

JENNIFER BACIA

A powerful woman –
afraid of nothing but
her dangerous past

INDECENT --- AMBITION

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AMBITION

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PRAISE FOR JENNIFER BACIA

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PROLOGUE

From the doorway, the girl stared boldly at the man who sat naked on the bed. They had warned her about this one. She knew his tastes were...exotic...but she wasn't afraid. And her co-operation, she knew, would be amply rewarded.

The man signaled for her to enter the dimly lit room noting the perfection that only youth can offer: full firm breasts, long toned legs, flawless flesh. As she moved closer he could smell the musky perfume of her body and caught the scent of freshly washed hair.

Standing in front of him now, the girl endured the blatant scrutiny of those cold, blue eyes. And then he uttered one curt word.

'Undress.'

She did as she was ordered, slipping off the flimsy bra and panties, but it was obvious that her youth and her beauty had no effect. The man's penis lay slack and indifferent between his pale, spreading thighs.

He made no attempt to touch her but lay back against the silky covers of the bed, indicating for her to join him.

Holding his gaze with her heavily made-up eyes, the girl moved to obey and with deliberate provocation stretched out beside him.

But if she had expected some preamble to initiate his arousal, she

was surprised when with one smooth action that belied his girth, he moved immediately to straddle her.

It was only then, as he stared down into that soft-featured, youthful face that he finally felt the first stirring in his loins. What excited him was imagining those eyes stark with fear, those full child-like lips twisted in pain, her breath coming in quick gasps of panic... A shiver of anticipation went through him and now at last he felt his shaft grow firmer.

The girl knew this one was different. All she wanted was to play her role and get it over with as soon as possible. Hiding her impatience, she decided to take the initiative. With eyes half-closed, she started to moan and ran a slim delicate finger over the heavy fullness of her breasts.

She didn't see the man's lips tighten in contempt. How many times did the bitch indulge in the same insulting performance? Did she really think he was so stupid, so gullible? He felt a fuse of anger ignite inside him. All women were whores, so contemptuously certain of their power to trap by sexual thrall, to render a male vulnerable, defenseless, exposed. Well he would show this one that the power, the pleasure were his...

Suddenly the girl was startled out of her provocative routine, flinching as her arms were forced painfully behind her head and her hands were thrust into powerful leather loops affixed to the frame. As the straps were tightened around her wrists, she recognized at last the stirring of desire in that cold stony face. The game, she could see, was about to start.

But she wasn't prepared for the thick, cotton gag that was shoved roughly into her mouth or the soft leather noose that was wound quickly round her neck. Her breath quickened and for the first time real fear flickered in her eyes.

The man was excited now, stiff with lust as he felt the growing sense of power, of domination. Slowly, mercilessly, he squeezed the flesh of those soft milky breasts and felt a hot rush of pleasure as he saw the tears well into those wide dark-ringed eyes. The ache in his groin was unbearable and he saw no point in delaying his pleasure. With an animal-like grunt he lowered his bulky frame and with

deliberate force, thrust his burning flesh between those perfect young thighs.

Lust boiled in his veins. He was the master...and now he would intensify his pleasure...

His thick fingers found the end of the noose and with one deft movement he tightened it around that straining neck.

It was now that the girl's terrified struggles began in earnest and he knew his moment of ecstasy had arrived. The smell of his victim's fear, her desperate writhing and kicking made the blood pound thunderously in his head. So much power.... So much pain....

The thought drove him into frenzy.

* * *

Several minutes passed before he emerged from the coma of exquisite ecstasy. As his breathing steadied and reason returned, he slowly turned his head on the pillow.

And it was then that realization dawned.

Recoiling in shock, the man stared in disbelief at the bruised and swollen flesh, the blank, unseeing eyes, the heavy make-up now smudged grotesquely.

No...

A violent trembling began to shake his pallid, heavy frame.

* * *

The disc of the lens hidden among the ingenious folds of the tented ceiling caught the desperate panic in the killer's ashen face.

From the corner of her eye, Anthea James could see the floor manager giving her the wind-up signal and with skillful ease she brought the discussion to an end.

‘And that’s where we have to leave the *Female Factor* for today. Many thanks again to our two very interesting guests.’

Anthea smiled at the two women sitting on either side of her; one was an expert on family relationships, the other an imposingly elegant member of the Bar.

‘And of course, thank you too to our studio audience for their very stimulating questions’.

