

Chapter One

“Good morning, George Taniwha & Co.” Emma forced a bright smile and hoped her despondency didn’t crawl down the telephone line. Twenty-five years old today. Twenty-five! And she still hadn’t plucked up the courage to approach Jack Sullivan and ask him out on a date—despite this being the age of equal opportunity. The man in question sauntered past her desk and strode into George Taniwha’s office, shutting the door firmly without giving her a second glance. A man to die for...

Emma sighed and stared at the bronze nameplate on the door in frustration. So, she wasn’t the most beautiful woman in New Zealand. She was built with the word generous in mind. A large ass and a chest made to house her big heart. Or at least that’s what her high school boyfriend had informed her. He’d also told her she had a nice smile and that he enjoyed being with her because she didn’t stress about her size. Yep, she was a normal, healthy woman—kind to animals and small children. Most people liked her, yet the wretched man of her dreams didn’t acknowledge her existence.

“Are you there, young lady?”

The querulous voice jerked Emma from her grievances about a lack of sex life back to her phone call. “I’m sorry. I had to sign for a courier parcel,” she fibbed. “How can I help you?”

“My name is Elisa Denning. I need the services of a private investigator. Someone is stealing my prize rose blooms. Right before the flower show, too.”

“Let me take some details, then I’ll arrange for an investigator to come and see you,” Emma said. “Address? Telephone number?” She jotted the woman’s particulars down, an imp inside her laughing as she imagined George assigning this case. None of the men would appreciate chasing a rose thief. George Taniwha’s operatives preferred the dangerous stuff that challenged them and proved they were men.

Her humor died, replaced by a frown that drew her brows together. That was another thing she wanted to change. She’d passed all her private investigator exams. George had promised her she would be able to take on cases. Soon. Perhaps she could start with this case. Never let it be said that Emma Montrose didn’t have ambition.

“When can I expect someone?” the elderly lady questioned. “I’m sure it’s Mrs. Gibb’s grandson, but the police won’t do anything.”

“An investigator will contact you tomorrow morning, Mrs. Denning.”

“Excellent. Tomorrow is my baking day. I’ll make them a cup of tea when they arrive.”

Emma couldn’t restrain a grin as a vision of one of George’s tough he-man investigators drinking tea from a bone china cup popped into her mind. “I’m sure they’ll enjoy a cup of tea. Thanks, Mrs. Denning.” She disconnected the phone and typed up two letters while she waited for Jack to leave George’s office. She was smitten enough to want to gaze her fill as he left since the man had a truly fine butt. The hands of the clock moved slowly, and still Jack didn’t appear. Reluctantly, Emma stood and packed up for the day. She picked up her bag and couldn’t prevent a glance toward the closed door, looking for the tall, dark-haired man of her dreams. Oh, yeah. No doubt about it. She was a sad, sad woman.

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“I have a case for you,” George said.

Something about his boss’s tone made Jack cautious. “Yeah?”

“Sports-enhancing drugs. Rumor says there’s a ring operating out of the Mahoney Resort on Waiheke Island in the Hauraki Gulf. I want you check it out.”

“And?” Jack’s gut told him there was more to the story. The glint of humor in George’s eyes confirmed it.

“I’ve assigned you a partner.”

Jack straightened from his casual sprawl against the wall, his eyes narrowing on George. “I work alone. I don’t work with a partner.” His last partner had died. Horribly. And he lived with that guilt. He wasn’t damn well having another partner he might come to like.

“You can’t do this job alone.”

“Why not?” Jack demanded. “I’ve managed every other job on my own.”

George leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers and looking over the top in a thoughtful manner. “This one might be a little difficult. Reuben J. Mahoney is a slippery character.” The chair squeaked a protest each time he shifted his weight.

“I can handle anything he throws at me.”

George glanced at the calendar pinned on the wall then cast his attention back to Jack. “There’s a blue moon coming up. It might fall before the mission is completed.”

Jack filled in the blanks. The blue moon would erode his powers and make it difficult to remain in human form. Without constant sexual stimulation, he’d shift into a taniwha, the legendary monster from Maori mythology. Jack snorted at the thought of being trapped in taniwha form in the middle of a mission. It had happened to other shifters on George Taniwha’s staff but not to him. He imagined the pandemonium if a change occurred in the middle of the bustling resort. His lips curled in disdain.

Little did New Zealanders know, but the species taniwha survived and lived among them. Jack didn’t intend to be the first taniwha to make headlines in the New Zealand Herald. No way. No how. If he had to find a woman to keep the monster at bay, then that’s what he’d do.

“Okay,” he conceded. “I guess a partner might help. Who’s available? Hone? Billy?”

George made a choking sound, merriment dancing across his lined face as he stuck his feet up on his desk.

“What’s so goddamned amusing?” Jack ground out. Another chortle exploded from George.

Jack bounded upright and paced the length of the room trying to work off the agitation that thrummed through his body. He paused to stare out the window, his mind taking in the yachts that zigzagged across blue waters of Auckland Harbor. Jack turned away from the window and stalked across the room to drop into the chair opposite George. He kept his expression neutral despite the amusement that still simmered across his boss’s face. “You’d better let me in on the joke.”

“You can partner up with Hone or Billy, if you want,” George said. “But you might want to consider the special circumstances.”

“What circumstances?” Jack bit out. Man, he had a hot date with Melissa tonight. Good, hot, sweaty, no-strings sex. He didn’t have time for this crap. “Either Hone or Billy. I’m not fussy.”

Reuben J. Mahoney runs a couples only resort. I'm assigning you a female partner."

"A female— No."

"I guess you can take Hone. Or Billy," George mused. "Of course, you'd have to share a room. And a bed." He shook his grizzled head.

"Two taniwha in the same room. Add in a blue moon and things might get a mite ugly."

Fuck. Jack sent a hard glare at his boss. Trapped as neat as an eel in a net. Jack shuffled through the range of possibilities and came up blank. "Who is she?" he gritted out.

"A new operative."

Great. Just bloody great. Not only was he being forced to take a female partner, he was getting a raw beginner. Jack didn't trust himself to speak so he firmed his mouth, folded his arms across his chest and scowled his displeasure.

"I'm teaming you with Emma Montrose."

"Your secretary?" Jack heard disbelief in his voice but thought he managed to keep his panic to himself. What the hell did a secretary know about investigating a case? What about the danger? To both of them. They would have to share a room for God's sake. Jack refused to let his mind dwell on Emma's sexy legs...or the rest of her body.

"Emma's capable of assisting you on this case."

"Assign me another case." Spending time alone with Emma was enough to give a man ideas. Jack wasn't interested in anything but sex. No relationships for him. Been there. Done that. Chucked away the T-shirt.

Nope. It was best he kept well away from the very curvy, brown-haired Emma Montrose. Every time he came into the office, her big blue eyes trailed after him like some pet dog. Except instinct told him, she had more in mind than stroking or petting. That was part of what made him so edgy whenever he was in the same room. A woman like Emma wanted happily-ever-after. Jack didn't want that. Not anymore. Some of the taniwha, like George, were happily married, but finding a woman comfortable with her man turning into a water monster wasn't easy. It was a rare female who could cope with the idea that her children might carry the taniwha gene. Or might not, depending on fate. The peculiarities of the taniwha species had rattled his ex-lover. She hadn't been able to cope with his ugly appearance and had run despite his assurances that she would always remain human. He hadn't even reached the part about taniwha living longer—about thirty years longer—than the average human before she'd run.

"Did you say share a room?" Jack ignored the interested twitch from his cock.

"And a bed," George said without inflection. "But if you don't think you can act as part of a couple with Emma, I'll send Hone. He's due off assignment tomorrow."

Jack thought about that for all of two seconds. He'd seen the way Hone looked at Emma. "I'll do it," he said, even though deep down in his gut, he knew he'd come to regret this decision. "Give me the details."

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Emma marched into the offices of George Taniwha & Co. the next morning, a woman with a mission. After spending her twenty-fifth birthday with her girlfriends and not one man in sight, she'd come up with a resolution. With the help of her tipsy friends, she'd decided to go for it.

Get Jack Sullivan to notice her or bust.

A smile—was that too much to ask for? No, dammit, it wasn't. And that would be just the start. She intended to progress from there—from a smile and good morning to down and dirty sex. Her breasts tingled at the thought and a swooping sensation spiraled through her lower belly. Of course, she wouldn't go as far as stalking the man, but she wasn't going to be a shy little wallflower either. Emma Montrose was coming out of the shade and going after the man she wanted. She was going to act like the fictional taniwha on George Taniwha & Co.'s letterhead—formidable and determined, ready to scare Jack into thinking her way. By the time she was finished, he was going to know she was interested. Then he could take the next step.

She drew herself up. No. That wasn't right. She wasn't letting him slide out of her sights without a fight. She'd take the second and third steps and as many other steps as the situation required.

Emma pushed aside several possible scenarios, concentrating on and visualizing the one she wanted. A secret smile curled across her lips as she fluffed her short curly hair.

Two lovers.

Emma and Jack.

Horizontal dancing.

Heat seeped into her face at the thought. Emma yanked out her office wheelie chair, plonked her butt on it then grabbed up a pile of envelopes off the desk to fan her face. This brave new Emma might embarrass her a little, but she'd try to keep up.

The front door of the office opened, and Emma straightened abruptly, her backbone hitting the back of the chair. Well. No time like the present to put her plan into action.

Emma put her best receptionist manner into practice and flashed a smile. "Good morning, Jack."

The man froze like a possum in headlights, giving Emma the opportunity to look her fill. He was tall and built like a rower with powerful shoulders, slim hips and a butt that she'd really like to get her hands on. His hair was shiny black, halfway between short and long and in need of a cut, making her fingers itch to smooth the messy strands away from his face. A dreamy sigh squeezed past her lips. The man was blessed with sun-kissed skin, no matter what the season. She often wondered what he looked like beneath the layers of clothing. Did the gorgeous olive tones that were a legacy from his Maori ancestors extend all over his body? Hopefully she'd be in a position of knowledge soon.

"Morning."

The word came out as a grunt, but it was a definite improvement on being treated as part of the office furniture. Emma forced away the sudden surge of nerves and looked him straight in the eye. "Are you here to see George?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." Emma's breath caught, her lungs filling with his seductive scent—something that reminded her of the mystical Orient with hints of orange and patchouli and a healthy dose of masculine musk. Emma found herself staring. Holding his gaze felt like poking her finger into a hot fire. Dangerous. Crazy. A challenge. Sorta made a girl wonder what it would feel like to have him thrust deep in her womb. A sensuous shiver swept through her body and arousal soaked her panties without warning.

Emma gulped and licked lips that were suddenly dry. All that from merely passing pleasantries. What would happen if they were naked?

Together? Get a grip, she thought sternly as her hormones went haywire. A cough cleared her throat. "I'll let him know you're here."

Hmmm. Not bad for the first time. She'd do better with the next meeting.

"I don't mind waiting."

Emma felt her eyes grow round and her mouth fall open. Huh? What was wrong with this picture? Jack closed the distance between them and used his forefinger to tap her under the chin. Her heart stuttered in a mad tattoo. She gasped, jerking away from his touch in outright shock.

The door from the street burst open, and George bounded inside followed by his son Hone. "Ah, you're here, Jack. I thought you might change your mind."

"No," Jack snapped, glaring at Hone.

Hone ignored Jack's scowl and sauntered across the office to stop beside Emma. "Hello, sweetheart." He hauled her from her chair and wrapped her in a bear hug that stole her breath.

"Put her down," Jack growled.

"But I haven't seen her for a week." Hone nuzzled her neck and made Emma laugh. "She's my girl."

"Don't you have a case to solve?" Jack looked as though he wanted to hit his mate.

Not in the least perturbed about his friend's bad temper, Hone parked his butt on the corner of her desk and flashed her a sexy grin. Emma sighed inwardly as she stared through lowered lashes at Jack's surly face. Why couldn't she fall for Hone instead of grumpy Jack? It was a mystery all right. Although Hone made her smile and was easy on the eye, he didn't affect her heart rate in the slightest.

Not like Jack did.

George shook his head. "Hone, I want you to check into a case that came in yesterday. Mrs. Denning has a thief she needs to flush out. Emma can give you the details. Jack, I want to go over a few details about the case we discussed yesterday." He strode toward his office but paused in the doorway. "Emma, I need to see you in my office when you're finished with Hone."

Bother. She'd hoped George might let her gain some practical experience with Mrs. Denning's case. Obviously not. Emma scowled and decided it was time to remind George of his promise. Five minutes later, Emma knocked lightly on George's door and entered. She carried a pad and pen to take notes. Jack was sprawled in a chair near the window. He bounded to his feet when Emma came in.

"Ah, good." George checked his watch then stood. "I have a golf date. I'll leave you in Jack's capable hands."

George's words echoed through her mind for long drawn-out seconds afterward. She heard the click of the door as George left but couldn't seem to concentrate on anything other than capable hands. A vision popped into her mind, aided by fertile imagination. Masculine hands on her naked breasts, fingers plucking at her sensitive nipples.

Oh, my. Emma subsided into a chair before her legs gave out. Suddenly, her cotton blouse felt several sizes too small and her face hot enough to cook a batch of small pancakes. She fanned her cheeks vigorously with her notepad.

"Are you feeling all right?" Emma's head snapped up to find Jack's enigmatic gaze settled on her. "You'll be as useful as a war canoe without a warrior to paddle if you fall sick."

"What...what do you mean?" Emma knew what she wanted him to mean but she didn't dare hope.

"George wants you to help me with my case."

Emma jumped to her feet and pumped her fist in the air. "Yes!" She did an impromptu jig before noticing his gaze on her bouncing breasts. Emma froze then dropped into her chair, striving to keep embarrassment from crawling across her face. She must work on maintaining her cool.

"Don't get too excited," Jack growled. "You're along on a trial basis only. You help out with the grunt work. Do what I say, when I say with no questions asked. Is that clear?"

"No problem," Emma said, restraining a celebratory grin and the need to give him a cheeky salute. Hot damn. She was going to be a private dick. "What's the case?"

"We're investigating at the Mahoney Resort over on Waiheke Island. We think there's a drug ring running out of the resort. Sports-enhancing drugs."

"Sounds great. Are we going for the day? When are we going?" Emma wanted to jump and dance around the room in celebration. She was finding it difficult to sit still. Her first case and closer contact with Jack all in one hit. Life couldn't get much better than this.

Jack scowled, a fierce frown, no doubt in an attempt to burst her bubble of enthusiasm. "We're going for a week. You'll need to pack tonight since we leave for Waiheke tomorrow. Here's the file. Read through it carefully and let me know if you have any questions."

Emma nodded eagerly and accepted the file. Their hands brushed during the transfer and a frisson of pleasure zapped down her arm. Surprised, she jerked away, almost dropping the file in her haste. "I'll read it," she promised trying to ignore the way her stomach swooped and plunged like a jumper on a bungee cord. She hurried into speech. "What time do we leave?"

"The ferry leaves at ten tomorrow morning. I'll pick you up from home at nine-thirty."

"I live at—"

"I know where you live. Don't be late."

Chapter Two

Excitement heated her cheeks and danced through her stomach like a swarm of giddy butterflies as they joined the queue to board the ferry to Mahoney's island resort. It was happening. She was actually taking part in an investigation. Emma shuffled from foot to foot, picking up her bag then putting it back down while she tried to take in everything and quell her impatience to get started. She glanced at Jack. Calm. Uninterested even. How could he act so unaffected when everyone else was so excited?

Loud, animated chatter filled the covered walkway where they waited to board. A hostess dressed in black shorts and a tight pale blue T-shirt emblazoned with the word, Mahoney's in navy blue over her left breast, checked people off on her list then allowed them to board. Couples of all ages and sizes lined up, shuffling hand luggage and making friends with the strangers in the queue.

No one talked to them.

Not that Emma could blame them. Jack could look scary to the uninitiated with his unruly dark hair and the serpent tattoo that wound around his left biceps.

Of course, there were some who saw past the tough guy disguise. Emma knew that he gave up his time to help out at a local foster home. She knew there was gentleness beneath the grumpy outer exterior. But he kept it well hidden.

Deep in thought, she leapt in fright when a masculine arm curved around her waist.

"You're gonna have to cure the jumpiness around me. We're meant to be lovers."

Emma's gaze shot up to meet dark chocolate brown eyes. Sinful eyes, she thought with an inward sigh. Those eyes could certainly lead her into sin.

Anytime.

"Sure, honey," Emma said, miffed for almost giving them away. Yet she was angry with Jack, too, because she thought he was doing his best to show her up. He'd certainly tried hard enough to talk her out of the assignment. Emma wanted to glare but it wasn't loverlike. Most of all she wanted to needle him. Yes, she felt like poking the man with a sharp stick to see if she could rattle him. "How long before we get to our room?" she cooed, fluttering her lashes at him. "I need your cock inside me." Part of Emma was shocked at her words, but the couple standing in front of them grinned at her in sympathy. "Have you seen the contents of those goody bags the hostess is giving out?" the young woman said. A theatrical shiver jiggled her pert, braless breasts. "No, what?" Emma asked, her fertile imagination creating all sorts of pictures. Handcuffs? Powerful aphrodisiacs? Torturous sex toys? The woman leaned closer to whisper, "A pair of edible undies." "Both his and hers," her partner added with a grin. "No!" Emma breathed. Good grief. It would probably be like trying to choke down pills. She'd gag and throw up all over the man's groin. All over Jack's groin. "I hope they're chocolate," Emma said, wagging her brows. "Oh, you're terrible," the woman said with a giggle. So terrible that Jack's arm tightened around her in silent warning, his fingers digging into the sensitive flesh at her waist. Emma smothered a grin. Perhaps if she kept needling him, she'd forget her nervousness. "I'm looking forward to this week," Emma confided to the young woman. "My honey works so hard. He's exhausted when he gets home and most nights just falls asleep." Emma peeked through lowered lashes to gauge Jack's reaction. Her stomach flipped anxiously when she noticed the tic in his shadowed jaw. He looked as though he might burst while the arm around her waist tensed until it felt like a shackle. But not enough to make her stop goading him. "Too tired for good sex, if you know what I mean." A low growl vibrated through his chest. Emma stilled and the hair on her forearms stood to attention. Slowly, her gaze rose from his broad chest, and traveled up his neck, across his rigid jaw and collided with eyes the color of onyx. "We intend to make up for that, don't we, sweetheart?" His flashing eyes promised retribution when they were alone. "Can't have you saying I can't get it up often enough to keep you satisfied. Wouldn't want you to wander to greener pastures." Oops. Perhaps she'd pushed a little hard. The line moved, and Emma nudged her bag forward with her foot. She was very conscious of Jack standing close behind. "Hello. Names, please," the hostess said. "Jack Sullivan and Emma Montrose." Jack stepped up beside her, taking control and smiling at the hostess. "Ah, yes. Here we go. Here are your goody bags." The hostess handed one bag to each of them. "Your room assignment and everything you need to know about the resort is in there along with a few surprises." "Thanks," Emma murmured accepting the bag. Her hand shook. It was like stepping over an invisible line. A gateway into sin. She glanced at Jack to find him watching her with the inscrutable expression that gave nothing away. Emma's mouth firmed with determination, and her chin shot up into the air. She could do this. She would do this despite Jack's silent censure. She intended to complete this assignment to the best of her ability. And if she managed to make Jack notice her as a female, a hot sexual being, then so much the better.

