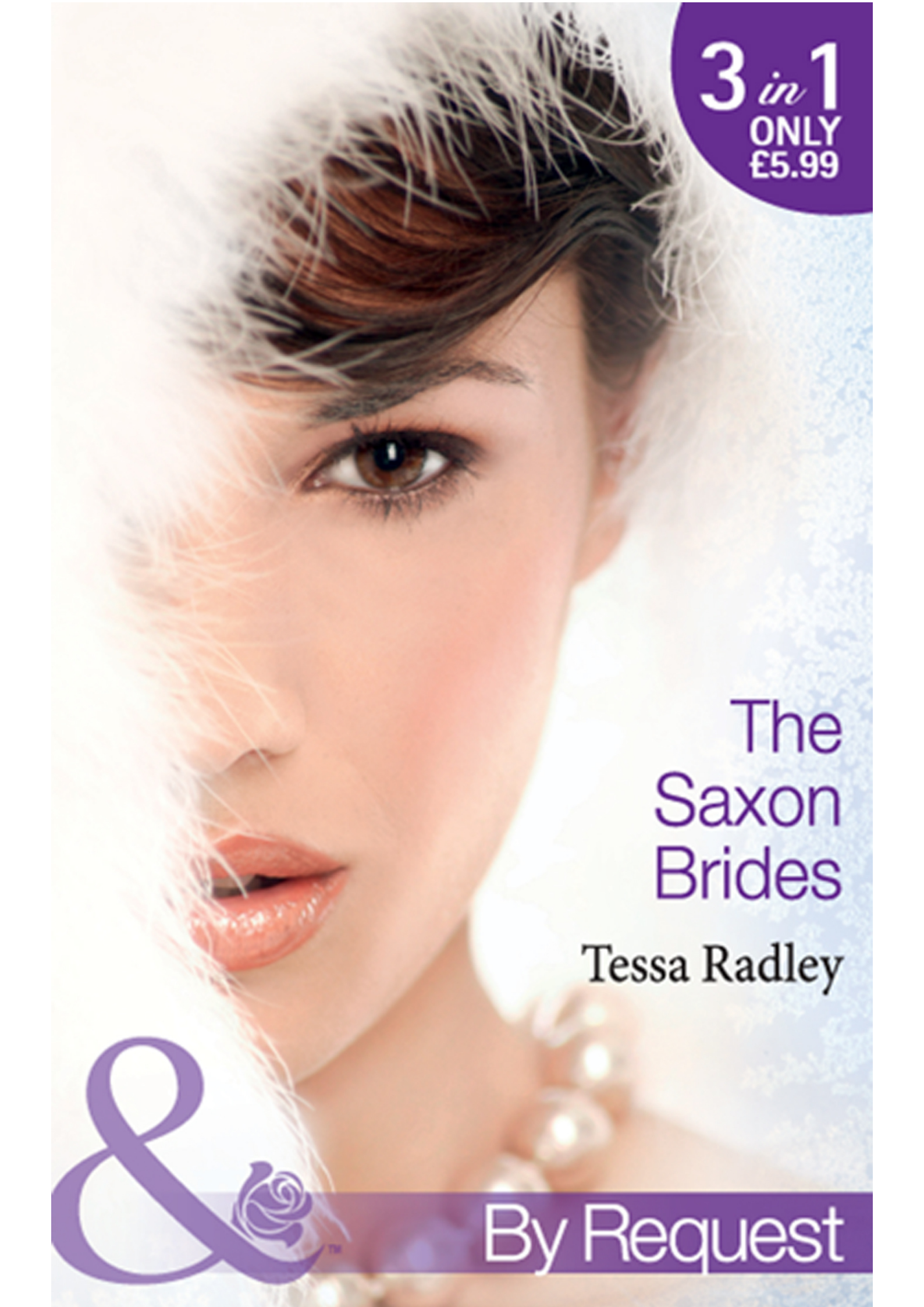




3 *in* **1**
ONLY
£5.99

The
Saxon
Brides

Tessa Radley



By Request

Tessa Radley

The Saxon Brides: Mistaken Mistress

«HarperCollins»

Radley T.

The Saxon Brides: Mistaken Mistress / T. Radley —
«HarperCollins»,

Mistaken Mistress Joshua Saxon, the arrogant millionaire who ran New Zealand's premier winery, believed Alyssa had been his late brother's mistress. But the true connection between her and the Saxons was even more shocking. From the moment they met, both Alyssa and Joshua had been shaken by passion. But so many secrets and lies were between them... Spaniard's SeductionThe desire for revenge had driven Rafaelo, Marqués de Las Carreras, for years and now the ruthless Spanish aristocrat had come to New Zealand. Seducing Caitlyn Ross, the Saxons' beautiful young winemaker, was the perfect way to get what he wanted. But as he came to know this woman, to taste her beguiling blend of inocencia and pasión, he wondered if he was the one being seduced...Pregnancy ProposalHis late brother's fiancée was pregnant with a Saxon heir and she thought she could just leave town? Not even Heath Saxon, the black sheep of the mighty Saxons, would allow that. So he propositioned Amy: avoid illegitimacy for her baby by marrying him. Convincing her wasn't easy; until he showed her what a night as his wife would be like.

Содержание

The Saxon Brides	6
About the Author	7
One	8
Two	17
Three	22
Four	28
Five	34
Six	42
Seven	55
Eight	61
Nine	69
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	70

**The Saxon Brides
Mistaken Mistress
Spaniard's Seduction
Pregnancy Proposal
Tessa Radley**



www.millsandboon.co.uk

About the Author

TESSA RADLEY loves traveling, reading and watching the world around her. As a teen Tessa wanted to be an intrepid foreign correspondent. But after completing a bachelor of arts degree and marrying her sweetheart she became fascinated with law and ended up studying further and practicing as an attorney in a city practice.

A six-month break traveling through Australia with her family reawoke the yen to write. And life as a writer suits her perfectly; traveling and reading count as research, and as for analyzing the world ... well, she can think “what if” all day long. When she’s not reading, traveling or thinking about writing, she’s spending time with her husband, her two sons, or her zany and wonderful friends. You can contact Tessa through her website, www.tessaradley.com.

Mistaken Mistress

For Lesley Marshall,
who is always an inspiration.

One

The annual Saxon's Folly masked ball was already in full swing when Alyssa Blake crept up the cobbled drive.

"Walk tall," she whispered to herself as she skirted the shadows between the rows of parked Mercedes and Daimler cars. "Look like you belong."

The winery's historic homestead came into sight, brightly lit against the dark sky. A triple-storey white Victorian building that had withstood more than a century of fires, floods and even an infamous Hawkes Bay earthquake. With every step the music grew louder, even though Alyssa couldn't yet see the partygoers.

At the top of the stone stairs a large uniformed man blocked the double, wooden front doors. Alyssa came to a halt.

Butler?

Or guard?

She wavered for a moment, her heartbeat quickening as her eyes scanned the building.

Don't panic.

"I've lost my invitation." She practised the timeworn excuse to herself under her breath. It sounded lame. Particularly as she'd never received one of the sought-after silver-embossed, midnight-blue invitations. If the guard took the time to check, he wouldn't find her on the guest list. But would he check?

Perhaps she could sashay past with a smile? What was the worst that could happen? The doorman, guard—or whatever he was—would fail to locate her on the list of invitees and demand her identity? No one would suspect Alyssa Blake, leading wine writer for *Wine Watch* magazine, of gate-crashing the annual Saxon's Folly masked ball. Or at least only the few who knew how much Joshua Saxon, CEO of Saxon's Folly Wines, detested Alyssa after the article she'd done a couple of years ago—and most people's memories didn't extend that far back.

There was a chance the burly doorman would let her in without a second glance. Wearing a long, ruby-red dress and her flamboyant black mask decorated with feathers and diamante studs, it was unlikely he'd suspect her being a gatecrasher. Alyssa hauled in a shaky breath.

She'd made up her mind to brazen her way past the doorman—guard, whatever—when a side door opened and light streaked out into the night. A couple slid out into the embrace of the darkness, laughing. The door swung closed but the latch failed to click shut.

Quickly, like a thief in the night, Alyssa slipped into the enormous homestead. She stood to one side of the entrance hall. Ahead of her, an imposing staircase swept upward.

At the top of the stairs Alyssa stepped into a different world—a world of wealth and privilege where women fluttered like designer-clad butterflies in the arms of men in dress suits and bow ties.

After one glance, she dismissed the dancers. Instead she scanned the vast reception room, searching ... searching for the man she'd gone to the lengths of gate-crashing a masked ball to find.

"Have you just arrived?"

She looked up into a pair of glittering dark eyes shielded by a black mask.

"I'm a little late," she managed, her nerves rolling as the realisation sank in that she'd made it to the ball.

"Better late than never."

"Never say never," she quipped, wagging a finger at him.

He laughed. "A woman of strong opinions, right?"

"And proud of it."

His voice was husky, oddly familiar ... and terribly sexy. A sweeping glance from behind her mask showed her that he was tall, the broad, hard planes of his body showing to best advantage in

the superbly tailored dinner jacket. Dark hair topped his head while a black mask concealed his face. A handsome face, she speculated.

“Dance with me.” He stretched an imperious arm out. Mr. Tall, Dark and Probably Handsome wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Not that those attributes had any effect on her. She preferred her dates kind, caring and capable ... qualities that were becoming harder to find. She stared at the demanding arm.

“I take it that silence means yes?”

Before she could object that it most definitely meant no the arm locked around her shoulder and he propelled her toward the dance floor. She started to object. She wasn’t here to celebrate the budding of the new season’s vines, she’d come with a purpose ... and it wasn’t to dance with this sexy, cocky stranger. But nor did she intend to cause a scene and be noticed.

If Joshua Saxon discovered her presence, he’d toss her out before she could even try to explain why she was here. Better not to cause a stir by refusing. At least she would blend in better with the crowd. And she could continue her search from the dance floor.

She let him sweep her into his arms and into the throng of dancers. The covetous glances her partner drew made her reevaluate whether this had been a good idea. Perhaps dancing with him would attract the attention she was so keen to avoid. She assessed him through her eyelashes, measuring what the other women saw: broad shoulders beautifully displayed in a dinner jacket, an uncompromising jawline. She glanced upward into eyes that gleamed behind the black mask.

“Do I know you?” he asked, his voice deep.

She considered that. If he was a member of the wine fraternity, they might have met at a wine show. It was possible he might have seen her during the occasional appearance she made on television, a guest spot on a food show ... or perhaps he’d read her *Wine Watch* articles or the column she wrote for *The Aucklander* newspaper. But none of those meant he knew her.

So she shook her head.

“Well, I’m going to enjoy seeing your face when we unmask at midnight—it’s a tradition.” As a pair of dancers jostled them, he leaned toward her. “Do you have a name, Oh Silent One?”

Alyssa hesitated, transfixed by the way the hard line of his mouth tilted up into a smile. The contrast was intriguing. “Alice,” she said finally, using the name on her birth certificate rather than the name she’d reinvented herself under as a teenager.

“Alice?” Those lips curved further, deepening the sensual smile. “Do you feel as if you’ve stepped through the looking glass, Alice?”

If he only knew.

“A little,” she confessed in a low voice.

He bent his head closer. “Does that mean this is the first spring masquerade you’ve attended?”

“Yes.”

“That explains why you’re not wearing a costume.”

She let her gaze linger pointedly on his dinner jacket. “You’re not in costume, either.”

He shook his head. “Didn’t have time to plan it this year.”

A busy man, then. But he didn’t need the trappings of a Robin Hood or a regency rake, she decided. He was commanding enough in his own right.

“Most women live to dress up.”

His comment set her teeth on edge. “I am not most women.”

He laughed softly. “I’ll be even more intrigued to meet you face-to-face at midnight. So Alice, you don’t like to dress up, but are you like all the Cinderellas—” he waved a dismissive hand at the beautiful women around them “—here to find a wealthy Prince Charming?” A tinge of cynicism coloured his deep voice.

“Definitely not here to find Prince Charming, wealthy or otherwise.” But she shivered at his percipience. She was certainly here to find someone.

“You’re not given to much conversation.” He sounded far too curious for her liking.

“All these people,” she simpered. “I’m not used to it.”

His gaze raked her. “I’d peg you as a sophisticated city girl—not someone who’d be nervous around people.”

Alyssa glanced down at the plunging V-neckline of her ruby-red dress. She’d better take care ... he was altogether too astute. Her pulse pounded in her head. She couldn’t afford to be thrown out—this was her best chance. “Perhaps it’s the excitement. The music ... the beautiful people, the handsome masked man.” Her voice was sweeter than syrup. She glanced up through the satin strip of her mask to see how the flattery was going down and caught a white flash of teeth.

“As long as you’re not nervous, Alice,” he whispered. “That’s not allowed.”

Alyssa shuddered as his warm breath skimmed her sensitive ear and arousal shot unexpectedly through her.

“You *are* nervous. You’re trembling.”

She couldn’t remember the last time a stranger had had such an immediate effect on her. Safer to say nothing.

“You’re the most silent woman I’ve ever met,” he growled, and pulled her closer to avoid a couple dancing with far too much enthusiasm in the mass of bodies.

“Not always.” Not when she wasn’t watching every word—her normal stock-in-trade—in case she slipped up. This disturbing stranger was far too confident ... and she was not in the frame of mind to handle him.

Not tonight.

A flash of red hair caused her head to whip around, and reality came crashing in.

Roland! She couldn’t mistake him, not even with a rakish pirate’s eye patch. The red hair was a giveaway. He held a slim, dark-haired sprite in his arms. Across the crowded room Alyssa followed the couple’s progress over her partner’s broad shoulder, saw Roland say something to the brunette and watched her reply.

Alyssa had read that her name was Amy ... and she was Roland’s fiancée. The two of them slowed and left the dance floor.

Panic surged through Alyssa. She couldn’t lose them—him. Not when she’d come so close.

“I’m parched, I need a drink,” she said, not caring how abrupt she sounded, and freed herself unceremoniously from her partner’s hold.

“What would you like?” Her stranger showed every sign of coming with her.

“I’ll find myself something.” Alyssa glanced anxiously after her quarry and back to the partner she’d failed to shake.

She mustn’t give herself away.

He was much too distracting, too perceptive. She didn’t want any third parties overhearing what she had to say to Roland. This was private. Too important. “You don’t need to worry about me. I’m sure there are other people you should be mingling with ... dancing with.”

He wouldn’t lack for partners. He danced like a dream ... confident ... moving with rhythmic grace, a man aware of his attraction and power. She jerked away from him.

His sensuous mouth twisted. “None as interesting as you, Alice. What would you like to drink? A glass of Saxon’s Folly Sauvignon Blanc? I can recommend last season’s vintage.”

Perhaps letting him get her a drink would get rid of him. “Just water, please.”

He beckoned to a waiter who arrived at breakneck speed.

So much for getting rid of him. Alyssa resisted the urge to swear.

“Just water?” His eyes gleamed through the mask. At her nod, he turned to the waiter. “Two bottles of Perrier.”

Alyssa forced herself not to look for Roland, but she was anxiously aware that if she didn’t find him now, she might lose him again.

“I need the cloakroom,” she improvised. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she flung over her shoulder, and dived into the crowd.

A glance back showed that her Mr. Tall, Dark and Probably Handsome had been detained by two women who each kissed him enthusiastically on both cheeks, the mask clearly an ineffective disguise to the ambitious Cinderellas. Impatience was carved into every line of his tall, muscular body, but he murmured a polite response.

Good, he wasn’t following.

Then Alyssa put him out of her mind as she wove her way between men in tuxedos, women in silk and satin dresses, intent on finding the man she’d come to confront.

But Roland—and his fiancée—had vanished.

Alyssa hurried out onto the balcony outside, brushing past Rhett Butler and Scarlett O’Hara flirting in the shadows, and a couple of men smoking alone.

She peered over the white wrought iron railing, through the criss-cross shadows cast by a clump of tall Nikau palms, into the well-lit garden below. Two couples stood under the trees. Her breath caught. But neither man sported that distinctive red hair. Her pulse quickening with urgency, Alyssa hurried along the wide balcony and down a set of steep narrow stairs and slipped through the side door back into the homestead.

Sweeping up the long skirts of her dress, she hurried, peering into rooms she passed. A quick scan of the large dining room with tables laden with finger food failed to reveal Roland.

Roland must’ve taken his fiancée—Amy—upstairs. Alyssa hesitated, eyeing a staircase that appeared to lead to another wing. The bedrooms must be up there. What if she disturbed them in an ... intimate moment?

Her teeth played with her bottom lip. She’d come so far, she couldn’t chicken out now. Drawing a deep breath, she moved toward the stairs.

But before she got there, the door on her right swung open and a brunette burst out. Amy. Her colour was high, her hair mussed. Alyssa stopped, and then Roland came rushing into the corridor, his eye patch in his hand, his expression determined.

“Amy, listen to—”

“Roland?” Like a sleepwalker Alyssa reached out and touched his arm. “Roland Saxon?”

She knew exactly who he was but she couldn’t help enunciating the name that had been imprinted on her mind for years.

He gave her an impatient glance. “Yes?”

“I’m—” She hesitated, her mind suddenly blank. Everything she’d planned to say withered under the attack of doubt devils. Dare she reveal herself as Alice McKay? He hadn’t responded to any of her letters or e-mails, so why should he be any more welcoming now?

He glanced past her to where the brunette had taken the main stairs and disappeared in the direction of the ballroom.

Concerned that he would brush by her and vanish again, Alyssa thrust out her hand and said, “I’m Alyssa Blake. I’m—”

Recognition flared in the eyes that met hers in astonishment. “The journalist who did that hatchet job on Saxon’s Folly. Yes, I know who you are.”

No, you don’t.

Finally, to her immense relief, he took her hand and shook it, before letting it drop. “What are you doing here?”

Alyssa found she was shaking. Roland had touched her. His skin had been warm and solid. Real. She’d met him. At last.

Struggling for composure, she said, “I’d like to arrange to interview you for a feature in *Wine Watch*.”

Now she had his full attention, but his expression had shifted to wariness. “What would the focus of the story be?”

“I’m doing a story on how some of the strongest brands in the industry have been built. As the marketing director of Saxon’s Folly Wines, I’d like your comments.”

“You haven’t been too complimentary about Saxon’s Folly in the past, Ms. Blake.”

“Maybe I’ve had a change of mind.” Please, God, let him believe it. She needed a chance to meet with him one-on-one. They had so much to talk about.

“I don’t know—”

“Please.” She was practically begging now. “It will be a positive article. I promise.”

“Why should I trust you? Joshua believed you were going to do a feature on the estate. Instead you lambasted his management methods.”

“Joshua Saxon had it coming,” she said heatedly. “He’s the most aggravatingly uncommunicative man I’ve ever interviewed.” The man had refused to see her in person, had given her precisely ten minutes of his time on the phone. And during each miserable second of those minutes his terse voice had made it clear that he was doing her a favour. A very junior cellar hand who’d been in the job for less than a week had shown her around the winery. Alyssa had asked him about his job and discovered that the previous cellar hand had been fired under very hush-hush circumstances. A few calls to the disgruntled former employee and she had a different story from the one she’d planned to do. Now she told Roland, “The facts bore me out.”

“Joshua didn’t think so.”

“I did my job.”

He looked her up and down. “Some job.”

“I tell the public what they ought to know.” She knew that sounded pious. So she drew a steadying breath. “Look, this is getting us nowhere. The piece I’m working on now is different. You can even see the copy before it goes to print.” Something she’d never offered but she had to see him privately.

He looked dubious. “Why the change of heart? And why ask me now, here at the ball? Why not contact me by more conventional ways, telephone—or even e-mail—to set up an appointment?”

I tried.

You never responded.

She’d tried as Alice McKay. She’d reveal Alice tomorrow. All she could do now was tempt him with the promise of a great profile. He was a marketing man. Unlike his arrogant brother, he knew he needed the goodwill of the press. “It will be great publicity for you, for Saxon’s Folly.”

But already he was moving past her. Time to give him an ultimatum. She spoke to his back. “Yes or no?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

Alyssa knew she’d lost his attention. “When?” Alyssa switched into the familiar role, closing the escape route. “I’m in the area tomorrow. Shall we meet at The Grapevine—” she named a popular café “—in town?”

He turned his head and gave a slow nod, and her heart leapt. At last! Quickly she confirmed a time. Alyssa wanted to punch a fist in the air and yell, “Yes.” After all the years ...

But instead she smiled sedately and banished her impatience. Time enough tomorrow to celebrate.

Joshua Saxon was frowning. The fascination that his mystery lady in red held for him was fast becoming a compulsion. He’d been holding the two bottles of Perrier, and positioned himself so that he wouldn’t miss the lady when she reappeared. But she hadn’t.

Either he’d missed her. Or she hadn’t been as desperate to go to the cloakroom as she’d led him to believe.

He made for the balcony on the off chance that she’d passed him and gone outside.

As soon as he stepped outside he wished he hadn't. Roland, no mask concealing his features, had Amy pinned against the balcony rail, trying to say something. But Amy was shaking her head wildly, her mask askew, telling Roland she was going home.

Under the hanging party lights Joshua caught a glimpse of tears streaking her cheeks. Roland growled that she wasn't going anywhere.

None of his business. Neither of them would thank him for the interference.

Then he spotted a flash of dark red in the gardens below and all thoughts about his brother's romantic problems fled. Alice. He leapt down the stairs that led to the garden.

"You aren't leaving already, are you?"

She turned, her rich red dress swirling around her legs, every line of her body revealing her surprise.

"Umm ..."

"You were." Outraged, he stared at her. Suddenly it had become critically important to know who the provocative woman was, where to find her. But he couldn't tell her that. Instead he said, "You can't leave before the unmasking." He checked his Rolex. "It's only three-quarters of an hour away. And then the real party begins."

"I need to make this an early night."

Joshua almost laughed. Women rarely used that line on him. "The Saxon ball happens only once a year. No early night tonight."

