

Anne looked aghast. “He hates clingy women.” She shook her head, and scored a line through the name her sister had only just written on the note pad.

“Tracy loves horses and Kane loves horses.” Lisa told her twin as if the logic was perfectly clear. “And she’s practically a neighbour.” Lisa replied, with dogged determination. “So we should include her!” She was not going to let her twin railroad her into constructing a particular list.

This was too important. If Kane was to find a partner from this list, then she wanted him to have a good selection of women to choose from.

With a deft shake of her head, Anne vetoed that idea. “She’s too young. She’s just, what? Nineteen? She’d be immature. She’d drive him up the wall.” Anne conveniently forgot that they were just four years older than Tracy and had been driving their brother up the wall for the last ten years at least.

“Well that is his choice. And, we need to give him choices.” Lisa retorted and without any regard for her sister, snatched the note pad and rewrote the name. “And he’s put up with us, so she might be exactly what he’s used to. Anyway, it was my turn to select. She’s in.” Then she turned to her twin, and handed her the note pad. “Your choice.”

Anne knew that arguing with her twin would be fruitless. Once Lisa had made up her mind there was no shifting it. So though she despaired of Lisa’s choice, she also accepted that there was little she could do about it. And she was sure Kane would simply ignore the nineteen year old.

“Lorna.” Anne stated without hesitation and added the name to the list.

“Lorna?” Lisa screeched, then rolled around laughing as she added, “Are you mad? You just said he can’t stand clingy women and you’re proposing Lorna.” Anne patiently waited

for Lisa to stop laughing, and then she scowled at her twin. But Lisa ignored the scowl as she added through a hic-cup, "Lorna. She's so timid it's scary."

"According to you. And anyway she's my best friend." Anne dared her sister to challenge that. "And she isn't clingy. Besides, Kane likes her. It brings out his knight in shining armour side." Lisa quirked a brow at her twin. Anne grinned, and clarified, "You know, want to protect and do whatever men do with Lorna type women." Lisa rolled her eyes in disgust, "And she is going to be my bridesmaid." Anne reminded her sister, "So she has to be at the hen party. Otherwise he'd smell a rat. You know Kane."

"Fine." Lisa grimaced and conceded as she added. "At least she's old enough. She's what? Twenty six?"

"Perhaps we need to include an older woman." Anne's lack of enthusiasm conveyed itself to her sister.

"No way." Lisa shook her head emphatically. "She'd be set in her ways. And would probably want everything to suit her way of doing stuff. She'd change the house. I don't want the place to change." Lisa folded her arms and shook her head to emphasize her point. Her shoulder length hair swung, as she added with more determination, "No I'm not having it. Can you imagine, she'll probably try to change him. I don't want him changed. I just don't want him to be lonely when we leave."

"Doesn't have to be older than him, just nearer his age."

After considering for a while Lisa looked at her sister, a frown on her brow, "So, who do you suggest? All my friends are under twenty-five and those I know over thirty are married."

Anne chewed the end of the pencil and thought for a few more seconds, then conceded. "Yeah. Me too." They both sighed as they thought about options. Anne began to say that perhaps they should forget the older woman option when

she blinked and a brief image flitted through her mind, “What about Trev’s cousin, she was at the engagement, she only came for a short time. She was attractive and funny.”

“Who?”

“Hmm, I can’t remember her name.” She scrunched up her face as she concentrated and tried hard to remember. “She was nice. But she didn’t stay long.”

“He has millions of cousins. Which one?” Lisa doodled around the names they had written down.

Anne frowned in concentration. She tried to re-visualise the scene. Then she gave up trying to dredge the name from her memory. There had to be an easier way. As the light bulb went on in her head, she said, “Phone him and ask.”

“What?” Lisa wasn’t too happy with that idea. It was one thing to sit with your twin and construct a list of eligible women for your brother, but quite another to ask your prospective husband to help.

“Phone and ask.” Anne insisted.

“You’re joking.” Lisa squirmed as she thought about it. “I’m not phoning Trev and saying we are drawing up a list of women to parade in front of our brother.” Lisa shuddered as she imagined Trevor’s response. “He’d probably laugh his head off, and most likely tell Kane!”

Anne folded her arms and thought about it, “Just say we are drawing up a potential hen night list and wanted to know the name of his cousin, so that we could include her.”

“He has zillions.” Lisa was not so quick to concede.

“Just phone, how many can he have? I’ll remember the name when I hear it.” Anne replied. And from the tone in Anne’s voice, Lisa knew they would not be continuing with the list unless she did as Anne said.

A few minutes later Lisa said, "He's only got one female cousin who isn't married and around his age, though she's older than him. Jacinta." Then at the look of triumph on her sisters' face added. "But he doesn't think she'd want to come. He seemed hesitant. He wasn't keen to give me her phone number. Said she wouldn't be happy about it."

"No harm in asking her. Did you get her phone number?" Anne scribbled her name and the number Lisa gave her. "Your turn."

"Charlie. She's my bridesmaid." Lisa replied matter of factly.

And for once Anne was in perfect agreement.

Anne nodded. "Yeah, plus she's Kane's type. She's got balls. She'll keep him on his toes." She wrote the name Charlotte then said, "Diana. She's also his type personality wise, and if he were a legman, then she'd be perfect for him. I swear her legs go all the way to her hairline. Did you see that skirt she wore to the engagement? Honestly, it was little more than a belt!"

"Focus Anne!" Her twin chided, but she remembered the outfit Diana barely wore. "Right, ok. Who else? Marie?" Lisa grinned then added with saccharine sweetness. "That's the perfect line up. Marie is such a homebody, if he's into the girl next door I'm so sweet I'd make you puke type! Ugh! Which we both know he isn't. But at least we've given him the option!"

"We need a vamp, a real bitch." Anne said thoughtfully as she scanned the small list they had thus far.

"I don't think so." Lisa replied without a moment's hesitation. They were not going to include someone they didn't like even a tiny amount, as they would more than likely have to meet with the woman on a regular basis if she succeeded in making Kane fall for her.

“Hey, it may not be our taste, but he might like catty women.”

“Then he is just going to have to find his own. I’m not hooking our brother up with a bitch. No. I think we draw the line here.”

Anne read out the list. “You think they’ll come?”

“To our hen week?” Lisa grinned, “They wouldn’t dare not, especially when we tell them where it’s going to be held.” Then she frowned at her twin who was now sprawled on her bed, “You think he’s going to say no?”

“Depends how we play it.” Anne grinned with a plan already in her brain. “An extended hen week, and yeah, he’d freak. A few of our friends coming to stay for a week instead of us having a hen weekend in Auckland, and he might think it’s the safer option.” Anne wiggled her eyebrows.

“Crafty.” Lisa grinned in response. “Very crafty. It might just work.” Then both girls looked at each other and laughed. He’d buy it.

Kane had been overprotective ever since they had lost their parents when they were just turning 15 and he was 25. After their parents had had Kane and then tried for almost 10 years to have more children they had given up thinking they would have a larger family. The twins had been their parent’s last attempt at invitro fertilization.

Though Anne and Lisa weren’t identical they were very, very close. But without their parents, they had spent their impressionable teenage years being brought up by Kane.

Most of their friends, at one time or another, had fancied him. And Kane had kept them at arms length. It didn’t seem to faze him when her teenage friends turned up and spent half the time trying to flirt with him, instead of spending the time with either or both of the twins.

And it wasn't as if he didn't date. He dated. Frequently. But he didn't seem to buy into long term. And as both girls were now engaged and soon to be married, they had decided that they didn't want to leave him on his own. And if he couldn't find himself a good woman, then they would.

## Chapter 1

Two months later, on an early Monday morning, Jacinta stood at the station entrance with four other women. They had gravitated toward each other, when they realised that the other passengers had disappeared and given that they were all single young women, it was likely that they were heading for the same place. After hesitant introductions, led by a very confident young woman named Charlotte, they had stacked the cases they had brought for the week and had begun to talk about the week ahead, using the opportunity to find out more about each other.

Jacinta, unlike the other women, was actually quite irritated, but no one would have thought she was anything but interested in listening to the girls chatter. And they were all girls. The oldest was twenty-six and clearly very shy.

Jacinta tuned out again as they talked about spending the week at the farm that had been the childhood home of their friends, Anne and Lisa. They seemed delighted by the fact that they were going to have a week at the farm. Between them they shared anecdote after anecdote involving Anne or Lisa. The problem was, that Anne and Lisa were not Jacinta's friends. Indeed, she'd only met them recently at her cousin Trevor's engagement party.

Her cousin was engaged to Lisa. And up until the engagement party, Jacinta had never met Lisa. Which only went to show exactly what this weekend was about. Jacinta was back on the marriage mart merry-go-round. Crap!

Of course she knew the twins had a brother. A single, very eligible brother. She'd met him briefly at the engagement party. He seemed like a nice guy. But she wasn't here to be paraded in front of him. With a rueful smile, she doubted he'd remember her. But then that didn't really concern her.

For years Jacinta had carefully managed her life so that she didn't have to put up with these fruitless matchmaking exercises. She thought that her extended family would have

written her off when she had cleared the age thirty mark. And after a few last gasp attempts to secure her a husband, most of her aunts had given up, deciding that she had indeed chosen her career over marriage and a family. It wasn't her career exactly. It was her independence. She treasured that.

Now, two years later, she found herself having to prepare again. And she was not happy. Not happy one little bit. She had a life. A nice life. She liked it. Comfortable. Secure. Independent. She didn't need it disrupted. And not with a cattle parade.

But instead of making a fuss, she had decided to use the strategy she had developed years ago. All she had to do was to simply roll with it. Let people believe they had got what they wanted, and then quietly slip slide ways. So all she had to do was survive this week. Keep a low profile, maybe do a bit of work if she could find some time, and generally make sure that the antics of the other women did not cause her any hassle. Easy!

While the other young women spoke enthusiastically about the week ahead, Jacinta took stock of her vicinity. It was quite a bustling little town, a lot bigger than she expected. But then she had not spent much time here, so she knew very little about the town.

She knew the Coromandel had fantastic beaches, and that it had beautiful native forests. She'd been to stay a Bach in Whangamata. Her best friend's family had their holiday home there. So she knew a bit about the Coromandel as she'd been to the Bach often. She hoped she'd have a chance to explore some more. If she was going to spend a week here, she was going to treat it like a holiday. Though as that thought registered she had to bank her smile, for she'd also brought her laptop with her, to get on with some work! It wasn't that she was a workaholic; just that she really enjoyed her sideline of creating computer games.

She liked the challenge, and she loved being able to create these fantasy options. Her hobby was the perfect foil for her



daily job where she worked as a technician at the local university. It was very practical, fixing minor glitches, organising different support systems, working on routine, relatively unexciting tasks. Writing computer games was anything but routine. It was creative, and needed imagination as well as her technical skills. And she loved it. There was something magical about being able to take a simple line of code and make it generate impressive visuals. She was working on one at the moment that was probably her best one yet.

A Ute pulled up followed by a car. The twins piled out of the vehicles. “Hi.” They called in unison as they dashed toward the small group of women. “Good, you all made it. Sorry we’re late.” The twins hugged the women and exchanged pleasantries as they did so.

“Jacinta? Right?” Lisa hugged her in her usual inimitable style. “We met at my engagement.”

Jacinta smiled and nodded. “Yes. We did.” Jacinta remembered her clearly, and had easily understood why her cousin had fallen for this woman. Lisa was very pretty, but she was also vivacious and charming.

“And you met my sister, Anne?” Lisa made the introduction while taking in Jacinta’s attire. Smart, casual but not what one would call eye candy. A pity. Lisa wanted to take the woman in hand. With a tiny amount of effort she could change this drab looking woman into one that turned male heads.

Anne tried not to focus for too long on Jacinta, but she couldn’t help but take in the conservative clothes. Jacinta wore a long blue cotton drill skirt, a white t-shirt and a blue blazer styled jacket. The others wore various styles of jeans. All the latest cut and all designed to highlight their assets. Most were adorned with trendy jewellery, and well applied makeup. Jacinta had small stud earrings, and absolutely no make up on. Her hair was cut very short and though it highlighted her high cheekbones, Jacinta had done little

more than comb it. No hair products to add volume or flicks or well anything really.

Oh well, Lisa thought as she finished taking inventory, Kane was not going to take much notice of this one. A pity. She remembered talking to Jacinta at the engagement party, and had enjoyed their conversation. And she knew that her soon to be husband thought that Jacinta was very special. And his opinion mattered.

Jacinta nodded again, well aware that she had not measured up as far as Lisa was concerned. “Yes, kind of you both to invite me.” All she had to do was survive the week and these girls’ matchmaking attempt. But Jacinta was out of practice and though her tone verged on the sardonic, the twins didn’t notice.

“Our pleasure.” Anne grinned then turned to address all the women. “Now, take your pick which mode of transport you want.” She gestured toward the Ute and car. “And once we load up, we can get going.”

Jacinta waited for the other girls to decide, then ambled toward the Ute. She thought she might get a better view of the landscape from the Ute.

Though she hadn’t visited it as much as she would have liked, she loved the Coromandel. She had been down to stay with Grace and her family in Whagamata many, many times. Jacinta thought the Coromandel had a certain majesty that she found both beguiling and awesome. She also loved the fact that one was so close to the Ranges and the beach. Her favourite combination.

The only snag this time, was that she would be seeing very little of it, given that the week would be spent being paraded in front of one particular man. A shame.

With limited enthusiasm, Jacinta got into the Ute. She found that Diana and Charlotte had already taken up residence. Jacinta hid her smile. Well, at least with these two she didn’t

think she'd have to contribute to the conversation over the next hour or so. She could just look out at the glorious scenery; she doubted they'd notice that she wasn't participating. Charlotte who had instructed everyone to call her Charlie sat in front, beside Lisa, their driver. Diana and Jacinta took up the rear seats.

It wasn't long before the girls had steered the conversation toward Kane.

"So, how's he taking this?" Charlie asked, turning slightly sideways as she watched Lisa respond.

"Fine." Lisa said and glanced across at Charlie, a smile in her almost jet black eyes.

"Oh really?" Charlie grinned, understanding Lisa's understatement.

Charlie had heard about Kane for years, but hadn't met him until the engagement party many months back. And she had decided that he was someone she wanted to spend quality time with. She'd hoped to work on him at the wedding, but this hen week was a bonus. The man was her perfect specimen. Tall, broad shouldered, slim hiped, athletic build. He was confident without being obnoxious, and he had been very, very, charming. He seemed to manage conversations with old and young alike.

"I mean, it's just a hen week." Lisa laughed. The other two also laughed. Jacinta feigned a laugh. "And anyway, I think he'll enjoy the company. He's always liked strong, feisty, women who have a mind of their own and can think for themselves." Lisa glanced in her rear view mirror and grinned at the passengers, "I mean he prefers women who don't fuss and don't fawn all over him. So he'll be fine." She indicated and pulled out to join the traffic.

Lisa stifled her grin as she thought about the invited group. Yes, he'd be fine, providing he didn't strangle Lorna or Tracy, he'd be fine.

Charlie decided she'd suss out her competition. So, turning in her seat so that she could face the two rear seat passengers, she said, "I didn't catch your name." And looked straight at Jacinta.

"Jacinta." Jacinta did her best not to burst out laughing as she watched the woman size her up. She was so tempted to tell Charlie not to panic, that she was just here to do her time and was no competition at all. But she doubted Charlie would believe her.

"Jacinta is Trev's cousin." Lisa kept her focus on the road ahead as she explained the relationship.

"Distant cousin." Jacinta muttered softly, but not loud enough to be heard.

"And what do you do for a living Jacinta?" Diana decided to get in on the conversation.

"I'm a technician." Keep it lightweight. Keep it simple.

"Oh, what in a lab?" Charlie's eyes widened. Ok, that might explain the drab dress code.

"Computers?" Jacinta replied without too much heat.

"Computers?" Charlie chuckled, tossed her long blonde hair, and turned back in her seat to face the front. "I don't know how those things work, I'm just grateful all I have to do is hit the on switch." She glanced over her shoulder, smiled, and Jacinta recognised the patronising gleam.

"So you must know Kane quite well then, being Trev's cousin and all." Diana stated. She needed to work out who had a head start, who would need to be watched.

"I've met him once. At the engagement party." Jacinta wondered if they were going to interrogate her for the entire trip. So much for just keeping a low profile and looking at the scenery.

“You were at the party?” Charlie didn’t remember her, and that had the confidence stepping up a notch. If Charlie didn’t remember her, the chances were that Kane wouldn’t either. Jacinta could see that the girl had written her off, and for a second she contemplated baiting the young woman, but then decided against it. Knowing her luck, it would probably end up with her being in exactly the position she didn’t want to be in.

If Kane liked feisty women, then she was going to do her best not to be feisty, and winding Charlie up would require a certain degree of feistiness. Because they were sitting at diagonal opposites, Charlie looked across at Diana, and recognised a potential competitor. She kept her tone light, her conversation chatty, “Diana, we didn’t get to talk but I remember you from the engagement party.”

Of course Charlie remembered the woman. Which meant that Kane probably did as well. But then who could forget a woman with legs that seemed endless and a skirt that barely started. Glancing at the length of Diana’s legs, Charlie wondered how had Diana had even managed to fit in the Ute?

“Diana and Anne did the same textiles course a couple of years back.” Lisa told Charlie.

“So are you working in textiles?” Charlie quizzed, deciding that the more she knew about her competitor the easier it would be to deal with her.

“She’s a designer. With Max.” Lisa stated the name of the label with reverence.

“Wow. Impressive.” That would explain why the woman had looked so stunning at the engagement. But then she was a size 8 and did have legs that one usually saw on a high jumper.

“Thanks.” Diana smiled easily, noting the caution in Charlie’s eyes. While Charlie had been sizing her up, she

had been returning the favour. Yes, competition. “So how do you know the twins?”

“Charlie and I go way back, we were at Uni together.” Lisa told her. “She’s one of my bridesmaids.”

“Oh.” Diana banked her frustration. Tough competition. Charlie was obviously already one of the family. Well, that could work to her advantage, Diana thought, after all, if Charlie had had access to Kane for all these years and he hadn’t made any moves, then perhaps he wasn’t interested. “So you’d know the family quite well.”

Lisa chuckled, “Well, she knows Anne and me, but you only really met Kane at the engagement, right?”

Charlie nodded. “Yes. We never seemed to be in the same place at the same time, when he used to visit you in Auckland and I never really made it out here.”

“Yeah, city girl!” Lisa teased and grinned at her friend. “So have you all been out to the Coromandel before?” They all nodded. “Well then there is no point me singing its praises. I love the place. Though I have to say Auckland comes a close second!”

“What about Kane? He must love living out here.”

“He does. He’s just the outdoors type really. Loves being out in all weathers. He used to hate coming up to Auckland to visit me, probably explains why you never got to meet him Charlie; he never stayed long.”

“Pity!” Charlie laughed. And everyone in the Ute recognized the honesty in the word.

When they arrived at a gate with the name “Mourinho” painted across the top bar, Charlie, hopped out and opened the gate, she waited for the car and Ute to drive through then closed the gate and dashed back to the Ute.

The drive from the gate to the house was another kilometre, and it was a beautiful route, hugging the coastline as it made it's way to a large modern house.

“Wow.” Charlie said as they got closer and she wasn't feigning the fact that she was impressed. “That is huge.” It looked amazing. “How many bedrooms does this place have?” She wished she had taken up any of the numerous invitations Lisa had made to come and stay on the farm. Him and the house. Wow.

“Not that many.” Lisa laughed, then added, “Six.” She grinned at Charlie, “But there are bunks out the back for the transient workers, mainly shearers, and the study has a sofa bed. Anne and I are going to share for the week, so we have four spare bedrooms, the study and the bunkroom for you to choose from.”

The Ute pulled up behind the car. Anne and the others piled out. Talking animatedly they unloaded the car and Ute and were just carrying their cases into the house when Kane Mourinho drove up.

As he climbed out of his Ute, Jacinta practically heard the other girls sigh and she did her best not to roll her eyes. Yeah, ok, so the man looked good. Better than average, good. But really, their response was a bit over the top. And ok, so his work clothes did everything to highlight the tautness of his thighs, his tight butt and the width of his shoulders. Obviously he would make a good poster boy for the Coromandel County set. The dark hair and flint grey eyes were a perfect combination. Reluctantly, Jacinta conceded that he looked great. She wasn't blind. But really, their reaction was way, way, way over the top. Jacinta wondered if she was going to spend a week with fawning, young women. They would drive her bananas. She wondered if they'd notice if she put in some earplugs.

Jacinta took her time watching him. Of course she remembered him from the engagement. He'd been pretty spectacular in formal clothes, but in this element he looked

exactly what he was: a man of the land. Raw, earthy, gorgeous. He was in his work clothes of blue short sleeve shirt, blue faded jeans, tough boots, and a hat.

He came closer, smiling at them. His eyes carried the smile and the women practically swooned. Jacinta wondered if the twins had thought to have some smelling salts ready.

Kane kept the smile on his lips and in his eyes. He took off his hat, dusted it against his thigh, while he used the other hand to settle his hair, and then he walked toward them purposefully.

Of course Kane had realised he'd been taken for a ride two seconds after he'd agreed to his sister's plan. And he'd had two months to prepare for this cattle market parade, or beef steer target practice.

"Good to see you all made it." He smiled charmingly. The fact that he was looking forward to this as much as he looked forward to a wisdom tooth extraction without anesthetic didn't show at all. He'd thought about absenting himself for this week, thought about it and had been forced to discard the idea as it was a busy time of the year for him. He could have delegated, but that would require as much effort as simply staying and doing his best to avoid being a target.

And then of course there were the perks.

These women were lookers. Great looking, he thought as they headed for him in a group. He planned on enjoying their visit, but he was only window shopping, he had no plans to buy.

Let the games begin he thought as the first woman stepped away from the group and walked straight to him. Not shy, he thought as he watched her approach.

"Thanks for letting us stay." Charlie stepped up, keen to make an impression and wanting to make an instant impact. "I'm Charlotte."



Kane grinned, it wasn't forced, she was gorgeous, "Hi, Charlie. I remember you from the engagement." And he did. She had flirted with him openly at the engagement, practically stalked him for much of the evening. But he knew how to keep her at bay, and he doubted he'd have much trouble with her stay for the week.

Charlotte practically preened, her eyes danced and her lips tilted as she smiled in delight and took in his appreciative once over. Ok, good, so he hadn't forgotten her. That was good. Better than good. It meant she had a head start on the rest. And well, really, the only real competition, as far as she could see, was Diana.

"And you are all welcome." Kane flicked a look past her as his eyes made contact with each of the other women, "Look come in. You'll probably want to freshen up." He stood to the side, one hand tucked into his rear pocket, "How about we do the rest of the introductions at lunch? Then I can show you around if you like."

"That's good of you." Lisa replied dryly and threw her brother a dirty look.

Kane winked at his sister acknowledging her message, "I just need to unload the Ute."

Lisa tucked her tongue in her cheek and glanced across at her sister. Anne shrugged.

Then Kane turned to the women again, and said, with careless charm, "Unless you'd like me to help with your cases or..."

"Good grief. No, thanks." That was Diana. She came to stand beside Charlotte, just to make sure that she was on an equal footing with the other woman. "I mean I don't want to speak for the others here, but I am sure we are quite capable of carrying our bags in." She was very aware of him looking at the length of her legs, and so she automatically struck a pose she'd learnt at the modeling workshop she'd taken

three years ago. Though she hadn't cut it as a model, the training came in useful every now and then. Today looked like pay day, big time. And if Charlotte's expression was anything to go by, Diana was making the right impression with Kane.

Kane smothered his smile. How obvious was that as a move. Clearly this one wasn't shy either. So, the rest of the week was not going to be dull. Kane wasn't sure if that was a good thing. Perhaps there was safety in numbers; Diana and Charlie could spend most of their time out doing each other. If they were too busy keeping track of their competition, they might just forget about their prey. He would live in hope. And pray hard.

"We can manage Kane." Anne told him, waving him away with a carefree gesture.

The twins had been delighted when he took their suggestion so well. For a few days they had worried that he would disappear for the week. But, he'd grouched for a few days and then resigned himself to the presence of their invited guests. Now, though, watching his expression, Anne wasn't too sure whether they were the ones who had actually emerged as winners here. He seemed to be enjoying the women way too much; he was supposed to be enjoying just the one. Any one, but just the one. Perhaps it was too early for him to have narrowed down his options, Anne thought as she watched him flirt.

Kane smiled at Diana as he said, "OK." He kept his eyes on her, "If you lovely ladies are sure." Then he tipped his head just a tiny fraction and focused his attention on Charlie, as he said, "Great to meet you. I'll leave the twins to sort out your sleeping arrangements." He dusted his hat against his thigh then tossed it into the cab of his Ute, and looked temptingly at each of the other three women, "See you all in about 15 minutes."

Jacinta wasn't sure whether to laugh or spew. He was good. Very good. She liked the fact that he was lavishing each and every one of them with equal amounts of attention.

Kane gestured for the women to proceed into the house. He smiled engagingly at each of them as they went in. Jacinta forced herself not to burst out laughing when he made eye contact with her. He was wasting his time. She wanted to tell him to remove her from his attend to list! But then she thought that if she did that, it might move her to the top of his list. He looked like the type of man who would want to be in command of the situation.

Anne and Lisa shared a pensive look. He was taking this remarkably well. They glanced at the women who were practically drooling, although Anne wasn't sure whether Jacinta was about to burst out laughing or not. Anne tracked her brother as he turned, then she looked at her twin. Lisa seemed equally bemused by his approach. In synchronicity they shrugged and headed into the house.

Once in, and with no one to witness it, Kane grimaced, tucked his tongue in his cheek and rehashed the last few minutes. His jaw already ached from that enforced smiling. This was going to be a nightmare. Though, Charlotte and the one with the endless legs seemed nice enough. The other three were mute but openly interested. He definitely had a target painted on his butt. Juggling them all to keep them at bay was going to be hard work. Too damn hard. He wondered whether he should opt for one, focus on that one, and hope that the others gave up. But then, that would be misleading the poor one he selected. He had no intention of being interested in them past the weekend. Kane frowned, as he did his sums, one was missing. Perhaps there was a God, he thought as he headed for the Ute and unlatched the rear. Though, knowing his sisters, if one couldn't make it, they would have drafted in replacements. Probably at least two more to make up for the disappointment of the missing one!

Muttering to himself he hefted a bag of manure onto his shoulder and carried it toward the garden shed. Their

housekeeper, cum, gardener come everything, also known as Rosa wanted manure for her spring flowers. Perhaps if he smelt awful enough they would steer clear. Wishful.

## Chapter 2

Some half hour later he knew that he'd have to be careful, "All settled?" he asked when he walked into the lounge and found the five women and his sisters sitting around chatting animatedly.

"Nearly." Anne replied and her eyes followed him closely. "We've done the tour of the house." She told him and watched his reaction.

"Oh?" He smiled at Anne, "I was looking forward to showing them around."

He was behaving very strangely. Very, very strangely. Anne frowned at him. He winked at her. "So are you going to introduce me to these lovely friends of yours?" Kane grinned, and an eyebrow quirked in challenge, as he remained standing and waited for the parade to begin in earnest.

Anne banked her frown. Yes he was definitely behaving very oddly. She and Lisa had thought about the possible scenarios when he'd finally conceded and agreed to the girls staying over. First they thought he would disappear, or perhaps be cold and distant, or just plain nasty. Though they doubted the latter was possible as he was one of the most laid back guys they knew. And he'd had years to cope with their antics. They had not thought about him going out of his way to get introductions, to actively seek out this company. He should be running for the hills, if he were behaving true to form, he'd be anywhere but in this room. But here he was, walking straight into the lion's den, and asking for an introduction. Miracles would never cease. Either that or he was practicing the biggest con.

"Charlie you know" Anne nodded toward Charlotte. Charlotte got to her feet and with a smile in her eyes headed straight for him again. Time to up the ante she thought as she flirted with her eyes. Kane's lips twitched.

“Hi again.” She said in a sexy whisper as she came toward him with an easy feminine grace. She took his hand then without any hesitation leaned in to kiss both cheeks, lingering for as long as possible. She took her time releasing his hand.

Kane couldn’t help the smug grin. She looked good in those jeans and t-shirts. Curvy, but slim. Not only did she look good, but she smelt good too.

“Charlie.” He smiled at her. He remembered her from the engagement. Perhaps this wasn’t going to be a total disaster. She could flirt and she could have fun. He’d enjoyed talking with her. And he didn’t have to worry about her. She might think she had him pegged, but she hadn’t a clue!

Kane watched as Charlie retook her seat. One week in the company of beautiful women. How hard could that be? As long as none of them saw it as longer than one week, that was going to be the key to staying in control, making sure they had a good time, but understood it was just for the week.

“Kane, this is Marie Machedo. Who drew the short straw and got the bed in the study for this week.” Lisa interrupted his thoughts.

“Oh, it’s not a hardship. It’s such a big room and the sofa bed is massive. It will be just fine.” Marie got to her feet and smiled sweetly at Kane as she reached for his hand. She was more practical than sexy he thought as she grasped his hand firmly, “Hi” she leaned in to kiss him on both cheeks as she had seen Charlie do. Big difference, it was almost sisterly. Kane banked his grin.

“Well Marie,” he kept his tone light, but his eyes flirted, “a beautiful, practical woman,” Marie practically melted on the spot when he added a smile to the words, “that’s exactly what this place needs.” Kane did his best not to roll his eyes. This was easy. They seemed to soak up every compliment.

“And this is Jacinta Reis.” Lisa gestured toward the woman who seemed the least in awe of him. But he wondered if that was just her strategy. Why come otherwise? “You probably met her at the engagement. She’s Trev’s cousin.” Lisa prompted, when she could see that Kane hadn’t made the connection.

Kane shook his head and narrowed his eyes in concentration. Then he frowned as he looked at the woman who stood before him. She had very short hair, jet black eyes and wore conservative, dated clothes. Not exactly trying to stand out, though perhaps that was reverse psychology in action, go for understated, to be different.

“No. I’d have remembered.” He kept the smile in his voice, and the twinkle in his eye was genuinely teasing. But the fact was he couldn’t remember her at all, which said something. “But you did practically invite the whole of the south island to the party.” He reminded his sister before he leaned in to lightly kiss Jacinta’s cheek. “Welcome Jacinta.”

Jacinta smiled perfunctorily but it didn’t register in her eyes as she recognised his hollow action and the meaningless platitude. She doubted he’d have even noticed if he’d missed her cheek, an air kiss was probably a closer description for his action. “Thanks.” She tried to make sure that word sounded sincere, but it was pushing it.

Jacinta hadn’t offered her hand, nor turned to collect a second kiss. She’d simply turned and retaken her seat. Kane found that his attention was snagged. Perhaps there was something in that reverse psychology, because she had piqued his interest. That surprised him, but he couldn’t dwell on it as his sister was introducing yet another woman.

“And Lorna De Santo. You remember, we were at Uni together in our last year.”

“Hi.” Lorna said shyly as she got to her feet, and then she reached up tentatively on tiptoe, braced her hands on his shoulders, and leaned in to kiss his one cheek lightly. She

might be shy, but she was not stupid, and when was an opportunity like this likely to represent itself. So with a great deal of courage, she then repeated the gesture and kissed him on the other cheek.

Kane imagined she would faint if he ever returned the kiss. He had felt her lips tremble against his skin, and he knew that she would run scared if he ever shared his idea of a basic sexual fantasy with her.

But she seemed nice enough! “Hi Lorna. Yes, I never forget a gorgeous woman,” he told her kindly, “So of course I remember you.” He told her and remembered that even at the graduation party she had been nervous and shy. No change there.

Lorna blushed. Jacinta did her best not to appear put out. But really, he remembered Lorna, a mouse, but could not remember her? Then Jacinta pulled herself up, it wasn’t as if she wanted him to remember her. It was simply pride. Clearly being a frump didn’t make one memorable, but being shy did.

“And last but not least, this is Diana Azevedo.” Anne stated.

Diana got to her feet confidently, kept her eyes on him and with cat walk grace stepped toward him.

He smiled in appreciation. “Azevedo, related to Clive?” He asked as she neared. She, like Charlotte, also held onto his hand. He let her.

Diana nodded, a sultry smile on her lips, as she struck a calculated pose, while she clarified, “Yes. My brother.” He was a high jumper with the national athletics side.

“Thought the length of those legs looked familiar.” Kane flattered as he took blatant stock of her legs, and the grin reached his eyes when he looked up at her. Kane knew the blatant once over would register with Diana, and with Charlie. That should keep them occupied, he hoped!



Diane smiled triumphantly, well that sealed it. "I'm glad you noticed." She all but purred.

Kane smiled winningly at her as she leaned in to kiss him. She caught him square on the mouth. Of course they both knew it had been a calculated, deliberate action. With a careless apologetic shrug and a contradicting smug twinkle in her eyes she stepped back.

Kane had to reassess. That one definitely wasn't backward at coming forward. Though their lips had made just the briefest of contact, she had taken the opportunity to tease his lips with the tip of her tongue. Definitely not shy. And clearly not likely to be fazed by any of his sexual fantasies! Now if only she didn't see him as a meal ticket. Pity.

"Well ladies, it's great to have you here."

Jacinta smothered her chuckle when she heard the collective sigh as the other women practically melted at his feet. Ok, he was good. The man could work a crowd, especially if the crowd was all female. Even she wasn't immune. She'd been miffed when he hadn't remembered her. Even more miffed when he said he hadn't remembered her! He was attractive. Charming. Rugged. Cordial. And downright dangerous to women! All women. Somehow Jacinta knew that she would have enjoyed his company, if he weren't being paraded in front of them and vice versa.

"Tracy's coming tomorrow." Anne told him as she took note of his sudden interest in Diana.

He nodded, and though he quietly wished for a bit of peace and quiet, he said, "I thought there was one missing." He gestured toward the patio doors, glanced at each woman and then said, "Rosa's served lunch on the deck."

He hadn't bothered to check how the twins hoped to sleep their six friends, in fact he had kept well out of their plans after they had roped him into it without giving him an opt out clause.

Jacinta watched him as he waited for each of the women to get to their feet and gestured for them to proceed toward the patio. He seemed to have a particular flare for making each one feel special as they passed by him on the way to the door. Jacinta caught his eye and couldn't help the twinkle and then she saw curiosity register in his eyes. Obviously he wasn't sure what to make of her, that could be a problem, she thought as she stepped out onto the patio. She didn't want him curious, or interested or anything for that matter. She was here to avoid starting world war three, and to get some work done.

