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ANNIE WEST

Undone by His Touch



Annie West

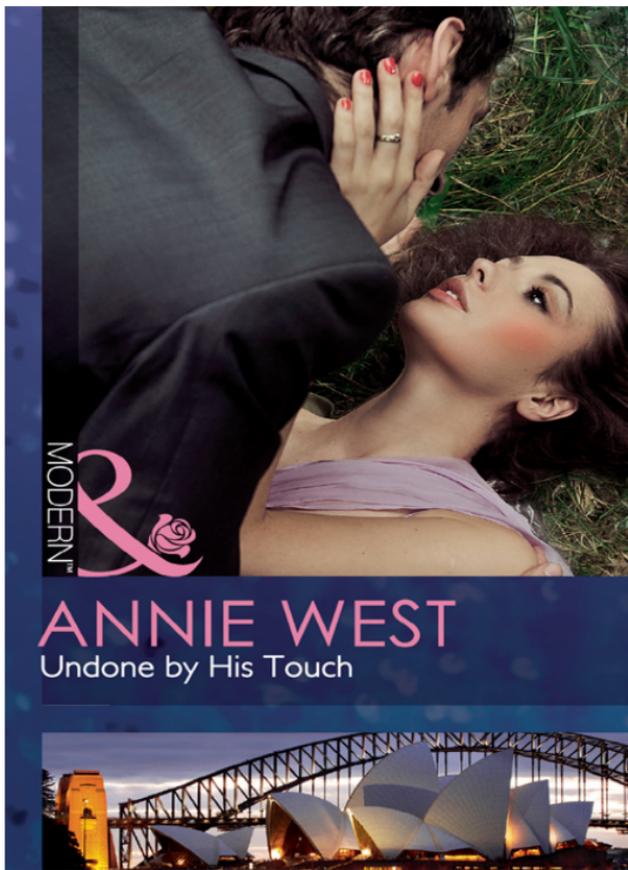
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Аннотация

Revealed in the darkness...Cast into a world of black, Declan Carstairs is a man in torment. Consumed by guilt, he sees no way out of the darkness his life has become. Only one thing drives him: finding the woman who caused his brother's death and the accident that took his sight. Housekeeper Chloe Daniels refuses to pity her devastatingly gorgeous boss, but treating him as the strong, capable man he is soon proves dangerous. As Chloe falls deeper under Declan's spell, awakened by his touch, she forgets all about the secret she keeps that may destroy them both...

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Declan's head shot round, following the sound of Chloe's voice as she moved closer.

'What did you say?'

'You're scared of someone else seeing you vulnerable.'

She stopped before him. Her voice was low and close. Her light scent swirled around him.

Furious as much at his awareness of her as at her words, he lifted a hand to grab her, then stopped at the last moment. Remembering what had happened the last time he'd touched her. How compelling the need had been to take more. To take *her*, with all the pent-up desperation of a blind man groping for the light. He'd never before been so needy. Or so bereft.

Fire scorched his skin—fury and guilt. And desire.

About the Author

ANNIE WEST spent her childhood with her nose between the covers of a book—a habit she retains. After years preparing government reports and official correspondence she decided to write something she *really* enjoys. And there's nothing she loves more than a great romance. Despite her office-bound past she has managed a few interesting moments—including a marriage offer with the promise of a herd of camels to sweeten the contract. She is happily married to her ever-patient husband (who has never owned a dromedary). They live with their two children amongst the tall eucalypts at beautiful Lake Macquarie, on Australia's east coast. You can e-mail Annie at www.annie-west.com, or write to her at PO Box 1041, Warners Bay, NSW 2282, Australia.

Recent titles by the same author:

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Undone

by His Touch

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To two inspirational women,
Miranda Lee and Emma Darcy, with thanks.

PROLOGUE

‘YOU can’t save us!’ The hoarse cry echoed in Declan’s ears and he tore his gaze back to Adrian, dangling below him on the rope. ‘It’s going to give way!’

They were suspended a hundred metres above an isolated canyon. The wind was rising and his brother’s nerves were shot. Already Adrian’s panic had dislodged one of the pitons securing them to the cliff.

‘Hang on,’ Declan gasped. His lungs hammered from his last attempt to haul them up.

Craning his neck, he looked up to where they’d fallen. A cascade of crumbling rock splattered his face. His throat shredded raw with each breath.

If only he’d called Adrian’s bluff when he’d threatened to climb solo. But Adrian had seemed so brittle, Declan hadn’t pushed. He’d hoped to regain their closeness and persuade Adrian to open up while they climbed.

Now their survival hung in the balance.

‘Steady, Ade. It’ll be OK.’

‘OK?’ Adrian’s voice rose. ‘Don’t lie, Declan.’

Declan shot him a reassuring look. ‘I almost made it last time. Third time’s the charm. You’ll see.’

Setting his jaw, he grabbed the rope and hauled, blocking out screaming pain as the rope lacerated hands already raw. His

shoulders and neck locked in agony as he took their combined weight. It felt as if his spine might snap or his shoulders dislocate from the strain.

‘You’ll never do it. It’s impossible.’

The words washed over him. He had no wind for speech.

‘You know, it’s not so bad.’ Minutes later Adrian spoke again, his voice barely audible over the thundering of Declan’s blood. ‘A fall will be quick, at least.’

‘Won’t ...’ Declan fought to dredge up words in a throat scoured dry ‘... fall.’

‘I’ve thought about it. One turn of the wheel in front of an oncoming truck and it’d all be over.’

The words slurred, warped by the frantic throb of Declan’s pulse and the searing pain in his hands. Sweat blurred his vision.

‘It’s not like there’s anything to live for.’ Adrian’s voice was so soft Declan wasn’t sure if he imagined it. Could pain make you hallucinate?

‘I’ve lost her. She wants someone rich and successful like you, not a failure. She dumped me!’

‘Dumped?’ Declan’s voice was a husk of sound.

He needed to stop before his arms wrenched from their sockets. The world narrowed to the line that wore his hands to the bone, the wrenching strain and the eddying sound of Adrian’s voice. A shiver of anxiety snaked through him at his brother’s tone, but he was too exhausted to respond.

The wind picked up, swaying them.

The salt tang of blood burst on his lip. Two metres ...

‘I can’t go on. I’ve tried, but she’s the only woman I ever loved and she betrayed me. This is for the best.’

Best? The rope jerked unevenly. Despite the sweat streaming over Declan’s sun-baked body, an icy finger slicked the back of his neck.

‘Ade?’

Readjusting frozen neck muscles, he managed to look down. Familiar grey eyes met his. This time they held no panic, only an odd calm that made Declan’s heart plunge.

‘This way one of us might survive. I can’t go on without her.’

Declan gasped in horror as he looked lower to where Adrian sawed at the line that bound them.

‘Adrian! No!’

‘Goodbye, Declan.’

Suddenly the dragging weight on his shoulders disappeared. There was no scream, no sound. It seemed a lifetime before Declan heard the muffled crunch of branches below and lost sight of his brother.

CHAPTER ONE

THE stack of towels was thick and soft in Chloe's arms as she nudged open the laundry door and headed for the pool house.

She dipped her head and inhaled the scent of sunshine and lavender: one of the special touches she prided herself on when the weather was good enough to use the drying hedge rather than the industrial-sized drier.

Concentrating on such small things, resuming her routine, had seen her through this difficult first morning back at Carinya.

She refused to let memories spook her. Her job was too precious and she needed the financial security more than ever. Besides, she had nothing to fear now.

So she'd ignored the anxiety feathering down her spine when she'd entered her housekeeper's quarters and remembered the last morning she'd been here. And again as she'd started work and imagined a dark-haired presence watching from the shadows as he had so often watched before.

That was in the past. He'd gone for ever. That knowledge helped banish the shadows.

Turning the corner of the house she slowed, hearing the sound of someone in the pool.

The sight of a familiar dark head emerging from the water with each stroke slammed her heart against her ribs. She faltered to a stop, not believing her eyes.