"I have a big day tomorrow."

"Big day?" His curiosity was well and truly captured.

"Work."

She definitely wasn't the most talkative woman he'd ever met. And that intrigued the hell out of him. Not that he'd ever admit it.

"Work? On a Sunday?"

She nodded. "Some of us are slaves to demanding bosses."

Her lips curved into an irresistible smile, and Joshua found himself smiling back. He couldn't imagine any boss forcing this woman to work against her will. He twisted the cap off one of the bottles of Perrier he held and handed it out to her. "At least take the time to finish the drink you needed so badly."

She looked startled, and a little embarrassed colour stained the elegant jaw that the mask didn't cover. "Oh, thank you."

"Do you want a glass?" Joshua twisted the cap off his own bottle.

"No, this is fine."

He gave her a reckless grin. "I probably wouldn't get you one—you might disappear again." Tilting his head to one side, he waited for her response. For an explanation of where she'd been.

But she only drew a sip and said, "Mmm, this is good."

The soft hum of appreciation riveted his attention on her mouth; the lips pursed against the top of the bottle were full and lush as she drank thirstily from the bottle. A sudden stab of sexual awareness pierced him.

"Dance with me," he said brusquely. He wanted to hold her in his arms again, feel her body against his.

"Here?"

"Why not?" Joshua moved closer. Out here there were no hordes of dancers to navigate in an overheated room. It was private in the cool intimacy of the gardens.

She didn't resist as he took the bottle from her fingers and propped it with his against the base of a Nikau palm. Nor did she utter a word of objection as one arm slid round her waist and drew her toward him.

His left hand closed around her right. Their bodies caught the rhythm first, then their feet started to shuffle against the night-damp grass.

She smelled of jasmine and heady notes of ylang-ylang. On a conscious level Joshua found his vintner's nose analysing the feminine mix of scents, scents only a woman confident of herself, of her sexuality and her place in the world would wear. The man in him responded to the rich, sensual aromas on another—much baser—level.

Her hip slid against the top of his thigh.

Desire exploded through him. A rush of heat chased through his bloodstream, wild and unwanted. He resisted for an instant in time, then he shifted, giving in to the heat, his leg brushing between hers as they moved.

She gave a little gasp, and her body softened into his.

Instantly Joshua relinquished her hand and wound his arm around her shoulders pulling her closer. She was slim and soft in the curve of his arms. He bent his head, nuzzled the smooth skin under her jaw, and heard the sharp, telling little exhalation.

"You smell wonderful," he murmured.

"Thank you." She sounded breathless. "You smell pretty good yourself." She gave an awkward laugh. "Goodness, we should start a mutual olfactory admiration society."

He doubted that her sense of smell ruled her life as it did his. While he didn't have his younger brother Heath's highly developed ability, he'd grown up at Saxon's Folly immersed in wine, and smelling was as natural to him as breathing.

He nuzzled again. "You smell of dewy nights and dark, exotic spices." He heard her breathing quicken. This time he pressed a soft kiss under her jaw. She quivered. "So soft," he murmured throatily.

"Oh." A sigh escaped her.

Joshua took that as license to nibble gently, and she arched in his arms, her response unequivocal.

His hands explored the bare skin of her back. Under his fingertips he could feel the electric tension tightening within her. But she didn't push him away. By the time he slid his lips across hers she was ready, her lush lips parted.

She tasted fresh and cool. Of mint and the hint of lemon in the Perrier. A powerful surge of hunger swarmed through him. Instead of tasting carefully, proceeding slowly, he yanked her close and devoured her mouth.

A wild sound escaped the back of her throat. Then her hands were raking up the corded muscles of his back, across his shoulders, her touch sparking a rush of energy that pooled in his groin.

His feet gave up all pretence of dancing. Behind his head her fingers rubbed against the exposed skin of his neck, before burying themselves in his hair. He groaned into her mouth. His tongue swept across the soft, slick inside of her bottom lip, tangled with the sleek wetness of her tongue, then plundered the back of her mouth.

Her response was instant and arousing. Her body tensed against his, and desire ratcheted up inside him until he felt that his skin was too tight. Restlessly, he ground his hips against her, acutely conscious of the blatant hardness of his erection straining for freedom. She moved, too, equally unsettled, and Joshua felt arousal kick up to the next level, his hormones telling his head there was only one place where this could end.

His bed.

For a moment he fought the savage urge. Too soon. He'd never bedded a woman he didn't know enough about to be relatively certain he'd still like her in the morning.

"God." He lifted his head, his breathing heavy.

"I should go." But she didn't sound very sure.

"Why?" he demanded, and his voice sounded hoarse to his own ears.

“Because it would be the sensible thing to do. And I’m always sensible.” But her breathlessness belied her claim.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to do something wild? Something totally out of character? Something that might change the rest of your life?” He murmured the inflammatory words against her lips, knowing that was what he was doing now. Allowing his body to rule his brain and letting go with this stranger was the kind of risk he, who liked his odds very carefully calculated, never took.

“Yes, I did that tonight.”

He raised his head a little, trying to read the glitter in her eyes behind the mask, in the pale silver light of the crescent moon overhead.

“By coming here at all,” she said cryptically.

“Come with me.” Joshua reached for her hand and pulled her toward the house, leading her down a dark passage, through the empty hallway to a set of stairs that descended to his suite.

She balked. “We can’t go down there.”

“Hush. Trust me.”

She trailed behind him as he hurried down the stairs and past the living room that he shared with Roland.

“I suppose there are etchings you want to show me?” But beneath the bite there was breathlessness.

“No etchings.” Joshua veered left toward his destination. “Come here, babe.” He didn’t bother to switch on the lights before he took her in his arms.

“But—”

He kissed her objections away. And when her hands ran over his back, Joshua groaned out aloud. He couldn’t wait for this. Couldn’t remember ever wanting a woman this much. He tore off his mask. The expensive Italian-styled dinner jacket landed on the floor, and Joshua yanked the snaps of the dress shirt open.

The touch of her fingertips on the bare skin of his chest was electric. Joshua bit back a curse of pure ecstasy. She drew her palms across his pectorals.

Joshua shuddered.

He drove his tongue deep into her mouth and shifted his hips, knowing she must be aware of how incredibly turned on he was. But she didn’t flinch. Instead her fingers teased, exploring the ridges of his abdominal muscles, brushing his lower belly.

“Woman, you’re killing me,” he said hoarsely.

She gave a little throaty laugh.

That was enough. His senses on fire, Joshua drew her to the bed and came down on the cover beside her. In the darkness he cupped her head in his hands, her hair soft and silky between his fingers. The ties of the mask tangled in his fingers and he tugged them loose. He kissed her cheeks where the mask had rested ... her neck ... and moved his lips to where he guessed the V-neckline of her outrageous dress would be.

She wasn’t laughing now. Her body arched beneath him, and the swell of her breasts brushed his arm.

“Alice.”

She stilled.

Then his hand closed over the fabric-draped softness of her breast. He heard her gasp out loud.

“Ah, Alice, this is going to be good. I promise.” Impatiently, he peeled the dress down over her shoulders—and discovered she wore no bra. He bent his head to taste the skin he’d exposed.

“Joshua.”

The call jarred Joshua back to reality an instant before the bedroom door burst open. He rolled in front of her, shielding her from the intruder.

Dim light backdropped the figure who stood in the doorway. Joshua snarled, “Dammit, Heath. Can’t you knock?”

Two

The bedside light clicked on. Brightness spilled into every corner of the room, hurting Alyssa's eyes.

But she didn't blink. She couldn't take her eyes off the half-naked man on the bed beside her. The high, slanting cheekbones and black eyes were all too familiar. She'd studied photos of him, wondering how someone so utterly beautifully and flagrantly male could be such an arrogant swine.

Joshua Saxon.

No wonder his voice had sounded so damn familiar. She pulled her knees to her chest and yanked the bedcover over her nakedness, then buried her head in her hands, humiliation crawling through her.

"What do you want, Heath?" There was an edge to Joshua's voice as he sat up and addressed his brother.

Through the cracks between her fingers, Alyssa peered toward the door. Heath Saxon. The younger, rakehell brother. He'd been featured in *Wine Watch* as a winemaker to watch. In the photo accompanying the profile, he'd been smiling, tanned. Now he hovered indecisively in the doorway. Until, a flush burning into his pasty skin, he said awkwardly, "Sorry, Joshua, but there's been an accident."

Joshua's shoulders bunched under the open shirt. "An accident?"

Alyssa's hand dropped to cover his.

"Roland's been hurt," Heath said. "We need to go to the hospital."

Roland hurt? Alyssa was off the bed in an instant, pulling up the neckline of her dress.

"Roland's my brother," Joshua said to Alyssa. Then his focus returned to his brother. "What kind of accident?"

"A car accident."

"What the hell happened?" Joshua asked the question before Alyssa could.

Heath shook his head. "I don't know, but an ambulance has taken him and Amy to hospital."

That catapulted Joshua into action. He leapt off the bed, started buttoning his shirt and trod into his shoes. "Do the parents know?"

Heath's eyes darkened. "I told them there'd been an accident, that you and I would go see how bad it was. They're telling everyone the party's over."

"Good move." Joshua headed for the door. "If it's necessary, they can come to the hospital later."

Before he could disappear, Alyssa said, "I'm coming with you."

To her relief both men were more concerned with getting to the hospital than arguing with her. Heath gave her a searching look—then glanced at Joshua and raised his eyebrows. Alyssa knew he was making assumptions—assumptions that were totally wrong. He thought she was Joshua's lover. She didn't bother to disillusion him.

Nor was it the time to get into lengthy discussions about her relationship to Roland ... a revelation that she suspected might come as a huge shock to both men. Joshua was not to find out who she was. She didn't need a crystal ball to know that she would be unceremoniously tossed out the house.

She couldn't afford that. She had to find out how badly Roland was hurt.

Once in Joshua's Range Rover, the tension became palpable. Joshua drove like a man with a lethal mission, in total silence, his hands clenched around the steering wheel. Beside him Heath made call after call from his cell phone, growing increasingly frustrated when he couldn't get answers out of the emergency staff.

Alyssa huddled down in the back, doing her best to remain invisible lest either man question her right to be here. She prayed that Roland's injuries were minor. Hopefully he'd be discharged tonight. It would be unbearable if, after all the waiting, she couldn't meet with him tomorrow.

The moment the Range Rover braked outside the hospital, the three of them leapt out, hurrying for the glass doors that led to the emergency room.

Inside the smell of urgency and antiseptic injected dread into Alyssa. As Joshua's voice rose, she heard the nurse murmuring "in surgery" and "someone will be with you soon." Alyssa stopped a distance away. Heath asked a series of short, sharp questions and Alyssa strained her ears to hear the reply. She heard "shocked" and "will need supervision" before Joshua replied, his voice cutting. Alyssa felt for the nurse. He'd used that same voice on her in the past after her story had been printed. It had riled her enough to tell him to get lost before she'd slammed the phone down. But now she hoped it would get the answers they all wanted.

When Joshua came back to where she'd settled to wait, his mouth was tighter than before and lines of strain were etched across his forehead.

"How is my—" Alyssa broke off.

Joshua did a double take. "Your ... what?" he prompted softly.

Furious with herself for the near giveaway and fighting to keep her face impassive, she asked in an even tone, "How is Roland?"

Instinct warned her that it was vital not to let Joshua Saxon know how important his answer was to her. He detested Alyssa Blake. As soon as he realised who he'd been kissing ... touching ... stripping ... in the dark, he was going to explode.

"He's in surgery. No news yet about the extent of his injuries." The chair scraped against the polished floor as Joshua threw himself down beside her. "Thankfully Amy got off with only some bruising from the seat belt when the car hit a tree."

Hit a tree? A vision of mangled steel and broken glass flashed across Alyssa's mind. The sound of screams and groaning metal rent her imagination. She bit her lip and focused instead on Joshua's drawn features, the beauty dimmed by the savage line of his mouth. For a moment she felt a sense of kinship with him.

"Joshua?"

He lifted his head at the intrusion and the spell was broken. Alyssa felt the loneliness return, stronger and more pervasive than before. There was no bond between her and Joshua Saxon—at least none that wasn't based on sex. She shook away the disappointment.

Heath was heading toward them. "The nurse says they've finished checking Amy out and it shouldn't be long until she's back here."

"It's a relief that she wasn't hurt. She could've been killed if they're right about the speed the SUV was doing," Joshua said darkly.

"Since when did Roland ever drive slowly?" Heath bit out.

Roland had been driving? Alyssa started to shiver with reaction. If only he'd been in the passenger seat ...

She thought back to when she'd spoken to him. Had he and Amy had a lover's tiff? Would he have had the accident if he hadn't been upset?

"I heard them having a fight earlier in the evening. I considered breaking it up, then decided to mind my own business. My mind was on other things." Joshua glanced at Alyssa, his face blank. "A mistake."

So she was nothing more than a mistake. Tightness filled Alyssa's chest.

"Not your fault," said Heath. "No guy would welcome interference in that situation. You probably had it wrong. Amy and Roland never fight."

Alyssa opened her mouth. "When I spoke to Roland—"

"You spoke to Roland?" Joshua interrupted Alyssa. "When?"

“Just before I decided to leave.”

“So before I spotted them on the balcony.” There was a peculiar note in Joshua’s voice. “What did you talk to him about?”

She stared at him, her hackles rising at his peremptory tone. She was a mistake, was she? Well, her business with Roland had nothing to do with him. “It wasn’t important.”

Joshua gave her a narrow-eyed glare filled with suspicion that told her he thought it was important. But before he could challenge her, a doctor in a white coat entered the reception, ushering a slender, white-faced young woman ahead of him.

Heath was on his feet. “Amy!”

Heath and Joshua both started forward.

“Are you her family?” asked the doctor.

“Yes,” said Joshua.

“No,” said Heath at that same moment.

There was a confused silence. The doctor looked from one to the other. “I need to see her family. She’ll require observation tonight.”

“We’ll take care of that,” said Joshua.

“I’ll take her home now,” added Heath, frowning as his gaze scanned Amy.

Alyssa flinched as she saw the scraped skin on the other woman’s pale face. Her fine-boned build made her look frail.

“She’s very lucky. Only one bruise from the seat belt. There’s not even a cracked rib or a broken clavicle where the seat belt restrained her. I have a list of symptoms to watch for. We’re particularly worried about concussion ... or any form of head trauma. If she displays any of them bring her straight back.”

Amy stood, unmoving.

“Come on,” Joshua said, putting an arm around her, “Heath is taking you home.”

Amy blinked. “Where’s Roland?”

Joshua answered, “In surgery.”

There was a moment’s silence. “Will he be okay?” There was fear in Amy’s voice. “There was so much blood ... and he was so quiet.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Heath said soothingly. “You know Roland, he always bounces back.”

Amy didn’t look reassured. “When will I be able to see him?”

“We don’t know yet.” Joshua’s frustration added a hard edge to his voice. “But I’ll soon change that.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Amy said with a stubbornness that belied her delicate appearance. “Not until I’ve heard what’s happening with Roland. And Heath won’t want to leave, either.”

“Don’t be a child, Amy,” Heath sounded exasperated. “You heard what the doctor said, you need rest and observation. There’s already one—” He broke off.

“Patient?” Amy’s chin lifted. “Don’t worry about me, I won’t collapse. You can observe me here. I’m not going anywhere until I’ve seen Roland.”

Alyssa suppressed the urge to cheer the other woman on for standing up to the overbearing Saxons. She knew exactly how Amy felt. She, too, wanted to see Roland with a deep, driving ache. She shifted restlessly.

Joshua’s gaze flickered to her before returning to Amy. “Can I get you anything while we wait?” His tone was gentle, not hinting at the frustration he must be feeling at Amy’s intransigence.

Amy shook her head violently. “I’m fine.”

But even Alyssa could see that the other woman was far from fine. How must Roland’s fiancée be feeling, waiting to hear the extent of her beloved’s injuries?

The waiting was bad enough for her. She’d only met Roland once. Very briefly. The man she’d been seeking for years ...

A strand of hair fell forward. She stared at it. It was dark red—thankfully not the bright red that topped Roland’s head, more of an auburn shade. But it was something tangible that she shared with him.

There would be more links to discover once they got to know each other. There must be. After all, Roland was her brother and they shared the same DNA.

A stir at the doorway caused Alyssa to lift her head. Kay and Phillip Saxon—Roland’s adoptive parents—had arrived.

“How is he? Can we see him?” Kay’s eyes were frantic, and the powerfully built, gray-haired man beside her looked shattered. Everyone swarmed around them. Alyssa saw her chance.

She stopped a passing nurse. “Roland Saxon ... where is he?”

“What’s your relationship to the patient?” The nurse glanced at the clipboard she held. “Are you the fiancée?”

She hesitated, glancing quickly back to where Kay Saxon was bending over Amy, patting her shoulder. It would be better if she didn’t lie outright and simply let the nurse assume she was Roland’s fiancée.

“My name is Alyssa Blake, I’m—”

“Alyssa Blake?” Joshua had come up behind her, unheard. Now his angry gaze impaled her. Uh-oh.

“Are you the fiancée?” The nurse looked confused.

“No! She’s *not* my brother’s fiancée,” Joshua hissed from between clenched teeth.

Alyssa’s heart crashed to the floor as she read the disdain and rage in his eyes. Game over. She could kiss her hopes of seeing Roland tonight goodbye.

“So you’re Alyssa Blake, the journalist?”

Suddenly everyone was gathered around. Heath, his eyes almost as glacial as his brother’s. Kay and Phillip Saxon. Only Amy remained seated, her face cupped in her hands.

Alyssa’s gaze flickered from face to face. “Yes, I’m Alyssa—”

“You told me your name was Alice,” Joshua interrupted.

“It is—”

“Alice?” Kay Saxon had gone so white that her lips appeared bloodless.

“Don’t worry—her name isn’t Alice. She’s Alyssa Blake, that bloody journalist who—”

Alyssa cut across Joshua’s rant. “What does it matter right now what my name is? Roland is hurt.”

“You’re right! I’ve wasted enough time on a journalist in the business of telling lies.” Joshua’s gaze scorched her. “It’s my brother who’s important right now. Come, Heath.” Joshua stormed past her, his brother in his wake.

Feeling sick, Alyssa started to follow.

“Wait.” Kay Saxon grabbed her arm.

Alyssa stopped. Maybe Kay would let her see Roland if she told the older woman the truth. That Roland was her brother. That she’d dreamed for so long of this day ... of finding her brother ... of meeting him. Warily, she searched Kay Saxon’s face for a hint of softness.

“Did Joshua call you Alice?” Kay’s eyes held desperation.

“Yes.”

“But you introduced yourself as Alyssa Blake to the nurse.”

“Yes.” Where was this going? Alyssa could feel impatience rising in her. She needed to find a way to get to Roland’s side. To hold his hand, absorb his pain.

“Does that mean you’re Alice McKay?”

Alyssa froze. “What do you know about Alice McKay?”

“You contacted Roland.”

“Yes. He told you?” She’d wondered how Kay and Phillip would feel about her contacting Roland. It looked as if she was about to find out.

Phillip stood behind his wife, a solid wall of powerful flesh she’d have to scale to get to Roland. “Darling, the doctor will be here in a minute to talk to us.”

“Phillip ...” Kay’s hand rested on his arm and Alyssa could see that the fingers were shaking. “Didn’t you hear? This is Alice McKay.”

After one startled moment when everything seemed to freeze, Phillip recovered and in a low voice demanded, “What are you doing here?”

Roland’s parents definitely knew who she was. But neither appeared welcoming. A sinking pit opened in Alyssa’s stomach. She lifted her chin. “I wanted to meet my brother.”

From across the room, she saw Joshua reappear and an ugly frown disfigured his handsome face when he saw her talking to his parents. Clearly he didn’t want them talking to the notorious Alyssa Blake.

“Now is not the time for this. We want you to leave,” Phillip ordered.

Alyssa stiffened and fisted her hands at her sides. “Now is exactly the time for me to be here—my brother is in surgery. I have every right to be here.”

Kay Saxon took her clenched hands. “I understand how you feel, but Roland wouldn’t want you here.”

Alyssa’s throat closed and she felt perilously close to the tears that she’d been fighting. “What do you mean?”

“He never responded to your letters or e-mails, did he?”

With heavy reluctance, Alyssa choked out, “No, he didn’t.”

“Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“That he didn’t get them?”

“He did receive them.” Kay’s eyes held shadows. “He chose not to reestablish contact.”

“But I’m his sister.” It was as though she’d ventured into a nightmare world, full of blood and death and unhappiness. All she’d wanted was a brother, a taste of family that most people took for granted. “He can’t not want to meet me!”

Phillip Saxon looked around, frowning.

Kay’s icy grip tightened around her fingers. “Dear, he’s a Saxon—the eldest. Not even his brothers and sister know that he’s adopted. Roland didn’t want it getting out.”

“No!” Her stomach churning, Alyssa rejected what she was hearing. She stared at Kay Saxon, hating the older woman for what she was saying. But then she took in Kay’s sincerity and the deeply etched lines of pain around her mouth and the hatred evaporated.

“This is hard enough for all of us right now, Alice. Don’t force us to reveal the truth ... that Roland isn’t a Saxon.”

The impact of what Kay was saying pounded into her. Roland had rejected his birth sister in case their relationship took away his Saxon status. How could she stay under those circumstances?

Tears stung her eyes. “I just wanted to see him, hold his hand.”

“It would be selfish—and not what Roland wants,” Kay Saxon said softly, persuasively. “Right now we have to think about Roland.”

Blinking back her tears, Alyssa nodded. “All right.”

Relief flared in Kay’s eyes. “Thank you.” The older woman hesitated. “Do you have a cell phone, Alice?”

Alyssa nodded.

“Give me your number, dear. I’ll call you as soon as we get an update.”

Alyssa dug a business card out of her bag. Kay took it and pocketed it, glancing past Alyssa as she did so. “Now let’s all talk about something else—Joshua is coming.”