Kane registered that the one with short hair, Jacinta, he thought her name was, seemed to be almost laughing at him. He wasn't sure whether she just hadn't got a handle on this flirting business or whether she was genuinely laughing at him. He banked a frown as he followed the group out.

Lunch was interesting. Charlie, Diana and Marie were in their element. Jacinta watched with hidden interest as they vied for Kane's attention. And he was clearly noticing. He teased them and they bantered good-naturedly in return.

What surprised Jacinta was the fact that he didn't simply pay attention to the loudest ones in the group. He also took the time to make Lorna feel at ease, and that surprised Jacinta. Then she noticed that he wasn't leaving her out either.

It took a while to realise that he was making sure that each of them got equal amounts of his consideration. He was clearly no fool. Jacinta banked a smile and decided that the best course of action was to just blend in. Let him pay her attention, just as he was attending to the others. She would see what she could learn about his taste in women and ensure that she stayed well clear. But she didn't think she'd have much to worry about, Charlotte, Diana and Marie were going to rope him in pretty swiftly and commandeer most of his time. All Jacinta had to do was stay beneath his radar. Not too low, in case he saw it as a challenge, but low enough to be considered boring! How hard could that be?

The next morning, just after 8, Jacinta made her way to the kitchen. Dressed in comfortable jeans, and a University sweatshirt, she doubted she would be deemed competition.

She was surprised to find only Rosa in the kitchen.

“Morning.” Jacinta tucked her hands into the pockets of her jeans, the baggy sweatshirt, tightened slightly, but not much.

Rosa glanced at her. Nothing special she decided, as she looked Jacinta over. Jacinta did her best not to grin. Better and better, that was another one she had managed persuade to write her off. At this rate she might actually get a lot of work done here with few interruptions. She could just retire to a quiet spot, and no one would miss her. Brilliant.

Eventually Rosa huffed and replied, “Morning. Are the other’s up?”

Startled by the blunt question, Jacinta stumbled into a reply, “Er, I er, I’m not sure, to be honest. I thought they might be. Do you want me to go and check?” But she was saved when the door swung open.

“Morning Rosa.” Lisa entered before Rosa could reply. “Hey, Jacinta, Morning. You first up?”

“I don’t know.” Jacinta shrugged and watched as Rosa murmured a greeting to Lisa, who’d planted a kiss on her cheek.

Charlotte strolled in. “Hi. Morning everyone.” She turned to Lisa, “Are we first up?”

But before anyone said anything in reply, Anne came through the back door with Tracy and her father. From the body language all was not well.

Anne threw Lisa a look. Lisa frowned in question. Tracy looked resigned. Alan looked calm. It didn’t take long to find out what was the problem.

“Hi Tracy. How did the competition go yesterday?” Lisa asked as she attempted to inject some degree of amicability into the room and dissipate the tension.

“Great. Thanks.” Though she didn’t sound it. Far from it.

“Oh, sorry, let me introduce you all. Jacinta this is Tracy Cotta, and Alan Cotta. Alan, Tracy, this is Jacinta Reis. And you know Charlotte. Also here for the hen week.” They shook hands.

“I’m afraid Tracy won’t be stopping.” Alan stated bluntly.

“Oh. Right.” Lisa mumbled.

Anne shrugged behind him and rolled her eyes. Jacinta wondered what was going on. Now if only she could have a relative like Alan, she too wouldn’t be stopping.

“I don’t think it appropriate for a young lady of her age and social standing to be expected to sleep with the hired help, and so far away from the main house.” Alan stated in an aggrieved tone. “I agreed to my daughter coming to this because I thought she would be with other women, in a safe environment, not in some outpost. A grown up girlie sleepover is what I expected. Instead she’s in the bunkhouse.”

“Dad!” Tracy looked embarrassed.

“I’m sorry darling.” His tone softened. “But I only agreed to you coming to this hen week because it seemed like a sensible thing.” that and the fact that he quite liked the idea of Kane as a son in law, “It wasn’t some drunken weekend in Auckland. But some unsupervised, poorly organised week, that would ruin your reputation because you shared the bunkhouse with Kane’s hired hands, is not acceptable.”

“I’m sorry Mr Cotta.” Lisa looked mortified. “We took it on a first come first serve basis yesterday.” She tried to explain. And there were no hired hands staying in the bunkhouse this week.

“Well you should have considered your guests safety!” He snapped rudely. Lisa cringed.

“Tracy can have the room I have.” Jacinta said calmly as the silence billowed around them. “If I understand what Mr Cotta is saying, his only objection to Tracy staying on for this week is that her bed isn’t in the main house.”

“Yes.” Anne mumbled.

“I’m happy to swap.” Jacinta stated. “I’m past reputation detonation state. Nothing to protect!” Jacinta tucked her hands into the pockets of her jeans and the large size sweatshirt bagged around her waist.

“Really. You wouldn’t mind?” Tracy sounded hopeful.

“It’s fine. If you want to stay, and if your dad is happy for you to stay here, I’m sure a room swap will be fine.”

Tracy looked imploringly at her dad. It had been her reaction to being given the bunkroom that had set him off. And she had certainly come with the intention of spending as much time as she could in the main house, after all how was she supposed to bump into Kane if they weren’t even in the same house? She knew they’d have lots in common. Their knowledge and love of horses for one. And she had lived on a farm, so she was used to the life. She might be young but she knew what she wanted. And she had learnt at a very early age how to manage men, her father in particular, so she knew exactly what she wanted and how to get it. First she wanted her father to kick up a stink to get her back into the main house. Then she wanted Kane. And she was going to get him. She wrote Jacinta off. But from below her downcast eyelashes she eyed Charlie with some speculation.

“Is that ok with you honey?” Alan turned toward his daughter. Tracy nodded and kissed his cheek to seal her conviction. Alan beamed. Jacinta wondered at the

transformation, from intimidating bully to putty. He smiled at Jacinta, "Thank you Ms Reis."

Tracy smiled at her father, and then once again kissed his cheek.

"No problem." Jacinta replied. This might actually work out to her advantage. She could retire early, get some work done. She could avoid the motley crew and spend more time on her own, with her computer. Perfect.

"Well I'd better go get your cases, honey." Mr Cotta turned and headed out of the kitchen.

"Won't be a second." Tracy followed her father out of the kitchen. Anne went with them.

Lisa looked at Jacinta. "Thanks for that. And sorry about you having to move. I didn't think it would be a problem."

Charlie flopped into a chair, "I don't know why she made such a fuss. She's daddy's precious little girl, isn't she? How irritating!" She would drive Kane up the wall. Oh well two less to worry about. Charlie had already written Jacinta off. There was no way Charlie would have volunteered to leave the main house, how did Jacinta hope to bump into him accidentally, if she wasn't even in the same place?

"It's no problem, really." Jacinta thought the bunkhouse would suit her down to the ground. She could get on with some work while here. No one would notice if she worked late or got up early and did some work. Perhaps the week wouldn't be a complete write off.

Rosa huffed noisily. "No problem to you. I have to remake the beds, change the sheets, do..."

"Rosa!" Lisa warned their housekeeper. Jacinta laughed. "I'll help you change the sheets." She told Rosa.

Kane joined them for lunch. Once again he was dressed in his work clothes. This time he had a navy t-shirt tucked into

faded blue jeans. Once again he looked like a picture postcard advertisement for a rugged man.

Jacinta liked his look. He seemed relaxed and genuinely able to talk to anyone. So once again Jacinta took the time to study the interactions. He was clearly a man who didn't like fuss. He went out of his way to make Lorna feel comfortable; Jacinta thought he did it out of compassion rather than interest. His tone was almost brotherly.

Tracy had used her late arrival to commandeer the conversation, much to the disgust of Diana and Charlotte. Charlotte realised she would have to reassess the teenager. She had certainly managed to fool Kane, given how long he had spent talking to Tracy. And for such a young girl, Tracy knew heaps of flirting tricks. Charlie wondered whether her flirting translated into real experience.

Jacinta was enjoying working out the different approaches adopted by each of the other women. Tracy was clearly going for the butter wouldn't melt approach; after all, she'd had years to perfect it on her father, if this morning was anything to go by. Marie had taken a different approach. She was showing how well she could fit in, just how competent she was at managing a household like this. She helped the twins bring things to the table, organised the women, and made the conversation links between quiet spells in conversation. All in all Marie was the general all round hostess.

If Jacinta hadn't been included in the set up she would have commended the twins, for they had clearly brought together a selection of very different women for her brother to choose from.

Much to Jacinta's dismay Kane had chosen to sit between her and Lorna, that way he was facing Diana, Charlotte Marie and Tracy.

"Rosa said you've been kicked out of your room." He focused his attention on her, and teased with a twinkle in his

eyes. It had surprised him when he'd heard she had moved. And over the course of the morning he had wondered why she had volunteered. He patted her hand in consolation, and though he registered a spark he was too busy watching the rest of the group to take much notice of it. Jacinta felt his touch with the force of a nuclear warhead and warning bells went off immediately.

Chemistry.

She could not possibly develop any chemistry with this man. No. No. No. She was here for one week, just one week. And that time did not include falling for a man, no matter how charming, or good looking, or compassionate or thoughtful.

Tracy interrupted sweetly, hiding her temper, keen not to be seen as a spoilt little girl, but determined to ensure the image she had cultivated over the last few minutes did not go up in smoke. "She volunteered. Said she didn't have a reputation to protect." She threw in with the right amount of naïve candidness to hide the jealousy.

"Is that right?" Kane's eyes flashed with laughter as he tipped his head to look back at Jacinta.

She was older than the others. And generally more reserved. He'd wondered if she was as shy as Lorna, but volunteering to stay in the bunkroom, because she didn't have a reputation to protect, even though the other two bunks were empty at present, didn't suggest someone who was shy. She seemed a touch aloof, as if keeping her distance was important. But then why come? He was absolutely sure that none of the women here for the weekend were under any illusions; this was not your standard hen night. This was a matchmaking week. What he hadn't fathomed out yet, was why Jacinta was here, because she certainly wasn't making the most of all the lifelines he threw her. If he had tossed the same statements at Diana, Charlie, or Tracy for that matter, he was sure they would have swallowed him whole by now. Even Marie and Lorna would have done something to build on the openings he was giving Jacinta. But she seemed to



just let them fly past. Either she couldn't be bothered, or she wasn't picking up his signals.

"Yes." Jacinta said simply but with a smile. Oh no, now he'd be interested. No, no, no.

"Why?" He prodded, when she said nothing more.

Jacinta did her best not to squirm. "Sorry, why what?" How did one stay uninteresting, she thought as she watched him inch closer, his thigh almost brushed against hers. He was trying to flirt with her. Was he mad? Hadn't he sussed out what his sisters were trying to do?

"Why stay there?" He asked, tipped his head slightly and waited. Jacinta heard the laughter in his voice. Ok, so he knew what his sisters were trying to do. But why was he playing them all? And why was he flirting with her. Surely he had bigger fish to deal with.

Jacinta's immediate inclination was to say something flippant in response to his question but then she remembered that he liked feisty women. So she shrugged, pretending to be tongue-tied and at a loss for words. She kept her lips closed and tried to look sheepish.

"Don't make an issue of it Kane." Anne advised from her end of the table. "Can someone pass the salad?"

Marie got to her feet and dashed to the end of the table to collect the salad.

Diana and Charlie rolled their eyes. Kane bit his inner cheek to stop from laughing out loud. Jacinta worked hard to keep her chuckle banked.

"This is lovely." Lorna said softly.

"Yes. Rosa is a marvel." Marie replied as if she was the hostess.

Lisa and Anne shared a look. They hoped Kane didn't go for her, she was proving to be a control freak. That was the last thing they wanted for Kane. He was an easygoing guy and a control freak would ruin everything.

Kane passed Jacinta the salad as the others began to talk about plans for their time here. He was confused. Kane watched as Jacinta's eyes lowered. Why was she here? She wasn't playing, well not obviously, and not with him at least. Every opportunity he handed her she seemed to bat away. As if she was completely unaware. Or totally naïve. That worried him. Perhaps she was better at this than he thought. Because she had definitely snagged his interest. It wasn't that she was playing it cool, she just wasn't playing. That was even more intriguing. She looked calmer now; her whole posture seemed more relaxed.

"Would you like some dressing to go with that?" He asked, just to try to engage her in conversation again and watched her eyes.

"No. Thanks." Jacinta helped herself to the salad and tried to keep her smile from showing. He was trying so hard. She'd give him that. He'd obviously picked up that she wasn't going to do the chasing, but from his tone she could tell that he didn't know what to make of her.

That was a bad thing.

She didn't want to rouse his interest. But how did one stay uninteresting?

"So you're Trevor's cousin?" He asked for want of something to say to her. Kane wondered what it would take to get and sustain a conversation with this woman.

"Yes. I am." Poor man. He really was trying to be inclusive. Her gaze flickered and then lowered, hoping he'd take the hint and drop the conversation. No such luck.

"From which side?" He asked, again trying to keep the conversation from flagging. He could tell that the instant he

stopped talking to Jacinta he'd have to deal with Tracy who was sitting beside him, and Charlie and Diana who were across from him. At least Jacinta wasn't talking non-stop, and she didn't try to commandeer his attention. She just seemed to take everything in her stride.

Even if he hadn't overheard his sister's conversation he would have pegged Tracy as a spoilt rich girl. She only seemed to have one topic of conversation, her. Diana and Charlie on the other hand were more interesting, but they were also openly on a manhunt.

"My great grandmother was his great grandfather's sister." Jacinta stated calmly and smiled vacuously.

"So quite a distant relative? But you are both of Goan descent?" He focused on her, took in the fact that unlike the other women present, she didn't have a scrap of make up on. Charlie, Tracy, and Diana had the works, all to make it look natural, but he could see the foundation, the blusher, eye shadow, and lipstick. Lorna had mascara and lip gloss. And even Marie had lipstick and eyeliner. But Jacinta's face had no make up. He thought her lashes were incredibly long, and for some odd reason wondered what they would feel like if they brushed against his nipple if she ever kissed her way down his chest. That thought brought him up short. She hadn't even succumbed to a welcome kiss last night, no chance of her making her way down his bod! He saw her lips move and realised he'd have to focus and stay seated for a while if he was to leave this table without embarrassing either himself, his sisters or their guests.

Jacinta, sitting so close to Kane, wondered about the suffusion of colour that made its way up his neck, "Yes." She acknowledged his comment and question with the one word response and continued to eat. She kept her tone light.

"So do you live near Trev?" Kane wasn't sure why he was going the extra mile to hold a conversation with her, she certainly wasn't making it easy and his body seemed to delight in tormenting him. But something about her seemed

to encourage him to keep talking to her. Something that he couldn't put his finger on. She wasn't the prettiest in the room, that would be a close call between Charlie and Diana. She wasn't the most socially accomplished, given how hard he was working to keep her talking. But there was just something about her. "I understood the Goan community were pretty close."

"I guess." She replied without looking at him and then proceeded to fork up some more salad.

"So you live near Trev?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean?" Kane knew the others were listening to him, probably wondering why he was banging his head against a brick wall, trying to keep a conversation going with Jacinta. And they were probably logging the number of minutes he had devoted to Jacinta. He'd have to change track soon, otherwise he was sure they would up their battle plans.

"He lives in Auckland." Jacinta told him with a smile. But he could see the smile was a sham, it didn't reach her eyes. "I don't."

Of course he knew that Trev worked and lived in Auckland, that's where Trevor had met Lisa. Where they now both shared a house.

"So where do you live?" Kane felt as if he was pulling teeth. And he knew he should give this up and focus on one of the others, before they started getting twitchy. From what he'd heard from Lisa, about the Goan community, they were pretty close, often organising social events. But apart from Trev and the people he'd met at the engagement party, he didn't know of any others.

Most appeared to have settled in Auckland, a few in Wellington, obviously others had taken up residence in other

locations, but his overall impression was that the community had established itself in one new migrant area in Auckland.

“Hamilton.” Jacinta replied.

“You work there too?” He was determined to find out something about her. Anything. She just seemed so self-contained. So sure, confident, but quiet.

“Yes.”

“What do you do?” He prompted, determined that this conversation would last.

“Work at the University.” She stated and put her fork down. Obviously this inquisition was going to take a while. Perhaps she needed to give him a bit of attention; otherwise he might just decide to lavish all of his awareness and curiosity on her. Not a good plan.

“An academic.” That surprised him. How did she communicate with so many people when she could barely sustain a conversation with him? Or perhaps it was him. With a frown he wondered about that. Perhaps he made her nervous and that had her clamming up.

She shook her head and said, “No. Support.”

“Admin?”

“Not exactly.” Jacinta felt a bit uncomfortable. Most people thought those who worked in her area were geeks. Social misfits.

“What exactly?” He grinned at her, sensing for the first time that she was uncomfortable with his line of questions.

“Computers.” She replied in a low whisper. Only for him to broadcast it loud and clear to the rest.

“Computers?” He widened his eyes. She really wasn’t what he was expecting. He wondered what she did with

computers. If she was in support, perhaps she was a technician of sorts. Well, that made things interesting. A brain behind those gorgeous ebony eyes.

“Jacinta would you pass the dressing?” Charlie smiled as she interrupted what she saw as a *tete a tete*. Enough was enough.

Kane had spent way too much time talking to someone she had written off as a no threat. Clearly Jacinta was a threat. Kane had spent the last few minutes with her as his sole focus of attention. What was that about?

Of course Jacinta was pretty, but there were several women in the room who were better looking. With a smile Charlie acknowledged that some of that was due to the others making an effort to bring out their best assets. Jacinta on the other hand was wearing student gear that was at best comfortable and at worst, simply dull.

Jacinta picked up the glass bottle and passed it to Charlie with a genuine smile. Charlie could have quite easily reached it without Jacinta’s assistance.

“Kane, will it be possible to ride while we are here?” Diana asked with a suggestive smile. Now that Charlie had managed to break up that little chat, Diana was going to make sure that Kane and Jacinta didn’t simply pick up where they left off.

“Of course.” Anne replied. “We thought we could go out maybe tomorrow or something.”

“Great.” Said Tracy in a breathy voice, hoping to re-snag Kane’s interest.

“What have you ladies planned for this afternoon?” Kane asked.

“A walk to hot water beach. And relaxation. You want to come?” Anne teased, knowing that he was unlikely to want

to be anywhere near the beach if this tribe were heading there.

“We could do with your man power to dig the water holes.” Marie put in, practical as ever and keen to assert her position in the group.

“I’m not sure.” He hedged, wishing he’d never asked about their afternoon. He hadn’t anticipated having to spend it in their company. He figured his sisters would have something hen weekend type stupid planned.

“I think he’s chicken.” Charlie tilted her head and smiled in challenge, “Six, single, attractive, women and him, would probably be too much to handle.”

Diana decided that she too should show him her assertive side, “If he wanted to, he could Charlie. I think he’s decided we aren’t worth the effort.” She quirked a brow at Kane.

Lisa laughed. “So, Kane are we worth the effort?”

“I’ll bring my shovel.” He winked at Diana who practically glowed in return.

They had dug 7 holes, with trenches to the sea water, to moderate the under sand hot springs, when Charlotte decided she was going to explore further along, and bluntly asked Kane to join her. He did without much fuss.

Charlie reached for her t-shirt and pulled it on, leaving her looking as if she had taken part in a wet t-shirt competition. Not to be left behind, Diana got out of one bath and asked if she could tag along. She wrapped her very short sarong around her waist and stepped up beside Kane. Tracy decided that she wasn’t going to be left behind. So she too reached for her towel and wrapped it around her waist.

“Any more interested?” Kane asked.

Marie, Lorna and Jacinta all shook their heads. Lisa and Anne said no in unison.

So the party of four set off toward the tree line in the distance. Jacinta could hear the other four laughing as they ambled along the beach, so they couldn't have got very far. Great she thought, finally some time out. She discarded the long shirt she had worn and in her black conservative swimsuit she burrowed deeper into the sand and allowed the hot water to ease tired muscles. Bliss.

A few minutes later Marie got out of her water hole, "I think I'll go join them."

Lisa and Anne smiled at each other.

"This is wonderful." Lorna said a few minutes later.

"Bliss." Jacinta agreed as she turned her face toward the sun and snuggled into the sand and water.

"Yes, it is. When we were kids we would come here often." Anne agreed.

"Thanks for inviting me." Lorna said. "It's lovely here." She sighed wistfully, "And, Kane is so nice."

Jacinta stifled her groan. So much for time out.

Anne and Lisa hid their smiles.

"Oh, I mean," Lorna was mortified. She hadn't meant to say that, it was just that the water made her relax, carefree, and she'd spoken aloud before she'd even thought about it. She sighed, she'd forgotten that there were three other women around. "That sounds so pathetic." Then she sighed again and with a wistful tone in her voice she said, "But he is fit." She rolled over, leaned on her elbow and faced the two sisters. "Does he have a girlfriend?"

Jacinta began to wonder if the other four women had underestimated Lorna. Clearly Lorna had chosen the best approach, hit the sisters for information.



“No.” Anne said. “He used to go out with someone, but that kind of fizzled a while back.”

“Oh.” Lorna licked her lips nervously, “He can pick and choose really, can’t he? He’s good looking, has a great body and is such a nice person.”

“And don’t forget rich.” Jacinta tacked on deprecatingly. “He is loaded!”

Lisa spluttered. “Loaded?”

“Yeah, rich. You’d have to be mad not to fancy a guy with this much money.” Jacinta worked hard to keep the smile out of her voice, and sound determined as she added with nonchalance, “Really, he could be butt ugly, but this farm would make him worth the catch.” She hesitated, wondering if she should labour the point. “Rich guy and all that “ Jacinta added in a feigned mutter.

She had accidentally hit on the right track. If she could put the sisters off, they would do their best to put him off. And between the sisters and her, she could avoid this whole debacle. Time to ensure that they bought this, hook, line and sinker.

So, with what sounded like a deliberate attempt to redeem herself, she added more meekly, “Er, not that I am of course after a rich guy.” Then she feigned sheepish, “I mean he’s just my type really, perfect, so the money doesn’t mean anything. It’s just fortunate, an added bonus. He’s my type even without the money.”

From the corner of her eye she saw Lisa frown at Anne who was looking absolutely aghast. Jacinta nearly burst out laughing, the sisters looked terribly unhappy.

Anne thought for a second, and then she muttered, “Your type?”

Jacinta kept her eyes closed, but nodded, and said in a dreamy whisper, “Yes, charming, attentive, caring, great

bod, nice home, car, farm, land, the trimmings.” She tacked on with just the hint of a sigh of contentment, “Just perfect really, don’t you think so Lorna?”

“Yes, he’s gorgeous.” Lorna all but gushed.

“And wealthy.” Jacinta stated softly, adding in a mock whisper, “Just what I always wanted.”

Lisa groaned silently. They’d included a gold digger on their list. A clever one, given the way she was trying to cover her tracks.

“He’s lovely isn’t he Lorna? And so kind?” Jacinta decided she would set the scene and leave Lorna to carry the conversation.

“Oh, yes.” Lorna replied without any hesitation. “He’d be absolutely fantastic as a husband. I’m sure he’d be perfect....”

Jacinta let her attention wander as she eased deeper into the warm water bath. It was relaxing, even with Lorna, Anne and Lisa still talking about Kane.

## Chapter 3

The next day, the sisters planned for the women to go riding for the day. They arranged with Rosa to have lunch packed and they had persuaded Kane to go with them. It hadn't taken much to persuade him. Lorna had practically begged him and he was such a soft touch that her simple pleas had secured agreement before he had even thought about it.

So, early the following morning he'd met with his foreman and arranged the tasks for the day, he did what he could before he left and planned on doing a few more when he came back. This hen week was proving to be more disruptive than he had anticipated. He'd assumed his meal times would be taken up with entertaining the women, but not his every waking moment.

His sisters owed him big time.

By the time he met them at the stables, he'd already put in three hours.

"Er, look, would you guys mind if I took a rain check?" Jacinta shrugged, tucked her hands into her jeans and said with feigned regret, "I thought I might stay here."

"But we are all going." Marie stated bluntly as if Jacinta's absence would cause total chaos.

"If she doesn't want to go." Charlie, ever one to lessen the odds smiled at Jacinta with pseudo support. She still remembered lunchtime, when Kane had practically spent every minute talking solely to Jacinta. What he saw in the woman, Charlie couldn't say, but she was going to do her best to make sure that it was short sighted and short term!

"I er, don't particularly like horses." Jacinta lied blatantly, without an ounce of remorse. "They kind of scare me." She murmured. "I was hoping I'd overcome that, but, this is close enough." Jacinta crossed her fingers as she told that whopper.

She needed to drop from Kane's radar, and given that his life centered on horses, this was the perfect time to bail. Yes, she could do this. She could lie. A little white lie. For a good cause, his and hers.

"Horses?" Kane looked puzzled. "You're scared of horses?" If she was scared of them what was she doing in the stable? "I'll get you Daisy, she's gentle as. You'll be fine." Once again he wasn't sure why he was trying to encourage her to join them. "I'll stay close." He grinned at her, wondering if that was what she was angling for. Maybe she was finally clueing up as to how to play this week. The fact that his statement had brought Diana, Marie, Tracy and Charlotte to instant attention did not slip his notice.

"I'd rather not." Jacinta looked down, because she was sure that her lie would be detected at any moment if she made eye contact with Kane. "I kind of got queasy the one time that I went riding. It's the height thing I think."

How many more lies could she come up with? Good grief what did it take to make this man loose interest. Perhaps she should look as if she was about to burst into tears. But she wasn't that good an actress. No, she decided. Keep it simple. He'd stop taking an interest soon enough. Please God!

"Oh." Lisa looked at Anne who rolled her eyes and shrugged a response to the unvoiced question, "Well, er, I guess I'll stay with you."

Well at the least the gold digger wouldn't interest Kane. He loved horses. They were his life. There was no way he'd be interested in a woman who was scared of horses. Please God! Though this week was turning out to be a nightmare, what with Tracy's little tantrum and now this scene. What and who would be next?

"Oh, no, no," Jacinta started to panic. "No, don't let me ruin your trip." How did one get some free time around here? "I'd feel awful. Really. I can go to Hot water beach and laze, that's my kind of day, doing nothing." She looked straight at

Lisa, “You know I could really get used to this lifestyle. Being kept in a manner to which I could rapidly become accustomed.”

“We can’t leave you here.” Anne did her best not to let frustration tinge her statement. It was exactly what she wanted to do, she really didn’t want to stay back and baby sit their latest prima donna. This week was going to be a nightmare if every woman chose a day to act the diva.

“I’ll be fine.” Jacinta told her, “Honestly. Go on. All of you. I’ll see you all for dinner right?”

“I’m not sure...” Anne hesitated as she weighed up her responsibility as hostess and her excitement to go riding with the others.

“Honestly. I’d rather go to the beach. See you all later.”

Jacinta strolled out of the stables with a smile in her eyes. She could hear the two sisters talking to Kane, as they discussed whether one of them should stay behind. So she turned around and added, “Go on. Or you’ll make me feel guilty.”

Anne jogged up to her. “Are you really sure? I could stay behind to keep you company.”

“No, I’ll be perfectly ok just lazing in the sand. And if you stop here, I’d feel dreadful. Go on. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.” Jacinta didn’t feign that. And clearly it was enough to convince Anne.

“Well if you’re sure.”

Jacinta nodded and stepped out into the sunshine, Anne returned to the group.

Once out of sight Jacinta returned to the cabin and retrieved her computer. She might be here for the week, but she wasn't going to waste her time. She wasn't here to snare a husband, and she had a deadline to meet. The computer game she had written as a prototype needed some fine-tuning, and she intended to spend the day doing exactly that. She put her laptop into her backpack, it had charged over night, so she had about 5 hours of battery time. Then she put her packed lunch, a bottle of water, some spare clothes, and her towel in the backpack. This week might actually be perfect after all.

She was walking past the stables when Jim, who she recognised as the foreman came out wiping his brow. He frowned when he saw her, "I thought all of you had gone riding."

"Er, no, I decided to take a rain check." Jacinta said as she reached him. He looked tired. "You ok?"

He nodded and muttered under his breath something about the twins not thinking.

"Is there a problem?" She asked him, more as a matter of courtesy than anything else.

"Nothing an extra pair of hands won't fix." He mumbled and reached into a bag, withdrew a bottle of water and drank thirstily.

"I'm a spare pair of hands." Jacinta told him with a smile in her voice.

"And a guest." He reminded her, looking her over. Nothing much to her.

"Not really. This is a hen week. A week of mad new experiences, they told me." She watched as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "So how can I help you?"

"You don't want to know." He told her, screwed the bottle cap back on and turned.

“Go on, try me.” She cajoled with a teasing grin, following him for a couple of steps.

“You want to muck out stables?” He tossed casually over his shoulder, stopped and waited for her response.

She wrinkled her nose at him.

“Thought not.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever done it.” Then she shrugged off her backpack and without hesitating went back and placed it beside his bag of water, “But if you show me, I’ll give it a go.”

He shook his head. “I was just joking. Thanks, but I don’t...”

“Come on. At least let me try. I’m stronger than I look.”

He looked at her and frowned.

“Go on!”

He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe he was about to allow her to help. “OK, but stop when you want, ok?” He figured she’d give it a go, realise how hard it was and pack it in.

Two hours later he was still waiting for her to cry off. She had swept as he’d shown her, heaved dirty smelling soiled hay into the wheel barrow and left him to cart it out to dispose, while she put down new, clean straw. So she had only managed three stalls to his seven, but that was three less than he would have to do. He had done one before she had arrived.

What had probably surprised him even more than her work ethic, was the fact that he had enjoyed working with her. After he had shown her what to do, she had simply got on with it. Hadn’t talked non-stop. He’d half expected her to hit him up for information about Kane. Thought perhaps that

was her ploy. But, no, she had simply done what he had told her, not as quickly as he managed, but she had helped.

“Ok. That’s us.” He told her as he wiped a hand across his forehead before putting his hat back on. “Thanks.”

“Hey, no problem. I can chalk that up to a new experience.” She followed him to the water pump. She arched her back, and let a kink work itself out. “I think I should head for the springs now.” Then she grinned at him, “You do that every day?” She stretched her back again, bending sideways and then front and back, and felt muscles, she’d only ever read about, signal their presence.

“Yeah, Kane and I usually.”

“Ah.” She glanced around. “I thought there were two other guys working here.”

“They’re fixing fence today. It’s an endless task. Left pretty early. Probably be back later once they’ve done that section.”

“What time do you think Kane and the rest will be back?” She stopped stretching.

Jim looked at his watch. “Kane said he hoped to be back around 5. We’ve still got the deer to check.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to help you there.”

He nodded. “Thanks for mucking out. Not the nicest of jobs.”

“I needed the exercise. At least this way I won’t have to worry about eating Rosa’s fab desserts.”

“Thanks.” He removed his glove and held out his hand. She shook it. They smiled at each other. Then Jim turned to head off.



But he'd taken less than a couple of strides when a sudden thought struck Jacinta. "Er, Jim."

He turned around. "Yeah?"

"Could you do me a favour?" She came back toward him, her brow furrowed as she contemplated what might happen if she didn't get this sorted.

Here it comes, he thought, never get something for nothing. He shrugged cautiously. "If I can."

"Could we keep this between the two of us?" She sounded almost sheepish.

"Keep what?"

"Me helping out." She came closer, ran her fingers through her short hair and said, "I'd rather the others didn't know I helped you with the stables."

He raised his brows. That sounded incredible. She didn't want them to know? Not possible. She'd want the opposite. How else was she going to get on Kane's good side?

"I mean, they'd probably think I'm a martyr or something, and it might become awkward. You know, being a goody two shoes!" She shifted. She hadn't thought about this when she had volunteered. She certainly didn't want Kane knowing about this. "So, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone, not Kane, or Anne, Lisa or well anyone."

"You don't want anyone to know?" He frowned as he registered the sincerity. It wasn't a line. She didn't want him to tell anyone that she had mucked out the stables. Stranger and stranger. Hadn't she realised she could probably make Kane sit up and take notice if he heard she'd helped?

"I didn't do it for the attention." She stated simply, "I just thought I'd help, and I had time to spare. It seemed like a good idea at the time." She bit her lip then grinned, "Now I'm just rambling, aren't I?"

He smiled.

“Sorry.” She tucked her hands in her jeans pockets, “But I really would appreciate it if no one knew about this.”

“Don’t you want him to like you?” Jim frowned again as it dawned on him that she really might not have helped him to get into Kane’s good books.

“Oh, it’s not that.” She looked at the ground, “er, I, er, just would rather no one knew.”

Jim shook his head. Then he nodded. “Ok. Don’t worry. I won’t say anything. Unless he asks. I don’t lie to him. Not about anything.”

Jacinta grimaced. “Pity.” She muttered as she scuffed a stone, “Let’s hope he doesn’t ask.”

Jim wondered if she was going for reverse psychology. Tell him not to tell, in the hope of prompting him to tell. Women!

She picked up her backpack, and slung it across one shoulder. Those hot springs were going to be perfect, she thought as she felt the presence of muscles she never knew she had. Jim watched her walk away and wondered whether he was meant to tell or not tell. He rubbed the back of his neck, muttering to himself as he turned and headed toward the house.

Her battery ran out just before four pm. She debated whether to stay put or head back to the bunkhouse. The computer deadline urged her home. So she packed up and headed back.

Around half four she headed for the house, if she was going to pretend to be interested but not interesting, she needed to at least pretend an interest in him, and all things connected to him. So she headed for the house. She was shooed out of the kitchen by Rosa, and after debating whether to head into the sitting room, study or dining room, opted eventually for

the room that housed lots of books, and comfy chairs. It opened out on to the deck, and she thought she would be able to hear them when they returned.

They returned just after five. It must have been a good trip. They looked happy and exhausted and were chattering loudly. She heard them all agree to shower and meet downstairs, so she decided to stay put until the first one came down, then she would follow them into whichever room they opted to use. And anyway, she'd found a really interesting book to read. It was one she had planned on buying, by one of her favourite authors. So as the girls' voices gradually faded, she returned her attention to the book.

So with her head still buried in the book she had been planning to read since it came out earlier last month, she didn't hear Kane come into the room, some half hour later.

From the doorway, Kane stood for several moments and just studied her. She had curled up on the settee, her elbow resting on the armrest, propping up her head, her other hand keeping the book open on her lap. Her legs curled up beside her. Totally engrossed in her reading.

"Here you are." He told her, and she shrieked in fright. "Sorry." He winced, but his eyes couldn't help but show the fact that her reaction had amused him, "I didn't mean to startle you."

"I didn't hear you come in." She automatically swung her legs down and allowed her bare toes to blindly find her sandals.

