

Grace

Chapter 1

“Kia Ora. I’m Grace Carvalho.” She informed the smiling, casually uniformed young man at the desk. “I was paged a few minutes ago.” She reminded him when he continued to smile but looked at her expectantly. Grace braced her forearms against the handle and slumped tiredly against her baggage trolley. Her eyes felt gritty from a lack of sleep. Unconsciously she rubbed the heels of her hands against her eyes and then moved one hand to cover her mouth as she yawned tiredly. She leaned against the handle of the trolley and did her best to stop her eyes from closing.

“Kia Ora Grace. Just give me a minute,” He sought out a record of the request, “Here we are. Mr De Souza,” He looked past her before saying, “ the man over there. Mr Joshua De Souza,” he indicated with his finger, “asked us to page you.”

Startled, Grace turned automatically to look behind her. What she saw banished her tiredness instantly and made her grin with sheer unadulterated amusement. Even exhaustion couldn’t stop her from grinning. Good old dad. Never give up. She’d give her father full marks for this one. Fatigue disappeared momentarily as she took stock of Joshua De Souza. Never turn down an opportunity to meet a fit guy.

And this man was definitely her idea of fit. Not handsome in a predictable way, but then she had never gone for predictable. There was just something about him that had instantly captivated Grace. He had a hard kind of face, too angular to be textbook handsome, and with the frown creasing his brow, not exactly picture perfect, but she liked the look of him. As far as she was concerned, the man was gorgeous. She took her time and scanned him from head to toe. Long legs, lean,

angular, slightly studious, she decided, as she wondered how her dad had found a guy who really did meet part of her wish list criteria. Dark navy blue sweater, well-worn snug blue jeans and bored eyes. Those were her first impressions.

“Thanks” She turned back to the man at the desk and smiled delightedly at him. He beamed in return, almost as if he knew all about the conversation between Grace and her father ten days ago. Her father had teased her, yet again, about finding a man. Told her he’d spoken to one at a party, and that man, Joshua, was going to phone that weekend to ask her to dinner. The weekend had passed, with no phone call or sign of Joshua. Before Grace left for her conferences she had taunted her dad mercilessly, even laughingly suggested he offer them a huge dowry if he was that desperate to get her married off.

Three conferences, three countries and thousands of miles later, the figment had materialised. She hadn’t realized just how sore a loser her dad was. But she was pleased with his effort. Once again she grinned as she took stock of the man waiting impatiently for her.

There was something about him that made her heart race, her hands go clammy and her thoughts scatter. Something intangible. She could feel it as much as see it. He made her want to stop and look. Well, more than look. Charisma that’s what it was, she mused tiredly as she continued to look at him. Or maybe it was just sex appeal. She grinned at her idiotic thoughts. She was way too tired to decide if some man had sex appeal and she was in no state to do anything about it anyway.

Then it came to her. An agency. To get even, her dad had gone to an agency. Resourceful. Grace found herself chuckling beneath her breath. This could be fun. She could play along for a while. Enjoy being met by some gorgeous stranger. No strings. Just talk. Tiredness was temporarily vanquished.

With more zest in her than she really possessed, she pushed the trolley forward, heading for Joshua. The closer she got the more sure she was; he was a bought and paid for hunk. All for her. Yes, there was a God. Yes, yes, yes.

Good choice dad. Her eyes took swift but detailed inventory just before she reached him. Chiseled looking, all planes and angles. Tanned to a golden brown, currently showing faint traces of evening stubble. Designer stubble? And those eyes. She'd thought they were black, until she got closer. Dark moss green, framed with lashes she would die for. Impatient green eyes she noted just before her own eyes left his face and moved down to his arms, to his hands, to his fingers. A light dusting of dark brown hair showing at the strong wrist. Long fingers and short clean nails.

His index finger was drumming restlessly against the arm rest and in direct contrast to the slow bored roam of his green eyed gaze. He watched the crowds that merged and mingled as they made their way past. Even though he feigned boredom, he was alert; she could see it in his eyes. His shoulders were broad, but they were tense. She sensed he was angry. She hoped it wasn't the thought of meeting her that did it. Maybe he disliked being kept waiting.

It took some deft footwork to bring the wandering trolley to a halt just in front of him. Trust her to pick a trolley that thought it was a four-wheel drive on automatic.

Grinning impishly she held out her hand as her mind began relishing the thought of shaking hands with him. "Mr De Souza? Joshua?" she questioned with a smile in her voice. "Hello. I'm Grace."

Her smile wasn't reciprocated. Rudely, he stared at her. Just looked. For several seconds he didn't move. Grace felt her smile freeze into position. Then he got to his feet, slowly, still not taking her proffered hand and without saying a word. For a fleeting second he had looked astonished. But he pulled himself together and allowed his eyes to arrogantly take stock of the woman standing in front of him.

Grace allowed him to take mental notes. She doubted she looked all that inspiring. Twenty-six hours in several aircraft and several airports didn't do much for one's appearance. But who cared? He'd been paid. It wasn't often she arrived home to find this kind of surprise waiting

for her. Even though she was out on her feet, her eyes were in good working order and what they saw appealed to her.

This was her? Joshua scanned her slowly and blatantly. From the top of her messed up pony-tailed jet-black hair, to the low heels of knee high, flat, black leather boots, all five foot seven inches of her. The frown lines deepened as he took stock. This couldn't be her. He wondered if the real Grace had sent a decoy. Quickly he glanced around, hoping to spot someone he'd recognize as an academic.

Grace waited for his eyes to return and make contact with hers. When they did, she wished he hadn't. At least he wasn't feigning boredom anymore. Although his eyes had masked it, she had definitely surprised him. She just wasn't sure whether he was pleased or not. Her intuition and initial assessment suggested he wasn't. Grace dropped the hand she was still holding out to him.

She wondered what he'd been expecting. Who cared? Weren't escorts supposed to feign attraction? Or even basic interest? This man wasn't. Obviously missed the charm training session. Either that or he was paid to look disinterested. Perhaps he was their strong, silent type.

Grace lost her smile. Surely she didn't look that bad. A bit mussed up, possibly a touch faded, but not as bad as he made out. Could she? She should have taken the time to freshen up. But then she hadn't been expecting a gorgeous specimen of manhood to meet her. If only she'd known. She'd have at least combed her hair, left it loose, maybe put on some lipstick, a bit of mascara. Instead all she had done was wash her face, brush her teeth and retie her ponytail, just before the plane landed. It was an attempt to freshen up and prepare for the last leg of her journey home. Too late now to wish she'd made more of an effort.

His eyes were conveying messages she didn't want to read. Dark green eyes flashed with something she didn't recognise. He scowled. She grinned back. She might be exhausted, but she wasn't about to be intimidated by this gorgeous guy. Only he didn't know that yet. Her smile widened when he glared at her. Then, suddenly, she decided it wasn't worth the hassle.

“How much does this cost?” She asked bluntly, quietly amused that her father would go to all this trouble. He was known in the family for his practical jokes, but never had he gone to such lengths. This was his best effort to date.

The jolly green giant studied her for several long seconds before he spoke. “What?”

Typical, thought Grace, the jolly green giant was tall, dark, handsome, and he had a gorgeous voice. Grace liked it. Deep, resonant and sexy. Pity he was such a bear. She noticed that his green eyes darkened even further when her lips curved into a fuller smile and her eyes glowed with suppressed humour while she looked at him. O.K, so it was obvious she was enjoying this meeting and he wasn’t. But it wasn’t often that a six foot two, black haired, green-eyed guy, with a sexy voice had her paged at airports. And if her father had gone to all this trouble to even the score, she should at least enjoy a few minutes of his endeavor. The least she could do was look.

Thank you Dad. She sent her father silent thanks and relaxed even more, “This arrangement between you and my dad, what did it cost? Hope it was worth it.” She added cheekily.

If anything, the man’s demeanour hardened. Well he might be gorgeous but he was dull-witted. A prime time, boringly dull, grouch. Didn’t he ever smile? No sense of humour. With a rueful shrug Grace decided that she couldn’t expect everything. Rough good looks and a sense of humour? A very rare combination. Well, one out of two wasn’t bad. But it could have been better, after all he’d been paid. He could at least make the effort. Pretend, she willed him silently, pretend I’m some breathtaking blonde.

Joshua silently studied the eccentric young woman in front of him. Eccentric was the only tame word that came to mind. Other words that registered were best kept quiet. Bizarre was closer to the truth. A raving lunatic was probably a more accurate description.

He'd been waiting for over 90 minutes for her arrival. As a logical man he had phoned the airport, confirmed the expected time of arrival, allowed time for her to get through customs and immigration, and had still found himself waiting for 90 minutes for her to make an appearance. And what an appearance. She was disheveled, he could make allowances for that. She had after all flown almost half way across the world. But she was also off the wall. That he decided was probably why she needed her father to find her a date. Any man who met her in person would know within minutes he was talking with a beautiful, but insane woman.

Grace would have been offended if she'd been able to read his mind and seen the confusion and the mess he was making of her comments. Fortunately for Grace she hadn't taken mind reading at Uni.

Joshua decided he'd better take control of this conversation before she really annoyed him. He simply had to get her home. The sooner the better. At least he hadn't been stuck with her for a dinner date. That had been a lucky escape. He'd been thinking that over, given that he'd been sitting around for 90 minutes, he'd had plenty of time to think about this whole mess. Through a process of logic and deduction he'd come to the conclusion that Grace Carvalho must be either ugly or have serious social problems. She'd be homely and unassuming and more than a little desperate for an offer of marriage. Having met her, he could rule out ugly. From the conversation thus far, behaviour and social skills were the likely cause for her single status.

Because she looked as if she wouldn't budge unless he responded, he felt compelled to say, "We haven't settled on it as yet."

She really wasn't what he was expecting. A frump, that's what he was expecting. But she wasn't a frump. Far from it. The woman standing in front of him was beautiful. She might be unkempt, grinned like a demented cat and raved on like an oddball lunatic, but she was beautiful. Warm, almost jet black eyes, high cheekbones, clear, make-up-less skin and the most inviting full lips. His body began to harden and his reaction puzzled him. How could his body react to a woman he didn't like? She was so not his type. Talkative. Illogical. Irrational. Absurd. Not even close to his type.

Her teasing brought him back to reality. He focussed on her disheveled appearance. He hadn't expected her to be certifiable. She was prattling on again. He'd better start listening.

"Oh-oh." Tiredly she propped her arms on the handlebars of the trolley and leaned forward to tease, "You mean you're here to do your stuff without a deposit?" She chuckled lightly, "Very trusting." She gave him a head to toe appraisal. It was deliberately almost as insulting as the one he had subjected her to a few minutes before. "Do you work on commission?" He stiffened and his eyes narrowed. But before he could take umbrage at that statement, she said, "You must get to meet some interesting people. Who do you work for?" She wrinkled her nose impudently at him.

She was genuinely curious, even though she realized he wasn't her type. Brooding, no sense of humour, no personality, too quiet. No, not her type at all. She liked guys with a modicum of humour, a trace of intelligence wouldn't be discounted, but someone who showed a little bit of interest would be a start. He met none of those criteria. She wondered about the agency. Did her father have a choice? Why had he settled for this man?

"Myself." Joshua told her scathingly. Her brow rose in silent question. The woman was definitely crazy. Joshua decided that trying to keep track of her conversation was impossible, so he stopped trying. She had no logic. She was scatterbrained, jumping from one topic to the next with no sense of sequence or relationship. Crazy. The quicker he got this chore done, the better. But she was off again before he had a chance to say anything more.

"How enterprising of you." She remarked with more than a hit of irony as she tried not to take offence at his acerbic tone. So he wasn't overly keen on this particular assignment. That wasn't her fault. He probably went for leggy blondes, or ... Suddenly feeling very cross and not particularly pleased with the fact that she clearly didn't appeal to him, she straightened and stretched, "What's your agency called? I might use it again." Not a chance. But she wasn't going to tell him that. Her lips twitched as she watched him frown. She wasn't sure why she enjoyed baiting him, but she just did. "Especially if you turn up in

person.” She whispered mockingly. He stepped back, as if the thought was an absolute anathema. Yes, Grace decided, she really was not his type.

“My agency?” Joshua was half tempted to summon the white coats to take her way. She was babbling again. In general women who babbled annoyed him. This one more so than most and, it would seem, with very little effort on her part. She seemed to be able to irritate him with the minimum of effort.

“Your firm, your company, whatever, what do you call yourselves?” She pursued her line of inquiry with a trace of impatience. He might be good looking but he was incredibly slow. Perhaps that was it, great face, super physique, gorgeous voice, but dim.

“Infotrec.” He stated and sounded perplexed. Joshua tried to hold onto his self control and his temper. This woman was pushing it. And why was he giving in to her interrogation. All he had to do was take her home. He certainly didn’t have to answer her questions, or buy into her totally illogical conversation.

“Infotrec?” She tipped her head to the side as she mulled the word, and what was left of her pony tail released several more wispy strands of black hair. Irrationally, Joshua wanted to touch the silky jet strands. Brush them off her face, tuck them around the back of her ear. Loosen the rest so he could run his fingers through her hair. She was talking again, that brought him back to sanity. Why the hell was he thinking about touching her hair when she was clearly crazy.

“Good grief. Real romantic.” She uttered sarcastically, then added insolently as she unconsciously pushed a few strands of jet-black hair off her face, “Do you keep track of people through computer data or something?” She rubbed her forehead, which was suddenly aching as if she had worked through some immense problem.

“Why would I want to keep track of people?” For the third time he wondered why he was having a conversation with a demented woman. Trying to keep up with her logic was making him dizzy. And as a

programmer he prided himself on his ability to make sense of most things. With her he was failing. Dismally. He was failing. All he had to do was get her home. He didn't have to talk to her. Hell, he certainly didn't have to listen to her. She was chattering away as if this whole thing was a huge joke.

"Well," She paused and frowned as she thought about it, "so that you'd know who's available and who isn't, I guess." She mumbled, the frown deepened as she peered up at him "You can't be very successful" She murmured beneath her breath just as she suppressed a yawn.

That rankled. "I stopped counting my millions when I reached eighteen." He told her arrogantly, then wished he hadn't reacted to her bait. That was another thing. She baited him with very little effort. She tormented him by standing so close, irritated him by talking so much and did it all so easily. He'd spent years being unflappable, and here was a woman annoying the hell out of him with the minimum of effort.

Grace had to stifle the smile. She was getting to him. He looked angry. No boredom now, she thought as she watched his eyes flash as he fought to bank down his ire.

"Oh yeah? So how come you're here? Personally? Why didn't you use one of your employees, huh?" She tried but couldn't keep the sarcasm from her voice.

His black brows drew together as he tried to work through her latest incomprehensible remark. His puzzlement conveyed itself to Grace. Grace chewed on her lower lip as she quickly reran the scenario in her mind. Joshua wished he could chew on her lower lip. But her next statement blew that thought away. "I get the feeling I've missed something." She muttered.

Joshua was half tempted to tell her she was missing a whole lot. He refrained. Years of ingrained manners rescued him. Just. Two deep lines furrowed his forehead as he frowned at her. Then he asked, with pronounced patience, "You are Grace Carvalho?"

“In the flesh.” She agreed, before tagging on a question of her own “And my dad, Ben, arranged this?” She massaged her temples and did her best to keep from giving in to the overwhelming tiredness.

He nodded. Well that settled that. Unlucky. For a while there he thought he’d managed to meet the wrong woman. Wishful thinking.

“So now what?” She was looking at him as if he had a wonderful surprise lined up for her.

“I drive you to Hamilton. Your folks took your car to Whangamata, apparently theirs is being serviced. They’ll be at the cottage tomorrow.”

Good work dad. That sounded plausible. She hadn’t thought her father could be so devious. She was tempted to play along. She glanced up at Joshua. She could tell from his body language that he was just about holding on to his patience. The spark in his eyes said more than his words. No, it wouldn’t be any fun hanging around with this guy, even if her father had paid for him. He had no sense of humour and from the way his eyes raked across her, far too much arrogance. She could tell that he was hating this assignment. He didn’t want to be here. Coming over loud and clear. Message received. Grace decided she’d let him off the hook. What she had been hoping for, just a bit of flippant camaraderie was quickly disintegrating into pique. He hadn’t made any effort to be charming. He hadn’t even bothered to pretend.

Her earlier lethargy resurfaced. She felt herself sag. A good looking male without a single pleasant personality trait would warrant too much work and she was too tired to play along. But she’d give her father full marks for effort. She’d have to tell him that he’d almost called it right. He had chosen a man who met all her wish list criteria on a physical level, but he’d have to work on the personality bit. At the very least, she wanted a man who wanted to talk to her. A man who wanted to spend time in her company, a man who at least looked at her as if she was the most important person in the room.

“There's no need.” She said quietly. Joshua narrowed his eyes at the tone. She sounded crushed. Now what was she up to? “I’ll take the coach.” She straightened up and braced herself to push the trolley off “Don't worry,” she said tiredly, when she noticed his narrowed gaze, “I’ll make sure that dad pays you. After all you showed up.” Even if you didn’t deliver charm, wit, personality, or even general interest, she added silently. She pushed more hair off her face, tucking errant locks behind her ear and then she had to stifle another yawn.

Joshua ignored her ramblings. She seemed to have lapses when she talked utter gibberish. Why on earth would her father be paying him? She might be a doctor but she needed to visit a psychiatrist. Soon.

Grace held out her hand, “Well, it's been different.” She smiled, and he saw the exhaustion that she had banked during their exchanges. “And between you, me and the gatepost, my dad sure has taste.”

He didn't proffer his hand this time either, in fact he was looking at her as if she had said nothing of consequence. Joshua could see that she was out on her feet. Even though she maintained eye contact, he could see that it was an effort. She was operating on sheer will power. Behind the flippancy was exhaustion.

Grace fought the urge to push the trolley into him, as he made no attempt to get out of the way. Instead she squared her shoulders and raised a brow as she continued to maintain eye contact. He really did have gorgeous green eyes, not doubt devastating eyes if he smiled. Come to think of it, that mouth would be devastating if he kissed her.

Startled by the direction of her dizzy thoughts, Grace dropped her clammy palm back onto the trolley handle bar and tried to steer it around him. She was clearly far too tired if she was thinking about kissing him. An escort? She wouldn't. Even if he did have a charming personality, which this one clearly didn't. Well dad, we are even.

She resigned herself to getting the coach home. Mentally she began to work through her ongoing travel plans. She'd take the shuttle bus from the airport to the bus station in downtown Auckland, then wait for

transport to Cambridge, and then get a taxi from Cambridge to the cottage. Just the thought of the journey was enough to make her feel fatigued again. She had just set the trolley-with-a-mind-of-its-own in motion, when his large palm clamped onto her black-leather clad shoulder. With one eyebrow arched, she looked pointedly at his hand on her shoulder and then looked directly into his eyes. Two seconds, and one look, that's all it took. He removed his hand. His mood worsened. The look she had thrown him was full of insolence, expectancy and demand. Very eloquent. And the look had been sufficient for his brain to dispatch a message to his hand to shift, even though he had not wanted to release her.

The leather under his hand had been warm and when she had turned her head to throw him that 'look', loose strands of hair butterfly kissed the back of his hand. His response was automatic, unexpected and he didn't understand it. That's what scared him. Beautiful women had touched him in the past, yet none had his body responding like this. Not so fast, not without real reason and certainly not with just the inadvertent brush from a strand of hair. His body tightened, hardened. Without volition, without conscious thought. That's what irked. With her eyes his brain had sent a message to carry out her demand, and with her hair his brain had sent a message to the rest of his now hard body.

"Just a minute." He grated as she made to move off again.

"Look, Mr, De Souza, if that really is your name, I promise dad will pay you," She blew a tendril of black hair off her face, it floated back to rest against her cheek, "On the other hand," Once again she stopped her trolley. This time she reached for her hand bag. She rummaged in the small black satchel and retrieved her cheque book. "I'm tired and I just want to get home. If you're so damn worried about being paid, I can write you a cheque right now," She explained, then muttered forcefully under her breath "anything to get you out of my hair." She flicked him a look, "How much?"

"I'm driving you to the cottage." He stated in a tone that suggested that she was being a recalcitrant child. Joshua was coming close to picking her up, tossing her onto the trolley with her luggage and wheeling

them out of here. Anything to get this over and done with. The only thing that was stopping him was the scene it would create. He was sure the police would intervene.

“No you aren’t. I’ve absolved you of that duty.” She mimicked his tone pointedly.

Joshua wanted to grind his teeth. The woman was annoying the hell out of him. She was unbalanced, uncontrollable and incoherent. But what really annoyed him was that his body found her attractive. He had never found irrational women attractive.

“I gave my word.” He bit out fiercely and even to his own ears sounded childish.

“Oh for goodness sake,” Totally unfazed she discarded his statement with utter derision, “you are too old to be a Boy Scout.” She flicked him a look that told him not to argue with her. “I’m tired. I’m cranky and I am going home. Alone.” But she spoiled the tirade by yawning.

“I’m driving you home.” He hadn’t gone to all this trouble, wasted all this time to be dismissed so condescendingly, and by some irritating jumped up mess that could barely stay awake. And he was trying to fathom out his mixed reactions to her. One moment he was desperate to get rid of her and the next he was arguing to have the dubious pleasure of taking her home. Madness was definitely contagious.

“I don’t know you from a bar of soap.” She told him flatly. “I have no intention of going anywhere with you.” She hadn’t raised her voice, but the firm resolve carried loud and clear.

That did it. What little control he’d had over his reaction to her dissolved into rudeness. “For fucks sake. Phone your dad.” He snapped in a calm voice that clearly showed he’d reached the end of his patience. “And stop pissing me off.” What he really wanted to do, was pick her up, toss her over his shoulder and stride out of the airport. And then dump her in the nearest rubbish bin. For a few seconds they just stood and waited. Neither broke eye contact.

“Fine. I’ll phone home.”

He grinned smugly. She groaned silently in exasperation and alarm. He was devastating when he smiled. Even when it was a disparaging smirk.

“What’s your name?” She demanded sternly, shoving her chequebook into her bag and zipping it up with little care and a great deal of anger.

“Joshua De Souza.” He growled in confusion. What the hell was the matter with this woman? How many times had he told her his name?

Grace floundered as his sincerity came through. That couldn’t be his real name. How would dad know that before he’d been to an agency? Her head snapped up to look him in the eye. “That’s your real name?”

Joshua swore softly and came to a firm conclusion. The woman was definitely stark raving mad. He swore silently. “Yes it’s my real name. I’ve told you that.” He sounded angry and genuine. “Repeatedly.”

This whole thing was beginning to shatter in front of her.

“You mean you really are.” She mumbled dejectedly as the full implication began to sink in. He was real, he wasn’t a figment of her father’s imagination. Where had dad met him? How had he persuaded this man to come here? She groaned silently as the repercussions hit home.

“You want it written in blood?” The question ferociously interrupted her thoughts. Of course it was his real name, he’d told her that. Several times.

“Driving license would do.” She stated boldly. Anyone could bluff. How did she know if that really was his name. He could be an actor. A good actor.

He reached into the rear pocket of his jeans and retrieved his wallet. He flicked it open, and removed his license. His eyes held hers through the entire process. He looked too sure of himself. He wasn't bluffing. Grace began to flounder. "Here." He thrust it at her.

Misunderstanding, apprehension and shock were clearly evident in her almost jet black eyes. This couldn't be happening. Hesitantly she inquired in a bleak whisper, "You're not from an escort agency?" She knew he wasn't, but after all the assumptions she'd made this far, she wasn't taking any more chances. She wanted to know exactly who he was. Exactly. This was rapidly escalating into a real farce.

He looked affronted, then scandalized and then he bellowed. "What?"

That drew several looks their way. The stream of people slowed to glance at them.

The next time his conscience smote him with guilt he was going to remember this meeting. An agency? Clusters of people continued to stare at them. Curious, avid interest was in their eyes. A few muttered, laughed and moved on. Joshua struggled to remain calm.

Grace cringed. "You are causing a scene." So the man was touchy about status, how was she supposed to know that? "Do you own an escort agency?" She stressed the word own.

"I'm causing a scene? You're insane, you know that?" He ran the fingers of his right hand through his dark brown hair. "I don't own a bloody escort agency." He finally stated and glared furiously at her, before adding, "You'd have to be the most absurd, illogical, obtuse woman I have ever encountered. Or just plain stupid."

Grace wasn't listening to his words. As Grace watched his hair fall back into its well cut, layered style, she stammered in confusion the question that was uppermost in her mind. "What's, er, what's Infotrec?"

When was the last time she had felt this stupid? Five years, ten, fifteen. No, this was worse than anything she'd ever done before. Much, much worse. And it was her father's fault.

"My company," As far as Joshua was concerned, this was the last straw, it just went to prove his point, she might be beautiful but she was stark raving stupid. "We write computer programmes." He enlightened her in a patronising, condescending voice. Then comprehension dawned. She thought he was a hired escort. A bought and paid for man. Superiority was replaced by disbelief. Joshua was swamped with feelings of bemusement, humour, and the strong inclination to wring her elegant neck. If he wasn't seething he'd probably be laughing. But he was seething.

"Ohh." Grace sighed, and realized just how badly she'd misjudged the whole situation, then she rallied hastily, "Why are you here?" Back on the offensive she felt much more confident.

"Your father..." In sheer exasperation he adopted a tone he'd use to address a petulant child. The last time he'd done that was over twenty years ago.

"What exactly has my father to do with this?" She interrupted him and fixed flashing jet black eyes on him. She knew what was coming, knew with absolute certainty, and could do nothing to prevent it. She waited for the inevitable words and reverted to her ingrained well-established defense mode. All the laughing, mocking, teasing lights disappeared from her eyes as they sparked with enmity.

For several seconds, Joshua was held by the glints that sparked in her eyes. The animation took what was a beautiful face and made it riveting. He felt his breath freeze, knew he was staring at her, and just before he completely lost it, he dragged a lung full of air in and wracked his brain for something to say. "I couldn't make dinner last weekend." He started to explain in a pseudo calm and patient voice. Grace began to implore the floor to open up and swallow her. It didn't. "I phoned on Monday to apologise. But you'd already left and your father suggested I meet you at the airport on your return. He explained

they were heading out and it seemed a reasonable request. At the time.” He didn't add that he had deliberately found an emergency and used it as a reason not to keep the invitation to a weekend dinner appointment. Guilt and inbred manners made him phone and apologise. Even though there had been no concrete agreement. Joshua didn't disclose the fact that he'd tried to get out of meeting her at the airport as well, but had found himself agreeing. Her father would make a good salesman. The man had steadily maneuvered him and systematically engineered this meeting. That was part of the reason why Joshua was so mad, the fact that he'd been manipulated, not once, but twice and had succumbed, did not sit well on his imperial shoulders.

“Why would you go to all this trouble?” She whispered in mortification, struggling to shift the humiliation.

He shrugged, “I'm not the one going to all the trouble.” He told her pointedly, “Your father's quite desperate to find you a man, isn't he?” Joshua knew the dart would find its mark. The woman had been enjoying this meeting far more than he was. It was about time he evened up the score line and she had put him in just the right frame of mind to do it. Joshua recalled the way Ben Carvalho had sung the praises of his eldest daughter. The way the man had described her, she had the physique of Elle 'the body' Macpherson, the brains of Einstein and the temperament of Mother Teresa. But Joshua had tossed that all aside and held onto his image of a dowdy academic. Why else would her father be trying to find her a man? A perfect woman wouldn't need her father to set up dates for her. He had met Ben De Souza at a party hosted by a mutual friend. A party that Joshua had not been enjoying, he should have known it would result in this fiasco. Sure she was beautiful, but mentally she had major problems and her personality left a lot to be desired. She was more likely to have tried the patience of Mother Teresa and Einstein, though Joshua conceded that she might well give Elle a run for her money.

Humiliation washed over her. “I don't know what you're talking about.” Nervously she felt her palms grow clammy as embarrassment and fury vied for top place.

“Oh, come on.” He admonished, using his advantage to ram home a few more points. “I spent almost half an hour, at a party, listening to your father touting for custom.” Joshua saw his statement register and watched the dart land. But his anticipated satisfaction did not materialise. Instead he felt like a savage thug.

Her eyes rounded in dread. “He what?” She squeaked in sheer horror, awash with dismay and deep humbling shame. Her veneer of confidence fell away.

For the first time during this meeting Joshua saw beyond the facade she presented. In her eyes he saw genuine sensitivity. Her earlier joviality was replaced with complete panic and a deep sense of humiliation. She believed him. He felt like a jerk. Prime time, class A, jerk. He thought about apologising. Then thought better of it. He doubted she’d accept an apology. Instead he went for clarification.

“Not exactly, but it was obvious that he was open to offers, of the marriage kind of course.” He tried to soften his earlier statement.

There were a couple of minutes silence as Grace battled to keep calm, tried to keep the mortification at bay. It was a close thing, holding onto her temper, when what she really wanted to do was to throttle all the men around her. And she wanted to start with the one standing directly in front of her, the smug ass. She’d finish with her father.

“So why are you here?” She finally demanded quietly. The sparkle had left her eyes and to Joshua it felt as if the day had suddenly turned grey. She turned away, pretending to close her bag. She fumbled with the buckle clasp, deliberately, anything to keep from looking at him. She needed time to erect safety barriers and adopt a bland, nonchalant expression. She needed time to deal with this quandary and find a way to stop the tears from spilling. But she doubted if she could wait around for centuries to pass. She had nothing to be embarrassed about. Her father had. Grace fiercely snapped the bag shut and her pride and indomitable spirit resurfaced.

“I thought I’d just explained.”

“No. You. Didn’t.” She said firmly, finally finding the courage to look at him. “I mean, if you aren’t looking for a wife, and you think my father is looking for a husband for me, why are you here?”

There was no mistaking the skepticism in her voice. He could feel the effort she was making to sound confident. The radiant flare of humour had disappeared completely. Now she just looked angry and even more exhausted than when he had first met her.

“I wanted to meet the treasure he talked about, see...”

“Rubbish.” She interrupted vehemently, “Perhaps you’re the one who has a problem finding dates.”

His spontaneous laugh told her she was way off the mark. Much to his surprise, she looked him in the eye and then with a rueful shrug she smiled. “No,” She shook her head and conceded, somewhat reluctantly, that she was wrong. She had no doubt that beneath his autocratic façade there was a man capable of great passion and warmth. “I guess that actuality is a bit remote.” With tired fingers she massaged her temples again. Her anger dissipated, leaving her feeling chagrined and at a loss, “I feel like a twit.” She announced quietly. “Wait till I see dad.” She sobered and, for the third time, she held out her hand, saying more solemnly, “Good bye.”

Her hand was grasped in a firm handshake. She felt her heart beat kick into an erratic pulse when their fingers and palms made contact. It sent an unusual tremor through her. Trying to describe the feeling was beyond her. And if she hadn’t known that her heart was anchored securely in her chest cavity, she would have sworn that it had done a back flip.

Quickly she broke contact and disengaged.

“My car is this way.” He said brusquely.

“So?” She looked at him as if what he had just said was of absolutely no consequence to her, and as a sudden frown marred his brow, she added, “ I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“For fucks sake.” He muttered under his breath, once again exasperated by the fact that she wouldn’t follow simple instructions and was making what should have been a very simple duty very complicated. “Don’t start. We’ve been through this.” He said more loudly as he scanned the vicinity. He took control of the trolley, and steered it, without any problem, so that it faced the opposite direction. He’d left his mobile in the car. “Do you have a mobile on you?” He did nothing to hide the rancor.

“It’s flat.” She was new to this mobile lark. Hers didn’t work from the cottage, but she’d bought one anyway, as a treat when she’d got her last pay rise. But she wondered what having a mobile phone had to do with anything, but before she could work it out he had pointed at a row of phones.

“There’s a phone, call home will you.” He didn’t give her much of an option because he was already pushing the trolley toward the wall-mounted phones. Grace followed automatically. Too tired to argue and too fed up to bother. They made their way steadily, avoiding bumping into other people, slowly they approached the phones.

Joshua might not like the woman, but he had agreed to meet her and take her to her cottage. And having agreed to meet her, and having seen her exhaustion, he had no intention of leaving her to fend for herself. He intended to drive her home. The problem was that she wasn’t making it easy.

As they meandered through the crowd, they walked past the reflective glass of a kiosk front and Grace caught sight of herself. She wished she hadn’t. Ignorance had its merits. Her hair was in total disarray. The pony tail seemed to have disintegrated into a jumble of loose strands, she felt rumpled. She was a mess. A scruff from top to toe.

She knew she was weary, she probably looked it too. She knew there'd be dark circles under her eyes, she hadn't got much sleep on this trip. Too much work, meetings, conference discussions. The flight had been packed, so she hadn't got any sleep on the flight back either. Suddenly all the lethargy she'd been holding at bay swamped her. If only.....

When they reached the phone, he asked "Don't suppose you have a phone card?"

She shook her head. He looked at her, noticing that she seemed to have suddenly waned. "Wait here a second. I mean it." His voice was so commanding, she doubted whether anyone would have dared to disobey. "Don't budge, I'll be right back." She was tempted. Just for a second she was tempted to walk away. But the way her luck was going, it wasn't worth the risk. She'd probably mistake a brick wall for the exit door.

Then he was gone. Grace watched him stalk over to the small kiosk. He didn't stroll, or just walk, his movements were too controlled for that, it was a definite stalk. His blue jeans were old and they fitted snugly. Very snug. The jeans encased long, long legs. He did have a cute butt. The sudden observation had her smiling to herself. Her eyes moved upward, he had a diver's physique, wide shoulders, and narrow hips. His hair was cut short at the back and it left a long column of exposed neck, obviously not a rugby player, neck too long and his ears weren't mangled. She giggled, then sighed, it was a mixture of fatigue and a touch of stress. Why had he come to meet her? Why did she have to look like she'd been dragged through a hedge backwards?

How could her father do this to her? When she caught up with him they would definitely be having words. If he thought he could attend parties, holding her up for sale, he had another thing coming. And all these years she had thought he had just been teasing her. She cringed. How many others had he tried? Hysteria almost took root.

Furiously she tugged at the band holding the remnants of her pony tail. Black hair cascaded onto her shoulders. With years of practice to rely on, she combed her hair with her fingers and then pulled her hair into a

tidier pony tail. She glanced at her reflection and pulled a face at herself. Then she saw Joshua's image in the glass too. She pivoted to face him, embarrassed to be caught preening. This predicament was going from bad to worse.

With one eyebrow raised in silent question, Joshua handed her the phone card "Dial" he told her.

Grace dialed the number to her cottage.

"Explain that we'll be late. I think we're going to catch the evening traffic." He muttered in accusation as he propped himself against the wall and waited for the phone to be answered at the other end.

After the third ring, her mother answered.

"Hi, mum..."

The walk to the car was conducted in silence. He had taken control of the errant trolley and she had mutely trundled along beside him, a couple of steps to his side. Neither spoke. She followed him to his car. When they reached it he had held open the passenger door for her, waited for her to get in, then closed the door. Grace snuggled deeper into the leather seat as fatigue and time began to overhaul her body clock. Joshua put her luggage in the boot and took a moment to bank his reaction to her.

Grace snapped the seat belt into place just as he opened his door and climbed in. Without a word he closed the door, put on his seat belt and started the car. Grace tried not to be too conspicuous as she eased her body into a comfortable position. Her body ached from being confined in small spaces for hours, the result of too many economy plane journeys. Her mind ached from the worry caused by the realisation that her father had been propositioning men on her behalf. Her pride ached from the indignity of the situation she now found herself in.

Ten minutes later Joshua and Grace were making their way through Manakau, out of the Auckland maze of roads that led to State Highway one. They were heading south.

She was worn out. But, she was determined to stay awake. The last thing she wanted to do was fall asleep with his shoulder for a pillow. Because knowing her luck she would have drooled all over him. She would stay awake. Use any strategy to stay awake.

Determined, she started a conversation. “What puzzles me is why you’d come to meet me. Especially knowing that dad was trying to fix me up. Do you want an arranged marriage?” She thought nothing about asking personal questions because she was exhausted, and she saw them as conversation. Joshua threw her a speaking glance. She missed it. “Don’t you have a girlfriend?” She stifled a yawn.

Joshua had no intention of discussing his personal life with her. He looked scathingly at Grace, then said brusquely, “That’s none of your business.”

The blunt comment surprised her and startled her into voicing her thoughts, “Well, I mean you’re good looking,’ understatement of the year, “ and, er, going by this car, obviously wealthy,” She knew no-one who drove a car that cost more than her home, “plus on most occasions you are probably charming.” Intuition rather than experience suggested the latter.

He said nothing.

Grace sighed, “Ok,” She glumly conceded defeat with that line of conversation, she tipped her head back, stifled yet another yawn and said, “What do you want to talk about? The weather?”

“I’ll put on the radio.”

He flicked a switch as he spoke. Billie Holiday singing the blues infiltrated the car. The music matched her mood. Great, thought Grace.

Subtle as a brick. Just tell me to shut up. Fine. She bristled as she turned her face toward the window and fought to keep her eyes open.

They were joining State Highway One, moving steadily through the traffic. He cut through, to the middle lane and joined the steady stream of cars doing at least 100 kilometres an hour.

About two hours from now she'd be home. She wouldn't have to deal with him again. Just two hours.

The buildings blurred as tiredness, crossing international date lines and lack of sleep caught up with Grace. Exhaustion took its toll. Within seconds long black lashes came down as her eyes closed. Her head lolled against her shoulder, her hair fell across her cheek.

A few minutes later, when Joshua glanced across, he saw that she was asleep. Relaxed she looked young, and sweet. He smirked. Her? Sweet? The woman was tart. She would make a lime taste like honey. He glanced at her again.

She didn't look comfortable sleeping like that. She was almost upright, and her head had simply dropped forward. No doubt she'd arrive in Hamilton with a crick in her neck. After a brief hesitation he indicated and pulled into the slow lane and then took the next exit off the motorway. They were soon in a tree-lined street. He indicated and pulled to a stop. Then wondering if he was just going to cause more trouble, he undid his seat belt and leaned across. Knowing his luck she'd awake and misread the situation.

With one hand braced on her headrest, he reached past her legs and found the seat position lever. He dexterously moved the slider to slip the seat back a few inches and give her more legroom. She mumbled, but didn't wake.

Joshua was inches from her face as he leaned past her, and sought the recline mechanism. His lips almost brushed against hers as he tried to shift her seat. For a second he contemplated a kiss, and then couldn't believe he'd even considered it. Startled he drew back. For several

seconds he just looked at her. She was beautiful, he finally conceded. But she was also irritating, idiotic and infuriating. Shaking his head, he reached once again to find the recline mechanism. A few difficult tugs later and the seat tilted. She snuggled deeper into the seat. As Joshua moved back to his seat he studied her face again.

She was a beautiful woman, even without makeup and with those dark circles under her eyes. He brushed strands of hair off her face, his fingers grazing soft skin as he tucked the errant strands behind her ear, his palm cupped her cheek and for a second he forgot himself and brushed a thumb along the high cheekbones, and gently caressed the dark circles. She sighed quietly. Then snuggled further into his palm. Joshua's gut contracted as her lips brushed against the mound of his thumb. Gently, slowly he extricated his hand, leaving her head resting on her shoulder.

After a deep breath to get himself back in control, Joshua checked the seat belt. A few minutes later they were back on the highway.

"Hey. Who's that?" Zachary whispered as he held the door open to allow his older brother into the house.

Joshua had his arms full. He was cradling Grace. He had one arm around her back and the other beneath her knees. He stepped sideways to enter and then carried her into the house. She was still asleep.

"Grace Carvalho." Joshua whispered quietly in answer to the question.

Zachary's eyes rounded in disbelief. "Are you kidding?" He muttered in hushed tones, "Are you nuts? Her father is trying to off load her."

"I'm not, I am, I know." Joshua stated quickly and quietly, "I need to get some stuff from the study. I could hardly leave her in the car." Although looking at her now, he thought it would take an atomic bomb to wake her. Joshua reached the study door, "Zac, get the door."

Zac opened the wooden door and Joshua strode in. He placed Grace gently on a couch in one corner of the room, her head rested on a cushion. She didn't stir.

Joshua looked at her and banked a smile, she could pass as sleeping beauty lying the way she was on his couch. As long as she stayed asleep! With a rueful grin he headed for his desk.

The room was cosy, littered with book shelves, old comfortable arm chairs, two sofas, a heavy Rimu desk, several potted plants and a whole wall lined with computers and related hardware. It was organised chaos. It also felt lived in. It served as the study, a room that Joshua did most of his work in when he didn't go into the office.

Full of curiosity, Zac walked around the couch to get a better look at the woman. Over ten days ago Zac and Joshua were at a party. Zac had gone for two reasons: To keep Joshua company and it was a friend's engagement party.

It had been Zac who had rescued Joshua from Ben Carvalho's hard sell routine. Or at least he'd thought he'd rescued him. Joshua was an easy target for hard luck stories. He was too much of a nice guy and had spent so much of his time bringing up his brother and sister, that looking after people, organising things and taking charge were natural traits now.

However, since the party, Zac had headed south, to Tongariro National Park, to catch the last remaining winter snow. It had been a great trip, six guys taking time to ski from almost dawn to dusk. The evenings meant heading for the Lodge, to party. Ten days had sped by. Zac had returned to the house barely an hour ago. He had showered, changed and was now on his way out to party. Time to catch up with the Auckland night life. Zac was a party animal.

Zac decided he would have a quick look at the best-thing-since-sliced bread- Ms Carvalho and then rescue his big brother. Why couldn't she get herself her own boyfriend? Why would her father be peddling her in this day and age? And why was Joshua still mixed up in this?

You'd have thought he'd learnt his lesson after Lisette. Like his brother, almost an hour earlier, Zac scanned Grace from head to toe.

Shapely, long legs encased in very fitting red jeans ended in black boots. His gaze moved upward, but her zipped black leather jacket provided no further clues. Zac's eyes moved higher, to her face. He noticed smooth olive toned skin, high well defined cheek bones, a full cupid's bow mouth, currently relaxed into a lazy smile, and long jet black lashes, as black as her hair. Frowning in confusion he glanced at his brother. Zac knew a babe when he saw one.

Joshua was agitatedly rifling through some papers on his desk.

"You sure you picked up the right woman? This one's a babe." Zac announced in hushed tones, surprised to find that Ben's daughter was stunning. He had imagined her to be hideous. If her father had to practically beg some man to take her off his hands, she'd have to be absolutely repulsive. This woman was gorgeous.

Joshua ignored that comment, instead as he continued to delve beneath piles of paper he voiced a question, "Have you seen a blue envelope?"

Zac shook his head but continued to stare at Grace, "Only just got in, haven't been in here. Is it important?"

Joshua nodded. "Yeah, it has a photo of her. I want to return it. I don't want her father using it as an excuse to send her round to get it." He continued searching through his paper work. "I want nothing more to do with them." He had almost pulled into the traffic and headed out of Auckland when he'd remembered the envelope and photo. His logical mind suggested that her father might well use it to angle another meeting between his daughter and Joshua. Joshua was going to do what he could to ensure they didn't meet again. So he'd diverted home to collect the envelope.

Zac looked incredulously at his brother "Are you serious? Hey, she's a babe." Why would her father have to do a hard sell? She was pretty. And why was his brother trying to get rid of her. That was the problem

with Joshua, he didn't know a good looking woman when he saw one. Well, his loss and Zac's gain.

Joshua looked up, smiling at his younger brother's gullibility at the sight of an attractive woman.

"What I can't understand is why her father was trying to set up an arranged marriage. He was, wasn't he? Anything in trousers, single and rich, wasn't that it?" Bluntly, Zac continued to mutter his thoughts, but his eyes didn't leave the prone woman. Joshua nodded absently as he opened another desk draw. "Unless of course she is clueless or something." Continued Zac, having finally exhausted all logical possibilities. Things just didn't make sense.

Joshua hooted with laughter. Then he checked himself. He turned to see if the noise had woken Grace. She was still asleep. It would take a rocket to wake her. Just as well really, the thought of dealing with yet another ludicrous conversation was not high on his agenda. In fact it would be perfect if he could manage to get her to the cottage without having to speak to her at all.

"Ah hah." Joshua announced triumphantly and loudly. He extricated the note written by her father, it gave details of the flight and provided a photograph. Joshua left the photo in the envelope. "According to her father she has a Ph D in something or other. I forget what." He shrugged his shoulders as he shared that little tit bit of information with his brother. Joshua hadn't bothered to remember the details. They hadn't been important. He'd had a chore to do. He had almost done it. That would be the end of it.

"You're kidding." Once again, Zac scanned her from head to toe.

When he'd set off for the airport Joshua had forgotten to take the note and photo, which had resulted in him having to page her. Just as well really, as he'd never have recognised her as the woman in the photograph.

The photo was clearly an old one, of her graduation, but even so he would not have recognised her. If anything she looked younger now. No, he amended after flicking her a look, she dressed younger.

In the photo she wore a suit under the blue and gold trimmed black gown and she had her hair in a fancy hair style. Now she wore what her students wore, leather and jeans and her hair was a mess.

“What’s that bit of paper?” Zac asked, when he noticed Joshua folding it carefully to put it away again. Before Joshua answered he looked up and sensed that Grace was awake. Her eyelids were fluttering as she blinked back to consciousness.

“Just details her father gave me, and his terms if I was interested in marrying her.” He said cheerfully and loudly, knowing she’d take the bait. She did.

“My father has no jurisdiction over me Mr De Souza.” Her sleep-tinged voice informed him quietly. “And even if he did, I doubt whether he’d hook me up with a pompous, conceited, ill mannered, stuffed shirt.”

Still tired, Grace swung her feet off the couch and as she stifled a yawn she noticed the mud imprint and began to automatically brush the material with the palm of her hand. “Damn, it will have to be cleaned.” She said into the silence that had descended. She continued to dust harder, furiously brushing at the material. Nerves, control and anger vying for predominance.

In the mean time Joshua was also vying for control. Her words and Zac’s stupefied expression were enough to ignite his usually unheard of temper. She didn’t give him a chance to speak.

“Which idiot lay me on the couch with my boots on?” She got to her feet, and stretched as she worked a kink out of her back, “No matter, send dad the cleaning bill. He deserves it after all this hassle.” She tucked an errant lock of hair behind her ear, rubbed at her eyes with

the heel of her hands and stifled a yawn. The pony tail had disintegrated totally.

The car trip and Joshua carrying her, had served to loosen many strands, consequently she was bedraggled and no doubt looked a state. Disgusted with herself, she yanked the elasticated band that held remaining strands of her hair in place and her shoulder length jet black hair cascaded into an unruly style. She knew she looked a mess, but she was past caring. Looking a mess could not make the situation any more intolerable than it already was. It was embarrassing, not only did one man know about her father's antics, a few seconds ago she discovered that there were more. How many more men knew about this? She felt like an insignificant leftover being thrown to the pack.

Yet to the two men in front of her, she looked sexy.

"I assume we are at your home." She stated accusingly, cloaking herself with antagonism. She combed her loose hair with her fingers and then, with years of ingrained practice and unconscious elegance, pulled the strands into a semi-tidy pony tail. She did it to stall for time. She needed time to collect her thoughts and her wits. She closed her eyes for fleeting seconds, trying to dispel the tiredness she still felt, wishing this was just a bad dream. "And you," she looked pointedly at Zac as she automatically pushed the strands of hair, that refused to be contained by the black elastic tie, off her face "resemble him, so you must be related." She stifled another yawn. Attack was the best form of defence. "I hope you aren't as insolent, arrogant or cavalier as him."

Zac grinned at her, green eyes sparkled with humour, no one he knew thought Joshua was insolent. In fact his boringly polite, tediously circumspect brother was never rude, let alone uncivil to women. That's what had got him into this predicament in the first place. His sense of doing the right thing.

Joshua was always earnestly responsible, usually considered charming, and that coupled with his looks seemed to attract good looking, smart women. But Zac couldn't remember any of them thinking his brother was rude. Zac's grin widened, this could be interesting.

“I’m his kid brother, Zachary.” He held out his hand to her. Grace shook it briefly. “But we don’t share too many personality genes.”

“How fortunate.” Grace turned back to face the older brother, although she was still exhausted, she’d had enough of this debacle. “Now, as I was saying, my father has no say in who I marry.” She flashed him one of her scathing looks, daring him to contradict her. “Got that?” She flung at Joshua.

Joshua snorted with rancour at the remark and the rhetorical question. He couldn’t resist taunting her. “That is not what it says here.” She really was incredibly attractive, even in her disheveled state, or maybe because of it. She looked as if she’d just made love. Lost in the image that thought conjured up, he grinned impertinently at her.

Zac watched this by-play speculatively. His brother was taunting this woman and that was quite probably a first. This woman certainly wasn’t fawning all over his older brother. That definitely was a first.

Her almond shaped eyes were flashing in anger and her skin was flushed with temper as she took in Joshua’s goading spurious grin. Joshua didn’t expect her to move so quickly nor was he expecting her to snatch the paper out of his hand. But she did.

Without even reading it, she tore it up. With unrestrained indignation, she tossed the fist full of tiny shreds of paper back at him. Blue and white confetti floated down to rest on the desk that separated the two of them.

The two brothers stood gawking incredulously. Zac nearly burst out laughing, but his brother’s expression advised against it. Zac watched the scene play out, this was better than street theatre, and it was the first time he had ever seen Joshua at a loss for words.

Joshua was beginning to regret bringing her into the house. He was also beginning to lose control of the animosity he had stemmed. He fought hard to hold on.

Totally unaware of his frame of mind, his escalating temper, the fragile hold on his patience, Grace launched her attack. She had been humiliated to find her father had been searching for a prospective husband, she was furious to find a fit man was doing his best to offload her and she was livid with the fact that she found him attractive. But she had also reached a stage where she was not going to tolerate any more. Enough was enough.

“Now, I don’t know why a rich, good looking guy like you has opted for an arranged marriage, and I really don’t care. Though if you ask me, your arrogance is a major problem. But I don’t have the time or inclination to do anything about it. Obviously you can’t stand the sight of me.” She jammed her hands on her hips “I want to go home. So show me a phone and I’ll call a taxi.” she snapped and tacked on a belated but mocking, “Please.”

This time Zac couldn’t stop his response, he howled with laughter. No-one ordered Joshua around. Josh had never been challenged in such a flagrant way. Zac wondered if his brother knew how to react to such commands. If Joshua seriously wasn’t interested in dating this woman, Zac thought he just might. She was gutsy. Beautiful and gutsy. His ideal woman.

Grace threw Zac a speaking look that quelled him almost instantly. Nothing else, just one look. Zac revised his earlier thoughts about her being his perfect woman. She had annihilated him with one glance.

Grace haughtily turned back to face Joshua, and waited, her arms folded across her chest, her left eyebrow quirked in silent question, her chin lifted. Grace was working hard to ensure that he couldn’t read the frustration, the misery and the humiliation that drenched her from head to foot. She wanted out of here. And she wanted it fast.

Joshua glowered at his younger brother who had stopped laughing but was clearly still enjoying Joshua’s predicament. Then Joshua glared at Grace and said with all the charm of a rattlesnake, “Let’s go.”

“No thanks.” She all but hissed in return.

“Don’t push your luck.” He advised in a very calm voice. Grace narrowed her eyes at his tone but shrugged indifferently as she moved away from the desk. “Take this,” He ordered in a peremptory voice as he handed her the photograph, “and don’t tear it up. It’s your photo.”

That stopped her. “My photo?”

What was he doing with a photograph of her? Grace swore softly as the full ramifications of her father’s little sortie into matchmaking sank in. He was passing around photographs of her.

This was worse than a cattle market. How could he? How many other men had photographs of her? And what photographs? There hadn’t been any solo shots of her in over ten years. Perhaps he was passing around family photographs, touting for custom for Sasha and Briar too. Just wait until she told them. With a sense of defeat, Grace took the envelope and peeked inside. Cautiously she withdrew the photo.

She grimaced. “It isn’t even a decent photograph. He’s in deep trouble.” She glared at Joshua, “And you came to the airport to meet me, knowing I looked like an ancient Shirley Temple in drag?” She jammed the photo back into the envelope. “Hell, you are desperate.” She pivoted. Anger replaced the shame she felt. Wrath providing the backbone to face him, when what she really wanted to do was scream, rant, rave and cry. She wasn’t sure in which order. “Let’s go.” She demanded arrogantly, as she walked to the door, calling perfunctorily, if a touch insincerely, over her shoulder, “Nice meeting you Zachary.”

Clearly Joshua was meant to follow. He did. But only after he’d thrown his brother a warning look. Zac was about to burst into another peal of laughter when he caught his brother’s look: Don’t even smirk.

Zac banked down his mirth. Joshua banked down his ire. That was the last time she was going to order him around. Just who the hell did she think she was? And how the hell could she look so haughty when she knew her father was trying to offload her to any bidder? At the very least she should be mortified.

Grace was furious. She couldn't remember the last time she had been this incensed or this ashamed. Evidently the whole world was going mad. Her father really had been touting for custom. All this time, she had mistakenly believed he'd been kidding her along. Just joking. A family joke. But he hadn't.

She missed Zac's grin as he replied, "Reciprocated."

Joshua slammed the study door shut and followed Grace out into the hallway. He caught her upper arm, effectively stopping her from moving on. Once again she looked pointedly at the restraining hand.

His expression turned positively glacial as he ignored the silent command and said, "Forget it. I don't answer to shrill, tantrum throwing, shrews." He opened the front door and propelled her out of the house. "No wonder your father has to find you a man." The throwaway comment was meant to rile her.

Grace strode out without even giving him another look. What could she say? Her father wasn't? She fumed silently. She needed to stay in control, otherwise she was going to humiliate herself further by throwing up.

The remainder of the journey was conducted in an uneasy silence. Pin drop, poker-faced silence. Joshua didn't even bother to turn on the radio. Grace kept her head turned toward her window. Both were thinking about the last few hours.