This time the smile broadened to include the packed tiers of seats that filled the darkness behind the cameras.

Then the full force of the James warmth and sincerity was directed at camera two. ‘To all of you at home – thanks for being with us. I hope you’ll join us next week when the *Female Factor* will have two more special guests discussing new and exciting careers for women in our rapidly changing world. Be sure not to miss it.’

For a further ten seconds as the credits began to roll the studio audience applauded with enthusiasm. Then the show was over.

It had been a hit from the start and very soon made Anthea James a

national name. Even now, three years on, she still felt the incredible adrenalin surge that came from knowing she was helping women gain the confidence, knowledge and power to deal with an increasingly complex world.

The success of the *Female Factor* had also vindicated her utter determination to get the program made at all. How often had she been told, 'women don't want that sort of stuff; they're not interested in current events, politics, financial info. It's all about cooking, decorating, gardening ...'

Well, she had proved them wrong, all those men who had argued that out-dated line. She had seen what they had refused to see: it wasn't that women weren't interested in those other areas any longer, but they were ready for more. And that's what the Female Factor gave them. The ratings were phenomenal and the challenge was to maintain the high standards that had been set. But challenges had never frightened Anthea James.

At thirty-nine, she was a major success story. To her large and devoted audience Anthea had it all: looks, fame, wealth, success. While older women admired and respected her, she was also their daughter's inspiration. If Anthea James could do it so could they...

Now, as the audience of excited, chattering women began to file out of the darkened studio, she waited for her mic to be unclipped and with no appearance of haste, smoothly divested herself of her guests. Given what was brewing in the back of her mind, she knew better than to waste any opportunity.

As she picked her way across the cable-littered studio floor, she stopped and chatted with the departing audience, those ordinary Australian women whose lives contrasted so starkly with her own. It cost her nothing and in the end could be so worthwhile.

The effect of Anthea's presence on her admirers was electrifying. That a woman as successful, as important, as busy as Anthea James could spare a moment to listen, to laugh, to sympathize with them made them glow with pleasure. Their eyes fed eagerly on the image she presented – the gleaming red-gold hair in its elegant bob, the understated but expensive clothes and jewelry, the slim perfect figure. To the women who clustered around her, Anthea James exuded the

confidence and ease of a woman who had never known failure or rejection.

Yet there was no resentment of their idol's glamour and good fortune. For in some mysterious way she was able to make them feel that she understood; that she knew what it might feel like to live in some dreary satellite suburb with the pressures of too little time and not enough money.

Her admirers loved Anthea for her compassion, her concern, for her understanding of their problems and for the message she seemed to offer each and every one of them. Through her television show, talk-back radio program and media website she reached out to each and every one of them. She offered hope.

It wasn't until thirty minutes later, suitable quantities of the James brand of charm and sincerity having been dispensed to all, that she was free to climb into her late model Mercedes for the drive to her harbor side home. As she turned out of the network gates and joined the heavy stream of late afternoon traffic, Anthea felt herself begin to relax. Her busy lifestyle took its toll but she loved the challenge, and the financial rewards were more than ample compensation.

In less than ten years she had become the country's highest paid media personality. Yet of even greater importance was the power and influence she had acquired along the way. With a half-smile, she tapped a manicured fingernail on the leather-covered steering wheel in time to a relaxing CD. Tonight at Julian Crane's cozy little dinner party she hoped to extend that power and influence in an entirely new direction.

She was taking the first step towards what had always been her ultimate goal.

* * *

Twenty-five minutes later the ornate wrought iron gates swung open and Anthea headed up the curved pebble driveway of her home. The house was hidden behind a high formal hedge overhung with muted green trees. It was her dream come true. One of the city's original sandstone residences, it had a charm typical of its Georgian

design. Located at the end of a quiet cul de sac, with its lush springy lawns running down to the harbor's edge, the home was her haven, her sanctuary, a place to relax out of the public eye.

As she opened the heavy oak front door and entered the coolness of the black and white tiled foyer, she caught the fragrance of furniture polish and saw the gleam on the French marquetry table further down the hallway. She thought again how lucky she was to have found Selena. The twenty-five year old Filipino woman was a treasure – fastidious, capable and discreet. Like so many immigrants, the young woman had come to Australia in search of a better life, and Anthea admired her for it. She didn't know how she would manage her busy working life without Selena's help.