But he's gone!

This was impossible!

Transfixed, Chloe watched him execute a perfect racing turn, coming up metres from the end of the pool. The strenuous butterfly stroke, one she'd never been able to master, looked easy as that long body cleaved the water. The scoop of out-thrust arms accentuated the impressive length of tanned limbs and the power in his shoulders.

Chloe sagged against the wall, her throat tight, heart pounding as she tried to make sense of what she saw.

But he's dead ... Dead. The words ran, a bewildered mantra, through her brain.

Yet for one lap of the pool Chloe was caught in nightmare, transfixed by the return of the man she'd come to fear.

Another turn and this time he swam freestyle, powering down the metres as if he had a record to break.

It was only then that her stunned eyes saw beyond the shreds of memory and noticed anomalies. This man looked bigger, though it was difficult to tell in the water. He swam differently, as if propelled by an unseen force that supercharged him through the crystal depths. He was like an efficient machine, each stroke smooth and economical, yet with a raw strength that seemed almost brutal.

Chloe couldn't imagine this man doing a lazy lap or two then loafing away an afternoon at the pool-side with a tray of drinks and his mobile phone.

Even now, turning again and beginning another lap, his speed didn't diminish.

Driven: that was the word that came to mind.

The man she remembered had been many things but driven wasn't one of them. *At least, not until he'd turned his attention to her.*

Chloe clanged that door shut in her mind. She refused to go there.

The swimmer reached the far end of the pool and in one supple movement heaved himself out. Water streamed down, bright sunlight burnished bronzed, water-slicked skin, from the bunch of muscles in his arms and back to the tight curve of bare buttocks.

Chloe sucked in her breath, her dazed brain registering his nakedness at the same time it assured her this couldn't be *him*. The shape of the head was different. The height. The breadth. His sheer imposing *maleness*.

He half-turned and she averted her eyes, but not before she saw a long scar ripping down one powerful thigh.

Relief, the return to normality after those frozen moments of disbelief, made her light-headed. Sanity returned with a rush of embarrassment as she realised who she'd been staring at.

Hurriedly, she straightened away from the wall and stepped out briskly towards the pool house.

'Who's that?' The deep voice was sharp but he didn't turn around, merely reached for his towel on a nearby sun lounger. He

wrapped it casually round his hips with all the nonchalance of a man supremely confident in his own nakedness. And the fact he owned the whole multi-million-dollar estate.

Reluctantly Chloe detoured towards the clematis-draped pergola where he stood, putting on sunglasses.

It wasn't the way she'd have chosen to meet her employer at last.

Housekeepers were supposed to be discreet, unobtrusive, not intruding on their boss's privacy.

The image of firmly toned masculine flesh flashed before her eyes and a tingle of unfamiliar heat stirred.

She faltered, taking a moment to identify the sensation she hadn't experienced in years. When she did, shock brought a gasp to her lips.

'I'm waiting.' The words weren't curt, but his languid tone barely concealed impatience.

Chloe stepped forward. Now was not the time to dwell on the fact she'd just felt a spark of arousal for the first time in six years. At the sight of her naked employer.

'It's your housekeeper, Chloe Daniels.' She waited for him to turn. When he finally did she hefted the towels higher on one arm and extended her right hand. Tried to banish the memory of how she'd stood, gawping like some sex-starved miss at the sight of him.

Sex-starved she might technically be but she was no simpering miss.

He stood four-square before her, wearing nothing but reflective sunglasses and a towel. He exuded an air of authority that befitted a man of his commercial stature.

Right now it was his physical stature that pole-axed her.

Chloe had to tilt her head to meet his eyes. Despite her self-discipline and the compelling need not to ogle her employer, it took far too much effort to keep her gaze from that broad chest and ridged abdomen.

Standing this close, she realised Declan Carstairs was bigger, tougher, more imposing than the man she'd known. Only the hair colour and loose-limbed grace were the same—family traits.

His jaw was shadowed, not with sculpted designer stubble, but with several days' growth that made him look more like a lumberjack or pirate than a corporate tycoon.

A sensation like swirling treacle low in her belly unnerved her. She had a sudden mental picture of him swinging across a tall-masted ship, a woman on his shoulder.

Maybe it was the scar that conjured the notion. Long and not yet silvered with age, it carved an uncompromising groove up one cheek, curling in towards his eye.

Chloe shivered as she thought of the long matching wound on his leg.

'We haven't met before,' she said in the efficient housekeeper's voice she'd perfected over the years. She was grateful for it now as her pulse hammered. 'I've been—'

'Away.' He paused, watching her, yet giving no answering

smile. His forehead pleated in a frown and his dark eyebrows slashed down as if in disapproval.

By now she felt gauche with her arm extended towards him. When it became clear he wouldn't give her the courtesy of a handshake, she dropped her arm, disappointment adding to her discomfort. Maybe arrogance ran in his family.

'A family emergency, wasn't it?' he surprised her by asking.

She hadn't expected him to know that, especially since they'd never met. His personal assistant had hired her, explaining his boss was often away for months at a time. Carinya had been his family's spectacular Blue Mountains retreat for generations but he lived a couple of hours east in Sydney when he wasn't travelling.

'That's right, Mr Carstairs. A family issue.'

Not that she'd known that the morning she'd fled this house. She'd simply packed her bags and caught the first train out. It was only later she'd discovered that in a weird coincidence of fate she faced not one but two crises. At least one of them was over.

'But we can count on your continued presence now?' One eyebrow arched above sleek designer glasses.

'Of course.' She'd been grateful when her sudden request for leave had been granted, but now she felt a spark of resentment at his attitude. 'I moved back in a couple of hours ago. I'll be on hand whenever you need me.' She forced herself to smile up into his stern face.

If she'd expected a glimmer of friendliness she was

disappointed.

The way he stood, staring, no answering smile or nod, should have unnerved her. But Chloe was used to standing up for herself, proving herself again and again. Her self-confidence had been forged in a hard school.

She met his gaze squarely, trying to read his face.

Most people gave non-verbal clues to their thoughts. Not Declan Carstairs. Maybe that was how he'd taken his inherited fortune and turned it into something astronomical—by playing his cards close to his chest.

Yet this was something more. Was that disapproval she read in his set jaw and tense mouth? Anger, even?

Her skin tightened as she recalled standing frozen, eyes glued to his naked form, well after she'd realised who he was. There'd been a distinct element of appreciation as her gaze had slid over his virile form.

Had he caught her staring? Heat washed her throat and cheeks.

'I'm sorry for interrupting you just now. I hadn't realised you were here in the pool.'

Or that you were naked.

'Mr Sarkesian left a message saying you'd both be working in your study this morning and he'd brief me after that. I'd never intentionally ...'

A dismissive gesture silenced her. 'David had to leave on unexpected business.' He paused and she had the impression of tension clamping his big frame rigid. 'Was there anything else?'

‘No, nothing.’ She’d been waiting for him. ‘I’ll just take these to the pool house. Unless there’s anything I can get you?’

He shook his head. Chloe fought not to notice the way tiny droplets of water eased over his shoulders to track down across the solid musculature of his chest.

Her mouth dried and the heat in her face notched up to scorching.

She was doing it again!

She didn’t ogle attractive men. Yet the sight of her boss’s half-naked body and don’t-mess-with-me jaw conjured feelings Chloe had all but forgotten. How could it be?

Even the dreadful scar seemed to accentuate the earthy sexuality and power of his strong-boned face.

Inwardly she cringed, hoping he was oblivious to her thoughts tumbling out of control.

That black eyebrow climbed again. ‘Well. What are you waiting for, Ms Daniels? Don’t let me keep you from work.’

That was what he paid her for. She had no trouble reading his dismissive tone.

‘Of course, Mr Carstairs.’ Chloe tamped down annoyance and embarrassment as she turned away. She kept her pace even and her shoulders back, projecting a calm she was far from feeling.

Yet she reeled in shock. First had been the horror of thinking the man who haunted her nightmares had returned. Then there’d been that rush of relief, so strong she’d trembled with it. And finally the punch-to-the-gut reaction to Declan Carstairs.