Two tense hours later he deposited her at her front door and didn't bother to do more than place her case on the verandah before he turned to leave.

"Here." She held out a few notes to him. Her anger had been festering. Pride vying with temper.

His eyes narrowed at the money she was offering him.

“Petrol money.” She stated bluntly, met and held eye contact. He looked savage. She spoke through her teeth, “You’ve gone out of your way to see me home.”

“Don’t push your luck.” He strode off, leaving Grace standing at the door glaring at him as he reversed down the gravel drive.

Chapter 2

Two months later, Joshua, Zac, their sister Mariah and her husband Stephen, were sitting in a church in Auckland. They had gathered for a wedding.

The pews were rapidly filling with guests and murmured greetings were heard as people recognised friends and acquaintances.

“That’s her.” Zac nudged his sister as he whispered the words.

“Who?” Mariah didn’t bother to look, her eyes remaining on the beautifully written service order booklet. When she turned twenty-one she stopped counting the number of women Zac introduced to her, and she wasn’t in the least bit interested now. Her brother seemed to date like it was going out of style, with no concept of fidelity or long term.

“Grace Carvalho.” He muttered in a hush and used his head to indicate where she was. Mariah’s head lifted instantly and she followed her brother’s gaze. She scanned the two pews ahead of them, on the other side of the aisle. Mariah recognised everybody except the tall slim woman, who had her back to Mariah, as she waited for people to move along.

Mariah craned her head past Stephen, much to his amusement, in an attempt to see more of the woman. Stephen, flashed a smile at Zac, and he noticed that Joshua was still sitting grim faced furthest away from the aisle. This must be tough on him, he thought, as he turned his attention back to his wife. She was trying to inch past him. He placed his hands on her hips and stopped her. Mariah looked irritated.

“I just want a quick look.” She whispered pleadingly at her husband.

“Later.” He told her firmly and did not budge an inch.

She threw him a speaking glance and settled back between Zac and Stephen.

Joshua kept his eyes firmly trained on the booklet outlining the order of service. He had no doubt he was the recipient of many speculative looks. Three months ago Lysette had been dating him. Today she was marrying a family friend, Craig. No doubt they had all reached their own conclusions. Most of them would be wrong.

Mariah caught a glimpse of Grace, as Grace threaded her way past a couple hugging the aisle seats, but when she settled into the available space Mariah lost sight of her. Almost. The hat was a beacon. Grace wore a pale ice blue jacket and matching short skirt. Both hemlines had a wide, bold, cut out applique edging that was mounted on a black edge, but what made the outfit stand out was the hat. Simply dramatic and daring. It was almost a black top hat with a wide band of matching ice blue applique tape at its base and a swirl of blue coils. It was very striking. Different. The woman was clearly making a statement. Mariah couldn't wait to meet her.

Zac had recounted to Mariah, in front of Joshua, details of the Joshua-Grace clash. He had failed to mention that the woman had style. Zac had simply spent the evening winding up his older brother. He'd been successful too. Joshua was exceptionally touchy about the whole subject, which only made things easier for Zac.

When the bride walked down the aisle on her father's arm, the congregation stood and watched with avid interest, but instead of watching Lysette, Mariah looked ahead straining to catch sight of Grace. She just wanted to see her face. A quick glimpse. Then she'd follow Lysette's progress down this rather long aisle. Plenty of time to see the bride. Mariah was surprised when she finally did catch a glimpse of Grace. That woman was a photographer's dream. She was beautiful. Mariah came to the conclusion that her brothers must be blind or stupid, neither of them had mentioned the fact that Grace was a raving beauty. Hell, Joshua had done his best to off load Grace. And why would her father have to find her a date?

Mariah found her view obscured when Lysette walked by. Momentarily she was sidetracked as she watched the bride progress the final few pews to the altar. Mariah peeked at Joshua. He was grim faced. Not much she could do there she thought. She knew that he wasn't pleased to see Lysette marrying a friend of his. But he had not voiced his reasons. Mariah knew Joshua didn't want to marry Lysette, and she knew Craig was in love with the woman.

Two hours later the wedding guests were chattering animatedly as they waited for the bridal couple to arrive. The wedding photographs were taking an inordinately long time. The guests had started mingling. And not surprisingly, Zac had found Grace and brought her over to his family's assigned table. He had told her one of his chronically bad jokes and she was laughing at the punch line by the time they reached the table. He introduced her to the others. Perfunctorily, Grace shook hands with Mariah and Stephen.

"I love your hat." Mariah stated in her usual candid manner.

"Thank you."

"It must be an original. Who's your milliner?"

Milliner? Grace chuckled, "Me." She removed her hat and handed it to Mariah. "It's a top hat I bought at a second hand shop and then trimmed it with leftover material from this." She pointed to her clothes.

"You made your outfit." The shock in Mariah's voice ignited a spark of humour in Grace.

"Yes." Her eyes still full of laughter dimmed slightly when she noticed the intense scrutiny she was receiving from Mariah. It was a contemplative stare and somehow, Grace knew the woman wasn't thinking about the hat anymore.

"Care to join our table?" Zac pressed his invitation by explaining, "My date couldn't make it, so we have a spare seat."

“No, thank you.” Grace smiled at him to soften her refusal. “I’m here on Mum and Dad’s behalf. I’d hate to mess up the seating plan. You know how much trouble people go to with seating arrangements at weddings.”

“Your parents aren’t here?” Asked Mariah. She’d spent a few moments studying the woman in front of her and her opinion was being reinforced by the minute. This woman was beautiful. She seemed articulate, she didn’t appear to have any odd habits. Why would Grace need her father to find her dates? That just didn’t make sense. And why did Joshua take such a dislike to her?

“No. Dad isn’t well and Craig’s family are close friends.” Grace shrugged elegantly, “So here I am, token representative.” She smiled at the softer version of Joshua and Zac, wondering how long it would take Mariah to ask the question she really wanted to ask. By now Grace realized that quite possibly this entire group knew about her father’s match making plans. Years of experience helped her mask her humiliation. Grace braced herself for the interrogation.

“You don’t attend Goan events.” It was a statement rather than a question.

The local Goan community, a mixture of Portuguese and Indian descent, were a small group of less than fifty families and they occasionally got together to celebrate Easter, Christmas or any other excuse for a party. They were very keen to maintain their cultural identity while taking up their place in New Zealand society. So they came together to party, to reminisce, to share and to support each other, while they settled into the environment.

“No, I don’t.” Grace confirmed, giving nothing away. She watched the puzzled expression flicker across Mariah’s face and knew the young woman had not finished her interrogation.

“Thought I hadn’t seen you.” Mariah continued more forcefully.

“Me neither. I’d have remembered.” Zac grinned.

“Is that why your father’s trying to arrange your marriage?” Mariah tactlessly pursued her line of questioning.

“Riah.” Steve flashed Mariah a speaking look, “Sorry Grace,” He apologised quickly, “My wife sometimes forgets her manners.”

Grace shrugged. There wasn’t much else to do. She had had several weeks to come to terms with her father’s machinations. And even though she was still embarrassed by it all, she was also better prepared to hide the embarrassment and humiliation.

“It’s o.k.” Grace didn’t believe a word of her father’s explanation, but she had come to terms with it. It no longer bothered her. Not much. She had hoped that it had remained a secret between a small group of people. She should have known that was unlikely. It seemed as if everyone knew.

Grace hadn’t recovered from the shock of her father propositioning men on her behalf. Although he’d sworn that he had only ever propositioned Joshua, and then because he had felt sorry for the man. Why anyone would feel sorry for the man was beyond Grace’s comprehension. She was sure he was never likely to be short of female company. Although according to her father he was. But then according to her father she needed his help to find a man. Her father had, apparently, only been trying to tell Joshua that there were plenty more fish in the sea. He was also very contrite about the whole thing, but that probably had something to do with the fact that her mother had kicked him out of their bedroom and he had been forced to spend two weeks in his study, sleeping on the couch.

“See.” Mariah said smugly, throwing her husband an I-told-you-so-look. “So why did he?” She pursued, “You’re attractive...”

“Stunning.” Zac interrupted candidly.

“Riah enough.” Steve shifted uncomfortably, even though he’d known Mariah from school days, he was still getting used to her habit of speaking her mind. And she did so at the most inopportune times.

Grace chuckled. “You are doing my ego the world of good Zachary.” Years of practice had her schooling her features into a pretence of joviality. This was turning out to be entertaining and her embarrassment was waning. Mariah was so guilelessly tactless and of the two men with her at that moment, Zachary had clearly had many more years to get used to her bluntness. Stephen evidently hadn’t. Their reactions to Mariah’s outbursts were comical, when no amount of scolding daunted her.

A passing waitress offered them tall stemmed glasses of champagne.

“Joshua said you have a PhD.” Mariah continued with the inquisition, Steven rolled his eyes and admitted defeat. Mariah helped herself to a glass from the tray as she stated “He said you lecture at Hamilton University. What in?” She took a sip of the pale liquid, but her eyes never left Grace.

Grace forced herself not to smile as she casually announced, “Feminist issues.”

Steven spluttered, Mariah choked and Zac burst out laughing.

Mariah stopped coughing, wiped at the split champagne as she gasped her astonishment. “You’re kidding.”

“Nooooo.” Grace was enjoying herself immensely. Nothing like telling someone you are a feminist to stir up trouble, even better when they think your father is trying to marry you off. Some feminist. Grace squashed her mirth, as she waited for the next predictable line. It came.

“But you don’t look like a feminist.”

Grace couldn’t help the laugh. Then she led the unsuspecting trio even further when she asked, “And what does a feminist look like?” She wasn’t disappointed. Mariah clearly knew no such thing as restraint.

“Oh you know, aggressive.” Mariah said candidly and without a care in the world for political correctness. This time Steve choked. He also frowned intensely at his wife. But she wasn’t looking at him. Her eyes were trained firmly on Grace.

“Well I’m assertive.” Grace announced to her transfixed audience. “And feminists come in all personalities, shapes and sizes.” The smile reached her eyes and the two men found themselves entranced by the twinkle within.

“Is that why your father is trying to fix you up?” Mariah pursued her original line and continued with her artless probing.

“What?” Momentarily Grace lost the train of thought, “Why?”

“Well, you being a feminist.” Mariah stated as if it was obvious.

The confused logic finally dawned on Grace. The twinkle in her eye became a full blown star. “I am not a lesbian if that’s what you mean.” Grace stated bluntly. “And if I was, my father would try to foist me off onto some poor woman.”

Once again Steve choked, this time he was joined by Zac. Mariah simply shrugged guilelessly as it finally dawned that she was perhaps pushing the limits a bit. “I was just curio..”

“Riah.” Steve cautioned his wife before she could launch into another inquisition. “You’ve grilled her enough.” He warned with another speaking glance, one that told her she would be in major strife if she dared continue with this inquisition.

“But I haven’t found out anything.” Mariah wailed plaintively, reading her husband’s message loud and clear. “You are a stick in the mud Steve.”

“My father loves me and wants me to be happy.” Grace provided smoothly, “He equates marriage with happiness, so much so that he’d

like to see me settled. We periodically have a conversation, more like a stuck record actually. He tells me he'll find me a nice Goan man. This time he went a step further. Unfortunately he set his sights on your brother." Just recounting it made her feel embarrassed.

Mariah sensed her discomfort. She tried to lighten her mood "Our dad was Goan, but our mum was third generation kiwi." Mariah informed Grace, "So he didn't find you a Goan guy precisely."

"I'd watch out Grace, he'll probably be looking for the real McCoy next time." Zac teased.

"Oh, I don't think so." She said confidently without explaining that her mother had put an end to his schemes. "But why did your brother go along with it? I doubt he'd have problems finding women." She looked around, her eyes quickly scanning the crowd. "Where is he by the way?"

"Propping up the bar." Mariah said in disgust and concern.

"I'd better stop him from getting blotto." Zac stated as he placed his champagne flute on the table.

"He has an alcohol problem?" That would explain a lot as far as Grace was concerned.

"No, he has a Lysette problem."

"Lysette? Craig's wife?" This was getting confusing.

"Yes." Mariah tried to explain the situation as concisely as possible, "She used to work for Joshua."

"And she doesn't come to work anymore?" Grace asked tongue in cheek.

“Until about three months ago she was also going out with Joshua. Then she up and announced she was marrying Craig.”

“Oh.” What did one say in circumstances like this? “The poor guy.” Grace improvised lamely but sincerely. The jigsaw puzzle began to fall into place. It was at Craig’s engagement party that her father had met Joshua. Perhaps dad hadn’t misread the situation. But then again, he didn’t have to throw Grace at Joshua. No, she wasn’t ready to let her father off the hook. But it did explain why Joshua met her at the airport. He was on the rebound. She probably wasn’t what he was expecting. No wonder he had seemed so pleased to off load her. He really was having a bad run of luck, poor dear, she thought facetiously.

A voice booming over the milling throng informed them that the bridal couple had arrived. The voice asked everyone to find their tables. Fortunately Grace did not have far to go. Her table was adjacent to the De Souza table. She took her seat, facing the De Souza table.

Grace watched Joshua and Zac return from the bar. Joshua seemed sober enough. A bit grim faced. Very grave but at least he wasn’t inebriated. Grace studied him without concealing the fact. She didn’t think he’d notice because he seemed totally unaware of her presence.

She had noticed him at the church. Not knowing many of the people there, she had hung back and away from the crowd when the couple had processed out of the church and stood for the usual round of endless photographs on the church steps. That gave her an opportunity to study him. But her view had been obscured time and time again, until she had walked to the car. From her secure vantage point she let her eyes roam freely.

His hair was shorter than she remembered it, almost a crew cut. His eyes seemed to be much darker, from this distance they looked almost black, but she knew they were green. He looked incredible in a suit but then she knew he would. The charcoal grey sat well on those wide shoulders and that rather loud tie nicely offset the crisp white shirt. The cut of his suit shouted expensive. Suddenly she felt drab. He was

out of her league. Clearly out of her league. But she couldn't stop looking at him.

The bridal couple entered the hall to rapturous cheers. Everyone rose. Everyone cheered, whistles rent the air and people clapped. The only person who didn't do any of those things was Joshua. He remained seated for several seconds. Then he picked up the glass of champagne downed it, and then stood.

The seat beside Joshua was vacant. After hesitating briefly, using the few scant seconds to question the prudence of her decision, Grace moved to occupy the vacant seat. Zac smiled in welcome. Mariah looked at her in puzzlement and Steven winked at her. When they reseated for the wedding breakfast, Joshua signaled a waiter and asked for another glass of champagne.

"So Joshua, you aren't going to marry me?" Grace hadn't the faintest idea why she started with that. The words just formed and escaped.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Startled green eyes blazed. Why hadn't he noticed her before? He couldn't fathom out how she came to be beside him. Well at least she wasn't wearing that damned hat. You couldn't miss her in that hat. He turned away from her as he accepted a glass from the waiter.

"That's a dumb question."

"Why are you sitting next to me?" The woman had an impulsive streak, either that or she really was insensitive.

"Zac's friend couldn't make it. He invited me to take up the spare. A chance to sit next to a good looking guy." It was nerves talking. Grace had a belated hunch that this was not one of her better ideas. He was close to throttling her. That much was obvious. So why was she pushing him? Zac spluttered with contained laughter. Joshua glared at him. Zac turned his attention to his first course.

“You’re pushing your luck Dr Carvalho.” Joshua warned quietly. Anyone within a mile radius would have picked up the fact that he didn’t appreciate her company. But here she sat. Irritating the hell out of him.

“I’m not.” She replied and her mouth went into gear before her brain did, “I do think you’re good looking.” She was on a nervous roll, she tipped her head sideways, feigning perusal, “And when you are slightly tipsy, you remind me of those pirates in old films. Those guys had women drooling over them. They were bad, except they were good guys underneath.”

He was speechless. She was babbling like a demented woman again. Was she teasing him? He shook his head to try and clear some of the fog. Then Joshua became aware that they were the centre of attention. Why did talking with her always cause a scene?

“Women who talk nonsense and nonstop bore me.” He snapped loudly for the benefit of those around him, and then added in a quiet but savage murmur, “And for your information I am not drunk.”

“OK.” She looked at him innocently, her mask slotted into place. He glared. She beamed.

Joshua muttered to himself as he turned away. It had rapidly become apparent to Joshua that any conversation that Grace took part in was apt to veer into the ridiculous. She really was unbelievable. He’d been flippant to the point of rudeness and she hadn’t even registered the attack. She was incredible. But right now he didn’t want incredible, he wanted to be left alone. He focused on his first course and attempted to ignore her.

Zac sensing the rapid demise of genial talk and the escalation of open hostility immediately launched into conversation. Grace gratefully took the opportunity he presented. Their plates were cleared and there was a brief respite while they waited for the main course. Zac started on another round of amusing surfing anecdotes. Steven assisted with

chef stories and Mariah and Grace laughed at all the right times. Hiding his troubled thoughts Joshua toyed with his drink.

The main course arrived. Occasionally Grace would attempt to draw Joshua into the conversation, but his stern stare eventually quelled that urge. After a while, she concentrated on talking solely to Zac, Steven and Mariah. Even though the meal was delicious Grace was pleased when all the courses had been served. Coming over had been a mistake. A big mistake. The question now was how and when she should make an excuse and escape back to the sanctuary of her own table. She had been buffeted by his silence, a cold silence that isolated her more than he could ever contemplate. For even though Zac had chatted away, it was difficult to forget the man on her left. The one who was diligently ignoring her.

Joshua tried, in vain, to ignore her. But she didn't know that. His features were schooled to hide his interest and more importantly his thoughts. But he was listening to her every word. And her laugh. Its sound was playing havoc with his heartbeat.

Grace was getting ready to leave the table, when the bridal couple doing their rounds, greeting guests and smiling happily, reached the De Souza table. The tension in Joshua was palpable. Grace couldn't help noticing the way his shoulders went rigid and the blank stare was studiously replaced with one of pseudo affability.

Craig spotted Grace instantly and, beaming at her, he came round the table to her side to take her into a warm hug. Grace smiled happily and returned the hug in full measure.

"Your RSVP said you couldn't make this."

"What a charming welcome." She remonstrated, but her smile belied her tone. She'd known him since they were children, and had often thought of him as a brother. As they'd grown they had spent less and less time together, but still that easygoing relationship was in place.

“You know what I mean.” He kissed her cheek and hugged her to him again. “I haven’t seen you in years.” He kept an arm around her shoulder, pressing her to his side.

“A few years.” She agreed, “ And look what happens when I leave you on your own, you do the dirty on me and get married.” She teased as she slapped a hand against his chest.

“Well” he tailed off suggestively, keeping her within the circle of his arms but turning to include the rest of the party. They were watching the reunion with unashamed curiosity.

“Yeah, yeah.” She grinned.

“I didn’t expect to see you here.” He was looking at her in speculative inquiry.

“Dad isn’t well, mum’s keeping an eye on him.”

“Nothing serious I hope.”

“I think it was the seafood they had yesterday, he’ll be fine, pigged out on too many oysters I think.”

He looked around, “No Bri and Sash?” He asked, referring to her sisters.

“Just me, but I’m with Joshua.” Blatant, barefaced lie spoken with such conviction. Why was her mouth going into action before her brain could sound out the consequences? Although everyone seemed to respond to that statement, Grace noticed that Lysette had suddenly become very attentive.

Lysette stopped talking with Mariah and moved to stand beside Joshua. “Joshua darling” She enthused as she nuzzled his cheek and looked pointedly at Grace. Grace maintained her smile. Lysette pouted

up at Joshua, and wrapped an arm along his waist Grace wanted to deck the woman. “I don’t remember you and Miss....”

“Grace Carvalho” Blind to the intense tension, Craig introduced Grace to his wife. “Our parents have known each other for years. Hey, I even took her to her first rugby game.”

“Only because I’d won two complimentary tickets to see the game.” Grace added dryly.

“Well you couldn’t have gone without me.” Craig pointed out.

“True.” Grace conceded and smiled. “Dad and his rules.”

“Heh, you’d have been mobbed if you’d gone on your own.”

“A slight exaggeration.”

“Guys,” Craig turned his attention to Zac and Steven, “Would she have survived a rugby game without being picked up?”

“I was ten at the time.” Grace laughed.

“All the more reason.”

Lysette looked critically at Grace, her pale blue eyes assessing, “Have you known Joshua long?”

For no concrete reason whatsoever, Grace had taken an instant dislike to the blonde woman. So it wasn’t so much the question, but the tone that did it. She just didn’t like her condescending supposition.

Appearing to be totally unaware of the challenge within the question, Grace remarked softly but loudly enough to be heard by those standing close by. “Long enough to talk marriage.”

“Marriage?” Lysette squeaked and her calm facade crumbled a little.

“You never mentioned that, you sly..” Craig began, only to be quickly interrupted by Grace. Grace was suddenly smote with regret and panic. She could feel Joshua’s irritation. She shouldn’t have done that. She had taken a dislike to the woman and was now reduced to trading cheap shots.

Grace started bailing herself out, “Just talk.” But then Lysette would have to smile like a smug cat. Almost as if she could read the panic and see through the slightly modified truth. Intense dislike was replaced with the will to flatten the pretentious woman. “And, well, Joshua had a narrow escape. Someone tried to pressure him in to marriage.” Grace was improvising as she went along, yet she couldn’t have been nearer the truth. “So I’m not making her mistake. No pressure.”

“Way to go Grace.” Craig laughed, but his eyes narrowed as they made contact with Joshua’s angry green gaze. Slowly Craig disengaged, as he misinterpreted Joshua’s response. “Stay in touch.” He added calmly just as Lysette threaded her arm through his.

“I think we should move on darling” Lysette suggested and smiled artificially at the group around her. “We’ve only managed to get round half the tables.” She offered by way of explanation as she tugged on her husband’s arm.

“Already ruled by the petticoat government.” He said happily as he was led away across the room.

The instant they were out of earshot Joshua whipped around to face Grace. His mouth held an exasperated slant.

She shrugged, “I didn’t like her.” She added candidly. Like, didn’t even start to describe the way she felt about that woman. There was something about her that rubbed Grace up the wrong way. Lysette was vain, supercilious and she thought she owned Joshua.

“You shrew.” Joshua marched off. He left her standing there to face puzzled curious stares. Grace was ready to curl up and die. Everyone within their immediate radius had heard him. Possibly within a five-foot radius, he certainly hadn’t been quiet in denouncing her. Open up and let me slide in. She commanded the floor. But the damage was done and the floor was pretty solid.

Joshua was half way to the bar when his conscience clobbered him. Grace was a hundred percent right. Lysette had pushed for marriage, he had said no and she had taken up with Craig within the week. Now here was a woman, who he didn’t even like, guessing accurately at the truth. And instead of thanking her, he’d crucified her. Loudly. He reached the bar and ordered a whisky. His brain mulling over ancient history. As far as Lysette was concerned both men were good options. Joshua realized this, Craig hadn’t. But then Joshua wasn’t in love. Craig was.

Grace watched Joshua stride furiously toward the bar, and then the remaining group all spoke at once to her. All with the intention of covering up the ugly silence his departure had created.

“You ok?” Steve asked quietly. He’d been surprised by Joshua’s reaction. Joshua never raised his voice. Even when Steve brought Mariah home late one night after a school disco, when he’d started dating her, Joshua had not lost his temper. Instead he had been quiet, deliberate and very clear. Steve had brought Mariah home on time after that, much to Mariah’s annoyance.

“Brilliant.” Zac announced.

“Why did you do that?” Mariah asked.

Sighing Grace turned to face them and said “I apologise.” She glanced over her shoulder in time to see Joshua reach the bar. “I’d better go say sorry to him too.” Grace suggested without much spirit. She had no business jumping in just because she couldn’t control her dislike of the other woman. She’d made such a mess of it all because she’d gone with her gut feeling rather than her intellect. This time she was going

to think before she spoke. Not one word was going to leave her lips until her brain had sifted through the ramifications. With general good byes said, Grace picked up her small black handbag and followed Joshua to the bar.

“Joshua.” She said quietly but firmly. He didn’t even glance at her. Grace put her hand lightly on his shoulder. “Look, I won’t take up much of your time. Please listen to me.”

“I think you’ve said plenty already, don’t you?” He couldn’t keep the sting from his voice.

“Yes” Grace agreed softly, as she persevered “and I’m sorry, but you don’t know why I did it.”

”I don’t give a shit, but I can hazard a guess.” He snapped without looking up at her. “You like meddling in what doesn’t concern you. You’re opinionated, pretentious and you like your own way. Now what else is there?” He drawled insultingly, still not bothering to look at her. He swirled the contents of his glass, “Oh, yes, I forgot, you really do think I am yours, because your father buys your men.” His disparagement was almost complete, “That about covers it.” He took a long swig of his drink as if he’d said nothing of any immense consequence.

Grace was reeling from his comments, but she was grateful that at least this time he had kept his voice low and glancing furtively around she was relieved to note that no one else was within earshot. Thank heaven for small mercies. She schooled herself not to reflect the bruises his words inflicted. She’d brought this on herself. She shouldn’t have interfered. She needed to apologise and leave. Just apologise and leave. Brain waves didn’t result in the action intended. Grace signaled the waiter and asked for a ginger ale. Though they had hurt her deeply she attempted to dismiss his comments and explain the situation. She had to explain

“You many not believe this, but I did it to help.” She studied his profile while he appeared to brood. His profile was strong and

distinctive, a straight sturdy nose, sharply defined cheekbones and lips and a perfect jaw.

He snorted derisively and then looked into the amber liquid in the glass he held. The ice clinked against the side. The need to explain was quashed by that expressive sound. The waiter placed a glass in front of Grace. She smiled her thanks before he moved on to another guest. She picked up her glass and raised it in a mockery of a salute.

“Cheers. You are making an ass of yourself.” She said succinctly when the bartender was out of ear shot. Then she sipped her drink.

“So what is it to you?” He snapped belligerently, not making the slightest attempt to hide the animosity.

“You seemed like a good guy. A bit grumpy and arrogant at times, but generally ok. Plus your family are worried about you. I like them.” She sighed softly, “Lysette hurt you by marrying a friend of yours. But it isn’t the end of the world.” She asserted tritely.

“You know nothing.”

“True.” Grace looked at his profile, he still hadn’t turned to face her. She was ready to concede defeat, but surprisingly she wanted to help him, quite why, she didn’t know. He’d been rude, offensive and downright truculent, but she really did want to help him. Idiot that she was. There was a fascinating duality that had her ensnared. On the one hand he was aggressive, a starchy successful programmer and on other occasions he’d been considerate. Their journey from the airport to her cottage in Cambridge had shown her both sides. He’d been rude to her, belligerent to the point of rudeness, but when they’d returned to the car she’d also noticed that the seat had been lowered, so clearly he had tried to provide some measure of comfort when she had slept.

He felt her staring and turned to glower at her angrily, “But?” He prompted, seeing that she was going to keep at him.

She continued maintaining eye contact, “Lysette and Craig made their choice and you getting drunk doesn’t change that.” Her words were flat, the pace measured, just recapping the facts.

“So?” He retorted and continued to focus on his whisky.

“So,” She emphasised, “don’t do it.” She gently beseeched, “Joshua, there are people here who really care about you, don’t embarrass them and yourself because one idiot woman doesn’t.” Even to her own ears she sounded like a prissy do gooder.

He turned away, signaled the waiter and ordered another whisky. Grace downed her drink. This was pointless, he really was determined not to dig himself out of this mood. She had run out of patience and resigned herself to the fact that he was determined to wallow.

Grace capitulated. “You know Mr De Souza....”

“What happened to Joshua?” He interrupted, turning his head to look at her, quirked an eyebrow in challenge.

“He’s a seditious jerk.” She put her glass down with a heavy thud and turned and walked briskly away.

Grace was furious with herself and with him. It had been like talking to a brick wall. No, no, a brick wall would have been more responsive. He’d made no effort to even listen to what she had to say. Total waste of time. She should have left him to drown himself in drink, he’d regret it in the morning. That was her only consoling thought as she strode quickly away from the bar. She returned to her original seat, where she was flanked by two elderly, but sober, men. She knew they must have heard Joshua’s earlier character assassination of her, but they were pretending to have forgotten all about it.

She bid her time, waiting for an opportunity to leave. Grace listened to the conversation around her, but not once did she look in the direction of the De Souza table. She didn’t know whether Joshua had returned to the table and she was too angry to care. Instead she glanced

surreptitiously at her watch at numerous times. Time dragged on. Perhaps another fifteen minutes and then she would make her escape.

The master of ceremonies informed everyone that the bridal couple would soon take to the floor for the first waltz. Grace breathed a sigh of relief, as soon as the floor filled with other couples she would leave. That should conceal her departure. More than likely, only the few people at her table would actually notice that she had left. Some minutes later Craig and Lysette began to dance. After several solo rounds, they were joined by the wedding party and eventually other couples. Great. Relief flooded through Grace as she watched the floor crowd. Escape was tangible. Grace smiled at the two men who had kept her entertained with stories about farming. She explained that she had to leave and she was about to push back her chair and utter further words of regret and departure, when she realized someone was assisting her. Her chair seemed to move of its own accord.

“May I have this dance?”

She recognised the voice instantly. Damn. And even more worrying, though there was nothing overtly suggestive in his manner or tone, his softly spoken request had a husky depth that made her heart somersault.

“No.” She smiled automatically and without a trace of sincerity, hoping that the surprise and panic that she was feeling did not show. “I’m on my way home.” She supplied as an explanation as she assessed the situation and debated whether to take to opportunity to leave right now.

Black eyebrows rose over understanding, apologetic, green eyes. “One dance.” Joshua pushed, “Just one.” He cajoled gently. “You can’t leave a wedding reception without dancing.” He chided jokingly, when he realized she wasn’t being persuaded. Of course he knew she could be stubborn, but he also knew she was kind, and so he waited, his eyes holding hers, as he waited to see what she would do.

“No you can’t.” Said one of the elderly gentlemen in a conspiratorial voice.

“Not good etiquette.” Chimed the other elderly man.

Grace looked at Joshua closely, trying to ascertain whether he was drunk. He looked sober, but she knew for a fact that he had consumed at least two glasses of whisky. Plus the champagne.

“I’m not drunk.” He said quietly, green eyes holding her own dark eyes hostage.

“You aren’t drunk and you want to dance with me? Now that I find hard to believe.” She mocked openly as she fought off her attraction to him. The smell of him, soap, sandalwood aftershave and male pheromones were making her nervous.

His lips settled into a faint smile as he acknowledged her comment. This was harder than he’d expected. He’d thought about what he’d said and he knew he’d been thoughtless. She’d received the backwash. Not surprising then that she wasn’t jumping at an opportunity to dance with him.

“Please will you dance with me Grace?” He inquired in a more humble, gentle tone.

Grace saw the regret in his eyes. She hesitated, suppressing an unexpected breathlessness.

“Go on lass, dance with him.” Said one of the elderly men at her table.

How could she refuse? Joshua smiling at her was devastating enough, but pleading with her, it would take immense will power to say no. And his eyes were pleading. She didn’t have that kind of will power. And anyway she really wanted a dance. Just one dance. No harm in that. One dance.

“I’m an idiot,” She muttered as she placed her black clutch bag and hat back on the chair, and acquiesced with a rueful smile, “O.k. Just one.”

“Good lass.” Said one elderly man. The other smiled in support.

Joshua placed his hand in the small of her back and as he escorted her to the dance floor he said “I’m the idiot, but I’ve been educated by an angel in a stunning blue suit.”

“You’re laying it on a bit thick.” She rolled her eyes in reprimand and did her best to settle her nerves. Any minute now and she was going to start behaving like a teenager with a crush.

He chuckled but didn’t comment. The dance floor was crowded. He took her into his arms almost as soon as they had reached the fringe of the dancing masses. Slowly they settled into the rhythm. It felt good to be held by him, his hand lying in the small of her back, his other hand holding her palm firmly. No, it felt more than good. It felt right. She relaxed into him and let her temple rest just along his jaw line. He smelled good. She hadn’t noticed that earlier, but then she hadn’t been this close earlier. Pressed up close, held tightly to his chest, her forehead almost in contact with his cheek. This felt really good. He had a clean crisp woody scent. She inhaled deeply, unaware that the action would force her chest into closer contact with his body. Grace pulled back when she felt his hammering heart. Nerves kicked in. But then he spoke and she could not hear what he said.

“I didn’t catch what you said.” She tilted her head to look up at him, taking the fortuitous opportunity to gain some space and time to get herself under control.

“Sorry.”

Grace didn’t feign ignorance, she smiled slowly. Her smile was reciprocated. He pulled her closer to him as she lowered her head. His body was reacting, there was no hiding that, but there was more. Much, much more. Joshua felt it, didn’t recognize it, but wanted more of it. His thigh slid between her legs as they shuffled but didn’t move

off the spot. The music stopped. Leisurely Grace tried to disengage from the embrace, but he was having none of it.

Grace did not want to create a scene by tugging frantically, so she tipped her head back to look into his eyes as she reminded him. “One dance.”

“That was half a dance. We came in half way through the set.” He replied smoothly, “You still owe me.”

The band began to play. Shaking her head ruefully, she slowly moved away. She needed a breather. Things were happening to her, in her, that she wasn’t used to. She’d danced with guys who’d been turned on, knew the state of arousal, but had never felt such a desperate need to take what was being offered. She needed time to reflect, think about this, figure out if she wanted to go down this track, with him.

“Another time. Thank you.” She said firmly but politely, “I must be going.”

He turned on the charm. “I can’t persuade you to stay?” Those gorgeous green eyes literally twinkled.

She shook her head, “No, not really, unless you’ve got a villa at Surfers, a condo in Hawaii or an apartment in Paris, not that I’m mercenary or any thing.” She batted long black lashes at him.

“How about a Bach at Raglan?”

She sighed, “How big?”

“Almost two bedrooms.”

“Pity.” Feigning regret, she stepped away.

He chuckled quietly and guided her off the dance floor, through the throng of people.

She smiled slowly, as she told him conversationally. “I said I’d call in on mum and dad before I head back to Cambridge.” They threaded their way past the edge of the dancing crowd, waiting for couples to move by, stepping through small gaps that appeared between couples.

Strange how not twenty minutes ago she was close to throttling this man and now she wanted to snuggle up to him, here, in public. Or at least hold his hand. Together they walked back to the table. Joshua was still holding her elbow as they finally cleared the dance floor. But a few feet away from the table, they met Lysette. Grace suppressed the urge to groan in frustration. So much for trying to make a stealthy escape. Why was everything going against her today?

“Josh darling, dance with me. It’s my wedding.” Lysette ignored Grace totally.

Grace decided the woman was a prime class bitch. But she refrained from jumping in to bat for him. The last time he had lacerated her for the effort. She had still to recover from that session and one bout per evening was enough for her.

“I’d love to Lysie” Joshua looked and sounded apologetic, “but we were just leaving.” He tugged Grace closer, so she was now pressed to him with his arm draped around her waist. It was a proprietorial gesture. Lysette’s eyes narrowed when she saw his action.

“Already, but...” wailed Lysette, only to be interrupted by Joshua.

“We’ve got to stop off at her parent’s place.” He lied blatantly, threw Grace a colluding smile and added, “Mr Carvalho isn’t well.” Pulling Grace to him he pressed his mouth to the top of her head. Grace felt the effect all the way down to her toes.

“One dance.” Pouted Lysette. The woman had the pout down to an art form, thought Grace. Recklessly Grace decided to help out. And that both worried and surprised her. Grace kept her fingers crossed and prayed that her impulsive gesture wouldn’t lead to another case of foot in mouth.

“Sweetheart, we must be going.” Grace flashed mischievous jet black eyes at Joshua, as she burrowed closer to his side “as it is, if we don’t leave now, you’ll have to spend the night at my place.”

“And that’s a problem, why?” Returned Joshua, quick as a flash, his own eyes full of mischief. He slid his hand around her shoulders, gently massaging the tense cord of her shoulders as he brushed her skin with his fingers.

If only you meant it, thought Grace, as she kept her smile in place. “SssssH.” Grace played the scene to the hilt. “Let them stay a weekend and they think it’s a permanent arrangement.” She mock whispered to Lysette and then she winked. “And some women have trouble trying to get guys to commit.” Another cheap shot landed. Grace grinned rather enjoying the position of being able to flirt without him actually believing that she was interested in him.

Lysette looked furious then petulant. Joshua wasn’t hanging around for any more. He hadn’t realized that Grace would take to the ruse quite so easily.

He kissed Lysette’s cheek, stepped back and said quietly, “All the best” and then firmly pulled Grace to him, saying ‘Come on sweetheart. We’ll need to get going.”

Grace smiled her goodbye to Lysette, and then turned, and arm in arm with Joshua walked away.

When they were out of earshot he bent his head to whisper, “Well you’ve just blown your reputation.”

Grace chuckled. She wasn’t repentant at all. He wasn’t yelling at her for her unsolicited comments. And he had taken hold of her hand. That was progress. He seemed to be totally unaware of the fact that his thumb was brushing against the back of her hand in a whisper of a caress. To Grace the caress felt like a hug. It was all she could do to keep walking with him. Her legs were slowly dissolving as his thumb gently moved back and forth again her hand.

They walked briskly to the table to collect her bag and hat. At the table he disengaged to allow her to retrieve her bag and hat. She repeated her goodbyes to her table companions and then in a daze she headed for the doorway, hoping her legs would hold out until she reached her car. Half way there, she realized he was still with her. The question was in her eyes before she could voice it.

“We are leaving together remember?” He answered the query in her eyes.

“Hmm, and you were worried about my reputation.” Black eyebrows rose in rueful question.

Joshua smiled lazily and propelled Grace in the direction of the bar. They were heading toward Zac. Grace walked with Joshua without further question. They drew level with Zac who had been watching their approach with blatant amusement.

“We’re off.” Joshua announced bluntly before Zac could say anything. Zac raised an inquisitive eyebrow but said nothing. “Take the car home.” Joshua handed Zac the keys. “No more drinking.” He advised his younger brother.

“Oh perfect. You take the girl, I take the car.” His sarcastic lament went unanswered. “Real fair Josh.”

Joshua winked at him. “Big brother’s rights.”

“Yeah.” Zac retorted sarcastically.

“I’ve drunk too much to drive anyway.” Joshua owned up.

“You said you weren’t drunk.” Grace accused instantly.

“I’m not.” Joshua replied, “But I am over the drink drive limit.”

“So where are you two going?” Zac was curious about the change in events. He wanted nitty gritty details.

“Between you, me and the gatepost, I’m going home and Grace is going to her parents.”

“Yeah, right.” Zac didn’t believe a word. His lack of faith was further spurred by the fact that Grace was smiling suggestively with pseudo innocence while she sidled up to Joshua.

“Come on you,” Joshua took her arm again, “before you ruin your reputation totally.”

“I haven’t already?” She tried to conjure up a pout to match the one she’d seen Lysette perfect. Joshua looked at her then, trying to analyse her behaviour. She grinned, destroying the illusion she had just created. Then she blew Zac a kiss.

“Nice meeting you again.”

“Yeah, likewise.” He grinned cheekily, two dimples appearing in an already charming face, “And next time I get to take you home. He doesn’t know how to appreciate a beautiful woman.”

By this stage Joshua had ushered Grace a few feet toward the door.

“You’re on.” she called to Zac. Then they were out of the door.

It was a mild evening, although it was supposed to be summer, there was still a faint spring chill in the air. Her car was parked quite close to the hall so it took no more than a few minutes to reach it. In that time, neither one had spoken. Grace opened the passenger door before she walked around to the driver’s side.

“You’ll have to direct me.” She told him as she reached over her shoulder to grab the seat belt. Joshua had already adjusted the seat to accommodate his frame and had fastened his seat belt.

“The nearest taxi rank should do.” He told her diffidently.

“Oh. Right.” Well so much for thinking this was his idea of making a move on her. He simply wanted out of the reception, just as she had. Feeling rather subdued, Grace put the car into gear and reversed out of her parking spot. She felt as if she’d been on a roller coaster ride. Up one minute down the next. And all because of him. “Taxi,” She mulled as she changed gear, slowing down as she watched the lights change to red, “Queens street will be your best bet.”

He nodded agreement. “Your father still trying to marry you off?”

The question came out of the blue and hit Grace with the power of a close range nuclear warhead. Fortunately she had stopped at a set of traffic lights. Otherwise she would have probably careered off the road. She turned round to fix him with a hostile glare. She was ready to push him bodily out of the car.

“Oh, shit.” He said in whispered disgust. He held his hands up in apology and said quickly, “I didn’t mean that the way it came out.”

“Sure you didn’t.” She challenged in a fierce hiss, but her stormy eyes returned to the traffic lights and she waited for the green signal with her anger barely restrained. Her fingers curled round the steering wheel as she struggled to remain calm. Ok, so that showed that she had read more into them leaving together than he had. Clearly she was more interested in him than he in her. Her anger escalated.

Again Joshua swore beneath his breath, then he said, “I honestly didn’t.”

Keeping her eyes firmly on the road, she sizzled “Then what the hell did you mean?”

“It was my charmingly, inoffensive,” he shrugged, “subtle,” he tacked on ruefully, “way of trying to find out why he set you up?” Adding lamely, “I doubt whether you’d have problems getting dates.” And that had puzzled him. “You are kind.” Going by the way she had tried to

help him this evening, “Clever by all accounts.” According to her father she had a doctorate, “Beautiful.” She was gorgeous, probably had heaps of dates, so why was her father groom hunting? “And enchanting.” He smiled at her skeptical look.

Grace let out a soft sigh and glanced across at Joshua before saying, “He loves me.” She shrugged as she went through the explanation again, “Mum and dad are very happy. And he wants to see me happy, he thinks being married is happiness.” Again she glanced across at the man beside her, “Not that I agree with his methods.”

Joshua turned toward her, “Can’t say that I blame you.”

“Here we are.” Grace pulled over at a taxi rank, relieved to be ending this conversation. They were at the top of Queens Street. He undid the seat belt. Now that he was here, he wanted to talk a bit more.

“Do you fancy a coffee? As token thanks for your help this evening.”

“No thanks.” Grace was now more than sure that he had used her as an excuse to leave early. She of course had read more into the situation. Wishful thinking she acknowledged as she flicked her indicator off. She was, surprisingly, rather nervous. He wasn’t the kind of man she was used to dating. Had known from the outset that he was out of her league. But in a tiny corner of her heart, she had wished and hoped.

“Thanks for the ride.” Realizing that his tactless remark had blown his chance, Joshua opened the door and stepped out of her car.

“No problem.” She said crisply, threw him a brief noncommittal look, and equally vague smile and then turned to face the front.

Admitting he’d blown it he shrugged. But he was still reluctant to leave. And that surprised him. “Well, thanks.” He held onto the door. She nodded. He tried to keep it light, “See you around.”

She nodded but as he closed the door she muttered under her breath “Doubtful.” She put the car in gear. He waved as she drove off.

Chapter 3

September flew past. A busy time of the year. The numbers of students taking her second semester courses had nearly doubled. The resulting work load quadrupled. She put in quite a few late nights, caused mainly by her post graduate lectures running during the evening. She also put in several early morning stints because she had a lot more marking to do. All in all a very busy time of the year.

Her lectures on Women's role in society and in the family had led to several heated debates during tutorials. And whilst she welcomed the opportunities for students to reflect and challenge their thinking, it was tiring facilitating those discussions. Some men had also enrolled on the course. That pleased Grace. It brought another perspective to the discussions. Keeping the discussion in perspective and allowing everyone an opportunity to debate issues that were at times intensely personal and emotive was not an easy feat. So it was hardly surprising that she was often mentally and physically drained by the end of the day.

She was really looking forward to her summer holiday. She kept her sanity by simply remembering that she and Sasha, her youngest sister, were going on holiday at the end of the academic year. The thought of the vacation break kept her working flat out trying to get her marking done and her preparation for next year up to scratch.

But it was early in October that Grace received an unexpected invitation to a party. She hadn't recognised the hand writing on the envelope, but once she saw the scrawled signature she couldn't help smiling. Zac. She read the crazy invite and then penned him a negative response, dredging up a suitable excuse. The last thing she really wanted to do was go to a party for Joshua. The fact that he had been in her thoughts an awful lot simply supported her argument. Self preservation. She was not going to get involved with the man. It, the situation, him; was complex. Every time she thought about him, and it was far too often, she became flustered, and when she recalled the way

he'd held her, she might as well not have had a brain. This was one man who managed to annoy her and make her heart hammer with intense awareness at one and the same time.

No, the last thing she wanted was to spend time with him, not if she was interested in her independence and maintaining her dignity. The instinct was strong, somehow without knowing why, she knew that he could make her drop everything.

She felt vulnerable when she was around him. Apprehensive even, not because he scared her, but because she scared herself. She was scared by her feelings. She recognised that. And she fought it. She had worked too hard to get this independent, she wasn't going to lose it now.

Grace finished giving a third year lecture, on Gender issues in the classroom, to a group of undergraduate teacher education students, and made her way back to her office. Grace was already mulling over how she would change it next year.

When Grace walked into the foyer, she couldn't help but notice the commotion in the corner. She stopped contemplating her lecture and flashed a look of inquiry at the receptionist. Tina signaled her over. So Grace ambled over, all the while keeping her eyes on the ruckus going on in the corner.

"Don't tell me we've got an All Black visiting." Grace suggested as she reached Tina. The only people Grace could imagine getting this type of attention were the men from the national rugby team.

Tina grinned, "No such luck. Though he is fit." Tina told her when Grace had come close enough to hear. "A guy to see you."

"OK." Grace answered absently, as she watched the group in the corner. She was interested in finding out more about the bedlam there, nevertheless she asked, "Did you send him to my office?" Grace inclined her head, unable to restrain her curiosity any longer, "So what is going on over there?"

“He’s there.” Tina used her finger to point at the commotion.

“Who?” Grace looked askance at Tina. Then realized who Tina meant. She didn’t know guys who’d get this kind of attention. “Who is he?”

”A hunk.” Tina said with much feeling.

“A hunk eh?” Grace chuckled at Tina’s rapt expression, “And he’s mine.” She said with relish. Her eyes scanning the crowd of chattering girls, hoping to see past them to the male body they had cornered. Tina giggled in acknowledgment.

“Think he needs rescuing?” Grace questioned as she watched the young women vie for the attention of the man buried in their midst.

“Well if you don’t I will.”

Grace feigned disgust, saying, “It’s a dirty job, but someone’s got to do it.” Grace put her bag and papers down on the reception desk. She winked knowingly at the receptionist and then turned and walked toward the cluster of young women. A few feet away from them she coughed loudly. No one took any notice. The gaggle of women remained huddled together, talking loudly, giggling pitifully. Grace tried peering past them. No luck, they were bunched too closely together.

Grace spoke loudly, “Excuse me. He’s waiting for me.”

Still nothing. They ignored her. Students ignored her. Grace turned her head back toward the receptionist and raised her hands in question. Tina laughed. Resigned, she took a deep breath, put two fingers to her mouth and whistled loudly and shrilly. Twelve pairs of stunned questioning eyes turned and focused on her. They looked affronted by the interruption.

“I believe he is waiting for me.” She announced into the silence.

The young women seemed reluctant to deliver their quarry. But they parted sufficiently for Grace to see the man.

“Zachary.” Grace announced in surprise. He was sitting on one of the low lying leather upholstered sofas, surrounded by a bevy of women. He looked totally relaxed, as if this sort of reception was perfectly normal. Grace quirked an eyebrow at him and Zac got to his feet.

He grinned with a lazy charm and sauntered over to Grace, calling over his shoulder, “Nice meeting you all.”

The sheer cheek of the man. Grace couldn’t stop the smile, “Come along Casanova.” She handed him the bundle of work she had picked up off the counter. Automatically he took it. “This way.”

They walked along the corridor, “Wasn’t expecting to find so many interesting women here.” He stated blithely.

“What?”

“Women’s studies, figured they’d be ...”

“You might want to think very carefully before you finish that sentence, I have a double doctorate in law and women’s studies, it comes in useful for defamation cases.” She told him and he meekly followed her to her office. It took a while to open her office door. As usual it was stuck.

“You want me to barge it?” He queried in a pragmatic tone of voice as he folded his arms and leaned against the wall watching her battle the door.

“No, “ She turned exasperated eyes toward him, “I want you to be patient.”

He shrugged and waited. A short while later they were in. She took the papers from him and placed them on her already cluttered desk. She

dumped her bag on her chair and switched the kettle on, all in one fluid chain movement. Practice long ingrained. She indicated a chair for him and then set about trying to find some desk space. She shuffled papers into several piles, finally clearing enough space to actually see the surface of the wooden desk. While she rummaged and organised her desk, Zac openly studied the room. Two walls were shelved and crammed full of text books, box files and paper stacks. Potted plants fought for quality space, several were perched on the window ledge. Her desk was at an angle to the window and in front of the desk were two chairs. To the corner was a small table with two other chairs, all the surfaces were covered with heaps of papers.

“Marking.” She told him as she eventually found space to put two mugs. “So what are you doing here?” She asked as she reached for a jar of coffee that was perched on the shelf to the side of her desk. “Want some coffee?” She asked before he even had a chance to answer her first question.

He answered her second question first, “Black, please.”

Grace spooned some instant powder into the mug, “Well?” she prompted as she stirred the granules until they dissolved. She peeked up at him waiting for him to respond.

He shifted uneasily, making Grace slightly wary. The fact that this usually confident man was stalling felt decidedly ominous. She handed him his coffee. Without hesitation, she shifted papers off a chair and sat down beside Zac. Gingerly she hugged her mug of boiled water between her palms.

“I’m waiting.” She reminded him when he still hadn’t said anything.

He shifted into a more upright position and looked her in the eye before shifting his gaze away “Er, it’s, the thing is, it’s about the party.” He finally admitted and glanced across at Grace a silent question in his eyes.

She frowned. “Didn’t you get my reply?” Grace distinctly remembered posting her reply early last week, he should have received it by now. “I can’t make it.” She reiterated her response.

He nodded, “Yeah, you said.” He seemed to suddenly make up his mind about something, for his body language changed and his posture relaxed, the confidence oozed, “I’m here to change your mind.”

“I don’t think so.” Grace laughed, seeing his transitory expression of dejection. He was very good. She could imagine him perfecting the look over the years. “Look, Zachary, I am sure that heaps of people want to go to your party, hey, those women out front wouldn’t say no. Ask them.” She smiled to soften her words. “Parties aren’t my kind of thing.”

“Make an exception.” He told her spontaneously.

“No.” She replied steadfastly. “I’m not really the party type.”

“Please.” He pleaded and if anything, his expression was even closer to that of a beseeching puppy.

Grace grinned at his strategy. “It won’t wash.”

“What?” He fenced, sensing that the ploy was wasted on her.

“That pleading expression you have perfected on probably hundreds of gullible women.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

Grace raised a shapely black brow at his statement.

He chuckled, “O.k., ok, I was giving it my best shot. It works on Riah.” He capitulated cheekily.

“I’m not your sister.” Grace told him dryly before she took a sip of her drink.

“Thankfully.” It was said with so much conviction that Grace chuckled.

“You are a rogue.” She informed him. He grinned. “Zachary, tell me why you are here. Keep it simple, honest and brief.” She sipped her water again, her eyes never leaving his face, her expression expectant. His eyes widened at her tone. She tilted her head in response, “So let’s hear it.” She commanded autocratically. He looked temporarily flustered, and she could see him do battle with his thoughts.

He didn’t tell her everything, of that she was sure, but he told her enough to make her feel guilty. Half an hour later she had agreed to go to the party. Two hours later, after he had left, she was left wondering if she’d made yet another mistake. Gut feeling said it was a big mistake. Another mistake. But her heart was doing mini somersaults.

Two weeks later, on Friday, just after an early lunch, Grace drove up to Auckland to stay with her parents. She took a fair amount of ribbing from her father about going to Joshua’s party.

“He didn’t invite me dad.” She said for the umpteenth time in vexed exasperation, “Zac did.”

“Yes dear.” Ben smiled. Grace wanted to strangle him. She imagined he was getting his own back for all those years. Fathers.

“Zac asked me and I said yes. Alright.”

“Yes Grace.” His eyes twinkled. He’d waited years for this. Years. Daughters.

“What are you wearing tomorrow?” Angie interrupted calmly trying to steer her husband away from his one track. Grace scowled at her father. He feigned indifference.

Side tracked by yet another dilemma, Grace quickly picked up the new conversation thread. "I don't have anything suitable." She remembered the group at the wedding. None of their clothes were home made, and Grace made almost all of her clothes. They employed designers, she designed her own. She had done for years. "Thought I might go shopping tomorrow. Want to come?"

Her mother nodded. "There's this lovely new place in Parnell. Had some lovely things. Took Sasha there." Her mother grimaced, "Total waste of time. That girl's dress sense leaves a lot to be desired."

"Well if it was tasteful and colour coordinated it would have been a real waste on Sasha." Grace agreed. Then with a telling sigh she said, "I want something that is classy, but not ostentatious. Casual enough for a BBQ but not just average. Did it have stuff like that?"

Angie smiled whimsically. "Yes." Ben was right. For a man that she didn't want to impress, Grace was going to an awful lot of trouble for Joshua's party. And she wasn't as confident as usual.

"It's just that I don't want to look out of place." Grace finally owned up. "They aren't exactly your average middle class family are they? Did you see the cars they drive? You should have seen what they wore at the wedding." Nervous, she found herself rambling, "I doubt they'd wear t-shirt and beach shorts to a barbie. I'm not in their class." She frowned, shook her head and then glanced up at her mother. "God, I hope I don't make a fool of myself. This was a stupid idea. I should cancel. If I had any sense I would cancel. Yes. I should cancel."

Angie threw her husband a speaking look. Ben didn't need the signal he was ready to jump in.

"Grace, you could wear a sack and you'd have more class than the lot of them put together."

"Hmm." She looked fondly at her father, his earlier teasing forgotten. "Not that you are biased or anything, dad."

“Stating the obvious.” He replied positively.

