze sliding down over bare shoulders to the shimmery silver dress that hugged her breasts, then slid over slim hips and long legs.

But it wasn't just her looks that coiled sexual hunger in the pit of his stomach. She had something that called to him on another level. A quality he'd never found in another woman, not even in his ex-fiancée, Julia. Hell, definitely not Julia. Julia had only been about one thing.

His mouth tightened. He had to remember that Kia was no different. Both women wanted the same thing.

Money.

He'd been suspicious of Kia from the moment he'd stepped onto the plane on his way back from Europe and caught sight of a photograph of her and his partner Phillip in the society section of a Darwin magazine. It was being read by the man next to him, and the picture had shown her arm in arm with Phillip at a cocktail party, looking very pleased with herself. The last he heard, Phillip still had his secretary from years back. This Kia was a total shock.

The caption had read, "Has one of Australia's richest bachelors finally been hooked by his new personal assistant? Miss Kia Benton obviously knows a thing or two about getting 'personal.'"

Yes, this woman knew how to get her hooks into someone all right. But what she didn't know was that he'd heard her on the telephone when he'd gone into the office the next day.

Of course I'm working on getting myself a rich man, she'd been saying when he'd passed by Phillip's office and seen her leaning against the desk, looking for all the world as if she owned the place. Then she'd laughed and said, *It's as easy to love a rich man as a poor one, right?*

This was the reason she'd made herself indispensable to his business partner so quickly. Within two months she'd had Phillip eating out of her hand. Oh, yes, she was a gold digger, this one. A beautiful, deceitful gold digger.

"Oh, don't they make a lovely couple?" one of the executive wives tossed into the conversation going on around him, pulling Brant from his thoughts and dropping him back into the Christmas festivities that were a necessary evil at this time of year.

"Yes, they're perfect together," one of the others agreed after all heads turned toward Kia and Phillip standing beneath the Merry Christmas sign in the doorway.

Then the head of the Legal Department's wife put her hand on her husband's arm. "Hon, I don't know what they're putting in the water at your office, but she's beautiful."

Simon puffed up with an odd sort of fatherly pride. "That's Kia. She's got brains as well as beauty."

Brains as well as beauty.

And she had no qualms about using those assets, Brant thought, hating the pull of her attraction but unable to do anything about it.

Dammit. If only he'd met her first. But two months ago, as senior partner, he'd gone to Paris to establish their new office and get everything up and running. Phillip hadn't wanted to go because he'd been heavily involved with his then girlfriend, Lynette. Yet when he'd returned a month later,

Phillip's secretary had resigned due to ill health and Kia had been firmly ensconced as Phillip's personal assistant during work hours.

And his constant companion out of hours.

Like now.

Of course, if he'd seen her first, they would have been lovers straight away. No doubt about it. He'd known it from the moment he'd gazed into her sparkling aquamarine eyes.

Why?

Because she knew what she did to him, that's why. She knew the attraction he felt for her. This deep, pulsing need to make her his own. She merely had to glance his way and sizzling heat coursed through his veins. Even now he could feel himself burning to be inside her, feeling her close around him as he moved ever so slowly in and out, watching her eyelids flutter against her cheeks, hearing his name a murmur on the parted bow of her lips.

"She's got a brand new car, too," someone interrupted his thoughts, making him stiffen in disbelief. "A Porsche. It's fantastic."

"Lucky girl," one of the guys said. "Did Phil buy it for her?"

Simon darted a look at Brant, as if he knew this wasn't a subject they should be discussing in front of the boss. "Er ... I'm not sure," the other man said awkwardly.

"It's understandable," Simon's wife added in a sympathetic tone. "He probably doesn't want her to have a similar accident to the one he had."

Pretending to ignore the conversation, Brant leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his whiskey. Late one night, Phil's car had broken down after he'd gone out on a date with Kia. When he'd stepped out to check the problem, a passing vehicle had clipped his leg, busting up his knee and breaking his ankle, leaving him with what would eventually be a permanent limp.

And Kia ... God bless her, Brant mused cynically ... had been quite happy ever since, going back and forth between the hospital and the office, assisting Phil with his workload. Through it all she must have been manipulating him to get the car. And a Porsche, to boot. Bloody hell. His friend and business partner deserved better than someone who was only using him for his bank account.

He was tempted to show Phil what sort of woman he was involved with. Kia would be easy enough to get into bed if he really put his mind to it. Only he couldn't. Not for *her* sake but for Phillip's. He knew how it felt for someone close to steal your woman.

And he'd be damned if he'd put the business at risk. He may've had to correct some of Phillip's poor decisions since they'd started buying up other businesses three years ago, but the last thing Brant wanted was instability within the company that was now riding the wave of phenomenal success.

Yet all of it could be jeopardized because of a woman who was out to get everything she could, he reminded himself as he watched the pair moving through the tables toward him, Kia pushing Phil's wheelchair but stopping to talk to people on the way. Oh, she was good at what she did. She knew how to work her audience.

Sickened that such beauty hid a heart of stone, Brant stood up. "Back in a minute," he muttered to no one in particular and headed for the exit behind him. His date had vanished into the nether regions of the ladies' room a while back, so he was unconcerned she would miss him until his return.

He needed to get outside and let the ocean air fill his lungs and clear away the smell of deception. Then maybe his body wouldn't ache so much for a woman who deserved nothing more than his contempt.

After finally reaching their table, Kia sat back with a glass of champagne and tried to relax. Brant seemed to have disappeared for a while, though she knew he'd be back. And he always affected her in some crazy way, no matter how hard she tried not to let him.

Tonight, for instance, it had started as soon as she entered the ballroom. She'd felt his eyes upon her, scrutinizing her, undressing her. This wasn't the only time she'd sensed his desire. Far from it.

From the moment she'd met him she'd known he'd wanted her, despite himself. In his bed and out of it. Anywhere and anytime.

And as much as she had fought it, his want always bonded with a need deep inside her. That knowledge had pulsed through her veins tonight, making her breathless, wanting more, wanting him.

"Everything all right, Kia?"

She took a breath and fixed a smile on her lips for Phillip, fully aware of the attention from the other tables guests. "Everything's fine."

His gaze slid to her throat and a glint of humor appeared in his eyes. "I'm glad you like your present."

Her hand went to the sparkling diamond necklace he'd asked her to wear. He'd wanted her to keep it, but she'd refused, so they'd compromised and she'd said she'd wear it only for the night. "It's fabulous."

"A fabulous gift for a fabulous lady."

She shifted in her seat. Did he have to lay it on quite so thick? Just because he wanted to give the impression they were a couple didn't mean they should act like characters in a thirties melodrama. It made her uncomfortable.

Suddenly the hairs on the back of her neck began to rise. There Brant was, dancing with a woman at the far end of the dance floor. Her breath caught at the sight of him, desire shooting to every region in her body.

He was certainly something to look at. Handsome, wealthy, extremely sexy in a black suit that matched the color of his gleaming dark hair and fitted his lean body to perfection. He exuded an attraction she found difficult to deny.

"Who's that dancing with Brant?" a visitor to the table asked the question on Kia's mind.

"That's his date," someone replied.

Kia hid her surprise. Brant usually only dated blondes. Beautiful blondes with gorgeous figures and impeccable style, if the photographs in the newspaper were anything to go by. Certainly the women who frequented his office were blond and beautiful. And according to Evelyn, his personal assistant, so were the women who called him constantly on the phone.

This brunette was definitely not in his league. The woman wasn't beautiful, though she wasn't unattractive either. She just lacked the confidence of those other women, and that red-and-white floral dress looked totally wrong on her. It seemed to swallow her up. Just as Brant's presence seemed to be doing.

And didn't she know how *that* felt, she scoffed to herself as the other woman smiled shyly up at him and Brant returned the smile with a devastating one of his own. The woman stumbled, and who could blame her? Brant Matthews, Womanizer Extraordinaire, had struck again. Maybe she could suggest he have that printed on his business cards.

All at once she realized Phillip had spoken. "Sorry, Phillip. What did you say?"

"I said she's my new physiotherapist."

Ah, so this was Serena. They'd spoken on the telephone. But why had *Brant* chosen her as his date? It didn't make sense.

Then it hit her.

"Phillip, you didn't," she said for his ears only.

"Didn't what?"

"Fix them up together."

He frowned. "Why not? I thought it would do Serena good to be asked out by someone like Brant. He didn't mind."

Oh, that poor girl. Why were men so insensitive at times?

"That's exactly why he's wrong for her."

His brows drew closer together. "What do you mean?"

“She’ll know people will be wondering what Brant sees in her and that’ll make her feel even worse.”

“I was only trying to help,” he said a touch defensively.

Kia’s heart softened. “I know you were. It’s just that.” How to explain the mind of a shy, insecure woman? It wasn’t easy delving into her own past and reliving her inadequacies.

“Merry Christmas, Kia.”

Without warning, Brant was beside her, his lips brushing against her cheek in a gesture that meant nothing yet everything. Kia’s pulse almost fell over itself as his warm hand touched her bare shoulder and she caught a whiff of his masculine scent. Her throat went dry.

Then he moved away and held the chair out for his date. “Serena, this is Kia, Phillip’s personal assistant.”

“We’ve spoken on the telephone,” Kia said with a smile as the woman sat down opposite her.

“Oh, yes.” The other woman gave a wavering smile in return, and empathy stirred within Kia, helping her recover from the shock of Brant’s greeting.

“Serena’s a lovely name,” Kia said, wanting to put her at ease.

Serena smiled tentatively. “You think so?”

“It suits you,” Brant said before Kia could respond.

Serena blushed, looking quite pretty. “Thank you.”

He sat down and handed her a glass of champagne. “Not too many women are as restful as you to be around, Serena.”

Kia saw his eyes flick toward her. Was he saying *she* wasn’t restful to be around? What a cheek. It wasn’t her fault he wanted her but couldn’t.

“Some men aren’t restful to be around either,” Kia pointed out, not willing to let him get the upper hand.

He eased back in his chair, confident but with a dark look in his deep blue eyes that sent shivers down her spine. “Are you saying that some men disturb you, Kia?”

Was he asking if *he* disturbed her?

“People only disturb you if you let them. I don’t ever intend to let any man disturb me.”

“Really?” His eyes slid across to Phillip at her side, then back to her again. They hardened, reminding her that from the day he’d met up with her outside the hospital room after he’d returned from his trip, this man had grown more and more hostile toward her. He hid it well, but she knew it was there. She could only assume that because Phillip had been going home after a date with her, Brant blamed her for the accident.

And that was totally unfair, but she wasn’t about to challenge him over it or he might start delving into her and Phillip’s relationship and discover the truth. How it had all started when Phillip had begged her to be his partner at a business dinner with people who knew his ex, Lynette. Things had snowballed after that and now they were out of control. Totally out of control.

Glancing at Brant, she saw a muscle pulsating in his lean cheek. Then, as if he’d had enough of her, he turned away to talk to one of the others.

She felt a spurt of anger at his dismissal. Was this the way he treated women when he had enough of them? Did he use them to amuse himself, then get rid of them once they’d passed their use-by dates? Of course he did. So why did she feel surprised? Did she think she was any different just because she shared in this intense physical attraction?

Schooling her features, Kia sipped at her champagne and watched the couples dancing out on the floor. She could hear Phillip talking about going home to Queensland to be with his family for Christmas. It reminded her of her own plans to fly south to Adelaide to spend Christmas with her mother and stepfather. She was looking forward to having some downtime with her family. She badly needed time away from the office—and the men who ran it.

All at once, Phillip leaned forward and said loudly across the table, “Hey, Brant. How would you like to dance with Kia for me?”

“Wh-what?” Kia said before she could stop herself. She didn’t want to be in Brant’s arms. Close to him. Touching him.

Brant’s eyes narrowed slightly, but was she the only one to see the flash of hunger in them? “Maybe Kia doesn’t want to dance,” he said, giving her an out, telling her that as much as he wanted her in his arms, another part of him didn’t.

She managed a short laugh. “Phillip, don’t be silly. I don’t need to dance.”

“I saw your foot tapping to the music,” he said, surprising her because she hadn’t been aware she’d been doing that.

She opened her mouth to say she really didn’t feel like dancing but then noticed all eyes upon her. Making a fuss would only make them wonder why she objected to dancing with Brant. And if that happened ...

“Okay, Phillip. Anything for *you*,” she emphasized, making sure Brant knew it wasn’t for *him*.

And then, like a gentleman, Brant stood beside her, helping her out of her chair. She tried to smile, but already his closeness affected her. Every nerve in her body suddenly started to tingle as he led her out onto the dance floor and straight into his arms. Knowing she was in danger of melting against him, she stiffened and pulled back.

“We’re only dancing,” he mocked, knowing full well the effect he had on her.

On any woman.

On women in general.

“Mr. Matthews—”

His mouth thinned. “I’ve told you before. Call me Brant.”

“You’re my employer. I prefer to keep it formal.”

“Why?”

“I was brought up to respect my elders.”

His laughter was low and throaty, his lips showing the tip of perfect white teeth. *All the better to eat you with, my dear*, she thought.

He moved his hand more comfortably against the small of her back. “Thanks for putting me in my place.”

“I try.” She moved to dislodge his fingers. They were an inch too low for her liking.

“I know you do.” He tilted his head. “It makes me wonder why.”

She looked somewhere past his shoulder. “Because you’re the boss.”

His hand moved imperceptibly lower, snatching her breath away, drawing her eyes back to him. “If I’m the boss, then you should do what I say,” he murmured, making the simple statement sound very, very personal.

Recovering, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. She was beginning to feel as if she were some sort of puppet to be manipulated. “I never *was* good at doing what I was told.”

“Shame.” His eyes hardened. “But I bet you know how to get your own way now.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” she quipped, not sure where this was heading.

“Every *woman*, you mean.”

Ah, so the womanizer had a low opinion of women. Color her surprised.

“Actually, I meant every *person*. Man. Woman. Child. Even animals—”

“I hear you’ve got a new car,” he cut across her. “A Porsche.”

Her mind reeled in confusion, not only at what he’d said but at the hint of accusation in his tone, though what she was being accused of she had no idea.

“Yes, I do have a new car.”

His lips twisted with a touch of cynicism. “We must be paying you well.”

His animosity was growing in leaps and bounds. “You get what you pay for,” she pointed out coolly.

“I’m sure we do.” He leaned closer so that his lips were practically pressed to her ear. “Or should I say *Phil* gets what he paid for.”

She stiffly drew back. “What do you mean by that?”

The corners of his mouth curved in a smooth smile that didn’t match the piercing glint in his eyes. “Merely that you’re a top-notch PA. I’m sure Phil believes he’s lucky to have you.”

“That sounds like a backhanded compliment.”

“Does it?” He pulled her slightly closer again, making her feel his heat.

Well, if he could be hot, she would be cold. Let him think she couldn’t care less about his little games.

“Serena seems nice,” she said, pasting on a cool smile.

He appeared casually amused by the change in subject. “I’m enjoying her company.”

“Naturally,” she said somewhat sourly. No one was safe from a womanizer like Brant.

The amusement left his face and he scowled. “What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” Two could play at this.

“Are you going to answer all my questions with a question?” he said, the scowl still in place.

“Is that what I’m doing?”

His glance sharpened. “You thought I’d ignore her, didn’t you?”

The thought had briefly crossed her mind, but she knew he would never miss an opportunity to charm a woman, whether young or old, beautiful or plain.

But she had to admit she was still annoyed with Phillip. “Actually, I know Phillip meant well, but I wish he hadn’t put her in this predicament. Believe me, I know what it’s like being an ugly duckling.”

His head went back in shock. “You? Never!”

“It’s true. I was always very plain-looking.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not. Ask my father. He was very good at telling me how plain I was.” She smiled grimly, remembering all the hurt. How many times had she looked into the mirror and wished she was beautiful? “Naturally he was delighted when I suddenly started to blossom into something resembling a female.”

Brant’s eyes probed far too deeply. “Shouldn’t a father’s love be unconditional?”

“Not my father,” she said, on some level surprised she was telling him so much. “He only likes being with women who are beautiful.”

“Women?”

She pretended not to care. “My parents are divorced. Luckily my mother settled down to a life of bliss with a man who truly loves her. Dad’s on his third marriage, to a model half his age.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I’m thrilled my mother found happiness.”

“And your father?”

She’d suddenly had enough. Already she’d told him more than she should have about herself.

She glanced back at the table to where the others were talking. “We were talking about Serena.”

His eyes said she wasn’t fooling him but he’d accept the change in subject anyway. “Serena’s a nice kid.”

“She wouldn’t appreciate being called a kid. She’s not much younger than me.”

“But you’re so much more—”

“Cynical?”

He broke into a sexy half smile. “I was going to say mature.”