"Obviously." He smiled as he came further into the room, "I went to the bunkhouse, you weren't there, Rosa said you were in the house."

Jacinta put the book down. Her heart was still thundering. "That's ok, isn't it?"

“Sure.” He had showered and changed. He smelt good. Jacinta wondered why the women were taking so long. She needed them around, so that he could ‘spread the love’! “Can I get you a pre dinner drink?” he wondered about the twinkle that appeared in her eyes.

“No, thanks.”

So he came and sat on the couch beside her, picking up the book she had put down. He scanned the cover.

“Interesting choice.” And that worried him. It was his latest purchase.

“I guess you’ve read it?” She muttered, and wished she hadn’t been caught reading it. Knowing her luck, it was probably his favourite.

He nodded. “I wouldn’t have said it was your genre preference.” He wondered whether she had done her homework and had deliberately chosen that book knowing it was one of his favourite authors. Surely the women at this hen week thing couldn’t be that calculating?

“Oh?” She shrugged. “What would you say is my kind of reading?”

“Not sci fi.” He told her. “More like chick lit.”

“Ah, now you are confusing me with Charlie, an easy mistake.”

He laughed.

“Or maybe Diana.” She added gamely. Jacinta couldn’t help but tease. Then wished she hadn’t.

“Ok, ok.” He smiled at her, “So apart from sci fi, what else do you read?”

“Depends on my mood.” She didn’t want to talk to him about her reading habits, that would take things to a more

personal level, and she had no intention of taking him to any personal level.

For a second or two there was silence. Then he said, “And you opted for sci fi now because...”

“Apparently it is your favourite genre.” She told him, deciding to fish, this just might be what she needed to derail his interest. From her limited knowledge of him, she thought he would hate the fact that he’d been researched. That would make the hunt closer to a stalk. He wouldn’t enjoy that. Who would?

“And you know that?” His eyebrow rose as he tacked on, “How?” He began to withdraw. Ok, so she may not be as obvious as the others, as forward. But she had clearly painted a target on his butt too. And she was more calculated in her approach if she had gone to such lengths.

“Your sisters are founts of information!” Jacinta smiled guilelessly, and tried to look coy. Well this was definitely a better strategy. He looked more cautious now. More wary about talking with her, here, on his own. Perfect.

“So you...?” Well that confirmed it. But at least she was direct. She could have feigned interest, pretended her choice of subject matter was just coincidence.

“Asked!” She sensed he was backing off. Thank goodness for that.

“You know, from what I know about Goan women, and I admit that it is very limited knowledge, but, from what I know of them, you aren’t typical.” He said in a very calm, reserved voice.

“Oh really? But I’m probably only one eighth Goan, my grandfather was Goan.” She quirked a brow, sensing that she had him well and truly in full flight mode. Perfect. Now to just help him fly faster. A nice gentle shove. “Any way what makes you say that?”

“You’re single.” He told her, and again wondered about that twinkle that had suddenly appeared in her eyes.

“Ah, but not for long.” She challenged with just the right amount of demureness and hope, all the time hoping that she wasn’t over doing it. She didn’t want him to figure out just how keen she was to ensure he didn’t see her as a prospective wife.

“And you seem a touch more independent.” He continued as he sifted through the information she had provided thus far. What he knew about her and how she behaved just didn’t seem to tally. Sometimes she appeared reticent and others she seemed to be like the others here for the week, in hot pursuit.

“I think your sample of Goan women is skewed. How many do you know?” She said dryly as she thought about her friend Grace and Grace’s sisters. No one would or could accuse those women of being anything but independent. And they were 100% Goan.

“Just you and some of Trev’s relatives. So you are probably right.” He tilted his head, kept his eyes on hers and said, “So tell me a bit about you.”

Oh shit! Thought Jacinta. After all that, he still hadn’t run for the hills. What was the matter with the man? Did he want to be trapped? Here she was trying to ensure that he ran a mile and he was inching back. Idiot man. “Me?” She hedged, playing for time. Then she smiled modestly at him, “Why don’t you start by telling me about you.”

“Me?” Both eyebrows winged up ward. He folded his arms and leaned slightly back.

She nodded, peered at him from beneath her lashes and said in just a faint whisper, “You.”

“What do you want to know?” Kane felt as if the room had suddenly got a lot warmer. That one word. The way she said it.

Nothing, she thought, as she began to panic. You are supposed to have taken fright. Why the hell are you sitting here still talking to me! So she shrugged coyly and looked at him from beneath her lashes as she said, “Whatever you feel comfortable telling me.”

He laughed apprehensively and shifted slightly, though he unfolded his arms and remained half turned to face her. “See, there, that isn’t a typical Goan girl response.” His arm draped along the back of the couch, as he tipped his head and studied her.

“Ah, but I am not a Goan girl.” She tilted her head and grinned at him.

“I stand corrected. Woman.”

“What do you think a typical Goan woman would have said?” And Jacinta found that she was actually interested in his thoughts on the matter. It was hard work keeping this man at bay, especially when he was so unassumingly charming. She liked his easy manner, liked the way he talked with her, the relaxed lightness of their conversation.

“She would have taken the opportunity” He grinned cheekily, and took the sting out of the words as he accused, “to talk about herself.”

“Oh, that doesn’t just apply to Goans!” Jacinta replied and her eyes sparkled again. “Really, that’s every woman!” Kane felt the room heat up another notch. This woman was dangerous. She was reeling him in with simple smiles.

Jacinta noticed that he flicked a look at her lips and then looked straight into her eyes. Oh, damn she thought. Now, he seemed more interested. What would it take to make this man flee? Didn’t he have any self-preservation instincts?

“Ah! There you are!” Diana strode into the room. She was far from pleased. Even less so once she saw who was sitting on the couch, so close to him. Diana had searched almost every room when Rosa told her that Kane had gone looking

for Jacinta. And now, seeing the two of them cosily tucked up on the couch, Diana knew she was definitely going to have to reassess.

Whatever Jacinta's strategy was, it was working. He seemed to be seeking her out. Diana wished she could understand why. It wasn't that Jacinta wasn't pretty, though she wasn't as pretty as some of the others. Diana just couldn't see what Kane would see in Jacinta. Yet, here they were, curled up on the couch having a cosy little chat. Just the two of them. And he looked way too comfortable talking to her. Too relaxed. Too close.

Jacinta all but breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, yes, yes, yes! The cavalry had arrived. Now all she had to do was ensure that Diana bought her some breathing space. She banked her smile and feigned frustration.

Diana didn't miss the aggrieved look on Jacinta's face, she smiled sweetly and kept walking purposefully toward the couch. Without the faintest hint of diplomacy, Diana plopped herself down between Kane and Jacinta. There was absolutely no way she was going to be out maneuvered by a computer geek!

Jacinta now understood why the women were taking so long, for if Diana's appearance was anything to go by, they would all be dressing to impress.

Diana wore a short black, shoestring halter, cocktail length dress that gave one the impression that she was all leg. And she had great legs. She shuffled back, so that her back leaned against the settee, and it allowed her to extend her legs to their full potential.

Kane smothered his smile, now that was some move. His gaze tracked the length of the tanned sleek legs, noted that the skirt of her dress had ridden up a few more inches and wondered whether he should remove her hand from his thigh.



Jacinta had for a bare second envied Diana's easy composure and quiet confidence. Diana knew exactly how to play to her strengths. Her legs were now in full display. The casual way in which she had placed her hand on Kane's thigh as she shifted to make herself more comfortable while ensuring she broke up the *tete a tete* between Jacinta and Kane, had been smooth and effortless. Jacinta's eyes scanned Diana's face. Her face was well made up, but the make up gave her a barely there look. She looked natural, fresh-faced, and beautiful.

Jacinta glanced ruefully at her denim skirt and pale pink t-shirt and felt a touch frumpy as she shifted to make room for Diana. Well, what did it matter, she wasn't interested in attracting the man, so what difference did it make what she wore to dinner. She had showered and changed, but had remained casual. No one had said anything about dressing for dinner.

Kane left his arm draped along the back of the couch, his fingers now rested a bare inch or so from Diana's bare shoulders. But for some inexplicable reason he had no urge to lower his fingers to caress what was being offered. It would have been so easy. So, so, easy. But it did not appeal to him in the slightest. And that struck him as odd, for he had been consciously aware of the need to keep his distance from Jacinta because there was something about her that appealed to him and his fingers had itched to touch. But with Diana, it didn't matter to him one way or another if they made contact.

"So?" Diana smiled invitingly at Kane, "Just us then? Where are the others?"

"Hey!" Charlie bowed in wearing a low cut red silk dress that showed off her hourglass figure to perfection and ensured that the cleavage was displayed to full potential. "I wondered where everyone was. I looked in nearly every other room!"

Jacinta made up her mind. She was going to change. It had nothing to do with jealousy or vanity, she pretended to herself, as she took note of Charlie's pose directly in front of Kane.

Kane slowly got to his feet, "Guess the living room will probably be more comfortable." He suggested with easy grace, "Shall we?"

Charlie latched onto his left arm quickly, "Sure." Diana was quick not to be left behind. "Kane, that's a perfect suggestion." She smiled as she latched onto his right arm, "We'd have run out of seating options here."

Diana glanced over at Jacinta, took in her denim skirt and t-shirt and said with absolutely no sincerity, "Or sorry, we should have said we were getting dressed for dinner. We talked about it on the ride."

"That's ok, if you give me a couple of minutes I'll go get changed." She got to her feet.

Kane glanced over his shoulder, "You look fine as you are." He told Jacinta and noticed that Jacinta had picked up the book, and appeared to be checking the page number, as she walked toward the shelf.

"Jacinta?"

She looked up, "Yes?"

"You look fine."

She nodded and smiled at him. "Thanks. But I'll go change. Won't be long." If she wanted to convey the notion that he was her target she would have to show that she was willing to make an effort. So, lying to herself she headed toward the bunkhouse to change. Though what she could wear was going to be a problem. She hadn't thought to bring a suitable wardrobe.

Frowning she returned some five minutes later, in the one and only dress she had brought with her. It was an empire line, mid calf length black dress, that was conservative, but dressy. A classic. It was also one of her favourites.

As she entered the room Kane noticed that she had also put on some lip gloss and some mascara. The mascara accentuated her eyes. The dress she wore flattered her figure. He appreciated the effort, and then had to remind himself that he was not here to be impressed. He was here to make sure they all left at the end of the week.

At dinner, Jacinta figured out his strategy. He was keeping them all happy. Giving all of them equal numbers of compliments and paying them equal amounts of attention. Even she was included in the rationing arrangement. She stifled a grin. She could manage this. Play along. Keep him convinced that she was as interested as the others, and he would leave her alone. Perfect.

## Chapter 4

The next day, the girls spent the day organising a party for Friday night. A party at the house. A full swing, 70 people or more party. They planned on it being a masquerade party. And they had spent the early part of the morning phoning and inviting people, ordering catering and beverages. Then they drove into Whangamata to shop and do lunch and spent the afternoon, getting manicures, pedicures, massages and whatever else they fancied. They used some of the time to wander around the shops to buy what they needed for their masquerade for the party.

Jacinta headed off on her own, and bought a wig, some material and some bracelets. She planned on enjoying Friday night and she couldn't do that if he recognised her. She didn't want to draw his attention, but neither did she want to sit on the sidelines, when there was a party. She bought a masque that would cover up most of her face and she bought some cosmetics to ensure she was well and truly camouflaged.

The excited women returned just before four. It didn't take them long to decide where to go on their return. They headed in Kane's direction. He was sitting on the fence watching Jim ride one of their horses.

Kane turned when he heard the women, who were still several feet away. He turned back and grimaced. "You think she's ready to go?"

"When did they want her by?"

"As soon as."

Jim grinned at Kane's pained expression. "It's ok for you to grin. You haven't got a target on your butt." Kane muttered so that only Jim heard. With a smile fixed in place he turned, "Hello Ladies. A good day to shop?"

“The best.” Tracy said as she climbed to sit up close beside him. “But it would have been more interesting to see you at work. She’s beautiful.” The other women copied Tracy’s action and climbed onto the fence. Kane did a quick head count. There was one missing. Jacinta. Then he remembered she didn’t like heights or horses.

Jacinta took the opportunity to escape. She headed for her cabin. With any luck she could get at least another hour’s work done before she had to put in an appearance. She booted up her machine, and set to work. An hour later she was just in time to see Kane and his harem head toward another paddock. She could almost feel sorry for him. Almost. He was being stalked and there was very little he could do about it.

Jacinta walked toward the now vacant fence and saw that Jim was still working the horse.

After Jim cleared the series of fences and brought the horse to a gentle trot, Jacinta said, “That’s pretty impressive.”

She climbed to sit on the top rail. She hooked her feet against the rail below and settled into a relatively stable position.

“Thanks.” Jim brought the horse nearer and Jacinta gazed into the most amazing soft brown eyes.

“She’s lovely.” She smiled. “Sorry horse. I have nothing to give you.” She showed the horse her empty hand. Then she smiled at Jim. “I wanted to say thanks. You didn’t tell on me.”

“He didn’t ask.”

“Thanks.”

Jim nodded, then dismounted. “He asked if the stables were done. I said yes.” He patted the horse’s neck then looked across at Jacinta and a frown marred his brow for a second,

before something clicked into place. She could see confusion give way to enlightenment.

“What?” She asked and wished that she hadn’t.

“You could have earned yourself some brownie points and gone to the top of the class.” He told her with a fair amount of conviction.

Jacinta climbed down from the fence. He led the horse toward the gate just a few posts along.

He frowned. “But you don’t want to go to the top of the class.” He told her as he led the horse forward.

Jacinta bolted the gate behind them. “Oh I don’t know about that.” She said facetiously.

Jim grinned at her as it all slotted into place for him. “I do.” He stated even more convinced and waited for Jacinta to reach him. “Kane told me you hadn’t gone with the others because you don’t like horses, or heights.”

She glanced at him, saw he was looking at her with a fair degree of skepticism. “Ok, you got me. I haven’t a problem with horses, or heights.” She grimaced as she conceded she’d been caught.

“So why say you did?” Together they headed for the stables. “Are you playing hard to get?” He asked wryly. She laughed and then held her side as a stitch kicked in. “I take it that means you aren’t.” He said sardonically.

“Would you want to spend the whole day with that lot?” She demanded bluntly, then huffed, closed her eyes and shook her head, “No, forget I said that. I was just thinking aloud. That was ill mannered.” But true.

She’d spent nearly the whole day with them today and they had nearly driven her mad. When they weren’t hitting up Lisa or Ann for information about Kane, they were

describing his various assets, material and personal. It was like being back in high school.

Jim laughed aloud. He liked her. She seemed like a nice person. Direct.

“You ever been part of a cattle market?” Jacinta asked him softly and he heard the exasperation in her voice. “Cause that’s what this feels like. And don’t get me wrong.” She looked over at Jim and added, “He seems like a nice man. He must be a saint to put up with the six of us panting after him. Stalking his every move.” Her voice softened, “And he must care for his sisters very much to tolerate all this.”

“But?” They had reached the stables. Jim pushed open a door, and ushered the horse toward the stall.

“But I’m not looking for a man.” She pointed out, blunt as ever. “I certainly don’t need to be paraded.” Then with a deprecating laugh she tacked on, “Gave up on waiting for Mr Right years ago.”

He followed the horse into the stall, “Then why come?” Jim asked gently, sensing that she was not happy with the situation.

“My cousin insisted.” Jacinta explained honestly, “He’s getting married to Lisa. And rather than cause world war three in the extended household, here I am.”

Jim sighed in understanding, “Well, tell Kane that. He’d understand.” And when Jacinta laughed, Jim frowned. “He feels he’s on the meat market himself, prime choice cut of beef! But he’s dealing with it. I mean he might find some of you interesting, I don’t know. But if you want out, tell him.”

“Yeah, right, and that wouldn’t whet his appetite? The one who said no?” She shook her head disparagingly. “I don’t think so.” She shrugged when Jim scowled at her. “From what I’ve seen, though he comes across as laid back, he seems to be a man who likes to be in control. His way of controlling this situation is to deal with all of us equally.”

“What do you mean?”

“We get measured doses of attention. Compliments. Contact. Control.”

“Oh?”

Jacinta nodded. “At lunch yesterday he devoted his time to Tracy and me. At dinner, it was Charlie and Diana. At breakfast he concentrated on Marie and Lorna. He’s managing us!”

Jim chuckled. Yes, that sounded like Kane. If life dealt you lemons you made lemonade. Typical Kane.

Jacinta carried on with her reasoning, “He may not be interested in any of us, but I am sure if one of us said we weren’t interested in him, it would be like a red rag to a bull, and all sights would be firmly set on that poor cow!” She laughed at Jim’s astonishment. “Come on, you know he would. At the moment he’s in control. He can play the field without any real concern. Because all are interested. So he feigns smiles, dishes out charm like it’s going out of style and is the perfect host for all of us.”

“So?”

“So, that’s ok. Give him the choice and he can play. But like any guy, say that one isn’t available, and suddenly that one becomes the one.”

Jim roared with laughter.

Jacinta folded her arms and looked fierce, “I’m not planning on drawing a target on my butt! I just need to get through this. Two days to go.”

“From what I’ve seen and heard.” Jim walked the horse toward the rear of the large stall, but kept his eyes on Jacinta as he said, “You’d be perfect for him.”



Jacinta stood stock still for a second, then she glared at him before saying, "You wash your mouth out." When he chuckled she laughed then advised, "Don't even think it!" And with that warning she strolled away.

Jim watched her go, his eyes registered the fact that, yes, she'd be perfect for Kane, if she ever let Kane see the real her. She was down to earth. She had an easygoing manner. She was easy to talk to. She had style. She was hard working. She was beautiful. She would fit in well on the farm, because she was a natural.

The next day, Jim and Kane were working alongside each other checking the tack.

"So, any of those women of interest?" Jim asked casually.

"They are all interesting." Kane ignored the note of interest in Jim's voice.

"Ok, let me rephrase that. Are you interested in any of them?"

"Sure, all of them." Kane replied with sardonic amusement. "Every single one!"

Jim laughed. "All?" He grinned across at Kane, "Equally interested." Seemed like Jacinta had Kane pegged right. That was one reason why Jim thought she'd be perfect for Kane, she already understood him.

"What about that one with the legs?"

"They've all got legs." Kane retorted matter-of-factly. Jim threw him a look and waited, "Yeah, Diana's great. But so are the rest."

"Any of them less than..."

"Jim, if I was interested, I'd be taking a long hard look, as it is I'm just doing my time." Kane grumbled. "Two days to go!" Kane muttered to himself before adding. "Then I don't

plan on smiling for months to ease these muscles back into line. You have no idea how painful smiling can be.”

“What are they doing now?”

“I don’t know and I don’t wish to know. I got out of the house pdq. And I plan on being well away from the house for the rest of the day.” He grimaced. “You heard no doubt that we have a party on our hands. I’m not to worry apparently. Everything is under control. Like hell!” Jim didn’t laugh. Kane didn’t sound pleased. “A masquerade. I’m to get my costume or they will get me one!” Kane groaned, “What will they come up with next? Roll on Sunday.”

Friday night, by 7 pm the house was heaving with people. Masked people with amazing costumes given the time they’d had. The girls had all been coy about their costumes. Just sharing the odd bit of information. But Jacinta was sure they would all be knockouts. And she was equally sure they would all be easily identifiable. Not one of them would want to be missed by Kane.

Jacinta had decided to go Grecian. She bought masses of bangles for her arms, and arm bracelets, she’d bought some material and she’d bought a wig from a charity shop. She just hoped it was clean and didn’t itch. She was going to use the earrings and brooch set that she had brought with her. The yards of white cotton from the local fabric shop in Whangamata, was fashioned into an off the shoulder toga. She had cinched it at the waist with gold curtain cord ties, also bought from the fabric shop, and had used the simple twisted Celtic knot brooch to hold the shoulder strap together.

So it wasn’t Grecian but at least it kept the thing together. The only thing that did. Without it, the toga would slither to the floor. She put on her matching earrings, the brooch pattern repeated in the earrings.

With her wig of top-heavy curls and loose ringlets pinned securely to her head she spent time painting her eyes, in Cleopatra fashion. She used a heavy hand with the kohl pencil. Accentuating the line of her eyes, tilting the already natural upward slant into an even more dramatic line. She glossed her lips with a deep damson lipstick and then secured her mask. It was gold, a mesh of lacework that drew attention to her eyes. It covered her face, her eyes and cheeks in particular, and together with the wig, the deep lipstick and the heeled shoes she was completely unrecognisable.

She was at least three inches taller, a statuesque 5.10 now, and the short crop was nowhere in sight, instead she looked like a long legged, short skirted, Grecian goddess. She could hear the party in full swing, but decided to wait until 8pm to slip in.

Jacinta studied the crowd. She hadn't spotted Lorna or Marie. But she recognised Diana, Charlie and Tracy instantly. They hadn't made much of an attempt to masquerade. But then if your intention was to draw notice to yourself, you'd hardly want to be unrecognisable.

So the bunny girl with the long legs, headband with cardboard cut out ears, black leotard and cotton wool fluffy tail was instantly recognisable as Diana. Charlie's wonder woman with her chest out there and the high cut almost sprayed on shorts and a bustier with gold stars dotted liberally, clearly did nothing to hide who she was. A tiara, arm bracelets and gold belt to cinch in the waist did wonders to show off her hourglass figure. Tracy's gown was simply stunning, and with her eye make up, and a very ornate headdress, she made a stunning Carmen Miranda. They appeared to be making sure they got noticed.

Then Jacinta saw someone talking to Kane, you couldn't miss him. He was dressed as a Maori warrior. With several tattoos drawn on his face, his chest bare, and the grass skirt across his shorts, he looked amazing.

Jacinta smothered her grin. Well at least she knew who to avoid. She looked at the people around him. Charlie, Diana, Tracy.

Further away Jacinta spotted Lisa in 1960s psychedelic mini with thigh high boots and a blonde bob wig and Trev in his loud shirt and flares, talking to Lorna. Little Bo Peep. She'd have to avoid Trev, he, was probably the only one most likely to see past her costume. It took her awhile to work out Marie. But it was her bossiness that gave her away. She was directing other guests dressed as a dominatrix!

The music flowed, the drinks flowed. People danced. The noise level racketed up. She was having fun. Milling and dancing, teasing and flirting. She wasn't short of partners, and was enjoying the anonymity. The masked Zorro kept hemming her in. And she began to suspect that he was going to be very difficult to deal with if she didn't escape.

So when she realised the music was being slowed, and the pieces sliding into ballads, she slipped out into the night and edged past various people, heading for the semi darkness and a bit of time out. She'd need to devise a strategy to avoid Zorro, or at least, avoid Zorro's hands if she wanted to stay longer at the party. It was quieter here. Most of those on the verandah had headed back inside when the music had quietened.

Jacinta looked out across the garden, and glanced at the stars. It was a beautiful night. Clear skies, dotted with tiny diamonds. She made out the Southern Cross and was trying to figure out some of the other constellations and patterns when the scent on the breeze brought her gaze back to earth. She could smell the roses and without thinking she walked down the steps towards the rose bushes. She'd just reached them when she was stopped in her tracks.

"Leaving already?"

Shit! She recognised the voice. Kane. She'd managed to avoid him all evening, and she had managed to have fun

with other guests. She just wanted a bit of fresh air. Not an encounter with Kane.

She shook her head and the ringlets bobbed. "Rose scent, I thought I'd get closer."

He took her hand and surprisingly she let him. There was an odd tingle that she didn't want to over analyse, and decided to put down to a cool breeze. "These aren't the scented ones." He told her, as he gently drew her further into the garden, further along the path, further into dimming darkness, and several feet later he turned and gestured, "This one is."

Yes, she could smell it. "Lovely." She breathed huskily as she leaned closer, inhaled, and then grazed the petals gently with her fingertips.

"Have we met?" He asked her after a few seconds. Her voice was husky, he couldn't make out her face, but something about her was familiar.

Jacinta laughed breathlessly. "I am mortified. You don't remember me."

His eyes focused on her lips, then flicked up to her eyes, but the dim moonlight, the mask and the make up were great camouflage. "You seem familiar."

"That's a poor line!" She chided with a chuckle.

He laughed. "It's dark out here, give me a break!" Still studying her. "Shall we dance?" He reached for her hands.

"Dance?" That threw her.

"Hmm" He tugged her closer, "I never forget how a woman dances or rides." He pulled her into his arms gently. They could barely hear the music, but they moved slowly. They were almost cheek-to-cheek. At six foot and bare foot, he was just a couple of inches taller than she was in her high

heels and high hair. After a second he drew her closer. She let him. In silence they swayed.

They heard the music come to an end. Slowly he tilted his head away, giving him room to look into her eyes. “You move beautifully.” He looked into her startled eyes, “But we haven’t danced before. Do you ride?”

She nodded. “Yes.” And for the life of her she didn’t know why she did it, but she traced her lips with the tip of her tongue. She saw the impact of that action on him. Felt the impact. Heard the impact. The swift inhale of breath, the hardening of his body, the glitter in his eyes, and still she didn’t take evasive action.

Instead she waited.

Not long, less than a second. Her lips parted almost at the same instant that his lips touched hers. Her heels sank into the grass when they staggered off the gravel path. It was either that or her knees had buckled. As she sank he gathered her closer.

The kiss deepened. His hands moved to frame her face, to caress her cheeks, as his lips fused and teased and gently ignited. The kiss went on.

But he wanted more. She wanted more.

When Kane dropped his head to kiss her neck, her bare shoulder, the exposed curve of her breast, Jacinta held his head to her. Encouraging him, she pressed closer, and allowed further liberty. His hand haphazardly pushed her toga away from her breast, and without hesitation his lips took the nipple in his mouth. It was then that her knees really did give way and Jacinta sank down, toward the grass, taking him with her.

On their knees, his arms still locked around her, his lips traced a path back to her mouth. His tongue gently penetrated the warmth of her mouth and his fingers brushed the satin skin that was bared to him. Jacinta felt her body

spark into life. Kane massaged her gently, his palm against the swell of her breast, tenderly he dragged his fingers against the hard nub, then gently caught the tight bud between his finger and thumb. Jacinta moaned against his lips and clutched at his scalp.

Kane pulled away slowly, and with limited moonlight, took in the sight of her semi-nakedness.

“More.” Jacinta was beyond coherence.

“Now.” He demanded, then he kissed her again. His hand made light work of the brooch, discarded it with no care and then he eased down the rest of the material.

Her toga held at her waist by the cord left her naked from the top up as she hadn’t worn a bra. The cold night air didn’t even register on her naked skin as the heat of their interaction forced adrenaline to surge.

Slowly they toppled sideways onto the grass, and as they fell her short-skirted toga rode up her thigh. Jacinta felt the grass against her legs, her thighs, and her hips. The material bunched at her back, against her waist.

She heard rather than felt Kane discard the grass skirt he’d worn. It rattled as the belt hit the grass. Then he resumed kissing her. The kiss drugged them both.

A few seconds later he was lying between her legs, pressed against her from shoulder to hip, rubbing against her. The juncture between her thighs flooded with moisture. Her knickers were soaked. Jacinta wanted more. Her touch became bolder. Sliding down his back, caressing, kneading, teasing the indentations between the vertebrae, she traced a path toward his butt.

Kane sucked in a breath when her fingers slid past the waistband of his shorts. Several seconds later he pulled away to breathe, “I need to be inside you.” He told her bluntly, well beyond the point of reservation.

She didn't have a voice. Her response was to tug at his boxer shorts. He lifted his hips to help her, his knees settling between her thighs as she pulled and tugged his boxers down. His erection pulsed against her hand and without thinking she touched him with a sensitive caress. Kane groaned. She glanced up at him, wondered at the effect she was having on him and then took him in her hands and tenderly brushed against the hot velvet.

He was about to come. And he wasn't even in her. Where was his legendary control? With little finesse and a great deal of desperation, he shoved her toga higher, and pulled the leg of her knickers to one side. Jacinta wiggled, freeing the material, giving him more access. Then with little sophistication and a great deal of luck, he placed himself against her, and nudged toward the damp heat. She helped, wiggled, and then reached between them to guide him.

They kissed. His tongue signaling loud, hard and clear exactly what he wanted.

He couldn't wait. His fingers brushed against her inner thigh, and felt her wetness. Breathing hard he was driven to take her, the warmth, the wetness the tightness cosseted the very tip of him and he knew that what little control he had was about to disappear completely.

He knew she was as ready for him as he was for her. With little elegance, and blind in the darkness of night, he took her lips again, his tongue driving in, past her teeth, to the wet heat. And that was it. He felt himself begin to shatter. Lifting his face so that he could look at her, he lifted his hips, then surged into the tight warmth. Hard and high.

And came to a shocked halt.

She bit down on a moan of pain and awe. Braced on his elbows in automatic shock, he began to lever off, but Jacinta was not having that. She knew there was more, could be more, and having come this far, she wanted it all.



She'd coped with the pain, now she wanted the pleasure. With her arms wrapped tightly around him, she took control and rolled him over. It wasn't difficult to do. He wasn't expecting it, was still confused by what he'd found, and hadn't expected, given the urgency of their interaction.

Jacinta's action forced him in deeper, higher, harder and he felt himself go, even as he fought to remain in control.

"Fuck!" He muttered hoarsely. The jolt through his system had him reaching for her, taking her mouth as he grabbed fistfuls of her toga and rolled her onto her back, and thrust until he was completely spent.

Jacinta stayed for the ride. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't subtle. It was glorious.

It was minutes later when he opened his eyes, and found her watching him carefully. He was still buried within her, gradually becoming flaccid but still buried to the hilt.

Jacinta was breathing deeply and her eyes were glazed but still dilated, as if she couldn't believe what had just happened and she was still aroused. His gaze flicked lower. She hadn't bothered to cover herself. Without conscious thought he reached gentle fingers to touch her breasts and heard her swift intake of breath. He'd never met anyone as sensitive as her. As responsive. To a simple caress. With one hand still keeping him braced, he reached for her head with his other hand and pulled her forward, so that their lips grazed in a gentle, tender, kiss.

Jacinta tightened around him automatically as her body brushed against his. He couldn't believe it. Even after that earth shattering orgasm he was getting hard. But he knew, that at least now, with the edge well and truly satiated, he could concentrate on her. He'd have control, he'd be able to give as much as he had taken a few minutes ago.

For a long second he looked into her eyes, wanting to memorise the look in her eyes as he rocked his hips gently.

Her breath hitched and her eyes dilated. The want, the need, the longing, the wishfulness remained in her eyes as she kept them trained on him. Then he rocked again. Slowly. A small fraction of a movement. Her breath snagged. Her lips trembled and parted. He lowered his head and kissed her. Tenderly. Then he rocked again. His hips tensing as he pushed gently. She arched, and sucked in some more air. His chest brushed a butterfly kiss against sensitive nipples. Her breath held, caught in the wonder of the moment.

Expecting heaven, knowing that it was going to be possible to reach it. He rocked gently, forcing her to take another inch, giving her time to accommodate him. Her eyes widened as she felt him stretch her again. He rocked, still in control, but angling his hips to go deeper, higher. Jacinta moaned as she felt the start of tiny tremors.

Softly he murmured something she didn't catch.

Kane kept his tempo, and rocked. Her nails dug into his shoulders, clenched him to her, as she felt the power of steel within her. Tighter. She could see the corded muscle on his neck as he strained to keep the movement controlled. She arched her back and bucked her hips, eager to have him take her, wanting him deeper, wanting him desperately.

Kane lowered his head, moved his mouth to her breast. That sent a spiral of flame down her spine, to fry her toes. She grabbed fistfuls of his hair, and tugged his head back. Reluctantly he lifted his head. Looked at her, saw the aching need, and lowered his lips to hers. Jacinta kissed him. Sent her tongue into his mouth. Ran her tongue past his teeth, then back to brush at his lips. With all the skill she had she fenced with his tongue, inciting him, encouraging him, willing him to bury himself fully. A flash of lightning scorched through her as his tongue matched hers, action for action. Jacinta broke the kiss, desperate to have him take her, begging for release, "Please." He heard her plead. "Please. Now. Please."

Kane increased the depth, the pressure, the penetration, the pace and watched the storm build in her eyes. She was nearly there. He moved one hand between them. Found what he was looking for with amazing accuracy and then detonated the orgasm within her. With his eyes tracking her every feeling he saw she was about to scream in fevered response and an instant before she did, he moved. Locking his mouth against hers, his lips fused to take in the sound, he felt her shatter. Held hard to him, he felt her vibrate, tense around him, tighten and then disintegrate with delirious abandon. With her body detonating around his he finally let go and once again came with blinding intensity.

Kane was just resurfacing from his second orgasm in as many minutes when he heard muted voices. Kane couldn't tell whether the voices sounded distant because he was still in recovery or whether they were distant. But he recognised the voices.

"I asked Diana. She said he headed for the verandah."

Jacinta recognised Charlie's voice. With the limited energy she had, she shoved at Kane's shoulders.

"Well he isn't here is he." Marie stated the obvious and sounded very disgruntled.

Kane eased out of Jacinta. She moaned, he groaned.

"What was that?" Marie said, her eyes narrowing as she strained to see into the inky darkness.

"What? I didn't hear anything."

Stealthily Kane and Jacinta rolled apart. Though their eyes stayed on each other, their ears were tuned in to the two women.

Kane reached blindly for his shorts, hauling them up in one fluid movement. Jacinta knelt, and brushed the toga down, blindly reaching for the edges, trying to remember how she had strung it together, trying to adjust it, so that it fell in

folds. She tied the corner at her shoulder. At least she wasn't naked anymore.

"Where's your skirt?" She hissed at him in a whisper, when he hadn't moved away.

"There!" Marie said. "Someone is out there. In the garden. I heard a voice."

"I didn't hear anything." Charlie replied.

Kane glared at Jacinta. In the darkness it was wasted. He ran his fingers through his hair, combing it into some semblance of order. Then his fingers accidentally found his grass skirt. He reached for it, pulled it toward him, wrapped it on and fastened it quickly. Before she could get to her feet, he pushed her back down and used his hand to tell her to stay down. Then without a backward glance he stepped onto the path and jogged along back the way they had come.

"Hello Ladies." He called from some distance away.

The two women spun around to face him.

"What are you doing out here?" Charlie asked with a slightly cautious and wholly inquisitive tone.

"I came for some air." He sounded perfectly normal. "I told Diana. It was getting way too warm in there."

Back on the lawn behind the rose bushes Jacinta began rummaging for the brooch. She patted the grass blindly. It had to be here. What happened to starlight when you needed it?