“Thanks dad.”

“Why don’t you make a day of it?” Angie suggested. “Pamper yourself.” She was warming to her theme, “Get your hair done, have a massage, get a facial, manicure, pedicure, whatever.” She hugged her daughter, “You were saying it’s been a hectic term, well treat yourself.” She smiled, “And to top it all go to the party.”

“I don’t know.”

“Ok, let us treat you.” Angie suggested wondering if Grace was temporarily skint.

“No, no, it isn’t the money or anything. I can manage that.” She shrugged. “I’m just not sure that it’s worth all the effort.”

”It?” Angie smiled at her daughter, “Not it, you. You are worth the effort, and once in a while we all need to treat ourselves to a bit of luxury.”

“I can run you into town tomorrow and meet you both later for lunch.” Ben suggested.

“Perfect.” Angie continued, “We can shop in the morning, then run you back to Titirangi, there’s this nice new place, get yourself a pamper and I’ll come and get you when they are all done with you.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Great, that’s settled then.” Angie went to the phone book to find the telephone number for the salon.

“Mum.”

“What?” She found the flier that she had folded and placed in the book.

”Oh nothing,” Grace conceded.

“Here, give them a ring.”

They telephoned the salon and were very fortunate to get an afternoon appointment. Someone had cancelled at the last moment. A good omen. She would be relaxed, look a million dollars and be ready to face Joshua.

On Saturday morning Grace and her mother shopped for an outfit and in the afternoon Grace spent two rather long hours at a salon, having her hair, face and body done. Throughout the day she wondered why she was going to all this trouble. She had never been one to spend minutes on her appearance, and now, here she was spending hours getting ready for a party that she was already having misgivings about going to. If only she hadn’t been swayed by Zac’s argument. Who was she kidding, an inner voice challenged, she wanted to go and she wanted to make an impression on Joshua.

Being honest, she soon admitted that Zac hadn’t had to push much. She was almost encouraging him to make the right statements, provide the right argument, all the while pretending that she really didn’t want to go, but was being magnanimous. Her brain told her it was sheer folly, her heart told her it was serendipity, her chance to dazzle Joshua. And she wanted to see him. She really did. There was just something about that man. Perhaps if she got him out of her system, she could get on with life as normal, instead of having to consciously drag him from her mind at very inopportune moments.

The party at Macleans Bay was in full swing when Grace arrived. For the umpteenth time she questioned the wisdom of coming here. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this nervous. Give her a three hundred-seat lecture theatre filled with colleagues and experts in her field, or a tutorial with the most demanding and challenging students and she would cope. Do more than cope. But a social event

like this and she was little more than jelly on legs. Her heart was racing as much from fear as anticipation. She was determined to leave this party having made a positive impression.

It was after half eight and still very bright, she could make out the red gold orb of the sun as it dipped into the water's edge. It had left streaks of red and pink in the still purple blue sky. Enthralled by the beauty of the vista, she simply stood and looked out across the water. It also gave her a chance to pull her self together. She closed her eyes for a second and willed herself to calm down. Then she opened her eyes, let out the breath in one steady stream and turned to face the house.

The drive was littered with cars, expensive cars. Grace threw a doleful glance at her ten year old Mitsubishi parked alongside a gleaming new Ferrari and a sporty Merc. Chalk and cheese. What the hell was she doing here she thought as she glanced along the rows of expensive new cars. She took her time to saunter up the steps toward the front door, counting the cars as she went. She guessed there would be at least seventy people here, there were more than fifty cars in the drive. Once again her heart jack knifed and her palms went from barely damp to an out and out sweat.

The last time she'd been here, she'd been carried through that austere looking portal. But she hadn't taken the time to notice it.

It really was a beautiful old white colonial house. Sweeping, majestic and beautiful. Even the gardens and the drive were immaculate. Grace wondered if Joshua or Zac did the garden, then realized they probably hired someone. These guys were rich. Absolutely loaded. What the hell was she doing here? This was not her scene. The people here did not play in her league. Her confidence began to ebb. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, squared her shoulders and summoned her flagging spirits.

The verandah was deserted and as she stood silently on the top step once again she turned to enjoy the vista of the coastline it provided. She knew she was stalling, but she took her time to study the Bay far below, yachts leaving Auckland harbour could be seen in the distance,

nearby, she saw wind surfers cruise slowly along. Grace slowly brought her gaze back to her surrounds. Two other, equally splendid houses shared the tree lined private road.

This really was a different environment to her modest cottage in Cambridge. Her entire cottage would probably fit in one room here. She smiled, funny that she hadn't noticed the size of this place the last time she was here. Childhood insecurities came back to haunt her and again she had second thoughts about being here. She felt out of her depth. Seriously out of her depth. With a great deal of self-consciousness she gave her outfit the once over. She'd actually bought this for tonight. She couldn't remember the last time she'd bought outerwear. She smoothed a non-existent crease as she took a deep breath and battled her reticence. Designer label clothes could not change who she was. And she was as nervous as a kid going to school for the first time.

Before she allowed herself to turn tail and run, Grace took a deep breath and used the doorknocker to rap loudly on the door. It was answered promptly.

A relieved Zac beamed at her and hauled her in, as if he sensed her inclination to run. He gave her lips a smacking kiss. "I thought you'd chickened out on me." He teased as his eyes quickly looked her over. He'd been hovering by the door for the last half hour. Thank God she had come.

"Thought about it." She murmured under her breath.

He closed the door firmly once she was in, then he wolf whistled long and loud. "You are gorgeous."

She'd needed that confidence boost. Her palms were still clammy with nerves, but her heart was just beginning to pick up a normal beat.

"Idiot." But Grace was incredibly pleased. At least she looked the part, she thought as she watched him continue to take stock of her.

“Everyone’s by the pool.” He took her arm and threaded it through his, his eyes glinting with appreciation. “This way. If we weren’t rescuing Josh, I’d chat you up myself.”

“Now you are over doing it.” Grace chided as she used her free hand to smooth her short black linen skirt. It was barely decent, the hemline was several inches above her knees. The skirt allowed viewing access to slim long legs, the low kitten heeled strappy, black and tan leather sandals did not give her much added height. Her temple only reached Zac’s shoulder. Clearly he was taller than his older brother. “I doubt I’m your usual taste, in fact I imagine you prefer well stacked blondes.”

“I’m hurt.” He clutched at his chest, and grinned at her. He let his hand rest on her bare back, “Beautiful skin.” He teased unrepentantly as his fingers stroked along her spine.

The tan linen halter top left her shoulders bare and her back devoid of any covering whatsoever. Why was it that designer label clothes cost so much and covered so little?

Grace chuckled just before she dug her elbow into his ribs lightly. “Oops.”

He threw her a wounded little boy look. She laughed. He grinned then added with a great deal of sincerity. “You know, I really like you.”

“Idiot.” She laughed at him

“She’s here.” Zac whispered, taking Grace with him, as they stepped through the open patio doorway. He kept his arm on her waist, any excuse to keep touching that beautiful skin. There were hordes of people. Grace was immediately daunted. This was a small party? Zac felt her tense as she quickly took stock of the people. His hand on her waist held firm as he felt her prepare for flight.

“A small party.” She mumbled.

Zac nodded. “Yes, Josh doesn’t like big events.” He sounded as if he didn’t share his brother’s viewpoint.

There were heaps of people. That was frightening enough, she never had been a crowd’s person. But even more alarming was the fact that the only people she knew in this throng were those related to Joshua or Craig and that amounted to a handful at the most. Her stomach did a somersault as nerves vied for recognition. Zac saw her pensive expression and continued to feel her apprehension as her body became more and more taut. He realized that she hadn’t been exaggerating when she’d told him she wasn’t a party person. He moved his arm up her body, gave her tense shoulder a gentle reassuring squeeze and left his arm draped along her shoulder, pulling her into a gentle semi hug.

The next time she had a gut feeling, telling her not to do something, she was going to follow it. This evening was going to be a nightmare. She knew it. A living nightmare with her in the starring role as the victim. She hated these kinds of parties. Even though she had no qualms lecturing to hundreds of students, walking into a party of people she didn’t know made her quake. Tonight was no different. If only she had stuck to her guns, told Zac that she couldn’t make it. Her reason for agreeing had been simple, and it wasn’t the one Zac assumed or believed.

Grace had wanted to come, wanted another chance to be with Joshua. It was unexplainable, and she had given up trying, but she had wanted to be with the man. So for the first time in her life she was going to chase a man. Her first thought had resulted in her sending the r.s.v.p regretfully declining the invitation. Her second thoughts were what if: What if she never got to meet him again? What if she never had an opportunity to bump into him again? What if he was never part of her life? It was beginning to depress her. Zac’s arrival had been timely. Almost providence. Subconsciously, she knew she’d accept Zac’s invitation to the party. Knew it, dreaded it and looked forward to it, all in the same heart beat. And now that she was here, she was surprised that she still had a heart beat.

Zac propelled her forward, pushing her toward a small group of people by the BBQ. He could feel her consternation and knew without a doubt

that she would make an excuse and leave within the next few minutes if he didn't do something, and do it quickly.

“Look who's made it.” He called loudly drawing immediate attention to them.

Several people turned to stare. Grace wished she'd gone into clinical research, a scientific field, because by now she'd have discovered how to make oneself invisible. A simple method, controlled by thought processes, that way, she'd have had a choice, make them invisible, or make herself invisible. Instead, without that protection, she found herself being observed by a dozen or so pairs of eyes. The people watching were filled with curiosity. She pinned a forced replica of a smile on her lips and gazed sightlessly at the throng that parted to let them through while following their progress. They studied her blatantly, avid curiosity in their eyes. Some recalled seeing her at Craig's wedding, they passed on that tidbit of information. Other's wondered if she was Zac's latest, though they vaguely recalled her leaving the wedding with Joshua. Fascinating. A few simply looked, having never seen her before they were interested in this newcomer to their scene.

Grace assumed an air of calmness, but her heart was thundering so loudly, she was surprised they hadn't heard it. This was worse than she expected or imagined.

First she wasn't expecting to see so many people, ‘a small family and close friends party’ Zac had said, small, hell, there were more people here than there were on the South Island. The only family she'd spotted so far was Zac, no doubt Mariah and Steven were here too, but surely Joshua didn't have this many close friends.

Second, these people were from a different world. Getting pampered this afternoon for this party, was a treat. It wasn't something she did often. The people here would probably have their hair and makeup done professionally on a regular basis. Designer labels abounded. The only designer label she wore on a regular basis was her bra. Although if she was being picky, she could say she often wore designer gear,

she'd designed and made her clothes. Expensive perfume mingled. Grimacing inwardly, Grace glanced down, then wished she hadn't. Their sandals probably cost as much as her entire outfit. She really was not one of this crowd.

As expected, Joshua was at the end of the parted throng. He frowned, then his eyes narrowed as they flicked from Zac to Grace. The look he threw Grace was enough to send her scuttling backwards, but Zac's arm along her shoulder forced her to keep moving forward. On top of everything else, Grace realized that Joshua was livid. Absolutely, uninhibitedly vehemently angry.

Joshua watched them come closer. He banked his anger. It was obvious what the two of them had in mind, and he was not going to allow it. He'd been rescued once by Grace, he did not need to be rescued a second time, no matter what his brother and Grace thought. Any interference was going to be dealt with swiftly. Before he could say anything caustic, Mariah bounded up to them. She launched into speech heedless of the formidable tension that was emanating from Grace and Joshua.

"Grace, great to see you." Mariah's enthusiasm was genuine, "Hey, you look terrific, as always. Like the hair." She hugged Grace briefly as if they were longtime friends, before guilelessly adding "Doesn't she look great Josh?"

Joshua looked straight at Grace, he didn't say anything verbally, but his eyes eloquently conveyed his response. The remaining streaks of confidence ebbed, but her veneer remained intact. Grace was ready to leave. Message received loud and clear. Mariah was momentarily distracted when someone called her name, so she missed her brother's reaction to her question. Zac hadn't.

"Plates please Josh." Demanded Zac, before the silence became noticeable, and before people realized that Joshua hadn't verbally answered Mariah's question. He wanted to thump his older brother. If it wasn't for his birthday and the fact that half a dozen people were within earshot he would have given him a mouthful.

Joshua thrust the plate at Grace, releasing it almost immediately, clumsily she held on to it. She felt gauche. Her stomach was somersaulting again and her palms were clammy. She glanced at the plate she held, and waited for the floor to open up. It didn't, but Zac gave her an out.

"Let's get some salad first." Zac threw his brother a speaking look and quickly steered her away from Joshua. Grace followed him blindly.

"You want to tell me what's going on?" She rushed into whispered speech as soon as they were out of earshot. "He didn't invite me did he?" She wrapped her arms around her waist. "I thought you said he wasn't interested in Lysette. He isn't pleased to see me." She picked up several celery sticks.

Zac shrugged. What could he say? He was as surprised as Grace. He'd expected Joshua to be thrown, but he wasn't expecting hostility. "I don't know what's eating him, but he seems mad about something." Zac heaped some Waldorf salad on to her plate. Then ushered her along the length of the table.

"Tell me about it." She picked up some baby corn and several asparagus tips.

Zac smiled in apology, "I don't know why he's being rude. I mean you're doing him a favour." He glanced over his shoulder before turning back to say, "By the way, Lysette is over by the trellis."

Grace picked up a celery stick and munched on it as she nonchalantly scanned the direction Zac indicated. "So?" She asked, wanting to leave the scene as soon as possible, knowing for certain that this had been a foolish idea. She was planning on leaving within a few minutes. This food stacking exercise was simply a ploy to pull herself together before she left. She didn't want it to look like she ran away. Even though she was going to.

"Just convey the notion that Joshua is out of bounds." Zac stated matter of factly.

“He is to me.” Grace retorted, amazed that Zac still thought they had a plan.

“Come on Grace, you can do it, just let her think there is something going on between the two of you, you managed it at the wedding.”

“Yes, that was easy, he helped.” She replied sarcastically. “If I stood at the opposite end of Auckland Harbour he’d probably think it was too close.” She walked toward the far end of the table, not really listening to Zac. She was desperately wishing that she had never agreed to any of this. Desperately wishing that she had gone with the voice in her head, not her heart. Her shoulders slumped dejectedly. What a fiasco.

She only realized that Zac wanted her attention when he tipped her chin up so that her eyes connected with worried green depths. “Here comes trouble.”

“What?”

Zac had no time to enlighten her. Joshua appeared beside them.

“Very touching.” He said cuttingly.

Grace sprung away from Zac, scattering some of the contents of her plate in the process. Apprehensively she righted the angle of her plate and looked desolately at the food she’d deposited on the grass. What other moronic thing could she do while she was here?

“Excuse us Zac, I’d like a few words with Dr Carvalho.”

He didn’t give either of them a choice. He simply took her plate of salad and handed it to Zac. Then he took her elbow and propelled her toward the patio. It was embarrassing, but she didn’t protest. Grace didn’t fight him, she could feel his just-about-controlled temper. And anyway, what was the point? The sooner they got this over with, the sooner she could leave. She simply had to explain that she had been

told he'd invited her to his party, and then briefly explain his brother's good-natured intention and then leave. No fuss. Just leave.

Or at least that was what she thought when he had materialised at her side, but now, having been dragged past several curious revelers, now she was getting cross. He was making her look like an unwanted guest. There was no courtesy in his actions, no show of manners, no quarter given. And his other guests had noticed, how could they fail not to? Grace began to seethe with anger and humiliation. They spoke to no one as they made their way to the study. Just as well. For although Grace was outwardly calm, she was fuming by the time they had reached the house. His friends had seen him drag her indoors, and no doubt when she didn't return, they would assume that she had gate crashed the party and he had thrown her out. Great. Just terrific.

She had a few things she was going to say to him before she left. None of them involved explanations. All thoughts of placatory clarification had long since fled. With her anger surfacing and her sense of indignation rising she was ready for him by the time they reached the study. She was ready for an argument.

He thrust Grace into the deserted room and he shut the door with a controlled slam, but he said very quietly, "Sit down." He stalked toward his desk. His anger, frustration, fury and tension were conveyed in those two words. But they failed to daunt Grace. She clasped her hands behind her back just to make sure she didn't reach across the table, pick up the paper weight and throw it at him.

"I'd prefer to stand." She replied evenly, stubbornly refusing to be intimidated by his obvious irritation.

"Sit down." He thundered. Joshua was furious that he'd lost his temper and raised his voice. Without thinking he stormed toward the drinks cabinet.

Grace stood, her chin came up and her eyes narrowed at his tone. This was ridiculous. Just who did he think he was? Grace held her tongue,

but by now she was fighting to remain calm. Her earlier apprehension had vanished. She flashed him a scathing hostile look.

“Don’t be so bloody stubborn. I have things to say to you. They may take a while. Sit down.” He snapped as he poured himself a shot of whisky. He didn’t offer her a drink. Rude jerk.

“Don’t be so bloody rude and I might.” She shot back just loud enough for him to hear.

He turned and his eyes pinned her as he said, “Would you please have a seat Dr Carvalho?” His heavy sarcasm did nothing to pacify the mounting anger she was holding firmly in check. At this rate he was going to make her ill. Violently ill. She was working very hard not to succumb.

Grace sat down, although seething inwardly she presented a calm outer facade. She had developed it at school and perfected it over the years. It never failed to convince those around her that all was well, that she had conceded, that she was pacified. The look hid a myriad of emotions and at this moment in time all of them were hostile and all were directed at the man in front of her.

Joshua stared at her. He could tell that she was furious by the way she sat, stiff, prim, contained. But her eyes conveyed none of that anger. Insolently he studied her and sipped his drink, maintaining eye contact, he took his time and waited. He watched the control dissolve, and the anger simmer and bubble into life as very eloquent brown eyes that were currently trained on him conveyed total animosity.

His initial impression, when he’d spoken to her in the garden, was that she was anxious. But that impression had long since disappeared, discarded when she had refused to be intimidated. And now, even though she had done what he had asked, no ordered, her eyes still told him she was far from cowed. Even if she was pretending to be subservient. She was as docile as a starved tiger in the presence of a fresh, available carcass. His carcass.

“I don’t know what my idiot brother thinks he’s doing, but this is my party and I don’t remember inviting you.” Joshua was intentionally rude. Deliberately insulting. Grace said nothing. She simply sat there, maintaining eye contact and holding in check a temper that was very close to exploding. She willed herself not to fidget. Without bothering to hide the insolence, she looked at him, her eyes making and maintaining contact. Her eyes froze into icy chips of ebony, her chin came up a fraction of an inch as she continued to brazen this out defiantly. Her eyes left him in no doubt as to what she thought of his tactics. He looked powerful, aloof and completely self-assured.

Joshua was impressed by her degree of control. He thought she’d have marched out in high dudgeon by now. Certainly his tactic of hauling her past the other guests had been an intentional plan to unsettle her. But it hadn’t worked, she was still sitting here, hostile, maintaining eye contact and stubbornly glaring at him. Of course he could see she was furious, absolutely livid. Yet she had kept a lid on it.

He propped his hip on the edge of his desk, placed his glass on the desk and said “Quite obviously you have been invited to save me from Lysette.” His irritation conveyed itself in the way he ran his fingers through his hair, though from his tone you’d have thought he was mentioning the good weather they were having.

Damn, thought Grace, he still wanted that woman. Damn, Damn, Damn. Her temper ebbed. She deflated instantly. A sinking feeling replaced her anger. This yo-yo effect was beginning to wear her down. One minute she wanted him, the next she wanted to throttle him and now she was back to realising that she wanted him. Idiot. How could she want a man who despised her? Why would she still react to a man who deliberately compromised her by dragging her past others as if she was a bag of rubbish? Why did she want a man who didn’t know or care to know anything about her?

“Has it occurred to either of you, that as a grown man I am quite capable of managing my private affairs?” A ghost of a smile touched his lips but it didn’t last long as her next sentence cut through his arrogance and snapped the tenuous hold he’d had on his temper.

“The only thing that occurs to me, Mr De Souza, is that you are an ill-mannered degenerate jerk who is tediously rude.”

“I’m rude.” Derision laced both words as he picked up on the one word at the end of her diatribe, “That’s rich coming from you.” He continued in that same cold voice, “I’m not an uninvited guest. I don’t presume to be Miss, oh, excuse me,” He scoffed, his brows snapping together as he pinned her, “Ms Wonderful.” He mocked. “I am beginning to see why your father goes to such lengths to find you a husband.” He flicked her a dismissive glance. “Only a desperate man would wish to hook himself up with...” His eyes scanned her in a slow derogatory critical once over, caustically he tacked on “such an asset.” His eyes were blatantly ridiculing her as he perched on the edge of the desk, feigning apathy.

Grace flushed with humiliation, however, she was back to dynamite detonation stage. But Joshua had only just warmed to his theme. He’d seen her reaction to his sneering last shot, and he knew from her reaction just how to provoke her further, “What happened Doctor,” he drawled insultingly, his brows quirked in emphasis, “Forced to seek comfort from books, no man desperate enough to fill your nights?”

Grace exploded out of the chair and flew across the few feet separating the chair and desk. Her palms hit the oak desk on either side of his body, her face a few angry inches away from his own. He looked momentarily startled. He hadn’t expected quite that volatile or instant a reaction. She could certainly move fast.

“You bastard.” She hissed each word through clenched teeth, then paused as she fought to rein in her temper. She drew in a slow breath before adding in a calmer tone, “I think you should hear a few home truths.”

“Me?” His dark brows arched further.

The movement made Grace very aware of just how close she was to him. He was still perched on the desk edge and she had her arms braced on either side of his body, leaning into him, her thighs brushed

his knees. She was almost nose-to-nose with the aggravating man. She could see tiny flecks of grey in the green depths of his eyes and she could see the dark stubble on his chin as individual bristles. Defensively and ill at ease she levered herself away.

Joshua noticed the cautious self-conscious gesture. “What’s the matter Doctor?” He asked contemptuously, his lips parodying a smile, his eyes full of derision, his tone audacious. “Is this the closest you’ve been with a man? Try paying for their time.”

Grace sucked in her breath, horrified that he could stand there and insult her so easily. It was then that she realized that if she didn’t care about him, then what he said wouldn’t hurt so much. But it did. It hurt. She was ready to crumble, ready to sink through the floor, as chagrin washed through her in sweeping nauseous waves.

But he hadn’t finished the onslaught. His voice was civil but the disdain was loud and clear as he added insolently, “My mistake. I forgot your father already tried that.”

Smack. Instinctive reflex.

Immediately Grace felt violently ill. Her fingers had connected flatly and hard with his cheek. The ring on her right hand cut his lip as it forced contact between enamel and metal. Blood began to seep from the small cut. She had never, ever, raised her hand in anger to anyone before. Never. And the thought that she could be moved to do so, so easily by this man shook her. She lectured on domestic violence for heaven’s sake. How could she have hit him? Where was her self control? She didn’t even remember sending her brain a signal to lift her hand, let alone a message to strike him. Mortified, she forced her brain to construct her apology.

“I’m sorry.” She mumbled as she fought to stop herself from being ill right there and then. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the stinging sensation in her hand. As the pain subsided, she opened her eyes, but kept them focused on the floor. She wished and prayed frantically for this to be just a bad dream, but the sheepskin rug looked

too authentic, the pain in her hand felt too real and the tears held in check took too much effort. This was real.

If Grace had looked at Joshua, she would have seen incredulity, comprehension and then exasperation. But she missed those expressions. In abject misery, she focussed her gaze on the floor and fought off the tears. His index finger probed tentatively at the cut and came away with blood. Some birthday present. He swore loudly as he pushed himself off the desk. Grace registered the movement in her peripheral vision and slowly raised her head, ready for the backwash. Grace straightened her shoulders and tipped her chin forward, though she kept her eyes slightly downcast, avoiding all contact with his no doubt hostile glare. She was, she believed, ready for any retaliation. None came.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” He said quietly, his voice full of derision, then he licked the blood off his lip with the tip of his tongue and reached for his glass. He took a quick sip, absorbed the sting and glared at her. The patent disparagement and banked fury were tangible. “I wouldn’t touch you if your father offered me the crown jewels and you were the last female within twenty light years.” He said in a voice that dripped with condescension, as he looked at her distastefully, “But perhaps you should hear some hard facts.”

He moved closer toward her. She stood her ground. Now was not the time to show cowardice. He stopped a few inches away from her. She expected the worst and braced herself for a tirade of insults. They came. Worse than she had expected. Much, much worse. Worse because he was saying these things and she cared about what he thought of her. And worse because they brought back memories she had long stored away. Each sentence sliced a little deeper and a little sharper. But as fine as paper cuts they didn’t show on the surface.

“Zac’s first mistake was opting for you to compete with Lysette. No competition.” He moved back a fraction and for the second time that evening, he gave her an offensive, derogatory once over. It was more insulting than the last one she had endured. With his lip curling with blatant revulsion he sneered, “Real class doesn’t stoop to your type of eccentric style to stand out.”

Grace pretended to dismiss the attack with a feigned disdainful snort. In her adolescence she had faced similar tirades. She had learnt to deal with them and to keep her thoughts and feelings to herself as she took the hits. The experiences of her youth resurfaced to strengthen her. Though his barbs hurt. They hurt a lot.

He scoffed loudly, almost laughed in her face when he noticed the way she erected barriers. With calculated contempt he said disparagingly, “And she sure as hell could teach you how to behave like a lady.”

Instinctively, she took him on, as she challenged quietly, “Of the night no doubt.”

His eyes darkened, and the muscle at his jaw line stood out for a fraction of a second, but his censorious words were measured and quietly spoken. That’s what made them all the more potent. “I’m sure many men would happily pay a fortune for her company, whereas your father has to entice men to date you.”

They had come full circle, and were back at the point she’d struck him.

Thankfully she did not go for a repeat performance. As he had lectured her Grace had felt all her old insecurities, but just as she had done in the past, she had quickly built her shield of detached calm poise, and had stood and listened to the deprecation. Self-control prevailed. She cloaked herself with a degree of poise as she murmured, “If you’ve quite finished Mr De Souza, I’d like to return”

She wanted to get out of this house as soon and as fast as possible. But she wasn’t going to let him to see that. She’d find Zac, say goodbye and slip quietly away.

She never wanted to meet this man again. Never.

His condemnation had hurt her more than he could possibly imagine, more than she had thought possible. Things she had thought she had forgotten, pain she had managed to disregard, his words, his tone, his actions, brought it all back.

She would get over him. How long could she stay attracted to a man to find it so easy to belittle her, a man who could do it with so little effort.

“Like hell.” He snapped assertively.

With her cloak of feigned self-assurance she turned and faced him as she said softly, “Whether you like it or not, I was invited.” Why was she deliberately antagonising him, she had no intention of staying, why didn’t she just tell him that and leave? Pride. Sheer pride. She was not going to leave with him believing he’d driven her away, because she didn’t fit in. She was not going to leave those revered guests thinking she’d been thrown out. She was invited. She was a guest, not a gate-crasher and they were going to damn well see that.

Then she’d leave. Quietly. Quickly.

“You must have the hide of an elephant, hasn’t anything I’ve said sunk in?” He jeered, his voice more terrifying because it was so autocratic and low. She looked serene, as if all that he had said to her was of no consequence. In ominous tones he continued, not realizing what his words were doing to her. “Let me spell it out.” Her eyes met his. He made sure that the contempt was obvious, though his voice was low, “This is my party.” He looked her up and down and added with a fair amount of denigration, “You don’t belong here.”

Grace recoiled as if he had physically hit her. Wincing as if there had been tangible contact between them. He wasn’t expecting that reaction. She looked disconsolate. The veneer of composure crumbled. Tears that threatened never actually fell. They shimmered in her eyes, but they never quite fell. She bit the inside of her bottom lip to stop them trembling. She clenched her hands, so that the pain of her nails digging into the fleshy parts of her palms kept her in control, and helped to maintain her dignity. But her cheeks lost colour and her tear glazed eyes mirrored pain.

He felt like a complete bastard. He didn’t know why, but she had felt his words with the same degree of pain as a fisted punch.

He wished the words unsaid. How was it that she could make him forget to think before he spoke? With self-disgust Joshua watched her fight for control.

Grace swallowed a painful lump in her throat and worked hard to regain her poise. The blow had registered with the impact of a nuclear warhead, it had shattered her composure but the real damage was to her heart. His words had torched her heart.

Slowly, she forced herself to raise proud tear glazed jet eyes to meet a concerned green gaze. Even with her lashes dutifully stopping her tears from cascading down her cheeks, she looked resolute and brave.

As he replayed his conversation, he began to consider the effect of what he'd said in anger and he knew, then, that he had scorched her emotionally. That hadn't been his intention. He had simply wanted her to stop meddling in his life. And he was old enough and experienced enough to deal rationally, calmly and politely with unexpected guests. But he hadn't with her. Not rational. Not calm. And nowhere near polite.

She wasn't as self-assured as she led everyone to believe. He could see that now. She was that intriguing mixture of confidence and insecurity. Buried deep behind the flash of challenge he saw in her eyes, he had also seen, albeit briefly, the very real pain his words had caused.

He regretted his part in the war of words. Swiftly he started to own up, he had been angry, he'd wanted to provoke, but not to puncture that spirit, not the way he had. But it was too late. "I..."

"Yes. I see that now." She interrupted softly, her voice clogged with unshed tears, then she turned and walked to the door. Her words cut into him. There was no sparkle and lots of hurt. He had done that. He couldn't remember ever feeling this much of a bastard. And he didn't know what to do about it.

Her hand was on the doorknob when she heard him say, "And how shall I explain my cut lip?" It wasn't what he meant to ask, but he

knew that she wouldn't accept his apology and wouldn't stay around long enough for him to explain his overreaction to her presence at his party. So he was stalling for time. Trying to think of a way to fix what he had wrecked.

Very slowly Grace turned to face him, her chin rose a fraction as she told him candidly, "Tell them the truth." She folded her arms across her chest as if she was trying desperately to hold herself together, but in her eyes he saw her struggle to remain blasé. "Tell them you tried to throw out riff-raff but I wouldn't go quietly."

Then she turned, opened the door, and left quietly, pulling the door shut behind her. Her eyes misted with tears. Old emotions resurfaced. Memories from almost twenty years ago replayed in her mind. When she had attended one of the prestigious girls' schools in Auckland she had faced similar ostracism. No money, no connections, no value, no fit. Deeply buried memories emerged. She hadn't been one of the accepted crowd at the school either. But she had always put that down to the fact that her uniform was second hand, her place afforded as a result of a scholarship and she couldn't afford the gadgets or clothes her peers had; the designer labels, the computers, and other paraphernalia.

It hadn't been anything personal, not an attack on her really, just her situation. Her status.

But tonight was supposed to be different. She had made it. She was no longer the little refugee girl, from a poor immigrant family. She was able to play with the people who had all the latest gadgets. She had some of those gadgets now. Tonight she had dressed the part, looked the part and for a very short while had even felt the part. But she had still been found wanting. Camouflage was all it was. And the camouflage had not worked.

She could still hear his words. The echoes cutting deeper and deeper until his words lacerated her to the very core. This time it wasn't her social standing that had been rejected, it was her. He had rejected her.

Seen through the camouflage and decided she was of insignificant value.

She had taken just a few steps down the hall when she realized that if she didn't find a bathroom soon, she was going to throw up on this immaculate wood stained floor.

Just then Zac materialised. "Thought I'd better rescue you." He stated, a worried frown creased his brow, as he came toward her. Then he noticed the hand at her mouth and the perspiration at her brow. "You ok? Grace?" She shook her head, trying to quell her heaving stomach. "Want the bathroom?" He asked in concern, his eyes widening in panic.

She nodded. He guided her quickly to the downstairs cloakroom. Grace raced in and locked the door. She tore off some toilet tissue and soaked it under the cold tap, then pressed it to her temples, the back of her neck and her forehead. She kept that up for a while, until the queasiness subsided. She braced her forehead against the mirror as she ran the tap and kept her wrists under the cool water.

She heard Zac knocking loudly and heard him talk to someone. But she was not ready to join the outside world. She needed time. Taking her time she turned off the tap, and took a deep breath. Then he called her name again and rapped harder on the door. She heard the gravity in his voice and the panic in the wallop to the door.

"One minute." She said just loudly enough to be heard by him.

She rinsed her mouth. It took her a few more seconds, but she finally summoned up the courage to rejoin him. She checked her reflection in the mirror, wasn't truly happy with the image she presented, but decided it was the best it was going to be. She opened the door and came face to face with Joshua and Zac. The two brothers were equally concerned, but Grace wasn't looking at Joshua.

"Are you all right?" Zac looked troubled.

“Fine.” She lied still refusing to look at Joshua though she could feel his eyes on her.

Zac wasn’t fooled for an instant. He glared at his older brother, challenging him quietly.

“Could I have a drink please?” Grace tried to side track Zac. The last thing she wanted now, was to be instrumental in setting up an argument between the two brothers. She wanted to leave. And in a minute she would.

“Sure.” Zac continued to glare at Joshua.

Joshua ignored his younger sibling as he kept his eyes trained firmly on Grace. She didn’t look too good. She didn’t look as if she was about to burst into tears, but she looked as if someone had taken her soul and stomped on it. His words had hurt her deeply. He’d never felt like a lowlife before. He was sure he didn’t like the feeling, just as he knew it was what he deserved.

Grace stepped past them both, “Zachary.” She prompted quietly and waited for him.

He nodded, then issued his brother a quiet warning. “Joshua, after the party.” Then he escorted Grace down the hallway, through the kitchen and onto the deck.

“What happened?” He asked as he handed her the glass of still mineral water that she had requested.

“Nothing.” A cool breeze feathered the back of her neck, touching the still damp skin and banishing any remaining queasiness. She sipped the water, pleased to feel the ice cold liquid slide down her throat. Normality was slowly returning. She was on the receiving end of several curious looks. Obviously they were wondering what she was still doing here.

“Grace.” He said in exasperation.

Shifting uncomfortably as she realized more and more people were looking at her and more than likely talking about her, she said, “He didn’t do anything. I did something which I regret, I ..”

“You hit him.” It finally dawned on him. Zac had asked Joshua about his lip. His brother had ignored the question. At the time Zac had been too concerned about Grace, who had fled into the bathroom a couple of seconds before, so he hadn’t pursued his question.

“I shouldn’t have.” She stated quietly, dropping her eyes so that all she saw was her glass of water.

“I bet he bloody well deserved it. He’s acting like a stupid bastard!” Zachary said with forceful conviction. Though he couldn’t understand it. Joshua would never intentionally hurt a woman, never, of that he was sure. So what had gone on?

“No one deserves violence.” She drained her glass, then raised her eyes to his, “I mean, I lecture on issues of domestic violence and here I am thumping the guy.” Grace felt terrible, her stomach was quivering sporadically, her head was pounding vehemently and her heart was squeezing painfully. “I was so angry. And I even talk about anger not being sufficient grounds to resort to violence. I’m a hypocrite.”

“What you are is one classy lady.” Zac assured her trying to rally her flagging spirits. He had hoped to cheer her up, instead a look of pain flashed in the jet depths of her eyes. That surprised him, but he wasn’t allowed to dwell on it. What the hell had gone on in the study?

“There’s no need to grease up to me.” She muttered gloomily. “I’m going home.” She let out a loud sigh, then her eyes caught Craig in the crowd. He was laughing. He looked happy. He had been kind to her as a child, always happy to play with her and her sisters. Even as a little boy he had been compassionate and thoughtful, when it came to her family. She took a breath, “But there is something I owe Craig.” She

handed her glass to Zac, he refilled it and handed it back to her. She took a sip and then said, “Are you sure about Craig and Lysette?”

“Yes. She thinks Joshua is available.”

Grace frowned in thoughtful consideration. It had all seemed so simple, all she had to do was turn up and give the impression that Joshua was with her. She had apparently been very convincing at the wedding. And, if she was honest with her self, she wanted an opportunity to see him again. Stupid, stupid woman, she castigated herself. Anyone with an ounce of common sense would have steered well clear of this triangle, but then, just recently she didn’t seem to possess much common sense at all. Why else would she have come to a party that she knew would be out of her league? Why had she gone to all that trouble to get ready? She had wanted to look good, and that wasn’t for Lysette’s benefit. The reason she was at this party was simple; she wanted to see Joshua again. She had never chased a man in her life, and after this debacle, she wasn’t going to do so ever again. Never, ever, again. Grace finished her glass of water. No sign of the queasiness she’d felt earlier. She rested her hip against the wall and looked forlornly at Zac.

“I don’t think this is going to work.” She told him softly.

“It can.” He corrected gently, not quite sure how to handle her. She seemed to be on some sort of personal roller coaster. Up one minute, dejected the next.

“He doesn’t like me.” She replied quietly, wrapping her arms around herself as the words he had thrown at her resurfaced in her mind.

“He doesn’t have to.” Zac was worried about her. She seemed so vulnerable, and he really didn’t want her to get hurt. Somehow he knew his older brother was responsible for a great deal of the pain she was striving to hide. “We just want Lysette to get the idea that you two are a bit of a long term thing.”

“And my being here won’t accomplish that.” Grace informed him as she surreptitiously wiped away a tear that was threatening to fall. She couldn’t cry, not here, and not now.

“It will if you are convincing.” He encouraged softly.

“Fat chance.”

“Hey.” He turned her to face him, “What happened to that gutsy woman I know?”

“Gutless more like it.” She amended woefully, a forlorn smile banishing her urge to cry. She had come here intending to create an impact, to make Joshua notice her and she was leaving like a dog with his tail between its legs, all because he had told her she didn’t belong. And he was right, she didn’t belong here. Not with these people, not in this neighborhood and not with him. She could see that now.

Now after she had made a total fool of herself. She flicked a derisory glance at her clothes. What a waste of money she thought as she dusted off an imaginary bit of fluff.

Zac smiled at her gently, he had watched a play of emotions flit across her eloquent jet eyes and he knew her resilience was crumbling. Matter of factly he suggested “Just hover around him, look possessive or something.” The little lost-puppy-dog expression was back. The last time he had used that expression she had seen through him and laughed, he hoped she would laugh now.

“If I hovered, he’d probably swat me like a fly.”

There was silence as Zac took in the vehemence in that statement and Grace contemplated her next move. Grace watched Joshua as he talked to a group of friends. He was smiling at them, they were smiling in return. Someone must have said something hilarious, for the smiles turned to laughter. She was an outsider looking in. It was like a rerun of a scene she had long buried. Standing on the outside looking in. Watching, waiting, hoping. She had put all that behind her, or so she

thought. And until today, she would have said it was all in the past. But, standing by the window, watching Joshua and his friends, she knew she was far from over feeling like an outcast. Once again she was being ostracised. The anger of past injustices mingled with the rudeness she had endured this evening, both merged to swell in a tidal wave of injured outrage.

“You know what Zac?” Grace tipped her face up so that she looked straight into his green eyes. They might be the same shade of green as his brother’s but they were much friendlier. He saw jet black eyes lit with sparks of anger, anticipation and sheer bravado. “I’m going to get even.” A semblance of a smile touched her lips but failed to register in her eyes.

Zac wasn’t sure what she meant by that remark, but her tone made him slightly apprehensive. It was the way she’d said it, made it sound like a threat and her eyes had been coolly contemplative. He wasn’t sure he liked the idea of her getting even. He knew it meant getting Joshua, and while he was all for having words with his brother, something he was going to do later, he wasn’t sure whether Grace’s method of retribution would be reasonable. Furthermore, he wasn’t sure he wanted to be party to something likely to antagonise Joshua even further, especially now. It was after all Joshua’s birthday.

“Get even?” Zac questioned with mild apprehension. If only she’d feed him some more information. At least let him know what she had in mind. That way he could avert any pending disaster. But she wasn’t being quite so co-operative. In fact she seemed to have suddenly brightened, and that in itself worried Zac. “Look, why don’t I...”

“No, no “ She interrupted coolly, “Just leave it to me.” The firmness in her voice convinced him that he had better do just that. “A glass of whisky please.” She told him. His eyes widened in concern but Grace ignored the look, she was still watching Joshua and his friends. That particular group seemed to be laughing a great deal. Her next quietly posed question caused Zac a great deal of consternation. “Does your brother enjoy scenes?”

“Scenes?” Zac mumbled in dread and panic. What had he created here? He sincerely hoped she wasn’t about to conduct a public vendetta of some sort. Joshua would kill him. If Joshua survived.

“Yup, scenes. How does he cope with people making a scene?”

“Generally calmly.” Zac replied pensively, a frown marring his brow. She was beginning to seriously worry him. And for Zac that was a new experience, he was usually so laid back that very little fazed him, but Grace was definitely threatening his usual equanimity. Nevertheless he handed her the tumbler of whisky. “Remember it is his birthday.” He supplied, hoping the reminder would quash any rash actions. She sipped the whisky, her eyes twinkling with whatever scheme she had hatched.

“Yeah.” She smiled broadly and walked away, tossing over her shoulder, “And don’t look so nervous. I’m just going to give him a belated birthday present.”

That did nothing to calm him. He began to worry. Seriously worry. He decided he would have to do something. She was going to wreck this party, he just knew it. “Now, Grace...” He hollered and found himself facing a group of amused looks. He grinned at them sheepishly. “Grace...” He called in a more moderate tone of voice as he pursued her through the throng that had gathered on the deck. Zac realized she was making a bee line straight for Joshua.

“Later.” She called over her shoulder as she took the deck steps two at a time. She threaded her way through the immediate crowd. Her gaze remained riveted on Joshua. His group were still together, still laughing, chatting, smiling.

Zac pursed his lips in vexed frustration. He tried to think of a recovery plan. Joshua was going to kill him, that much was certain. The question was, would he make it a painful or painless death. Zac would prefer the latter. But somehow he knew Grace’s actions were going to result in the former. It was after all Zac who had invited Grace to the party. Joshua wasn’t likely to forget that.

Grace walked quickly and purposefully toward a group of five people. Grace felt a tiny prickle of apprehension as nerves vied for precedence. But she ignored the feeling and held on to the anger and injustice. Now was not the time to start getting nervous. She had gone and hidden away the last time someone told her she didn't belong, today it was time to exorcise that ghost.

She was on a mission. As soon as the mission was accomplished she would leave. But it would be with her head held high. In a few minutes she would be out of here. On her terms. And people would know that she had been invited to this party and that she left it on her terms.

She approached the group with a great deal of recklessness. Joshua had his back to her and didn't hear her approach, let alone see her imminent arrival. The group ahead of her was still laughing over the last little anecdote that had been shared. A few feet from the group, her nerve almost abandoned her. Almost. Out of sheer desperation, she sipped the whisky again, it trickled warmly down her parched throat.

"Darling." She purred just loud enough for Joshua and his group of friends to hear her above the hub of conversation. She should have been an actress. This was definitely Oscar winning material.

The entire group turned toward her. Joshua, being nearest, ended up facing her, a few scant inches separated them.

In his right hand he held a plate of food. She thrust the tumbler of whisky into his left hand and reflexively he caught it, before his brain could even question the action. Grace releasing the glass speeded his spontaneous response. He held it firmly, stopping it tumbling to the ground. His eyes narrowed at her gesture and his automatic reaction.

Then his eyes widened when she slid an arm up and along his polo shirt resting against his chest, and said, "Am I forgiven?" He read the false message in her eyes while her tone conveying all sorts of intimacy, professing all sorts of rapture, just grew more sultry "I got carried away" To Joshua's utter incredulity she gently traced his upper lip with her forefinger.

Zac watching from a few feet away was stunned into limbo, he gulped and his eyes widened as he watched her next move. She reached up on tiptoe and curled her hand around Joshua's neck. She rested against him, nuzzling his neck. Zac began to smile. The smile broke into a grin as he watched his brother's paralysed reaction. Way to go Grace, Zac encouraged her silently.

Joshua was speechless and totally unprepared. He was also effectively immobilised. He'd have to drop something if he was to pry her off him or he'd have to ask for assistance. Neither option appealed. Though he was tempted to simply pour his drink over her to cool her off. What the hell was she playing at now? Grace tipped her head back and pouted briefly, sheer parody. His eyes narrowed in speculation. He didn't have to wait long for clarification.

"Here, let me kiss it better."

Absolute disbelief hit Joshua squarely between the eyes. She wouldn't dare. Hell, she'd better not. Damn, but she was going to. Her head moved closer, Joshua was too dazed to arch backward and move out of range. He watched with a fascinated sense of dread and a curious state of want as she drew nearer.

Soft, warm, quivering feminine lips touched firm masculine lips. Grace noted that he hadn't yielded an inch. He was as stiff as a starched shirt and equally unresponsive. This was going to be tough. He was fighting her. What was she expecting? Co-operation? With a slow but deliberate brushing action, her tongue traced the outline of his lips, following a path that had earlier been mapped by her index finger. He shuddered. Defences crumbled suddenly. Grace was elated. She could feel his reaction. She would be ok. He was responding.

She leaned into him as her hands took his head firmly in a no nonsense grip that gave him little opportunity to evade her mouth. Grace put all she knew into that kiss. Her eyes drifted shut as she opened her mouth, ready to deepen the kiss she had initiated. She knew the exact moment his eyes closed. It was the instant she heard the thud of the china plate and glass of whisky as they hit the grass within seconds of each other.

It was also the instant when control of the kiss swapped partners. Her hands released his head and drifted down to tangle loosely with his shirt front and then hold on tightly as the kiss took over.

Joshua hauled her to him, holding her tightly in his arms. Pinned. She was as much trapped as she had planned to trap him. Her right palm was jammed between her body and his. Her left hand buried in dark brown hair at the back of his head was stroking him into a frenzy. French kissing didn't even begin to describe the act. They were devouring each other.

Joshua's group of friends watched this public demonstration in absolute and comical astonishment. Amusement began to replace incredulity as the seconds ticked by and they watched the kiss develop. The Joshua they knew was normally as controlled as his computer. Cool, calm, cogent. They didn't know the woman, but Joshua clearly did. Or if he didn't before today he was getting a damn good introduction. And after they'd seen him drag her away a few minutes ago, this wasn't quite what they were expecting. They were all secretly astonished to note that Joshua clearly didn't care that he was putting on such a public performance. The same Joshua, who they knew as quietly reserved and in control, was passionately kissing a woman and he didn't seem to mind, let alone notice, his audience within close proximity. Was it some sort of birthday-o-gram? A surprise? Zac's idea.

"Steady." The voice barely registered, but it was enough to remind Joshua about his whereabouts and to drag him back to reality. He became conscious of his environment a split second before Grace.

They broke apart, breathing heavily and looking with uncertainty and query into each other's eyes. For an explosive second the physical attraction was clear and open to view. Then, in a blink of an eye, they had both erected fences and shut down communication. Nevertheless it took a few moments for them to get their heartbeats and breath back to an almost normal, even keel. Almost.

“Whew.” Teased the same male voice, “You guys sure got me steamed.” Luke flicked Grace a speculative glance. He’d seen the flashpoint look she had shared with Joshua and he’d seen, at close hand, Joshua’s reaction to her kiss. He and Joshua were as close as brothers, and he knew this was the first time Joshua had ever lost sentence of his environment. Luke’s analytical brain came up with a worrying possibility: Love. Luke hated that word. But before he could succumb to loathing, his more analytical brain suggested love was unlikely. For as far as Luke knew, this woman wasn’t currently dating Joshua. Unless she was that flight attendant Joshua had told him about. Luke ransacked his mind for details. A few seconds later he discarded the notion of flight attendant, as he remembered that Joshua said she was blonde.

“Shut up Luke.” Growled Joshua in a distracted response. Luke quirked a brow. Interesting, he thought to himself as he continued to watch the two performers.

Grace fought down her embarrassment. That kiss had got out of hand, way out of hand. The last time she had felt this vulnerable was on her first day at secondary school. It was a period in time that had fashioned her into what she was today, but it had fashioned her the hard way. She managed to hold on to her hard won dignity and schooled her features not to show the discomfiture she felt.

“Got to go.” She whispered to no one in particular. She felt compelled to say something, they were all staring at her as if she was some sort of freak. Her fingers curled into her palms, finger nails digging into the flesh as she strove to remain self-assured.

“Josh seems to have forgotten his manners.” The tall man to her left announced and flicked a look at Joshua. Joshua glared at him. “I’m Luke.”

“Grace.” She managed to croak in some semblance of normality. She felt her hand engulfed in a firm hand shake. When she had thought about this plan, she hadn’t got as far as considering her escape strategy

to get away, that was probably because she hadn't really believed she would go through with the plan in the first place. But she had.

The plan had been implemented and she was standing like a lummoX waiting for divine intervention to rescue her from this ridiculous predicament. A predicament she had engineered. Why was she constantly getting herself embroiled in outrageous situations with this man? She swore silently. This was the kind of thing Sasha would do, act before she thought the whole thing through. Grace on the other hand, was supposed to be boring, think everything through, plan every minute detail and then execute the agenda. So what had gone wrong today? Not just today either. This was becoming a habit where he was concerned. This man was making her take risks she would never have considered and he wasn't even aware that he was making her do it.

"I must be going." She mumbled to no-one in particular.

"Really?" Luke threw a questioning look at his friend. This was puzzling. Joshua was frowning, the woman looked appalled and the gathered throng were quietly trying to put the pieces together.

Joshua said nothing, he carefully watched her face and in particular her expressive eyes. Though he could feel her trying very hard to conceal her humiliation, in her eyes he managed to catch glimpses of mortification, alarm and something he couldn't quite label. In a few seconds his very world had changed. Everything had changed. One slightly primitive kiss, that's all it was. One kiss that had shattered his control, lost him his sense of rationality and dropped him into a morass of conflicting signals. His and hers. Lucid thought fled as he watched Grace catch her lower lip between her teeth.

"Well, Josh," Grace recognised Lysette's voice, but even if she hadn't, the woman's cloying perfume would have signaled her presence. "I never knew you could be so publicly demonstrative." The words were as sickly sweet as her perfume.

Defensively Grace folded her arms across her chest, "Hello, Mrs Vaz" Grace stressed the woman's married status, "That was my fault." She

smiled with affected candor, “We’ve been low profile for so long, I felt I had to up our visibility.” Grace mimicked the expression Zac had perfected. The docile puppy dog expression was turned on full pelt.

Luke watched this new turn of events with ever growing confusion. She and Joshua were an item? He’d bet his career it was a lie. They weren’t a couple, Luke knew that intuitively, but what was she playing at? And why was Joshua going along with it?

“Am I forgiven darling?” Grace purred provocatively at Joshua, not caring whether she was or wasn’t, and her eyes told him so. Only he was close enough to see the look she flashed him. Her voice and words said one thing, a message that was contradicted by the one delivered by her eyes. Her eyes told him to go to hell.

Joshua wasn’t too pleased. A tiny pulse hammered away at his jaw line. Oops. Time to go. Grace decided.

Well she had managed to live up to the bargain she had made with Zac. “I must go.” She inched backward. She flashed him a mocking smile when she was out of arm and harm’s reach, “I know you want me here,” Her lips twitched when she recognised laughter in his eyes as he shook off some of the passion. “But my friends” She stressed exuberantly “are waiting for me.” Her eyes were full of mischief as she moved a further two steps away. The humour in the situation began to seep through, he couldn’t hide his smile.

Luke found the whole situation intriguing, he was definitely going to have a chat with Joshua and Zac. Luke decided his best bet for further information was Zac, so he stepped behind Joshua, resolving to wait for an opportunity. He glanced around, trying to spot Zac.

Just before Grace sprinted away, a finishing touch sprang to mind. Quickly she opened her small shoulder bag. She took out her only ten dollar note, glanced up at him and moved toward him. She chuckled quietly at his unconscious reflex action; he stepped back only to bump against one of his friends.

“Sorry Luke” He apologised automatically as he glanced over his shoulder to see who he had cannoned into. Those few seconds gave Grace all the time she needed. She smiled and took two quick jaunty steps toward him again.

That worried Joshua. He braced himself, his chin came up, his shoulders squared and he held his breath as he waited for her next move. The question was; what was she going to do? Was she going to kiss him again? He doubted that. Though she looked a touch too assured. What else could she do to him? The woman was so damn unpredictable. She was just too capricious. He doubted he could handle another kiss. Not in public. In private, now that was another matter. In private she wouldn’t be the instigator of the kiss, but she sure as hell would know she had been kissed. He was temporarily lost in wonder. It was short-lived, her words brought him back to earth with a jarring bump.

“Honey,” His eyes widened at her tone and the word. “Here.” She made a great play of tucking the ten dollar note into his shirt pocket, and then got up on tip toe to whisper “Because you’re worth it.”

Luke didn’t know what to make of that little statement. This whole milieu was very, very interesting. His analytical brain began to sift through the events of the evening, but he was hard pressed to come up with a reasonable explanation for Joshua’s actions.

Fleetingly Grace kissed Joshua’s cheek and darted away from him, leaving him completely bemused. She didn’t turn to check on his expression. If she had stopped, she would have seen the dawning of a slow, lazy, frank smile. Luke watched his friend and his suspicions were confirmed. That love thing had struck. Joshua was a victim. He wondered if Joshua realized.

On Monday two days later, at work, Grace received a large bunch of flowers and a card with a scrawled ‘thank you’. They were from Zac. They brightened up the room, and every time she looked at them she smiled. Vivid memories of her behavior surfaced. She wondered if Joshua was remembering the occasion with the same degree of clarity

or amusement. She doubted it. Her escape had likely been a pleasant respite for him, but her behavior was probably something he had had to work hard to play down. He had most likely gone on to enjoy the party. Unlike her. She'd walked quickly to her car, pursued by Zac who seemed to be asking her questions, plying her with pleas to stay and laughing, all at one and the same time. Grace said nothing as she almost jogged to her car. He continued to beg.

"I'll see you around." She stated as she opened the car door.

He took her arm and prevented her from climbing into the car, "Grace." She waited. "I'm not sure what went on in the study." She shrugged but didn't maintain eye contact. That only convinced him that his brother had really upset her. "I apologise."

"What for? You didn't do anything."

