

FANTASY

Had she dreamed him up -- this man, this fantasy?

Her fiance's betrayal and her frenzied flight to a secluded beach near Sydney had been for Eve a nightmare - until the moment a stranger held her in his arms and revealed a lotus land where love was possible...

For a while Even gave herself up to the joy of loving and being loved for herself and not as the money-making image her fiance had devised with his camera.

She wanted the fantasy to go on forever. Surely to stay would be like trying to prolong a dream...

CHAPTER ONE

THE car lurched from one pothole to the next. Steering a steady course was fast becoming impossible. Dense bush-scrub crowded in on the dirt track and just as Eve began to think she had made a mistake, it thinned out and there was the sea.

She brought the car to an abrupt halt. As she leant forward to switch off the headlights, another light seemed to wink at her from the darkness ahead. She closed her tired lids, squeezed some of the strain from her eyes, then looked again. Nothing. The darkness around her was complete. Relief poured its soothing oil on over-stretched nerves. She was alone. Not only alone but well away from any human contact. She could stay here without fear of anyone coming to question or look at her with curious eyes.

For a long, weary moment she rested her head on the car-door. The tangy crispness of sea air drifted through the open window and teased her nostrils. It smelled clean. The peaceful drone of lapping waves washed through her fretful mind. Eve did not want to think any more. Every thought brought a bitter sickness. As another shudder of revulsion cramped her stomach, she thrust the door open and almost fell out of the car.

The sound of the sea drummed in her ears, rolling out its sonorous invitation. She walked towards it, kicking out of her shoes as sand dragged at her feet. Frothy crests glinted in the moonlight, endlessly moving, spilling on to the beach, beckoning her closer before coyly retreating. Wet sand squelched between her toes. It felt good. Cool water washed around her feet, sucking at them persuasively.

Eve's hands moved instinctively, ridding her body of clothes. She trod them underfoot, a grimace of disgust on her face. Such clothes did not belong in this place. There was nothing corrupt here, no perversion of nature, no trace of a sick, twisted society. Her gaze

swept slowly around the cove. The sea had been beating on these rocks and sand for thousands of years and would probably do so for many more thousands of years, unchanged by so-called civilisation.

Again water swirled around her feet, seductively inviting. She followed its drag, welcoming the cold sting of the next wave as it broke against her legs. Urged on by a blind need to rid herself of tonight's events, Eve

struck out past the breakers to where the water rose and fell in soft swells. Here it was peaceful, soothing, and she floated with the tide, bobbing mindlessly like a piece of driftwood.

An alien sound filtered through her ears. Its message tapped persistently on her brain until reason insisted it was the sound of a voice, a human voice. She rolled her head sideways, not quite believing that it was so. The sight of a man ploughing into the surf towards her was nerve-jolting.

Eve thrust her legs down, frantic to avoid facing anyone. She kicked out jerkily and just as she began to swim, her leg-muscles cramped with paralyzing pain. Her mouth opened to emit a scream of agony. Water gushed in, choking the sound in her throat. Her legs were useless. She was sinking. Her arms flapped in panic. She broke surface for a moment but not long enough to gulp in air. Pain crippled her and the water was all around, endless pain and water. Her lungs were bursting with the need to breathe. She had to breathe.

Consciousness came with more pain. Her chest heaved convulsively as she coughed out sea-water. Eve whimpered in agonised protest as nausea compounded the torture in her legs.

'Stupid bitch! If you want to drown yourself, go do it on someone else's beach!'

The harsh invective was lost on Eve. She struggled to reach her legs. 'Oh God!' she sobbed, clutching at the knots of pain.

Other hands swept her feeble grasp aside. Eve collapsed back on to the sand while strong fingers massaged the cramped muscles. Slowly the tension eased until only a bearable ache remained. Eve unclenched her teeth and opened her eyes. The man was kneeling beside her, a huge, dark blur.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

He slapped the loosened muscles once more and stood up, a towering figure of a man, completely naked. Only then did Eve remember her own nakedness. She shivered as his gaze raked her from head to foot.

'The mermaid act is over for tonight. Get on your feet,' he ordered peremptorily.

Before she could gather strength enough to make a move he had leaned over and pulled her up. Eve's legs wobbled and she would have fallen if he had not caught her in time.

'Goddammit!' he muttered. 'I suppose I'll have to carry you.'

There was no gentleness in the arms which cradled her. Eve's breasts were crushed against a hair-roughened chest and the sand clinging to her body rubbed its gritty discomfort into her flesh. The enforced contact between her nude body and his brought a flood of embarrassment to add to her discomfort.