Unloading her briefcase in her study, she made her way through to the sunny kitchen at the rear of the house. In the refrigerator, she found the jug of iced tea that Selena always left in readiness. Pouring herself a glass, Anthea carried it through to the back veranda which offered sweeping views of the harbor. Settling herself amid cushions on the cane sofa, she slipped off her high heels. While she hated to admit it, she felt tired.

Her schedule would have crushed any normal woman: the media commitments, the meetings and committees, the endless speaking engagements, the constant demand for her imprimatur by an endless stream of charitable organizations. And now, her steadily increasing involvement in the political arena.

Politics was the reason for tonight's dinner party at the harbor side mansion of her employer, multi-millionaire media tycoon, Julian Crane. It was to be her formal introduction to those men she had to win over, the men she was counting on to be major supporters in her bid for political office.

The by-election for the Federal seat of Elwyn was to be her testing ground. As a marginal seat it was likely to suffer the usual tendency of a protest vote against the troubled sitting government. But the current member had been encouraged to retire and Anthea was aiming to take his place. The group of high-powered businessmen she would meet tonight, all friends and associates of her employer, were fully aware

that she had the electoral appeal to give her every chance of retaining the seat for the government.

But Anthea was not so naïve as to think her fellow guests were disinterested parties. If they offered her their support, she knew that in the future there would be favors expected, trade-offs anticipated when the time was right. No doubt, even these days, there would be some amongst them who would view a woman as more malleable, more easily influenced.

Her eyes hardened as she swallowed the last of her tea. Well, let them keep their illusions. In the meantime she would make full use of their support and assistance. Afterwards, they would find out soon enough that Anthea James was not quite as pliable as some of them might have anticipated.

As she stood up and took in the broad, expansive view, she let herself think back to the advice Nan had given her about men so many years ago.

‘Use them, my darlin’...Use every last one of them...’

* * *

After a catnap, she woke refreshed. The short, dreamless sleep had revitalized her and she felt in good form for the challenge of the evening ahead.

As she headed for the shower, the phone rang. It was Alex.

‘Darling,’ her tone was warm, ‘where are you?’

‘The airport. The Manila flight’s been delayed an hour...bloody Qantas.’ Alex’s faint Hungarian accent always sounded a little more pronounced on the phone. ‘Never mind, it gives me the chance to wish you all the best again for this evening.’

‘Thanks...I feel as if I’m about to be assessed for head prefect.’ Alex was the only person Anthea had confided in about this evening’s dinner. Her tone was light but he knew how much it meant to her.

‘I’m not sure I approve of your company – all those terribly respectable wealthy businessmen.’ There was something in the dryness of his tone that put Anthea on the alert.

A well-known barrister with a fearsome reputation, Alex Volka had been secretly seconded onto a government-initiated committee with the brief of investigating the alarming growth of organized crime in Australia. But his increasing frustration with the committee's limited powers to follow through on its investigations had caused him a *crise de conscience*. Soon afterwards he had resigned his position and now, while still as busy as ever with his practice, he spent every spare moment researching the book he hoped would document the activities of those, he described to Anthea as, 'Australian's most protected criminals'.

He was convinced that the only way the government would be forced into action was by the publication of the facts.

'At least I feel I can achieve something this way,' he had told Anthea one evening not long after resigning his position. 'On the committee I felt as if I was supposed to work with both hands tied behind my back – and one eye closed too.'

Not a man to anger easily, he had shaken his head of thick blonde hair and his hazel eyes had darkened. 'No, by the time this book comes out, and if I can make sure enough mud sticks, the government will have to take some action. The public outcry will make sure of that.'

For all he had confided to Anthea, he had not mentioned names and she had had no hint – until now.

She frowned and her hand tightened around the phone. Was Alex implying that someone among Julian Crane's dinner guests was in his sights? She knew better than to ask. When he wanted to, Alex would tell her more, she was sure.

For a few more minutes they chatted cheerfully before saying goodbye. But as she put down her phone, Alex's earlier comment was still on her mind. Did he really mean there was someone in tonight's company whose activities had aroused his suspicions? Of course Australia was different these days, the world was different. People didn't play by the rules any longer no matter what strata of society they came from. A committed and dedicated media brought that message home on a regular basis.