"I invited you to this party." He said earnestly, "I didn't mean for you to get hurt. And certainly not by Josh." He shook his head as if he was still trying to figure out what was going on. "He isn't usually a stupid bastard."

Grace hesitated briefly, "It's ok." She smiled ruefully at him, "I think I got even, don't you?"

He nodded, then whooped and hugged her. "Yeah. Personally I'd have brained him. Still might." He tipped his head back so that he could look at her, and then he smiled.

"See you around." She repeated her earlier insincere words and tried to pull out of his embrace.

"Why is it that I think the chance of that is slim to nil?" His smile disappeared as he considered the likelihood of seeing her again. For a second he wanted to keep holding her. There was something about her that seem very fragile.

She smiled and pushed out of his embrace and then said without any malice, “We don’t exactly mix in the same circles do we?”

That startled Zac. It wasn’t the reason he’d have associated with her reticence to meet again. “Oh I don’t know.”

“I do.” She said with quiet dignity, “And your brother thinks so too. He’s right.” She glanced at the cars in the driveway. “I don’t belong here.” She murmured before she kissed his cheek, “I’ve really enjoyed meeting you Zac. If you are down my way again, drop in.” She smiled before adding, “Bye.”

“Bye.” Zac replied mechanically, wondering what she had meant by that statement about Josh. What had Joshua said to her?

She was half way home when she realized that there would be questions if she went directly home. She had only left her parents; home just over an hour ago. They wouldn’t be expecting her back quite so soon. She wasn’t ready to be questioned. She didn’t know the answers for a start. And she really wasn’t ready to face anyone. Not for a while.

She needed time to get her heart and brain back into synch. One was berating her the other was celebrating her actions. She was revisiting that kiss as if it had been her first. And that scared her. She pulled off the next exit and headed back into the city centre, deciding to go to the cinema. Anything to kill time. And sitting in the semi darkness would give her an opportunity to think up what to tell her parents.

They were asleep when she arrived at the house and Grace had to wait until the next morning to go through her lines. She thought she’d been convincing. She had deflected some penetrating questions and provided a flippant commentary on the party.

They weren’t fooled. Something had gone wrong last night. They asked about having a good time and got a response about the size of the pool, the decor of the house and the incredible garden. They asked about talking to new people and got a response about Lysette’s hair,

Mariah's dress and Zac's lunatic charm. They asked about Joshua and got flippancy and no sense whatsoever.

Something had definitely gone wrong at the party.

Ben was going to find out what, but not through Grace. She could put a clam to shame when she decided to keep silent. But he would find out.

Chapter 4

One week later Joshua paid Grace an unexpected visit. She was working in, what was laughingly referred to by the family as, the back lawn. The acre, that swept from the house to the beginning of a slight inclination that formed the base of the hills, was almost a paddock. A rough, uneven expanse of land. Part of it served as a vegetable garden and a few flower beds bordered the house and the path leading to the clothes line. But beyond the vegetable plot, the land had been left in its natural state, it was rough, clumpy and during the summer very dry. Occasionally a neighbouring farmer would ask to graze a few sheep there. It was an arrangement that suited the Carvalho family, for it kept the grass and tussock at a reasonable height. At the moment it was clumpy blades and tufts of long knee high dry grass.

The area between the house, the vegetable plot and the clothes line was also what passed for a backyard in these parts. Grace was pushing a dilapidated lawn mower over that grass when Joshua paid her his visit. He hadn't phoned to tell her he would be visiting. She would have dredged up an excuse not to be there, of that he was certain. His plan was to arrive unannounced and work from there. If she let him. Of that he was less certain. He had pensively reasoned the whole thing through. He'd start by apologising, if she'd let him. He wasn't expecting it to be easy or straightforward. But having her on his mind was not conducive to an efficient work load.

She was wearing very short cut-off jeans, a t-shirt that was knotted under her bra-less breasts, and on her feet were a pair of old trainers. Her hair, as usual, was in a pony tail, and as usual, there were several wisps that escaped the confines of the hair tie. She was sweating profusely. The wisps of jet black hair clung damply to her face and neck and her T-shirt was plastered wetly to her back. She had her walkman hitched on the waistband of her jeans and ear plugs fed an endless rendition of indy rock songs into her ears. Singing loudly, and slightly off key, she urged the lawn mower forward. The majority

within hearing distance would have considered her singing more akin to yelling. It certainly bore no resemblance to the melody.

Her mind was tuned into hear the music and her other senses had switched off as she carried out the mundane, but necessary, task of mowing the tough strip of grass. She had managed to mow almost half of it and had her back to the house as she made one more sweep up the slight incline. She was leaning heavily against the dilapidated mower as she pushed it steadily along. This was her way of working out, she had no need of a gym.

When Joshua rounded the corner of the house he was surprised into temporary immobility. He had planned his speech carefully. He had logically expected to find her reading or doing what ever it was that lecturers did on their day's off. He hadn't expected to find her pushing a rather ancient manual lawn mower, yelling loudly as she went. Of course he'd heard the racket as soon as he had stepped out of the car, but he hadn't expected it to be coming from her. And he had expected her to stop that racket to find out who had arrived. She seemed oblivious to his presence as she continued to holler loudly. He stopped and watched. It wasn't the sound that paralysed Joshua. What held him transfixed was the expanse of flesh that he had been imagining, dreaming and lusting over for the last week. How could a woman pushing a dilapidated lawn mower look so sexy? And those shorts were positively indecent. He sincerely hoped she didn't wear them in public or beyond the fence line of this property. As far as Joshua was concerned she looked sexy.

He knew she had shapely legs, but the first time he'd formed that impression, her legs had been clad in red denim. This time they were bare and never ending. The sight of her bare midriff was what his fingers remembered. His hands had felt, teased and held that skin only a week ago. His mind had completed the picture for him over the last few days and nights. He grew hard. Taking a deep breath he watched her move. The pony tail of jet black hair bobbed along as she propelled the heavy machine forward. The next time he touched her he was going to thread his fingers through that hair, and hold onto a fistful as he made love to her. He swallowed.

One kiss. That's all he'd had. It had taken his logical, sensible world and tilted it. Not just tilted, but shaken, rocked, and completely up ended it. He pulled himself together, the last thing he wanted was for her to turn around and find him slathering over her and a decrepit lawn mower.

"Grace." He finally called, when he realized that he was aroused watching a woman mow a lawn.

Nothing changed. She didn't turn around. She hadn't stopped singing either. His lips twitched as he listened to the slightly off key yelled rendition of a recent hit. Then he noticed the walkman. A smile formed on his lips as he came to a decision. No point wasting a good opportunity to be a voyeur, and she'd be turning around soon enough. He smiled as his brain told him he was a coward stalling for time. Joshua sat down on the fourth step by the back door. He waited. She had almost reached the top edge of the patch of lawn. She heaved it one more time and finished the final few inches before the clothesline. Any minute now, she'd turn around, any minute. He felt his heart pick up pace. Anticipating her reaction. Getting used to his own.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Grace suddenly felt disconcerted. It was as if she was being watched. It unnerved her. She slowed to a halt, not quite finishing the strip of green, her eyes scanned the immediate horizon. Slowly, she scanned the fields ahead of her, followed the slope of the hills, then she looked up the hill. Nothing. For as far as she could see, no-one. She half expected to see her farming neighbour. No-one. A tiny tremor shivered down her spine. Decidedly uncomfortable, she gave the horizon one last scan. No-one.

Slowly, she turned her head and looked over her shoulder, and jumped visibly with shock when she saw Joshua. She hadn't really been expecting to find anyone sitting there watching her, not on her back doorstep. Not looking as if he were totally comfortable and relaxed, whilst she looked a state. And she certainly wasn't expecting to see Joshua. Not in real life, not in her life. She only saw him in her thoughts every day and in her dreams most nights. Maybe that was all this was; a mirage. A very life like mirage. Ever hopeful, she blinked. No, he was still there. Shit. She swore silently. He was even smiling.

Thoughts raced frantically through her mind as her heart hammered, a combination of the fright he'd given her, the thrill she felt at seeing him and the expectation of imminent trouble. Her palms got clammy.

Now what? She wondered, as he continued to just sit there and watch. He seemed so at ease, as if he lived here and was just sitting out in the afternoon sun, enjoying the view. That brought her down with a jolt.

He had a brilliant view at his home, in a salubrious area, with the in-crowd, one that she didn't belong to. His crowd. Shock was replaced by practiced reserve. The old Grace was back. With deliberate reticence, she slowly removed her ear phones and switched off the tape. Deliberately slow she levered the lawnmower off the strip she'd done, turned it around and pushed it primly and ponderously back down toward the house. Time to face the music. She could handle this, she had handled similar situations when she was at school. She was older now, more sophisticated, more poised and more experienced, of course she could handle this. Just remain passively indifferent. Just a touch of restraint, that's all she needed to get through this, a touch of restraint.

She knew that she had behaved recklessly at his party, something she had been trying to fathom out for the last week, but she also knew that she would pay for it at some point. She had counted on it being a long way in the future. Fifty years from now would have been great, a nice safe option, when he'd hopefully have forgotten the incident. Some hope. He was here, ready to collect his dues. Shit. She muttered as she left the lawn mower propped up against the corner post of the clothes line and walked toward him with her arms crossed in front of her chest. Defensively but decisively she moved toward him. When she reached him, Grace jammed her hands into her back pockets, unaware of how the action drew attention to her chest. "Mr De Souza." She said ultra politely, her eyes cool, her features schooled to reflect reserve and indifference. Her posture tense.

"Grace." He mimicked her tone, but his eyes were full of suppressed laughter.

“What do you want?” She asked bluntly, momentarily discarding her strategy to stay aloof. She could see the laughter gleaming in his eyes, while she found nothing remotely funny. The fact that she had so easily slipped beyond the sanctuary of reticence made her cranky.

“You.” Came the equally candid, unexpectedly teasing, reply.

That startled Grace. Her eyes widened in shocked confusion, then she revived enough to say, “Look, Mr De Souza...” She was in trouble, he was getting to her again, without even working at it. She willed herself to remain unflappable. But his next sentence didn’t help her cause.

He grinned at her, “It was ‘darling’ a week ago.” Her equilibrium shattered. Joshua breathed a silent sigh of relief, and continued to work hard to keep her on the back foot. From his limited meetings with her, Joshua knew that his best strategy would be to keep her guessing. She thought she knew him, she had certainly read him well at his party.

“I suppose you’re here to pay me back.” There was such an air of inevitability in her voice that he had to laugh.

“Pay you?” He queried boldly, and smiled broadly, “You still owe me. That kiss was worth more than ten dollars.” He continued jovially.

Grace relaxed a fraction, he seemed quite laid back, she took her hands out of her pockets. “Look, Mr De...”

“I liked ‘honey’ better. Or if you could, darling would be perfect.” His eyes twinkled. She seemed to be coping well so far. She hadn’t thrown him off the property, she was a fraction cool, and too remote, but he could work with that.

“At what age do men stop being stupid bastards?” She flashed back.

“A trick question?” His eyebrows rose. OK, so she wasn’t taking his teasing as well as he’d hoped.

“Don’t play games with me Mr De Souza.” She said quietly, folded her arms across her chest, and once more went into defensive mode. “You may have been right about a lot of things you said, but having the hide of an elephant was not one of them.”

Green eyes instantly sobered as Joshua recognised his words. His whole demeanour became earnest, this was it, his opening to apologise. “Grace, I’m sorry.” He told her sincerely.

She tipped her head to the side as she interrupted. “Did Zac press you into this?”

“Zac?” Why would Zac press him to make this apology. Had she told him what had happened in the study? He and Zac had had a full scale, almost physical row. But Zac didn’t appear to know what had been said between Grace and Joshua.

“Yes. Did he tell you to apologise?”

“Yes.” Joshua agreed. “But I’m here because I need to apologise, I was way out of line.” He flicked her a measuring look, to see if she was still listening to him. “It’s no excuse, I know, I just didn’t stop to think before I spoke. I was so bloody furious.” His eyes met and held hers. She said nothing. “I want to apologise. What I said was appalling. I really am sorry.”

Still she said nothing.

He knew he’d have to explain, he just hadn’t counted on it being so early in their conversation. Oh, well, better to get it out of the way, after all he had more important things to sort out. He decided on the honest approach.

“It was obvious why you were there. But I’d only just heard the rumours about Lysette embroiling me in her shenanigans and then you arrive. I’d had enough of women thinking they could manipulate me.” He shuffled nervously, not sure whether to tell her that his reaction to her fazed him. “I’m sorry. I know what I said hurt you. I didn’t mean

to. I was saying things before I'd actually thought them through. I was angry and I dumped it on you. I am very sorry. ” He waited for her response. He kept his eyes trained on her face, hoping to catch a glimpse of her eyes, he could sometimes read her thoughts in those eyes, but she kept her head averted from his gaze.

“It’s ok” She whispered finally, shrugged, confused by the turn of events. An apology was the last thing she had expected. It also destroyed her strategy of dealing with the situation. How could she stay indifferent, let alone hostile, when he was being so nice. And, so honest.

“No it isn’t o.k.” He disagreed emphatically, “What I said was cruel and completely wrong.”

Grace brushed aside tendrils of drying hair. “I’m sorry I hit you.” She whispered quietly, sensing that this was an opportune time to make her own apologies.

“I deserved it.”

“No-one deserves violence.” She corrected him firmly.

“O.k., o.k. I didn’t come here to argue.” He held up his hands in surrender, “How about we agree to mutually forgive each other for our out of character behaviour?” The bantering was back in his voice.

She considered him, tried to keep her feelings from showing. But her heart hammered frenetically and she was sure he would hear it. This was crazy. He was being nice to her. He was teasing her. There had to be a catch.

“Does this mean you’ll offer me a coffee?” He pushed his luck.

She hesitated for a brief second. To Joshua it seemed like eternity.

“Sure.”

She kicked off her trainers as she stepped barefoot past him and onto the step. She unknotted the t-shirt and her midriff disappeared under the shapeless t-shirt which hung loosely and well past the length of her shorts. Joshua was momentarily disappointed. Then relieved. She was arousing him without touching him. He followed her into the house. He glanced around as he stepped into the room. The last time he'd visited this house he hadn't been invited in. He'd brought her home from the airport, deposited her cases on the verandah and beaten a hasty retreat. It seemed to him that he had been hasty about a great many things. Too many.

The back door of the small timbered cottage led to a small laundry area and two other doors. The left door led to a shower, Joshua and Grace stepped past it and took the door directly ahead and walked straight into the kitchen. It was a large sunny room with a small breakfast counter bisecting the room into a kitchen and dining section. There were four wooden stools tucked beneath the counter and Grace indicated for him to take one as she walked toward the electric jug.

Joshua glanced around as he perched on the stool and in silence Grace filled the electric jug with some water from the tap. The kitchen walls were painted white and the floor boards and units were polished stained wood. The double drainer sink and dish washer were by the back door as you walked into the room, the outside wall was flanked with window sill level units, the adjacent wall had the stove, more units and the start of the breakfast bar. The surfaces were clear. A vase of tiny white roses was the only item on the work surface. Pots and pans hung from a metal rack suspended from the ceiling and knick knacks sat on the window sill. It was a small room, but uncluttered it looked slightly more spacious.

On the other side of the breakfast bar was an open doorway, it led to a lounge room. Next to that was another door. It was shut. Grace strolled to the shut door and opened it. It was a small pantry. She retrieved a tin of biscuits and placed the tin of chocolate chip cookies on the counter in front of him. "Help yourself."

"Home made?" He queried when he opened the tin and found palm sized biscuits with enormous chunks of chocolate in them. They

looked homespun. He doubted whether a company would pour this amount of chocolate into one biscuit.

“Sasha makes them.” Grace told him, as she stood with her back to him waiting for the kettle to boil. “How do you take your coffee?” She turned to see him munch into the large biscuit.

“Black, no sugar.” He said between munching.

“Just like your brother.” She murmured, but he heard her.

“He’s been here?” Joshua wondered when that could have been.

“No, the Uni,” Grace told him as she spooned in some powdered instant coffee. “Caused quite a stir I can tell you. Did wonders for my reputation too.”

“Sounds like Zac.” He took a another munch of the cookie, it melted deliciously, he savoured the effect, home baking was a rarity in his house, “Sometimes I..”

The sound of a phone ringing interrupted him mid sentence, “Excuse me.” Grace said automatically as she went to answer the insistent ring.

She was gone a few minutes. Joshua helped himself to another biscuit.

When she returned there was an added sparkle in her eyes.

“Good news?” He couldn’t help but ask.

Grace nodded and treated him to the most enchanting smile he’d ever faced. It left him feeling winded. “Brilliant news.” She released a happy sigh, as she came into the room and perched on a stool. “Briar is on her way home.” She sounded as if all she had ever wanted for Christmas had just been given to her.

“Briar?” He said spontaneously, although he recollected that it was the name of another sister, he wasn’t sure whether she was the middle one or the youngest. “Where’s she been?” He’d made his coffee and had poured hot water into her mug too. It had a herbal tea bag. Grace rescued it before it could stew too long.

“My sister,” Grace enlightened him smugly as she placed the tea bag on the saucer, “has been all over the place, any rough spot you can think of, she’s been there.” She glanced at him and realized that he was still looking confused. “She’ll have completed two years with the UN. Just finished in Liberia.” Grace informed him proudly.

“The UN?” He was impressed.

“She’s a medic.” She hugged the mug of herbal tea between her palms, smiling as she said, “The most gifted, beautiful doctor in the whole world.” She finished with a flurry. He grinned at the obvious bias. Unabashed, she smiled broadly when she saw his grin. “She is.” She reached for the cookie jar, “Here, help yourself.”

“I already did, several times.” He owned up.

“So who’s counting.”

He took a biscuit. “Three girls in your family, right?” He sipped his coffee, and waited for her to answer. She nodded as she cupped her mug and momentarily reviewed the past in silence. “You’re the oldest.” He prodded and waited.

She nodded, “Then Briar, then Sasha.” She tacked on automatically as she reached for a massive cookie.

“Ah, the one who knows a way to a man’s heart is through chocolate chip cookies. So where is this woman and do I take it she’s a chef?”

“She’s in Otago, Dunedin actually. Just doing her Post doc.”

He whistled, “You all have brains as well as beauty?”

It was meant to be rhetorical, but Grace answered it anyway. She placed her mug on the breakfast counter. “Beauty?” She chortled, “Even with her dress sense, Sasha only has to walk into a room and guys fall all over themselves as they stampede to be the first to chat her up.” She smiled happily, “And Briar,” she shook her head ruefully, beaming as she remembered her sisters, “She thinks that looking like a Vogue model is a hindrance in her line of work. You should see the extremes they both go to, just to play down their appearance.” Grace stopped speaking, suddenly realising that in her good mood she had let down her guard and she was talking too much. “Anyway, I’m sure you haven’t come here to discuss my family.” She shifted awkwardly past him and reached for her mug of tea. Fortunately he moved away. Slowly, imperceptibly she relaxed, although she finally acknowledged to herself that he made her nervous.

“No, that wasn’t the purpose of the visit, but it was nice to get those snapshots.” He stopped smiling and his tone was serious as he said, “I came to apologise. I never meant to hurt you.” He took his mug to the sink and rinsed it. He did it automatically, as if he was comfortable in her company. Grace thought he looked so at home as he glanced around for a tea towel. Grace handed him the floral cotton sheet that hung on a peg by the door. It seemed such a natural thing to do. She felt part of a contradictory dilemma, nervous of him and natural with him.

“You’ve apologised.” She reminded him, as she backed away again, putting distance between them.

He had his back to her as he placed the cup back in the cupboard he’d seen her get the mugs from earlier, “And I came to ask for a favour.” He squared his shoulders, she noticed the action and braced herself for the words she knew were to come. His shirt stretched and she found herself focussing on his broad back. Waiting, waiting. Joshua wasn’t aware of her reaction, he was too busy preparing himself for one of the biggest gambles of his life. Silently and mentally he ran through his plan of action again and then he turned to face her.

From the look on his face, she could tell that he was having difficulty saying what he had to say. She decided to help him out, "Like keep out of your way." She responded softly, "I'm a quick learner." she added when he still hadn't spoken. "That shouldn't be too hard." Briefly she held his stare, and then nerves took over, "I don't usually make such an ass of myself, but around you I seem to be making a habit of it," She knew she was rambling, but the way he was looking at her made her loose track. She walked over to the sink, the pretence of washing up her cup did nothing to stop her babbling. "It's ok. Normally, I'm quite well behaved." She rinsed the cup. "I know you don't think so, but I was invited to your party, so I came. It was a mistake. I won't be repeating it." She put the clean cup on the drainer, and turned to face him. He was watching her intently. So she rattled on, "So, yes, I should be able to keep out of your way. You should have just phoned, I...."

"Grace." He interrupted her and his tone had made her freeze in mid action. "Would you come to a River boat party with me?"

She was rendered speechless for a few seconds. His lips quirked at her. She looked bewildered. She gradually got over the shock, closed her mouth, and pulled together some degree of composure, but her eyes remained puzzled. Was he having her on? She looked directly into his eyes. He looked straight back. Sanguine jade eyes met and held suspicious deep brown eyes. Her forehead furrowed, "What?"

"Will you come to a party with me?"

"Why?"

He couldn't really be asking her out, could he? No, no, that was impossible. The last thing he'd want. Go out with her? Fat chance. No, there was something else behind this. But what? Some plan to get even? No. Her mind raced on and on as she thought about his unexpected question. Why was he asking her out? He came to stand in front of her.

“I’d like to get to know you.” He made it sound plausible. Almost conceivable, but, not probable enough. She recalled the party, and instantly she was incensed.

“Get real.” She stormed, when her over sensitive brain had assured her that this was about as likely as a whale walking across a desert. “A week ago I was a flea infested termite as far as you and your friends were concerned. Come to think of it, you’d have preferred a termite.” She worked hard to get herself back in control. “It would have been less work dealing with a termite. Instead of trying to throw me out you could have simply stamped on me.” She banked her fury as she added unhappily. “Come to think of it, you did.” She took a deep breath as she fought for composure. “I’m not that gullible.” She stepped past him and headed for the tea towel, muttering angrily, “Stupid may be, but my memory is pretty good.”

He followed her. Plan A wasn’t going down too well. She was still hurting from his tongue lashing of a week ago. She clearly hadn’t forgiven or forgotten. “I don’t think you’re gullible or stupid.” He told her realising that he’d blown it.

She pivoted quickly, it brought her within two inches of him, and then she snapped, “Then don’t treat me like a fool.” Why the hell was she so mad? So he was coming on over the top, but it was no big deal. No big deal at all. Her eyes flashed sending furious sparks flaming toward him.

She was beautiful, but she was also very, very, angry. Joshua recognised the signals. He’d seen them before, just before she’d hit him. He moved out of range. With the space of a few feet between them, he carefully and quickly rethought plan A. Cautiously he considered his next few words. He took his time. He walked even further away from her to stand by the open back door. He needed something that was akin to emotional blackmail because she certainly wasn’t buying his honesty.

With his back to her he said, “It’s a favour, to Craig actually.”

It was a lie. A little white lie, but he hoped it would work. She clearly wasn't buying the line that he was interested in her, yet, that was the truth. He was. He was interested. Seriously interested. In fact he'd never been more serious in his entire life. If only he'd realized that before he'd let his mouth go into overdrive at his party, if only...

Grace deflated like a stabbed balloon. It would be, wouldn't it. Half of her wanted him to plead with her. She wanted him to tell her that he really was attracted to her. Her pessimistic half reminded her that she wasn't in his league. She recalled his party. Damn but it hurt. He could have pretended he liked her, just for a while. Just for the date. Even though she had expected him to have an ulterior motive it still hurt to hear it. She felt her eyes smart. She was not going to cry. Not now, later maybe, but not now. Please not now. It wasn't a big deal. Hell, it wasn't even a small deal, it was nothing. Nothing. So why was she struggling to hold back tears? She wasn't a weepy sort. She never cried. Never. It wasn't as if she was short of dates. So why was this so painful?

"I'm tired of doing people favours." She murmured in a gloomy whisper. Her body language conveyed dejection. She struggled to put the whole situation into perspective.

"I told Craig I'd ask you." Another white lie. "He thinks it could convince Lysette." He shrugged. He tried to make it sound realistic. To his own ears it seemed like a woefully inadequate reason to ask someone on a date. To her ears it sounded as if he had been forced into it.

"What about you?" She got herself under control.

"Me?" He shrugged his shoulders, "What about me?"

"You love her."

He shook his head before he spoke. "I've never loved her."

“Then why were you getting drunk at her wedding?” She questioned indignantly. “I saw you. You were upset when she got married.”

“Because I knew she was marrying Craig for the wrong reasons. And without it looking like a case of sour grapes, or even arrogance, there was nothing I could do about it.” He sounded so matter of fact, he almost convinced Grace. Almost.

“I don’t see why it has to be me.” Graced changed track.

He turned around, and by this time, Grace had herself under control, there was no outward evidence of her inner urge to cry.

“A week ago we gave a very public demonstration of, er, our affection for each other. Prior to that you were with me at the wedding, we left together and early. If I turned up with another woman, she’d just think I am playing the field. If I showed up with you,...” He let the sentence trail off and watched the effect his words had on Grace. He noticed every nuance she tried to hide. He had a feeling that she was about to cry. But he dismissed the notion. That wasn’t her style. He remembered her in his study. Argumentative. Obstinate. Feisty. But no tears.

“I don’t go to Goan parties, I’m a disaster at them.” Grace prevaricated with a hint of theatrics.

“It isn’t a Goan party. It’s hosted every year by one of the companies I do business with.” He could bat down that objection easily. “It’s to raise funds for charity, the homeless actually.” That was the truth. She saw it his eyes.

“I can’t.” She dropped eye contact.

“Why?” He crowded her personal space by coming up close.

“I can’t.” She inched away.

“Don’t you believe in the sacrament of marriage?” Using his index finger he tipped her chin up, so that she had to look at him and his eyes held her gaze.

“Yes, I do.” She admitted then twisted out of his grip. Quickly she moved further away, she kept the breakfast bar between them.

“Enough to help your friend try to keep his marriage intact?” He came round the bench and stood beside her.

“This has nothing to do with that.” She backed against the wall. Trapped with the bench beside her, the wall behind her, he stood in front of her and braced an arm on the bench and wall. Effective. Very effective. She retreated and found herself pressed against the wall.

“Hasn’t it?” He asked softly.

“No.” It was the merest whisper. But he heard the word.

“Convince me.”

“You’re crowding me.” She complained. He removed his arm from the bench. But he didn’t move away. Firm but gentle fingers cupped her chin, forcing her to look at him again.

“Why can’t you go to the party with me Grace?” His words were gentling, encouraging. His eyes were hopeful.

“Pride.” She whispered woefully.

“Pride?” He repeated, milling the word over in his mind.

“And embarrassment.”

That threw him. “You’d be embarrassed to be seen with me?” He stepped back in surprise. Embarrassed to be with him. Embarrassed? He shook his head as if that would clear the sudden haze.

Grace smiled at his reaction. He looked poleaxed by the thought. He actually believed she’d be embarrassed to be seen with him. “No, of course not.” She denounced, as if it was his fault, “But I did make a total ass of myself at your party.” She reminded him ruefully and couldn’t help some of her chagrin from showing. Relief blazed through his eyes, Grace chuckled. He really wasn’t as confident as he made out. That reminded her of the confident facade she often employed. Perhaps they had something in common after all.

“If that’s all,” and Grace could hear the relief in his voice, “it isn’t a problem.” He hauled her to him, resting his hip against the bench, he laced his arms around her waist saying, and “The only people from the party will be Craig, Lysette, Zac and Luke.” Joshua was appeased. It wasn’t him. For a while there he thought he’d blown it. Grace extricated herself from his embrace and reviewed her earlier notion. Nothing wrong with his self confidence. That had been one smooth move. She’d barely registered his movement and before she could blink he had her in his arms. Very smooth.

It was his turn to smile. “Grace, why are you always running away from me?” He teased as he felt the tension drain away.

She ignored the remark, “OK.” She told him, “I’ll go.”

Once more, she surprised him but he laughed happily at her. “Are you ever predictable?” She smiled provocatively and shrugged. “I’ll pick you up around eight, ok, next Saturday?” He told her.

“Fine.” But having agreed to go, she was now having second thoughts. What had she done? So much for keeping out of his way. Joshua could see her inner debate and knew she was building up to changing her mind. He preempted that.

“You can’t back out now Grace.” He stated firmly but gently.

“I wasn’t going to.” She prevaricated and threw in a ruse to cover her tracks. “I was just wondering whether I had anything suitable to wear.”

Dark brown eyebrows rose in subtle judgment and he poked his tongue into his cheek to stop him saying something stupid.

“I mean, you haven’t said whether it is really formal or just formal.” She tailed off lamely, knowing that he had rumbled her lie. Subterfuge had never been her forte.

“Black tie.” He enlightened her affably. He could afford to be affable, she had agreed to go on a date with him. There was hope for him yet. He just had to make sure he didn’t blow it.

“Oh.” She threw him a synthetic smile. Joshua grinned at her.

“I must be going.” He said, “And you still have a lawn to mow.” He reminded her as he walked to the door.

Grace snorted “Typical,” She challenged indulgently. “I thought you’d at least offer to do it.” She shuffled her feet back into her trainers. Joshua stopped and turned back to face her.

“I was going to, but I figured your feminist ideals would prevent you from accepting.” He charged amicably, waited for her to join him on the pathway.

“Well you could have offered.” She feigned reproach as they walked together toward the front of the house.

“Would you like me to do the lawn?” His eyes glinted in teasing question as they reached his car.

“Not now, thanks.” She told him flippantly, coming to stand beside his car.

He laughed, “I’ll see you Saturday.” He pulled open the door and got in. Then Joshua left, smiling as he drove off down the drive. It might not have been his original plan, but it had worked. She was going on a date with him. That was the crucial part of plan A. Now to work on his next strategy.

Grace watched him leave, her lower lip caught between her teeth as she worried about the date. Why the hell had she agreed to go out with him? So far their every encounter had been disastrous. Unmitigated disasters, in which she was usually the one left emotionally shattered. Why would she put herself through that again?

By Tuesday morning, Joshua was tired of waiting for Saturday to arrive. Normally a patient man he found waiting one week to see her again, was one week too long. Much too long. He needed to see her now.

Finally he phoned a firm in Hamilton. He was in the middle of some consultancy work for them. It didn't take much to organise a visit. Twenty minutes later, he had the first phase of his plan in place. He had arranged to meet one of the company directors at eleven the next morning.

Now he had an excuse to see her, he was in the area, on business. After all, Zac had been to her office, surely she wouldn't mind seeing Joshua. He grinned to himself. Why was he having to find excuses to see her? Why was he so scared she might not want to see him? Why couldn't he just phone her and ask her out to lunch? Joshua doubted it would have been that simple. She would have made it difficult. He was going to go for the casual, just passing by routine.

He had his arguments and reasons rehearsed and ready when he drove to the University. It was a wide spread campus, with several gates to the site. Which one did he take to get to her building? If Zac could find it so could he.

Finally he settled for the gymnasium car park. He asked a couple of students for directions and realized that he was at the opposite end to the building he needed. Typical. He asked about parking. They told him all the car parks at the opposite end filled early, rarely had available spaces and it would probably be a good idea to leave his car and walk. It would only take him fifteen minutes, if that, and it would probably take that long to find a car parking space. He walked.

The campus was spacious and the buildings modern. Following the directions they gave him, he walked past the Marae on campus and then turned right to walk up a brief incline to Grace's office. He spotted the building at the crest of the hill and began to mentally rehearse the next few minutes.

The automatic doors slid open when he was inches away from them and Joshua stepped into an open plan foyer. Joshua glanced speculatively at the environment. Very sparsely furnished, clean lines, a few startling modern prints in chrome frames.

“Can I help you?” A voice behind the reception desk called enthusiastically as soon as he was within hearing distance.

“Yes,” His lips curved into a smile as he strode toward the desk. “I’d like to see Dr Carvalho. Grace Carvalho.”

He could almost hear the penny drop into place as the woman beamed at him. She murmured something that sounded vaguely like, “She has all the luck.”

“Sorry?” Joshua cocked an eyebrow at her.

“You reminded me of another guy who was here a couple of weeks back, you don’t happen to know Zac?”

Joshua smiled in dawning comprehension, “Yes, my kid brother.”

“Cute guy.” The girl told him candidly as she dialed Grace’s extension number and waited for the reply. “Grace had to practically pries him away from half our students.” She exaggerated and grinned. “I don’t think they’ve forgiven her as yet.”

“Sounds like the kind of thing that would happen to Zac.”

The phone was obviously answered, for the reception removed her hand from the mouthpiece and said, “Oh, Hi Sheena. Grace put her phone through to you?” The receptionist listened attentively to the explanation, “No, it’s just that there is a guy here to see her,” she held her palm over the mouth piece, and mouthed “What’s your name again?”

“Joshua De Souza.” Joshua was surprised by her casual approach.

“I’ll ask.” She covered the mouthpiece again, “Do you have an appointment?” Joshua shook his head. She repeated the information to Sheena, “Will she be long?” Another hesitation, “Yeah, I see, ok.” She paused and her brow furrowed, “Yeah, I’ll ask him.” Once again she covered the mouth piece, “She’s got a student with her at the moment, but they’ve just called for a taxi. Can you wait or are you in a rush?”

“I’ll wait.”

“He’ll wait.” She informed Sheena, “Yeah, ok, bye.” She replaced the phone and pointed to the chairs and table, “Take a seat. She said they’d be through in about five minutes or so.”

Joshua took a seat and he glanced at his watch, just gone one.

A few minutes later the door opened and a man sauntered in calling cheerily to the reception, “Someone wanted a taxi.”

The receptionist was about to answer when Grace and a young girl came through another set of doors. The girl had her head bowed and Grace had a protective arm along her shoulder as she ushered the girl toward the exit.

“Err, Grace.” The receptionist called hesitantly, just as they walked past the desk. Automatically Grace turned to her, “There’s a guy waiting for you.” The receptionist indicated with her head and Grace turned to look over her shoulder.

Joshua read the astonishment in her eyes before her voice could convey the impression. “Joshua? What are you doing here?”

He walked over to her, smiling diffidently. “Thought, as I was in the area, we could do lunch.”

He saw her shoulders slump as she offered a rueful smile. He’d reached her and the girl by then. The young woman kept her head

down and her face averted from him. Perhaps she'd been crying, he thought, as he turned his attention back to Grace.

"Not a good time?" He asked as his eyes flicked meaningfully toward the student.

"No, 'fraid not." He saw the regret in her eyes and was sure his eyes mirrored the same sentiments. "I'm just on my way out, I could be at least an hour." She explained.

"I'll wait." He said firmly.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea." She looked at the girl. "It may be a bit longer."

"O.k., look, I'll give you till 2.15 and if you aren't here, I'll head back to Auckland. I was down here on business anyway."

She was really tempted, he could see the revelation in her eyes. So he pushed the point home, he wasn't going to give in so easily. "We could get a few details ready for Saturday." He wanted to spend more than a few minutes talking with her.

She surrendered, "O.k., wait till 2.15, you can use my office. If I'm not back," she shrugged eloquently, "well, thanks for the thought." She turned back to the receptionist. "I've left my phone through to Sheena o.k.?" The receptionist nodded and smiled sympathetically.

It was only as the young girl looked up to see if her path was clear that Joshua saw the livid bruising on her cheek, temple and eye. One side of her face was disfigured. He was shocked mute by what he saw. Grace and the girl climbed into the taxi. He watched them, saw the way the girl gingerly got into the car. The girl was clearly in agony. That bruise to her face couldn't be all that she had suffered. He noticed the way Grace fussed over the girl. Hell, what was going on?

He flicked a look of enquiry at the receptionist. "What happened to her face?"

The young woman who had earlier been so chatty, just shrugged regretfully and said nothing.

"Looks like she's been in the wars." He was talking aloud.

"Or got in the way of a man's fist or foot." The receptionist muttered beneath her breath.

Joshua turned startled eyes to her, having only just caught a glimmer of the whispered words. "What?"

But she didn't answer him, instead she turned to answer the phone.

Joshua walked back to his car and having taken directions drove his car round to the other side of the campus. It took him a while to get a park space, but he had plenty of time. He returned to the reception area with his lap top and began to set up for work.

"Hey" The receptionist interrupted him, just before he could settle down to concentrate on one particular task. "Grace said to use her office."

"It's o.k."

"No, no, come on, I'll get Sheena to open up for you." She was already dialing through to Sheena. "Don't think I could cope with another ruckus, your brother was quite enough thanks. And the students would never forgive Grace the second time!" She grinned. Joshua reciprocated the grin.

Within minutes Joshua found himself in Grace's office. He spent some time studying her environment, noticing the little knick knacks she had scattered all over the place, mainly pottery, a few sea shells and several photographs.

He studied the photographs for a long while. Group photographs of her with her sisters, or the whole family. Not the most attractive photographs in terms of aesthetics or in terms of appearances. But they were plainly representative of fun times and good memories. And they made him smile.

There was only one posed family photo. From that studio shot taken, Joshua guessed, when they were teenagers, he was able to see that Grace had not lied when she had described her sisters.

They were stunning. Both were taller than Grace. They were more than likely to draw their fair share of male attention, of that he was sure. Zac would die to meet them. That made him smile again. He studied the two women more closely. One sister could definitely have made it as a covergirl. The camera loved her. High cheek bones, smiling mouth, almond shaped eyes, perfectly proportioned nose, a heart shaped face and legs that were endless.

Joshua looked at the photographs again and again, gaining clues.

Eventually he settled down to work and was so engrossed that he failed to notice the time. So it was gone 2.30 when Grace walked in and found him there.

She smiled wanly. She had been surprised and unexpectedly pleased when the receptionist said he was still there.

“Thanks for waiting.” She said quietly, the fatigue clearly evident in her voice. She came in and closed the door. “You must be starving.”

Joshua got to his feet and came round the desk, “Yeah, you could say that.” He wanted to hug her. Her eyes were clouded with worry and she was gnawing subconsciously at her lower lip.

“I’ve got a lecture at five and a seminar at 6.15.” She told him regretfully as she pulled herself together.

“You aren’t prepared?” He moved closer toward her. She threw him a look that told him she was affronted that he would think she didn’t prepare for her classes in advance. “Then there isn’t a problem. We can get a bite to eat and I’ll have you back here in time.”

Again the regretful smile. “Now is not a good time.” He’d reached her by then and he could see the stress and the anxiety in her eyes.

“The girl?” He asked gently and slowly eased Grace into his arms. She didn’t fight him. Grace nodded, took a deep breath as she fought down the urge to cry. He didn’t even stop to think. Joshua wrapped her tightly to him and was soothingly rubbing her tensely held back. Gradually as he murmured soft words, she began to crumple. He could feel her body shake. She was fighting hard not to weep.

“I’m o.k.” She mumbled into his chest.

“Humour me.” He held her.

A few silent minutes later she said, “I’m ok.” He tipped his head to look down at her. She reluctantly pushed out of his arms, nodding, and he let her go. “I’m fine.” She brushed errant locks of hair off her cheek, tucking them behind her ear. She was buying time, trying to get her equilibrium back.

“Come on.” He took her arm and reached for her hand bag at the same time, “Lets go to lunch.”

“No.” She protested, but it was half hearted.

“Grace you won’t be in any fit state by the time you lecture this afternoon, not unless you get some time out now.”

“I can’t talk about Saturday. Not just now.” She wrapped her arms around her, as if holding herself together on the outside would hold it together on the inside.

“We don’t have to. But you need time out. Come on.”

She was ushered out of the door and down the corridor before she could protest again. They walked past the receptionist and Joshua told her they were going to lunch. The woman nodded in silent understanding.

Joshua hadn’t noticed the man following them to his car until they had actually reached the Jag. Then the man sprang out. A big guy, and aggressive.

“Fucking bitch.” He yelled, as he advanced purposefully toward Grace and took no notice of Joshua. “Slut.” He raved in rabid fury as he came nearer. “Bloody dykes.”

Joshua instinctively put himself between the man and Grace. His body acting as a barrier.

“Joshua.” Grace interrupted quickly, seeing the way he readied himself to take on the man who was threatening her. “Don’t touch him. The police are dealing with it.” She explained quickly. “Let’s just go. Come on, get in the car.” She urged plaintively, taking his arm and tugging him toward the car door.

“He won’t be near all the time.” The man snarled ominously as he dogged their footsteps. Grace pulled Joshua along, holding onto his forearm desperately, tugging him away when he showed every inclination to stop and deal with the taunts. “I’ll fuck your brains out when he’s gone.” The thug harassed confidently, but on noting Joshua turn and determinedly shrug off Grace’s restraining hand, he took off.

“Joshua. No.” Grace yelled, but Joshua was already in pursuit. They raced in between parked cars, Joshua gaining on the man. Running through the gaps between several cars the man darted past a reversing car, Joshua was forced to stop. He watched as the man vaulted over a small wooden fence that provided the boundary to the car park and a tree lined road. Joshua watched him disappear from sight, and then

turned and still trying to catch his breath walked back to face Grace. That was the last time anyone threatened her he vowed silently.

Grace glared at him furiously.

“Who was that?” He asked as he reached her side. He was pretty shaken up. And coldly angry.

“That’s the girl’s father.” She snapped.

“Why’s he mad at you?” And for that matter why are you mad at me? He thought silently as he watched her eyes flash angrily.

“I reported him to the Police this morning, got his daughter into a safe house, a woman’s refuge, and went round to see his wife.”

“He hit that girl.” The truth dawned. Noticing that they were drawing attention to themselves, he opened the passenger door and helped Grace into the car. He walked briskly around the bonnet and clambered into his seat. He was furious, until he noticed her hands were shaking. She was trembling as she tried to buckle her seat belt. He took her hands in his and just held them, his eyes conveying strength. They sat like that for a few seconds. Then he buckled her seatbelt. He was appalled as he recalled the girl’s face. “What had he used?”

“His feet and a softball bat.” She whispered.

It was just as well that the car was at a standstill, for Joshua was stunned into incredulity, immobility and silence. The man he’d just seen was at least twice the size of the girl he’d seen earlier, both in height and girth.

“He wants her working, not studying these airy fairy ideas with women who like women.” Grace repeated the excuse his wife had given her that afternoon. “We’d better get going.” She reminded.

Joshua was lost for words. He set the car in motion and they drove the two short miles in silence. They reached a set of traffic lights and he took the opportunity to turn and look at Grace. “Are you ok?” She was still trembling.

“Fine.” She grimaced, “Though I’d be a lot better if you hadn’t chased that maniac.”

“What was I supposed to do? Let him abuse you?”

“They were only words.”

He remained thoughtfully quiet as the lights changed and he pulled out of the slow line of traffic. They drove to the Museum car park in silence. This was not a world he was used to. He’d read about it, seen newspaper items reporting the domestic violence situation, even been to a New Zealand movie, “Once were Warriors” which was about domestic violence. But he had never come face to face with the ugly reality. This reality was far too frightening. Slowly he turned to face Grace. She was staring straight ahead, her palms clenched into bunched fists, her teeth worrying at her lower lip.

Her voice, when she finally spoke, was a bare whisper, “I thought, once, years ago, that I’d get used to it.” She was still shaking. “Be able to handle it better. But I don’t. Every time it happens, I fall apart.”

Every time? Shit. This wasn’t a one-off situation. Joshua wondered how often she had to deal with these circumstances, cope with battered women and brutal men. Why did she have to? She was a lecturer, not a counselor or social worker. He reached for her hand, took it between his, gently unfurled her fingers and began to stroke her palm, gently, tenderly.

“Grace, you don’t fall apart.” He stated quietly as his hands began to ease away some of her accumulated tension. “Look at today. You’ve got that girl into a safe house. You have him charged. That isn’t falling apart.” He hesitated, “Falling apart is when a grown man throws caution to the wind and chases after a thug.” He reasoned calmly. He

stroked her hand for several seconds, his eyes on her face, watching her strive for control. Her eyes were full of unshed tears, and she had her lower lip pinched between her teeth. He released her hand and stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "Is it a big problem? Domestic violence?"

"Yes." She said huskily through a haze of tears.

"Doesn't the Uni have a student support unit?" His thumb moved higher to brush away an errant tear.

It was then that Grace realized that she was crying. She backed away from his fingers and dashed away the tears with the heels of her hands. She willed herself to get back in control. He waited for her to regain her composure.

"Yes, they do." She finally answered him and turned to face him. "The student unit got her the place at that refuge. But students tend to go to their tutors first, it's one thing that's safe and constant in their life." She shuddered as she remembered the girl's face and the refuge centre's doctor's report. The beating had been vicious in the extreme. It had almost cost that student her eyesight. The bruises were livid welts, the bones, fragmented in several places. How she could have stood that pain, borne it while she spoke to Grace, waited while the University tried to get her a safe house, was incomprehensible.

Grace closed her eyes and remembered that she had a class to teach soon. If she didn't get herself together, and fast, she wasn't going to be in any condition to take any class.

"Let's go. I need to be back in an hour." She reminded him softly. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and forced her self to stem the tears.

Joshua hesitated, she still looked ready to burst into tears at any second, but she also, clearly, didn't want him fussing over her. He'd never felt so helpless in his entire life. He wanted to haul her into his arms. Grace unclipped her seat belt and was already opening the car

door when it dawned on him that he wanted to be the one to look after this fiercely self-reliant woman. She needed someone. And he wanted it to be him. A hell of a time to realise that you are half way in love with someone who has an independent streak wider than the Atlantic Ocean.

He locked the car and escorted her to the cafe.

Chapter 5

The Museum cafe overlooked the Waikato River and on a day like this, with the sun beaming full on and not even a puffy white cloud in sight, the doors to the wooden deck were open. The river was a few meters below, meandering past in lazy abandon. A picturesque spot that enticed you out to brave the gentle breeze.

The cafe was deserted. Too late for lunches and too early for the trendy afternoon set.

With the ease of a regular patron, Grace headed for the counter and smiled at the waiter. Joshua followed her over to the counter and waited while Grace scanned the line of mouthwatering desserts and dithered awhile. Joshua read the menu board, ordered his meal and then waited patiently for Grace to give her order. Eventually Grace made up her mind. A young man took their order. Grace and Joshua bickered amicably over who paid. Joshua paid.

The waiter told them to take a seat and he'd bring their order over to them. Grace headed straight for the wooden balcony that was called the deck. Four small tables huddled in the available space. There was a gentle breeze which ruffled the cream lace edged tablecloths, threatening to blow them off the metal lattice tables.

Sitting outside allowed them a view of people travelling up and down the river for several hundred metres. Not that there were many. A couple of canoeing eighths practicing, and the steamer in the distance. Several walkers and a couple of joggers on the paths beside the river. Very quiet.

“So what brought you here today?” She asked quietly as she put her bag on the floor and settled into the leather backed director chair. Although her eyes were still shimmering with unshed tears her voice was steady and composed. Grace clasped her hands in front of her, laid them on the table and adopted a pose of serenity.

Joshua stifled his grin, just as he'd anticipated, she needed him to provide a reason to explain his visit. He settled back, “I saw a guy about a programme I'm writing for his company.” His reply was almost too perfect, it rolled off the tongue just that bit too easily. “Just wanted to run it by him before I went any further.” He tried to keep his tone light, but even to his own ears it sounded glib. As he spoke he noticed her hands were still trembling. He reached across the table and took one hand in his, his thumb brushed across the back of her hand. His caress was gentle. She let him hold her hand.

“Computer programme?” She quizzed striving to put the last few hours behind her and making an attempt to return to normality and enjoy a very late lunch. Her composure was returning slowly, his fingers gave her strength.

She concentrated on Joshua. That wasn't hard. She took detailed note of his appearance. He was wearing a suit, a dark grey business suit, a white shirt and another loud tie. He looked like a successful businessman, apart from the tie. His suit was obviously expensive, the material and cut fairly shrieked money. Once again Grace was made

aware of the difference between their lifestyles. He lived in a totally different tax bracket, that much was evident. His clothes were hand made and she made hers.

“Yes,” He missed her analysis and failed to see the conclusion dawn in her eyes. He warmed to his theme, “With the approach of the year 2000, many computers hold files that are dated, but when 1999 passed, because we operate on a binary system, that plus the fact that most machines only register the last two numbers, so many computer systems reverted the files back to 1000.” He grinned. “Or even worse 00. Mega bucks time for us poor programmers to help retrieve them.”

“Well that was a bit shortsighted of the buyers.” Grace said facetiously.

He shrugged, “Many of the machines we are looking at revamping had a life expectancy of twenty, twenty five years max, so we are really looking at rather old machines.”

Grace smiled. “You don’t look like a computer boffin.” She told him bluntly.

His eyebrows rose a fraction. “Oh yeah. What does a computer boffin look like?”

Grace laughed quietly before teasing him gently, “You know, nerdy.”

“Nerdy?” He choked back a laugh.

“Yup.” She agreed happily. He shook his head and smiled at the generalisations she was throwing around. “And the computer boffin types seem to be minting money these days, unlike us poor over worked, underpaid...” She stopped when she saw the waiter within her peripheral vision.

Grace retrieved her hand from his grasp when the waiter approached and confirmed their order as he placed their respective plates in front

of them. Joshua had a large jacket potato with bacon, tuna and cheese, a huge slice of carrot cake with walnut icing and walnut pieces and a latte. Grace had a large slice of triple chocolate sticky toffee pudding and a fresh banana yogurt shake.

Joshua had been amazed and amused when she'd given the order and was now even more amused by the way she tucked into the cake. There was no pretence of a diet, no lettuce leaf in sight and certainly no lack of appetite. He watched as she forked a bit of the pudding and placed it on her tongue, savouring the aroma as much as the flavour. She was such a sensualist. His eyes watched as she licked her lips.

He swallowed and his body hardened. First the lawn mower and now eating. God, wasn't there anything she did that didn't turn him on? He couldn't take his eyes off her as she continued to eat, forking up another bite of the ridiculous dessert and with suspended breath, Joshua followed the movement of her tongue tracing remnants off her lips.

"This is good." She dabbed at her lips with the corners of the serviette, "Want some?" She asked looking straight into his eyes.

What she saw confused her, he looked poleaxed. But, by what? She'd only offered him a taste of this delicious pudding. He was tempted to say yes, but knew that he didn't want dessert, just her. He couldn't form the words to respond anyway. Bemused by his reaction she launched into another question. "What's yours like?" Grace fired the question at him, hoping it would release him from his trance like state.

He was still sitting there as if someone had taken away his senses. Perhaps he was embarrassed. He was probably used to women who nibbled daintily on tiny celery strips and carrot matchsticks. Well, too damn bad. She liked her food, and she loved desserts. She quirked a brow at his open mouthed frozen stare and willed him to say something.

"You always eat that kind of stuff?" He struggled to string the sentence together unaware of the interpretation she put on it.

Well that confirmed it. Grace experienced temporary chagrin. He thought she was a pig. She glanced down at her dessert and tried not to show how the comment affected her. Then, once again, she recalled that they came from different worlds. If he was used to eating with women who nibbled at their food, too, too bad. She'd had a hard day, and her day wasn't over yet. She needed this sugar hit. She didn't need questions about her dietary intake. And she wasn't going to defend her appalling diet to anyone. Well, anyone apart from her mum.

"Uh-huh." She finally replied as she forked up a bit of cake, "Want some?"

Joshua hooted with laughter. She sent one jet black eyebrow winging upwards in a questioning challenging gesture.

"Perhaps after the potato." He suggested sardonically. "You want to try the jacket?"

She looked it over, seriously considering the offer of the smothered potato. "Yes, why not."

There was something almost erotic about him feeding her a morsel of potato, tuna and bacon dripping with cheese and mayonnaise. Her lips closed around the fork and sucked the food in, then her tongue appeared and gently licked at her lips, circling the outline, removing traces of cheese.

Joshua almost sank through the floor boards. Since when had sharing food become so erotic. And did she have to lick her lips so suggestively. He swallowed again and shifted to make himself more comfortable. Thank heavens he'd worn a suit, Double breasted jackets and loose trousers definitely had their place, jeans would have been decidedly too snug and far too embarrassing.

"Not bad." She announced after swallowing the stuff. He seemed to be waiting for a decision, he was still watching her intently. Grace struggled to find something else to say about the jacket potato. "Nice cheese." She added lamely. Why was he watching her like that?

He hadn't been waiting for her to comment. Joshua simply had trouble taking his eyes off her mouth. Without even thinking about it, he put his fork down and then leaned over and wiped the corner of her lip with his forefinger, dragging his finger slowly along her lower lip. Gentle pressure teased along the soft skin before leaving her mouth.

"Mayonnaise." He told her as he sucked his finger clean.

Grace felt her stomach clench. Her cheekbones flushed. Her palms got clammy. Her heart thudded against her diaphragm before somersaulting toward her collar bone. She nervously licked her lips. Panic flared. Grace scampered.

"I just want to order a take away for tonight. Beats cooking. They do such a great take away range." She scooted to her feet, pushing the chair back as she hastily got some distance. "The thought of cooking after a 2 hour session just does not appeal. You want anything?" She was garbling her words. But by now her brain was totally addled. Watching him lick his finger had done that, muddled her thoughts, addled her speech and atrophied her muscles. She felt weak. Closer to shattered. Totally shattered by one masculine finger touching her lips.

"Well," It was his tone that had her frowning down at him. She was sure she wasn't going to like what was coming. "Grace," How the hell would she take his interference? "about tonight," From the way she was scowling at him, not very well. "I don't think you should be on your own," He tacked on desperately, "stay with a friend or something."

His hand had her wrist, which effectively stopped her from moving away before dealing with his suggestion. His green eyes were concerned. She could see that. That appeased her a bit. She smiled gently as she leaned forward, bracing her forearm on the chair.

"Look, I'm fine, really."

