

Chapter One

“A-A-A-AAAARGH!”

The muffled anguished cry welled up from the depths of the sufferer’s being. Bianca eased back slightly, recognising the limit of her patient’s stoicism.

“Just tell me when it hurts too much, Mr Gilmour,” she said.

“Dammit, I’m *telling* you, woman!” he snarled. “Can’t you understand plain screams and groans?”

Bianca bit back an angry retort at that “woman”. It was better than “girl”, she supposed, but it had definitely been delivered like an expletive. Oh well, she had to take his frazzled nerves into account. The bare male back under her hands, not normally the most demonstrative part of anyone’s anatomy, seemed to quiver in outrage at her ministrations.

“Sorry,” she said breezily. “This kind of injury needs fairly heavy manipulation, so I have to establish your tolerance to pain.”

“Consider it established,” he gasped into the face-hole in the massage table. After a long heavy-breathing pause he added with forced casualness, “Anyway, how do I rate on the sado-masochism scale?”

How like a man, she thought. Competitive, even in the agony stakes. It would be a pleasure to put him down, but honesty compelled her to be truthful. Also, she must consider the very real danger that his pride might drive him to suffer silently and risk too vigorous a treatment, thus compounding his injuries. And so she answered in a cool, businesslike manner.

“Quite high, actually. Your good physical condition helps, of course, but I find that even the strongest of men sometimes wimp out under treatment.”

The back seemed to flex and preen itself under her hands. Bianca finished manipulating the rib-joint and leaned back for a moment to relieve her own muscles.

“Now let’s have a look at the bottom, shall we?” She slipped off the towel draping his hips, delicately took the waistband of his bikini-briefs between thumb and forefinger, and eased them down.

“Would you like me to take them right off?” His voice dropped an improbable octave, like the bite of a bow on the lowest string of a cello.

“That won’t be necessary,” she said absently and leaned closer, distracted by the sight revealed. “Mmmm ... ohh, that’s really *beautiful*.”

“I’m glad you think so,” he replied complacently.

“It’s like looking through layers of stained glass...”

“You’ve lost me. What on earth are you talking about?”

“Your bruises. They’re the deepest I’ve ever seen. They highlight every layer of the skin structure.” She poured on some oil, and started massaging.

“And I thought you were admiring my butt,” he said.

“Just bruised meat to me, Mr Gilmour.”

In spite of her offhand comment, Bianca struggled to preserve a professional detachment.

Actually, it was quite the nicest male bottom she had worked on in a long time: trim and taut, no clumps of wiry black hair, just golden down, like peach-fuzz. The unmarred section of fair skin on the globes of powerful muscle, standing out against the dark bruises and the light golden tan of the rest of his body, brought the fruity image vividly to life.

Bianca shook her head. No matter how damaged, she was finding Brant Gilmour, the Golden Boy, to be even more unsettlingly attractive in the flesh than on the silver screen.

Physically attractive, that is. She was beginning to suspect he could be just as boorish as the most muscle-headed sexist footballer who came under her hands in what she privately called the thugby season.

“Judging from these bruises, you’re lucky you didn’t break your coccyx,” she remarked.

“My what?” His tone indicated he was just waiting to jump in with some sexual innuendo. Bianca sighed inwardly.

“Your cock-six,” she repeated, accentuating the break between the two syllables, then charged on, gently poking the spot at the top of his cleavage. “The tailbone here, just between the *gluteus maxima*. Your little link with the apes.”

Without pausing to see what he made of that sally she went on sweetly, “Now the warm and fuzzy part, Mr Gilmour. A buzz of the ultrasound. Look out, here comes the gel.”

The squeeze-bottle blurted impolitely, and Gilmour winced as a blob of cold gel splattered across his posterior, still warm from the massage. Bianca spread the gel with her finger, admiring the way the slick crystal-clear film brought up the bruises’ rich reds, blues and purples.

Soon he was purring contentedly as she gently stroked the node of the ultrasound over the livid tissue, the focused vibration sending relieving heat deep into his body. He muttered in protest when the timer pinged and the machine switched off. Bianca took a handful of tissues and wiped the gel away.

“That’s enough. We don’t want to cook you, do we? Now how about—” She broke off as her eyes, admiring the length of his muscular legs, were arrested. “What’s that on your right calf?”

“I don’t know. What?” he returned irritably.

“This.” She squeezed the bruise, feeling a hard nodule under her hand. His leg twitched violently.

“Ouch! It’s just another bruise. Not as bad as the ones on the butt.”

“You think so? Just how did you get this one, when you hit the ground?”

