

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless dress, a gold chain necklace, and large hoop earrings, is shown in profile from the chest up. She is sitting on a blue and gold patterned chair. The background is a panoramic view of a city skyline, including a prominent tower with a circular observation deck, under a clear blue sky.

What if money and
success are not enough?

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CHAPTER I

New Year's Eve

She couldn't help wondering why it was love that so often taught the true meaning of hate.

Around midnight, after she'd performed the ritual hugs and kisses and clichéd best wishes, the emotion surged through her again, choking off her breath.

But still, Cass congratulated herself bitterly, she was managing the impossible. Keeping her secret to herself. Hiding it behind the fixed smile that made her face ache and the forced bonhomie of the moment as she moved around the crowded living room. Johnny's friends mostly. 'Friends' he felt they should know. The city's movers and shakers. The people who knew people who knew people.

She hadn't wanted a party this year. Not after what had happened. But she had known there was little chance of talking Johnny out of something that had become such a fixture on their social calendar. Johnny Dunworth was a party man. Throwing, or going to – Johnny knew how to have a good time. Even at a party for two.

‘Cass! Everything wonderful for the year ahead!’ She caught a whiff of Giorgio as a tall, attractive strawberry blonde embraced her and planted a kiss on each cheek.

For Angela Kelly, Cass managed to produce a smile that was genuine. They mightn’t see each other often but Angela was a real friend – as distinct from a lot of others here tonight. Which was probably why even the smile wasn’t quite enough to fool her.

‘Cass . . . is something the matter?’ Those warm hazel eyes searched her face with concern.

Cass should have known better. Angela Kelly, investigative journo, couldn’t be fooled quite that easily. What sign had alerted her? she wondered. Had Angela somehow sensed the anguish and anger behind Cass’s artificial stretch of lips and teeth, noted the stress and confusion in her tight, clenched fingers?

‘I –’ Cass looked away, dreading the sting she felt starting behind her eyes. Suddenly she realized how much she wanted to confide, to pour out her worries. To Angela, who had it all together. Who would tell her what to do, how to handle the nightmare her life had become.

But she knew she couldn’t do that now. Not here. Maybe not ever.

‘Cass! Happy New Year; my sweet! May all your sexual fantasies come true!’ A business friend of Johnny’s, a man she barely knew, had slung a too familiar arm around her neck and was pulling her close, crushing her breasts against his perfectly rumpled Boss linen. Cass could smell the stench of rum on his breath.

Hiding her distaste, she threw Angela an apologetic glance. ‘I’ll call you, Angie. Soon.’

And Angela Kelly got a hint of something seriously wrong in her friend’s bleak blue eyes.

*

Fran Antonio hated New Year almost as much as she hated parties. Parties too obviously revealed her as the freak she felt herself to be. If she'd been divorced she could at least have laid claim to fitting society's norms. But there was nothing normal about being a thirty-nine-year-old never-married woman.

She stood as inconspicuously as possible in the far corner of the lavish, high-ceilinged living room with its spectacular water views. The glass in her hand was a comforting prop. She didn't drink. Her vices were few. But a selling point? Hardly. So what else? Certainly not her figure, hidden in the expensive crepe pantsuit. Hardly man-catching gear, she knew, but what difference did it make when a quick perusal of her assets left on offer only her brain and a six-figure salary? And she'd read enough to know that these days even that hardly counted if it were true that most men were threatened by women more intelligent and better paid than themselves.

Fran took another sip of mineral water and wondered when it might be polite to leave. It was only because Cass had insisted that she'd accepted the invitation for tonight. Kind, generous Cass whom she'd always admired. And envied. Cass who had married the handsome, charismatic Johnny Dunworth, ad man *terrible*. Cass, who was mother to Joanna and Tom and Nicky.

Fran knew that envy was a sin. But she couldn't help herself. Not that she begrudged Cass her good fortune. It was just that Fran wanted her share of it too. The things that made life worth living. The things that really mattered. A husband and a family.