The woman was going to drive him to drink. In her short red shorts, and her figure-hugging shirt, she was a menace to clear thinking. Jack glared at her back as she sashayed down the gangplank to board the ferry. His gaze drifted down to her curvy butt, encased in the tight shorts. With the enhanced hearing all taniwhas had, he could hear the rapid beat of her heart. She wanted him. Suddenly, he had a hard-on to beat all. Deep inside his mind, the serpent clawed for release. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His head started to swim in an alarming manner. Hell, he couldn't shift here. Not now, in front of all these people. The demand of the serpent pounded him until he trembled with the desire to change to taniwha form or to fuck a woman. Any woman. In the serpent's mind, these were the only two alternatives. Jack knew better. Desperation made his fists bunch and his chest heave as he tried to force oxygen into starved lungs. Concentrate. Focus on something else. Block. In his mind, he pictured his cat—the scrawny stray that should have known better than to seek refuge with a taniwha who wasn't a vegetarian. The cat had kept coming round anyway. Though damned if he knew when the arrogant black tom had become his cat. Jack snorted under his breath, cursing the taniwha that struggled for dominance. He concentrated hard, forcing his mind to change track. The cat had probably won him over about the time he'd presented Jack with a huge eel in the middle of the night. A gift of the highest magnitude. That had been the defining moment. Jack focused on the scruffy black cat he'd pictured, fighting the serpent that writhed through his body. The serpent roared in displeasure, the sound echoing through his mind. He ached to feel the cool waters of the harbor. Or the explosive release of sex. You can't damn well have sex, Jack shouted silently. Behave, dammit. Shit, no wonder he had a headache. "Are you all right?" A slender hand with pale pink nails touched his forearm. Jack started, his nostrils flaring as her clean floral scent washed over him. The serpent fought briefly then retreated with a snarl. "I'm fine. Thinking about the case." Jack didn't relax an iota. How could he when he was reminded of innocence every time he set eyes on Emma's voluptuous body? The scent of lavender and roses backed the innocence up along with the baby pink nail polish she'd painted on her finger and toenails. His gaze drifted up to meet her eyes. Whoa, baby. No way was her avid gaze innocent. She puckered her pink lips then her tongue slid out to moisten the plump curves of her mouth. The serpent roared approval, and his cock stirred again with definite interest. Well, hell! Emma's intriguing mix of innocence and pure sex appeal knocked all confidence in his ability to remain detached. This assignment could be the death of him. And the serpent wasn't about to let him forget her willingness. Perhaps he should have brought the damn cat with him because he was going to be thinking about the furry creature a lot. Jack drew Emma up to the bow of the boat. It was crowded at the moment, but when they pulled out of the sheltered harbor and into the Gulf, the cool sea air and brisk wind would send the passengers scurrying for the warmth of the lounge and bar area. He edged her toward the railing and caged her in place with his arms. Emma jumped like a nervous schoolgirl. "Quit that," he muttered, speaking close to her ear. "Remember you're playing the part of my partner." "I hate that word," Emma muttered, looking over her shoulder at him. "What does that mean? When someone refers to their partner." He crowded her from behind, gritting his teeth as his cock brushed her ass. "Would you prefer lover?" He felt her shiver, and satisfaction

filled him as she tried to edge away "Take care. We don't want people to think we're arguing."

The number of passengers boarding slowed to a trickle then stopped. Finally, the deckhands released the moorings and the ferry slipped from the berth. Excited chatter filled the deck area where they stood. Jack scanned faces and bodies. Despite the breeze, most of the women were dressed in a similar manner to Emma—shorts and skimpy T-shirts or thin cotton shirts. Shouldn't be long before they beat a retreat inside out of the wind.

"I thought the weather forecast said fine and sunny." Emma tried to move. "Can we go inside? It's cold."

"I want to discuss the case before we arrive. Work out a plan of attack." Jack pulled her against his chest and wrapped his arms around her. The taniwha stirred, sighing in pleasure. Jack ruthlessly erected a barrier in his mind, forcing the beast back. Then Jack sighed, too, pushing away the hum of pleasure as her scent filled his senses. No doubt about it. Emma fit his arms perfectly.

"Okay, so talk."

"Ground rules. This is a job, and that's all. Don't get any romantic ideas just because we're posing as a couple. I'm not interested in anything but getting the job done." Emma froze in his arms, and he wished he could see her face. Instead, she stared directly ahead at the dormant volcanic island of Rangitoto.

"Of course, I understand." Her voice was clear but stiff.

"Good." Jack should have experienced relief, but instead he felt like a jerk. However, he'd achieved what he'd set out to do. She wouldn't suffer from a single romantic illusion about them becoming a real couple.

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An hour later, the hostess led them from the resort reception area to their room. She pushed the door open and stood back to let them enter.

"There's only one bed," Emma blurted.

The hostess stared at her in bemusement, making Emma realize she'd stumbled at the first hurdle. Of course, they'd be expected to share a bed. This was a week for couples and sex. After all, her mind dwelt on sex.

"He snores dreadfully," she muttered to the hostess, taking petty revenge for the hurt he'd inflicted on her earlier. Just a job. No romantic ideas, she mocked silently as she detoured around the bags the porter had deposited in the middle of the floor. She didn't have any romantic ideas. All she wanted was sex. "I suppose I can always pull out the earplugs as a last resort."

"I do not—"

Emma stepped up close to Jack and gave into the temptation to run her fingers through his hair. The dark locks slithered through her fingers like a piece of fine silk. The strands felt as soft as they looked. "Of course you do, but that's part of your charm. Too many good points and I'd get bored. I mean you're good at sex. Very good. Great stamina. What more could I ask of a lover?"

Jack made a choking sound deep in his throat as she trailed a hand across his broad chest. Her fingers tingled while her pulse leapt at her daring.

"Can I help you with anything before I leave?" the hostess asked, amusement coloring her voice. "Remember, the welcome party starts promptly at midday. We would like you to make an appearance for a short time so we can outline the activities for the week. After that, you're free for the rest of the afternoon to partake in all the facilities we have here at the resort. We want you to be rested for our gala dinner tonight."

"Thanks," Emma murmured, carrying on with her exploration while she had Jack captive and within touching distance. "We have everything we need."

The door swung shut with a soft click.

"That's enough," Jack growled. "She's gone now."

Emma drew a sharp breath, gathering up her courage. "You need to kiss me."

"What?"

Was that panic she saw in his dark eyes? "We're meant to be a couple," she explained, starting to enjoy herself. "We'll have to kiss at some stage to make sure we look the part. I think we should practice. We don't want to give ourselves away." Her heart thundered loudly and blood heated every inch of skin on her body. She was hyperaware of his strength and masculinity.

Jack glanced at her mouth and immediately her lips tingled as though he'd touched them. His chest rose as he sucked in an audible breath. Yep, she'd definitely put the fear of God into him. His mouth worked, but no words came out, then before she could take another breath, he grabbed her. Their lips smashed together and parted just as quickly. Jack jerked away from her, and they stared at each other, both breathing hard.

"That was not a kiss," Emma said breaking the pregnant silence. Frustration washed through her, leaving her feeling totally cheated. The mission she'd set for herself was going to be trickier than she'd first envisaged.

Jack scowled. Emma supposed he meant to frighten her like he scared everyone else he came into contact with. It wouldn't work. She was on to him. "Come here. I want to show you how we should kiss in public."

When he didn't move, she closed the distance between them. She placed her hands on his shoulders. They were tense. Like touching blocks of cold rock except for the dragon tattoo. For some reason that was hot. "You're very cold."

"Get it over with." Jack's eyes flashed with enough temper that she knew not to push him any longer.

She stood on tiptoes and gingerly pressed her lips against his. He didn't move but he didn't cooperate either. Time to move this experiment along. Emma opened her mouth and brushed her tongue across the seam of his mouth. A groan rumbled deep in his chest. Oh, yeah! Score one for the home team. Working on pure instinct, Emma moved her lips persuasively against his. She nibbled his bottom lip, then soothed the nips she'd inflicted on him with a swathe of her tongue. Jack's arms came around her without warning, tugging her off-balance so his muscular chest flattened her breasts. He tipped her head back and moved his lips over hers with an expertise that made her toes curl. She gasped taking in his masculine taste, a hint of mint and the tang of the sea. He tasted so good—better than she'd ever imagined. Then his tongue slid inside her mouth, and she was addicted. Her breasts peaked against her bra as their tongues slid together in a sensuous dance. Jack pressed her closer and to her delight, she found he was interested. A hard-on. With a subtle twitch of her hips, Emma pressed against his sizeable erection. Her eyes fluttered shut to savor both the sensation and her triumph. Emma Montrose had turned on big, bad Jack Sullivan.

Jack pulled away as abruptly as he'd grabbed her. They stared at each other for a long drawn-out moment. Emma's tongue snaked out to lick her lips and his dark eyes followed the movement. Game, set and match, bad boy.

"Right." He straightened and took a giant step away from her. "We've established we can manage a kiss without looking as though we've never done it before." He glared at her, obviously in an attempt to regain control. Emma wasn't about to let her advantage go, no matter how much he glowered. His body was interested in sex. Sex with her. All she needed to do was push harder until he crumpled.

Doubt flittered briefly through her mind. Could she act with sexual aggression? She quashed the negative thought. Nah, men were easy. And damned if she would turn twenty-six without knowing sexual pleasure with Jack.

Jack glanced at the diver's watch on his wrist. "We'd better go to this blasted meeting we've all been summoned to. While we're there, I want you to take note of the faces. If there's anyone you think is familiar or is mentioned in the file take note and tell me later."

Emma nodded. "I'll just change before we go. I thought I'd check out the pool after the meeting."

Jack watched the sway of her hips as she walked over to her bag and rummaged through the packed contents. She fished out something small enough to hide in her fisted hand, then sashayed into the en suite and closed the door behind her. The taniwha released a low growl of need.

"Fuck," he muttered with real feeling. He rubbed the heels of his hands over his eyes and dragged in a huge breath. He was in trouble here and was man—taniwha—enough to admit it. What the hell had happened to the brown sparrow from the office?

The creak of the door jerked him upright. He turned and experienced an instant roar of approval from the taniwha. This was no brown sparrow standing proudly in front of him. Emma Montrose was one curvy, confident, sexy woman and she scared the shit out of him. Her breasts were poured into an itty-bitty red top that barely contained them. Then there were acres of smooth, pale skin before his gaze hit the brief bikini panties shielding her femininity. She reminded him of the curvy film stars of the fifties with her Marilyn Monroe figure. Add in a little more height and you got Emma Montrose—a luscious armful of femininity.

"Is that all you're wearing?"

"I have a sarong." She grabbed a square of brightly patterned material from her bag and wrapped it around her hips then tied it with a knot. "I'd like to buy another from the gift store to take home as a souvenir."

"What about a thing for the top? A towel?" He gestured at her breasts in their itty-bitty top. Anything to screen her lush curves from his sight.

Emma tossed her head. "I'll get a towel at the pool."

"Won't you get cold?"

This time, Emma shrugged and her breasts jiggled enough to distract him. "The sun has come out and it looks as though the wind has died down. Besides, the brochure says there's nude bathing—"

Jack ripped his gaze from her cleavage to stare at her in shock. "Over my dead body." Emma was going to be difficult. He could tell by the way her chin lifted. How had he missed her stubbornness? She'd always scuttled out of his way like a frightened bird.

This Emma was no sparrow.

Jack jerked the door open then stood back. "Let's go."

She sashayed through the door, the pert wiggle of her hips drawing his eye. Sweat coated his body while his cock jumped to high alert. Jack didn't know whether to curse a blue streak or laugh hysterically. One thing was for sure. They couldn't share a room without the simmering attraction between them boiling over. Oh, yeah. No wonder George had laughed like a bloody loon. His boss had probably noticed Emma's crush, too. The joke was well and truly on him. Jack followed her down the brightly lit corridor and outside.

The sea, pungent and briny, called its siren song trying to entice him to shift and slip into the cool waters. He forced himself to concentrate. Instead of facing temptation tonight, he'd wait for Emma to fall asleep, then leave to do some investigating. With luck, he'd be able to check out Mahoney's office and find something to further their investigation. Or blow the whole case wide open and save his taniwha butt so he could hightail it home to safety and his scruffy tom cat.

Emma paused by a garden full of colorful blooms. She trailed a hand over the lavender border. "Do you prefer to swim in a pool or the sea?"

"The sea," he said without thinking.

"You live by the sea, don't you?"

"Yeah."

She made a small huffing sound. "Do you live by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"No pets?"

"I have a cat. What's with all the questions?"

"I'm your significant other. I should know these things. I live by myself but have loads of friends. I hate swimming in the sea—long story, but I almost drowned. I'll tell you one day. I'm twenty-five years old and my favorite food is hokey pokey ice cream. Oh, and chocolate. I love chocolate."

"Looks like this is where the meeting's being held," Jack muttered. He opened the door and ushered her through, relieved to be done with the twenty questions. There was only one thing worth knowing about a woman and that was how easy she was. As a taniwha, he needed that type of information. He did not need to know her personal likes and dislikes.

The large meeting room was packed to capacity and most of the women were dressed in similar outfits to Emma's. In fact, Jack felt distinctly overdressed in his shirt and shorts.

Jack directed her toward two empty chairs and settled at Emma's side. He scanned the men and women sitting either side of him. Damn, crowds made him antsy. And they were so bloody happy. Shit, make that horny. He could hear their rapid heartbeats and their naughty whispering. The majority of them looked as though they needed a bedroom. He glanced at Emma, and saw the sexy flush on her cheeks, the kiss-swollen lips. Damn, he didn't need this crap. Jack forced his mind back to the job. Given the opportunity tonight, he'd scour the island, and check out the private marina and wharf area.

"Good afternoon!" A young woman walked up to a microphone followed by several others. All of them but one—a man—were dressed in uniform. Black shorts and blue T-shirts.

Well, damn, Jack thought, sitting up straighter. Rueben J. Mahoney himself. Interesting. The owner wasn't always at the resort. His presence could mean a deal was going down.

"Welcome to Mahoney Resort. We have a great week planned with lots of naughty fun especially for couples!" A roar of approval greeted Mahoney's words. "Now I'll hand you over to Lissa."

"Welcome! Sounds like you're ready to party." With a laugh, she held up her right hand in a bid for silence. "To start off the fun, I want you to look under your chairs. Two lucky people should find a red heart sticker."

A buzz of chatter filled the room again as everyone stood to peer under their chairs.

"I've got one!" Emma shrieked.

Jack winced. "That figures."

"Could the two lucky winners come up here to collect their prizes? We have a bag full of sex toys and games for you to spice up your

week.”

Emma bounded up to the stage with the red sticker clutched in her hand. A man in his fifties followed hot on her heels. Jack swallowed a groan when one of hostesses on the stage presented Emma with her prize. Reuben J. Mahoney kissed her on the cheek and tossed her a joking remark. Jack gritted his teeth as he heard the drawl of the man’s voice but not the actual words. The desire to swear a blue streak and shock the hell out of the little old lady and her bright-eyed husband sitting beside him rode Jack hard. Contrarily, the serpent roared with excitement and anticipation. Bit by bit his strength and determination to stay the heck out of Emma’s panties was being eroded away. Jack sighed and finally accepted the truth. He was a dead man, but at least he was gonna die happy.

Chapter Three

“It wasn’t my fault I won the spot prize,” Emma said. Jack could tell she wasn’t the slightest bit sorry. The twinkle in her blue eyes gave it away. “What are we going to do now?”

“I am going to do a reconnaissance of the resort,” Jack muttered. “I thought you were going to the pool.”

Her bright smile dimmed then suddenly burst into life again. The sight made his stomach flip with foreboding. What the hell was she up to now? “I think I’ll go to the beach instead of the pool.” She lifted the large package she’d won and waved it in front of him. “Not to swim. I can sunbathe and check out my loot.”

Jack froze then slowly nodded. She couldn’t come to much harm on the beach.

One hour later, Jack finished his quick whistle-stop tour of the resort. He’d checked out the gym, the swimming pool with the spa pools and sauna facilities. There was a health spa he’d poked his head in, then promptly retreated but not quite fast enough. He’d ended up making an appointment for Emma for a massage and something to do with seaweed before he could escape.

He’d checked out the golf course, the archery area and the petanque pit, where guests played the French version of outdoor bowls. Then, he’d hit one of the walking tracks that skirted the property and led to Stoney Batter—the World War II gun placements and connecting tunnels—if the walker was willing to walk for two hours. There were several other walking tracks of various lengths along with tennis and numerous water sports available to entertain the guests. The private beach stretched the length of the resort golf course. At the end of the beach, a river mouth emptied into the sea, the sand changing to thick river mud. Hundreds of mangrove trees grew in the oozing mud. They were full of bird life but not very hospitable for humans.

The resort was big and more spread out than Jack was happy with. It would be very easy for a drug ring to operate without detection. He made a mental note to check about day guests.

Jack turned toward the beach to check if Emma was still there. The sand crunched under his sandals when he stepped off the footpath onto the beach. The surge and retreat of the waves lulled him as he searched for Emma. Halfway along the beach, he saw four males crowding around a beach towel. He caught the low drone as one of them spoke and the answering feminine laugh.

Emma.

Jealousy hit him hard and without warning. His steps lengthened, and the taniwha growled ready to kick some butt.

“Emma, there you are.” He kept his voice low and even—or tried to. The taniwha let loose with a roar that squeezed past his control before he could blink.

The four men visibly backed away from Emma.

She sent him a chiding look and pursed her rosebud pink lips before saying, “Darling, this is Carlos, Daniel, Justin and Doug. They wanted to know what I’d won in my prize.”

Jack made a concerted effort to contain his displeasure, but it couldn’t have been that good. The four men jumped to their feet.

“We’d better get back to the bar. The girls should have finished in the spa by now,” one of them said after they’d exchanged glances.

“Nice to meet you,” Emma said. “And thanks for the hints. I’m sure they’ll come in handy.”

“See you round,” another of the men said.

Jack managed a brief nod of acknowledgment and waited in broody silence until they left. He yanked his shirt over his head then dropped onto the sand beside Emma. All it took was one look and he almost drooled. She smelled of coconut lotion and her skin gleamed, drawing his eyes to the itty-bitty red top and her breasts.

“You could have been a bit more polite.”

“Why? What hints?” If she wanted hints, she should ask him.

“About the best way to use some of the sex toys I won. Do you have some hints for me?”

Jack went from pissed to boiling hot in seconds flat. The woman had a smart mouth and he was just the man to cure her of the malady. He sprang, pushing her down until she lay full length on her towel. A small “oomph” escaped her as he covered her body, squashing her breasts against his bare chest. He thrust his thigh between her legs to hold her in place, ignoring the surprise in her big blue eyes. She opened her mouth, probably to complain, but he didn’t give her a chance to form the words. He sealed them inside by covering her mouth with his and plundered, sliding his tongue into the moist cavern beyond, just as the taniwha demanded. She froze at the contact, then softened beneath him, her hands coming around his shoulders to hold him closer. Her hands slid across his back then lower to cup his ass.

Jack ripped his mouth away from hers. “What the devil are you doing?”

