

## Prologue

Black ice.

Hard.

Smooth.

Covering the road with an invisible layer.

The Volvo sped through encroaching dusk, the driver focussed on keeping her panic under control. After two months the route through the Blue Mountains of New South Wales had become familiar, though no easier to navigate.

The windscreen wipers slashed through wind-driven snow, revealing the road snaking through ancient mountain eucalypts. For the first time since arriving in their temporary home, she saw menace in the looming foliage, and felt the fear isolation in strange territory can bring. That isolation had been a welcome change from the bustling crowds of Sydney, and a haven of peace and quiet in which to gather her strength.

Now it became the enemy.

The bleak winter's day had turned biting cold some hours before, the unexpected change bringing snow to areas normally untouched by Antarctic breath.

She reached over and turned up the warmth spread by the car heater.

A cry of pain tore at her throat. Her foot jerked off the accelerator. Teeth clamped onto teeth as her stomach tightened into a hard ball. She panted, tried to go with the pain, fingers clenching the steering wheel. The car wavered, veered to the side, wheels spitting gravel. Slowly, carefully, she turned the steering wheel, eased back onto the hard surface.

As the contraction lessened the woman breathed in deeply, forcing herself to relax. She wound the window down a fraction, hoping the cold air on her face would distract her from the pain. The sharp tang of eucalyptus bit into her nostrils, obliterating the sweet smell of rain that had fallen before the snow.

She exhaled raggedly. The contractions were close together now.

For an instant she smoothed her hand over the thick coat covering the mound of her baby and whispered words of love and reassurance. The baby was anxious to be born, she could feel the pressure of it hard between her legs.

Darkness came swiftly. Her headlights sent shadows spinning through the trees, danced the misty snowflakes in arcs of light.

Anxious to gain time while the baby was still, she accelerated, careful to stay close to the middle of the road. A thin layer of snow covered the grass verge, and the bitumen glistened beneath her headlights. She had no concerns about oncoming traffic, it was infrequent here. The main road wasn't far now, and some of her tension eased as she thought of the houses where she could go for help. She forced her mind back onto her driving as she approached a curve.

The steering wheel went light in her hands.

The car began to slide. She eased on the brake, hoping the tyres would grip and slow her pace. They didn't.

Realisation hit her.

Black ice.

Praying and swearing in jumbled entreaty, she watched the curve, now only metres away. Panic seized her and she pulled on the steering wheel, her mind registering the futility of the act even as her hands carried out the command.

She pushed on the accelerator.

No traction.

In horrified fascination she felt the car continue its inexorable glide. The front wheels hit the verge side on, caught in a rut, and spun the car in a crazy circle. Then it rolled, flinging her body from seat to roof as she tried to protect her swollen stomach.

The Volvo thumped solidly into a tall eucalypt. Crunching metal and splintering glass swallowed her scream of pain as her belly smacked into the door.

The wheels spun lazily, whispers of noise in a suddenly quiet forest.

The woman fought the pain engulfing her body, concentrated on making sense of her topsy-turvy world. The car was on its roof, the driver's side door open, the interior light glowing softly in the darkness. She orientated herself, realised she was lying on the inside roof.

Pain ripped through her, too intense to allow a scream to form in her throat. It curled her over, tightening her belly with a grip almost beyond bearing. After it passed, she lay exhausted, hardly moving. Before the next pain could take her, she reached down between her thighs, praying against what she instinctively knew she would find. A sob of despair racked her as she looked at the bright red stain on her hand.

A plea for strength formed on her lips. She rolled on her side, pushed herself up, and bit back a cry of agony. Her baby. She had to get help for her baby. Struggling against the deep, dragging ache and the newer pains engulfing her, the woman crawled out of the car. Her hands slipped on the slushy grass and she sprawled face down, veiled by her long black hair. The faces of her husband and child flashed into her mind, and she forced back the tears that threatened to blind her.

Icy wind knifed into her lungs. She realised the lack of warmth was more dangerous than the walk to the main road. Fear like bile welled up in her chest, only to be replaced by agony as another contraction seized her body, then left her limp and exhausted. The pressure between her legs increased, blood poured liquid heat over her cold skin, and she knew it would be impossible for her to walk even a short distance.