Before she could stop it, she found herself smiling back at him.

“You should smile at me more often, Kia.”

As Serena had, she stumbled—just a little—then recovered. “But if I smile, you might think I like you,” she said with false sweetness.

As if he realized he’d let down his guard, the smile froze on his lips. “We wouldn’t want that to happen, now would we?” he said, but his voice sounded flat and he’d withdrawn into himself.

Thankfully the song ended. She cleared her throat and went to move away. “Thank you for the dance, Brant.”

But he surprised her by holding on to her arm. “Say it again, Kia.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Say my name again.”

In a way, she was grateful the womanizer was back. “Brant Matthews,” she said defiantly.

Looking satisfied, he dropped her arm the way he’d drop her heart if she dared let him near it.

Not that she would, she told herself on the way back to the table, then forced her face to maintain a calm expression when Phillip gave her an odd look. Phillip didn’t know it, but he’d taken on the role of a buffer between her and the man who was her principal employer.

She spent the next hour listening to a couple of speeches, then talking to the other guests at the table and to the staff who stopped by to pay their respects to the top table.

“Hello, Phillip.”

Kia blinked as a wave of apprehension swept over her. She’d seen a picture of this woman hidden in Phillip’s desk. Lynette Kelly. Phillip’s ex-girlfriend.

Phillip smiled coldly. “Lynette. What brings you here?”

The other woman straightened her shoulders. “I’m here with Matthew Wright,” she said quietly, looking beautiful in a silky black evening gown, her dark hair framing a lovely oval face with high cheekbones and a dainty nose.

“So you’ve finally found your Mr. Right, have you?” Phillip said rather nastily, and Kia turned to look at him in dismay. He and Lynette had been deeply in love until her career as a flight attendant had come between them.

Lynette’s chin lifted with an odd dignity. “Yes, Phillip. I believe I have.”

Kia was sure she was the only one who heard Phillip suck in a sharp breath. Thankfully the others at the table didn’t appear to realize what was going on.

Except Brant, she noted.

“What a coincidence,” Phillip said, recovering quickly as he picked up Kia’s hand and eyed Lynette with cold triumph. “I’ve found the right one this time, too. Kia’s agreed to marry me.”

Two

“Ma-marry?” Lynette stuttered just as there was a lull in conversation at the table. Then all hell seemed to break loose.

“Marry? Who’s getting married?”

“You and Kia are getting married?”

“Oh, I just *knew* something serious was going on between you two.”

Kia was frozen in her seat. It wasn’t often she was lost for words, but this time she was, shock causing any protest to wedge in her throat. Had Phillip just said what she thought he’d said? In front of everyone?

He looked at Kia, brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I know we were going to wait until after Christmas, darling, but I think now’s as good a time as any.” He smiled, but his eyes implored her not to make a scene. “Forgive me for telling everyone our little secret?”

She was going to kill him. Doing a favor for her boss was one thing, but this was going too far. But what could she do? Make him look a fool in front of everyone? In front of Lynette? The other woman had been the reason for all this pretence in the first place.

A faint thread of hysteria rose in her throat. “I—”

“Details,” someone cut across her, which was probably best because she had no idea what she’d been about to say.

“Yes, give us details. We want to know everything.”

“Yeah, like where’s your engagement ring?”

Phillip laughed. “We don’t have any details yet. I only proposed tonight.” He smiled lovingly at her. “We’ll pick out a ring after Christmas, won’t we, darling?”

Still in shock, Kia was trying to think what to say. “Um ...”

“How romantic,” one of the women said on a sigh.

“Yes, isn’t it,” Brant said, a penetrating look in his eyes that made Kia feel as if he knew everything about them and didn’t like what he saw.

Yet Phillip had been insistent when they’d started this charade that no one know about it but themselves. Not even Brant. *Especially* not Brant, Phillip had said, worried his business partner might think he was being irresponsible. Apparently Brant still hadn’t forgiven Phillip for some silly error he’d made with one of their clients. It hadn’t been that important, Phillip had told her, but Brant had been watching him like a hawk ever since.

And she’d gone along with the secret for her own reasons. It had afforded her some degree of protection against the desire she saw in Brant’s eyes. Always he was around ... watching ... waiting ... as if ready to pounce on her the minute Phillip was out of sight, both physically and mentally.

“You’re a lucky woman, Kia,” Lynette suddenly said in a quiet voice, her face pale as she took a shaky breath. An awkward silence fell. “Well, I must get back to my table.” She looked at Phillip, her bleak eyes riveted on his face. “Congratulations, Phillip. Goodbye.”

His very breath seemed to leave him, then he appeared to gather his resolve. “Goodbye, Lynette,” he said brusquely.

She walked away with stiff dignity that made Kia inwardly flinch. God, she felt bad about her involvement in all this, having met the woman now. It had started out so innocently ... so uncomplicated. No one should have gotten hurt.

But Lynette was hurting badly right now. And so was Phillip. He couldn’t have known she’d be here. Couldn’t have prepared himself for—

Suddenly something fell into place and Kia realized that Phillip *had* known Lynette was going to be here tonight. It was the reason he’d been distant after lunch. The reason he’d given her the

diamond necklace to wear. And the reason he'd asked Brant to dance with her, making sure she was on the dance floor and on show for the other woman.

To *hurt* Lynette.

The thought tore at Kia's insides. She'd never deliberately hurt someone in her life and didn't appreciate being a part of this now. She'd tell Phillip on the way home and make him promise to set things right after this once and for all.

It was as well the DJ announced he would take a break while they served the meal, and everything became a flurry of people returning to their tables.

All at once she realized Brant was watching her with narrowed intensity. Every instinct inside her told her not to let him figure out the truth just yet. He was the senior partner—the boss—and he would take no hostages.

She felt uneasy as Brant continued to watch them while they worked their way through each course. By the time dessert was served she felt as though her relationship with her new fiancé had been scrutinized.

Suddenly Phillip pushed his wheelchair back from the table and gave a weak smile to the other guests. "You'll have to excuse me, but I think I'll call it a night. My leg is really starting to give me hell." He looked at Kia apologetically. "Darling, you stay and enjoy yourself."

She'd been concentrating so hard on Brant that his announcement took her completely by surprise. Come to think of it, Phillip hadn't eaten much and he'd been very quiet throughout the meal.

Probably from guilt, she decided, anger building at him even *thinking* about leaving her here and throwing her to the wolves. Or should that be *wolf*?

As in, Brant Matthews.

"I'll come with you," she said, reaching for her purse, determined to get away from all prying eyes.

He gave her a tired smile that was offset by the wary gleam in his eyes. "There's no need, darling. I'll be going straight to bed."

Kia wasn't about to let Phillip get away with this. They needed to talk. *Tonight*.

She pushed her chair back farther. "Still, I think I'll go home, too."

Phillip put up a hand. "Please stay, darling. I don't want to spoil your fun."

What fun? She didn't call Brant's company fun, not with him watching her, waiting. And if Phillip called her "darling" one more time, she was going to scream. She was no man's "darling," not when her father liked to call her his "darling girl."

She turned back to Phillip, ready to insist on going with him. Only the look in his eyes stopped her dead. Seeing Lynette again had upset him.

Compassion stirred within her, diminishing her anger to a degree. "Okay, Phillip. I understand. You just get plenty of rest so that we can go to the art exhibition tomorrow." Her eyes said she intended talking to him then about all this.

His eyes darted away uneasily. "I'll call you in the morning."

"I'll make sure she gets home safely," Brant said out of the blue.

Kia's heart lurched. She couldn't imagine being in the confines of a car with Brant. Why, even the ballroom wasn't enough to stop his silent seduction.

"No, that's okay," she said quickly. "I'll take a taxi."

"Not in that, you won't," Brant said arrogantly, giving her breasts a raking glance in the clinging silver dress. "There was a woman attacked just last week after she left one of the hotels by herself."

"Yes, and they caught the guy, remember?" she pointed out, resisting the urge to tug at her bodice and cover her cleavage. "It was an old boyfriend." She turned to Phillip. "I'll be fine."

But Phillip was frowning. "No, Brant's right. You're too attractive to be out on your own late at night."

Okay, this was getting crazy.

“Phillip, don’t be ridiculous. I’m a grown woman. I know how to take care of myself.”

Phillip opened his mouth, but it was Brant who spoke. “I don’t think it’s ridiculous that your ...” He paused. “... *fiancé* is concerned for your safety.”

She grimaced inwardly. What could she say to that? “Fine. You can drive me home then.”

God help her.

Satisfied with that, Phillip fobbed off someone’s suggestion that they announce the engagement over the microphone before he left. She shuddered at the suggestion, knowing it would be public knowledge soon enough. Oh, heavens, and wasn’t that idiotic journalist who’d written the comment about her getting her hooks into Phillip going to just love all this?

Thankfully Phillip’s male nurse, Rick, was in the hotel and was ready and waiting by the time Kia pushed the wheelchair through the ballroom doors. She tried to speak to Phillip, but all she got was a quick apology and a promise to talk later.

Then Rick wheeled him away. Suddenly the hardest thing to do was turn around and walk back into that room. Brant would be there with his arrogance and his hostility, and if he said so much as one word out of place, she would pour his drink over his head.

She smiled to herself. As a matter of fact, she hoped he did, she mused as she pushed open the doors and immediately felt those hard eyes eating her up from across the room. They scorched her with a look that bordered on physical intensity.

Unable to stop herself, she glanced at Brant. Through the sea of people and smoke-filled air, her knees weakened as sexual heat enveloped her, even as he pretended to be listening to something Simon said to him.

And it *was* a pretence. Every feminine instinct told her that he’d like nothing more than to sweep her into his arms and lose himself in her body. *Her body*. She had to remember that’s all he wanted.

“Hey, babe. Wanna dance?”

Startled, she turned and looked into the face of Danny Tripp, the teenage son of one of the executives who worked a few days a week in the accounts department, and who turned beetroot-red whenever she came into the room. She’d never been able to get him to say more than two words at a time.

But not tonight, it seemed. Tonight tall, young, clean-cut Danny Tripp, fortified by alcohol, had a silly grin on his face and was game for anything, especially with a group of his mates egging him on.

Great. Now she had *two* men lusting after her. Well, one was really only a boy in a man’s body. And the other? Yes, Brant Matthews was all man. And more. Much more.

She glanced across the room and saw the alert look in his eyes that told her he sensed another male moving in on his territory. *His* territory. How ridiculous to think that way. Yet she couldn’t shake the feeling.

Dragging her gaze away, she gave Danny a friendly smile so that he wouldn’t feel embarrassed in front of his friends. “I’d love to dance with you, Danny.”

“You would?” For a moment he appeared stunned. Then he grabbed her hand and dragged her out onto the dance floor.

She stumbled into his arms when he spun around to face her, and before she knew it, he’d slid his hands onto her hips, pulled her close to his lanky body and buried his face in her hair. There was none of the finesse Brant had exhibited earlier when he’d taken her in his arms. This was pure adolescent male, hungry for sex, and all the better with a woman he fancied.

Slightly alarmed—and hearing his pals’ whistles over the slow music—she put her hands against his chest and forced some distance between them. “Danny, I—”

“Don’t talk, babe.” He went to pull her back into position.

She held firm against him. “Dan-ny ...” The tone of her voice must have gotten through to him, because the hold on her hips slackened. She breathed a sigh of relief and looked up at him, pleased to see some of the alcoholic glaze disappear from his eyes.

He gave her a self-conscious grin. "Sorry, Kia. I guess you went to my head."

She relaxed with a smile, finding his boyishness easier to handle. "I think the drink had more to do with it than me."

He shrugged wryly. "Yeah, well, I'm not used to drinking rum."

Kia suspected he wasn't used to drinking at all. "I once got drunk on brandy and was sick for a full week."

"*You* got drunk? No foolin'?"

"I was young once, too, you know," she joked, even while her heart cramped with pain at the reason she'd been drinking. It had been the day her father had married his second wife. He hadn't wanted his "plain-looking" daughter at the wedding—or that's what he'd been telling her mother when Kia had accidentally picked up the telephone to make a call.

She'd been crushed by his rejection, though at fifteen she should have been used to his insensitivity. Afterward she'd feigned ignorance when her mother had gently explained about her father's remarriage. She had then gone out and gotten rotten drunk at a friend's party, learning the hard way that drinking didn't solve a thing.

"I hope you won't spread that around?" she said now, pushing aside her painful memories to smile up at Danny.

"Er ..." His eyes darted to his friends at the table behind them, then back to her. "Sorry. What did you say?"

Someone yelled out, "Yea, Danny," but she pretended not to notice. They were only having fun. "I said I hope you won't tell anyone that I once got drunk. I have a reputation to uphold," she teased.

His gaze went beyond her again, seemed to hesitate. Then, taking a deep breath, he pulled her up close once more. "I won't say anything," he said as if whispering sweet nothings in her ear. "I promise, babe."

He was obviously more concerned with his own reputation than hers, so it was silly to feel a flutter of apprehension just because he wanted to show off for his friends. He was really just a kid who'd had too much to drink.

Should she wait until the music stopped, then go back to her table? Or go now? The room was full of people. Surely nothing would happen to her in the middle of the dance floor....

She jumped when he began to nuzzle her neck. Okay, no way could she let this go any further. "Danny, I—"

"Let the lady go," a deep male voice said beside them, startling them both, the warning in Brant's voice clearly evident.

Danny shoved himself away from Kia, a slightly belligerent look on his face until he caught sight of who'd spoken. His cheeks began to turn red as he looked at Brant's thunderous expression. "I'm sorry, Mr. Matthews," he said quickly. "I wasn't doing anything wrong."

"I know exactly what you were doing, Daniel." Brant jerked his head at the table behind them. "I suggest you go back to your table before I decide to tell Mr. Reid what you were trying to do with his PA."

Danny looked horrified. "I was just fooling around, Mr. Matthews—promise," he said, then scurried away, obviously terrified he would lose his job.

Kia couldn't help but feel sorry for the young man. Brant could be a formidable figure when he chose to be, though why he chose to throw his weight around now was anybody's guess.

She winced inwardly. That wasn't quite true. She knew *exactly* why he wanted Danny away from her. But before she could think further, Brant swept her into his arms and began to lead her around the dance floor. His touch was impersonal enough, so why did she feel acutely aware of him and his sexual power over her?

Angry with herself for her reaction, she shot him a look that would make a lesser man stumble. "You didn't need to frighten him like that."

“Yes, I did.”

And she saw that deep down he did. It fit his dangerous persona. The predator who never gave up his prey without a fight. All very subliminal, yet it was there, hidden beneath his civilized exterior. God, was she the only one who saw it? Who felt it? She must be.

She swallowed a lump of apprehension. “You had no right to interfere.”

His grip tightened. “I had every right. Philip would expect me to protect his ... fiancée.”

She ignored another insulting pause. “Danny’s just a boy. He was having some fun, that’s all.”

A cynical smile immediately twisted his lips. “He’s a young man who was almost having his way with you right there on the floor.” He shrugged. “But, hey, if that’s how you get your kicks, then maybe—”

“Shut up, Brant.”

For a moment it was hard to tell who was the more surprised, but then a satisfied light came into his blue eyes. “Hurrah! She said my name.”

Kia found herself exchanging a subtle look of amusement with him. Okay, so he’d won that small victory. She could allow him that, seeing he really had saved her from a possibly unpleasant situation.

“If it’ll make you feel any better, I’ll talk to Danny on Monday,” he said. “For now, it’ll do him good to stew over the weekend. He needs to learn a lesson about not making a move on the boss’s woman.”

Which boss? she wanted to ask, a tingle running down her spine at the thought of being Brant’s woman. She grimaced. *One* of Brant’s women. “Thank you.”

There was a moment’s pause, then, “So congratulations are in order,” he said in a harsh voice that suddenly matched his eyes.

Unable to bring herself to say yes, she merely nodded.

“I’m surprised,” he continued. “Most women couldn’t have kept it a secret.”

“I’m not most women.”

“True.” But it didn’t sound like a compliment. His burning gaze slid down the column of her throat, to the necklace, and rested there for a moment. “Diamonds look good on you,” he said almost as if he disliked her for it. “Another expensive gift from Phillip?”

“Another?”

“As well as the Porsche.”

Good grief. Did he think Phillip had bought the car for her? She felt her cheeks redden. “Phillip did *not* give me the Porsche.”

His eyes flickered with surprise. “But he gave you the necklace, right?” His expression darkened, grew stormy. “He’s generous to a fault.”

The way he said it was as if Phillip was generous and *she* was at fault. For a moment she wondered what she’d ever done to this man—apart from *not* hopping into bed with him.

As for the necklace, how could she tell him she was giving it back to Phillip? He’d have to ask why. So let him think what he liked. He did anyway.