“I’ve wanted to cop a feel of your butt for ages,” she confessed a trifle breathlessly. “It’s...ah...very nice.”

The sensation of her hands sliding over his ass, even though he wore shorts, sent his libido soaring into overdrive. His cock hardened with painful intensity until it felt as though his shorts were several sizes too small. A groan formed deep in his chest and without direction, his hands started doing a little exploration of their own.

Smooth skin greeted his touch. He trailed a hand across her rib cage then higher to cup one breast. The hands on his butt stilled and when their gazes met, he saw her eyes were wide and held a trace of shock. Jack traced the edge of her itty-bitty top with a forefinger then dipped beneath the tight fabric to the smooth flesh beneath. Maintaining her gaze, he leaned down and let his tongue trace the same path as his finger. Her scent filled his nostrils—the same lavender and roses he’d noticed earlier plus coconut from her suntan lotion—as he licked a path down the slope of one breast. Not enough, Jack thought. Not nearly enough. He peeled the red material away from her breasts, revealing taut pink nipples to the afternoon sun and his gaze. Proud and full breasts, that enticed and enthralled him.

She made a tiny sound. Jack couldn’t decide whether it was shock or to urge him on.

Then her lips parted and white teeth flashed in a grin full of challenge. “You gonna stop there?” She rolled slightly, reached behind her back, and Jack heard the faint click of her bikini top closure. The red fabric fell down her arms. A shrug made the top fall completely

away leaving her topless and vulnerable to his gaze. A breath hissed through his teeth. He couldn't have stopped to save himself. His heart thundered and the taniwha stretched and stirred, prodding him to continue. Slowly, he lowered his head to take one pink nipple in his mouth. Jack closed his mouth around the taut peak, the need to do everything all at once riding him hard. Like a man who hadn't eaten for days, he feasted. Savoring the taste of her—the texture. Gently biting. Tasting her and tormenting himself. Dicing with danger. Emma cradled his head, her fingers entwining in his hair, urging him on. He drew hard on her nipple and she bucked beneath him, brushing against his groin. "Harder," she murmured in a dreamy voice. "That feels so good." Emma had no pretense in her. She was innocence and honesty all wrapped up in a bow. And he wanted to take this to a conclusion. Jack pulled away far enough that he could see her face. Her eyes were closed and her lips were curled up in a dreamy smile. That smile jerked him back to reality. Jack rolled away, trying to ignore the gleam of her nipples, still wet from his mouth. He wasn't interested in anything more than a roll in the sack. Getting his rocks off. "We'd better go." He stood and handed his shirt to her so she could cover up. "We have a job to do. Mucking about on the beach isn't getting it done. Besides, we've got this dinner thing."

* * * * *

"I can't believe it," Jack muttered, glancing at the huge box Emma carried. He rolled his eyes while the taniwha inside danced a Maori war dance and combined it with a few exuberant high kicks by the feel of his bouncing gut. A year's supply of condoms. "I've never met anyone with such dumb luck." "I can't help it," Emma said cheerfully without a trace of remorse or embarrassment. Hell, no. He'd been the one who'd caught the flack. Lots of jokes and pats on the back—all with the same message. He was going to need to eat lots to keep his strength up. Sure, it was all in good fun, but it wore thin after a while. But worst of all, Emma's win had called attention to them. Everyone in the whole damn resort would recognize their faces. It was going to be difficult to skulk around trying to investigate when everyone was busy snickering. "What are you going to do with a year's supply of condoms anyway?" "Use them," Emma said sweetly. Jack's fists clenched at his sides, and he felt as if someone had kicked him in the gut. The thought of Emma using the condoms with another man fueled his temper. But using them with him wasn't a much better proposition. This afternoon had been a mistake. He wasn't going to touch her again. She was commitment through and through. He was free and easy—a different species of fish altogether. Jack opened the door for Emma and stood back as she sashayed through into the night air in her short black dress that showed far too much skin for his liking. Gritting his teeth, he stalked after her. Colored lights lit both sides of the path that wound through lush plantings of native ferns and trees and strategically placed rock carvings. In the bush on the far side of the resort, a lone morepork cried. Its mournful call echoed through the still night. Jack heard the rustle of small creatures scurrying for cover from the owl. Waves rolled into the shore interspersed by laughing and shouting from the couples still celebrating in the bar after the gala dinner. Even though it was almost one in the morning, he'd have to go back to the room with Emma to give everyone time to settle in for the night. It was either that or hit the bar. He shot a glance at Emma who walked down the path in front of him. Temptation shot through him, fast and hard. He wanted her. Perhaps a drink would be the better option. "Emma, wait up." She paused and turned slowly to look at him. That bloody box of condoms taunted him without mercy. "I'm going to the bar to check out who's there. I want to see if the staff will talk to me." "Should I come?" Yes, please. Preferably with me inside your tight pussy. "No!" he snapped, appalled at his wayward thoughts. Bloody hell, he couldn't blame his serpent. That's the last thing he needed—to smell her flowery scent and hear each hitch of her breath. He needed sex tonight. That was the only way he could exert control over the serpent and continue to work closely with Emma. "I'll see you back to the room then head back to the bar."

"I could help." "I thought you'd agreed to do what I said whenever I said it?" She had the audacity to raise one shapely eyebrow and let the corners of her mouth drift upward in the beginnings of a smile. "Hmmm." Jack grabbed her by the elbow and hurried her toward their room. Two minutes later, he pulled a keycard out of his pocket and slid it into the door. He slipped the keycard into the wall socket and a single light came on, spotlighting the bed. The rich burgundy cover gleamed, looking decadent and suggestive of sex. Jack froze. If he were a superstitious man, he'd think someone was trying to tell him something. Condoms. Bed. Emma. The ingredients were all there. All he needed to do was stop fighting and go with the flow. Then he heard a scraping noise, soft and totally out of place. He prowled into the center of the room trying to isolate where the noise vibration had originated. Emma sat on the corner of the bed and bent to slip off her strappy black shoes. The soft sigh she made when she wriggled her toes pulled his cock tight and tented his black trousers. Surreptitiously, Jack searched the room, looking for anything out of place or remotely suspicious. Feet shuffled and it sounded as though someone fidgeted. Jack cocked his head, listening for the slightest vibration but couldn't pinpoint the sound with accuracy. It came from near the bar. Nothing seemed disturbed yet the back of his neck prickled insistently. He snarled beneath his breath, allowing his taniwha senses free rein or as much as he could with a human in the same room. Gradually, he filtered out the small sounds made by Emma as she removed her jacket and kicked her shoes out of the way. He sauntered over to the minibar. "Would you like a drink?" Jack continued to scan the area, his gaze skimming a large mirror that hung on the wall near the bar. Standing this close to the mirror, two dark shapes were discernable within. Behind. Jack tensed then forced himself to relax. A two-way

mirror directly in line with the bed.

"No, drink for me, thanks. I thought you were going to the bar."

"Soon." The distinct crackle of wrapping paper momentarily shifted his attention. "What are you doing?" To his critical ear, his voice sounded harsh and a touch defensive. Damn, he was losing his grip on this assignment and he didn't like it one bit. All he could think of was sex. He winged a glare at the mirror. Now a bloody two-way mirror to complicate their case. Aware his famed control was starting to unravel, he took a deep breath and fixed himself a whiskey. He tipped back his head and let the alcohol slide down his throat. Although the peaty flavor of the whiskey tasted good, it didn't do a thing to soothe his irritation.

The two watchers remained, and Jack couldn't decide whether they'd lucked out and scored a room specially set up for voyeurs, or if their cover was blown and they were under surveillance for more sinister reasons.

He poured another finger of whiskey and stared into the amber depths in broody silence.

"There are six different types of condoms in here along with two types of lubricant," Emma said. She sounded breathless as if she expected him to react.

And dammit all—he wanted to react.

Perhaps that was the solution. They could reassure the voyeurs by having hot, sweaty sex. Just one bout, he told himself. He glanced at Emma and found her exploring the contents of the package she'd won at dinner. She'd tried to do it before but he hadn't given her the opportunity. His mind grouped sex and Emma in the same sentence too often as it was without looking at visual props.

"Ohhh." Her small breathy sigh snared his attention, mainly because it reminded him of sex. But then, everything reminded him of sex when Emma was around.

"Do people really use these?" she asked, extending something in her palm for him to see.

Two pastel-colored hearts lay in her palm. Each bore a suggestion.

Lick my pussy. Suck my cock.

Both temptation and the taniwha roared at him to grab her up quickly and hammer into her body until they were both satisfied. Jack glanced away to study the dregs of whiskey in his glass. Sex with Emma. He flirted with the idea and the possible repercussions. The taniwha clawed for sexual appeasement, and Jack knew he'd have to give in or shift and scare the living daylights out of Emma and their silent watchers. George Taniwha & Co. couldn't afford the publicity—that was for sure. The hand holding the glass started to itch insistently. When he glanced down, Jack saw the sheen of forming scales. That settled it.

They'd have sex.

He was a professional. He could do this—remain detached and get the job done. Sex was only an exchange of bodily fluids.

Decision made, he swallowed the last mouthful of whiskey and placed the glass on the bar top with a decisive click. His hands went to the buttons on his shirt. He unfastened them rapidly then shrugged from the blue cotton shirt and tossed it aside. He stepped out of his black trousers and chucked them in the direction of his shirt.

"What are you doing?"

She didn't sound scared. A good thing, but he didn't intend to force her. He'd show her the goods and gauge her reaction. Then, he'd give her one last chance to say no.

Jack slid his fingers under the elastic band of his black silk boxers. A growl of excitement escaped the taniwha. Emma's eyes widened at the low, rumbling growl. Jack pushed the boxers over his fully erect shaft. Her mouth dropped open as she continued to stare at his groin. But at least she hadn't screamed and run from the room.

Jack sauntered closer to the bed. "What does it look like I'm doing?" The entire room throbbed with silence. Even the two watchers had stopped their fidgeting to concentrate on the action in the bedroom. Jack hoped they were enjoying the view of his bare ass.

Emma licked her lips. "Ah, getting ready for bed?"

"Full marks for the lady," he said in a husky voice. Damned if this strip tease wasn't winding him tighter than a spring. Turning him on.

"Thought we might use some of those condoms you won," he added casually.

"Condoms?" Emma cast a nervous glance at his erect cock then at the box full of condoms. She plucked a bright orange packet from the box and waved it in the air. "Do they make them big enough to cover you?"

"It will fit with no problem," he said coming to a stop right in front of her.

She eyed his cock with misgiving, staring so hard he twitched. "But will you fit?" she blurted.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, Jack wanted to laugh about sex. Grinning, he leaned over and cupped her face in his hands. "I promise that by the time I've finished with you we'll fit perfectly."

Emma had no idea what had made Jack change his mind about sex. She'd been pretty sure he didn't want her after he'd refused her advances earlier on. But she wasn't about to object now that he was naked and sporting an impressive hard-on. She'd fantasized about this moment for months. Heck, longer than months.

Emma stood ready to unzip her dress and shimmy out of it before he changed his mind. Then she'd jump him.

"Wait."

Emma froze. Wait, as in stop, he didn't want to do this? She lifted her head, trying to read his expression. Yeah, right. A book with blank pages contained more information.

"I want to undress you."

"Oh." Emma nibbled her bottom lip while she thought about it then gave a decisive nod. He might as well see all of her straight off. Her body wasn't catwalk model material, but with her height she'd look stupid with tiny bones and no padding. Emma didn't believe in pretense. "All right."

"With the light on," he added with distinct challenge.

In answer, Emma turned her back on him to present the zipper of her little black dress. Her heart raced while she waited for the first step in her master plan to take off. She wanted to grab. She wanted to touch the serpent tattoo on his biceps and see if it was still hot to the touch. And kiss. Fondle. But she did none of these things because she didn't want him to change his mind.

The zipper whined downward. No fumbling or cursing, just masculine competence that boded well for the actual act. The material slithered downward and caught on her hips until he maneuvered the fabric safely over the obstruction. Before Emma could move, he swung her off her feet and dropped her on top of the mattress. She hadn't even stopped bouncing when he was on her, pressing her body into the mattress.

"You need to wear more clothes," he muttered, running his hands around her naked breasts.

"Frightened I'll catch cold?" God, his hands felt so good on her bare skin.

"I'm going to wonder each time I see you." He plucked at one nipple, hard enough that it should have hurt. Instead, the sensation

traveled straight to her achy clit. Emma arched her back, silently pleading for him to do it again. "Think about your underwear," he muttered.

Instead of repeating the nipple tweak, he kissed a trail across her rib cage, pausing to circle his tongue around her belly button. Emma groaned, her body a sudden mass of writhing nerves. He could do whatever he wanted to her. It all felt good. She'd exert her rights to explore him later.

"No bra," he whispered, his warmth breath feathering across her lower belly. "Panties that are so brief I don't know why you bothered." His tongue darted out to trace along the lacy elastic band that held her panties in place. Along her lower abdomen then from her hip to inner thigh. "And then there's the stockings. Man, they make me hot."

"I like them," Emma murmured. She was dying here, so close to losing her cool. She stirred restlessly, the urge to beg him to rip off her panties and lick her, trembling on the tip of her tongue.

As if he'd read her mind, Jack tugged her panties down her legs, but left the thigh-high stockings where they were. His fingers felt callused on her legs and feet, even through the sheer stockings, as he edged the lacy material away. He reared up to a kneeling position beside her, parted her legs and looked his fill.

"Yeah," he murmured. "Stay just like that. So pretty." He skimmed a finger across her labia.

Emma felt the flush of arousal that swept the length of her body. She felt wanton. She felt beautiful and feminine. And she wanted him desperately.

He grabbed a fistful of condoms from the box that still lay on the corner of the bed and dumped them on the wooden bedside cabinet before dropping the rest on the floor at the foot of the bed. The plastic wrapping crackled as he opened the packet. Emma watched with fascination as he rolled the bright orange condom onto his penis. Anticipation danced through her stomach and moisture gathered between her legs. He hadn't done much more than finger her and she was a quivering mass of desire.

Jack's hand slid in a long, luxurious stroke down her body. He combed his fingers through her pubic hair then drew a finger along her dew-slick cleft. Emma started, the zing of excitement almost too much to bear. Jeesh. She wondered if there was such a thing as female premature orgasm. Because if she wasn't careful, it was going to happen to her. What was the man dithering for? Did he want a diagram? A schedule of instructions?

"You're wet for me," he murmured.

Well, that was pretty obvious. No point denying she wanted him. "Yes."

He parted her legs even farther and moved into the space between. "But not wet enough. Can't wait any longer," he muttered almost to himself. Taking his cock in one hand, he rubbed it across the mouth of her pussy, coating the tip of his penis in her juices. Another surge of excitement swept through Emma. Reaching over her, he grabbed up a container of lubricant. He broke the seal and pumped the bottle several times before a colorless gel squirted into the palm of his hand. With a soft grunt, he smoothed the gel in rough strokes along her cleft. Coolness hit her first, tickling and bringing laughter then warmth, intense and pleasurable as the lubricant coated her clitoris and pussy. Jack smoothed the rest of the gel along his erection. He probed her cleft, sliding one finger into her cunt. Emma groaned as he withdrew his finger then slowly pumped two fingers inside her vagina, stretching and preparing her for his entry.

"Better," he muttered as he pushed his fingers inside her for a third time and slowly withdrew them. He replaced his fingers with the thick head of his cock and thrust inside her. His groan echoed in the silent room.

Emma bit her lip, wanting to groan, too. Desire kicked hard as he pushed his cock deeper into her womb. She felt stretched, and still Jack kept up the pressure, thrusting then retreating until he was fully seated.

"You okay?" Jack's glower was downright scary.

Too bad. She was enjoying the experience, Emma thought dreamily, fit to bursting with happiness. It could only get better with an orgasm. "Yeah," she murmured in understatement. "I'm fine."

"Good." He upped the pace, thrusting and withdrawing in a steady, powerful rhythm that made the bed creak.

So good. Her mind hazed with pleasure as she rose to meet each thrust. Her pussy was on fire. So close to exploding. His hands traveled up her body to cup her breasts, then he flicked his thumbs over sensitive nipples. Emma moaned. He squeezed one distended nipple between finger and thumb, timing the pinch to coincide with a slow thrust of his cock into her pussy. The sharp nip sent frissons of excitement skipping through her veins.

"Jack," she murmured in a thick voice she scarcely recognized. The sensation built higher and higher. She clung to his broad shoulders, arching her back and meeting each hard thrust with a swivel of her hips.

Deep shudders shook the strong shoulders beneath her clinging hands. Each successive thrust moved Emma up the bed until her head banged on the padded headboard. Jack withdrew again and slammed home. She burned for fulfillment. Burned. Then the next thrust sent her over the edge into a world where sensation ruled. Jack thrust once more and froze. Deep inside, Emma felt the pulse of his cock as semen jetted from him. His arms wrapped around her tight, tucking her firmly against his chest.

He sighed loudly, right near her ear. "You okay?"

"Oh, yeah." Emma brushed a lock of hair off his forehead, then gave into temptation and traced his mouth with the tip of one finger.

"What's next?"

Jack snorted a sound that might have been a laugh. Emma wasn't sure since she had trouble reading him, which was a damned shame since he was a mystery she was desperate to solve.

Chapter Four

Like any good private dick, Emma started her investigation of Jack in small increments and proceeded with caution. She wriggled from beneath him then took him by surprise and pushed him back on the bed. She wanted to explore every inch of his body then she intended to entice him into play. Emma didn't expect to leave Mahoney Resort without trying out some of the toys and sex games she'd won.

Jack removed the condom and discarded it. He opened his mouth and looked as though he was going to tell her to stop. That wasn't going to happen. Distraction. She needed one now!

Emma bent and grazed her teeth over one flat, masculine nipple. She plucked at his other one with her fingers exactly the way she liked him to do it to her. Emma slid her mouth across his flesh, tasting salt and smelling a hint of soap. Heady. Addicting. Very yummy. Her busy hands cupped his shoulders then explored further afield, delighting in each new discovery—firm abs, bulging biceps, the mysterious dragon, flat belly and an erection that leapt beneath her questing fingers.

A huge, pulsing erection. She ran her fingers along the silky skin, feeling the inherent strength beneath. Jack was like that, she thought. An iceberg. The man kept a tight lid on his emotions, never letting anyone close enough to get a glimpse of what he really thought. A

man like Jack was a challenge. He made a girl want to explore, to discover what made him tick. Emma strummed her fingers along the underside of his cock. For the first time in her life, she wanted to try oral sex. She wanted to hold him in her mouth. Taste him. A growl rumbled through his chest, but instead of alarm or fear, exhilaration swept through Emma. She lowered her head, the desire to taste and explore, a siren dance through her veins. She cupped his balls in her hands, squeezing gently then licked the length of his cock from base to tip. Jack groaned a dark, needy sound, his hands tangling in her hair. Encouraged, Emma opened her mouth and took the very tip of him between her lips. She swiped her tongue over the slit at the end and a salty taste exploded in her mouth. His hips jerked at her touch, thrusting upward, and an incredible sensation of power filled Emma. He liked what she was doing to him. With renewed confidence, she relaxed her jaw, opened her mouth wider and took more of his erection inside. Jack thrust again, slowly and with more control this time. Emma swirled her tongue then sucked, drawing on his cock and treating him like a sweet—something delectable and delicious to savor.