As she watched the happy groups and couples around her she wished again that she'd been strong enough to resist

Cass's invitation. A good-hearted attempt, she knew, to keep her from spending this significant evening alone. Yet even being by herself would have been preferable to this.

In the flurry of the stroke of midnight she'd found herself being kissed by half a dozen strangers and felt the stir of a physical sensation she had almost forgotten. How long had it been since she'd felt the pressure of a man's lips against her own? She could barely remember. Four years? The doctor she had met on that Christmas cruise? Breathing passion into her again. Igniting remote memory. Bringing her to life – for a few days at least – before he flew back to somewhere in Perth. Address not offered. She could understand, of course. Not special enough to change his life for. Or hers. But the aftermath had made her almost regret what had occurred. Had left her with an itch impossible to soothe, that clawed at her insides, left her sleepless with unrest. She should have known better.

Surreptitiously, she checked her watch. Twenty after midnight. Polite now to leave? It would be easier, she thought, to slip away, avoid the fuss of goodbyes. Cass would forgive her and she'd already mentioned to Angela that she wouldn't be staying long.

Angela . . . She caught sight of her friend across the room, confident, smiling, the center of attention. Another never-married. The only difference being that the choice was Angela's. Needing no man. Not even one as ruggedly attractive and high profile as Christopher Tolbert who hovered attentively at her elbow.

Even if her job hadn't made her instantly recognizable, Angela would still have turned heads, Fran thought. Tall and gorgeous, perfect profile, the sort of legs Fran would have given ten years' salary for. Blessings, taken for granted, she felt sure, by those women lucky enough to be born with them.

With an effort Fran shook off her mood. What good would it do her to get so morose? This was the brink of a new year. Another chance. Another reason to hope. And – another year older . . .

It was time to go. Excusing herself, she moved through the crowded room and found the small study off the foyer where she had left her handbag. Soft, pale leather. Chanel. One of her compensations for what she really lacked. And there were others. Like the gleaming BMW that awaited her outside. The well-planned share portfolio. The central city apartment where notables such as Angela were her neighbors.

Yet none of it was ever enough to make up for what she longed for so desperately.

*

Angela Kelly was worried. Sometimes she wondered if it was the natural state for people employed in her fickle industry. Still, she did her best to comfort herself, she had survived longer than most. Twenty years in the business, and now prime time anchor on *Deadline*. The current affairs show everyone watched. Five years, she'd lasted. An eternity for anyone, and particularly for a female of the species.

But tonight she was finding it more difficult than usual to put her paranoia on hold. The party and the anticipated pleasures of Chris Tolbert's sexual prowess were some distraction but she still couldn't shake off her worries.

Because she'd heard the rumors. Because that old line about it being too dangerous in television ever to take a holiday might now be coming true for her.

There was no summer recess for *Deadline*. While Angela took her usual six-week break the program contin-

ued to air with a substitute anchor. In previous years the job had been swapped between a couple of the weekend newsmen. But this year there'd been a change. A serious change. This time Cia Morgan had been chosen to take Angela's place in the chair.

Cia Morgan. Twenty-eight. Bright, brash, intelligent and camera beautiful. From the time eighteen months ago when Cia had joined the program, Angela had known she had something to worry about.

Cia Morgan was ambitious. And it showed. She was also eleven years younger than Angela. And if the rumor mill was as accurate as usual, she was a serious contender for *Deadline's* top job. The new-blood, fresh-face scenario of the gladiatorial ratings game. Especially when those ratings had taken a sudden dip in the last six months.

They would turn it around, of course they would. It had happened before. *Deadline* was the pinnacle and Angela knew how lucky she was to be sitting in that chair. Sure, there was the crap, the pop psychology, the stories geared to the viewing public's short-lived attention spans, but there were important issues as well. Issues she felt passionate about, committed to. And *Deadline* gave her the chance to make a difference. There was no way she was walking away without a fight. Cia Morgan or no Cia Morgan.

'It's almost one-thirty, Angie. Feel like calling it a night?'