“No. My leg went through the rungs of the ladder, then I fell over backwards. Before the leg slipped out and I fell all the way, my shin jammed under one of the rungs. The leverage of my body-weight toppling must have crushed the calf muscle against the upper rung. Then my leg slipped out, I landed on my butt and my back hit the edge of a crate. A real pratfall, and they got it all on film. Does it matter how it happened?”

“It certainly does! Crushing is potentially the worst injury of the lot. Didn’t your doctor pick it up?”

“I didn’t mention it. I didn’t think it was serious compared to the other injuries.”

“Well, let me tell you, Mr Gilmour, if you want a long career as a tough guy on the stage and screen, don’t try to tough it out with any injuries you pick up along the way. A permanent limp won’t do the image any good at all.”

“Permanent?” He lifted his face out of the hole in the table, tried to turn it towards her then winced and dropped his head again with a groan.

“Yes, permanent,” she went on inexorably. “Have you ever heard of calcification?” A wiggle of the back of his head and a slight, painful shrug of the shoulders told her he hadn’t.

“It’s how broken bones heal. Blood-clots form around the break, and they’re gradually replaced with calcium. Unfortunately, your body can’t discriminate about where the blood clots are. You’ve got clots in the calf muscle here, and unless they’re forced to break up they’ll be replaced with a calcium nodule which will permanently damage the muscle.”

Bianca relented a little as she finished the lecture. His back seemed to have drooped in discouragement. She patted his calf reassuringly.

“Never mind, Mr Gilmour. Now we’ve identified the problem in good time, we can fix it. The process will be painful—”

“Naturally.”

“—as I’ll have to break up the clots and move them on with massage. But I can promise you’ll make a complete recovery.” She squeezed his calf experimentally. “Perhaps we’d better leave it till next time. Your nerves have probably had enough for one day.”

“No, let’s get on with it.” Pain made his voice gravelly. “I think I can stand a bit more punishment, as long as it’s in a different place. I have to get back on the set as soon as possible — the whole production is waiting on me.”

“If only we all could feel so wanted. Righto, Mr Gilmour. Brace yourself.”

He had guts, Bianca admitted as she worked, putting most of her healthy young strength into manipulating the big, hard muscle. No more screams and groans, just the occasional gasp and hiss of indrawn breath. Then a long, shuddering sigh of relief as she progressed to the ultrasound.

“You can help things along by working on this yourself, Mr Gilmour. Gentle stretches, until you feel a pull, but don’t go so far as to feel a tearing or burning sensation.”

“Okay.”

“And just to speed up the circulation, give it ten minutes with an ice-pack, followed by ten with a hot-water bottle or heat-pack, two or three times a day.” She gave the nearest beautiful buttock a gentle tap, then pulled up his briefs. “Now roll over, and we’ll check your front.”

“What for? I fell on my back, remember—”

Bianca sighed. “I do remember, Mr Gilmour. But believe me, I know what I’m doing.” Groaning and grumbling, he struggled over onto his back, wincing as his weight came onto his damaged bottom.

Bianca covered his hips with the towel again and counted up the ribs to the one she wanted. She was very aware of his eyes fixed on her, arrogantly demanding the acknowledgment of contact, but she refused to look away from the matter in hand. It was one of the first lessons a health professional learnt: to avoid eye-contact when caught up in what would normally be an intimate position.

But she could see the famous Gilmour mouth out of the corner of her eye. It was very distracting, particularly as it curved in mischievous appraisal. She could almost feel the pressure of his eyes taking in every minute detail of her face. Bianca began to wonder if a zit had sprouted in a prominent position since leaving home that morning; now swelling, growing and reddening. She resisted the temptation to check over her face for lumps.

“I bet most of your patients are male,” Gilmour murmured, derailing the unpleasant thought.

How predictable, thought Bianca. A little devil made her widen her eyes innocently and say with a simper, “Not really. But all the *long-term* ones tend to be men.”

He fell right into it, flashing a knowing smirk. Just as he opened his mouth to comment she cut in, “That’s because women are much more sensible about pain and injuries.”

Thrown off his stride, he frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Women seek timely treatment. Men try to tough it out until it’s so bad they can’t stand it. By that time it’s often too late.”

He smiled again, thoughtfully this time. “You’re a hard woman, Ms...”

Bianca ignored the invitation to supply her name. “Not at all, just observant. Now, tell me if you feel any pain,” she said, and pressed.

“Ouch!” She tried the other rib-joints, but he made no further response. He stared at her, frowning in an aggrieved manner. “It’s my body, and *I* didn’t know it would hurt there. How did you know?”

“Simple, Mr Gilmour—” Bianca swung her head, and gulped.

In her eagerness to put him in his place, she made the cardinal error: eye contact! The trademark Gilmour golden eyes blasted her, both barrels, at point-blank range.