"Shall we go for a stroll around the gardens, to cool off?" Marie sounded as practical as ever. But Jacinta heard the wistfulness in her voice.

"Yes, those roses smell lovely." Charlie said.

Jacinta froze. Shit. She'd have to forget the brooch. Maybe she could look for it before she left the farm. More chance of finding it in daylight. She put a hand to her head, found that her wig was still on, if a touch lopsided. She was pleased they had faint moonlight, otherwise she was sure he would have known who she was. And that was not a good thing.

“Ok. But first, give me a second, I must change, I thought it was the heat, but this skirt is giving me a rash.” Kane said quickly, he knew that the nail marks on his back would draw attention and comment. Without thinking he took both ladies by the arms to lead them back to the verandah. “I’ll do a quick change.” He walked with them to the open doors. “I won’t be long. Wait for me here.” He winked and then he was gone, disappearing along the verandah before they could turn to follow his progress.

Just as quickly, Jacinta got to her feet and stealthily made her way to the cabin. With little care, and a great deal of haste she unknotted the toga. Tugging at the cord, she eventually removed it and let the toga drop. She stripped off her knickers and yanked off her wig and mask. Then she buried the toga, wig and mask in the bottom of her backpack. She needed to get back to the party before anyone noticed she was missing.

Jacinta raced to the bathroom and washed her face. She squirted some moisturiser on to a cotton pad and used it to remove the heavy eye make up. Even after several drags, it still left her eyes faintly outlined giving her eyes an added depth. She needed to cover it, change the look, so she rummaged through her make up bag, and found some old eye shadow. With her fingertips she smudged on some pale blue eye shadow and glared at her reflection in the mirror. With a sigh she decided that it would have to do, and hoped it would draw attention away from the black outline that was faintly visible. She removed her lipstick and put on her usual nude lip-gloss then she removed her earrings. She tried tugging the bracelets off, but they were tight. Resigned she left them on.

Back in the bedroom she hunted out a long sleeve shirt and quickly pulled the long sleeved check shirt on, she knotted a scarf at her throat. She rummaged for a pair of knickers and though she recognised a slight tenderness, she pulled them on before tugging on her jeans. Still not happy with her appearance she looked around. Her eyes found the drizabone. Perfect. She slapped on the drizabone hat she had with her for use on the farm.

She hadn't told the girls about the wig or that she had planned to go Grecian. Instead she had told them that she was still thinking about it, and was probably going to show up as a cowgirl. She'd showed them the hat. They had almost looked at her pitifully when she said she had her jeans and checked shirt to finish the effort. But that was before she had spotted the wig in town, and before she had decided that she was going to have fun at the masquerade.

Quickly Jacinta pulled on some socks and pulled her boots on then after a quick look in the mirror, she raced back to the house.

She was just in time to see Kane come down the stairs, doing up the buttons of his long sleeve check shirt. He'd showered. His hair was damp. She wished she'd had time to shower. Her thighs felt sore, the juncture at the top of her thighs felt tender, but her heart was soaring.

He appeared to be scanning the crowd. When his eyes met hers, they barely paused. He gave her a friendly vague smile and continued to scan the room. Surely he wasn't expecting the Greek goddess to simply swan back in, after what they'd just done? Jacinta did her best not to frown.

"Having fun?" Anne in her harem outfit tweaked a couple of scarves and sat beside Jacinta.

Jacinta nodded. "Yes. It's a great party. Amazing how quickly people can throw things together."

Anne nodded and surveyed the crowd. Then she noticed that Kane had changed. "I knew he wouldn't last in that skirt!" She waved, slightly tipsy and then she blew her brother a kiss. He waved back, but continued on his way. Anne turned back to Jacinta.

"Can I ask you a question? And don't take offence ok?" She tilted her head, and looked at Jacinta with a tipsy grin.

Jacinta smiled. "OK."

"You aren't really a gold digger are you?"

Jacinta spluttered, then grinned, "No. I'm not."

"I thought it was too obvious." She smiled at Jacinta. "I remembered our conversation at Lisa's engagement party and you didn't come across as someone out to get a rich man." Anne tipped the scarf that covered her lower face, so that it hung just below her chin, "I guess you figured out why we invited you here."

Jacinta laughed. "Anne, I think everyone has figured out why we are here."

"But, you aren't interested."

Jacinta took a deep breath. "I don't like being paraded. And I am shelf material."

"Do you like him?"

"What's not to like?" She hedged. Her mind returning to her recent encounter in the garden. What was she going to do? What if he found out it was her? Would he be mortified? Or happy?

"Hmm." Anne scowled then looked at Jacinta thoughtfully, "You don't look 32!"

"Thanks." Jacinta laughed.

“And you’ve done something amazing with your eyes.” She looked Jacinta up and down, “If you made the effort, you’d be great together.”

“Have you written off the others?”

Anne shrugged. “Not exactly. But he’s kind of played us at our own game.”

Jacinta nodded in complete agreement. “Very skilled.”

“That’s what Lisa said.”

Jacinta glanced at Anne, “Why don’t you let him find his own girlfriend.”

“It’s not that. He doesn’t have any problems finding girlfriends.”

Jacinta waited.

“But with Lisa and I both going, he’ll be alone. He’d make a really great husband, when he decides on the one.” She watched as her brother approached and added in a hushed voice, “He’s a really nice guy.”

“I don’t need the hard sell.” Jacinta told her. “I know he is.”

“Anne, can I have a word.” Kane looked apprehensive, but his gaze barely registered Jacinta. “Excuse us a second Jacinta.” He drew Anne a few feet away. But not so far that Jacinta couldn’t hear. He leaned closer to his sister “Who is the Grecian goddess? Lisa said to ask you.”

“Grecian goddess?” Anne frowned, as she thought about their guests.

“Yeah, she had a short toga, hair curled on top, a few ringlets, gold mask” He glanced around, “about so high” he indicated against himself.

“I think I know who you mean. I saw her. But I don’t know who she is.” She looked around, “Where is she?”



“I haven’t seen her in the last few minutes?” He frowned at Anne, “Don’t you know who you invited?”

“Well, yeah, of course, roughly. But I didn’t ask what they were going to wear.” She glanced at her brother. “What’s the big deal? You fancy her?”

“Long legs, great figure, probably pretty under that mask.” He stated laconically, “What’s not to like.”

“Personality?” She teased with a tipsy smirk. Then she added, “She could be one of the girls down for the week.”

He shook his head. “No. I’ve seen them all, and none of them are in a toga.”

“Sorry, can’t help.” She glanced at Jacinta. “Hey, ask Jacinta to dance?” And before he could disagree, she had dragged him before Jacinta. “Hey, Jac, Kane wondered if you’d like to dance.” Anne didn’t wait for the answer, and tipsy or not, she knew her brother too well, she winked at Jacinta, “See you both later.” Anne sashayed into the throng.

Apart from being sore, and in desperate need of a bath, Jacinta really didn’t want to move from this seat. “I don’t dance.” She said the first thing that came to mind, then smiled and shrugged “Sorry.” Lying was becoming a habit. She hoped she didn’t develop this characteristic for the long haul. But their recent encounter was still too new, and she needed time to think about it all before she ever stepped into his arms again.

He nodded grateful for the reprieve, “I thought I hadn’t seen you take the floor.” He kept scanning the crowd.

“Not really my scene.” She told him and crossed her fingers out of sight. Thank goodness he hadn’t made the connection. “I love people watching.”

“Do you?” He asked idly and continued to search the room.

Where the hell could she have gone? It wouldn't take long to straighten up a toga. Unless, she had already left the party. That worried him. He needed to see her. Make sure she was ok.

She nodded. "Yes." She said gaily. "Saw a cowboy do his best to get Lorna to dance with him. She's painfully shy."

"Yeah, she is." Kane acknowledged even though he didn't turn to face her.

"Saw the toga woman go out for air, trying to avoid Zorro! The poor woman. She was practically fending him off at every turn. He's got some moves. So I wasn't surprised to see her escape." That got his attention.

"Toga woman?" Kane frowned at her, and waited with baited breath for her reply.

"Yes, short toga, dark hair, gold mask. She was fending off Zorro. That's why she stepped out."

"Really? When?" He queried as he took the seat beside her.

"Oh ages ago. Actually a few minutes before you went out on the verandah trying to avoid Tracy and Diana." She said blandly and added, "Though I think Charlie and Marie headed for the verandah soon after." He couldn't help the grimace. She smiled at him. "Don't worry." She told him gently. "Just a couple more days, then you can relax."

He turned and looked at her, speculation in his eyes. "So what? You've given up on the chase?"

"Hardly. This is my tactic. The listener."

He chuckled. Not quite sure whether to believe her or not. "You've done something with your eyes." He said finally as something tugged at his memory.

Keep it light, she reminded herself. "It is amazing what mascara and blue eye shadow does." She grinned, then batted her eyes at him, "You like?"

He laughed. "So what do you do when you aren't hunting for a husband?" He leaned back in the chair, kept his eyes on the dancers in front of him and let his body settle down again. He was mentally cataloguing all the information he had. She must be about five ten, long legs, tip tilted eyes, long curly hair, or at least long hair to curl. Slim, but enough for him to get a hold.

"The usual."

"And what counts as usual for you?" A quick glance in her direction showed him that she was also watching the crowd. He was just making conversation for the sake of it, all the while trying to remember details. She had Celtic earrings and a Celtic brooch. Lots of armbands. Bangles, bracelets. He didn't know what eye colour, but he would remember them if he got another opportunity to kiss her. He'd recognise her. Long hair, given the curls. He tried to remember other things, but most of what he remembered had to do with them making love and he doubted he could go around making love with everyone until he found her. Where was that glass slipper when you needed it?

"Bits and pieces."

He laughed. She turned to look at him, a brow rose in question. He said, "You a secret service agent or something? If you tell me anything you'll have to kill me?"

"I work with computers. I told you that." She told him.

"Yes, but that's all you told me."

"So what more do you want to know?"

"Anything and everything." He challenged.

“Live alone, got a place in Hamilton. I love chocolate, so I play squash, run twice a week, go to yoga and do a boxercise class at the gym. I have no brothers or sisters, or parents. An orphan really. But that only happened when I was all grown up. I drive an old Mitsubishi Mirage but usually cycle, got to keep the chocolate at bay. I have all my own teeth, rust is my favourite colour and I don’t sing in the shower.” She looked at him, “And you are still alive, so your turn.”

“My turn?” He looked skeptical. “And rust isn’t a colour.”

“Come on, fair’s fair. And rust is a very special colour. What colour are autumn leaves?” He shrugged, “Ok, your turn.” She prompted.

He settled more comfortably in the seat beside her, threw his arm along the backrest and half turned to face her, “Well, I work on a farm.”

“Duh, really.” Her lips quirked into a smile. His eyes flicked to them. Then back to her eyes. She had tip-tilted eyes, like his Greek goddess.

He frowned, now he was seeing similarities in other women. “You seem so familiar. Have we met before?” Something about her was familiar.

She laughed, “Yes, at the engagement, remember!” She told him as she cuffed his shoulder with her hat, “Now quit stalling and spill.”

He shook his head. “Lived here since I was born. I love fudge, so I ride horses, clean stables, and ride fence at the local farm. I have two scamps also known as sisters, no parents. I am soon to be deserted when Lisa and Anne get married. I drive an old Ute, but usually walk to work. It’s going to be quiet when they leave. I have my own teeth, my favourite colour is blue, a real colour, and I do sing in the shower.”

“You’re going to miss them.” She said softly and after a second.

“Like a hole in the head.” He announced, surprised by the knowledge that he had conveyed his feelings in that short burst of information.

“Like an adoring brother.” She glanced at him, “And they adore you. Look at how much trouble they’ve gone to, just to make sure you aren’t going to be alone.”

“Trouble being the key word.”

Jacinta couldn’t help the grin. “They really have put a lot of thought into this week you know. And it was just for you.”

“I’d say the plan was to create as much chaos as possible on a working farm. Make my life hell.”

“No, and you know that isn’t what they are trying to do.”

“OK, fount of all wisdom, what are they trying to do.”

“Give you choice and opportunity.” She said resolutely.

“Give me choice and opportunity?” he didn’t sound convinced.

“Yes, to meet your ideal woman.”

“What? What makes you think that?”

“They brought six women to this hen week. They could have had their hen night in Auckland, anywhere.” He waited for her to continue, she flicked him a look, “But instead they brought six women here. Six fairly different women. Shape, size, age, outlook, personality.” He quirked a brow.

“Apparently you like independent, feisty women.”

“That torpedoed your theory.”

“Why?” Jacinta frowned.

“Lorna?” he prompted.

“Ah, I’d say she is here in case you go for the opposites attract scenario. And I think she is independent, just shy.”

He nodded. “OK. Tracy. I really don’t like women who are possessive, clingy.”

“Yes, but you do like horses. And so does Tracy.” Jacinta warmed to her explanation, “Then there’s Marie. She could probably run your farm as well as you. So a real partner, she would probably organise you, if you were that way inclined.”

Kane began to wonder if there was some truth to Jacinta’s statement. He’d just assumed the 6 women were friends of his sisters’ brought down to the farm with him as a target. Though, now, thinking about it, the only two who could really be classed as friends were Charlie and Lorna.

“Take Charlie for example,” Jacinta had continued with her explanation, “Strong, independent, funny, good looking, nice personality. Your kind of woman.” Kane quirked a brow at her but didn’t interrupt. “And Diana, the same, but if you are a leg man, rather than a breast man.” Kane choked. She smiled at his stunned reaction, “So you see, they’ve gone to a lot of trouble, to round up various types to give you a chance not to be left alone. I’d say they adore you. They have put a lot of thought into this, at a time when they have much to do in planning their weddings. And when they could have had a right rave up in Auckland.”

He was silent for a long minute, then he cocked his head to one side, “So where do you fit into this mix?”

“I’m here in case you go for an older woman!”

“What?” He laughed. “How old are you?”

“What a question to ask a lady?”

“OK. Older than me?”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty four.”

“Nope, younger than you.”

“You can’t be more than twenty six ish.”

This time Jacinta laughed in delight. “Thank you.”

“You’re older than that?” He seemed surprised.

She nodded, “Oh, what the hell. Thirty two.”

His eyes widened. “Sorry,” He apologised quickly. “I, er, you just don’t look it.”

“Thank you again.”

He shook his head. “I should have guessed they’d try to fix things.” He kept looking at Jacinta as if he would be able to suddenly see in her the six years that he couldn’t. “They haven’t lived at home for the last five years, but they’ve always spent time here. I’ll miss them.”

She heard the sadness in his voice. “They’ll come and visit.”

He took a breath then released it in a huff, “Yeah, but how often. They’ll have their own lives. Own families.”

“So will you. When you decide.”

He glanced across at her. “Are you hitting on me?”

Jacinta laughed then teased, “Oh definitely. Is it working?”

He grinned. “A bit.” His eyes tracked Lisa who danced by in Trev’s arms. “She looks happy.”

“He’s a good guy.” Jacinta told him.

“You would say that. He’s related to you.”

She nodded, “Yeah, and he’s a good guy.”

“I know.” Kane finally acknowledged, but still sounded wistful. “You think he’d wait for a few years?”

“No.” Jacinta laughed then she added gently “But I’m sure when you become an uncle, your nephews and nieces will insist on visiting Uncle Kane. And Trev will bring them. You haven’t lost your sisters. You’ve gained more family.”

Their eyes met. Again something registered in his brain, “You know, you are very easy to talk to.”

“Ah-ah! Now to just reel you in!” She teased. “You see, they chose well. I’m the listener. Charlie the talker, Maria the organiser...”

He held up his hand, “OK, ok. Stop, stop.” He laughed. “Thanks.” Kane leaned toward her and without any warning brushed his lips against her cheek. The frisson that sparked stunned them both.

But neither had an opportunity to dwell on it for Diana, Charlie, Tracy and Marie arrived like the well needed cavalry.

“Kane!” Charlie admonished. “There you are.”

“Jacinta you can’t keep hogging that man at this party.” Diana chided Jacinta and though she uttered the words lightly her eyes made sure that Jacinta knew she meant every word.

“Sorry ladies. You know how it is. Any chance is fair!” Jacinta leaned in “Two days.” She reminded him as her lips brushed his ear lobe. His heart kicked up a beat. But before he could do or say anything, Jacinta got to her feet. Her bracelets beneath her long sleeves jangled, but no one noticed.

Kane got to his feet again rocked by that sensation of touch “Jacinta.” He said softly before the four surrounded him and dragged him away. He decided he was still in the Grecian goddess zone, so of course his body was still sparking. But



he wasn't thinking logically, because his body wasn't sparking now and he was in contact with four beautiful women.

Jacinta took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Her heart was still hammering. She had to avoid touching him. Skin to skin. No more touch. Her pounding heart would not stand the pace. She was beginning to feel stiff. Tender. What a night. Though she wanted to leave, she knew she had to stay until at least half the party had left. So it was well past one when she headed for the cabin. She settled for a hot shower and then naked, she climbed into bed and pulled the sheet up to her chin. Sleep was a long time in coming, for every time she closed her eyes she found herself in his arms.

## Chapter 6

She couldn't sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she could taste him, feel him, and hear him. She rolled over, thumped her pillow into a firmer rest and tried again. But he swam into view.

Jacinta groaned. No, no, no. She was not going to let this happen. It was just sex. First time sex for her. But just sex. Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep. But it was just before 3 that she finally fell asleep. Two hours, that's all she managed.

She tossed and turned for another hour and then in sheer disgust with herself she got up, washed and dressed in jeans and heavy jumper. She needed to walk. To think. To get over this.

She was still tender. A pleasant feeling she decided as she tugged on her socks and boots. It was just coming up to six when she stepped out into the crisp morning. She walked purposefully toward the front of the house. She didn't want to come across the others, and didn't want to bump into anyone. She would walk the mile to the gate and the mile back. That should be long enough to think. Hands in her jean pockets she strode off. Twenty minutes later she reached the gate. She braced her arms along one of the wooden planks and leaned forward, staring sightlessly through the gap at the road on the other side, lost in thought.

"Escaping." A teasing voice asked her.

How hadn't she heard the horse, she wondered as she turned to look up at Kane.

"Morning." He said, then got off the horse, remembering that she was afraid of the animal, he put himself between her and the horse. She frowned.

"You're up early."

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Me neither.” He smiled at her and mumbled under his breath, “Probably for different reasons.”

They walked on in silence for a minute or two.

“You enjoy the party?”

She nodded. “Very much.” She looked up at him, “What about you? Did you manage to evade the clutches of the famous five?”

He snorted. “God they were tenacious.” Then they looked at each other and grinned. Walked on a bit more in silence. “You didn’t dance then?”

She shrugged.

“I could have taught you.”

You already did, she wanted to say, but just shrugged again.

“I was amazed by the costumes, given that they only had a day to throw them together.”

“Well yours was pretty special.” She teased, “No wonder the famous five were going mental.”

“What about you?”

“Oh definitely, but I was more subtle.”

He laughed. After a few minutes he said, “er, did you see the toga woman again, at all, during the evening?”

“Toga woman?” She tried not to allow the panic to surface.

“Just wondered if she’d managed to evade Zorro” He tried to sound nonchalant.

“I think she did.”

“She did?” he stopped walking and turned to face her.

“Well, er, I saw Zorro dancing with Marie for most of the rest of the evening.”

“Oh.”

They walked on in silence.

“I should tell you I lied.”

He waited for her to continue, watched her frown disappear to be replaced with rueful resignation. When she didn’t say anything, he prompted, “Really. About what?”

She shrugged, lots of things. “About being scared of horses.” Start with the little things, then tell him about the whopper.

He quirked a brow. “You aren’t.” He stopped.

She shook her head. Then reached past him to pat his horse.

“So why did you say you were?” he seemed genuinely puzzled.

“Why do you think?” When he didn’t reply she said, “What did you do when the twins told you they were going to do this? That six women were coming to stay for a week?” She figured if she broached the subject gently, she could lead up to telling him she was the Grecian goddess. Then they could just take it from there. He might be interested. He might not. Not once he knew who was really behind the mask. But she thought she should tell him.

“Initially agreed, then swore, when I realised I’d been conned. But it’s just a week, and 6 good looking women can’t be all bad.” He looked at her, “What’s that got to do with you lying about horses.”

“Initially when I got the invite I swore, but I came because Trev asked me to. As he put it, 7 days on a farm on the Coromandel, couldn’t be all bad. “

“So?”

“But, vying for your attention was never on my to do list.” Not then she added silently. “No offence.” She tacked on.

He grinned. “None taken.”

“The horse thing, well, it was an excuse so that I didn’t spend the whole day pretending.”

“Ah.” They started walking back toward the house. Jacinta walked alongside him and he led the horse.

“I’m sorry. It was a stupid thing to do.” She offered. They walked down the middle of the track, slowly. Him between her and the horse.

“That’s not stupid.” He told her, after a few seconds, then added more angrily, “ Stupid is what I did yesterday.” He muttered.

“Yesterday?” She peeked up at him. “What did you do?”

“Something I regret.”

“You regret?”

He nodded solemnly. “It was a mistake.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“It’s probably the most stupid thing I have ever done in my entire life.” He said in complete disgust.

“Oh.”

“I had unprotected sex with a complete stranger in our rose garden during the middle of a family party! How stupid is that.” He stopped walking, and dropping the reins used both

hands to cover his face. Slowly he parted his hands, ran them through his hair and left them knitted together at the back of his neck as he tilted his head up toward the sky. “And now, I’ve probably embarrassed the hell out of you.”

Jacinta swallowed. He looked down at her. She was a good six inches shorter than him, and in her trainers she barely came up to his chin.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to spill like that. You’re easy to be with.” Jacinta winced at the use of the word easy, but he didn’t notice as he bent to retrieve the reins. “Easy to talk to.” He added as he straightened.

“Was it just sex?” She said softly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know.” She shifted, suddenly uncomfortable about taking this conversation in this particular direction. He waited, watching as she decided whether to carry on and explain or not. “Given the way you are this morning. Perhaps it was love.” She finally said in a rush.

He laughed. “No. Just sex. Mind blowing, but just sex. I don’t even know her, for God’s sake. How can I love her?”

“Ah.” Blew that hope out of the sky.

They walked on.

“How would you feel if it was one of us?” Jacinta decided to give it one last go. If she could just muster the nerve to tell him, that might make things easier. Or a lot worse. “You know how hard we’ve been working on you. Me for instance.”

He shook his head, smiled at her, thinking she was trying to lighten his mood. “No, you don’t fit the profile none of the hen group fit.” He wasn’t going to tell her the woman was the Grecian goddess. Having sex with someone was one thing, and until today, he had never bought into kiss and tell.

So although he had told Jacinta he had kissed, he hadn't told her who. And he didn't plan on telling her. Neither did he plan on telling Jacinta the woman he'd had sex with had been a virgin. So she must be quite young. Probably one of Lisa's and Anne's friends. Kane wanted to punch himself.

"Profile?"

"She was quite tall, so that rules out Tracy, Charlie, Marie, Lorna, even you and though Diana would make the height, she doesn't have the bust." He smiled at her, "And after the last five days, I think I would recognise one of you if I had sex with one of you. "

"So now what?" She asked him. He wouldn't believe her. Not in a million years.

"Now I hope to hell she was on the pill." He muttered. Then looked across at her. "I didn't have a condom. See what I mean about stupid. How stupid is that? It isn't as if I'm some inexperienced hormonal kid that can't control himself. I lectured Lisa and Anne about using protection."

After a while she said, "Look, there's no point worrying about it. She knows where to find you if she needs your help. But, in this day and age, she's probably taken precautions." Jacinta hoped that she sounded sincere. She doubted whether she was pregnant, but she certainly hadn't taken precautions.

Kane scowled. He would have to find her. No way in hell a virgin was going to be on the pill. What for? He would get the list of people from Anne and Lisa and work his way through that. It had to be one of the guests.

"Well I'm going to find her and make sure she's ok."

Jacinta grimaced. Then she added. "Maybe she doesn't want to be found."

"Tough." He looked down at Jacinta, "When I find her, if she's pregnant, I'm marrying her."

“Marrying her?” Jacinta’s eyes widened. “But you said you didn’t love her.”

“What the hell has that got to do with it?”

“You can’t just marry someone because you had sex with them.”

“I can.” He stated with absolute arrogance. “I will, if she’s pregnant.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to get married.”

“Tough.”

“She might have just been in it for the sex. A great one night stand.”

“No.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just do.”

“And how are you going to find her?” Jacinta asked him in sheer exasperation. “It will be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Not a very big haystack, and for quite a recognisable needle.” He replied and then had the nerve to grin. “I’m going to get a guest list from Anne and Lisa and all of those at the party are coming to the wedding in two weeks.” He smiled confidently. Dance. He was going to dance with every young woman on the list “I’ll know her.”

Jacinta looked dubious. He grinned. “Wait and see.” They had nearly reached the house.

“Thanks.” He said cheerfully. “You really are a great listener.”



He was going to kiss her cheek when he heard, “There you are!” Charlie bounded down the steps. She threw Jacinta a calculating look.

Jacinta rolled her eyes, muttered “Good luck.” and strolled away.

Jacinta was out of sorts for the whole of Saturday. She was angry with herself. And angry with Kane. According to him he would ‘know her.’ Yet she had walked one mile with him and he hadn’t. Idiot man. And what the hell did he mean by going to marry someone just because they might be pregnant. Idiot man. Didn’t he realise that they lived in enlightened times.

Jacinta avoided Kane. The rest of the group drew their own conclusions. Conclusions not helped by Charlie’s stirring. “She threw herself at him and he rejected her, what did she expect?” Charlie told Diana as they walked along toward the garden. “She practically tried it on last night, did you see the way she had him cornered and he was positively grateful when we rescued him.”

“Yeah, and this morning, she must have waylaid him. Poor guy. He probably felt stalked.” Diana agreed.

“You could tell she was upset when we interrupted.” Charlie blew out a breath. They walked on.

Half way along the path, they met Kane.

“You must really like this garden.” Charlie teased him.

“Last night you escaped here and again today.”

“I love this garden.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Have you had a chance to explore it?” They shook their heads. “Well, if its roses you like, this is the place to be.” Kane grinned. His hands in his pockets, he held on tightly to the brooch he had found. He could afford to be happy. He was collecting evidence. And he had a piece of it. “I’ll see you both later.” He strode away.

Diana and Charlie looked at each other in puzzlement.

Dinner was an interesting event. Jacinta and Kane seemed to spend much of it watching each other carefully, but saying very little. Kane was embarrassed by the fact he'd told her about last night. He wondered if she'd inadvertently let the cat out of the bag. Jacinta was jealous and frustrated. She wondered if she had the nerve to just tell him it was her.

After dinner when they had all retired to the lounge, he squeezed himself next to Jacinta. She scowled at him. He leaned in to whisper, "You're drawing attention to us."

"I'm?" Her mouth dropped open and she shut it with a snap. She flounced off and found an armchair. He took the sofa. And was quickly flanked by Tracy and Diana. Jacinta looked away. Enough. She had had enough.

"That was a good party last night, wasn't it?" Anne carried the coffee tray in. Lisa brought the tray of mugs. Marie brought the tray of cheese and biscuits.

"Terrific." Marie agreed as she put the tray on the table.

"Ok. Whose costume did you think was the best?" Anne plopped herself on the rug beside the fire place, and sat cross legged facing them, with the tray in front of her.

"At the party or amongst us?" Lisa handed out the mugs of coffee as Anne finished pouring.

"The party, I don't want to start a cat fight!" Anne laughed. She sent the jug of milk round. "Let's start with the guys."

"I liked what you were almost wearing Kane." Charlie teased from her vantage point sitting across from him.

"Who did the Maori tattoos for you?"

"Jim."

"He did a great job." Charlie winked.

“I liked Zorro.” Marie said with a twinkle.

“Yeah, we noticed.” They laughed.

“There was a pretty good Charlie Chaplin.”

They all nodded, “Who was that?”

“Tom Hunter.”

“Oh, and what about the mummy?”

“Yeah, all those bandages. He’d have to plan well in advance if he wanted to go to the loo!”

“The three musketeers looked good and Dracula was funny.”

“Lots of cowboys and cowgirls.” Charlie said. “And there were heaps of 1920s flappers. Beads and all.”

“OK. What about ladies?”

“Lorna as Bo Peep was great.” Jacinta said.

They all agreed.

“Your Carmen Miranda was pretty stunning.” Lisa told Tracy. “Did you get the dress in town?”

Tracy laughed. “No I brought it with me, just in case we went out, or whatever.”

“Di, only you could have carried off the bunny girl thing with your legs.”

Diana smiled. “I thought Charlie’s wonder woman was a feat in itself. How did you manage not to fall out of that top?”

“Bondage, lots of tape in the right places!” Charlie grinned, “Though, Marie took that to a different level.”

“I started out planning to be cat woman, but kept cutting the material badly! So by the time the party started, there wasn’t much left of the cat suit!”

“No offence girls, but I think Janice wins.”

There were murmurs of agreement. “Yeah, only Janice would come as a box of chewing gum!”

“It must have taken her ages to get it sorted.”

“What did you go as?” Diana asked Jacinta and thought she’d been quite successful in hiding the cattiness in her question.

“A cowgirl.” Kane answered simply.

“Oh, a cowgirl, oh yeah, I remember now.” Diana rolled her eyes at Charlie who smirked in return.

“More coffee?” Lisa got to her feet. “Kane pass the milk jug back, I’ll go fill it.”

“She was a gorgeous cow girl.” Kane threw in.

Jacinta wanted to smack him. Didn’t he realise that it was his focus of attention that was making these women bitchy. And for goodness sakes, a gorgeous cowgirl?

“It was simple to dredge up. I’m not terribly creative.”

“Now you’re being modest.” Kane corrected completely unaware of the fact that both his sisters were throwing each other wide eyed looks, while the other women in the group began to scowl.

“I don’t think so.” Jacinta told him, hoping he’d take the hint and stop being so fulsome in his praise.

The women watched the verbal table tennis match escalate and wondered what had happened that morning.

“You must be creative.” Kane challenged.

“What makes you so sure?” Jacinta all but gave up, the man clearly wanted to be lynched. And the way he was going, if the other women didn’t get to him, Jacinta was seriously thinking about flattening him.

“You design computer games.” Kane stated oblivious to the undercurrents.

“Who told you that?” That brought Jacinta up short. How would he know about the computer games design?

“Trev.” Kane quirked a brow at the challenge in her tone, “Said you had a game just about to be sold.”

“Not quite.” Jacinta said coolly. She had only just passed the game onto Joshua to have a look at. He was a legend, and if he said it had potential, then she might, just might start thinking of herself as a designer. But right at this moment she was still a university technician who dabbled in designing computer games.

“That you designed.” Kane stated softly, pushing her to see just what she would do and say.

“We all have hobbies.” Jacinta replied quietly.

“Well, you do have hidden depths.” Diana said, and wondered how they had allowed Jacinta to hog the conversation once again. “I thought you were a technician.”

“I am.” Jacinta wondered how long she would manage to hold onto her temper.

“But you write computer games.” Diana folded her arms, her body language conveyed her irritation, “You must be very, very, clever.” Diana challenged and only barely hid her animosity.

“And very creative.” Charlie added her two cents worth. They had clearly underestimated Jacinta.

“Manipulating all those characters. That would take skill.” Diana added slyly.

“Some characters are easy to manipulate.” Jacinta kept her head high and her tone light, but her eyes conveyed her feeling on the matter. Enough, she had had enough.

Diana and Charlie were forced to reassess. Kane’s lips quirked, but he said no more. Lisa and Anne mouthed a silent question to each other and shrugged.

Marie, sensing the lull launched into conversation, discussing the arrangements for their departure the next day.

## Chapter 7

The next morning the women packed up and after breakfast the twins drove most of them to the station. Marie was being picked up by her dad and Jacinta was waiting for Trevor to pick her up. He'd stayed with an old college friend after the party as the twins had insisted that the hen week ended on Sunday! Kane had left fairly early that morning, to work with the two guys, so he'd said his goodbyes the night before. The girls hadn't hung around, and by mid morning they were on their way back to Tauranga station.

"You still here?" Kane asked in puzzlement as he stepped out of the Ute and headed for the door. He hadn't expected anyone to be home. The twins would only just be reaching the station, and Marie and Jacinta were due to be picked up around ten. Marie had obviously been collected, but Jacinta was sitting on the step. She thought about getting up when Kane strode toward the front door.

"Trev texted. He's running a bit late." She told him by way of explanation. Although she wasn't really sure how late Trevor was going to be. His text just said he was running late.

"You could have waited indoors." Kane told her, noticing that she had been sitting on the step beside her packed case.

"What are you doing back? Last night you said you'd be out all day." She tipped her head up, rather than get to her feet, she figured she would just stay where she was. They had said their formal goodbyes last night, as Kane had explained that he had an early start in the morning and probably wouldn't be around to see them off. The girls had gathered for a group photo and group hug with Kane as a good bye last night.

"I had an accident." He said simply and it was only as he walked past her that she saw his back.

“Good grief!” She was on her feet instantly. “What happened? Are you ok? You look like you’ve lost gallons of blood.” His shirt was plastered to his back, and stained with blood.

“I’m fine. It’s just a few cuts.” He pushed open the front door and stepped into the hallway. Jacinta followed him.

“How can you tell?” Some of the blood had obviously dried as the shirt seemed to cling to his back. But from the spread of the stain it was clearly more than a few cuts. “You got eyes in the back of your head?”

“It looks worse than it is.” He told her and kept walking.

“And you know that because...” She asked him, as she trotted to keep up with him.

“The guys had a look at it. That’s why I’m back. To get cleaned up. Get a new shirt and head back.” He walked briskly toward the kitchen, through the dining room. Jacinta followed.

“You’ve got to be joking.” She told him. “You sure you don’t need stitches? Or a blood transfusion? Or...”

He glanced over his shoulder, and rolled his eyes at her dramatics, “It’s fine. And now if you don’t mind...”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She huffed, then threw up both hands when he quirked a brow at her tone. She asked, “How are you going to reach your back? Hmm?”

“I’ll manage.” He stated simply and began to unbutton his shirt.

“For goodness sakes. I’m not going to swoon at the sight of your rugged, manly, back, ok?”

“Swoon?” He chuckled. She shrugged. His lips twitched and then he repeated, “Swoon.” He nodded. “Nice word. Ok, then, if you want to play nursemaid and promise not to



swoon. The first aid kit is in the bottom cupboard.” Jacinta stalked to the cupboard he pointed to and retrieved the box.