"You can be a bit rougher," he murmured in a husky voice. "But don't bite," he added hastily when she opened her mouth wider still and introduced the slightest scrape of teeth.

Emma smirked as much as she could with a mouthful of cock. Pleasure coursed through her body as he massaged her head with his big hands. He set up an easy surge and withdrawal, each successive thrust going deeper into her mouth. His cock had been big before but now it filled her mouth and she loved it. Her breasts felt swollen and needy. A simmering sensation, half pain and half pleasure tortured Emma. Juices surged between her legs. So wet. So desperately needy for his cock to fill the emptiness.

He pulled from her mouth without warning, taking her by surprise. "Did I do something wrong?"

Jack barked a laugh. "Hell no! Anymore right now and I'd come. I'd rather come inside your pussy." He levered up on his elbows then leaned over to grab a condom off the bedside cabinet.

"I want to put it on." Emma held out her hand.

"I'll put it on." He ripped the packet open with his teeth and rapidly rolled the condom onto his member. "Ride me," he murmured, his dark eyes glowing with promise.

"Oh, a challenge, huh?" Emma straddled his hips and grasped his cock in her right hand. She couldn't resist stroking his length and feeling the power of him.

"Don't torture me, Emma. Or else I'll take matters into my own hands."

Humor surfaced inside Emma. She was tempted to tease, but his hands locked around her forearms in a silent bid for obedience. She placed his cock at the mouth of her cunt and eased down, closing her eyes to savor the stretching of internal muscles, the slide of their bodies as they joined and he pushed deep.

"Move faster," he directed.

Emma's eyes shot open as she snorted and executed a smart salute. "My ride. My way." She maintained her easy pace, enjoying the sparks of pleasure igniting her body.

He reached up to cup her breasts and tweaked one nipple. Emma gasped, catching her bottom lip between her teeth as sensation raced through her sensitized body. After this afternoon he knew how much she liked that, how hot it made her. Then he reached up to where their bodies joined and slid a teasing finger around her swollen clitoris. His touch was firm, but not enough to push her over into orgasm.

"Please," Emma pleaded. "Do that again. A fraction harder. Now."

Jack grunted as she rose then lowered herself slowly on his cock. Excruciatingly slow, so he massaged her right where she needed it.

"You want to give instruction but not to take it?"

"Ohhhh," Emma moaned. She swayed above him, feeling powerful yet needy, feeling as though she could do anything. The first tremors of orgasm shimmered through her, radiating outward until fiery flames licked through her lower body. Her eyes drifted closed so she could savor the experience. The rise and the slow return. The sense of fullness. The slide of their bodies, the intimacy of it. The shimmer deepened. Emma sucked in a pained breath as she balanced on the precipice, unsure of whether to move again and push over or to remain poised in anticipation. Then she felt Jack's fingers, nimble and clever, rubbing her in just the right place, just the right way. A cry escaped. Her body jerked, and she shattered. Her pussy clenched tight around Jack's cock. Emma's head tipped back as she rode out the exquisite sensations then her whole body relaxed.

"My turn, princess," Jack whispered, and he gripped her hips and lifted her off him. Before she could blink, he'd placed her face down on the bed and raised her ass in the air. His big hands cupped her buttocks, making Emma shiver with renewed awareness. He could have as many turns as he wanted. She wasn't finished with him yet.

Jack palmed her ass then ran a finger down the crevice between her butt cheeks. A shiver racked her body and he hesitated. He'd hate to frighten her. When she didn't voice any objections, he took it a little further. Gripping his cock in one hand, he positioned himself at the mouth of her pussy. He pushed inside until her heat enveloped him. She was wet—her juices coated his cock and made his surge and retreat easy and incredibly arousing. But he needed a little more for what he intended. Jack reached for the lubrication again. Half of him expected questions, but they didn't come. Instead, she made a sexy little moan that tightened his balls and made his blood run hotter. Who'd have guessed that the little sparrow was such a sexual creature?

Jack pumped a generous amount of lube on his palm and smeared it from where they were joined all the way up to the puckered rosette of her anus.

The serpent inside him roared. Sex. Now. Jack held the beast back by setting up a lazy surge and retreat. In and out of her pussy. His cock swelled as the pleasure rolled through his body.

"What are you doing to me?" she whispered, her words throaty. Sexy.

Jack rubbed his finger back and forth over her rosette, delicately probing while continuing the steady strokes of his cock into her pussy.

"Don't you like it? Tell me if you don't like anything I do to you."

"It feels different," Emma said finally. "But good. I like it."

Jack made a mental note to check out the sex toys she'd won. If she liked this and wanted to try more, he was ready.

The single light that shone over the bed highlighted her creamy skin. Being able to see his cock slide in and out of her cunt was an incredible turn-on. His darker skin against her pale, creamy curves. Jack hastened the pace, removing his finger from her anus so he could grip her hips and hold her steady for each stroke. He felt her quiver deep inside, clasp and clenching at his cock. He jerked his hips, ramming his cock home, flesh slapping against flesh until he erupted, spurting his seed deep and hard with a loud groan.

Gradually, Jack eased away from Emma, separating their bodies. A sharp intake of breath made him still. The noise came from behind the mirror. Fuck, he'd forgotten about their watchers. He'd forgotten everything except Emma and how it felt to pound into her body.

Admitting that fact, even to himself, scared the shit out of him.

* * * * *

"We need to check out all the different activities more closely," Jack said the next morning, trying to avoid looking at Emma's cleavage and force away memories of what they'd done to each other throughout the night. The serpent wasn't cooperating. Jack's cock leapt with enough vigor to fuck a netball team—the whole seven plus reserves. Bloody blue moon was really pushing his libido.

Emma dropped her hairbrush into her pink canvas bag and rose from the stool that sat in front of the dressing table. "Good. Where do we go first?"

Jack ripped his gaze away from Emma and glared at the mirror above the bar. That was another thing. He couldn't be sure if a sound system went along with the two-way mirror. They'd have to watch what they said in case it was recorded.

He risked another glance at Emma. Her smile was so bright it almost blinded him. Damn. Now she had expectations. He'd have to make it clear his lone status wasn't going to change. He was going to hurt her, and despite the necessity, he regretted it. Emma was a likeable girl. Easy to be with. Tempting. But after Rachel, he didn't want to put himself through an emotional wringer again. Admitting to the whole taniwha monster thing, and all the garbage that came along with the truth. About him. About George Taniwha & Co., and the team of taniwhas who worked as private investigators. Nah, he'd skip the emotional crap. Better she was hurt a little now, than come face to face with monsters later.

"I think we should split up."

"Oh." She wrinkled her nose. "I thought we'd spend time together like all the other couples."

"We only have the week." Jack scowled at the time constraint reminder. It was tighter than Emma realized. With the blue moon coming up on Saturday, he'd need to have plentiful sex or shift to avoid excruciating pain. He'd hoped to have this case wrapped up quickly and be back home in time for the fall of the blue moon. It was bloody inconvenient, but once he shifted, he was stuck in his taniwha form for twenty-four hours. Suffering through a full moon was bad enough but a blue moon... Jack forced away the dire thoughts to concentrate on Emma. "I forgot to tell you. I made an appointment for you at the spa for this afternoon." He pulled a small card from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Wow! Thank you," Emma said.

"It's not all luxury. You need to ask questions and check out the spa area without being obvious. Think you can do that?"

Emma gave a decisive nod. "I've trained for it. Which areas do you want me to check out this morning? Will we meet up for lunch? It might look a bit strange if we don't."

"Let's go," Jack said. "We'll talk on the way."

The early morning sun peeked over the stand of native trees, warming the clearing and petanque pit not far from the entrance to their apartment block.

Jack took Emma's arm and set a brisk pace. "We'll walk along the beach."

Emma flashed a smile and tucked her hand into his as soon as the path widened enough for them to walk side by side. Jack froze momentarily before resuming his long strides toward the beach. Her floral scent swam through his senses, making it difficult for him to concentrate. Why did she have to touch him all the time? If she stroked her hand across his serpent tattoo one more time...

"We need to watch what we say while we're in our room." Jack couldn't make up his mind whether to snatch his hand from her grasp or not. Her touch burned like a brand, bringing every one of his senses to life. He heard her soft breathing, the waves rushing to shore and a gull wheeling overhead, felt the soft texture of her hand and bare arm. Man, he had to get a grip. Concentrate. "It's possible our room is bugged."

"Someone listening in on us? I don't— Someone's watching us right now! No, don't look." Emma's eyes widened then she leaned closer and twined her arms around his neck. "Kiss me."

It was an order, and Jack found himself in a lip-lock with Emma before he could ask questions. Her lips were soft, and smooth and moist and distracting. She slipped her tongue between his lips, and Jack was a goner. Taste and sensation kicked him in the gut, combining with the feel of her curvy breasts plastered against his chest. The taniwha gave a sleepy yawn then woke rapidly with a demanding growl. Jack took over the kiss, plunging his tongue into her mouth and withdrawing in a facsimile of the sexual act.

Suddenly, he wanted to rip her clothes off and plunge into her hot pussy. He didn't care about an audience or the public location. He just wanted to fuck her senseless. But what he wanted and what he got were two different things. Jack struggled to hold onto the semblance of sanity that remained. Her fingers curled into his shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh through the thin shirt he wore. The small pain jerked his cock tight enough to cause him discomfort. Emma wriggled even closer, rubbing against his chest and groin and making a sound that resembled a purr. Dammit if the serpent didn't purr in tandem.

Jack tore his mouth away from Emma's. Panic roared through him as the taniwha clamored inside his head, demanding he take what Emma offered. The ever-present guilt surfaced, bringing uneasiness. He was using her, and he had to stop because he didn't intend to follow through and give her what she needed. Jack removed his hands from Emma and took a giant step away. She needed a man who could commit wholly to her. Jack Sullivan wasn't that man.

"I'm not doing that again," he muttered. "What's our watcher doing?"

"Nothing. I made it up," Emma said, lifting her chin up in the air with hauteur. "There isn't anyone watching. And I can't believe that our room is bugged either. This is a low-level investigation. George said so."

"Dammit, Emma! Our room is bugged," Jack roared. Frustration rode him hard. If she'd been male, he could have smacked her. He should damn well tell her about the two-way mirror. If he could trust her to maintain natural behavior, he would have told her about the voyeurs. He stared at the thin gold chain that hung around her neck, his hands fisting. Taking a deep breath for calm, he said, "This is the plan for this morning. I'm going to check out the gym since this is the most logical place for drugs. I'd like you to check out the pool area and this afternoon the spa. Talk to people. Mahoney has to shift the drugs somehow."

Thankfully, Emma must have realized she'd pushed him hard enough and merely nodded agreement.

"We'll meet up for lunch and compare notes. And you can keep your hands to yourself. We're not having sex again. Last night was a mistake." Jack turned away from her wounded expression and stomped off without looking back.

* * * * *

Emma didn't understand Jack. He ran hot then cold like a water tap on a hot day. It was difficult to keep up. One minute, he seemed to enjoy kissing her and then there was the sex. She squeezed her eyes shut and conjured up the memory of their bodies sliding together in the many different ways they'd tried the night before. The way his muscular body felt beneath her hands. And his sexy serpent tatt. A tingle sprang to life between her legs and she stirred restlessly on the sheet-covered couch inside the spa. The idea of never making love with Jack again sent a touch of panic swirling through her mind. She had to get him to change his mind. And if he didn't, she'd try again. They were good together, and one time didn't qualify as a win in the bet with her girlfriends.

The slap of soft soles on the tiled floor heralded the return of the spa attendant. Emma opened her eyes and lifted her head. Eek, that green stuff looked a bit nasty. Didn't smell much better, either. Emma wondered if Jack had intended this spa visit as punishment. The attendant smeared green paste all over her back, from shoulders to toes and bade her lie still to let the stuff dry for five minutes. Then, Emma had to turn over for the woman to smear the paste on her front. When she looked like the original green alien, she was left in solitary splendor to dry and absorb the goodness from the paste. Mood music slipped stealthily into the room from concealed speakers, while the green glop did its work.

Emma must have fallen asleep. An hour later, the woman shook her awake and directed her to the shower. Feminine chatter hit her the moment she opened the door into the huge shower block. In the outer area, large mirrors covered the wall. A line of padded stools stood ready for women to attend to makeup and hair. A vase of pink roses and white gypsophila fragranced the air. Emma moved through into the steam-filled shower area. Several women, with varying shades of paste covering their bodies, were waiting for showers. Time for some questions, Emma thought, remembering Jack's terse instructions. "Your paste doesn't smell much better than my seaweed," she said.

The other woman laughed. "Ah, but I'm a prettier color."

"That's debatable," Emma said studying the bright yellow decorating the other woman.

"Oh, look. The communal shower's emptying. Let's grab it. We'll be waiting for ages for these ones."

Emma shrugged. Suited her. She grabbed the canvas bag the spa had provided for her clothes and hurried over to the communal shower with her new friend close on her heels. Three other women bounded over. Emma blinked. Each of them was a different color, covered head to toe with a similar thick paste to her.

"I don't know which of us looks worst," she said, glancing from woman to woman with a critical eye.

"I hope they don't have security cameras getting shots of my naked ass," a dark-haired woman said.

"Do you think anyone will recognize it in purple?" Emma said.

They glanced from one to the other then burst into shrieks of laughter.

"Last one to wash off is a rotten egg," one said.

"You already look like a rotten egg," Emma quipped.

As one, they made for the shower door with good-natured pushing, breasts and butts jostling, and lots of laughter. Ten minutes later, they were clean and ready to go back for the next part of their treatments.

"How about we meet up at the bar afterward?" the ex-purple woman suggested.

"Good idea," Emma said. It would give her a chance to ask questions. "I'd like to see how we all turn out," she added with a conspiratorial grin.

"Make it the poolside bar," another said, "and we can watch the sunset."

Two hours later, Emma walked into the poolside bar. She had no trouble spotting the women she'd come to meet. Raising her hand in greeting, she ambled over to the bar and waited for the barman to finish with his current customer. Her gaze wandered the bar before settling back on the barman. With his blond surfer-boy looks, he was easy on the eye. His blue resort shirt stretched over muscular shoulders, the tight sleeves highlighting a set of well-developed biceps. Emma frowned.

"Would you like me to suggest a cocktail?" the barman asked in a husky voice. "Can't have a pretty lady getting frown lines."

Emma started and gave a self-conscious laugh. "I was miles away. What would you suggest?"

"How about the house special cocktail? Good for what ever ails you. Tastes good, too."

"Sure." Emma watched his deft movements as he sliced an orange. "What's it like working here? Are you allowed to use the facilities on your days off?"

"I use the gym a lot," the barman said as he competently measured and mixed a cocktail for her. "The job suits me. Everyone's happy. Lots of people wanting fun." Woman throwing themselves at him, Emma translated as she intercepted the avid gaze of an attractive brunette at the other end of the bar.

"Maybe you can give me some quick advice—if you do weights that is."

"I enter Ironman contests," he said. "I've lifted my share of weights."

"What's your name? Have you placed in any of the local competitions?"

"I came second in the Taupo Ironman," he said.

Emma oohed and ahed and fluttered her lashes. She leaned over the bar to stroke her hand across his forearm. "Wonderful. If I wanted to train for a bodybuilding contest, who should I talk to at the gym? Just for some initial pointers. I've been thinking about it for a long time now. No time like the present."

"Max is the one you need to see," the barman said without hesitation. "He's an ex-bodybuilder and knows everything that's worth knowing."

"Thanks! I'll check it out first thing tomorrow morning. Nice to chat with you." She paid for her cocktail then wandered over to the group of women by the pool.

"Hello." Emma pulled out a chair and sat down.

"We're going to play strip poker. Would you like to play?"

Emma hesitated before deciding it would be a good opportunity to get to know the women. It was possible that one of them had info or had seen something that would help her and Jack in their investigation. She'd just have to slip her questions into the general conversation. "Okay," she said. "But you'll have to show me how to play."

"Oh, good." One of the women rubbed her hands together and grinned wickedly. "A rookie to fleece. Deal up."

* * * * *

Jack checked their room, but Emma wasn't there. Since he couldn't hear any vibrations from behind the mirror, he took the opportunity to search the room. If there were hidden cameras, his search would alert those who had rigged their room, but he decided to risk it. Instinct told him the cameras were activated whenever the voyeurs were present so they wouldn't need to search through hours of meaningless film. They were probably able to guess when the occupants of the room were present since most guests would attend the gala dinners and special nights. Either that, or they had resort staff alert them when guests were in their rooms. He moved in a systematic manner around the room, searching every conceivable hiding place for audio and listening devices.

"Nothing," he muttered, checking his watch. Perhaps it was as he'd thought—they'd lucked out scoring a room that voyeurs could access, making the addition of sound unnecessary. Or, they'd decided it would be easier to add a soundtrack later, something that would appeal more to their audiences than the words the innocent actors might say. Jack grimaced. Nah, it couldn't be that simple. Surely, they'd want sound? Jack crossed over to the bed and sat while he considered the problem. Where the hell could they hide

sound equipment? Enlightenment hit, along with a feral grin of triumph. Under the bloody bed. Bingo, he thought less than a minute after his brainwave. He tugged at the wiring in such a way that it appeared as though the resort staff had damaged it while vacuuming under the bed. He'd check each time he returned to the room. It should be simple enough now he knew what to look for.

He wandered over to the window and stared out, wondered if he should worry about Emma's absence. Outside, the sun was starting to set. Ribbons of fiery red and orange spread across the horizon as the sun sank lower. Over on the mainland, people started to switch on their lights and they twinkled in pockets of illuminations along the coast.

Jack paced the length of the bedroom and back. Time for a drink. Tension thrummed through him, and he didn't have to think too hard to analyze the cause. Emma. Jack checked his watch again before deciding to shower and change for the themed pirate dinner the resort was hosting.

Half an hour later, Jack was ready, dressed in tight black trousers and a loose white shirt that made him feel like a sissy. Tight black leather boots encased his feet and calves. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror and snorted. He'd be glad when this assignment was over and his life got back to normal. He was really looking forward to the tarts and vicars night later in the week. What the devil was Emma doing? Although they hadn't agreed on a time to meet back at the room, it had been implied it would be before dinner. In his mind at least. He grabbed up the keycard, thrust it inside his back trouser pocket and slammed the door. If something had happened to her, he'd never forgive himself. And if she didn't have a good reason for not showing up and worrying him, he was going to wring her bloody neck.

The bar near the restaurant was hopping, full of pirates ready to plunder and party the night away. Emma wasn't there. A few people had drifted into the restaurant and the reception area, but no sign of Emma. The pool bar wasn't as busy but there was a cluster of people, mainly men at the far end of the outdoor balcony. Despite the warmth of the evening, a gas heater burned above the table where the group sat. Roars of laughter filled the air followed by the odd groan.

"Come on, Emma," a male voice chided loudly. "Concentrate."

Jack's gut tightened as he strode up to the massed group.

"Forget what he said, love." The voice was low and slurred. "Don't concentrate. Get your gear off. Show us your pussy."

Jack scowled and elbowed his way through the men crowding around the table.

"What do you think you're doing?" a man snapped.