Despite the scarring, he had the body of a male pin-up. More than that his sheer, sizzling intensity resonated like a force field, sucking the air from her lungs.

She was horrified to register a jiggle of response in that secret hollow place deep within. It had been years since she'd felt sexual awareness. On the contrary, she'd been accused of chilling indifference, of being an ice princess.

The recollection twisted her lips. She'd promised herself never to dwell on that again.

Now to feel a spark of attraction for her boss? Impossible!

In twenty-seven years there'd only been Mark, just one man to make her feel the blaze of desire. It was unthinkable that Declan Carstairs, rich, ruthless and disapproving, should re-ignite such feelings.

Pursing her lips, Chloe set about stripping the pool house of used towels.

Halfway back to the house, the sound of shattering glass made her spin towards the pergola.

Declan Carstairs stood, frozen in tableau, one arm stretched towards the table. On the ground before him lay the splintered remnants of a glass.

Curiously it was his stillness that snared her gaze rather than the broken glass so dangerously close to the pool. Too late she caught herself staring at those broad, straight shoulders a little too avidly.

'It's all right, Mr Carstairs, don't you bother with it. I'll fetch a

brush and pan.’ Chloe hurried back to the laundry, dumped the towels and scooped up her equipment.

Strangely, on her return he hadn’t moved, as if he was waiting to make sure she did the job properly.

She’d worked for wealthy people before, some demanding and others so relaxed they barely noticed what went on around them. None would have questioned her ability to do such a simple task. Yet his stillness and the furrow of concentration on his brow told her he had other ideas.

Chloe crouched before him, brushing up the shards.

‘I’ll just be a moment.’ Yet her usually brisk movements seemed slow, her limbs heavy as his silent presence loomed close. Deliberately she turned from the sight of those strong sinewed feet planted wide on the flagstones.

Ridiculous that even the man’s naked feet looked sexy. He disapproved of her, was checking on her. She didn’t want to feel anything for him.

‘Thank you, Ms Daniels.’

Chloe bit down on a bubble of laughter. Such formality when her mind buzzed with unsettling images of his bare body. Just as well he couldn’t read her thoughts.

If only he’d move and leave her to get on with this.

Thinning her lips, she concentrated on locating shards that had spread further than the rest. ‘I think that’s almost—No! Watch out!’

Too late she saw his heel come down on a splinter as he turned.

A single, low oath blasted from his lips as bright scarlet bloomed and spread across the flagstones.

‘Wait, there’s another one.’

Chloe scuttled across to pick up the shard. ‘There, that’s all. You can move to the chair now.’

Above her he stood still as a bronze god, though in the silence she heard the hiss of his indrawn breath. Blood streamed from the gash at his heel.

Finally he spoke. ‘Perhaps you’d help me, Ms Daniels.’

Frowning, she got to her feet, put the brush and pan aside and moved closer. What did he want her to do? Surely he had the strength to hop the short distance to the chair?

‘You want me to support you?’

Something like anger flashed across his face and his nostrils flared. ‘Nothing so dramatic.’ He spoke through gritted teeth. ‘Just give me your hand.’

Bewildered, Chloe complied, slipping her hand into his, absorbing the heat and sensation of hard strength surrounding her work-roughened fingers. She registered the ridges of scar tissue across his palm. A shiver of sensation skated up her arm and shoulder, raising the fine hairs on her nape.

She ignored it and looked into his face. This close she read the tiny lines bracketing his mouth as if he spent more time compressing his lips than smiling.

His features were stiff and the scar stood lividly on his taut cheek. Fierce energy hummed through him and into her, like a

power source without a safety valve, inexorably rising. Tension twisted as she waited for him to speak.

Her eyes were at the level of his mouth and she watched, fascinated, as his sensuously sculpted lips thinned into a pained line.

‘You need to sit down so I can get the glass out. It won’t hurt so much then.’

His bark of laughter, rough and raw, echoed across the flagstones, jerking her gaze up to those impenetrable dark glasses.

‘The pain doesn’t bother me.’

Chloe frowned. If he wasn’t in pain, then what ...?

He exhaled slowly through his nostrils, his fingers tightening around hers. When he spoke there was resignation as well as an undercurrent of anger in his words. ‘Just lead me to a chair, will you?’

‘Lead ...?’

‘Yes, damn it. Haven’t you realised you’re talking to a blind man?’

CHAPTER TWO

THE silence pounded with the beat of blood roaring in his ears. He held his breath with anticipation, waiting for the inevitable gush of sympathy.

It was all he could do not to fling away from her.

He didn't want sympathy. He didn't want company. But he couldn't afford the luxury of managing for himself. He'd probably end up with a foot full of glass, or, having lost his bearings completely, a black eye from walking into the pergola.

Almost he didn't care. Yet he retained enough pride not to want to make a complete fool of himself before her. He did that often enough when he was alone.

Frustration surged and his muscles tightened as he thought of his frequent tumbles, his inability to do half the things he'd always taken for granted.

'Of course,' she murmured. 'I apologise. I hadn't realised you couldn't see.' Her words were the same as before, cool, crisp, not a shred of syrupy sympathy and for a moment he stood, startled.

Then she lifted his arm, wrapped hers around his torso and wedged her shoulder beneath his armpit. 'If you lean on me it will be easier.'

She might have been a nurse with her brisk practicality. If he was reasonable he'd be grateful for her no-nonsense attitude.

But the soft press of her breast against his side, the cushioned

swell of her hip against his thigh, the sudden scent of vanilla and sunshine as her hair tickled his bare chest and arm, made him anything but reasonable.

How long since he'd held a woman close? Would he ever again?

'No!' Declan yanked his arm free, shoving her aside rather than feel the teasing brush of that rounded feminine form. 'I can do it myself. Just show me the way.' His other hand tightened around hers as frustration rose.

'Very well.'

Without another word she stepped forward, leading him. Declan put his weight on his good foot, and then supported himself on the ball of the injured one.

She didn't go too fast. Nor did she shilly shally and ask if he could keep up. It had taken him weeks to cure David of that and David was the best PA he'd ever had.

'There you are. The chair is to your left.' She took his left hand in hers and pulled him gently forward till he touched metal. 'There's the arm of it.'

She said no more but waited till he manoeuvred himself round and down into the seat.

'If you wait a few moments I'll go and get the first-aid kit.'

'I've got nowhere else to go.'

There was an almost inaudible huff of sound, as if he'd surprised a laugh out of her. Then she was gone and he was alone.

He should be used to it now, this sense of isolation. Sometimes

it grew so intense it morphed into a crawling fear that one day he'd be left so completely alone in the dark he'd never be with others again. A childish terror, but one that still woke him in the middle of the night, chest heaving and heart pounding as he reached out, clawing at the inky darkness that enveloped him.

Declan reminded himself that solitude was what he'd always come to the mountains for. A change from the hectic pace of his overloaded schedule. His usually overloaded schedule.

No longer. He'd had to delegate more to keep up, despite David's assistance.

Anger, his ever-present companion, snarled in his veins—till he reminded himself he'd been the lucky one.

Instantly the familiar fog of regret and guilt enveloped him. His stomach twisted. He should be thankful to have survived. Yet he couldn't convince himself it was for the best. His failure made this prison of blankness even more unbearable. If only he'd ...

'Here you are. I've brought the first-aid supplies.' That voice again, cool and clear, yet with a richness that made him wonder what her singing voice was like.

'You had no trouble finding me, then?' Sarcasm was poor repayment for her assistance, but the caged beast that raged and growled inside demanded outlet. Declan's usual means of using up excess energy—skiing, climbing and sex—were denied him.

Sex was possible, he supposed. He'd have to get someone like this efficient housekeeper to find and dial the numbers in his private directory. For a moment he diverted himself, wondering

how she'd react if he asked her to ring his ex-lovers. Would she sound so prim and proper then?

But he couldn't stomach the thought of sympathy sex. For that was what it would be.