She crawled back into the car.

## Chapter One

He could still turn back.

Walk away.

Never again risk the pain that had threatened his sanity these past two years.

The glass reflected the haunted look in his eyes as he gazed through the window to the painting spotlighted in the small art gallery. He thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, and his boots ground sand onto the pavement as he turned to leave.

But the painting drew him. Like its artist who had spun her magical web around him and lured him into a fantasy he had felt would last forever. His gaze traced the blossoming honeysuckle vine tumbling over the roof of an old cottage, then the half-open front door and the darkness inside. Set onto a parchment background, the scene depicted only a tiny portion of the building. The darkness beyond that half-open door beckoned him, teased him, aroused memories once precious but now too painful to bear. He tried to block them, but they rushed back, flooding through him.

The sounds of traffic and laughing tourists faded and he was there again, smelling the sweet honey scent, touching the rough-textured stone wall and the decaying timber of the door.

He remembered the vibrant russet of her hair and the way her blue eyes had widened in surprise as he'd led her inside. Before their eyes had time to adjust to the dimness, his lips had captured the smile on hers and he'd tasted a sweetness and a passion that had stayed with him ever since.

Only now the memory was bittersweet, the passion an anger that swung occasionally to despair.

Caught between the need to walk away and an overwhelming desire to see her again, he wavered. Finally, desire won. At least he might be able to find out why she had left him without even a word of explanation. And why, four months later, the private investigator he'd hired had photographed her in the arms of another man, and reported she was also living with that man. After what they had shared, she owed him that much.

The gallery entrance was sandwiched between the small window displaying the painting and a Swiss bakery on Noosa's famous Hastings Street. Two diamond-glassed doors sparkled in the afternoon sunshine as they swung open at his touch. He walked inside, his boots making no sound on the smooth carpet.

He'd seen her sketches before, but not a finished painting. Now, looking around at the paintings hanging from the pale walls and dividing panels, he was surprised at the extent of her talent. Some of the paintings were delicate pastels. He didn't need to look at the artist's name to know they weren't hers. But the others, the brilliant colours and vibrant, breathtaking seascapes and landscapes, the rainforest animals with their almost-alive eyes, were as much her signature as the *Kirri* that flourished in the bottom right-hand corner.

He walked slowly between the hessian screens dividing the room in half. Like the painting of the old cottage doorway, these paintings also drew him, made him want to reach out and touch, to dip his hand in the water, run his fingers over the glossy rainforest leaves.

Then he saw her. She was talking to a middle-aged couple whose clothing and cameras betrayed their tourist status. He watched the animation in her face, the smile that had once set his heart racing, and cursed as that same sensation gripped him once again. She was a little thinner than he remembered, and there was a maturity now that had lessened but not dimmed the vivacity of her movements, her speech.

He felt a familiar tightening in his chest as he observed her, and wondered if the benefit of closure was worth the risk of renewing the pain of rejection. When the couple turned to leave she looked across, caught him staring at her. She walked towards him, smiling. Her expression didn't change as she stopped in front of him.

'Can I help you?'

Stunned disbelief swept through him. She didn't recognise him, had spoken as though he was just one of many strangers who passed through the gallery every day. For a few seconds he simply stared at her, then the shock gave way to incredible anger. He saw her expression falter, then the smile picked up.

'We have more paintings in the next room. Would you like me to show you?'

He knew if he spoke the anger would pour out, so he simply nodded. She turned and walked towards the far end of the narrow room. He watched the gentle sway of her hips, the way her dress moulded to the curves he had once caressed. Blue Monarch butterflies scattered across the brilliant white material and he wondered if she had painted them. He remembered how fascinated he'd been by the hand-painted vest she'd worn when they'd first met.

She stopped, turned slightly to see if he was following. The movement pulled the soft material against her breasts. He walked quickly forward, hoping to disguise his involuntary reaction.