As she stepped into the warm spray of the shower, she thought too about her relationship with Alex. He worked at a feverish pace and their dedication to their respective careers meant sometimes weeks

could go by when they didn't see each other. But they kept in close touch. They had met three years ago and had hit it off right from the start. Although he had been only a child when his mother had managed to find her way out of Hungary, Alex had the charm common to many European men. His mother, Margo, a divorcee and an accomplished pianist, had been very ambitious for her only child. Sacrificing her own career, she had worked at various menial jobs to put Alex through the best private schools and university. The contacts she had made while giving piano lessons to the children of some of Sydney's wealthiest and most influential citizens had helped in establishing Alex's career. With her son's talents now fully acknowledged, Margo Volka basked happily in the reflected glory of his success. Her only regret was that Alex had never married and given her grandchildren

At forty-three years old, tall, handsome and refined, Alex Volka was one of Australia's most eligible bachelors. Women pursued him openly, captivated by his charm, his looks, his power. Yet he had remained unclaimed until his meeting with Anthea James. And then it had been Alex himself who had done the chasing. Anthea's own relentless ambition, her driving desire for success plus the scars of her past had left her convinced that there was little place for a man in her life.

But as she grew to prominence, as her successes piled upon each other and her wildest dreams seemed more and more as if they might become a reality, she was astute enough to see that an appropriate mate was an inevitable social requirement. Not only did it sidestep gossip, it would also enlarge her in the public eye; she would be viewed not only as a professional success but as a woman who had been equally successful in her personal life. That attitude might have sounded calculating if she hadn't been genuinely fond of Alex and theirs was a close and intimate relationship.

From the beginning, the Australian media had worked hard at making her and Alex Volka an 'item', had delighted in photographing them together and in speculating on the possibility of marriage. But theirs was a relationship that suited them both. There were no unrealistic demands, no distracting complications. Alex was a

passionate exciting man who demanded the best of himself and of life, yet much as she cherished their relationship, respected his integrity and admired his drive, Anthea knew she would never marry Alex – and she was sure he understood that.

A husband had never been part of her plans. Not even someone as wonderful as Alex. Marriage meant sacrifice and selflessness, and for Anthea that meant the risk that her goals would be eclipsed, overshadowed, and everything she had worked so hard to achieve would slip away from her.

That thought brought a stubborn light into her eyes as she turned off the shower and reached for a towel. She would never let that happen. Not now. Not when she was so close.

* * *

Wrapped in a silk robe, Anthea sat in front of the mirror and applied her make-up. She had learned long ago how to highlight her best features: her slim, straight nose, her high cheekbones and clear dark eyes. If her jaw was a little too strong, her mouth a fraction too wide, such imperfections went unnoticed in the overall impression of attractiveness. Looks helped in the first three minutes she always told young women, after that, a woman's intellect and outlook were far more important in defining who she was.

Make-up done, she ran a brush through her sleek, shiny bob. She had always managed it easily herself. Beauty salons with their idle gossip and intrusive curiosity were best avoided for someone as disinclined to self-revelation as herself.

For despite her high profile, she had made certain little was known of her personal history. To the Australian media her existence had begun a mere dozen years ago. Before that the details were vague...A country childhood? Brought up abroad? A traumatic family background? Everything was merely guesswork. Nothing was known about her family, her education, her childhood friends. Or the way in which almost overnight Anthea James had taken Sydney social scene by storm.

As far as the media were able to discover it had begun with the

launch of her exclusive collection of stunning and innovative jewelry – a brilliantly timed move given the booming Australian economy at the time.

Drawn by the massive publicity in newspapers and cutting edge fashion magazines and websites, the conspicuous consumers of Sydney's wealthiest suburbs had been thrilled to receive invitations to the opening party at the plushly appointed Double Bay boutique. But just how Anthea had managed to afford such a bombardment of publicity no-one had ever been able to discover.

Yet achieve it she did, and her exquisite pieces sold with fervent disregard for price to a small army of dedicated well-heeled shoppers. From then on her path had been assured. Anthea had known exactly how to capitalize on her success and intrigue. In no time she was a fixture on the A-list party circuit, featuring regularly in the Australian media. It had all happened exactly as she had planned and no-one then could have imagined how much higher Anthea was aiming than that initial vapid socialite milieu.

Now, with a sense of inner satisfaction, she clipped on the black opal and platinum necklace that was one of her own designs. The jewelry boutique had served its purpose. It was one of her lesser concerns now. She knew that Roy was perfectly able to look after that side of her affairs. After all, it was thanks to him that it had existed at all. It had all been part of her game plan.