After that, he seemed to sense her withdrawal, because he remained quiet while they danced around the floor. Kia fought hard to concentrate on being angry with him, but the music was growing insistent, bringing his body against her own, each step sensuously rubbing leg against leg.

His hand rested on her hip, every movement making his palm slide a little up, a little down.

Up. Down.

Hot. Cool.

In. Out.

Oh, God.

“Are you all right?”

His husky words snapped Kia's head back and she gazed into eyes that smoldered with awareness. Her heart lurched sideways, his magnetism so potent, so compelling that she could imagine him taking her right here and now in a raw act of possession that had everything to do with pure sex and erotic pleasure and nothing to do with reason. And he knew. Oh, yes, he knew, because that feeling was rushing through him, too. She could see it in his eyes. In every beat of his heart.

"It's—" she moistened her lips "—a bit hot in here, that's all," she said, pretending it was the crowd of people on the dance floor affecting her, and not him. "Too many people wanting to let their hair down, I guess."

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and the blue of his eyes darkened. Then he glanced up at the blond hair she'd put up for tonight. "Do *you* ever let your hair down, Kia?" he murmured.

What was he really asking? Whether she'd dare go to bed with him? Somehow, somewhere, she had to find the strength to pull herself out of this. If Phillip were here ...

Of course!

Stronger now, she planted a cool smile on her lips. "Phillip's really the only one I let my hair down for now."

He tensed, a muscle ticking at his jaw. "Phillip didn't seem himself tonight."

She knew what he was implying. That Lynette's presence had upset him. "He's been doing too much this week."

"Nothing else?"

Kia remembered the deciphering way Brant had looked at her and Phillip after Lynette had left and she felt a flutter of panic. "Maybe being the center of attention tonight was too much for him."

"Perhaps."

Everything had been crazy since the accident, and with Phillip having been told he'd have a permanent limp, she knew Brant couldn't be sure that *hadn't* been the problem tonight. She was banking on that to save her from further interrogation.

The music ended, and her heart skipped with relief when he let her slip from his arms without another word. He escorted her back to the table, fortunately without touching her, but she still resisted the urge to fan herself as she took her seat. One more dance with him and she'd have gone up in smoke.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Serena asked.

Kia smiled at the other woman and tried not to show how her pulse was bubbling like the fresh glass of champagne in her hand. What a question. How could she enjoy herself when every look sent her way told her that this woman's date wanted her with a passion.

"I'm having a great time," she lied, watching Brant sit down on the opposite side of Serena. "I just wish Phillip hadn't left so early." That, at least, was the truth.

Serena's eyes turned sympathetic. "He needs time to adjust."

Kia felt her throat close up. She didn't deserve Serena's sympathy. Or anyone else's, for that matter. She was such a fraud. "I know," was all she could manage.

After that, talk around the table turned to other things. Her heart took the chance to settle back to its regular beat as she listened to the discussions going on around her. They were all such nice people.

She glanced at Brant, his dark head tilted toward Serena while she spoke to him. Well, *nearly* all of them were nice. She couldn't exactly call Brant Matthews "nice."

It didn't apply to a man with probing eyes and an inscrutable expression, a man whose body coiled with barely controlled sensuality but bordered on an unfriendliness that belonged to an archenemy.

Thankfully the music started up again, this time playing rock and roll, and Simon asked her to dance. Desperate to forget thoughts of Brant, who was now asking Serena to dance with him, she willingly went with the older man to the dance floor, where he showed her that being middle-aged still made him capable of some daring moves.

“He’ll be paying for that tomorrow,” his wife teased to Kia when she returned to the table with Simon after only one song.

Kia smiled, but before she could catch her breath, Bill Stewart grabbed her hand and insisted on a dance, too. She figured out then that they were making sure she was having a good time even without her fiancé.

When she eventually got to sit down, she saw Simon about to get to his feet again. “No more,” she gasped, reaching for the jug of ice water. They were killing her with kindness.

“Oh, but—” Simon began.

“No more,” Brant said firmly across the table, the look in his eyes reminding them all who was boss. “Kia looks tired.”

Kia didn’t want to agree with him, but she didn’t want to dance again either. “I am a little,” she smilingly apologized to Simon.

“That’s okay,” the older man said with obvious relief. “I wasn’t sure I had another one in me anyway.”

After that, the music got even louder, until it became more impossible to talk. It wasn’t long before the older couples decided to call it a night.

“Would you ladies like to go home soon?” Brant said, encompassing both her and Serena with his question. “It’s nearly midnight.”

Rather than going home with Brant, Kia would have sat here all night if she knew she hadn’t been inconveniencing Serena. “That’s up to both of you.”

“I’m ready when you are,” Serena agreed, giving a delicate yawn followed by a self-conscious laugh. “I have an early appointment in the morning anyway.”

“No sleep-in for you then,” Kia teased.

Brant quickly finished off his drink. “Right. Let’s go,” he rasped, getting to his feet.

Startled by his tone, Kia got to her feet, too, followed by Serena, who didn’t seem to notice and continued to talk while they made their way through the tables to the exit.

Kia listened even while she wondered why Brant’s face looked like thunder. Had it been her mention of sleeping in tomorrow morning? Did it remind him of being in bed? Of making love? She must have reminded him that he *wasn’t* about to get any sex tonight. Not from Serena. And certainly not from *her*.

Of course, he would still have plenty of other woman friends who would willingly sacrifice themselves for his pleasure. He only had to make a phone call and it would be his.

But she soon forgot all that when they reached the front of the hotel and were discussing where they lived while waiting for Brant’s car to be brought around. It appeared Serena lived closest.

“Then we’ll drop you off first, if you don’t mind,” Brant said as the gray Mercedes glided to a stop in front of them.

Serena smiled shyly. “Of course I don’t mind,” she said, and before Kia could do a thing about it, Brant was holding the back door open for Serena and she had slid onto the backseat.

Kia was tempted to slide in right next to her, but as if he knew, Brant took her by the elbow and walked her to the front passenger door.

His touch made her shiver in the balmy night air. Soon she’d be alone with a man who had no need to touch to get his way. A man who had perfected foreplay with just a look. Perhaps it was as well she was an “engaged” woman now.

Three

Kia consoled herself on the way home that at least her presence wouldn't give Brant the opportunity to seduce the innocent Serena. Not that she really thought he would now, not after the brotherly way he'd been treating the younger woman all night.

Then she remembered her father and all the young women who'd passed through his life and she knew that some men just couldn't help themselves.

Five minutes later, she watched from the car while Brant walked Serena to the front door of her house. The security light had come on at their approach and Kia saw everything clearly. She breathed a sigh of relief when Brant gave Serena a smile and a quick peck on the cheek, then strode back to the car.

"Was that chaste enough for you?" he mocked as he started the engine.

Chaste? A kiss from this man could never be considered chaste. Not for her, anyway.

She forced a cool smile. "I didn't think you knew what the word meant."

He smiled grimly as he pulled out from the curb. "I could say the same about you."

"Me?"

He glanced sideways, his eyes boldly raking over her. "Sweetheart, you *ooze* sex appeal. Why do you think young Danny was falling over himself?" Obviously seeing her surprise, his eyes narrowed. "Surely Phillip's told you how sexy you are?"

Sexy? No, Phillip had never told her that.

"Yes, of course," she lied.

"You don't sound too sure."

She stiffened. "Of course I'm sure. It's just that ..." *Think*. "Well, since the accident we've been concentrating on him rather than me."

He appeared to consider that. "He's going through a tough time right now." Once more his gaze slid over her, almost contemptuously this time. "But if any woman can make him think like a man again, it's you."

She didn't appreciate the comment. "You've missed your calling. You should be doing talk shows."

This time he laughed. A deep, rich sound that made her catch her breath and confirmed why women of all kinds wanted him. She didn't even *like* him and *this* was her reaction.

Luckily for her, they came to some night roadwork and Brant had to slow the car and concentrate for the next kilometer. After that, except for her directing him, they both remained quiet until they reached her street.

"It's the house at the end," she said as they came around the corner into the leafy cul-de-sac.

A few moments later he pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. "You live here by yourself?" he asked, his eyes going over the ground-level house nestled amongst the lush garden. It was obviously too big for one person.

"I live by myself, yes, but the house has been divided into two. The owner lives in one apartment and I live in the other."

It was a bonus that June didn't drive, so Kia got to use the garage at the far end of the driveway. But why, oh, why hadn't she driven herself tonight? If she'd known Phillip would leave early and she'd be stranded with Brant, she would have insisted on taking her Porsche.

The Porsche Brant thought Phillip had bought for her.

He opened his door, letting in the late-night sounds of a tropical summer. "I'll walk you inside."

She'd known he would. Her front door was actually around the back of the house, so it wouldn't be possible to dismiss him easily. The minute he saw her walking down the driveway alongside the house he'd be out of the car and following her anyway.

"It's around the back." She moved to get out of the car, but her long dress proved difficult, and before she knew it he stood beside her, offering her his hand. For a moment she hesitated. Already her pulse was skittering all over the place. What would his touch do to her?

Having no option but to appear unruffled, she held her breath and put her hand on his. Her skin immediately tingled from the contact, but surprisingly his fingers didn't close around hers. His hand remained open, palm up, allowing her to grip him as she chose.

Is this how he lets a woman make love to him? At her own pace?

That thought spread the tingle through her body as her fingers closed around his hand and she pressed her palm against his, using his strength to bring her to her feet.

He stepped back before their bodies could touch further, making her grateful for small mercies.

"It's this way," she said huskily and hurried forward, the path illuminated by small garden lights mingling through the palm trees, the clicking of her high heels in competition with a chorus of green tree frogs.

But when she came up to the door, it was standing open. She began to frown, then gave a soft gasp as realization hit. Someone had broken in.

"Oh, my God," she whispered in disbelief.

"Stay there." Brant strode the few feet to the door, swearing softly when he tread on some broken glass. He reached inside for the nearest switch, flooding the kitchen with light.

Kia came up behind him and they both stood there looking around. At first it appeared as if nothing had happened but the glass on the floor showed that someone had smashed one of the panels on the door.

"Careful," Brant warned, stepping over the mess, then helping her while she lifted the skirt of her long dress with one hand and gingerly stepped over the glass.

Kia's heart was almost jumping out of her chest. "Do you think he's still here?" she whispered.

Brant peered toward the darkened hallway, his expression hard. "If he is ..." He pulled his cell phone out of his jacket pocket. "He's going to regret it."

Kia shivered as he dialed the police and spoke quietly for a moment. She almost felt sorry for the robber if he was still here. He'd be in for a shock if Brant got hold of him.

He swore as he ended the call. "They've had a busy night. They could be a while."

Kia's stomach churned with anxiety. She'd hate to think what would happen if she were here alone. For the first time, she was glad of Brant's presence. "What now?"

He reached over to grab a knife from the block on the sink. "I guess I'm going to play the bloody hero," he muttered, stepping toward the hallway, but he stopped when he saw her face. "What's the matter?"

"You're not going to use that, are you?"

He grimaced. "It's only for protection. Come on. Stick with me."

Kia needed no second bidding. She stuck like wallpaper while they went from room to room, switching on each light, her knees knocking with relief when no one jumped out at them.

In the loungeroom they discovered her laptop and DVD player missing, plus a small antique clock, along with other knickknacks. Her bedroom appeared untouched, thank God. She'd hate to think of some stranger handling her personal things. Perhaps fondling her silky bra and panties ...

She shuddered, and Brant put his hand on her forearm and turned her to face him. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she murmured, though she knew she wasn't. She couldn't seem to stop shaking.

"Shhh," he said, starting to massage her arm in a comforting gesture that made her drop her gaze to his hand on her, suddenly wanting to lean into him and let his strength wrap around her.

She looked up and all at once he was staring into her eyes.

"Kia?" he growled, and she opened her lips slightly despite a silken thread of warning in his voice. He was going to kiss her.... She wanted him to, dear God, she did.

Just then the sound of crunching glass came from the kitchen and a male voice called out, "This is the police. Everything all right in there?"

Brant immediately stepped back. "About bloody time," he rasped without looking at her and left her side to stride down the hallway. "We're here, Constable," he said more loudly. "We were just seeing if there was any damage."

Kia stood there for a moment, fighting intense disappointment. Brant obviously hadn't suffered from the same frustration—or if he had, he hadn't shown it. He'd turned away from her so fast she'd almost got whiplash watching him.

Which only reminded her that's exactly what he'd do if he ever got her into bed. He'd use her, then he'd walk away without a second glance.

Kia took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Now she felt strong again. She'd resisted him this far and would continue to do so. She'd been weakened by the shock of the robbery, that's all.

For the next ten minutes she sat at the kitchen table and answered questions for the two very nice policemen who'd responded to the call, while Brant leaned back against the sink and watched the proceedings like a judge in a courtroom. He certainly made the younger policeman uneasy, by the looks of things, though the older one didn't bat an eyelid.

"Probably an addict," the older policeman said now, giving a world-weary shrug. "Got to get their fix somehow. Just as well you were wearing that necklace, Miss Benton, and didn't leave it at home."

Kia gave a soft gasp as her hand went to the diamonds circling her neck. Then she saw Brant's jaw clench and the way his eyes burned her and she couldn't help but think he was somehow angry over Phillip giving her the necklace.

The policeman interrupted her thoughts by going on to suggest ways of tightening her security, including putting a bolt on the door and getting a dog.

"Oh, but we do have a dog. I mean, the lady in the apartment next door has a dog." Something occurred to her. "Oh, no. I wonder if he broke into June's place, as well? The house has been divided in two, you see." She swallowed. "Do you think you could check? She's not home this weekend, thank goodness. She went to visit her sister and took Ralphie with her."

"I'll go take a look around," the younger policeman said after getting a nod from his boss, then nervously looked at Brant before leaving the room, as if glad to get out from under such a strong presence.

The older policeman glanced at Kia. "Have you got someone to stay with you tonight, Miss Benton? Something like this can shake people up pretty bad."

"I'll be staying with her," Brant said before she could open her mouth.

She shot to her feet. She couldn't have Brant stay here. She just couldn't. "I can look after myself. I don't need anyone. I—"

"What if he comes back?" Brant cut across her.

The spew of words froze on her lips. Somehow she managed a short laugh. "He won't. He got what he wanted."

"Did he?"

She shivered and hugged her bare arms. "Stop it. You're scaring me."

"Well, you should be bloody scared," he said, straightening away from the sink. "You've got a door with a broken lock and no one close enough to hear you scream." His jaw tautened, making him look dark and dangerous. "I'm staying."

How silly to feel relief. She should be more scared of Brant and her own attraction for him than of being robbed again. Only if the robber came back he might not only want to rob her. He might want more than that....

"I really think that's a good idea, Miss Benton," the older policeman coaxed, looking at her in a fatherly fashion, reminding her that they weren't alone.

She swallowed deeply. "Yes, of course."

Right then the younger policeman stepped back into the kitchen, interrupting them. "Everything's fine next door." He shot a look at his boss. "Sarge, that call we were expecting just came through."

"Right." The older man straightened and immediately put his notebook in his pocket. "We'll be in touch," he told them quickly, then was gone.

A moment's tense silence stretched between her and Brant, then she cleared her throat, determined to be as businesslike as possible. "I'll get the couch ready for you."

Brant's mouth twisted. "I doubt I'll get much sleep on that two-seater in your loungeroom."

She felt as if her breath cut out. *Was he asking to share her bed?* Over her dead body.

Well, maybe not her *dead* body, she mused, hurrying to the refrigerator to get a cool drink. "Isn't that the point? To stay awake and protect me?" She lifted out the jug of cold water, almost tempted to hold it up to her forehead to cool herself down. "Anyway, it opens out to a sofa bed. You'll have plenty of room."

He began loosening his tie. "Fine. I like being able to spread out."

"That must be a novelty for you," she said before she could stop herself.

The look in his eyes held a spark of eroticism. "You make it sound like there's a woman in my bed every day."

She feigned ignorance. "You mean there isn't?"

"Sweetheart, I'm not married. I only let a woman in my bed when I'm looking for some affection."

"That's what I said. Every day." She placed the jug on the bench and walked toward the hallway door. "I'll get you a blanket," she said before he could respond. She had to get out of that room or she'd strangle him with her bare hands. Either that or smother him with one of the pillows she was about to get him.

The ringing of the telephone next to him woke Brant with a start the next morning. It seemed as if he'd only just fallen asleep, having tossed and turned for most of the night, blaming the sofa but knowing it was because the sexiest woman alive lay in a bed not meters away from him, with only a thin wall between them.

So he didn't appreciate being woken now. "Yes?" he barked into the mouthpiece.

A moment's silence, then a man's shocked voice came down the line. "Brant!"