Jack cast him a ferocious glare and the man backed up to let him through. Jack took one look and cursed.

Fuck, he was gonna wring her scrawny neck. His hands flexed at the pleasurable thought as he scanned her flushed face. The woman was tipsy, giggling fit to wake the dead and practically naked. His gaze tracked over her butt, and he corrected himself. She was naked. Those panties didn't cover enough to call her clothed.

He stepped up behind her naked back and bent to breathe in her ear. "What are you doing?"

Emma whirled around so quickly her naked breasts bobbed up and down. "Losing," she warbled.

Alcoholic fumes hit him in the face. "I can see that," Jack said with a calm he didn't feel.

The other four women sitting around the table were in various stages of undress but they were all more fully clothed than Emma. Jack wanted to grab a towel, a tablecloth, anything to cover her beautiful naked breasts. All of a sudden, he felt possessive. He didn't want the others to see the tiny mole on the curve of her left breast. And if the guy behind him didn't stop pushing so he could cop an eyeful of Emma and her semi-clothed friends, Jack was going to rearrange his nose for him. The beefy male could have fries with the rearranged nose if he wanted—Jack wasn't fussy.

Emma turned around and beckoned him closer. She wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear. "I don't want to lose. I hate to lose, but I don't know what to do with my hand. Can you help me?"

"Yeah, okay. What have you got in your hand?"

Emma fanned out her cards so he could see. Feeling the weight of a stare, Jack glanced up. Every one of the four women sitting at the table was staring at him. Suddenly Jack felt like a lump of beef being chucked to the dogs. He turned away to concentrate on Emma's cards. She had a pair of sixes and that was it. Jack maintained an impassive face. With that hand, she was stuffed. Unless she bluffed.

Jack leaned closer to whisper instructions in her ear. She turned to him and winked.

Surprise kicked him in the ribs. Emma wasn't as drunk as she seemed.

"Are you in?" the dark-haired woman who was dealing asked.

Emma's body language screamed confident, and pride grew in Jack. "I'm in."

"Cards?" the dealer asked.

Emma didn't bother to look at her cards before she shook her head.

"I'll take two," one woman said.

The men crowding the table were silent as they watch the ending stages of the game. Jack scanned the faces, ready to lash out if anyone tried to help out by letting the others know that Emma was bluffing.

"I fold."

"Me too."

"I'm out." The cards slapped face down on the table.

The last woman studied Emma then laid her cards down. "I'm out."

"Take it off! Take it off!" The chant started with one man then others joined in as the four women removed a garment each.

Jack noticed gooseflesh forming on Emma and decided to take action. "Sorry to be a spoil sport, but I need Emma to come with me. Maybe you can finish the game tomorrow?" Over his dead body.

"Good," said the slim blonde sitting on Emma's right. "I'm getting cold, and I'm also chicken." She laughed, gesturing at her pale pink panties. They were the only item of clothing she wore. "I have a premonition that I'm going to be the first naked body. I'm going to quit while I'm ahead."

Jack relaxed as the men started to drift away. "Ladies." He inclined his head and turned to Emma. "Ready?"

Emma knew he wasn't pleased with her. It was in the set of his shoulders and the grim line of his mouth. Well, he could just deal with it. She had flushed out a few leads to check out tomorrow, and she wasn't going to apologize for her methods. Besides, she wasn't the only one to bare her breasts tonight.

"It won't take me long to get ready. I'll meet you back here if you like."

Jack handed Emma her T-shirt, his dark eyes glinting dangerously. "I don't think so."

Damn, he was going to be difficult.

Emma pulled the shirt over her head then yanked on her denim shorts. She picked up her shoes, dropped them inside the canvas bag the spa had allowed her to keep and stalked off. She heard Jack fall into step behind her.

The walk back to their room took forever. Emma was very conscious of Jack walking behind. She could practically feel his glare between her shoulder blades but that didn't stop her adding an extra little sway to her hips. Her nipples were already pulled tight from the chill of the night air, but now they tingled insistently. She sucked in a hasty breath and hastened her pace. The path changed from pavement to gravel. Emma winced at the sharp stones beneath the soles of her feet.

"What's wrong?" The tone was sharp enough to tell her this was a man on the edge. She'd pushed him hard enough.

"Bare feet," she muttered.

Without warning, he swept her off her feet and dangled her over his shoulder. Her butt poked up into the air and the blood rushed to her head. Her canvas bag hit his ass with each step.

"What are you doing?" she shrieked, kicking out ineffectually with her feet. "My brains will fall out."

"Close your mouth and you won't lose them," he snapped, tightening his grip on her flailing legs. He continued to stride along the graveled path without difficulty or labored breathing.

Emma took a deep breath ready to harangue him when she glanced down toward the ground. Her gaze lit on his butt. It was tightly encased in black trousers that gave her a spectacular view. Emma wanted to bite. Really badly. She licked her lips and suddenly being so close to Jack wasn't an undignified punishment. It was a gift. Her heart pounded as he strode through the automatic doors at the entrance to their block of rooms. Between her legs moistened with the carnal thoughts, truly wicked thoughts that circled her mind like a bird of prey after an evening meal.

"Quit that," Jack barked as he paused outside their room and plucked the keycard from his pocket. He shouldered open the door and negotiated the doorway without hurting Emma. Then, he let her slide back over his shoulder until her feet hit the ground. The brush of her unbound breasts against his shoulder and hard chest made her gasp. The intimate touch of his hand on her ass as he helped her stand made her gulp.

"Quit what," she whispered.

"Those little sighs," he muttered moving away from her as if she'd scalded him. His dark eyes were wary as they moved over her face then flickered down her body.

Emma barely suppressed her shiver of desire.

Jack could smell her arousal, and it had woken the taniwha inside, the part he was desperately trying to keep in a locked compartment. The beast roared his need for sex. Hot, sweaty, no holds barred sex. Then, she walked toward him, her hips swaying with a pert wiggle that made his throat tighten along with every appendage on his body. When he felt the wall at his back, he realized he'd been in a steady retreat. With the wall behind him, the only way to avoid Emma was to move her out of the way. Which would involve touching. She touched him first, and he couldn't restrain a flinch. Her fingers were hot, the heat searing through his thin shirt and into his skin beneath.

"You like my sighs?" Her voice was low. Breathy. And made him think of sex even more. His cock was painfully tight, nudging against the placket of his trousers.

"No." Damn, the one night had been bad enough. But another night... His conscience groaned then spoke sternly to him. Don't. Do. It.

"You're trembling."

Him? He didn't...shit! He was shaking like a tree in a storm. "Hadn't you better get ready for the pirate dinner?" Feeble, Jack. Real feeble. Exert yourself, man. Act like you're her boss instead of a victim. He watched mesmerized as she licked her lips until they gleamed in the moonlit room.

"Suddenly, I don't feel like going to the dinner. I'm tired." He caught her glance at the bed with a sense of alarm. With that come-hither look in her blue eyes, no way did she want to go to bed to sleep!

Chapter Five

The woman was undressing him with her eyes. Jack felt the situation escalating from his control and with the taniwha's roars pounding inside his head, his grip was tenuous at best. Then, she raised a hand and traced the V of flesh visible at his neck. Jack lost it. He grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her against his chest. Man, she felt good, her soft curves pillowed against him. She leaned all her weight against him, brushing her belly against his sensitive cock. His cursed trousers were so tight Jack thought he'd lose circulation to his groin if he didn't get them off soon. The thought faded when their lips collided, greedy and ravenous for a taste of each other. He explored the moist cavern of her mouth, the contrasting hardness of her teeth and the softness inside her cheek. She tasted of limes and salt. Emma. It was damned addictive. When they finally pulled apart, they were both breathing hard.

Her blue eyes glittered and a soft smile played on her lips. "Did you want to go to the dinner?"

"No." But he didn't want to do this either. Another night of horizontal dancing with Emma smacked of heading down Commitment Road. Just a hop, skip and a dance away from Wedding Row.

His hands tightened around her shoulders. Nope, he didn't want this. He was going to push her away. Push her away—

Liar.

Jack wanted sex with Emma so badly his hands, his body still trembled. Even the idea of them being watched didn't bother him as much as it did at the start.

Her warm hands burrowed under the fabric of his shirt, and just like that, Jack's willpower toppled and he gave up the fight. "Dammit, woman. You're killing me here. If you're going to undo things, start with the trousers. They're cutting off my circulation."

"Poor baby," she cooed. "Can't have that." She redirected her busy hands to the fly of his trousers and cupped his erection, teasing him some more.

Jack heard her wildly beating pulse and knew she was excited. "I bet your panties are wet. I bet you're wet for me."

A soft blush suffused her cheeks. "Why don't you find out?" she whispered, her lashes drifting down to hide the sleepy expression in her blue eyes.

Holding back a grin, he slid his hands beneath the hem of her T-shirt. Blue. It matched her eyes. His hand skimmed the warm flesh of her belly. She sucked in a rapid breath and her stomach as well. Jack decided to ignore the feminine vanity. To his mind, she was perfect. He didn't get a sore neck when he kissed her, and he didn't feel in danger of flattening her if he took her in a missionary position. Yeah, she was perfect—more's the pity. His fingers traced across her rib cage then a little higher to hold the generous weight of one plump breast. He lifted her T-shirt, exposing her breasts to his gaze.

"Beautiful," he whispered. Jack wet his forefinger in his mouth then traced around the areola of one breast. Her pink nipple puckered,

drawing tighter before his fascinated eyes. Leaning closer. He blew, his breath moist. Warm. Emma shuddered and made a tiny sound of encouragement at the back of her throat. Jack had never really taken the time to explore a feminine body. Had never been interested in anything but satiating the taniwha's demands. But now, despite the insistent pain in his groin, he wanted to touch, to explore the mysteries of Emma. He pressed a kiss in the valley between her breasts then licked along the fine web of blue veins beneath the pale surface. Strawberries. Tonight, she smelled of sweet, juicy strawberries.

"Stop teasing me," she said in a thick voice.

"I want to make sure I win my bet. I want you wet—dripping with your juices—so I can pound between your legs the minute I remove your panties."

Another shudder racked Emma's body. Jack smiled against the curve of her breast and placed tiny kisses, tantalizingly brief on the top of her breasts, near her nipple and on the undersides of the plump globes.

Emma tangled her hands in his hair, gripping tightly as she tried to direct his mouth to her nipple. Her fingernails dug into his scalp, and Jack's amusement deepened.

"Hurry up," she muttered with a grumpy edge to her voice.

Instead of giving her the relief she wanted, Jack let his hands drop to the dome snap at the waistband of her shorts. He tugged the snap and it parted with a sharp crack. The zipper slid down allowing the denim material to sag down around her hips. Jack wet his finger again and ran it along the elastic waistband of her panties. He studied the wet trail he'd left and sucked in a deep breath. Man, his cock ached, the pressure for release intense and unrelenting. But if he waited, held off, his orgasm would be mind-blowing. A memory to dig out when he returned to solitary life alone in his seaside home with only his scruffy tomcat for company.

Jack knelt in front of her, sliding the shorts down her long legs. He helped her balance so she could step out and kick them away.

The scent of her arousal hit him—spicy and seductive and with a hint of strawberry. The same fruity aroma that perfumed her skin. He pressed his nose against her lower belly and breathed in her scent so he would remember. His lips moved, and he scraped his teeth against the sensitive flesh, nipping then soothing.

"I'm hot for you now, Jack," she said almost defiantly.

"Let's see, shall we?" But even though his words indicated action, he still dallied, teasing both of them to the point of madness. He palmed her naked buttocks, gripping one cheek in each hand. More than a handful, just the way he liked—a sexy curve to hold onto when he wanted to thrust into her tight pussy. He kneaded the flesh, enjoying the fact she didn't attempt to hide her generous ass or try to move away from his attentions to that area of her body. Jack liked that about Emma—her acceptance of her size.

He loosened his grip on one butt cheek and ran his fingers in the crevice between. Emma jumped in surprise as he followed the G-string down. Then she rocked her hips trying to massage her clit to gain relief.

"Not yet, sweet cheeks." Jack allowed his finger to travel between her legs, just a brief foray. His finger emerged wet. Emma was ready for his possession. Jack tipped back his head to meet her gaze.

"Please," she murmured, moving her weight from foot to foot.

He lifted the damp finger to his mouth and maintaining her gaze, he licked it, savoring the tart taste of her juices. Emma moaned, her blue eyes dark with arousal.

"Would you like my mouth on you? We haven't done that yet."

Her eyes widened a fraction before she nodded.

Jack ran his fingers under the elastic band of her g-string and slowly tugged away her panties.

There were changes from this morning. "What have you done?" he murmured, shaking his head. It seemed the spa had a lot to answer for. "What else did you do in that spa?"

Emma glanced down at her pelvic region. "Don't you like it? I thought my heart looked sexy. And besides, you made the appointment." Well, he couldn't argue with that. "It's...cute," he said finally staring at the close-clipped heart that shielded her femininity. Jack drew her panties down her legs and then leaned closer to lick around the edge of the heart. She smelled intoxicating, and he gave into the temptation to comb his fingers through the heart then made a quick foray down her naked cleft. "You're not sore?"

"No side effects. Not yet anyway. They gave me some cream in case I have itching. Are you going to take all night?"

"Just drawing out the anticipation." And making himself crazy with lust, but it would be worth it. He glanced down at his hand and saw the glint of scales starting to form on the top of his hand. The shadow of claws had formed beneath his fingernails, ready to pop out into webbed talons. He'd run out of time to play with her. "Turn around," he said. "Put your hands on the wall."

She hesitated, looking uncertain.

"Do it."

Slowly, she turned to face the beige-colored wall but cast another doubtful glance over her shoulder.

"Hands against the wall."

Emma sucked in a breath loud enough for Jack to hear. But she placed her hands, one at the time on the wall, her heart pounding and drawing the taniwha closer to the surface.

Jack ripped at the laces that fastened his shirt at the neck.

"What are you doing?" Emma half turned.

"Look at the wall," he barked. Jack scrambled for an excuse to keep her from seeing him. Iridescent scales shimmered on his chest—pearl gray scales the same color as the inside of a mussel shell. Thank God, his chest always changed before his back. If he hurried, the change would recede. "We're doing a role-play and you're the submissive. That means you follow orders. For a change." Please let her follow his directions. Jack eyed her still body with misgiving. He yanked at his belt buckle and peeled the trousers over his swollen cock with care. Seconds later he kicked the trousers out of his way and grabbed a condom. His breathing sounded harsh to his ears, and his hands shook, suddenly clumsy because their dexterity was compromised by the start of his change to taniwha form. He unrolled the condom awkwardly onto his penis, hoping like hell he didn't put a hole in the rubber with the sharp claws that extended from his fingers. The last thing he needed were baby taniwhas running around.

"What does a submissive do?" she whispered, still thankfully looking away from him at the wall.

"Follows orders," he growled. He didn't know what he'd do if Emma decided to disobey. Maybe he should introduce a bit of kink. Keep her busy with new experiences. And definitely a blindfold because if he didn't make haste, it was going to take time for the scales to fade from his body. "A submissive does what they're told when they're told. I'm not sure you could manage."

"Of course I can," she snapped.

Jack grinned at her indignation. A sharp, nagging pain shot through his stomach, making him double over with the pain. Damn, if he didn't hurry, he was going to be in trouble. Jack cast a belligerent gaze toward the window. The moon was almost full, and he could feel

its siren pull with every particle of his body. Another sharp pain shot through him. Fuck, he hoped Emma was as ready for his possession as he thought, because he wasn't going to manage gentle tonight.

Jack ambled up to Emma and gingerly ran his finger pads over the silky smooth skin of her back, taking care not to scratch her with his claws.

"Spread your legs farther apart," he whispered, hoping she wouldn't notice the changed timbre of his voice. Generally, his vocal cords changed slowly still allowing him to speak in a growl before he shifted. Once he changed, all he could do was roar.

Emma widened her stance, drawing his attention to the full cheeks of her ass. He stepped up behind her so the fronts of his thighs brushed the backs of her legs.

"You feel hot."

"I am." Jack curled his hand around his cock and brushed the tip across the soft flesh of her backside. The resulting jolt ran the length of his body. He changed the direction, massaging his tip down the crevice between her ass cheeks.

Jack fingered her, skimming his fingers across the sensitive nub nestled in her core.

"Ohhh," she whispered, shifting her body weight slightly and pushing her ass outward.

The soft moan reverberated through the room, and his lips quirked as he leaned closer to nip the sensitive cords of her neck. Emma was so responsive with no pretense. No secrets. Jack's hands snaked around to cup her breasts in his hands. Guilt rose but he shoved it aside. He had a job to do.

"I'm wet for you now," she complained. "You must have noticed. Ohhh! Do that again."

A muscle jumped in his jaw and his cock swelled impossibly tight at her sexy sound. Jack kissed her shoulder again then sucked on her flesh. "You ready for me to fuck you?" he growled.

"Yesss," Emma hissed with a trace of impatience.

Jack felt the absurd need to hold himself in check for longer, but he already balanced on the fine line between pleasure and pain. He pumped his cock with one hand then shoved into her tight cunt. Hot pleasure simmered through his veins at the feel of her. Tight. Clinging. Grasping. Enough to send a man mad or keep a taniwha sane. God, she felt so good. Deep shudders shook him as he stroked, hard and fast.

Thank God, the change had slowed. His claws had retracted a fraction. The closeness with Emma and the charged hormones running through his body had pushed the serpent back to its den. Scales still glinted beneath his skin, but he could explain the phenomena away if he needed to.

"More," Emma gasped. Although she'd been skeptical about being taken against a wall, he'd made her so hot, so quickly she could barely think. All she could do was feel. Jack slid a hand over her belly then lower, to rub her clit. His cock filled her impossibly full, possessing her and stamping ownership. Frissons of excitement swelled to a heady spill of pleasure. Another pass of his finger pushed her over the edge and she shattered. Her breaths came in harsh pants, echoed by a grunt as Jack pumped into her then held still, his cock expelling semen deep inside her. Emma sighed softly as the ripples of pleasure kept coming, gentler now, but still consuming. Already, she wanted another go. The man to die for had her hooked, literally addicted, and she didn't think she'd ever be able to look at another man again.

Jack nuzzled her shoulder, his chest pressed against her back. He pulled out of her, removed the condom and led her over to the bed. They stared at each other for a long moment. Jack looked away first, glancing at the mirror above the bar.

"Interested in trying out some of the toys you've won?" he asked.

"Yes, please," Emma said, feeling suddenly happier. Sometimes, it seemed as if Jack was making love to her against his will. But if he wanted to play with toys, then it must be her imagination. Emma plucked her box of goodies off the bedside table and handed it to Jack.

"What would you like to do first?" She took pleasure in watching him as he studied the contents of the box. His face was in the dark, his hair tousled, making him look mysterious and sexy. She leaned closer, brushing her breasts against his serpent tattoo.

Jack plucked two items from the box and handed them to her. A glowing thing that looked a little like a penis but had a sort of handle at the end. Emma read the packaging and felt hot all over. A butt plug. She'd liked it when Jack had touched her there before. Excitement rose inside at the thought of trying something new. The other was a jar of chocolate paste. Emma turned the package over to read the instructions. There were several illustrations of breasts decorated with the paste and made to resemble edible items. A snigger emerged. "Which one are we going to try?"

