



LIVE THE MOMENT

By

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Chapter One

A gust of wind ruffled the red and blue striped umbrellas in front of the Noosa café. Rain pelted the white sand, and another puff of wind sent the fine particles swirling along the pavement. Josephine Murdoch cupped her latte glass between her hands and tried to ignore the gaggle of goose bumps that prickled across her bare arms.

“Have a holiday,” she muttered. “Recuperate while you get a tan.” She eyed the churning waves that thundered to shore. “Huh!”

“I’ve heard talking to yourself is a sign of madness.”

The accent sounded pure Kiwi, the same she heard every day in her Auckland event’s management office. The similarity ended there. This man was tall and had to bend both head and shoulders to duck under the umbrella and slide into the plastic seat opposite her. A navy blue T-shirt stretched across a broad chest and lower, jeans clung lovingly to slim hips and muscular thighs.

“It’s when you answer back you need to worry,” Josephine mumbled, hurriedly looking away from masculine assets to study his face. A knowing grin flashed, and the ball of tension at the pit of her stomach dissolved into flustered confusion.

“That a fact?” he drawled. “Lucky I came along then. Seemed to me you were in danger of crossing the line.”

“I’ve almost finished my coffee.”

Dark brown eyes bored into her, the gentle humor making her squirm uneasily on the hard chair. “You gonna run away?” The words held clear challenge.

“My mother told me not to talk to strangers.” Good, God! That sounded so prim and proper. Heat crawled across her face, and she looked away to concentrate on the foam at the bottom of her glass. Her friend’s jaws would be hitting their hem lines about now--if they’d witnessed this exchange and seen the cracks in her confident demeanor. It just showed how stressed she was, how much she needed this holiday.

The man smirked at her reply. “So did mine.” He thrust a tanned hand across the table. “Seth Turner.” One dark brow rose to prompt an answer.

“Josephine Murdoch.” She glanced at the man again, astonished she’d actually responded instead of freezing him out. Slowly, as if she were under a spell, Josephine stretched out her hand. When his large hand enfolded hers, a slither of heat sneaked down her arm and alarm bells started to clang. She jerked her hand away from the fire.

This man was dangerous.

“There, that wasn’t so difficult.” Traces of laughter tinged his words.

Josephine felt her eyes widen. Memories of Ethan flitted through her mind. “You’re such a control freak,” he’d shouted at her two weeks ago. “A carbon-copy of your bloody mother. I don’t need this.” At the time, she’d conceded he was right and let him walk away into the sunset with a new woman. Her life was fine. She liked routine, lists, a sense of knowing where she was going. That was the way to make her business

grow. But right now, her stomach climbed and swooped as if she was on a roller coaster. No way was she in control.

A lanky teenager, sporting pimples and a tray of coffee, stopped by their table. "One double espresso and a *latte* for the lady."

"But I didn't--"

"I'd like the company, if you don't have any other plans," Seth said.

They both turned to study the driving rain and the surf crashing to shore. Piles of white and gray foam remained when the water retreated.

"I thought this was meant to be the Sunshine Coast," she muttered. Weather was a safe topic. She'd bore him into leaving.

"No commitments?" His eyes were watchful. Full lips turned up in another grin. "So you'll stay and keep a lonely soldier company?"

An inelegant snort escaped Josephine. "What's with the military bit?" Unbidden, her gaze touched on the black spiral curls that brushed his shoulders--hair that most women would sell their souls for. "Your hair's long."

"I didn't think you'd noticed my looks." He leaned back in his chair and pinned her with an intent look. To her dismay, the husky voice oozed satisfaction.

"Are you flirting with me?"

"Yeah. Is it working? Will you keep me company?"

Strange. Men never flirted with her. Josephine dithered while she wondered what to do because safety was another thing her mother preached. Josephine looked to her left then to her right. Despite the ugly weather, there were lots of people about. It should be safe enough.

“I suppose I could sit for a while. But one thing, if you’re working up to a dinner date, then you should know that I value honesty. Don’t lie to me about anything.” *Soldier indeed*, she thought lifting her chin in a show of disdain.

Seth had wanted a diversion, something to take his mind off the horror of his last mission. His mate, Boomer, had wanted him to go home to New Zealand, but he’d opted for a holiday in Australia--Noosa to be precise. Hot sun, beaches and babes, not necessarily in that order.

“Jo, I am a soldier. I’m with the Special Air Services.”

“*Josephine.*”

The censure in her voice made him grin. While the uptight woman was nothing like his usual date-du-jour, her lonely blue eyes had snagged his attention. They cried out for fun, a little loving. Right now, those eyes were full of disbelief and disappointment. She didn’t believe a word of what he was saying. The scrape of the chair across the pavement as she stood confirmed his thoughts.

Seth reached out to snare her forearm. “I’ll prove it.”

Jo eyed him for a long moment, and Seth had to stop himself from squirming. Although definitely not his type, she pushed every one of his libido hot buttons. He wanted to get to know this dark-haired ice princess better.

“You’ll sit while I get out my ID?”

Her head dipped in a nod, but she perched on the edge of the chair, ready to bolt if he made a wrong move.

He smiled in encouragement, keeping it light instead of predatory.

Great figure. Not fat. But not runway model thin either. Nothing Seth hated more than sharp angles on a body. Soft curves were best to pillow a man. *Oh, yeah.* Catching the impatience in the set of her lush mouth, Seth fished an identification card from his wallet. While it didn't state particulars, it did list his occupation as soldier. He watched her smooth face, with the faint scatter of freckles across the bridge of her nose, as she reached for the card. The frisson of heat that leapt between them during the exchange told him the sex would be good. Somewhere under the outer ice, the baggy white top and the full black skirt lay a slumbering volcano. Instinct had never failed him yet. Awareness spiked his pulse, but he didn't relax until she met his eyes. As much as he wanted to pursue this woman, if she told him to take a hike, he'd go. He saw enough bullies in the course of his missions.

"All right, I believe you."

"Don't look so apprehensive. I don't bite." But he'd certainly like to. His gaze slid across her face to linger on the soft, pale skin of her neck. *Friggin hell. This had to stop.* He was positively drooling. If she sensed his thoughts she'd run a mile. Hell, probably two in Olympic record time.

The rain looked as though it had settled in for the day. Seth racked his brain for ideas of non-threatening entertainment. He'd have to take things slow, but he was a patient man. A movie and maybe dinner sounded like a plan.

"Could I interest you in a movie?" he asked tentatively, picking up his cup to take a sip.

Big, blue eyes studied him, dark brows drawing together in a frown.

“I don’t suppose I can get into much trouble in a movie theater.”

Seth almost choked on his coffee. Back row at age fourteen--Melissa Stokes. Trouble? *Oh, yeah.* He could do trouble no problem at all.

“I’ll even let you choose the movie,” he said deadpan.

* * * *

The list took pride of place on the table. A record of the objectives she wanted to achieve while holidaying in Noosa. Most work related and all important.

Despite the necessity of completing her work, concentration proved a problem this morning. Unbidden, memories of a kiss slid into Josephine’s mind while she nibbled at a piece of papaya and sipped coffee from a china mug. Just a friendly kiss when Seth had dropped her off after dinner, a soft peck that finished way too quickly. The heady taste and the subtle masculine scent had left her wanting more.

Much more.

Josephine scowled at the uncharacteristic feeling. She glared at the slices of pineapple on her fruit platter. A holiday fling wasn’t on her list. It wasn’t her style. But she couldn’t help but feel she’d missed an opportunity. Sighing, she stood and tugged the belt of her silky robe tighter. *Fool.* Josephine’s Events took every scrap of energy she possessed. Men had no place in her life, not if she wanted to prove to her mother she could make it in the business world, and show that she hadn’t wasted her savings and small inheritance on a whim.

The doorbell chirped. *Finally*. The extra towels she'd requested. Josephine yanked open the door expecting one of the staff. Instead, six foot plus of trouble lurked outside.

Seth's dark eyes skimmed her body before cruising to her face. Usually, being the recipient of such a blatant look made her both angry and ashamed. This time, heat and awareness danced across her skin. Desire for a serious kiss throbbed through her body. Her eyes drifted to his mouth. No namby-pamby peck for her. She wanted a real kiss complete with dueling tongues and roving hands. Just what would his hands feel like on her bare skin?

"Sun's out. Coming out to play?"

Josephine blinked at him. "Play where?"

"How about spending a few hours at the beach and taking it from there?"

For fleeting seconds, Josephine thought of the business plan she wanted to write. She glanced over her shoulder at the thick writing pad and silver pen that sat on the small wooden table.

"Or we could stay here." The soft words were machine-gun sharp in the silence.

Josephine's gaze shot to Seth's face, her breath stalling half way down her throat. Low in her belly, warmth escalated into humming desire. She'd like nothing more than to take him by the hand and lead him inside her apartment even though it went against every inch of her upbringing. Instinctively, her head shook from side to side.

Seth straightened away from the verandah pole, his dark eyes

unreadable. "I'll leave you alone then. Sorry if I misunderstood."

The door shut gently, right in her face. Solid wood separated them but didn't break the simmering desire. Outside, soft footsteps moved away. Gut-wrenching disappointment slashed her heart. She really liked Seth, and heaven knows why, but he seemed to feel the same attraction she did. Was it really so wrong to let her emotions fly, to do something for herself, even if it was irresponsible? Suddenly, the idea of two weeks on her own didn't sound so appealing. She needed a friend--Seth's companionship and whatever that might involve. She'd take anything he offered. To the devil with planning for the future. For once, work could take second priority, and she'd step away from routine.

Josephine ripped open the door. "Seth, wait! Don't go."

But the path leading to reception was empty.

Next door, a baby cried. A woman, not much older than a teenager, pushed a trolley load of cleaning supplies around the corner. The rubber wheels squeaked as she negotiated the curve in the path. She stopped to hand Josephine a pile of fluffy white towels, her jaw working a wad of gum.

"Thanks," Josephine said. *He'd gone. Just like that.*

"Never mind, love," the woman said, moving the gum about some more. "Lover's spats never last long. He'll calm down and be back with flowers and chocolates in no time."

Josephine forced a smile. "Thanks for the towels."

"No trouble, love. Call reception if you need anything else." She wheeled the trolley past and stopped at the apartment door next to

Josephine's.