'Please. I can walk if...'

'Shut up!'

The sharp impatience of the man made her squirm. He held her more tightly.

'Please...!' she began again.

'I'm not spending the whole bloody night on a cold beach pandering to you.'

'If you just let me go you won't have to worry about me.'

He ignored her, striding purposefully towards the road but not towards Eve's car, which was now some hundred metres behind them. Discomfort and embarrassment quickened into fear.

'Where are you taking me?' she squeaked, panic catching at her voice.

He reached firm ground and abruptly stood her on her feet. His hands gripped her waist, holding her steady while he drew in a deep breath and expelled it. Then he spoke, biting each word out with sharp emphasis.

'Look, Lady! I'm not interested in you. Neurotic women are a bore. To put it plainly, you're just a headache. I'm tired. Because of you, I'm also wet and cold. I'm going back to my cabin to have a hot shower, get warm, and if it's at all possible, get some sleep. And you're coming with me.'

'I've got my car. You don't have to --'

'No way!' he snapped impatiently. 'If you think I'm giving you another chance to drown your woes, you can think again. I can do without a body washed up on the beach, not to mention the hassle of calling the police.'

'But I didn't mean to --'

'You're wasting your breath.'

'No, truly. I --'

'Oh, for God's sake! I saw the headlights come down the track and I watched to see what you were up to. You went straight for the sea and you weren't figuring on putting those clothes back on again. You churned right on in without a backward glance. A dead-set suicide if ever I saw one. You ignored my shouts and when you saw me coming you sank out of sight.'

'I got cramp and ...'

'So it was cold. I'm cold. And I'm not going to stand here arguing. What you do with yourself tomorrow or next week is out of my hands, but tonight you came to my beach and made yourself my business, so just shut up and walk since you don't like being carried. My cabin is just behind that grove of trees.' He had swung her around and pushed her in the right direction. Eve stumbled along. The hand on the pit of her back did not allow any choice in the matter. She did not have the strength to fight him, and besides, she was now shivering with cold. A small building loomed out of the darkness ahead. Obviously this had been the source of the flicker of light she had seen earlier. It was a log cabin, small and primitive. The front door was open. She hesitated on the step, panic attacking her once more at the thought of being shut in, alone with a hostile stranger and both of them naked. The man swept her inside and closed the door.

'Stand still while I light the lamp,' he ordered curtly.

Eve stood rooted to the spot, her mind too numb to direct any other action. It was an old-fashioned kerosene lamp. The man's face sprang to life in its yellow glow. It was a hard, imperative face, framed with thick, shaggy black hair. Straight eyebrows beetled over deeply set brown eyes. His nose was slightly hooked. The jawline was strong and square. Deep lines ran from cheeks to mouth, an attractive mouth which gradually thinned in irritation as he looked at her.

'I'll get the water-heater going. Grab a blanket off the bed and put it around you.'

Her eyes skittered away from his very masculine nakedness. The powerful physique was intimidating. A double bed stood in one corner of the room. A mohair rug lay across the foot of it. The man moved to a back door and disappeared outside. Released from his presence Eve snatched up the rug and wrapped it around her. She sat down on the bed. Her legs were trembling too much for her to do anything else and she needed to rest and recover some balance.

Haphazard thoughts darted in and out of her brain. She was too exhausted for any coherent thinking. It was much, much easier to simply sit still and wait for the man to tell her what to do. He had saved her from drowning. But for him she would be dead. Right now she was not sure if she was glad to be alive or not and she could not find the will to care about the immediate future.

'Come on. Water's running warm.'

She glanced numbly at the man, not heeding his words. The towel around his hips was reassuring. And he was older than she had first thought. His features had a settled maturity. Closer to forty than thirty, she mused, yet his body was that of a young man.

'Move, dammit! I've done enough carrying for one night.'

Eve forced her legs to obey. He beckoned her outside and she followed him along a short verandah to a room which was also lit by a lamp. It seemed to encompass several purposes. Fishing gear was stacked along one wall, laundry-tubs and work-table against another, and a makeshift shower at the end. Water was spraying down. The man felt its temperature before whipping off her rug and pushing her under it. He handed her a washer.

'Hurry up! I haven't got water to waste.'

Her slow movements annoyed him. With another exasperated mutter he slung his towel aside, stepped into the shower with her and reclaimed the washer. There was nothing gentle about the brisk way he set about wiping her free of sand. Her neck, back and legs were given a quick rub-down. Then he roughly swung her around to face him.