Lion’s eyes, they were, perfectly matching his thick tawny hair. The pupils widened slightly as they gazed up into hers. Amazing, she thought dazedly, they really *are* golden. She had always thought it an illusion; perhaps some trick of the lighting technicians. The level bronze eyebrows, too, were just as thick and forceful in real life as they appeared on the screen. The only flaw in this well-advertised face was the broken nose, which perversely added to the overall effect, suggesting a devil-may-care extra dimension.

He blinked rapidly, and the beautiful mouth curved in a knowing smile. “You were saying...?”

“Um, er...”

Brant Gilmour was not unaffected himself, as he watched his physiotherapist hasten to regain her equilibrium. But he had an advantage over her: he had seen many of the world’s most beautiful women in close-up. Nevertheless, he suddenly found Byron’s words reverberating in his mind with a power they could never have possessed for him when he was forced to study the poem at school:

“... *And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes...*”

Those eyes were just the brown side of black, throwing the whites into startling relief, ringed by the longest and thickest non-artificial lashes he had ever seen. Her face was wide, classic Mediterranean, the better to frame those gazelle-like eyes. Luscious bee-stung lips quite devoid of lipstick glowed with a natural colour. Black curly hair, lightly touched with auburn, rioted around her face, pointing up clear olive skin which glowed with health and the warmth of exercise from the massage. With an effort, he brought his attention back to the conversation.

“About how you knew I was injured in the front,” he prompted.

Bianca gave herself a mental shake and wrapped herself in the protective coat of professionalism, forcing into her voice a briskness she no longer felt.

“Think of your ribs as being like the handle of a bucket, Mr Gilmour. The anchor points of

the handle are your spine and sternum. If you give the bucket a sharp blow on one side, it's likely to flex the handle joint on the other side. The shock of your landing transferred through the rib to the joint on the sternum here."

"You explain very clearly, er ... what do I call you?"

Suddenly the raffish look was unmistakable, those unique eyes gleaming in mischief. Lying helplessly on his back, Brant Gilmour still seemed in charge of the situation. Bianca couldn't help thinking what it would be like if their positions were reversed, and he was not handicapped by his injuries. She blinked. Preposterous thought!

"You're not a doctor, but 'physiotherapist' is a bit of a mouthful, and 'masseuse' has some unfortunate associations these days. Tell me what I should call you."

Eye-contact once made was hard to break, Bianca found. Perhaps a premonition of just this situation arising with her famous patient had suppressed her usual brisk introduction when he had come in. Instead she had sat at her desk, looking steadfastly down as she filled out his card, and brusquely ordered him to strip and get up on the table. Maybe it was some primitive thought that to give your name was somehow to give up your power. But she couldn't hesitate any longer without arousing his curiosity by making an issue of it.

"Just my name will do. Bianca Cherubini."

"Musical." He rolled it on his tongue. Bianca didn't know whether to be flattered or offended.

"The surname suits, with those lips," he continued. "But Bianca — that means white or fair, doesn't it?" His tone remained bantering as his eyes explored her face, and settled on her lips. "I think 'Rosa' would be more appropriate."

"You may think so," she snapped, nettled. "But don't forget the cherubim were supposed to be second-order angels, so Bianca fits that."

"I don't think there's anything second-order about *you*, Bi-ANC-a Kerr'u-BI-ni," he murmured. "And don't forget the cherubim were probably copied from Cupid. Angelic, then: so it's white for purity? But I must say, such absolute purity seems like a wicked waste."

Bianca stood up from the stool beside the table, suddenly fed up with this verbal fencing.

"Well, I don't think there's anything more I can do for you today, Mr Gilmour," she said. "Put your clothes on again. I have another patient after you."

He sat up more quickly than she would have expected for one in his condition. A grunt of agony told her what it cost him, but he swung his legs unhesitatingly over the side and stood.

Bianca took a step back. At 175 centimetres she was not a short woman, but even in bare feet he towered over her. About 190 centimetres, she judged. He looked much larger standing up, and quite overpowering as he presented his superficially undamaged front to her.

He really was in splendid condition; she had the feeling that if she reached out and ran the backs of her fingernails down the rippled muscles of his abs, they would ring hard and staccato, just like when she used to run a stick along the picket fence of the teacher's house as a child.

"I've annoyed you, haven't I?" he said. "Perhaps I'm imagining it, but you seemed from the start to be a tad unsympathetic." Bianca's hackles rose. "That's the reason I've been trying to get a rise out of you. I'm sorry if I've offended you, Ms Cherubini."

"I accept your apology. If I gave that impression, I apologise. It certainly wasn't intended," she lied, and turned to the desk to write up her notes on the session.