Josephine stared down the empty concrete path again. The back of her eyes ached, then seconds later her vision blurred. A loud shout followed by a gigantic splash in the swimming pool over to her right jerked her back. She swiped a hand across her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. What the heck was wrong with her? Where was the famed Josephine Murdoch control? It was almost as though she'd forgotten to pack it inside one of her three matching green suitcases. A half-laugh, half-sob slipped out. Perhaps her control had dropped out when Customs had searched her bags at Brisbane Airport.

She stepped back inside, the air-conditioning cool on her skin after the sunshine outside. Her gaze slid to the wooden table and her list.

The business plan waited.

Suddenly Josephine wanted to play hooky for another day. Almost before she knew it, Josephine was in the bedroom, rifling through the clothes her personal assistant had purchased for her because she'd been too busy. There should be swim wear here somewhere since she'd given Anna a list. Ah, this looked like a swimsuit.

Josephine plucked the shiny black fabric from the tangle of clothes and held it aloft. Air exploded from her lungs in a loud gasp.

"No." The word sounded weak and ineffectual. Josephine screwed her eyes shut then opened them a crack. The view was just the same. She couldn't go to the beach wearing this! Anna had bought the bikini on purpose. Josephine stared at the flimsy black bra top. She had known Anna wasn't happy being sent shopping, but dammit, she paid her well.

The woman should follow orders. A sharp puff of air whistled between her teeth. On her return, she'd deal with Anna. The bikini pants looked brief too--like something that Anna would wear. Size twelve. Josephine pursed her lips, doubt racing through her mind.

Go on. Try it on. The thought whispered seductively and before she knew it, Josephine had whipped off the robe and donned the bikini pants. She slid her arms into the narrow straps that held the top in place and fastened the back. Swallowing her doubts, she turned to survey the final result in the full-length mirror. If it was too scary, she could always buy another suit.

A pink-cheeked siren with messy dark chocolate-colored hair stared back.

Her hand clapped to her mouth. Excitement deepened the color in her cheeks and stirred restlessness. Something had happened to Josephine Murdoch. She didn't know what, but she decided to go with the change.

Chapter Two

Seth wandered down the boardwalk that ran along the edge of the beach. The hollow thud under his bare feet sounded solitary. Lonely. Consigning the whimsical thought to purgatory, he strode onto the white sand. Halfway down the beach, he halted to spread a sunshine yellow towel across the sand and dropped a pair of well-worn sandals next to it.

He wished Josephine hadn't blown him off like that. It shouldn't have hurt since they barely knew each other but strangely it had. Hell, he'd had trouble sleeping because of the blasted chaste kiss they'd exchanged last night.

Celibacy was his problem, he thought savagely. Too many full-on missions with no feminine company.

He needed to get laid.

Seth ripped his T-shirt over his head and dumped it on the towel. Feeling the weight of a stare, he angled his body to the right. Two blondes lay stretched out on beach towels, their breasts bare to catch a strapless tan. The sight didn't raise so much as a goose bump. It wasn't that they weren't attractive. They were.

But they weren't Josephine.

Seth gave a curt nod, dropped his sunglasses beside his T-shirt and

headed for the surf. The hair at the back of his neck prickled telling him that the two beach babes continued to watch him. He never looked back.

The guys in his unit would have a field day if they guessed at his thoughts. Mac and Spike would rib him something dreadful. They'd never let him hear the end of it. Seth Turner in a spin because of a broad. Hell, he didn't believe it himself, but she'd slipped under his skin with the same ease as a case of winter flu.

The cool waters of the Pacific Ocean jolted his mind from crazed panic to sensible. Seth waded deeper until waves lapped around his chest. He loved his job, the unpredictability, and the comradeship. The danger.

The SAS was no place for marriage. Divorce figures proved that. He went into each mission knowing the danger and accepting that it could be his last. Seth dived through a wave and surfaced as it swept to shore. There was no way a marriage could survive that kind of pressure. It would be his parent's marriage all over again. And he sure as hell didn't want to put his kids through that sort of hell. When he retired, that was the time to think about a relationship. Until then, he'd stick to strictly casual.

Seth bodysurfed to shore then swam back out to repeat the performance until his arms and legs felt pleasantly tired. Half an hour later, he waded from the water and headed for his towel.

A woman stood poised on the boardwalk. The way she stood, still and wary and ready to run, grabbed his attention and held it. A tug of awareness made him look closer, at her face.

Josephine.

Every resolution he'd made while swimming faded into oblivion.

Without even knowing how, he was at her side.

"Decided to play after all?" The delicate wash of color to her cheeks attracted his gaze. A definite crack in the control she'd shown earlier, making her appear softer, more innocent.

"I ... um ... decided the beach sounded nice."

"Good." Seth reached for Josephine's hand and led her across the sand to his towel. *No pressure. Don't scare her off.* This could turn out all right in the end. Just because he'd crossed his own personal line that didn't mean he was totally screwed. Two weeks, a few laughs and good sex then they could both go their own ways. Yeah. The scenario would work. He'd make it work.

"Did you want to go for a swim first?"

Josephine stared at the beaded drops of water on Seth's chest. Slowly, without volition, she reached out. Her heart thumped at her daring, her hand trembled, hovered then dropped back to her side.

"Jo?" A grin hovered at the corners of his mouth. It was almost as if he could read her confused thoughts.

"I ... um ... I'm not much of a swimmer." She raked her teeth across her bottom lip, and looked away to grab a towel from her orange straw basket. The cotton material of her shirt stuck to her flesh, feeling as though it had shrunk a size. What was wrong with her? She was behaving awfully blonde.

Seth took the purple and white striped towel from her and spread it

out on the sand beside a yellow one.

“Do you want me to rub sun tan lotion on your back?”

The idea of his hands on her body stirred a spear of pure lust. Edgy, she stepped from one foot to another while she carried out a silent debate. There was nothing wrong with a holiday fling. Nothing. Her mother wasn't present to spout doom and gloom and tell her she was making a big mistake. And her mother had been totally wrong about Ethan. This time, she'd go with gut instinct.

“Yes, please. I have some in my bag.” Although the words weren't steady, she'd uttered them. She couldn't take them back now. Josephine smiled brightly and produced the bottle of lotion from her basket. The tingling sensation at the base of her stomach reinforced the feeling that she was doing the right thing.

Their eyes met and held. Emotion, hot and awe-inspiring, shimmered in his dark eyes. A man had never looked at her like that before. Never.

Josephine swallowed. She could do this. *She wanted to do this.*

“You'd better take your shirt off.”

Wordlessly, her hands went to the small pearl buttons that fastened her turquoise shirt. Her fingers shook noticeably and fumbled the task.

“Let me,” he murmured, his voice low and husky. He stepped into her private space. His knuckles brushed her breast while his clean masculine scent tinged with fresh air and sunshine teased her senses. Seth held her gaze the whole time while the buttons slipped from their holes as though they were bewitched. Just like her, Josephine thought.

Overhead a seagull squawked as it wheeled through the sky. A few

feet in front of them, two young children argued over a collapsed sand castle. Yet Josephine felt as though they were in their own private world. Her stomach lurched at the promises she read in his dark eyes.

The shirt slipped from her shoulders. Remembering the brief top that barely contained the spill of her breasts, Josephine grabbed for the protective cotton.

Seth's hands stayed her compulsive move. "Don't." The heat in his eyes intensified.

Large, masculine hands smoothed the shirt down her arms. A breath caught in her throat as the cotton shirt whispered to the ground. Did he think her breasts were too large just as her mother constantly told her?

"Take your shorts off and lie down on the towel," he said.

Nerves jellied her knees, and she flopped to the towel like an ungainly seal. Taking a deep breath, Josephine wriggled out of her tailored shorts. Acres of white thighs and hips made her blink. Sunglasses. Where were her sunglasses? Had she picked them up off the dresser?

"Sunglasses," she blurted, reaching for her basket.

"Trying to hide?" Amusement laced Seth's voice.

"No!"

"Then stop acting as though I'm going to do the nasty right here on the beach."

"I ... didn't say that." Josephine's gaze slid from Seth's, and her right hand dug into the sand. The sun caught the particles as they poured through her fingers.

“But you thought it.”

“No, I ... ” Josephine decided nothing less than the truth would do.

“This is the first time I’ve worn this bikini. It’s a lot briefer than I’m used to.”

A chuckle escaped Seth. “What do you normally wear? Nun’s robes?”

“Close.” Her mother had kicked up a stink when she’d decided to come to Noosa instead of the family beach at Taupo. She’d wanted her to try to reconcile with Ethan. If she saw the bikini or Seth, she’d think her nightmares had come to life and take to her bed for the day.

“You look great.”

“Thanks.” Another handful of sand slid through her fingers. *The nasty*. Somehow, she didn’t think there would be anything horrible involved, not with Seth.

“I hear a but in there.”

Josephine had no intention of opening that conversation avenue. Already, her cheeks blazed with heat. She turned and lay face down on the towel. Every muscle tensed as she waited. Finally, she’d have his hands on her. Anticipation slowed her breath. Her breasts tingled, her nipples tightening to hard points against her bikini top.

Cloth rustled. The plastic bottle wheezed a protest when he squeezed it. The sound of masculine palms rubbing together made her pulse race.

Then silence bloomed.

Josephine’s mouth dried. She swallowed. The small hairs at her nape prickled.

“The lotion’s cold.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered. If he didn’t touch her soon, she was going to scream. Before she could further the thought, his hands slid across her shoulders. Her breath eased out while every muscle tightened in her belly. A groan fought for release.

“Better not stay out in the sun for long,” he said. “Don’t want to burn on the first day. That would spoil things a bit.”

“Things? What things?” she croaked. Josephine’s imagination soared, fueled by fantasies of Seth in nothing but skin.

Seth’s hands moved downward to her waist and traced circles across her lower back. The bottle wheezed again. Lotion dropped onto her upper thighs. Her wince made him chuckle.

“How about I tell you on a need to know basis,” he said.

“Oh.” Her imagination kicked into overdrive. Sex reared its ugly head, but for once the idea seemed appealing. Exciting even, rather than a chore to keep Ethan happy.

“My thoughts exactly.” His hands continued to move across her skin, massaging lazily and sending swirls of sensation racing through her body. “How’s that?”

“Good.” What would happen if she told him exactly how she felt? She wanted to turn over so he could massage her front. And a kiss or two wouldn’t go astray. A soft groan emerged at the thought.

“That good, huh?”