And now at last she was in sight of her highest goal, a goal brought closer she was sure by her selection as the most recent Australian of the Year. Excitement lit her dark eyes as she pondered the major step she was about to take this evening. The right backing and support would ensure her entry onto the political scene. From there she had no intention of stopping until she reached Australia's highest political office.

She wasn't a fool; she knew it wouldn't happen overnight. But she was patient; she could bide her time. And of one thing she was sure – nothing was going to stop her now.

With her eye on the time, Anthea slipped on the black lace cocktail dress she had chosen for this evening. It hinted at her full bosom, revealed the smooth curve of her hips yet stopped short of

provocation. She knew the ropes; knew best how to conquer those who might think themselves immune to her charm and presence, who might fear a woman's intellect and ambition. To them she would present the ultimate winning combination: femininity and power.

Yet as she made a final check of her appearance, her inner excitement was tempered by the knowledge that once she had changed direction and headed into the maelstrom of a political career, she would be subjected to much closer scrutiny by the media at large. It was inevitable. Her dark eyes glinted in the mirror. She had conquered that fear long ago. Her tracks were well-covered, she assured herself. She had seen to that. Lenore Hamlyn had been dead and buried a long time ago.

With furious impatience Maxine Crane ripped off the crimson silk Chanel gown and flung it on the floor. Shit! Five thousand dollars worth and she still looked like an overfed heifer.

With blazing eyes she stood in front of the full-length mirror and took in the loathsome sight of her ample body clad only in satin bra and panties. Even in the deliberate softness of her bedroom lighting the puckered sagging flesh was clearly visible around her hips and backside while the large breasts she had once flaunted so proudly now hung low and pendulous like two slowly leaking balloons. The sight revolted her.

Having kids had ruined her, she decided bitterly. That and the start of the damn menopause. Her scarlet lips tightened. Christ, only forty-eight and already she was losing her sap, drying up like an old bone that had been sucked dry.

Angrily she rummaged through the rows of designer dresses in search of something that would better perform the miracle of transformation. Tonight especially she had wanted to look her best. With Anthea James under her roof, she had wanted to preen, shine, establish without a doubt her own status and power. To show that Anthea James wasn't going to get it all her own way...

Once more the anger bubbled up inside her. She loathed the bitch, loathed her success, her smug self-confidence, her air of infallible righteousness. Who the hell was she after all? Where had she crawled from? For all her celebrity no-one seemed to know the answer to that. From the moment she'd burst onto the scene completely unheralded a dozen or so years ago, from the moment she had opened that outrageous boutique in Double Bay, her climb had been meteoric.

A look of pure hatred crossed Maxine's puffy, over made-up face as she struggled into a too tight organza sheath. She was so sick of seeing Anthea James's smug, perfect features staring at her from yet another magazine or television screen, of hearing her making pronouncements on yet another 'important current issue'.

As she finally yanked up the zipper, Maxine turned her rage towards her husband. How dare Julian expect her to endure an evening like this? She knew what she was in for: the dutiful hostess in the background while every man in the room flattered and fawned over that sharp-eyed bitch. She couldn't believe that grown men could allow themselves to be so easily manipulated. That self-righteous cow clicked her fingers and they fell over themselves to do what she wanted. And if simple manipulation wasn't enough, Maxine was as certain as she could be without concrete proof that Anthea James would have no hesitation in sleeping with whomever she felt could best promote her own interests.

Her lips curled in a sneer. She wasn't fooled by the relationship with Alex Volka; a means of distracting the media from probing into other, more revealing aspects of the media queen's private life, Maxine was sure.

Her temper flared again. Did Julian think she was a fool? Did he think she hadn't heard the rumors spread gleefully around this incestuous bloody city? That Anthea James's speedy climb to the top of the Crane Corporation – the television program, the talk-back radio, the media column – had been achieved by screwing her employer? And now the thought of having to sit and listen to that condescending, sanctimonious bitch all evening drove Maxine crazy.

In an effort to distract herself she opened the green velvet box she had taken earlier from the safe. Inside, lay a magnificent string of

Paspaley pearls, a gift from Julian for her last birthday. The sight of their lustrous beauty helped to ease her mood, and with a small sigh of satisfaction she lifted the heavy pearls from their padded cushion and carefully clipped them around her plump neck. One of her consolations. And then she gave a contented smile as she thought of her other source of comfort... Oh, yes, without Brett life would be almost unbearable.

