

Heading South

Mali Farnell

Pulling the beat up yellow Hi-Ace onto the lightly forested reserve felt strangely familiar. Only the greenery was different. Up North, she had been used to a more tropical climate, the local craft market being umbrella-ed by glossy green Camphor Laurals and Lilli-Pilli's.

Unloading the scratched metal clothes racks, the tape fraying at the joints, she went about setting up her stall at the base of an ancient Cyprus tree. It was a majestic giant with a dark exterior that stood tall and mysterious among the others. Humph, she thought. The man she had left behind up North would fit the same description, he too, held mystery.

It was his tall, striking appearance that had initially caught her eye. He was typically masculine, all except his wavy shoulder length hair; which gave the impression of being in touch with his feminine side. He had a stubbly face with an olive complexion, piercing black eyes and huge hands that made hers feel like a child's.

Hers was a small slender Anglo Saxon figure, adorned in over-dyed undergarments such as singlets, slips and spencers. These rainbow coloured creations featured hand-dyed doilies and other textile handicrafts. Seeing herself as an alternative lifestyle, she felt good about earning money from her creativity. Being a cash business and working the local craft markets meant she could keep her Centrelink payments. Everyone gets a little help from the Government from time to time, she would assure herself. She considered Unemployment Benefits to be a kind of arts grant, or rather a craft grant.

It was at the markets up North that she first met Ricci. Intrigued by his cross-cultural heritage; his brooding good looks gave him an air of international allure. At first she wasn't sure if he was of Spanish, Puerto-Rican or South American descent, or whether it was just the Guatemalan imports he was selling that gave her that impression. Like her, he was almost self-employed. Not being a naturalised Australian he was unable to receive Government hand-outs and was therefore forced to supplement his market earnings with a 'Green Income', growing and selling leafy substances.

Blinded by hope and ever the optimist, she chose to see his lifestyle as entrepreneurial. At least he's working, she would think to herself. She was also smitten about the way they both chose to live outside the mainstream - together they dwelled on the fringes of society. Thirty five and unlucky in love, she was determined to make a real go of this relationship. She was prepared to accept anything. Well, almost anything.

After 18 months of dating, she suggested moving in together. After all, they got on really well, could save money on rent and carpool to the markets on

weekends. Although he said he loved her, he persuaded her that it was not a good idea at this stage, what with the comings and goings of anonymous buyers at all hours of the day and night. And, he didn't want to risk implicating her should he get busted.

How chivalrous, she thought. He offered her the manly protection she had always craved.

Feeling disappointed and slightly dejected, she understood his reasons. After all, she was extremely lucky to have him. Loving, thoughtful and considerate, he knew how to make a woman feel good in more ways than one. He would often buy her lingerie, silver jewellery and essential oils. More often than not, they were exchanges or swaps with other stall holders from the markets. But, he seemed to have an innate understanding of what a woman wants, even if he didn't have the means to buy it. He was a passionate and attentive lover, yet still possessed the initial mystique and intrigue that had first drawn her to him.

She also knew that he liked his space and enjoyed his own company. Or so she thought. Until the day she went to his drawers in search of a warm jumper and found a woman's bra.

Dizzy with adrenaline, she ran her fingers over the full, lacy cups. He couldn't possibly have bought it for her as a surprise, she was a 12B. She held it up to her face and breathed deeply. It held the faint aroma of a ladies perfume mixed with his smell. Bloody Bastard, she spat. No wonder he didn't want me to move in with him. He just didn't want me cramping his style. He was no different from the others, he was just like the rest of them.

That familiar sickening feeling crept into the pit of her stomach and camped there like an unwelcome relative. Confronting him about her worst fears, he reassured her that it was not what she thought it was. Recalling her past history of betrayals and infidelities was excruciatingly painful. The lies, deceit, humiliations. What did men take her for? A fool?

Twisting and turning the facts in her head, she desperately wanted to believe him; to restore the relationship to where it had been before the bra discovery. Perhaps he wasn't lying to her about another woman at all. Could he possibly have bought the bra for her to over-dye and add to her stock?

He did not give her an explanation. He said he did not feel that he needed to. She either trusted him or she didn't. It was her choice to stay with him or leave.

Self assured Prick. How could he so easily turn this back onto her? Wasn't this about him? Struggling to stay on top of it all, he asked her what she needed to be able to move on. Time... time heals all wounds. In time, she would come to know him and see the truth.

The clanging sounds of the other stall holders unpacking their vehicles roused her senses. The cool clean mountain air gave her a momentary shiver.

Hanging the over-dyed under-garments on their racks brought a sad little smile to her face. He was different from the rest, she lamented. Too different.

In time, she had uncovered the truth. There was another woman, of course. But a woman she couldn't confront or compete with, even if she'd wanted to.

His mother... all cups and lace in the bottom of his drawer.