The man was flirting with her again. The knowledge brought growing confidence. Everything was going to be all right. It didn’t matter that

they were opposites in every way. For the next two weeks, she'd live for the day and let the future take care of itself. "I'm thinking you need a little more practice."

"Any time," he drawled. "Just say the word." One of his hands halted on her upper thigh and like a brand, the heat seared to the bone.

A gasp trembled at her lips, and a shiver of awareness raced the length of her body. Okay, she was new to this flirting stuff. What did she do next?

"All done." Seth moved his towel so it touched hers then flopped on his stomach beside her.

"Do you ... ah ... want lotion too?" Wow, that was smooth.

"Maybe later. Tell me about your business. You didn't get a chance to tell me about it last night."

Josephine turned her head to look at him. He was so close she could kiss him if she wanted. There was a sexy little dent in his chin that she'd like to explore with her mouth. Her gaze landed on his lips and lingered.

"Don't, Jo. Not unless you want to face the consequences."

"Consequences?" Her gaze shifted to study his eyes. Once again, passion simmered in their depths, drawing a response from deep inside her.

"That's right."

"Maybe ... " She cleared her throat. "Maybe I'm happy to cope with the consequences."

"Yeah?" One dark brow rose while his face expressed definite interest.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“That’s it. Ten minutes are up,” Seth muttered. He leapt to his feet, picked up his towel and thrust it inside her basket. “This is your last chance to change your mind.”

Josephine swallowed. Did she know what she was doing? No way. Slowly, she accepted Seth’s hand. Brute strength yanked Josephine to her feet.

“We’ll go for a walk first, just so we’re clear that we’re both on the same page.” Seth stuffed the rest of their possessions inside her basket, brisk and businesslike.

“Josephine? Josephine! It is you. My God, I didn’t recognize you.”

Josephine wheeled about to see her ex-boyfriend’s best friend gaping at her with something akin to shock. Shock was quickly replaced by frank interest.

“Fancy going for a coffee? We could catch up on old times.” The avid look on his face told Josephine he’d heard that she wasn’t with Ethan anymore and fancied his chances. His eyes lingered on her breasts making Josephine aware of her brief attire.

Seth growled under his breath and stepped up beside her. His arm curled about her waist in an unmistakable statement of possession.

“Maybe another time,” the man said, taking a step back.

“I don’t think so,” Seth said, his eyes narrowed, his face fierce. “I’ll be keeping Jo very busy.”

A taut silence trembled in the air between the two males. There was a time to speak up and a time to keep quiet. Josephine just knew this was

one of the times to remain silent.

I'll be keeping Jo very busy.

Seth couldn't have made his point more clearly. He wanted her just as much as she wanted him. Josephine stood straighter, buoyed by Seth's silent encouragement.

"I guess I'll see you back in Auckland," Ethan's friend said directly to her breasts.

A soft curse from Seth grabbed his attention. He jerked his gaze northward, took one look at Seth's face and hurriedly backed away before hurrying across the sand to a boardwalk cafe'.

"Not very bright, is he?"

"I'm glad you think it's funny," Seth growled.

A glimpse of Seth's stern face made her chuckle. Giving into temptation, she reached up on tiptoes and kissed him, moving her lips slowly over his until a low groan sounded at the back of his throat. Jo jerked away. For long seconds afterward, they stared at each other.

"What was that for?" Seth murmured. His gaze wandered back to her lips as though he wanted to eat her up.

"It was a thank you."

"I don't want that from you."

"I know."

Seth reached out to tuck a curl behind her ear. "And you're all right with that?"

"I think so."

"No thinking needed here. You've got to be sure, Jo. I'm not making

any decisions for you. Just so things are up front, I'm not offering forever."

"What are you offering?"

"Two weeks. Nothing more. Nothing less. Can you deal with that?"

"Yes." Maybe. Probably not, but she'd cope with it later in the same way she always did. She'd immerse herself in work.

Chapter Three

Maybe work wouldn't be enough. Nerves jumped inside Josephine, as second-guessing nipped her hard. It wasn't too late to tell Seth she'd changed her mind. In a blind panic, she looked up and opened her mouth to say the words. He watched her, his face a picture of hard angles and determination. It was the lack of expression in his dark eyes that told her of his disappointment and made her push the attack of nerves away. For once in her life, she was going to go with instinct.

"Do you want to go back to my apartment?" she asked, a trace of diffidence in her voice.

"Is that what you want?"

"Very much," she whispered, catching his gaze and holding it. She must have managed to convince him because a sudden grin transformed his countenance.

"Let's go then." He clasped her right hand in his and tugged her off the boardwalk.

They ambled down the footpath toward the Ambrose Apartments where Josephine was staying.

"I thought I might hire a car for the rest of the week," Seth said.

"Would you like to go to the markets tomorrow and then take a drive

through the Hinterland?”

Josephine’s heart stuttered on hearing his question. They hadn’t even made love yet and he was making plans for the next day. A tentative smile flirted with her lips. “That sounds like fun.”

“Great. It’s better sightseeing with someone else.”

His matter of fact words took some of the shine off the prospective outing. But then, he’d asked her and not one of the women who had ogled him while they were down on the beach. This living for the moment was taking a little more effort than what she had thought. Turning off the parental conditioning of years was difficult.

“Jo, you’re very quiet. Is there a problem?”

“No problem,” she muttered hastily. Drat the man for being so intuitive. And here she’d thought her mental arguments were quiet and unobtrusive.

The pool area at her apartment complex was crowded with families and a few older people who looked as though they might be retired. Seth led her past the pool, tugging lightly on her hand as they made their way to her apartment.

“Found him, did you, love?” The young woman she’d spoken with earlier in the morning grinned from ear to ear. “Told you he’d come round.”

Josephine felt heat surge to her cheeks. Seth squeezed her hand and flashed a wink at the woman.

“Couldn’t let a misunderstanding spoil our holiday,” he murmured. His gaze touched on Josephine’s mouth the whole time. Heat spiraled

through her belly. She didn't even hear the woman leave because Seth filled her mind, and made her body hunger for him. Only for him.

"Where's your key?" he murmured.

"At the bottom of my basket."

Seth slid his hand into her straw basket and retrieved her room key with a minimum of difficulty. He slid the key into the lock, opened the door and stood back to let her enter. It felt as though she were crossing the point of no return. For a moment, her feet hesitated and then she lifted her chin and stepped over the threshold.

"Good girl."

Josephine turned to face him. "I'm not sure I want to be a good girl. That sounds a little ... well ... boring."

Seth flashed her a grin that sent aftershocks dancing through her body. "Don't you worry, sweetheart. There's nothing boring about you." He stepped inside the apartment and shut the door behind him with a soft click.

Josephine swallowed. A shiver worked its way down her body but it had nothing to do with fear.

"Come here," he said, his tone intent and serious.

Josephine hesitated. She wasn't frightened, more expectant and excited. She was on the top rise of the roller coaster again, it was almost time to drop into free fall, but her stomach trembled with apprehension. Adrenaline. She raised her eyes to look at him. Before she knew it, her tongue snaked out to moisten her dry lips. Oh, yeah. There was definitely adrenaline in the room.

Seth cocked his head to the side. “You big on control?” he asked.

The way he said it didn’t sound like an insult.

“I have my moments,” Josephine admitted.

He nodded, and Josephine just knew a smile lurked in his mind.

“We’ll have time to explore all the possibilities,” he murmured. The rough huskiness of his voice shivered through her mind. Her stomach turned over, while her nipples pulled into tight buds. She swallowed again, her pulse leaping as she stared at him.

Josephine found herself stepping toward him. Her heart still thundered but deep down she knew she was doing the right thing. Seth wouldn’t hurt her. As of today, she had a new motto. Live for the moment.

Just repeating the mantra in her mind gave her new confidence. A smile curved her lips and she leaned into him, curling her arms around his neck.

“Is this close enough?”

“For the moment.” One hand rose to skim across her cheek. His fingers were slightly callused but his touch was so incredibly gentle that she started to melt inside.

His eyes sparkled, full of laughter and something else less easy to define. “Do you think you can work up enthusiasm for a kiss?”

Josephine leaned into him, resting against his muscled chest. She lowered her lips and touched his mouth with the softest of kisses before retreating.

“Is that what you have in mind?”

“Not quite.” His eyes sparkled in a naughty boy kind of way. “I’d thought we could try a more advanced kiss.”

“Mmmm.” Josephine pretended to consider his suggestion. But inside, laughter bubbled like a glass of champagne. This was fun. Sex had never ever been fun with Ethan. “Perhaps you should show me what you have in mind?”

“Sure, I could do that.”

Before Josephine could take a breath, his mouth covered hers. She gasped at the suddenness as his tongue slipped inside to taste her more fully. His hands anchored on her shoulders as their bodies melded together from chest to thigh. Josephine’s eyes fluttered closed and every sensation heightened. His hands smoothed down her arms, then moved to her hips, holding her and molding her body to his.

This wasn’t enough. Josephine wanted more. More skin, more kisses, more everything. She pulled away slowly, noticing at the back of her mind that each breath was coming fast and choppy while Seth appeared unaffected. He seemed as calm and unruffled as when he’d stepped through her door. Josephine took that as a personal challenge.

“Can I take your shirt off?”

“You can do anything you want, sweetheart. Remember, you’re the one in control.”

So, she’d take him at his word. She’d give him control, she thought, staring at his calm face through narrowed eyes. Her fingers smoothed over his chest, savoring the feel of hard muscles beneath the cotton fabric of his T-shirt. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth as she

considered her first move. Skin. Definitely warm skin under her exploring fingers. Her hands wandered down his chest to his swim shorts.

“These definitely need to go,” she told him, her tone soft yet serious.

Josephine caught the slight quiver of his lips and the bright humor in his eyes before he nodded.

She held his gaze. Her hands slid down his hips and inside his shorts to caress warm, silky smooth skin. Josephine splayed her fingers across his belly then, with a thundering heart, she grazed her fingers across the swollen hardness of his arousal. His only reaction was a slight widening of his dark pupils. Josephine decided the response wasn't even a blip on the radar screen, not when her heart threatened to jump out her mouth. Her hands shot up to the waistband of the black shorts and in seconds flat, they puddled around his feet. This time, he blinked, but she only caught the reaction because she never took her eyes off him. Her hands fisted in his cotton T-shirt. That had to go as well. Then she'd have a view worthy of a photograph.