He inclined his head with an enigmatic smile, and slipped into his shirt. "When can I see

you again?”

“Not until Tuesday, I’m afraid. I’m fully booked tomorrow morning and Monday.”

He paused in the act of pulling on his jeans, frowning. “I can’t wait three days! I’ve *got* to get mobile as soon as possible!”

“I’m sorry. Perhaps another physiotherapist—”

“No, I want you. You’re the best I’ve found. I don’t know if anyone else would have picked up on the nodule.”

“Oh, I’m sure any competent—”

He cut her off, smiling in sudden inspiration. “Do you make house calls?”

“Yes, for emergencies, but—”

“This is an emergency. I’ll pay double rates—”

“That’s not the point. As I was about to say, I can’t lug this ultrasound machine all around the city, because it’s needed here. And without it there’ll be limited benefit.”

“Okay, I’ll buy one.”

“You’ll what?”

He gave her a curious look. “I think I’ve said the wrong thing again. Did I?”

She sighed. “It’s nothing really to do with you, Mr Gilmour. It’s just that I’m called on to work in inner-city public hospitals from time to time, hospitals that the government is starving of funds, so they can’t afford new equipment. And then you blithely talk about buying an expensive machine to use for just a week or two.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand,” he said thoughtfully. “Here am I, getting paid much more than the prime minister just because I happen to be photogenic, eh?”

He tried without success to slip on his loafers without bending. Then, wincing, he put his foot on the chair by her desk where his hand could reach. The sheer size of him made her feel crowded. She found herself pressing back against the cubicle wall.

“Well, I wasn’t intending to just throw the thing away when I’m finished with it.” He glanced up with a grin. “What about this, Ms Cherubini? You come to my place every afternoon to treat me. I’ll pay you overtime rates, and when I’m fit again I’ll donate the machine to the hospital of your choice. Deal?”

Bianca’s head spun. “That’s a very generous offer,” she said at last.

“One which I can very well afford. As you probably realise.” He smiled mockingly. “Your next patient is waiting while you make up your mind.”

Bianca felt trapped. Blackmailed, even. But remembering what she had said, she saw no possibility of refusal, and surrendered. “What time will I come?”

“Shall we say at three tomorrow and Sunday, and six on the weekdays?”

She nodded glumly.

He handed her a card. “Here’s my address.”

Turning to go, he paused in the doorway. “I’ll look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Bianca. I’ll have the warm and fuzzy machine. You just bring your torturer’s hands and Gestapo boots.”

Bianca gave an outraged gasp, but couldn’t think of a suitably cutting reply. Gilmour smiled at getting the last word, then left with an ironic wave.

Long after he had gone Bianca was still mulling over the encounter, wondering why she had verged on behaving so unprofessionally towards him.

At times like these she keenly felt her lack of sophistication. Even after living for nearly a year in the city, there were some brash Sydneysiders who could, with a word, make her feel like she still had farm dirt between her toes and banana sap on her hands. This feeling had overcome her, faced with Brant Gilmour's *savoir-faire* and international reputation.

Only when at home with her family, or when working on a patient, could she feel capable and fully in charge of a situation.

She was used to, literally, *handling* people who were famous and powerful in business or politics. The inner-city location of the clinic was ideally suited, as her boss Terry often remarked, to "catering to the pains and injuries of the rich".

Her brooding look softened at the thought of Terry, who was not nearly as cynical as he liked to make out, and who did voluntary hospital work. He also had a way of making her feel capable and self-confident.

When Terry told her that Brant Gilmour was to be her patient, she had felt a pleasant thrill of anticipation. Brant Gilmour, the biggest Australian international film star since the Hemsworth brothers! When he got the Oscar nomination she had even cheered along with his fans, feeling a patriotic thrill at his success.

So what had gone wrong?

It was the way he came in, she decided. Okay, he was injured, but did he *have* to shuffle in like that, looking so scruffy in old jeans and K-Mart T-shirt? Reverse snobbery, if ever she saw it. And not taking his reflective wraparound sunglasses off until he lay down on the table? What a seventies film-star cliché. What a put-down. Try to look in his eyes, and all you saw was your own reflection — diminished by the curve of the lenses.

And then the shocking contrast when he had stripped off, revealing that magnificent, damaged body. But still, why had she behaved so childishly? She should have kept her professional detachment.

He had known. He had sensed her pique, and probed it by teasing her. And she had reacted, like a fool.

She groaned aloud before she could stop herself.

The patient twitched under her hands. "What's the matter?"

"Uh ... I just remembered something I should have done."

It wasn't until that evening when Bianca was getting off the train at her station that she finally admitted to herself the real reason why Brant Gilmour got up her nose so much. It was simply that she found him too damned attractive.