Chris Tolbert's dark eyes were as loaded with intent as the plays he wrote to such acclaim. This was their second date and there was still plenty of ground to cover.

Angela switched modes. Easy when you'd had as much practice as she had – and men were such pushovers. She smiled at the attractive playwright. 'Well, it's probably time to do something . . .'

She'd done the asking for this date. Long ago she'd

come to the realization that it takes a certain sort of male to approach a high-profile female. It was the aura of power that men couldn't handle. Particularly those men who were used to wielding it themselves. She had noted with silent amusement their obvious unease and discomfort in her presence. But paradoxically, she had sensed the sexual charge too. Their desire, perhaps, to master that power . . .

But she would never allow that. She was in control of her own life. Exactly as she had always planned.

And so, as daylight broke on the first day of the new year, Fran Antoni lay alone in her hopeful queen size bed, Angela Kelly rocked passionately in her new lover's embrace and Cass Dunworth lay sleepless beside her handsome, snoring husband.

None of them could know that by the same time next year one of them would be dead.

CHAPTER 2

‘It was *her*, wasn’t it! Tell me the truth, Johnny! That’s all I’m asking – just the truth this time!’

Johnny Dunworth, less than his immaculate self on that first morning of January, emerged pale-faced from the bathroom.

‘Cass, your imagination’s working overtime.’

Still in her dressing gown, she stood her ground in front of him. ‘I know what I heard, Johnny. Ten minutes after midnight to be exact. It was *her* you were talking to, wasn’t it?’ Her voice shook with emotion. ‘Why? Why? When you told me it was over?’

She heard his heavy sigh as he ran a hand over his salt-and-pepper hair. Thick. Intact. As attractive as his gym-firm frame, his rugged, still boyish looks and the inviting lopsided smile. For almost twenty-one years Cass had thought of Johnny Dunworth as hers. His love and his body her exclusive possessions forever. He was her strength, her comfort, her security. She’d been only nineteen when she’d fallen crazily in love with the stylish, handsome, ambitious advertising executive six years her senior. Eight months later they were married.

It had seemed like the stuff of dreams. Johnny Dunworth had been a catch, and she was human enough to enjoy the envy of her girlfriends. She'd been so sure that in Johnny she'd found everything she'd ever need in a man. He was easygoing, kind, intelligent and fun, and she loved his quick wit and humor, his ability to charm. Like the father to whom she was so close, Cass felt utterly sure that Johnny would always take care of her, love her, indulge her and dote on her. She adored him totally.

Totally . . . utterly . . . Back then, childish superlatives had described her life. It had been a fairytale come true. And for so long had continued that way. Three great kids, good friends, financial success. She'd been happy to lead the conventional life of the corporate wife – the elegant North Shore home, the gracious entertaining, the expensive holidays, opening nights and other glamorous events associated with Johnny's work.

For the first nineteen years of marriage Cass's focus had been her husband and family – and that was exactly how she wanted it to be. The idea of a career had never really interested her. She'd gone to university only because it had pleased her parents – and because no better option had occurred to her. But when she'd met Johnny she'd been more than happy to drop out.

Cass had loved the ups and downs of marriage and motherhood, had delighted in seeing her children grow into caring, intelligent, responsible human beings. It was unfashionable now, she knew, but she and Johnny had played the traditional roles, he the breadwinner, she the homemaker – and grateful to be offered that option.

She was sure she'd have hated having to cope as a working mother. Juggling the balls of children, husband, housework, and still trying to hold down a full-time job. Something would've had to give, she was sure, and if the

divorce statistics were anything to go by it was her relationship that would have suffered. Cass never ceased to wonder how other women, tense and exhausted after fulfilling their many duties, could still find the time and energy to keep a husband happy.