“Lift your arms, please.”

Laughter flashed in his eyes before the dark blue cotton swept over his head and dropped to the floor.

Josephine stared, her breath catching in her throat. The man looked good--mighty fine as her friends would say. A fine dusting of hair covered his chest then arched downward to his groin. Tight abs, slim hips, muscular legs. Her eyes skimmed his erection, and she swallowed as she imagined how he would feel thrusting into her with long, slow,

deep strokes. A low moan built at the back of her throat and heat suffused the length of her body. She moved from one foot to the other, edgy and aware of arousal soaking her bikini panties.

“Turn around,” she whispered, licking away of dryness of her lips. “Please.”

The soft plea in her voice did things to him. He’d never felt so turned on so quickly before and with just a glance, a few soft words. Seth turned as she instructed, feeling her gaze on his back and bare ass. He wondered what she’d think of the small cartoon dragon tattoo that decorated his right butt cheek. Seth slowed his turn and looked over his shoulder. The expression on her face made his gut tighten and his cock twitch. God, she was beautiful. But one of them was slightly overdressed here and it sure as hell wasn’t him. He turned to face her. Silence hummed between them. As he watched, her fingers went to the tiny buttons that fastened her shirt. She shrugged her shoulders and the turquoise colored shirt fell down her arms.

“Wait. Let me,” Seth said. His eyes skimmed the upper slopes of her breasts. Still concealed by her bikini top, they rose and fell with each ragged breath she took. “You’re beautiful,” he said.

His tone told her he really believed what he said. He made her feel beautiful.

“My ex told me I needed to lose weight,” she murmured. Still seeking reassurance, she thought. She had to stop that. He’d said she looked good, and there was no reason to doubt him.

“His loss,” Seth muttered. He bent forward to kiss her, his hands

drawing her close and pressing her against his erection. “Can I take your top off?”

If he didn’t, she’d probably scream. Instinctively, she rocked against his groin, reveling in the soft hiss that escaped him. Fire licked through her veins, converging in one tight, achy spot. Hunger rose within and the dampness between her legs increased. Josephine sucked in a hasty breath. His sandalwood scent rose off his heated body, underlined with a more personal masculine scent. Josephine nuzzled against the cords in his neck, playfully nipping then soothing the bite with a sweep of her tongue. The need to play was foreign to her, but it felt right so she followed the instinct that told her to trust Seth. He growled under his breath, one hand kneading her bottom. His other hand dealt with the back clasp on her bikini top. His expertise gave her pause, but she shoved the envy away. He was with her, and he’d told her he wanted her. Live for the moment. Remember? Before she could even repeat the mantra, her bikini top fell away to reveal her breasts.

“Beautiful,” he murmured again.

Josephine felt a smile move across her face. The smile died when he bent his head and took her nipple into his mouth. Pure physical sensation shot from her breast, drawing a groan. His curly hair looked dark against her pale skin. She felt a tightening sensation deep in her womb and instinctively, her hands rose to cup his head, a silent demand to keep his attention on her breasts. Josephine sighed as another arrow of heat darted to her pussy.

“Jo, how about we move this to the bedroom? Since it’s handy.”

Josephine grinned, not bothering to correct him in his name shortening. “You mean you don’t want to do it on the floor or against the door?”

“Jo, anytime, any place with you. I just thought that since a bed is handy, we might as well make use of it.”

“Traditional first?”

“Yeah.” His dark eyes glowed with dark, sensual heat. “Kinky later, okay?”

Josephine tilted her head to the side. “Will you tie me up?” Good grief! Was that her talking? She almost turned around to see if someone else had sneaked into the room with them.

Seth pressed a hard kiss to her mouth and ground his erection against her stomach. “Whatever you want, sweetheart. Whatever you want.”

Before she could untangle her tongue to comment, he swept her off her feet, holding her against his chest. Her heart pounded. “Which room?” he asked.

“The door to the right.”

Patches of sun filtered through the slat blinds, but the air conditioning made the room feel cool. Seth placed her on the mattress and dropped down to her side. His dark gaze held promises. Those silent promises made her confidence grow, her heart pound and her pulse race.

“I still think you’re a little over dressed,” he said.

Josephine glanced down at the brief bikini pants she still wore. She grinned. “You have my permission to take them off.”

Seth leaned over her, pressing her into the mattress with his weight.

His tongue swept across the seam of her mouth, and she opened eagerly for another taste of him. Like an alcoholic, she craved more. More of him. All of him. Already, she was so wet for him. She wriggled against him in a suggestive manner, wanting him to hasten the pace, but he seemed in no hurry. Josephine let her hands smooth over his shoulders then lower to his muscular buttocks.

“No, sweetheart. Take things easy, okay? I want to make things good for you because this first time I won’t last long. Once I’m inside you, I won’t have much control.”

“What if I’m in a hurry?” Josephine demanded. Her busy hands explored his hips then dipped between their bodies to smooth over his cock. Air hissed between Seth’s teeth. Josephine’s gaze jumped to his face. His eyes were closed, but his expression held pleasure and enjoyment. In an experiment, she stroked her hand the length of his shaft, and he moved with her, the air hissing between his teeth again.

“Do you like that?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. This is gonna be good between us.” As he spoke, his hand reached down to cover hers. Gently, he forced her hand away and pressed it to the bed. He grabbed her other hand and effectively shackled that one to the mattress too so she couldn’t touch him. “Let’s see how you deal with torture,” he murmured, his husky voice holding laughter and teasing. His lips kissed her belly then moved lower. Josephine tried to wriggle free, wanting to touch him as he touched her, but he held her firmly. His tongue darted out to lick along the elastic band of the bikini briefs. Josephine couldn’t hold back a moan as frenzied shivers of

excitement zapped to her core, leaving her even wetter and aching.

Wanting. Desperate for the relief that only he could bring.

“Just starting,” he murmured, satisfaction coloring his words. Tiny shocks jolted nerve-endings as his tongue traced along her inner thighs. “If you promise not to move, I’ll take these off for you. Promise?” Dark eyes still held the promise of great pleasure. She shivered then nodded.

In an instant, he tugged the briefs down leaving her bare to his gaze. Silently, he parted her legs. Josephine drowned in the heat that sizzled through her body, and that was just with his look, his eyes touching her. Without warning, he released her other hand and pushed away from her.

“Back in a sec,” he murmured.

Confused, Josephine stared after him. God, if he’d changed his mind she’d be mortified. A rustle of clothing sounded then seconds later he was back.

“Condoms,” he muttered in explanation. He ripped the small plastic packet open and with quick, competent moves, sheathed his erection.

“No more interruptions now,” he said. “Where were we?”

Josephine could tell by the grin that hovered across his face, he remembered exactly what he’d been doing.

“Ah, yes.” His brows rose. “We’ll start with a kiss.”

At least he seemed to have forgotten about her hands. They were still free, and she took advantage of the fact to explore his body.

Masculine nipples puckered when she investigated. Her lips traced the whirls of crisp body hair on his chest then followed them down his body.

His strong hands halted further investigation. “Remember what I said? I haven’t done this for a while. My control is nil.”

“For someone with no self-control you’re doing an awful lot of talking.”

“That sounds like a complaint, sweet, Jo.”

“Josephine.”

“Yeah, right.” He grabbed at her wandering hands and restrained them. Kissing her briefly on the mouth, he edged down her body to lathe one nipple. Drawing it into his mouth, he sucked hard. Josephine groaned, her head moving from side to side at the exquisite sensation. She relaxed, going boneless and he released his grip on her arms. His hands moved lower, doing some exploring of his own. Her thighs loosened, falling apart to allow his exploration. Seth moved down the bed, his hand gliding between her legs. Hot, moist breath followed. Josephine stiffened. Live for the moment. The words were a whisper in her mind. Before she could decide on a reaction, his tongue flicked out to smooth over feminine flesh, the length of her cleft and back, pausing to suckle her clit. A gasp sounded. Her gasp.

“Oh. My. God.” A shiver wracked her body.

“That good, huh?” He laughed, his dark eyes wicked and full of carnal knowledge as he gazed up at her. He knew exactly what he was doing to her control--shredding it, peeling it away in layers. And Josephine relished the loss especially when it was accompanied by this much pleasure. His hands dropped to cup her buttocks, and his tongue lashed out over her swollen clit, strands of long silky hair spilling over

her thighs.

Her hands gripped the white cotton bed covers. Sensation gathered momentum, cresting into long pulses that left her gasping, her hips lifting insistently, grinding into his questing mouth. Then, like an explosion, a final shattering climax ripped through her. Josephine shuddered helplessly, adrift in a world of sweet, agonizing pleasure. Gradually, her body relaxed. She sighed softly, her eyes flickering open to see Seth smiling.

Seth shifted up the bed, kissed her, long and lingering then moved over her body and slid home into her warmth. The smooth, seamless stroke made her shudder again, the sensation of warmth and fullness creating aftershocks in her body.

“That feels good,” Seth murmured. His lips moved across her jaw and down her neck, using teeth to take small nips and then soothing the stab of pain with moist kisses. Another lazy stroke was followed by a quicker one. White teeth nipped at her neck. Josephine wound her legs around his waist and arched her back into the next stroke. She trembled. Seth growled. His hips pistoned faster and faster. Josephine shuddered again. Her eyes drifted shut. Seth withdrew then surged home. His hands gripped her hips, and after one last surge, a groan squeezed past his lips. They lay entwined together, neither saying anything, but savoring the aftermath. Or at least, Josephine hoped that was the case. She had never felt so close to a man before, but then she didn’t have much experience to compare.

Seth rolled onto his side, taking Josephine with him. Her skin tingled

as his hands smoothed down her back. Her heart continued to thunder.

“I notice you have a spa bath.”

Disappointment rocked through Josephine. Ethan hadn’t liked to cuddle afterward either. “You can try it out if you’d like to.” She forced a smile.

“I thought we’d both try it out. It looks big enough for two.”

Josephine sucked in a deep breath, relief twisting around her heart. She smiled and pulled away from Seth enough so she could see his face. One finger traced across his lips.

“Should I turn on the water?”

“Great idea, sweetheart, but how about letting me catch my breath.”

His hands wandered down her waist and across her hips to draw her flush with his body. “And I’d like to explore a bit further first and maybe a repeat.” He glanced over her shoulder toward the window. “It’s early yet, Jo. We have loads of time. We have two weeks.”