How could she have forgotten him? Hell! They'd spent nearly three weeks together. Three weeks in which they'd fallen in love, made love, the best lovemaking he'd ever experienced. Three weeks of laughter, of talking, of sharing confidences and hopes and dreams. And at the end of those three weeks he had asked her to be his wife. Twenty-nine years old and he'd never even contemplated asking anyone that before. Until he'd met Kirrily Smith and fallen in love.

'Have you seen anything you like?' Her question jolted him back to the present. Something was wrong. Her smile was a little too bright, a little too strained. She was nervous. But she hadn't been shocked to see him. There'd been not the slightest sense of recognition in her eyes, and he'd once learned that her eyes gave away her thoughts. Or they had. Perhaps she was only pretending now.

'The cottage - the one in the window - I'd like to buy it.' The words were no sooner said than he wondered why. He didn't want any reminders - the pain was only slightly more bearable now than it had been two years ago. A strange expression flickered across her face, but was gone so quickly he wondered if he'd imagined it.

'I'm sorry, that painting's not for sale.'

Suddenly it became important that he have it. 'I'll pay whatever price you want.'

The expression was back, this time long enough for him to identify it. Hurt, and incredibly, fear. What the *hell* was going on? He was about to ask her when she spoke again.

'It's not for sale.' This time more definite, and with a tinge of panic. Then the blue eyes flashed, her shoulders straightened just a fraction more, and she gestured towards the doorway. 'Perhaps you'll find something else in here.'

Before he could reply she walked into the next room. As he stepped behind her he caught a hint of perfume, a light fragrance that hurtled him back through time and conjured up memories of warm nights and balmy breezes and the taste of her so sweet on his lips. A groan of frustration escaped before he could stop it and she turned towards him. He read concern in her eyes, the way they darkened from summer sky blue to a deeper shade. When they'd made love that depth had intensified and her voice had taken on a husky timbre.

Hell! What was she doing to him! He'd had two years to get over her and he was no more able to control his feelings now than he had been from the moment he'd met her. And she didn't appear to have a damn clue who he was!

He turned abruptly and focussed on the wall of paintings. Again the mix of delicate pastel-hued watercolours and Kirri's colourful oils. He walked slowly, pretending to study each painting while his head reeled with questions. He felt rather than saw her hesitate, as though she would prefer to flee rather than stay in his presence.

'Your accent ...' her voice, too, was uncertain, 'it's American, isn't it?'

He looked back at her, at the uncharacteristic nervousness betrayed by the hand that rubbed at the base of her neck. He'd seen that action only once before, and his heart had twisted in his chest as she'd confessed the reason.

'Seattle, in Washington State on the west coast.' He waited for a reaction. None came. He cursed silently. Enough was enough! He couldn't stand the emotions churning through his gut. Two strides and he was in front of her, his right hand extended. 'Daniel Brand.'

With just a second's hesitation she slipped her small pale hand into his. 'Kirrily Smith.'

He almost said *I know*, but that strange mix of fear and apprehension was back in her eyes.

'Are you on holidays?' she asked. 'With ... family?'

'No. I'm alone.'

He looked down at their joined hands, the way his engulfed hers, her pressure strong in spite of its delicacy. As his eyes raised he glimpsed a small painting behind her, and his heartbeat soared erratically.

The child was about twelve months old, her chubby fist clenched on the ear of an obviously long-suffering grey speckled dog. Black curly hair framed a determined, olive-skinned face with broad high cheekbones and a wide mouth. She was dressed in long white pants and a white tunic, both with fringing attached.

'Who -' his voice was a croak, and as he cleared his throat he felt Kirri's hand pull from his grip. He looked into her face. 'Who is the girl?'

She flinched, and he felt a barrier slam into place around her. 'My daughter. I painted her a few months ago.'

Daniel moved forward, staring intently at the painting. Kirri stepped away, as though weighing her chances if she had to run from this madman. 'And it's not for sale either. Everything else in the gallery is, though.'

'Kirri,' a voice interrupted from the doorway, 'I'm sorry to intrude, but there's a lady here who wants to buy two of your paintings and she'd like some discount. If you could ...'

'I'll be right there, Jenny.' Kirri turned her attention back to Daniel, 'If you'll excuse me?'