'Why, in God's name, would a woman with a body like yours want to risk drowning?' he demanded curtly:

The washer encircled her breasts and moved down, over her stomach, between her thighs.

'Wasn't thinking of drowning,' she mumbled as a treacherous warmth tingled through her body.

She grew more and more aware of the hand behind the washer and the masculine strength of the body so close to hers. Here was a real man. Not like Simon. This man was well and truly aware of her as a woman. She stared in fascination at the undoubted evidence of his male arousal.

With his self-appointed task completed, the man straightened and the powerful thrust of his loins was even more awesome. Her fixed gaze elicited a further sigh of exasperation.

'What the hell! I don't take a shower with a woman every day and you're not exactly ugly.'

His explanation fell on deaf ears. A wild melee of emotions was churning inside Eve. The shattering disillusion of finding the man she loved in bed with another man forced every instinct to cry out that she was a woman who wanted to be loved as a woman. Loved, desired, taken as a woman. To know, to feel how it would be, how it might have been if Simon had been the man she thought. If he had wanted her, been excited by her, like this man. She had been looking forward

to her marriage night, the marriage night that would never come now. Frustration and thwarted curiosity and a thousand crying needs forced her hand out. She touched him, her fingers soft, tentative, wondering.

His swift intake of breath was followed by an instant rejection. He knocked her hand away, stepped out of the shower and hastily knotted the towel around his waist. He turned back to her with a glare of contempt.

'What are you? Some kind of nymphomaniac? Or do you simply get a kick out of living dangerously? The package might be tempting, but I'm not so starved for sex that I'll take anything that offers.' He turned off the taps and threw her a towel. 'Dry yourself and cover up. I'll make us some coffee. It might bring you to your senses.'

Eve knew she should be ashamed, knew that she should be shocked at herself, but the dull, empty feeling was back again. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was shocked but it did not seem to matter. It did not matter what this man thought of her either. He was a stranger, not of her world, here tonight and gone tomorrow. It was quite ironic, really. Far from being a nymphomaniac, she was a virgin whose virginity had never been even threatened.

She knew now why Simon had never wanted to make love to her, why he had insisted that her wardrobe consist of boyish clothes, why he had liked her hair kept short. He had explained his reluctance to consummate their love by claiming that he wanted a true bride. She had been flattered by his old-fashioned romanticism, pleased and proud that he valued her so much.

Eve sourly wondered what excuse he would have given on their wedding night, whether he would have been able to sublimate his true sexual inclinations and keep fooling her. It was lucky that she had found out before she was legally tied to him. But she did not feel lucky. She felt badly used. And yet she was not used. Here she was,

all untouched, and likely to remain so. A bitter irony curved her mouth into a grimace. She was certainly safe from being touched by the man inside the cabin. She wrapped the mohair rug around her once again and returned to the main room.

The man had pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater. He was standing at a gas stove, waiting for a kettle to boil. Two mugs were sitting on a roughly hewn wooden table. Eve pulled out a chair and sat down. Neither of them spoke. Clearly he did not like the situation and Eve had nothing to say to him. She was not about to explain her behaviour. He had taken control and brought her here. If he did not like it he had only himself to blame. The kettle whistled. He poured steaming water into the mugs and pushed one towards her.

'There's sugar there. No milk,' he stated flatly.

'I don't take either,' she muttered.

Models could not afford excess weight. Simon had drummed that into her. He had approved of her slim hips and long legs but had always been critical of her full breasts, even demanding that she wear a bandeau to flatten them for some photographs. 'Top models are not cows,' he had said disparagingly. A whole parade of his words and actions marched through her mind, stamping out a new dimension of meaning. She had been a blind, naive fool not to have guessed something was wrong in their relationship. Simon had never been a manly man, not like the brooding figure across from her. His chair creaked. She glanced up to find him studying her with cold objectivity.

'I seem to know your face. Should I?'

Alarm screeched through her brain. The last thing ... the very last thing she could afford was to be recognised. Her break-up with

Simon would cause comment enough. A rumoured suicide attempt would hit the headlines. She forced her voice to be dull and careless.

'I don't see how. We've certainly never met before.'

He could have seen her face on magazine- covers whenever he passed a newsagency, on television advertisements, hoarding boards. But not quite the face he was seeing tonight, not a face washed clean of its artful make-up. He stared at her for a moment longer then gave a dismissive shrug. His glance fell to her hands.

'Not married?'

She shook her head, relieved that the danger was over.

'Man trouble?'

Her mouth twisted with disgust. 'You could say that.'

'It figures.'