Chapter Four

“You don’t have to see me off at the airport. We said goodbye last night.” Jo’s voice was soft, and she refused to meet his gaze. Seth’s stomach knotted. Hell, he didn’t want her to go. Two weeks hadn’t been long enough. Instead of keeping a mental distance from her and slaking his sexual thirst, she’d wormed her way into his affections. “Don’t cry, Jo.”

“I’m not crying,” she muttered, her voice thick with tears. “Here’s the cab now.”

“Are you sure?” Hell, he wasn’t sure that he wouldn’t start bawling himself. The back of his eyes ached in a way they hadn’t since he’d been a kid.

“I’m sure.” Jo finally looked up at him. A brave smile fixed to her face. “Thank you, Seth. I’ll never forget you.”

The cabby tooted his horn.

It was time to let go, but Seth didn’t want to let her go. “Do you have a pen?”

Jo nodded. She fumbled in her black leather handbag and came up with an engraved silver pen.

“Paper?”

Silently, she handed him a pale blue business card. He scrawled an email address on the back and handed it back to her.

“If you need anything, email me.”

“But you said this was just for two weeks, and I agreed.”

“But we’re still friends, Jo. If you need me, you can contact me with this email address.” Seth hauled her into his arms and kissed her hard, holding her tight as if he was never going to let her go.

In the distance, Josephine heard the honk of the taxi’s horn. Tears stung the back of her eyes, and her throat felt tight and achy. Although it was time to go, she didn’t want to leave Seth. Knowing she had to, she pulled from his embrace and smiled. Concentrating fiercely, she committed his face to her memory.

“Thank you,” she murmured, then stepping away from him, she turned and opened the taxi door. She slipped inside and pulled the car door shut. Lifting a hand, she waved and forced a happy grin even though she was dying inside.

* * * *

Seth peered through the long undergrowth. Camouflage paint covered his face and mud coated his khaki-colored clothes. Beside him, his mate Boomer lay on the ground.

Boomer turned to grin at him. “Time to rock and roll.”

Seth crawled through the damp undergrowth with Boomer at his side. In the distance, sporadic gunfire broke the dawn quietness. The training

exercise was going well. Just a few more hours and they'd be able to head off on leave.

Jo. God, he wanted to hold her so much he ached.

Boomer grabbed his upper arm and immediately, Seth froze. Boomer jerked his head off to the side. Slowly, Seth turned his head. The glow of a cigarette. Hell, he should have seen it. Instead, his head was back in Auckland with Jo.

* * * *

“Josephine, who is that man?”

Her mother at her imperious best. Josephine sighed inwardly. No matter who the man was Josephine considered kissing him just to create a scene. She turned to look in the direction her mother was pointing. Cripes, she hoped her mother wasn't trying to set her up with Ethan again. She'd harped on about the subject ever since Josephine had returned from holiday. Ethan had money. Ethan was a go-getter. He could keep her in style. She didn't need to work if she married Ethan. Huh! If Ethan was so great, he wouldn't have been unfaithful, he wouldn't have told her he sought other women because she was frigid. As far as she was concerned, Ethan was history. She had her thriving business, and she had her memories. Live for the moment. She turned in the direction her mother indicated. A gasp escaped as she stared at the tall muscular man. Totally underdressed for the occasion, with his dark curls hanging loosely around his face and hitting his shoulders.

“Seth,” she whispered.

“Do you know that man?” her mother demanded.

Josephine ignored her mother and pushed through the couples on the dance floor to reach the door. Her heart thundered and hope surged through her. His presence might mean nothing or it could mean everything, but whatever it meant, she’d live for the moment.

“Seth?”

“Jo.” He clasped her hands and stood back to look at her. His gaze traveled slowly down her body, making her breasts tingle with a sensual awareness that she hadn’t experienced since being in Australia.

Six long months had passed since their holiday together. Josephine knew she’d changed. For the better. Seth had built her confidence and given her the means to deal with her mother’s demands.

“What are you doing here?”

His mouth twisted. “I wanted to see you, but I can see I’ve come at a bad time. I’m sorry, Josephine.”

“Jo.”

His mouth softened, as did his eyes. “What time will you finish here?”

Jo took his hand. “Now.”

Seth headed for the door, and she followed willingly. When she glanced back over her shoulder, she caught the look of horror on her mother’s face. A look that told Josephine she’d hear about this. Sooner rather than later. Josephine kept walking and that told her more than anything, that she’d changed.

“Where are we going?” she asked when she caught up with Seth.

He visibly hesitated then said, “Would you like to go to my apartment?”

Josephine nodded. Less chance of her mother hunting her down there. “Let’s go. Do you have a car or do you want to take mine?”

“My car’s parked over there.” He pointed at the dark blue Ford across the road.

Josephine grinned. “I’m in your hands.”

“That’s what I was hoping,” he said.

Josephine waited for the inevitable grin but he remained serious. “I’ve missed you.”

Her heart skipped a beat before starting up in racing mode. She’d missed him too. She’d tried not to but at the oddest times, he’d crept into her mind. Well ... actually, most of the time. He’d never really left.

“Have you had dinner?” she asked.

“I’m not hungry.” An abrupt answer that should have scared her. Instead, it made her smile inside.

“Okay.”

Silently, Seth opened the passenger door for her. Josephine pulled her dress up slightly, and she noticed that Seth’s eyes lingered on her bared leg. A shudder went through her along with a surge of pleasure. An insistent ache started between her legs.

Seth climbed into the car and switched on the ignition. The car started with a soft well-tuned hum. He pulled from the parking space and drove away from the central Auckland hotel.

“How did you know where I was?” Josephine asked.

“Detective work. I went to your apartment and met your neighbor. She told me that you were at a ball.”

In the dim light, she could barely read his expression. But she read more into his words. He must have wondered what her reaction would be. He’d taken a risk. That thought warmed her even more.

“Where do you live?”

His gaze speared to her. “Having second thoughts?”

“No.” She didn’t even need to think about it. During the two weeks they’d spent together in Noosa, trust had developed.

“Epsom,” he said. “My parents owned a property there, and they left it to me when they died. I share it with my younger brother, but he’s away at the moment.”

Another slice of his past. Josephine wanted to ask questions, but she sensed that this wasn’t the time. She nodded and sat back to let anticipation grow.

Seth pulled up beside an old wooden bungalow. A large oak tree grew out the front, its branches stark and empty during the July winter weather. Josephine shivered. She’d been in that much of a hurry to leave with Seth that she’d left her coat. Her skimpy black dress wasn’t much protection against the cool breeze.

Seth hit a remote control, and the garage door rolled upward. He parked the car and switched off the ignition. Silence hummed between them. Seth’s hands clenched on the wheel, and his broad chest rose as he sucked in a deep breath.

The notion that he was nervous enchanted Josephine. And gave her courage of her own. She opened her door and climbed out. Bending over to peer back inside the car, she said, “Coming?”

He stiffened. A soft curse colored the air, but he climbed from the car, pausing to stare at her over the roof of the Ford. “Sweetheart, you scare me.”

“Me?” Josephine sauntered around the front of the car and stopped a few inches away from him. “You’re the one that should scare me.” She rubbed one finger across his jaw line and came away with camouflage paint. “Been playing soldiers?”

“I’ve been at base all day. I have to go back tomorrow.”

“We’d better not waste time then.” Josephine caught his gaze and held it.

Seth captured her hand in his. “I couldn’t agree more.”

If she had imagined where Seth lived, it would have been an apartment. She knew he was out of the country a lot of the time so she would have pictured an apartment with scant furniture and no personality. Something sparse with not much color. She couldn’t have been more wrong. The house breathed color. Deep blues, green, yellow, orange and lots of good quality wooden furniture that glowed from years of being lovingly polished. The floors were wooden too. Seth led her through the living room, down a hall and into a bedroom. A handful of loose change lay on top of the dresser. A T-shirt and a pair of jeans were tossed on top of a wooden chair.

“Am I going too fast for you?” he murmured.

“You haven’t kissed me yet.”

A grin bloomed on Seth’s face. Finally. Josephine smirked back knowing that whatever was worrying him was dealt with. With a daring that was out of place for Josephine, she closed one eye in a wink and stepped into his arms.

Seth kissed her. Hard, without gentleness. Instead, his kiss held desperation. A hint of anger. Josephine didn’t care. She was right where she wanted to be, in his arms, kissing him and holding him tight.

They toppled back onto the patchwork quilt. Seth’s hands were all over her, shaping her breasts, cradling her face, as if he wanted to commit her body to memory.

“Too many clothes,” he muttered. “How does this come off? I don’t want to rip your dress.”

Josephine sat up and presented her back to him. “Zipper,” she said.

The zip whined as he slid it down. The black silk peeled away from her body baring her back to him and allowing the cool night air to tease her breasts. Seth swore softly and hauled her to her feet. The dress slithered down her hips leaving her clothed in black briefs, lacy thigh high stockings and high heels.

Seth turned her to face him, his gaze holding hers. “I didn’t think I’d make it back here without touching you,” he said. “I don’t have any control around you.”

Josephine knew exactly what he meant. As her gaze drifted over his dark green T-shirt and khaki trousers, he groaned. He ripped the T-shirt over his head and yanked at his belt. Moments later, he was naked to her

gaze.

God, she was beautiful. He'd missed her so much. Hadn't been able to concentrate on his mission. Concentration had never been a problem before. Never. When they'd finished training today, he'd been in his car and headed to Auckland before the others could mutter '*pub*'. After calling in a few favors and a little investigation of his own, he'd found Josephine. Seeing her at the Carlton Hotel had made him realize how different their lives were. But it hadn't seemed to matter. He wanted her, and he'd had to try. Somewhere along the way, he'd crossed a line--a personal line that in the past had restricted him to casual relationships. Seth had no idea where this was going, but at the moment, he didn't care.

He bent to slide the black panties off then stood back to admire the result. She was sex personified. And she belonged to him, he thought savagely. Not the stupid fool who had cheated on her and called her frigid and fat. His hands drifted to her breasts, large and luscious with pink nipples. His fingers plucked at her nipples then he bent his head to take one in his mouth. She trembled against him while her hands cradled him to her breast. Seth sighed as he toppled her back onto the bed.

He reached over for the packet of condoms in his bedside drawer.

"Let me," she murmured.