Daniel didn't want to excuse her. He wanted to shake her. Hard. Wanted to find out what the hell had happened two years ago that was more important than the love she'd professed for him. Why she'd run out on him when he'd most needed her. And why she appeared to have forgotten the very existence of the man she'd promised to marry. But he simply nodded.

As she hurried from the room Daniel's attention returned to the painting. A fine film of sweat had broken out on his forehead. Compared to November in Seattle, November in Queensland was almost furnace hot, but the gallery was air-conditioned, and he knew the reason for his discomfort had nothing to do with climate.

His eyes focussed on the painting as he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and took out his wallet. Only when he had unclipped it did he glance down at the small photographs as he drew them from behind a plastic covering. The first one, of a man in his mid-fifties, he looked at only briefly, but the second one held his attention for a long, long time. Then his gaze returned to the painting.

He stood for a minute, then shook his head as though to clear the confusion in his mind. He'd thought confronting Kirri would answer his long-pondered questions, but now he had no answers and even more questions. He needed time to think, to re-assess the situation, to try to analyse his feelings. He walked back into the main room. Kirri was busy at the sales desk filling out paperwork for a customer. As Daniel walked past she looked up, and he thought he detected a note of curiosity in her gaze, but she only smiled and continued with her work.

Daniel hesitated. Could he take the risk that she wouldn't be there when he returned? *If* he returned? Damn! Of course he was going to return. Now more than ever he needed to know what had happened two years ago. He walked slowly from the shop.

Kirri watched the tall American as he stepped through the gallery entrance. The strange mixture of relief and disappointment that washed through her took her by surprise. The angry vibes emanating from his big, broad-shouldered frame had scared her just a little, but it was the pain and hurt blazing in his golden-brown eyes that had compelled her to talk to him when common sense had warned her to leave him alone.

Was it his pain, his anger, that had sparked something inside her? He was attractive but not conventionally handsome, with thick light brown hair and facial features with a pleasant symmetry of shape complementing the strong bone structure. It was a face that would still be attractive even when he was old because it intimated strength of character. It was that strength which had appealed to her, and she sensed something in his eyes that told her he was capable of great kindness.

His handshake had been a shock. Skin meeting skin with ... her mind finally admitted the words ... surprising familiarity. Her interest had flared at the sound of his accent, and she'd chided herself at her disappointment as she'd studied his face. There was no familiarity in the features, even the colour of his eyes wasn't the same. Would she ever get over this compelling need to *know*! Heaven help her, it was two years! Surely -

She shook her head, turned her attention to the sales docket she was writing. But her mind still churned. She asked herself again why she'd opened this second gallery in another of Queensland's top tourist spots. Had it really been to promote her and Trish's names in the market, or to place herself in a position where she might meet someone who recognised her?

With a smile she knew didn't reach her eyes Kirri handed the docket to the customer while Jenny finished taping cardboard over the protective bubble-wrap surrounding the paintings.

Further down, on the other side of Hastings Street, a surfer lounging in a sidewalk cafe chair paused in raising a beer can to his mouth. He watched Daniel Brand emerging from the art gallery. As the American stepped onto the pavement, the surfer's vision was obscured by a Pajero four-wheel drive pulling into a "No Standing" zone in front of his table. The surfer jumped to his feet, almost colliding with the Pajero's driver hurrying from the vehicle.

Brand was almost at the pavement's edge, and the surfer relaxed when he spotted him again. Then the sound of the Pajero's engine still running caught his attention. A smile lit his face. He dashed around to the driver's side, tossing the can into the gutter as he went. In seconds he was in the driver's seat, gunning the accelerator.

Kirri's gaze was drawn to the display window, to the tall figure of Daniel Brand stepping off the pavement between two parked cars. He glanced around briefly and began walking across the street. Halfway across he hesitated, then spun on his heel and looked back at the gallery. His white T-shirt formed ripples as his muscles bunched in tension, and he stepped back in her direction.

Kirri saw the four-wheel drive, saw the way it veered from the other side of the road, tyres howling; saw the bullbar slam into the American as he tried to leap to safety. She saw his body spin forward and sideways; heard the thud as his head thumped into the windscreen of a stationery BMW.

His unconscious body slid off the bonnet to the bitumen.