Three

Joshua made his way over to where his parents stood with Alyssa, Alice—whatever her damned name was.

He was aware of the incongruously glamorous, burgundy dress she wore and how it mirrored the colour of her long hair. Against the rich hue her bare shoulders gleamed like pale pearls.

Angrily he suppressed the flare of reckless want. He'd just taken a call from the surgery team advising that his brother was in critical condition—worse than the medical team had originally believed—and here he was lusting after Alyssa Blake, accomplished liar. It was insane.

But even as he drew closer, she gathered up her bag and rose to her feet. He stopped beside his parents and thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, at a loss to convey what he had learned. As Alyssa started for the doors one hand shot out and snagged her arm. "Where are you going?"

She kept her head down and continued to walk. "I'm leaving."

"Wait ... I need some answers."

But she pulled free of his hold and marched toward the external glass doors in a flurry of dark red. Joshua started after her, then stopped as Heath came over and murmured, "Have you told Mum and Dad?"

He shook his head.

His parents must come first.

The next two minutes were a nightmare as he relayed what the surgeon had told him. "It's the internal bleeding they're worried about, and the head injury. Roland wasn't wearing a seat belt. He was catapulted from the SUV. The surgeon said they don't expect to be out for hours."

His mother's eyes stretched wide, shocked. His father straightened stiffly. Heath, his brave, bad-boy brother, was still pale under his tan. Joshua knew they all feared the same unspoken thing—that Roland might die.

Through the glass doors he could see Alyssa Blake's back, bare above that killer dress. She must be freezing. Then he put how cold she must be out of his mind.

All this had started with her arrival.

Anger turned his vision bright red. Leaving his parents with Heath, he stalked forward. The doors slid open and cool, dank night air rushed against his face.

The doors hissed closed behind him. Ahead lay the almost-empty car park. Alyssa didn't spare him a glance.

He drew a deep, steadying breath. "You came with me. How do you propose to leave?"

She brandished a cell phone. "I've called a cab—I need to collect my car from your home."

"You can't be intending to drive back to Auckland tonight?"

"Don't worry, there's not a drop of alcohol in my system." She gave him a sideways glance. "But, no, I won't be leaving tonight. I want to stay near Roland."

He drew another, deeper breath and forced himself not to react. Instead he said as calmly as he could manage, "You must be freezing. Here, take my jacket." He started to shrug off the black dinner jacket he'd grabbed before they'd left the homestead.

But she said, "No, thanks. I'm fine."

"You've got gooseflesh." He touched the skin on her upper arms, and she leapt away as if he'd singed her.

"I don't need it. The taxi will be here in a moment."

"You can give it back to me tomorrow."

She stilled. "Okay, thank you."

He slid the jacket off. It sounded as if it had taken a lot for her to accept his offer of help. Contrary damn woman. Watching her wind the jacket around herself, he relaxed a little as the pale tempting flesh disappeared out of sight.

“Where will you stay?”

Her mouth curled. “Don’t worry, you won’t need to track me down. I’ll return it to you tomorrow.”

“I wasn’t worried about that.”

She named a popular hotel in town.

“And you’re leaving tomorrow, right?” Part of him wanted her to leave, never come back. He couldn’t help the ridiculous superstitious stab of dread that her arrival had heralded Roland’s accident. But there was another part of him, the sybaritic pagan part, who wanted to see her again. Touch her again. Kiss her again.

For one reckless instant he considered doing just that. It would be so easy. One tug, and she’d be up against his chest. He’d feel her body warm against his, he’d taste her lips under his mouth. The cold that froze him inside might seep away under her touch ... her kisses.

And then he’d despise himself for it. He shook his head to clear it.

Maybe Alyssa Blake was a witch.

“I might leave tomorrow. It depends.” Alyssa gave him a sideways glance.

But Joshua barely heard. He frowned as he took in her red-rimmed eyes, the silvery stains on her cheeks where the wind had already dried the tears. “You’ve been crying.”

Quickly she averted her face.

“Why?”

The look she gave him revealed too little. Secrets, he thought suddenly. He glanced through the glass doors and his gaze landed on Amy, curled up in the chair, her face wearing an expression of intense misery.

His gaze came back to Alyssa and narrowed. Instead of drowning her, his dinner jacket simply increased her upmarket city sexiness. She was gorgeous, stylish, smart. The kind of woman Roland had always dated before he’d become engaged to Amy....

And Amy had been upset earlier this evening—she and Roland had fought, even though it was common knowledge they never fought. The uncertain suspicion coalesced into certainty.

Alyssa had been having an affair with Roland.

She must have confronted Roland during the evening, and Amy had found out.

It wasn’t important, Alyssa had said when Joshua asked her about her conversation with his brother. He’d known from the flicker in her eyes that she’d been lying. The conversation had been very important.

And now Roland was unconscious....

No wonder Alyssa was upset. Did she feel responsible for causing her lover’s accident?

Did she *love* his brother?

He raked his hands through his hair as unruly thoughts churned round and round in his overwrought brain. “Who invited you to the ball tonight? You weren’t on the list of official guests—it had to be a personal invitation.” From Roland?

“I didn’t have an invitation. I gate-crashed.” There was defiance in her gaze.

Then she turned away. He heard what she had, the sound of the taxi pulling up at the curb.

But all he could think about was that Roland hadn’t invited her. Or she could be lying. Again. “Why? What did you hope to achieve?”

She didn’t answer and started to move away.

“Tell me, dammit.” Without thought, he reached for her. His hands closed over her shoulders covered with the fine fabric of his jacket. He glared down into her blank features, her lashes lying long and dark against her cheeks. “Tell me!”

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

Had she tried to break up Roland's engagement? He struggled to read the beautiful, frozen face. "I think it does."

She didn't answer. He slid his hands down and circled her wrists, gave them a shake to get her to meet his gaze.

Wrapped in his jacket, she stood unmoving. And strangely that made him even angrier. He wanted her to object to his hold, he wanted her to struggle, to see her eyes spit fire at him; he didn't like the limp arms in his grasp, the listlessness in her eyes.

So he softened his grasp and said with quiet menace, "What did you want at Saxon's Folly tonight?"

She hesitated. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you."

He heard the taxi door open.

"Ma'am, did you book the taxi?"

He looked over her shoulder. "The lady's not ready to leave yet."

"But I am," she murmured.

His brows drew together. "I want an answer before you go. What did you want?"

What had happened between her and Roland? Had Roland sent her away—was that why she'd kissed *him* out in the garden? To get back at Roland? Was that why she'd landed in *his* bed?

As revenge against his brother?

He didn't like that idea at all. Yet he couldn't seem to bring himself to release her arm. The pain in her eyes damn near killed him.

He'd never envied his older brother, but now he did.

Whatever happened, if Roland survived the hours of surgery that lay ahead, Joshua wasn't going to allow Alyssa to rekindle whatever affair she and Roland had going. He told himself that his resolve had nothing to do with the wild feeling that Alyssa had aroused in him; he had Amy to think about. Sweet Amy who was expecting to marry Roland in two months' time.

Behind him he heard the doors whisper open.

"Joshua?"

He turned and glared at Heath. "What?"

"Mother wants you."

Alyssa pulled free. "I'll get your jacket back to you tomorrow."

"I don't care about the damn jacket." Inside he seethed. "This conversation is not finished. I'll talk to you in the morning."

She wouldn't flee town overnight, not while the outcome of Roland's surgery was unknown. Secure in that knowledge he turned on his heel and followed his brother back into the hospital.

It was going to be a long night.

The sound of her cell phone ringing shattered Alyssa's restless sleep. The compressing darkness of the hotel room lay like a heavy blanket around her.

It would be Joshua calling to finish the conversation he'd started outside the emergency room. Alyssa dragged herself upright. She wasn't ready for this confrontation. Then she spotted the green digital numerals of the clock radio and her heart jolted with fear. Four-thirty in the morning. Too early to be Joshua.

Her hand trembling, she picked up the phone.

"Where are you staying?" Little composure remained in Kay Saxon's voice.

Alyssa's heart slammed against her ribs in fear as she automatically gave Kay the information she sought. "Is Roland okay?" she asked shakily.

There was an ominous silence. Then Kay said, "I'll send a cab. You need to come now." The phone went dead.

It had to be bad.

With few alternatives—the red dress or a pin-striped business suit—Alyssa threw on the pair of baggy sweats and sweater she'd worn for the drive down to Hawkes Bay and was downstairs in minutes. By the time the lights of the cab cut through the dark gray pre-dawn light she was already out on the sidewalk.

Too soon she'd reached the white hospital building. Inside, everything was quiet. She made for the front desk. "Where will I find Roland Saxon?"

"Are you Alice?" A nurse came around the desk at her silent nod. "Come, I'll take you to him."

Sick with anxiety, Alyssa was led through double-seal doors into a unit filled with beeps and a sense of life-and-death gravity. At the sound of hissing as the ventilator rose and fell, fear shafted through Alyssa.

She took in the couple hovering by the bed.

Kay and Phillip Saxon.

On a high bed lay a prone figure wrapped in dressings, attached to the life-support machines, an oxygen mask over his face, so swollen that he was rendered unrecognizable. Only the shock of red hair sticking out from the head dressing revealed that this was Roland.

"You have five minutes," the nurse whispered. "Only family are supposed to be here—and only two at a time. I've already stretched the rules." Then she was gone in a rustle of starch.

Kay Saxon turned, her eyes puffy. She'd aged in the past few hours. "I'm glad you made it."

"How is he?"

"He's unconscious. I'm not sure how much is induced—"

Alyssa said desperately, "But he's going to be all right."

He had to be.

Kay took her hands. "The doctors don't think so. That's why I called you. I couldn't live with myself if—" Her voice broke.

Cold dread suffocated Alyssa. "They think he's going to *die*?"

Kay hesitated. "They told us to call anyone who might want to see him. They warned us to prepare for the worst."

Her world crashed in. Alyssa fell to her knees, stretching her hands to touch the heavily bandaged hands of the man in the bed.

Her brother.

Her brother who was dying.

Kay sniffed behind her, but Alyssa was crying so hard she couldn't think.

This wasn't how it was supposed to have ended.

She was to see him tomorrow. *Today*. She'd been looking forward to reuniting with the brother she'd been searching for since she was eighteen.

"*Nooo!*" It was a wail of anguish.

Then Kay was holding her and murmuring to her not to cry because it might upset Roland. As Alyssa's tears subsided, Kay pulled away. "Alyssa, the boys are coming, and I don't want them to find you here. Phillip and I don't want to have to answer their questions. Please, for our sakes—for Roland's sake—will you go now?"

Before Alyssa could answer, the nurse was there, waiting to escort her out.

She wanted to beg for more time. Her throat closed. The words didn't come. Finally, she swallowed and managed to speak. "Give me one minute. To say—" her voice cracked "—goodbye."

Kay nodded and waved off the nurse.

Alyssa bent forward, her lips colder than ice as they brushed the forehead of the man in the bed. She noticed a drip of liquid on his forehead. Water? Another splash. No—tears, she realised. Her tears.

Closing her eyes she prayed. For Roland. For herself. For a miracle. For all the years they'd missed. Then she kissed him and murmured, "Au revoir."

Blinded by tears, she turned for the door, the room a blur.

Joshua hurried toward the hospital elevator, Heath and his younger sister, Megan, flanking him on either side. The panel above the elevator doors showed that a car was already descending and Joshua found himself drumming his fingers as they waited for the doors to open. Hurry. Hurry.

The doors opened. A nurse exited. Then Joshua saw Alyssa coming out. “How did you get here?”

“In a cab.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He turned to his brother and sister. “You go ahead, I’ll see you upstairs.”

While he waited for the elevator to depart, he inspected Alyssa’s features, taking in the hollows under her eyes, the lack of makeup and the way her glorious hair had been pulled back from her face, as though she’d gotten ready in a hurry. In the tatty sweats she looked nothing like the sophisticated woman he’d met ... was it only last night?

“What are you doing here?”

Her eyes flicked away from his. “I came to find out if there was any news about Roland’s condition.”

Joshua’s mouth tightened; he suspected she was dissembling. The suspicion of earlier was back in full force. “Why are you so upset? What’s Roland to you?”

She shook her head and didn’t answer.

Joshua couldn’t help thinking about Amy, brokenhearted and sedated for shock. “Heath had to give Amy a sleeping tablet. He’s left her at his home, with his housekeeper watching over her. How could you, Alyssa?”

Alyssa let her hands drop and stared at him blankly.

“She and Roland are getting married in two months. Now it’s all gone to hell because you couldn’t stay away from Roland.”

“What?” Her eyes were stretched wide.

Joshua frowned at the shock in her eyes. He’d surprised himself with the outburst. Normally nothing fazed him. He was the boss—people came to him for guidance and advice. Yet right now he felt like raging at her. For sure he was losing it.

And she was the catalyst.

He pushed a hand through his hair. “Why did you have to come to the ball last night and cause trouble? Was it worth it? Was it worth telling Amy about your relationship with Roland?”

“I didn’t tell Amy a thing.”

Joshua relaxed slightly. So Amy didn’t know that Roland and Alyssa were lovers. But surely Amy must have suspected Roland was embroiled in a heated affair with a woman because Joshua certainly had. All the signs had been there. The constant visits to Auckland, the cell calls that his brother took privately while talking in a low, intimate voice. By not denying her clandestine relationship with Roland, Alyssa had confirmed the suspicions he’d had about his brother for months.

“You must know that if Amy found out about you, it would devastate her. Not to say what it would do to my parents to discover that Roland had been two-timing Amy, their goddaughter. Right now they need to think about all the good things he’s achieved.”

Alyssa’s eyes widened. “You think—” She broke off.

Joshua waited for her to refute that she’d been attempting to seduce Roland away from Amy. Deep down, he wanted that denial. Even though he knew it would be a lie. Instead she stood shifting from foot to foot, her eyes reflecting her inner turmoil.

Raking his hands through his already ruffled hair, he sighed. “It would be better if you left now and returned to Auckland.”

“I haven’t got your jacket here—it’s back in my hotel room.”

He shrugged. “I don’t care about the jacket. I want you gone.”

She said flatly, “I’m not going until—” her throat moved as she swallowed “—until it’s all over. But Amy needn’t worry, I won’t be staying a second more than I have to. I know when I’m not wanted.”

Not wanted? Joshua suppressed the urge to groan. He *wanted* the woman standing in front of him more than he’d ever desired a woman in his life. But no good could come out of it. Not only had she assassinated his character in print, she’d been his brother’s lover.

And he had no intention of following in Roland’s well-worn footsteps.

Four

Alyssa felt terrible.

Joshua thought she and Roland had been lovers. Worse, he believed she'd come to Saxon's Folly to steal Roland away from his fiancée. She bit her lip to stop herself blurting out the truth. How could she refute what he believed without revealing the truth about her relationship to Roland?

Yesterday, just before midnight, his parents had demanded that she leave; now Joshua was ordering her to go, too. A sense of hurt settled around her. The sooner she got away from here, the sooner she could retreat to the solitary comfort of her Auckland apartment and lick her wounds in private.

But for now she had to shrug off the hurt. This morning she would hold vigil for as long as necessary. Because this wasn't about her. It was about her brother.

"Nothing to say?"

The words jerked her attention back to Joshua. He was watching her through dark, suspicious eyes.

"You should go upstairs," she said quietly. "You don't want to miss what might be your only chance to say goodbye to Roland because you wasted time arguing with me." The thought of her brother lying there with little chance of regaining consciousness was unbearable ... heartbreaking ... and she sniffed back the fresh wave of tears.

"Do you love him very much?" Joshua's voice held a strange tone.

"Yes, I love him a great deal." Alyssa didn't look at him in case he read the depth of the loss and confusion in her eyes. Instead she stared at her feet and noticed that the laces of her left sneaker had come undone. What was a lace? So unimportant in the greater scheme of things.

"He never mentioned you."

She sighed. How tricky this had all become. Clearly Roland hadn't wanted his brothers to know that he wasn't a Saxon by birth. Now, because of her promise to Kay Saxon and out of her respect to her brother, she couldn't tell Joshua the truth—even though she desperately wanted to. They'd connected on some primal level, she and Joshua. She didn't like lying to him. Finally she settled for, "We hadn't known each other very long."

One brief meeting last night ... she'd shaken Roland's hand. And this morning she'd touched his unconscious body.

From the old cuttings in the town's archives she knew he'd played rugby as a boy and captained his team to a regional win. She'd shuddered in fear as she'd watched television footage of Roland as a late teen riding his horse over solid fences with a determination that had won him numerous eventing titles. An article in a wine magazine had said Roland joked that he'd liked fast women and good wine. Alyssa had wondered what Amy had thought about that! A recent appearance on a lifestyle television programme hosted by a pretty blonde had revealed that he wore jeans with panache. Every last fact she could glean about him, she had uncovered.

Yet Roland didn't know her at all.

"Maybe he didn't say anything because he knew you wouldn't be pleased with his friendship with Alyssa Blake, despised journalist." Now, through desperation, she'd cornered herself into an outright lie. Before last night's meeting, Roland had only known her from the letters and e-mails ... written in the name of Alice McKay.

"Friends?"

Joshua looked her up and down in a way that made her regret donning the ancient sweats. A disturbing prickle of awareness followed in the wake of his gaze. She shut it out ruthlessly. "Yes, friends. Why not?"

"I can accept that Roland didn't want us to know he was sleeping with you." Joshua's lip curled. "First, because he knows I think you're a hack writer and have no respect for you after that hatchet job you did. And sec—"

"Hack?" She glared at him in outrage. "I only did—"

He held up a hand. "Let me finish. Second, I'm sure Roland didn't mention you because you're of little importance—certainly not worth losing Amy over." Joshua gave her a long, hard stare. "Roland was always a bit of a ladies' man. But I'm not going to let Amy be hurt."

Alyssa drew a deep, steadying breath and counted silently to three before saying slowly and distinctly, "I have absolutely no intention of hurting Amy."

"Good. Then we understand each other." Joshua stabbed the button to summon the elevator. "You're trouble. As long as you keep far away from Saxon's Folly, my family—and Amy—everything will be fine!"

"You should go and see Roland," she said with urgency.

He gave her a snooty look. "My brother has the luck of the devil—he's a survivor."

Alyssa prayed to God that he was right. But his words caused a flare of hope. Joshua knew his brother. If he thought Roland might live ...

"And when he's out of here, you stay far away from him."

No chance.

Joshua blamed her for the argument between Amy and Roland last night. She thought about the pretty TV-show hostess who'd interviewed Roland only a month ago. Alyssa had gone to see her. The woman had giggled that Roland was a great lover—and lamented the fact that he was already taken. Not that it had stopped him, she'd added, giving Alyssa a lascivious smile.

Maybe Amy had quarrelled with him over the hostess, but it wasn't up to Alyssa to reveal that scandal to Joshua. It might turn her stomach having Joshua accuse her of being Roland's lover ... but no one except she and his parents knew how vile that accusation really was.

She wasn't the troublemaker Joshua had branded her.

Alyssa started as the elevator pinged beside her and the doors slid open. "Think what you want about me—I don't care," she said at last, suppressing the sting of his words.

Joshua strode into the waiting elevator. His gaze swept over her, cool and dismissive. "I'm sure you don't care about anything except yourself."

Alyssa decided that it was just as well she could seethe over Joshua's departing comments while she sat in the hospital café drinking stale coffee. But under her fuming she still fretted about how Roland was faring upstairs in that sterile ward.

Drained of all emotion, Joshua paused in the entrance of the coffee-cum-flower shop in the hospital lobby. His eyes burned. After almost twenty-four hours awake, he needed a shower, a change of clothing and sleep.

But right now there were other things—important things—to which he needed to attend.

His chest expanded as he hauled in a deep breath.

And the first that needed sorting was sitting at a table beside a rack of magazines, staring into a coffee cup, a napkin crumpled in her fist. Some sixth sense must have alerted Alyssa to his presence because her hand tightened around the mangled, once-white napkin and she looked up.

The vulnerability in her eyes vanished the instant she spotted him, replaced by wariness. Okay, so this conversation wasn't going to be easy. But it couldn't be delayed. He started forward.

"Alice—" No, not Alice. "Alyssa," he corrected himself. He'd kissed Alice. He'd never willingly touch Alyssa. "My mother sent me to tell you ..." He broke off and swallowed the burning bile at the back of his throat.

She was on her feet, her hand against her mouth. "Roland ... is he conscious? Can I see him?"

He shook his head. An appalling sorrow splintered inside his chest. There was frustration and bewilderment, too.

“Why? Just for a few minutes? Please?”

Her eyes were wide, beseeching. As much as he disliked her, it was clear that she loved his brother, that she’d do anything, even beg, to be with him. Damnation! This was more difficult than he’d expected.

His legs carried him to her without his realising it. He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Alyssa—” Her hand touched his sleeve. He flinched, and she jerked it away.

“I won’t make waves. I won’t do anything to cause Amy anxiety. I just want to see my—Roland.” She was frantically shredding what was left of the paper towel.

He caught her flailing hands and tossed the napkin on the table, hating what he had to do. “Alyssa, you don’t understand. Roland is dead.”

“What?” She rocked on her feet, looking as if she was about to faint.

“Steady.” He moved closer, shifting his hold to her shoulders, propping her up with his body.

Her eyes were wide, staring. Shocked. Little flecks of black floated in the unseeing smoky purple irises.

“Alyssa?”

“Is it true?” She pulled away from him, wrapping her arms around herself, looking shaken to the soul.

Joshua nodded, swept by a wave of terrible pity. She’d said she loved his brother. Had Roland known the depth of her love? Had he even appreciated it? Joshua doubted it. But he couldn’t afford to relent. Family came first.

Alyssa Blake was more than capable of looking out for herself.

Besides, she was too much of a forbidden temptation. “So you’ll be leaving in the morning?”

Her head came up. The magnificent eyes flashed. “I’ll go after the funeral. Please, leave me alone until then.”