The thought of her hands on him sent a jolt of lust surging through his body. He handed her a small foil packet. "Go easy, sweetheart. I haven't done this for a while."

She stilled and looked up at him.

He nodded, answering her silent question. "Not since Noosa."

“No time to waste then.” Competent hands slid the condom on. She pushed him back on the bed and straddled him, her blue eyes glowing with silent laughter as she stared down at him. “No problem, hotshot.”

As he grinned back at her, contentment curled around her heart. She bent to suck and lick masculine nipples with her tongue, enjoying the thrust of his cock against her belly. His tanned chest beckoned, demanding further exploration. Without warning, he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off him. One hand swept down her belly, delving in moist and tender flesh. A finger circled and pressed against her swollen clit, wringing a soft moan from her. Seth surged inside her just as sensation gathered momentum. She arched up into him, closing her eyes to enjoy the magical release that only Seth could give her.

He hadn't been with another woman. Josephine held the thought close to her heart. He'd sought her out.

Sleepily, he gathered her close and placed a soft kiss on her lips. His dark eyes slid closed, his chest rose and fell as he drifted into sleep. Josephine continued to watch him and knew, deep down, that this new, precious feeling inside was love.

Chapter Five

Josephine came awake to a soft, lazy kiss. Almost before she was awake, he slipped inside her, loving her with long, slow rocking motions that sent her pulse pounding, her heart soaring and her body shuddering into climax. Seth groaned and was finally still, his muscular body a heavy but welcome weight.

The alarm went off on his wristwatch, and Seth rolled to his side, dragging her close in spoon fashion. He squinted at the time. "I have to go."

"Right now?"

"Sorry, sweetheart. This time it looks as though I'm gonna be away for a while." He rolled over her, one hand smoothing the hair from her face. "Can I have your phone number?"

Joy shot through Josephine. "Of course you can."

"I'll ring you when I can, but don't worry if you don't hear from me for a while. Some of the places we go don't have reliable phones."

* * * *

It was two hours later when Josephine pulled up outside her

waterfront apartment. To her dismay, her mother's Nissan was parked in the visitor's parking space. Drat. She did not want to face her mother at the moment. She'd much rather savor the memories of her night with Seth. For a moment, she thought about getting in her car and driving somewhere for breakfast. The only thing that stopped her was that she was still wearing the black dress from the night before. Josephine sighed and sailed forth to deal with her mother.

She found her mother sitting out on her deck, enjoying the view of the yachts sailing on the harbor, a cup of coffee in hand.

"Mother." Josephine nodded stiffly, trying to conceal the burst of anger inside.

"Where have you been? I was about to call the police."

"How did you get inside my apartment?"

"Never mind that. I want some answers. Did you go off with that ... that disreputable man?" Her mother's jaw dropped as she finally registered what Josephine was wearing. "My God! You did. Josephine, how could you? The way he was dressed ... the long hair." Her mother paused to shudder. "He's not one of us."

"Mother, how did you get into my apartment?"

"You gave me a key--"

"No, Mother. Remember, you threatened to disown me when I moved out of the house."

Her mother laughed and to Josephine's mind, the sound carried uneasiness.

"I'm sure you gave me a key."

“I gave you a key while I was in Noosa on holiday.” Josephine fixed her mother with a stern gaze and took heart from the look of shock and discomfiture that flitted across her mother’s face.

“I had a copy made in case you lost your key and locked yourself out.”

Josephine held out her hand. “I’d like the key, please.”

“Josephine, what’s wrong with you? You’ve changed. Ever since you came home from that holiday. I knew you shouldn’t have gone on your own. I told Ethan that. If you had married Ethan then none of this would have happened.”

“I’m not a child.” Josephine knew this conversation should have happened a long time ago. But she loved her mother. She didn’t want to hurt her. “I’m not marrying Ethan, no matter how much you’d like him as a son-in-law. I don’t love him and I won’t marry him.”

“Love will come with time.”

“No. I’ve met someone else.”

“That ... that ruffian?” Horror bleached her mother’s face until two round circles of blush were the only color left.

“He’s in the army, Mother. We’re friends, that’s all.”

Her mother leapt to her feet. “That’s all right then. This is just a phase. We won’t tell Ethan about this other man. I must go. I have a luncheon to attend.” Her mother air-kissed her cheek and then swept out in a cloud of Chanel No. Five. The door shut with a decisive clunk.

Josephine made a moue with her mouth. She noticed that her mother hadn’t returned her apartment key. Never mind. Her mouth firmed with

decision. She'd arrange for a change of locks.

* * * *

"Josephine, call on line one."

Josephine picked up the phone. "Good morning, Josephine's Events. How can I help you?"

The masculine chuckle made her pulse race. "I'm not sure if what I have in mind is legal, sweetheart."

Josephine cradled the phone under her chin. If she closed her eyes, it sounded as though he were in the same room rather than the other side of the world.

"How are you?"

"I'd be better if I was there with you. What are you wearing?"

A laugh exploded from Josephine. He made every conversation fun. "I have a prim black suit on. Nothing to get excited about."

"Pity," he said. "I could do with some excitement."

"Are you coming home soon?" The minute the words left her mouth, she wanted to recall them. There were no promises between them. She didn't want to be like her mother. Demanding and controlling so that she eventually drove him away. If she carried on like that, she'd end up old and lonely like her mother.

"I'm not sure, Jo."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

Seth heard the sudden strain in her voice. He closed his eyes briefly.

Man, this sucked. He didn't want to be half way around the world, fighting someone else's dirty wars. Increasingly, he was thinking of chucking it in. Next time he went home, he'd talk to Jo. Face-to-face so he could see her expression and gauge her response.

"No problem, sweetheart. Can't tell you exactly, but I'm hoping it's soon. Keep the bed warm for me."

"I will. Let me know as soon as you hear, and I'll take some time off."

Seth recalled her warm curves, as she lay cuddled next to him, and the small cries she made at the back of her throat when he stroked her body.

"That's a promise. What do you have underneath the prim black suit?"

"Lace," she said in a breathless voice.

Seth shifted on the wooden crate as the vision settled in his mind. Sweat trickled down his face. A fly buzzed overhead. "What color?"

"Hey, Seth, man. Stop talking dirty on the phone. We got things to do, places to go."

Seth lifted his forefinger in a universal gesture. "Jo, I've gotta go. I'll ring you when I can."

* * * *

"Josephine, I've finished everything on last month's list. Do you have the new list for me?" Anna, her assistant, hovered by the door.

Josephine checked her gold wristwatch. “It’s getting late. Why don’t you finish up early?”

Anna’s mouth gaped open and her eyes widened behind small oval glasses. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Fine. I just haven’t had time to do a list yet. I’ll try to have something ready for you on Monday.”

If anything, Anna’s eyes widened even further. “You’ve changed,” she blurted. Josephine smiled. “I’ll see you on Monday. Have a nice weekend.”

“Thanks. You too.” Anna’s dress rustled as she departed leaving Josephine alone with her thoughts. They immediately drifted to Seth, as they often did. She hadn’t heard from Seth for almost three weeks. Doubts crawled through her mind. Josephine tried to ignore them. She’d felt lonely before meeting Seth, yet somehow the empty gap in her life seemed worse now like a series of peaks and troughs. Sighing, Josephine stood and gathered up her bag and coat.

The phone chirped as she fumbled for her apartment keys. Josephine dropped her bag and ran for the phone.

“Seth?”

“You’re not still seeing that man!”

“Mother.”

“The Albright benefit is tomorrow night.”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

“Ethan was asking after you.”

Josephine sighed inwardly. Another lecture coming on. “What time

should I be there?”

“Be ready at seven-thirty. Ethan will pick you up.” A soft click sounded on the other end of the phone.

Josephine muttered one of Seth’s favorite curses. Her mother was trying to manage her life for her again, and she was doing a fine job of undermining her daughter’s confidence in the process. Trust. She was trying, but it wasn’t easy when she hadn’t heard from Seth for so long. What if he had decided he didn’t want anything more to do with her? What if he had met someone else on his weekend leave?

Long distance love. It didn’t work according to her mother. A man like Seth didn’t commit, he had women in every town. Again, according to her mother.

Josephine kicked off her black pumps and padded through to the kitchen. She grabbed a wine glass and filled it from an open bottle in the fridge. Her mother had accused her of becoming isolated instead of getting out and socializing. In a weak moment, Josephine had agreed to attend the Albright function. She hadn’t agreed to go with Ethan.

Still, if she rang her mother back and kicked up a fuss, it would be like waving a red tablecloth in front of a charging Jersey bull. Her mother would see her protests as a validation of every one of her statements. She had to prove that she wasn’t interested in Ethan. A frown slid across her brow. She just wished she was sure of Seth and could push aside every insecurity that sat on her shoulder and whispered in her ears. She wished she could drown out the noisy voice in the same way she tuned out her mother.

* * * *

The doorbell rang at precisely seven-thirty. Josephine picked up a black bag and shrugged into her woolen coat before answering the door.

“Seth!”

“Pleased to see me?”

Unaccountably, shyness tied her tongue in knots. The grin slipped from his face and his gaze slipped to her form-fitting in-your-face red gown. The expression blanked from his face.

“I see you have other plans. I’ll let you get on with them.”

He was leaving. Horror dissolved the knots tangling her tongue. “No, wait!”

Seth slowed and turned back to face her. His face held doubt and wariness.

“You came.”

Seth folded his arms against his chest. “But my timing stinks.”

The mild words tightened her throat. “What are you trying to say?”

“I don’t have to say anything. It’s obvious by the way you’re acting so defensive.”

Footsteps sounded behind them, and they both looked up to see Ethan round the corner.

“Great, you’re ready. Traffic was a nightmare.”

A snort erupted from Seth. “Now I know where I stand. It’s been fun.”

“No, Seth. Wait!”

“Josephine, we must go.”

Seth kept walking, didn't look back, just kept going taking Josephine's heart with him.

Josephine swallowed. She had to go after him. After an agonizing minute, Josephine finally moved. She flew down the corridor and arrived outside only to see Seth's car rounding the corner.

Footsteps sounded behind her. “Ready?” Ethan asked, glancing at his Rolex. “The driver is waiting.”

Josephine huddled into her coat feeling cold to the bone. Going out tonight was the last thing she wanted to do.

* * * *

“You're late. Where's Ethan?”

“He met up with one of the partners in his law firm on the way in.”