When the children had first left home she'd found the adjustment difficult, been at a loss for a while. Then her weekly game of tennis had expanded to fill another couple of afternoons, she'd taken up volunteer work at one of the hospitals and started having too many boozy lunches with other similarly 'released' friends. The talk was light and gossipy but occasionally would turn to complaints about kids and husbands. Cass said little, but on the way home she would find herself thinking the sort of thoughts she normally avoided. About the distance she'd felt growing in recent years between herself and Johnny. About how little time they spent with each other even with the children no longer around.

There'd been occasions when she'd tried to talk to him about it, but he refused to discuss it seriously. His business had grown exponentially; was now one of the biggest in the country. These days, it seemed, he spent longer hours at work than in the years when he'd been getting established.

It was in these pensive moods that Cass found herself confronting the worrying idea that maybe Johnny found her boring. For the first time in years they were alone together, should have time to relate, do things just the two of them. But she found herself doubting her ability to provide the stimulus her husband needed, to compete with the glamorous, fast-paced, quicksilver world he moved in. A world full of young, dynamic women. Like Lisa Fleming

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Even now, Cass could replay with ease the shellshock of that first discovery. The panic, the anger, the humiliation.

The good wife cocooned by blind faith, never questioning the late nights and weekend ‘conferences’, the waning of sexual interest in bed.

Until she had made her discovery by the simplest means of all. The credit card copy of a hotel receipt. In the pocket of the coat that the Good (Stupid) Wife was taking to be cleaned. And what had made the cold, hard weight settle in her belly was the fact that the hotel was here. In town.

Still, she had forced herself not to jump to conclusions – at least not until she had checked her own diary. And noted that Johnny was supposed to have been in Melbourne that particular evening . . .

Forgetting to breathe, she had quickly and unashamedly searched the filing cabinet in his study, sifting through credit card statements, cross checking dates and times until she found out more than she’d wanted to know.

Sometimes three nights a month. Once even, a whole weekend at Peppers by the Sea. Rage shot through her like a flame as she realized that had been the twins’ birthday weekend. The weekend Johnny had been the oh-so-apologetic father. The meeting with out-of-town ‘clients’ that he just ‘couldn’t miss’ . . .

Caught out, confronted by evidence too concrete even for an advertising executive’s febrile imagination, he was too much Johnny to try bluster. Instead, he’d moved easily into damage control.

‘Cass, darling, it was nothing serious, I promise you . . . It just – happened. Too much to drink one night and . . .’ The pleading-for-understanding shrug of the naughty little boy she had fallen for. ‘Darling, she’s not even my type.’

‘Who? Who’s not your type?’ Cass had to know this or she would never breathe or sleep again.

‘It doesn’t matter. It’s over. It meant nothing.’

‘Three weeks ago it wasn’t over!’ She had flown at him then, waving the evidence in his face, until finally instinct prevailed and she beat her fists against his chest, crazy with rage and jealousy.

It had proved remarkably easy to put a name and face to her husband’s illicit lover. All it took was one surreptitious visit to the office drinking hole at a time she knew Johnny was usually there. Hidden from view, and with the instinct of the betrayed, Cass had spotted at once the woman concerned. Her gut churned at the sight of the twenty-something with the gleaming cap of dark hair, the petite, curvy figure and ubiquitous power suit. The body language between them was unmistakable. The long looks, the casual touching, the secret, sensual smiles.

Cass had felt a chilling numbness start in her fingers and creep through her body, the frozen tentacles finally wrapping themselves around her heart. Something terrible gnawed at her insides and her mind ricocheted between emotions she had never before experienced. Nuclear-strength jealousy, mind-numbing rage and free-fall panic.

The confrontation was ugly. Her rage exhausted her, her fear frightened her, her need diminished her. Even when Johnny admitted his guilt, offered the blandishments of excuses, promised to end the affair, she could not be calmed. She screamed her questions of fear. How could she believe that he would call it off? If there’d been this woman, how many others had there been? And would be again?

Johnny’s answers were soothing, his placatory gifts expensive, but Cass discovered that trust is the hardest of virtues to restore.

The children had never known. Nor had she revealed her torment to any of her friends. Not even Angela or Fran. Her humiliation and shame were too great for that. How

was it possible to choke out the words that your role as wife is merely illusionary?