Scorching anger churned in his belly. What woman would want him now?

He refused to be the object of anyone's pity, grateful for the crumbs they deigned to dole out now he was so much less than he'd been. Even the doctors played that game, holding out the possibility his sight might return, though never guaranteeing it.

'Your foot must be paining you after all.' He heard her put something on the paving stones.

'You know that for a fact, do you?' He'd got tired in hospital of the staff dictating what was best for him and how he should feel. Till he'd discharged himself early and come here to recuperate in private.

'I'm guessing. You're cranky, but I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt in thinking there's a reason for your tone.'

To his surprise, his mouth lifted in a twist of amusement that pulled unused muscles tight. He couldn't remember smiling since the accident.

'Where's your sympathy for the poor maimed invalid?'

'Probably the same place your manners are.' She paused and lifted his foot carefully to place it on something cushioned. A towel on her lap? For some reason he rather enjoyed the idea of her kneeling at his feet.

‘Besides,’ she said as he felt gentle fingers touch his heel, ‘You’re not an invalid.’

Declan’s mouth tightened and his hands curled into fists. Great, just great: another happy-clappy optimist. Just like the last rehab worker.

‘What do you call this, then?’ he jeered, jerking a hand in the direction of his glasses.

‘Just because you can’t see doesn’t mean you’re an invalid. The man I saw doing lap after lap in the pool was fitter and more agile than most people I know.’ Her hold on his foot changed. ‘This may hurt a little.’

It hurt a lot, but Declan was used to pain now. Getting walking again on that bad leg had taken more guts and determination than anything he’d ever done. It had been harder even than turning his back on family connections when he was a kid determined to build a business his own way.

‘Most people can see what they’re doing.’ Was she deliberately obtuse?

‘Are you looking for sympathy?’

‘No!’ Not that. Just ...

Hell. He didn’t know what he wanted. Just that he was tired of do-gooders telling him to look on the bright side.

‘Good.’ She pressed something to his heel. ‘This is just to stop the blood. I don’t think it needs stitches but I’d like the bleeding to slow before I dress it.’

‘You’re one tough cookie—is that it?’ For the first time he

wondered what sort of person his housekeeper was. What had made her so cool and capable in the face of a growling employer who wasn't fit company for anyone? 'Are you trying to prove yourself to me?'

'I'm simply trying to help so you don't get an infection in this foot.' Not even a hint of impatience in that controlled tone. For an unsettling moment Declan was reminded of his kindergarten teacher who'd had a way of quieting rambunctious little boys with just a look.

'What are you smiling at?'

'Was I smiling?' He firmed his mouth into its habitual line.

'This may hurt.'

Good. It might focus his straying mind.

Pain sliced through him as she applied antiseptic.

'What do you look like, Ms Daniels?'

For the first time she hesitated. *Intriguing.*

'Average,' she said firmly.

'On the tall side,' he amended.

'How do you know?'

Declan shrugged. 'The way you fitted under my arm.' He paused. 'What else?'

'Is this really necessary?'

'Indulge me. Think of it as the job interview I never gave you.'

'You're saying my job's in doubt?' For the first time a hint of emotion coloured her voice. Panic?

He shook his head. 'I'm not that unreasonable, just curious.'

He heard a huff of exasperation and then she was winding a bandage around his foot with deft movements that assured him she knew exactly what she was doing.

‘I’ve got light hair, light eyes and pale skin.’

‘Freckles?’ Why he bothered to tease when he couldn’t see her reaction he didn’t know. But despite her calm responses Declan *felt* her disapproval. It shimmered around him. Tired as he was of his own company and his limitations, even that was preferable to solitude.

How pathetic could he get? Taunting the woman because he was bored, bitter and defeated by the guilt that clung like a shadow.

‘Yes, as it happens. A few.’ Her voice dropped a little and he caught a husky edge as she snapped shut the first-aid kit.

Declan surged to his feet. ‘Thanks. Now, if you’ll just lead me to the edge of the pergola, I can find my way from there.’

Chloe stopped in the open doorway to the vast book-lined library. It had been updated with a state-of-the-art computer on the antique cedar desk and a phone that looked like it could hold conference calls to several countries simultaneously. Hand raised to knock, she paused at the sound of Declan Carstairs’ voice.

‘OK, David. There’s no help for it, you’ll just have to stay there. Don’t worry about it.’ Her employer thrust a hand back through his hair in a gesture of clear frustration. ‘No, *don’t* send one of the junior staff in the meantime. I don’t want anyone here gawping and ...’ He hunched his shoulders. ‘Never mind.’

He turned and she caught his expression. His face was drawn with weariness. Lines etched the corners of his mouth and furrowed his brow. Then she caught a glimpse of his eyes and wondered with a jolt if it was tiredness or something akin to despair that shadowed his face.

The notion surprised her. He'd seemed so vibrant, so arrogantly in control just half an hour ago. Even as he'd been dependent on her to lead him and remove the glass from his foot, there'd been no question but that he'd been the one calling the shots, and not just because he paid her wages. The force of his personality made him dominate any situation.

'No, I'll just have to wait till you—'

He broke off and lifted his head as if scenting the air, his head swinging round inexorably to where she stood in the doorway.

Dark eyes fixed on her with an intensity that was unnerving.

Even knowing he couldn't see her, Chloe had to resist the urge to straighten her neat skirt and blouse or lift a hand to ensure that flyaway curl hadn't escaped again. Heat trickled through her veins and her skin flushed.

'Call me later, David, and update me.' He disconnected the call and stepped towards her, his eyes never wavering.

Was it an illusion that his gaze connected with hers? It had to be. Yet Chloe felt a strange breathlessness facing that hard, handsome face, as if he saw her with a clarity no-one else ever had.

'Ms Daniels. How long have you been there?' His voice

dropped to a velvet-soft murmur that signalled danger.

How did he know she was there? She hadn't made a sound. The hairs rose on the back of her neck at the idea he'd somehow sensed her presence.

'Not long. I was about to knock but I didn't want to interrupt your conversation.'

His mouth firmed and his nostrils flared as if with impatience. 'In future make your presence known immediately. Given my ... impairment, I like to know when I'm not alone.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Especially when I'm discussing business. I have a particularly delicate negotiation underway at the moment and I prefer to keep the details private. Understood?'

Chloe's mouth pursed, holding in indignation. Did he think her a potential corporate spy?

'Of course.' Stung at his assumption she'd tried to eavesdrop, Chloe hastened to explain herself. 'I came to find out if you'd like lunch soon.'

His mouth twisted. 'What have you got planned for me? No, let me guess—coddled eggs and toast. Or soup. Soup is always good.'

Chloe frowned, her mind racing through the contents of the pantry and what she could make quickly from scratch.

'If you like soup I could manage that.'

'I *don't* like,' he growled, pacing towards her, close enough to block her view of the room and fill her senses with his presence.

'I'm sick of bland food and being fussed over. The housekeeper the agency sent in your absence thought I needed cosseting to build my strength. If she'd had her way I'd have lived on omelettes and junket.' He shook his head, lifting a hand to rub his stubbled chin.

Unwillingly Chloe's eyes followed the movement, noting the hard, intriguing angle of his jaw and the line of his powerful throat. A faint citrus scent teased her nostrils and she wondered if he'd lathered himself with lemon soap in the shower. She swallowed. He hadn't buttoned his shirt. It hung loose, revealing glimpses of taut golden skin and a smattering of dark hair.

Her breath stilled as she recalled him emerging from the pool: naked, wet and virile. Her mouth dried.

Horrified to find her gaze following a narrow line of dark hair to the top of his faded jeans, Chloe yanked her attention back to his face, her cheeks glowing.

Anyone less in need of building up she had yet to meet. He was all hard-muscled energy and husky, powerful lines. She'd never met a man so vibrantly alive. So confrontingly masculine. Her stomach gave a strange little shimmy just being close to him.

'I hadn't thought in terms of ... building up your strength.' Again her gaze strayed and she firmly yanked it back to his face.