And as he watched the tears pool, the foolish and chivalrous part of him wished he had the right to hold her, comfort her and wipe those tears of hopelessness from her eyes.

Alyssa crept in and stood in the back of the church, keeping her head bowed, and stared blankly at the order of service booklet that had been given to her by the usher at the door.

Yesterday she had called David Townsend, her editor at *Wine Watch* magazine, requesting a few days’ leave, without giving him any explanations. If she mentioned the word *bereavement*, she suspected that the tears that dammed up the back of her throat might overflow. Once she started, she feared she might never stop.

David had given her two days.

Alyssa had told him she’d be back in the office on Wednesday. But standing here in the crowded church, work ... and Auckland ... seemed so far away. A numbing mist enveloped her. Beneath the booklet she held, her gray pin-striped pantsuit seemed woefully inadequate. She’d intended to wear the outfit to the one-on-one meet she’d coerced Roland into. A quick glance around revealed that the boutique businesswear was out of place among the designer black and sedate pearls.

She hadn’t brought much with her—she’d only expected to be in Hawkes Bay for the weekend. She didn’t even have pins to put her hair up. The dark silky mass lay around her bowed face in a sleek wave. But shopping for mourning clothes and hairpins had been the last thing on her mind yesterday. Roland’s death on Sunday had left her reeling.

She opened the order of service booklet and found herself staring at a photo of Roland ... a piece about his achievements, a short eulogy where he was described as “the much loved son of Kay and Phillip, brother of Joshua, Heath and Megan.”

Of course, there was no mention of his real parents, or the sibling who had been robbed of the chance to know and love him.

The hymns reverberated around Alyssa, moving her until her heart ached so much she thought it might burst. Then Joshua stood and started to talk about Roland, and her heart shattered.

By the time she arrived at the cemetery on the farm where Saxons had been buried for nearly a century, Alyssa was so wrung out by emotion that her legs felt a little shaky.

She'd debated about the wisdom of coming to the burial. She'd known it would be upsetting. The last funeral she'd attended had been her adoptive mother's—and that had been simply awful. But in the end, the need to see her brother—her flesh and blood—laid finally to rest had won out. Perhaps now she might get some peace, too.

The first person she recognised as she made her way through the white-painted picket gate was Joshua.

She hesitated. He hadn't seen her yet.

Alyssa halted a distance off from where the Saxons crowded around the grave and sneaked another look at Joshua.

His arm was around his white-faced mother and on his other side stood his sister, Megan, sobbing into a hanky. Behind them stood Heath and Phillip Saxon, looking solemn. Amy hovered dry-eyed at the edge of the raw grave, her expression bleak.

From her vantage point, Alyssa could see the rows upon rows of vines planted on the hills that lay below the cemetery. They would only just be starting to bud for the coming summer. It struck her that, unlike the vines, Roland would never see another summer.

Blinking back a fresh prick of tears, she barely noticed the breeze that swept her hair off her face as she listened to the priest delivering the prayer.

"Amen," she murmured with the rest of the crowd as it ended.

"Don't plan on staying," Joshua said very softly from behind her.

She didn't turn her head to look at him. She hadn't heard him approach. But every hair on her nape stood up. "I won't."

"Good." He moved to stand beside her as the final hymn started. "I don't want Amy suffering any more than she already is."

Alyssa stared at the words on the sheet of paper in her hand and stifled an impatient sigh. Amy. His parents. That's all he could think about. What about *her*? "Please believe me, I'm not going to do anything to harm Amy."

He gave her a hard look. "I wouldn't let you." His eyes scanned her face. She could feel the intensity of his gaze, as he examined every inch of her face.

"Well?"

"You're beautiful." His tone was dispassionate. Unmoved. He might have been studying an inanimate block of marble.

"Thanks," she said tersely, her gaze dropping away from his. The knowledge that he considered her beautiful didn't bring satisfaction. Joshua didn't even like *her*—the real Alyssa Blake beneath the veneer—he'd made that clear enough.

A disturbing thought struck her. Perhaps he fancied Amy? And, now with Roland out of the way, did that mean Joshua expected a chance with his brother's grief-stricken fiancée?

She gave him a covert glance from behind her lashes. "Amy's beautiful, too."

He stilled, the skin over his slanted cheekbones suddenly taut. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Her lashes swept up. Her eyes clashed with his frigid ones. "Just that you seem to admire her immensely."

"You think I have the hots for my brother's fiancée?" Darkness moved in his eyes.

"It would be understandable."

Amy would be the perfect wife for Joshua Saxon. She was even Kay's goddaughter. It was a no-brainer. "Amy is vulnerable right now. You'll need to take care that she doesn't view you as a rebound relationship."

“I don’t need your pop-psychology advice. I don’t poach my brothers’ women.” His gaze was bleak. “Or at least, I never did. Not until the night I met you.”

What was that cryptic statement supposed to mean? A burst of adrenaline shot through Alyssa, quickly followed by a flare of desire.

What would happen if he learned Roland wasn’t his real brother. And that she, Alyssa, was Roland’s younger sister.

And what was the point of agonizing over it all. It was moot. Because Joshua would never learn the truth.

Despite the pale golden light of the sun, a cold shiver started at the base of her neck and inched down her spine, leaving Alyssa feeling like an emotional wasteland.

He moved away and Alyssa shut her eyes, and let the singing voices swirl around her. After what seemed an interminable time she heard car doors slam, the roar of engines starting.

Her shoulders sagged with relief. Conscious of the careless caress of the wind on her skin, of a tui whistling in a nearby phutukawa tree, Alyssa stood still as the cemetery rapidly emptied.

Finally, she opened her eyes. Only a few people remained. Joshua was gone. But the memory of his intensity as he’d told her that he didn’t want Amy suffering any more than she already was, remained vivid. What would it be like to be the focus of all that masculine protection?

She wished....

What was the point of wishing? The connection she’d sensed with Joshua had ended the minute he learned who she was. She was accustomed to being alone. As the indulged, only child of two older parents she’d grown up curiously isolated. She’d been thirteen when she’d discovered that she was adopted, that she’d been born Alice McKay—not Alyssa Blake.

She’d been so excited at the prospect of finding siblings ... more family. But her mother had cried at the idea of Alyssa searching for her birth parents. For years Alyssa had put it off, fearful of upsetting Margaret. But finally she’d been compelled to make a start, secretly. Only after her mother’s death three years ago had she been able to focus single-mindedly on her quest.

She’d never tracked down her birth father. But she’d found her vacant-eyed birth mother in an institute for stroke victims and she’d become a regular visitor. But from the moment Alyssa discovered that she had a brother, she hadn’t rested.

She’d wanted to find him ... Roland.

And now Roland was gone forever.

A cloud drifted across the sky and passed over the face of the sun, blocking out the sunlight and casting a shadow over the mound where Roland lay. Alyssa shivered.

Why? Why had she not forced the issue with Roland sooner, *made* him see her. They could’ve had a few weeks ... months. She sighed. But would extra time have made any difference?

Alyssa supposed it wasn’t a big deal to him. Roland hadn’t needed a sister; he’d already had a sister—and two brothers. A whole proud, supportive family.

While, to her, finding her brother had become everything.

“Alice....” Kay spoke hesitantly from beside her.

She gave a start of surprise. “Call me Alyssa.” Alice was gone. Buried in the ground as surely as Roland was. Alice had existed only as evidence that she had once been someone else ... someone with a brother.

Coming to a decision, Alyssa said flatly, “Joshua thinks that I’m Roland’s lover.” Alyssa still felt sullied by the accusation in his eyes. “I don’t like it—especially not since Roland was already engaged. I’d like you tell Joshua the truth, please.”

Kay shook her head, and gestured to the raw, new grave. “Roland is dead. Phillip and I don’t want the trauma of explaining to the children that he was never their blood brother.”

Children? Alyssa goggled at the older woman. Joshua Saxon was no child. “They’re adults, not children anymore. Surely they’ll understand?”

Kay looked uncomfortable. "It would mean their whole upbringing was based on a lie."

"They deserve the truth."

"It's too late for that." Kay shook her head and started to move away toward the white gate where Phillip stood, his back to them, talking with a group of mourners.

Frustration and despair pooled deep inside Alyssa's chest, setting a heavy lump.

"Why didn't you tell them sooner?" Then Roland might even have come looking for *her*. He'd have had time to come to terms with having a sister, of not being a Saxon by birth.

Kay stopped. "At first we intended to tell them, but the years passed, and then it was too late. Neither Phillip nor I want them to know now. It's not necessary." Kay faced Alyssa, her eyes a cool, implacable gray. "I'd like you to respect that."

Alyssa had known how Kay would react, but she'd hoped ...

It wasn't to be. Roland was gone. Yet there was so much Kay could share about her brother. Maybe.

Alyssa's heart started to beat anxiously in her chest at the audacity of what she was contemplating. "Kay, I won't tell anyone. But only if you share your memories of Roland with me. Every day for a week. I want to see the photos of him, hear the stories of what he did, share the places he knew growing up."

"That's not poss—"

Alyssa read the other woman's refusal in her eyes. Thrusting her apprehension away, she firmed her lips into a determined line and stalked past the older woman. "Then I have no reason to give you my promise to keep my relationship with Roland a secret."

"Wait."

She turned her head.

"You can't do that." Kay looked horrified. "And if I do as you want? How can I trust you not to say anything later?"

"I'll give you my word." Alyssa sagged under the weight of the tension. "And I'll never break it, no matter what pressure I'm put under. This is important to me ... It's all I'll ever have of the brother I've been searching for since I turned eighteen."

"Okay." Kay wore a peculiar expression. "Come to Saxon's Folly in the morning. You'd better bring your bags. You may as well stay for the week."

Alyssa felt a surge of victory ... until she remembered Joshua's hard, judgmental gaze.

Five

Alyssa drove through the curving set of white gates of Saxon's Folly the following morning, nerves tying her stomach in knots. The beauty of the rows of vines stretching away on both sides of the long, oak-lined drive, still bare of the lush green growth of leaves that would come with summer, failed to calm her trepidation about encountering Joshua Saxon again.

At least she had her boss's blessing. She'd called her editor early this morning, telling him that she needed a few more days off. David's annoyance had evaporated when he'd found out she was in Hawkes Bay.

"Why didn't you tell me that last time you called? I heard that Roland Saxon was killed over the weekend. A terrible tragedy. You can do a story on the great loss that he'll be to the industry. Try get the scoop on who'll be replacing him as the marketing man of Saxon's Folly—and how that will impact on Saxon's Folly's place in the industry."

Her breath catching in her chest, she said, "David, I want to take time off."

"Are you ill? You sound strange."

To distract her canny editor, Alyssa announced in a rush, "I've been invited to stay at Saxon's Folly."

There was a short silence. Alyssa could almost hear the cogs turning in David's mind.

"Get a short obituary on Roland Saxon to me ASAP—if I have it by Friday, it can run in the next issue." There was a moment's silence. "You should've told me you were on visiting terms with the Saxons."

She had no intention of explaining about Roland. She'd promised Kay it would remain a secret ... and it would.

Alyssa thought about the obituary she'd agreed to write while she walked through the town picking up some toiletries and clothing for her extended stay. She had a horrible suspicion that Joshua would not be pleased when he learned about it.

Typically, as she pulled up in front of the winery, the first person she saw was Joshua Saxon. When she got out of the car, his face hardened, radiating disapproval. Alyssa's gaze locked with his as he approached.

"The funeral is over." His obsidian gaze bored relentlessly into her. "I thought you'd be packed and gone by now."

Alyssa raised her chin. "I brought your jacket back."

"Oh, thanks." He had the grace to look slightly shamed as she got out of the car, popped open the trunk and drew out his jacket.

He took it from her and slung it over his shoulder. "Have a safe trip."

Staring at her overnight bag, Alyssa hesitated. To hell with it. He'd know sooner or later. "I'm not leaving yet. Your mother has invited me to stay for a week."

"You approached my mother?" He replied, openmouthed. "My mother is grieving the loss of her eldest son. She doesn't need an interloper barging in at the moment."

"I didn't 'barge in,' as you so delightfully put it. Your mother invited me." She drew a deep breath. "Inviting" was stretching the truth. She'd given Kay no choice. "Don't worry, Joshua, I'll be very sensitive of her feelings."

He bent forward and hoisted her overnight bag out, then cast her a disbelieving look. "Right."

Her heart started to race and apprehension shafted through her as his narrowed gaze raked her. He'd better never discover the truth of how she'd gotten her invitation. Quickly, she said, "Also, my editor has asked me to write a short tribute to Roland. I'll use this week to research that." No point hiding that.

"Oh, no, you won't! You're not poking around here for dirt on my brother."

She'd expected his reaction. She lifted out her handbag and slung it over her shoulder. "I'm not here to dig up dirt. I'm here at the invitation of your mother. But it's a good opportunity to talk to people about Roland, about what he meant to them, how he enriched their lives. Think about it, Joshua, there's nothing sinister about a tribute in *Wine Watch* to your brother. The wine community is going to miss him." And so would she.

Terribly.

He paused. She watched him weighing up her words, seeking the worst.

"I don't trust you," he said at last. "Don't forget I've been at the sharp end of your poisoned pen before. I want to keep an eye on you, hear the questions you're asking. You're coming with me each day."

Alyssa saw her dream of spending time with Kay, learning about Roland going up in smoke. "But—"

"That's screwed up whatever it is that you want." His eyes had narrowed to black slits. "So why did you gate-crash the ball? What is it that you really want, Alyssa? An exclusive interview?"

His derogatory tone caused her to say heatedly, "No, I came to—" Too late she remembered her promise to Kay.

"To what?" He pounced on her hesitation like a mountain cat.

She tempered her response. "I came to see Roland." Let him draw whatever damn conclusions he wanted from that.

"Why? You still haven't told me what you wanted with him."

"I thought you'd decided that." Alyssa couldn't stop the snippy retort as she slammed the trunk shut.

"To get him to break up with Amy?" He didn't take his eyes off her. "I'm still leaning that way, am I correct?"

"No!"

His eyes held cynical disbelief. "Then what? You had another agenda? Or do you still want me to believe that you and Roland were 'friends'?"

Joshua gave *friends* such a mocking intonation that she flinched. But she didn't give him the satisfaction of a response.

He tilted his head sideways, examining her. "You wanted something from him. Did you think Roland would feed you the story of a lifetime?"

"No, seeing Roland had nothing to do with any story."

"You're trying to tell me that hooking up with my brother meant more to you than the sniff of a story?"

She nodded. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

Joshua fell silent, a frown grooved between his guarded eyes. "You know, I'm starting to believe that Roland meant something to you. That you're grieving for him as much as we are."

Before Alyssa could respond to his unexpected concession, he'd set off with her bag in the direction of the main house.

They found Kay in the library, working at a big walnut desk overlooking the gardens that rolled down to where the vineyards started.

"Your houseguest."

"Joshua—"

"I'm sorry, Mother. I can't stay, I need to get back to the estate." Joshua set down her overnight bag and slung the dinner jacket onto a leather chair. "Don't forget that we arranged to go to see Amy tonight." He glanced pointedly at Alyssa. "It'll probably be better if you stay here."

"It would be rude to leave Alyssa. She can come, too."

"No, it will be too upsetting for Amy—if she ever discovers the truth about why Alyssa was so eager to attend the ball."

Kay blinked, the only sign that she'd remembered what Alyssa had told her in the cemetery about Joshua's belief that Alyssa was Roland's lover. For a moment Kay looked indecisive then she said, "If you think so, dear."

"I do." To Alyssa he said, "As soon as you've settled in, come find me. I'll be in the winery."

"Oh, but ... I thought I would get to know Alyssa a little, especially if she and Roland were ..."

Kay's voice trailed away "... close." Her eyes darted everywhere—except Joshua's face.

But he didn't notice; he was too busy glaring at Alyssa.

"Behave yourself then," he growled.

Which she took to mean that she was not to ask Kay too many questions about Roland for the tribute she was writing.

After Joshua had gone, Alyssa turned to Kay. "I know this must be very hard for you. Rather than talk about Roland so soon maybe we can take a walk around the vineyard."

Kay sniffed but her eyes remained dry. "I want to talk about Roland. It happened so fast. Roland and Amy were due to get married in December. Phillip and I were looking forward to grandchildren—now he's dead."

"Children ... I've never thought of children." Or a niece. Or a nephew. Or a sister-in-law like Amy. "I hadn't thought beyond finding Roland. He was the family I've been looking for since I learned I was adopted."

The stark statement hung in the air.

Kay's eyes darkened until the gray had turned almost black. "Oh, Alyssa..." She hesitated then she opened her arms.

Alyssa walked into them, conscious of the scent of lavender that clung to the older woman. At last she stepped away.

"I feel so ... lost."

"What about your parents? Wouldn't it help to stay awhile with them right now?"

"My mother—adoptive mother—died of cancer three years ago. That was when I really stepped up my search for Roland. She'd never been keen on my finding my natural parents—or Roland when she learned I had a brother."

Kay gave her a peculiar look. "Maybe she feared she might lose you."

"How could she ever lose me? She was my mother, she'd raised me. I loved her."

"What about your adoptive father?"

"He remarried last year—his new wife wanted to live on Australia's Gold Coast with her daughter and two granddaughters."

"So in a space of a few years you've lost your mother, your father has gone away ... and now your birth brother is dead." Kay looked quite ill.

"Yes," Alyssa whispered, the pain of it all closing her throat. "But you're going to share a little of Roland with me ... and that's so much more of him than I've had before."

Once the Saxons had driven off to visit Amy that night, Alyssa felt strangely deserted. Using the remote to switch off the television, she was plunged into silence and within seconds the vast quietness of the homestead enfolded her. Other than one solitary creak of the beams, the lack of sound was absolute. Picking up the photo album that Kay had shown her earlier, Alyssa started to browse through.

A sharp burst of nostalgia pierced her as she stared at the images. Roland as a baby with only a little ginger fluff on his head. As a toddler, holding a new-born Joshua. A photo of Roland on his first day of school, gap-toothed, his red hair slicked down, with Joshua and Heath in front of him, as different from them as fire from coal. Roland and Heath smiling like little devils while Joshua stared solemnly at the camera, his gaze already self-possessed and direct. No Megan yet. Just the three boys.

The next page showed Roland on a bay horse, grinning as he held a great, big silver trophy aloft while Megan and Joshua stood on either side of the horse's head, looking proud and pleased.

When she'd finished paging through the album, Alyssa set it aside and made her way to the kitchen, which Kay had asked Ivy, the friendly housekeeper, to show her around earlier. There was a tray set out for her. In the fridge was the slice of quiche and bowl of salad just as Kay had promised. But Alyssa didn't bother to nuke the quiche in the microwave. She set the empty wineglass to one side and made herself a cup of cocoa instead and, picking up the tray, made her way out.

At the foot of the stairs Alyssa paused. Her room lay upstairs, along with Megan's quarters, and Kay and Phillip's suite. Downstairs was the wing that housed Roland's rooms—and Joshua's. A wave of shame swept her at the memory of what had so nearly happened in Joshua's bedroom the night of the ball.

Curiosity propelled her down the stairs. At the base of the stairs the area opened up into an airy sitting room furnished with a large plasma-screen television, two brown leather sofas and a pair of armchairs. She'd caught only a glimpse of it on the night of the ball when Joshua had hauled her through.

An immense kauri bookshelf covered one wall that closer inspection revealed was filled with books on viticulture and a couple of rows of crime novels interspersed with classics. The opposite wall was filled by an abstract study of an incoming tide that looked like a John Walker. A narrow arch led to a sleek, streamlined galley kitchen gleaming with stainless steel appliances and beside it lay a cosy dining area.

Leaving the sitting room, Alyssa glanced both ways down the passage that led off the sitting room. At one end, a door stood ajar, at the other, the door was firmly closed. With soft footsteps she made her way to the closed door at the far end. The handle twisted under her touch. As she stepped through the doorway, her throat closed.

Without a doubt this was where her brother had slept.

It hurt too much to stand beside the double bed that he would never waken in again. Through an archway she glimpsed a desk. A few steps took her to what had clearly been his private domain. His trophy room. Two glass-fronted cabinets held an impressive array of silverware. A closer look revealed schoolboy medals for athletics, awards for rugby, while trophies for eventing were prominently displayed, holding pride of place.

She made her way back into Roland's bedroom, and stopped at the sight of a door leading off into a bathroom en suite. An electric razor lay on the marble slab, charging, awaiting its next use. Alyssa picked up the wooden-backed hairbrush. There were short strands of red hair in its bristles. She disentangled a hair, then pulled one from her own head. Laying them side by side, she compared the texture and colour. Hers was darker, his was coarser. She swallowed the lump in her throat and shook the two hairs free.

Closing the door behind her had a certain finality.

At the other end of the corridor the open door beckoned. She couldn't resist the call. Joshua's rooms. She stepped past a study, papers neatly stacked on a desk, past the walk-in dressing room with the bathroom that lay beyond. The instant she stepped into his bedroom, she smelled his scent. Familiar. Taunting. The dinner jacket she'd returned hung draped over a chair, and she lifted it to her face, inhaling the rich, living male scent that had surrounded her outside the chilly hospital. She dropped down onto the navy bedcover and fought back tears. She sat there for what seemed like an age. Finally she rose and returned the jacket to the chair. Collecting her tray, with the now-cold cocoa, from the landing, she made her way upstairs to her own room.

The silence of the empty house was suffocating.

A hollow emptiness pressed down on Alyssa. Here, in the heart of the Saxon family's home, she felt more alone than she'd ever felt in her life.

Joshua had swept Amy—along with his parents and Megan—off to dinner. It was good for Amy to get out. His eyes rested on his parents—and good for them, too. Yet as they sat at the window table

of an upmarket-café overlooking Napier's Marine Parade, an unaccountable sense of guilt nagged at Joshua at the thought of Alyssa alone in the great house.

"Why so pensive?" He found Megan staring at him curiously as he set his knife and fork down.