It took three months for a semblance of normality to return to her life; when every unrecognized female voice on the telephone and every late meeting weren't immediate causes for paranoid suspicion. During those weeks she had done something she had never imagined herself capable of. Had waited in her car outside the office on many of those late evenings. Had followed his Porsche afterwards. Surveillance her only route to igniting the small spark left of her trust.

And until last night she had found no further reason for suspicion. Had begun to shrug off the debilitating burden of vigilance, come slowly to believe again in the validity of her marriage.

Her husband's affair with Lisa Fleming was over, she had comforted herself. The one-off fling so many men allow themselves with the excuse that it 'didn't mean anything' was finished. If she tried, she might even be able to pretend it had never happened.

Or so she had thought until she'd overheard that post-midnight call.

'*Why, Johnny?*' she repeated now, her voice high pitched and trembling, her whole body throbbing with pain. She had to know. Even if the answer made her torture worse.

With an impatient shake of his head her husband dragged on a pair of Levi shorts. 'Look, it's over, Cass. Okay? How many times do I have to tell you before you believe me?'

'Then why the call, Johnny? Auld lang syne, is that it?' She hated the sound of her own sarcasm. But she couldn't believe it was happening again. After all she'd already been through, after all the promises and denials . . . How could

he do this to her? To all of them? And expect her to go on believing his lies?

He didn't answer. Face etched with pain, he pushed his way past her, and in impotent despair Cass let him go. What more could she do?

Then, stopping by the bedroom door, he turned to look back at her. 'I'm still here, Cass.' He spoke with quiet intensity. 'I haven't left. Isn't that what you wanted?'

As she listened to him pad his way downstairs to the kitchen, her eyes filled with hot, angry tears.

It wasn't that simple! Couldn't he see what she wanted? She wanted the life she'd once had. The security and peace of mind and contentment she'd known before she'd found out about the existence of Lisa Fleming. About the affair that she now realized had been going on for at least six months.

With an effort she dressed and went downstairs. The twins had spent the night with friends at some party. Only Joanna sat with her father on the terrace amid the boxes of cereal and crusts of toast.

'Just made fresh coffee, Mum.' Her daughter spoke through a mouthful of toast as Cass appeared at the patio door.

In her own youth, Cass's cool beauty had often been compared to that of Grace Kelly, but Joanna had inherited her father's dark hair and olive complexion. Long-limbed, long-haired, face devoid of make-up, her daughter had an easy, casual charm that needed no adornment.

Forcing a smile and a cheery good morning, Cass joined them. It was lovely to have her daughter home again, if only for a short while. The college where she was studying hotel management was only a couple of hours' drive from Sydney but still Cass missed her.

She missed the twins, too. Tom, studying for a business

degree at Bond University, and never a worry. Nicky, softer, more laid back, surfing his first love, and therefore happy to move with his brother up north. Never academically inclined, Nicky was the one they'd worried about. Yet he wasn't entirely a surf bum, had landed himself a full time job at the casino. What really mattered, Cass knew, was that he was happy. She'd come to recognize the value of that.

'Coming sailing with Dad and me, Mum?'

'I don't think so, darling. I should really get things in order around here.' Cass knew she was making excuses. The caterers had cleared away almost everything before they'd left last night.

'The wind's right, should be a good day.' Cass couldn't see her husband's eyes behind his Ray Bans. But she knew his words hadn't been an invitation; He was playing the game with her in front of Jo.

'You two go,' said Cass as she spooned sugar into her coffee. 'You'll enjoy it.'

She knew Joanna would be pleased to have Johnny to herself. Cass had long recognized the same closeness between them that she'd shared with her own father. Since she was a little girl, Joanna had adored Johnny.

And that made everything all the more difficult.

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They were lounging around Chris Tolbert's pool and Angela could tell that he was expecting her to spend the rest of the day with him. The same way she could tell from the glaze in his eyes that he was expecting an encore at some stage to the night before.