This in itself was strange. Her boyfriends had always been dark, Italianate men. Could that be why they had never lasted? Was it just cultural imprinting, and did she really, deep down, prefer blonds? Or just one blond?

She shuddered, knowing without doubt there was no future in that direction.

What could Brant Gilmour, international star and jet-setter, friend and lover of Hollywood beauties, possibly have in common with an *ethnic* physiotherapist from Marrickville, who grew up on a banana farm? Nothing except his bruises and sprains, and they would soon fade. That's what had made his flirting so objectionable to her. It was as if he was just practising out of

habit, with no regard for any possible effects on her.

Bianca set off up Illawarra Road at her usual fast clip; chest out, curls bouncing, dynamic glutes driving her black leather Reeboks in a pavement-devouring stride. She wheeled into the next street, right on schedule to break her record from station to home, when something in the window of the St Vincent de Paul op shop caught her eye. She slowed, stopped, contemplated.

It was a pair of the tackiest-looking boots she had ever seen; not at all the usual Vinnie's Boutique stock. Black, knee-length, inside zip, spangled with metal studs and stars, with ten centimetre stiletto heels which would boost her height to 185.

It's fate, she thought, if they fit me. The notion brushed aside any commonsense reflections. She squeezed past Filomena, who was about to close up the shop, kicked off her joggers and lifted the boots from the window. The worn leather fitted like a glove.

"Last sale of the day!" she said, before she could change her mind.

"Bianca? You gone crazy, maybe?" Filomena's plump, pimply face looked stunned. The idol she had always admired for her style, grace and assertiveness had suddenly sprouted feet of clay, thrusting those feet into something Filomena had been reluctant to accept, even in the name of charity.

Bianca laughed. "It's a joke, Mena. Some smarty-pants patient made a crack about torture and Gestapo boots. I'll just wear them to my house-visit then donate them back on Monday." Filomena, relieved, joined in the laughter. "Wrap them well, please. I don't want Rocco to get the wrong idea."

Filomena nodded sympathetically. She knew all about heavy brothers.

Rocco was sitting on the steps of the old terrace house they shared, having an end-of-the-week beer with his rev-head mates, when Bianca came charging up the little back street towards them. As usual, he scowled at her swift approach. He was always at her to walk like a lady, eyes modestly downcast, instead of striding along in what he called her "follow-me-home-strut". She had long since given up explaining how she needed to stretch her legs after standing and sitting all day, exercising only her upper body with the massaging. It was none of his business, anyway.

"G'day, sis. What's in the bag?" her brother grunted.

"New shoes. G'day, boys," said bilingual Bianca in her flattest accent, out of the corner of her mouth. The boys greeted her politely, their usual leers subdued out of deference to the brotherly sensibilities of their host.

Bianca breezed on inside, briefly greeting Rocco's girlfriend Jenny who barely looked up from the DVD she was watching as she peeled the potatoes, and went upstairs. Normally she would have liked to annoy Rocco by grabbing a beer and sitting down with them, inhibiting their masculine talk by her presence. Not this time, though. She didn't want anyone asking to see her new shoes.

She grinned with delight as she hid them in the bottom of her wardrobe. She couldn't wait to see Brant Gilmour's face when she strutted up to his place tomorrow. Him and his Gestapo boots!

Bianca loitered around Oxford Street, pretending to window-shop as she avoided the variously

hot or derisory glances coming her way. She had long since decided that her choice of outfit was a major mistake, but it was too late to change now.

You'd think I'd learn. How many times in the past have I taken off on the bright wings of impulse, only to crash and burn when I realised it had been a really bad idea?

And now this! All because he got under her skin at their first session. She'd thought taking him up on his Gestapo crack would show him she was a good sport, and make him feel a bit ashamed of his needling.

Wrong. Now he'll just think I'm a complete airhead.

Rocco and Jenny had gone out for the afternoon to risk their eardrums at a tavern where their current favourite heavy-metal band was performing. That left the coast clear for her to borrow Rocco's leather jacket, the perfect accessory for the black T-shirt that she also liberated from Rocco's wardrobe, and black stretch-cotton jeans — the nearest thing to an SS uniform she could assemble on short notice. And the boots. Rocco's leather cap, perched on her curls, completed the ensemble.

Her misgivings had started almost from the time she left home. The looks she got as she strode towards the station reinforced her doubts. When three thuggish-looking citizens in low-slung jeans, black singlets, greasy ponytails and tattoos had levered themselves off a wall and begun following her, she changed her mind about taking the train and hailed a taxi. The expense was preferable to sharing a poorly patronised Saturday-afternoon carriage with *them*.