Jack grinned suddenly, making Emma catch her breath and stare. The man was so sexy when he smiled. "I've always liked Christmas pudding," he murmured, reclaiming the package from her. He opened it, and the deep, rich scent of chocolate filled the air. Emma watched as he dipped his finger into the jar. He raised it to his lips and licked the paste away.

Desire unfurled in her belly. He pushed her back against the pillows and bent to take a nipple in his mouth. Jack drew hard. And just like that, Emma was wet and ready for his possession. Needy. Desperate. Why play with toys when she had the real thing?

"Jack?"

He glanced up, his dark eyes glowing strangely. A quirk of the light, she thought. "I need you inside me," Emma said. "We have all night. We can play with toys later."

Maintaining her gaze, he set the jar aside and reached for a condom. He covered his erection with calm, confident moves. "Just a little chocolate," he murmured. "I want to taste it on your skin."

Emma shivered at the avid note in his voice. No doubt about it—she was gonna die a happy woman.

* * * * *

"You like Thai food, too?" Emma paused in the middle of applying suntan lotion, ready to hit the pool straight after breakfast. "There's a great Thai restaurant near Botany Downs. We should go for dinner when we get back to Auckland."

"We're not a couple." The flat and final tone of his voice made Emma stare.

Shock punched her in the lungs, stealing her breath. "I thought—"

Jack scowled. "It's nothing personal, Emma. I need sex. You're handy and willing. It's as simple as that."

Emma's mouth opened then closed. Her jaw worked but words dammed up in her throat. She swallowed once. Twice. After clearing her throat, she managed to squeeze out a few words. "What you're saying is that our affair comes to an end once we leave the resort?"

Jack rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "By George, I think she's got it."

"You bastard," Emma hissed. The urge to wrap her hands around his neck and squeeze until he gasped for air was strong. Tempting. But it would be too quick. The man needed to suffer like he was making her suffer. "I have—" She broke off mid-sentence. No way was she giving him the pleasure of trampling on her feelings any more than he had already. Tears built at the back of her eyes but damned if she'd show the feminine weakness. She straightened her shoulders and forced herself to meet his gaze without flinching. "Fine. At least

I know where I stand. I won't force myself on you again." Although she tried to keep her voice even, it was colored by the distinct bite of temper.

Her canvas bag lay beside the bed. Averting her gaze from the ruffled bedcovers and memories of how they'd spent the night, she grabbed it up in her left hand. "I'm going out."

"Where?"

He had no rights where she was concerned. Her hand fisted so hard, the canvas strap of the bag dug into her palm. "I am going down to breakfast. I missed dinner and I'm hungry."

"Wait five minutes, and I'll come with you."

Emma stared at him incredulously. The man was thick as two planks. Did he want her to draw attention to them by having the mother of all temper tantrums in public? Because that was a dead cert—if he didn't quit with the big, bad private investigator act. "I don't think so."

Emma terminated the conversation by leaving their room and shutting the door quietly behind her.

She stomped down the passageway to the front entrance. Despite telling Jack she was going to breakfast, this morning she'd skip a meal and head straight for the gym to start some subtle questioning.

The sooner the case was solved, the sooner she could leave and head home to lick her wounds. The thought gave her pause. She'd failed in her mission. Emma glared at the man tending the gardens and stormed down the path to the main part of the resort. Bypassing the restaurant, she carried on to the gym.

A male a few years younger than she manned the reception desk at the entrance. Highly tanned and muscled, he looked as though he belonged in an ad for a gentleman's magazine.

"Morning. Can I help you?"

Emma cast aside her sudden doubts. "I've never been to a gym before," she said. "I thought this week would be a good time to see if I like it before I fork out money for membership. How do I start?" She'd scope out the territory first before she started to ask questions.

"How about a tour of the facilities and a description of the different membership options. How does that sound?" The young man—his name badge read Allen—gave her his whole attention, making her feel important and soothing her wounded spirit. Emma shook free of his charismatic spell and nodded. "That sounds perfect."

Allen picked up a phone and minutes later another young man who could have been Allen's twin joined them.

Emma was introduced to various machines and shown the aerobics area, the weights area, the indoor swimming pool where a vigorous water aerobics session was underway. Once again, the instructor was an Allen clone but with red hair this time.

"You all look very fit." Emma batted her eyelashes at her guide. She paused hoping he'd pick up the conversation batten. If not, she'd play bimbo and ask stupid questions.

"Most of us are in training. Mahoney Resort enters a triathlon team in the Ironman competitions. I made the team," he added with modesty.

"That's awesome." Emma fluttered her lashes and peeked through narrowed eyes to judge the effect. Yes, he was lapping up her bimbo act. She let a tiny gurgle escape and flashed a grin. "What's a triathlon?"

"It's a competition. Competitors swim, they do a bike ride and then they have to run. Have you heard of Martin Hamilton? He won a gold medal at the Olympic games for New Zealand."

"Awesome," Emma cooed, closing the small gap between them. "Have you won a medal?"

"I'm going to one day," he said with confidence.

How? How did he know that? Or was he just psyching himself up? Positive thinking and all that? Emma thought rapidly, unsure of how hard to push. "Have you been training hard?" Her voice was breathless as she ran her fingers along his bulging biceps. The man was gorgeous, a real hottie, yet she didn't feel a thing. He wasn't Jack. Emma's mouth firmed at the thought. Jack didn't deserve her loyalty. And now she understood why he had a procession of babes waltzing through his life. The man didn't want to commit. He was a coward. Her guide's eyes widened, and Emma realized she was blowing her bimbo act. "Do you?" she prodded.

"I train each day and..." He paused to look over her shoulder. "I have a special diet."

"Ohhh." Emma rubbed her finger back and forward across his tanned upper arm. "It's working." What special diet? she wondered with a trace of frustration. Perhaps if she shook him, she'd rattle the answer loose faster. Flirting wasn't helping. "I'd like to muscle up. Is there a fast way to do it?"

"You'd need to train every day for a few hours." His gaze held clear doubt. "Protein shakes might help. And you'd have to diet."

"Diet?" Bloody cheek of the man.

He shrugged and grinned. "The changing rooms and showers are in there. Ladies to the left and men to the right. And that's about everything," he said, coming to stop by a row of stationary bikes facing a large video screen.

People drifted into the gym in ones and twos. Emma was pleased to see that there weren't many people in bright-colored spandex, the vision that popped into her head whenever she thought of a gym. Most people wore comfortable shorts and a T-shirt similar to her sleeveless top and stretchy back shorts.

Emma smiled brightly. "Okay. I'm interested. What do I do next?" She didn't intend to leave until she had answers.

"We do a fitness check. Would you like me to see if I can schedule one in for you? I have a personal trainer session in five minutes, otherwise I'd offer to do the check for you."

"Okay." Great. A fitness check. Emma hoped it didn't involve too much. Her muscles were sore from the sexual gymnastics of the night before.

They walked over to the receptionist's desk, and Emma scanned the gym. There were five, no, six beefy young men wearing the resort's uniform. Not a scrawny specimen among them. The two women she saw were also muscled up but it might be a coincidence. Jeesh, how was she going to find out? Perhaps they needed to check out the premises during the middle of the night when no one was around. Maybe the offices and places that were off-limits to guests.

"Jamie can do a fitness test, but she'll be another five minutes since she's with a client."

"That's fine," Emma said.

"Come with me, and I'll show you where to wait."

Emma followed her guide down a narrow corridor she hadn't noticed earlier. They passed two offices then came to a third room. Her guide opened the door and gestured Emma inside.

There were charts on the wall with illustrations depicting people doing different warm-up exercises.

"See if you can follow the diagrams and do a few stretches while you're waiting for Jamie. She won't be long."

"Thanks for the tour," Emma said, smiling and fluttering her lashes, keeping up the image of bimbo to the end.

Her guide left, leaving the door slightly ajar. Emma debated if five minutes would be long enough to explore the offices next door and decided to risk it. She was halfway out the door when she heard several masculine voices in the office closest to the room in which she stood. Bother. Emma dithered, wondering what to do. Raucous laughter suddenly filled the air.

"The couple in room 243?"

Emma stiffened. Shit, were they under investigation? She edged from the testing room, flattening against the beige walls so she wouldn't be seen easily.

"Oh, yeah," a loud voice said. "They go at it like rabbits. All night long."

Emma's mouth dropped. Someone had heard them? How mortifying!

"What do they look like?"

"Both tall. The guy looks dangerous. Not the sort to meet in a blind alley on a dark night."

"What about his partner?"

"A bit big for my tastes."

"What are you talking about, man? Her ass is fuckable. I'd like to ram one right up her."

Emma's jaw sagged so much it was a wonder it didn't hit the ground. These men had not only heard them, they'd watched them as well! But how? Why? Emma groped for understanding.

"What's the take been like for this couple?"

"Through the bloody roof. We've made more in three days than we made for the whole of last week."

People paid to watch her and Jack have sex? That was disgusting. Heat flooded her body followed closely by anger. Making love to Jack was private, dammit. Strictly because that's what Emma was doing—laying out her heart for Jack. The idea of other people watching...

"They're filming tonight and intend to release it as an amateur movie. It should win a prize for sure as well as make a ton of money."

Emma felt her face turn scarlet. Her teeth gritted so hard they were in danger of breaking. A tic burst into life in her jaw. They were not going to get away with this.

Chapter Six

Footsteps at the far end of the passage galvanized Emma to action. She whipped back inside the room, easing the door shut behind her. Oh, boy. She had to get a grip. Warming up. That's what she was meant to be doing.

Emma sprinted over to the closest poster on the wall, rapidly read the instructions and attempted to emulate them. The muscles at the back of her thigh groaned in protest, sending a wave of jagged pain the length of her leg. Emma winced and eased up. Cripes if she'd known sex with Jack was going to be so strenuous she would have gone into training first.

"Though why you're worrying when Jack has as good as told you there's not going to be any more sex once we're off the island," she muttered. Thinking of sex brought her back to the main problem.

Movies.

Of her and Jack.

Naked.

The door to the room flew open and a tall redhead stepped inside. "Oh, good. You're warming up already. Excellent."

Oh, she was warming up all right. And busy thinking of payback.

"You look as though you're warm enough. I'll weigh you and take some muscle-to-fat ratios then I'd like to see what your existing level of fitness is. But first, I'll get you to fill in this form about your medical history."

Emma stopped torturing her legs and accepted the form and a pen from the woman.

Three quarters of an hour later, Emma teetered from the room on weak, rubbery legs. Jamie was a sadist.

Emma slowed as she passed the offices, but the men had gone so she had no idea what they looked like. Though she'd recognize their slimy voices if she heard them again. That was for sure!

The thought of putting them in their place reinvigorated Emma and she picked up the pace from a teeter to a stomp. At reception, she stopped to find out when the gym closed. A little recovery time wouldn't go astray. She'd come back later to do her first training session and ask more questions. Right now, she'd find Jack and let him know what was going on.

Jack found her first. As she strode along the beach heading for their room, a hand curled around her upper arm jerking her to a stop. Emma whirled ready to defend herself. "Jack." She straightened, tossing her head as his dark glare hit her. At least, she assumed he was glaring because the line of his mouth was straight and firm. Difficult to tell since he wore sunglasses.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere."

"I didn't know you cared," Emma said sweetly. No mistaking her tone for anything but snide and bitchy. Despite looking for him, he wasn't forgiven for blowing hot and cold. Jeesh, that sort of behavior was meant to be on her agenda. Men were supposed to be black and white, not shades of marbled gray.

"I was worried," he snapped. He took a closer look at her face then had the effrontery to stroke a finger across her flushed cheek.

"What's wrong?"

Emma jerked from his touch and stalked farther along the beach before dropping onto a clean patch of sand. With legs outstretched, she stared out to sea. She felt rather than saw Jack sit at her side. The man could have put a shirt on, dammit!

"I've been at the gym. I wanted to follow up on something I heard from the bartender and also in the spa yesterday. While I was there, I heard some men talking. Our room is bugged." Emma turned to Jack, feeling the full thrust of anger and indignation and loss of privacy sweep through her body all over again. "We've been filmed having sex. They're going to sell it on the Internet."

The concern faded from Jack's face and he suddenly seemed more alert. Dangerous and in private investigator mode. Emma couldn't tell what he was thinking because of the glasses shielding his eyes. Bother the man and his rigid control. Just for once, she'd like to see him really lose his cool.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she demanded. "Frankly, I'm pissed. What are we going to do about it?"

"We aren't going to do anything."

"What?" Emma's screech of outrage scared a foraging seagull. It took off into the air with a startled cry. "You knew? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think you'd be able to keep up the act if you knew we were being watched."

Right. This just kept getting better and better. "You could have given me the benefit of the doubt."

"I wasn't sure if they were onto us or not. It seemed better to ignore them and watch developments."

"And?" Emma didn't bother to hide her testiness.

Jack rolled toward Emma and tugged at a short springy curl just behind her ear. Emma was ready to blast him but he spoke first.

"Someone is watching us right now."

Jack watched Emma carefully as he fingered another curl. He'd never seen her like this before—curt, irritable. Plain bitchy. He liked it.

"What are you doing?"

"We're going to give another show for our audience. Let's see how your acting skills shape up." Her blue eyes narrowed, making him want to laugh. "I dare you," he drawled.

She landed on top of him before he could blink, knocking the air from his lungs. Her leg slid between his, her thigh riding up high against his groin. Instantly his cock lengthened, and he knew by the gleam in her eyes she recognized the effect she had on him.

"I was thinking of a kiss." But his body had other ideas.

"Well, what's stopping you? Don't say the audience is putting you off," she mocked.

Jack glanced up and down the beach. Empty, apart from the man over on the far balcony. And he wouldn't see them either if they moved closer to the gnarled pohutukawa tree a few feet away. The sun streamed down from directly overhead, and Jack didn't need to check his watch to confirm the time. Almost midday.

He cupped her face in his hands, savoring the buzz of the waking taniwha simmering beneath his skin. "Nothing stopping me at all." He closed the distance between them so her breasts brushed his naked chest. Surprised she was even talking to him let alone letting him get this close after this morning, Jack wasn't about to back away from her challenge. He covered her lips and kissed her, really kissed her, thrusting his tongue deep into her mouth.

"Get a room, why doncha," a man called. He whistled shrilly.

A feminine giggle followed.

Where the hell had he come from? Jack slowly lifted his head, his gaze touching on her lips. They were pink. Moist. And he enjoyed caressing them more than he should. "Guess we'd better go to lunch. See if the big man has arrived back from the mainland. I heard the receptionist mention it. He was away overnight."

"Have you found anything helpful?"

"Nothing. Just a gut feeling." Jack stroked his finger across her silky cheek. His gut was working overtime, but he couldn't be sure if it was edginess because of the blue moon or instinct about the case.

"All the male employees are big. Muscled."

Difficult not to notice them, then there were the security guards who patrolled the perimeter of the resort. Keeping people in or out. Hard to say. "Did you notice the trophy cabinet when you were over at the gym?"

"Bulging with trophies."

Jack rolled off Emma and climbed to his feet. He extended a hand to her and helped Emma up. "I'm going to search the admin offices tonight."

"What time? How are we going to get around the watcher problem?"

"I'm not taking you with me." Jack didn't want to have to worry about her, but one look at her face told him she was going to argue.

"We'll talk about it later."

They walked down the beach together, heading toward the main resort area and the restaurants.

"What are you doing this afternoon? I'm going to do a hike around the far boundary of the resort. I want to check out a couple of boats I saw this morning."

Emma nodded thoughtfully. "That would be a good way to get drugs either on or off the island. This is so frustrating. We haven't learned anything new. We don't know anything more than what we knew before we arrived."

"A lot of investigations are like this," Jack said. And she thought she was frustrated? Try being a taniwha with a blue moon on the horizon. His mind turned to sex. One-tracked bloody thing.

"I have a hair appointment. I thought I might be able to worm something out of the hairdresser or at least hear something interesting in the salon."

Jack glanced at her curly brown hair then shrugged. She couldn't get into much mischief at the hairdresser's.

"Okay. I'll meet you on the beach near the pohutukawa tree at six to discuss how we're going to get around our voyeurs."

"Perhaps we could stage a fight," she said. The twist of her lips was mocking. "It wouldn't be difficult shouting at you."

Jack grinned then sobered abruptly. He seemed to do that a lot lately. Smile. And usually it was Emma related.

"Don't laugh," she snapped. "I still haven't forgiven you for this morning. You should know that I'm big on revenge so watch your back. You never know when I might strike."

Jack stilled at the idea of Emma plotting revenge. A fight. His mind immediately went to the part after the fight when two lovers made up... Alarm bells tolled loudly inside his head. Hell. Emma Montrose was wriggling into his head. And it was bloody uncomfortable with her in there. Made him think things—impossible things—involving a future.

They walked into the restaurant, and some of Emma's poker partners waved at them to join them at their table.

Emma waved back and hurried over, giving Jack no option but to follow. She'd changed since they'd arrived. She seemed more confident. More everything. Heads turned when she walked past. Jack intercepted the gaze of another man watching her. Jack speared the guy with a dark scowl. The other man hastily looked away to make a selection from the buffet.

"Is everyone having a good time?" the hostess purred into her microphone at the front of the dining room.

The diners roared back a resounding yes, and she beamed.

As Jack dropped into the seat at Emma's side, he noticed several of the resort hostesses trot onto the stage bearing boxes.

Without warning, his gut churned.

"We have several appropriate gifts of the his and her nature. In this barrel, I have discs bearing the name of each guest. A roaring sound filled his head as she read off the first name. A couple at the table on the far side of the room sprang from their seats. Jack relaxed fractionally when a second name was read out.

"And finally," the hostess said. "Jack Sullivan and Emma Montrose."

Jack and Emma shared a telling glance, and it was obvious to Jack they were thinking the same thing. They were being set up, and it was going to make it difficult to leave the room to do a search of the resort if they were being watched.

Amidst much clapping and ribald shouts, he and Emma made their way up to the front to accept their prizes.

"What have you got?" one of Emma's new friends asked.

He was almost afraid to look. Jack ripped away the pretty steel gray bow and tore the black wrapping paper from the box. He lifted the lid to an array of sex toys. Jack jammed the lid back on.

"Toys," he said.

"Emma?" her friend said.

Emma glanced at Jack, her brows rising in a silent question. He shook his head. She tugged the tape from the pink parcel she'd received and peeked inside.

A soft gasp emerged, and Jack noticed she seemed a bit flushed.

"What is it?" Each of her friends leaned forward to peer inside.

"Ohhh," said one. "That's the newest model vibrator out. Wish I'd won that!"

"Why would she want a vibrator when she's got Jack?" another said.

Emma sneaked a look at Jack and found him staring at her. A flush ran the length of her body. But in truth, the vibrator wasn't such a bad prize to win. When they were finished this assignment, she might need it, because finding someone to fill Jack's place was going to be difficult.

Half an hour later, Emma finished her lunch and checked her watch.

"I'd better go," she said. "My appointment is in ten minutes."

"I'll walk you out," Jack said. He stood and picked up the box she'd been given as well as the one he'd won.

"Where are you two going? Are you off to try out your prizes?"

Emma smiled politely, but the same anger she'd felt earlier in the gym rose up her throat to choke her. They'd probably been set up so that they won—props—to enliven the movie that was being shot with them being the star performers. She wondered what other prizes she and Jack would win during the rest of their stay.