When she turned around she saw that he had undone all his shirt buttons and opened his shirt but was having trouble peeling it off. He clearly had limited use of one arm, and the blood-encrusted shirt was stuck to that particular shoulder. And he wasn’t able to shrug off the other side of the shirt.

“Hang on a second.” She told him as she put the box of first aid supplies down and came toward him. “Ok, now shrug off the sleeve.” She helped him ease the shirt off his good arm, and slid it gently off that shoulder. And then taking the edge of the shirt walked it round. It was stuck to his back. She could see grazing, and it was still bleeding in places. But some of it had also dried and now attached the shirt firmly to his cut skin. “I think this is going to hurt.” She mumbled as she thought about how she could get the shirt off with the minimum of pain, “How did this happen?”

“I wasn’t paying attention.” He winced when she tried to ease the shirt off his lacerated back. “The horse was spooked. I fell off.” He grimaced.

“You fell off?” She winced and looked at his raw back and the shirt still attached to bloody skin.

“Almost. I got tangled in the stirrups and when he bolted I kind of went with him for a second or two, until I managed to kick out.” He tried to bank the pain. “Just tug.” He advised her when she was still gently trying to peel the shirt away from his skin.

Jacinta could not imagine what that felt like. To be dragged by a horse. But given the state of his back, he was lucky he had managed to disengage, otherwise she doubted whether he would have any skin on his back.

“I’m not into inflicting pain. No. Wait.” She came round to face him. “Hold this.” She gave him the edge of the shirt, “And sit.” She pulled out a chair, and gestured for him to

take it. He raised a brow at her orders but sat astride the chair she had held out to him. His chest against the chair back.

“Now what?” He asked, looking over his shoulder as Jacinta filled a bowl with antiseptic and hot water.

“I’m going to sponge down the shirt, to wet it so that the dried blood gets loosened.”

“Ok.” He braced his arms against the top of the giving her the whole of his back.

“It might sting, but it will be better than having it all ripped open again if I just tugged it.” She warned as she put the bowl on the table beside her. She dipped the large cotton cloth into the bowl, wrung it out and then unraveled it.

“Beats having half your skin go with your shirt I guess.” He told her and wrapped his arms around the chair.

Gently she pressed the antiseptic soaked cotton towel against his shirt, and against his skin, then dipped it into the bowl, wrung it, unraveled it and pressed it against his skin and shirt. Slowly the shirt eased off his skin, she gradually eased off the blood-encrusted shirt, peeling it away inch by inch. She could tell that it stung, his shoulders were bunched every time she dabbed at the skin.

“Nearly done.” She stopped, wanting to give him a chance to regroup. She picked up the bowl, emptied it into the sink and filled it with fresh antiseptic laced water. Once again she placed it on the table beside her, “You ok?”

He nodded, but kept his head down.

“Nearly there.” She murmured again as she eased his shirt another couple of inches. She dabbed gently, wiping at the skin with gentle strokes. “There, nearly done.” She whispered, repeating the mantra, as much for her benefit as his, “You’re doing really well.”

He chuckled. "You sound like a mum."

She smiled.

"You going to kiss it better?" She heard him ask, his head still down, his shoulder muscles still bunched as the antiseptic stung.

"Depends on whether you are a good boy or not!" She told him.

"Oh, I can be good." He muttered.

"Yeah, I bet." As she eased the shirt off the last few inches she saw the full extent of the injury. She did her best not to sound as disconcerted as she felt. "This looks rough. It might need stitches."

"I've had worse. No stitches."

"How can you tell? You haven't got eyes in the back of your head."

"It's just grazed." He muttered.

"It's lacerated in parts. The grazes are practically all over your back, but across the left shoulder, your skin is practically shredded. And what isn't, is bruised. Really bruised." She told him bluntly.

There was silence for a few seconds.

"Yeah, I figured. I was too slow to kick off the stirrups when I fell. My ankle was still tangled and I kind of got dragged a bit, bumped along."

"You can't find this funny." She emptied the bowl and washed it out before refilling it with some fresh water and antiseptic.

"Beats crying." He muttered laconically.

“Oh yeah? Well brace yourself I am about to wash those cuts with dilute but potent antiseptic. It is going to sting like hell. But it should stop it getting infected.”

“Yes Doc.” He replied.

“Last chance.” She warned. “We can still take the Ute to town and get this seen to in the hospital.”

“No need.” He blew out a breath, and prepared. “There are some butterfly stitches in the first aid kit. Know how to use them?”

“I can read instructions.” She replied, still a touch disgruntled by the fact that he was not opting for the hospital. “I can’t imagine you falling off a horse.”

Gently she bathed his back, trying to glide over the tender flesh, while still ensuring she cleaned it. His sharp intake of breath was plenty of evidence that the antiseptic was reaching its target.

“Haven’t fallen off one since I was three.” He grated between clenched teeth.

“Well I guess you were about due then!”

He grunted, then winced as fresh antiseptic touched one of the deeper cuts.

“Wasn’t your mind on the job?” She asked, trying to think of ways to distract him. She attended to the grazes first, hoping that they wouldn’t sting as much as the deeper cuts. “I bet you were thinking about the bevy of beautiful women you left sleeping in your house this morning.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Either that or the relief of knowing that we’d all be out of your hair by the time you returned.” She took a breath. She had to tackle the cuts. And she knew it was going to burn. “Sorry.” She muttered as she gently pressed the damp cotton

to the first deep cut. He arched and hissed in a breath. Jacinta cringed and removed the cotton. Dipped it into the bowl, wrung it out and prepared for the next cut.

“Guess I can tell them I took care of you.” She stroked his hair, and waited for him to slowly relax before she said, “OK?” She waited for his shoulders to relax slightly then added quietly, “Sorry, but this is going to sting.” He braced, while gently she dabbed at the other cut and wiped in gentle strokes. Jacinta imagined that the bruises were as painful as the lacerations, and while she was trying to be as gentle as possible she knew she must be causing him pain. “Sorry.” She murmured.

He sucked in a breath, she could feel his muscles spasm as they bunched in retaliation.

She tried to distract him. “Though Charlie did suggest she stay over for a week, until the wedding.” She said softly as she removed the cloth “Now if you were thinking about her, er, assets, that I imagine may have ...”

“I wasn’t thinking about her.” He grouched, as his mind returned to what had caused him to stop concentrating when he was out riding.

“Oh, then who was the lucky lady?”

“What does it matter?” He mumbled. “And what makes you think it was a woman?”

“Ah ha!” She rinsed the cloth, and looked at the third deep cut, “Last one.” She muttered beneath her breath as she steeled herself for his reaction. She dabbed gently, “So it was a woman.” She made sure she smiled. He could hear it in her voice as she said, “So, give me a clue? Tall? Short? Do they know you have made a choice?” Then she came round to the table and delved into the first aid box again. She found a tube of antiseptic gel.

“I haven’t made a choice.” He snapped, his voice tinged with pain, exasperation and frustration.

“You haven’t? But just thinking about her allows your horse to unseat you?” She put the tube on the table, then picked up the bowl of liquid and emptied it into the sink. She rinsed the bowl then wiped it with some paper towels. A few minutes later she returned to the table.

The cleaned wounds had stopped bleeding. “I’m going to put this gel on, ok?” He nodded. “Then I’ll put some of these stitches on.”

“Just do it.”

“You make a terrible patient!” She teased him as she gently applied salve, patting the gel onto his skin. “At least nothing is bleeding.” She was surprised by how well he had coped with her treatment, she knew the antiseptic would have stung, given the depth of the cuts, and she knew from the feel of his muscles that he was in a lot of pain, but he had settled for home treatment. “So you fell off your horse.”

“He was spooked.” Kane retorted defensively.

“Sounds like you were spooked too.” Jacinta said quietly. “You know your sisters will be really happy if you found your match amongst their friends. And if you like her then...” She rummaged in the first aid kit to find a dressing large enough.

“I don’t even know her.” He said and she could hear his exasperation.

“You don’t... Ah.” Jacinta met his eyes. “Toga woman.”

“Greek goddess if you don’t mind.” He couldn’t help the grin. “I can’t believe I had sex with a woman I don’t know. In my garden! And I didn’t use protection. She might be....”

Jacinta went and stood behind him as she began to position the first of several butterfly stitches across gaping skin. And she didn’t want him to see her face. “I imagine you know how to please a woman and I imagine she is grateful.”

“Grateful?” His head snapped round to her. “Grateful?” He sounded affronted.

“er, ok” She shrugged, then chuckled at his look of absolute consternation, before she tacked on, “Happy. Delighted.”

“What if she’s pregnant?” he murmured., turning his head around, so that she could concentrate on his back.

“Then I imagine you will hear from her.” Jacinta put the dressing against his back.

“And what if she doesn’t get in touch?” For some strange reason that worried him even more. He was not going to be able to forget that woman, and wondered if she would forget him quickly. Her first time. Wasn’t that supposed to be memorable? Special?

“Then I guess you both chalk it up to experience and move on.”

“What?” He turned his head to face her as if she had just proposed something that was completely unethical.

“Ok, lean back, I need to wrap this around you.” Jacinta gave him one end of the bandage. “Hold this.” She told him, “Kane, you said yourself, you don’t know her. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that I had sex with a Greek goddess in my garden.” He sounded mortified. “I don’t do one night stands. I don’t have sex with strangers. I’m not into sex in public places. And I don’t walk away from responsibility.”

Silence greeted that statement. Jacinta gently held the dressing against his back and then used the bandage to hold it to him. She passed the tape under his armpit, across his chest, then beneath the other arm. Slowly she wound the strip until the dressing was held tightly in place.

“I think it should be ok. It stopped bleeding, so it shouldn’t cake. But I don’t think you should go back out. You’ll just

open up the cuts, and getting that dressing off will be painful.”

“Thanks.”

“We should get some second skin to put on it. It would be better than that dressing.”

“I’ll ask the twins.”

“I’ll text Trev. He can pick it up when he comes through town. The twins might be a while.”

Kane swung his legs around so that he sat side on.

“Kane, don’t worry about her. If she wants to get in touch she knows who you are.”

“I just want to make sure she’s ok.” He said quietly. “I’d hate to think she was upset by what happened last night.” He closed his eyes, blew out a breath then said, “I want her to know that I don’t do that sort of thing on a regular basis.” He couldn’t help the desperate tone that tinged his words. After a second he added, “I’ve never been into one night stands. Never. I don’t know what happened last night.”

“Do you have any idea who she might be?” Jacinta asked quietly, hoping he would say something to give her an opportunity to explain. She’d never been into one-night stands either. And like him, she couldn’t explain what had happened last night. Why had she simply discarded years of restraint and caution? How had he got beneath her defences?

“Not a clue.” He glanced up at Jacinta. Then he smiled ruefully at her, “You know you really are very easy to talk to.”

She shrugged.

“I’m serious. I’d never tell the twins that I had sex with a stranger. And they are family, yet, here I am, talking to you about it.” He smiled at her. “I have sex with a stranger and I



tell someone who is practically a stranger to me, all about it.” He shook his head as if he couldn’t understand it, “Thanks for listening.”

“Hey, you haven’t told me all about it.” She tried to hide the fact that she knew all about it, could still remember the taste of him, the scent of him, his touch. “Should I sit down or is it a short story?”

“Baggage.”

The back door to the kitchen opened. Jim poked his head in, “Oh, good.” He said when he saw that Kane was clean, and bandaged. Jim looked across at Jacinta. “You got him cleaned up then?”

She nodded. “He cried like a baby!” She told Jim. “Good job his men couldn’t see him.” Jacinta wiped down the sink. She then started clearing up the bits and pieces on the kitchen table.

“Thanks Jac.” Kane got to his feet. “Everything ok?” he turned to ask Jim.

Jim nodded. “We brought Merlin back.”

“Is he ok?”

“Yeah. Gav’s getting him settled. Not sure what spooked him. But he’s ok.” He looked at the bandage. “You look worse than him. How’s the back?”

“It’s lacerated. Grazed. Bruised with some nice shades of mauve. But he’s such a he-man he doesn’t think he should see a doc. I assume you guys are up with your shots?”

“Yes mum.” Kane rolled his eyes. Jim glanced from Kane to Jacinta and banked his smile. He doubted either of them would appreciate it.

“Well in that case you might want to go put a shirt on, before you catch a chill. You know all that bare chest stuff is

wasted on me!” She smirked, “I’ll phone Trev to ask him to pick up some of that second skin stuff.” And with that she left the kitchen.

Kane and Jim looked at each other.

“She’s very practical, isn’t she?” Jim said with a teasing glint in his eyes.

“And bossy.” Kane replied with a chuckle.

“Really?” Jim’s eyebrows shot skyward.

Kane shook his head, “No.” He tucked his tongue in his cheek as he thought about it. Then he shrugged, “She’s actually very easy to talk to.” He frowned. “And..”

“What?” Jim prompted when Kane simply petered out.

“And not what I had expected.”

“Oh?”

Kane shrugged self-consciously. “She’s, I don’t know. She’s just, remarkable I guess.” He looked embarrassed. “I can’t put my finger on it. It’s like she just knows me, and I know her. I can talk to her about anything.” He frowned. “Doesn’t that strike you as odd? I mean I barely know the woman, in real terms, and yet I feel as if I’ve known her forever.” He glanced up at Jim as he muttered sheepishly. “She’s incredible.”

“She seems to have done a good job with your back.” Jim told him, feeling slightly bemused. Kane wasn’t the romantic type. He was realistic, down to earth, and matter-of-fact. Yet listening to him just now, Jim wondered if Kane realised what he was owning up to.

Kane nodded. “Yeah, she tried to be very gentle. She has good hands.” He tried to flex his shoulders. Winced. “She doesn’t think I should go out again today.”

“I’m inclined to agree with her.” Jim nodded, from what he saw of Kane’s back, he thought he’d be heading for hospital by now. “Those cuts might open up again.”

“I think you’ll have to finish without me.” Kane told Jim as he got to his feet and attempted to arch his back. The bruises made their presence known.

“Ok. Not a problem.” Jim watched Kane carefully. “You sure you don’t want to go into town, ER might check that back.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Ok.”

“Get something to eat before you head out. Rosa left some stew to reheat.” Kane picked up the bloodstained shirt and bundled it. “I’ve left the Ute out front.” He opened the bin and tossed the shirt in. “I’m going to go get some clean clothes on.” He gestured toward the stove. “It should be ready in fifteen minutes. Ask John to come in too.”

When he returned, Jacinta was sitting down at the table, with the two men. She was listening avidly as they told her what they’d seen happen.

The stew was heating up slowly. Kane walked toward the stove, and gave the stew a stir.

Jim had set the table for four. “Jac said Trev will be here in a couple of hours.”

“Hours?” Kane glanced at Jacinta for confirmation.

“Apparently a small land slide. The twins will probably also be caught on the other side.”

“I think this is ready.” He stirred it automatically. “Guess a trip to the hospital is out then.”

“You were going to go?” Jacinta couldn’t keep the surprise from her voice.

“No.” He admitted honestly.

Jacinta got up and walked toward the stove. “Ok, well, grubs up then! Shall I serve up? You take a seat.” She glanced at Kane, “Got any bread?”

He nodded and headed for the bread bin, he pulled out the loaf and sat it on the breadboard. Then reached into a drawer and retrieved a bread knife.

John brought the plates to Jacinta who carefully scooped heaps of stew onto the top plate. John then handed that to Jim who placed it on one of the settings. They repeated this until all four plates had stew. Then John and Jacinta joined Kane and Jim at the table. Kane put a jug of water on the table. Jim put out four glasses.

“Well, this is pretty fortunate. I get to see one naked back, and then” Jacinta told the three guys. “I get to eat lunch with three gorgeous men. Alone. Just me! If the girls could see me now!” She winked at Kane, who seemed to suddenly get nervous. “Oh relax!” She told him blithely, as she picked up her fork, “Now that I’ve seen you without your shirt on, you’re a bit too scrawny for my taste!”

Jim and John laughed. Kane quirked a brow at her insolence, but couldn’t help the smile that appeared in his eyes and on his lips.

“You saw me without my shirt at the party, you didn’t mention my scrawniness then.” He teased as he dunked some bread into his stew.

“I was more interested in your skirt.” She replied with eyes that twinkled at him. “You should wear one more often, it suits you.”

“You are incorrigible. You know that?”

“Yes.” She winked. Then she changed the conversation, “So what are you going to do this afternoon, now that you can’t head out again?”

“There’s always some bookwork to sort out.”

“Not your favourite activity.”

“Not by a long short.” He reached for the jug and winced as the action registered several of the bruised muscles.

“Water?” He gritted.

Jacinta hid her concern, knowing that he would hate to be coddled. Instead she nodded and passed him her glass. So did Jim and John.

“So what are you doing this afternoon?”

Jacinta shrugged and frowned. “I guess it depends on what time Trev eventually gets here. I’d like to be home before five if at all possible. But who knows when they’ll clear the slide.”

“You could stay the night.” Jim threw in and watched Kane’s reaction carefully.

“I don’t think so.” Jacinta laughed. “You obviously have no idea how desperate Kane has been to get rid of us all.”

“Now you are making me sound ungallant.”

“You’ve been anything but.” She told him. “But you have to admit, you are happy to see the back of us.”

“Not at all.”

“Woose.” She accused.

“Gentleman.” He replied.

“Even gentlemen are allowed to be honest.”

“I enjoyed the company.”

“Diplomatic as ever.” She replied with a teasing smile. Jim and John watched the exchange and then shared a little look. “So was it as bad as you expected it to be?”

Kane poked his tongue in his cheek as he thought about it. He eventually shook his head. “No. It wasn’t what I expected at all.”

“Oh?” Puzzled Jacinta’s fork hovered between the plate and her mouth. “In what way?”

“It was fun.”

She chuckled. “You fibber.”

“No, it was.”

“What you liked being stalked by five rabid women?”

“Five? Not counting you?”

“I was counting me. Marie was way too practical to be counted as rabid.” Jacinta told him with a cheeky grin.

“What about you?” Jim asked, when neither Kane nor Jacinta had picked up the conversation.

“Me?”

“Yes. Did you enjoy it? Like living on the farm?”

“Loved it.” She replied honestly. “The air is clean. The people were fab. The food was great. The scenery stunning.”

“You didn’t get bored?” Kane asked and wondered why he considered her response important.

“Bored?” She laughed. “Are you joking? You sisters had every minute planned.”

“Not every minute.”

“No, ok, slight exaggeration.”

“Could you live on a farm? On a daily basis.”

“Oh yeah.” And the corners of her mouth twitched as she added. “Are you proposing?”

“Funny.”

“I guess that means no.” She glanced at Jim and John.

“Guess I blew it eh guys?”

Both men grinned.

“So would you let me come and stay? Sometime?” She asked Kane.

“You’d want to come?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I don’t know half of what goes on, on a farm like this. It could be interesting.”

“Well, if you hadn’t lied about horses and heights...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The conversation over lunch continued to be low key and chatty. Jim and John were loath to leave, they found Kane’s interaction with Jacinta fascinating.

## Chapter 8

“Jac, this is impressive.” Joshua handed her the disc. “I’ve got a buyer for you, if you want to take it forward.”

“You really like it?” She pushed her glasses off her face, perched them on her head and waited for his answer.

“Hey, I gave it the acid test.” She looked puzzled. He grinned. “Zac and his mates.”

She laughed. “And he liked it.”

“They raved.”

“Ok.” She shrugged. “Then I guess that’s it.”

Joshua frowned. He’d known Jac for just over three years, having met her through his wife Grace. “You don’t sound all that impressed.”

“I am. Really I am.” She smiled, but even she knew that the smile was a bit lightweight. A few weeks back and she would have been dancing a jig. Today, the fact that she would be super rich, did nothing more than make her relieved.

“This could make you a millionaire.”

“That’s good.” She nodded, accepting that in comparison to what she thought she had lost, being a millionaire was nothing.

Joshua watching her reaction seemed bemused for all of a second. “Nope.” He shook his head. “Come with me.” he took her by the hand and led her to the French doors and onto the deck. “Grace?” He called, and waited for his pregnant wife to stop playing with their two-year-old toddler.

She smiled when she saw her husband and her friend. “Hey Jac. Josh was thrilled with that new programme.” She took



her two year old by the hand and slowly headed for the deck.

Jacinta smiled as she watched Grace steer her daughter toward them, "So he said." She bobbed down when Grace and her daughter reached the deck, "Hello Iona."

The two year old smiled but clung to her mother's leg.

"And her response was anything but ecstatic." Joshua said dryly and reached to pick up his daughter. "Hello Imp. Have you forgotten Jacinta?"

"No Papa." She tucked her head in the crook of his neck and put her little arms around his neck as she lay against him. "I'm shy!"

He laughed as he wondered whether two year olds understood the concept of irony. "Come on. Let's get something from the fridge." He carried her into the house, leaving Grace and Jacinta staring at his retreating back.

"I guess that means he wants us to talk." Grace laughed having watched her husband and daughter disappear.

"She's grown." Jacinta said as Joshua and Iona entered the kitchen, "And she looks more like him."

"Thanks."

"It's the eyes. But she has your personality, I'd say."

"You're stalling." Grace looked at her friend, "What's going on?"

"I don't know." Jacinta shrugged self-consciously, "He told me the programme was good. I said good. He said I didn't sound impressed and brought me here."

"Well you seem under-whelmed." She quirked a look at Jacinta.

"Under whelmed? That's not a real word."

“And now you are stalling. Again. This could mint you money.”

“I am pleased. Honest.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“There isn’t a problem.” She stepped down, onto the lawn.

“Look, if you don’t want Josh to handle the deal, just tell him. He’s ok about stuff like that.” Grace followed, now even more convinced that something was wrong. Jacinta was definitely not excited about her programme, and Grace knew that it was a career changing even life changing development.

“Oh, no. No. I want him. He’s the best.” Jacinta stopped and waited for Grace to reach her.

Grace grinned. “Yes.” Then she took Jacinta by the arm and led her into the garden, “So if it isn’t the programme, what is it?”

Jacinta shrugged. They walked on in silence for a few more metres.

Jacinta had known Grace for several years. They were good friends. Close friends. Best friends. But she wondered what her friend would say if she told her about the garden.

“Jac?” Grace prodded gently.

“You know I went to a hen week thing?” Jacinta finally said.

Grace nodded. “I meant to ask. How was it?”

“Fine.”

“Fine.” Grace repeated and her brows furrowed as she considered the tone and the word. Fine? Something was seriously wrong here.

“I met someone.” Jacinta stated boldly and closed her eyes as if that would help her pretend she hadn’t said anything.

“At the hen thing?” Grace prompted.

“Him. The brother.” Jacinta opened her eyes and peeked at Grace.

“What brother?”

“Anne and Lisa’s brother.” Jacinta shook her head, then covered her face with her hands, “It’s all mental really.” Jacinta sighed, “I mean, his sisters brought six women to the farm, to try and set him up.”

“And you struck gold.” Grace teased.

“In a roundabout kind of way.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s embarrassing.” Jacinta acknowledged. She wondered if she had the nerve to tell Grace.

“Not half as embarrassing as a father trying to bribe guys to go out with his daughter.” Grace threw in. The droll tone was not lost on Jacinta. Though Jacinta couldn’t understand why Grace’s father would have to find her a man, Grace was lovely, and kind, sensitive too. “He was touting for custom.”

Jacinta laughed. “Your dad?”

“Yes. That’s how I met Josh.” Grace smiled.

“Your dad?”

“He conned Josh into meeting me at the airport when I got back from a conference.” Grace stroked her protruding stomach, “But we are getting off topic.”

“I had sex with him in his rose garden!”

“What?” Shrieked Grace.

“And he doesn’t know it was me!” Deciding that having started, she should tell all, Jacinta went for blunt.

“What?”

Jacinta covered her face with both hands. Then slowly she spread her fingers and looked at Grace. Grace reached up and removed her hands, then drew her friend into a loose hug. With her pregnancy, getting close was a touch difficult, but still she managed to hug Jacinta. She’d known Jacinta for over ten years, having met her when the University had assigned her to work on a project that needed computer online support. She knew Jacinta wasn’t impulsive. In many ways, she was like Grace, very sensitive. She would never have sex with someone in a rose garden.

“He must be a very special guy.” Grace said softly as she drew away and looked at Jacinta.

“He is.” Jacinta closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes she looked directly at Grace and said with a great deal of angst, “I’m sure if he knew it was me, he’d have a fit.”

Grace shook her head. “Not if he’s special. He’s probably wondering who you are.”

“Well he was when I left.”

“And you didn’t tell him?”

“I couldn’t.”

She smiled, “How is it you had sex and he doesn’t know who with? How is that possible?”

So Jacinta explained.

“Could you be pregnant?” Grace threaded her arm through her friends and walked further into the garden.

Jacinta shook her head. “I don’t think so.” It was unlikely. For though Jacinta was not on the pill and Kane had not

used a condom, the timing was wrong. Jacinta doubted whether she was pregnant.

“So what are you going to do?”

“What can I do?” Jacinta sounded forlorn. She had revisited the week, over and over. Replayed the party, over and over, and still she hadn’t a clue what to do. He would be shocked if he found out it was her. Shocked and angry. What was the point in telling him? Surely, in time he’d forget her. The problem was that she doubted she would forget him. And she didn’t want him to forget her.

“Do you want a relationship with him?”

“Yes. I never expected to feel like this.” She whispered, then grimaced as she added “But not because he thinks I’m pregnant.”

Grace nodded then with a rueful shrug said, “That’s how Josh and I got together initially.”

Jacinta looked bemused.

“He thought I might be pregnant. Made this great song and dance about us getting engaged, and if I was pregnant, then we were getting married.”

“You agreed to that?”

Grace laughed. “I know. Me? But yes. I did.” She smiled as she thought about that time in her life. “I was confused. I mean, I knew I wanted him, loved him, knew it even then, but, I thought he just wanted me as the sex was good!”

“Grace!” Squealed Jacinta. “Way too much information!”

“Says someone who told me she had sex in a garden with a gorgeous man.” Grace grinned. “He is gorgeous isn’t he?” Grace hesitated then said. “Josh was my first.” She grinned at Jacinta’s stunned reaction. “Yeah, I know, women’s lib and all that.” Grace stroked her tummy absently, “But I

always believed that it was about choice. We have choices, we can sleep with whoever, whenever, or if we don't want to, we can wait. I waited."

"So did I." Jacinta admitted softly.

Grace gave her a hug. Then she pulled away and said, "So what are you going to do?"

Jacinta took her time answering. "I don't know." She closed her eyes, "If he found out it was me, then what?" She opened her eyes. "I've got the wedding to go to next weekend. He'll be there."

"Why don't you tell him?"

"Cause he'll never believe me. He's expecting some Greek goddess, not a geek! I'm just a computer programmer."

"Soon to be rich computer programmer." Grace added. She turned them round and they started walking back toward the house. "Ok, then, why not make him fall in love with you, geeky Greek goddess."

Jacinta chuckled. She turned her face to look at Grace and said, "How?"

"Show him you. It sounds like he was already interested."

"Probably sees me as a kindly aunt. Someone to listen to his woes."

"I doubt it." She glanced at Jacinta, "What's he like?"

Jacinta's eyes glowed, "He's a really lovely man. I mean it. He was practically stalked by a group of five women and he kept his cool."

"Come on, hardly a hardship."

"And he's thoughtful. He was nice to all of us. He's really easy to talk to. He listens. And he's gorgeous. Out door fit

guy. And whenever he looks at me, there's this incredible lift in my heart." Jacinta pressed a palm to her chest.

"That's a plus." Grace said softly.

"And he's just, well really special. I know I sound like a complete idiot. But he makes me laugh. He's got a good heart, and he's caring, and just wonderful."

"Wonderful? Are we talking about the sex?"

"Grace!" Jacinta screeched.

"Just asking." Grace grinned, "But going by your expression, he's good in the sack. Or should I say garden?"

"Grace!"

"What are you wearing to the wedding?" Grace changed the topic.

"Why?"

"Cause I think we should go shopping."

"Shopping?"

"Yup, retail therapy, always a good bet to cheer up. And you'll need something to knock his socks off. Come on. Let's tell Josh we are going out."

## Chapter 9

A week later, Jacinta attended her cousin's wedding. The church service was held in the little town down the road from the farm, and the reception of just over a hundred people was held at the farm. Kane had 'given' the bride away. Anne and Charlie made beautiful bridesmaids.

Jacinta did what she usually did at these affairs, sit and watch. The only real problem with this wedding reception was its location. She knew she wouldn't be able to simply leave early as she did most events. Even though she had driven here, as with many of the others, she was staying at the local motel so she didn't have an excuse to leave early. That had been Grace's idea.

She had chosen to wear a simple pale salmon silk sheath that she had found when she went shopping with Grace. She had her Celtic earrings on, and her watch was the only other piece of jewellery. Her feet were in strappy sandals with her toenails and fingernails painted a darker shade of salmon. She had outlined her eyes with blue-black eyeliner and eye shadow, and dusted her cheeks with the same shade of amber blusher. She knew she looked good. And from the number of appreciative glances coming her way, she knew that other people thought she looked good too. Grace would be pleased with her. Then she smiled. No Grace would not be pleased, as for most of the reception, Jacinta had hidden from Kane. She had tried to pluck up the courage, to approach Kane, but just couldn't do it.

It was quite late in the evening when trouble arrived.

"Come on coz." Trev leaned down toward her. "Dance."

"Trev..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, you don't dance. What a load of garbage. You choose not to dance. Well it's my wedding, so you dance. With me. After that. You're on your own!" He twirled her round, "Have I told you how stunning you look?"



I know lots of people have been asking about my gorgeous cousin. You look stunning.”

“Thanks coz.” She said dryly and stepped into another twirl “If I end up back on the marriage mart, I am coming looking for you.” She threatened as he swung her into a waltz when the band changed tempo.

“They’ve given up.” He grinned at her, “And anyway, what’s wrong with marriage?”

“Nothing. As long as it doesn’t involve me.”

“Coward.” He smiled, “You’d make someone a perfect wife.”

“You must be drunk. I’d make a lousy wife.”

“Why?”

“I’m not domestic.” She pointed out calmly.

“You look after yourself don’t you?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So how come that doesn’t count as domestic?”

She huffed, “Ok, I’m selfish. I like doing what I want, when I want.”

“We all do.” He twirled her around and they bumped into Lisa and Kane. “Hey, what are you doing with my wife. Hand her over.” And with that he took Lisa in his arms and waltzed off with her.

Kane stood puzzled for a moment, “You said you don’t dance.” He stepped up. Automatically, nervously, she stepped back. “Come on.” He advised and frowned. He had watched her surreptitiously over the course of the reception. She looked eerily familiar, and yet unlike the person he had seen during the hen week. With short hair wisped into a softer style, her tip tilted eyes outlined to draw attention, and

in that beautiful dress, she looked stunning. Sophisticated. Beautiful.

“Can I just say you look beautiful.” He told her, as his eyes conveyed the truth to that statement. Elegant, Audrey Hepburn, he thought as he had tracked her during the reception. He had thought about asking her to dance, then remembered she didn’t dance. So he had been trying to come up with another reason to approach her. Now he had been handed her on a plate.

“Thank you.” She glanced around furtively and then tried to find a way out, “Your back must still be sore. Why don’t we just sit down?”

“Why don’t we just dance.” He replied with a grin, and without further fuss took her into his arms. “And my back has healed just fine. So don’t worry.” Again there was that unexplainable tingle as they touched. A frisson of electricity. He shifted his hand to lie in the small of her back and edged her closer. She was tense.

“Relax.” He whispered into her ear. “It’s just a dance.” She tensed even more. “I’ll lead. Ok. Don’t worry. You’re doing fine.”

She tried. God knows she tried not to relax, not to enjoy dancing with him. But after a few steps she simply gave into it. She loved dancing. And she loved dancing with him. They moved gracefully, beautifully together, in silence.

When the music stopped, they stopped. Even though it had been a slow piece they were both breathless. The band started with another melody. Jacinta edged away, praying to God that he didn’t remember and wishing with all her heart that he did. She was relieved and a little disappointed when he didn’t.

“The set isn’t over.” He told her with a gentle smile, and taking her back into his arms with the gentle zing of the unexpected current of electricity that seemed to course

through him whenever he touched her, he guided them round the dance floor for another three minutes. This time he pulled her close, his lips against her ear. He folded her arm in, and drew her closer. As the piece came to an end, he couldn't help but brush his lips against her cheek. "Thanks." He murmured against her ear. They stepped apart. He smiled. "You move beautifully." As he uttered the words, comprehension dawned. His eyes snapped to hers. Astonishment rendered him speechless.

But before he could do anything about it, he was tapped on the shoulder. "Mind if I cut in?" Said a man Jacinta didn't know

Jacinta held her breath. Kane stood stock still, his eyes flashed to the earrings. They had looked familiar, he'd thought that, absently when he had first taken her into his arms. Of course he recognised the pattern now, he had the brooch in his pocket. He'd be carrying it around for the last two weeks. But perhaps the design was common. The man took Kane's silence for an ok, and he whisked Jacinta away. Jacinta breathed a sigh of relief. Now if only she could get this man to take her outside. She could escape.

Kane tracked her across the dance floor. It couldn't be. Her. It couldn't be. She came to the party as a cowgirl. He'd spoken to her. Sat with her and talked. She told him she'd seen the goddess step out.

She couldn't be her. She couldn't.

The goddess was taller. He glanced at her shoes. Realised that she was wearing kitten heels, that at the farm two weeks ago she had spent most of her time in trainers or low-heeled boots. The goddess had worn high spiky heels, all the better to accentuate the length of leg she had been baring. And of course, the hairpiece, a wig, had added height in curls.

But surely to God he would have recognised her eyes. He watched her intently. Could he be wrong? Perhaps she

danced like the Goddess. Perhaps he wanted her to be the goddess.

He watched her move with her partner. She looked worried. They danced past Kane. Jacinta kept her head down, but from the corner of her eye saw that he was watching them. Frowning at them. She would need to leave. Soon.

She saw Charlie reach Kane's side and decided this was going to be her only chance. With a politely worded apology, she asked her partner to excuse her when they were just a few feet from her table. She thanked him politely, all the time checking to see where Kane was. He had his head bent, as he listened to something Charlie told him. He nodded. Jacinta picked up her bag, and threaded her way through the tables to the verandah. Kane lifted his head and scanned the room, searching for her amongst the dancers. Then he saw her, just as she stepped out. He excused himself and leaving Charlie open-mouthed he threaded his way through the tables. He saw her from the verandah. She was heading for the cars. Practically running for the car.

"Not until I've got my answers." He swore and took off to catch up with her.