The taxi-driver had made her feel even worse. After giving her the lugubrious look of one who has already seen it all, he merely asked her destination, and there the conversation lapsed. Obviously he didn't consider her a person worth talking to.

Because of the taxi she arrived early, and this did not suit her plans. Better to keep Brant Gilmour waiting; he would be conceited enough to connect earliness with eagerness.

For the umpteenth time she glanced at her watch. It had gone three at last; time to stroll around to his house which she had located earlier.

Brant's house, however, was not the Taj Mahal she had expected of someone of international star status. Oh, it was streets ahead of the little terrace she lived in, of course.

It was a free-standing cottage, unlike most of the houses in Paddington, and had probably been built in the eighteen-nineties, out of mellow sandstone and red brick. It had wide front and side verandas, paved in large diamond-shaped ox-blood and ivory tiles set out in patterns between narrow lines of figured dark blue. Wide ivory-painted timber architraves framed leadlight windows, complete with open latticed shutters held back with wrought-iron S-clips. Ornamental wrought-iron pillars supported the graceful curve of the veranda roof.

It had subtle beauty and great style — but the style of a bygone era. No hint of Hollywood glitz. Bianca was charmed, and surprised; first because she loved it, and second because her patient was showing a taste she hadn't expected from her first impression of him on the previous day.

Her courage almost failed her. The joke outfit seemed even more tasteless in these surroundings. Before she could change her mind she pressed the large porcelain button set in a copper filigree sunburst, and heard a mellow Big Ben chime echo through the house. A long pause followed, during which she tried to think of every smart comment he could make on her outfit, and snappy rejoinders for herself.

Just as she raised her finger to press the button again, the door opened.

Chapter Two

Although Bianca had seen many men in tracksuits, she had never seen one who managed to look both elegant and sexy in one. She noticed how the soft folds of Brant Gilmour's white tracksuit clung to the muscles of his chest, shoulders and legs, and outlined the lean stomach and hips. The tawny hair was plastered darkly and damply to his skull, accentuating a head which, Bianca thought, would have done a Roman emperor proud.

The golden eyes looking out from the head she was studying took in every detail from the cap on her head to the toes of the boots. His eyebrows tensed with the effort of remaining still, and his lips didn't even twitch. He was an actor, after all.

"Good afternoon, Bianca. You look very charming today," he purred with studied politeness. "Please, do come in." He half-bowed as he stepped back with a gracious wave of his hand. The formality barely masked an amused gleam in his eyes.

Bianca hesitated. His reaction — or lack of — took the wind out of her sails, and all her snappy comebacks blew away with it. Then she strode past him towards what she thought of as the lion's den. But a few steps later she paused, uncertain where to go in these strange surroundings. Despite the bulk of the leather jacket, she flinched as Brant put his hand on her shoulder and guided her before him down the short hallway and into a lounge room. She propped as a small, dapper man with a seamed smoker's face rose from an armchair.

"Lennie Valk, my agent. Lennie, this is Ms Bianca Cherubini, who is going to get me back on deck in record time."

"Good stuff. Pleased to meet ya, love." His beady brown eyes almost disappeared in the laugh-wrinkles as he grinned appreciatively. "Y'ever thought of an acting career?"

"No way. I—"

"Bianca's time is limited, Lennie. Weren't you just leaving?"

"Okay, okay. I can take a hint." He paused at the front door and added, "You'd be a natural as a—"

"*Goodbye*, Lennie," Brant interrupted. He turned to Bianca as the door finally closed.

"I've set up a table on the patio. It's pleasant out there at this time of day."

Flustered by the business with Lennie, Bianca failed to register the furniture in the room as Brant hustled her outside, noticing only that it was in an unfamiliar style. She gained a fleeting impression of the architecture: wide, clear-varnished red cedar skirting boards around polished floors, the dark heaviness relieved by embossed ivory wallpaper and high, ornately plastered white ceilings, with mouldings highlighted in pale blue and gold.

A vine-covered trellis over the patio outside softened the afternoon sunlight spilling through the French doors. The vine's summer leaves provided cool shade, and promised succulent grapes in the coming months. A long, narrow swimming pool angled across the yard past the end of the trellis. Bianca judged it was twenty metres long; a lap-pool, designed for serious use.

She glanced at his damp hair. “Have you been swimming?”

“Yes. Shouldn’t I?”

“It’s good for you, Mr Gilmour, as long as you don’t overdo it.”

“Brant, please.”

A massage table with a hire firm’s ticket tied to its leg stood near the pool, with a new ultrasound machine beside it. Bianca assumed Lennie had brought them. She slipped out of the leather jacket.