"Just thinking."

She gave him a wicked grin. "About a woman?"

"No comment, wench."

She laughed. Then her cell phone pinged to announce a new message and she looked down at the screen with a secret smile.

"New admirer?"

A slight stain of uncharacteristic colour tinged his sister's cheeks. "Maybe."

"When do we get to meet him?" Kay leaned forward, looking interested, while beside her Phillip shook his head and laughed.

Megan rolled her eyes at Joshua. "See what you've started."

He grinned. "Serves you right for being so secretive." And she wasn't alone. Roland had been keeping secrets, too. A lover who no one knew about, for one. His gaze rested on Amy. She hadn't spoken much, but he thought she was looking happier since leaving her solitary cottage. Joshua had no intention of letting her find out about Alyssa's relationship to her fiancé.

Amy was the reason Alyssa wasn't here tonight. There was no need for him to feel guilty about not inviting her. But nor should Alyssa's presence at Saxon's Folly be kept secret. Amy worked as a PA at the winery. She'd find out soon enough.

"Did my mother tell you that Alyssa Blake, the wine writer, is staying with us?"

"Alyssa Blake?" Amy bristled in disbelief. "Really? After that article she wrote?"

"She wants to write a tribute to Roland for *Wine Watch* magazine." Joshua held his breath, waiting for Amy's—and his parents'—reaction.

To his surprise, Amy nodded. "It would be a nice way for Roland to be remembered."

His mother perked up. "I have some photos she can use ... I'll have to find them."

Neither of them had fallen apart at the idea. Joshua started to feel as though he'd overreacted by telling Alyssa he'd be keeping her under his scrutiny ... yet, from past experience, he felt he couldn't trust her.

What would she be doing right now? Eating in the salon, settled in front of the large picture windows that overlooked the garden? Or would she be in the bath, soaking out the stresses of the past days? He liked the idea of Alyssa naked in the bath, covered with frothing bath foam. He liked the idea far too damned much.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and censored the provocative images. How had this happened that thoughts of the woman could reduce him to a state of hot and bothered?

Restlessness drove him out of the café on the pretext that he had a call that he needed to make. Once outside, he stood on the pavement surrounded by smokers who had come out the restaurant for a quick smoke after their meal.

He fingered the keypad of his phone. He wanted to call home, speak to Alyssa and reassure himself that she was okay. His mother was right. It had been rude to take off and leave her alone. However much he disapproved of her relationship with his brother she, too, must be experiencing grief over his death—much like Amy was. And that disturbed him.

He stared at the phone. What reason would he give for calling her? It was unlikely that she'd even answer the homestead phone.

Finally he pocketed his phone. For the first time in his life he wished that he smoked. It might've helped to ease this unsettling tension inside him.

By the time he got back to the table, everyone was talking about one of the scandals in local politics. Joshua signalled for the bill. He wanted to leave. The feeling that he should not have left

Alyssa alone on her first night at Saxon's Folly, with nothing but grief to keep her company, grew stronger.

As they drove up the long drive to the house, Joshua saw that the wing where Alyssa was staying was in darkness. He'd worried for nothing. She was already fast asleep.

It was the siren that woke Alyssa from a restless slumber and confused dreams full of disturbing, disjointed encounters with Roland and Kay and Joshua.

Disorientated by the shriek, uneasy from the aftermath of the nightmare, she swung her legs out of bed.

Men's voices filtered in through her window. Quickly Alyssa pulled on her robe, grabbed her bag and headed for the door. Kay had told her there had been a fire in the past, but the homestead had survived without great damage. Could it be happening again?

Downstairs the house was empty, the doors of the salon flung wide onto the verandah. No smell of smoke. No red haze to signal a fire. But Alyssa could hear the sound of motors. Fire engines? To the left she could see floodlights. Moving outside, she made her way down the stairs, toward the vineyards where she could hear the commotion.

It took the sound of the helicopter overhead to alert her.

Frost.

Of course. The siren had been a frost warning.

Alyssa glanced at her watch. Four o'clock in the morning. The roar of motors morphed into the drone of tractors. As she came closer she could see the giant fans hitched behind and whirring as the tractors drove up and down between the rows of vines. Overhead the rotors beat the warmer air down, desperate measures before the frost settled on the vines.

A figure materialised out of the murk.

Joshua.

"Did the siren wake you?"

Instantly she was aware of her hastily pulled on robe, which must look incongruous with her bare feet and the handbag slung over her shoulder. As he came closer she saw that his hair was mussed adding to the impression that he, too, had risen in a hurry.

"I thought it was a fire alarm."

"Not fire, only frost."

Only frost. There was little to be dismissive about frost. She knew the dangers of frost at the delicate budding stage. "Did you catch it in time?"

Joshua nodded. His eyes glinted in the light from the house behind her. "We've got good equipment. And all the local helicopter companies are on standby. Heath usually does a flyover once he's finished his yards—he's a qualified pilot."

The air beat down on them, Alyssa's hair whipped across her face. She rocked on her feet and almost fell against Joshua.

His hands shot out. "Steady."

Pulling out of his grasp, she pushed her windswept hair off her face and gave a strangled laugh. "Sorry, it's the wind."

"You can go back to bed now, there's no emergency. You'll only get chilly standing out here."

She was conscious of his gaze taking in her dishevelled hair, her sleep-mussed face and the comfortable terry robe that was a world away from the glamorous, sophisticated image she preferred to present.

As the self-consciousness spread within her, she became aware of how isolated they were from the rest ... how hidden and sheltered under the cover of night. Her pulse picked up, she breathed slowly, trying to hide her agitation. How could this man have such an effect on her?

"Okay, I'm going." Her voice was hoarse, a croak of sound in the night.

His gaze darted over her wind-ruffled hair, to where the robe gaped in front. Alyssa yanked the sash tighter. He stilled. She sensed his tension, knew he'd picked up on what she was feeling. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry you were woken."

"It's not a problem. I should catch another couple of hours sleep if I go back to bed now."

Immediately she wished she hadn't used the word *bed*. It brought an intimacy that she didn't want. And Joshua was aware of it, too. The utter stillness that surrounded him told her that. For one wild moment she felt herself swaying toward him, inching closer. Then she caught herself.

This was madness.

Joshua believed she'd been his brother's mistress.

Spinning away, she hurried back to the homestead, nerves of apprehension fluttering like drunken butterflies in her stomach when she heard his footsteps crunching on the gravel path behind her.

Alyssa set her bare foot on the first step and paused, not daring to look back. "See you at breakfast." She tried for a casual, throwaway tone, and knew she'd fluffed it up when he stepped closer.

"Not so fast."

She froze. Her chest rose and fell, and her toes curled into the cold stone stairs. She was eternally grateful for the fans, for the drone of the rotors. Hopefully Joshua wouldn't hear the thunder of her heart.

He stopped beside her. And touched her face. Gently. His fingertips cupped her cheek, turning her head toward him.

The thunder of rushing blood grew loud in her ears. She caught a whiff of his aftershave, the same scent that clung to his jacket. To her intense horror all the emotion she'd experienced in his bedroom welled up inside her. Joshua grew blurred. The tears she'd been suppressing since Roland died spilled over.

"Hey, don't cry."

"I'm not crying." She wiped frantically at her eyes. "I'm not." She faced him, blinking furiously. His features softened in the light from the salon behind her. "Come here."

"I'll be okay," she choked out.

"Hush." He reached out and took her into his arms.

The storm of sobs caught her unawares and caused her shoulders to shake and her stomach to ache. His arms were strong and he cradled her against his chest, rocking her slightly. The merino lambswool sweater he wore was soft and warm under her cheek, and she could feel his heart beating steadily under her hand. It was comfortable and safe. Alyssa wished she could stay in his arms forever.

The tears fell faster.

Simply holding her, he let her cry, saying nothing.

The tempest subsided. Her sobs quietened.

And in the silence of the pre-dawn it all changed. Suddenly Joshua's hold wasn't only about comfort. There was something else, too. In slow degrees she became aware that the steady beat of his heart under her fingertips had picked up, that his breathing had become irregular. A sense of expectancy hung over them.

A moment of indecisiveness. To snuggle closer? Or push him away? She was desperately tempted to move closer.

Whatever she did now would change their relationship irrevocably.

But he made the decision for her, easing his grip. "My touch has never had that effect on a woman before. I've never made a woman cry before."

Alyssa knew he was trying to lighten the moment, trying to make her smile. But she couldn't.

She hiccupped. Mortification set in. How could she have dissolved into weak, womanly tears in his arms?

After a little silence, she said awkwardly, “I’m sorry, I’m crying like a baby.”

“It’s been a hell of a week.” He pulled her closer again and rested his cheek against her hair. The unexpected contact was achingly tender. The pulsing sensuality had evaporated. “Cry all you want.”

She regretted the loss of whatever it was that had stirred between them. She ached. But his tenderness made the tears flow afresh. Alyssa sniffed, furious with herself for appearing so vulnerable. “You must think I’m so dumb.”

His arms tightened around her. “I don’t think you’re dumb at all.” After a moment, he added huskily, “I miss him, too.”

Six

A little awkwardness from her emotional meltdown still lingered when Alyssa entered the sunny glass-walled breakfast room later that morning. But she gradually relaxed once she realised the room was empty until Joshua strolled in from the kitchen.

“Oh, you startled me.” Her heart started to race and not only from the shock of his sudden appearance. He looked utterly, heart-wrenchingly gorgeous. He’d changed. A black shirt and blue jeans replaced the sweats. The lambswool sweater that had been so soft against her skin earlier was gone.

“Where is everyone?” Her voice was annoyingly breathless as she fixed her attention on his face.

“Working. We rise early. No city hours at Saxon’s Folly.” His eyes scanned her, making her aware of how out of place her boutique-chic, pin-striped pantsuit and suede shoes must seem. At once she wished she’d worn the jeans she’d bought yesterday morning.

Today’s early-morning encounter with Joshua had put her on the defensive, forcing her to don corporate armour to withstand the devastating effect he had on her. Off balance, she said with a touch of acerbity, “Oh, then what are you still doing here?”

The beautiful bone structure tightened, and his mouth firmed into a sculpted line and all affability vanished.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” There was not an ounce of gentleness in his narrow-eyed inspection.

“Why?” she asked baldly, tensing for a confrontation.

“Have you forgotten? You’re accompanying me today. So eat up, I need to get moving.”

She *had* forgotten all about it. Her brain had been short-circuited by the nightmare, then jolted by the siren. The crying jag and Joshua’s show of sympathy had only deepened her turmoil. She met that granite gaze. “I don’t need a guard dog.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

His way or hit the highway. His flinty eyes and the rocklike set to his jaw warned her that there would be no point in arguing. Not if she wanted to stay at Saxon’s Folly.

No hint of the gentle pre-dawn Joshua remained. She’d been duped into believing that he was empathetic. Nurturing. Safe.

Mistake.

This was the real Joshua Saxon. Too arrogant. Too sure of himself. Too darn *everything*.

But even knowing all that, she couldn’t stop the sensual awareness that prickled under his penetrating regard. What a pity her body was so out of sync with her brain about the kind of man that was good for her.

Alyssa helped herself to toast, scooped on homemade marmalade, and let out the breath she’d unconsciously been holding, “So, what are you going to show me today?” She tilted her head to one side. With Joshua, attack was probably the best line of defence. “More etchings?”

“I’m a pretty straightforward kind of guy. I say what I want. I don’t need those kind of ploys—if I wanted you, I’d tell you.” His grim smile held little humour.

So he didn’t want her anymore. Alyssa withered a little inside and bit into her toast. Discovering her identity had killed his interest. After a few minutes of eating in silence, wishing she’d resisted the temptation to provoke him with the etchings dig, Alyssa followed him out to the Range Rover.

He took her to the vineyards first. “The vines are the heart of Saxon’s Folly.” Leaping down from the vehicle, he opened the passenger door for her to alight, then bent and picked up a handful of red soil and let it trickle through his fingers. “And this is the lifeblood.”

Some hidden place deep within her responded to the passion in his voice. Standing a little distance from him, she fought it as she’d fought the hold he wielded over her senses. But she suspected

this ability that Joshua Saxon possessed to get under her defences, deep into the heart of her, was more dangerous than the way her body responded so wantonly to his.

What was it about this man?

She examined him. Sure, he was tall, dark and dangerously gorgeous. But she'd never been one for looks alone. And, yes, the slanting morning sun struck his almost-perfect features giving his skin a rich, golden glow as he dusted his hands off. But it wasn't that alone that made her heart leap.

"This block was originally planted in 1916. Strange to think about it, isn't it?" He glanced at her. "Men from Napier, a few miles away were going off to fight in Europe during the Great War, and here, on this piece of land a world away from the war, a dozen Spanish monks planted vines. Even during times of death, life must go on."

And just like that he held her captive. Alyssa knew Joshua was talking about more than the vines that he touched with careful fingers. He was talking about Roland. About grief. About life continuing on the other side.

She resented him for it. Resented him bitterly for this uncanny ability to get through to her on the most elemental level, to hold her in his thrall.

In an attempt to break the sudden tension that snapped like a pulled string between them, she said, "What cultivar is that?"

"The monks thought they were planting Cabernet Sauvignon. Only years later when the grapes were ready to harvest did they discover their mistake. They're Cabernet Franc. Too late then to pull them out. They made their wine."

She assessed him. The way his Driza-Bone hat tipped over his forehead, the way he stood with his legs planted hip-width apart on the soil. Master of all he surveyed. "You love it out here, don't you?"

"Who wouldn't?" Pleasure lit up his eyes. A flash of white teeth transformed his face into breathtaking sexiness. Her stomach dropped as desire swept her. "Before Dad decided he wanted to step down as CEO of Saxon's Folly, I managed the vineyards. I never wanted to make the wine. I wanted to grow the fruit that winemakers like Heath and Caitlyn so magically transform into a nectar fit for the ancient gods."

The sheer beauty of the picture he painted touched Alyssa on a primal level. Here was a man with roots, who knew who he was. A man so solid, so confident in his own skin that she couldn't help but admire him ... and want him.

Alyssa suppressed the yearning. She couldn't afford the distraction that Joshua presented. Drawing a shuddering breath, she said, "So you miss it?"

He nodded. "I still keep an eye on the vineyards. But I've appointed two vineyard managers. One here, and one for the blocks over at Gimblett's Gravels where most of the grapes for our reds are grown."

After an instant of hesitation, she asked daringly, "Do you miss having Heath to work with since he walked out?"

A frenetic buzz caused Alyssa to pull a vibrating cell phone out of her handbag. She glanced at the caller ID. David. She killed the call.

"Sorry." She smiled sunnily at Joshua. "You were about to say?"

His face expressionless, he said, "That last question sounded a little too much like an inquisition. Alyssa Blake in journalist mode. You should've taken your call."

Heavens, he was perceptive. Thank goodness he had no idea who had been calling. "I'll ring back later." Changing the subject, Alyssa gestured to the rolling vineyards around them. "And how did all this end up in your family's hands?"

"After the Great War the monks decided to move on. The land was sold. My Saxon forefather won it three years later in a poker game. The monks had planted vines for sacramental purposes—everyone laughed when Joseph Saxon said he was going to grow wine in commercial quantities. The

land was barren, people told him. But he was determined to prove them wrong.” Joshua’s mouth slanted wryly. “Stubborn old bastard. The locals called it Saxon’s Folly. The name stuck.”

“So that’s who you get it from.”

He raised an eyebrow. “The name Saxon?”

She laughed appreciatively. “The stubbornness. The hard-nosed streak.”

He touched his nose. “Soft as butter.”

“Sure,” she said, smiling up at him. And warmth rose within her as he smiled back at her.

But Alyssa was no longer smiling when, back in her bedroom, she managed to sneak a call back to her editor later that afternoon.

“I’ve been hearing things about Saxon’s Folly ... rumbles in the jungle,” David said without preamble. “Let me see what more I can find out. I’ll get back to you to see if there’s enough for a story.”

A story about Saxon’s Folly?

Alyssa’s heart sank. “I haven’t heard anything ... and I don’t want to do a story now. Isn’t there anyone else available?” She was no longer certain she could guarantee an impartial perspective. “I’m on leave, David.”

“Maybe you won’t need to use up your leave,” he said cryptically. “I’ll call you once I know more. And don’t forget to send that obituary through by tomorrow.”

Alyssa killed the phone. Oh, heavens, Joshua would have conniptions if he discovered David was considering assigning her a story about his precious vineyard and family. It would be best to say nothing. After all, David’s rumbles might turn out to be nothing more than unsubstantiated rumours.

With that conclusion, Alyssa’s step lightened. For now, she would put it out of her mind and concentrate on learning about her brother’s life for her own satisfaction. Nothing more.

“Jump in,” Joshua called to Alyssa late the following afternoon as he throttled back the engine of the Range Rover and drew up behind her.

A quick hello and she clambered into the cab, slinging her handbag at her feet. His rapid sideways glance showed long, feminine legs encased in dark blue denim and a purple T-shirt moulding curves that caused his chest to constrict and heat to shoot downward.

He forced his gaze away from her. “My meeting was unavoidable.” His voice was suddenly husky. He cleared his throat. “What have you been doing?” Better, Joshua decided.

“Nothing much.” Alyssa paused, pulling a notebook and pencil from her bag. “After you left I took a walk around the winery—Caitlyn kindly showed me around.”

Joshua relaxed a fraction. He’d been uneasy about leaving Alyssa alone, uncertain what mischief she might wreak left untended. But he’d had no choice. Work came first. He risked another glance at her. Her hair was blowing around her face and her rosy lips tilted up.

Another surge of lust hit him. Shaken by the force of it, he tightened his fists around the steering wheel and focused on the track leading up the hill ahead.

“That’s all?”

“And your mother showed me some family photo albums and told me about the stories behind Roland’s trophies.” The words sounded torn from her.

All feeling of relaxation vanished. He shot her a brooding look. “I don’t want you upsetting my mother.”

“I didn’t. I promise. She wanted to do it. I think she found it therapeutic.”

Was he overreacting? His innate distrust of the woman had him wanting to keep her in his view all the time. But his mother had invited Alyssa to stay at Saxon’s Folly. He could hardly forbid his mother to talk to a houseguest. It might even be good for her to talk about Roland to a stranger. God knows he wasn’t ready to talk about his brother yet. Certainly not to Alyssa.

They were climbing to the west, the sea behind them.

“Where are we going?” Alyssa broke the silence.

A sudden foreboding closed around Joshua. Perhaps this was not a good idea. “There’s something I want to show you over on the other side of The Divide.”

“The Divide?”

Joshua pointed through the windshield to where a winding pass cut into the hills ahead, which had they been higher might have earned the label of mountain range.

As they crested the summit of The Divide, he heard her breath catch. He flicked her a look and caught the entranced expression on her face.

Ahead of them lay a valley so beautiful it never failed to take his own breath away. But this time all his senses were focused on the woman seated beside him, a pencil gripped in her fist as she took in the vista of rolling hills, the wide plain, the river running through.

“So, what do you think?” Holding his breath, Joshua waited for her response.

“My God, it’s beautiful,” she said softly. “Too beautiful to describe in words.” She tapped her pencil against her shorthand notebook.

Joshua started to smile inwardly. Satisfaction spread through him. Maybe it hadn’t been a mistake to bring her here after all. “On a warm summer’s day this is the best place in the world. See that river?”

Alyssa nodded.

“Chosen Valley Vineyard—Heath’s home—lies on the other side. There are trout in the river. They lurk under the rocks. It takes time to coax them out.”

“What a lovely picture. It’s absolutely idyllic. Clearly you love it here and Heath must, too, otherwise he wouldn’t live here.” Alyssa fell silent for a moment. “What about Roland, did he love it, too?”

Joshua forced himself not to react to the way his brother’s name fell so easily from her lips. Yet he couldn’t stop the tension that settled between them, destroying the bond that had been forged in the last few minutes.

He gave a short laugh. “Roland didn’t have the patience to land a trout. He was drawn to dangerous sports, fast cars ...” he cast her a derisive glance “... and equally fast women.”

She rose like one of the trout that lived in the stream to a particularly tempting lure. “You’re saying that I’m fast?”

Joshua pulled the vehicle off the road and turned his head. “Fast lane? Fast tracked for success? Maybe. When last did you take time to reflect a little? To go hiking? To stand on the edge of a hill and wait for the sunset?”

Then he turned his back on her wide eyes and silky hair and the womanly fragrance that tangled him up in knots. Swinging out of the driver’s seat, he slammed the door behind him, and walked to the road’s edge, his back to her, his hands on his hips.

He heard a door slam, heard her footsteps crossing the hard ground. She stopped behind him.

His every muscle went rigid.

“You’re right.” She sighed, a soft, breathy sound that only served to ratchet up the tension inside him. “I’ve been working so damn hard.”

“Why?” He stared blindly ahead, for once not seeing the beauty of the valley. “What drives you?”

“It’s so hard to explain.”

He swivelled to face her, his eyes searching her features. Her eyes were troubled, her mouth soft. “Try me.”

For a moment he thought Alyssa might refuse. Then she said, “I was raised an only child ...” Her voice trailed away.

Raised an only child? That was a peculiar way to phrase it. Joshua let it pass. She was clearly unhappy about the subject matter. And waited.

Eventually she spoke and the words were so soft that he had to strain his ears before the wind carried them away. “I was brought up to excel. Special tutoring. Piano. Drama. Art. Tennis lessons.”

“Because you were an only child?” He eyed her profile. It would explain some of her hard edges, the ambition that drove her.

She didn’t answer immediately. “My parents thought of me as their protégée ... their chosen child. Eventually all their expectations became my own. I was expected to become someone. Don’t think I was a cipher—I wanted that, too. For a long time I wanted success so much, even though my version was a little different from my parents’. My father was a judge and he wanted me to become a lawyer. It took a while for him to come to terms with my choice of career. I worked like a dog.”

“But you got your success.” Joshua couldn’t help wondering if some of her father had rubbed off on her. “Maybe you’re a chip off the old block after all.”