Despite her embarrassment, amusement rose at the idea of trying to cosset this man like a child. The previous housekeeper must have had her work cut out trying to feed him invalid food. Had she *really* tried to serve him junket? Chloe wouldn't have

dared.

‘What was that?’ His brows arched down ferociously as if he’d heard the laugh she stifled.

‘Nothing, Mr Carstairs.’ She paused. ‘I’d planned chicken tikka-masala burgers with cucumber raita and lime pickle for lunch. But if that doesn’t suit ...’

‘It suits perfectly. Suddenly I’m ravenous.’ For a moment the shadow of a grin hovered on his lips and Chloe had a shocking glimpse of how irresistible he must be in good humour.

If ever he *was* in good humour.

‘Clever too,’ he drawled. ‘Far easier for a blind man to handle.’

That observation, the little sting in the tail, robbed his earlier praise of warmth and left her deflated.

Was there anything wrong in trying to take his limitations into consideration? To realise it must be difficult chasing unseen food around a plate?

He made her consideration seem like condescension.

Her boss was frank to the point of rudeness, bad-tempered and graceless. He was nothing like his charmer of a brother.

A shiver whispered down her spine and she stiffened.

Chloe knew which brother she’d rather deal with. Declan Carstairs might be arrogant but ...

‘I’ll have it ready in half an hour, then.’

‘Good.’ He turned away, took three uneven paces and put his hand down to the corner of the desk as if to reassure himself he was in the right place. It was a subtle move she wouldn’t have

noticed except that her brain was busy cataloguing everything about him.

Instantly she felt a pang of sympathy. How hard it must be for an active man to adjust to a world he couldn't see.

Perhaps his temper was understandable.

'Before you go, Ms Daniels.' She paused in the act of turning away. 'Tell me, you did sign a confidentiality clause with your contract of employment, didn't you?'

'I did.'

'Then you know the severe penalties for revealing private information about anything you see or hear in the course of your work.'

Chloe drew a deep breath, telling herself he was within his rights to check, just as he'd been to insist she sign such a clause before working for him. It had nothing to do with her personal integrity.

'I understand that.' Nevertheless her fingers curled tight.

'Good. Keep it in mind. Because I'd have no hesitation in suing an employee who betrayed my trust if, for instance details of this current deal, or personal information about my life, were to appear in the press.'

Chloe's hackles rose. Did he distrust all his employees on principle or just her?

That fragile stirring of sympathy withered, replaced by a belligerent determination to keep out of Declan Carstairs' way. She didn't need to listen to his provocation. She had enough on

her plate with worry about Ted's health and meeting the cost of his rehabilitation.

'I've worked for celebrities in the past, Mr Carstairs. People hounded by the paparazzi every time they stepped outside.' Her tone, more frigid than cool, implied they were far more newsworthy than he, despite the fact he was one of the country's richest men. 'None of them ever had complaints about my discretion.'

'Really?' One dark eyebrow arched provocatively.

'Really. Now, if you'll excuse me, Mr Carstairs, I'll get on with lunch.'

Chloe immersed herself in the routine of keeping the house in tip-top condition. A magnificent sprawling place, it dated from the nineteenth century. Her favourite feature was the wide veranda with its vista of manicured gardens. The gardens led to the cliff edge that dropped sheer to the blue-green valley, which spread into the distance.

Built at a time when a rich man included a ballroom in his country retreat, the place was a pleasure to work in. Especially as a wing had been added with a modern kitchen and housekeeper's suite.

She loved the gracious old home and didn't mind that it took a lot to maintain. That gave her reason to avoid the corner study where Declan Carstairs spent his time.

Occasionally as she crossed the lobby she heard his rich baritone on the phone or chatting to his PA, David Sarkesian,

who'd returned from Sydney. The sound of her employer's deep voice made her quicken her pace lest he accuse her of eavesdropping for saleable gossip.

That insinuation still burned.

As did the suspicion that she enjoyed listening to the smooth rhythms of his voice for too much. The tingling awareness she felt in Declan Carstairs' presence disturbed her. It reminded her that, contrary to everything she'd learned in the last six years, her libido hadn't died with Mark.

She wished it had. She didn't need that hot, edgy sensation low in her stomach when Declan touched her hand reaching for a plate. Or the breathless anticipation that caught her lungs when he spoke to her.

She even enjoyed the verbal wrangling that seemed to be part of daily life working for him. He never let an encounter go by without challenging, probing or teasing till she almost suspected he looked forward to provoking her responses.

At least it prevented her dwelling on memories of the last time she'd lived here, when her dream job had turned into a nightmare.

'It's over now. You need to put it behind you,' she told her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Easier said than done when fragmented nightmares still shattered her dreams. That was why she'd forced herself to come in here, to what had been Adrian Carstairs' suite.

Better to face the past squarely.

She'd learned that when she lost Mark years ago. The shock of grief, the unfairness of it, had kept her in denial for ages, trying to cling to a life that was past. It was only when she accepted the devastating blow that had stolen their dreams that she was able to move on.

Chloe swiped a cloth over the vanity unit.

'The past is gone.'

When she lost Mark those words had been a lament. Now there was relief that the trauma of Adrian Carstairs' frightening obsession was over. No matter how much she regretted his death, she couldn't help feeling a sense of freedom that he'd never stalk her again. That his dangerous fixation was over.

She picked up her cleaning supplies and turned, only to walk into a wall of naked male muscle.

She was soft, lithe and warm as his arms instinctively closed around her. The unexpectedness of contact momentarily stunned Declan, but a second later his body was responding to the intimate contact.

Predictable, he supposed, since he hadn't had a lover since well before the accident.

Yet why did his grip tighten when she moved to pull away? Surely not because he enjoyed the feel of her slender hand splayed across his bare chest? The gentle, almost phantom caress of her breath near his collarbone?

'Ms Daniels, I presume?' He forced himself into speech, covering his abrupt loss of control.

‘Mr Carstairs, I didn’t expect to see you here.’

There was a slightly breathless quality to her usually crisp voice as if he’d caught her out in some way.

He liked it.

Just as he liked the firm yet enticingly soft curves pressed against him.

This was Chloe Daniels, his sharp-tongued, no-nonsense housekeeper? She sounded young, but he’d supposed her voice was misleading. She was nothing like those sturdy, slightly frumpish women who’d staffed the various Carstairs properties in his childhood.

This woman was slim but curved in all the right places. ‘Luscious’ was the word that sprang to mind. His fingers tightened.

A familiar surge of frustration hit him: impatience that he couldn’t see her for himself. Anger at this disability. Damn his blindness! Would he ever be whole again? He’d been curious about her so long and now, holding her, he had more questions than ever.

‘I didn’t expect to find you here either. I thought I heard voices.’

No need to say the muffled sound of conversation from Adrian’s room had hit him like a sledgehammer blow to the heart. He’d dropped the shirt he’d taken off as he reached the head of the stairs and hurried here, nerves strung tight.

He wasn’t a fanciful man but to his guilt-ridden conscience,

the sound of talking from Adrian's suite had seemed portentous.

'I was talking to myself.' She sounded defiant rather than defensive, as if challenging him to make an issue of it. He was intrigued at this facet of his ever-practical employee.

'Indeed?'

'I'm sorry I disturbed you. I was just doing a quick clean.'

'No one will be using the suite.' He'd lost his taste for company the day he'd lost his brother.

'I understand.' She paused then added, her voice low, 'I'm sorry about your brother, Mr Carstairs.'

'Thank you,' he said tersely, dropping his hands.

Familiar guilt swamped him—that he was here, alive, experiencing a surge of sexual interest for this woman, when Adrian was dead. He'd failed his younger brother.

He should have been able to stop him.

His stomach lurched sickeningly. They'd been close, despite their recent geographical separation. He'd been Adrian's biggest supporter, the one Adrian had turned to when their parents had been busy with their business and charity interests.

But that counted for nothing. All that mattered was that last, irrevocable failure.