"It's not that." Not knowing just how independent she was made him cautious. He didn't want to tread on toes, not hers, not again. So far

his track record was not good but he was certainly doing his best to improve it. "I don't like the idea of you being alone at the cottage. Not after that deranged imbecile made those threats." The thought of what could happen if that man found her, terrified Joshua. And it made Joshua very determined. "Who knows what he might do? You're miles away from anyone." She was not going back to that isolated cottage. "I don't like it." He looked positively ferocious, "You shouldn't be alone." The more he thought about it, the more concerned he became. She was not going to that cottage this evening and that was final.

He knew he was going to have trouble convincing her. But as far as he was concerned she was not going to be staying at that isolated place on her own. The question was how to make her see reason.

"He won't come near me. He knows the police will have a field day if he touched me." Her placation was ignored.

"Before or after he has beaten you senseless?" He growled as he fought down the urge to shake her. He tried to remain calm and reasonable. It was short-lived.

"It is not going to happen o.k."

"No. It isn't o.k." He ran agitated fingers through his hair, mussing up the order "It would be impossible trying to get some sleep tonight, knowing that you are on your own and knowing that maniac was out there." The force of his concern laced every single word.

It was then that Grace realized that he was seriously worried about her. It wasn't just a line. He was worried about her. She wanted to hug him. For years she had built up this parapet of independence, and now she just wanted to lay her head on his shoulder and let him help her. For a short while at least. A lifetime would do.

"Thanks for caring." She said softly, her eyes conveying gratitude and something else that Joshua couldn't quite fathom out.

“Grace,” She could read the obstinate tone. Then he said firmly, having come to a decision. “I’ll meet you after your class. I’ll follow you home and stay the night.”

“Oh really?” She stood upright and glared at him telling him in no uncertain terms what she thought about his peremptory decision. “I don’t remember inviting you.” One minute she was ready to hug him the next she wanted to throttle him. Just who did he think he was, and when did he figure that he could manage her life? All trace of wanting him to take care of her vanished in an instance as his order registered.

He took her wrist, when she turned to storm off. “In the car if you don’t trust me in the house.” His eyes made sure she understood that he had no intention of conceding, “I’d get more sleep in the car.” He wasn’t joking. “If I went back to Auckland I’d lie awake wondering if he found you.” His face clouded with defiance and anger. “I’m coming home with you tonight. End of discussion.”

She ignored his last sentence and tried to reason with him, giving him her detailed itinerary for the weekend. “He won’t find me this evening, he isn’t that bright. And I’m in Auckland tomorrow night and Friday night. I have a day’s conference on Friday and a talk-in radio show to do tomorrow. So I’m staying with mum and dad.” Joshua lifted his eyes to the sky in silent supplication. Grace smiled reassuringly, before she said “So it’s only one night and nothing is going to happen in a night.”

“Exactly, I’ll be camped outside your door.” He told her curtly, ever the autocrat.

“You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said.”

“I listened. As yet, you haven’t said anything that convinces me you’ll be safe tonight.”

Grace recognised stubbornness. How many times had she been told she was too stubborn for her own good? Perhaps this wasn’t the time to be stubborn. She had been trying not to remember the threats that

odious man had made, but just below the surface she was scared. Really scared. Joshua was right. That idiot could follow her. She knew that. And she knew he wouldn't have any qualms about hitting her. She'd seen what he'd done to his own daughter.

She sighed loudly as she conceded and she smiled inwardly at his determined expression. "You like lasagne?"

He grinned when he realized that she'd given in. "Love it."

"Ok, let go of my wrist, I need to go order it."

Reluctantly he let her go.

Once back at her office, he phoned home and left a message for Zac. Then they both worked. Or at least, for the benefit of the other, they both pretended to be busy.

Joshua attended her lecture. He wasn't letting her out of his sight. Not for one moment.

He sat in the back row and watched as a steady stream of students filled the small lecture theatre. He was intrigued to see a sizable number of men attended the lecture and he wondered whether his presence would make Grace uneasy. He watched her switch on the console, and insert her disc. The first slide of the powerpoint presentation flashed onto the screen.

The seats were gradually filled and when she was ready to start she simply said in a voice just loud enough to be heard over the chatter, "Good evening." A gradual hush descended as everyone focussed on her. She smiled as she waited for them to settle. Then she began, "Last week, we pursued the notion....."

Joshua was surprised to find that forty five minutes had passed from the moment he started listening to her talk. He was impressed by the way she presented her material and he was fascinated by the material she presented. Even though he knew nothing about the area, he had been engrossed throughout the class. There were things he was going to ask her about, later, when he took her home. That had him smiling. He was going home with her. That made him inordinately pleased.

He was still mulling over some of the points she had highlighted and found himself listening avidly to fifteen minutes of follow up questions. There was plenty to talk about. Issues that he wanted to talk about. It had been fascinating. That surprised him.

There had been over a hundred students there and as they left he listened to them. They were still discussing some of the issues, weighing up the ideas.

None of her students would have guessed that she had had a lousy day. That her day prior to this lecture had been filled with threats, violence and concern. She came across as informed, amiable and articulate. Yes, he was impressed.

The more he got to know her the more he found himself ensnared.

He waited patiently for her while she talked to a few students who had ambled to the front to seek further clarification. Joshua watched as she dealt with each situation quickly and affably. When the last student departed she threw Joshua an apologetic smile, as he got up from the seat he had taken.

“Sorry.” Grace gathered her folders and discs, placing them back in their respective slots and original packaging.

Joshua strolled down the steps to the front podium.

“That was impressive.” He stated as he handed her a pile of the left over hand out material she had used.

“Thanks.” She switched off the computer she had used for her powerpoint presentation and turned off the console, taking off the radio microphone and flicking off numerous switches. “It could have been better.” She muttered to herself as she automatically reflected on her lecture. “I skimmed some of the points and I need to update my third slide.” She was muttering to herself, even though it sounded as if she was answering Joshua’s praise. “Plus I forgot to include stuff on the section on surrogacy. And I talked too fast. Again.” She shook her head, “Next time.”

Joshua chuckled. Grace threw him an affronted questioning look.

“Grace.” He beamed at her, “You were bloody brilliant and here you are nit picking.” He ruffled her hair with his free hand. “I was so engrossed I lost track of the time, and the students were still talking about the topic as they left.” He smiled teasingly, “I might even sign up to do this course next year.”

“Yeah, right.” But suddenly all the little mistakes she had made were exactly that, little. He had listened to her lecture. Somehow it wasn’t what she had expected. She thought he might retrieve some of his work and do it while she delivered her lecture. Initially, she had been aware of him, when she began her talk, she was very conscious of him being in the theatre, but as she began to talk about the issues, she had slowly shifted focus. She was aware of his presence but she wasn’t unsettled.

“Here, let me take those.” He reached for the pile of papers she had and she handed them over without an argument. That in itself told him she was exhausted. The day was taking its toll.

“Thanks.” She put the computer discs in her satchel and glanced around one final time, just making sure she had all her things and had shut down all that needed to be switched off.

“You ok?” As the adrenaline disappeared, she looked tired.

“Nothing a good bed won’t fix.” She replied as she pushed her hair off her face with both hands and then lifted her satchel off the podium top. “Ok, let’s go.” She glanced around, checking to see that she had collected all her gear, “Right, we need to get a move on.” She flicked the wrist of her cuff, “Yup. Cutting it fine.”

“Where do we have to be?”

“Back at the department, seminar room. We say 6.15, that gives everyone a chance to get a tea or coffee and settle down before the seminar starts.”

“Is it ok for me to be there?”

“Sure, it’s open to all and sundry. Basically our students, PhD students, use it as an opportunity to rehearse for conferences or papers or vivas even.”

“Useful.” Amicably they walked toward her building.

“Usually. Unless of course someone is trying to score points then it becomes tricky. But usually two students get a chance to talk about their work. They get twenty minutes to present and ten minutes of questions. We break them in gently.”

“How often do you do this?”

“About once a month, but we take it in turn to chair the session. I’m chairing the second session.”

He asked about the classes she taught, she gave him an overview of her teaching load. He asked her some questions about the lecture. She gave him a bit more background information.

After Grace had introduced him to some of her colleagues, Joshua took up a seat at the rear of the small room. About thirty people were there, and though he’d listened to the first student, the poor woman was so

nervous it was difficult not to cringe on her behalf. Even Grace kept wincing.

The second student was no better. She was nervous and stuttered her way through the entire presentation, though clearly what she had to say was of interest to those present. Joshua felt them shift into a more alert mode as soon as she started. When it came to the questions, it appeared as if one particular member of the audience was determined to upstage her. It wouldn't take much, but Joshua thought it was unnecessary. He wasn't at all surprised when Grace skillfully turned the question back when once again the student looked completely baffled. Grace then proceeded to guide the discussion asking members of the audience for their views, giving the student a chance to catch her breath.

When the seminar was over, Grace said something quietly to the student and the other adult who had come up to the student immediately after the talk. The two people smiled at Grace.

A few minutes later Grace retraced her steps back to Joshua.

“Well that’s it for today.” He could see that she was exhausted.

“That’s quite a shift you’ve put in.”

She grinned, albeit tiredly, “yeah, see I told you we are poor, hard done by academics.”

“But you love it.”

She nodded. When she reached for her case he beat her to it and kept it out of her reach even after she raised a demanding brow.

“Come on. I’m ready for that lasagna.” He draped an arm along her shoulder and hauled her closer to his side. If she had been anything other than tired she would have moved out of his embrace. As it was, she was grateful to have his support.

They both called out good byes and received replies as they left the room. Grace was sure she would face a barrage of questions from her nosey colleagues tomorrow morning. But she was too tired to care.

Together, with his arm still across her shoulder, and with him carrying her work bag, they made their way to his car.

“Why was that guy giving that student a hard time?”

Grace sighed. “Politics. She changed supervisor. He’s not too impressed that she dumped him to stay with her second supervisor. Both her supervisors were having some professional difficulties to do with each other. Unfortunately the student got caught up in it.”

“Ah, that’s why he kept hassling her.”

“Yes. And she was so nervous because he was there.” They crossed the car park to his car.

“You were pretty deft at steering him away from her jugular.”

She laughed. “I just knew he was going to be difficult. And it’s not fair on the student.”

Joshua agreed. “You were impressive, I’ve got to tell you. I think the way you batted the questions back at him, soon shut him up!”

She looked up at him, “You don’t have to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Be nice to me. Butter me up.”

“Stating facts Grace. No buttering.”

He opened the door for her and when she climbed in he put her bag on the back seat. It didn't look as if anyone was following them, but that didn't ease his mind.

He drove round to her car that was parked in a different car park. Grace transferred to her car and then Joshua followed her to the cottage. He did not let her out of his sight and he made sure he checked his rear view mirror. Now wasn't the time to wish that he had trained as a detective. They arrived at her cottage ten minutes later.

They watched t.v and ate their reheated lasagna from plates on trays on their laps. Grace had thrown together a salad. Joshua opened a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc that he had bought. He had brought it along just in case they went to lunch at a b.y.o place. Dessert was fresh fruit from the fruit bowl. A low key unexpected dinner date, that was a success given its inception.

The ease with which they settled down to eat, wash-up and talk, suggested a longtime congenial friendship. No-one would have believed that a few weeks back she had been incensed enough to strike him. They had come a long way in an incredibly short time.

They talked about Zac and Mariah, about Briar and Sasha. They talked about computing and Joshua running his own business. They talked about anything and everything that wasn't too intimate.

Family, work, lifestyles were safe topics, but their reactions to each other were not shared. It was too risky. Too much had happened, and not enough time had elapsed for them to accept what they were feeling for each other. But for the moment they were both pleased with the way things were going.

Even though she was exhausted, it was late when they mutually decided they should get some sleep. Neither of them had wanted the evening to end.

"I'll show you where everything is." Automatically Joshua followed her. She showed him the bathroom, and retrieved a new spare

toothbrush and a spare towel for him. She showed him how to operate the shower, and then she showed him Briar's room. "I'll get some fresh sheets." She disappeared out of the room for a few minutes leaving Joshua with time to look around. It wasn't a large room, one double bed, a dressing table and a wardrobe occupied what little space there was. There were photographs of young children on the dressing table and Joshua was looking at them when Grace returned. She had her arms full of pale blue cotton sheets.

"I didn't realise your sisters were married. They've got kids?"

Grace chuckled as she put the sheets down and picked up a pillow "That was us." She peered over his shoulder, "I'm the tallest one there. In fact I was taller than them until they turned fourteen then they suddenly shot up. Now I'm the shortest."

Joshua studied the framed photographs more intently. "How old were you here?" He held out a photograph toward her.

Grace glanced at it and said offhand, "Oh, about eleven, I guess." The newly covered pillow was thrown on to the bed and she picked up the next one.

Joshua continued to study the photograph. There was something about her in that photograph. She looked stoic, her eyes reflecting experiences beyond her years. He replaced the photo on the dresser and glanced at the others again before turning back to Grace.

"Here, let me give you a hand." He took one end of sheet she was holding and helped tuck it in. They worked quickly.

"There you go." She glanced around the small room, "Got everything you need?"

He nodded, "I think so."

“See you in the morning.” She hesitated at the doorway, “And thanks for staying over.”

“At least this way I might get some sleep.” He reminded her.

“Well, thanks anyway. Good night.”

“Sleep well Grace.” He replied but she had already stepped out of the room.

Turning he surveyed the room and picked up the photograph once again. There was a self-possessed look in her eyes, and suddenly he remembered when he had seen such a look. It had been earlier today, when she had pulled herself together, fought the tears and grappled with her fright. He replaced the photograph amongst the others, glancing at them slowly in turn. In the other photographs she was smiling, it was reflected in her eyes and on her lips. They were happy photographs. He stripped off, switched off the light and lay in the darkness, thinking of Grace a few doors down the hallway.

He was up early, way before Grace. Not surprising, given that she was generally prone to lying in bed for as long as possible. When her alarm finally went, she hammered it with her flat palm before she flung the duvet off in disgust and shrugged into her dressing gown. It was a typical routine, she wasn't a morning person.

He was standing with a towel wrapped low round his hips when Grace sauntered into the bathroom. “Oops.” She reacted automatically, “Sorry, I thought you were still in bed.” She had to work hard to stop her eyes from straying from his face. She had to work harder still to stop herself hugging him. She fought down that urge. But it was a close call.

“I'm up early.” He smiled at her and moved to one side, “It's all yours.” He indicated the bathroom. “Had to use your stuff.” He apologised as he gestured at the shower gel and shampoo.

“Mmm, you smell like peaches.” She wrinkled her nose as she teased, as if this was a regular occurrence, having conversations with naked, or near naked men in her bathroom. If only she was so lucky.

He grimaced. “Do I really?”

She grinned. “You should have checked the cabinets, Dad normally leaves some Old Spice.”

He rolled his eyes. Grace smiled again. “We should have washed your clothes last night. Would you like to borrow a T shirt or something? Or do you plan on driving up to Auckland in a fluffy pink towel?”

He cuffed her chin gently. “Or something,” He said, “The clothes will have to suffice till I get home,” adding tongue in cheek, “unless you’ve got a pair of boxers I could borrow.”

“Funny you should say that.” She grinned at his surprise.

“Interesting. I wouldn’t have thought your father wore boxers. ”

Grace didn’t respond to that as she said “I have just the thing.” She took his hand as if it was the most natural action in the world “Come with me.” She stifled a yawn with her free hand. “How did you sleep?”

“Ok.”

She turned to face him, smiled wryly. “Me too, tossed and turned most of the night. Although I have to say that I’d probably have got no sleep at all if you hadn’t stayed the night.”

He raised a questioning brow at that comment.

“I’d have probably barricaded myself in my room and stayed up all night, wondering if he might just have found out where I was.” They’d

reached another bedroom at the end of the corridor and before he could ask a question, Grace let go of his hand and moved to the dresser.

She pulled open the second draw and rummaged for a few seconds. Then she triumphantly held aloft a pair of boxer shorts.

“Here you go.” She threw them at him and he caught them. Bright egg blue silk covered in hundreds of garish ruby red lips. “We bought them for dad one Christmas. He laughed.”

“These?” He looked dismayed by her suggestion. Joshua held the pair of tasteless shorts as if they were a contagious disease.

“Why not? They’re new. You can’t wear yesterdays. Ugh.” She grimaced.

Without even thinking he said, “These are tacky.”

“They aren’t that bad. And who’s to see them. They’re boxers. Clean boxers. New at that.”

“I’ll go without.” He told her provocatively, wiggling a suggestive brow at her.

She quirked black eyebrows, “Could be painful, zips, accidents do happen....” She tailed off suggestively, her eyes twinkling merrily.

He grinned. “I’ll be very, very careful.”

“Oh-oh, very risky.” She teased and ducked out before he could catch her arm.

He heard her laugh all the way to the bathroom. He smiled. Joshua tossed the boxer shorts onto the bed.

Grace and Joshua left the cottage at the same time. He followed her to the university and walked her to her office.

“Grace don’t take any risks, ok?”

Grace stood up on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his cheek. “Stop worrying.”

“Easier said than done.” There was a long pregnant pause as both of them stood facing each other, their eyes glued to each other, their hearts willing them to stay together, their minds telling them they had a day ahead.

“You’d better get going.” She said softly, a winsome smile tugging at her lips.

“Yes,” but still he hesitated. “Just be careful.”

“You too.” Still neither of them moved.

“Don’t go anywhere on your own. Got that?”

“Yes.”

“And make sure you go straight to Auckland, don’t go back to the cottage on your own.”

“Ok.” Grace did not enter her office and Joshua did not turn and walk down the corridor.

“I’ll see you.”

“Yes.” She nodded.

Then he moved, toward her, slowly. Steady and slow. Her eyes focussed on his mouth, then drifted up to meet his eyes. The jade had darkened to almost black.

Grace waited for his lips to touch hers before she opened her mouth and closed her eyes. The kiss was gentle, tasting, and sweet, to start. But it was only a few seconds later when it moved up a notch. Tongues fenced and tangled as heads turned and sought better angles to deepen the kiss. She laced her fingers through his hair. He wrapped his arms around her waist. She tipped her head back to given him access to deepen the kiss, he pressed forward and his body revealed how instantly she aroused him. He felt as much as heard Grace mumble as he pressed against her abdomen.

If it hadn't been for the department secretary they would have probably ended up making love in the corridor.

Grace went beetroot.

How did he manage to make her forget everything? Where she was, what she was doing and how publicly. She was glad that it was only Sheena who had seen her practically devouring Joshua.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

He thought about her all day. He shouldn't have kissed her. That was a bad move, now he couldn't get her reaction out of his mind and he was constantly in a state of arousal. It was uncomfortable and frustrating.

Grace thought about him as she drove up to Auckland. She couldn't help smiling as she recalled the conversation they'd had about his underwear. She couldn't help but blush when she remembered the kiss.

Grace did the radio talk show, debating the reasons for increases in recorded domestic violence. Some people argued that people were no

longer scared to speak out about personal domestic violence, and that was one of the reasons the statistics were so alarming: It wasn't that domestic violence was increasing just that more people were reporting it.

Then there was the notion that men were losing their status and role in society. As they had always been providers they were now taking their responsibility to mean showing that they still had power, that they were still in charge. Power being demonstrated through violence. Others argued that men were becoming more aggressive.

The debate went on for an hour, with people phoning in to cite cases, reasons and to suggest ways to deal with it. There was a hotline number issued for those looking for help.

When the session finished Grace checked in with the University and had a message relayed to her. She had to contact the police. Grace phoned them immediately. She had to wait for several moments while they found the sergeant who'd left the message. But the news he gave her was worth the wait. They had arrested the man. They'd been called out by his neighbours and he'd been caught assaulting his wife. She was in hospital. He was in gaol with no option for bail.

Grace was relieved. One of the reasons she had let Joshua stay, was that she had also believed that maniac might, just might, come looking for her. The other reason was, if she was honest with herself, that she wanted to spend time with Joshua. She knew it was crazy. But she liked being with him.

He phoned her later that evening at her parents home hoping to persuade her to come to dinner, but she was already booked for the evening. She was going to dinner with a group of people from the talk show. A business meal, she'd said. How many people were going, he wondered? He hoped Mike Nolt, a panel member on the talk show would not be there too. He'd seen the canoeist on television, the man worried Joshua, he was too good looking, too suave, and during the debate he'd sounded as if he and Grace were old friends. After several minutes bantering, Joshua persuaded Grace to come over to his house

the following night on the pretext that they had to get their stories straight for Saturday. He promised to cook. Nothing fancy he'd told her, just come as she was.

As Joshua hung up the phone he was surprised by how much he missed her. He had been looking forward to seeing her. One plan that had kept him going through the last couple of days was the thought that he could probably wangle a dinner date out of her when she came up to Auckland.

"Heh, have you finished with the phone?" Zac called as he ambled toward Joshua.

Joshua nodded but said nothing, he was mulling over a gut feeling. A wish that surprised him. It was the last thing he had expected and yet it was perfect.

"You ok?" Zac glanced at his older brother, noticing his preoccupied pensive expression.

"Yes." Came the not quite with it response.

"You don't look it." Zac stated in his usual inimitable forthright style as he reached for the phone.

Joshua slowly smiled at his younger brother. Then the smile turned into a grin. "I'm thinking of getting married."

"What?" Like a scalded cat, Zac dropped the phone back into the cradle. "That's just thinking, right?" His eyes were round in amazement and disbelief when his older brother continued to grin at him. "Married?" Zac started shaking his head. "You want to get married?" He narrowed his eyes and looked straight at Joshua. "I'm missing something here. You? You who has always said that bringing up Mariah was enough to put off anyone having a family. You want to get married?"

Joshua grinned at his brother's dumbstruck expression.

"Who?" Zac questioned anxiously. Then instinct kicked in and a light clicked on as he figured it out for himself. "Stupid question." He grinned like a demented monkey. Relief clearly evident in his face. He liked Grace, liked her no-nonsense approach, her slightly unorthodox bluntness and her smile. He found her charming. "Grace."

"Once she says yes." The smile had disappeared, as Joshua realized just how difficult that was going to be.

Zac threw himself at his older brother and gave him a fierce hug. "Thank God it's Grace." He laughed happily, "She'd be my choice for sister-in-law. Thank God for Grace." He grinned. "Unexpected isn't it? I mean it was only a few weeks back when you two had a dramatic, shall we say a tad heated, discussion." Zac pulled out of the manly hug and then chuckled.

"I know." Joshua grimaced. "How the hell was I supposed to know she'd be the one." Then he grinned at his brother. "All I know is that she's mine. I'm marrying that woman."

"Josh." Zac teased, "You think you're man enough for her."

Chapter 6

The conference went well. Her paper had created much debate and the discussion time afterwards had taken longer than its prescribed time. She felt as if she had achieved something, so it was in a somewhat buoyant frame of mind that she arrived at the Joshua's home at the Bay.

Traffic had been light and though Joshua had said anytime around seven, she wondered if she should have loitered in the area for another twenty minutes or so. She was at least a quarter of an hour early and she didn't want to appear too keen. Well not that keen. Summoning her confidence, she parked the car.

She let the door knocker bang against the heavy wood again, for no one had answered the first hammering. Then another car pulled up and Zac waved at her from the driver's seat. He came bounding over, his now familiar grin clearly signaling his pleasure at seeing her again.

"Hi yah." He called to her idiotically as he came to the door. He gave her a hug and a kiss on the lips before she could even think about stopping him. "No one in?" He queried and reached for his keys. But before he was able to insert them into the lock the door opened. Grace was still recovering from the bear hug and lip lock.

Joshua stood there, dripping, a towel wrapped securely around his hips, his hair plastered to his head.

"Tsk. Tsk. Joshua" chided Zac as he indicated for Grace to precede him into the house, "Fancy keeping your date waiting."

"You're here." Joshua stated warily. He had persuaded Zac to make himself scarce, so what was he doing back here? How the hell was he supposed to make this a romantic dinner for two, if Zac was going to hang around?

Joshua's statement was aimed at Zac, but for a brief embarrassing moment, Grace thought he was talking to her. She tried to quickly conjure up a suitable reply, but then relaxed a fraction when Zac said, "I forgot to check something." Zac did indeed sound hassled. "Have there been any calls for me, I'm expecting a rather urgent message."

"I got in five minutes ago, check the answer machine." Joshua advised, "But, first entertain Grace, while I get myself together." He held onto the towel as he let Grace into the house.

"I can come back." She suggested lamely.

Both guys turned to look at her as if she was talking nonsense.

"Zac." Prompted Joshua. "Entertain, I'll be down soon."

With that he bounded up the stairs. It was a wonder the towel didn't unravel. Grace watched him disappear at the top of the stairs.

"Yeah, yeah, ok." Zac closed the door. In his usual inimitable style he asked, "What d'you fancy to drink?" as he ushered her toward the study with one arm casually draped across her shoulders. He was trying not to pull her into a sisterly hug and beg her to marry his older brother. The way he saw things, they were perfect for each other. If only Grace recognised that fact.

He changed direction, and began to head for the kitchen when she said, "Any chance of an ice cold lemonade?"

"Can you cope with the kitchen?" He was one of the most laid back characters Grace had ever met, and she smiled slowly as she was tugged behind him toward the kitchen. "That way I can save time and check the answer phone." The man really didn't have a clue about etiquette. Her smile widened into a grin. He was incorrigible.

"Sure." Was there a real choice? Not that she minded.

He pushed the kitchen door open with the palm of his free hand and allowed Grace to enter the room first. She revised her earlier notion, well perhaps he did know a bit about etiquette, a tiny smidgen.

She recognised the room from her last visit. They weren't pleasant memories.

"Grab a seat." He suggested, when she continued to just stand and look around. He reached for two glasses and placed them on the table. "Heard you're going to be on the boat tomorrow night." He was hoping his older brother's campaign to woo and win this woman would take off. Perhaps he could help out a bit. A bit of encouragement never went astray. Sell a few of Joshua's key points.

"Yes, and it's your fault." Grace admonished as she pulled a chair out and sat on it.

"You'll love it." He flashed her a grin and then retrieved a jug of lemonade from the fridge, "Homemade stuff all right?" He put it on the table next to the glasses as he headed back toward the freezer.

"Don't tell me you guys make lemonade." She teased looking at the pale liquid.

He took it in his stride, "Riah does. She makes heaps, comes and ransacks the trees in the back yard and makes it like it is going out of style." Deftly he flicked ice cubes into the glasses, "Personally I think it's because she is such a lousy cook." He poured some lemonade into the tall glasses after the ice had nearly reached the rim of the glasses.

"Typical male." Grace chided good naturedly.

"Nah. " He looked hurt, "Really, she is a dreadful cook. My theory is that's why she married Stevie babe. He's a pro." Zac handed her a glass "Cheers." He grinned at her before sauntering over to the phone. "Mind if I play back the messages? I asked this cool babe to go with me to the boat thing tomorrow. Shelley, she said she'd let me know.

When? That's what I want to know? Two minutes before I leave for Hamilton?" He rolled his eyes in feigned disgust. "Women."

Grace had to laugh. "When did you ask her?"

"This morning." His tone implied that was ample time to make a decision.

Grace laughed louder. Zac looked sheepish.

"That's heaps of time." He flicked the machine on. "I mean, it's a yes or no decision, isn't it? What's there to think about?" He flicked Grace a look that she couldn't quite interpret, "I mean, you either do or you don't, just like you either love him or you don't, right?"

She didn't have a chance to reply to that rather cryptic comment, as the answer phone played the first telephone message, but somehow she got the feeling that he wasn't talking about his date anymore. Very strange.

The first message was from Mariah to tell her brothers she had made and left some more lemonade for them in the fridge.

"Listen to the next one, bet it's Riah." It was. A continuation of her message,- could some one let her know the plan for tomorrow?- "See she just rattles on." Zac chuckled and shook his head as the message came to an end. "The allocated time is never enough for her." Zac took the seat beside Grace and reached for his glass of lemonade.

The next message was from a man called Luke. There had been a Luke at Joshua's party, the man Joshua had told to shut up. Tall man, taller than Joshua, slimmer too. Grace couldn't remember much else about the man. Luke was apparently going to be with the party on the boat and wanted to know if they were driving down together tomorrow and if so whose turn it was to be the designated driver. Grace wasn't sure she could cope with an outsider who had been at the party and witnessed her debacle. Someone who had seen her practically devour Joshua.

The fourth message was from a woman to Zac, -could he ring her soon-. Zac looked sheepishly at Grace. Clearly that message wasn't from Shelley. The fifth message began to play just as Joshua pushed open the kitchen door. Neither Zac nor Grace saw nor heard Joshua enter, they were both concentrating on the messages and had their backs to Joshua.

"Josh, Cass here. Dinner tonight is fine. The flight rosters aren't . . ."

Zac dived to switch off the answer machine, but the message was already broadcast, the damage done. He cursed himself under his breath. Why was he always rescuing his older brother when Grace was within earshot. And how the hell did Joshua hope to marry Grace if he kept shooting himself in the foot?

"That wasn't necessary." Grace told Zac. Her tone unexpectedly calm.

She was taking it remarkably well for a woman who had just heard a double date message. Zac threw her a placatory smile then turned and saw Joshua. Joshua scowled fiercely. Zac shrugged his shoulders.

"Err, that was for you." He said diffidently as he acknowledged his brother's presence "And there's no need to look at me like that." Joshua continued to glare at him. "How was I to know she'd be on." Zac responded as he rewound the tape.

"Thanks Zac." Joshua came into the room. He was wearing jeans and a T shirt, just like Grace. His hair was still wet from the shower and he smelled fresh.

Another opportunity blown. He was setting a great track record with Grace. The perfect strategy on how not to maintain a relationship. Hell what relationship, he was still trying to get one established with her. The long term goal might be marriage, but just getting to first base and a date was proving to be trickier than finding elephants in Antarctica. Joshua glanced speculatively at Grace, wondering if there was any chance that she was not going to take the last telephone message badly. It was a simple mistake. The question was, would she give him a chance to explain?

“Sorry Grace.” He apologised, wondering whether the situation was redeemable. She didn’t look terribly upset. That was misleading. He was coming to know that closed off look. Her eyes were very adept at keeping her feelings hidden, but her body language signaled some of the hidden pique. The problem was, he was still learning to read her body language, and he wasn’t sure just how angry she was.

“Sorry I heard, or sorry I’m second choice?” Grace remained seated but her back had stiffened and her head was held high. Her tone wasn’t lost on him.

He was coming to recognize that tone too. To know that when she became that controlled, and that quiet and reasonable, there was trouble in store. Heaps of trouble. The prelude to the storm. He went for the honest approach.

“She called mid week to cancel.”

“Right.” She kept her temper in check “And you being at a loose end, thought, yeah, why not call good old back up, Grace? Right?” Even though she continued to swirl the ice in her lemonade with her index finger, her eyes remained trained on him, “She’ll jump at the chance. After all her father goes around soliciting men for her, finding her dates.” She quirked a brow at him, “Desperate, dateless, dumb, Grace, right?”

Joshua could see that she was simmering. Put like that he could understand her anger. But it wasn’t like that. The problem was that he doubted whether she’d listen to any explanation he provided, whether it was the truth or not. She looked calm, but he knew she was feigning it. Her eyes were beginning to spark. Definitely trouble.

“Hold on. It wasn’t like...”

“What I don’t understand is why you don’t take her to the boat thing tomorrow.” Grace cut him off before he could even begin to clarify the situation.

“Now, Grace” Zac jumped into the fray and went in to bat for his brother, totally oblivious to the fact that she was at detonation stage, “If he took her,” he began in a placating tone of voice, not realising that he was only adding to the anger that was consuming her. “Lysette would think that he was still playing the field.”

Joshua nearly throttled his younger brother. He wasn’t helping at all. He could see the reaction in her eyes. Jet black fused into molten red.

“And he isn’t?” She shot at Zac in a straight toneless voice, “Is that it?” Her eyes flashed angrily, as she tried to keep the heat out of her voice. “He’s just misunderstood? He hasn’t really got two women lined up for tonight, right?” Her words were beginning to show the anger that was barely being held in check.

Both brothers looked at each other for help. Joshua had no strategy to deploy. Zac hadn’t been expecting to have to defend his brother, especially when Grace had seemed to be taking it all so well. He hadn’t realized she wasn’t. Not one little bit. Not until now.

“Well no, not exactly, I mean, yeah, he kinda....,” Zac couldn’t remember the last time he was this flustered. “but not what you’d call,... really,... if you know what I mean...” Zac tailed off lamely seeing signs of a temper escalating, a temper his brother had detected several minutes ago. A temper on the rise. He was also struck by how beautiful she looked with her eyes flashing angrily, and that threw him.

“No I don’t Zac.” The flat austere words had him backing away.

She was offended. And he didn’t know what to do to diffuse the situation. So he took the only option available to him. “Well, er, I’ll leave Josh to explain, I’ve got to find that address and get going. Don’t want to be late.” He shrugged “See you.”

If Grace hadn’t been so angry she would have laughed at the way he beat a hasty retreat. He rushed out of the kitchen almost as if he’d been

scalded. Literally fled. A few astringent words and he scampered, quickly.

“It’s not what you think.” Once again, Joshua tried to clear up the situation, using his reasonable tone of voice, a tactic he’d perfected when dealing with Mariah in her more recalcitrant moods when she was a teenager. He could always reason with Mariah, providing he kept calm and used a rational tone and argument. The ploy failed with Grace.

“And what do you think I think?” She mimicked his tone.

His eyes narrowed at her deliberate mockery, but he ignored that question. He was in enough hot water as it was. He decided to be factual, recount the situation thus far. Surely she would listen to reason.

“I met her on a flight back to Auckland several weeks ago and I invited her to my party. She couldn’t make it, so we made a date for this evening. She phoned to postpone it, so we changed...”

His explanation was rudely curtailed by Grace interrupting him to say through clenched teeth. “So you phoned me. Good old stand in.” She blazed in a furious hiss, “Bastard.” She stood, her resolution to hold onto her temper finally deserting her. Her lemonade only half finished. Why, oh why did she do this to herself? Why was it always with him? Why hadn’t she learnt that he could hurt her? Why was she still here?

“Look, Grace...” Joshua realized he was loosing this battle and knew he’d have to come up with something pretty dire to change the situation. Somehow he doubted whether she’d give him another opportunity to make amends. Things were looking as if their first real date would be non-existent. And for a logical man, he knew he needed a first date if he wanted to get to a wedding date.

“Don’t you -look Grace me-, you perfidious ..”

“Grace.” He interrupted her quickly before she really had a chance to wind up and use her extensive vocabulary of derogatory adjectives. “We needed to talk about tomorrow, get our stories straight, it seemed like a good idea. What more can I say?”

“Don’t bother.” She turned ignoring his attempt to placate her. “I’m not going anywhere with you, today, tomorrow, ever.” Grace was angry with herself. Why did she get taken in by him so easily? Why?

She marched to the door, leaving Joshua standing by the table, totally stunned by the swift turn of events. He turned to follow her progress to the door. It was then that he noticed her jeans. He almost smiled as he recalled thinking that she had dressed in a remarkably understated way, for her. Blue jeans, albeit well worn jeans, cropped white t-shirt, flat leather sandals. Very sedate. Very normal, so unlike her normal attire. Normal jeans. It had even influenced him to wear his jeans. Make her feel comfortable. He should have known better. This was Grace after all. He stared at the jeans.

There was a major difference between his jeans and hers and not just in the way they fit. For a start his were intact, well worn but intact. Certainly not threadbare. And certainly not threadbare in those particular places.

On both cheeks, a few centimetres below one rear pocket were several large tears, and across the other cheek, where there should have been a pocket, were strands of white threads, both tears left teasing glimpses of bright blue boxer shorts with ruby red lips. The rips were thread bare and as she strode for the door the splits had gaped and closed, gaped and closed, providing expanse and then teasing glimpses of bright red lips on blue silk boxer shorts and golden brown skin. The minx. He knew exactly where he had seen those shorts before.

“Hey.” He finally got himself together as the door swung shut and she’d disappeared. “About tomorrow?” He yelled before he stormed out after her. He caught up with her in seconds, reached for and held onto her arm. “You can’t just leave me in the lurch like this.” He had

to work hard to keep hold of her arm without bruising her. She was squirming and wriggling, tugging at his grip.

“Watch me.” She snapped furiously trying to dislodge his restraining hold.

“Grace you’re being unreasonable.” Wrong move. That registered instantly. Her eyes were almost alight, when she pivoted round to face him fully. She stopped trying to shrug off his grip as she glared with stormy black eyes straight at him.

“Not being. Was.” The words ricocheted with the speed of rapid-fire automatic firearms. “I was totally stupid to even think about going out with you. I don’t need this bullshit.”

Zac reappeared at that precise moment, and sensing that a full scale row was about to break out he scuttled out of the door like a discovered termite. “See you later.” He called quickly then opened and closed the door before either of them could respond. Grace turned to blaze at his back, but he was gone.

In that instant, Joshua seized the opportunity to haul Grace to him. Things were rapidly escalating from bad to worse. He didn’t stop to think, he simply acted. Desperate times called for desperate measures. And what was there to loose anyway? So far all his carefully thought out plans had been disastrous. If he’d planned to mess up he couldn’t have done any better.

So he kissed her. Really kissed her. No holds barred, no half measures, no constraint.

Eventually they came up for air. But it was a long time later. Very slowly he moved away from her, his eyes remained riveted on her face, watching her every expression as he said softly, “That’s why I asked you to go to the party tomorrow and that is why I asked you here this evening.”

The words and his eyes were candid. Her equilibrium took a while in coming. Joshua watched the emotions play in her eyes, he could see that Grace was seriously torn between believing him and wanting out. She took her time deciding. He waited, knowing intuitively that he had no other option. Several long seconds passed. Seconds when Joshua ransacked his brain for a plan B, just in case. He was not going to give up so easily. Not after that kiss and all that it delivered and promised.

She shrugged diffidently, the fight going out of her as she conceded. "Well," She pushed a lock of hair off her face and tucked it behind her ear as she played for time. It was a nervous gesture. Her hair had come loose during that kiss. Male hands ransacking through a loose pony tail had destroyed all form of tidiness. "I guess I'm here now."

Plan B was shelved, just in case it was needed at a later stage, Joshua breathed a sigh of relief. That had been a close call. He was relieved. It was short term, the newly found reprieve was dashed by her next statement.

"I'll stay ten minutes to get our story for tomorrow."

"But," He began his defence in earnest only to be cut off once again.

"No buts. Cass will be expecting you."

"She won't be expecting me." He wanted to shake her. Why was she so stubborn? Never in his wildest imaginations had he ever thought he would fall for a woman who argued with him. "Grace I'm sorry." In sheer frustration he shoved a hand through his wet hair, leaving the hair to stand in a good imitation of porcupine quills. "I didn't ask you here as second choice." He restated sincerely. "Stay for dinner. I'll get some great Malaysian take away."

"Take away?" She queried in feigned criticism. "I thought you said you'd cook?"

"Yes I did" He admitted in a contrite tone of voice as he smoothed down his hair. "But things seem to be working against me today. Have

to settle for takeaways or we can eat out. The stove gave up the ghost this afternoon.” He pushed his advantage, seeing that he was finally getting somewhere. “You’ll stay?” If only he could make sure he didn’t blow it again. Pensively, he waited for her answer.

Grace nodded. “I’ll stay. Takeaway sounds fine.” She capitulated and wondered if this would turn out to be yet another of her mistakes. So far her track record with this man was appalling. She seemed to have filled in the spot of temporary-fill-in date. And she didn’t like it. “Call her. Tell her I’m a family friend who just dropped by. She might want to join us for takeaways.”

Joshua hid his scowl. He had no intention of inviting Cass to join them. He had after all just made progress. Progress. He smiled. He was making progress with her. She hadn’t left.

Now to optimise on this opportunity. Take it slowly, he reminded himself. Don’t blow it. Don’t push. Don’t squander the chance. He quickly ushered her away from the front door and to the study. After getting her another drink and putting on a Roberta Flack CD he left Grace, and went to the phone.

He phoned Cass. She took it good naturedly. Then he phoned the takeaway restaurant and ordered a meal for two.

It arrived twenty minutes later and was utterly delicious. They ate in the kitchen, because Grace turned down his suggestion that they eat in the dining room. She liked their kitchen, liked the coziness, the warmth it seemed to exude, like a family room. Joshua set the table, insisting that Grace sit and allow him to wait on her. He opened a bottle of Pinot noir and poured it into simple tulip shaped glasses, before offering a toast to their friendship. Grace and Joshua sipped at the wine before replacing the glasses on the table.

Then Joshua dished up the meal.

The conversation was light and time flew by too quickly for both of them.

“Coffee?” He offered.

“A herbal tea if you have it.”

“I think so.” He answered, “ We have something I think.”

“Great.” She stretched like a well fed contented cat. “That was delicious.”

He put the kettle on and they continued to chat while waiting for it to boil.

When tea and coffee were made Joshua suggested they took their respective drinks to the lounge. It was a new room to Grace, one that she had not been in during any of her previous visits. She glanced appreciatively around her. Now this was sumptuous living.

“You have a lovely home.”

He looked around and smiled. “Yes,” He agreed. “ I guess I take it for granted.”

Grace sat down, sinking blissfully into a luxurious teak leather couch. Joshua placed his mug on a coaster on the coffee table beside the couch and then headed for the sound system. He selected a mellow blues CD and returned to the couch. The blues ballad begin to filter through the room.

“I’ve taken a lot for granted.” They listened and relaxed. He felt very comfortable sitting here with her, talking about items in the news. When the CD ended he got to his feet, “Any preferences?”

She shook her head. He flicked through the small pile of CDs and selected Sarah Vaughn.

Joshua knew he was going to tread on thin ice. He had deliberately not brought up the topic for discussion during dinner, because he knew it

would mean an early end to the evening and he had already had one major scare today when she nearly walked out. But it was nagging away at him and he needed to resolve the situation.

He had no rights to her, he knew that, but the thought of that maniac out there had him seriously worried. Worried enough to stick his neck out even if it did mean the end of a great evening. "I don't like the idea of you going back to that cottage on your own." Anxiously he waited for her to get mad.

She didn't get angry, she reached for his hand. That surprised him. She squeezed his palm reassuringly. "It's o.k." She told him happily and with heartfelt relief. "He's in gaol."

"What?"

"He beat up his wife, the neighbours called the Police." She gave him the potted version of the police account. "He won't be getting bail." She had been elated to receive the news. Joshua was equally relieved, though still a touch concerned.

"But will they put him away? What if he comes after you?" Joshua turned his hand so that his palm was facing hers and he gripped her hand in a possessive gesture. He wanted to protect her. "Grace, I don't like it."

"Joshua if I hid every time one of my student's father, boyfriend, brother, uncle, whatever, threatened me, I'd never be able to leave home, let alone teach."

She liked the feel of his hand stroking hers, caressing almost. She tried to emulate the gesture. It felt so right to touch like this, just stroking, gently squeezing, feeling.

"I don't like it." He persisted as he continued to lace his fingers with hers.

“I know. I don’t like it either.” She squeezed his hand once more trying to reassure him through that physical palpable touch, “ But he’s in gaol. I’ll be o.k.” then she smiled winsomely as she changed the topic with all the finesse of a bulldozer, “That was lovely. I haven’t heard Sarah Vaughn in ages.”

“Changing the subject?”

Her lips twitched. Her ploy had been read as if it had been written on her forehead. But then it hadn’t been very subtle.

“Well I’m not happy about this.” He returned to their original discussion.

“Always have to have the last word.” She retorted, stalling from getting back into that debate.

“Of course.” He acknowledged without antipathy. “You’d better get used to it.”

Grace laughed. He grinned. The rest of the evening went quickly as they talked about music, food, drink, almost anything and everything. It was only when Zac returned to the house, and the front door slammed, that Grace realized just how late it was. It was way past midnight.

“Good grief. Have you seen the time?” She flew off the couch, her now empty glass of whisky sat neatly beside her equally empty mug.

“It’s not so late.”

“For you. Me, I’m a country girl, early to bed.” They were standing a few scant inches from each other, unconsciously swaying toward each other, their eyes darting from eyes to lips and back again, when the door was suddenly yanked open. They flew apart.

“Thought I heard voices.” Zac announced blissfully unaware of the effect of his untimely entrance.

“And you just had to come and explore.” Joshua stated in frustration.

“Yeah.” Zac beamed and then turned his attention to Grace. “So, had a good evening?”

Grace chuckled. “Yes, very.” She inched past him. “And I was just on my way home.”

“You’re not going because I’m back are you?” Zac suddenly realized that he might have botched things. Again.

“No.” She smiled gently, “It’s late.”

“You’re joking. The night has only just begun.”

“For you.” She laughed when she realized he was serious. “I’m off to bed.”

“No staying power you oldies.” Zac announced as he sidled past her, “Anyway I got to go, got to change, they’re waiting for me in the car.” He flicked Joshua a quick look, “It’s my lucky night, I’m not the designated driver. We’re going to Christy’s, so don’t wait up.”

Christy’s was a local Auckland nightclub.

“Where does he get all that energy?” Grace shook her head as she and Joshua made their way to the front door. She reached for the doorknob. “I had a lovely evening, thanks.”

“Wait.” He growled quietly.

Grace turned to glance at him in puzzlement.

“I don’t want an audience.” Tenderly he brushed a lock of hair and tucked it behind her ear. His touch sent a frisson of electricity through her.

“What?”

She didn’t have to wait long to find out. Gently he took her face in his hands. He could see that she was startled and knew that her heart was hammering in nervous anticipation. His thumbs gently stroking the high cheekbones, his head getting closer and closer to her own until finally their lips touched. A slow, gentle, teasing kiss began, stroking into life the fire that both felt, though neither admitted. Hesitantly as the last vestiges of caution fled, her hands crept around his neck. His hands moved to her waist. Her fingers threaded through his hair, drifted to touch his scalp and sent a cascade of hot tingles down his spine. Her touch, simple as it was, escalated his need. His fingers brushed the swell of her rear as he prepared to intensify the kiss. The kiss deepened. Lips parted, breath mingled and tongues touched. He nibbled at her lower lip as he backed her up against the door, leaning into her as he pressed against her softness. His hands moved higher cupping her breast, hers moved lower to mould his bottom.

“Whoa. Steady on guys.” Zac boomed from the top of the stairs.

Joshua backed off faster than a fox pursued by hounds. Grace folded her arms across her chest in a defensive move that spoke volumes. Zac bounded down the stairs.

“Your timing is lousy Zac.” Joshua grumbled in frustration.

“I’d say it was perfect, any later and you guys would have been....”

“I must be going.” Grace interrupted, her face turning red as she took Zac’s meaning and realized that he was probably right. They would.

Joshua threw his brother an angry speaking glance.

“Sorry Grace.” Zac apologised quickly. “Sometimes I talk first and think later.”

“Sometimes?” Queried Joshua with a deceptive calm, “Try always.”

“Yeah, well, sorry.” Zac squirmed.

“Goodnight.” She mumbled as she gripped the doorknob and pulled the door open.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Pick you up, about eight?” Joshua asked softly.

She nodded in agreement. “Night.”

Joshua and Zac followed her out into the inky black night.

“See you on the boat, Grace.” Zac bounded down the drive. He wasn’t hanging around, not when he knew that he would be in for a lecture from Joshua after that little faux pas. Joshua waved casually at the occupants in the car as they headed down the drive.

“I should follow you home. It is quite late.”

Grace smiled gently. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be home before you can get the car out of the garage.”

“It’s over there.” He pointed to a Porsche parked only a few metres away.

“You know what I mean.”

“You’re too damn independent, you know that, don’t you.”

Grace smiled just before she lightly kissed his cheek. “I’ll see you later today.”

“Give me a call when you get home.” He ordered sternly before pulling her into a bear hug. He nuzzled her neck. “Call me, ok.” He ordered more gently before kissing her lightly on the lips.

Grace nodded and got into the car.

Joshua watched the tail lights of her car disappear down the road before he turned and walked back to the house. Progress. They were making progress. Slow and painful. But it was progress. Three kisses. That had to be progress.

Chapter 7

He wasn't sure what to expect, but he hadn't expected to have his breath knocked out of him, to feel as if his heart was about to explode and his lungs collapse. At this rate he would be hard before he even strung a sentence together.

He stammered through his greeting. "Ev, eve..evening."

Grace threw him a questioning look, because she couldn't understand his problem. "Come in a sec, would you." She invited as she held the door open, "I was just on the phone. I won't be long." She waited for him to step into the house and then indicated for him to take a seat. Once he was seated she moved quickly to the phone.

With her back to him she picked up the phone, "Mum, Joshua is here, I'll have to go." She listened attentively before she said, "Yes, I will, yes. Love. Bye."

She turned back to face him. "Sorry about that." She said when he still hadn't spoken. Her voice pulled him back to the present. He attempted a smile. "Are you ok?"

"Just poleaxed." He replied without thinking.

"What?" Grace was puzzled by his reaction.

He shook himself, smiled ruefully and admitted candidly, "You're gorgeous."

She erupted into nervous laughter. "Yeah right." It wasn't a ploy for further compliments. With two breathtakingly beautiful sisters, she genuinely had never considered herself gorgeous.

He came closer. “Honestly.” His hands caressed her upper arms, sparking a frisson of electricity that she came to associate only with his touch. She took a breath, inhaled the woody scent of his aftershave mingling with a scent she only associated with him, and felt her heart skitter. His hands dropped to encircle her waist. “Stunning would be closer to the truth.”

She laughed nervously and tried to lean out of his hold. “Now you’re laying it on a bit thick.”

He could hear it in her voice. She didn’t believe him. He took her chin in his hand, and tipped her face up so that his eyes would endorse what he had to say. “I can’t believe you don’t know how beautiful you are.” He was surprised to see her squirm.

“Thank you.” She replied shyly. Her confidence, her ego and her self esteem suddenly buoyed with the unexpected praise.

He shook his head, she was full of surprises. “You are.” He reiterated frankly. He bent his head and brushed his lips lightly against hers. Once more the jolt that he associated with touching her seemed to ignite his body and make what was already hard now painfully hard. “And if we had the time I’d stop here and prove it to you.” He stepped away. Took a breath. Grace smiled tremulously at the promise she heard in his voice. “We’d better get going, we’re late.”

“I’ll just get my shawl.” She retrieved the filmy length of material that was lying on the arm of the couch and followed him to the door.

He drove them to Hamilton, but because they were late, all the near parking bays were taken and they had to park a long way down a rather busy River road. They had to walk several hundred metres to reach the paddle steamer moored on the Waikato river. He held her hand. She let him. It felt right. Joshua relaxed a fraction, their first date was going well.

It was just approaching eight-thirty and they were the last couple to board the boat. Grace hitched up her long straight black silk skirt as Joshua handed her onto the gangway to the boat.

The skirt, with a slit from the hem line to almost mid thigh, was topped with a strapless boned filmy gold bustier. Once again his eyes were drawn to the bare golden shoulders and slender neck. At her neck was a simple twisted coil of fine pearls. Her hair was pinned expertly in a riot of curls, with a few tendrils escaping to soften the look. Fine pearl threads hung from her ear lobes and the only other jewelry she had on was her watch. She looked elegant and beautiful. And she was with him, he couldn't help the smile that appeared on his lips. She was with him, on the boat. She hadn't backed out. Progress.

As soon as Grace and Joshua boarded the steam driven paddle riverboat they were offered champagne in long stemmed glasses.

With one hand in the small of her back he propelled her urgently along the narrow corridor until they were at the rear of the steamer, just in front of the now unmoving large wheel. Right now, he wasn't ready to share her with any of the crowd. He wanted a few minutes with her.

"How many are they expecting?" Grace asked and then nervously took a sip of her fizzing drink. She felt slightly uncomfortable. She'd seen the dresses worn by some of the other women on board. They had money stamped all over them. Not her league. Damn, she wasn't ready to be emotionally battered again. No wonder he'd told her she was gorgeous, he knew she'd have to cope with this. Hell. She'd made these clothes herself. She'd chosen them to wear tonight for their very simplicity, knowing she would be once again in a different league.

If she hadn't noticed their clothes, the jewelry would have given them away. None of it was paste she was sure. She looked at her simple gold and platinum watch, a present from her family when she'd got her doctorate. She toyed with a strand of her earrings as she fought down apprehension.

“About fifty to sixty I think.” He finally said as he watched her sip the champagne again and then said, “Have I mentioned how gorgeous you look?”

“Yes.” She laughed anxiously, “And thank you for being so thoughtful.”

“Thoughtful?” He queried in confused tones.

“I don’t belong here.” She muttered beneath her breath as she lifted the glass to her mouth.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged, feigning indifference. Joshua frowned. What was the matter? He focused on her. For every step they took forward they took two back. Just when he thought they had made progress, she was showing signs of unease. It made him apprehensive. He looked at her, hoping to pick up some clues.

The gold strapless top left an enticing amount of her shoulders and the curves of her breasts bare. The colour of the material also made her amber toned skin glow warmly. She had taken a lot of time with her appearance too. Her eyelids were dusted with a fine coat of gold eye shadow and outlined with jet kohl, a rich russet lipstick coated her lips and she had sparingly applied a fine coat of foundation and powder. She was beautiful.

Joshua looked at her. “You’re staring at me.” She smiled slowly, moments of apprehension dissolved as she realized he really was impressed.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Cut it out.” Her mind sidetracked and she was pleased to have her thoughts diverted.

“You’d better get used to it.” Joshua told her frankly, sensing that he had finally convinced her, “Half the guys here are going to tell you the same thing.”

“The other half will be trying to stop their partners from running off with you.” She retorted immediately. Joshua laughed and hugged her to him, pleased that she considered him attractive.

“Only half?” He teased as he gently rubbed the back of his hand against her cheek. A slow sexy smile materialised in Grace’s eyes and on her lips. It promised so much. Joshua’s head descended slowly. Their eyes remained open and locked on each other as his head continued to come closer. Progress.

“Joshua.” Bellowed a loud, instantly recognisable, currently unwanted, voice from a few feet away, “What are you guys doing back here?”

Muttering a fervent curse, Joshua abandoned his intention to kiss Grace.