Brant removed the tracksuit, revealing a pair of red Lycra racing briefs — of the kind colloquially known as “budgie smugglers”. Bianca sucked in her breath, and averted her gaze from his too-alluring body. He gingerly lay face-down on the table then turned his head to watch her, his eyes running appreciatively over her ripe curves before saying, “Well, are you going to get on with it?”

“Just as soon as I limber up my *torturer’s hands*.”

Bianca swung her arms, flexing the muscles, then lifted up on her toes off the spike heels. Brant watched with interest as her chest expanded with a deep breath, arms stretched above her head, and she scowled at him while cracking her knuckles in the way her brother Sean had taught her. The staccato echoed off the high brick fence.

It didn’t seem to faze Brant. “Great boobs, Bianca,” he observed.

“More muscle than mammary, Gilmour, and just watch it with the sexist remarks,” she growled.

“Merely an aesthetic appreciation, I assure you.” He grinned disarmingly as she came towards him. “At least you’ve dropped the ‘mister’. We’re progressing, I guess.”

“Towards what?” Bianca poured the massage-oil on his back and went to work. She mentally kicked herself for answering, curiously disturbed at carrying on this verbal fencing while touching him.

He winced as her expert fingers sought out the source of his injuries, then said, “That remains to be seen.”

The tone of his voice sounded suddenly serious; perhaps, Bianca thought, due to the pain and discomfort he was experiencing. Her mind shied away from the contemplation of any deeper reason. She forced it into purely clinical channels, almost managing to see the magnificent body laid out before her as a marvellously detailed machine, and herself as the mechanic who would dispassionately restore its damaged parts to perfect running order. In fact, just as Rocco did for the old bombs at the garage where he worked.

This sense of detachment persisted, more or less, through the bare-buttock massage, the calf manipulation and the ultrasound. Finally, she broke the long silence.

“Right, Mr Gilmour. Over you go.”

He rolled over obediently. “We’re back to that, are we?”

“Back to what?” She began to massage the joint of the rib and breastbone, just below the solid curve of the pectoral muscle.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his eyebrows twitch. “*Mister Gilmour*.”

“Oh. Well, it’s...” Bianca trailed off as, in an effort to avoid eye-contact, she glanced away, down the length of his body. Wrong move! His briefs had slipped down a bit when she treated his bottom, accentuating the solid bulge in the red Lycra. A *big* flock of budgies. Her fingers continued their massage. Round and round and round and...

Suddenly she felt his hand at the back of her neck, his long fingers slipping up to tangle in her curls. He turned her face decisively towards his. The leonine eyes had a warm, hungry, blood-lapping look.

“Let’s take a little break before you wear me away.” he said. She could feel the vibration of his voice under her fingers.

Bianca realised she’d been distracted, and had overdone the manipulation. She also realised his intention — a split-second too late to take evasive action.

He took full advantage of her mouth opening in surprise, pulling her down to meet a kiss which started as determined, and escalated from there.

Bianca’s brain shorted out. Later, that was what she rationalised had happened.

Once he had the kiss well under way the pressure of his hand eased to a gentle guidance of her head in a rolling, rhythmic movement, as he explored her mouth with expert thoroughness and lingering relish. His other arm snaked up around her waist, easing her body down to lie comfortably on his warm bare chest and stomach.

She found herself surrendering to the pleasure of the moment, before simultaneously realising that his hold was gentle and quite easily broken, and that this was *not* professional behaviour. She jerked back, belatedly aware that she had been compliant for far too long to be able to give a convincing show of outrage, but determined to recover as much ground as possible.

“That’s enough, Mr Gilmour! Kindly remember I’m here to treat your injuries, not your libido. I’m not one of your easy-lay Hollywood starlets!”

“You could easily pass for one.”

Bianca’s instant fury showed in her face.

“Starlet, that is, with your looks. I’ll reserve judgment on the adjective.” He smiled up provocatively at her, surely noting the hot flush she could feel on her face — and were her lips swelling?

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” he continued, “but I got the impression you were enjoying it.”
Ouch! Too true. How can I get out of this?

Bianca regained some shreds of control and said, “I have a normal level of curiosity, Gilmour. It’s not every *ordinary* woman who gets kissed by a movie star. Think of it as a research experiment.”

“May I inquire as to the results of the experiment?” he asked facetiously.

“No, you may not! You’ve taken more than enough liberties already!”

“Dressed like that, and considering the stretching routine you went through, I could be forgiven for thinking you wanted to play, couldn’t I? I’m sorry if I misunderstood your intentions.”

“Well, after your crack about Gestapo boots...” Bianca protested.

“Yes. I know. A joke. Very funny, too.” His eyes mocked her as he dropped his arms submissively by his sides. “Be gentle with me. Please don’t take out your temper on my poor bruises.”