But she was ready to go. Needed the salve of her own company again. The chance to switch off, read the papers, please only herself. She had never feared loneliness. Took

pleasure in her self-sufficiency. She knew it made her different from most women. But she had learned from an early age how important it was to need no one. To rely only on herself.

Now, with a glance at her watch, Angela exclaimed, 'God, I didn't realize it was this late.' She pushed herself out of the sun lounge.

'What's up? You don't have to go, do you?' He was squinting up at her in the sunshine and she heard the note of surprise in his voice.

'I'm sorry. I should have said something earlier. I've got a squash game booked in less than an hour.'

And when his dark eyes reflected his obvious disappointment Angela felt the familiar surge of satisfaction.

For Chris Tolbert could never know that he, like so many others before him, was paying the price for a crime committed by another man long ago.

*

Even though it was late morning the city streets were comparatively deserted as she turned into the basement car park of Parkland Towers.

She'd bought her spacious two-bedroom apartment eight years, before when the prestigious development was brand new. The price had stretched her at the time, but the rarity of an inner-city location overlooking the lush greenness of Hyde Park had made the purchase one of her best investments.

Some of the apartments were used only when their well-to-do rural or overseas owners visited the city, the rest were mostly occupied by people like herself – busy high achievers to whom the central location meant less time wasted in travel.

People like Fran, whom she'd met in the elevator one evening not long after she'd moved in. Offering a hand as Fran struggled with a stack of legal briefs, Angela had discovered that her neighbor was a partner with Mathison and Lloyd, her specialty commercial law. The information had brought a gleam to Angela's eyes. Never one to miss an opportunity, she'd asked if she might pick Fran's brains over a program idea she was working on involving white-collar crime.

Their friendship had grown quietly from there. Fran Antoni was different from everyone else Angela was forced to deal with in her working life. There was no brashness, no ego, no malice. Instead, Fran's gentleness and quiet judgment, her soft-spokenness and quick intelligence made her company so enjoyable.

'You're a genetic freak, Fran,' Angela had proclaimed more than once. 'Lawyers aren't supposed to be kind and compassionate and interested in justice.'

'I'll take that as a compliment, shall I?' Fran had said in reply and smiled.

Neither of them had much time to socialize but they kept in regular touch, just to say hello, make sure each other was okay, or sound each other out on some issue of concern. In Fran, Angela sensed, she'd found a friend she could count on. She could speak her mind, blow off steam, and know that her confidences were safe. A tenet of friendship that was almost unheard of in the backstabbing climate of her usual world. There, she kept her own counsel, ran her own race, only too aware of the rivals and enemies more than eager to prey on any sign of weakness. With Fran she could drop her guard, leave off the armour she normally wore.

It had taken her a while longer to realize what she in turn offered Fran. Certainly, Fran had never been impressed

by, or tried to score off her celebrity status, had shown no interest in the two- faced players of the media circus. In time Angela came to see that Fran Antoni was essentially lonely. Despite her professional success she lacked the one particular strength Angela had always been so determined to achieve – emotional self-sufficiency. Fran needed some connection to fill the void inside her. The void, Angela quickly realized, that had been left by the lack of husband and family.

One evening, as they'd shared a casual meal in her apartment, Fran had confided why she could count on little support from her own family. The Italian migrant parents who felt shamed by the fact that their only daughter had failed to marry and produce a family.

'As far as they saw it I had my chance,' Fran said. 'But I threw it away.'

She saw Angela's questioning look and explained. 'When I was twenty they introduced me to the son of some Italian friends. A boy they considered eminently suitable husband material.'

Angela raised an eyebrow over her wine glass. 'Recoil at first sight?'

'No, nothing quite that dramatic. We went out for almost two months, but – it just wasn't there. I didn't love him. And my parents couldn't understand that. They said I'd humiliated them by rejecting their choice. It caused a real estrangement. Particularly with my mother.'