Brant's eyes flew open. "Phil?"

The other man sucked in a sharp breath. "What the hell? Where's Kia?"

"Look, it's not what you think," Brant growled, shooting to a sitting position and regaining his composure. "Someone broke into her place last night. I slept on the sofa so I could keep an eye on her, that's all."

"Is she okay?" Phil asked, anxious now.

"She was a bit shook up last night, but I'm sure she'll be fine in the light of day."

He looked up and saw Kia standing in the doorway. Her blue eyes were sleepy, her blond hair sexily tousled, not a bit of makeup on her beautiful face as she wrapped the sash of a silky blue creation around her waist. She looked so bloody gorgeous he had to stop himself from throwing the phone down and ravishing her on the spot.

"I'm glad you were there for her," Phil said slowly, dragging Brant's thoughts away from the woman in front of him. Phil still sounded depressed.

"Phil, I'm sure she would rather have had you here," he said, watching her eyes come fully awake at the mention of the other man's name.

"Is that Phillip?" she said, stepping into the room and hurrying toward him. In an instant Brant could feel her female heat coiling around him. Could hear the silky swish of her thighs. The soft gasps of her breath that came closer and closer. If he reached out, he might just be able to caress her.

Instead he held out the phone. “Yeah, it’s Phil.”

She snatched it to her and immediately turned her back on him. “Phillip? Did Brant explain what happened?” She gave a delicate shudder. “It was awful. I can’t believe someone would do this.” She listened for a moment, then said, “He broke the glass door. The police think ...”

She continued to talk, but Brant had stopped listening. And he’d almost stopped breathing. She didn’t know it, but with the morning sun streaming in the room he could see straight through her gossamer robe to the line of her buttocks. God, how he’d love to run his hands over them. They’d be so smooth to his touch.

Giving a silent groan, he leaned his head back against the pillows and closed his eyes. Dammit, he had to stop this. She wasn’t worth the looking ... the wanting....

“Brant?”

Did she have to say his name in such a husky voice? As if she was his lover, waiting for him to stir. The next thing she’d be reaching out to touch him....

“Yes?” His voice sounded rough, like the night he’d just had.

“Are you awake?”

“No. I always talk in my sleep,” he mocked and opened his eyes. Disappointment rippled through him when he saw she’d moved out of the sunlight.

Her mouth tightened. “That’s one thing *I’ll* never find out.”

“No, you won’t, will you?” And suddenly it was the biggest regret of his life. His lips twisted. Okay, that and getting involved with Julia all those years ago. She hadn’t been too innocent when she’d run off and married his brother.

He threw back the sheet and swung his legs over the side of the sofa bed, his black briefs his only covering. “Tell me. Does Phillip ever talk in his sleep?” he asked, forcing himself to remember who this woman belonged to ... and what she was about.

Money.

She gave a light laugh. “Only to murmur sweet nothings in my ear.”

An intense jealousy slashed through him. It should have been *him* who whispered in her ear. *Him* who lay beside her. *Him* who made love to her. That’s what felt right. Not her and Phillip. Every minute he grew more certain of it.

He reached for his trousers. God, what was going on here? Why didn’t he suddenly feel right about those two? There was something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Something important. Yet all he had was a gut feeling he couldn’t shake. And a bloody hunger for Kia Benton that wouldn’t stop.

“Would you like coffee before you go?”

At the crack in her voice he looked up and caught her appraising his bare chest and taut stomach. Despite being newly engaged, the look in her eye said she wanted *him*.

His muscles immediately tensed as he zipped up and asked the question that hit him from out of nowhere. “How come you didn’t call Phillip last night?” All at once he found it interesting that she hadn’t gone running to her fiancé after the burglary.

She’d been about to turn away, but now her eyelids flickered, as if the question startled her. “What? Er ... I didn’t want to worry him.”

“If you were my fiancée, I’d *want* you to worry me.”

She moistened those oh-so-enticing lips. “You know he was tired and in pain when he left the party.”

“I’d still want to know if you were in danger.”

Her chin angled. “Phillip’s not like you, Brant.”

No, he wasn’t, was he? Phillip was a one-woman man. And that woman was Lynette Kelly, of that Brant was suddenly certain. Ever since he’d seen Phillip’s reaction to his old girlfriend at the Christmas party last night, he’d had this deep nagging feeling. And what about Lynette’s reaction to Phillip? They were both still in love with each other, no doubt about it.

Brant looked at Kia and wondered if she knew. Surely she'd noticed something amiss?

"Forget the coffee," he rasped as he quickly slipped on his shirt and made a grab for his jacket. He had to get out of here before he did or said something he'd regret. Phillip may be in love with Lynette, but the other man obviously wasn't prepared to do anything about it. And Kia must be thanking her lucky stars she'd found a man who didn't give a damn that he was being taken to the cleaners.

Ignoring the tight knot forming in his stomach, he sat down again and began putting on his socks and shoes. "I'll call a locksmith and get him to fix the door for you." What he should really do is get someone to lock *her* up. Only then would men be safe from her beauty and self-seeking ways.

"I'm quite capable of picking up a phone."

"I didn't say you weren't, but I can get it fixed faster. I have connections."

"What you mean is you'll offer him more money to fix it today?"

"The company can afford it."

She drew in a sharp breath. "Don't be ridiculous. I won't be letting the company pay for anything."

His mouth clamped into a thin line. Who was she trying to fool? This was a token protest at best.

"So you're going to sleep another night with your door wide-open?" He stood up, ready to leave. "I could always come back and use your sofa again." It was a foolhardy threat. He'd never be able to handle another night without touching her. And he had better things to do with his time.

"I'll go to a motel."

His teeth clenched. "Fine and dandy. And when you get home, the rest of your stuff will have been stolen." Without waiting for a response, he started toward the door. "Someone will be round within the hour."

"Brant—" she warned, only to have the ring of the telephone interrupt her.

"Answer that," he said and left the house before she could get another word in. What he found interesting was that she hadn't mentioned staying at Phillip's place, when that would be the ideal solution. Perhaps she was holding out for a white wedding, he mused cynically.

Four

Later that day, when Phillip's attendant knocked on her door to pick her up to take her to the art exhibition, Kia had to take a calming breath before answering. She was furious with Brant over the locksmith he'd sent here. All the names she'd been calling him seemed too tame for the thoughts bubbling in her brain right now.

But instead of showing her feelings, she smoothed her hands down the front of her slim-fitting sleeveless dress and reached for the door handle. She wouldn't let Brant spoil her afternoon. She'd rather eat rat poison.

"G'day, Kia."

The breath caught in her throat. The man on the other side of the doorway emitted a sex appeal so potent it cracked through the air like a whip, invisibly wrapping around her body and almost pulling her toward him. Black trousers fitted his lower torso to perfection, a light gray polo shirt molded over his chest. He looked casual and confident. A man any woman would be proud to be seen with.

Anyone but her.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Brant said, stepping past her into the house without waiting for an invitation.

She spun around to face him. Of all the arrogant ... "How dare you!" she managed to say.

He merely looked amused. "How dare I be in your house? You didn't mind me being here last night."

She glared at him. He made it sound as if they'd been making love all night. "I'm talking about the security alarm."

His forehead creased. "He didn't do a good job?"

"Yes, he did a good job, but that's not the point. He was supposed to fix the lock, not put in an alarm system." She'd thought the man had been merely checking security risks when he'd started going from room to room. By the time she'd realized he was doing the whole thing, he'd climbed on the roof and had half the place wired.

"I thought an alarm system would be better."

"*You* thought? Where do you get off ordering an alarm for *me*?"

"I told you. The company will pay for it."

"It's not the money," she said through gritted teeth.

His eyebrows lifted with cynicism. "Really? Then what's the problem?"

"This is *my* home, Brant. *My* private life. You're interfering in it. You've no right to even be here, let alone tell someone to install an expensive piece of equipment like this. Heck, it's not even technically my house."

His shrug belied the hard gleam in his eyes. "Don't make a big deal out of this, Kia. You're Phillip's fiancée now. He wants you to be safe."

She tried not to wince. "Phillip knows about the alarm?"

"As you're now his fiancée, I suggested it and he agreed. We all know it's quite common for criminals to return to the scene of the crime. You either had to get an alarm or move."

She flashed him a look of disdain. "Oh, really. And where would you like me to live?"

"How about with your fiancé?"

She gulped and quickly spun away to turn off the air-conditioning. Anything not to look at Brant. "Phillip and I haven't discussed that yet."

"That's what Phil said."

Relief rushed through her. "There you are then." She remembered the security alarm and glared at him. "Anyway, you and Phillip have no right to tell me what to do or what to put in my own house. And as soon as he gets here, I'll be making that quite clear."

"Then you're going to have a bit of a wait," he said, his gaze seeming to watch her reaction. "He's not coming. He rang and asked me to take you to the exhibition instead. He said he wasn't feeling up to it today."

Her stomach knotted. She didn't want to go to the exhibition with Brant. Damn Phillip for being selfish enough not to turn up. She was beginning to think taking the easy way out was a weakness he couldn't control.

"Why didn't he phone me himself?"

"He said he'd tried a couple of times but kept getting the busy signal."

She bristled with indignation. "Because the alarm was being connected to the phone line, that's why." She waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, it doesn't matter. I'm not going without Phillip."

His eyes narrowed. "Phil said one of our clients invited him to the exhibition."

"Er ... yes ..." She licked her lips. "But it just wouldn't be the same without Phillip. I'm sure they'll understand."

"*They* may, but *I* won't. This is a work assignment, Kia. Think of it as payment for the security alarm."

Her mouth tightened. So there *was* a catch to his free and easy statement of "the company will pay for it."

"Perhaps I should go by myself ... on behalf of the company, that is. There's no need for you to waste your Saturday afternoon." She didn't want to deprive some poor besotted female of his company either.

"I wouldn't think of it as a waste. I'd like to see the exhibition, too. Early Australian art fascinates me."

It fascinated her, too, but she didn't want to say so. Yet could she spend hours with him and survive the draw of his attraction? She swallowed. It looked as though she wasn't getting a choice. But after she put in an appearance for their client, she'd make sure it was the quickest walk around the gallery on record.

An hour later she and Brant strolled through the art gallery by themselves after they'd shared an afternoon tea of pineapple scones, finger sandwiches and a delicious tropical fruit platter. Brant had been his charming self with their client and the others. A couple of times she'd even let her guard down and surprised herself by actually laughing at some of his witty remarks.

Of course, being witty and a womanizer was what he was about. That's how men like him got women into bed, and if the looks some of the other women were giving him were anything to go by, he'd have had plenty of offers today if she hadn't been around. Yes, he knew exactly how to charm the panties right off a woman. She stiffened. *Not this woman.*

"I like this painting of the early settlers," he said now, his deep voice bringing her out of her thoughts. "I saw a print of it years ago, but the brushstrokes and paint textures are nothing compared to the original." He turned to look at her. "It's very evocative, don't you agree?"

She fumbled for words when she saw the piece of work he was referring to. "Um ... yes."

He arched a brow. "You sound surprised?"

A thrill raced through her, but she managed to shrug as if it were no big deal. "It's my favorite painting."

"And you didn't expect us to have the same tastes, right?" He paused, his blue eyes darkening. "I think we'd have a lot in common if we looked closely."

She moistened suddenly dry lips. "Yes. Phillip, for one thing."

He gave a slightly bitter smile. "Ah, Phillip. We'll always have him in common, won't we?" He turned back to the painting. "Tell me. Why is this your favorite?"

Obviously he wanted to keep things on an even keel, and she was only too happy to oblige. Yet she couldn't help but feel a burst of excitement that he found the imagery of the painting as touching as she did. Perhaps there was more to him than met the eye.

She turned to the painting and let her gaze wander over the picture of their pioneer ancestors, losing herself in its sheer vibrancy and color. “I’d say it’s because it personifies the Outback spirit. That it’s possible to overcome any obstacle, no matter how big or daunting.”

“So you like challenges?” he pounced.

She drew in a shaky breath. Always the predator. He just couldn’t help himself. “*Some* challenges,” she admitted.

“I like certain challenges, too,” he drawled, his eyes intense. “If somebody tells me I can’t have something, then that’s when I want it.”

And he wanted her. He had no need to say it out loud. The wanting poured from him like a familiar scent.

She plastered a smile on her lips. “Then you’d better get used to disappointment,” she quipped, knowing her first instincts about him were correct. She hadn’t misjudged him. Not in the slightest.

A few hours later the two of them sat at an outdoor café not far from the exhibition, sipping at fruit daiquiris. The pre-Christmas festivities were still continuing, and people were out in force and in holiday mode, enjoying a stroll along the sail-shaded Smith Street Mall, listening to a busker play her guitar, watching a mime artist perform.

Brant couldn’t have cared less where they were or who was nearby. His concentration was solely and fully on one person. Kia looked as beautiful as always, with her blond hair pulled back in a French knot, and wearing a lemon-colored dress that displayed the elegant line of her neck and showed off her tanned shoulders and arms.

But something else about her today set his pulse spinning like a top. Watching her talk to the others at the gallery, he’d glimpsed an innocence in her lovely eyes that had been at odds with the knowing look in them, as if she couldn’t quite hide the sweet beneath the spice. Yet *sweet* was hardly a word he’d expect to use about Kia Benton.

He swallowed some of his drink, then decided he didn’t need any more intoxication right now. Apart from a brief time last night and again this morning, he’d never really been alone with her like this before. It had gone to his head—no, his *body*. His state of constant arousal was killing him.

And she knew it. That’s why she wasn’t quite facing him as she sat sipping her daiquiri, her body turned slightly toward the crowd.

But she was only fooling herself. There could be a brick wall between them and the attraction would still seep through. Didn’t she know there was no stopping it? Not unless they made love and got it out of their systems, and then he had the feeling it would probably only intensify.

“Tell me more about your father,” he said, suddenly interested in what made her tick.

She raised a wry eyebrow. “Why?”

He gave a smile. “Are you this suspicious of everyone or is it just me?”

“Just you,” she said, her lips curving into a sexy smile that was as unexpected as was her words. God. She was lovely, with her smooth cheekbones, perfect nose, eyes that could dazzle a man with just one look and a deliciously tempting mouth.

She put her glass down, and when she looked up again her face had sobered. “There’s nothing much to tell. My father thinks he’s one of the beautiful people. He can’t stand being around someone who isn’t.”

Brant frowned. “You’re still his daughter.”

Her slim shoulders tensed. “The only reason he wants me around is because he thinks it’s good for his image.”

All at once something occurred to him. “Good Lord. Your father isn’t Lloyd Benton, is he?”

If it were possible, she tensed even more. “The one and only.”

Now he knew where she was coming from. Lloyd Benton owned the biggest fleet of used-car yards up and down the east coast of Australia. He was constantly in the newspapers with some young

thing hanging off his arm—usually his current wife but not always. The man gave *sleaze* an added dimension.

“*He’s* your father?”

She raised her chin in the air. “I won’t apologize for him.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

No wonder she didn’t seem to hold men in high regard. Well, *some* men. He freely admitted that men like himself, who took one look and wanted to take her to bed, would only confirm her low opinion of the male species. Dammit, suddenly he was seeing another side to this woman that he wasn’t sure he wanted to see.

“It certainly explains a lot about you and Phillip.”

She tensed. “If you mean I want to marry someone who doesn’t have to bed every beautiful woman he meets, then you’re dead right. Phillip’s a nice man.” Her gaze dropped to her glass, then up again. “He’ll be a wonderful father and a faithful husband.”

“You didn’t say you loved him.” And he found that interesting. *Very* interesting.

“That goes without saying.”

“Does it?”

“Yes.”

And perhaps it was all an act. Perhaps working on people for sympathy was how she wormed her way into men’s beds ... and their hearts. Perhaps it was all about paying back her father for being so weak.

“What about you?” she said, catching him off guard. “Are your parents still alive, Brant?”

He had no wish to talk about himself. “No. They died when I was eighteen.”

Sympathy flashed in her eyes. “I’m sorry. Any brothers or sisters?”

His jaw tightened. “A brother. And before you ask, he’s younger than me by a couple of years.” He looked at his watch and stood up. “Come on. Let’s go. It’s getting late.”

For a moment, surprise mixed with hurt appeared in her eyes, then cynicism took over. “Got a date, no doubt.”

“No doubt.” He didn’t tell her he was getting together with his two best mates for dinner, though Flynn and Damien would no doubt find it amusing that they were to be his “date” this evening.

Not that he’d tell them. The three of them had grown up together on the same street in this town—had shared everything from stories of their first kiss to their first million—but Kia Benton was one thing he wasn’t about to share with his rich and successful friends.