“Why didn't you stay with him? Ethan is a good catch for you Josephine. You wouldn't need to work again.”

The air hissed from Josephine's lungs as though she'd sustained a blow to the stomach. “This is not the time or the place,” she muttered.

“I don't know why you insist on working so hard. I've said it before and--”

“You'll say it again. I know, Mother. I'm going to find a drink. Would you like one?”

“No, thank you.”

Josephine turned and stalked to the bar. Nothing was going right today. The expression on Seth's face brought another flash of pain. She looked up. For a moment, she thought she was seeing things. Pain closed her eyes but when she opened them, Seth still stood in the entrance to the ballroom with a blonde woman leaning into his muscular body. The woman's body language shrieked of ownership, the subtle signs of familiarity sending shards of pain stabbing through Josephine's heart.

Josephine wavered between running and confrontation, her hand clutching at her champagne glass as though it were a good luck talisman.

Across the room, their gazes met. Josephine raised her chin. Right, confrontation it was, because in that instant she'd realized something. She didn't just want to live the moment. Tomorrow loomed as important as today. She wanted Seth in her life, and if she had to fight for him then so be it.

Her heart thumped in her chest as she strode across the dance floor to Seth. A sliver of fear clawed at her throat. What she was about to do was uncharacteristic and totally unplanned. She never did anything without a plan, a bullet-point list made to deal with every contingency. This felt as though she was attached to a bungee cord and about to step out into the nothingness of air. No safety nets. No guarantees.

Josephine kept walking, her gaze focused on Seth's dark, expressionless face. The fear that pumped through her veins held a tinge of longing.

Josephine stopped in front of the couple. "Hello, Seth."

He nodded, his face giving away nothing of his thoughts. "Jo."

Josephine's gaze drifted to the petite blonde that cuddled up to him. She swallowed the growing lump of tension in her throat. The woman was attractive, the sort of woman she imagined Seth would spend time with. Pain sliced through her head and echoed in her heart. Give up. Turn and walk away. Maintain the all important Josephine Murdoch pride.

Her fists clenched at her sides. "Why didn't you give me a chance to explain tonight?"

"I didn't need to. It was obvious what was going on."

Hurt exploded in Josephine. "I haven't cheated." Her gaze drifted to the blonde in silent accusation.

"I tried to ring you, but you refused to speak to me." His full mouth twisted. "Now I know why."

Questions trembled at her lips, and the back of her eyes burned. She blinked rapidly. "Can we talk? In private?" Strain laced her voice, and there was a distinct wobble in her last two words. Her fists clenched and unclenched as she waited for his answer. Tension gripped her heart, stealing the air from the ballroom until she felt dizzy and unconnected.

Seth let go of the blonde. A searing pain in her chest reminded Josephine to breathe.

"Anna, Boomer and Mac are at the bar. Wait with them until I come back."

The blonde looked from Seth to Josephine then back at Seth. Finally, she nodded. "All right. Don't be long. I want to dance."

Jealousy struck Josephine like a blow. She'd never danced with Seth.

Seth took her arm. "Come outside on the terrace."

Silently, Josephine walked by his side. In her mind, she rehearsed what she would say.

Outside, cool air ruffled her hair, but up in the sky a full moon watched over a sea of sparkling stars. The perfect setting for a romantic interlude.

Seth stepped away from her and thrust his hands in his trouser pockets. "Say your piece," he said.

"I haven't cheated on you. I promise I haven't." Her voice throbbed with pleading emotion, while her heart hammered waiting for his reaction.

"That was Ethan at your apartment?"

"Yes, but you don't understand." Josephine closed the distance between them, trying to make him understand. "I'd promised to attend this ball months ago, before we met. I tried to get out of it, but I couldn't. This is the first time I've seen Ethan for weeks."

Seth wanted to believe her, but female tears made him suspicious. So many women specialized in tears on demand. He'd been caught before. "I rang you. Your mother said you didn't want to talk to me, that you weren't going to see me again."

"My mother? But-- Where did you ring?"

"Your apartment. I left messages and spoke to your mother. I rang work once, but your assistant said you were in a meeting."

"Why didn't you ring back or leave a message?"

"I did," he said tersely.

Understanding came in a flash. Her mother had visited her in the

office during the last week. Several times. Josephine filled in the blanks and tried to ignore the sick sensation in her stomach. “I’m sorry.”

“Your mother told me to take a hike.”

Once again, Josephine filled in the gaps. Frigid politeness when talking to the undesirables. Her mother ... Josephine gritted her teeth. “I didn’t get your messages.”

“But you came to the ball with Ethan.”

Anger flared without warning. “You came with the bimbo.” Had she just said that? Josephine sucked in a deep breath, praying for calm and the right words. “I’m sorry,” she muttered. Okay, an apology was a good start. “Seth, please. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again. Phone calls are a bad substitute.”

Seth dragged a hand through his dark curls. “Tell me about it,” he muttered.

“So you believe me?” There was definite pleading in her question. Josephine tried to read his expression but this silent dark stranger was nothing like the laughing, teasing man she’d first met. “Seth?”

“I’m thinking.”

“I wondered about the smell,” she muttered.

A snort of laughter burst from him. “Do you want to dance?”

“I’d rather go back to my apartment, but I promised I’d stay for the charity auction. I guess a dance will have to suffice.” Daring words for her, but the glint in his dark eyes told her the risk had been worth it.

They returned to the ballroom, hand in hand, and stepped onto the dance floor.

“What about your date?” Josephine asked as she caught sight of the blonde woman across the dance floor.

“She’s my mate’s sister. I’ve known her since I was five.”

“So you’re just friends?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t act so smug. Ethan and I are friends too. At least, we are now. You weren’t very pleased when you found us together.”

Seth moved her to the edge of the dance floor traffic then gathered her closer. “That’s different.”

“Right,” Josephine said. “Seth, what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.” God, he wanted to kiss her so bad it hurt. Truth be known, he wanted to kiss her in places that would get him arrested if he tried it in public. This short-term fling had turned into something bigger.

The song cruised to an end, and a local celebrity stepped up on the raised podium where the band sat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention, please?”

Seth grabbed her hand and led her over to where his friends stood. “I’ll introduce you.”

“I hope you’ve brought your credit cards,” the celebrity said. “We have lots of tempting items up for auction tonight.”

Seth curled his arm around her waist and pulled her close. Josephine shivered.

“Cold, sweetheart?”

Josephine inhaled a deep breath of Seth and his exotic after shave. Her mind drifted to the last time they’d made love. The low simmer in

her belly heated up a notch. She let the banter of the auctioneer and the noisy bids interspersed by laughter and smart quips drift over her.

“Next on the bidding list--an all expenses paid holiday to Fiji. Two weeks on a secluded island. Sound good? I’ll start the bidding at two thousand.”

Josephine’s mind drifted off again as she imagined a luxurious holiday with Seth. Seclusion, sun, and minimal clothes. She couldn’t resist pressing a quick kiss to Seth’s hand where it rested on her arm.

“Are you sure you want to stay?” he murmured next to her ear.

Josephine cast a quick glance around the room for her mother and Ethan. She couldn’t see either of them and since Ethan had practically ignored her all night, she didn’t think it would matter if they left.

“Let’s go,” she whispered.

“Going, going, gone! To Ethan Matthews.”

Astonished, Josephine stopped. Ethan had purchased the holiday? As she watched, Ethan made his way up to the auctioneer to accept his purchase.

“Would you like to say a few words?”

Ethan grinned and turned to the audience. “This holiday is for Josephine. We’re going there on our honeymoon.”

Josephine’s shocked gasp was drowned by the sound of the crowd’s cheering.

Seth’s hand dropped away from her waist leaving Josephine feeling cold and bereft.

His mouth tightened. “Congratulations, Josephine. You nearly had

me.” He took a step back then another until the distance between them seemed like a huge chasm.

“Josephine, where are you?” Ethan scanned faces searching for her.

“Aren’t you going to go to him?”

Disbelief sharpened her tongue. “Maybe I will.”

“It’s been great knowing you, Jo.” Seth turned and walked out of the ballroom without looking back.

Josephine forced a smile as expectant faces turned to her. Hands urged her toward the stage, and she found herself standing beside Ethan. His arm wrapped around her shoulders, feeling like a shackle. Josephine stood in his embrace, silent and still, a fixed smile on her lips while inside anger grew. Her mother and Ethan had engineered this fiasco. Already, she regretted that she hadn’t turned and walked out of the ballroom with Seth. The thought made her want to laugh. Create a scene.

She turned to Ethan and whispered in his ear. “If you don’t get me off this stage, I’m going to make a scene like you’ve never seen before.”

“You wouldn’t,” he said, and the smugness smarted.

Josephine bared her teeth. “Try me.”

Ethan waved to the crowd, took her by the arm and escorted her off the stage.

“I am going home,” Josephine said through clenched teeth. “You can explain to me tomorrow.”

“Maybe you should talk to your mother first.”

Josephine whirled about to glare at him. “I intend to. I know my mother is involved.”

“I mean to marry you, Josephine. Make no mistake about it.”

Chapter Six

Josephine climbed from her tangled bed sheets before the alarm went off. All night, she'd tossed and turned trying to work out what Ethan was talking about. She'd looked for her mother but she had disappeared from the ball, and if she'd been at her Newmarket home, she hadn't answered the phone. Probably too embarrassed to talk to her daughter, Josephine thought as she stomped into the kitchenette to start the coffee maker.

After a quick shower, she threw on a pair of black jeans and a light blue T-shirt that hugged her curves. Back in the kitchen, she poured a cup of coffee while she thought up a plan of attack.

The doorbell interrupted her scheming. Seth? Josephine flew to the door and yanked it open.

Ethan stepped inside. "Hello, darling. Looking forward to the honeymoon trip?"

"I don't think so."

Ethan smirked before walking into the kitchen and helping himself to a cup of coffee. "I take it you haven't talked to your mother yet."

"She's not answering the phone."

Ethan took a sip of coffee. "I guess it's up to me to tell you what's going on."

The doorbell rang again. Josephine went to answer it.

“Josephine, we have to talk before--”

Josephine gestured for her mother to come inside.

“Too late, Sylvia. I’m already here.”

“I should have known,” her mother spat.

“Don’t worry, Sylvia. I have everything under control. It’s safe to leave us. Go and do lunch or something.”