* * *

Anthea had timed her arrival to perfection. The Crane harbor side mansion was renowned for its palatial opulence but it was far from her own taste. She found the place as blatantly vulgar as she found Julian Crane himself. Yet now, as she was shown into the large formal sitting room where the other guests were already assembled, she put such thoughts out of her mind

Eight perfectly barbered heads turned towards her and eight pairs of appreciative male eyes took in the woman who stood poised and smiling in the doorway. Her face was familiar of course although as yet none of those assembled had met the star of the Crane Corporation in person. But from the time she had openly began to express interest in the possibility of a political future, her progress had been intently monitored and her phenomenal popularity with the Australian public noted with particular interest.

Given Julian Crane's enthusiasm for his protégée, it hadn't taken this powerful coterie long to decide that the woman who now stood before them was a prospective candidate who deserved their serious consideration. The Party was going through tough times; they were always on the look out for first class people and the consensus of opinion was that as well as being talented, Anthea James might also be perfectly placed to ensure their interests were protected.

* * *

Smiling smoothly, Julian Crane moved to greet her. He was thickset, bull-necked, with pallid indoor skin and not even expensive tailoring could quite give him the patina of elegance.

'Anthea...' He took her hand and his dry lips barely touched her cheek. 'You look wonderful...as always.' There was the usual cool arrogance in his voice that might have been mocking or not.

Anthea permitted herself a small smile of acknowledgement. She had long ago formed the impression that her employer viewed her first and foremost as a valuable commodity to be treated accordingly, but that as a woman she was merely to be tolerated. He had never seemed at ease in her company.

'Come in and let me introduce you.' He put a hand on the small of her back. 'You have a roomful of very serious admirers here.'

The oily smoothness irked her but she kept the smile on her face. Julian Crane needed her, and if she was going to fulfill her long-held goals, she needed him. He was one of Australia's most powerful men and a classic migrant success story. Abandoning an economically depressed and politically troubled post-war Britain, he had arrived in Australia with fifty pounds sterling in his pocket. With survival skills learned as a child on the tough mean streets of a Welsh mining village he had quickly seized the opportunities afforded by his adopted country.

Transport and communication he soon saw were the backbone of a land as large as Australia. A desk job with a small trucking firm rapidly taught him the ropes and within six months he'd put down a deposit on his first second-hand truck. After that, it was a simple matter to redirect business from his unwitting employer to himself.

It had started from there and eighteen months later, having finally resigned his clerk's position, Julian Crane had three trucks of his own and a third of his ex-boss's business. Ten years later, his trucking empire was among the largest in Australia and borrowing heavily while interest rates were ridiculously low, he had proceeded to branch out into refrigeration and building materials, again tapping into a market swollen by the continuing arrival of thousands of eager immigrants.

Controversial, flamboyant and a risk taker, he had made his first

million before he was thirty and was ripe to cash in on the booming resources and property markets that followed. From there, Julian Crane's fortune had escalated in a dizzying fashion. It was his acquisition in the last dozen years or so of several major newspapers followed by the purchase of a leading television and radio network that had not only brought him immense wealth but great personal power as well.

And power, Anthea had realized very quickly after meeting him, was something Julian Crane found immensely exciting and satisfying. It seemed to matter to him every bit as much as money. She was aware of the stories how, in the early days of his fortune building the moneyed Establishment had rebuffed him, had wanted nothing to do with this rough, working class upstart whose ambition to succeed was so blatant and so ruthless. In the end, when it no longer mattered, his fortune had ensured his acceptance – but Julian Crane had never forgiven the early slight and relished the power that his money brought.

It was a power, Anthea was well aware, he could also use with indiscriminate malevolence. She had heard the rumors not only of his political manipulations but also about the peremptory sackings of attractive, young female journalists who had seen fit to resist their employer's blunt advances. On the other hand, for the bold and pretty young models who succumbed, there was the assurance of career-enhancing publicity via Crane's wide-spread media holdings.

Yes, Anthea had few illusions about the man who was her boss, but their own relationship had never been anything more than a very profitable working arrangement on both sides. She knew instinctively that to a man like Julian Crane, an older, independent, powerful woman like herself held no appeal. Easily-managed young girls were much more to his taste.