“Phillip Reid, how could you!” Kia exclaimed the next day as she swept into his study. She’d been phoning him on and off since returning from the art exhibition yesterday. He hadn’t answered, but she suspected he’d been at home. He’d been feeling low so she’d given him a reprieve, but now she had a few words to say to him whether he still felt bad or not.

He looked up and winced. “What can I say, Kia? I’m sorry.”

She stopped right in front of his desk. “I don’t like being used,” she said through gritted teeth.

His dark brows drew together. “I wasn’t ... I didn’t mean ...”

“Yes, you did.” She slapped the box containing the diamond necklace down in front of him. “Don’t try and fool me, Phillip. You gave me this because you knew Lynette was going to be at the party. And then you had Brant dance with me so she’d see who you’d brought as your partner. And to top things off, you tell everyone we’re engaged and leave me high and dry to field all sorts of questions.”

He looked thoroughly shamefaced and embarrassed. “I really *am* sorry. I didn’t mean for it to go so far.”

She was nowhere near ready to forgive him. Not after what she’d been through. “And yesterday? What happened to coming to the art exhibition with me?”

He swallowed hard as he leaned back in his wheelchair. "I'm sorry. I just wasn't up to going out." Then he looked confused. "Didn't Brant take you? He said he would."

"Yes, but I'd rather have gone by myself," she said sourly, preferring not to think about how much she'd enjoyed herself. She had to remember Brant could charm *any* woman into having a good time.

A speculative look came into Phillip's eyes. "Are you upset because I didn't go? Or because Brant did?"

Kia tensed, then forced herself to relax. "It's awkward spending time with one's boss," she said, avoiding a direct answer.

"You don't mind spending time with me."

She shrugged. "You're different."

"Look, if there's something between you two—"

Somehow she managed to hide her panic. "Don't be an idiot, Phillip. And, by the way, what's the deal about my security alarm? I don't remember giving either of you permission to put one in my place."

Phillip frowned, falling for the diversion. "It was the only thing to do, seeing you're my ... er ... fiancée. Brant would have been suspicious otherwise."

Her teeth set on edge. "Engaged or not, I am *not* some feeble female who can't take care of myself," she said with more bravado than she'd felt the other night after the robbery. "And if Brant thinks he—"

"So this *is* about Brant?" Phillip said, pushing his wheelchair back from the desk, looking very much the all-knowing male now that the heat had been taken off him.

She realized she'd given too much away. "Phillip, will you stop this. I don't know what's come over you today."

He wheeled his chair around the desk and toward her. "He gets to you, doesn't he?"

She gave a hollow laugh. "Of course not."

"And I've gone and spoiled it for you by telling everyone you're my fiancée." He stopped a few feet in front of her and thumped his hands on the armrests in helpless anger. "Hell. This is all such a bloody mess."

"That's an understatement." She just wished he'd stopped to think things through before making drastic announcements like they were engaged. "The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

He looked up at her, his expression thoroughly wretched. "I'm not sure."

"This can't go on, Phillip."

"I know. God, we were just supposed to be a couple for *one* date."

Sympathy started to soften her. "Phillip, you didn't know Lynette's father was going to be at that dinner."

"Yeah, but I knew he shared the same business circles. Dammit, I shouldn't have asked you to continue with the charade after that. It wasn't fair of me." He looked down at his leg and his lips twisted. "Pity the accident got in the way and ruined everything. But this ..." He gestured at the plaster from toe to thigh. "I *know* Lynette. She would've convinced herself that I needed her. And then she would have convinced *me*. I couldn't let that happen." He took a shuddering breath. "She deserves better than a cripple for the rest of her life."

"Oh, Phillip." She crouched down in front of his wheelchair. "Don't say that. A limp does *not* make you a cripple."

He took a deep breath. "Sorry. I'm just full of self-pity today."

"Look," she said, thinking hard. "Let's wait until after Christmas, then we'll make an announcement that things didn't work out after all."

His eyes lit up, then drooped just as quick. “But your name will end up being mud. No one will care about the details, especially not the press. They’ll just know you broke off the engagement during a bad time for me.” He grimaced. “I’m sorry, Kia. I never meant for any of this to happen.”

She squeezed his hand, trying not to think about all this being made public to the people of Darwin. “Let’s ride it out, Phillip. In the meantime, we’ll carry on for another week until Christmas. I heard you tell Mary that you were going home to Queensland for the holidays anyway. That’ll give us some breathing space.”

Intense relief surged across his face. “Good idea.”

All at once Kia couldn’t help but think that Brant would never let anyone else sort out his problems for him the way Phillip was doing here. Brant would have taken charge and done what he had to do. Actually, on second thought, he would never have gotten himself in this situation in the first place. Brant relied on no one except himself. He needed no one.

Just like her.

“Don’t let him get to you, Kia.”

She feigned ignorance. “Who?”

“Brant.”

She pretended to be unconcerned. “I wish you’d stop implying that there’s something going on between me and Brant. There isn’t. End of story.”

Is it? Phillip’s eyes asked, but she promptly looked away. She wasn’t about to tell him she suspected he was right.

The next week leading up to Christmas proved difficult for Kia. Not only was she extremely busy tidying things up at work so that she could enjoy their two-week closure over the holidays, but Brant seemed to sense something amiss between her and Phillip. She had the funny feeling he was homing in for the kill.

Then, just as she thought she might be able to relax, the airline phoned at the exact moment Brant walked into her office. They were checking to see if there was anything else they could do to assist Phillip on his trip to Queensland tomorrow.

Kia tried to sound as if she were talking to a client. She didn’t want Brant to know she wasn’t joining Phillip at this stage. “Thank you, but I believe everything’s under control.”

“What about on arrival in Brisbane?” the woman persisted on the other end of the line. “Can we arrange transport from the airport?”

“That’s kind of you, but there will be someone to meet him,” she said, then could have kicked herself when the look in Brant’s eyes sharpened.

“That’s fine then. But please let us know if there’s anything we can do.”

“Thank you, I will.” Kia hung up, swallowed, then planted a polite smile on her face. “Can I help you, Mr. Matthews?”

His mouth thinned. “You can’t keep calling me ‘mister’ for the next twenty years.”

She kept a reign on her temper. “Who knows where any of us will be by then?”

“You’ll be married to Phillip, of course.”

She’d forgotten that was what he’d think. “Yes, of course.”

“Who was on the telephone just now?”

Her heart thumped as she quickly began to tidy up some papers. “Oh, no one you should worry about.”

A pair of hands flattened on the desk in front of her, stilling her. “That was someone from the airline, wasn’t it?”

She drew a shaky breath and looked up into blue eyes that were riveted on her face. The caress of his warm breath on her cheeks stirred her senses. “Yes.”

“So you’re not on the same flight as Phillip?” he demanded, shooting each word at her with the precision of gunfire.

“No.”

“Are you catching another flight?”

“Yes.” To Adelaide.

“To Queensland?”

She lifted her chin in the air and decided she'd had enough of this. “I'm not going to Queensland. I'm spending Christmas with my family in Adelaide.”

He leaned in that little bit closer. “So you're not spending Christmas with your new fiancé?”

She resisted shrinking back in her chair. “Not this year, no.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

Anger flared in his eyes as he pushed himself back from the desk and straightened. “It's usual for an engaged couple to spend Christmas together.”

“We're not a usual couple.” She realized what she said too late. “I'd already made other arrangements,” she pointed out as she slowly began to breathe again.

An odd glint appeared in his eyes. “I'd have thought you wouldn't want to let him out of your sight.”

“I trust Phillip,” she said, slightly puzzled by his question. It wasn't as though Phillip would be out nightclubbing every night. Now if it was Brant who was her fiancé ...

“But do you trust Lynette Kelly?” he purred.

Shock ran through her. Had he guessed that Lynette still had feelings for Phillip? Did he know things hadn't really been settled between them?

“Lynette and Phillip are no longer an item,” she said coolly, and before he could say anything further she handed him a piece of paper. “I believe this belongs to you, Mr. Matthews.”

His face hardened. “Kia, I swear if you call me Mr. Matthews one more time ...” He trailed off as he opened the slip of paper. His head shot up. “What's this?”

“A check for my security alarm.” She'd rung the man who'd come to her home only to find out the bill had already been paid.

Cynicism entered his eyes. “Forget it. You paid for it by coming to the art exhibition, remember?”

Yes, so why did she deserve that mocking look in his eyes? “I'm sorry, I don't see it that way. Not even as Phillip's fiancée.”

“My offer was non-negotiable.” He ripped it in two.

She got to her feet and walked to a cabinet too close to Brant to get her purse. “Fine. I'll write another one and give it to Phillip.”

“No need for drama, Kia. Let it go.”

“Mr. Matthews, if you think you can do what you like—”

He captured her arm with his warm hand, sending a slew of shivers racing over her spine. “Listen, if I did what I'd really like—”

“Is everything all right in here?”

Kia drew a ragged breath before she looked up to see Phillip had wheeled to the office door and was looking at them in concern. She stepped sideways and Brant dropped his hand.

Somehow she planted a stiff smile on her lips. “Yes, everything's fine. I was just reminding Mr. Matthews that you're going to Queensland tomorrow.”

“The name's Brant,” Brant snapped and stormed out of the office.

Phillip raised his brows as he looked at Kia. “Sure you don't want to come with me tomorrow? It might be safer.”

Kia shook her head. There was no place on earth safe for her. Not another state. Not another country. No, she'd just have to polish her armor and pray that Brant had better things to do on Christmas Eve than harass her.

And if she believed that, then maybe Santa Claus really did exist.

Five

Kia saw Phillip off at Darwin airport the next morning, then returned to the office to finish up some work before doing some last-minute Christmas shopping. She found Brant in Phillip's office, riffling through some papers on his desk.

He looked up when she appeared in the doorway, and his eyes darkened when he saw her. "You're back," he said as if she'd returned just for him.

And suddenly she knew she had. Despite all the attraction she *didn't* want to feel for this man, she still felt it. Her armor was paper-thin at best.

"Yes," she murmured, willing him to come to her. To pull her into his arms. To make love to her. Long moments crept by, and she saw the struggle on his face to resist doing that very thing.

He cleared his throat. "Phil's plane get off okay?"

Phillip. Her so-called fiancé wasn't gone half an hour and she was ready to fall into bed with Brant. Dear God, why did this man have such a hold over her? She hated it. She would fight against it ... with every fiber of her being.

Her gaze dropped to the paperwork in his hands. "Can I help you?" she asked, injecting cool disapproval in her tone.

His face closed up. "I was looking for the Robertson file." He went back to searching through the papers. "Phil was supposed to do some work on it."

"He did. I just have to finish typing some notes, then you can have it. Give me an hour and I'll get it to you."

"Fine." He strode around the desk and came toward her, all business now. "I'll be in my office."

She stepped back and moved to her desk before he could come anywhere near her. He sent her a mocking smile as he passed by. Well, he could mock, she told herself as she sat down and opened up the file. It wouldn't get her into his bed any faster.

Or at all.

An hour later she hurried down the hallway to his office, determined to leave the paperwork with his PA, only Evelyn was nowhere to be seen. He must have heard her in the outer office, because a few seconds later he called out to bring it in to him.

She swallowed hard, not wanting to go into his inner sanctum when no one else seemed to be around.

"Kia?"

She straightened her shoulders and walked forward. For all its luxury, she may as well have been walking into a prison cell.

"How did you know it was me?" she said.

He gave her a look that told her he always knew when she was around. "Bring it over here," he said, putting down his pen and leaning back in his chair as if she were about to put on a show and he didn't want to miss a second of it.

She hesitated. Her legs felt like jelly. Then she moved forward, and just as she'd known it would, his gaze slid over her blue tailored skirt and white silky blouse. She could see him mentally stripping the clothes from her body, piece by piece.

She was wishing that she hadn't discarded her jacket before coming in here. At least then she wouldn't have the urge to cover up the tight feeling in her nipples, and her arms wouldn't be goose-bumping in reaction.

She put the correspondence on his desk. The hint of sandalwood aftershave filled the air and stirred her senses. "I'll be leaving now. I want to finish some Christmas shopping this afternoon."

"When are you off to Adelaide?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"You'll miss Phil, no doubt?" It was a question, not a statement. Those eyes watched her like a cat stalking a mouse, waiting for her to make one wrong move. Well, she didn't much like cheese.

She pasted on a smile. "Naturally, but I'll be kept pretty busy. My mother loves to put on a bash at Christmas," she chatted on nervously, until all at once she saw a hint of bleakness in his eyes that clutched at her heart. She spoke before she could stop herself. "What about you, Brant? Any plans for Christmas?"

"So you remembered my name, eh?" Then he straightened in his chair. "A friend has invited me around for Christmas dinner, but I'm not sure I'll go yet. I've got too much work."

"What about your brother?" she said, curious to see his reaction again.

"What about him?" he snapped, his eyes turning colder than winter.

She swallowed. "I just thought—"

"Look, I don't want anything to do with my brother and that's the way I like it."

She took a step back. "Oh."

Tension filled the air and hung there for a few seconds before Brant appeared to make himself relax. Then he leaned over and took something out of the drawer in his desk. "I have a Christmas present for you."

Her heart jumped in her throat. "A ... a present?"

He held out the small package toward her. "I gave Evelyn one, too. Can't let the best two PAs in town not know they're appreciated."

His tone held something biting, though she knew it was intended for *her*, not Evelyn. But she accepted the gift anyway. Phillip had given Evelyn a present, so what was wrong in Brant giving *her* one?

Then she met his eyes and she knew that everything *was* wrong about this. This wasn't because of her work. It was because he wanted her. This was a man wanting his woman and telling her in the only way he could.

Her hands shook as she undid the wrapping paper and lifted the lid on the small box inscribed with the top jeweler's name in Australia. She gasped when she saw the small medallion nestled on a velvet bed amongst the gold chain.

"It's not a diamond necklace," he said with cutting emphasis, "but it should keep you safe on your journey home."

"It's a St. Christopher medallion," she murmured, pushing his cynicism aside, touched by the charming gift. "Thank you. It's lovely. I'll make sure I put it on before I leave."

"Let me," he rasped.

Her breath hitched. Could she bear to have him touch her, no matter how briefly? Oh, how she wanted this. Was this one little thing too much to ask?

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice shaky.

He came around the desk and took the present out of her hands. "Turn around."

She did, and for a long moment everything in the room went quiet. Her heart skipped a beat. She could feel him standing there looking at her, his warm breath flowing over the nape of her neck, making her light-headed. If she leaned back, his arms would snake around her and then ... *Oh, for heaven's sake, Kia, get a grip on yourself*, she scolded inwardly.

The package rustled and then the gold chain came around her neck. The medallion lovingly touched the base of her throat, cooling her skin.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and slowly turned her around to face him.

"Merry Christmas, Kia," he said hoarsely, moving in to kiss her.

She lifted her lips. She had to. An avalanche could be coming their way and she'd still wait for that kiss.

His lips touched hers briefly. So brief that it should have been a chaste kiss. But every pore of her skin felt him there, acknowledged him, cried out for more.

He moved back and their eyes locked. Her throat seemed to close at the intense desire written in his eyes and the struggle within him not to take her.

He stepped back with a low sound in his throat that seemed to wrench from deep inside him. It broke the spell of the moment.

She drew in a shaky breath. "Merry Christmas to you, too, Brant."

A muscle knotted in his jaw as he walked back around to the other side of the desk. "I hope you get everything you want."

If ever there was a time for *not* getting what she wished for, it was now. When she wanted *him*. She spun around and hurried toward the door, needing to get out of there.

"Have a good holiday, Kia ... even without your fiancé."

Kia stopped to glance at him and saw the look in his eyes was harder than ever. She tensed. They were right back where they'd started. And that was fine with her.

"I intend to," she said coolly and left the room.

Kia normally loved being with her family at Christmas. Neighbors dropped by for a Christmas drink in the morning, and her sister, Melanie, came around for lunch with her husband and young son. The weather usually proved to be hot at this time of year, so a variety of seafood and salads was the order of the day, followed by an English-style trifle that her mother made to perfection. A treat her stepfather loved. All very normal and comforting. Usually.

So why did she feel as though something was missing this year? It was a nagging thought inside her that remained there throughout the day and began again when she woke on Boxing Day. She felt restless. As if she should be some place else but didn't know where.

It wasn't until a barbecue lunch in the backyard, where she was playing peekaboo with her six-month-old nephew, that she looked up and her heart dropped to her feet. The laughter died on her lips. And suddenly she knew what had been missing. *Brant*. He stood near the corner of the house, watching her, his eyes piercing the distance between them. Her family faded from her mind.

"Who's that?" she heard her mother say, and all at once Kia realized he *was* there. He wasn't a figment of her imagination. And here she was dressed in denim jeans and a stretch knit top, far from the businesslike persona she kept for the office and even for Phillip.