Josephine’s gaze zipped from face to face as though she were watching a tennis match. They both knew what they were talking about, but she didn’t. It was about time they let her in on the plan because it seemed to involve her.

“Mother, do you want a coffee?”

“No thank you. I’m on a liver-cleansing diet.”

Josephine rolled her eyes. Her mother was always on a diet and extolling the advantages of remaining pencil slim. “A glass of water then.” She reached for a glass and a bottle of water. “Right. Who’s going to tell me what’s going on?”

Ethan smirked again.

“Ethan, if you keep up that superior look, I’m gonna find a pin and poke you to let some of the air out. Stop mucking around and tell me. I have things to do.” Somehow, she had to contact Seth and explain that she and Ethan were not engaged, marrying or in any other sort of relationship. It was him that she cared about.

“Your mother owes me money.”

Josephine shrugged impatiently. “What has that got to do with me?”

“There were conditions. I thought she’d explained them to you, but it appears I was wrong.”

Months ago, Josephine would have handled this situation with hauteur and control. But right now she wanted to yell and scream. How dare he? “Ethan, we do not have a relationship. Whatever we had between us ended the moment I discovered you in bed with another woman. What conditions are you talking about?”

“When you were both children, we decided to mesh the families. It was always understood that the two of you would marry,” her mother said.

“And?” There was more that her mother wasn’t saying.

Ethan helped himself to another coffee. “And money changed hands. An informal loan.” His eyes glinted with determination. “A loan that I’m calling in unless you marry me.”

“If the loan is informal then there’s no proof. You can’t call in a non-existent loan. And you can take your marriage proposal and shove it somewhere dark.”

“I don’t think so.” The smirk reappeared on Ethan’s face. “Seems your father had a gambling problem.”

Wordlessly, Josephine turned to her mother. One look told her it was true.

“How much money is involved?”

“Half a million,” Ethan said. “Not much in the scheme of things.”

“Half ...” Josephine shook her head, but her mother’s stony countenance told her Ethan spoke the truth. “What are the terms for

repayment? Mother, why didn't you tell me?" Instead of pushing me at Ethan. Instead of offering me up as some sort of incentive for the loan to remain unpaid.

Ethan straightened from his casual pose. "Terms of repayment. Well, that's when things get a little complicated."

Josephine didn't like the sound of that. And there was no way she could raise the money to repay the loan ... unless she sold her business. Her heart jolted at the idea. "Explain."

"My father and grandfather want me to settle down and have a family. They want me to marry you. They like the idea of having you as a daughter-in-law."

Josephine stared at him, contempt tightening her mouth. "We have a problem then."

"I don't think so," Ethan said slowly. "You will marry me and soon." He pulled a small blue velvet box from his pocket and tossed it at her. Josephine caught it instinctively. "The wedding is still set for the end of November. See you at the church."

The door clicked as he left. Josephine turned to her mother.

"Ethan sounds very confident that I'll fall in with his wishes. What else don't I know?"

"After your father died, I had a few difficulties. Ethan helped me out."

"Don't tell me. He lent you more money."

The clipped nod was the only answer her mother gave.

"How much?" Her voice was tight but that was the only indication of

anger that Josephine gave.

“Five hundred thousand.”

“So we owe Ethan’s family one million dollars.”

“Only if you don’t marry Ethan,” her mother pointed out.

Unbidden, the memory of walking in on Ethan and the woman he’d been with returned in bold, bright color. The vision of tangled sheets, and the stench of unbridled animal lust. Josephine shivered. She couldn’t marry Ethan--not when it was Seth she wanted.

“I’m not marrying Ethan.”

“You have to,” her mother snapped. “What will all our friends think if you don’t? The engagement notice went in the paper today.”

“Your friends. Not mine.”

“I don’t have the money to pay back Ethan. You’ll have to marry him.”

“You marry him, if you’re that worried.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t see why you’re so upset. You were engaged to Ethan before.”

“A lot of things have changed since then.”

“That man,” her mother scoffed.

“It’s time for you to leave.”

“But this isn’t settled,” her mother protested.

“I’m not going to make a decision like this without a great deal of thought.”

“There’s no decision to make. You will marry Ethan.”

The very idea made Josephine’s stomach curdle. But she didn’t say

that to her mother. “I’ll think about it and let you know tomorrow.”

* * * *

“Josephine. How lovely to see you. You’re the image of your grandmother.”

Josephine smiled at Ethan’s grandfather. She’d wanted to see Ethan’s father, but he was currently in Japan. Josephine had wanted things settled so she’d asked to see the grandfather.

“Would you like to pour the coffee?” Stanley Matthews asked.

Josephine poured the coffee as requested, her mind busy with how to approach the subject. There was no easy way, she finally conceded.

“What’s on your mind, dear? If you bite your bottom lip much harder, you’ll be able to wear a stud. Very trendy, I’m told.”

Josephine grinned. “But not exactly in keeping with a business image.”

The elderly man reached over to pat her hand. “So perhaps you should tell me what’s troubling you.”

Josephine took a deep breath. “I wanted to talk to you about Ethan.”

“Ah, my grandson. Now what has that young rascal been up to now?”

* * * *

Josephine pushed through the crowded beach front café to grab the only empty table left. She subsided into the chair and waited for the

young waitress to take her order.

Seth had told her he had intended to spend his next leave in Noosa. Josephine hoped to meet up with him. So much had happened in the last two months. Things had changed. She'd changed.

Josephine stared out to sea while inside nerves made her stomach quiver. So much hinged on her meeting with Seth.

"Jo, is that you?"

Josephine's head jerked up. Her breath caught as she stared up at him. *Show time.* "Seth."

"What are you doing here?"

Josephine moistened her lips and continued to stare at him. She'd missed him so much. And she had one last chance to convince him that she loved him. "Stalking you," she said finally.

A surprised laugh burst from him. He grinned at her, his teeth a dazzling white against his tan. "So what you're saying is that if I refuse to talk to you right now, you'll follow me until you wear me down."

Josephine swallowed. "Something like that."

"Well, if it's that important to you ... " Seth dropped into the empty seat opposite. "What have you been up to?" His gaze speared to her left hand. "Not married?"

"No."

Seth reached across the table to capture her hand in his. "Engaged?"

"No."

He continued to hold her hand, running his fingers across the sensitive skin at the base of her thumb.

“How long are you staying?”

Josephine looked up from the tabletop where their hands rested. “As long as it takes,” she said.

Seth stilled, but the beginnings of a smile quivered at the corners of his mouth. “Definitely stalking.”

“Yeah.” Josephine looked into his dark eyes, a lick of heat curling low in her belly. This gamble had to work. It had to. “I wanted to apologize for what happened on the night of the ball. Ethan and I aren’t engaged--not then and not now.”

Seth’s fingers soothed across the top of her hand, leaving a trail of tingles in his wake. Overhead a seagull wheeled through the sky, squawking loudly as it encountered another gull.

“How do I know he won’t appear again? Maybe when I’ve become used to having you to myself.” Seth caught her gaze again. A soft gasp rushed past her lips when she glimpsed the promise inherent in his eyes. Her heart gave a solid thud while her pulse leapt. Josephine tried to speak and had to clear her throat before she started again.

“My parents and Ethan’s made an agreement when we were children. It was expected that we would marry, but I found him in bed with another woman and called our engagement off.”

“Go on,” Seth said.

“There was a loan involved from Ethan’s family to mine. And after my father died, Ethan loaned more money to my mother.”

“You didn’t know any of this?”

“No.”

“So what’s happening now?” Seth’s steady gaze demanded truth, and she wanted to give him nothing less.

“I’ve paid off the loan and the family obligation is cleared.”

Seth nodded and signaled the waitress. “A latte and an espresso please.”

“I wanted to know if there was a chance for us.” There. She’d said it. Josephine stared at him anxiously for a reaction.

The waitress placed a latte glass in front of her. Josephine’s hand shook as she attempted to pick it up. She gave up and tucked her hand out of sight on her lap.

Seth felt a surge of hope. She’d come to find him. She’d admitted to stalking him. His mouth quivered with the need to laugh out loud. The victim of a stalker. Him!

“Depends what you have in mind.” God, he wanted to kiss her. His gaze drifted across the sensual pout of her lips, and immediately his cock stirred, pushing insistently against the fly of his jeans. But this time, he wanted to know exactly where he stood before they went further.

“I want you.” She paused, and her eyes held visible nervousness. “If that’s what you want too.”

“What about your business?” Seth knew how important Josephine’s Events was to her, how hard she’d worked.

“I’ve sold it.”

She’d said they’d owed Ethan’s family money, but her business? Seth reached for her hand again. “I’ve resigned.”

Stunned silence met his words, and his grin burst forth.

“We’re both unemployed?”

“Yeah.” Seth leaned over the table and kissed her. Soft, warm feminine lips dragged him deeper, from casual to serious. Man! One kiss wasn’t enough. And the café was way too public for the closeness his body demanded. Seth stood abruptly and held out his hand. “Come for a walk on the beach.”

Josephine stood. “Live the moment,” she murmured.

Seth lowered his voice as they stepped out onto the boardwalk. “Actually I had a bit longer in mind.”

Jo grinned for the first time today, a tiny grin that broadened to a full out smile. “You sure?”

“Oh, yeah.”

And right there on the crowded beach, Jo leapt at him, throwing her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Seth twirled her around. His woman.

“I love you, Jo.” The sentiment came out easily. Natural. And dammit, he meant it. Jo had the power to rip out his heart if she wanted, but he couldn’t be sorry he’d met up with her again.

A gurgle of pure joy spilled from her lips. “I was counting on that because I love you too.”

A grin curled across his mouth, while desire flared, burning brighter. Dammit, he wanted her so much he was shaking. “Wanna go somewhere more private?”

“Oh, yeah,” she whispered. “Live the moment.”

Seth squeezed her tightly. “But you’re gonna marry me, right?”

Jo trailed her fingers across his lips and leaned into him, promise sparkling in her eyes. “Try and stop me. I want it all--today and all our tomorrows. Nothing less will satisfy me.” Then, without warning she winked. “We have a lot of wasted time to make up.”

“I might have a few ideas about how we can do that.” Seth curled his arm around her waist and propelled her along the boardwalk toward his motel room.

The waves rushed into shore, the shriek of excited children filled the air and the low hum of conversation rose from the beach side cafes. They walked slowly, as if they had all the time in the world--two lovers living the moment.

The End