How had he let himself be persuaded by Adrian's upbeat assurances? He should have come here sooner, not relied on phone and email during that vital phase of his new project. How could he not have *known* Adrian was in such despair?

'Is there anything else, Mr Carstairs?'

Declan plunged a hand through his shaggy hair. He wished there was something else—something to distract him.

Work was no solace. It couldn't ease the weight of remorse.

Nor could the search for the woman who'd used his little brother then tossed him aside when she found he'd lost his wealth. Her betrayal had driven Adrian to suicide. Any doubts Declan had about her guilt had been obliterated by the scrawled note David had found jammed in Declan's desk. As soon as he'd recognised Adrian's handwriting he'd told Declan, who'd insisted he read it aloud.

Neither had spoken of it since but the words were engraved in Declan's memory: desperate words that confirmed Adrian's unnamed girlfriend, the woman he'd been seeing those last weeks, had pushed him to the edge.

Yet the private investigator had turned up no clue to her identity. Where had she vanished to?

Declan's mouth tightened. Adrian had always been the more sensitive one and, he realised now, more vulnerable. Declan felt impotent, unable to find the woman who'd destroyed his brother and make her face what she'd done.

He gulped down bitter regret, concentrating instead on the burning hate that sustained him when the burden of guilt grew unbearable.

Self-hatred for not saving his brother.

Hatred too for the woman with red-gold hair and come-hither green eyes in the photo his brother had shown him so proudly.

A photo so candid it was obvious he'd taken the shot in bed. The woman had lain sprawled in abandon, as if sated from love-making. Golden light had bathed her, giving her the aura of a languid sex goddess inviting adoration.

And Declan had felt a shot of pure, unadulterated lust blast through him at the sight of her.

Remembering made him sick to the stomach, as if he'd betrayed his brother with his response to the woman Adrian had loved. The woman who'd driven Adrian to fatal despair.

Between them they were responsible for Adrian's death.

CHAPTER THREE

HE NO longer touched her, yet Chloe burned as if still pressed against him.

Shivers trembled down her spine. She had to lock her knees to stand firm. But nothing, not all her willpower, could prevent her dragging in the scent of citrus and man, spice and warm musk, that tickled her nostrils. Her gaze strayed to his half-naked form.

She'd never seen anyone like Declan Carstairs—his powerful, beautiful body and his larger-than-life aura. Unshaven, hard-jawed and scarred he looked more than ever like a pirate. The sort who thrived on danger and the pleasures of the flesh.

Chloe tried to recall Mark's generous smile, the twinkle of encouragement in his hazel eyes and, to her horror, conjured only the weakest of images. Could she have forgotten in just six years? Or was Declan Carstairs clouding her thoughts? The idea appalled her.

Eyes wide, she retreated a step and put down her bucket of supplies, crossing her arms defensively.

'Mr Carstairs? If there's nothing else I really should be getting on.'

A flicker of movement stirred his features as if he'd only just recalled her presence. Why did he look so grim?

'Actually there is something, Ms Daniels.'

He flexed his hands, drawing her gaze to the sinewy strength

in his forearms.

What would it be like to be held by him? Not supported impersonally after bumping into each other, but embraced?

It felt like betrayal of her past even to wonder. Yet she couldn't prevent the niggle of curiosity.

'You were working here when my brother came to stay, weren't you? While I was in China?'

Instantly alert, Chloe darted a look at his face.

'Yes. I'd been here some time when he arrived.' Anxiety jiggled inside. Just the mention of Adrian Carstairs gave her the jitters.

How could one brother fascinate and reawaken long-dormant female awareness when the other had left her cold?

'Tell me, did he bring anyone to stay with him?'

She shook her head, remembering too late that Declan needed to hear her response. 'No, he came alone.'

'But there must have been visitors.' Dark eyes fixed at a point near her mouth, as if focused on her words. She sensed an intensity in her employer she hadn't encountered before, even when he'd quizzed her about confidentiality.

'There were no overnight guests.'

'But for a meal perhaps?'

'No, not that I recall. Your brother ate alone.'

Except for the days he'd turned up in the big kitchen and insisted on sharing a meal with her.

At first Chloe had welcomed him. Then, when he had grown

more intense—his gaze fixing on her hungrily, his moods unstable—she'd taken to eating early in her room or finding an excuse to be away at meal time.

But she couldn't say that to his brother. There was nothing to be gained by sharing the fact Adrian Carstairs had made her life hell those last weeks. Declan had enough to deal with without her dumping that on him.

'I see.' Yet still he frowned, his brows bunched. 'But it's possible he had a visitor you didn't know about?'

'It's possible,' she said slowly. 'Though not likely.'

Increasingly Adrian had spent his time within sight of her until she'd had to resort to subterfuge to escape him. She'd have been grateful then for visitors to distract him from his fixation on her.

'He didn't mention anyone?' The urgency of her boss's tone surprised her.

'I ... Not that I recall.'

'I see.' Declan's head sank slowly, as if weighted. The vibrant energy that was so much part of him dimmed and she sensed despair.

Impulsively she lifted her hand to him, then let it drop. She could imagine his sharp rejection of unwanted sympathy.

'I'm sorry I can't help.'

His lips curved in a twist that might have passed for a smile if it weren't for the grim lines creasing his cheek and pulling his scar tight.

'No matter.' He lifted a hand to thrust back a lock of dark hair

from his brow. 'But if you recall seeing a woman with gold hair—a friend of Adrian's—you'll let me know? I'm trying to contact her. It's ... important.'

'Of course.'

Chloe frowned. Adrian had never mentioned a girlfriend. He'd seemed a loner.

'Good.' For a moment longer Declan stood, as if wanting to prolong conversation. Then he turned and paced stiffly away, arm out in front of him till he reached the hall door and disappeared towards his room.

'I have a favour to ask.'

Chloe spun round to find her employer leaning against the doorjamb as if he'd been there for ages, watching her.

Her pulse accelerated. Though he clearly hadn't been watching, she was unsettled by the notion he'd been there, listening to her potter in the kitchen, humming under her breath.

Yet even as the thought surfaced, she realised it wasn't anxiety she felt. Not like when his brother had stalked her, silently watching with an intensity that had given her the creeps.

No, this was different—a spiralling drop of excitement that drew her skin tight and clenched her stomach muscles in awareness. It had everything to do with her inability to blot Declan Carstairs from her brain.

His charismatic presence had banished the last shadows of anxiety she'd felt about returning to Carinya.

At least now her dreams weren't all nightmares, she admitted

with a grimace. The last few nights she'd woken hot and shaken by vivid fantasies featuring Declan in glorious, nude detail. An insidious little tremor shot through her at the memory.

'Yes, Mr Carstairs?' She injected her tone with a brisk efficiency she was far from feeling.

He straightened and stepped into the room, turning to the sound of her voice.

'I have a meeting in Sydney and I want to be rid of this beard.' He lifted one hand ruminatively to his chin and Chloe heard the scratch of bristles.

For one insane moment she was tempted to lift her hand so they rasped against her palm. She could almost feel the rough pleasure of that tickle on her skin.

The realisation hit her like a hammer blow, robbing her of speech.

How had she grown so desperate for this man? Just imagining the scrape of his unshaven skin made her insides liquefy. How could that be? They weren't friends or anything like lovers. She barely knew him! With Mark, desire had grown with liking, with love. By comparison this was a smash-and-grab raid on her senses.

'David's gone on ahead so I wondered if you'd oblige. I can just about get by with an electric razor but it's pretty haphazard.'

'Of course, Mr Carstairs. I'm happy to help. But I should warn you, I've never shaved anyone.'

'Then I'll be your first.' His mouth widened in a slow smile

that snagged her heart mid-beat. ‘A first for us both.’

Not once in these last weeks had he smiled at her properly. Chloe wished fervently he hadn’t decided to begin. She sagged against the worktop, her hand to the pulse trembling in her throat. Just as well he couldn’t see her.

Even blind and scarred the man was devastating. What would he be like if he set his mind to seducing a woman?