She handed Dominic to her sister and jumped up. "It's okay, Mum. It's one of my bosses. I'll be right back."

She raced toward him, her hand going to her throat as something occurred to her. Something must be wrong. Terribly wrong.

"Phillip?" she croaked as she got closer.

Irritation flickered across his face, then disappeared. "Relax. He's okay, as far as I know."

She moistened her lips. "Then what are you doing here?" It had to be something important if he'd flown from the north of the continent to the south, over three thousand kilometers.

"The Anderson project needs redoing. Phillip must have been having a bad day when he met with them, because he got all their instructions wrong. If we don't present them with another option by Thursday morning, we lose the account."

Kia remembered she'd been a bit uneasy about that particular project. She'd even said something to Phillip about it and gotten her head snapped off at the time.

"I've got a ton of work ahead of me and I need a PA."

She frowned. "What about Evelyn?"

He smiled without humor. "Remember that medallion I gave her that was supposed to keep her safe? It didn't work. She came down with a stomach virus yesterday morning. It looks like she'll be out of action for the rest of the week."

She grimaced. "Poor Evelyn." But why did she suspect he was pleased about this? Not about Evelyn being sick but about needing *her* as replacement. Probably because he was enjoying ruining her holiday like this.

Her eyebrow lifted. "Why not hire a temp?"

"This project is too important, Kia. The company will still survive if we lose them as a client, but I'm not sure about Phil. How do you think he's going to feel if he finds out what's happened? He's pretty down at the moment." He had her with that and they both knew it. "No, I need you to come back to Darwin and help me out. I flew down last night and I've got a jet waiting at the airport now. I'll pay you triple time, of course."

She waved a dismissive hand. "I don't care about the money."

"Then think of it as repayment for the security alarm."

Her shoulders tensed. "You said that was already paid in full," she reminded him, though she still had every intention of paying off the debt herself, and in cash. "Or is this one of those debts that only seem to compound interest?"

A half smile crossed his face. "Perhaps."

"Kia, love," her mother's voice said behind her, and Kia froze. "Why not bring your boss over to meet the family?"

Kia leaned toward Brant. "Please don't mention Phillip," she whispered.

"What?" he muttered.

"They don't know about him." She saw his flash of surprise just before she swung around to face her mother to make the introductions.

But surprised or not, he soon recovered. Kia watched him turning on the charm, but she knew he'd be asking some hard questions when they were alone.

"I can certainly see where Kia gets her looks," he told her mother with a warm smile that only seemed to be available for other women.

Kia mentally rolled her eyes, but she had to admit her father would never have married her mother if she hadn't been a looker. Her mother had the warmest of natures, too. She hadn't deserved to be treated so badly.

Marlene blushed with pleasure. "Thank you, Mr. Matthews."

He darted a wry glance at Kia that said *like mother, like daughter* for calling him "mister," then turned back to her mother. "Call me Brant."

Marlene nodded. "Well, Brant. Come over and meet the rest of Kia's family." She slipped her arm through his and began walking toward the others. "Have you had lunch yet?"

"Yes, but thanks for the offer."

"Then have a drink. It's Christmas, after all." She gave a warm smile. "Besides, we want to get to know Kia's boss." She leaned slightly closer to Brant. "We worry about her up there in Darwin by herself."

He smiled. "No need to worry. We're keeping a very close eye on her," he said, and Kia's heart lurched at the hidden meaning behind those words. Suddenly her jeans felt too tight and her pink top too skimpy.

"Oh, I'm so pleased to hear that." They reached the others. "Brant, this is my husband, Gerald." The two men sized each other up and shook hands. "And this is Kia's sister, Melanie. And her husband ..."

Kia gritted her teeth as she watched the females succumb to Brant's charm like a line of dominoes toppling over. The men weren't so accommodating at first, but before long Brant had them eating out of the palm of his hand, too. Did this man know no bounds?

"So why have you come to see Kia?" her stepfather asked, and Kia saw that maybe Brant hadn't quite charmed the older man as much as she'd thought. She smiled at Gerald, loving him all the more for his protection.

"There's a major problem at the office and I need Kia's help. She's been working on the project with Ph—" He hesitated, then smiled at Kia. "She knows it by heart and I can't do it without her."

I have no choice but to beg her to return to the office with me. Believe me, I wouldn't ask her if it wasn't important."

"Of course you wouldn't," her mother said. She glanced at her daughter. "Darling, are you still doing your studies?"

Brant's ears pricked up. "Studies?"

Kia groaned inwardly. "I'm learning Chinese."

"And she's doing very well, too," Marlene said proudly. "She's got quite a knack for languages and is already fluent in French and Italian."

Brant regarded her with a speculative gaze. "You really are a mystery at times, aren't you?" he said, but she could see a slight hardness back in those eyes.

He glanced at his watch. "We'd better be going."

She nodded. "I'll just get my things together." She left him talking to the others, a little regretful that she hadn't had more time to spend with her family. But, on the other hand, helping out in a time of crisis was a small sacrifice to make for the good of the company.

Then she thought of working alone with Brant when they got back to Darwin and she pushed aside a level of excitement that had nothing to do with the challenge of the project and everything to do with the man himself. She swallowed hard. Correction. This wasn't a small sacrifice. This was going to be a *big* one.

Her hands shook as she quickly showered before slipping into a floral-print shirtdress with a short-sleeved jacket that was easy-wearing for travel but stylish enough for the office. Not bothering with stockings, she stepped into high-heeled sandals that complimented her long, tanned legs. A light touch of makeup and a quick deft of her hand to twist her hair up and she was ready. For battle. For Brant.

"Perhaps you can explain something to me," he said once they were seated in the plush jet and were heading back to Darwin.

Warning shivers started going up and down her spine. "Like what?"

"Like why you didn't tell your family about Phillip?"

She tried not to flinch. "Oh. That."

"Yes. *That*."

Her cheeks reddened. "I just want to be sure, that's all."

He straightened in his seat, on full alert now. "You're not sure?"

"Yes, of course I am," she said quickly. "It's just that it all happened so fast. I don't want my family to worry and I know they would."

A moment's pause, then he said, "Tell me. Do you love Phil?"

If she hesitated, she was lost. "Yes."

His jaw clenched. "When do you plan on telling them?"

"When the time is right. Thank you for not saying anything today. It would have been ... awkward."

God, she didn't like lying, but what else could she do? If she told the truth, Brant would go all out to seduce her. She'd be putty in his hands and she had no doubt she'd enjoy it. But that would be just a physical release. It wouldn't be enough. She needed more from a man than a quick roll in the hay.

Besides, this wasn't just about her. She couldn't give the game away yet. How could she tell Brant the truth and dump all this on Phillip's shoulders without giving him any warning? She didn't think she was better than Phillip, but she couldn't do to him what he'd done to her. No, she'd have to wait until he returned to the office in another two weeks. She just hoped she survived until then.

"I'm sure they'd be happy for you," Brant said. "Phillip's a great catch."

"Yes." She ignored the cynical tone to his voice, not quite up to verbally fencing with him right now.

About to look away, something about him grabbed her attention and she was surprised to catch a bleak look in his eyes before his gaze dropped to the papers in his lap. An odd feeling of sympathy caught at her heartstrings. Was his coming to fetch her more than just the problem at work? Had he been feeling lonely, despite a “friend” inviting him for Christmas lunch?

“Did you have a nice Christmas, Brant?”

His gaze shot toward her. “Why?”

“I just wondered.”

His smooth look made her wish she’d kept her mouth shut. “Yes, I was kept very ... busy.”

She winced inwardly. “I see.” He was a womanizer, so he’d been with a woman most likely. She understood him only too well. He was just like her father.

Nine o’clock that evening Brant decided to wrap things up for the day. Exhausted, he eased back in his leather chair and flexed his fingers. He could hear the clack of the keyboard in the outer office and knew that no matter how tired he was he would still want Kia Benton.

Even today, when he’d caught her offguard at her mother’s place, she’d made his stomach knot with desire. Hell, he could still remember how he’d felt when he’d seen her dressed so casually in those tight jeans that lovingly hugged her body. She’d looked so different. So carefree and friendly.

And when he saw her with that toddler in her arms ... it was as if he’d been seeing a glimpse of the future.

His and Kia’s future.

For the first time since Julia, he imagined actually being with a woman. Having more than just a physical connection. But not even Julia had roused the same level of yearning that had ripped through him today when he’d seen Kia.

But Kia was only out for one thing.

The woman needed money the way she needed air to breathe. Her assertion that she loved Phillip had sounded hollow to his ears, but even if he were tempted to forget it, he only had to remember that while her beautiful mouth might lie, the camera hadn’t. The self-satisfied smirk she’d been wearing in that photograph of her and Phillip had said it all: Kia Benton had caught her man.

He straightened in his chair, disgust tightening his mouth. So how could he even think about Kia on a deeper level? It was all this damn Christmas stuff, that’s what it was. It stirred too many memories of when he was growing up.

Not that he could complain about his childhood. His parents had been the best, practically adopting the other kids in the street. Many a time Flynn had taken refuge in Brant’s house when his father had been too drunk to care. And Damien’s parents hadn’t meant to be so distant from their son, leaving the small boy starving for parental affection. Brant knew if it hadn’t been for Barbara and Jack Matthews, his two friends may not have turned out as well as they had. It had bonded the three of them together.

Like brothers.

His mouth tightened. Unlike his own flesh and blood, who had stolen his fiancée.

He got to his feet and walked to the doorway, pushing aside the thought of his younger brother, Royce, as he forced his mind back to the business at hand.

For a minute he stood watching Kia’s fingers fly over the keyboard while she continued to type up the reams of paperwork needed to get the project back on track. He didn’t know what Phil had been thinking, putting together a package like that. It had been totally wrong, full of errors and not feasible.

“You knew, didn’t you?” he said, coming into the room. “That the presentation was all wrong?”

She blinked in surprise, then nodded. “I had an idea. I mentioned it to Phillip, but he thought he was right, so I left it at that.” She shrugged. “He’s the boss.”

“And so am I. You should have come to me.”

She arched a brow. “And tell you what exactly? That my boss wasn’t thinking straight because he’d lost the use of his leg and now I was telling him he was beginning to lose his mind, too?”

“I admire your loyalty, Kia, but next time save us both some stress and just tell me about it. I won’t go running to Phil, but I’ll find a way around it. If Phil’s not coping, we need to get him some help.”

She sighed. “Yes, you’re right.”

He went to speak, to tell her how Phillip’s judgment was sometimes suspect and had caused problems before, but then he remembered whose fiancée she was.

“Right. Let’s call it a night. Would you like to get a bite to eat on the way home?” Suddenly he didn’t want to go home alone. He had nothing waiting for him there. And no doubt they’d still have all those sappy Christmas movies on television.

She began stacking papers. “No, thanks. The pizza was more than enough.”

“We ate that hours ago.”

She looked up with a rueful gleam in her eyes. “I’m still full from Christmas lunch yesterday.”

That gleam hit him right in his chest. There was a warmth in her eyes whenever she spoke of her family that just didn’t correspond with the cold, callous player he knew her to be.

He stared at her for a minute more, then spun around and went back into his office. He supposed even criminals had their good points.

Six

The next day Kia would have loved to concentrate on the job at hand, but with everyone still on vacation, just being alone with Brant in the executive suite left her scarcely daring to breathe. It was the reason she'd insisted on working from her own office at the other end of the floor. Away from him. Away from temptation. And out of the sexual firing line.

He'd seen right through her, but she'd still held her head high when she told him she felt more comfortable at her own desk. It had been the truth, after all.

"Bring me the next twenty pages when you've finished them," was all he'd said midafternoon, the glint in his eyes telling her that even a crucial project couldn't surpass this attraction between them.

"Aye, aye, sir," she'd snapped, spinning on her heels and leaving the room, but not before she'd seen the arrogance in his eyes. Okay, so he was the boss, but that didn't mean he had to "boss" her about. It only made her madder, and ever since, her fingers had been flying across the keyboard, wanting to finish the twenty pages as soon as possible so she could march into his office and slam them down on the desk.

And that's exactly what she did—in half the time it normally took. But to her amazement, when she got to his office, he was nowhere to be seen. The adrenaline that had given her fingers strength dissipated, leaving her drained and ludicrously disappointed. She sighed. The considerate thing for him to do would have been to tell her he was going out.

She placed the papers in the center of his desk and turned to go back to her office. A figure in the doorway made her jump. For a minute she thought it was Brant. Adjusting her eyes she realized it was Lynette Kelly.

Kia breathed in deeply, her heart not quite settling back into place. "Lynette, what are you doing here?"

Lynette blushed as she took a few steps into the office. "Oh, hello, Kia."

She looked so nervous Kia felt sorry for her. "Can I help you?" she asked gently.

"Er ... I need to see Phillip. I called him at home, but there was no answer. I thought he might be here."

"I'm sorry. He's not." Lynette's face fell and Kia spoke before thinking. "He's gone home to Queensland for a couple of weeks."

The other woman's eyes widened. "Without you?"

Kia's gaze darted away then back. "I had to stay here. To work."

"Oh." Her shoulders slumped. She turned away. "I guess I'd better—" She spun back. "Kia, do you really love Phillip? I mean, like a woman should love a man? Please, I need to know."

There was such anguish in her eyes, guilt stabbed Kia in the heart.

"Kia, he needs me. I know he does. I love him with all my heart and I'm swallowing my pride in front of you and begging you to tell me the truth."

Kia couldn't stand Lynette's pain any longer. It just wasn't right to keep the other woman in the dark. She owed it to her—and to Phillip—to help straighten things out.

"No, Lynette. I don't love Phillip. Not in that way."

"Thank God." Lynette swayed, then quickly gathered herself, blinking back tears. When she'd recovered, a crease formed between her eyes and she looked confused. "So why did you get engaged?"

Kia told her the truth and explained how one thing had led to another. "I'm sorry for all the pain we've put you through, Lynette. I was just trying to help Phillip."

"Do you ...?" Lynette swallowed. "Do you think he still loves me?"

"I know he does."

Hope filled Lynette's eyes and made them shine. "I have to go to him."

Kia nodded. Behind the other woman's delicate appearance, she sensed a strength of character she suspected would surprise Phillip. "If he gives you a hard time, tell him I said he's a fool."

Lynette quickly hugged her. "I hope you find someone for you soon."

"I'm not sure I want anyone," Kia said with a small smile. The only person who had ever really affected her was Brant. And he ... well, there was nothing more to say there.

Lynette left the room, so happy she looked as if she were walking on air. Kia smiled as relief swept through her that she'd told the other woman of Phillip's love. It was in Lynette's hands now.

Just then, the hairs on the back of Kia's neck stood to attention. Even before she turned toward the connecting door she was certain Brant would be standing there.

And he was. He'd been in the small conference room the whole time. A fear such as she'd never known skittered under her skin. Primal fear. Sexual fear. She only had to look at the anger in his eyes to know he had overheard.

"Um ... Brant. I didn't know you were there."

For a moment the air hung between them like a sheet of humidity.

"So the gold digger's conscience got the better of her, did it?" he sneered, leaning against the doorjamb, about as laid-back as a crocodile lazing in the sun.

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Gold digger?" *Was he crazy?* "Are you talking about *me*?"

"Too bad, sweetheart. You missed out on marriage this time, but I'm sure you can find another man to fall for that innocent act."

"Wh-what?" She had no idea what he was talking about.

"Don't deny it. I saw your picture in a magazine. Even the journalist could tell a fortune hunter when he saw one. In fact, he remarked on how you'd hooked one of the Australia's richest bachelors."

Was she really hearing this? "That *journalist*—and I use the word loosely—has got it in for me because I refused to go out with him. He's just trying to make me look bad." She'd felt ill when she'd seen the photograph and the comment he'd made.

"Really?" Brant's eyes said he didn't believe her. "Even if that's the case, I heard you on the telephone. My ears don't deceive me."

She frowned. "Telephone?"

"That's right. When I came back from Paris I heard you bragging to someone on the phone about it being as easy to fall in love with a rich man than a poor one." His top lip curled. "The next thing, you were Phillip's shadow and engaged to him."

She tried to think. Then it hit her. "I was talking to Gerald ... my stepfather. It's a joke between us. Good Lord. So this is why you've been a pig to me since I first met you? You thought I was marrying Phillip for his *money*?"

He made a harsh sound. "You were quick to take the diamond necklace from him."

"He asked me to wear it to the Christmas party. I gave it back the next day. Ask him if you don't believe me."

Something flickered in his eyes. "The Porsche?"

"My father gave it to me. He deals in cars, remember?" Her heart twinged. "He likes his 'Barbie' to come with accessories."