But now, as she was introduced to her fellow guests, Anthea was reminded again just how important Julian was to her quest; it was he who had summoned these prominent wealthy men here this evening; he who had already given her his imprimatur. As she shook hands, acknowledged greetings, she was aware how closely she was being judged. In essence, she had this one evening to convince those

gathered that she had what it took to enter the political arena on the Party's side. Yet she couldn't help wondering how differently they might they feel about her if they knew what lay behind her ambition. Perhaps they imagined she was taking this step to satisfy her ego, to further gild her celebrity. They had no idea how far she planned to go, how long she had dreamed of taking this step, how much patience it had taken to position herself for this moment.

She was well aware too why this elite group might be interested in her. There were new challenges in the world these days, challenges that made governments vulnerable. A familiar face, someone with easily identifiable values would help to placate and appease a nervous electorate.

Of course she believed in the value of free enterprise, in a system that rewarded those who strive and achieve but Anthea had another agenda too. Fundamental to her beliefs was the premise that women should have a major role to play in the formation of their own destinies - and it was this that drove her. Yes, the rules had begun to change but she was impatient. She saw a need to speed up the process, to bring to an end the exploitation and exclusion from power that woman had endured for too long. Women, ordinary women, had to be able to gain real power - in the home, the work place, in schools and universities. Given her own secret history, Anthea cared deeply about these issues; they were at the very core of the force that propelled her.

'And of course,' Julian was saying now, 'you have met my wife, Maxine.'

'How lovely to see you again, Maxine.' Anthea's voice maintained its friendliness as the other woman nodded coolly and pointedly turned away to continue her conversation with the director of a major mining company.

Inwardly, Anthea shrugged off the insult. This was not the first time Julian's wife had made her feelings clear. They saw each other seldom, but Maxine Crane's animosity was palpable. Despite her general popularity, Anthea fully recognized that there was a certain sector of Sydney society that would always refuse to acknowledge her or her accomplishments. The reasons weren't so hard to fathom - her popularity with the masses, her influence and power. And might it also

be the case that as an unknown factor she made some of them uneasy? Whatever the answer, she had never let it worry her.

The introductions completed, the party moved into the dining room where the long, mahogany table gleamed with candles, silver and Waterford crystal. As the chairman of a leading international financial institution helped Anthea into her chair, he let his cool, smooth hand rest a fraction too long on her bare shoulder. A half-smile hovered around Anthea's lips.

Women like Maxine Crane would never get in her way.

* * *

It was late when the evening finally came to an end. As she sat cocooned in the soft leather comfort of the back seat of Julian Crane's purring Rolls Royce for the short drive to her home, Anthea let herself relax. Thinking back on the night, she felt a sense of overwhelming satisfaction. Whatever test had been presented to her, she felt certain she had passed.

Every issue raised she had discussed with perception and understanding, had expertly answered the most penetrating questions on a diverse range of subjects. And of equal importance, she had expertly side-stepped any reference to her private life. A wave of elation swept through her. She was supremely confident that she now had the support that counted.

And it was at that moment, as she stared out at the lights of the city where she had first made her mark, that Nan's oft-repeated words echoed once more in Anthea's mind: *Use them, Lenore...use them... Just like they used you my darlin'.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Bacia (pronounced 'batcher') has lived in Rome, London and Los Angeles and traveled widely in the Far East and Europe. Her first novel was bought for a record-breaking advance and was an international best-seller. The author of dozens of short stories, she has written for television and had her own newspaper and magazine by-line in leading publications.

Apart from suspense thrillers, Jennifer also writes fast-paced romantic suspense. Titles include *Everything to Lose*, *Best Kept Secrets*, *One Door Closes* and others.

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A spellbinding thriller about wealth, power
and one woman's all-consuming ambition
to achieve her wildest dreams.

Lenore Hamlyn is taken in by her sympathetic landlady and is shocked when she eventually learns the source of Nan's wealth. But that life-changing revelation fires her deepest ambition.

Returning from her London finishing school as the sophisticated, enigmatic Anthea James, she is determined to achieve the ultimate power – even if that means confronting rich and deadly enemies.

But the most shocking threat of all comes from the only man she has ever loved – who now has the power to destroy her.

Jennifer Bacia has lived in Rome, London and Los Angeles. Her first novel was bought for a record-breaking advance and was an international best-seller. Jennifer is the author of 9 novels, including her latest release *Dark Side of the Harbour*, two works of non-fiction and dozens of short stories. She currently lives in Brisbane, Australia.

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