She should be grateful for his usually brusque manner. It was a buffer to what she guessed could be formidable charm. His rare smile set her heart hammering.

‘Shall we say my bathroom in five?’

Though she’d lived with Mark for almost a year, Chloe hadn’t realised how intimate shaving a man could be.

Standing between Declan’s splayed knees as he sat on the bathroom stool, jammed between the basin on her right and the wall at her back, she felt hemmed in. Not by the room, but by his proximity.

Her breathing shallowed as she slid the razor over his foamy cheek, too aware of the soft puff of his breath against her shirt and the heat of his legs around hers.

Her hand trembled and slowed.

‘Like this.’ His hand closed on hers, guiding her. She tried to concentrate on the shape of his jaw, the need to be careful. Yet her mind kept straying to the way his long fingers encircled hers.

‘Got it?’ His hand dropped and she sucked in a breath.

‘I think so.’ She cleaned the blade then made herself lean in,

stoically ignoring his citrus scent and concentrating on the next stroke of the blade.

He sat statue-still and she told herself this would get easier. Except she made the mistake of looking into his eyes between strokes, intrigued to find they weren't blank as expected. Even unseeing they fascinated her. Deepest brown, so dark they hinted at blackness, yet rayed at the centre with a rim of golden shards.

'Chloe?' The question in his voice focused her wandering thoughts.

'Yes, Mr Carstairs?' This time she dared to tilt his chin for better access, telling herself the faster she got this done the sooner he'd leave and she'd be alone, safe from these unsettling feelings.

'Just checking,' he murmured. 'Given the circumstances, you can drop the "Mr Carstairs". It sounds too formal when you're holding a razor to my throat.'

Chloe rinsed off the razor and tilted his head further to the side, trying to ignore the fact his face was bare inches from her breasts. And that her nipples puckered flagrantly against the lace of her bra.

'You *are* my employer,' she protested, clinging to formality to counter the rising tide of utterly inappropriate feelings. She looked down, registering the way his jeans clung to solid, muscled thighs and felt a jab of longing deep in her belly.

'So, if I don't mind you calling me Declan, there's no reason to refuse.'

Silently she shook her head and ventured another stroke down the hard line of his cheek. The scrape of the blade against his skin was curiously sensuous. There was something intriguing about revealing the strong contours of his face with each careful stroke.

‘Do it, Chloe.’ The words feathered the bare flesh above the top button of her shirt and a line of tingling fire ran from her tight breasts to her groin.

‘Sorry?’

‘Say my name.’

‘I really don’t think ...’ It was stupid to refuse, but at some instinctive level she knew she’d be crossing into dangerous territory from which there’d be no retreat.

‘Are you contradicting me?’ His deep voice slid like silk across her skin.

‘Are you ordering me?’

She watched his mouth lift at one corner.

‘How did you get this job when you’re so unwilling to comply with reasonable requests?’

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that calling him Declan wasn’t reasonable. That it might reveal the pent-up longing she’d been trying so hard to repress, the very unprofessional thoughts she’d been able to hide only because he couldn’t see.

‘If that’s what you want,’ she said grudgingly.

‘I want.’

His eyes lowered. Did he realise he appeared to be looking straight at her breasts? Was that why a smile flickered at the

corner of his mouth? She made to step back, only to find his thighs imprisoned her. A pulse of sensation throbbed low in her body.

‘As you wish.’

‘Out loud, Chloe.’

She drew a deep breath, telling herself she was making a mountain out of a molehill.

‘Declan.’

There. It was done. The word was easy and she sounded confident.

So why did she lick her lips as if she’d just tasted a forbidden delicacy? Why the jitter of excitement at the echo of his name on her tongue?

‘Good. Now, stop delaying. I know it must look appalling but it’s just dead skin.’

For a moment Chloe stared, uncomprehending. Then finally she realised. His scar. She’d stopped before shaving there. He thought she was wary of touching it.

Carefully she rinsed the razor.

‘It doesn’t look appalling.’ The words emerged, a hoarse whisper, before she knew they’d even formulated in her mind.

‘Don’t give me that!’ The lingering trace of amusement died and his lips thinned in a cruel, hard line. ‘I don’t need lies to keep me sweet. I know I look like the very devil.’

‘No.’ The choked protest welled from her.

That long, mobile mouth twisted in a sneer. ‘No?’ His nostrils

flared as he dragged in a breath that pumped his whole torso. 'Then what, pray tell, does it look like?' Cynicism skeined through his words like silk.

The venom, the strength of his anger, was a vibrant, living force, pulsing from him in waves. Instinctively Chloe stepped back, or tried to. His thighs, iron-hard and unmoveable, trapped her. Something hot twisted low in her belly.

'Come on, Chloe,' he taunted. 'I deserve to know.'

Her mouth flattened at his baiting tone, even as she realised his fury stemmed from issues that had nothing to do with her. That he was still coming to grips with the legacy of the accident that had blinded him.

'I didn't say it's beautiful.'

'Ah, at last, something like the truth!'

Her hands fisted as she stared down into his grim face. 'But it's not as bad as you think. It gives you ... character.'

No way could she be frank enough to add that the way it followed the natural line of his cheek complemented his strong features. Or that she'd come to appreciate the asymmetrical cast of his face that saved it from being too dauntingly perfect.

It made him look dangerous and sexy and far too intriguing.

'Character!' A jeering laugh burst from his lips. 'That's a good one.'

'It's true.' The fire inside, the heat of unwanted arousal, twisted and morphed into a dangerous mix of distress and anger.

He shook his head, his hands clamping on his thighs as if to

restrain himself from pushing her aside and shooting to his feet.

‘I do not need your sympathy.’ Each glacial word dropped with the pinpoint accuracy of a precision bomb, designed with lethal intent.

A shiver sped up Chloe’s spine and her skin iced. She hunched her shoulders.

‘No, but you need to stop feeling so sorry for yourself.’

The words burst into echoing silence.

The razor clattered, unheeded, into the sink and Chloe found herself standing, arms akimbo, staring furiously down into eyes that darkened to ebony. A pulse jumped at his temple and the air throbbed with a surge of dangerous power.

Silence stretched till her nerves were taut with expectation. She couldn’t believe she’d answered back that way. He was her boss. The man who paid her wages.

Yet she cared about him. Cared enough, it seemed, to risk the sack to tell him the truth.

The unnerving realisation froze her while the ramifications played out in her mind.

Abruptly he raised his hand, fumbling in front of him till long fingers touched her hip. She told herself she imagined the imprint burning through her skirt. But she didn’t imagine the burst of heat when his fingers found hers, locking them hard and tight in his hold.

He yanked her hand to his face, to the point beside his eye where the scar ended.

A tremor hit her as he pressed her finger on the damaged flesh so she felt the ridge of healed tissue. But her overwhelming impression was of heat and excitement—an illicit thrill that skirled in her abdomen, clenching muscles.

Slowly, oh so slowly, he dragged her hand down, her fingers to the scar, her hand dwarfed by his.

Through the shaving cream, centimetre by centimetre the skin-to-skin contact continued. It was a punishment, a challenge, yet to Chloe it had the force of a caress. Potent, provocative, drawing out hidden longings and exposing them, raw and unvarnished, to the light of day.

His warm skin scent was inside her; his heat infused hers. The prison of his long legs evoked a delicious, terrible thrill she fought and failed to conquer.

Now her hand was beside his mouth, pressed there, feeling the supple skin stretch as he spoke.

‘You have the gall to call that *character*?’

She opened her mouth but before she could speak he dragged her hand away. A blob of shaving cream fell from their joined fingers.

Did he know he held her so tight that the sensation bordered on pain?

‘Or this?’ He slammed her hand, palm down on his thigh, right up near his hip.

Chloe’s heart galloped high in her chest as she looked at her fingers splayed under his, moulding the wide muscle of his upper

leg. Her breath came in raw, shallow gasps at the intensity of the contact.