For a moment there was a flash of sympathy, then his face hardened. "If you dislike your father so much, why take the car?"

"He offered and I thought why not? I figure the man owes me for all he's put me through. If he wants to give me a Porsche, I'm taking the Porsche. There's nothing wrong with that." She paused. "Anyway, if I wanted money, I only have to ask him for some ... not that I would. He's got enough money to keep me in luxury for the rest of my life. Unfortunately it comes with a price."

A tic beat in his jaw. "Even if all that's true, you're obviously very good at conning people. You've been living a lie."

She winced. "For Phillip's sake."

“And for your own. You used him just as much as he used you.”

Her chin lifted. He was so conceited. “Now why would I do that?” she said, then realized it was a challenge.

Suddenly he turned and closed the connecting door behind him. “To keep *us* apart.”

Her eyes darted to the doorknob where his hand still rested. “Us? There’s nothing between us.”

He strode across the room to the main office door. “Lying again, Kia?” He shut that door too. Then he turned back toward her in the middle of the room.

Her knees began to shake. “Er ... what are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” His voice flowed over her like liquid silk.

Her throat went dry. “You’re playing games with me.”

“No game, Kia. Far from it.”

She straightened her shoulders. “Brant, stop it. This is ridiculous. You’re my boss. I’m—”

“About to be kissed,” he murmured, stopping right in front of her. He didn’t touch her. Didn’t reach out. He just stood there, looking at her. And what she saw melted every bone in her body. He was still angry, but oh, God, he wanted her.

She licked her lips. “Brant, I—”

“I’m so angry with you right now I’m either going to swear or kiss you.”

She tried to step back.

He grabbed her arm to prevent her from moving, his touch shooting desire to every region of her body. “And then I’m going to take the clothes off that delicious body of yours and taste all of you.”

She felt the room twirl around her. “I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

He pulled her closer, his pupils darkening. “I’ve waited too long already.”

A ripple of anticipation ran through her as she watched his head lower ... watched those lips come closer ... and when he touched her, she could no longer deny him or herself. Every moment from the minute she’d met him had been rushing headlong toward this kiss. Ever since her first look at him in this very office, nothing else had mattered, nothing but wanting to feel the consuming pressure of his lips on hers, as they were doing now.

At last.

The kiss still took her by surprise. She expected him to plunder and ravish her on the carpet, but he didn’t, and she soon forgot all about his anger as the velvet warmth of his mouth stirred every nerve ending on her lips, before he used his tongue to slide inside her.

And there he stayed, exploring the soft, sensitized recesses of her mouth until she thought she might fuse with him. But she wanted him closer. She wrapped her arms around his neck and cupped the back of his head to hold him to her. It felt so good to be like this with him. This was where she belonged. If only for a short while.

Raising his mouth from hers, he gazed deeply into her eyes, so deep that she suddenly worried he might see the real her. Not the outside person but the inside person. The person who didn’t know how she was going to handle this man.

“What’s the matter?” he said, watching her.

“Um ... nothing.” Her gaze darted down to his chest, lowering her eyelids, briefly covering her face from him. She wanted to remain like this and not let him see her thoughts. She needed to keep something of herself to herself.

And then he took her arms from around his neck and put them at her sides. He lifted her chin, holding her gaze. “I won’t let you hold back from me,” he warned softly.

She took a shaky breath. “You won’t *let* me?”

“No.” He reached out and undid the top button of her dress, and suddenly she didn’t have the strength to argue with him. She stood there and let him undress her. She *wanted* him to do it. *Wanted* him to undo all the buttons and feel his touch on her skin. *Wanted* to give all of herself to him.

His hands were sure and never missed a beat as they slid down from one button to the next, opening the material wider, more fully. For him.

She could see the pulse in his neck thumping wildly and she wanted to reach out and run her finger over it. Touching him would be like throwing a match onto kerosene.

He pushed the material off her shoulders and let it slide down her arms, down her body, to the carpet. She heard him groan as she stood there in a lacy bra, bikini panties, no stockings, and high-heeled sandals. For a moment she wished she'd worn them. It may have put up a barrier.

But who was she kidding? Nothing was going to stop this. She didn't want it to stop, God help her.

"I like the color peach on you," he murmured, his eyes flaring with hot desire. "It flatters you."

She moaned and whispered, "Touch me," and he suddenly swung her in his arms, carrying her over to the large mahogany desk. With one hand he swept the papers aside, then planted her in the middle of it. Her stomach somersaulted as he stood looking down at her.

"I've fantasized you like this for weeks," he murmured, reaching out to twine his fingers in her hair, loosening the blonde strands at the nape of her neck. "And this," he said, lifting her hair up in his hands, then leaning forward and burying his face in her locks, inhaling deeply.

She stilled, breathing in the mingled scent of his body heat and aftershave as it soaked into her pores ... until the soft peck of his lips moved to her ear, to her jawline and finally her mouth again.

Eventually he broke off the kiss. "Here, let me," he murmured, his fingers sliding under her bra straps and slowly pushing them off her shoulders.

She trembled when his palms caressed the bare skin there before slipping around to her back to undo the catch. Her bra fell away, and suddenly she was naked from the waist up. She wanted to hide, not from him but from herself. She didn't know if she could let herself go like this.

"Beautiful," he said in a gravelly voice, teasing her breasts with his hands until her breathing quickened even more and she had to close her eyes from sheer pleasure.

His head lowered, his mouth closing over one nipple, and she gasped, her breasts surging at the intimacy of it all.

"Brant!"

He pulled back, his eyes searing a path over her. And then he moved and his lips followed that same path, kissing down the center of her, teasing her belly button with the tip of his tongue before stopping at the top of her thighs.

He inhaled deeply through the thin lace, and she almost dissolved. She'd never done anything like this before. Never *let* a man do this to her. She'd had one lover in high school and nothing since.

He pushed the material to one side. "I have to taste you," he said, his fingers seeking her, opening her to him. He placed his mouth against her, and she cried out his name as his tongue darted out to taste her, explore her, tracing the shape of her, teasing the small part of her that suddenly felt as if she were about to explode.

"Oh, Brant," she moaned again. She closed her eyes as something powerful inched up inside her with every touch of his tongue. It felt so good ... so right ... so exquisite.

"Ooh!" She exploded with one more stroke, going up in flames like a bushfire sweeping through her, burning everything in sight, leaving nothing of her unmarked. She would never be the same again, never forget what it was like to have this man touch her like this.

And when she opened her eyes, Brant was leaning back in the chair, watching her with such possessive satisfaction that her breath caught in her throat.

Her heart gave a triple beat. She wanted to look away, only she couldn't. There'd been too much between them all these weeks. Too much longing. Too much wanting each other. They'd earned this moment between them.

Brant spoke first. "Here, let's get you dressed," he said brusquely and gently closed her legs.

“Oh, but ...” She could feel her cheeks growing red as he passed her bra. “I mean ... urn ... aren’t we going to ...?”

“Make love? Not yet.” He stood up and helped her off the desk as intense disappointment swept through her. She went to turn away, but he held her still. “My place. Seven o’clock.”

She blinked. “To-tonight?”

“Yes.” He ran a finger across her lips, his eyes a mixture of need and still-deep anger. “No more waiting. For either of us. And I can’t do everything I want to do to you in the office.”

She swallowed, suddenly panicked by the magnitude of it all. He overwhelmed her. He made her feel things she didn’t want to feel. Made her do things she *wanted* to do.

“No, I can’t. I—”

“I’ve put my stamp on you now, Kia. You can’t deny that.”

She sucked in a shaky breath, very much aware he was right. “Brant, this was just a ... brief interlude.”

“It was a prelude,” he insisted, putting his hand under her chin. “You were ready for me a minute ago,” he reminded her, and she almost dissolved again.

“Yes, well ...” She cleared her throat. “That was then. This is now.”

His eyes darkened dangerously. “Kia, we should have been lovers weeks ago.”

Her shoulders tensed. She could see his anger over Phillip still simmering beneath the surface. “Even if you hadn’t thought I was with Phillip, it doesn’t mean—”

“Yes, it does,” he cut across her. “Have no doubts, Kia. We *would* have been lovers. You’re only fooling yourself if you think otherwise.”

To prove it, his hands slid around her waist and brought her close. Her body immediately arched against him, her near-naked curves tucking in against his hard contours. Heat rippled under her skin and jolted her mind into the realization that once again he was right. She pushed herself away, and thankfully he let her go, but the smoldering look in his eyes said it all.

Trying to maintain her composure, she hurried around the desk to get the rest of her clothes, feeling exposed in more ways than one. His gaze remained on her, watching her every move, and she silently shuddered as she dressed as fast as she could.

“Kia.”

She did up the last button, then looked up at him. The hunger in his eyes sent a tremor through her.

“You owe this to yourself,” he growled, challenge in his voice.

Kia made her way back to her office on shaky legs and collapsed onto her chair. She couldn’t believe what had just happened. Had she really let herself be taken in such a way? No man had made love to her with his mouth before, though she knew it was an aspect of lovemaking that most couples enjoyed. Dear God, now she could see why.

What she hadn’t expected was to come apart in Brant’s hands quite the way she had. Where was her control? Her self-respect? She’d known she was a challenge to him. That he only wanted her body. So what had she done? She’d handed herself to him on a platter, that’s what.

Or a desk, she corrected, feeling a blush rising up from the tips of her toes. How could she hold her head high now? Suddenly she knew she had to get out of there. She’d earned the right to leave early ... in more ways than one.

Jumping to her feet, she grabbed her handbag and headed for the door. If she remained here alone with Brant, he might be tempted to take up where they’d left off and not wait for tonight.

Tonight.

You owe this to yourself, he’d said.

He was right, yet how could she turn up at his place when he thought she was a gold digger? Had thought it from the start. A woman who was mercenary enough to use men for her own advantage. That hurt.

So why did her heart turn over at the thought of *not* making love with Brant?

Brant tossed the pencil on the desk. He needed to get these reports out, but his mind kept dropping back to Kia. Could he accept she wasn't a gold digger? Her answers had made sense, but isn't that what con artists did? They conned you into believing what they wanted you to believe.

And all these weeks she'd been living a lie by pretending to be involved with Phillip. Had even let herself become engaged to him. Just as Julia had lived a lie. Until she'd run off with his own brother.

Hell. He thought he'd been hearing things when Kia had told Lynette she didn't love Phil the way a woman should love a man. She'd lied to *him*, dammit. He'd asked her straight out if she loved her fiancé and she'd said yes.

Why? Because she knew he'd have her in bed in no time, that's why. She wouldn't be able to help herself. She'd wanted to make love with him, too.

Yet how different she'd been to the experienced women he usually bedded. Women who proudly strutted their stuff. Women who took the initiative, the way he liked. Women who hadn't shattered in his arms as Kia had. Her passion, her innocence in this way, convinced him she hadn't been with a man or come alive under a man's mouth in years. That was something in her favor. Surely a gold digger wouldn't hesitate to use her body to get men to fall in love with her? Oh, hell. He just didn't know what to think anymore.

What he *did* know was that she'd been perfect. Had tasted better than perfect. It's the reason he'd held himself in check and not taken her fully as he'd ached to do. He wanted to love her slowly, take his time, make up for all those weeks of aching. Tonight he'd brand her with his body and make her his.

When he opened the door to his penthouse that evening, Brant almost forgot to breathe. The soft blue material of Kia's dress bared her tanned shoulders and arms and fell lovingly over the length of her body to just above her knees, in a simple design that would have looked plain on another woman. Yet on her it looked stunning. She couldn't look unattractive if her life depended on it.

He stepped back to allow her to enter. "Relax. I'm not going to ravish you on the spot," he said, even if the thought was more than tempting.

She moved past him in a cloud of perfume that was endlessly alluring, then stopped in the middle of the room and faced him, the light of battle entering her eyes. "That's a relief," she quipped, a becoming flush staining her cheeks.

He closed the door, knowing he could always count on her to be defiant even in the most difficult of circumstances. And this had to be the most difficult for her ever. But her uncertainty didn't change a thing. They would make love tonight.

"Take a seat while I pour you a drink." He gestured to the black leather sofa. "Gin and tonic, right?"

"Extra large."

"Oh, no, you don't," he drawled. "I don't want you to forget a moment of tonight. *I* certainly don't intend to."

She moistened her lips. "Brant, I think this is a mistake. I shouldn't have come."

"It isn't a mistake. It's called being grown-up. It's about being adults over a situation that we both clearly need to address."

Her chin rose in the air. "I thought it was more childlike when you give in and take what you want."

"Ah, so you admit you want me," he said as he poured the drinks at the bar.

She glared at him. "I think we should leave things as they are. My being here will only complicate matters."

He picked up the glasses of liquid and walked toward her. "A complication I'll willingly embrace, if you'll pardon the pun."

She ignored that as she accepted her glass. "How do you know I won't be faking it? After all, I faked the engagement and you never knew the difference, for all your extensive experience."

"I suspected something was amiss."

Her mouth set in a stubborn line. "I did it for a reason. To help Phillip."

"And to keep me at arm's length."

"It worked."

"And now it doesn't. Accept it."

Her blue eyes lit with anger. "Look, you said yourself that I'm a gold digger. If you want a woman tonight, why pick on me? Wouldn't any *body* do?"

His amusement deserted him. "No," he said tersely. No other woman in the world would do. It was the reason he hadn't returned any of his women friend's calls. Why he hadn't made love in weeks now. The reason he'd thrown himself into his work even harder. And why he'd been so bloody snappy with everyone lately. It just hadn't been humane that the one woman who turned him on had been involved with his business partner.

He expelled a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Yes, she *had* been involved with Phil. *Had* been untouchable. *Had* been out of reach.

But she was no longer.

He nodded at the sliding glass doors. "Let's go out on the balcony. We can have dinner out there."

Her shoulders stiffened. "I'm not hungry."

"Then perhaps we should give dinner a miss?"

She immediately stepped forward and strode past him to the balcony, her set mouth telling him what she thought of that idea.

"I figured that would change your mind," he murmured, following her over to the railing, where she stood looking out over the spectacular sunset view of Mindil Beach and Darwin Harbor. It was glorious out here at any time of year, but during the beginning of the wet season, like now, he loved watching the incredible lightning displays that lit up the sky most nights.

Yet tonight the only thing he wanted to light up was the woman standing next to him. He turned to look at her. The evening sun reflected on the delicate contours of her face, giving her a special glow, making her look more beautiful.

"Do you have to look at me like that?" she said in a throaty voice, a blush creeping into her cheeks.

"Yes," he said huskily. Right now he didn't think he'd ever get enough of looking at her.

She swallowed hard. "You're not making this any easier for me."

"Nothing worthwhile is ever easy."

She turned to face him, her expression growing resentful. "That's the attraction, isn't it, Brant? You couldn't have me, so you decided you wanted me."

"I admit I like a challenge." His eyes dipped to her parted lips. "But wanting you wasn't a decision I chose to make. I took one look at you and knew the decision had already been made for me."

"How nice," she said with false sweetness.

He smiled. She could fight herself all she liked, but it wouldn't make one speck of difference. She would be in his arms tonight. And in his bed. He was sure of that.

"Shall we eat?" he said and took great pleasure in placing his hand under her elbow to lead her over to the small dining table in the middle of the balcony. Her shiver was from desire, he saw it in her eyes, and it sent a hunger for more than food racing through him. But he could wait. He wanted to savor her first.

They dined on prawn cocktail as an entrée, followed by a grilled lamb with zucchini and tomatoes that his housekeeper had made. Brant watched in amusement over Kia's attempt to go slow as she chewed each mouthful as though it was the last food she'd ever eat.

"This is very good," she said, taking another tiny bite of the lamb. "Did you cook this yourself?"

He shot her a mocking smile. "Do I look like a cook?"

She stiffened. "I don't think there's anything wrong with cooking. Lots of men like to do it."

"And lots of men like to make love," he said, purposefully seductive. "How many men have made love to you, Kia?"

She almost choked, then recovered quickly. "How many have *you* made love to?"

"I don't find men attractive. Now women, that's more my style."

Her eyes filled with derision. "I guess it's more an art form than a technique with you then."

He leaned back in his chair, curious at her remark.

She pressed on. "I'd say you've had plenty of practice having sex."

"True. But I've always practiced safe sex, so you have no worries on that score."

"I'm relieved," she said drily.

"It's important, Kia."

She sighed. "I know."

"So, Kia." He paused and took a sip of wine. "How many lovers have you had?"

"One."

He arched a brow as the muscles at the back of his neck tensed. Could she really be as innocent as all that?

She shot him a defiant look. "Hey, you asked, so don't blame me if you don't like the answer."

His eyes narrowed. "I know your game. You think I'll back off if you tell me you're inexperienced."