Bianca would have liked nothing better, but he’d had more than enough massage. Lips compressed, breathing heavily through her nose, she started the ultrasound treatment.

A soft drizzle began to fall. By the time the machine pinged, the rain was threatening to become serious. With all the distractions, she hadn’t noticed the sun disappear, nor the

temperature drop. In one of Sydney's characteristic sudden changes, a brisk southerly now gusted and eddied around them. It stirred a few fallen vine leaves left over from last summer into a parody of life, skittering them briskly around the yard until they were caught and stilled by the cool embrace of the swimming pool.

Brant got up, rather too quickly for the good of his injuries, and put on his tracksuit. Bianca hastily packed the machine away, brushing off a few drops which had penetrated the vine leaves.

"I'd better drive you home."

"No. You should rest. I can take a taxi—"

"And spend all that overtime?" He shoved his feet into a pair of battered joggers. Quite a trick, she thought, with no hands. Bending was obviously still painful. "I'm stir-crazy, woman. I need to get out. Would you like a drink or a coffee first?"

"No, thank you." Who knew where that could lead, she thought.

But wouldn't you just love to find out? a little devil whispered in her ear.

She hesitated, but had missed her chance. He shrugged, handed her the leather jacket and cap without comment, and led the way to the garage.

Bianca eyed an anonymous-looking green Land Rover Discovery with surprise as he opened the door for her.

"Expecting a Ferrari?" said Brant, noting her expression. "Sorry, but I don't go in for pretentious transport."

He fired up the engine, picking up the masking black sunglasses from the dash as he did so. The garage door tilted open at the touch of a remote-control button. "Left, or right?"

Apart from her directions, they drove in silence. Bianca found this much more unnerving than the sparring they had exchanged earlier. In spite of herself she kept glancing at his inscrutable profile as he weaved competently through the city traffic. She tried to think of something to say, becoming increasingly nervous as they approached home.

"You don't have to drive a flash sports car, but wouldn't an ordinary car be more suitable for the city?" she blurted, at last.

"I don't drive much in the city. The Rover's good for the farm."

Farm? Before she could pursue that he added, "Number twelve, was it?"

Bianca saw they had arrived at her street, and nodded. As they turned in, she immediately regretted having given him the number. Rocco had arrived home, and was sitting on the front step. He glanced incuriously at the car, then stiffened as he recognised his sister.

And his cap. And his jacket. And his T-shirt.

Brant pulled up directly in front of him. "Is this the jealous boyfriend?" he murmured. "Am I about to be thumped, do you think?"

The prospect didn't seem to worry him. "Ah, brother, I guess, by the resemblance."

He jumped down and, with a speed which belied his injuries, came around to open the door for her. Rocco surged to his feet as she stepped out, revealing the full and seedy glory of her costume.

"Who said you could borrow my things?" he snarled, ignoring Brant. "And whaddaya think you're doing, dressed like a *tart*? What'd Mum and Dad think if they saw—"

Verbal niceties were wasted on Rocco when he galloped off on his high horse, intent on brotherly domination. Bianca opened her mouth to squash him in the time-honoured way; but

to her amazement, instead of savouring her discomfiture, Brant came to her rescue.

“I’m afraid it’s my fault,” he interrupted. “Bianca’s been treating my injuries. I made some tasteless remark yesterday about torture and Gestapo boots, and she decided to send me up as a joke. Ben Gilmour’s the name.”

He thrust out his hand. Bemused, Rocco took it.

Bianca was amazed at how quickly Rocco calmed down, and felt a twinge of envy at the ease with which Brant — Ben? — took charge of the situation.

Look at him, she thought, glaring at her brother, who grinned up at Brant like he’d found a long-lost friend as they exchanged the grunts and monosyllables of introductory man-talk, leaving her standing on the pavement like a lily on a dustbin.

Finally, Brant remembered her. The blank sunglasses turned her way; then he took them off, startling her with the sudden warmth of those brilliant eyes as he took her hand.

“Well, I must be off. See you tomorrow, Bianca.”

To her confusion, he bent and gently kissed the hand he held. An electric tingle travelled up her arm at the speed of light, spreading a sunny warmth to all the secret places of her body. He deftly slipped the glasses on again as he turned back to Rocco, still holding her hand.

“Your sister has the most amazing, healing hands. It’s a great gift,” he told Rocco.

“Yeah?” Rocco said, looking startled at the compliment, then glanced at her, seemingly waiting for a response. Bianca came back to earth with a jolt.

“Yes, well, thank you, Br-uh-en.” She dredged up a smile. “Same time tomorrow, then.”

“Seems like a straight enough bloke,” Rocco remarked, as Brant drove off. Bianca raised her eyebrows at the highest compliment she had ever heard him bestow.