They left the restaurant with neither speaking until they were ensured of privacy.

"We're being set up," Jack said, gesturing at the boxes he carried with a jerk of his chin.

"That's obvious," Emma muttered. "Just what I wanted. My sex life plastered all over the Internet."

"Don't worry. We'll get them," Jack said in a harsh voice.

"That's a promise," Emma snapped, still smarting each time she recalled the males she'd overheard in the gym. "And we'll bust their asses for both drugs and illicit filming."

Jack grinned suddenly. "That's my girl," he said, and he leaned forward to kiss her square on the lips.

Emma's heart somersaulted. If he wasn't interested in her then why was he kissing her like this when they didn't have an audience?

Men! She sure as heck didn't understand them. Her lips softened under his, and she pressed into him even though the two boxes he carried dug into her ribs. Every breath she took was full of his scent. A groan built deep in her chest. Her body heated. Her pussy heated, moistening her panties. A perennial situation when she was around Jack. All she needed to do was think of him and her body prepared for his possession.

Their lips slid together. Sipping, nibbling, tasting. Mating. Her stomach swirled.

Jack pulled away with a curse, and they stared at each other for a long moment.

"I'll see you on the beach at six," he said. "Don't be late."

* * * * *

Jack paced the sand beneath the old pohutukawa tree and checked the skyline again. The last rays of sun brightened the horizon, but still Emma didn't come.

A couple paddled in the small waves that rushed to shore, slowly making their way toward the main part of the resort. It was a Middle Eastern night tonight so Jack presumed everyone was preparing for another night of frivolity—drinking, eating and dancing late into the night.

He paced away from the tree and shivered when his body reacted to the pull of the moon. Even though it wasn't visible in the sky yet, edginess assailed him. He glanced down at his tented shorts with a wry twist of lips. Damn, he needed Emma.

The vibrations of approaching footsteps made him turn.

Emma.

Jack found himself smiling—an automatic reaction. He couldn't seem to stop.

His gaze scanned her body from the top of her head, down her curvy body and long legs to her feet. Whoa! His gaze darted back to her hair.

"Hi," she called. Her whole body screamed self-conscious, alerting Jack to the fact that he could hurt her if he didn't say the right words.

An opportunity to blow this budding relationship apart. He didn't take it.

"I was starting to worry," he said.

Emma came to a stop right in front of him, so close they were almost touching. The back of his fingers drifted across her smooth cheek then he lifted his hand higher to tug lightly on a fragrant curl. It was the exact color of the sunset—a combination of red and golden brown and orange.

"You've got a sunset in your hair."

Her head jerked up, her blue eyes wide and uncertain at his compliment. "Is that good?"

"You look beautiful. Worth the wait." Jack hesitated awkwardly on hearing his words, but they came from the heart. And that gave him pause. What the hell was happening to him? This investigation was going nowhere. Frustration was his middle name, yet it wasn't the lack of progress that irritated the heck out of his life plan. It wasn't the impending blue moon. It was Emma.

A sensible man who happened to also be a shape-shifting taniwha, would do the job and walk away...

Jack shrugged inwardly and pushed away his insidious fears. Emma wasn't going to die because he was a taniwha. If he had his way, she would never find out.

"Find out anything helpful?" Emma sat on the sand and hugged her knees as she stared out to sea.

Jack dropped down by her side, casting a quick glance at Emma. "Nothing."

"Are you still going out tonight?"

"Yeah." Damn right. It was even more dangerous staying in.

"What do we do? Stuff the bed with pillows and make it look like we're sleeping for a change?" She glanced over at him with an impish grin that made her resemble a mischievous pixie.

Jack stared. "It's so simple, it might work." He kept staring. Damn, she was pretty. He'd never noticed how creamy and touchable her skin appeared. His gaze drifted then lingered on her mouth, and he found himself leaning toward Emma. Their lips collided then clung

together, lingering, nuzzling and sucking with the ease of familiarity. A hand—Emma's hand—slid around his neck urging him closer. They kissed until the need for air forced them to stop. Breathless, they drew apart.

"I didn't think we were doing that again," Emma said, toying with the hair at his nape. Each sharp tug and scrape of her fingernails sent a corresponding jolt to his groin.

"We shouldn't be," Jack muttered. But he gave into the temptation to lick the delicate whorls of her ear. His mouth drifted lower to nuzzle and taste the soft skin of her neck. "But I was never big on rules," he added.

"Me neither." Emma ran her hands through his hair, still tugging hard enough to send a pleasurable pain to his cock and keep him in sensual thrall. "Are we going back to our room?"

They stared at each other for a long drawn-out moment. Jack considered everything he should do and immediately did the opposite.

"Let's stay here."

Emma's mouth dropped. "Make love here? On the beach?" She glanced up and down the beach then looked back at him and licked her lips. "What if someone sees us?"

"They're going to see us in our room." Just once, he wanted to love her without a paying audience. Jack pushed aside sudden guilt as he scanned the beach. The situation was more complicated than a simple fuck. He shrugged inwardly and concentrated on Emma instead of emotions he didn't want to deal with. Besides, he'd hear the vibrations of footsteps coming in their direction long before they were discovered in a compromising position.

"That's true." She nodded, a slow grin spreading across her luscious lips. "I like the idea of cheating them out of takings and movie rights."

Hell, what had he done to deserve this woman as a partner? Once again, Jack shied away from his thoughts. He'd fuck her since that's what they both wanted.

Jack pushed her gently back onto the sand. "Last chance," he whispered. "We don't have a blanket. We'll probably end up with sand in places that are uncomfortable."

"You trying to change my mind?" Emma's gurgle made him want to grin.

"Never," he breathed, placing a kiss in her fragrant cleavage. "Have I told you how much I like your tits?"

"Yeah?" Her eyes lit up with laughter. "Why don't you show me?"

Jack scanned the beach again. The brilliant colors of the sunset had faded leaving the horizon a dark, inky bluish black. Overhead the pale moon shone, a day short of full.

His cock twitched insistently.

God, he needed her—it was that simple. He unzipped her shorts and tugged them down her legs. Purple panties today. Jack removed them, too, leaving her bare to his gaze. He parted her folds, sliding his fingers down her moist cleft, then Jack cupped her bottom with his hands and lifted her to his mouth.

Emma forgot they were out in public and concentrated on the feel of him. Her eyes closed leaving her adrift in a world of senses. His fingers on her bare flesh, his tongue laving across her sensitive clitoris. Heaven. The sensations built, lifting her higher until she shuddered, slow waves of ecstasy washing over her until a final swirl of his tongue made her convulse in a violent climax.

A soft kiss on her belly jerked her eyes open. A grin spread across her face. "That was wonderful." An understatement.

"Yeah?" Jack glanced down the beach before ripping off his clothes. In the moonlight, he glowed, looking mysterious and magical. And so sexy, she couldn't believe he was with her. Even if it was just for this week. Emma chewed on the unpalatable thought. If she was persistent, she could win him over. I'm going to make that man mine, she thought as she watched him roll on a condom. Yeah, she'd win him over or die in the attempt.

Jack leaned over her, burrowing his hands under her shirt. "Are you brave enough to take this off?"

Emma thought for all of a second. "Take it off." Cool air brushed across her breasts, tightening her nipples to hard points. The contrast of warm and cold made her needy. Achy. Ready for Jack's possession.

He parted her legs and filled her with one seamless thrust. Pleasure coursed through her body, and a cry escaped. Jack scored the tender skin along her throat teasing another soft cry free. He filled her, hitting the sweet spot behind her legs, at exactly the right angle, sending her soaring. Too quick, she thought with a trace of regret as heat punched through her. Jack thrust into her, hard and fast. Deep shudders shook his large frame then he stilled. Emma felt his heart pumping and rejoiced in the fact that she made him feel. She placed a tentative hand on his shoulder, only relaxing when he rolled off her and tugged her into a close embrace.

Tears burned suddenly at the back of her eyes. She loved this man, but how the devil was she going to make him admit he felt something for her? Sighing, she cuddled closer just enjoying the moment.

They dressed slowly, laughing and snatching nibbles from bare skin before clothing fell into place. Relaxed and limber, Emma was ready to take on anything. Jack reached out to ruffle her hair, the peacefulness on his face snaring another piece of her heart in the process. She'd thought she'd known Jack, but each hour spent with him peeled away another layer of mystery. He was gentle and moody. Bossy and loyal. And she loved him even more than she had at the start of the week. Go figure.

"I've been thinking about how to handle the search."

Disappointment surged briefly through Emma. But at least he was sharing his plans and treating her more like a partner. If she couldn't have his heart, at least she'd have a working relationship. "How?"

Jack took her arm, and they wandered toward their room. He leaned close and whispered his plans. "We'll go back to our room. If our voyeurs are at their post already, we're stuffed. If they're not, we'll stuff the bed with pillows so it looks as though I'm in bed."

"One problem with that," Emma said. "They must have some system of lighting. I mean we don't always make love with the lights on."

"I know. I've thought of that. The only thing I could think of was distraction."

Emma stopped walking. "What sort of a distraction?"

"You and your vibrator."

"They'll film me!" She didn't have to pretend horror.

"Yes," he said simply. "The decision is yours."

Emma was still thinking about her vibrator when Jack unlocked their room and slipped inside.

"Wait there." It was an order.

Emma's breath came out in a hiss. The man was impossible and as for expecting her to do a solo performance for the benefit of the camera... Emma waited for all of two seconds before following.

"All clear," he murmured. "No one there yet."

"How do you know?"

"My hearing is very good."

Was it her imagination or had his whole persona undergone a swift change. He looked awfully grumpy, and his dark eyes flashed with an emotion she had difficulty deciphering. Definitely not the time to argue.

"We'd better sort out the bed then. I think there are some spare pillows in the wardrobe." Emma jerked open the wardrobe as she spoke and grabbed two pillows plus a spare blanket. When she turned, Jack had tugged back the covers on the left hand side of the bed.

"That's my side of the bed," she said.

"It's farther away from the two-way mirror." His mouth tightened. "Housekeeping has been busy while we've been out this afternoon. We have two cameras. There and there." He pointed before accepting the pillows that Emma held out.

Cameras.

Anger built inside until she felt like a volcano ready to blow. They were not going to get away with this while she had breath in her body. One glance at Jack confirmed his fury.

"How are the cameras activated? Not by movement?" Emma glared in the direction that Jack had pointed. She couldn't see obvious signs of a camera, but she believed him. "Are we being filmed now?"

"I don't think so. If the cameras were movement activated, they'd film housekeeping and anyone who came into the room. They'd waste a lot of film. My guess is they film when they see some action. They'd be able to guess from the timing of the dinners and special events when the guests would return to their rooms."

"But they must have had cameras all the time. That's what they implied when I heard them talking."

Jack scowled. "Going for different angles for their film, I'd say. But I think these are new. I haven't noticed them before."

A blush suffused her face. It slowly crept down to heat her breasts. Surely, the way they made love wasn't that different. Not different enough to warrant more cameras.

Jack finished arranging the pillows and dragged the covers back into place. "How does that look?"

Emma tilted her head to study his handiwork. "Like two pillows and a blanket made to look like a body."

Jack's scowl grew darker. "Cut out the smart-ass remarks." He paused.

"I wasn't—"

"Showtime. I'd better go. Turn off the main light. Quick. Once I'm gone, you can turn on the bedside lamp on your side, but see if you can adjust the lamp so it shines away from the bed."

Emma nodded and followed him to the door. "Take care."

He grabbed her in a bear hug and squeezed her tightly before kissing her hard and swift. Then he slid out the door leaving Emma alone with the voyeurs.

Keep them busy.

The words echoed through her head—taunting and a touch repulsive. The idea of knowingly putting on a show for these creeps...

Taking a deep breath, she padded across the room to the edge of the bed. After fumbling in the dark for a few minutes, she managed to swivel the bedside lamp so it pointed away from the bed. Before she switched it on, she allowed her gaze to run over the mirror. If she hadn't known about the mirror, she would never have suspected.

Maybe if she switched on the television. She could bore them into leaving.

Emma strode over to the television and pushed the power button then found the remote and settled back to channel surf.

Eek! Not that channel, she thought as naked bodies writhed on the screen. She hurriedly changed channels. Emma's eyes widened when she saw a mass of bodies on the bed. There were so many bodies it was a wonder they didn't fall off.

The third channel change clued her in. The television was strictly R18 and geared toward couples. She wouldn't find distraction there.

Emma picked up her e-book reader and tried to concentrate on her most current purchase, a book called Talking Dogs, Aliens and Purple People Eaters. She chuckled at the antics of the dog and other characters, but then she reached chapter three and the hero and heroine started in on the sex. Emma hit the off button. Perhaps reading wasn't the best distraction at the moment.

The phone rang. Not Jack? Emma's heart pounded as she picked it up.

"It's Caroline, your resort hostess. Is there any way we can make your stay more enjoyable?"

Like what? she thought indignantly. More cameras in our room? "Everything is wonderful," Emma said, not bothering to hold back on the irony.

"Have I called at a bad time?"

"I was about to go to bed."

"Oh! Say no more! I understand completely. Just give us a call if we can do anything to make your stay more enjoyable."

Emma slammed the phone down, fury and frustration making her restless. She stomped past the bed and stormed into the bathroom. Perhaps she'd take a shower to ease the tension from her body.

Twenty minutes later, Emma stepped from the shower and grabbed a towel to blot the droplets of water from her body. Someone thumped on the door and kept thumping. At first, Emma thought about ignoring the summons then she realized that the racket should wake up a person who was sleeping. It would seem odd if the pillows didn't react. She wrapped a towel around her body and hurried to answer the door.

"Hello!" The girl's greeting was breezy and her smile bright enough for Emma to see she used a tooth-whitening agent. "You and your partner are the lucky recipients of a mystery prize." She gestured at her laden trolley.

Yeah right. Emma fought the need to scowl in her best Jack manner. The cynic in her suspected the voyeurs wanted action in the bedroom instead of the sound of running water and the scent of perfumed steam.

The girl picked up an apple green bag and dropped several small bottles inside. "Here you go. Some massage oils and some special lubrication. Oh, and these are great. Some nipple jewelry!" She thrust the bag at Emma then with a wave, tottered off pushing her trolley.

Emma clutched the bag and slammed the door shut. These people were unbelievable. All to get a stupid movie. Rage colored her cheeks as she tossed the bag on the dresser with all the other prizes she'd received during the week.

So, she'd give them a show.

Emma grabbed up the pink box that contained her vibrator. She pulled it from the protective wrapping and deftly loaded the batteries. It would come with batteries provided. The vibrator buzzed when she tested it.

Okay. What other props did she need for her show? After checking the towel was secure, she padded across to her box of toys.

Scented massage oils with a hint of the Orient. Oh, yes. Just the thing. Nipple jewelry. Maybe Jack would like to see that later.

Emma sauntered over to her side of the bed and bent over, pretending to kiss the head end of the roll of blankets. Then, she sucked in a

deep breath. Showtime.

She settled on the corner of the bed nearest the mirror. After popping the lid off the bottle of oil, she smoothed it across her arms, legs and upper chest. A pulse throbbed at her throat as she stood. With a casual shrug of her shoulders, she loosened the knot holding the towel in place and let it slither to the floor. Emma pictured Jack and imagined it was his hands smoothing the scented oil on her naked breasts, his fingers plucking at her aching nipples. The heady scent of cinnamon and oranges filled the air as she massaged oil down her legs and across her buttocks. With a languid move, she dribbled oil on her belly. Damn, that felt good.

Heat pooled between her legs as her oil-smeared fingers dipped lower, through her clipped pubic hair, to smooth down bare pussy lips. Emma caught her bottom lip between her teeth to bite back a moan. The friction of her damp finger was exquisite. Damn, she was getting off on this. Did that make her sick? The anger had receded, replaced by pure lust and enjoyment in what she was doing. Heat flooded her pussy as her finger did another pass. Her heart pounded. Too much. Too fast, she decided. But Emma couldn't help tracing a slow circle around her engorged clit before she squeezed more oil on her hand. Her breasts, she decided, then the jewelry. Emma smoothed more of the fragrant oil across her breasts with light feathering touches. She tugged at her nipples again and pleasure swamped her. After skimming the instructions, Emma fastened the loops at each end of the jewelry around her nipples then tightened them. A surge of hot sensation jolted her and a groan sounded. Her groan. Red and gold glass beads draped over the curves of her breasts when she was finished, tiny bells sounding with each move she made. Emma breathed deeply, her breasts rising and falling. A jolt of pleasure shot to her clit and shimmered in place like a promise of what was to come.

God, she was so turned on, it wouldn't take much more than a nudge to push her over the edge.

The snick of the door drew her head up.

Jack.

Heck, what about the blankets? Distraction. Emma picked up the vibrator. And turned it on. Widening her stance, she ran the vibrator down her cleft. She was aware of soft sounds behind her but didn't dare look because of their watchers. Ripples of sensation streaked through her body, the tautness of the jewelry at her nipples intensifying the heat, the pleasure.

Suddenly, Jack was behind her, his bare chest hot against her back, his erection pressing insistently, nudging her buttocks. His arms snaked around her middle.

"You make me hot," he whispered. "God, I need to be inside you now."

"Yes," Emma murmured, setting the humming vibrator aside. "Yes."

Jack turned her and bent her over the bed. Gentle fingers probed her slick cunt, filling her momentarily then vanishing. Before she could protest, his cock filled the emptiness. Two hard strokes deep into her womb shoved her into climax. She shattered, her body shuddering with the force of her release. Jack climaxed a stroke later while her womb still convulsed and spasmed.

He rested against her for an instant then pulled free, tugging Emma to her feet and into his arms. His mouth lowered over hers as he plundered, kissing her deeply, driving her desire higher and winding her tight as a spring. Her last thought as they fell onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and tinkling bells was that she could never ever get enough of Jack.

Chapter Seven

Emma headed for the gym. With Jack's finds last night—a computer with shipment details—the case was on its way to being wrapped up. Once they found physical proof and tied a few loose ends, it would all be over. Back to the way things were. Pangs of regret pierced Emma. Not exactly the same way because she knew what Jack looked like naked, how it felt when his cock filled her impossibly deep. A man walked down the corridor in front of Emma. Dressed in a suit, he seemed out of place in the casual atmosphere of the resort. Mahoney. The creep. He yanked open the fire door at the end of the corridor then waited, holding the door open for Emma. "Thanks," she said, smiling even though she'd prefer to spit at him.

A smile curved his lips, amusement shining in his eyes. "You're very welcome, my dear."

Emma gasped. He knew who she was. Making love with Jack was private, dammit! Fury lashed Emma without warning and accusations bubbled out before she could think.

"Mr. Mahoney. I want the films back."

The smile broadened. Like the dog that had polished off the last of the cat's dinner, he smirked, his gaze drifting up and down Emma's body. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

Emma shuddered, and it wasn't with the same awareness she experienced when Jack looked at her. Mahoney made her feel dirty. His smirk poked her anger to a higher level.