She placed her fork on the table. "Actually, I don't care what you think. It's the truth."

His gut clenched. "Tell me about it."

"Why should I?"

"Because I want no more secrets between us, Kia. Not in bed, anyway."

She considered him for a long moment. Then she said, "I lost my virginity at a party when I was fifteen. It was the one and only time I got drunk and I gave it away to the first boy that looked at me because my father had just gotten married and didn't want his 'plain-looking' daughter at his wedding and I needed to feel loved. He didn't even ask me my name."

She said it so matter-of-factly that he believed her. He swore under his breath.

She shrugged. "I hardly remember most of it. I was just so lucky not to have found myself pregnant."

He scowled. "The boy didn't use protection?"

"I was too drunk to notice."

"But surely—" His jaw clenched, then he forced himself to relax. "I'll make a deal with you. We'll make love, but if at any time you want me to stop, I will."

Her throat convulsed. "You'd do that?"

Something softened inside him. "I want a willing female in my bed. I don't get my kicks from forcing a woman." Rising, he held out his hand. "I need you. Need to make love with you, Kia Benton," he said, deliberately saying her name, wanting her to know that he knew exactly who she was, unlike the boy who had stripped her of her virginity. "I promise you this won't be like your first time."

Seven

The evening breeze gently lifted the lace curtains away from the open window as Kia followed Brant into the bedroom. In a way, she felt like those curtains. As if she was lifting a part of herself, unveiling herself for him to see.

Yet it was a risky move to make, and for a moment she hesitated. Did she really want him to leap the boundaries she kept around herself? Today in his office she'd relinquished her body to him. But now, once his body was inside her, once he knew her so physically, what would happen to her emotionally?

Just then, he squeezed her fingers and she looked at him. The sheer depth of desire in his eyes made her shiver with longing. All her doubts disappeared.

"I want you, Brant," she admitted, unable to stop the words from spilling from her. She couldn't deny herself this. No matter what happened afterward, no matter what he thought of her, she would always have this memory. "I want you so much."

Heat flared in his eyes. "Then you've got me," he muttered, pulling her close.

She went willingly into his arms, the palms of her hands pressing against his chest, feeling his warmth and vibrancy through the material of his shirt.

"I have *never* had a more beautiful woman in my arms," he rasped, his warm breath flowing over her.

"You make me *feel* beautiful," she murmured. And he did. As if someone had waved a magic wand over her and turned her into more than she was.

She lifted her face for his kiss, and his mouth swept down and took possession of hers. And from that moment on she was his. Her need had been smoldering inside her for so long now. She needed this release.

His mouth moved against hers, silently telling her how much he wanted her. She reveled in it, opening her lips, letting him take whatever he wanted yet returning the favor. She wanted to be a part of him, so much a part of him that he'd never forget her.

The kiss deepened, lengthened. His hands caressed her spine through her dress, then eased down the zipper to stroke her bare skin, gliding up to the curve of her shoulders and provocatively pushing the material aside like a maestro playing their song.

He broke off the kiss and skimmed his lips along her jaw. Hypnotized by his touch, she arched her neck, as his mouth continued to her earlobe and then proceeded down the smooth column of her throat. He planted a tantalizing kiss at the hollow of her neck and she gave a soft moan and slid her hands beneath the material of his shirt, not prepared to wait another millisecond to touch him.

Her head spun at the first feel of his warm flesh beneath her tingling palms. "Oh, my God," she whispered, the shock of his taut muscles running through her body even as she luxuriated in feeling the strong beat of his heart against her palms. Strong and fast.

"You're playing with fire," he said, shuddering, then stormed her mouth again in a kiss that sent her up in flames. At the same time he clasped her hips, grounding her against him. She'd felt his arousal once before when they'd danced together. This was different. This was her first full contact of him as a man. It stunned her. Delighted her. It made her ache for him.

He pulled away and in one swift motion tugged at her dress, letting it rush down her body and fall to the floor. But he didn't stop to stare, though she felt his gaze on her. Her bra vanished next. Her panties followed. Then he swept her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed, laying her out on top of the comforter.

And that's when he finally stopped to look down upon her. The intensity in his eyes sang through her veins, making her very much aware of being not only a woman but the woman he wanted.

"Tonight you're mine, Kia."

Her throat went dry. She wanted to deny it, but how could she deny something so intrinsically right?

“Yes,” she whispered.

His hands went to his shirt and he quickly began to undress. It hit the carpet, followed by his trousers. It didn’t take long before he stood beside her all naked and in full glory.

Her breath caught in her throat. He was absolutely magnificent, with a beautifully proportioned body that shot her pulse right off the chart. His broad shoulders topped a powerful chest that fostered wisps of dark hair and tapered down to lean hips and long, muscular legs. And to a commanding erection that magnified his masculinity tenfold.

He joined her on the bed and she surrendered to the moment, to herself, to him. She gasped when his lips moved to her breast and enclosed a nipple, pleasuring her into a mindless state even as his hand brushed over her hip and dipped to the junction at her thighs. His fingers slid between her feminine folds and ran around the small, sensitive nub in circles. Sanity began to blur as her world shrank to that one caress of his finger, to the sweet tug of his mouth at her breast.

But then, just as she was about to go over the edge, he pulled away, making her cry out in intense disappointment. “Don’t stop!”

“Shh. This time we make love together,” he murmured, reaching for a foil packet on the bedside table. He sheathed himself and poised at her thighs. She softened beneath him, ready to take him into her. *Needing* him in her.

“Open yourself to me,” he said, nudging her legs farther apart, and she did willingly.

He entered her slowly, his eyes never leaving her face as her tightness confirmed what she had told him earlier. No *man* had ever filled her in this way before. Acknowledging this, his eyes bathed her with a tenderness that took her breath away. Then he filled her completely, gently, only stopping when he could fill her no more. His sensitivity made her heart roll over.

For one long moment they stayed still, each studying the other, connected in both body and spirit. It was the most profound moment Kia had ever experienced. She sensed it was the same for him.

As if in silent agreement, he took a deep breath and slowly began to withdraw. Then he moved forward and filled her again. He took another breath and withdrew as far as he could without separating their bodies. He kept repeating the motion, and she lifted her hips to take more of him into her, feeling something building, something so electric she had to close her eyes.

“Look at me,” he said hoarsely, and she moaned but she did what he told her, finding it incredibly erotic when he mesmerized her with his eyes and began to move once more. He picked up the pace, and that rush of heat turned into a whipcord of male muscle, stamping her with each thrust of his body, taking everything she had within her. She offered it up to the one man in the world worthy of everything she had to give.

“Brant!” she cried as he rasped out her name in a strangled tone that said he couldn’t hold on much longer either. He kissed her then. A deep, deep kiss that was followed by a final plummet of his body as she arched against him.

They reached their climax together, holding themselves as one, in total sync at this precious moment in time.

Kia spiraled down to a hazy aftermath with a series of lingering kisses before he rolled over and held her in his arms for a few moments.

Then she watched his long, lean length disappear, as he rose and headed toward the bathroom. She lay back and closed her eyes. She had to, otherwise when he came back he would see something that had just hit her.

She had fallen in love with him.

Shock ran through her. She went hot, then cold. *She loved Brant Matthews.* She would love him until the day she died, even knowing she would never be enough for him. Dear God, this couldn’t be ... yet she knew it was, felt it in her heart.

The bed sank on one side and she scarcely dared to breathe. Brant was sitting beside her, waiting for her to look at him.

“Kia?” he murmured, tenderly pushing some strands of hair from her face.

She had no alternative but to look at him and pray that he didn’t see what was so obvious to her now. How had she not seen this coming?

Her eyelids lifted, and her breath hitched in her throat at the look in his eyes. It was all-knowing. All male. Full of sexual satisfaction.

And he had no idea she loved him.

Thank God. She could breathe easier now and enjoy their time together. That’s all she’d let herself ask for. That’s all she’d let herself want. It would be over soon enough. And if he ran true to form—as her father did with his women friends—having gotten what he’d wanted from her, she wouldn’t be seeing much more of him after this anyway. She shivered. Already that thought cut through her heart.

“Did I hurt you?” he murmured.

“No.” But he would. When he dumped her.

His shoulders relaxed, his mouth curving with sheer sensuality. “Woman, that was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

Yes, that’s all it came down to with Brant. She tried not to show her hurt. “Me, too.”

“For all intents and purposes, you were a virgin.” He leaned forward and gave her a long, slow kiss, then looked into her eyes. “I’m honored I was the first *man* to sleep with you.” He kissed her again briefly, then leaned back, an odd look in his eyes. “Why?”

Her breath stopped and she realized he saw more than she’d thought. She licked her lips. “Because I ... I mean, you ...” She shrugged. “Well, what woman wouldn’t want to make love with you?”

His mouth twisted. “Flattery will get you everywhere,” he mocked, but she had the feeling he wasn’t happy with her answer.

But if he expected a declaration of love, he was going to be disappointed. Maybe that’s what his other women always provided, but she wasn’t about to copy them. She swallowed hard at the thought of all those other women who would come after her. She couldn’t bear to think about it. And she wasn’t going to wait around for him to throw her away like some piece of garbage that was past its use-by date either.

Panicking, she sat up, almost knocking him out of the way. He put his hands on her shoulders, stilling her.

“What’s the matter?” he said with a scowl.

“I’m going home.” She tried to push him away, but he kept his body firmly in front of her.

Surprise came and went in his eyes before they flared with anger. “I won’t let you run out on me, Kia.”

“*You* won’t let *me*?” she choked out. Did he think because he’d made her his own she would leave her brains at the door?

“I’ve already had one woman who mattered run out on me. I’m not going to let you do the same. Not yet, anyway.”

She gave a soft gasp. A woman *who mattered* had run out on him? And she was in the same category? But what did he mean by mattered?

“Are you saying that I’m ... that we ...?” She tried to find the words to say it. “Is there something more between us than I think, Brant?”

He stood up, and she saw he had wrapped a white towel around his lower half. “You bet there’s something between us. And we’re going to see it through to the end.”

The end. She shouldn’t be surprised by his choice of words, yet she was. How could she love this devil of a man? Fate had certainly played a sick joke on her.

“Don’t tell me what to do, Brant.”

“If I told you everything I wanted you to do, you’d run for your life.”

She got to her feet, wrapping the sheet around her as she did. “I don’t need to run. I’m leaving anyway.”

“I don’t think so,” he warned ominously.

Her heart jumped in her chest. “You can’t stop me.”

Can’t I? his eyes said arrogantly. “Then you have nothing to lose by coming over here and kissing me like you mean it. Do that, and I’ll even hold the door open for you on the way out.”

She moistened her suddenly dry lips. “And if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll come over there and kiss you, and we’ll see where it leads.”

“What a choice,” she muttered.

She swallowed. One kiss. Could she kiss him this one time and get away with it? She knew she would melt in his arms again. She knew she would want more. But hadn’t she always prided herself on her strength of will?

Without stopping to think further, she pulled the sheet tighter and closed the distance between them. Then she went up on her toes and quickly kissed him on the mouth before turning away.

He grabbed her arm and spun her back toward him, his eyes holding a faint glint of humor. “Like you mean it, I said.”

Somehow she’d known he wouldn’t let her get away with that chaste peck. “Oh, but I did mean it like that,” she mocked, even as a thrill raced through her. This time she’d give him exactly what he wanted and more. Then she’d walk out that door, put everything back on a business level and hope to God she could cope with knowing she’d fallen in love with a man who thought *woman* was a synonym for *sex*.

Her heart beating at full speed, she moved back toward him. In the split second before she put her lips to his, she saw his eyes darken and she realized she’d never once instigated a kiss with him. The other two Christmas kisses had been him coming to her, not the other way around. She felt thrillingly provocative.

She placed her mouth to his and began a kiss that gave him all the love she had inside her. Her stomach quivered even as she let her tongue slide around his mouth, then briefly dip between his slightly parted lips. She heard his groan deep within his throat, so she repeated the action, this time her tongue sliding over the top of his, tasting him, loving him.

The clean male scent of him exuded an attraction she found difficult to deny, and her arms slid up around his neck and cupped the back of his head, holding him to her, deepening the kiss. The sheet slipped down between them, and she felt the muscles of his chest tighten against her bare breasts. She rubbed herself against him, the feel of curly male hair teasing her nipples.

Suddenly he broke off the kiss with a guttural sound that made her think he had almost reached his limit. Then he swung her up in his arms and strode toward the bathroom.

“You’re heading the wrong way,” she murmured, not really caring right now that she was supposed to be leaving and not coming back.

“No, I’m not. I know exactly where we’re going.”

They made leisurely love in the spa surrounded by tropical plants that gave a dreamy quality to the setting. Kia responded to Brant’s instructions and sat on his lap facing him, with him inside her. It was an incredible experience. And the most brave. Face-to-face like that, she had to stop herself from crying out she loved him.

Then they made their way back to the bed, and she reveled in taking her time to explore his male body before he growled her name, rolled on top of her and made love to her all over again. Exhausted, they fell into a deep sleep.

The ringing of the telephone next to the bed woke them during the night. Kia groaned and pressed her cheek against Brant's bare chest, wanting to hold on to the euphoria, hoping the noise would go away so she could go back to sleep.

Vaguely she was aware of Brant reaching out an arm to pick it up. She heard the deep rumble of his voice as he answered it. Then, the next thing she knew, he'd jerked into a sitting position, throwing her off him.

"What the hell?" she heard him say as she lay on her back and came fully awake. "My God! Julia?"

There was silence for a moment as the person on the other end of the phone responded. Then Brant's gaze skidded to Kia and darkened. "Yes, I have company," he answered in clipped tones. He listened. "Now?" He looked at Kia again, then away. "Okay. Give me half an hour." He hung up and turned back to her. "I've got to go out for a while. Something's come up."

Yes, and her name is Julia.

"Don't worry, I understand. Totally."

His face hardened as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I didn't ask for your understanding."

That hurt. "Aren't you lucky I gave it anyway?" she snapped, throwing back the bedclothes.

"You don't have to leave."

Did he think she would wait for him to go to this woman, then come back to bed and make love to *her*?

"I don't want to stay."

A long moment crept by as she gathered her clothes from the floor.

"Then I'll walk you down to your car."

"Don't bother." She looked up and caught his eyes going hungrily over her naked body. A quiver surged through her veins and she wondered if she could stop him going to this Julia.

Then she realized what she was thinking and her lips tightened. Did she really want to compete with another woman? No, she'd had enough of watching her mother fight for her father's love.

Brant pulled on his trousers. "Nevertheless, I insist. It's late."

Yes, far too late, she thought, glancing at the clock and seeing it was two in the morning. It had been a mistake to make love to him. A beautiful mistake at the time but a mistake nevertheless.

In a damning silence they finished dressing, then he walked down with her to the underground car park.

"Call me as soon as you get home," he ordered, holding the car door open for her. "Use my cell phone number. I want to know you're safe."

She squashed the spark of warmth at his concern. He was only protecting what he thought was temporarily his. "I'll be fine."

"Call me," he warned, his dark gaze holding hers. "If you don't, I'll call you."

She didn't respond as she started the engine and drove out of the car park without looking back. Which is exactly what she'd have to do where he was concerned anyway. Walk away and not look back.

She was halfway home when something occurred to her. Was this Julia the woman who had "mattered"? Without a doubt she knew that she was. And obviously Julia *still* mattered or Brant would still be in bed with *her* right now.

Kia didn't call him when she got home. Worse, he didn't call her, and that made her heart sink more. Obviously she wasn't as important to him as Julia.

Kia got no sleep for the rest of the night and by morning she felt exhausted. Not even her usual shower, followed by a breakfast of sliced mango, nor a cup of coffee, could make her feel the slightest bit better.

If only she didn't love Brant. It would all be so much easier if he was the kind of man she thought might eventually love her in return. Only he wasn't. And he never would be. A leopard didn't change its spots. A womanizer didn't become trustworthy. The word *faithful* wasn't in his dictionary.

Phillip rang as she headed out the door. She'd decided to go to work early and get some of the paperwork typed and on Brant's desk before he came in. He was bound to be late, if he turned up at all.

"What do you think you're doing sending some woman to seduce me?" Phillip joked, his tone so heartbreakingly light that Kia had to smile.

"And did Lynette succeed?"

"Let's just say she surpassed all expectations." There was a slight hesitation. "How can we ever thank you for all you've done, Kia?" he said softly.

"Just be happy. That's all the thanks I want."

"We will. And we want you to come to the wedding in two months time. We would have scheduled it earlier, but I have to see one more doctor, then I'm all hers."

Kia knew she wouldn't want to go to the wedding. How could she bear seeing Brant in a social situation? Worse, with Julia by his side.

"I'll put it in my calendar."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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