Jacinta opened her car door and scrambled in. She checked the rear mirror, no sign of pursuit. Quickly she inserted her key into the ignition, but when she looked up, there he was, glaring at her through the windscreen. She sat frozen. It gave him time to open the passenger door and get in.

"The bride and groom haven't left yet."

"I, er, I, er, I don't em, usually stay long at these things." She told him truthfully. "People start matchmaking."

There was silence. She turned and found him staring at her earrings.

"Nice ear rings."

She thought quickly. “Yes, Trev bought them for me for the wedding, a thank you for doing the reading at church.” A tiny little lie. They had been a birthday present from Trev, with the brooch two years ago.

Kane frowned. Perhaps he’d made a mistake. She wasn’t tall enough. At 32 she wasn’t young enough to be a virgin. And Trev had given her the earrings. So she moved like the goddess, but that may be because he had fixated on the missing goddess, and because there was some measure of electricity between Jacinta and him. Transference.

Nerves kicked in. She needed to get out of this car. “Oh!” She opened the car door, flashed him a look, “I’m such an idiot, I’ve forgotten my jacket.” She left her jacket in the boot of her car, but he couldn’t see that. “I’d better go back and get it.” She climbed out of the car fast. He got out more slowly. She could feel her heart pounding. Feigning nonchalance, she turned to look at him across the roof of the cars, as she threaded her way through the parked cars “Why did you get in the car?” She grinned at him, as they reached the clear driveway with the bridal car “Not still trying to escape the famous five?” She walked round the car.

“No...” he shook his head and glanced warily at her. “I thought...”

But the rest of what he intended to say was cut off as the bride and groom emerged from the house. That’s what Charlie had been telling him, that Lisa and Trev were going to be leaving. People hurried behind them, cheering, offering Trev and Lisa ribald advice. Trev’s brother’s had prepared the car, tin cans and all.

As Trev opened the door, Lisa glanced around, looking for her brother. When she spotted him, she smiled, then walked toward him with tears in her eyes. He gave her a fierce hug. She returned it.

“You take care of her.” He told Trev as he handed Lisa back. Trev nodded. Then shook Kane’s hand.

The chauffeur held the door open for the couple to get in. He closed the door once they were settled and walked round to the driver's side. With the windows wound down Lisa leaned past her husband and blew kisses at the crowd on the steps. Kane blinked several times. His throat too clogged up to speak. His baby sister. Married.

Jacinta didn't think about it. She just reached out and took Kane's hand. He looked at her. She laced their fingers, and she squeezed gently. "You did good." She whispered.

He nodded. The car began to pull away. The tin cans rattled. The crowd cheered. Kane brushed an errant tear away then pretended to rub his chin. Anne came up to him and threw an arm around his waist. He hugged her to his side. Anne was crying, and smiling, and laughing as she waved at her sister.

Jacinta tried to release his hand. But he held on. He was forced to let go when Jason came up to shake his hand, "One down, and one to go." He teased as he smiled at Anne and Kane. "Your parents would be proud." He told them.

"Thanks Jason."

Other people came up to him to shake his hand in congratulations, and they swarmed around him. He couldn't see Jacinta.

There was a steady exodus for another hour as people left the reception. It was nearly mid-night when the house was almost empty. Just Anne, her soon to be husband Derek, Rosa, and Jim.

"Well that went off well."

Anne nodded. "I am so tired." She smiled at Derek "Can we elope?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

"No chance." Kane stated. "Eight weeks and you're up."

Anne and Derek grinned.

Kane indicated the mess. “What time are they coming in?”

“Ten.” Rosa said, “the caterers said ten, and the cleaning team said mid day.”

“Ok, well, then I suggest we head for bed.”

Derek and Anne said good night and headed for the stairs. Rosa smiled.

Jim nodded at them. With his arm around his wife of thirty years, he walked toward Kane. He’d seen Kane dance with Jacinta. Seen him follow her out to the car. Seen them when everyone had poured out onto the verandah. And seen her take Kane’s hand when he needed support. “She’s staying at the Haven Motor Inn.” He told Kane.

“Who?” Jim quirked a brow at Kane’s question. Kane ran a hand through his hair. “You sure?”

“I asked her when she was at the church.”

Kane reached behind him to the peg by the door. He took his jacket, rummaged in the pocket and found his car keys. “Thanks.”

The door opened with the chain attached, and Jacinta peered at him with a fair amount of trepidation showing in her eyes, “Open up or I can speak loud and clear in the car park.” He told her.

Jacinta frowned but didn’t do as he said, “It’s nearly one in the morning.”

He waited. She said nothing. “Ok, loud and clear it is.”

With a smothered expletive, she scraped the chain back, and opened the door to him. He strode in. She closed the door

and room was bathed in just the light from the lamp on her bed stand.

“Now what?” She folded her arms and glared.

He hooked an arm around her, hauled her to him and kissed her.

Several minutes later he disengaged. He strode away.

“You’re her!” He turned and strode back, looking at her as if he was seeing her for the first time. “Fuck!” He marched away, then turned and stalked back to stand a few inches from her. “You can’t be!”

“Fine.” She glared in return, pushed past him and marched to the door. “Thank you. Now that’s settled.” She reached for the door handle, “Leave.”

“Leave.” He stormed toward her and slapped his hand against the door, “Not until you’ve explained.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation.” She flung at him, and realised that with his hand against the door she couldn’t open it.

“Jacinta, I don’t like being taken for a ride.” He removed his hand, but didn’t move away. “Don’t push your luck. I can’t tell you the last time I was this angry.” She pivoted. His arm caught her. “No, I want to see your eyes.” He stepped up closer, stood close enough to see what had been so clear for days. Her eyes. “Why?”

He just couldn’t understand why she would do this to him. All the time, she knew it was her, and she hadn’t told him. He’d practically confessed everything to her, and she hadn’t owned up. It just didn’t make sense.

“Why what?” She folded her arms in front of her and fought down the panic.

“Why did you trick me?” He demanded with a weary sigh.



“I didn’t trick you.” She snapped and once again pushed past him, this time striding away from the door.

“You pretended.” He told her, and though she heard the hurt in his voice, it didn’t stop her temper from sparking.

“Pretend?” She interrupted and her eyes widened in temper as she spun around to face him. “Which bit was pretence?”

“You could have told me you were her.” He said quietly.

“Oh, yeah, right.” This time she stalked toward him, and jabbed her index finger against his breast bone “I told you it was one of the girls and you discarded that. Remember? ” She jabbed again just to add a touch more emphasis, “You told me you’d know the goddess.” Another jab, anger laced that prod, “ I was too short,” jab “ too this,” jab, “too that,” she slapped her palm against his chest “In fact, nothing like her.” She stormed, absolutely furious. “Well, I was her, you bloody idiot!”

“Why didn’t you say you were her?” He asked softly sensing that she was as angry as he was. But he didn’t understand why? He was the one who had been duped. She’d known all along who he was, but he’d spent weeks trying to figure out who she was. She didn’t have the right to be angry. He did.

“You’d have believed me?” He couldn’t miss the fact that she really didn’t think he would. The sheer incredulity was clear in her tone.

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” He insisted with absolute conviction. He came closer and said quietly, “Once I’d kissed you. I’d know for sure.”

Jacinta stood her ground, incensed, “And so to believe me I’d have to ask you to kiss me?” She jammed her hands on her hips and glared at him. “And you of course would have jumped at that chance. Trev’s spinster cousin pleading for a kiss.” She quirked a brow. He squirmed. “Yeah. As I thought. Not a hope in hell!” She spun away, took a deep

breath, then turned back. "OK. So now you know." Her eyes flashed as she said coolly, and with as much control as she could muster, "You don't have to worry. You haven't ruined my reputation. I am not pregnant. I had a great time. You were great. Thank you."

He came toward her. "I don't understand."

"What's to understand?"

"Why? Why me? Why in the garden?" He ran a hand around the back of his neck and shook his head as he remembered what they had done in the garden. "The garden for God's sake!"

"It just happened. I didn't plan it."

"Just happened." He repeated, as if that was as likely as the oceans drying up. "For 32 years you don't have sex and then it just happens?" He asked incredulously, as he gently tipped her chin up, "I don't think so." He looked into her eyes, searching for answers, "You wouldn't treat sex lightly."

She moved out of reach. "You're right. I don't."

"So?" He pushed.

"I didn't plan to have sex with you." She admitted in a quiet whisper.

"So why did you?" His voice was equally low.

She shrugged. She closed her eyes, huffed out a sigh and added softly and honestly, "It felt right."

He knew that. It had felt perfect, perfectly right.

"When you kissed me, it just felt perfect." She mumbled.

Gently he pulled her into his arms and held tight for several long seconds. Jacinta closed her eyes and held on. Kane closed his eyes and held on. Then without much thought, they both turned their faces toward each other, looked into

each other's puzzled eyes, and then slowly inched closer. The movement was tentative, hesitant, as if each expected the other to step away, yet both wanted the contact. Slowly, heart-stoppingly slow they reached for each other. Their lips accurately found their targets, as their eyes drifted shut.

What started as a gentle searching, quietly questing, tenderly demonstrative kiss didn't take long to step up a gear. Lips parted and tongues dueled as the passion they'd experienced in one dark, rose scented, garden sprung instantly to life.

The kiss deepened. Plundered. Asked for more. Got it.

They were right back in the garden. Oblivious to everything around them, centred only on each other. Completely and totally focused on the taste, the scent, and the feel of each other.

Kane held her face so that he could angle this way and that, reach for and gain better access, to twist against her lips, brush gently, nibble delicately, suck fiercely. And even then he couldn't get enough. He brushed her lips with more demand, coaxing them to part, then he thrust his tongue in, licking, tasting, drowning.

Jacinta felt her heart thunder and knew her legs were boneless as she clung to his shoulders to stay upright.

"I want you." He breathed into her neck, taking the time to gather some much needed air. But he needed her more.

"Now." He nuzzled her cheek, nipped at her earlobe and then returned to her lips. His hands moved, past her shoulders, one locked around her waist, the other provided a crook for her head. The kiss was hard, demanding, wanting, and showing her what was to come.

Her response was raw.

Several minutes later he asked, "Jacinta, d'you want me?"

"Yes." Came the breathless whisper.

He backed her to the bed. Felt her stagger as the back of her calves met the base of the bed. With his lips still locked to hers he discarded his jacket, tore off his shirt, heedless of the need to undo buttons. The cuffs caught. He tugged. The cufflinks went flying.

He broke off the kiss and shucked off his shoes.

“Jacinta.” He growled, when she just stood and watched him. “Strip. Fast.” He unzipped his pants, but before he stepped out of them he removed his wallet, flipped it open and removed some condoms. He tossed them onto the bed, realised that she hadn’t disrobed “Jacinta.”

She always slept naked, but he didn’t know that. So when she unbelted the robe, slid it off her shoulders, and stood before him as it pooled around her ankles, he felt as if he had taken a punch to the gut. What little air he had gulped in between kisses evaporated as his body took the electricity hit. His eyes went molten as he stared at her.

## Chapter 10

His imagination had fallen way short. In his dreams, their time in the garden was always illuminated. He could see her body, not just feel her. He could see her eyes, not just touch her lips. He knew what she looked like. Or so he thought. The reality was much more powerful. His chest rose and fell as he struggled for breath and control. She was a vision of perfection.

“You are so beautiful.” The heat in his gaze nearly sent her up in literal flames. His breath labored as if he had already taken her on the wild ride he intended to take. She was absolutely beautiful.

Jacinta watched him as he took detailed inventory. She was nervously licking her lips when his eyes returned to her face. He groaned and pulled her into his arms.

His mouth fastened onto hers, with unerring accuracy, his tongue tangled with hers as his hands held onto her face, keeping her right where he wanted her.

That left her fingers free. They roamed his back, touching, kneading. Holding on for dear life when his tongue mated with hers. Her fingers shifted, lower, to slip beneath his boxers. Round past his hipbone, she grabbed a handful of butt. Squeezed.

Jacinta felt Kane harden against her stomach. She broke the lip lock and moved to kiss her way along his chin, up to his ear lobe. She kissed her way down the column of his neck, licked the pulse she felt hammering as she made her way to his scapula. She pressed a kiss to his arched neck, then returned with feverish abandon to his mouth. Kane groaned.

Slowly she moved her hand, finding his nipple, her palm rubbed against the nub hardness. He moaned against her lips. She broke the kiss, as her lips followed her hand, found the pebble hard nipple and she did what he had done to her. She took him in her mouth, brushed the very edge of his

nipple with her tongue, and then grazed it with her teeth. Kane fought to stay on his feet as sensation after sensation rocked his senses.

Jacinta felt his heart thunder and the power she felt gave her more confidence. She grabbed hold of his hips as he struggled to stay upright. For a second they looked at each other, hardly daring to believe that what they had experienced in the garden was just a token of what was to come, the experience they were having now.

With his eyes holding hers prisoner, he moved her hand, pressing her palm against him, encouraging her fingers to trace his hardness. Jacinta pushed against the cotton of his shorts, tugging at the material. He helped push his shorts down, past his hips. They skirted his thighs and then fell to the floor. Kane sucked in a breath, as she held him firmly. His head flung back as he arched into her hands.

Then as her mouth continued to tease his nipples, moving from one to the other, her hands stroked up and down, her thumb flicking at the very tip. Kane was ready to explode. He tugged at her hair, waited for her to stop lavishing his chest with kisses, and bent his head to meet her kiss.

Her hands stayed on him, firmly they slid up and down. Determined strokes. She swallowed his growl, then broke the kiss and returned to his chest, before slowing following the arrow of hair down past his belly button.

“Jacinta.” He breathed hard, sucking in air, gasping as he fought for control. His eyes closed as he felt her breath against him, his chest contracted as he fought off a premature orgasm. “Please. Jacinta.” He guided her head toward him, sucking in a great gulp of air as he felt her moist breath against him. He shuddered as her tongue fenced with the very tip. The groan that escaped was guttural. Jacinta kept her eyes on him as her mouth continued to taste, to suck, to lick. Kane’s hands rested on her shoulders, tempted to pull her away before he lost complete control and at the same time desperate to keep her mouth on him.

Guttural became muted whimpering as her tongue laved and licked. Hollowing her cheeks as she felt him throb. He grabbed hold of her head and held on for dear life as he came in great shuddering pulses. Kane's knees gave. And he toppled onto the bed, taking her with him as he went. Her head buried in his crotch. She was on her knees, kneeling at the very edge of the bed, his feet were flat on the floor, his hips on the edge of the bed.

Several seconds later she lifted her mouth from him, sliding her moistness away, her eyes on his as he watched her. He lay propped on his elbows, still panting hard, sucking in great gulps of air as his heart did its best to find a normal beat. He doubted whether he could move at all. Drained. Completely drained. She waited. Watched his reaction and waited. He was still breathing hard. His chest rising and falling as he sucked in air and slowly came down to earth. Jacinta rocked back onto her heels. He struggled to a sitting position. "Where the hell did you learn to do that?" He asked with uncharacteristic hoarseness.

"Porn video." She said blithely with a sheepish smile.

"What?" He looked startled, saw she was serious, and then he laughed as he said, "Virgins don't watch porn videos!"

"I did." She stood, thought about it, hesitated briefly and then moved to straddle him. She sat across his crotch. Wiggled and settled. He laced his arms around her waist, and settled her more comfortably in his lap.

Eye to eye level they just looked at each other. He laced his arms around her back, then leaned forward and kissed her nose, her cheek, and her jaw line. "Learn anything else?"

"Some." She tilted her head and added with a cheeky grin, "You sounded like you were about to die!" Her eyes filled with possessiveness as she studied him.

"Can't think of a better way to go." His hands brushed up and down, against her hips, to her waist, down to her hips,

keeping her close to his body. "You feel like satin." He murmured. "Even when I'm in you, you feel like liquid satin." She licked her lips. He groaned. "Don't do that. You really will kill me. I need a minute to recover."

"Just a minute." She teased and rolled off him. He didn't let her go far. He tipped onto his side, propped his head on his hands and pinned her to him with a look of clear intent. They faced each other. Kane reached to touch a lock of hair, "You didn't have to do that, you know."

Perhaps she hadn't been as good as she thought. He saw the concern register in her eyes, "I, wasn't..." She caught her lip anxiously.

He interrupted her, "Sweetheart, I can barely move." He saw the relief flash into her eyes.

"So it was ok?" Then she added with blunt candor. "You're big." He groaned, closed his eyes and fought for control. With a smothered expletive, he rolled her over onto her back. "Ready?" He grinned as he moved to lie on top of her. He body brushed her as he reached past her head to retrieve a pillow. "Pay back." He whispered against her ear, as he nuzzled, then told her to lift her hips. Jacinta did. Kane put the pillow beneath. "And sweetheart, don't scream too loud. These walls are paper thin and I live in this town."

Her belly fluttered. He inched his way down her body. Kissing every square inch. He kissed her inner thigh, licking against the sensitive soft skin. Her legs quivered. She practically dripped with wetness. He kissed her pelvic bone, running his teeth against the hardness beneath the skin, while his finger furrowed beneath the cropped hair at the juncture of her legs. Jacinta mewled, and her legs scissored, trapping his hand. He lifted his head. Looked at her. Waited. With steely determination she relaxed her legs. He could feel the effort it took. Slowly he grinned then replaced his finger with his lips and automatically held her thighs apart as they flexed into responsive reaction. He pushed her legs further apart, spreading them wider, opening her up to him.



With his lips he trapped the outer folds, with his tongue he traced her inner folds.

Jacinta's hips practically came off the bed. He raised his head, looked at her. "Hon, too much?"

She thrashed her head, but her voice was a faint thread as the words emerged. "No. No, no."

He smiled and returned to lick at the tiny bunch of nerves. She almost jack-knifed off the bed, shrieking.

He lifted his head. "Keep it down." He challenged with male pride lacing all three words. She whimpered. With a smile of satisfaction he went continued. With his tongue in her, his finger moved to find that bundle of nerves. His nail brushed against the sensitive nub, once, twice, and that was all it took. She gushed, screamed, her legs locked around his shoulders. Her stomach quivered as the powerful orgasm drove through nerve fibres that up until now had lain dormant. Tremors. Hook her up to a Richter scale and they would have registered ten.

Slowly, soothingly he eased her into his arms, and held on as the vibrations receded. He moved gently up her body, kissing the remnant shivers as her body came back to equilibrium.

He saw the packet on the bed. Still kissing her, he reached for the foil. Before her shock waves could recede completely, he used his teeth to rip the packet open. He rolled on a condom, waited for her to look at him and then entered her slowly, smoothly. She was wet, warm, ready. He leaned his forehead against hers. He withdrew, taking his weight on his knees as he inched out.

She looked puzzled. "What?"

"I can't wait. Not this time." He gritted. He couldn't understand it. His years of control simply vanished. As soon as he got into her, he wanted her, hard, fast and instantly.

“OK.”

“No you don’t understand.” He muttered. “I won’t last.”

She lifted her hips. “What makes you think I will?” She asked him as she clenched her pelvic muscles. What little control he had all but disappeared. He linked with her fingers, lifted them to lie on either side of her face, braced his upper body on his forearms, and then hammered deeper. His body was sweat slicked as he slid and ground against hers. She felt it come. The shock waves that she’d experienced two weeks ago were tiny compared to what was pulsing through her now. Then, he came, and she came with him.

Kane lay breathing hard, lying heavily, on her. Too exhausted to move. He felt her shift. He was too heavy to just remain, to continue to lie on top of her. So with a lethargy that made even breathing an effort, he rolled them.

Tenderly he drew her head onto his chest and tugged the duvet. Pulling it over them, knowing that as the shock receded and the adrenalin faded she would feel the cold. He held her. Tight. Then he felt the tears.

“You ok?” He asked the top of her head. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” She shook her head against his chest. “That was earth shattering.” She mumbled into his chest. “I feel so weak. I don’t know why I’m crying.”

Kane hugged her closer. Relieved. He stroked her hair. “That was a massive orgasm.” He pulled the duvet tighter around them both and cuddled her closer.

Exhausted they lay cocooned. Their breathing laboured.

“Can you sleep like this?” He asked her. His hands stroked up and down her back, offering some comfort.

“I don’t know.” She snuggled closer, “I’ve always slept alone.”

“Do you want me to go?”

“No.” She mumbled. “Stay. Please. Stay.”

He tugged the duvet closer, so that they were wrapped up tight.

Within moments they were both sound asleep.

They awoke almost within seconds of each other. Feeling sticky. The room smelt of sex. The duvet moved. He looked at his watch. 7am. They had slept for five straight hours. Jacinta wasn't sure what the protocol was on such occasions. Kane wasn't sure how to deal with this. He barely knew her, yet he knew her intimately.

For several minutes, though both were awake and both aware of each other being awake they said nothing.

His fingers traced absently against her naked back. And within seconds they were teasing each other with gentle touches. Slowly he shifted them, and then positioned himself to enter her gently. They made love slowly, caringly, lovingly. It was much later when she lethargically lifted her head off his chest and rolled onto her back. He fed out more of the duvet so that she stayed warm and covered.

“We need to talk.” He said gently.

She nodded. Now what? Should she offer to take a shower first?

They both lay on their backs, staring up at the ceiling.

“What are we going to do about this?” He finally asked.

She swallowed and hoped that her voice would come out normal. “Do we have to do anything?”

He turned his head toward her. “You are kidding right?” He waited until she turned her head toward him. “We make love

like it's the end of the world. I've never had sex like this." He told her candidly "Never this good. Never without any control. Never so real."

"So, what are you saying?" She whispered.

"We need to work something out."

"It isn't love. You don't know me." She told him bluntly.

"You don't know me either." He replied. "I didn't say it was love."

"So it's just a sexual relationship. Good sex." She stated flatly.

"Bloody good sex." He corrected and she heard the smile in his voice.

She smiled. Then the smile disappeared. "Even bloody good sex will peter out. It isn't the basis for a long term relationship."

"So what are you saying?"

She closed her eyes for a second. "We let it run its course. Enjoy the sex and that's that."

"You think you can do that?"

"Do what?"

"Have sex and not get involved?"

She sighed. "We've had sex. We aren't involved."

"And you think you can keep doing this?"

"I don't know."

"We could get married." He told her and was as surprised as she was to hear the words. He had only just thought that thought when the words emerged. Marriage? Him?

“No.” She replied quietly.

“Why not?” For some stupid reason the fact that she said no only made him more keen.

“Marriage should be for the long haul.”

“Agreed.”

“And when we are old and grey and riddled with arthritis, sex will be just a dream.”

“But what a dream!”

She smiled. They lay silently for a while.

“So will you marry me?” A few minutes ago, asking someone to marry him because they had good sex would have seemed like a stupid idea. Now it was the perfect idea. They were good together. They were at ease in each other’s company and they were sexually compatible. Compatible? He nearly laughed out loud at that understated word.

“No.” she repeated.

“We are good together.” He tried to cajole. If anyone had told him that he would have to persuade the woman of his choice to marry him, after they had had earth-shattering sex, he would have laughed in their face. Yet, here he was, having had mind-blowing sex, with a woman who looked like Audrey Hepburn, and behaved in bed like Emmanuelle, and he was begging her to marry him.

“We are good together in bed.” She told him bluntly.

“It’s a good start.”

She closed her eyes. “I’m not marrying for anything less than love.”

“People have arranged marriages and love comes later.” He seemed baffled by the fact that she wanted that emotional

tie. They had it when they made love. But it seemed like she wanted to words too.

“I’m not taking the risk.”

“How about we live together.” He suggested. Desperate times call for desperate measures. It sounded to him like she was getting ready to bail, as if marriage scared the living daylight out of her. He wondered if they had swapped gender during that mind blowing sexual marathon. Surely it was the guy who got nervous when it came to commitment.

“No.” She replied.

“Can we date?” Now he sounded like he was beyond desperate. Kane wanted to kick himself. How had he let it get to this stage?

She shrugged. Jacinta wasn’t sure that dating would be a good plan. She was already pretty sure she was in love with him, and spending more time with him was only going to make it more painful when it came to parting. And she was sure they would. He would move on.

“Is that a yes?”

“I guess.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“I live in Hamilton. You live here. How are we going to date?” She asked him, turned her head and frowned at him, “We don’t live close enough to date.”

“Weekends?” He pulled her closer, “We’ll work something out.” Relief was tangible. For a moment there he thought they were heading for the just good friends conversation, and he really wasn’t sure that he would survive that. He might not have said the words, but he was starting to think that he might just be in love with this woman.

## Chapter 11

Their first weekend did not go according to plan.

“What are you doing here?” He asked her as she stepped into the house.

“Well, as you couldn’t come to Hamilton, I came here.” She kissed his lips. The electricity sparked. “I wasn’t going to miss out on a weekend of sex.” She teased as she put her bag down by the coat stand.

He closed the front door. “I don’t think there’s going to be time for that. Not tonight anyway.” He gestured for her to head down the hallway. Then he pushed the kitchen swing door open and waited for her to go through. “I’m sorry. The foal is in distress. She’s way too early. Jim and Aroha are at their daughter’s place, Rosa’s out for the weekend, and I was going to drive down and leave the guys here to keep an eye on things.” He pulled out a chair for her, “I was just doing some last minute checking when I saw her.” He looked exhausted. “I can’t go anywhere this evening.”

“That’s ok.” She said calmly.

“Jacinta, I won’t have time for us.”

“I know.” But she didn’t make any move to shift. “Have you had anything to eat?”

“I was going to check the freezer.” He got up, “Look, I’m really sorry. I know I was supposed to be at your place this weekend.”

She got up. “Kane.” He stopped. She gave him a hug. “It’s fine, ok. You can do next weekend at my place.” She stepped out of his arms and watched as he rubbed tiredly at his neck.

“But you’ve had a wasted trip. Sex isn’t going to happen.” He opened the freezer and extracted a plastic tub. “Reheated Lasagna ok?”

“Fine.” She reached for the tub. “And I don’t think dating means only sex.” She told him. “Sit before you fall, I’ll reheat.” She took it to the microwave. “So what’s going on with the mare.”

He told her. He wasn’t sure. The foal was too young to be born and the mare was quite old to be pregnant. She could hear the concern and the worry in his voice. But as she knew nothing about horses, all she could do was listen.

Just talking to her about it seemed to lessen the strain. That surprised him. Then he remembered how easy it had been to talk with her at the party. He told her what was worrying him the most, and what he dreaded. He told her about the mare and the memories associated with her. He talked about what he needed to do, and how he hoped it would work out.

Jacinta put a large segment of the reheated lasagna on his plate and then gave him a fork and knife. She helped herself to a smaller piece and took a seat facing him.

After they ate, he took Jacinta by the hand and headed for the stables.

He examined the mare, talked to her, tried to soothe and calm her. Then he said “Jacinta could you stay with her, I’m going to phone for the Vet.”

From his tone, Jacinta could tell that something was seriously wrong. She didn’t ask what. She just sat with the mare and spoke quietly to her the way she had seen Kane talk to the mare.

The Vet arrived an hour later, just before ten. And he confirmed what Kane thought. The mare was miscarrying. Kane told Jacinta to go back to the house. She refused. But she stayed out of their way.

Labour took a long time. The small foal covered in a layer of mucous was born dead three hours later. The mare was very weak after the birth. Exhausted. Jacinta tried to make



the mare as comfortable as possible. She continued to talk to her, trying to stop the tears from appearing in her voice.

The two men took the dead foal away, for the Vet to take back for a post mortem.

Kane returned a few minutes later. He looked devastated. "Look, there's nothing you can do here. Go to bed. I'll be along soon. Once she's settled."

"I can wait."

"No. You go in."

Reluctantly Jacinta headed back to the house.

She hadn't unpacked and she hadn't asked him if he wanted her in his room or not, but that is where she took her bag and where she settled for the night. Tired and emotional she cleaned up, did her teeth, moisturised her face and then got undressed. She climbed into his bed.

She was tired, and she was sound asleep in minutes.

But he didn't come to bed. He stayed with the distressed mare, stayed with her until just after sun up.

At seven am, Jacinta woke, realised that he hadn't come to bed, and quickly got washed and dressed. She practically ran to the stables, but was stopped from going in by one of the men. He told her the mare had died. Kane must have known the mare was going to die, that's why he'd sent her to bed.

They had loaded the mare into the Ute to take to the Vet an hour ago. Kane and one of the men had gone.

Listlessly Jacinta headed back to the house. She put the kettle on, made some hot strong coffee and waited for Kane to return. He did just after eight, but he didn't come up to the house. She saw him from the kitchen window, but he didn't see her.

Kane headed for the horses. Jacinta was just out of the door when John, who'd told her the mare had died, came up to her. "Kane's going to be gone all day, fixing fences. He said to tell you that you should probably head back to Hamilton."

Jacinta narrowed her eyes. "Did he now?"

"Sorry." John doffed his hat and was about to turn away.

"How is he?" She tugged at his arm until he turned around. He seemed somewhat surprised by the fact that she had held onto him.

John shrugged. "He's upset. The mare was Lisa's horse. Kane's mother chose that horse. He'll be fine. Just needs to work some of that frustration out."

"Are you two going with him?"

John shook his head. "No, he said to get on with our jobs. The stables need to be mucked out, the..."

"But he can't go on his own. He's been up all night. He's exhausted." She ran a hand through her short hair, "I'd be useless, I know nothing about fixing fences. Or horses for that matter." She took his arm and much to his amazement tugged him toward the stable. "One of you needs to go with him. Go on."

"I don't think he'd be too keen on that." John told her bluntly.

"Tough. He isn't going to be alone at a time like this. You are going."

"He won't..." He began to argue the point.

"It's a two man job right. Fixing fences. I'm not arguing, with you, I'm telling you." They saw Kane lead his horse out of the yard. "Go on. Otherwise you'll be left behind."

John looked at her. She jammed her hands on her hips, and glared. He touched his hat. "OK. I'm gone." He walked briskly toward the stables, and a few minutes later she saw him lead his horse out and follow Kane.

She was about to turn around and head back into the house when another man came out of the stables with a full load of hay in his wheelbarrow. Without thinking Jacinta headed toward him.

"Hi."

"Hello." He said and continued to wheel.

"Er, I'm not very good at this, but I can help. I learnt the last time I was here." She told him.

"Thanks. But I don't think this is the kind of job you'd want to do."

"You're mucking out the stables, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"Well, given that I have probably cost you the extra pair of hands for this task, the least I can do, is help." He looked at her with a question in his eye. "I er, suggested to John that he go with Kane." The man smiled.

"That was a good idea. John will see Kane's ok. He was gutted about the mare."

Jacinta followed him into the barn. "So where do you want me to start?"

"It's ok. I'll do it."

"I'll help. We won't do it in half the time, but it will be quicker with two of us. I'm Jacinta by the way." She picked up the fork. "So?"

He smiled, no wonder John had done what she'd said. "You take that one. I'll start here. I'm Gavin, they call me Gav."

They worked through the day. She helped him whenever she could. He showed her some new jobs. She did them. Lunch came and went, with no sign of Kane. Dinner came and went with no sign of Kane.

Resigned to sleeping alone again she showered early and climbed into bed just after half eight. Saturday night and she was in bed at 8.30pm. She smiled, tucked the pillow under her head and drifted off to sleep. She was exhausted.

Kane was surprised to see her car still parked out the front when he returned just after nine. He found some supper she'd left for him in the fridge with a note to reheat the pasta she'd made if he was very hungry.

Jacinta felt Kane get into bed. But she feigned sleep. He wrapped himself around her, spoon fashion, tucking his arm along her waist and hugging her close. She snuggled closer, but kept her eyes closed.

He held her tight for a long while.

Then she heard him sigh as he pressed his face into her short hair. His hand moved to rest below her breast. She felt him shake as he fought to stem the tears. She could feel his body pulse quietly, felt his arm tighten around her as he tried to hold back. She felt the wetness of his tears as they fell on her bare shoulders. She knew instinctively that he didn't want her to see him weak like this, and knew just as instinctively that he needed to hold on to her.

When she woke on Sunday morning. She was still wrapped in his arms. Still sleeping spoon fashion. That astonished her, because she usually tossed and turned through the night. Slowly she stretched.

“Morning.” He whispered against her ear.

She turned her head carefully, then as he lessened his grip, she rolled to face him. “Morning.” She said cautiously. She wasn’t sure what sort of a reception she would get from him.

Silence for several long seconds.

“Thank you.” He finally said looking straight into her eyes.

Her lips twitched in a fleeting smile, “For staying?”

“For letting me cry all over you last night.” He surprised her with his directness. “And not making it an issue.”

“So. You didn’t buy my sleeping beauty scenario.” Now her smile remained, “How did you know?” Her smile faded, she’d kept her breathing regular, kept her eyes closed.

“My hand told me.”

“Your hand?” She looked incredulous.

“It was over your heart.”

Jacinta acknowledged that, her heart had been racing erratically when he’d got into bed. And when he had taken her in his arms for a cuddle, it had kicked up a beat, but his tears had her heart breaking. “I didn’t know what to do to help.” She said softly.

“You knew exactly what to do.” He corrected softly.

“I didn’t.”

“When John caught up with me, I told him to go back. He said he’d rather take his chances with me than have to go back and face you without me!”

“Cheek!” She grinned sheepishly. “I only *suggested* he help you with the fence.”

“And Gav tells me you *suggested* helping him muck out.”

“I’m so sorry about the mare and her foal.” She said gently. His chest rose and she saw the muscle tick at his jaw.

“She should never have been pregnant. She was way too old.” He brushed a lock of hair off her temple. “I hadn’t planned our first weekend to be like this.” He rolled onto his back. “So much for sex.”

“I was going to drive into town and go to mass before heading back. Do you want to come?”

He turned his head, “Yes.”

Just then they heard a car drive up.

“You expecting anyone?”

He shook his head. “I’ll go down and see.” He hauled on his jeans, pulled on a t-shirt and padded barefoot out of the bedroom.

Jacinta showered and dressed, and quietly made her way downstairs. She recognised the voice.

“Morning Tracy.” Jacinta stepped into the lounge.

“Oh, Jacinta. Morning.” Tracy glanced from Jacinta to Kane. “I er, I heard about the horses.”

Kane got to his feet. “Could I leave you two to help yourselves to coffee, I’ll get showered.”

“Sure Kane.”

Jacinta smiled self-consciously at Tracy “Shall we?”

“You must have set off pretty early.” Tracy said as they walked toward the kitchen. Jacinta said nothing. “I mean I heard the news this morning, but it still took an hour to get here. I knew he’d be devastated. I mean, I know the history with that mare.” Jacinta held the door open and waited for Tracy to step into the kitchen before following her in. “I

guess for someone without that background, it's difficult to understand, how we feel when a horse dies."