She glared. "If you don't give me the films you've taken of me and Jack, I will go to the papers. I will tell every single guest that they are being filmed without their knowledge. I will warn them that their images are being peddled on the Internet." Her chest rose and fell with the force of her anger.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The clear amusement in his brown eyes as she looked up told her he knew exactly what she was talking about. And he'd seen the films. With his gel-slicked hair, his designer aftershave and suit, he appeared self-important. Emma's right fist curled and drew back ready to let rip. His face. His gut. She didn't care what she smacked—anything to prick his smug ego.

"Fine," she snapped, taking a deep, calming breath. "I'm going to ring the police." She marched past, but his hand shot out and fastened around her forearm with the force of a steel manacle.

"I don't think so, my dear."

"I am not your dear." Only one man for her, and it wasn't this one.

With his greater height and strength, Mahoney forced her to trot at his side a short distance down the corridor before knocking on a door with his free hand.

Emma fought every step of the way. "Let me go."

The door jerked open and Mahoney pushed her inside a storage room. Shelves were stacked with small brown boxes while a desk and two chairs sat just inside between the door and the shelves. Emma squinted trying to read the labels on the boxes. Her breath hissed through clenched teeth. Bingo. The storage room they'd been searching for.

The man who had opened the door looked alert. "Problem, Mr. Mahoney?"

"Nothing we can't handle," Mahoney said, shoving Emma farther into the room.

Emma was pleased to see her struggles had messed up Mahoney's hair. She jerked from his touch, and this time he let her.

"Keep her here out of trouble. Get a rope. We'll tie her up."

Emma backed up, lashing out with her feet, kicking and biting but the two men overpowered her when they forced her into a corner. Still,

She didn't make it painless for them, managing to draw blood with a blow to one man's nose. George would have been proud of her. The arrival of a third man made their job easier and soon she was trussed up tight. They left her sitting on the floor near the shelves. "You can't keep me here," Emma screeched. Hopefully, someone would hear. Mahoney scowled as he swept a hand through his dark hair. "If the noise gets too bad, gag her." He glared at her before striding from the room. Emma stopped mid-shout. Best she saved the shouting for later when she really needed to attract attention.

* * * * *

The magnetic pull of the moon gave testiness a whole new meaning. Jack strode to their room, hoping like hell Emma was there and could be tempted into a quickie. His stomach twisted, pain slicing like a blunt knife. Sex. God, please let Emma be there. He'd never felt the like of this before. He needed to slam into her pussy in the worst possible way. A glance at his hand showed the dark stems of his claws beneath his human fingernails. Another sharp surge of pain almost doubled him over. He fell inside the room. Emma wasn't there. Shit. He was gonna have to jerk-off to stave off both the pain and the taniwha. Along with the thought came a sliver of worry. He hadn't seen her since this morning. Jack ripped off his clothes before a wave of pain doubled him over. He crawled into the bathroom before pulling to his feet in front of the mirror. His face glinted with the pale gray of taniwha scales. His hands fisted around his cock and he noticed that too glinted a pearl gray color. Emma. He concentrated, visualizing her in his mind. Her ripe curves. Her mouth wrapped around his swollen cock. Jack pumped his erection, stroking with hard, even strokes. Not enough to send him over the edge but sufficient to keep the taniwha at bay. Jack stretched the process out for as long as he could before applying a bit more pressure to his sensitive tip. He came with a rush in his fisted hand. As he cleaned up, Emma filled his mind. Where the hell was she? She'd said she intended to go to the gym. He'd go there first. If anything had happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

* * * * *

The guards scarcely paid any attention to her. There were two of them and they looked like clones of the ones who worked in the gym. They argued about who was going to lunch first. Evidently, it was chocolate penis day and the chef had a great recipe for the truffle filling. Finally, they tossed a coin and the winner left jubilant. The other placed a pair of earphones on his head and played his music loud enough that Emma could hear the bass where she was sitting. Half an hour passed as Emma fought to loosen the length of rope they'd tied her wrists with. The first man returned brandishing his chocolate penis dessert and the second left for lunch. Emma continued to work toward freedom, her gaze on her minder. He swiped his tongue across the very tip of his chocolate penis dessert and moaned in ecstasy. Good grief. He was taking eating to a whole new level. Emma stared, not wanting to watch but mesmerized by his performance. His groan was an animal grunt, and when he pulled the penis away from his mouth, Emma saw he'd nibbled off the tip. A trickle of the filling dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Eew! She shuddered and looked away. That was so not sexy. Without warning the rope that tied her hands loosened—just a fraction. Emma doubled her efforts and five minutes later, one hand slid free. She drew her legs up in a stealthy fashion and unfastened the rope around her ankles.

A weapon. Carefully, she turned to scan her surroundings. There was no way she could creep out, not with the penis-sucking man right near the door. But he was so engrossed... Emma's gaze lit on a large rock near the door. It looked as though it was used as a doorstep when they were bringing in more supplies. She glanced from the rock to the man's head. The rock would make an excellent weapon—if she could grab it before the man worked out what she was up to. The man continued sucking on the penis. Emma's lips curled in distaste while she worked on freeing her other hand. Then she blinked. Even better! The man was nodding off. She scanned the room. Perhaps she should take a look in one of the brown boxes? The man looked as though he was asleep. Holding her breath, she tugged open the closest box. It was full of foil packs containing pills. Emma slipped one inside her shorts pocket. A snort sounded. Emma froze, but when she whirled around to look, his eyes remained closed. Her breath eased out and she stood, gliding smoothly forward to scoop up the rock. It was heavier than it looked. And in truth, she wasn't sure she could hit a sleeping man over the head. As she edged closer, she saw his face was smeared with dark chocolate. That settled it—she couldn't hit a man who looked like a defenseless kid. Emma took another two steps and reached for the door, still holding the rock. Her free hand closed around the brass handle and twisted. The door squeaked. The man jerked awake. "What?" Emma threw the rock at him and ripped the door fully open. The man cried out. She heard a crash but didn't stop to see the damage. Instead, she hurried toward the main corridor, peeked around the corner. When she saw it was all clear, sprinted in the opposite direction to the restaurant.

Jack.
She had to find Jack.

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Jack scanned the bodies in the gym, urgency humming through his tense body. Emma wasn't here. He couldn't smell the girly floral soap she used and he sure as hell couldn't see her. He stalked through to the restaurant, searching faces, his gut churning insistently the whole time. If anything had happened to her... Pushing through the queue at the buffet, he ignored the comments about rudeness. She had to be somewhere. Outside, he checked the bar and around the pool. Down on the beach. Worry creased his brow while the pull of the blue moon created havoc with his body. Every bone in his body ached as if he had a fever and sweat glued his shirt to his chest and back. He forced himself to stagger farther down the beach, to push through the pain that made him shiver and shake. All he could think of was Emma. The way she smiled. The way she pushed him, ignoring his bouts of surliness. The way she gave her all when they made love. Jack snorted. Somewhere along the line, Emma had crept into the empty spaces inside. It was a damned uncomfortable sensation, but he'd come to like her presence. A flash of red caught his eye as he hurried along the beach. "Emma. Where the hell have you been?" A wave of pain doubled him over. Sex. Shit, now. Jack glanced up and down the beach. He jerked her against his chest, shuddering at the feminine feel of her. Her

sunset hair was ruffled and dirt coated one cheek. He lifted a trembling hand, battling nausea and acute stomach pangs to unbutton her shirt. A quickie to take the edge off, to stave the pain and halt the shift to taniwha. He fumbled, his nails well on the way to transformation.

Emma frowned, glancing over her shoulder. "What are you doing? Shit! We've got to go." Her hands and wrists were bloodied when she lifted them to push against his chest.

"What happened?" Damn, his voice was changing. Desperation swelled along with pain. Sex. Now.

"Run." Emma grabbed his forearm. "They're after me."

A gunshot punctuated her words. Emma sprinted down the beach toward the river mouth. Jack lumbered after her, trying to focus on moving one foot after the other. Waves of pain engulfed him, sharp and intense. His hands had turned. If the transformation went much further he wouldn't be able to come back—not for twenty-four hours.

The soft sand changed to mud that oozed between his sandaled feet. Jack paused to rip off his shirt and yank off his leather sandals. Pearly scales had already formed on his chest. Jack glanced at Emma in front of him as she darted between two mangrove trees. He lumbered after her, ignoring the grasping branches of the mangrove trees that gouged his limbs.

The pungent scent of the mud and the salty tang of the water called to his taniwha soul. Emma. Regret pierced Jack along with sorrow, and in that moment, he realized he cared more for her than he'd ever cared for another woman. And he was going to lose her, if he didn't scare her to death first.

Jack's senses sharpened. The pounding of running feet following them continued, the sound of the men's harsh breathing a signal to hurry.

"Emma," he growled. "Into the water."

Her face whitened noticeably. "No, I can't swim."

But he could since taniwhas were creatures of the water. "Climb on my back." He had to concentrate to get the words out.

Emma hesitated but the crack of a gun firing galvanized her to action.

Jack jerked off his remaining clothes and waded into the water. "Come." His voice was barely recognizable. He glanced back, and from the shock on Emma's face knew that the transformation from man to taniwha had progressed enough to traumatize. Jack wanted to rail at fate but instead he grabbed Emma and tugged her resisting body out into deeper water.

Knowing his options were gone, he focused, picturing the serpent in his mind. Muscles and bones lengthened, his face changed, elongating to fit the sharp teeth and fangs that had developed. His nostrils changed shape, as did his eyes. A long tail formed, making him appear much larger than his normal six foot two. His arms and legs changed into strong, webbed limbs suitable for swimming. Fully shifted, the taniwha resembled a water beast, half dragon, half Loch Ness monster in appearance, capable of inflicting mortal wounds to enemies.

Conscious of Emma clinging to his back, Jack filled his lungs with air then swam just below the surface allowing Emma to breath but hiding as much of her from sight as possible. Jack headed for the mainland, his heart heavy. Things would never be the same with Emma now. Her hands gripped him, but after her initial gasp, she hadn't uttered a word. Shock, he thought. She would fear him now, and he hated the idea. Too late, he'd realized he wanted her in his life. He shied away from the word love, but it felt uncomfortably close to the emotion he swore he'd never let into his life again.

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Surreal. She was shooting through the water on the back of a beast. And that beast was Jack.

George Taniwha & Co.

Emma's heart pounded in fear but exhilaration, too. The taniwha part of the company name was real. She was riding on the back of a taniwha. Jack was a taniwha, and he stunk. She wrinkled her nose. Could be worse. Emma had glimpsed his teeth. The sharp fangs in children's storybooks were not exaggerated.

A wave slapped her in the face. An undignified screech emerged, and she grabbed the long strands of hair that grew on the taniwha's back, twining her fingers through it and using them like reins. Reality check! She was in the middle of the bloody sea. God, she hated deep water. Instinctively, she clung tighter, curling her fingers into the slimy flesh of the taniwha. Panic rose dangerously close to the surface but a glance over her shoulder at the three men brandishing guns put a realistic spin on the situation. She gripped Jack with her knees and squeezed her eyes shut. How fast did a taniwha swim anyway? Faster than a boat?

Emma concentrated on the mainland, praying they'd get there quick. She wondered about George and his sons. And George's wife Meri. Were they all taniwha? Did they look as ugly as Jack? Another wave slapped her in the face and she gasped, inhaling deeply. A mistake. Did all taniwha smell as bad as Jack?

The taniwha changed direction suddenly, and Emma's eyes flew open. Alarm surfaced until she realized Jack was heading for a part of the coast that was covered in bush. Heck, the moment when she could put her feet on the ground again couldn't come soon enough. The waves became bigger all of a sudden. Emma shrieked when one broke over her head. Panicked, she struggled, one hand loosening its grip on the taniwha's coarse hair to flail to the surface. Air. She needed air now.

A growl filled the air, vibrating through her ears like the boom of distant thunder. Then, her head cleared the water and she gasped a lungful of air. Another wave crashed to shore but this one only came to her shoulders.

The taniwha swam then stood at the water's edge. Emma attempted to scramble off the creature's back but the taniwha roared. She froze, trying not to breathe too deeply. The stench was a combination of day-old fish and swamp mud.

The taniwha lumbered up the beach with Emma on its back. It was a pretty color—a bit like the inside of a mussel shell—pearly gray with hints of pink and green. The color was the only attractive thing about the taniwha. Emma found it hard to believe Jack and the taniwha were one. Jack was a man to die for. The taniwha was plain ugly and grotesque.

They crashed through low scrub and bush until Emma couldn't see or hear the sea. The scrub gave way to larger trees—punga, karaka and manuka. The taniwha continued with its uneven lope, taking a small overgrown path. Ferns brushed against the taniwha and the leaf litter cracked under its feet but Emma couldn't hear a single bird. The taniwha—Jack—never hesitated. Gradually, the shadows gave way and they emerged into a clearing. Jack stopped, and Emma cautiously let go of his hair and slid down his slippery back to the ground. They eyed one another but the taniwha broke contact first. He lumbered over to a punga and stripped several of the branches from the fern tree. After laying them on the ground, the taniwha turned to her and gestured with a clawed arm.

Okay. It appeared they were staying.

"I'm going to find help." Emma turned to leave.

A roar echoed through the clearing. Like a clap of thunder directly overhead, it made Emma leap in fright. She took another step and the taniwha moved.

"All right," she snapped. "I get the picture." Maybe there was something of Jack in the taniwha. They were both bossy. Emma sat on a fallen log and glared at the beast. Its mouth widened, and she could have sworn the taniwha was smirking. Day passed to night and the temperature dropped. Emma shivered, fighting the need to sleep. Suddenly, the taniwha grunted. It ambled over to her side and scooped her off the log before she could scramble away. "I don't think—"

The taniwha growled and flashed its teeth.

"All right!" she muttered, screwing her nose up at the stench. He needed better dental hygiene.

The taniwha placed her on the fern bed and lay down beside her.

"You smell," Emma stated with a trace of defiance.

The taniwha grunted, and it sounded like a bark of amusement.

Emma rolled away from the taniwha and smiled. If only she could get used to the smell, there might be hope for them.

The twitter of birds woke her at first light the next morning. She rolled over, away from the clammy warmth to see the taniwha studying her warily.

"Morning," she mumbled, self-consciously combing her fingers through her messy curls. "When do you change back? You do change back, right?"

The taniwha grunted. He seemed to do that a lot but Emma was no linguist. Each grunt sounded much the same.

The taniwha walked heavily toward a path the other side of the clearing then stopped to look at Emma.

She sighed. "All right. I'm coming."

They walked for hours through heavy bush, scrambling up and down hills. By late afternoon, Emma was footsore, tired and desperately hungry. When they reached a clearing and a bubbling stream, Emma stopped, refusing to go a step farther without rest. She glared at Jack, half expecting a thunderous protest but he shrugged and strode into the stream, splashing like a playful child. Then, he stepped out of the water and stood before her. His skin glowed in the sunshine. He shimmered.

Emma blinked as the air around him shifted. The length of his jaw changed before her eyes. "He's transforming," she whispered, amazement coloring her voice as his long tail disappeared.

Soon, all that remained of the taniwha was the whiff of fish and mangrove mud that lingered in the air.

Jack took a cautious step toward Emma. She hadn't behaved in the way he'd expected. She hadn't screamed. Much. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"You make a very ugly taniwha."

Jack scowled. "Is that it?"

A slow grin danced across her face as she looked him up and down. "You're stark naked."

Reaction set in making his knees wobble. Jack sank to the ground and continued to stare up at Emma. "The last woman who saw me in taniwha form panicked. She fled the scene and was so traumatized she crashed her car and died. It was my fault she died."

"Oh, please," Emma scoffed. "How was it your fault? You made her drive? You made her crash?"

Bemusement filled Jack as she continued to smile at him. He opened his mouth to speak then snapped it shut. Hope bloomed and his cock rose in a silent demand. She looked damned sexy with that snooty superior expression on her face.

"So what do we do now? Have we got enough to fry Mahoney's ass?"

"Don't you care that I change into an ugly serpent when the moon is full?" He'd leave the explanation about sex for later. The whole issue was clouded enough already. No, he'd give her the worst now. "When the full moon approaches, I need constant sex several times a day to help me maintain human form."

"It doesn't have any bearing on our case," Emma said, but her cheeks flushed a bright red. "Can we get Mahoney for running the sports-drug racket and selling illicit movies? We have to do something about that man. He's a creep. Besides, I don't want our images for sale on the net."

And they weren't going to appear on the net. Jack would get them before things went that far. But maybe he'd keep them for private viewing. "I love you," he said.

"You do? About time!" Emma dropped to the ground at his side. She plucked at the white flowers of a manuka tree, before looking up to flash him a blinding smile. "It took you long enough to work it out. And the sex part is fine with me. I like sex."

Was that it? Didn't women get off on this emotion stuff? Jack stared at Emma willing her to tell him she loved him, too. She wasn't a casual girl. She must feel something for him. And they hadn't had sex, dammit. They'd made love.

"So, are we going to charge Mahoney?" She dug deep inside her shorts pocket and pulled out a foil pack of pills. "I took this from the room where they held me."

Jack straightened in alarm. "What did they do to you?" Emma looked all right, but he knew about hidden wounds.

"Tied me up." She shrugged. "I managed to get loose, and I threw a rock at the guy they left to look after me."

Shit, she'd even escaped by herself. Why did she need a big, bad taniwha around when she could rescue herself? "We have enough to make life difficult for Mahoney," Jack said finally.

"Good. Let's go."

"I need clothes."

Emma grinned suddenly. "Does this happen a lot? I mean you look pretty good without clothes but doesn't it get a little cold?"

Jack reached over to stroke her cheek. "Not if I have a willing woman to keep me warm."

"I won't share." Emma's eyes narrowed in warning. "I expect you to concentrate on me. No other women."

Jack didn't mind admitting it—he was having trouble keeping up with Emma today. She wasn't reacting as she should. In other words, she was confusing the shit out of him.

"We are getting married. Right?"

"You haven't told me you love me," Jack muttered. Marriage? With Emma? The idea didn't scare him like it would have a week ago. In fact, the more he thought about it, the better the idea sounded. Marriage and Emma.

"You silly man." Emma's blue eyes were full of laughter and something else. Tenderness. Caring. Her expression made Jack hope for the future, marriage and maybe children. "Jack Sullivan, you're a man to die for. Of course, I love you! Haven't you noticed that women fall over themselves to go out with you? Why wouldn't I want you? Come on. If we don't hurry, we'll have to spend another night outdoors." She stood and held a hand out for him to take. "You need clothes."

"I have a friend who lives not far from here. He'll help us."

"Great. I hope he has food." Emma couldn't believe Jack didn't know how she felt about him. He grasped her hand and tugged until she

fell against his naked chest. His eyes glittered as he stared down at her and her heart thudded with sensual awareness. Oh, yeah. She loved him like crazy.

A taniwha.

It didn't matter. She could learn to live with the taniwha smell. And the sex part of the equation didn't worry her either. In fact, it made her hot just thinking about it. Emma grinned as another thought occurred. Was that why George and the rest of his operatives looked really tired at certain times of the month?

"I love you, Jack." Emma pressed a chaste kiss to his lips.

He hugged her tight and deepened the kiss.

Emma smiled against his mouth, feeling so happy she wanted to cry. As far as twenty-fifth birthday presents went, winning Jack's love was a doozey. And now she'd caught the man, she had no intention of letting him go. It might take him a while to get the idea, but she had patience enough for them both...