At his fury. His frustration. Her regret, sorrow and still, through it all, the unrepentant hum of sexual energy that furred her nape and drew her breasts tight and full and heavy.

Under his guidance her hand slid down over soft denim that covered hot flesh and uneven scar-tissue.

The wound was long and jagged.

‘What would you call that, Chloe?’ The jeering note had faded from his voice, replaced by a weariness that betrayed the effort it took to face the world as if it was his for the taking.

These last weeks she’d marvelled at his confidence, his ability to adapt within mere months to his life-changing injuries. His ability to stride without pause through the open French windows of the study, unerringly cross the flagstones and dive without hesitation into the pool. To run a multi-national company despite his impairment.

He even had time to parry and riposte verbally whenever their paths crossed, as if drawing her into conflict was a challenge that afforded him pleasure.

Now, feeling the tremors running through his thigh, the fierce clench of his hand, she glimpsed a fraction of what it cost him to appear in control.

Her heart missed a beat as another protective layer crumbled. Soon there’d be nothing left to keep her safe.

‘Well, Chloe?’ His voice dropped low, reverberating right

through her. 'Is that full of character too? Should I be *grateful* for the accident that blinded me?'

'Maybe it sounds trite, but there are lots of people worse off than you.' Chloe drew a slow breath, refusing to be cowed by his anger. 'You have your health. You're mobile. You have the satisfaction of running your own business. You have enough money to live in comfort. Millions of others aren't that lucky.'

She spoke from experience. Her own foster father, Ted, had been an active, energetic man whom nothing could daunt. Now, still grieving the loss of his wife, he was confined to a rehabilitation clinic, recuperating slowly from the stroke that had immobilised one side of his body and robbed him of speech. And then there was Mark. His death at twenty-two had been fate at its cruellest.

'You're right,' he snapped. 'It does sound trite.'

'I'm sorry.' Not for speaking the truth, but that he obviously wasn't ready to hear it.

His sightless eyes glittered with barely leashed emotion.

'Do you have any idea how infuriating it is to be lectured about looking on the bright side? About how *lucky* I am? To have false hope of recovery held out like a holy grail?'

'No.' She stood stiffly.

'No.' His expression was grim. 'How could you know?'

Abruptly he stood, making her shuffle a half-step into the corner to give him room. Still, he held her hand and she wondered if he'd forgotten it.

But then, with a sudden, unerring accuracy, he lifted their joined hands to her cheek. Together they stroked the contour of her cheekbone and her skin came alive at the incredible intimacy of their joined touch.

‘You’re whole,’ he said, so low it was like a vibration rather than a sound. ‘Your life hasn’t turned upside down so that everything you took for granted—*everything*—is now exponentially more difficult if not downright impossible.’

Their hands traced down to the corner of her mouth and a ripple of awareness shook her.

‘You’re not dogged by regret over what you *couldn’t* do, that you failed the one person who above all relied on you.’

He was talking about Adrian, she realised, and her heart squeezed. She wanted to tell him she knew the guilt that came with loss. She’d spent so long bedevilled by guilt because she hadn’t recognised the signs of meningitis early enough to save Mark.

But it was too soon for Declan to listen to reason. His fury was too fresh, too raw.

Perhaps she shouldn’t have stood up to him. He was still coming to grips with his changed lifestyle and his loss.

Suddenly he loosened his hold and let her hand fall. It tingled as blood rushed back.

Yet he didn’t move away. His tall frame crowded her into the corner, making her acutely aware of how her wayward body responded to him. Even tipping her head up to look into his face

shot a tiny thrill through her.

He was her employer. Feelings of this sort were totally inappropriate.

That didn't stop anticipation swirling through her.

His hand settled on her face, fingers spreading to mould her jaw.

Chloe sucked in a startled breath as he slid his hand over her, cupping her chin and circling her cheek almost as if he could picture her face through touch.

Each stroke reinforced the urgent, eager need for more. It was all she could do to stand still, not tilt her head into his hand.

Her response scared her.

With Mark there'd been fun, shared joy, respect. She couldn't remember anything like the visceral urgency she felt when Declan Carstairs merely brushed his hand over her skin in the questing gesture of a blind man.

'How old are you, Chloe Daniels?' His voice hit that low, rich note that made something curl inside her.

'Twenty-seven.' She straightened and tilted her chin higher, only to find his hand dropping to her throat as if she'd invited his feather-light caress there.

Had she?

Whorls of lazy heat eddied at his touch and her head eased back.

She gulped, desperately trying to regain her composure. 'How old are you?'

Long fingers stroked her lips, cajoling her into silence.

‘Thirty-four.’ His head tipped towards her as if, even blind, it was important that he look her in the eyes.

‘Thirty-four, blind and scarred. Not the man I was.’

His voice was an indictment, as if he saw himself as less a man than before.

He leaned towards her and her breath caught.

‘And you, Chloe, are smooth and young and unscarred.’ He paused while his hand traced her nose and returned with heart-stopping intent to her mouth. Her lips felt swollen and pulsing, as if waiting for more than the touch of his hand.

Fire sparked in her veins and she found herself straining towards him.

‘You’re whole,’ he murmured. ‘And I’m ...’

He shook his head, his mouth grim, even as he framed her face with his fingers, letting them slide through her hair. Tremulous delight filled her at his gentle massaging pressure.

Then, with an abruptness that floored her, his hands dropped and he stepped back, his shoulders stiff, his face a forbidding mask not even the smear of shaving cream could humanise.

‘I don’t want you here.’

The statement, so simple, so unambiguous, stuck in her dazed mind as if he spoke in a foreign tongue.

When she didn’t move, his brow pleated in a ferocious scowl. His hands curled into tight fists.

‘Get out of here, Chloe.’ Words spat from him like bullets.

'Now!'

CHAPTER FOUR

DECLAN paced the empty boardroom his staff had scurried to leave. The pace of the China project was too slow and he hadn't minced his words.

He felt so bloody powerless, managing from a distance. Unable to see the figures for himself, view the footage of the site, read the faces of the consortium partners during the video hook-up.

He spun on his foot and strode down the room, registering the faint heat from the long windows beside him. They gave a spectacular view over the Domain and the no-doubt sparkling waters of Sydney Harbour, right to the Heads where the sea swell surged in from the Pacific.

A multi-million-dollar view he'd never see again despite the doctors' talk of possible recovery. They said there was no lasting physical damage to keep him blind.

As if he *chose* not to see!

He shoved back the hair flopping over his forehead and turned to pace. At least with the room's simple layout he wasn't going to trip over furniture and make himself a laughing stock.

Maybe he should be grateful for *that* too.

Chloe's words rang in his head—that there were people worse off than himself.

Did she think he didn't know that? There was barely a minute

ticked by when he wasn't acutely aware that Adrian was dead, not merely maimed and blind.

Or that Declan was the one who'd failed to save him.

How dared she accuse him of feeling sorry for himself?

Who was she to lecture him? To talk in platitudes about something she didn't understand?

She was young, too young surely for the responsible job of running Carinya. Her skin still had the smooth, taut texture of youth. Unblemished and perfect.

Declan clenched his fists, recalling the pulse of need that had shot through him as he'd traced her features, learnt the high curve of cheekbones and delicate point of her chin. Her silk-soft hair, pulled back from her face. Her neat nose and soft, plump lips.

Damn! His fist pounded the toughened glass window with a dull thud that did nothing to ease the turbulent roil of emotions churning his gut.

Anger—yes.

Impatience—that was a given.

Frustration—that word had taken on a whole new meaning since Chloe Daniels had entered his home. Before that he'd been frustrated merely with his blindness, his incompetence in this world of darkness, his inability to find and punish the callous woman who'd driven Adrian to his death. That failure ate like a canker at his soul.

Now Declan's frustration had the keen edge of sexual hunger. The ever-present hint of Chloe's vanilla-sunshine scent in his

home tantalised his nostrils and fed the gnawing hunger in his belly.

For too long his dreams had been haunted by Adrian's fall. Now they'd changed, waking him nightly, sweating and with his heart pounding.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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