Grace chuckled. “He has great timing hasn’t he.” She murmured with a smile.

Resigned to having lost the moment, Joshua shook his head at Zac’s untimely appearance. Grace turned to greet his brother. Zac came forward, stepped closer and kissed her cheek. His eyes were wide open in astonishment.

“You look great.” Zac said sincerely. His eyes swept over her making her feel gorgeous. “Wow.” He kept shaking his head as if he couldn’t take it all in. “You scrub up great Doc.”

“Thank you.” Grace murmured a trifle abashed by his open admiration.

For once, Joshua wished he hadn't been right about other men's reactions. He was going to have to work damned hard to keep her with him this evening, given Zac's drooling expression.

"You've seen her before Zac." Joshua chided as his brother kept taking inventory.

"Yeah, but not like this."

Grace shifted uneasily, tucking a fictitious errant lock of hair behind her ear.

She seemed unfamiliar with people complimenting her on her appearance. Even now she was shuffling from one foot to the other in insecure acceptance. She was totally artless and unaffected by her beauty. That's what made it even more potent. Joshua found that thought startling.

"I saw you guys clamber on board ages ago, but when we left our mooring and you didn't show up on the deck up front, I came in search." He smiled happily, still captivated by Grace. He kept staring at her. "Craig, Luke and the girls are waiting."

"Thanks." Joshua said with a hint of exasperation that completely escaped Zac's notice.

"Come on," Zac took Grace's arm, "You look amazing." He gushed with total abstraction, "There's a handkerchief size dance floor up front, how about a dance?"

"Zac." Joshua interrupted forcefully, "This is my date, which means I dance with her." He extricated Grace from his brother's clutch, "Where is Shelley anyway?" Joshua demanded, hoping to remind his brother of his own date this evening.

Zac was infatuated with his latest girlfriend of two days, so why was he holding on to Grace like a limpet.

“Told you, up front with Craig, Luke and Lysette.” Automatically, without thinking, he reached for Grace’s hand. He tugged her along, totally oblivious to Joshua’s narrowed gaze. They had only taken a few steps when Joshua finally snapped.

“Zac if you don’t let go of her hand within two seconds I’m going to throw you overboard!”

He wasn’t joking. That much was clear from the tone. Grace came to a sudden halt and Joshua cannoned into her. He reached out to steady her. His fingers brushing against her breasts as he grabbed her upper arms.

Zac also stopped and having decided that his brother was not joking, quickly released the hand he was holding. “Don’t get stressed Joshua.” He remonstrated with his usual brand of impudence, “I was only leading the way.”

“Then lead.” Joshua told him, “She doesn’t have to be towed like a bloody car.” He growled his message as he stared at his brother.

Zac’s dark eyebrows rose skyward, but he said nothing as he turned and headed back the way he had come. Slowly Grace smiled at Joshua, then shyly slid her hand into his. Together they followed Zac.

A few moments later they had reached the others. Grace extricated her hand from Joshua’s hand lock in order to shake hands as she was introduced to all those she hadn’t met before, including Luke’s date, Marina, and Zac’s date Shelley.

It was a black tie affair. The men wore dinner jackets and pretended not to swelter. Fortunately it had cooled down immensely, but it was still too warm for the men to keep their jackets on for long. The woman barely wore sufficient material to keep them decent, and none of them seemed worried about the temperature. Thankfully it was still a warm night.

Joshua waited for the introductions to be made, and as soon as they were accomplished he led her onto the dance floor and took her into his arms. He'd seen the assessing way Luke had taken note of Grace, seen the way Craig had smiled at her. Was no man immune?

Luke watched the man he considered a brother and best friend. He had taken a long look at Grace, wondering what it was that had enthralled Joshua. Sure she was attractive, but then Joshua had never been short of beautiful women to date. So why was he captivated by this one? For he was definitely hooked. Luke wondered if Joshua had admitted that fact. He might not have owned up to it, yet, but there was no misreading the truth. Joshua could start counting his single days. They were over. Luke watched the couple for several more seconds. Then his own date persuaded him to dance with her.

Possessively, Joshua locked Grace to him. They swayed in time to the music without actually moving very far off the spot. There wasn't much room. The dance floor was crowded. Couples jostled each other but no one seemed to mind.

Joshua had his arms fastened around her waist while Grace rested her palms on his jacket lapels. A few moments later, Grace moved closer to him, because his arms gave her no choice. The music seemed to mellow as the paddle boat moved out into the midst of the Waikato on its slow cruise down the river. His thigh brushed against hers before finding a niche between her legs. Fleeting Grace registered his lips against her temple, brushing gently, and she tipped her head back to teasingly reprimand him about the public display of affection.

The words were never uttered, they were swallowed. Skillfully and swiftly his lips found their target and Grace was lost in a mind shattering kiss. His lips were hot and light as they gently worked her mouth. Her mouth, ready to teasingly scold, was worked over, ever so gently with the tip of his tongue. It was the tenderest kiss she had ever received. Gentle, delicate and shattering. All thoughts about chastising him about public displays were forgotten.

She had lost the battle before it had even begun. She knew, after last night, that things were going to be different. She had known that tonight would be special. Very, very special. Grace gently slid her hands around his neck and pulled him closer.

Joshua needed no further encouragement. His mouth slanted over hers with less finesse and more passion than he'd normally show in public. His tongue became more insistent, his hands more possessive and his thigh more abrasive. His left hand splayed across her upper back and his right hand rested firmly on her bottom bringing her closer to him. Hauled to him, pressed close, she reveled in his hardness.

Her skin and the silk of her gold strapless top felt similar in texture, but where her skin was warm, the silk was erotically cool. His hands roamed, pressing, urging responding. She stood within the sheltered embrace of his arms and legs, dispensing all pretence of dancing to the melody the band played. Her neck arched as his kiss became more insistent. Her lips were swelling as his mouth sucked seductively.

Desperate for oxygen they broke apart. Silent words passed between them for the fleeting moment they were apart. A message of need, longing and lust flashed between the two with the speed and impact of lightning. Then once more he was devouring her and she was encouraging him as best she knew how. She arched against him, felt him pressing into her lower stomach, her hands grasped and held his head, forcing him to take what she was giving him freely.

Suddenly he stopped kissing her, whispering, "We must stop." He took a deep breath and as the band switched from one tune to the next he smiled, "Let's dance."

Grace allowed his knee to nudge her legs apart and allowed his legs to be caressed by her thighs as they swayed almost imperceptibly, their feet remaining glued to the deck of the boat. Her fingers splayed across his shoulders and gently kneaded the coiled tension she felt in the corded muscle sheathed in a white linen shirt. Grace turned her head to rest her cheek against his shoulder, her lips a scant couple of inches from his neck.

The temptation was too much. Too, too much. Slowly, almost without conscious volition she moved her head nearer, her breath whispering across the sensitive skin below his ear. Her lips rubbed, slowly, lightly, where her breath had teased. Then, instinctively her mouth opened, her tongue tasted and her teeth grazed.

Blood surged through him with the torrent force of water cascading over the Niagara falls. His heart hammered and his body grew taut. All because she was kissing his neck, lightly teasingly sucking at a small patch of skin that he had never recognised as an erogenous zone.

“Grace.” He pleaded in hoarse whisper, begging. When he felt the last of his control about to desert him he tried to turn. His breath ragged as he entreated her desperately “Stop.” He arched his neck away from her mouth.

She saw the strip of flesh her lips, tongue and teeth had been imprinting with her passion. Grace moved a fraction of an inch and cool air dried his throbbing skin. She lifted her head off his shoulder and looked straight into his eyes. He drowned in the passion he saw contained within the depths. She wanted him.

He went down in a frenzy, his open mouth clamped over her lips, sucking on them, running his tongue over moist swollen lips that parted to allow his tongue to thrust forward. Her fingers ransacked his hair and fused to his skull as she held his head in a frame that allowed her to be devoured. There was no holding back.

The air had been forced out of her lungs when his arms, now resembling steel bands had clamped around her. They broke apart when they ran out of air. Their breathing was akin to gulping for any available oxygen. It took several minutes.

Several minutes to get their breath and to persuade their hearts to beat a normal staccato rhythm. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. She held his gaze.

“The Earth moved.” He watched for her reaction to his light hearted but truthful statement. Deep jade twinkled and then sparkled as the smile formed. Grace smiled tentatively in answer.

Even white teeth echoed the smile in her eyes “The whole damn Universe moved.” She owned up in a hushed whisper.

His teasing smile vanished, his eyes darkened and his heart slammed into his ribs with the force of meteorite on a glass pane. He moved to kiss her.

“Break it up.” Zac jostled them apart, just before Joshua put his thoughts into action. Zac flashed his brother a reprimanding look, “This is a dance floor, not centre stage for the ABC guide to good sex. Thank goodness it’s dark.”

The barely whispered words were overheard by Grace and mortification swamped her. Joshua glared at his brother. Zac simply raised a questioning brow. Another couple bumped into the back of them. Some of Joshua’s anger dissipated as their environment registered in his brain. Zac saw the instant sanity returned to his brother’s mind. But he was taking no chances. He took Grace by the hand.

“Come on.” He announced in imperious tones that brooked no argument, “Time to switch partners.” He took Grace by her elbow and moved her several feet away from his brother. This was a turn up for the books. Normally it was Joshua reminding Zac about his surroundings and behaviour.

They left Joshua standing with Shelley. Shelley smiled pensively and waited for Joshua to focus on her. She hadn’t known him long and she wasn’t sure how he would take his younger brother’s cavalier approach. But when Zac told her his plan, she’d agreed.

“Shall we?” Joshua asked as he took her elbow.

“Sure.” She’d met Joshua for the first time this evening, and according to Zac this date thing between Grace and Joshua had been a set up. It didn’t look like a set up to her. From where she stood these two people were in total lust with each other or in love. Either way this was no scam.

The music changed tempo and an insurgent beat from a recent chart hit throbbed. Couples split as the beat demanded more vigorous movement. People jostled, bumped and stepped on each other as they tried to make space for their frenetic movements.

“Can we sit this one out?” Grace hollered over the loudness. Zac heard her shout, though he wasn’t sure that he caught the words or simply lip read them. He nodded. Slowly they made their way through the heaving mass as Zac escorted her back to the table.

Joshua saw them go. He’d never taken his eyes off her. He waited for the song to end before he escorted Shelley off the dance floor and made his way to their table.

“Where are they?” Joshua asked Luke as his friend gallantly surrendered his seat to Shelley.

“Grace went to the little girls’ room. Zac’s getting the drinks.” Luke said, a teasing glint in his eyes. “I suggested he get you heaps of ice.”

“I’ll go help him get a bucket.” Joshua replied as he turned away.

Joshua reached the bar just as Zac was paying. Joshua tapped his brother’s shoulder. Zac turned his head saw that it was Joshua and threw him a questioning look.

“One of these for me?” Joshua asked as he reached for one of the empty pint glasses.

“No.” Zac retorted bluntly. “Get your own.”

“She’s my date Zac. I can kiss her.”

“Kiss?” Zac picked up four bottles of beer. “Kiss?” He repeated impudently, before accusing boldly, “You were having full on sex.”

“You sound like a worried father.” Joshua told his younger brother. This was a novel experience. Receiving a lecture from Zac about personal relationships. The longest Zac went steady was a week.

“I am worried.” Zac snapped at his brother, “I set this particular ball rolling and I don’t like the way you are playing ball.” He thrust the four bottles at Joshua and turned to pick up the other glasses. “I feel responsible.” He tried to keep his voice calm as both brothers faced each other. “Don’t blow it Josh.”

“We were kissing.” Joshua tried to placate his irate younger brother.

“Yeah, but for whose benefit?” Zac demanded then he reminded his brother in a furious voice. “Pretending for Lysette?”

“Lysette?” Joshua shook his head, wondering if he’d missed part of the conversation. What did Lystette have to do with all this? He thought they were talking about Grace. He saw real concern in the eyes of his normally laid back brother. Incredulity surged through Joshua before he all but spat in a savage whisper, “I don’t give a shit about Lysette.”

“O.k., don’t get steamed Josh.” Zac’s easy going nature resurfaced. He grinned at his brother. “I was just making sure that’s all.”

“I’m planning on marrying Grace.” Joshua snapped, still recovering from Zac’s lack of logic.

Zac nodded ruefully, “Yeah, but your idea of planning includes not remembering to cancel dates with other women and worse still allowing Grace to find out. Some strategy.” He beamed “And be a bit discrete on the dance floor. I don’t want Shelley thinking my family are all nymphos. A touch of restraint would be appreciated.”

“Look who’s talking.”

Zac continued to grin infuriatingly at his older brother. “Don’t switch the subject. We were talking about you.” He nudged his brother, “Let’s go.” He turned ready to walk back to the table where the others were no doubt waiting, “Oh, oh, here comes Grace.”

Joshua turned to see Grace making her way toward them. She had retouched her makeup. That lipstick wasn’t going to last. He couldn’t stop the smile that formed as that thought registered. She smiled in response, totally unaware that she was drawing attention as she made her way to the two brothers.

Zac looked from Grace to Joshua and shook his head in resigned acknowledgement of the inevitable. He sighed dramatically, stacked the glasses he was carrying and then tapped Joshua’s shoulder. “Give me those bottles.” Deftly he hooked his fingers around the necks of three brown bottles and Joshua placed the fourth in the stack of glasses.

“See you later.” Joshua murmured as he walked off to meet Grace without giving his brother another look.

“Yeah, right.” Zac muttered and watched Joshua move purposefully toward Grace, take her elbow and propel her out of the room. “Next century maybe.” Zac continued to mumble to no one in particular as he ambled back to the rest of the party, his hands full, balancing the precarious cargo of drinks and glasses.

“Come on.” Joshua said firmly. Grace followed him. No questions asked. She held onto his hand as they threaded their way through the throng and headed for some privacy. He led the way out.

Once out of sight of other people he stopped. Slowly he pulled her back into his arms to continue where they had left off. He backed her against the old timbered walls of the upper deck. His hands braced on either side of her head, his fingers splayed against the painted wooden walls. Once again his mouth began to rove in a gentle but demented

fashion across her face. Grace slid her hands and arms beneath his jacket and around his waist, tugging his shirt free. She wanted to touch his skin, the way he was touching hers. She wanted to drag her nails across his back, to palm the lower muscles of his back and to run her fingers along his spine. She had no conscious thought, just this unrelenting need to touch him. Just when she had tugged the shirt free and her hands had started to put imagination into practice, Joshua initiated the most erotic kiss Grace had ever had. As his hips pressed forward and she was made even more aware of his erection, his tongue plunged slowly in and out of her mouth, fencing with her tongue and rimming the inner edges of her lips. Totally mindless she kissed him back. Striving to echo his movements, eager to give as much pleasure as she was receiving.

A loud cough, "Excuse us?" Said a laughing voice.

Joshua leaned forward, keeping Grace within the shelter of his body and arms. He tried to shield her from the prying looks. The other couple shuffled past. He breathed deeply when they'd gone. Then he laid his forehead against hers, their eyes inches apart.

"Fuck." He whispered without any semblance of romanticism. "I don't think this is the right place."

"No." She agreed in a voice that was husky and rough with passion. In that one word she communicated the desolate frustration she felt. His green eyes were almost as dark as hers. "I can't believe I do this in public." She whispered back, totally bemused by her behaviour, "What was in that champagne?"

He stroked her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs "I'm only this public with you." He fought for some semblance of control. "Come."

"Where?" but she followed him without waiting for a reply.

The rear of the paddle steamer was deserted. There was a gentle cooling breeze and the blades of the rotating wheel were flicking a fine spray of water that caught in the wind before hitting the deck. The sun

had dipped totally out of sight, but in it's wake it had left a sky of misty pink streaks and a slowly darkening evening. Grace shivered slightly and only then remembered that she had left her shawl lying on the back seat of Joshua's car. Joshua noticed the shiver, he removed his jacket and gently placed it around her shoulders. It dwarfed her, making her look strangely vulnerable. He tucked his shirt back into his trousers and smiled at her when she looked mortified.

"I think we'd better talk. Touching seems to get out of hand." Joshua joked. "If I kissed you now, I think I'd end up making love to you on the deck."

"Oh really?" She challenged with a lot more bravado then she felt.

"Easy." He retorted with all the audacity she'd have expected from him. The word was said softly, the green eyes that held hers told another story. They were blazing with a passion held tightly in check. Grace swallowed when she saw the flames and realized how he felt, tentatively she moistened dry lips.

"Don't do that." He commanded hoarsely. She looked startled. "Turn around. Looking in your eyes is tantamount to conceding."

She did so without even questioning his dictatorial order. Grace faced the open water, her hip bone pressing against the balustrade that kept her from falling into the midnight darkness below. Joshua stood behind her, his hands resting on either side of her, his body a few scant inches from hers. He slowly inhaled.

He whispered into her ear, "Tell me about you."

"Wh, what d'you want to know?"

"Anything. Childhood anecdotes, what's your favourite colour, what your dreams are, why you smell so good." That startled him. That wasn't what he meant to say, he was only thinking it. There had been no conscious command to voice that thought, how had it escaped? He moved away abruptly, "This isn't going to work." The hoarseness was

back in his voice. “Come on.” He said once again and smiled gently at her bemused look.

She looked like he felt. Shell shocked. Overwhelmed. Shattered. Now he knew why people in love acted so irrationally at times, their normal senses were totally screwed up. He loved this woman. Her spirit, her intelligence, everything about her.

“Let’s go below deck.” She jerked from him in surprised confusion. He grinned with a faint hue of regret. “Sweetheart, they are serving supper in the cabin downstairs.” He chucked her under the chin and then slid an arm along her shoulder as if he had done it many times before. “Heaps of people around. Lots of light. I certainly haven’t the discipline to be here alone with you and I don’t think you have the hide to cope with splinters in your butt after we make out on the deck of a paddle steamer.”

The cabin was just as crowded as the deck where all the dancing had been taking place, the only difference being the amount of light. It was brighter in the cabin.

Zac caught their eye and signaled them over. “Glad you could rejoin us.” He ribbed facetiously, then handed Joshua a serviette, “Here, you are wearing more of her lipstick than she is.” He grinned happily as his brother took the serviette and began to wipe faint traces of lipstick off his lips. Grace hadn’t even noticed that she had left her mark on him. Getting warmer by the minute she tried to pull away from Joshua.

He was having none of it. He pulled her closer to him, saying, “That’s what happens, little brother, when you kiss someone.” Promptly he kissed Grace again, once again acquiring traces of the lipstick she wore. His arm remained possessively around her waist when he released her lips. His eyes lending her courage to ride out the scrutiny they were both receiving.

He missed the snide comment Lysette made under her breath; “Only if it’s cheap lipstick.”

But he heard Craig's comment, "Grace, if only Sash could see you now." He was shaking his head as he smiled in remembrance.

"Sash?" Zac asked. "Who's Sash?" He flicked a look at Craig then Grace, waiting for an answer.

"Sasha is her youngest sister." Six pairs of inquisitive eyes focussed on Craig, waiting expectantly for further enlightenment. Craig gave Grace a fleeting look, checking her reaction, waiting to see whether he could go ahead. She nodded imperceptibly.

"Sash used to hassle Grace when they were younger"

"I was a trifle bossy and a born feminist." She threw in before Craig continued.

"Sash said no man in his right mind would ever kiss Grace, because she was so bossy."

"I'd be happy to prove to Sasha otherwise." Joshua offered gallantly, his left hand stroking her cheek reverently.

"I've done that. Thanks for offering." She said automatically, then noticed the look of jealousy that flitted through the already green eyes. She had only been teasing, she hadn't meant to hurt him, Grace reached for his hand and squeezed it gently, her eyes staying with his. He smiled, slowly, as if she was the only person in the room.

Provoked, Lysette interrupted the eye contact "Joshua" She said in saccharine sweet tones that hid the astringency, "Anyone would think you were in love." She mocked acidly.

"Darling," Craig chastened, then grinned unrepentantly "He is."

"Really" Lysette snorted before adding bitchily, "Joshua is out with a different woman every week."

Grace squared her shoulders and her chin came up defiantly. She tried to extricate her hand from Joshua's grip. But he held fast. Joshua, Craig, and Zac were about to dive into speech to rescue Grace, but she didn't need their help and she didn't wait for it. Very softly and pointedly phlegmatic, Grace said, "That was before me."

Luke, who'd been keenly alert all evening, watching the way his normally reserved friend was behaving, and seeing the difficulty Joshua was having in keeping his hands off his date, watched this last scene with a fair amount of interest. He whistled quietly before whispering, "Touche." She was beautiful and she wasn't intimidated by anyone. If Joshua hadn't looked so smitten with the woman, Luke would have been tempted to make a play for her. But as it was, he contented himself with silently wishing his friend success, because he knew this would not be an easy courtship. He recognised, what he considered her main failing. The woman was terribly, incredibly, blatantly independent. Too independent for Luke. Hell, she probably thought for herself. Not his type of woman at all. But he could understand why Joshua had fallen hard. She was smart, charming, and stunning.

Joshua beamed at Grace, Zac guffawed loudly and Craig nodded knowingly.

"Come on you." Joshua tugged her along, "Let's go dance."

Zac roared with laughter again, "Dance? Is that what you call it?" He challenged, "Come on Shelley, let's go dance." He winked provocatively at his date.

Shelley cuffed his shoulder. "When I know you better."

"Now's your chance." He teased as he dropped a hand on her butt. She promptly jabbed an elbow into his ribs and smiled when he scowled. Grace turned and gave Zac an innocent look and then smiled saucily at him. Once again he hooted with laughter. He would enjoy having her for a sister-in-law. But that would need Joshua to demonstrate a lot of skill in persuading her to marry him.

Once they had stepped out of the dining cabin, having eaten nothing, Joshua pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard. He broke off the kiss, breathing rapidly as he rested his forehead against hers, "I wish we could get off this damn boat and get some privacy."

"Oh yes." She said wistfully, "To do what?"

"What do you think?" He breathed into her ear before nibbling lightly at a vulnerable spot just below her earlobe. A frisson of electricity shot through her and she heard herself saying yes to the unvoiced question.

Last on, first off: Joshua and Grace were the first to leave. They were standing by the balustrade gate and as soon as the boat docked, much to the amusement of the deck hand, they got off. They were the only couple to abandon ship so early in the evening. Hand in hand Grace and Joshua marched through the park, setting a brisk pace. He had his jacket draped over her shoulders to keep her warm, for the heat of the day had disappeared and the clear moonlit sky held a touch of frost. They reached the car in less time than it had taken to walk from the car to the paddle boat earlier that evening. He drove straight to the cottage where he gave her a choice again. He needed her to be very certain.

"Are you sure?" He asked when they walked up the two steps and stood outside the door.

Grace rummaged in her small evening bag and retrieved the front door key. "Yes." She told him as she opened the door.

Chapter 8

With little finesse and great haste he unzipped the black silk. She vaguely felt the whisper of lined silk drift past her thighs, as the skirt floated to the ground. That was just beside the front door.

With his mouth teasing her lips, her cheek, her temple, he blindly tackled the buttons on the boned bustier, and staggered them both, toward a bedroom. Grace laughed through the kiss as he crashed into the doorframe. When he paused to apologise for the bump and to take stock of his route, she murmured, “It has a zip.”

“Zip?” The automatic question was voiced before he had even registered the information. His eyes narrowed. She smiled and watched as disorientated from kissing her he regrouped and her words registered. He growled something she didn’t catch but his fingers felt along her back searching for it. He pulled back and looked at her accusingly when he found no trace of the zip.

Grace chuckled, “How do you think I’d get into this? I live alone. Who’d do up the buttons?” She reached to her side and below her arm to show him the hidden zip.

He took over the zip.

She tugged his shirt free of his trouser waistband, just before he spun her around and removed the bustier. Instead of feeling embarrassed, Grace felt excited. She was practically naked he was fully clothed.

Joshua nuzzled each vertebrae, his mouth and tongue tasting and touching her skin, causing a quiver to streak down her spine, as he steered her toward the bed. Blind with passion and nerves she let him move her, guide her until they were nearly at the bed. Then he spun her around, and looked into her eyes, already contemplating what he wanted to do with and to her. She could see him thinking, as he

lowered his head to brush against her collarbone. Her head fell back, presenting him with free access to her throat, and the hammering pulse.

He murmured against her skin, but she barely caught the words. All she knew was that her knees were slowly dissolving. Where had all that strength gone? How could she be feeling so hot, so feverish, so out of control, when all he was doing was kissing her?

He lifted his head, once again looked into her eyes, and then swooped to kiss her lips, teasing, coaxing until she was breathless once again. Grace lifted her hands to his head, threading her fingers through the thick locks, before moving down to caress his neck. Gently, he traced a path along her jaw line, down her neck, across the slopes of her breast. Grace trembled as the simple action caused her vagina to flood.

He took one nipple very, very gently, almost reverently into his mouth. Grace gasped as his tongue flicked deftly at the already turgid peak. Briefly he glanced at her, saw that her pupils had dilated. He lifted his head and returned to graze her lips. His fingers scissored her nipple as his tongue coaxed hers to play.

She dissolved. Without any warning her legs gave way and blindly she clutched at his shoulders, holding on as her legs folded beneath her. She felt as if she'd sprinted a marathon in an oxygen free zone.

Joshua lifted her into his arms, carried her to the bed and placed her in the middle of the bed. For a second he simply looked at her. With a frown on his brow, and his gaze serious, he asked, "Grace?"

She nodded. He made short work of removing his clothes. Grace watched. He was wide shouldered, narrow hipped and hard. And big. For a second Grace wondered about the logistics. But then logical thoughts melted away as she wiggled free of her cami knickers. She was naked.

He crawled onto the bed and lay beside her. Taking his time, he leaned in to kiss her. Slow, gentle, smoldering. He lifted his head, studied her face and smiled when she opened her eyes.

Slowly he brushed along the tops of her shoulders, and let his hands wander, tormenting her as he played with her skin. His fingers moved closer to her breasts, until eventually his hands cupped her. She arched into his hands, and with an appreciative murmur his thumbs flicked against the distended nipples before he leaned in to kiss her lips.

He lifted his head, and his fingers teased the taut nipple while his eyes watched her reaction. Her breath hitched. Her eyes fired. So responsive he thought just before he leaned in and took her lips again.

Grace felt her legs part as his hands stoked along her thigh. Up to her hip bone, brushing lightly along until his hand reached her knees, then back again to her hip. All the while he kept kissing her, deepening the kiss then lightly teasing. Feasting on her lips as if he had all the time in the world. Fingers delving and parting. Stroking and gently pinching.

Grace felt the wetness between her thighs and felt the tremors spread from that core.

As his mouth found hers again, his palm and fingers gently cupped her, stroked insistently, and then rubbed sensitively against her. They came away soaking. Grace was beyond thinking sensibly. Moaning, pulsing, squirming, reaching. Movement was raw and instinctive, pleasurable and responsive. It tested his control. She learnt from his lead, touching him as intimately as he was touching her. There was no restraint, no need to restrict her touch, no hesitation. It felt right, it felt perfect. He felt perfect.

A pit deep sensation, like the fluttering of millions of butterfly wings just below her navel, fanned out in shattering waves to reach her toes. It was washing through her in rapidly escalating pulses that she barely understood, yet reached for with growing urgency. This was what she had waited for, this man. Him. Just him.

Fingers delved, stroked, cupped. Teeth nipped, grazed and nibbled. Lips soothed, sucked and pressed. Moans became pants, mewls became screams. The hammering of butterfly wings was replaced by a jolt of electricity as she bucked off the bed when one finger penetrated with carnal reverence, while his thumb pressed and flicked at a bundle of tiny nerves. Grace knew she screamed loudly, just before his mouth trapped the remainder of the sound. Joshua stilled and she drew breath. Then with his eyes on hers, watching every emotion that flitted through, his fingers continued to work their magic. She mirrored his own feelings, he could see it. Dilated pupils, passion glazed, splintering into scorching tenderness.

Slowly he inched down her body. Kissing both breasts, licking her breast bone, brushing against one nipple then the other, suckling gently, then nipping lightly, teasing his way down. He took his time. Grace was frantic. Desperate, reaching, trying to find that release that was one breath away.

“Josh.” She mewled as her fingers dug into his shoulders, her nails etching tiny crescent indents as she held on.

“Let me.” He murmured against her dampness as her legs scissored. With his palms against her inner thighs he opened her and then lightly traced circles against the tender skin of her inner thigh. Grace squirmed, while her body prepared for his invasion. Moving closer to that scented heat, he buried his tongue deep, tasting, licking. Grace screamed and bucked but Josh held her legs apart and continued to feast.

Wave after wave coursed through her. Still he went on. Just as she came back down to earth, he slowly licked her hipbone and as slowly as he had descended he made his way up her body. His lips kissed the indent of her waist, the start of her rib cage, the spot where her heart pounded, the underside of her breasts. Slowly he returned to her lips.

The kiss was deep. Her response was wanton. With one arm framing her head, he used his other hand to slowly insert first one, then two fingers, and watched as her eyes dilated and he felt her pulse kick up

again as she started on yet another rollercoaster ride. Grace begged, pleaded, for what she didn't really know. He thrust slowly, an inch or two, with both fingers. "You're tight." He whispered hoarsely as her body clamped hard against his fingers. "Grace, I can't wait any longer. I need to be in you. Deep in you." She tightened around his fingers for an instant before he withdrew his fingers.

With her unfocused gaze watching his every move he licked his fingers. She almost came watching him do that. With her taste still on his lips he leaned in and suckled her breasts, before lifting his head, to look at her. He took his time, slowly inserting the head. With her eyes on his, he thrust his hips forward, allowing her body to fit around him, prepare for his size, adjust to take him. Slowly he withdrew. He kissed her lips, moved his head, angled to take in her lower lip, suck gently and then release, before repeating the action with her top lip.

"Please Josh. Please." She whimpered, as he continued to tease her body. It was only when Joshua finally settled over Grace, and for a few seconds she bore the full brunt of his body weight before he took his weight on his forearms, that a fleeting thought re registered. It vanished quickly, as his tongue danced back into her mouth

The tip of his tongue entered her mouth, and at the same time he inched his penis in a bit deeper. Once again, he allowed her time to settle around the tip of him. Breathing hard he did his best to keep himself from thrusting. He wanted to. Desperately. The moist, heated skin clasped him as he inched slowly forward. She was tight, but she was also incredibly wet.

Lifting his head he laced his fingers with hers and positioned them at either side of her head. Taking his time, striving for control, he continued to enter her, slowly, pausing, while she clenched around him. His elbows took some of his weight, his fingers remained laced with hers, his hips ground into hers. He watched her eyes as he entered and withdrew for just a fraction of an inch. Grace moved beneath him, bucking automatically toward him, urging him deeper. Wanting him deeper. Harder. He withdrew slowly, murmuring sounds that were incoherent to Grace.

“Slow, slow down, we ...” She wriggled some more. Instinct led her. She knew there was more. And wanted it. Her throat vibrated with sounds of pleasure as her body prepared for more. She ground her hips against his, then levered her hips off the bed, as he withdrew, arching as she tried to meet him. She was driving him over the edge, he couldn’t keep this going, couldn’t maintain the control he was barely holding onto. “Grace.” He gritted in rasping concentration, trying to slow her actions. But as stubborn as she was out of bed, she was even more determined in bed. Her response was to clench around him as he moved almost wholly out of her, in an attempt to wrest back control that was slowly slipping from his grasp. Her tightness, her wetness, her response.

“Now. Josh. Please.” She begged. Her fingers grazed each damp skinned vertebrae, then dug into the tense muscles coiled on either side. “Please.” She pleaded as she moved her hands to clasp his butt.

A few seconds later, he pistoned into her, entering her fully and forcefully. Joshua froze.

For a second, sheer pain sheared through Grace. The sensation was short lived. Grace willed herself to relax. It would ease, it would get better. Still he didn’t move. He was rock hard, she was skin tight.

“Grace.” He moaned, a mixture of question, surprise and anguish laced the one word. He continued to murmur to her, as he felt her body adjust. His jaw clenched as he fought for control, not wanting to cause her more pain, wanting to pull out as painlessly as possible. His thumb brushed over her forehead as he smoothed a damp lock of hair away for her eyes.

“Don’t ruin it.” She breathed into his neck, feeling the heat of his body as she held onto him tightly. “Please,” She begged, and with the courage he associated only with her, she tentatively lifted her hips forcing him even deeper and clenching him tighter.

The guttural sound that came from within Joshua was loud and animalistic. He took some of his weight as he used his forearms to

support himself, his hands framed her face. Grace turned her head and kissed his palm, licking against his heart line before sucking on his forefinger, drawing it into her mouth. Joshua nearly ejaculated. Fighting for control, breathing hard, he resumed slow movement. She was tense. He was rock solid.

Grace wanted to urge him on, he was obviously scared of hurting her. She nipped the mound at the base of his thumb. Joshua moaned as pleasure surged through him, and he inadvertently entered more aggressively than he had intended. Her body made allowances. She was stretched to accommodate him. The pressure between her legs increased. He kept impelling himself deeper, but used his voice and his hands to ease and soothe.

Grace mewled as she felt her body yield. Holding himself deep within her, he brushed a kiss along her forehead.

“You are tight.” He muttered.

“You are big.” She replied with a slight hitch as he moved a bare fraction of an inch forward.

He reached between their bodies and using the finger she’d been sucking on, and the moisture between her legs, he lubricated and manipulated the tiny bundle of nerves. Grace almost bucked him off as her body reached for yet another orgasm. Varying his actions, circling then stroking the engorged nub he worked until she screamed and clamped against him.

His mouth descended on hers, his tongue surging forward to replicate his actions as he continued to thrust. His movements sparking a riot of pleasure that spiraled through her, cascading through nerve endings she never thought she had. She screamed. Her back arched, her hips lifted, as he thrust and stroked within her tight wetness.

Joshua worked hard, fighting off his orgasm, trying to ensure that she peaked. She could feel the rolling waves build, the tightness unfurl,

and she knew she was going to shatter. Joshua invaded her in deep rhythmic thrusts that rocked her higher up the bed.

Her pupils dilated, her eyes rolled back and her body went rigid just before it exploded into fragments as pleasure found nerve centres that had lain dormant for years. Grace felt as if her body was convulsed with wave after wave of incredible vibrations.

He held her in a tight cuddle, she carried his weight, savoring the feel of him pulsing through her. Her fingers moved down to tease lightly against his butt as she kept him close. The gentle action, the tentative caress took Joshua over the edge. Joshua drove again and again, a low growl escaping every time he thrust and was met. Then he felt her body clench around him as she continued to twist and turn. He shuddered as his own climax rolled in, and then he let go as it roared through him. He tunneled deeper into that warmth, yelling her name. His release was rough, he shivered hard, pounding deep, his voice hoarse as his desire escalated to near madness, and suddenly, blindly he erupted deep in her warmth.

Joshua took longer to come back down to Earth. His heart was hammering with thuds that sounded more like a pneumatic drill, and his body was slow in returning to an even keel. To Joshua it seemed that she held him for an eternity. An eternity that he wanted to prolong. But he knew he was crushing her. He slid his lips along her cheek, lethargically kissing her, gently easing his sweat slicked body away. He eased completely off her. Grace winced at the intimate soreness. A gentle delicious exhausted kiss.

She whispered something he couldn't hear as she nuzzled into his chest. He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to him binding her tightly to his side as if he imagined she would leave. He felt exhaustion settle. She had worn him out. Literally wrung him dry. Emotionally and physically. A first.

A few seconds later he was asleep.

Grace though slumberous, had too much on her mind. She knew daylight would bring an inquest. And that worried her. Things were about to change. That really worried her. She had set out to seduce him and had succeeded. Succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. But the time to pay was fast approaching. Later this morning she knew she would be held to account for her actions. If only she could postpone that inevitable discussion.

Grace sat on the wooden steps hugging her knees as she gazed into the distance. Her blue cut off jeans left her knees and ankles bare. Her hair was damp from the shower she had recently taken and she was lost in thought as she stared unseeingly at the horizon. She had woken early, unable to sleep and worried about facing Joshua. He had slept soundly. And she had taken those minutes to watch him sleep. After a few tentative minutes she had stealthily climbed out of her bed and left him to sleep on.

The fact that it was barely six o'clock was a clear sign of just how agitated she was. Grace wasn't a morning person, never had been, and the fact that she had got out of bed without having to argue with herself, showed just how unsettled she was. She took a shower, rummaged in Sasha's room for a clean t shirt and shorts, because she didn't want to wake him up, and had made herself a cup of herbal tea before heading for the back door step. Strange how old habits never died. She remembered the last time she had felt this vulnerable and faced making a challenging decision. She had made it sitting on this very step. Then she had been flanked by her sisters. She was nearly twelve Briar was mid way between her tenth and eleventh birthday, and Sasha had just had her seventh birthday. Yet, at that age, the three of them had sat on this step and decided how they were going to tell their parents that Grace was going to take the bus to the school in Auckland.

They'd all been contributing to the long running drama about Grace's scholarship, but their lack of funds meant that Grace couldn't board. So she had come up with plan B. She and her sisters had talked about it, sitting on the back door step, they had talked through the plan and how to present it to their parents. And her sisters helped her to execute

it. She had butterflies in her stomach, wondering whether she really knew what she was doing then.

Now, almost two decades later, she was feeling the same. She felt vulnerable. All because last night she realized that she was no longer in control of her feelings. Realized that for her, the man sleeping in her bed was the one. The one she had dreamt of as a little girl, the one she had thought about as a teenager, the one she had waited for. The one she loved. And that scared her. She had grown up surrounded by love. Loving her sisters and parents, and being loved in return. But while she knew that she loved him, and she knew that he wanted her, she didn't have the faintest idea whether he loved her. But she knew that he had a disproportional view of responsibility. Of honor. Of integrity.

She should have told him. Earlier, much earlier, she should have told him. Too late for that now. Having spent time with him, she knew he would feel guilty. She closed her eyes, tried to visualise sitting here talking to her sisters, asking for advice. With a quiet laugh she opened her eyes. Sasha would tell her to get over herself and if the sex was good to just keep going! Briar would not doubt tell her to take the relevant precautions. Grace groaned. Too late for that now. They hadn't even used a condom. She felt like a naïve twit. But what had happened between them last night and the way it had happened, had been perfect. It had been more than she had been expecting. Her first orgasm was the most honest candid carnal miracle she'd ever felt. She had waited her whole life to feel so replete, to feel so magnificent. Even now, just thinking about it, she could feel her heartbeat escalate. He made her feel like she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Without previous experience to count on, she had gone with her own imagination and learnt from his lead. She had always been a fast learner. And he was a good teacher, really good. She had reasoned that the touch that set her heart pounding, as if it had just worked through a marathon at a sprinters pace, would work on him too. So she had tasted with her tongue, raked with her nails and brushed with her lips. His response was electric. She could still hear his heart, feel his thrusts as he'd tensed and yelled and joined her in that bone melting climax. Just thinking about it was making her damp. She closed her eyes, saw his. She could remember exactly when his changed to register shock as

he realized that she wasn't experienced. She knew he would make an issue of it, take responsibility, and probably subconsciously feel that she had misled him.

"Morning."

Her thoughts had conjured him up. Joshua stood in the doorway, bare to the waist, creased black evening trousers covering his long legs. He had more clothes on this morning than the morning she'd walked into him in the bathroom, but today, she couldn't handle it with quite the same urbane flippancy. Too much had happened between them.

"Hi" She replied softly.

"Grace.."

It was his tone that panicked her. She wasn't used to these morning after chats. And at thirty she was too mortified to talk about her lack of experience. Intuitively she felt she was about to face the inquisition she was dreading. So she should have told him, before he went to bed with her, but it was too late now. What had happened, had happened, she didn't want to track through her dearth of experience, or the guilt she felt in seducing him without telling him he would be her first. And she just knew he would do the gentlemanly thing. She knew it.

"No post mortem please." She interrupted hastily as a frisson of alarm uncoiled within.

"I wasn't going to..."

"No." She tilted her head to look up at him, her eyes flashing in suppressed warning.

"Grace," He dropped down to sit by her, "I was going to say, sorry. I wouldn't have..."

The gentleness went unnoticed by Grace, as the apology registered. He was sorry they'd made love? And here she'd been, sitting in constant reminder of last night, mulling over the most exquisite moments in her life, reliving every moment as if it was the most brilliant thing she'd ever done. It was. And he was sorry he'd been a part of it. He was sorry. She knew he'd feel guilty, but sorry, sorry she hadn't expected.

"Sorry?" She screeched, as she shot to her feet. She knew she was being overemotional. But she couldn't stem the words. "What the hell for?" She jammed her hands on her hips as she glared at him in mounting outrage. Apprehension and anger took over. Defence mechanisms went into play. What the hell was he sorry for? For going to bed with her? For making love?

"Damn it." He growled aghast as he realized that Grace was misreading his apology. He was trying to explain that he shouldn't have assumed she was experienced. That based on the way she had responded to him, he thought she knew the score. He wouldn't have been as demanding if he'd known she was inexperienced. But she was misreading his apology. Grace jumped, "I thought you'd be, well, I assumed you had some experience." He informed her, tipping his head to look into her eyes as she stood looking down at him, "I must have hurt you." He explained, anxiously trying to placate her. "I thought you were experienced." He got to his bare feet.

"You patronising bastard." Stormed Grace, moving off the step altogether as she flung the words at him.

Joshua stood rooted to the spot. He was shocked. It wasn't her words, it was her anger. What was the matter with her? Why was she so angry? Was she already regretting last night? Had he been too rough? If he'd known she wasn't experienced he'd have been considerate, he certainly wouldn't have taken her with such demand. He'd made no concessions. From her responses, from the way she touched him, he expected her to have had other men. She certainly knew how to kiss. How was he supposed to know that she wasn't experienced, no virgin would have responded like that. No one without experience would have allowed him to take so many liberties. Hell, how could he say that? He'd never been with a woman who wasn't experienced.

Grace was totally unaware of his thoughts. She was too far enmeshed in her own confusion. Inexperience, vulnerability, need, heightened nerves and anger; they all played a part in her emotional irrationality.

“You bastard.” She repeated, “What the hell gave you the idea that I was experienced huh?” She yelled.

It was a lucky thing she had no close neighbours. She was certainly yelling loudly enough for Mr and Mrs Kelly two kilometres down the road to hear, fortunately they were both partially deaf. Joshua felt trapped between a rock and a hard place, he could hardly tell her that it was her behaviour, her reaction to him. The way she had touched him, the way she had kissed him, the way she had looked at him. Sophisticated, that’s what he’d thought. She knew what she was doing. Joshua shrugged in response to her hostile question. Determined not to get into the argument he knew would follow if he explained that her behaviour gave no indication of her lack of experience. She wasn’t in a frame of mind to listen.

But Grace refused to let it go, “I want to know what made you think that I slept around?” She demanded as she faced him squarely.

He thought about the question for a long time before answering. This was going to be tough. The question was, how to find a way back to the state of amicability they had achieved yesterday.

“I never thought you slept around,” The placatory tone was lost on her. “just that you’d have been with someone by now, that’s all.” He knew he’d blown it before she even replied.

”Why?” She stormed indignantly at him.

“Several things” he said quietly, coming down the stairs to stand beside her, knowing that this explanation was not going down well. But there was no other course of action. She was furious and he couldn’t find a way of appeasing her. The truth was all he had left.

“Like what?” She snapped totally unaware that he was fighting hard to remain patient. She wasn’t giving an inch and he was rapidly losing his tolerance for her unwarranted wrath.

His own temper fused into life, “Like,” he stated bluntly, “for one, your age. In this day and age a thirty year old virgin is rare.”

“Huh.” She snorted, incensed by that ridiculous comment, “How would you know? You didn’t even recognize one when you saw me.”

“Two” He interrupted heatedly, seeing that she was far from appeased, and he was still being given a raw deal, “You call yourself a damn feminist.”

“So what?” She hollered like a fishwife, “Feminism doesn’t equate with a sex mad licentious hooker, you imbecile. It means I have a choice.”

“Three,” he bellowed appalled by the way she was twisting everything to suit her illogical interpretation, “the way you kiss.”

“Bastard.” She flung the word at him like a manic missile.

“Suit yourself.” He threw the words at her in a dismissive gesture, turning around to walk back inside the house. Grace grabbed his arm. He stopped dead in his tracks, knowing this argument was far from over.

“Don’t try and change track.” Grace glared at him “O.k. I’m a thirty year old woman who lectures in women’s studies, I’m independent and a damn good kisser, I’m still a catholic Goan.” She fired the barrage of words as if they were supposed to make perfect sense to him. She didn’t give him a chance to ask her to explain, “How many Goan women do you know sleep with guys before they get married hmm?” She was still holding his arm in a vice like grip.

“None.” He thundered, turning around to face her fully. He took her by the shoulder, as he pointed out in a calm laconic drawl. “But you aren’t married either and you slept with me. You came onto to me.” He quirked a brow at her to emphasise his point.

“I came on to you?” She inquired with a shrillness that would have embarrassed her at any other time. Glaring belligerently at him she jabbed his shoulder, “You sure as hell have got that wrong.” She slapped his hands away and moved up the two steps.

“Really?” Joshua asked in what his family would have recognised as the voice of hidden fury. He was too furious now to even think through what he was saying, but he could say it in a tone of voice that was chilling. He was enraged because she was angry and, as far as he was concerned, he could see no reason for her anger. She was angry because he’d been thoughtful enough to apologise because he hadn’t realized she had no experience. It was a no-win situation. He was furious because what should have been a glorious morning was disintegrating into a travesty, and he was furious because he was being left to carry the can for this whole debacle.

“So your hand was a figment of my imagination was it?” He asked in a coolly taciturn tone, “If I remember correctly, last night, on the boat,” sarcasm laced every word, “you”

Grace was mortified. “Stop it.” She demanded softly, awash with shame. She recalled the moment he had started to describe. He was right. She had made many of the moves. They had been driven by sheer instinct. Instinct and want. He stopped talking. They were both breathing hard. Tempers were beginning to be leashed. “O.k.,” She was the first to speak, a bare whisper, a huge difference to the shouting she’d been indulging in for the last few minutes, “Let’s forget last night. Just forget the whole damn thing. It never happened. Forget it.” She sounded as if she was talking to herself. And she wasn’t meeting his eyes.

“Forget it?” He thundered. His command over his temper fled and he was once again at boiling point. “Only a few minutes ago you were

telling me that Goan women don't have sex outside marriage and now you are telling me to forget that we did."

"I knew it." Grace stated softly, having once again come to a totally wrong conclusion. So she had been right all along. He was feeling guilty. And taking responsibility. The honorable idiot.

"What?" His exasperation snapped the word out. He just couldn't keep up with her changing track mid flow. How had he managed to fall in love with such a difficult, touchy, unpredictable woman? How could they be so good in bed and so poor at communicating out of it?

"You think I'm pushing for a wedding ring." She jabbed his shoulder with her index finger, "Desperate Grace gets her man by conning him into sleeping with her. Her dad can't pay him to marry her, but she can through sex! Forget it. I absolve you of any commitment, responsibility, obligation, duty, ok?"

"Grace, for,...."

"I don't want to hear it." She scorched his statement before he could even get into gear let alone full flow, "You don't have anything to worry about. You owe me nothing." She marched past him, "Nothing. Thank you for last night. It was great. You were great. Thank you. But that's it." She emphasised, "Now leave." She fired a fusillade of words as she moved rapidly down the path, "I'm going for a walk, don't be here when I get back."

She raced away. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she succumbed to overwhelming emotions. The roller coaster ride was over and she had just realized that she hated roller coasters, especially emotional ones. Joshua let her go. He could have stopped her. Gone after her, but in her current frame of mind she was unlikely to listen. The more he thought about it, the more he realized they both needed a bit of time and space between them to cool off. At least for now. They both needed to calm down, think rationally. He watched her storm up the grassy incline and disappear from sight over a small ridge.

He returned to the bedroom to dress. Their relationship was far from over. All Joshua had to do was convince her. Commitment? Obligation? It was simply sheer need, want and love.

It was just after eleven when Joshua arrived in Titirangi. He wasn't sure why he had come here, but then, in the last twenty four hours he had done things that were completely against the grain. He had never fallen asleep after sex. Never. He had never stayed over. For years the excuse had been he had to get home for Zac and Riah. As he'd got older he hadn't bothered with the excuse, simply explained that he couldn't stay, he'd shower dress and leave. And he was surprised by the fact that Grace had woken up before him and without him realizing she'd left the bed. Everything was topsy turvy.

The door was answered by Ben who recovered from his surprise quickly.

"In the neighbourhood?" He teased, knowing how unlikely that was.

They lived at diagonally opposite ends of Auckland. It was unlikely that Joshua was passing through the neighbourhood, or even lost. So he was here for a purpose, one that had him visiting in a shambolic state of dress. He hadn't been home. That much was obvious from the evening clothes and from the designer stubble he wore. Ben was surprised to see Joshua slightly disheveled, in crushed evening shirt and dark black formal trousers, that appeared to be equally creased, but he was even more surprised to find Joshua speechless.

"Late night eh?" He quirked a look at Joshua as he beckoned him in, "Come in." Ben waited for Joshua to enter and then shut the door. "Mind if we talk on the deck?" Ben led the way through the house, past the L shaped dining room and through the kitchen, "I'm marking. You've got good timing. I was just getting ready for a break." He led Joshua toward the back of the house, down the corridor, and through the large kitchen. Joshua could smell a roast dinner. They went through the open ranch slider that led from the kitchen to the deck.

There were papers on the wooded deck just as there were papers on the wooden table. In fact there were papers everywhere. Like daughter like father, Joshua thought as he remembered the state of Grace's office.

"I've come at a bad time." Joshua finally found his voice as he realized he had interrupted Ben's work.

"For whom?" Ben removed a stack of papers from a chair and placed them beneath the table.

"You obviously." Joshua indicated the paperwork.

Ben grinned at the nervous man. "You couldn't have picked a better time." He stated amicably, and then cleared a space on the deck beside the chair, "Any excuse not to do this." He indicated for Joshua to take the now vacant chair. "Beer?" Ben asked.

Joshua nodded and took the seat that had been cleared for him. Now that he was here, he wasn't sure how to go about this. Logic told him that he needed help. He thought he'd find it here. He needed to talk to someone about Grace. Zac wasn't around. Luke didn't know the story. He was making a hash of it, so far he had managed to do everything wrong. He needed help.

"What brings you here?" Ben called from the kitchen, his head poked into the open Fridge as he retrieved two cold beers. "I imagine trouble with Grace." It was as if he'd read Joshua's mind.

"I should've called," Joshua said apologetically when Ben returned with two stubbies, and gave Joshua a bottle and a glass. "Actually I should have gone home showered and changed." He proffered an apologetic smile.

"It's not a problem Joshua." Ben tried to pacify him. "If you want to shower here, I can lend you some clothes."

Momentarily Joshua smiled as he recalled the boxer shorts. He wondered whether Ben had any other gifts from his daughters that were decidedly tasteless. Ben watched the amusement flit through the young man's eyes. Joshua reached for table, and placed his half filled bottle on it. He noticed Ben was watching him warily and felt he compelled to say something.

"Mrs Carvalho not in?" Coming here was a mistake. But he needed to talk. If he was going to win Grace, he needed to know more about her.

"Angie plays golf with a few friends on Sunday, leaves yours truly here to get the Sunday roast on. I'm surrounded by bossy women." Ben smiled, "She'll be back around one- ish." He opened his bottle and poured the pale liquid into the glass, carefully watching the froth as it neared the rim, "You wanted to talk to both of us?"

Joshua shook his head. This was harder than he expected. He'd been looking after his younger brother and sister for so long now that he wasn't used to having someone listen to his personal problems.

"So what brings you over here?" Ben inquired in pseudo innocence, watching the younger man. Joshua was definitely anxious.

Joshua glanced uneasily at Ben, "You know exactly why I'm here Mr Carvalho." He picked up his beer glass and swallowed a mouthful.

Ben's grin widened at the young man's forlorn expression. "Grace I would imagine has something to do with it."

Joshua let out a deep sigh. "This is ridiculous." He mourned, "Actually I'm not sure who I should be talking to." Now that he had started, he felt better. It was easier to just talk.

"About Grace?" Ben asked, picking up threads of the conversation and recalling some other recent feedback he'd stumbled upon. "I heard you two had become an item. A very public item."

Joshua tried to staunch his face from reflecting the incredulity he felt, but his words were less masked. “You know about us?”

Ben shrugged his shoulders. “News travels fast, even if we don’t move in the same social circles.”

Joshua sipped the cold beer, his mind was working over time, as he tried to fathom out just how much her father knew. Great Joshua. Just great. You make love to the daughter and the father knows about it within a few hours. Had Grace phoned home? What had she told her father? Obviously not everything if the man could still treat him amicably.

“I shouldn’t have taken advantage.”

Ben hooted with laughter. He liked Joshua and he was pleased that the young man was being a gentleman and taking the flak. Yes, he liked him a lot. He’d be perfect for Grace. She needed someone strong, but more than that, she needed someone who would cherish her and understand her. Ben thought Joshua would do just that.

“What I heard was that my daughter, my cool, calm, usually collected, daughter, practically threw herself at you.” Ben laughed in happy recollection.

“Oh, now, hold it there,” Joshua felt compelled to rescue Grace’s reputation. “Mr Carvalho, that isn’t....”

“And she kissed you in the garden in front of everyone.”

The word garden hit Joshua between the eyes. Relief surged through him. It dawned on him that they were talking about different occasions.

“I know it was your birthday party, but that type of behaviour is not usually Grace’s style. She’s kind of sensitive about what people think.

Though you'd never believe it from her taste in clothes." Ben was chuckling happily as he reached for his beer again.

While feeling relieved that his prospective father-in-law did not know the half of it, Joshua was trying to put together the right words to tell him at least part of it. He was going to have to tell him something, if he was going to get any help. That was assuming the man didn't strangle him first for taking advantage of his oldest daughter.