The dry comment brought a painful flush to her cheeks. He was obviously applying her answer to a lot more than she had meant. That mad impulse to touch him must have seemed blatantly wanton.

'I'm sorry that . . . that I've disrupted your night and been so much trouble to you. I . . . I didn't think there was anyone here.'

'Lucky for you I was here. And still awake.'

'Yes. Lucky,' she echoed dully.

He sighed and stretched back in his chair, making it tilt backwards. 'Didn't he want you?'

Her gaze flickered up and for a moment the whole depth of her disillusionment was there in her eyes before she tiredly hooded them. 'No, he didn't want me. He wanted the image. Not me.'

There was puzzlement in his voice when he spoke. 'What image? You mean the face and the figure? Or are you someone ...'

'No, no,' she said quickly, not wanting him to probe out her identity. The sick debacle of her love for Simon billowed through her mind and all the bottled-up horror of the night burst out of her in tortured words.

'He doesn't want a woman. Not a real woman. We were going to be married. Next week. And tonight . . . he wasn't expecting me at his apartment. I went . . . the music was so loud he didn't hear me ring. I used my key. There was a smell—heavy, sweet—incense, pot, I don't know. It worried me. I went into his bedroom. He was with . . . with another man . . . and they were . . . they were . . . I . . . I ran out and just kept driving until I found this place.'

The tears which Eve had kept choking back for hours began trickling down her cheeks. The large green eyes were pools of misery, blind to everything but her inner grief. She did not see the flash of recognition on his face, nor the comprehension which brought a soft compassion to his eyes. Having found release, the tears continued to well up and overflow. Eve slumped forward, propping her head with one covering hand as she wept uncontrollably. Her heart seemed to swell to breaking point. Great racking sobs eased the constriction in her chest, and it was a long time before the sobs deteriorated into shuddering little sighs. She dabbed the wetness from her eyes with the back of her hand.

Only then did she become aware of fingers drumming a restless tattoo on the table. Her chest heaved once more as she struggled to pull herself under control. A furtive glance at the man caught the dark

frown which pulled his eyebrows together into a heavy line. The fingers stopped tapping and she felt his gaze on her. Having bared her soul as well as her body, Eve felt even more naked. Her hand clutched the rug more closely around her, subconsciously grasping for a protective cloak.

'Want to lie down?'

The quiet question brought a self-conscious flush to her cheeks. She hung her head, not knowing what to answer. All along the man had judged her harshly and she could not tell if he was being kind or critical.

'You must feel completely wrung out. It's been a very rough night on you, and I haven't made it any easier.' He sighed and his hand spread open in a gesture of appeasement. 'I'm sorry for having been so ... so unsympathetic.'

She darted a glance at him. He seemed sincere. She swallowed nervously and forced herself to speak.

'I really didn't think of drowning. It was just ... I felt ... I needed.. .'

He waved a dismissive hand. 'You don't have to explain.' Then in a softer voice, 'You're well rid of him, you know.'

'I know,' she whispered, but her eyes were haunted with the pain of emotional surgery.

He pushed himself to his feet, rounded the table and gently squeezed her shoulder. 'Come on. Into bed. You'll feel better in the morning.'

Taking it for granted that she would follow his suggestion, he leaned forward and turned off the lamp. Eve was slow to react. An arm slid around her shoulders, lifting her upright and supporting her for the few steps to the bed. It was not until he tried to relieve her of the mohair rug that Eve felt driven to protest.

'Please...'

'A little late for modesty, don't you think?' came the dry comment. 'You won't need it in bed,' he added as he pulled back the bedclothes for her.

Eve hesitated, then realising that the darkness cloaked her anyway, she let the rug go and quickly slid between the sheets. The soft comfort of the pillow and mattress felt incredibly good. She stretched her legs and sighed before languidly moving into her usual sleeping position.

The slight rustle of clothes whispered in her ear. Her head whipped around, her eyes wide open in alarm. The dark silhouette near the bed was tossing a garment aside.

'What ... what are you doing?' Eve choked out. It was perfectly obvious what he was doing but she did not want to accept it.

'Coming to bed.'

'With me?' she squeaked.

'There's only one bed. You surely don't object to sharing it with me,' he said reasonably.

'But...'

'Look! I was wrong earlier and I made you feel bad. I didn't understand what you were feeling, the rotten kind of sexual shock you'd been through. No woman deserves to be hurt like that.'

He climbed into bed and before Eve could shrink away, his hand reached over and gently cupped her cheek. He propped his head up with his other hand and looked down at her.

SAMPLE