Her lips curved into a sad smile. “I was always a bit of a crusader. And my father made sure I had firm ideas about right and wrong from the time I was very young. Believe me, it’s not easy being a judge’s daughter. Especially when you’re a teen. You can never win.” Her eyes had regained a hint of sparkle. “But once I grew up, I realised he was right. The world needs people who stand up for what they believe in. For truth and honesty and all those old-fashioned values.”

Joshua decided that this was not the best moment to remind her that trying to break up his brother’s engagement was hardly honourable behaviour. But he didn’t want to see the desolation return to her eyes.

“At least my mother lived long enough to see me become an award-winning wine journalist,” Alyssa was saying. “A television personality instantly recognizable. But it cost me time I should have spent with her—though I never knew she was ill. Cancer,” she added as she read the question he didn’t ask.

“That would’ve been hard.” There was compassion in his eyes. “She must have been proud of you.”

“Oh, she was.”

“I’ve never thought of what it might be like being an only child. About the pressures that go with it,” Joshua mused, tilting his head to one side to study her. “We’ve shared all the responsibilities that go with Saxon’s Folly. My life would have been empty without Roland and Heath to fight with, without Megan always wanting her own way.”

“You’re lucky.” There was a wistful light in her eyes.

“Think so?” He gave a chuckle. “Sometimes I want to murder them. But I love them,” he added hurriedly when he saw the horrified expression on her face.

“Maybe I was too driven,” Alyssa conceded. “But that changed around three years ago.”

“When your mother died?”

Alyssa’s eyes were bleak. “I missed her.” Her gaze focused on him. Direct. Disconcerting. “I wanted siblings ... a brother. More than anything in the world, I wanted a family.”

Maybe death did that to a person. He knew he would give anything to have Roland back. Pity for Alyssa stirred inside Joshua. Carefully he said, “I’m sorry that you lost your mother. Death is so final.”

Emotion flared in her eyes. “I grieved for her.”

“And your father?”

“He grieved, too. He remarried last year ... He was lonely, I think.”

She turned her head and gestured to where the sun had sunk a little more. “Somewhere along the line, I stopped looking for sunsets.”

Joshua stood quietly beside her, staring out over the distant western hills at the orange-and-gold streaked sky as uneasiness filled him. He wished that her story had not moved him so much. He wished that the senseless attraction to her would cease.

He should have more sense than to want Alyssa Blake.

“You know, Joshua, I never thought that every splendid sunset means the death of another day—and that time is passing by at an alarming rate.” She looked up at him, her eyes a haunting purple that would seduce him if he let them. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe my life has become too fast.”

A long-awaited sense of satisfaction curled inside him. The impulsive words escaped him before he could curb them. “I didn’t think I’d see the day that Alyssa Blake might admit that she was wrong.”

Her eyes narrowed, the purple depths no longer soft as they shot sparks at him. “You’re pretty fast, too. Vineyard manager of a sizeable estate. CEO of Saxon’s Folly. Mentor to a full staff. Architect of employment practices that business schools studied,” she reeled off his successes. “Are you any better? Saxon’s Folly is a big business. You’re the boss where the buck stops. Surely you’re driven to achieve? Surely you set goals?”

He should’ve known she’d come back fighting. “Touché. Sure I do. But I’m not obsessed by goals.”

“You’re implying that I am?”

He shrugged. “You know my philosophy. Here at Saxon’s Folly enjoyment is fundamental to the wines we make. How can people enjoy our wines, if the people who work with the wine don’t have fun making it?”

She shook her head dismissively. “That’s a pile of codswallop. I told you that back when you tried to sell me that line in the ten minutes you granted me for a *Wine Watch* interview.”

“I was busy. You caught me in the midst of the harvest with a bad forecast on the way.” He paused, not liking how defensive he sounded. “And I firmly believe that the happiness of the staff shows in the finished product.”

He could see her fighting to hold her tongue. She wanted to tell him that his concern and benevolence was nothing more than an act. He could see it in her blazing eyes.

Finally she said, “You didn’t strike me as the crusading type.”

His own anger was rising. “No, you preferred to view me as the type who could dismiss someone arbitrarily.”

Alyssa took up the challenge. “So why did you dismiss Tommy Smith? He maintained he was victimised, that you made his life a misery. That your ‘happiness’ philosophy was a sop.”

“You know that’s not true, you discovered he was dismissed from his next job only three months after I fired him. I know that the vineyard owner advised you.” He’d asked Michael Worth to let her know. Her low opinion of him had rankled. It still rankled.

“That was long after the story was published,” she protested. “And it was different. That time Tommy was dismissed for a sexual harassment of a fellow worker.”

“And you don’t think that I dismissed him for the same reason?”

Alyssa looked at him in horror. “That’s why you dismissed him? Why didn’t you *tell* me?”

“The last thing the victim needed was the story spilled over the papers.”

“So who—”

But Joshua was shaking his head. “Sorry, I’m not at liberty to say. Even off the record.”

Alyssa thought back to how dismissive she’d been of Joshua in the story she’d done, how she’d championed Tommy, the underdog. Her stomach rolled over. Had she misjudged Joshua ... and Tommy ... so badly?

Then her misgivings receded as he said with the arrogance that she’d come to associate with him, “Forget it. It’s over and done with.”

Any lingering liking for the man vanished.

A cool sea breeze swept over the hill they’d traversed. Alyssa shivered and rubbed her hands briskly up and down her arms, feeling her flesh prickling under the fingers of the wind.

“You’re cold. We should go.”

But Alyssa didn’t move. “I didn’t know that he’d harassed one of your staff. And by withholding that essential piece of information, how could I present your side of the story?”

His mouth curled. “I wasn’t prepared to break my word to someone who trusted me simply to satisfy your curiosity.”

Impasse. “But it cost you and Saxon’s Folly.”

He slanted her a cynical smile. “And lost *Wine Watch* any respect I’d previously held for the magazine.”

“And any respect you might have had for me.”

“Yes.”

Annoyance—and disappointment—surged within her as he confirmed his poor opinion of her. What had she expected? A denial? Maybe. So when had his opinion become so important? She tried to brush the hurt away with a flippant comment, “So you didn’t respect me the morning after the magazine hit the newsstands?”

The brightness of his eyes intensified. “That’s what you want? My respect in the morning?” There was a sudden simmering heaviness in the air that hadn’t been there a moment earlier.

“Joke,” she said hastily, “that was a joke.” And, as much as she craved his respect, the crack had not been appropriate. Alyssa could’ve bitten her tongue out. “My mouth runs away from me sometimes.”

His gaze dropped to her mouth. “Funny, I had you pegged as calculating rather than impulsive. I have the impression that you think rather carefully about every word that comes out of that delectable mouth.”

And suddenly he was much too close. Blood rushed to her head, she could feel herself flushing. Alyssa tensed. Yet even as she pressed the lips he’d mockingly referred to as *delectable* tightly closed in annoyance, she experienced another betraying flare of heat.

Joshua’s expression didn’t change. But a muscle in his jaw tightened, the only warning she had. Alyssa didn’t move. His head lowered, slowly, his lips parting. She felt his breath against her mouth and a wave of desire ripped through her. His mouth claimed hers. For a moment he stilled and then his tongue entered her mouth, and Alyssa melted against him.

His body was big and warm and she no longer felt chilled. His arms came around her, pulling her against him. She was fervently conscious of the hardness of his chest beneath his shirt, of the flimsy cotton of her own shirt and her nipples tightening with excitement. So when his fingers slid into her hair, cradling her head, holding her exactly where it was comfortable, all her senses responded and he kissed her with deep intensity.

The tingle started under the touch of his fingers against her scalp and spread down her spine, along nerve pathways she hadn’t known existed, until Alyssa felt like every inch of her flesh was electrified.

He lifted his head. “You taste of peaches.”

Alyssa opened her eyes, stunned by the emotion that had exploded within her, and stared at him blankly. “*Peaches?*”

“Luscious and sweet like a fine Prosecco.” His mouth came down again before she could retort. She couldn’t help noticing he tasted of the wind, cool and wild with a hint of mint.

The kiss was thorough, his tongue exploring her mouth, the soft inner skin, the sleekness of her tongue until Alyssa felt that he’d overpowered her senses. She clung to his shoulders, not wanting it to end, not sure whether her legs would support her if he let her go.

When he finally raised his head, her breathing was ragged. He slid his hands down behind her back, linking them, supporting her, their lower limbs touching. Denim brushed against denim. Intimate. A whisper of sound that carried in the velvet silence of the evening.

Alyssa glanced up and found Joshua watching her.

“So, can you respect a woman who responds with such abandon to your kiss?” She tried to sound casual ... dismissive ... sophisticated. Instead her voice came out thin and thready.

“I respect the honest emotion I discovered,” he said throatily.

And her heart flipped over in her chest. Maybe he did want her. Maybe discovering her identity had not stanching the desire.

Even though he fought against it.

Right then Alyssa realised that Joshua was far more complex, far more dangerous to the yearning woman deep inside her, than she'd ever suspected.

That evening Alyssa was the last to arrive at the dinner table in the smaller dining room used for cosier family meals. Her first dinner with the family—last night she'd eaten on a tray in her room. Everyone had already settled in their seats, leaving only one chair empty. Roland's. The place her brother had occupied for years.

Her chest tight, she sank down on the chair where her brother had eaten countless meals. Opposite her sat Joshua with his mother on his right side, and his sister, Megan, on his left. Phillip and Caitlyn Ross, the Saxon's Folly winemaker, sat on either side of Alyssa.

"How was your day?" Caitlyn asked with a polite smile.

"It was fabulous," she replied mechanically, and Joshua shot her a quizzical glance, his eyebrow raised.

Oh, heavens! He was thinking about their kiss. That had been more than fabulous. Earthmoving. Mind shattering. Nothing as mundane as fabulous. Not that she intended him to know any of that.

"I learned a lot," she said lamely, then started to flush as his expression turned incredulous. So she quickly added, "Well, it's so beautiful here."

"Heaven on earth," said Caitlyn.

Alyssa stilled.

Not heaven. Not with Roland gone.

But for the first time she managed to think of her brother without the wild grief and searing regret that had so shaken her. There was still sadness, but the anger and resentment at missing the opportunity to know him was receding and acceptance of his death was starting to settle in. In some peculiar way talking about her mother's death to Joshua had helped.

"If you want to see something special, you need to get the boss to take you to the waterfall," Caitlyn said, with a glance at Joshua. "The best way to get there is by horseback, to hike there takes forever. It's a fantastic ride."

"I haven't ridden much." Alyssa thought back to her childhood, when her adoptive mother had signed her up for two terms at pony club, but with all the other scheduled tuition, she'd never had the time to learn to ride well.

"You can ride Breeze, she's very gentle," said Megan.

"I don't know ..." Alyssa hesitated.

"Roland always loved it at the falls." Kay entered the conversation. "He used to beg to go on picnics there as a child. As a teenager he loved to hang out there with friends."

Alyssa started to pay attention. A place that Roland had loved? "Maybe I'll consider it." Perhaps there she would capture that spiritual closeness that she was seeking. Perhaps she'd finally lose the loneliness that lurked inside her.

"Did you know Roland?" Megan was staring at her with a puzzled frown.

Damn. Had she given away too much? Apprehension filled Alyssa. Her gaze shot to Kay, who had stilled at her daughter's question. Then moved on to Joshua. His mouth was set in a hard line.

"Uh ... no."

The stuttered denial didn't sound convincing to her own ears. And the force of Joshua's glare told her that he was convinced she was lying.

But thankfully she appeared to have deflected Megan's interest. Alyssa let out a silent sigh of relief. That had been far too close.

Kay turned hurriedly to Joshua. “Do you remember one night you terrified me by arriving back covered in blood? You and Roland had some sort of competition that I never quite got to the bottom of.”

Megan glanced from Joshua to her mother. Joshua’s mouth tightened. “Teen garbage,” he said dismissively.

“For a few years you all thought you were bulletproof.” Phillip spoke for the first time.

“We grew up,” Megan said quickly.

“Think carefully. You’ll be sore if you’re not used to riding—it’s a fair distance,” Joshua murmured as Ivy arrived to collect the dishes.

Looking at him, Alyssa realised that he didn’t look wild about the idea. “If you’re too busy, we don’t need to go.”

“I can probably find time to take you on Monday, the winery is closed to the public after the weekend, so it will be quieter.”

Had he offered Monday because he knew she was supposed to be back at work then? But if she stayed, that would give her an extra day at Saxon’s Folly. Despite his grumbling, David wouldn’t mind, she never took leave. And seeing a place that had been special to her brother would be worth a bit of extra stiffness.

“I’d probably survive.” She threw Joshua a quick smile, saw his double take and stopped smiling. “As long as I’m back in Auckland by evening. I’d like to do it—if you don’t mind taking me.”

There was a gap in the conversation. Then Caitlyn said, “I heard that you’ve decided against attending that European wine show, Megan.”

Megan glanced tellingly in her mother’s direction. “The timing was all wrong. I wanted to be here, with the family. There’ll be more shows next month, starting with the show in Paris.”

She’d stayed because of Roland’s death. Megan didn’t need to say it out loud. But her meaning was clear.

After a short pause, Caitlyn said with forced humour, “That should be fun. Those French vintners can be very charming.”

Megan’s lashes fell, hiding her eyes, but a small, secret smile curved her mouth revealing a dimple in her cheek. “Oh, I intend to have a lot of fun. I want to taste some of those deliciously sexy wines.”

“Frenchmen are supposed to be legendarily sexy, too,” Caitlyn responded.

“It’s the language,” Alyssa said. “Even though I don’t speak it, everything sounds so sexy in French.”

“Passez-moi votre verre de vin, s’il vous plaît.”

Everyone started to laugh as Alyssa stared at Joshua in bewilderment, until Megan took pity on her and said, “He asked for your wineglass.”

“No more for me, thanks,” Alyssa said, feeling warm and fuzzy inside at the good-humoured amusement on Joshua’s face, coupled with an intensity that made her heart melt.

At last he glanced away and the discussion moved onto Chardonnay, becoming increasingly technical—temperature and malolactic fermentation. Alyssa couldn’t help noticing how easy the relationship between Caitlyn and Joshua was. Had he ever dated the winemaker? It would be such a sensible relationship, the winery boss and the stellar winemaker, a marriage would truly cement the relationship. She couldn’t help wondering whether Joshua had ever considered keeping his winemaker happy forever.

The notion caused her a stab of something like discomfort . . . she didn’t want to label it anything as significant as envy. Or, even worse, jealousy.

On Saturday, David called Alyssa to tell her that the rumours were definitely buzzing and that Saxon’s Folly was in the thick of it all.

“It’s all about a Chardonnay that was entered in the Golden Harvest Wine Awards. One judge is muttering that what’s available in the shops, isn’t the same as the wine he tasted in the competition.”

“So what happens next?” Alyssa asked.

“They’ll give Joshua Saxon the option of withdrawing the wine before the scandal becomes public, I suspect. Although there is a rumour that an investigator has been appointed. But it’s all under wraps right now.” David was speaking quickly now. “See what you can find out, Alyssa.”

“Hey, I’m back in the office next week. Tuesday probably.”

“That gives you three days.” David didn’t say a word about the extra day she’d added on.

“I’m not doing this story, David. I’m on leave.” He was still trying to convince her when she ended the call. And the rest of the day passed in a lazy fashion.

The next morning when Kay broke the news that two of the casual workers—students who regularly helped on the weekend with the tastings and cellar door sales—hadn’t turned up on Sunday, Alyssa leapt into the fray.

Kay looked relieved. “Thank you, Alyssa. Joshua is there now, he’s pitching in, too. He’ll tell you what to do and give you price lists.”

The car park beside the winery was packed with vehicles glittering in the morning sun. Alyssa couldn’t believe the amount of visitors who came for the weekend tastings and tours.

Joshua looked harried. “At least with working for *Wine Watch* you’ll know how tasting works.”

“Don’t be so sure.” She gave him a teasing grin. Within minutes she’d settled next to him behind the counter, bottles of wine uncorked beside her, a list of wines with prices. Alyssa scanned the labels of the bottles in front of her out of interest. A Sauvignon Blanc, a Cabernet Merlot and a Semillon. And even a Chardonnay. Could this be the controversial vintage David wanted her to find out more about?

A brief lull followed.

“It’s been so busy,” said Joshua in disbelief, “now it’s gone all quiet.”

“Maybe I killed off all the customers,” Alyssa joked.

He shot her a dark look. “Maybe.”

“Hey, that was a joke.”

“It wasn’t funny.” But his lips curled into a smile inviting her to smile back.

“Why aren’t you married, Joshua?” That sounded so blunt. But it had been on her mind since Friday night when she’d seen how at ease he and Caitlyn were in each other’s company. “Or at least attached. You’re an attractive man—”

“Thank you.” He gave her a slow smile.

She felt herself flush. “Don’t get me wrong, this isn’t a proposition. I’m—”

“In journalist mode?” This time the smile held an edge. “Don’t worry, I never did consider it a come-on.”

“What a relief,” she said, a little barb to keep him from realising how interested she, Alyssa the woman, not Alyssa the journalist, really was. “So are you going to answer?”

“Always the journalist,” he said, and the irony was not lost on her.

She didn’t respond.

Finally he sighed. “I’ve never found anyone that I want to spend my life with.” He gave her a crooked smile. “My parents set a tough example to follow. They met each other at a dance and knew from the first moment.”

“You expect the same?”

He gave her a strange look. “Perhaps.”

“Perhaps their romance has grown in the telling.”

“They love each other. They always have. There’s never been anyone else for either of them—ever.”

Alyssa felt a moment of envy at his certainty. “I hope you find it—the once-in-a-lifetime love that you’re looking for.”

He shrugged. “I’m not looking for it. But if I find it, I’ll recognise it and embrace it. And in the meantime I’m not settling for second best.”

“Don’t you get lonely?”

He shrugged again. “Not really. I date. I’ve got friends—”

“And family.” Joshua had friends, he was highly respected, he ran a successful winery. Yet more than anything Alyssa coveted his family.

“Yes, my family is important to me.”

“And your staff ...” She waved a hand around the tasting shed.

He nodded, his eyes softening. “Saxon’s Folly is more than a workplace, more than a winery. It’s home.”

“If you ever marry, your wife is going to have to love this place.”

“It’s in my blood,” he said with a simple acceptance that she envied.

“What about Caitlyn?”

He blinked at the sudden question. “What about her?”

“Have you ever dated her?”

“Caitlyn?” He gave a surprised laugh. “What makes you think that?”

“It seemed like such an obvious partnership. The winemaker and the winery boss.”

“I like Caitlyn. She’s smart—a great winemaker. But she’s always been one of the boys. There’s no chemistry.”

“One of the boys?” Caitlyn? Alyssa stared at him in astonishment. Was he blind to the other woman’s tall, slim strength? Granted, she wore jeans and boots and men’s shirts that gave her a tomboy look. But her light blue eyes, dusting of Celtic freckles and strawberry-blond hair had an undoubted charm even if her hair was always pulled back in a no-fuss ponytail and she wore no make up, but she hardly resembled a boy.

Men! Alyssa shook her head in disbelief, but she couldn’t prevent the relief that flowed through her that he’d never been attracted to the other woman.

Joshua leaned toward her. “Here come your first customers. Are you ready?”

She looked up to see three women and two men in their late twenties approaching. Alyssa gave them what she hoped was a welcoming smile and waved them onto the barstools in front of the counter.

“What would you like to taste?” She lined up five tasting glasses. One of the women and the two men chose the Cabernet Merlot, the other two women pondered indecisively. Alyssa poured the red wine into the three tasting glasses and watched as they picked up and swirled it around.

“I’ll try the Semillon,” said one of the two who had been undecided.

“Sav Blanc for me, please,” said the other.

“Black currants,” said one of the men, sniffing at the dregs of the red in his glass. “It smells of black currants.”

The others laughed. “I tasted red grapes,” said the blonde who had tasted the red.

“You wouldn’t be wrong to say black currants,” Joshua’s voice was low and serious.

“And I suppose the Sav tastes of grapefruit?” The woman with the Sauvignon Blanc gave him a flirtatious look from under her lashes.

Unaccountable annoyance rose within Alyssa. “The Saxon’s Folly Sauvignon Blancs are known for their stone fruit flavours.” She forced herself to smile blithely at the flirt.

“Stone fruit?” The woman gave her a blank look.

“Yes, peaches and nectarines.” Alyssa poured a little more wine in her glass.

“Can you tell the difference between a Sauvignon Blanc and a Chardonnay,” asked one of the men, giving her an interested look.

“Yes.” Alyssa took out two clean glasses and placed them before him. She poured a little Chardonnay in the one and a sample of Sauvignon Blanc in the other. “You’re looking for taste on the palate. The Chardonnay will have hints of oak—it’s been barrel fermented—not in the bottle. It’s also a little buttery, whereas the Sauvignon Blanc is fruitier. Have a taste of each.”

“Ooh, can I try, too?” one of the women asked.

“Sure.” Alyssa repeated the ritual for her.

“I taste a hint of peaches,” said the woman.

Joshua had said she tasted of peaches when he’d kissed her up on the hill. A tremor ran through Alyssa. She flashed him a sideways look from under her lashes—and found him gazing at her, his gaze hot, his eyelids heavy.

A flare of excitement ignited deep in her belly.

“The stone fruit flavours are very specific to this region, if you travel down to Marlborough, you’ll discover that the flavour’s grassy, reminiscent of gooseberries.” Joshua’s voice washed over her talking about fruit and flavours and she listened to the mesmerising cadence of his voice, words like *peach* and *smooth* and *creamy* creating a sensuous flow that surrounded her.

“Can you taste the differences between the same wines?”

“You mean, from different producers?”

The tall man nodded.