"The thing is, Mr Carvalho," Joshua began, "It was my fault. I made the moves, I kissed Grace at the party."

"Not the way I heard it." Ben stated flatly in complete confidence.

"What? Grace told you she kissed me?"

"Grace didn't tell me anything. That girl can be tight lipped when it suits her." Ben shook his head, "And too damn stubborn. Just like her mother." He glanced across at Joshua, "Grace didn't tell us anything, and so I asked around."

"You asked around?" Joshua couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Well she gave us a lot of drivel when we spoke the next morning, I knew something had happened, but she wasn't saying anything much beyond telling us what people wore and who was there. Naturally Angie and I were concerned."

"Naturally." Joshua began to panic.

"So we asked a close friend."

"Craig's father." Joshua reasoned.

Ben nodded, "Yes, Joachim told us that she kissed you."

“She initiated it, but I kissed her. She only kissed me to make a point.”

“Would you like to clarify that statement Joshua?”

Joshua felt as if he had just been summoned to the headmaster’s office to account for a misdemeanour. The tone of voice, the measured pace, the quirk of the grey eyebrow, the questioning eyes. The school teacher had informed the father. Taking a deep breath, Joshua explained what had happened at the party. He tried to keep it light and left out the slap incident. There were some things one just didn’t share.

“That might be so Joshua, but I know my daughter. There’s more to it than that.” Ben voiced his thoughts as soon as Joshua stopped explaining. But Joshua didn’t want to go down that track. So he tried a detour.

“I took her to a Christmas party yesterday.”

“I know.” Ben took a gulp of the beer as he waited for Joshua to continue. There was something about this situation that was beginning to worry him. He clearly wasn’t being given all the facts. Joshua was stalling, feeding him part of the story.

“I want to marry her.”

Ben spluttered and tried to dash the remnants of the beer from his face.

“You want to marry her?” He repeated in complete bewilderment. “Why?” He sat up straighter, “I mean,” he hastened to explain his reticence, “don’t get me wrong, she’s wonderful and I like you. But she said your date yesterday was as a favour to Craig. Something to do with you and his wife.”

Joshua heard the note of censure in the older man’s voice.

“Lysette used to be my secretary. She wanted me to marry her. I didn’t oblige. So she went after Craig. He loves her. Now she wants out and

is trying to implicate me. Grace agreed to head her off.” Joshua was getting tired of having to explain a situation that was only part of the story and getting more and more complicated by the minute.

“You used my daughter.” Ben was vehement, provoked by the thought of someone using his daughter.

“I asked for her help. She agreed.”

Ben looked at Joshua for a long, long, time in total silence. Finally he said, “So why do you want to marry her?” He was indubitably hostile. “Part of this scam to keep Lysette out of you life?” The sarcasm wasn’t lost on Joshua.

Joshua realized that if he was to convince the man in front of him, he was going to have to put into words what he felt. “I love her.” The words sounded as if he was still reeling from that discovery. But there was no denying his sincerity.

Joshua kept his eyes trained on the older man in front of him, allowing Ben to see exactly what Joshua was feeling. He was easy to read, intentionally so at that very moment. Very, very slowly, as the full impact of Joshua’s words finally registered, Ben began to beam. He sat there and smiled happily at Joshua. “Good.” He finally stated.

Joshua’s shoulder’s visibly dropped. “The thing is,” Joshua declared in sombre tones, “I need to persuade her to marry me.”

“Ahh.” Ben remarked, a wealth of meaning in that sound. It explained why his prospective son-in-law was at his door late Sunday morning. “Have you told her you love her?”

Joshua shook his head. He had been mulling it over, and over, trying to put his feelings and his reaction into perspective. Trying to account for the sense of loss he felt when she wasn’t around. Trying to divine the feelings he had every time she defended him, every time she argued with him, every time she touched him. Trying to understand why such a stubbornly independent woman, the type he avoided at all

costs, had him down on his knees, praying that she'd give him a chance. She never gave him a chance to tell her.

"Did you stay at her place last night?" Ben probed as if it wasn't the most personal question one could ask. He sounded almost affable. Joshua nearly fell off his chair. His eyes flashed to the older man, and he tried not to go a nice shade of beetroot. "Grace told her mother she was going to seduce you."

Joshua was floored. "You and your family always talk about things this personal?" His voice gave away the fact that he was unsettled.

Ben smiled gently as he explained his tightly knit family "We are a close family. We talk over our worries." He could see that Joshua was startled by the fact that the family shared such information. Ben didn't explain that discussing his daughter's seduction plan had been a first for his family, nor that he had nearly gone ballistic when Angie had told him, even after his wife had pointed out that they were living in different times. "When the girls were younger we went through several tough patches. It made us discuss problems." Memories of his daughter's early childhood and the family's first few years in New Zealand surfaced. "There was a lot of give on all sides. It pulled us together. We talk a lot of our worries out, as a family. We trust each other." Ben topped up his glass of beer before he continued, "Grace told Angie, because she wanted us to know it wasn't just a casual thing, she'd thought it all through." Ben saw Joshua watching him with a slightly confused look in his eyes. "I think I had better tell you a bit about us. It might help you understand things from Grace's point of view. I'll get us another beer, we could be a while." Joshua sat pensively waiting for him to return. This was turning out to be a most unusual morning. "What do you know about my daughter?" Ben asked when he returned to the deck, handed Joshua another stubby and settled back down in the seat he had vacated only a few minutes ago.

"She's feisty. Caring. Passionate. She's not as confident as she makes out. She can be obstinate. She's incredibly sensitive, terribly stubborn, impressively loyal and highly imaginative. She's over defensive, exceedingly opinionated and totally exasperating. She's gentle, soft as mush, very compassionate and incredibly forgiving. She's considerate

and kind. She has her own sense of style, and she doesn't see herself as a stunning, sexy, beautiful woman. But she is."

"Yes." Ben finally said, before he quizzed lightheartedly. "How many dates have you been on?" Ben was dazed by the description. "I thought it was just the one."

Joshua was just as rattled. He had started to describe her and found that the words just formed. The thoughts just kept coming. His mind reeled from the fact that over a few short meetings he had picked up this amount of information. Albeit based on gut intuitive feeling. But as he described her she began to materialise in his mind. He could see all those characteristics. And his body began to react. He shifted. Ben retraced his steps to the kitchen to collect more supplies.

Ben placed the spare bottles on the table. This might turn out to be a marathon of a talk, best to be prepared. "Perhaps I'd best just describe our start in NZ, it might help explain her character." Ben poured another beer for himself. "I have three beautiful daughters, even if I do say so myself."

He smiled at the younger man, "Grace thinks her sisters are stunners. She's never considered herself beautiful. She's confident, as you say, surface confidence. Acquired at a very early age." He could see that he had Joshua's full attention, "We were expelled from Uganda."

"The Idi Amin thing?" Joshua asked.

Ben nodded. "Yes. Goans dispersed all over the globe, Canada, the UK, Australia, all over." He was remembering the terrible time, wondering where they would go, him, his wife and three young daughters. They could take what they could carry. "We came here. I guess it seemed like a good idea, because Craig's father, Joachim, was here. We'd been to school together. He migrated to NZ with his parents when he was in his late teens and we'd continued to keep in touch. We wrote for years. He talked about New Zealand and socially it sounded like Uganda." Ben retraced his reason for remembering, "Anyway, we came here." Ben sipped from his beer glass as he

remembered arriving in Auckland, over twenty years ago. “It was a difficult time. We came as refugees. My teaching qualifications weren’t accepted and Angie had never worked in Uganda, we’d had servants there. A very different lifestyle to the one we were about to embark upon.” When they arrived, they didn’t have much. Angie had to work, she supported the family, kept them cheerful and together. Ben had a lot to be thankful for. “The girls were young, Grace was five going on six, Briar had just turned four, Sasha had just turned one.”

He could still remember them holding onto his hands and clutching at his trouser legs as they had stood quietly in line, even after a long, long flight, they had waited patiently to be processed through New Zealand immigration. Briar and Grace peering anxiously around them, knowing that their life had changed, but unable to comprehend what that really meant. All they knew was that they were going to live somewhere else.

Chapter 9

Customs wasn't a problem, they had so little with them. Three suitcases, two bags and one pushchair. He could remember and see himself carrying two cases and one bag, while Angie had pushed the stroller with Sasha in it and dragged the other suitcase. Briar and Grace had tugged the other bag. They had been allowed to take with them only what they could carry. So they had hoisted the three cases, and two bags across the tarmac to the aircraft that was to take them away from their home. That's all they had with them when they set foot in New Zealand on a bright summer's day. It had been the start of a new life for them, initially a life that had been difficult, making ends meet, finding ways to keep food on the table and giving the women in his life a chance to start again. They had worked hard. All of them.

"They've done well for themselves." Joshua stated, seeing that Ben was beginning to look sad. "Grace lecturing, Briar a doctor with the UN and Sasha doing her post doc. You must be proud of them."

"I am." Ben said and fierce pride laced the two words. He put his beer glass down on the floor beside his chair, removed his glasses and wiped his eyes surreptitiously. Then he continued to relate his story, "I had to retrain. While I studied and worked part time Angie looked after the girls. In between times she took in sewing, and ironing and anything else that meant she could work from home. Things were tight for a long time. We scrimped and made do. We couldn't stay with Joachim for long. Joachim and his family tried to help out, but he had a young family too. We eventually got a house assigned to us, the cottage in Cambridge." He smiled in fond remembrance, "Originally, it was two army huts linked together? We've added on over the years."

The two huts had been joined to form four rooms. The kitchen and lounge were one room and meal times were a carefully orchestrated event. The three girls had shared a large room and Ben and Angie had the second room. The bathroom was a small add-on, just beyond the kitchen. It housed a shower, a basin and a toilet and it used to be a real chore taking a shower, because the room was always freezing cold. Persuading three young girls to take a shower in a cold room was a

nightmare. Surprisingly none of them had even been ill. Too hardy. They'd been bred tough. Some of the melancholy and sadness disappeared temporarily as Ben recalled the stories he'd had to tell, the ploys he'd had to use to entice them to take their daily shower. One of the reasons why the girls were so good at sport was due to the fact that the school had showers. So after a game, they'd take a shower at school, in a warm large room, and then when they got home, they'd argue their way through not having to take another shower.

"Grace and Briar got the school bus into Cambridge, Angie would walk them to the junction, it's about half a mile down from the cottage, and then she'd meet them at the end of the day. I studied part time. Worked at the local supermarket stocking shelves, that kind of thing. We became quite thrifty. Recycled clothing, hand me downs." He smiled in recollection, "Probably accounts for Sasha's sense of dress." The thought had him chuckling, "She was always the last to get things, and they tended to be clothes that lasted, jeans, dungarees, tough clothes and there wasn't much point trying to get them to co-ordinate."

Ben glanced at Joshua and noticed the sympathy, "Hey, it wasn't that bad." He put his glasses back on. "We managed. It took five years part time study for me to re-qualify and I managed to get a post at the local college. By this time all three of the girls were in primary school in town, and Angie began to work part time. So we got onto the mortgage ladder, we bought the cottage, it meant security for us, but it also meant a few more cut backs. You'd be surprised at how frugal you can become."

Joshua sipped his beer. This was a world away from his lifestyle. He'd always had security. Always, until his parents had died. But even then, they'd never been strapped for cash. His parents had left them well provided for. He'd always had Zac and Mariah, had taken responsibility for them at an early age, but they'd never been strapped for cash.

"The head at the local school told us Grace was one of the brightest students the school had ever had, quite possibly a gifted student. She wanted Grace to sit the entrance exam for St Hild's, the private school

in Auckland. So, just before she turned eleven, she did.” The note of pride was back in Ben’s voice. “She won a scholarship, it paid for her school fees, her books anything academic, things like that.”

“A scholarship?” Joshua was impressed. Mariah had sat the entrance exam for that school and had failed and she was no slouch academically.

“Yes, a scholarship, it covered her school fees. I think she scored 99 or 99.9 %.” Ben said full of triumphant paternal esteem, “But we needed to find cash for her lodging, her uniform, meals.” His smile vanished, “We couldn’t. Every cent was accounted for every week. There was no surplus. We certainly didn’t have any savings.” Joshua, about to sip his beer, stopped mid track, his wary eyes staying with Ben. “We tried everything, Angie and I stayed up, working through an entire night, trying to figure it out. We just couldn’t make ends meet, if we had to pay boarding costs or if we had to find her lodging. We couldn’t afford it.”

There was abject disappointment in Joshua’s voice when he said, “So she didn’t go.” Tears burned his eyes as he thought about the little girl who’d been so bright, had so much opportunity at her doorstep and was unable to pursue her goals. Her photograph materialised in his mind. The solemn look in her eyes. He understood that look now.

Ben looked at him in astonishment. “She went.”

“But you just said...”

“We couldn’t afford for her to live up there.” Ben interrupted.

“So?”

“Stubborn.” Ben stated soberly, “Remember this is Grace we are talking about. She’s the obstinate one.” He sighed in whimsical remembrance before he enlightened Joshua “She commuted for two years, until we moved to Auckland. Briar received a scholarship. The thought of both of them commuting was unbearable. You can’t begin

to imagine the nightmares I had. Angie and I talked it over and I applied for and got a teaching post in a rough area in Auckland.”

“What?” Joshua wanted to shake the man sitting in front of him. He was still reeling from the earlier information Ben had provided. “She commuted from here?” How could he let her do that? The thought of a young girl, not even in her teens, travelling two hours to school, each way, everyday, on a bus, had Joshua seething with barely controlled outrage. “Bloody hell.”

“It must have been.” Ben agreed in a subdued voice.

“She’d have what? A two hour trip each way?” Joshua was striving very hard to keep his voice neutral, to show none of the anger he was feeling. But he wanted to haul the man in front of him to his feet and shake him senseless.

“About that.” Ben agreed diffidently.

“Everyday.” Joshua cringed and flexed his fingers, resisting the urge to do some physical damage to his prospective father-in-law.

“Yes.” Ben sounded far away, lost in painful reminiscence. “She insisted she’d be able to do it. She can be a very determined person.” Ben could still recall the stubborn way his young daughter had battled and battled until both her parents had finally consented to give it a trial run. They’d both thought she would give it up when confronted with the reality of it, day in day out. The thought of the daily grind, the routine, the early mornings. That, they reasoned would have Grace opting to go back to a local school in the space of weeks. They hadn’t counted on her determination and sheer graft. “You know how stubborn she is.” Ben couldn’t summon a smile “She did it.” He murmured quietly his voice choking on emotion.

“Hell.” Joshua exploded out of his chair as rage surfaced.

Then he saw Ben’s expression and remorse enveloped him. In his place what would he have done? He hadn’t had to face such a decision.

Would he have prevented Grace from going? Joshua gripped the banister railings until his knuckles went white, his fingers digging into the wood, until he finally calmed down.

“The fares would have been expensive.” Joshua sat back down and took hold of his beer bottle. Anything to compose himself. It wasn’t to last long.

“She cleaned buses.” Ben stated with a great deal of guilt.

“What?” Joshua bellowed thunderstruck and once more got to his feet. He wanted to hurl the bottle in anger, instead he slammed the bottle down on the table. He strove to control his fury and achieve some modicum of cool-headedness .

“She phoned the bus company to ask if they would let her ride to Auckland and back in return for her cleaning the buses.” Ben grimaced as he remembered the row that had taken place after that little strategy. It had indeed been the turning point They had argued with Grace, telling her she couldn’t commute because they still wouldn’t have been able to afford the travel costs. So she had found her own solution and presented it to them fait accompli. Ben had read her the riot act, Grace had repeatedly explained how she would manage, Angie had tried to pacify both sides, Briar and Sasha had sided with their sister.

Grace had contacted the company, phoned them and arranged her own deal, before she told her parents about the plan. She wasn’t even twelve years old. But she had organised it all. Ben had shouted, ranted, argued and threatened, all to no avail. Grace had stuck to her argument. They had argued for days, the house was a minefield. She wanted to go to that school and she was going to go. She’d arranged it all and she wasn’t going to change her mind. That’s what came with having a gifted, determined child. It was one of the many times that Ben had wished that his daughters were average, rather than exceptionally, bright. They could argue most favourably when it suited them. Even at twelve. The house had been a battlefield as Ben repeatedly told her she couldn’t go. She had threatened all sorts of terrifying things, including running away.

Joshua choked on the beer he was about to swallow. “You let her do that?” He demanded aggressively when he had stopped coughing and spluttering.

“Didn’t have much choice. She wanted to go desperately. She wanted that education, she would have been frustrated at the local college. She recognised that. At twelve, she knew that. At St Hilds they would plan a timetable to suit her, to challenge her, but still keep her with children her age. She wanted that.”

“So she cleaned buses.” Joshua snarled, he had given up trying to control his temper, he was ready to thump the man in front of him. Of course he had a choice, he was her father, he should have put his foot down; no was no. How could he let her. Joshua swore furiously.

Ben could understand the younger man’s sentiment, there were many occasions when he had wanted to thump himself.

“I’m not telling you this so that you can beat me up. Or so that you can feel sorry for Grace. As it is she is going to be furious when she finds out I told you.” Ben stood up and moved to the railing, to stand alongside Joshua. “I’m telling you so that you can understand what makes her the way she is.” Joshua moved a small distance away, afraid that he might still punch his prospective in-law. Ben could understand the young man’s actions. Explaining this was tougher than he had expected. The guilt he’d harboured for years was rearing its ugly head. If there had been any other way to provide for his family he would have done it. But at the time, he had very few options open and even less available cash. “She used to get the six thirty bus, get into school around nine, get the three forty bus back, get into Cambridge around six and clean buses for an hour before cycling to the cottage.”

Joshua quietly strung a sentence of obscenities together before he demanded, “Why did you let her do that?” He addressed Ben’s back.

Joshua recalled the photographs he’d seen in Briar’s bedroom. Grace as a twelve year old, with that grave expression. A twelve year old putting in at least a sixteen hour day.

“She pleaded and pleaded. She argued and reproached and carped on and on until we agreed. Then she made sure that we never saw what an effort it was.” Ben had tears streaming down his cheeks, but with his back to Joshua, his pride was still relatively intact. “The bus drivers were great. After a couple of months they saw the work she put in, she did her homework on the bus, and then she would have those buses spotless. She never does things by half that girl. The guys clubbed together and ‘gave’ her a travelling scholarship.” Ben sighed, dashed the tears off his face, “But she’s never been one for charity, she helped out in the office, or cleaned buses, or tutored those guy’s kids for free, during her holidays. She still visits those old codgers. They even came to her graduation ceremonies. They are family. ”

Joshua had run his fingers through his hair in agitation, what he really wanted to do was to scream at the whole scenario that was unfolding. But there was more to come. He just knew it.

“She’s never really been a party person. Commuting never gave her a chance to really make friends at school. She’s quite self-conscious because of that. She only ever went to one school social.” Ben surreptitiously wiped away evidence of his tears and flicked a look at Joshua. “She’s never had an opportunity to pick up the skills. She gets nervous at the very idea of going to large parties.” He shook his head, “Though if you saw her at a party you’d never guess. But put her in front of students and it’s another thing altogether.” There was a sense of pent up anger, injustice and frustration in his words.

Some of the anger Joshua was feeling dissipated as he realized just how Ben must have felt at the time. How he felt about the situation, even today. The man clearly felt he hadn’t provided well for his family. He wondered how he would have coped in Ben’s situation. “So you moved?” He prodded Ben out of his despondent, sad recollections.

“Yes we moved here. A local bus goes past the school. This area wasn’t really the affluent area it is now and at the time we put a caravan on the land and slowly built this house.”

Ben drained the beer in his glass and topped it up again. With a resigned sigh he resumed telling his story, knowing that he was going to exacerbate the fury that Joshua was trying so hard to conceal and control. He couldn't blame the man, even to this day, he felt he should have been able to provide for his family. And at least it confirmed what he had hoped: Joshua loved Grace.

"We weren't poor. Not really. We had food on the table, we were clothed and we had a roof over our head. But we didn't have much money. Angie and I both worked, but we were building here and paying off the cottage. That wasn't much, it isn't the place you see now. The girls have modified and extended it." Ben sipped his beer, reflectively pondering on the past. "Things were difficult and tough for a very long time. I'd say for most of Grace's school years. Things were tough. My daughters dealt with the lean times in different ways. Grace became independent. She adjusted clothes, revamped them, she made unique clothes and wore them with a sense of challenge. You've probably noticed that her taste in clothes almost shouts- so what?" Ben took a deep breath, "It was only when I took the girls to school one morning that I realized what Grace had been up against for two years." His eyes misted again as he remembered, "We had this rust bucket of a car by then and I started to take the girls to St Hilds. Drop them off on my way to work." He looked over at Joshua, "I'd say the kids who attended St Hilds had your sort of background. Money wasn't a problem, large homes, well-to-do parents, expensive gadgets, clothes no problem." He stared away, lost in remembrance, "For the first two years, we came to the parent evenings and things, but it was always such a rush, either Angie or I would come up, we couldn't both do it, someone had to look after the girls." He paused, " But it never really sunk in. Until I took Grace and Briar to school."

The school materialised as he remembered driving up the tree-lined school driveway, proud that his daughters were attending such a well known school. Ben faced Joshua as he continued to explain.

"Looking back on it I should have added things up earlier, but I didn't. I should have known when Grace argued for Briar to have a new school uniform when Briar started. We were going to kit them both out in secondhand uniforms. We couldn't afford new stuff for both of

them. Angie and I had agreed to buy secondhand. We bought Grace a second hand uniform when she started, even made a conscious decision to buy a large size, so that she could grow into it. You know, try to get as much wear as possible. She wore it for those first two years. Then she bought another secondhand uniform for her third year, but when it came to Briar, Grace insisted that we bought Briar a new uniform. Briar is shy. Reserved. So we got her a new uniform. ”

Memories returned, and Ben could see the car pulling up outside the stained glass fronted doors, his daughters stepping out of the car after giving his kiss a cheek. “This group of girls walked past and said something derogatory about Briar and Grace not being sisters because Briar had a new uniform. They suggested Grace get herself a new uniform, if she wanted to belong. Spiteful horrors.”

Joshua remembered what he’d said to her in his study. She didn’t belong. And dressing up wouldn’t help her belong. He felt like someone had just punched him in the gut. Why the hell did he have to taunt her? He stalked a few feet away from her father, moving to the far end of the deck. He was angry enough to seriously consider getting physical. He gripped the banister and looked out, unseeingly, into the garden, trying to curb turbulent wrath. He was such a jerk, how could he have done that to her. He knew how sensitive she was. Too sensitive. And he had told her she didn’t belong.

Ben was talking again, “And I remember wanting to get out of the car and haul these girls to the head’s office. But Grace just smiled serenely at the group and said “Yeah, she’s my sister, but in my case it will take more than a new uniform.” They’d all laughed and walked away.”

Joshua’s eyes narrowed but he forced himself to remain silent.

“I asked her about it when we got home, but she just shrugged and said it was not a big deal. It took me years to put together her first couple of years at that place.” Joshua retraced his steps and returned to his seat. Ben got to his feet. They seemed to be taking it in turns to pace the deck. “It had never even occurred to me to question why she had only been to one school social, apart from the final year school

ball.” Ben braced his hands against the deck railings as he continued to recount, “She had practically begged to go to that first one, had even drawn this outfit that Angie made for her. In her final year she went to the school ball with Dan who’d been asking her out for months. The son of one of the bus drivers. He worked at the depot too.” He folded his arms across his chest, looking Joshua in the eye, “You know why she didn’t go to any of the other socials?”

Joshua shrugged imperceptibly and suggested, “Cost?”

Ben shook his head. “We’d arranged for her to stay overnight with Craig’s parents. Though they live in your area, and it was a bit of a hike for them, they were great. They took her to the school social at six. Picked her up at eleven.” Ben’s tone was bitter, “Five hours to a girl of twelve, ostracised because she didn’t have the right clothes, the right accessories, the right background.”

Grace had arrived at the school social full of anticipation. She was eager to socialise, to talk about inconsequential things, giggle a bit, share trivia. Instead, after an hour of trying to fit in with several groups of girls and their boyfriends, she had finally conceded defeat and retreated to the edge of the hall, where she had stood and watched. Standing alone. She had four more hours to practice looking unconcerned. It was something she had found had stood her in good stead over the years. She could feign indifference without even thinking about it. Five hours was a long, long time. Her swot friends, other girls on scholarships, had not come to the social, it was not their scene. Grace had. It was her first and last social mistake at that school. Ben’s anger was palpable, “Grace believed she’d made so few friends, apart from the swots, because she was never there after school to mix with them, get to know them. She always had a bus to catch to get home. This social was going to be her big chance to get in with the in crowd. Make some friends.”

Languidly Grace had watched groups of her giggling peer group amble onto the dance floor to gyrate to a current hit. She had wanted to dance, really, really wanted to dance, but had decided she had made enough of a fool of her self for one night. She could just imagine them all moving away. She wasn’t that strong. She found a wall to lean on,

and waited. Waited for the time to pass. When that became unbearable, with hours to go she had gone outside and sat on the school wall, waiting to be collected by Craig's parents. It was fortunate that it was a warm, dry night and a good neighbourhood for Grace sat outside alone. Waiting. Waiting and thinking.

Ben turned to face Joshua, to try to gauge his reaction to these disclosures. "I found this out a few years ago. At Sasha's graduation we were all reminiscing about the tough times and talking about how well we'd done for ourselves. Flippantly Grace mentioned how she'd like to meet some of her schoolmates to show them." He turned his back to Joshua and stared far into the distance, but his voice carried all the same. "Apparently they told her that she didn't belong there. And getting all dressed up didn't change anything. She wasn't invited, she wasn't one of them and being in their crowd was not an option. She couldn't possibly pay them enough to be seen with her."

Joshua blanched. It must have been *deja vu* for Grace. Hadn't he said much the same to her only a few weeks ago. His pallid complexion paled even further. She had simply stood there and taken it. She didn't have the hide of an elephant, more like a gossamer spider's web, but she held herself together just as toughly. He was furious with himself. He was as bad as those young girls. Worse, they had immaturity on their side. He had simply been a jerk.

"So she sat outside waiting to be collected." Ben turned once again to face Joshua, "She decided she wasn't going to be a door mat any longer. If they wanted to be friends with her, they would have to make the first move and they were going to have to take her as she was." Ben noticed Joshua's pallor, "You ok?" The younger man was looking decidedly ashen beneath the tan of his skin.

"I'm a bastard." Joshua muttered beneath his breath as he reached for the now warm beer. Ben didn't hear him, he'd been pulling out his chair and the scrapping sound covered the mutter.

"She expects everyone to take her as is, not as they want her to be. So she presents this image of quiet confidence. As you described earlier.

But she is very sensitive. Perhaps a mite too sensitive.” Ben retook his seat and sat facing Joshua, “If anyone puts her through that again, they’ll have me to deal with.” He vowed succinctly just before he downed his warm flat beer. “So now you understand why Grace would never kiss a man -enthusiastically- I was told, in public. Let alone at a party like yours. To her it wouldn’t be worth the risk. It would be inviting trouble. She was nervous when she left for the party. Wasn’t really sure that she would fit in. So Angie and I were astounded when we heard she’d kissed you. In front of your friends.”

Joshua felt his face suffuse with colour. From ashen to red in a few scant minutes, that was a first for Joshua. It puzzled Ben.

“I really didn’t give her much of a choice.” Joshua hedged.

“Grace hasn’t got to her age without dealing with unwanted attention.” Ben told him. “She considers herself a feminist because she has a choice. She is empowered.” He sounded as if he had heard the words often.

“I kissed her.” Joshua persevered adamantly. “There wasn’t much she could have done about it.”

“Yes, you keep saying that.” Ben bridged his fingers, “So, you want to marry my daughter.” It was a statement, rather than a question. His eyes pinned Joshua to the spot.

“Yes.” Joshua reiterated. He maintained eye contact with Ben as he put his glass down on the table. He held the gaze of the man he envisioned as his father-in-law and made sure that his message was easily read. He found it easy to talk to him.

“Good luck.” Ben stated, a mixture of euphoria and worry in his tone.

“I’m going to need it.” Joshua spoke his thoughts aloud. “And I’m counting on you to help me.”

“Course you can son.” Ben grinned and patted Joshua’s shoulder. “Come to lunch next weekend.” Ben winked, before adding, “Grace will be here.”

“You sure I should come?” Joshua sounded far from convinced about the merits of the whole thing. He felt he needed more time to come up with a fool-proof strategy. A week wasn’t nearly long enough. She would still be spitting tacks, he was sure of that. She would be furious. Joshua knew that he needed to spend time with her. But if he went by his experiences with her to date, the probability of getting another date with her through normal channels was slim to non existent. The woman was too prickly, too unpredictable and far too stubborn to see sense. So he took the only option available. It was going to be problematic, he knew that. Just as he knew that she was going to fight him every step of the way. Even if she loved him, he knew this was not going to be smooth sailing.

“The sooner we get the campaign started the better.” Ben announced, almost back to his normal jovial state .

“Campaign? Huh. I haven’t even got a plan. That’s why I came here.”

“Just tell her you are getting married.” He grinned and added “Then duck. The plan will take shape. Mark my words.”

The two men looked speculatively at each other for a long time, before a smile finally broke through their contemplation.

“Cheers.’ The chorused in unison as they settled back to enjoy their warm beers.

He wasn’t there when Grace returned from her very long walk. She was relieved. She wasn’t sure how she could ever face him again. But then perhaps she would not be seeing him again. They’d managed to not meet for thirty years of her life, she could cope with another thirty. She never wanted to see him, ever.

It had taken a long time to calm down. Although, in reality she was far from calm. Last night, she finally acknowledged, had been a milestone in her life. Not for the reasons Joshua would have assumed, but because Grace had been startled by the extent of her love for him. The intensity of the desire she felt for him worried her. It had been a thunderbolt to realise she loved him. She loved that annoying, stiff-necked, obstinate, resolute man. Really loved him. She had admitted that much to herself earlier that morning, sitting on the doorstep looking away into the distance, she had suddenly realized she loved him.

She was nervous and scared. Never, never had she reacted to a man in that way. There had been no illusion of control. No control, just this feeling of living the moment with real candour and total certainty that it was the right thing to do. There had been no self discipline, something that she always considered the very fabric of her make up, but last night had been special.

It had been doubly hard to take when he had started to apologise for being part of that awesome experience. A commitment and love had been ignited by the very man who now wished he'd had no part of it, or her. She had mulled over the whole scenario, from the boat to their arrival at the cottage right through to the argument earlier this morning. She finally came to the conclusion that while he might regret last night, she didn't. It was very, very special. A night that she would always remember. With Joshua, she acknowledged, she had given full and free reign to the passion that existed within her.

Grace shook off her trainers and in her bare feet she padded into the kitchen to make herself some herbal tea. She was putting off going to the bedroom. Had he picked up her things or were they still strewn around the room, like they were this morning when she had crept out of bed and stealthily headed for the shower. She was slightly sore, but not overwhelmingly so, and the jet of sluggish but warm water removed faint stains of blood from her inner thighs. She had dried herself and found some clothes when she raided the linen basket of clothes waiting to be ironed. She didn't want to return to the bedroom. Not just yet. Too much had happened, and there was a lot to think

about. With a cup of hot herbal tea she had headed for the back step, where Joshua had eventually found her. That was over eight hours ago.

Grace put the kettle on and waited, lounging against the breakfast counter. It was then that she noticed the little green light on the washing machine was on. It had completed the cycle. Grace peered into the front loader. Tumbled within its confines she recognised her bed sheet. Just the sight of the sheet had memories flashing back through her mind. Damn. How could this be happening to her? She'd been out with scores of men but had never wanted to sleep with them. And the ones she had considered had never offered and she had never been brave enough to seduce. Yet from the very moment she had met Joshua she knew there was something between them.

Suddenly, she buried her face in her hands. Not because she had slept with him, but because she had driven him away. Which man in his right mind would want to date a woman who couldn't handle a simple thing like last night without behaving like a shrew? Within minutes she developed a full blown head ache. Did she have to shout at him? Why, oh why couldn't she have demonstrated some maturity and sophistication? A small degree of either would have helped. All she had to do was act normal. Normal. Just talk to him, ask him if he wanted coffee, cereals or toast, that sort of thing. It wasn't hard. Instead she had opted for over reaction. It hadn't really been a conscious thing, it just seemed to happen, she couldn't help being defensive. The evening sky was a clear blue with the setting sun fanning golden red rays over the hills. But Grace saw none of this as she stared out of the kitchen window. She hadn't eaten all day, but she felt no hunger. It was almost four hours since she had stopped crying, and set about tidying up the cottage. Her eyes were red, her nose was sore and her head ached. But all that was better than thinking about the earlier part of the day. Every now and then she would remember last night and this morning and she would find herself working hard to stop the tears. As the hours passed she reviewed her ideals and reworked her values in very fine detail.

Chapter 10

Grace was late to the lunch date with her parents. She had been packing for a Christmas vacation she was taking with Sasha. And Grace had forgotten the time. Subsequently, even though the drive up to Auckland had been relatively traffic free, she was still running late.

“Hi mum.” She hugged her mother, “Sorry I’m late.”

Her mother greeted her with the cryptic response, “Hi hon. I’m sure he’ll make a perfect son-in-law.”

Grace stilled the panic button that was automatically triggered by those words. She couldn’t be talking about Joshua could she? No. Remonstrating with herself about paranoia setting in, Grace shrugged off her jacket and hung it on the coat stand. Grace hadn’t seen him since their fight. He hadn’t phoned her but he had sent her yellow roses every day last week. There had been no message, just his name boldly scribbled on the card. She’d waited for him to phone. To arrive at her door step, at her office. No sign. Just the yellow roses every day.

Angie put her arm around her daughter’s waist, as Grace looked questioningly at her mother. “Who?”

“They’re on the deck.” Angie smiled. Grace frowned.

Who was on the deck? When Grace stepped onto the deck, she was momentarily stunned into limbo. Joshua was sitting sipping beer with her father. The last thing she had expected was to find him here, at her home, looking as if this was a common event. Grace flashed her mother a look: traitor, it said. Her mother smiled nervously.

“I’ll start carving the roast.” Angie disappeared back into the house.

Grace looked pointedly at her father and then Joshua. Here he was, sitting on the deck, sipping beer from a bottle, having a conversation with her father, as if this was all perfectly natural. There was nothing normal about this set up. Nothing. That much was obvious. So they were now in cahoots with each other. The question was, could she handle it without another bout of primadonna syndrome.

“Grace.” Her father got to his feet and came to hug her, “You’re late.” He admonished as he kept his arm around her shoulder, as he sensed her rising panic. She was ready to bolt. He kept a firm hold.

“Sorry.” She said mechanically, her eyes on Joshua. Ben felt her trepidation ease, fractionally. Ben dropped his arm and quirked a look at Joshua. The look went unnoticed by Grace. She was making a big show of looking Joshua straight in the eye.

“Well, I’ll just go help your mother. After all it is my roast she’s carving.” He escaped before Grace could stop him. Another traitor. Still she kept her eyes trained firmly on Joshua. She couldn’t stop staring at him, and at least her heart wasn’t thumping loudly against her chest. She was breathing calmly, holding his gaze and trying to remain in command of all her faculties. The majority of which seemed to be diminishing quickly. She decided to lean against the balustrade, some degree of support was necessary, her legs were giving way.

This was a perfect end to a perfectly odd week. A week that had started with a troubling message. The note had been postmarked Auckland and the message was terse and written in block capital letters. The words flashed up as if she was seeing them in reality: “Bitch. You took mine.” Grace had frowned at it for a few minutes then binned it. She hadn’t shown it to anyone and had fleetingly thought it might be Lysette. Lysette was Joshua’s problem. She’d let him resolve it. Now she found herself presented with a perfect opportunity to ask him to do something about it. If only she had the courage not to make a hash of this.

Take it easy, be calm, act normal. Not a chance.

“What are you doing here?” She hissed. So much for acting normal. But then hissing at him angrily was normal conversation for the two of them. That thought almost had her giggling hysterically.

“Having Sunday lunch with you and my future-in-laws.”

Grace almost lost her balance as she went to sit down. “What?” She gripped the back of the nearest chair and shot to an upright stance.

“We are getting married.” He said with the merest hint of a smile in his eyes. He had enjoyed throwing her that line. She had looked far too composed when she’d seen him, while he had been drinking in every second that she stood regally in front of him. Beautiful. A crop top, shorts and flat leather sandals. Surely she hadn’t driven here wearing those clothes, the shorts barely covered her butt.

“What are you talking about?” She challenged, ignoring his first command. She eased into the chair, making sure the short shorts didn’t ride up further. She would never have worn them here if she’d known he was going to be here. She’d have worn a kaftan. She surreptitiously crossed her legs at her ankles. “Why would you want to marry me?”

“Good tax benefits. My surname would suit you, I’d like to have your parents as in-laws, I...” She snapped her open mouth shut and got to her feet ready to do battle. “Walk with me.” It wasn’t a request, more of an order and he gave her no option. He took her elbow, then he walked with her down the two steps to the grass lawn.

Grace could have fought him, but she had issued her brain orders to try and keep this serene and collected, no more prima donna retorts. She could be sophisticated. Calm. She could remain calm. When they were out of sight of the house he swiveled to face her. She folded her arms defensively and looked away. Keep calm she commanded herself.

“I want you to listen to me. I ...” He commanded her as he clasped her shoulders and turned her to face him fully.

Calm rational thought fled. "I'm all ears." She declared angrily her eyes flashing.

He smiled, this was the woman he'd been missing all week. His hand reached out and with her chin in between his thumb and forefinger he attempted to persuade her to look into his eyes. She kept her eyes down cast. The chuckle should have alerted her, but it didn't. His lips touching hers had her eyes flying up to meet taunting green depths. Then she was lost. The merest touch, that's all it took.

He broke away, "If you interrupt again, I'm going to kiss you again and then we'll never get this sorted." He let her go, watched her with a fair amount of wariness. She was breathing hard. "Now listen." He commanded, smiling gently at her glazed look, "I have your father's permission to marry you."

Numb from the shock of his kiss and the words she'd just heard, she gaped at him for several seconds. A good impersonation of a landed fish. Then he saw the numbness replaced by white hot outrage. He waited, knowing there would be a reaction. Her eyes darkened to almost jet and she was still holding her breath.

"Breathe, damn it." He ordered, and had to shake her to snap her back into reality. Sparked out of the comatose state that had overcome her, she turned furiously to shove both palms against his shoulders and push him a good few inches away.

"You would have to be the most aggravating, brain dead man that I have ever had the misfortune to meet." She rallied against him, pushing his hand away with barely concealed outrage, "Well you can tell my father that I don't need his permission and whilst you're at it tell him that I don't want to marry you." She made to storm past him, but he caught her upper arm and swung her back to face him. He clamped her to him, forcing her, effectively, to stand still. His arms were wrapped tightly around her, pinning her own arms to her side.

"Grace," he waited for her eyes to make contact, "We are getting married." Cool, calm and flat. Although, imperceptibly, quaking. So

much hinged on this. And realising that this approach was going down like a lead balloon was not helping the situation. She was fuming, he could see it in her eyes, hear it in her words and feel it in the body language. She was livid. But he was not going to give her up.

“Yes, no doubt eventually,” She tossed at him, “but not to each other.” She shoved at his chest with the flat of her hand. It made no impact. The man was a rock. Why hadn’t she noticed that before? “Let go.”

“Grace you aren’t on the pill and I didn’t use a condom last weekend.”

“So?”

“You could be pregnant.”

“I’m not marrying you because you think I may be pregnant.” She tried to shake off his restraining hold and disengage, “There is such a thing as single parenting you know.” She threw the careless remark at him as if he had no role in fathering the possible child.

“My child will have both parents in his or her life.” His air of nonchalance disappeared as indignation took over. Now it was his turn for anger. If she thought she was going to have his child, and not have him involved in its life, she had another thing coming.

“I’m not marrying you.” She reiterated adamantly, realising that steering the conversation down single parenthood was not a smart move. But she had his attention and he wasn’t looking quite so smug. So, perhaps, that throwaway line was worth something after all.

Joshua thought fast. He needed to change tack. She was back in control. “Why not?” He blocked her path back to the deck.

“Because.” She snapped belligerently without adding anything else and tried to leave. He held fast.

“Why?” He demanded again.

“Because, I believe people should marry because they love each other.” Silently she continued; and you don’t love me. For a twinkling of a second he thought she was about to say something cutting. She had sounded as if there was more.

“People get married for other reasons.” He watched her face carefully. Her expression was closed.

She shrugged and said softly, as if it pained her to admit it, “I don’t.”

“You do now.” His reply was equally gentle, but the words were enough to have her spitting tacks again.

“I don’t think so.” Her hands planted firmly on her hips, her eyes flashed antagonistic messages and her tone conveyed her resentment loud and clear.

“What about the baby?” That was a last minute desperate shot. If she cared that much about love and marriage the chances were that she was equally straight about babies born in wedlock.

“What baby?” She hissed. “It was only one night.”

“That’s all it takes.” He informed her in mockingly supercilious tones, “Or don’t they teach you that in women’s studies?”

“I’ll take my chances.” Glaring she turned to march away.

“Not with my baby you won’t.” Large hands returned to clamp down on her shoulders and once again he halted her progress.

“You arrogant..”

“Spare me the adjectives,” he said in weariness, “I remember most of the ones you’ve used before. Just take it as said.” He shook her gently, “My child will know and be with both parents.”

“There might not be a child.” She tried one more time to force him to see reason.

“I’m not taking any chances.” He stated firmly, “We are getting married, end of story.”

“Why don’t we wait and see if I am pregnant? I’ll get a kit, do the test?” Why was she making excuses, of course there wasn’t a baby. She didn’t need to prolong this. She knew he’d take the responsibility angle, knew he would try to badger her. And she’d thought she’d settled this that morning on her back door step. Just go along with it. Her subconscious nagged her.

“They aren’t a hundred percent.” He replied, suddenly realising that she was capitulating, slightly. There was a window of light.

“If I don’t get my period then I will look at my options.” Damn but she’d only just finished her period during the week preceding the boat party. It would be a long wait. But she wasn’t pregnant. She knew it, she just knew it.

“No.”

“I’ll see a doctor.” She shouted as she pushed ineffectually at his chest.

“We get engaged. If there is no child we can break it off.”

“Forget it.” There was no way she was getting engaged. Engaged to him? Did he think she was made of stone?

“We get engaged, if you’re pregnant we get married within the month, if not we break it off after a reasonable period of time.”

“No.” She retorted flatly. “I’ll see a doctor.” This was ridiculous, she had no intention of marrying anyone just because of a one night stand.

“Stop being unreasonable.” He pushed bravely, “I’m giving you choices.”

“Choices?” She snapped and the irritation she felt at being backed into a corner was loud and clear in the word. “My child will not grow up in a home where the parents can’t stand each other.”

Although she’d said the words firmly Grace was torn. She wanted him in her life, even if it was for a short time. She wanted him. But not because he felt obliged, she wanted him to want her. Unconditionally.

“You’re mistaken Grace,” The words were measured and quietly spoken, “if that were the case we wouldn’t have made love.”

She didn’t answer that challenge, what could she say? He was right.

“Decide Grace.” He pressed her, almost as if he could read her mind, see the indecision. She was wavering. “We get engaged.” He kissed her lightly, pushing home his advantage. He knew his kisses rattled her and he needed to keep her on the back foot. Another light kiss.

Her rational mind lost out, “O.k.” She whispered the word she had no intention of saying out aloud. Instantly Joshua hauled her to him and kissed her long, deep and hard. She was speechless as they walked back into view of her rather anxious parents. What had she just done?

Ben and Angie exchanged relieved glances and pinned generous smiles onto their faces. “Dinner is on the table.” Ben announced when they were within earshot, as if his daughter strolling, in his back garden, with a man’s arm draped across her shoulder was a common occurrence.

Joshua grinned, his hand clamped on her shoulder, just in case he needed to prevent her from escaping, “Grace has agreed to marry me.”

Both parents laughed with delight and relief. Angie hugged her daughter, Ben shook hands with Joshua and then pulled him into a hug.

“It will be good to have another male in this family,” Ben teased, “my women have had it their way for too many years. About time I got reinforcements.”

Then Joshua was hugged by Angie. “Welcome to the family.” She kissed his cheek.

“Thanks.”

Ben held his daughter in a fierce hug. “He’s a good man.” He whispered into Grace’s ear. Grace felt as if her life had just been derailed. Things were speeding, uncontrollably, fast, too, too, fast. The problem was that she didn’t want to jump off. She wanted to take the ride. That really terrified her.

On Monday Joshua phoned Grace at the cottage. She was in the shower when she heard the phone and she was tempted to leave it to ring, but it kept peeling incessantly, so she answered it.

“Grace.” Came the voice before she even had a chance to announce herself.

“Yes.” She glanced at the puddle that was forming at her feet.

“Morning.” He propped the phone between his shoulder and ear and reached for another form that was on the desk.

“Joshua.” Grace scowled into the phone, as she stood dripping water, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” He chuckled, “Just thought I’d give you a good morning call. Are you always grouchy in the mornings?”

“Yes.” She was half tempted to tell him that she was only grouchy with him, but that would be giving too much away.

“What time do you normally go to work?” He continued as if they were used to chatting inconsequentially.

“Around eightish.” She sighed, realising that he was going to ramble on, while she stood in her lounge getting decidedly cold, breaking out in goose bumps and dripping carelessly all over the rug, “Joshua we saw each other yesterday. What is this all about?”

“Nothing serious.”

Far from nothing serious, she’d kept him awake through half the night. He put the form, he had intended to fill while he talked with Grace, back down on the desk. He couldn’t talk to her and complete the form at the same time. Normally he could do that, manage a telephone conversation while doing his paperwork. But listening to her voice addled his brain and he couldn’t even remember why he’d needed that particular form. Obviously multitasking was not going to be possible around Grace. He recalled trying to get to sleep last night. The situation had gone beyond a joke. He kept seeing her face every time he closed his eyes and then he would get hard, after that he couldn’t sleep.

“It’s a bit daft isn’t it?”

“No.” He sounded affronted, “I figured we should keep in touch. We are getting married soon.” A sore point, and if he hadn’t been so tired, one track he wouldn’t have pursued. By the time he acknowledged his mistake it was too late.

“According to you.” Grace told him with just a hint of challenge. “We are temporarily engaged. At this rate very short term.”

“Have you told your parents that?” Sanguine. Joshua was pleased to see that years of dealing with Mariah were finally paying off.

Grace held onto her temper, “Joshua I’ll decide...”

“Let’s not start another argument.” He kept his voice calm, even keel and firm.

“Yeah right.” Grace snapped with barely contained sarcasm. “You always instigate an argument.”

Well obviously calm and firm did not work with Grace. “I’ll ignore that inflammatory remark.” He grinned, as if teasing her was perfectly normal, “I was simply calling to say good morning. Don’t you think we should at least talk to each other without going for the jugular?” There was silence at the other end of the phone and Joshua wondered whether he had blown it. Perhaps he had taken this far too lightly. Too, too, lightly. That was the trouble with dating a sensitive woman, you had to watch every move. “Grace?” His voice sounded hesitant and tense as he came to the conclusion that he might have been pushing too hard.

It was difficult predicting just how Grace would react. That was part of the reason he loved her, so he really couldn’t ask for it both ways. But right at this moment he would have preferred her to be predictable. Easy to read. Pedestrian. At least that way he could gauge whether there was a partnership still in place.

“Yes.” She stated with a trace of terseness. Why was it that this man could cause her to throw a tantrum so easily? Years of carefully constructed composure went out of the window in two seconds flat.

“Yes, what?”

“We should stop hassling each other.” She capitulated in a bare whisper. Why was she always yielding?

She could hear the smile of relief in his voice when he said, “So how about you phone me tomorrow?”

She sighed, he really was a hopeless case, one minute annoying, the next playful “O.k. I’ll phone you. Now can I go get dressed?”

He wished she hadn’t said that. His mind instantly conjured up a naked vision of her body. It was another reason he loved her, she had such a delicious body. His imagination needed little incentive to go into over drive where she was involved. The last thing he needed was another uncomfortable morning at the computer. At this rate he was never going to be comfortable in jeans ever again.

“You aren’t now?” Why did he have to ask that? His mind was already in overdrive. He was hard. This was getting beyond a joke, he told himself as he tried to get back under control. He couldn’t simply react to the thought of a naked body, even if it was her naked body, he wasn’t a teenager anymore, he should be able to control his lust. His body told him otherwise.

“No, I got out of the shower.” The matter of fact statement did nothing to liberate the discomfort. He would have to invest in baggier trousers.

“I’ll call tomorrow.” She repeated when he hadn’t said anything.

“Great.” He sounded restless. “Oh, and have a great day.”

She laughed, “You too.” Grace looked in dismay at the tiny puddle that had formed at her feet, she smiled as she recalled the conversation. That man. Her man. She walked to the bedroom to get dressed, a smile still on her lips as she revisited the conversation.

She did phone him the next day, just after eleven, at night. Amy had taken the last bag out to the car, and Grace was just locking up the cottage when she remembered that she hadn’t phoned Joshua as she’d promised.

“Can you give me a minute? I promised to phone Joshua.”

Grace dialed the number and Amy sauntered back into the house to wait. Joshua was not impressed.

“You play dirty.” He chided when he answered the late call. “I’ve been waiting all day for your call.” And that was the truth. He had answered every phone call promptly, just in case it was Grace. Zac had ribbed him about it and Mariah had interrogated him, when he’d answered her call after it had barely rung. He had waited for her to call. Waited for the call with all the nervous excitement of a boy on his first date.

Grace was delighted with his honesty. “You could have phoned me.” She quipped gently.

“I did.” He confessed sheepishly, “but you weren’t in.” That came out as an accusation “I tried around eight.” Joshua had phoned a couple of times, but he wasn’t too keen to tell her that. It was bad enough admitting that he had phoned.

“I was out.” She told him, giving nothing away. Things were a mite difficult at the moment and she wasn’t feeling in the right frame of mind to go over it just now. Somehow she just knew how he would react and she wasn’t sure whether she would cope. She had faced all the questions she could take. What she needed was a goodnight’s sleep. Then she’d sort out today.

“Teaching?” Joshua felt like a jealous school boy. He wondered why getting information out of her was harder than finding problematic code in a computer programme.

“No.” She hedged, not wanting to lie and not sure whether to tell him just where she had been. She toyed with the idea of telling him the whole story, knowing that he’d most likely over react. At this late moment in time she just wanted a good night’s sleep, not a lecture. Certainly no more questions. And she knew she’d get both.

“Anyone I know?” He pursued in a quietly glum tone. What was she so secretive about? If she’d been out on a date, she should be straight about it. He could handle that. Like hell.

Grace laughed, but he detected a hint of melancholy as she said, “No.”

“You aren’t going to tell me anymore.” He finally acknowledged grimly.

She sighed. “Nothing else to tell. Anyway, it’s late.” She kept her reply lighthearted. Grace knew exactly how he’d react if she told him about her day. She was already feeling rather washed out, the endless round of questions at the police station, after a long day at the university, had taken its toll. All she wanted was to curl up under a warm duvet and go to sleep. She knew Joshua well enough to know that if she told him the truth about her day, she wouldn’t get any sleep until the early hours of the morning. He would most likely insist on driving down, and then would probably badger her into giving him all the details. No, she wouldn’t tell him tonight.

“You don’t play fair.” He remonstrated in a grouchy voice. “Where will you be at one tomorrow afternoon?”

“Working as usual.” If he hadn’t still been wondering about where she’d been that evening, he’d have picked up her subdued tone. But he was mulling over the fact that she hadn’t told him anything. And that rankled.

“How about lunch? I could be at your office around one. I have a meeting in Hamilton at eleven.”

“The same guys as last time?”

“Yes.” Although this meeting was not a set up job. Joshua had the programme written, and wanted to run it on their system. This was a bonafide visit. And a bonafide visit warranted a bonafide lunch date and a chance to find out where she’d been tonight. He was better at getting information out of people face to face.

“Ok, that sounds great.” She agreed, “I’ll see you at one.”

At least she hadn't invented an excuse not to see him. That pleased him. It also gave him another sleepless night, as he lay awake contemplating the next day. He was going to make it special. The question was how?

When Grace hung up the phone she sagged. It had been a long and difficult day. So much so that she had almost forgotten her promise to phone Joshua. She had finally contacted the Police when the third note had arrived. As per usual she had checked her email and was systematically working her way through snail mail post.

The letters not marked personal had been opened by the department secretary, but the personal and confidential mail was in an unopened pile. There were three letters. She impatiently opened the first brown envelope and retrieved a short note. It was unsigned and Grace experienced a sickening sense of dawning dread. She flicked a look at the envelope. Auckland postmark, again, but that was all it had in common with the other two notes she had received. This one was block printed, unlike the others which had been cut and paste newspaper text. This one didn't simply make threats, it went into graphic aggressive and sexual detail.

She knew the notes weren't from Lysette. They were ugly and offensive. Threatening, the last one especially so. And Lysette for all her actions did not strike Grace as a person who'd resort to sending obscene mail. The intended malice was beginning to worry Grace. The thought of possibility becoming reality finally galvanised her into contacting security at the University. They contacted the police.

An officer was sent round to see her at her office. Being a relatively small police force, it was the same police officer who had dealt with her student's abusive father. Grace and the young man spent a few moments talking about that case. He told her the man had been refused bail and was now in Hamilton gaol, waiting for a family court session which was due next week. The girl was apparently still at the safe house.

Well that was one less thing to worry about. Now to deal with the threats. Grace wasn't able to pinpoint any person in her sphere of acquaintances who might be responsible for the letters. There was very little that she could actually say to the Police. The letters came to her office, two were cut and paste from newspapers, and generally lewd. The last one described in graphic detail intended physical and sexual violence. She handed over two letters and explained that she had discarded the first one.