Fran paused, then added with unexpected intensity, 'But I knew what real love felt like, Angela. I wanted to feel like that again.'

She hadn't explained and Angela had known better than to push her.

Angela remembered her reaction at the time. Poor Fran, she'd thought. Poor silly Fran. Didn't she realize that needing love was the most deadly failure of all?

As she entered her home she felt the usual sense of sanctuary. Everything in order, every room perfect, a reflection of her taste, style, personality. Some real art on the walls, the furniture an eclectic mix of modern Italian and Asian antiques, expensive Turkish underfoot.

Not bad for a kid from the bush, she would occasionally think. But nothing less than she had ever expected . . .

She put some freshly ground coffee into the machine and waited for it to brew. The squash game had been an excuse. A ruse to get away without having to explain herself. Her need for solitude and serenity.

Suddenly her thoughts turned to Cass and she recalled the sense she'd got last night that something was wrong. Did it have anything to do with that whisper she'd heard about Johnny Dunsworth? She hadn't given it much credence at the time. Anyone with a profile in this city was fair game for the rumor mill, she could vouch for that. But maybe this time there'd been some truth to the gossip. Maybe that was the reason for the expression she'd caught last night in Cass's eyes.

Angela hoped not. She was fond of Cass, had been ever since Fran had introduced them.

'You'll like her,' Fran had said with conviction when she'd invited Angela to join her and her old university room mate for a meal one evening. At the time Angela couldn't imagine what in the world she might have in common with a married woman from the suburbs, a mother who'd never had a paying job in her life.

But Fran had been right. They might move in alien worlds but there was something about Cass that Angela found soothingly attractive. She was gentle, good natured, giving.

Exactly the type who let the bastards destroy them, Angela thought grimly as she poured her coffee.

*

She hated having to miss her early morning run, so half an hour later, changed into shorts, T-shirt and runners, she let herself out of the apartment. Even at this time of day a run through Centennial Park would help clear her head, restore her energy for the next party this evening.

As the elevator made its descent Angela looked at her reflection in the mirror. And liked what she saw. Her body was firm and shapely, a tribute to the same self-discipline that had realized her other achievements. Thanks to her daily runs and twice weekly swims in the Parklands pool she was fitter at thirty-nine than she had ever been in her twenties. Long ago she'd realized that being fit was the only way to survive the stress of her career and she prided herself that in her five years with *Deadline* she'd never missed a day through illness.

It was a short drive to the large, inner-city parkland, which was as busy as usual with picnickers and families, cyclists, horse riders and dog walkers. Finding a space to park in the shade of the trees, Angela warmed-up with a few quick stretches then headed off on the roadway that encircled the grassland and lakes.

The time of day and the holiday had brought out the crowds. City refugees finding a few hours' respite among the beauties of nature. Children released from the cramped confines of urban back yards to enjoy such simple pleasures as climbing trees, skimming stones over water, running without restraint. The sorts of pleasures Angela and her brother had taken for granted growing up in the bush.

Rarely did she think of those times. The past seemed as unreal now as a dream. But there were certain memories of childhood that were too vivid to forget. The same

memories that had spurred her ambition, that had made her who she was.

She'd been just seven when her father had left them. But the day was etched in her mind with a razor-sharp clarity. The shock and gripping fear when she and her elder brother had come home from school to their mother's frenzied sobs.

'He's gone! He's left us . . . Dad's left us!'

She would never forget the sight of her mother's stricken face, red and blotchy with crying, the sound of her desperation and panic. The few faded early photos she had of her mother showed a small, pinch-faced woman, aged beyond her years by the harsh outback heat and a life that had never been easy. Yet nothing had prepared Elaine Kelly for being on her own. She had dreaded telling her husband about another pregnancy, had kept it to herself until she could do so no longer.

Jack Kelly, she knew, was not fond of fatherhood. The boy had been okay. But he had resented his daughter. Resented the demands and expenses of another crying brat when there were so many better things to do with his money. Like gambling. And drinking.