“That’s called horizontal tasting. So Saxon’s Folly makes Sauvignon Blanc, and over the hill at his winery my brother makes Sauvignon Blanc, too. They’re different. He’s a fine winemaker ... but so is Caitlyn Ross our winemaker—”

“A woman makes wine here?” One of the men sounded shocked.

“Good wines, too.” Alyssa found herself bristling a little.

“Of course you’d say that, you work here.”

“Actually I’m a journalist—”

“Ooh, you’re doing a story? How exciting. Which newspaper?”

Alyssa told her the name of the magazine.

“I know you,” said the tall man. “You’re Alyssa Blake—you have a column in the Sunday papers, too. And I’ve seen you on television. So what do you think of the wines here?”

Alyssa gave him a smile, aware that Joshua was growing tense beside her, his hand tightening around the bottom of the wine bottle. Did he really believe that she would say something that might be detrimental to Saxon’s Folly?

“You taste and tell me what you think,” she responded, passing a glass to the man who had spoken. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed that Joshua’s grip had relaxed a little, his knuckles were no longer white.

“Make sure you get some photos of him—” the flirt pointed at Joshua “—I might even buy a copy of the magazine.” The woman batted her eyelashes in that way that Alyssa found intensely irritating. But she swallowed her annoyance and said nothing.

In the end the group walked away with a purchase of three cases of wine and Alyssa let out the breath she’d been holding.

“Hard work?” Joshua asked, a glimmer of laughter in his eyes.

“Let’s just say it’s not quite the easy sell I thought it would be.” She looked up at him. “So you can tell the difference between the wines you brew and those that Heath makes, hmm?”

He nodded.

“And I suppose you can tell the difference between different Saxon’s Folly vintages?”

“Piece of cake.”

“And then you try and tell me that the samples you supplied for judging in the Golden Harvest Wine Awards taste the same as the same label available for sale in the supermarkets?”

Joshua froze. “Trying to ambush me?” he asked very softly.

Alyssa refused to be intimidated. Joshua made a big deal about his reputation, about how honourable he was. She was entitled to know if that was the truth. What she wasn't sure about yet was what she would do if she discovered it was all lies. She didn't want to hurt Kay and Phillip Saxon—or their children. Not now. Not while they were grieving. And she couldn't bear to find out that Joshua was dishonest.

It surprised her how much she needed to believe that he was as solid and real as the hills surrounding the vineyards he loved. She badly wanted to accept his word.

But she owed a duty to the public. The consumers who were possibly being scammed. She couldn't rely on her feelings, her desire to find the best in Joshua. Growing up, her father had drummed into her that people lied. All the time. Facts counted. She needed proof. Hard evidence.

It tore her apart to think of what she might discover....

"No," she said finally. "Just trying to get to the bottom of a disturbing rumour that the Chardonnay Saxon's Folly supplied for tasting in the recent competition is far superior to what's available at the retail outlets."

Seven

“So that’s why you gate-crashed the ball.”

Joshua had known all along Alyssa had an agenda. Bitter disappointment corroded the fondness and respect that had been developing against his will. He’d been right not to trust her.

He propped one elbow on the tasting counter and swivelled his body to face her. “And that’s why you inveigled an invitation to stay at Saxon’s Folly.”

Her eyes flickered. “I told you before, your mother invited me.”

“Right.” Disbelief and sarcasm loaded his voice.

“Honestly, I didn’t know about this until recently. I haven’t agreed to do the story.”

He should’ve known *Wine Watch* would be on to the story. “I’m supposed to believe that?”

“Yes.”

Her amazing eyes widened ingenuously. But he wasn’t about to be taken in by a pair of purple pansy eyes and an act of injured innocence. She’d known, all right. And he’d *almost* been suckered. And Alyssa Blake would not turn down the opportunity to do such a story.

Then the thought crossed his mind that Roland might have let something slip to her. Pillow talk after a hot session between the sheets.

Anger twisted his stomach into knots.

Pushing away from the tasting counter, he straightened to his intimidating height of six foot two inches.

Alyssa didn’t flinch.

Roland had known about the dark cloud hanging over one of the premier Saxon’s Folly wines. As soon as Joshua had learned there was a potential problem with the wine judging, he’d told Roland. He cast his mind back. The conversation had taken place a few days before the ball. He’d wanted to pull the wine from the competition. Roland had assured him there was nothing to worry about, that the sample provided for tasting was uniform and no danger of adverse publicity existed.

Would he have told his lover about the debacle? Joshua didn’t want to believe that Roland had let something so confidential slip to a wine writer who’d already slated Saxon’s Folly in the past. Joshua assessed her. But the wide eyes and patient smile revealed little.

Was it possible that Alyssa had found out from another source? The competition organisers? Highly unlikely. Wine-tasting competitions were run with rigorous secrecy.

Roland *must* have told her. He must have been taken in by Alyssa’s inviting eyes and confiding manner. Damn! Annoyance at his brother’s gullibility shook him. Being led around by the libido was the oldest trick in the book. Joshua could hardly believe Roland had fallen for it. But Roland had never been able to resist a pretty face.

Joshua scrutinised her. Shiny, dark red hair framed her face in a smooth sheet, the wide-spaced pansy eyes promised untold sensual delights. Yup, definitely a very pretty face. His gaze moved lower. Long legs went on forever in the new denims and the stretchy top, the colour of the lavender that grew outside the homestead, moulded the generous curve of her breasts.

No doubt about it. Roland would’ve have been utterly infatuated. Okay, so maybe he could understand why Roland had blabbed. Alyssa Blake was certainly the sexiest thing he’d seen for a long time. In Mata Hari mode she would be lethal.

He ignored the whisper in his head that suggested he might be every bit as susceptible as his brother had been; that Alyssa Blake had him tied up in knots. He narrowed his eyes. This crazy wanting had never happened before. Why now? Why *her*?

How was he supposed to deal with the fallout when she reduced him to this damn idiotic state of constant arousal? He fought to get his thoughts in order.

While she knew there was a problem with the judging, it didn't appear that she knew much more, otherwise she wouldn't be here, digging for a story.

The story she insisted she wasn't doing.

Maybe there was still time for damage control. He gave her a grim smile. "There will always be some variations between batches—it's only the small vineyards with small outputs that can almost guarantee that every bottle will taste the same. We bottle thousands of cases of Chardonnay. There's going to be a little variation—"

She gave a snort of disgust. "I'm not talking about a small amount. I'm talking about a huge difference—enough to make it taste like two completely different wines. Please don't take me for a total idiot."

Joshua held on to his temper with difficulty. "What you're suggesting is not possible. When we have a batch that comes out so much better, we bottle it as a reserve selection. Why would we pretend it's the same? Especially when we can command a higher price?"

"To garner awards? To deliberately entice the public to come out in droves and buy an award-winning wine when the one they get is vastly inferior to what they're expecting? Not that they'd ever find that out."

His brows drew together at the accusation. "We would *never* do that."

"Maybe I should ask Caitlyn that question, since she makes the wines." Alyssa started to turn away.

She was going to confront Caitlyn? After he'd told her not to question his staff? She was challenging him, walking away from him, after all but calling him a liar. He glared at her shapely back, irate that he noticed how her hips flared in the snug jeans. "It's not necessary. I am the boss. I speak for Saxon's Folly. We don't indulge in questionable practices designed to mislead the consumer. You can quote me on that in your damned article."

Looking past her he saw that a new group of tasters were heading in their direction. "We've got company. Better behave yourself," he said softly, and he knew by the sudden tension between her shoulder blades that she'd heard.

Arranging his features in a pleasant, welcoming smile, he added, "You leave tomorrow. My final word is that you're not to go to the winery ... or try to interview my staff without me present."

She threw him a searing look over her shoulder. "I've no reason not to behave. I'm telling you the truth, Joshua. I've no intention of writing this story. I'm too close to ... everything."

But instead of feeling relief at her revelation, Joshua felt annoyance because it underlined how much his brother had meant to her. *Too close to ... everything*. His irritation was exacerbated as Alyssa flashed the wide smile that caused his body to snap to attention. Even more irritating was the fact that it wasn't directed at him, but at the approaching enthusiasts.

He couldn't trust her for a moment. She would do exactly what was best for Alyssa Blake, as always. He started to seethe.

Mata Hari indeed.

When Alyssa stirred on Monday morning, an appalling sense of dislocation rocked her at the thought of leaving Saxon's Folly later today.

The end had come before the beginning had started. She still had so much to learn about Roland. Grief eroded to a raw ache as she walked down to the stables for the last time with an unusually silent Joshua beside her.

Earlier, she'd considered calling off the ride, given Joshua's annoyance with her yesterday. But now as Alyssa watched Joshua saddle the two horses, she found she was looking forward to visiting a place that Roland had loved.

It would give her a chance to say goodbye. Closure. That's what she was looking for.

Then she could put Roland finally to rest. She wished that she could tell the Saxon siblings the truth. She'd come to like them all very much. She watched Joshua tighten the girth. With him the

connection went deeper than fondness. The last thing she wanted was to leave him with the wrong impression of her relationship with Roland.

But she'd promised Kay

In return for her silence she'd gotten a week to trace Roland's footsteps, learn about his life. And that week of time had a high price: her secrecy. She'd given her word and she could not go back on that. End of story.

Joshua led Breeze toward her, his expression unreadable. "Come, I'll give you a leg up."

She approached a little nervously. Breeze turned her head, pricked her ears and gave Alyssa an enquiring look.

"Bend your leg."

Alyssa obliged. The next moment Joshua hoisted her through the air. She landed in the English saddle and picked up the reins, while he adjusted the stirrups.

She stared down at his dark head. His hand brushed the inside of her jean-clad thigh, causing a frisson of heat. Her breath caught. She hated this tense awkwardness that yawned between them like a chasm and craved a return of the Joshua who had shown her around the vineyards. The Joshua with love for the land and passion in his eyes.

Even though she'd told David she couldn't do the article, Alyssa couldn't help wishing that Joshua would cooperate on the story. That way he'd have a chance to air his side of the situation to the public and she'd be able to do the article that David wanted so badly—and even clear up the damage she'd done to Joshua's reputation last time.

The end result would be win-win all round. Then she and Joshua might be able to resolve this friction between them. Become colleagues or even—

"How does that feel?"

At the question she abandoned her wishful thinking and stood up in the stirrups. Both legs felt even. She pulled a face. "Wobbly. Like I haven't been on a horse in a very long time."

Joshua's head tilted back and his black-as-midnight eyes clashed with hers. Her heart flopped over.

"Your stirrup leathers ... are they even?"

"They'll do." Alyssa made a pretence of fiddling with the reins—anything to avoid looking at Joshua, not to feel that shameless heart-stopping surge of want that simply glancing at him aroused.

"Okay." With economy of movement, Joshua swung himself easily up onto the bay's back. Alyssa watched furtively through lowered lashes as he settled himself. He sat straight, totally at one with the horse beneath him; the broad shoulders tapering down beneath his blue-and-cream-striped shirt to where his faded jeans rode low on his hips. She didn't even see the command he gave to make the bay move. No doubt he'd been riding all his life.

As they rode out of the stable block, a black horse trotted poker-legged along the length of the fence, neck arched, his head held high. Beautiful but defiant.

"I'm glad you're not riding him." Alyssa tipped her head in the stallion's direction.

"I want to enjoy the ride." Joshua turned his head to look at the horse. "And I won't if I ride that animal. It takes hours to catch Ladykiller."

Alyssa gave the stallion a look of sympathy. But the horse belonged here. She didn't—and never would.

Joshua had made that very clear.

An hour later the rolling grasslands ended. The trail entered dense, overgrown bush and narrowed dramatically. They rode in single file with Joshua ahead.

Alyssa looked around with interest. Roland would've taken the same path and passed beneath the same trees. She called out, "So how much farther to go?"

Joshua turned in the saddle. "Not long now. We're nearly there."

Birds chirruped in the canopy overhead and bits of sunlight dappled the lush green ferns under the trees. Alyssa's heart lifted. She banked the scents and sounds to remember later, when she was back in the rat race of Auckland amidst the hurly-burly of deadlines and rush-hour traffic.

"Hold tight," Joshua said a few minutes later.

Alyssa's breath caught in her throat as she saw the incline that he planned to ride down.

She tugged on the reins to slow Breeze down. "I can't go down there!"

"Yes, you can. Believe in yourself. Lean back a little, hold the pommel of the saddle and try to relax. Come, follow me. You can do it."

Already he was descending. Alyssa could hear the scrabble of loose stones under his mount's hooves, could see his back swaying in time to the horse's stride. Rigid with apprehension, she let the reins slide through her fingers as Breeze extended her neck, lowered her head and pricked her ears forward. Alyssa grabbed at the pommel, and stared through the space between the mare's ears and hoped frantically for the best.

At the bottom of the incline she let out a whoop of triumph that caused Breeze's ears to flicker back. "I did it!"

She couldn't believe the sense of achievement she felt.

Joshua was waiting. He shot her the first grin he'd given her for what felt like a century. "Of course you did. Did you think I would've let you get hurt while you were in my care?"

As she heard the words, a penny dropped. Joshua was the boss. The final responsibility always stopped with him. Shielding a female worker from ugly gossip after she'd been harassed, making sure his mother wasn't upset while she mourned her dead son, protecting Amy from any sexual indiscretion that Roland might have committed. How many more burdens did he assume?

The boss. The guy who carried all the weight. Didn't he ever tire of it?

"Don't you ever want to share the load a little?"

"What load?" The grin disappeared and he stared at her blankly.

Alyssa wanted the grin back, wanted to see the flash of white teeth and the way his eyes lit up and crinkled at the corners. "The load of taking care of everyone around you. It must grow exhausting."

"Not really. I like to see people grow and achieve things that they doubted they could." He nodded at the incline. "Like you did there." He wheeled the big bay around and moved forward.

And that was the quality that made him such a great boss. She'd watched him at work in the winery. He had the ability to encourage people to try new things, to strive to do their best. Alyssa was thinking so hard about Joshua, she almost missed the first view of the waterfall as they rode into a sunlit clearing, and Joshua reined in ahead of her.

Her breath caught at the sight of the water tumbling down the sheer rock face, frothing into a lazy pool at the bottom. Roland must have spent hours here. A perfect swimming hole for a hot summer's day.

Breeze stopped alongside Joshua's bay.

"I didn't bring togs to swim in," Alyssa said.

"The water is icy this time of the year. In a month or so it will be warmer. We can eat instead."

Hunger rumbled in her stomach. "I didn't even think of food."

"I brought some lunch," Joshua revealed, dismounting. "We can eat that beside the waterfall."

"You made food?"

"Not me, Ivy made it."

But he'd remembered to organise it. Alyssa had always considered herself organised, but Joshua's attention to detail was overwhelming.

He helped her off the horse, his hands firm at her waist. Alyssa suppressed the flare of awareness. Relief overtook her when Joshua moved away to tether the horses. She sat down on a soft mound of grass above the water's edge. From here the view of the waterfall was spectacular. It

bubbled over a ledge of rock and plummeted over the drop into the dark green pool below, the sound oddly soothing. A sense of peace stole over her.

“It’s beautiful. I can see why Roland loved it here.”

Joshua flung himself down beside her and started to unzip the saddle pack he held. “It wasn’t the beauty that Roland loved. It was the danger the place represented.”

“Danger?” Alyssa stared at him. “Where?”

“See those rocks?” He pointed to boulders at the side of the ledge over which the waterfall flowed. “Roland liked nothing more than challenging a friend to dive from there.”

Alyssa’s heart sank like a stone as she took in the sheer height of the drop. “Was he insane?” The words burst from her.

“He loved the adrenaline rush. Roland never felt fear.”

She had to ask. “Didn’t anyone get hurt?”

Joshua nodded. “Roland had a friend who slipped and broke a leg climbing up there—of course, the parents never knew the full story. Once, I cut my head on a rock in the pool when I hit the water headfirst.”

Alyssa swallowed at the thought. He could’ve drowned! “You were equally reckless.”

“I did it to stop Heath. Roland bet him that he couldn’t, that he was too chicken to dive in. I took Heath’s place. Although if I hadn’t been hurt, Heath would probably still have dived in. He was as mad as a snake that I’d taken his turn. So my big gesture was probably for nothing,” Joshua said wryly. “The joys of being sixteen—and impatient to be a man.”

And the man had become every bit as responsible as the boy had striven to be. She eyed him furtively. Gorgeous, too. And loyal to the point of fault.

Alyssa remembered his mother saying she hadn’t known how he’d been hurt. So he’d never dobbed his brother in. She didn’t know if the loyalty was stupid or admirable.

“Here, have a bagel.” He held out a paper bag.

“Thank you.” It was perfect. Fresh and slightly chewy, filled with smoked salmon, avocado and cream cheese. Eating distracted Alyssa from what she’d been going to say next. But at least Joshua was talking to her again. She’d had enough of the silent treatment to last her a lifetime.

Next he produced a bottle of Pinot Gris and two glasses out of the pack. Once he’d filled the glasses, Alyssa took a sip. The slightly sweet, well-rounded sturdiness of the wine took her by surprise.

“Very nice,” she said appreciatively, squinting at the label. “I didn’t realise Saxon’s Folly produced Pinot Gris.”

“Not in large amounts,” Joshua said. “You need to be on our loyal client mailing list to even get a chance of snapping it up. We hold the grapes on the vine until early May, so it’s essentially a late-harvest wine.” He swallowed a mouthful. “Mmm, the really special thing about this wine is that we sourced the vines from an ancient Alsace clone.”

Alyssa dusted her fingers of the last of the crumbs from her bagel. “Alsace? In France?”

“Yes, imported into New Zealand in 1886.”

“That *is* ancient.”

Joshua topped up her glass. “And to complement fine wine ...” His voice trailed away and he dug into the pack again. With a flourish he drew a punnet of strawberries and a container of chocolate dipping sauce.

“Oh my, this is decadent.” There was something incredibly sexy about a man who provided food. A primitive leftover from ages past when the male had been the hunter. It was disgusting to be so impressed. There should be no need to feel so nurtured. She was a modern woman, totally able to take care of herself. Self-sufficient and sensible enough to be able to forage for herself.

Alyssa glanced around the clearing but couldn’t see anything in the surrounding bush that would’ve appeased the appetite that the fresh air and ride had whetted. Not even the birds that called from the treetops.

Then there would be the little problem of catching them, cooking them. She slid a glance at the man beside her, his fingers long and tanned against the bright red berries. Okay, so he'd probably make a plan to find food in the bush. While she'd only poison them both.

City girl.

Fast lane....

Joshua's words came back to haunt her. So what if she was out of her comfort zone? This was Joshua's world. He'd been born and raised here.

"Try this." He held out a strawberry that had been lightly dipped in the chocolate.

She took it and bit into the ripe red fruit. Juice leaked over her fingers, her lips. She gave a little self-conscious laugh as she licked them. "Juicy, aren't they?"

He didn't reply.

She looked up into blazing black eyes.

"Joshua?" she whispered, her nipples hardening under the pink cotton T-shirt she wore, warmth flowing through her body to pool between her legs. The heat and desire and that other emotion ... something terribly primal ... in his eyes set her instantly alight.

"God, but you are the most provocative woman I have ever met."

She stretched her eyes wide. "What did I do?" But she already knew. The fire in his eyes was unmistakable.

She'd turned him on.

"You bit into the berry," he said, his voice cracking.

The hoarse sound caused shivers to spread across her skin. Alyssa didn't know how this had happened. Didn't want to think too much about it. She only knew that she wanted more of the heat, the exquisite arousal that softened her body, the excitement that churned in her stomach.

She picked up a strawberry, swirled it through the chocolate sauce and offered it to him, her pulse racing. "Your turn to bite."

"Oh, yes," he drawled, his eyes dark and slumberous. "My turn."

Eight

The heat that scorched through him at Alyssa's offer turned Joshua's lower body to fire. Bending his head, he took a bite of the strawberry she held. His teeth sank into the soft flesh of the fruit and instantly his mouth was filled with an assortment of flavours.

The succulence of the strawberry.

The sweetness of the chocolate.

The complexity of the Pinot Gris.

There was another flavour, too. The unmistakable spice of desire. Slowly he chewed, swallowed, then raised his head.

A hectic flush staining her cheeks, Alyssa quickly popped the remaining half of the berry into her mouth. Their eyes held. She swallowed. Joshua groaned and leaned forward.

His mouth closed over hers. She tasted sweet. Of fruit and juice and wine. He moaned, licking the soft inner skin of her cheeks, sealing her lips tightly with his lest any sweetness escape.

His head spinning, he finally lifted his head. He cradled her chin between his cupped hands and stared into her glowing eyes. "Was that good?"

She nodded.

"Tell me you want more."

She hesitated. An unfamiliar emotion flickered in her eyes. "I want more."

Satisfaction settled in him. She'd come with him for this. And he wasn't objecting. Instantly Joshua wanted to take her mouth, slake his hunger for her. What was it about this woman? With one searing look, a couple of words and she made him throw all his customary caution to the wind. He'd had girlfriends ... lovers ... women that he'd easily kept at a distance while he waited for the right one. But no one like Alyssa. Never this hunger.

Why her? This woman could never be right for him.

His brother's lover....

Alyssa Blake, the woman who had once before humiliated him in print. Compromised his reputation and Saxon's Folly's profits. And would do so again in a flash. A woman who took what she wanted, to get what she wanted. To desire such a woman was *his* folly.

He forced himself to slow down, told himself he was in control of his senses, his tight-wound body. Sure, he was. He told himself he could control this reckless desire as easily as he controlled a busy and successful vineyard, told himself that he could take his pleasure and watch her walk away later today with no regrets.

He almost believed it.

"So you want more." He coupled the gentle taunt with a deliberate, measured smile and watched her breasts rise and fall as her breathing quickened. He picked up another strawberry. The strange colour of her eyes deepened. Clearly she'd expected him to kiss her, not feed her.

"Oh, no, my beauty," he whispered softly. "We're going to take this slowly."