Jacinta kept her thoughts to herself.

"So what time did you get here?" Tracy decided to go for the direct approach. But Jacinta was saved from replying when the kitchen door opened and John stepped in.

"Morning." He addressed both women. "I was looking for Kane."

"He's taking a shower." Tracy said and looked at him expecting him to explain what he wanted.

"Ok, right." He glanced from Jacinta to Tracy and back to Jacinta. Jacinta smiled at his confusion, but said nothing. He dug his hand into a back pocket, "Could you give him this?" He addressed Jacinta and handed her a folded note. She nodded. Then he added gruffly, "And er, thanks."

"Your welcome."

He nodded, then stepped out.

"What was that about? He's kind of surly isn't he." Tracy looked at Jacinta expecting an explanation from her. Jacinta shrugged, put the note in her pocket, then reached for the percolator and spooned some coffee into it.

They had coffee ready by the time Kane joined them. He looked better, Jacinta thought, seeing that he had shaved.

"Coffee?" Tracy got to her feet, and got him a mug before he could do it for himself. "I can just imagine how you feel." She poured him a mug and set it before him. Then she came and sat beside him. "You poor thing." She reached for the sugar bowl, "Sugar?"

"No thanks."

Tracy put the bowl down, “She looked fine when we were here. I saw her a couple of times, Lisa was showing us around, and told us about her. She’s going to be devastated when she gets back.”

Jacinta saw the pain flash through Kane’s eyes. She would have cheerfully flattened Tracy at that moment.

“Yes.” He said softly. “She is.”

“She was quite old to be pregnant.” Tracy continued blithely unaware of the pain she was causing.

“Kane, I don’t mean to rush you, but the service is at 11, we’d need to get going if we are to make it.” Jacinta got to her feet.

“Service?”

“Mass.” Jacinta corrected.

“Oh. Right.” Tracy glanced at Kane, “But he hasn’t had any breakfast yet.”

“I’ll get some on the way.” He downed the scalding coffee with little thought.

“Oh, and John said to give you this.” Jacinta handed him the note.

He took it, read it. “Tracy, it was good of you to come.” He reached for the peg on the back door, “Jac I’ll meet you by the cars in five minutes.” Then he excused himself and left by the back door.

“Well he seems to be handling it really well.” Tracy said as she got to her feet.

Jacinta collected the mugs, rinsed them and put them in the dishwasher.

“Are you coming back here after Mass?”



“No, I’ll be heading back for Hamilton.”

“Oh.”

The back door opened and Rosa walked in. She seemed surprised to see Jacinta and Tracy in her kitchen, but she didn’t ask for explanations. “Good morning ladies.”

“Morning Rosa.” They replied.

“Well, I’ll be off then.” Tracy smiled at the older woman. “Guess I might as well use the back door.”

When the back door closed, Jacinta hesitated for a second before saying “Lisa’s horse died.”

“Yes, I heard. That’s why I came back early.” Rosa watched Jacinta carefully. She hadn’t known what to make of the girl when she had stayed for that week. But Jim, Gav and John had all been very complimentary about her.

“I’m pleased you’re back early.” Jacinta needed to get her overnight bag. “I’m off now too. Kane is going to mass in town.”

Rosa nodded and continued to study the young woman.

“I’ll get my things.” Jacinta headed back for the bedroom, but before she could step out of the kitchen, Rosa stopped her.

“You ok?”

Jacinta nodded, then shrugged. “I feel so useless. I don’t know how to help him. I know nothing about horses. And..”

“And the boys tell me that you did good yesterday.”

“They did? I did?”

Rosa smiled, nodded. “Said Kane was lucky to have you around.”

“Oh.” Jacinta hugged the woman. “Thanks.”

“You ready to go?” Kane stepped in, he was puzzled by the hug he’d just witnessed, but he didn’t question it.

Jacinta nodded. “Just going to get my bag.”

“I’ll get it.”

They went to mass, then onto lunch, then spent the afternoon in each other’s company, just rambling through town.

## Chapter 12

“I know I said I’d head down to Hamilton this weekend, but I can’t.” He told her on the phone.

“Oh right. Ok.” She wondered if this was his way of breaking things off. Though breaking it off could hardly be right as they hadn’t started anything, not really.

“Lisa is coming down this weekend.”

“Oh.” Jacinta could hear the worry in his voice. “I’ll come there then.”

“No, no.” She could almost see him run his hand through his hair, “I think it would be best if you didn’t.”

“Oh, right. Ok.”

“It might make Lisa feel uncomfortable.”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s going to be hard on her as it is, with her horse and everything.”

“Yes, sure.”

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“I’ll give you a call during the week, to sort something out. Ok?”

“Sure.”

“You aren’t angry or anything are you?”

“Angry?”

“About this. Two weeks in a row, I’ve said I’d head for Hamilton, and not kept either appointment.”

“These things happen.”

“I don’t think I thanked you for last weekend.”

“Yes, you did.” She felt as if her world was crashing down. She could feel him build up the barriers. Knew that she was being pushed away.

“Ok, look, er, I’ve got to go. John’s just come in, and we need to go over some stuff.”

“No problem. Take care.”

“You too. And I’ll call you during the week.

“Ok.”

“Night Jac.”

“Night.”

Trev phoned mid week to tell Jacinta that he and Lisa were driving down to the Coromandel that weekend, and to invite Jacinta along. She explained that Kane had been quite specific about not coming down, but she had her excuses shot down when Lisa got on the phone and insisted.

After the phone call, Jacinta phoned Kane to let him know she would be coming down, and though he didn’t sound pleased, he hadn’t insisted that she stay away. So the following weekend Jacinta accompanied Trev and Lisa to the farm. They arrived just after eleven in the morning.

Kane met them on arrival and helped them unload the car. His greeting was welcoming but friendly rather than lover-like. He asked about the drive down. Asked about the weather in Hamilton. That should have given her a clue. They carried the bags into the house. Lisa had brought

several. Lisa and Trev took Lisa's old room. Jacinta had brought an overnight case that Kane told her to put in the spare room. That was the first clear signal she got that things were going to be different.

When Jacinta met up with them in the kitchen, after freshening up, some ten minutes later, Rosa had the kettle on and Kane and Lisa were talking about her horse. Kane suggested he and Lisa take a ride to where he thought they could set up a memorial stone for the horse. Lisa asked Trev to accompany her. Which only made the fact that Kane did not invite Jacinta, more noticeable.

That was the second clear message she got that their relationship, if it had ever been that, was not just on the way out, it was already ditched.

Lisa hurriedly asked Jacinta if she wanted to come, but Jacinta shook her head, kept her eyes on Kane and said, "No, this is a family thing." So after drinking their coffee, the three of them left the kitchen and got ready to ride.

Jacinta helped Rosa tidy up.

"He doesn't know what he's doing." Rosa tutted as she took the mugs Jacinta handed her.

Jacinta didn't pretend ignorance. "Yes, he does. He knows exactly what he's doing."

Rosa shook her head. "No, he's not a stupid man. And if he's doing what he's doing and doing it on purpose, then he is stupid!"

Jacinta gave her a hug. "He didn't make me any promises." She said quietly as she stepped away.

"Hmmp." Rosa muttered.

"It's ok." Jacinta said softly.

"Hmmp." Rosa added.

“He told me not to come.” Jacinta said.

“So why did you con Trev into bringing you?” Kane stepped into the kitchen. Both Rosa and Jacinta turned to look at him. He looked angry. Rosa frowned.

“I didn’t con Trev.”

Kane shook his head and headed for the pegs by the door.  
“Right.”

“I didn’t.”

“I told you not to come this weekend.” He stated bluntly as he shrugged on his denim jacket. “But here you are.”

“Kane, what is this really about?”

“It’s about you.”

“I explained to you on the phone that Lisa asked me to come.”

“Why would she do that?” He folded his arms and glared.

Jacinta shrugged. “I don’t know.”

He pinned her with a flinty glower. “You didn’t happen to mention to your cousin, that we were an item.”

“We aren’t an item.” Jacinta retorted.

“Exactly.” He pulled out his gloves. “So what are you doing here?”

“Kane!” Rosa interrupted.

“It’s ok Rosa.” Jacinta folded her arms, “I’m here because I was asked to come. I told you that. You seemed ok with it.”

“Yeah, well I’m not.”

“Clearly.” Jacinta replied coolly. “But I’m here now, and will be going back tomorrow with Trev. So unless you have an alternative plan, I’m here for the next 24 hours. Is that going to be a problem?”

“Not if you stay out of my way.”

“Kane!” Rosa exclaimed in astonishment.

“Ok.” Jacinta replied and headed out of the kitchen. She heard Rosa begin to take Kane to task, but didn’t loiter to hear what his response would be. She met Trev and Lisa on the stairs on the way down.

“I’m not going to be much help to you.” Jacinta said as they reached each other.

“I didn’t ask you down for me. I asked you down for Kane’s sake. From what he said on the phone about last weekend, I thought you were together.”

“No.” Jacinta smiled sadly. “It wasn’t anything like that. Just sex!”

“Too much information cuz!” Trev laughed.

Lisa grinned.

“Kane’s in the kitchen ready to go.”

“Ok. See you later.”

Jacinta came down some thirty minutes later, and after a quick chat with Rosa headed out toward the barn. Jim and Gav were going into Whangamata and then doing some deliveries and hoped to be back around seven. Jacinta asked if she could tag along and when they agreed, she told Rosa what her plans were, and not to prepare any dinner for her that evening. They set off for the one-hour drive to Whangamata just before one o’clock, some twenty minutes before Kane, Trev and Lisa returned from the prospective memorial site.

Rosa had lunch ready for them, and informed them that Jacinta had gone into town with Jim and Gav.

Jim, Gav and Jacinta didn't return until just after seven. Jacinta made a brief appearance in the lounge, explained that she was exhausted and was going to grab a bath and she'd probably have an early night. She checked their departure time plans for tomorrow then excused herself.

Though Trev and Lisa had looked at their watches, they said nothing until she had left.

"What's going on?" Lisa asked her brother.

"Going on where?"

"Between you and Jacinta."

"Nothing is going on." He said calmly.

"That's not what she said!" Trev tossed in.

"Really?" Kane banked his anger.

Trev grinned. "This morning she said it was sex!"

"Trev!" Lisa laughed.

"Well, she did."

"It's none of our business."

"Then why did you ask him what was going on?" Trev took her hand and squeezed it gently before raising it to his lips for a light kiss.

"Because Kane told me about last weekend. That's why I persuaded her to come this weekend. And no one goes to bed so early."

"Unless there's sex involved. I rest my case." Trev teased as he kissed her hand again.



“Dinner’s ready.” Rosa announced.

“Saved by the bell.” Lisa told her brother and got to her feet.

“What about Jacinta?” Kane asked Rosa. Trev and Lisa flashed each other a look.

“She’s eaten.” Rosa told him huffily and stalked to the kitchen

“When?”

“With the boys in town.” Rosa pushed open the door and headed for the stove, “She told me not to cook for her, that she would get a bite to eat in town. Sorry I forgot to tell you she wouldn’t be joining us this evening.” She looked pointedly at Kane. “What are you upset about, she followed your instructions!” He squirmed.

“Smells good. As always.” Lisa said as she and Trev took their seats.

Kane didn’t see Trev, Lisa or Jacinta for breakfast. But that probably had something to do with the fact that he had his at six that morning. But he did catch up with Trev and Lisa at eleven as they got ready to go for a ride. They told him they were planning on returning for lunch before they left for Hamilton and Auckland later that afternoon. He didn’t see Jacinta. And she wasn’t at lunch. Rosa informed them that Jacinta had said not to wait for her for lunch, as she had taken a packed lunch and was going to spend the day at hot water beach. She’d told Trev she’d be back before three. She’d left her bags in the hallway by the front door. Kane felt like a complete jerk.

When she returned, later that afternoon, Trev had already loaded the car. Rosa offered to make her a quick cup of tea, but Jacinta had waved that aside. The goodbyes were platonic. Both Jacinta and Kane registered the spark of touch as their cheeks airbrushed kisses, but neither took it further.

Jacinta kissed Rosa's cheek and grinned when the woman whispered that he was an idiot!

"Ok. Spill." Lisa demanded as they drove away.

"Spill what?"

"Why, for a start, you spent all your time avoiding Kane!"

Jacinta laughed. "Because once the sex is gone, it's really uncomfortable being with an old lover!"

Lisa spluttered then laughed.

"So can we change the topic?" Jacinta asked with a hint of a smile.

"Not so fast." Trev added. "Call me an old romantic. Or consider it the effects of being recently married. But there's something between you two. And it isn't just sex!"

"What do you think it is?"

"You tell me?"

"Trev. I have met the guy on less than half a dozen occasions. We had one weekend. What do you think are the chances of it being anything other than lust?"

"I knew I loved Lisa the moment I met her." Lisa leaned over and kissed his cheek. "She on the other hand took months to come to love me."

"Not months!" Lisa corrected. "Weeks."

"Felt like months." He flicked a look in the mirror, caught Jacinta's eye, "But we are getting off track. You like him. Admit it."

Jacinta shrugged. "What's not to like. He is a nice man. Good looking, Charming. Filthy rich!" Jacinta grinned when Lisa laughed.

## Chapter 13

Six weeks later Jacinta attended Anne's wedding. Of course Kane expected to see her. He knew who was on the guest list. He even knew which table she would sit at. So he had been expecting to see her. He'd prepared for just this event. He hadn't expected the jolt when he saw her. The sudden surge in his heart.

"You ok?" Anne whispered while she kept her smile in place.

He nodded. They'd just stepped into the church. And on the last pew to his left, three in, stood Jacinta. He tried to tell himself that he hadn't sought her out. It was just luck. And unfortunate that she was sitting at the back of the Church. He was giving Anne away, walking her down the aisle, and they had entered and stood for a second while the organist prepared to play the entry. How he had unerringly sighted her was not something he wanted to dwell on. He was over her. He was over her. All he had to do was keep repeating that. Even if the surge in his heart was telling him otherwise.

They posed for wedding photographs outside the church, and he had been very conscious of Jacinta. It annoyed him. It had been more than six weeks since she had come down with Lisa and Trev. In that time he had been out with the other five girls who'd come for the hen week. Diana was even his escort today. But the only person he sensed was Jacinta. She was the only woman who seemed to register on his radar. Though he fought to ensure that his attention didn't constantly wander in her direction, he knew he was losing the battle. He knew what she did from the moment she came into the reception.

He'd danced with all the hen week girls. All except Jacinta. So after much stalling he headed for her table. Better to get it over with. That way he could pretend that all was well in his world.

“Jacinta.” He kept the smile in his voice. “May I have this dance?” He’d waited until the band chose a relatively fast piece, one that didn’t warrant them dancing in each other’s arms. They simply had to be seen on the dance floor. They didn’t have to be in each other’s arms on the dance floor.

“Sure.” She said with a reticent smile and then gracefully got to her feet. Without touching her he guided them to the dance floor. They danced without saying anything for barely a few seconds when Jim tapped him on the shoulder, and asked if he could cut in. Kane shifted automatically, then he thanked Jacinta and stepped off the dance floor. He didn’t go far, waiting to cut back in after that first dance, in a few minutes. But he was even more astonished to see John beat him to it. He cut in just as the first piece ended. Kane looked suspiciously at Jim when he walked off the floor. Jim just shrugged. Kane waited. He was going to dance with her, to a fast piece of music. He would do this duty. He wasn’t going to be accused of not being fair. He’d danced with each of the others for the full three dances. But just as the second dance came to an end, Gav approached John and Jacinta and Gav asked her to dance next. They all seemed at ease with her. Kane waited for John to reach him.

“What’s going on?”

“What d’you mean?”

“You don’t dance.”

“Yeah I do.”

“Why her? Why now?”

“Why not?” he said, looked his boss over and added, “Why, you upset about it?”

“Just curious.” Kane gritted.

“You can dance with her next. A slow one I think!” John grinned. Kane scowled then turned and headed back to the top table. So that’s what they were up to. Well, he could

manage them. None of the rules of etiquette said he had to dance with her, let alone dance a slow dance with her.

Jim and John shared a look.

Jacinta smiled at Gav, "So, what is all this about?"

Gav shrugged.

"Gav." She warned.

"We just fancied a dance with you."

"And you couldn't do that unless you cut in? I've been sitting down for the last half hour!" She said without any heat.

He shrugged.

"Why?"

He looked sheepish then said. "We decided he needed a wake up call!"

"What?"

"He's a good boss, usually quick off the mark." He twirled her round, "But with you he's being plain stupid!"

"What?" She laughed.

"The man's in love. Any fool can see it. Any fool except him."

"He's in love. And I suppose you think he's in love with me."

"Not think. We know. He loves you."

"Right."

Gav laughed. "In the last six weeks he's been out with every one of the hen week girls that Anne and Lisa brought to the farm."

"And that shows that he loves me?" She looked at him as if he had grown horns. What she hadn't expected was the shaft of pain that sliced through her. She was supposed to be over him. Six weeks to get over him. She was over him.

"And every time anyone of us talked to him about the date he muttered something about it not being the same."

"Gav you are reading too much into this."

"When I asked him about Marie, he said she was so obliging she drove him nuts."

Jacinta chuckled. "Yeah, but that was Marie, nice girl and all that, but..."

"Said you did things for him on the farm and didn't make him feel like throwing up!"

"Gav. You are making that up."

Gav shook his head. "Ask Jim. When Jim asked him about his date with Charlie, he said Charlie was a flirt but he wasn't interested. He seemed really hacked off about the fact that he just couldn't be bothered."

"And, so?"

"Then he added that you didn't flirt and still pushed all his buttons!"

"That's an exaggeration."

"Even Rosa said he mutters your name when he's muttering to himself." Gav laughed. "And the real give away, is that yesterday he had us all scrabbling around in the barn, because he'd lost your brooch."

"My brooch?"

“Yeah, the one that matches your earrings.” Gav looked pointedly at the earrings. “Knew it the minute we saw you, the brooch he had us on our knees for yesterday must be yours.” They both stopped dancing as the music had stopped. “He said he had it in his pocket and it had fallen out. He was going mental about it. We thought it must belong to Anne, or was a family heirloom or something. I thought it was important for today. So we all got down to look for it. Four men scrabbling in the dirt.”

“And did you find it?”

Gav nodded.

“Well they’re fairly common earrings.”

Gav pinned her with steely look, “You trying to tell me you don’t love him.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“So what are you saying?” he pushed.

She closed her eyes, took a breath. “I love him.” She said in a whisper.

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“What can I do?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Fat lot of help you are.” She chided with a smile.

“We’ve done our bit.” He replied and escorted her back to her table.

Jacinta took her seat. The band began to play a slow set. She watched as couples slid into closer contact. The three pieces came to an end. When the next one started up she got to her feet and headed for Kane before she could change her mind.

“Kane,” She stopped beside him. “You, you still owe me a dance.”

He looked surprised to see her standing beside him. “Sorry.” He got to his feet.

“You owe me a dance.” She repeated. He looked at her thoughtfully. “The boys cut in last time.” She tacked on lamely, feeling more and more like an idiot.

“And I thought...” He tailed off, then started again, “The thing is, I’ve promised this dance to ....” He seemed very uncomfortable.

“Me!” Diana chipped in.

Jacinta stepped back like a scalded cat. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to push in.”

“Come on Kane. They are almost into the next piece.” Diana took his arm, tugged it through hers and headed for the dance floor.

Jacinta stood rooted to the spot in sheer embarrassment. She was sure other people had seen her. Had heard him turn her down. Though the other couples at the head table were on the dance floor, the nearby tables still had several people sitting around, and they looked at her speculatively.

Jacinta willed herself not to panic, and with her head up she slowly walked away from the top table. Kane watched her progress. And knew he was a complete fool. He watched her walk toward a door, watched while she stopped to talk with Jim, John and Gav.

He saw Gav drape an arm along her shoulder. And that very simple action had him glaring at Gavin. Then he watched as Jim grinned at her just before John leaned in and whispered something in her ear. Obviously it was a pseudo whisper for they all laughed. Surly, quiet, introspective John laughed.



A few minutes later she excused herself and continued past them. She headed for her table and gracefully took her seat. Kane started wracking his brains, trying to think of a way for him to fix the mess he'd made. He couldn't let her go.

When Derek removed Anne's symbolic garter, Anne whispered something in his ear and that resulted in whistles. But she then watched with a delighted smile when Derek simply walked up to Kane, and slapped the garter in his hand, amidst much laughter and jokes by their guests.

The bouquet throwing was much more of an organised event. Though, from where Anne was standing she wasn't so sure that her plan was going to work. Jacinta had not joined the throng of women who had circled when the MC had invited all the single women to come forward. Jacinta had simply remained seated.

When the band begun to play, Jacinta slowly started gathering her personal belongings. She had no intention of seeing who caught the bouquet and consequently who partnered Kane for the next dance.

She was going home.

When the band stopped Jacinta got up to leave, hoping that the hullabaloo surrounding the circle of women good-naturedly calling out to the blindfolded Anne, would ensure she left without being noticed.

But Jacinta hadn't reckoned with Anne's determination. Anne, with her ballet dance training ability to pirouette without becoming giddy knew exactly where she was when they stopped spinning her. She didn't so much toss the bouquet as throw it like a dart as she whipped the blindfold off to see if her target was true.

It hit Jacinta square in the chest.

There were loud cheers. Jacinta looked aghast at what had landed against her, what she had automatically clutched, shrouded in her coat and bag. She looked stunned for all of a second, then it was very clear what she was going to do with the bouquet.

So Lisa squealed her name and rushed toward her. Jacinta rushed away. The rest of the crowd circled Kane, teasing him about his sister's strategic aim and the deliberate garter delivery. He was surrounded. But being a head taller than most of the people around he watched as Jacinta headed for the doors.

By the time Kane had cleared the throng and made it to the door, Jacinta was getting into her car. John, Jim, Gav, Rosa, Aroha, Lisa, Trev, Anne and Derek followed Kane. Not far behind them were Charlie and Diana.

"Where is she staying?" Kane turned to ask Jim.

"How would I know?"

Kane didn't remind him that he had known where Jacinta was staying after Lisa's wedding. So he turned to Trev, "Trev?"

"She isn't staying overnight." He shrugged his shoulders as he watched the car reverse. "She's probably heading home." Then he looked directly at Kane, "I hope you are pleased with yourself."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I can't believe you did that to her." Lisa told him bluntly.

"Did what?" He watched Jacinta edge her way past the closely parked cars. She had to reverse past a stream of cars and was doing so gingerly.

"Left her looking like a fool for asking you to dance." Anne said quietly.

“I had a prior commitment.” Kane snapped, as guilt ate at him and his foolishness came back to bite him.

They all looked dubious.

“Well, er, he did, sort of.” Diana said sheepishly. “I mean I didn’t know it was serious between them, I thought I was bailing him out.” She hunched her shoulders “Then he spent all our dance tracking her position!”

“Diana!” he didn’t even turn to face Diana, instead he watched as Jacinta headed for the driveway.

“Come on Kane.” She told him “You did.”

“She’s your match Kane.” Lisa told her brother. “She’s right for you in every way.”

“She loves you. You love her.” Anne added. Derek draped an arm along her shoulder and gave her a gentle comforting squeeze.

Kane looked at all of them. They waited. Then slowly he smiled. “Anne, you know I love you.” She frowned. He continued, “So you will forgive me for leaving your wedding party.” With that he grinned sheepishly at everyone, and headed for his car, which was parked right in front of them.

“Don’t stuff this up!” Lisa called.

“Hey, what are your intentions toward my cousin?” Trev yelled. “They’d better be honourable, or I really will have to hurt you.”

Jacinta realised that she had the bouquet as she drove off. But she had no intention of stopping and returning it. Being turned down in private was one thing, but she wasn’t sure she could cope with what he would do in public. No doubt there would be a lot of talk. But she had to leave. She followed the road out.

Kane being a local knew all the shortcuts. He blocked her at the traffic lights at the T-junction that took her road onto the main road. He put on his hazards, leapt out of the car and raced around to her side.

“What are you doing?” She asked him warily when he opened her car door.

“I want your word that you will follow me.”

“What?” Jacinta stared at him in shock. Her eyes sparked as the crispness of his words registered. What was he angry about?

“Follow me Jacinta, or I will tail gate you all the way to Hamilton.” He had done his best to keep his irritation to himself, but clearly she’d picked it up.

“For goodness sakes!”

The car behind hooted when her set of lights turned to green.

“I’m not budging until you promise.”

Another hoot of the horn.

“Fine!”

He closed the door, and raced back to his car. He pulled out, waited for Jacinta to follow then drove slowly until they came to a side road. He indicated to park. She pulled in behind him and got out of her car. She slammed her car door. He hid his smile. Then locked his car.

“Right!” She strode toward him. “Now what?”

“Now,” He took her arm. “You and I are going for a drive.” He looked at her car.

“I. Don’t. Think. So!” She tried to tug out of his grasp.

“Are you trying to ruin Anne’s wedding?” He asked calmly. “Lock it.”

“The nerve!” She spun around to face him. “Don’t you lay that on me.”

“Well you are. She is very upset.” He reached for her keys, “Lock it.” He pressed the automatic lock and pocketed the keys.

“She is not.”

“She was distraught when I left her.” He kept propelling her toward his car. “She meant well. She thinks she’s embarrassed you.”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Come and see for yourself.”

“I’m not going back.”

“I told Derek I’d bring you back.” Kane opened the car door. “You don’t have to stay long. Just one dance, with the garter holder.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Show Anne all is well. Then leave.” He held the car door open and waited expectantly.

She got in. He raced around the front, opened the door. Without saying anything else, some five minutes later they were back.

Jacinta stalled for as long as she could. Then she allowed him to escort her back into the hall. Jim and Aroha were the first to see them. They smiled, then turned and made frantic signs to Gav who was dancing with Lisa. A few seconds later Lisa turned and saw Kane and Jacinta. She almost ran toward them.

“Oh great!” She hugged Jacinta.

Then she was off again. Jacinta frowned. Kane kept his hand in the small of her back as he steered her toward the centre of the dance floor.

Slowly he took her into his arms. Felt his heart kick up a beat and knew that he'd been an idiot. For several minutes they danced in silence, with Jacinta stiff as a board and Kane quietly bidding his time. At the end of the dance, he took her elbow and walked off the dance floor. He headed toward Anne and Derek.

"Isn't it about time you guys left?" Kane asked.

"I was just waiting for you to get back." Anne smiled.

Jacinta tried to disengage. Kane held on, his fingers interwoven with hers, and holding tight.

Slowly the crowd moved as Anne and Derek made their way out, kissing well wishers, being hugged, making slow progress toward the door. Kane tugged Jacinta along with him, heading for the door. "Stop trying to escape." He told her as he draped an arm along her waist and kept her pinned to him. Lisa and Trev came and stood beside Kane and Jacinta. They waited for Anne and Derek to reach them. After long hugs Derek and Anne raced to their car, as rice was showered on them.

Kane stood on the deck and watched. Anne blew him a kiss. He smiled. But all the time he held onto Jacinta.

When the car disappeared and the crowd returned to the hall to continue to enjoy the reception, he whispered something to Trev, who grinned in response. Then Kane steered Jacinta toward the car.

"Now." He told her "Your car?"

She felt dejected. He really had meant to just bring her for the dance then return her. Quietly she got into the passenger seat.

They reached her car. He clicked the automatic door lock as they walked toward it. Clicking his own car lock shut.

Jacinta opened her door. "Thanks." She said quietly. He opened the passenger door, lifted the bouquet and began to get in. "What are you doing?"

"Coming home with you." He took his seat, reached for the seat belt and waited for her to get in.

"What do you mean?" She bent at the waist and peered in at him, while he deftly slid the seat belt clip into lock.

"I'm spending this weekend in Hamilton."

"What?"

"With you."

"With me?"

He nodded.

"What about your car?"

"Trev will get the spare key and take it back to the farm for me."

"He will."

Kane nodded.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because you came to me for two weekends. Now it's my turn to go stay with you."

"Why? We aren't..."

"If you believe that, you are even more blind than I've been." She sat but did not start the car. "Take me home Jacinta." He said softly "I've been a complete idiot, I know. But give me a chance, just one chance."

“What about the farm?”

“The guys can handle it for a couple of days. A week. Whatever it takes.”

Still she did not start the car. Then she shook her head.  
“No.”

“No?” He frowned. “Jacinta, please..”

“No. Not like this.” She said calmly. “I don’t want grand gestures. I want reality.”

“So do I.”

“Do you?” She turned to face him. “Ok, so you came for me. Now you come home, to my place. We do what? Have sex? Then what? Then you come back to the farm? Then what?”

“Then we see each other, as much as possible.”

“And what happens when the next emergency hits? When you don’t want me around?” She shook her head. “I know what I want. I don’t think you know what you want.”

“I do. I do.”

“Do you?”

“Instead of having this conversation in your car, we could have it at your place. Take the rest of the weekend to work out how we are going to make this relationship work. I want you. God knows I need you. I want this relationship to work. I want you in my life. Permanently.” He took her hand, “Jacinta, please. Give us a chance.”

After a long pause she said, “Ok.” She heard his sigh of relief. “But, we go to my place to talk. No sex.”

“No sex.” He repeated. “Why?”



She laughed. "Because I don't think either of us have any doubts that we make each other happy in bed." She smiled at his grin, "But do we make each other happy out of bed?" She looked him in the eye, "So, you decide? If you come for the rest of this weekend, it will be platonic."

"Just the weekend?"

"You won't be staying longer."

"Kicking me out?"

"You'll be begging me to let you get back to the farm. You aren't a city person."

"OK."

"OK?"

"Yeah, ok. Your terms." He grinned at her.

"Take your car back to the farm." She suggested. He narrowed his eyes. "You can pick up some gear."

"Ok, but if you don't follow me to the farm, I'll..."

"Just get going." She unlatched his seat belt. "I'll be right behind you."

The drive back to her house in Chartwell was accomplished in just under two hours. Two hours in which they talked about the wedding, the farm, her work, his work. Their families. Their friends. But one thing remained like an elephant in the room. They didn't talk about their disaster weekend.

## Chapter 14

It wasn't until quite late that evening, when Jacinta sat curled up in the corner of the sofa, with a mug of hot chocolate cupped in one hand as she tracked Kane's movements, that she wondered if her heart could cope.

He'd been pretending an interest in the array of photos on the various tables, nooks and crannies in the lounge. He'd studied her bookshelves of fiction, barely glancing at the titles as he paced along the length of the room. She could see from the way he was standing, his shoulders tense, his body anything but relaxed, that he was clearly apprehensive. And nervous. There was a certain restlessness to his movements. It wasn't interest that had him picking up each photo and scrutinizing it.

"Kane." She finally spoke, and waited for him to give her his full attention. "You're already regretting coming here, aren't you?"

He shook his head instantly, "Anything but." He told her as he slowly made his way over toward one of her comfy chairs, the one that faced her, but was across the room. He pushed his fingers through his hair and left his hand cupping the back of his head when he said, "I was wondering how to broach the subject."

That had her anxiety levels kicking up a notch. "What subject?" Jacinta was sure her heart was about to explode. It was pounding hard and furiously. Hammering against her rib cage as fear took root.

He sighed, tucked his tongue in his cheek, and thought about what he really wanted to say to her, "I'm not a new age guy."

That had her frowning and unease seeped through every nerve fibre. But she said nothing. She wasn't sure she'd be able to say any more without falling apart. This had been some rollercoaster day, and her energy levels were down,

her apprehension levels were up and her usual pragmatism had completely left her.

With a self-deprecating smile he perched on the edge of the chair, but remained at the opposite side of the room to her. “I’m not one of those guys who finds it easy to talk about their feelings.”

She shrugged in confusion. Then she pulled her knees closer, curling up more defensively, and not really sure what she was meant to say to his statement. Or even if she knew what to say whether she’d be capable of speech.

“And the thing is, that to a certain extent, you’ve spoilt me.”

“What?” Well at least she knew she had the capacity for speech! She put her mug of hot chocolate on the corner table and turned to glare.

That had him chuckling apologetically. “See what I mean?” He tipped his head back, “I’m not good at this kind of stuff.”

“Stuff?” She started chewing nervously on her lower lip.

“You know, expressing how I feel.” He shifted, lifting his head so that he could look straight at her. “You understand me.”

“I don’t right now.” She mumbled.

“Jac, in the time we have known each other, time and time again I’ve not had to say a word. You’ve understood exactly where I’m coming from.”

He shifted, so that his back lay against the chair, and he turned more fully. Their eyes made and held contact. Jacinta stopped chewing her lower lip.

“You understood how I felt about the twins leaving.” She nodded almost imperceptibly, “How I felt when Lisa’s mare and the foal died. You understood I needed to work but made sure I was safe.” He smiled repentantly, “You

understood my need to keep the hen week girls at arm's length." He added more quietly, almost as if it was a remarkable and splendid thing, "You understood me." His lips quirked, as he added, "Even Jim knows you understand me."

"Jim?"

Kane nodded, "He told me about your chat, when you told him not to tell me you'd helped with the stables."

"He did?" She narrowed her eyes, "When?"

"After that stupid weekend, when you left with Trev and Lisa." He rubbed the back of his neck, "He's usually pretty laid back, but he didn't hold back that evening."

"Oh."

"He said I was a stupid son of a bitch for letting you go. That you knew me inside out. I of course told him he was talking through his hat. And he proceeded to give me what I assume was a verbatim rerun of your conversation with him as to why you didn't want to go riding with the other girls that day." He looked up at her, "So you see, you understand me. As Jim says from the inside out."

He waited, expecting her to speak. But she seemed at a loss. He wasn't sure, but he thought she looked as if she was about to cry. And that had him reaching forward, leaving his seat across from her and making it to her side pretty quickly, to take her awkwardly into his arms.

"Please don't cry. Please." He stroked her back as he hugged. Then he leaned back and looked into her eyes. "I'm being selfish, aren't I?" He perched on the edge of the couch, releasing her so that both of them now sat facing each other.

"What?" She mumbled pensively and in confusion.

He added, "You let me cry all over you." He reminded her with a sheepish smile. "That was the first time I'd cried in over ten years." He said softly and somewhat awkwardly. That had Jacinta rearing back, to look at him in puzzlement. "I cried when mum and dad died." He explained shamefacedly, as if owning up was a fault, "When I was told they were dead." He swallowed, licked his lower lip before he continued, "And then as I sat at home and waited for the girls to come home, I realized that I'd have to be strong for the twins. They were barely fourteen."

"How old were you?"