Elaine Kelly had steeled herself for the inevitable blows when she gave him the news; what she hadn't expected was that he would abandon her penniless with two children and another on the way.

Without warning, Angela's world had collapsed. She had heard the shouting and arguments, of course. They'd woken her regularly. And she couldn't miss the bruises on her mother's arms and face. But somehow she had managed not to think about what that really meant. Had convinced herself, as children do, that because they were a family, that meant they were happy. It was easier that way.

The impact of her father's abrupt departure struck

deep. Angela found herself facing emotions she'd never known till then. Vulnerable, insecure and confused, she had craved the sort of assurance and comfort her mother had been incapable of providing.

For Elaine Kelly, distraught and helpless, there was only one option – made easier by her miscarriage of the child that had been the cause of her abandonment. It was only a short time later that Angela and her brother were introduced to Dave, their new 'lodger'.

But he, and the others who followed, brought little stability or happiness into the Kelly household and Angela and her brother soon realized that their 'lodgers' did more than help her mother pay the rent. In time, Angela came to despise her mother's weakness, hated her for her dependence on a series of rough, loud-mouthed men who treated them all with such contempt and disdain. For something had already begun to stir in her. Even then she knew she would never allow herself to become as weak and vulnerable as her mother, would never put herself and her future at the mercy of another human being. Especially a man.

When again Elaine Kelly found herself pregnant, the family, once more on their own, were forced to move out of their rented home into the shabby shelter of a caravan on the property of a kindly neighbor.

Once happy at school, Angela now hated facing the taunts and whispers of her classmates. Angry and rebellious, she changed from a hard-working student into one who had little interest in her studies. Yet equally, she hated going home to the stifling van with its pervasive stench of urine and the piercing cries of the new baby.

When, at just five months, the child died of meningitis, Angela felt overwhelmed by her conflicting emotions of guilt and relief. But again, her mother was too lost in her own misery to notice her daughter's trauma.

Colin, Angela's brother, was only fifteen when he made his escape and as she watched the train bear him away to the mysterious pleasures of the city, Angela was filled with envy as well as a sense of loss. She too longed to escape, but how, or to what, she had no idea.

The turning point came one afternoon a few months before her own fifteenth birthday. She thought of it later as her 'Vision'. It occurred in the main street of the slow, dusty town, a sight so wonderful that it stopped Angela in her tracks.

She felt as if she were watching a movie. The low, white, open-roofed car. The good-looking man in dark glasses behind the wheel. And there beside him . . . the sight that changed Angela's life . . . A girl, dressed in white, long, dark hair curling on her shoulders, her lips colored a warm, shining pink, her arms slim and tanned.

The car stopped just meters in front of her and Angela stared riveted as the Vision alighted. Tall and willowy, the white dress short enough to show off tanned, perfect legs, the girl smiled at her companion as he held open the door.

Angela felt her heart begin to race. *This* was who she wanted to be. This beautiful girl with her ease and air of confidence, the sense of self-worth surrounding her like an impregnable halo.

It was at that breathless moment that Angela Kelly knew she was going to be *somebody*.

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 had her own newspaper and magazine by-line in leading publications, and also written for television.

Apart from fast-paced romance, Jennifer also writes suspense thrillers. Titles include *Indecent Ambition*, *Whisper Her Name* and her latest thriller *A Dark Side of the Harbour*.

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They share the best address in town but behind closed doors each is facing the crisis of her life.

Cass seems to have it all – spectacular home, clever children, good friends, and a great marriage to a successful man who adores her. Or so she thought.

Fran, a leading litigation lawyer, has all the trappings of her hard-earned success – not that her Italian parents are impressed by a single, childless daughter. When passion ignites with a new client, Fran discovers that self-deception can exact an impossible price.

Angela, is proud of having made it in the tough and ruthless world of the media but there are threats waiting in the wings – younger rivals and dangerous strangers. Fearless and independent, she is prepared for anything except the shock of a crisis too enormous to handle alone.

Will they leave it too late to finally tell each other the truth?

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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