A trace of fear flitted over her face. If he hadn't been watching her so closely, he wouldn't even have seen it. And that was what concerned him most about Alyssa Blake. She wasn't easy to read. He never knew what this woman was thinking. Hell, he still didn't even know what had been behind her gate-crashing of the masked ball.

Why had she come to Saxon's Folly?

To patch up a relationship gone wrong with Roland? And if so, then why the hell had she let *him* kiss her that night? If Heath hadn't interrupted them ... she would have made love with him. In his bed.

For revenge? Because Roland hadn't done what she wanted? Except Joshua couldn't forget how those kisses had sizzled. How could she have wanted Roland back ... yet have kissed *him* with such abandon?

Was it possible that she had come to the ball intending to seduce *him*, the CEO of Saxon's Folly Estate & Wines, hoping to get a scoop on the story she was after? The story that she now denied chasing....

Was that why she'd leapt at riding out here with him alone today? Had this been her intention all along? His head felt as if it was about to explode. His body, too, as her lips parted and he glimpsed the tip of a pink tongue. Without planning, his hand moved closer, the juice of the berry staining his fingertips. Joshua felt himself hardening as her lips closed over the fruit he held.

And why the hell was he hesitating? She was less than an arm's-length away. Her pink tongue a hair's breadth away from his fingers. If she wanted to seduce him ... well, hell, he was more than willing. He craved her. Right now he didn't care if he would regret it later ... after she was gone.

He wanted her ... would have her.

Every sexy inch.

"Taste good?"

Even to his own ears his voice sounded hoarse.

She nodded and her tongue ran over his fingers, licking off the sticky strawberry juice.

It was enough.

Joshua took that as consent. He placed his hands on her waist, and hauled her toward him. She landed in his lap with a gasp of surprise. She filled his arms with soft, womanly warmth, her curves fitting against the hard angles of his body. Exotic perfume clung to her skin, her hair. He inhaled sharply. She smelled of sweet strawberries, jasmine ... and desire.

This time his kiss was careful. Joshua was conscious of stepping into the unknown as his tongue probed her mouth, tasting the sweetness within. Of the shifting boundaries between them. Their relationship wouldn't—couldn't—be the same again.

The want that swirled in his lower abdomen was strong and hungry. Astonishingly so. Joshua suspected that he was going to be thinking about Alyssa Blake long after she'd returned to Auckland ... that this interlude would change him, even if he never saw her again.

He told himself that her leaving was for the best.

But his body didn't agree.

She wriggled in his arms. Under his fingers, her top rode up. The smooth skin of her bare stomach was silken to his touch. The feminine feel of it tipped him over the edge. He pulled her closer, filling her mouth with the ferocious hunger that was building within him, threatening to explode, threatening to destroy everything he'd ever believed about women ... about sex and desire ... and love.

She didn't hesitate. She kissed him back with everything he desired, her purpose clearly the same as his. To make love ... and the hell with tomorrow. Her tongue moved under his ... giving as much as he took ... as much as he wanted. With a hoarse groan, Joshua rolled, taking her with him, mouths locked, landing on his back in the cushioning grass. Pulling her above him, he shoved his hands under her top and his fingers ran riot over her back. Around them the air was redolent with the pungent scent of sweet, crushed grass. And Joshua felt his tightly leashed control start to slip.

In a staggering moment he realised that the forbidden attraction he'd been fighting had taken over. It was stronger, more powerful than anything he'd experienced. He surrendered to its force.

Even as the relentless hunger took him, he knew he had to have her. Just once. Before he let her leave Saxon's Folly.

Joshua's torso was solid beneath her. She felt safe ... not exactly loved ... but certainly cherished. It felt like coming home.

"This is in the way," Joshua murmured.

“This” turned out to be her T-shirt. Alyssa shifted, lifting herself so that he could push it up, then her breath caught as his hand slipped forward ... further up ... under her bra and touched her breast.

“Ah.” She sighed and her head fell forward against his shoulder.

His other hand fiddled with her bra clasp. It gave. Then his hands were cupping her, shaping her, holding her apart from him. Eager to help, to prolong her pleasure, she braced herself on hands planted on the grass beside his shoulders.

Another gasp—sharper this time—escaped her as his head lifted and his mouth closed on one nipple then the other. Then his fingertips took over from his mouth ... massaging ... until an achy sweet sensation pierced her.

A hand moved between their bodies in restless little circles over her stomach. Down. Under the waistband of her jeans.

She was panting now. The sound loud in her ears. Alyssa shut her eyes. Patterns danced across her eyelids. He touched her where she was already wet with wanting. Blood rushed through her ears. She felt as if she might pass out.

Then he was rolling again, and she lay flat on her back, while Joshua rose above her. Alyssa kept her eyes closed, focusing on the stroke of his hands as he ran them over the skin that his caresses had laid bare.

“You’re hot and soft.”

The throaty drawl was uttered against the bare skin of her belly.

His hand moved again. She heard the rasp of a zipper.

Alyssa’s eyes shot open. Ohmigod. “What are we doing?”

His lips curved, sensual, satisfied. “Isn’t this what you wanted?”

His words shocked her. “*What?*”

Maybe it was what she wanted. But she hadn’t even admitted that to herself. How on earth did he know?

“That’s why you came here with me ... to be alone.”

“You—” Words failed her. She pulled away from him, disappointment piercing her heart, and tugged her T-shirt down, uncaring that her bra was rucked up. Right now she wanted her breasts ... her belly ... covered.

“No need to be shy about it. We’re consenting adults.” The dark eyes simmered. “I have to admit it’s a huge turn on to be seduced by a woman who knows what she wants.”

“Knows what she wants ... ?” Alyssa stared at him. The smoked salmon ... the strawberries ... the Pinot Gris. He thought she wanted ... this. He’d planned it down to the last detail.

Damn, but she’d been dumb.

She covered her face. How could he have misunderstood so badly? “I wanted to come here because Megan said that Roland had loved it here ... that it had been one of his favourite places.”

“Roland.” His tone was peculiar, flat, dead.

After a long moment she pushed her hair back and looked up at him. “Yes, because of Roland.”

He gave a laugh, but it held no amusement. “I thought you wanted something from me.”

She blinked. “Why would wanting something from you involve coming here alone and—” not making love “—having sex?” What kind of woman did he think she was, for heaven’s sake?

“Something you wanted enough to allow yourself to eat strawberries from my hand while your eyes promised me untold delights.”

Alyssa felt the flush start on her chest, spread up her face. But she forced herself to hold his gaze.

“Something you wanted enough to forget your lover.”

Her lover? Oh, yes, Roland.

She bit her lip at that. “And what was I supposed to want so much?”

“The big-break story. The insider’s report on whether we lie to our consumers.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. I told you I’m not doing that story.”

His intense, disquieting eyes stayed locked with hers. “So if you came on this ride today only because of Roland, why did you kiss me ... respond to me ... so convincingly?”

Alyssa gulped. How was she supposed to answer that? Tell him that he confused her? Bewildered her? Tied her up in knots? Made her feel emotions she’d never known?

No way was she handing him that much ammunition! He’d never believe her anyway. He’d think it was another seduction attempt. How utterly humiliating....

But his question hung in the air. Why had she kissed him ... responded to him so wildly? Alyssa groped mentally for an acceptable explanation.

“Grief?” she offered at last.

“*Grief?*” He looked poleaxed.

Sorry, Roland. “Yes. Grief does strange things to people.” She was babbling now. She wanted to run away. Hide. “Everyone reacts differently. Being here—” she waved a hand at the waterfall “—thinking and talking about Roland set me off. I’m leaving today. I’ll never see you again. I didn’t think you’d mind. I mean, guys don’t take sex as seriously as women ...” She stopped talking as anger ignited in his eyes.

“Didn’t think I’d mind? I suppose I shouldn’t care that it’s just my bloody bad luck to be the butt of my brother’s clandestine girlfriend’s lustful grief attack.”

Alyssa couldn’t think of any suitable response to that.

It was just as well that she was leaving.

Thank goodness she hadn’t agreed to do the story David had wanted her to do. If she stayed any longer, there was a very real danger that she was going to do something incredibly stupid ... like fall in love with Joshua Saxon.

They headed home in silence. As the bush gave way to grassy fields, Alyssa scanned the surrounding countryside with nostalgic eyes. Even though she’d come with the express purpose of being closer to Roland, Alyssa knew she would never think of dense green bush and cascading water without remembering the tall, commanding man who rode beside her.

She cast him a sideways glance. A frown carved a deep furrow between his brows. She glanced quickly away before he could catch her looking at him, her silly heart in her eyes.

As they drew closer to the stable yard they heard a commotion.

“What the—” Joshua broke off as they were met by the sight of the black stallion racing up and down along his paddock fence, his tail held high like a banner and his nostrils flared so wide that the inner red tissue showed. In the adjacent paddock horses whinnied frantically, milling around in a tight bunch.

“What’s upset them?” Joshua nudged his horse into a trot.

Alyssa followed more slowly.

The black horse, still galloping along the length of the fence, slammed to a halt at the gate and trumpeted with rage. It was then Alyssa saw the two youths in the paddock, half concealed behind the trunk of a gigantic oak.

“Hey,” Joshua yelled.

The pair took one look at Joshua and ran across the field, vanishing round the back of the stables. A moment later an engine roared and a motorbike came racing out from nowhere.

“Look out!”

But Joshua’s warning came too late. The stallion came catapulting over the paddock fence, rushing headlong toward them. Breeze had gone rigid between her legs. Alyssa snatched at the mare’s mane. At the last moment the black horse swerved around Breeze, so close that Alyssa could smell his sweat, and galloped past, his iron-clad hooves ringing on the ground.

Unsettled by the motorbike, the enraged and screaming stallion, the mare shied violently to the side.

Alyssa lurched in the saddle. For a moment she thought she might stay on, but then she felt herself tossed skyward. She hung suspended in the air for a moment, conscious of the plunging distressed horse below her. Then she was spinning toward the ground, sound and colour rushing past.

“Let go of the reins.” It was a frantic yell.

Alyssa opened her hands. Breeze bolted free. The impact of the cobbles was bone-numbing. Alyssa sobbed with pain, which turned to fear as she discovered that she couldn’t breath.

“Lie still.”

Joshua’s voice boomed above her. His black boots came into her line of vision and then he crouched down beside her. She caught a glimpse of dark, worried eyes.

She gasped, trying to speak.

“Hush, you’re winded. Don’t talk.”

A moment later a sound escaped her throat. Agony.

“Does your head hurt?” His voice was urgent.

She shook her head again. “My back,” she sobbed.

He went white, his lips pale. “Don’t move. I’m going to call an ambulance.”

There was the sound of light feet running on the cobbles. Caitlyn? Joshua turned his head and barked out a terse order.

Then a fresh stab of excruciating pain stopped her thinking. “My hand!”

“Breeze must have stepped on you.” Joshua touched her fingers.

“Ouch!” She nearly blacked out.

He pulled his hand away. “The ambulance won’t be long.”

Alyssa was barely aware of the ride to the hospital as she shifted in and out of consciousness. But even as everything closed in and went dark, Alyssa knew that Joshua sat beside her, his eyes full of concern, never leaving her face.

After her examination in the emergency room had been completed, Joshua entered the curtained-off area where Alyssa lay.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

Terrible. She hated the hospital. The sterile smell, the hushed sounds all brought back the nightmare of Roland’s accident—of Joshua breaking the devastating news that her brother had died.

“Sore,” she said finally, coming back from the hellhole to find his gaze fixed on her face.

“They’ll operate on your hand soon. Is there anyone you want me to call?” Concern etched deep lines into his face. And there was something more. Something that made her heart tremble.

“To call?” she said stupidly, closing her eyes so that the gorgeous features with the misleading concern would go away. Joshua didn’t give a damn for her. He thought she was the kind of woman who seduced men for career gain. Allowing herself to build hopes on his concern for her would bring nothing but heartache.

“Your family. Your friends. To let them know what has happened.”

Her editor.

It reflected the barren state of her life that the only person who came to mind related to her work. Her boss ... not family ... not a friend. But David could wait until after the operation.

Thankfully the emergency-room doctor had confirmed that there was no damage to her spine—only some bruising on her back, and damage to her fingers where the reins had wrenched the ligaments and the fracture of her thumb where Breeze must have trodden on her. It would need setting. And perhaps a pin, the doctor had said. Nothing life threatening.

No, there was no one who desperately needed to know. No one who would drop everything and rush to hold her mangled hand. A tear slid out the side of her closed eye.

Alyssa turned her head away, reluctant to let Joshua witness her bout of self-pity. The silence lengthened. He—her nemesis who was being so unexpectedly kind—was waiting for her reply. She moved her head from side to side against the regulation hospital pillow.

“No one?”

Was that disbelief she heard? Swallowing the lump in her throat, she opened her eyes. “My father lives in Australia with his new wife and her children,” she murmured huskily, her throat raw from suppressed tears. She gave him a tremulous smile. “He’s taking his retirement from the bench seriously.”

“I’m sorry you’re alone.” Joshua sounded more subdued than she’d ever heard him, no sign of his usual take-charge arrogance remained.

Clearly he’d remembered that her mother was dead, that she was an only child.

“What about friends?” he asked. “Can I call anyone?”

“They have their own lives ... families, children.”

“They’re all married?”

“Yes. All except Lanie, my best friend, but she recently moved to Christchurch.”

Emotion flashed in Alyssa’s eyes. An emotion that caused Joshua to blink. Pain? Vulnerability? Loneliness? He looked again. But her eyes were already closing.

“I’m tired,” she whispered.

And Joshua wanted to kick himself for interrogating her when she least needed it.

“Rest,” he said feeling utterly powerless to do anything about her misery. “It shouldn’t be long until they operate.”

In the end, Joshua waited until the operation was over and had been declared a success by the surgeon he’d arranged—the best in the region. Once Alyssa had been moved to the private ward he’d booked, Joshua sat beside her while she blinked sleepily after a hefty dose of painkillers.

The surgeon would be doing rounds before he went home, and Joshua had every intention of cornering him to discuss Alyssa’s prognosis.

He looked down at her. She’d been a real trouper. Uncomplaining. Pleasant to the nurses. A dream patient.

On cue, almost as though she’d heard his thoughts, her eyelids fluttered.

“My boss is going to be mad. I’m going to need even more time off work.” She gave him a sleepy look from under heavy eyelids and pushed the covers back with her uninjured hand, revealing a white hospital-issue flannel gown.

Instantly his body stirred. God, the woman was hurt ... drugged ... and one sleepy glance was all it took to electrify him. To bring back the memory of strawberries and soft skin and—

He pressed his mouth into a hard line.

“Have no fear, I won’t be staying at Saxon’s Folly,” she muttered, misinterpreting his frustration.

“Yes, you will.” It had been bothering him ever since the doctor had asked who would be looking after her. “You’re staying. I’m the boss, remember? What I say goes.”

“I thought you couldn’t wait to be rid of me?”

“So did I,” he growled.

But she didn’t laugh as he’d half-intended. Instead her irises darkened her eyes to an unfathomable shade. “What of your concerns that I might stir up trouble with your mother ... and Amy?”

“I’ll confine you to your room—so seeing Amy won’t be a problem.” Joshua smiled to make sure she knew he had no real intention of locking her away. “And for some strange reason your presence seems to be doing my mother good.” He hadn’t expected that. “Everything she says is prefaced by ‘Alyssa thinks ...’ It’s her latest craze.”

Her expression softened. “I like your mother very much, too. I couldn’t impose on her. She has enough on her plate emotionally without an invalid in the house.”

“You don’t have a choice.” Joshua stood and stretched, his back aching from the hard hospital chair that he’d occupied for the past hour. “You’re staying at Saxon’s Folly.”

“Because you feel that what happened was your fault?”

Trust Alyssa to see through his offer to the self-blame that lay beneath. “Yes.” He raised an eyebrow and added with barbed humour, “And because I don’t trust you not to rush away and get legal advice so that you can sue Saxon’s Folly. Consider my invitation an attempt to save on legal costs.”

That managed to raise a smile. “Okay, then I definitely have no choice. But don’t accuse me of trying to seduce you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He couldn’t blame her for her reluctance to stay. He’d done all he could to drive her away, scared that she might hurt his family. And then there was his other unspoken fear.

The fear that stirred whenever she came too close.

The deep-seated fear that she could seduce him anytime she chose seemed unreasonably absurd when, eyelids drooping, she said softly, “Thanks, Joshua.”

The fear melted away beneath her gratitude.

“My pleasure.”

The hands of the clock on the wall moved forward, and Joshua sat quietly by Alyssa’s side as her eyes remained firmly shut. Not even the bustle of activity when the night staff came on duty caused her to stir.

He stared into her pale face. She was beautiful in sleep, her features perfect. The straight nose, the curved lips, the ivory skin and dark auburn hair that spilled against her fine-grained skin. How could he have missed her perfection?

Awake, Alyssa was so animated—so opinionated—that all consideration of her beauty was driven from his mind. He was always aware of *her* ... the spirit of her ... the very essence that was Alyssa. She annoyed him. She frustrated the hell out of him. And, yes, he’d admit she intrigued him more than any woman in a long, long time.

The night of the masked ball his attention had been captured by her figure, her poise, her assurance ... and the in-your-face challenge that she radiated. Once he’d held her in his arms ... well, hell, his hormones had taken over.

And then at the hospital, when his only concern should’ve been for his brother, he’d discovered he’d been turned on by Alyssa Blake, his dead brother’s forbidden lover.

The discovery had shaken him to the core.

Now he stared at her, remembered the flash of vulnerability when she’d spoke of her married friends with their families.

The loneliness in her eyes had called out to him.

Did she yearn for a family ... children? Had she expected to find them with Roland? Or had his sometimes obtuse older brother caused the emptiness he’d glimpsed hidden inside her?

Then there was Amy, the woman who Roland had been supposed to marry before Christmas. Joshua had been eager for Alyssa to leave—before Amy found out Roland had been screwing around with another woman.

He felt torn between looking out for Amy, his mother’s goddaughter who he’d looked out for all his life, and the responsibility he’d acquired to Alyssa. She was hurt, in hospital, with no one to call on to tell about her operation.

Tough, opinionated Alyssa Blake needed *him*.

Watching her, something heavy shifted deep inside his chest. Alyssa wouldn’t be able to leave tomorrow. And even when she’d recovered enough to drive, how could he let her go back to Auckland, where clearly there was no one to take care of her?

Suddenly Joshua wished Roland had lived so that he could throttle his brother. How dare Roland have been so irresponsible? He’d always been a bit of a playboy ... but to mess around with two women simultaneously was stupid. Hadn’t he expected them to find out about each other? And now Joshua was stuck with the mess.

Joshua stared at Alyssa. The worst of the whole mess was that he was starting to suspect that if she crooked her little finger at him, he’d come running.

He wanted her for himself.

A memory from earlier in the day flashed into his mind. Of her head tilted back, her eyes shut and her glorious hair spilled over the grass beside the woodland pool. God. He'd nearly damn well had her. He'd touched her pale skin, kissed her soft, sensitive breasts. He'd taunted Alyssa, asking if she wanted more. The raw truth was he'd craved more. Much more.

If the knowledge that she'd gone with him only because she'd wanted to see Roland's favourite spot hadn't been flung over him like a bucket of icy water, he would've taken her.

He almost wished he had.

A soft groan of shock escaped him.

What kind of man lusted after his brother's lover ... a brother who hadn't even been buried for a month?

Nine

Alyssa woke to find pale gray, early-morning light filtering in through the half-closed blinds. Outside the ward she could hear the clank of heavy trolleys, hear the attendants offering patients tea down the corridor.

She started to sit up. A movement in the corner of the still-dim room startled her.

Joshua unfolded himself from an armchair. "Let me help you."

"Thanks." She leant forward. He bent over her and immediately his masculine scent embraced her. Sun and earth and a hint of lemon and something a little spicy. He propped a pillow in behind her back.

She couldn't help thinking how unfair it was. She must look a mess, her hair rumpled, her eyes sleepy. Whereas the hollows beneath Joshua's eyes gave him a jaded appeal that simply made him more attractive. The events of the past week had added edges and angles to his handsome features. Shadows darkened his eyes to black pits and in the depths she could discern his turbulence.

"Don't tell me you stayed up all night?" she asked.

He nodded.

She clicked. "You should've gone home. That chair must've been terribly uncomfortable. Did you get any sleep?"

He came closer, till he stood beside the hospital bed. "Not much. There's a lot on my mind."

She could imagine. Joshua took his responsibilities seriously. And right now they must be piling up almost out of control. Saxon's Folly took up a huge chunk of his time. He had his parents' emotional well-being to look after ... and Kay had told her that he was the executor of Roland's estate. And beyond that lurked the threat of scandal about the tastings in the wine competition. No wonder he looked drained. All those matters must weigh heavily on his mind.

His eyes scanned her face, inspecting every feature, until Alyssa started to feel self-conscious. "What is it? What are you thinking about?"

The dark eyes met hers squarely. "You told me once that you loved my brother a great deal."

He seemed to expect a reply. Alyssa swallowed hard, not knowing what to say. At last, she simply nodded.

"But you let me kiss you." He brushed her lips with his fingertips. "Here. And here." His fingers skimmed her neck, touching the base of her throat.

"Joshua!" Eyes stretched wide, she objected to his touch.

His hand moved to rest on the covers beside her. "I'd like to think that you would not have responded to me like that if you loved Roland."

"I loved him." It was a squeak of sound. Alyssa found that she couldn't hold his gaze. She glanced down. His hand lay on the crisp white bedcovers. She jumped as he lifted it and placed a finger under her chin.

Tilting her head, he looked down into her eyes and asked, "Did you ever sleep with Roland?"

Her pulse started to hammer. She swallowed nervously. "What kind of a question is that?"

"Answer me."

She shook her head.

Something gave in the bleak, black gaze. "Now we're making progress. I don't believe that you'd sleep with one man, and then respond to me like you did down at the waterfall so soon after his death. Not if you really loved him—not with your black-and-white views of the world. Not even because of grief."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.