Turning sideways on the couch so that she wasn't looking at his profile, but was looking straight at him, he thought about what happened ten years ago. He bent his knee as he found a more comfortable sitting position on the sofa, and with one hand clutching his ankle and the other lying against the sofa cushion, he said quietly, "Twenty four."

"Oh, Kane."

"And, well, I knew I'd have to be strong for them." He hesitated, took a breath than said with more than a trace of awkwardness, "I don't think I really gave myself time or permission to grieve. Not then, not really." Again he stopped and she could see the effort it took to keep explaining, to stop from clamming up. She said nothing, just waited for him to regroup, but her hand reached out and touched his leg. Then he added, "When I agreed to look after the girls, I just thought I had to keep it together for their sake and to show welfare that I had the situation under control. Stupid huh?" She shook her head. And waited. "And well, after a while it became second nature."

"Oh Kane." She sighed, her eyes misty with tears, her voice clogged.

"Then when both of them said they were getting married, it suddenly dawned on me that they were leaving. It felt like intense loss." He swallowed. "That sense of loss was so

acute.” He looked at her and his lips kicked up in apologetic acknowledgement, “I know all the rhetoric,” He shrugged, “about how them getting married means we are gaining a family, and the girls went on about the fact that they’d still be down to visit, and I wasn’t going to be alone, but it just didn’t feel like that. And with both of them announcing, on the same day, that they were getting married, twins I guess, I was completely stunned. Until then I hadn’t realised how big a wall I’d constructed. I went to bed that night and felt as if I was completely alone in the world. Just me.”

Jacinta said nothing, she just waited quietly.

“I guess that sounds stupid and insecure and...”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Yeah, it does, it sounds like I’m a real wimp!”

“Kane, it doesn’t. It’s exactly how I felt. Yet, you’ve met my extended family, there are millions of us! Cousins galore. Aunts and uncles by the bucket full, and they aren’t exactly reticent. Even when mum and dad were around, there were always in our lives. It used to drive me mad, that they all had an opinion about my studies, my boyfriends, my homework even! And yet, when mum and dad died, and the rest of the motley crew were still in my life and in my face, I still felt completely alone. I remember curling up in bed and feeling as if the world had ceased to exist.”

“I thought I’d got used to the idea of me being on my own.” He shook his head as he wondered how he could have been so naïve, “Then the foal died and Lisa’s mare died. And I was devastated. And surprised by how devastated I was. I mean I work on a farm, we have animal deaths, it’s not rare, not everyday, but we’ve had our share. But this was different. I couldn’t understand why this had hit me so hard.” He looked straight at Jacinta when he said, “Then I realized that it was because it showed me that if I could be so hurt by the girls leaving and the reasons that Lisa may

have come to visit were being dismantled, how would I survive when you left me?"

"Me?"

He nodded. "So, in my stupidity I thought the best thing to do was to start closing that relationship down." He closed his eyes for a second, "Warped logic, but I thought that if I left you, it wouldn't hurt so much. I'd be back in control. I'd been out with others and walked away unscathed. And if I nipped what we had, in the bud, before it had a chance to develop, it would be easier to get over."

"Well..."

"Brain dead. I know." He rubbed at his jaw. "Pathetic ignorance on my part."

"Well..."

"Our relationship wasn't at budding stage, it was a sturdy, bloody oak! And trying to hack it down with a plastic knife was bloody stupid and impossible."

"Well it felt more like an axe than a plastic knife." Jacinta muttered through a watery smile.

"I will never intentionally hurt you." He told her. "And I will do my best to never hurt you, period, intentionally or unintentionally, but as you've experienced, I have lapses in judgment and stuff up occasionally."

"So do I." She murmured.

"Jac, you are the most giving person I know. The most conciliatory, the most appeasing..."

"No, I'm not. If I was I'd be married by now! My relatives have been throwing men at me for years, and I've been stubborn enough to ignore their machinations."

Kane snorted. “Yeah, that’s how you came to be at the hen week.”

“Ok, ignore is not the right word. I don’t ignore, but I know how to deal with them. I’m not acquiescent. I comply, but on my terms. I find a way for it to suit me. Look at when you and the girls went riding that day, I didn’t want to, so I didn’t go.”

“You are placatory. You moved to the bunkhouse when Tracy had her little tantrum about staying in the bunkrooms.”

She smiled, “Yes, because it suited me. I could work in peace without the hassle of having to explain why I’d packed a lap top in my luggage!”

He chuckled.

“And yes, I came to the hen week because Trev asked me, but I brought my work with me because I planned to use the week to suit my needs!”

“You came down with Lisa and Trev, to pacify Lisa, how was that on your terms?”

“I needed to see that you were ok.” She said quietly.

“And I was a complete bastard.”

“Not complete!”

He lunged for her, and sprawled on top of her said, “I know I don’t deserve you, but...”

“Oh for goodness sakes!” She shoved him off, and he retook his position in the corner of the sofa, facing her, within touching distance.

“Though I have to say you aren’t good at accepting compliments, you really are the most giving person I know.”



“Only with some people.” She conceded. “Special, key, people.”

He hesitated, then asked, “I want to ask you something, don’t take it the wrong way, ok?”

She nodded pensively.

“Why aren’t you married?”

That had her chuckling in relief. “Because.”

“Because?”

“No-one’s asked me.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“But true.” She muttered self deprecatingly.

Kane frowned as he considered the situation, it just didn’t seem possible. And yet here she was, thirty-two and not married. “And is it too personal if I ask why did you wait until your thirties to have sex?”

She laughed with embarrassment. “I don’t really know.” She shrugged self-consciously. “It just happened.”

“Or didn’t happen!” He teased.

She snorted. “It nearly did when I was sixteen.” She screwed up her face as the memory resurfaced. “James Delaney.”

“James Delaney?”

“Yes. He was one of the most popular guys in school.”

“So what happened?”

“I went out with him a couple of times. He pushed for us to, you know, get it on.”

“But?” Kane frowned. “Too pushy?”

“No,” She laughed uncomfortably. “Though come to think of it, yes. He was. Anyway, I found out that he was only going out with me, because he and his friend had a bet as to who could shag the most number of girls that term. I was apparently to be number six!”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

Kane smiled, “But he was a kid, a stupid kid. You didn’t let his stupidity put you off?”

“No,” She shook her head. “I think what put a dampener on the whole thing, was when I was at Uni. I was getting serious with one of the guys on the course, you know, doing computer engineering at the time was great for one’s social life. Very few women on the course, lots of guys. You’d think heaven when it came to choice.”

“Sounds like good odds.”

“Yes, except I happened to opt for Mr infidelity. Caught him in bed with my flat mate.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Exactly! Oh!” She nodded, “I guess after that I just became more picky.” She wrinkled her nose as she thought about it, “Probably not consciously. But I think I figured I’d want to see real evidence of commitment before I took that step.”

“Oh.” But Kane was still confused.

“And well I wasn’t short of dates. I went out heaps, with other guys on the course. But most of the time it was platonic. And then I guess time just marched on.”

Kane inched a bit closer, “So why me? I didn’t offer commitment. And in the garden, with a guy you’ve just met.” His uncertainty escalated, “And you didn’t seem to

want me to remember you, so you weren't angling for commitment. It does fit with what you've just said. Why me? Why then?"

She plopped her head on her hand, which was balanced on the armrest of the sofa, and looked at him as she asked, "The honest answer?"

He nodded.

"I don't know, why you and why then. It just felt right." She looked straight at him. "It felt absolutely right. I wasn't thinking commitment. Just that it was exactly what I wanted."

"And does it still feel right?"

She nodded. "It feels right. But that doesn't mean I want us to jump into bed tonight."

"No, I know. Separate beds."

She kicked her feet out, uncurled and got to her feet. "Speaking of beds. I think I'll call it a night." She reached for her mug of now cold chocolate, "You know where everything is, just make yourself at home, ok?" She'd shown him around the small house soon after they had arrived. She'd shown him the spare room, and he'd left his overnight bag there. She'd shown him the bathroom, got some fresh towels out for him, and showed him how to operate the temperamental shower. Then they'd headed for the kitchen. That had been several hours ago.

He nodded.

"See you in the morning." She bent down to him and kissed his cheek. "Night Kane."

"Night Jacinta."

Separate beds didn't last for the night. About an hour after climbing into bed, and tossing and turning for a goodly

portion of it, Jacinta had thrown back the covers and padded out of her bedroom. She'd rapped on the spare bedroom door. Just lightly. The door was slightly ajar and she could see Kane sprawled in a tangle of sheets. It looked like he too had tossed and turned. Taking a deep breath, as she gathered her courage, Jacinta pushed the door open and walked quickly toward the bed. Before she could change her mind, she lifted the duvet and got in beside him. He didn't stir. She shifted up close.

"Jac?" Came the sleep muttered question.

"Hmm." She mumbled against his back.

He turned his head in confusion, as if he wasn't sure whether it was a dream, and his eyes met hers in the dim glow of the moonlight from the open curtained window.

"I just want to cuddle up while we sleep, ok?"

He nodded, then turned his head again, "Cuddle up close." He whispered languorously.

Jacinta shifted closer, and spooned. Then when she found a comfortable niche, her arm stretched out and as she laced it around his waist his hand reached for hers, and drew it up slightly to rest against his heart. With his hand holding hers to his chest, she settled more comfortably against him. And within seconds was asleep.

## Chapter 15

On Sunday, Kane was up before Jacinta. It was habit. Years of living on a farm had conditioned his body and his internal alarm clock. Early hours. Weekday or weekend, it didn't matter.

For several minutes he'd simply stayed put. Last night was a dream, or so he'd thought, until he'd woken during the night and found her sleeping close, her cheek against his back, his hand still holding hers. It had surprised him. For someone who usually spent half the night in perpetual motion, he'd barely moved from their original starting point. For several minutes he'd simply wondered about the significance, and then with wonderment threading through his mind, and a smile of awe on his lips, he'd gradually fallen asleep again. So when he awoke early the next morning, he took his time, enjoying the feel of her against him. Savouring the tranquility of the moment. And its significance for both of them.

He'd showered and was getting dressed when she stirred.

"I thought I'd get breakfast." He told her, when her eyes opened in confusion and gradually focused, only to narrow when she found him doing up his shirt.

"Perfect." She murmured, when she realized he wasn't leaving. With a muffled instruction, that he didn't quite catch, she reached for her pillow, closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Kane chuckled softly as he finished zipping up his jeans, then he leaned over her, brushed the back of her head with his lips and when she didn't stir, turned and left the room.

After breakfast, they headed for Mass, then went to Cambridge to meet up with friends of hers, for brunch.

As Jacinta drove to Cambridge she thought she ought to give Kane some background information. "I think there'll be five

for Brunch. Grace, Joshua, Luke, Briar, and Nathan. Their kids are at their grandparents. Sasha and James aren't going to be there. So that's five."

"How do you know them?"

"They kind of adopted me." She told him. "Well Grace did initially, when she took up her post at the University. She's an academic. And once you are friends with Grace, well, that automatically brings her sisters into play. I've probably seen the least of Briar, as she did a stint with the UN. But Sasha, she was around heaps. And then she got employed at the Uni, and she is also an academic. So I bump into her on campus now. And though Grace has moved to Auckland she is still my best friend."

"So that covers the sisters. How do the men tie in?"

"Grace is married to Joshua, he's the one giving me a break with that computer game I wrote. Briar is married to Luke. He's a lawyer. Anyone who looks less like a lawyer and more like a thug, I have yet to meet. James, he married Sasha. He's in construction. You heard of Lonergan construction?" Kane nodded. "That's James. But they won't be there. Nathan is James' brother, you heard of Ben Sinclair?"

Kane nodded. "The writer."

"That's Nathan."

"How's he going to feel with me tagging along?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well it seems to be a couple's thing. You. Him?"

She laughed. "No. Grace and her sisters meet for brunch every couple of months, set place, set time. Anyone who wants to come, comes. This weekend, Nathan and I were the only two around. Though, Briar wasn't sure if Nick was going to be up from Dunedin."

“Nick?”

“Another person they adopted. Well Luke initially took him under his wing, but then the Carvalho family got involved in Luke’s life, so Nick got that dose too! He’s a student. Doing medicine in Dunedin.”

“Do they know I’m coming.”

“I rang Grace last night.”

“And I’m?” For Kane, this whole relationship thing was a challenge, and meeting her friends, when things were still not quite settled between the two of them, was making him edgy.

“With me.”

“With you.” He repeated and the apprehension escalated. What if they didn’t like him? How much weight did their reaction carry?

She laughed. “Yes. I said I was bringing a friend. And you might as well brace for an inquisition. They are terrible. Nosey.” She grinned. “And blunt.”

“Great.” He mumbled. He couldn’t remember the last time he was this nervous. It would have been a whole lot different if he knew exactly where they stood with each other. But as things were, they still had a lot to talk about, just the two of them. But here he was, getting ready to meet a group that sounded like the nearest thing she had to family, beside the rest of her blood kin.

“Er, and I should tell you that Grace knows about us at the hen week.” Now she sounded anxious. And that worried him.

“Knows what?”

“That we had sex and you didn’t know it was me.”

He laughed anxiously, and said with a touch of incredulity, "You told her."

"She kind of dragged it out of me." Jacinta turned and threw him a look that he didn't quite understand, so she added, "You wait and see. She'll have you telling her everything."

"I doubt it." He sounded confident.

Jacinta laughed at that misplaced confidence. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy this." She warned with more than a hint of anticipated delight in her voice.

"Great." He muttered.

They were the last to arrive, and consequently had to face all of the inquiring faces at once. He was trying not to stare at the two women. Jacinta hadn't told him they were beautiful. They didn't have any make up on, one was pregnant, and yet he felt that he should recognise her from some glossy magazine cover.

When Jacinta had spoken about Grace and her sisters, in his mind's eye he'd envisioned women who fit his sketch of academics. Intellectual. Conventional. Standard. The two in front of him were anything but. Though they both appeared to underplay their looks, they were nowhere near average.

The introductions were made. The women kissed him on the cheek and their eyes took open inventory. The men shook his hand. Kane noted that the men kissed Jacinta on the lips. And he wasn't happy about that.

Basic background information was provided as everyone settled back. Grace passed on two copies of the menu.

"Here. You'd better read this and get your order ready, before we grill you for information about the wedding." Grace told Jacinta.

The waiter arrived a few minutes later to take their order.



Jacinta described the wedding. The other two women threw in bits of information relating to their weddings. It took several minutes for Kane to realise that while the women and Nathan were engaged and avidly listening to Jacinta, the two other men were keeping a more watchful eye on him.

He first noticed it when he'd thought he'd casually draped an innocent arm along Jacinta's chair, and raised his eyes with a smile of accomplishment only to find Joshua quirked a brow at him. He had almost removed his arm, an instinctive reaction, given the challenge being issued. But he had returned the look and left his arm on the back of her chair. Joshua scowled in return.

Kane smothered a grin. It almost made him feel as if he was late bringing a date back and had to answer to her father, except in this case the man giving him grief was probably only a few years old than Kane.

A few minutes later, as Kane ran his fingers softly across Jacinta's shoulders, drawing absent circles on her sleeve, he found his attention snagged by Luke who narrowed his eyes at him in question. Kane stopped the caress, but left his fingers on her shoulder.

When the first part of the order arrived, and the waiter placed their drinks in front of them, he'd taken the opportunity to gently caress the back of her hand. As he reached for his coffee with his other hand, Kane found his attention snagged by Joshua who had tucked his tongue in his cheek and was giving him a steely glare.

The waiter finished placing their drinks order and left them.

"So you're Lisa's brother." Joshua stated the obvious. Kane nodded. "And you're interested in Jacinta?" The question asked more than the obvious.

"Josh!" Grace squealed. "That's my line."

"Well, hon, you were taking so long to get to it! I thought I'd just get the ball rolling."

“We were just waiting for him to get a touch more tactile before we cornered him.” Grace told her husband and the corners of her lips twitched when she saw Kane’s reaction.

Kane flashed her a surprised look. He’d been convinced that the sisters’ attention had been solely focused on the wedding account.

“So, Kane,” Grace began with a cheeky smile, and an innocent tone that covered the intent in her question, “You going to tell us all, or do we go the painful route?”

“Not much to tell.” Kane said and then took a sip of coffee to buy him a bit of time. A mistake.

Grace beamed as she challenged. “Ok, just start with the fancy dress party at the hen night.”

Kane choked. Jacinta laughed. Then she thumped his back.

“Ok, Jac, you tell us.” Briar threw in, as Kane continued to choke and splutter.

“Kane thought he’d come down for the weekend to see how we could work things out.” Jacinta replied, calmly, much to Kane’s amazement. “We have a lot to sort out.”

“Oh. Like what?”

“We are trying to work out a balance, see if we can make it as a couple.” Jacinta said bravely.

“What do you mean?” Nathan frowned, they behaved like a couple, given the amount of touching that had gone on.

“You seem like a couple to me.”

“Yes, given the amount of caressing, I’d say a close couple.” Grace threw in, now that Kane looked like he was about to squeal.

Kane went beetroot. Nathan took pity on him. “Just roll with it.” He advised. “And tell them all they want to know. Believe me, it’s the best option. Least embarrassing.”

“Hey.” Briar challenged with a chuckle. “That’s not fair. You make us sound nosey.”

“Sweetheart, your family are the inventors of nosey.” Luke told her with an unrepentant grin.

“Thanks.” Briar turned to scowl at Luke, “I just want to remind you that....”

“We are digressing.” Grace threw her sister a warning look as she returned their attention to Jacinta’s original statement. “So, what are you trying to work out exactly?”

“How to make this work.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Grace, asking for information is one thing, prying is another. It could be personal.” Joshua told her.

“Jacinta knows what we mean.” Grace ignored his pointed remark and looked at Jacinta.

“Kane lives on a farm, in the Coromandel. I work here.”

“People move.” Briar said. “Grace moved to Auckland. I moved to Auckland.”

“So I should move?” Jacinta frowned at the inequity. “Why me?”

“I offered to move to the cottage.” Joshua interrupted. “I can work from anyplace.”

“But, I decided to move to Auckland, especially when we decided we wanted to have kids. Closer to grandparents, that sort of thing.”

“I don’t have family.” Jacinta murmured.

“What are we? And what about Trev?” Grace queried.

“And those aunts who are constantly trying to get you hitched?” Briar added.

“You know what I mean.” Jacinta grouched.

“Bri and I started at the cottage. Part time.” Luke threw in his two cents, “We lived at my place, when we wanted Nick to stay with us. And, to a certain extent the cottage is the family Bach. So we moved to my place when we had Landon.”

“James lives in Cambridge. So Sasha didn’t move far.” Nathan explained.

“So you think I should move.”

“Not for us to say.” Grace told Jacinta. “Find a compromise.” There was silence as Jacinta mulled over what she’d heard so far. “So was that it? The big dilemma?” Grace demanded with a smile in her voice and in her eyes.

Jacinta laughed. “Cheek. It is a big dilemma.”

“Kane, what do you want?” Briar asked quietly.

“What?” Kane replied apprehensively.

“What do you want?” Grace braced her chin on the heel of her hand and turned her face toward him. “Do you want to move?”

“If that’s what it takes.” He said, and as the words emerged he realised that he really meant them. If he’d been watching Luke and Joshua instead of Jacinta he would have seen their shoulders relax, and seen a perceptive and sympathetic awareness enter their eyes.

“Course he doesn’t. His life is on that farm.” Jacinta frowned, puzzled by Kane’s response. She knew he loved that farm. He wasn’t going to leave. “He’s got...”

“No it isn’t. Not without you.” Again, he missed Joshua’s and Luke’s reaction, if anything Joshua and Luke looked almost approving. Kane added, “My life is with you. Where ever you are.”

They all heard the honesty in his statement.

Another silence descended.

Then the waiter arrived. After he’d placed their brunch in front of them, checked to see that all was as it should be, he left them to it, and the talk began again.

But none of them returned to the topic of Jacinta and Kane.

Nathan was looking for some advice on finding a horse stud as he needed to do some research for his next book. Kane suggested his place, but also suggested the McGregor place up the road from him, as they had a bigger operation going and were solely into working with horses.

It was just after one when they said their goodbyes.

Jacinta drove them back to her house in contemplative silence. Kane was also lost in thought. For something as mundane as brunch, the last couple of hours had certainly been anything but ordinary. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt that his life was going to change.

They arrived back at the house thirty minutes later.

“Well, you survived them.” Jacinta smiled at him, as she locked the car and waited for him before walking up the drive. She wasn’t sure what he’d made of his friends, their nosiness or their comments.

“They are very protective of you, aren’t they? You are part of their family.”

She frowned, thought about it then smiled. “Yes.” She started to explain, “Grace, Sash and Bri are..”

“I was thinking more of Joshua and Luke.” He corrected dryly.

“Josh and Luke?”

“Yeah.” He chuckled. “Every time I touched you, one of them gave me the evil eye. Big brother watching me! If they weren’t around my age, I’d have said over protective fathers!”

“Really?” She grinned as she considered Kane’s words. “I didn’t notice.”

“They were very clear. Clearly not too keen about my actions, until the inquisition.” Kane waited as Jacinta opened the door.

Jacinta opened the door and they stepped in. Jacinta shrugged off her coat and placed it automatically on the coat stand. Kane followed suit.

“I meant what I said Jacinta.”

“About what?” She turned to face him.

“I will move.”

“What?”

“If that’s what it takes to have you in my life.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’d hate living in the city.”

“If you compromise, we could live just out of town. We can get a few acres just outside. I can move here. I’m not a big enterprise, so it would be simple.”

“You’d do that?”

“Hell yeah. I was thinking about it on the drive just now. We can put the farm on the market. I can buy somewhere out of Hamilton. You’d still need to commute, but half an hour tops. Better than two to three hours.” She stayed silent. So

he carried on. "We'd need to look into what is available around here. Maybe check out some of the estate agents before I head back today." She was still just standing in her hallway looking at him. "It's feasible. I know what we need. It might be a few months before we shift, but we could manage for the short term to juggle between the two places, it would only be for a few months. Possible, within the year we'd be here. Less really..." He came to an abrupt halt. "Why are you crying? Don't you want this?"

She shook her head as tears streamed down her cheeks. "No."

"No." He repeated, and looked completely gutted.

"No. I don't want you to move." She dashed away her tears and then wrapped her arms around herself. "I don't want you to move."

"But.."

"I love you. And I love where you live." She sniffed. He looked happy but confused. "I don't have to live in Hamilton. I can work from the farm."

He frowned. "What about the University?"

"I don't have to work for them." She used the heels of her hands to mop at the tears.

"You don't."

She shook her head.

He hauled her to him, hugged her tight and whispered. "I appreciate what you are saying, but I can't ask you to give up your working life. Me moving is no big deal. We both keep our jobs, but I do mine in a different location."

"No." She shook her head. He nuzzled her cheek and whispered. "What?" She stopped abruptly.

“I love you.”

She just stared.

He cupped her face, and with his eyes open lowered his head so that his lips just brushed hers. He saw her response. “I love you.” He took her hand, “I can shift operations to someplace just out of Hamilton.” He told her. “The MacGregors, down the road would be only too keen to buy some of my land. We can keep the house as a Bach, and, well I’m not exactly poor, so we can afford a decent spread down here. I ....”

Jacinta kissed him. Then she stepped back. “No.” She said firmly. “I can write programmes anywhere. If I want to write.” She couldn’t help but beam as she added, “Josh says the one I gave him will probably bring in several million over the next three years.”

“Million?”

“Dollars.”

“Dollars?”

She nodded. “And I’ve already started work on another.”

Kane laughed as threads of relief began to filter his system. It didn’t matter where they lived, as long as she was with him, and from what he’d heard so far, she was his. Kane pulled her into a hug and muttered. “Lisa and Anne thought you were after my millions when you came to the hen week.”

Jacinta giggled. “I know. I couldn’t resist.”

“Jac, are you absolutely sure? I can move. I can...”

“Yes. I know. But what about Rosa, and Jim and..”

“I’d ask them to come with us.”



“But why go to all that trouble, when I love where you live?”

The next morning he drove back to the farm. They kept in contact by phone during the week. Talking early in the morning and late at night.

The following Friday Jacinta arrived at the farm just after five. Kane was waiting for her at the front door. As her car pulled to a stop he came down the steps.

“You made good time.” He told her when she opened her door and stepped out.

She nodded. “The roads were good.” Jacinta was about to walk round to the boot of the car when he stopped her.

“Hang on.”

Puzzled she turned. He smiled and then wrapped both arms around her. After kissing her senseless for several minutes he broke away, kept his arms locked around her and just looked at her.

“I’ve missed you.”

“We spoke every day.” She reminded him.

“It’s not the same as having you here.”

Then Rosa appeared. “Ah, Jacinta. Good. I thought I might miss you.” Reluctantly Kane released Jacinta when Rosa came up and gave Jacinta a hug. “I’m pleased to see this man has some sense after all.” She whispered then stepped away. “I’m off to my sister’s place. The casserole has another hour to go.” She told Kane and then with a wave walked toward her car.

“Where are the others?” Jacinta asked as she watched Rosa put the car into gear before driving down the long driveway.

“Jim and Aroha went into town this afternoon. Gav and John are working.”

Together Kane and Jacinta walked to her car boot. He was about to retrieve her bag when he turned and asked her “Are you tired?”

She shook her head, “No.” but she was still surprised when instead of retrieving her bag he closed the boot.

With her hand in his, he tugged her toward his Ute. “Good. Up for a drive?” He asked as he opened the door and waited for her to climb into his Ute.

“Where are we going?” She got in.

“You’ll see. Not far.” He closed the door and sprinted round the bonnet to his side.

“This is all very mysterious.” She twisted in her seat to face him.

“Buckle up. Not far. I promise.” And with that he put the Ute into gear and drove down the driveway. Some fifteen minutes later they reached the end of rutted track. When they stepped out she could taste the sea air and feel the breeze.

“Come on.”

“Curiouser and curiouser.”

He took her hand and led her down a short foot track until they came to a small cove.

“Our land up to here.” He pointed north, “That beach fronts the McGregor land.” He gestured toward the expanse of land to his left.

“Oh. Ok.” Jacinta was puzzled by the geography lesson she was receiving. Why now?

With his hand still holding hers he helped her step down onto the sand. The sun was just starting to dip. He guided her to a large whitened tree trunk and gestured for her to sit. With a mystified smile she did.

“This is beautiful.”

The sun was just casting a golden hue on the water, the sky was streaked with burnt orange, faint traces of pink and a tiny smidgeon of purple.

He nodded. Then much to her surprise he got down on one knee in front of her. She wasn’t sure if her mouth dropped open or her eyes widened. She just knew her heart started to race.

“Jacinta,” Kane ran his tongue over his dry lips as he reached for her hand with one hand. He took a breath, and looking her in the eyes asked, “Will you marry me?” He showed her the ring in his other palm as he added, “Please.”

Jacinta froze. He held her hand tight. It was a good job that she was sitting down as her legs had turned to jelly. Her heart was pounding. He whispered “Marry me.” and then leaned closer and said more loudly, “Jacinta, please will you marry me?”

To add to the tension, she looked like she was about to cry.

Jacinta felt herself nodding before she formed the words. But her response was loud and clear, “Yes.”

She saw his eyes flash with relief and excitement, and with a sense of utter contentment, felt him slide the ring onto her finger. But before she had a chance to look at the ring, she found herself being lifted into his arms as she said yes over and over again.

Kane hugged her close then twirled her around. Then they fell. He kissed her haphazardly as they tumbled, laughing and shrieking, a jumble of arms and legs, onto the sand.

“You know, for a man who doesn’t think he’s good at talking about his feelings, you sure are good at showing them when it counts.” Jacinta murmured with tears in her eyes as they lay sprawled in the sand some minutes later.

“I love you.” He said.

“I love you.” She told him.

The sun had set by the time he eventually hauled her to her feet. Smiling like complete idiots they just stared at each other. He draped an arm along her shoulder and together they watched as the remaining light began to make its descent into the water line. For several minutes they watched in silence as the colours merged and dusk settled.

On the drive back to the house, Kane glanced across at Jacinta, saw that she was looking at the ring and said, “I never asked if you liked it?”

“It’s beautiful.” She held her hand up, palm facing the windscreen as she studied the emeralds and diamonds. “I love it.”

Kane looked over again, and saw that she was still smiling at the ring.

“Engaged.” She murmured. Then grinned, “I can’t wait to tell people. Grace will be ecstatic. Trev will be in high spirits. And my aunts will be a complete nightmare!”

“Grace phoned me on Wednesday.”

“Ohh.” She squirmed. “I couldn’t help it. I was so excited. When she phoned on Monday to say they were back in Auckland, she asked about you, and well I blabbed about me moving up here. I said we were going to talk about practicalities this weekend. And get organized, get a timeline for me to move in.”

He grinned happily. Then after a second said, “Grace said she and her family were at the Bach, and invited me to join them for dinner.”

“What?” Jacinta frowned. “In the middle of the week? What were they doing here?” He laughed at her pique. “Did you go?” She asked.

“I don’t think it was an invitation, but a quorder!”

“A quorder? What’s that?”

“A question that’s really an order.” He smiled, “Trev says Lisa’s good at them.” His smile widened into a grin, “Apparently she says things like, Trev can you put the bins out? When she really means, Trev put the bins out!”

Jacinta laughed.

“Grace issued a summons, couched as a question.”

Jacinta did a good impersonation of a beached fish. “I’ll flatten them.”

Carefree, he shrugged. “I admit, I was a worried when I arrived and found that Briar and her side kick were there too.”

“Ohhhh!” Jacinta huffed, and glared at nothing in particular. “Honestly, sometimes they go too far.”

“And I was concerned when Grace and Briar withdrew to get dinner...”

“What? Those two can’t cook for toffees!”

“And when they left me with their esteemed husbands, I was expecting to have a rough ride.”

“I will flatten the lot of them.”

“But, they congratulated me on my good sense.”

“They did?” Jacinta frowned. He nodded.

“Even offered me a drink.”

That had her narrowing her eyes again, “Really?”

“And then Luke asked if I’d asked you to marry me and if we’d set a date!”

“What?” Jacinta was speechless. “Ohhh.”

He grinned at her reaction. “The question is should I have asked them or Trev for your hand in marriage?”

“You asked the one and only person you needed to ask. I don’t need their permission.”

“Good, so we can set a date without having to consult them, right?”

“Right.”

“So when do you want to get married?” He glanced over at her, “A month?”

“A month?” Astonishment underlined the question. “I, er, I don’t know if people can get married in a month. Is it possible?”

Kane shrugged.

“You think we can get everything arranged? In a month?”

“Depends on the scale I guess.” He replied. “Ok, how about we compromise and say a couple of months max. What do you think?”

“Eight weeks?”

“Yeah, eight weeks today?”

Jacinta knew she didn’t want a big wedding, but even that would need planning, and arrangements and preparations.

But if she didn't want it to get out of hand, and if she wanted to keep her relatives in check, then she didn't want to give them too much time. "Yes, ok, eight weeks today."

Kane grinned. "Perfect." He pulled up in front of the house. But once again, instead of heading for the boot of her car to retrieve her case, he took her by the hand and headed toward the bunkhouse.

"Where are we going now?"

"I want to show you something." He told her and continued to lead her toward the bunkhouse.

He turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. "Your office." He said as he flicked on the switch. The room was bathed in light as Jacinta stepped past him and into the room she'd last seen as a bunkroom.

"My office?" The room that she had slept in, during the hen week had been gutted and converted into an office. A large corner desk, several bookshelves and a row of filing cabinets. A glass sliding door to another room. But she couldn't see into that room.

"I figured we can both leave for work together. You head for your office and I head for the yards or stables." He kept his eyes on her, and kept his fingers crossed. Hoping he'd done the right thing.

Jacinta didn't know what to say. They'd knocked the bunkhouse walls out, and changed the place completely. In under a week.

"You still have to decorate the place, and choose the rest of the furniture that you will need. And you know make it your space. We still have to get internet access, but they said that would get sorted by the end of the month." Kane found himself talking fast as nerves kicked in. "Is it ok?" He asked, when she still hadn't spoken.

"Kane, what about the itinerant workers?"

“We are going to build a bunk house at the yard end.”

“That will be expensive. I could have worked on my lap top in the kitchen or your office, or something.”

“Ah, well, my office,” He gestured toward the glass floor to ceiling sliding door, “is just through there.” He smiled teasingly. “So I’ll be checking on you to see that you are working and not just playing computer games.”

“You’ve gone to so much trouble.” Her eyes scanned the freshly painted walls while her nose picked up the scent of the new furniture.

“Not as much as you.” He said softly, “You’ll be giving up heaps to move here.” He smiled, “The colour scheme is open to negotiation. We can get some plants and stuff, you decide. And we’ll...

“Kane, you didn’t have to do this.” She interrupted him.

“I wanted to.” He reached for her, and pulled her into his arms. Lacing them around her waist he added, “You are giving up a hell of a lot to be with me. Moving up here, I know it’s going to be tough. The least I could do was make sure you got something in return.”

“I got you.” She wrapped her arms around him. “That’s a pretty good deal I think.” With a smile on her lips she reached up on tip-toe and kissed him. “Thank you.”

Relief coursed through him. “Come on, let’s get your bags.” He waited for her to leave the room, then switched off the lights. “You know I said I met Grace and family earlier in the week?” He took her hand and together they strolled toward the car. Jacinta nodded. “Grace said it would be quite isolated for you.”

“No, it wouldn’t. There’s Rosa, and ...”

“I think she meant in terms of the amount of company you had at the Uni. With your current job.”



“But I was planning on leaving if the game took off. Which it has done.”

“I know. But it’s still a huge mind set change.”

“I’ll get used to it.” She told him honestly.

“Josh said if you wanted, he has a consultancy thing going at the local college. It would mean a half hour drive once a week.”

“Consultancy?” She chuckled. “Me? A consultant?”

“He said if you were interested and wanted to talk about it, to get back to him.”

“Ok.” They’d reached the car, and Jacinta opened the boot and reached for her bags. “I was going to give notice next week. I have to serve a months notice.”

“Here. Let me.” He took her bags from her. “That isn’t going to give you much time to get the wedding organized.” He looked across at her.

“It will be plenty of time, knowing my aunts.” She replied with a grimace, and slammed the boot of her car.

“They can’t be that bad.” He laughed at her expression.

“Wait and see.” She huffed, “And you’ll have to come down to Hamilton to help plan stuff.”

“Does that mean you aren’t moving up here until we are married?” They walked toward the front door.

She frowned, “I guess it does. I’ll do long weekends maybe. Is that ok?”

“As long as you marry me in eight weeks, that’s fine.”

“Eight weeks. I promise.”

He kissed her. “Ok, your promise is good enough for me.”