They went over and over the information. Question after question. Details about her private life suddenly became public. Information about her personal relationships were suddenly dissected by people she'd only just met. But at the end of it, there was nothing they could do. As the detective constable explained to her, it would be a while before they were able to do anything. He also said these things were difficult to trace. The young officer suggested she come down to the station later that day to talk to another officer about protective measures she should adopt. Grace agreed to visit the station after her lectures that evening. A University security guard had escorted her to her car. It was one of the measures the police had put in place, short term, but any late night movements on campus were to be in company. She was to keep to public places, and call on security if she worked late. The female police officer suggested strategies to employ. They suggested she move in with friends, or at least arrange for someone to stay with her. They couldn't provide round the clock surveillance and she shouldn't take risks. They told her to keep her mobile phone charged and keep it with her at all times. She was given pamphlets with the contact details of other agencies and support groups.

Then, once again they went through another question and answer session, just in case she could shed some more light on the case. They gave no indication about how long their inquiry or the pervert's intimidation would go on, but they said they were powerless to do much. All in all it was a very disheartening and disturbing meeting.

Grace telephoned Amy, a colleague and close friend of hers. After she'd explained the situation they returned to the cottage with a policeman to collect some of Grace's personal belongings. It hadn't taken long, but she was pleased to have company. Driving down her

unlit tree lined gravel track would have probably scared her witless, even though she had been doing it for years. She was terrified. It was after eleven when Grace and Amy finally left the cottage. “You didn’t tell him about the letters.” Amy said as they drove past the sleepy town of Cambridge.

“I’ll tell him tomorrow. He’ll only worry about it.” And in her heart she knew he would. And he’d make a fuss.

“What about your parents?” Amy flicked Grace a probing glance before she refocused on the deserted road and steered the car carefully along a road shrouded in country darkness.

“They’ll both be in bed by now.” Tiredness laced her words and Grace was convinced that they too would worry. This was going to upset more than just her life.

Chapter 11

Joshua arrived the next day at precisely one in the afternoon. He was carrying a small hamper and a bunch of flowers. He set the hamper on the floor as he stood looking at the large art print hanging on the wall facing the receptionist. He waited patiently for the receptionist to inform Grace that he had arrived. After several seconds she told him to go through to the office.

He had put a lot of effort into this lunch, hoping Grace would appreciate the romantic gesture. He wasn't sure whether she would, but he was living in hope. He was unable to get her image out of his mind, and for a computer programmer, that was a real problem. He needed to think logically. Instead he had found himself trying to come up with a plan to impress her. That was a novelty. Joshua had never had to work to impress any woman. But he desperately wanted to impress Grace. He knocked and she opened the door with a half smile. It touched her lips but not her eyes.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” He responded and handed her the flowers. Automatically Grace held them to her face and inhaled the fragrance of twelve yellow roses. “Thank you.” She turned away from him, “I’ll get some water. Won’t be long. Grab a chair.” She took a vase and left him in her office as she went in search of water.

She returned a few minutes later with the roses in the vase. She put them on her desk and smiled at him, “They really are lovely. Thank you.”

He grinned. Well that part had been successful, now for part two. “Thought we’d have lunch in that Japanese garden I walked through the last time I was here.” He informed her when he saw her look

questioningly at the things he was carrying. He could tell something was wrong.

“Ok.” Reflexively, Grace agreed with the suggestion. That wasn’t quite the reaction he had hoped for. He was hoping she’d be impressed or at least tease him about the suggestion. For a computer programmer this was a very romantic idea, a picnic in a secluded Japanese garden. But, for a feminist lecturer it clearly wasn’t.

He looked at her more closely trying to gauge her mood, decide whether to do a quick change and take her to a restaurant. She looked preoccupied. No, more than that, she looked pensive. She was putting things away, but clumsily. Her fingers shook as she patched her phone through to her secretary and then preceded Joshua out of the office.

“You don’t mind do you?” Joshua looked doubtful. Last night he’d thought it was a great idea. But she certainly wasn’t overwhelmed. So much for being sensitive and thoughtful. What did it take to impress a new age woman?

“No, no, that’s fine.” She sounded distracted. Joshua’s ego deflated a further notch.

A sense of unease descended. She did mind, he thought as he automatically followed her out of the building and into the glorious sunshine. Shit. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. She was probably expecting a flash restaurant, not a hick picnic. Suddenly the whole idea seemed paltry and flawed. They walked in silence down a wood chipped pathway, winding along the edge of a man made lake, they followed it through the back of some neatly trimmed bushes until they came to the Japanese garden. They’d said absolutely nothing as they walked along. Joshua was considering a change in plan. Grace was wondering when to tell him about the letters. Things improved when he set the rug on the grass and spread out the veritable feast he’d brought with him.

“This is heavenly.” She told him as she squatted down into a cross legged position and looked at the food and wine. Her eyes smiled at him.

This was like being on a roller coaster, Joshua finally owned silently. One minute down, the next minute up and the oscillations were dictated by Grace. He was torn between relief and exasperation. Relief because it was a good idea and exasperation because she had made him think it was a serious faux pas.

“I thought you might like it, though for a while there you didn’t seem too keen.”

She glanced up at him, “When?”

“When I suggested it.”

She was frowning at him as if that was the first she’d heard of it, “I thought it was a wonderful idea, very romantic, actually. Especially for a computer programmer.”

He smiled but let her challenge go, as he spread the blanket on the ground and lay the hamper beside it. “We aren’t going to start arguing again are we?” He raised a questioning brow.

Grace smiled slowly, “No.”

He grinned. “Good.”

They ate and talked mainly about trivia, but it didn’t take Joshua long to figure out that something was on her mind. She was fidgeting with the napkin, unconsciously nibbling on her lower lip, and occasionally he caught a glimmer of alarm in her eyes. Something was really worrying her, that much Joshua knew. But what? Grace put off telling Joshua about the letters she’d received. She had to find a way of broaching the subject. But she just couldn’t. Things were going so well. They hadn’t argued. She didn’t want to spoil this date. So they

had eaten the large crusty bread rolls with very ripe brie, munched on hot and spicy chicken wings, downed it all with a wonderfully oaky Chardonnay and nibbled on raspberries and blueberries. The tastes and textures not quite complimentary but neither seemed to notice. They had eaten everything, every last crumb, almost as if that would buy them time with each other. Joshua was busy watching her, and Grace was busy trying to look as if she wasn't anxious. Her actions were giving her away.

It was almost time for Grace to make tracks for her office when she finally broached the subject in a roundabout way, "Is Lysette vindictive?"

That was a bolt from the blue. And it threw Joshua. For a second he could only stare at her as his brain tried to make a few logical leaps. Lysette, why would Grace suddenly mention her?

"Lysette?" He mulled the question for a moment, "Vindictive?" He queried as he kept his eyes pinned on Grace, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know," She prevaricated, shrugging her shoulders, seeing from his reaction that Lysette wasn't likely to be sending her mail, she dropped eye contact, dusted at some breadcrumbs, "but you know how some women are, er, when they've been offended...." She trailed off wanly and continued to sheepishly dust non-existent crumbs off the rug. This was harder than she had thought. How did you accuse your current boyfriend's ex girlfriend of sending you obscene mail? And then how did you apologise when you realise she definitely isn't the one?

"No I don't." He poured some more of the wine into a long stemmed glass and handed it to her, a smile on his face as he assumed she must still be a trace wary of the other woman. But then he noticed that as she took the glass her hands were trembling. He looked up and into her troubled eyes and his voice reflected the concern she saw in his eyes. "Grace?" He took both glasses and placed them on the lawn. One glass tumbled over and the wine spilled out unheeded, Joshua was past

caring, he was too intent on the signals she was projecting. “When are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“I’ve received some letters. Really disgusting notes.” She blurted abruptly and without any preamble, looking straight into his eyes.

“What?” The second glass of wine spilt over his hand as he jerked upright. “What do you mean?” She couldn’t mean what he thought she meant?

Grace shivered as she recalled some of the messages. “I’ve been getting obscene letters, brief notes, threats really,” unconsciously she began shredding the paper napkin “the police are trying to trace them.”

“What?” Joshua took her chin and tipped her face up. “What kind of letters?” He quizzed, keeping his eyes firmly trained on Grace, reading every anguished moment in her eloquent eyes.

Grace shuddered. “Horrible.” She mumbled as she tried to tug her chin free of his grasp. He wouldn’t let her go. “Threats. Involving violence and sex.” She finally conceded.

He didn’t know what to say. So he pulled her to him and held her tight, as if that would wash away the problem and protect her from any future crisis. “Since when?” He murmured into her hair.

“A while.” She muttered into his chest.

“What.” He moved back an inch and looked at her, his eyes blazing with suppressed annoyance. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me?” How the hell was he going to survive being married to such an independent woman?

“I just did.” She stated calmly as if she had just told him her favourite brand of chocolate.

“Damn it. Earlier.” He hauled her back into his bear like grip. “Much, much earlier. Like when you got the first one.” He was crushing her to him as if he could pull her into him and protect her from all the evil in the world.

“I knew you’d over react.” She murmured into his chest.

“Over react?” He growled into her ear. “I’m being very restrained. Very.” He squashed her to him. Wrapped his arms around her, pressing her to him. How could he ever hope to keep such an independent spirit safe?

She grinned into his shirt and muttered, “You’re crushing the living daylights out of me. That isn’t very restrained.” He released his grip a fraction but still kept her within the circle of his arms.

“Why would anyone send you ...” He was thinking aloud, “That jerk who beat up his daughter.” He announced having reasoned through his argument before he could finish voicing his original question.

Grace shook her head, “No my mail is coming from Auckland, and he’s in gaol in Hamilton, waiting for his case to be heard.” She tipped her head up to look into his troubled eyes, “The police told me that. He was our first guess.”

“They’ve no idea who it could be?” That worried Joshua.

“No. I didn’t mention Lysette either, it seemed so, well, so sort of petty, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t think Lysette would do this. I’ll check it out.” He swore under his breath, “Do you have any other suspicions? Any idea at all?”

For a second she said nothing, then she smiled teasingly at him, before saying, “Amy suggested you.”

“What?” He reared back to look in her eyes. She was smiling at him.
“Who’s Amy?” He demanded with narrowed eyes.

“My best friend.”

“I need to set her straight.”

Grace smiled. “I already did.” Joshua hugged her tightly while his brain went into over drive.

There was some idiot terrorising her. He was going to make damned sure that nothing happened to her. The question was how? How did he keep this maverick woman of his safe?

“Right.” He announced in a peremptory manner, “You’re coming home with me.” He had no intention of giving her a choice in the matter. It was about time he showed her that sometimes he’d make the decisions, some she wouldn’t necessarily like. He was not leaving her here, that was for sure. For one grim moment he wondered what he would do if she stubbornly refused. Then he dismissed the thought, he would not allow her obstinacy to jeopardise her life and his sanity.

“No I’m not. Joshua I’ve got classes to teach. I work here.” Grace explained patiently, shaking her head as she added accusingly. “I knew you’d over react.”

She was going to be stubborn. “Fuck it. I’m not over reacting.” He growled, “Over reacting would be to go down to the police station and tell them to get their butts into gear.” He took a deep calming breath, “There is a lunatic out there.” Joshua noticed the defiant set of her chin, “I don’t care for that look Grace.” She quirked a brow at him, he ignored the challenge, instead he simply continued with what he had to say, “I am not leaving you here alone whilst some idiot threatens you.” His response was full force and vehement. “And that’s all there is to it. Your cottage is too damn isolated. And your nearest neighbours are deaf according to you. You’re coming home with me.”

“Get over it.” She advised him flatly.

“Grace, you are coming with me.”

His tone convinced Grace to change tack. Grace tilted her head to look up at him. “It’s o.k.,” She tried to appease him, resorting to a conciliatory tone of voice “I’m staying with Amy until term ends.”

“No Grace. It isn’t o.k.” He pushed his hair off his forehead in a gesture that reflected his frustration. “Damn it. I’m not leaving you here.”

“It will be settled soon,” She placated, lying blatantly, she hadn’t a clue how long it would take to settle this, let alone track the jerk. Just how long would it take to identify him, if that was even possible? “and anyway, I’m off with Sash on Monday. She’s flying into Auckland and we’re going to Bali for a week. They’ll have got whoever it is by then, or it may all stop anyway. It could just be some idiot kid who thinks it’s a great laugh to send a feminist some sex mad letters.” She was trying to sound calm and rational. Joshua wasn’t buying any of it. She could see it in the way his jaw clenched. He was ready to carry her off, if the signals she read in his eyes were anything to go by, he was about to pick her up. Grace launched into speech quickly, “And when I get back, we all go to Whangamata. Sash, mum, dad and me. We are going to the Bach, for Christmas.” She sounded nonchalant, “So you see I won’t be at the cottage for much time anyway. ”

“You won’t be at that cottage at all. You won’t be alone at all.” He began his list of demands as frustration snapped to life within him and he began to scowl at her with barely contained anxiety. Looking after Mariah and Zac in the heyday of their teenage years hadn’t been as hard as this.

Casually Grace interrupted him, “I’m staying with Amy, so I won’t be alone or at the cottage except for the weekend and then on Monday...”

Joshua didn’t let her complete her sentence, “You aren’t staying at that cottage, for one second let alone one weekend, and that’s final.”

“You’re over reacting. I knew you would.” She accused and her eyebrows drew together as she frowned at him.

“You haven’t even begun to see me overreact.”

“Get a grip Josh, this is...”

“Damn it. Grace, some idiot out there has got you scared witless and you are being stubborn about it.”

Grace pursed her lips, counted to ten and then said with deliberate coolness “I am not being stubborn. I have arranged to stay with a friend.”

This was too important to give way on. Joshua continued to hold her glare as he said equally firmly, “Fine. Stay with Amy, but you will not return to that cottage until they get that maniac. I’ll pick you up Friday night.” He stated implacably, totally oblivious to his peremptory manner. He’d spent many years taking responsibility for Zac and Mariah, years of weighing up options, the final responsibility lying with him, now his response was just an automatic behaviour. “We’ll go to Raglan.”

“Have you heard yourself?” Grace’s chin rose a fraction and her eyes narrowed with contained resentment. “Joshua, I’m not going into hiding just because of some idiot out there. I can’t hide forever. If the police don’t get him, I’ll have to take my chances. I can stay at the cottage.”

“Like hell.” He stormed as his annoyance at her inability to see sense overrode his control of the situation. He noticed the defiant look she had perfected was back in her eyes. Things were never this difficult with Riah and Zac. They did what he suggested when he suggested. Well eventually they did. He’d have to try a different tack. “Look, I was planning on spending time at the bach this weekend, get it aired for Christmas, that sort of thing. Come with me, you can help me. We could spend some time together. I’ll even take you up to Auckland on Sunday night.”

“There’s no need for all this. Amy doesn’t mind me being with her and if I wanted to I could drive up to Auckland on Friday.”

He released a long pent up sigh, now that he had persuaded her not to stay at the cottage, she was going to her parents, and he would rather she stayed with him. “The bach at Raglan is right on the Point, you’d love it.” He really couldn’t stand the thought of her being in any danger. And he wanted to be with her. “Grace?” He could see that she was tempted, but fighting it. “No strings Grace.” He promised rashly, “It’s a great spot. You’ll love the place.”

She chewed her lower lip as she considered the offer. She wanted to spend time with him, wanted to be away from the cottage and wanted some time out. This seemed perfect. He was right, she was worried about that idiot, but she was trying very hard to subdue her fear. It was the ‘not knowing’ that was really getting to her. Not knowing who was stalking her and why. Not knowing for how long she would have to live with that threat. Not knowing whom. And she didn’t want to worry her parents unnecessarily.

She agreed. “I guess Amy and Greg will probably have heaps to do.”

“Greg?” Joshua felt his shoulders drop slightly, she was close to agreeing to his suggestion.

“Yes, that’s who I’m staying with. Except, Greg, he’s a pilot, and he’s on a flight at the moment. He’s due back friday, I think.”

“Ahh, “ Joshua smiled knowingly.

“I guess, I’ll go with you.” She conceded finally.

“Your enthusiasm overwhelms me.” He wanted to whoop with joy but as a grown man of thirty three, amongst the unseen but no doubt nearby students of lesser years, he decided against it. He settled for squeezing her hand. She smiled reassuringly at him.

Joshua drove to the Police station after he'd escorted Grace to her office. He spent fifteen minutes with the officer in charge, talking through every angle, asking for answers. They were doing all they could to trace the maniac out there. But they told him it would be difficult to trace. Difficult and time consuming. Joshua did not like the situation. He told the police he was taking her to Raglan the next weekend. By the time he arrived back in Auckland he had plan B ready. Joshua phoned Luke.

"I need a detective." He announced without preamble when his friend answered the phone.

"Problem at work?" Luke replied casually as if it was the most normal occurrence.

"No, personal."

Luke's tone changed. "What?" There was genuine concern in his voice now. "Are you ok?"

"Grace received threats in the mail." Joshua told him candidly, "I need someone to trace them."

"Threats?"

"I've spoken to the police, not much they can do. I think they had me as a possibility. Do you know anyone who could help track this jerk?"

"Leave it with me. I'll get someone."

"Thanks."

"Is she ok?"

"She thought it was Lysette. The letters are postcoded Auckland." Josh rubbed his eyes, "She doesn't now."

“What’s she doing about the situation?”

“She’s staying with a friend till the weekend, then I’m taking her to Raglan, and she’s off to Bali. The police are handling all her mail before she gets it, save her some of the unpleasantness, but” Joshua was quick to explain. “they’ve got no leads. And, as they explained, it will be tough tracking the letters.”

“Yeah. They’re right.” Luke agreed. “Leave it with me, I’ll get someone onto the letters. You take care of Grace.”

“Easier said than done. You have no idea how annoyingly obstinate that woman is.”

Luke tried to keep the smile out of his voice. He had guessed at her independence the very first time he’d met her. Yet it seemed like Joshua had only just discovered the fact. Of course the woman was insubordinate, it was in her very makeup. “You’ll handle it. You did with Riah, Zac and” Luke added an after thought, “me.”

“You guys were a piece of cake.” Joshua couldn’t understand how he’d fallen for a woman who was so much his opposite in so many ways. “Grace doesn’t know what compromise means. She hasn’t a clue about concession. And to her, stubbornness is a positive quality.”

Luke chuckled even though he heard the frustration in his friend’s voice. “So why are you pursuing her?”

“No choice.” Joshua retorted, “Logically we are poles apart.”

“And illogically?”

“She makes my blood sing. I can’t imagine life without her.”

“Oh shit.” Luke whispered, Joshua’s words confirming what Luke had thought all along. Joshua had met cupid. They talked some more, then

Joshua hung up and Luke called the agency he used. On Friday Joshua drove to her office.

“Back again?” The receptionist teased.

“Can’t keep away.”

The receptionist informed Grace of his arrival and then told him to go on through.

“Hi.” He said as he walked in.

She was in the process of switching off her computer. The machine shut down and she came toward him, smiling as if she had been waiting for him all her life.

“You made good time.” She said as she reached for her light cotton jacket and leather bag.

“I was in a hurry.” He moved toward her.

“Oh?” She turned innocently to face him, a frown marring her brow. She hadn’t realized he was this close, she bumped into him. “Sorry.” She tried to take a step back. He stopped her by simply placing his hands on her shoulders.

He bent his head, his eyes open as he kissed her. He saw the flare of sensation in her eyes just before her eyelashes fluttered down and then his own eyes closed. Instantaneous, no preamble, passion flared. She really made his blood sing. They came up for air. Her bag had fallen to the floor, along with her jacket. He picked them up and handed them to her, smiling as if she had just given him everything he had ever asked for every Christmas for the last thirty-three years.

“Come on. Let’s beat the Hamilton rush hour!” He looked around, “Where’s your gear?” She pointed to the bags by the door. His brow quirked. “I did say weekend!”

“Cheek!” Her lips twitched despite her trying to stop the smile, “I’ve got stuff from my stay with Amy, stuff for the weekend, and stuff for my trip with Sasha.”

“Sure.” He teased and then picked up the three bags. He slung one over his shoulder and held the others, one in each hand.

“I can carry something.” She took one of the bags off him before he could even argue the point. For a second he contemplated arguing, and then realized she had provided him with a perfect opportunity. He waited for her as she pulled her office door shut, and as she turned he reached for her hand.

For a second she hesitated, then she took the hand he offered. Hand in hand they walked out of the building.

By three thirty they were on their way to Raglan. It was an hour’s drive from the office to the Bach via a road that wound round a series of hills and clung to the very edge of the hewn out ledge. Joshua concentrated on the road and Grace concentrated on Joshua.

“Any progress?” He asked having just negotiated one particular hair-raising hairpin bend. He knew Luke’s detective had traced nothing as yet but the man was still working on it.

She sighed, “No.” She shifted in her seat so that she was almost facing him, “But then I guess I wasn’t expecting to hear anything. They said it’s rather difficult tracing these things. It could just be some idiot prankster.”

Joshua didn’t turn his head, he kept his eyes on the road, “I don’t care if he’s a bloody bishop. I want him found.”

“So do I.” She agreed with feeling and patted his thigh for a second. She felt the muscle tense and quickly retracted her hand. He threw her a quick sideways glance before he negotiated the next bend. Grace shifted in her seat and turned back to face the road. The scenery flashed by.

In the last few days she had become intensely aware of just how isolated she was at the cottage. Living with Amy for a couple of nights had been quite strange, there were so many new noises to get used to. Back at the cottage, things were always so incredibly peaceful, quiet, tranquil. All due to the isolation. Isolation she liked. The isolation that now worried her. After a few seconds of amicable silence they talked about their respective families. Safe topics. Topics that kept the conversation flowing. Sasha, Zachary, Briar and Mariah were described in friendly but minute detail. Quirks, peculiarities, charms, attributes. By the end of the drive, Grace had learnt things that Zachary and Mariah would have rather kept quiet and Joshua knew Sasha and Briar trivia that both would have disputed or pretended never existed.

Several kilometres out of Raglan, Joshua took a small track that led to a solitary bach. The small four room house sat high on the point overlooking the narrow inlet. Waves crashed noisily below and surfers pitted their skills in trying to ride the rolling surf and avoid the jagged rocks. After opening the front door to the Bach Joshua ushered Grace in and waited for her reaction. He hadn't told her what to expect, and given his home, he thought she might be expecting a beach house with all mod cons, rather than a glorified shack. He opened the door to the main room. It was a sparsely furnished room, several large wicker chairs stuffed with calico cushions and one small coffee table. A high breakfast counter separated the tiny lounge from the kitchen. He put the two overnight bags on the floor beside the coat stand and waited for her to stop looking around.

"Bedroom," he pointed to a door on their left, "and through there is the bathroom. Nothing fancy." He admitted, when she still hadn't said anything. After seeing their house in Auckland, she was probably expecting more than the basics. This place was pared down, functional, spartan.

"This is great." She stopped pivoting and turned to grin at him.

"Yes. And it's all mine." He told her proudly as he walked toward the kitchen to flick on a switch. He turned to look at her again, "It isn't exactly fancy, but it is mine."

“All yours?” She quirked an inquiring brow at him, waiting for him to explain.

“Yes. The house at Bucklands belongs to all of us, Zac, Riah and yours truly, but this,” He indicated the room, “this is mine.” There was so much pride in the voice. She waited for him to continue. “I bought it when I was sixteen. It was a shack, still is I guess.” He glanced around, he could afford a larger holiday place, but this Bach was special to him, “I wrote and sold a computer game. A humdinger of a programme.” He reached behind him and pointed to the framed computer disc on the kitchen wall. “I got fifteen thousand for writing that computer game.”

“What?” Her eyes were as wide as saucers as she came to stand beside him and took the small blue disc in her hand. “This?” She read the label written in a tidy block capital blue ink pen- Galaxial star warrior.

He nodded, “Fifteen thousand dollars. Anyway, with dad’s help I found and bought this place. It was a shack, but I loved the view. That was about seventeen years ago. It had one room.” He surveyed his handiwork. “I used to hoon it down here at weekends. Mainly to go surfing, and get some time out, but then I started coming down and working on the place. At one point I think Luke and I slept in the car, cause we’d taken the roof off and it had poured with rain.”

She was speechless for a few short seconds. “Good grief. It must have destroyed all the furniture.”

He chuckled at her aghast expression. “It would have, if there’d been anything to destroy. There was one ancient chair. I’d bring down my sleeping bag and the camping stove gear. So not much was lost. I started adding to it. Dad and Luke helped. Zac was a nuisance.” He glanced back at her “If the surf was up, he’d be off. In fact I think he only came for the surf. And the girls. Luke, he came because Dad came. He’d kind of adopted our family.” He smiled in memory. Then he turned to face her, “What do you think of the place?”

“I’m impressed.” She liked it. He grinned like a schoolboy who’d just received the ok for his first date. Of course he could afford to buy a huge beach house if he wanted, but this place was it for him.

“Really?”

She nodded, “When I was sixteen I was still trying to figure out what I was going to do.” She grinned “and here you were minting money.”

“Not much.” He laughed happily, “Here, you take this room.” He picked up the overnight bags and led the way. She followed automatically. It wasn’t a large room, and like the front room was spartanly furnished. One king size bed that seemed to take over the whole room, one small table and a torch. There was enough room to just edge round the bed, but that was it.

“What about you?”

“I’ll take the lounge.” He put her bag beside the small table.

Grace wanted to tell him not to bother. She wanted to tell him they could share the bed. If she’d had more experience at this, she would have. She was tempted. But the last thing she wanted at the start of the weekend was a put down. She would have to bide her time. She hadn’t brought much in with her so she didn’t bother to unpack. Instead she followed him out of the bedroom and back to the lounge.

“A cup of tea would be good.” He stated as he opened the front door, “I’ll get the groceries.”

“Need a hand?”

He nodded. “Please.”

She followed him out to the car. They quickly unloaded the groceries from the car and stored what Joshua had brought. After they’d drunk

their tea, normal for him and herbal for Grace, he suggested they walk down to the Point. It was just after five.

So, taking her hand, and leading the way, they made their way down a slight incline toward the shoreline. There was a rough track of sorts, but it still needed careful negotiation.

There was still plenty of sunshine and the surf was good. About a dozen surfers were trying to catch wave after wave, always hoping for a good ride. They stood for a while, just watching the riders come in.

Then Joshua settled on the grass and Grace sat down beside him.

“Who do you think will get up first?” He asked.

“That one.” She pointed. He leaned closer to follow the line of her fingers.

“Not a chance.” He said and when she turned to look at him with a challenge he kissed her nose. She backed away, he said, “The yellow guy. My money is on him.”

All the surfers had wet suits on, so it was the board that he referred to.

True enough, the yellow board paddled hard and caught the next wave. Several took tumbles as they got to their feet on the board. But many weaved effectively, riding the wave with skill and ease. They came right into the shore line where the wave dissipated when it pounded into the black volcanic sand.

“Do you surf now?” She asked him after a while and shifted gingerly as she tried to find a more comfortable sitting position.

“No. You?” He watched her for a second, debating whether to just haul her onto his lap.

She shook her head in a negative response, “Sash is brilliant.”

“She sounds amazing. Bake and surf. Does she still surf?”

Grace nodded. “When we moved up to Auckland, she hung out with guys who were real surfer bods. Ruined her dress sense I can tell you. And it was pretty bad to start with.” She was smiling as she recounted the story, but Joshua remembered the insight Ben had provided. She made things sound easy, but he knew they had all had quite a tough time. “She kind’ve got all our hand me downs. So they tended to be a few years out of style by the time they got down to her, not that she seemed to notice. Still hasn’t I don’t think.”

He quirked an inquiring brow at her. “She can’t be that bad.”

Grace just grinned at him before saying, “You’ll see.”

“Grace.” She turned to look at him, “Use my chest as a back rest.” He shifted, then propped a knee. She hesitated a second, then scooted closer, and settled between his legs, resting her back against his chest, with both of his legs framing her, she hugged his knees and relaxed against him. And strangely enough was very comfortable. She watched each surfer come in, paddling furiously to catch the wave and then ride it.

They talked for a long time, he told her about his work and she told him about her school days. The way she told it you’d never have known that they’d been tough. She recounted escapades and arguments, yet all the time she sounded as if they were simply part of living a normal family life. They joked about some of the tumbles the surfers took, and winced when they saw some close to the rocks. He laced an arm around her shoulder and anchored her more closely to him as he pointed out some of the local scenic points.

Joshua told her about his parents. How they had been killed by a drunk driver when he was twenty. Fortunately, social services had decided that he was capable of caring for Zac and Mariah, who were seventeen and fourteen respectively.

So they had stayed together as a family. Their parents had left them well provided for, so finances were never an issue. Grace took hold of his hand as he talked about his parents, she gripped his fingers gently. Joshua talked about the trips they had, sailing into the Harbour, tramping in the South Island, the holidays, the fun times. Grace listened, feeling his sadness. It must have been quite a daunting task taking responsibility at twenty. At that age most people were just beginning to live a little. He must have grown up fast.

It was almost eight when they glanced at their watches and with startled laughter got to their feet.

“See, we can do it.”

“What?” She glanced over her shoulder.

“Talk, without arguing.” He whispered against her cheek. Turning slightly she smiled at him. “The only problem is that I promised you separate beds.” He leaned toward her and framed her face with his hands.

“Hmm.” She managed just before he kissed her. He smiled at her with a playful, smug look. She missed it, her eyes were still shut. Reluctantly she opened her eyes and forced herself to meet his gently teasing gaze. “Incorrigible.” She told him affecting disgust. If anything, the grin widened. Grace couldn’t help the giggle that escaped. “Come on, we should head back.” Grace scooted forward and got to her feet.

Hand in hand they clambered back to the house.

As he put the salad on the table he said, “Can we spend the night together?” She stopped smiling as she considered her reply. “I’m moving too fast?”

She shook her head “It’s not that.” She moved away, she rolled her eyes skyward, wishing for the umpteenth time that she’d had more

experience at this, and then, plucking up the courage she turned back to him, “Condoms.” She said ingenuously.

Understanding dawned. He retrieved his wallet from his jeans pocket and flicked open the slim leather wallet, “I don’t know if I’ve got any condoms with me.” He sounded almost disgusted with himself. He looked disgusted with himself when he found none. “I had good intentions.” He told her quietly and dismally, “And I’d promised no strings, so I didn’t check.” Hell of a time to be so honour bound, he swore silently.

“We’ll get some tomorrow.” She whispered the shy promise.

That startled him. He lurched back to look straight into her eyes. The look he gave her was intense. It held her rooted to the spot, speechless, just watching as he came toward her. His eyes slowly filled with playfulness, and a look she had come to recognize.

He slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her gently. His tongue explored her mouth, tenderly at first, tasting, intimately tormenting and softly invasive, and her tongue reciprocated every move. He groaned and tightened his grip, pulling her closer, crushing her to him. Grace clutched his head, as he teased her with his lips and hips. She moaned, sagging as her legs stopped carrying her, and her heart hammered loudly in her ears. He pressed firmly against her, leaving her in no doubt.

“You are the only one I have ever had unprotected sex with. I completely forgot. That’s what you reduce me to.” He levered away.

“Good to know that is what you call a reduction.” She quipped. He mumbled something she didn’t hear and hauled her to him.

The smell of burning meat finally brought them back to earth. But it was too late. The steaks were charred beyond redemption. The room filled with fumes of acrid burnt meat. They went out to dinner. They went to a local pub. After dinner, Joshua bought a packet of condoms from the machine in the men’s room and Grace bought a packet from

the machine in the women's room. When they left the pub an hour later, just before they got into the car, she handed him the packet. He chuckled before he retrieved a packet from his back pocket.

"Well that's the first hour covered!"

She laughed. They slept together when they returned. Although there was very little sleeping done by either one of them.

"You are insatiable." He murmured early Saturday morning as he rolled on to his side, taking her with him so that they lay facing each other.

"You're complaining?"

"Nope. Just a statement of fact."

"I have a lot of lost time to make up for. When did you first have sex?"

"What?" His eyes widened warily at that question.

"I said, when did you first have sex?" She propped her head in her hand, her elbow supporting her, and looked him straight in the eye.

"Uh, I don't think we ought to go into this...."

"I just want to know how old you were, that's all."

"Sixteen. She was nineteen." He admitted sheepishly.

"A toy boy eh." Her lips quirked as he frowned at that statement. "That's seventeen years of sexual experience to catch up, seventeen times twelve times, no say eleven, times say thirty, divided by two, if we assume every couple of days."

"Grace what are you doing?" He couldn't help the laughter.

She muttered “Roughly 3000 nights of sex.” She told him as she rolled onto him, pushing him onto his back, “That’s how many nights of sex you are ahead of me.”

He took her with him as he rolled onto his back as he hooted with laughter and his chest rubbed against hers. He tried to stop laughing. She was lying atop him, her arms on his chest, providing sufficient leverage for her to be able to look at him. He took her weight comfortably.

“Sweetheart,” He grinned, “Thanks for the compliment, but I’m not superman. I haven’t had sex every night for the last seventeen years.”

“It was a guestimate. Once every two nights, with a month off per year!” She laughed. “The law of averages.”

“A very generous guestimate.” He told her as he grabbed her waist and rolled her onto her back. “Although the way we are going tonight, I think I’m making up for all the nights I missed out.”

That was the end of verbal coherent communication.

Saturday, they awoke late. After a long leisurely brunch they walked into town. Strolling hand in hand they wandered through every single shop. They walked to the beach, and strolled along the shoreline. Then headed back to the house, to break into a new packet of condoms. Sunday found them attending a late morning Catholic mass in town.

Chapter 12

Sasha was waiting for them when they arrived. She was stunning, he acknowledged, as her long legged, barefooted, stride brought her closer toward him and the car. His eyes watched in bemusement as she drew nearer. Grace was right, Sasha dressed outrageously.

Her hair was jet black, glossy and cut into a sleek fringed but ragged chin length bob. The fringe drew attention to almond shaped jet black eyes. Eyes similar to her sister's. A straight nose, high cheekbones and a heart shaped face all complimented each other to leave no doubt that the woman was a beauty. And this one wasn't the vogue model according to Grace. Joshua couldn't wait to meet Briar. But she wasn't due back in New Zealand for a couple of months.

Joshua watched Sasha come closer. She was either totally unaware of her looks or past caring. She was bare foot, bare of make up and wore the most incongruous, ill fitting, pair of surfing shorts he had ever seen. She topped it off with a large shapeless lurid T-shirt that made no attempt to complement the shorts. She certainly had a wacky dress code. And she must be colour blind. After Grace had hugged and been hugged she introduced her sister to Joshua. Sasha, never backward at coming forward, promptly wolf whistled her appreciation and continued to ogle Joshua. Grace closed the car door.

"Don't mind her." Grace told him, "She's always nuts."

Grace handed her sister a large overnight bag and then another. Joshua reached in to retrieve another bag and listened as the sisters ribbed each other. He carried the remaining bag to the house, following the two sisters who were still making outrageous statements about each other's appearances.

“Hey.” Sasha said, “We are only going for a week and the idea was to buy stuff there, not take your entire wardrobe. Unless you are planning on leaving your junk there.”

The baggage was a combination of several things. There were clothes from Grace’s stay with Amy, from her trip with Joshua and for her intended holiday trip with Sasha. Two sets needed washing and the third was very scant.

“Junk.” Grace shot her sister a fulminating look, but the smile in her eyes made a lie of it, “You can talk, at least I don’t go round dressed like a deranged surfie. I hope you’ve packed some decent stuff. I’m not sitting next to you on the beach. I’ll have no chance of picking up a hunk, you’ll put them off or blind them.”

“Greedy.” Sasha called over her shoulder as she lugged one bag toward the house, “You’ve already got one.” She’d reached the doorway, “And what have you got in here? The kitchen sink?”

“Oh, stop whining and take it in.”

“Aren’t you coming in Mr De Souza?” Sasha asked when she saw that he was walking back to the car, having deposited the bag just inside the doorway.

“No, can’t stop. And make it Joshua, we are going to be in-laws.”

Sasha beamed, “Yeah, amazing. Dad must have come up with one hell of a dowry.” She winked at him before grinning unrepentantly at Grace. “Or is Grace blackmailing you?”

Joshua chuckled, but his eyes flicked to Grace, just to make sure that she hadn’t taken any offence. She hadn’t. She stood there, with a fake glower, while her sister giggled and resumed her struggle to drag the bags into the house.

Joshua reached her side. She shook her head in woeful acceptance as her sister disappeared into the house and then she smiled. “Is she always like that?” He quirked a brow.

“Fraid so.” Grace grinned at him, “She’s all talk basically.”

He grinned, “Just wondered.” He was quite taken aback by Sasha. “Her legs seem endless.” He said without thinking. Grace folded her arms and quirked a brow. He shifted uncomfortably, then shook his head as if to clear his brain, “Is she colour blind?”

Grace chuckled, “No.”

He came and stood beside her, his arms locked around her waist. “Is she always so direct?”

Grace nodded, “Yup, never has been the bashful type. Speaks her mind; before she thinks half the time.” She turned her head to look at the house, almost expecting her sister to materialise. “But we love her despite that. Except when she loses her temper, then we take cover. Thankfully she doesn’t lose it often.”

“She’s sexy.” He stated candidly, feeling more secure about the fact that Grace would take the bait.

“Oh?”

“But not as sexy as you.” He gave her a chaste kiss.

Grace was not satisfied, “That’s it?” She teased as she linked her fingers behind his neck. He needed no further encouragement. Slowly he lowered his head and gave her a heart melting toe curling kiss. He gradually eased his lips away, kissing her forehead tenderly as he released her from his embrace. “Thanks for the weekend, and the ride up here.”

“My pleasure.” He turned to walk away, then stopped, “Don’t forget I’m driving you down to the cottage when you get back, but only if they’ve got whoever it is. You are not to go there on your own. You hear me Grace?” He said grimly.

“Yeah, yeah, the neighbours probably have too. You really are a pushy man, you know that.” She followed him as he walked to the car.

He ignored the comment, adding quietly, “Tell your parents.”

“There’s no point. I’ll tell them when it’s over. I don’t want to worry them unnecessarily.”

He took her face in his hands and tipped it up so that she was looking straight into concerned green eyes. “I don’t think it’s unnecessary. There is a nutter out there, and until they’ve got him, we are taking no chances. Got that?”

“Duh.” She tossed back flippantly.

“Grace.” He admonished in exasperation. “No chances.”

“I’m going on holiday, I doubt whether he is going to follow me to Bali. And by the time I get back they’ll have got him.” Her reply was optimistic. Her eyes were flashing warningly, but he wasn’t reading the signals and if he was, he simply ignored them.

“And if they haven’t?” He shot back.

“I’ll think about that when I get back.” Curt.

“You’re too stubborn, you know that?” Exasperation was beginning to seep into his voice.

She smiled cheekily, as she brushed up against him “Not all the time, I let you have your way sometimes, when it counts.....” She knew she

wasn't playing fair, but she also knew she was on a losing wicket unless she got him off this particular conversation.

Joshua growled, way down, fighting not to pull her closer, and needing to make sure she understood. He knew exactly what she was playing at. His hands went to her back and he held her close, feeling her pressed against him. "You are not to be at the cottage on your own. You are not to go anywhere isolated on your own. You are not to..."

"Joshua." She pushed out of his arms, realising that instead of capitulating, instead of forgetting, he was now issuing orders.

"I mean it." He scowled, before allowing a rueful grin to escape, "Don't pick up anyone on holiday." He ordered as he opened the car door and climbed in. He wound the window down. "Come here."

She glanced around, shrugged her shoulder at him and stayed exactly where she was, "I don't know, it's a touch isolated here, and I am on my own."

Joshua raised an eyebrow at her antics. "Now." She pouted. "Grace." She heard the warning. She folded her arms. "I'm not averse to telling your parents." She glowered. "Come here."

"I don't respond to blackmail." She announced as she stood her ground. His seat belt was unclipped in an instant and the car door opened. Grace was ready to bolt. But he didn't step toward her. "Where are you going?" She demanded of his back.

"To talk to your parents."

Grace raced to catch up with him. "Don't you dare." She hissed, as she tugged on his arm and dragged him to a standstill. Her gaze caught his, and she saw that he had every intention of carrying out his threat.

“I dare.” He told her. “I get the feeling that you think I’m your lap dog. You think all you have to do is rub up against me and I’ll grovel and do what you want. Doesn’t work all the time does it?”

“That’s ridiculous.” She said tersely.

“You lost the argument, or at least you had hoped to force me to forget my stance, you tried to derail the conversation, and when it didn’t go according to plan, you started sulking.”

“I did not start sulking.” She shot at him.

“Damn good impression.” He quirked a brow at her, “You are again.”

Grace had folded her arms around her midriff and was glaring at him. “For your information, this is not sulking, this is anger. I’m glaring.”

“Looks like sulking to me. Pouting too.” Her eyes flashed at him. “Ok, now that’s anger.” He conceded and hid the smile that was threatening to escape. “Anyone ever tell you that you look pretty good when you are mad?”

“And you accuse me of derailing conversations.” That deflated Grace instantly. “You are futilely mercurial.”

“Futile? Shall I speak to your folks, or are you going to see me off like any agreeable conventional engaged woman does?” The moment lengthened as both of them watched each other and waited.

“I’m not agreeable, conventional or engaged.” She struggled to find her voice.

“So you’ve settled on the first option.” He set off again, heading toward the front door.

“You are the most exasperating, frustrating, arrogant...” She hissed as she trotted alongside him.

Sasha stepped past the front door, “You still here?” Grace made a scornful sound.

Joshua stopped, quirked an eyebrow at Grace and waited for her to respond. She snatched his arm.

“I was just telling Joshua that he should be going.” She mocked as she towed him toward the car, “And I was about to see him off as any agreeable, conventional engaged woman does.” She muttered for Joshua’s benefit, “I’ll decapitate you if you say one word.”

Sasha seemed unconvinced, but she left them to it as she headed back inside.

Grace and Sasha had a wonderful time. On their last holiday Briar had been with them. This time they talked about her. As they lay side by side on their beach towels on the sand, Sasha glanced at her sister, “He’s special isn’t he?” It was their first day in Bali and the lure of the golden sands wasn’t enough to tempt Sasha away from quizzing her sister.

“He’s ok.” Grace feigned nonchalance, cushioned her forehead on her forearms and lay flat on her stomach.

That brought Sasha to her knees, giggling, “Get real. He’s a hunk. A bit too serious for my taste, a touch too grey, but then you are pretty ancient yourself.” Sasha dusted some sand off her hips and began to apply some barrier cream. She smoothed the lotion onto every visible bit of skin, and given the miniscule bikini she barely wore, that left a lot of skin to cover. Without being aware she was drawing attention to them she continued to smooth the cream into her skin.

“If you think I’m going to bite, forget it.” Grace threw her sister a withering look and waited for the rejoinder, which she knew was coming. Sasha didn’t disappoint her.

“What is it that you like? His body or his mind?” Sasha rubbed the cream into her arms.

“His money.” Grace retorted flippantly as she rolled on to her front, and buried her head in her pillowed arms.

“Yeah, right.” Sasha kicked her feet out again, then sat cross-legged. Just before she closed the plastic bottle she slapped a huge dollop of cold cream onto golden brown skin. Skin that was on her sister’s back. Grace squealed in surprise and protest, then she rolled onto her side and glared at Sasha who had almost got to her feet.

“Just being helpful.” Her sister quipped as she backed away. “Thought your back needed doing.” She tried to bluff.

“Then you’d better do a good job.” Grace indicated the bottle, “And make sure it’s warmed.”

Sasha made a face and began to rub the lotion into the skin.

Over the remaining days they shopped, ate and lay around reading. Both were in the mood to do nothing but laze, both had been through hectic timetables and teaching loads. So lying around on golden beaches was idyllic.

A week later, relaxed and bearing gifts, they returned to New Zealand. They had been home about ten minutes, Sasha doing her best to recount tales of their holiday with Grace cast in the role of a layabout, seducer of all men and poor sport all round.

“So what did we do?” Sasha had upended her suitcase contents on the floor in the living room and was rummaging for the sarong she had bought her mother. “We just lay on the beach, every day.” She threw a

pile of T shirts from one pile to another a few feet away. Her father, mother and older sister watched in fascinated, amused but resigned expectation as Sasha went through her usual ritual of dumping everything for open inspection. “Because she” Sasha indicated Grace with a disgusted nod of her head, “didn’t want to do anything.”

“I was tired.” Grace said sincerely as she picked up Sasha’s clothing and began to throw them back into the suitcase.

“Hey, I haven’t found mum’s present yet.” Sasha objected and reached for the items Grace had replaced in her case.

“That’s probably because we packed mum’s stuff in my case.”

Sasha froze mid search, looked indignantly at her sister, then picked up her beach shorts, balled them and threw them at Grace. Grace ducked and came up laughing, she reballed the shorts and threw them back at Sasha. Angie and Ben smiled, twenty five years on, and their daughters’ basic characteristics hadn’t changed.

“You could have told me before I dumped everything out here.”

“Duh. Like it would have made a difference?” Grace teased.

“So you had a great time?” Angie calmly interrupted them.

Sasha began to stuff her clothes back in her suitcase.

“Yes, we did.” Grace smiled, “It was great. The company could have been better. But beggars can’t be choosers. I couldn’t afford the single supplement, so I had to go with the clothes-hurricane” Sasha’s nickname surfaced. As a little girl when she dressed herself she looked like she had been dressed by a hurricane. “but she was ok.”

“I was great.” Sasha retorted modestly. “Dad, you won’t believe what I had to do to keep her out of trouble. She flirted with every guy there.”

“Yeah, right Sash.”

“You did.” Sasha retorted. “What about that Brad what’s-his-face?”

“Brad fancied you and you were giving him a hard time.” Grace pointed out calmly “He was only talking to me to be polite and to improve his chances with you.”

“We’ll see what Joshua says about that feeble explanation.” Sasha threatened. Grace went pink. She knew he’d mis read the situation, especially if Sasha gave him her version. Grace had sent him a post card from Bali, she wondered if he’d received it as yet. It had been fairly boring, the usual comments about the food, weather and locality.

On cue the phone rang. It was Joshua. He’d phoned earlier that morning to check on her flight arrival time. He had missed talking to her. Missed seeing her. Missed her.

“Kia Ora.” Grace answered the phone.

“Grace. Hi.”

“Joshua.” Grace had a smile in her voice. “This is lucky, we’ve only just got in.”

“Had a good flight?”

“Yes, it wasn’t bad.”

“Hi Josh.” Sasha yelled near the ear-piece as she moved past Grace, hauling her half closed suitcase behind her. Grace pulled a face at her retreating back. It went unseen.

“She’s not the shy, quiet type is she?”

“No.” Grace agreed wholeheartedly. “She definitely isn’t.”

“So how was the holiday?”

“Good. You haven’t got our post card then?”

“No.” He mulled that over, smiled, so she hadn’t tossed him to the back of her mind while she had been away.

“The post as usual.” Grace rummaged for something else to say, “We had a great time.”

“Picked up guys no doubt.”

“No, actually we didn’t.” She smiled, “Though Sasha wasn’t short of offers.”

“And you were?”

“Sash told them at the reception I was engaged.” She sounded semi-disgruntled, “Might as well have stuck a sign on my forehead saying-off limits.”

Joshua hooted with laughter. “Remind me to thank her.”

“You do and I’ll place a magnet near all your computer discs.”

He laughed. There was a fraction of a second of silence. Grace rummaged frantically for something to say. “How about you? Anything new happen?” He knew they were no nearer finding the hate mail source. He wasn’t sure whether now was a good time to bring it up. “No, not much.”

“I guess things have been pretty quiet.”

“I checked with the police this morning. They are no nearer tracing the sender.”

“Oh, well. I guess that’s to be expected.” She frankly hadn’t expected them to, not after the explanation the sergeant had given her.

Routinely Joshua ordered, “You have to tell your folks.”

“No.” Grace replied, adding truthfully, “I’m going back to the cottage for a week.”

“Stop being so bloody stubborn Grace.”

She kept her voice low, “I’m not being stubborn. Just practical. If I stayed here they’d want to know why the change of plans. I’m not going to worry them unnecessarily. There is probably nothing to worry about. Some prank or something, that’s all.” Lamely she added, “I can take care of myself.”

“You are the most stubborn woman I have ever met.”

“Thank you.”

“Tell them Grace.” He advised flatly before issuing an ultimatum, “Either you tell them or I will.”

“Blackmail again. Get over yourself.”

“Tell them.” Joshua thundered as exasperation finally won. Grace scowled, thought her parents would probably hear him and wondered why she was even having this conversation.

“No. I appreciate your concern, but this is really none of your business.” She hissed down the phone. “And keep your voice down.”

“We are engaged, remember? I’m supposed to be looking out for you. There is a raving nutcase out there.”

“You’re taking this whole thing too seriously. For a start we aren’t really engaged, second nothing is going to happen and third you can’t just bully me like this.” She sizzled, hoping that no member of her family came into the hallway, because if they did, they’d know something was wrong.

“I wouldn’t have to bully you if you used a bit of commonsense every once in a while. That’s all I’m asking for, a bit of commonsense. If you don’t tell them Grace, I will.” He promised coolly.

“Threats again?” Grace held onto the temper that would have rivaled her sister’s. That really would shock her parents, hearing their normally even keel daughter shriek like a shrew.

“Damn right.”

He’d checked with the Police and they were no nearer to finding the culprit. They had intercepted three other letters. The person responsible obviously didn’t know Grace was away, or at least didn’t seem to care that she was away. His detective wasn’t faring any better than the police. The man was making no progress as far as Joshua could tell.

“I’ll tell them after Christmas, if they don’t catch whoever it is. I don’t want to ruin Christmas.”

“Tell them now. And don’t go back to the cottage on your own.” There was silence at both ends of the phone for several seconds. Grace was battling to keep her temper in check and Joshua was waiting for her to concede. Eventually Joshua asked, “How do you fancy a week in the Bay with me?”

“What?” She snapped.

“A week with me?”

“You can’t take off, Joshua.”

“Are you going to argue with every thing I suggest?”

“No, of course not. But you can’t just take time off like this. This should only affect me, not disrupt everyone’s life.”

“That’s about the most moronic thing you’ve said.”

“Fine.” She hissed. “Now that that’s clear, you can go jump...”

Joshua rolled his eyes, gritted his teeth and interrupted, “Steven’s family have a house close to Russell. Well a bit out in the sticks actually, but it is close to Hot Water beach and it has some beautiful rough country around it, so Riah says. I could do with a week off. And now is a good time. I have a considerate boss. No-one would know where you are. You’d be safe.”

He paused, waited for her to speak, and when she said nothing, added “Well?”

Grace thought about it. She wouldn’t have to tell her parents about the letters, she really didn’t want to worry them. She knew she was stalling, that eventually she’d have to tell them, especially if the sender wasn’t caught soon or didn’t stop. She could go back to the cottage, but she was, even though she was arguing with Joshua to the contrary, she was scared to be there on her own. She could always ask Amy again. But in theory they were on their honeymoon. Amy hadn’t been able to get time off work so they were saving their honeymoon for the Uni vacation. “I can’t...”

”For fucks sake.” He snapped, then took a deep breath and added with barely concealed exasperation. “Tell your parents, because if you don’t, I will. And that is a promise.”

“As I was saying,” Grace told him calmly, when his monologue had come to a close, “before I was so rudely interrupted,” she added simply to annoy him, “I can’t think of a better solution. I’ll stay with mum and dad tonight. We could leave late tomorrow afternoon, if you can manage that.”

He recovered quickly and ignored her pointed remark about his interruption. He wasn't giving her a chance to change her mind "I'll pick you up at four."

They spoke a while longer, making plans for the weekend and talking about the holiday. As long as she didn't spend all the time arguing with him, it would be heaven. Once in a while was fine, making up was fun, but a week of arguments would be dreadful. Grace had begun to notice that she wasn't winning as many of her arguments with him. Surprisingly it made her smile.

Chapter 13

On Monday evening, when they were half way into their journey to the house in the Bay of Islands, the sun disappeared and the clouds opened up. It poured with rain, great big droplets in a never ending stream. The windscreen wipers worked overtime, double rate, but it was still difficult to see into the greyness. The deluge of rain was unexpected. Neither Joshua nor Grace had coats with them. The rain was unrelenting. The road was washed out, the track dissolving to nothing more than a quagmire of mud. Joshua slowed down. It was also getting dark. Greyness washed into inky black. They hadn't passed a town in over an hour having taken a rough unsealed track that Joshua assured her led to Steven's house.

"Not far now." He told her. Joshua peered into the darkness, vaguely making out the road. The downpour continued. He could barely see through the screen even though the wipers were doing double time.

"You've been here before?"

"No," He shook his head, "But Riah drew the map, says we can't miss it. There should be a turn off that takes us straight to the house. Can't miss it."

Grace wasn't too sure about that, they could barely see anything as it was now. From where she was sitting, the screen barely cleared before it blurred again. The rain hammered on the car roof, against the windows and onto the wind screen. It showed no signs of letting up. Not a good way to start a holiday. They rounded a bend slowly and saw the last 'off track' track that they were supposed to take.

"They didn't forecast this did they?" Grace asked as they bumped their way along the unsealed road.

“Not as far as I know.” He braked, to avoid a large water filled ditch in the road. Then he swerved to avoid the branches dragging along the ground. “Shit.” He veered away from the edge of the road as the car lost traction. Grace braced her hand against the dash. Her shoulder bumped against his. Just as well they were only just mobile, he couldn’t have been doing more than 10 miles an hour.

“Sorry.” They muttered in unison.

“You ok?” He threw a brief glance at her, but not for long, his eyes refocused on the road. His speed dropped to less than ten miles an hour as the rain continued to drum down.

Grace nodded. “Yes.”

They bumped and jostled their way down the muddy track for another kilometre.

The house finally came into view. “Great.” It was heartfelt and an accompanying sigh of relief followed as he switched off the motor. “Finally.”

Grace could see how tired he was. “That was quite a ride.” She rubbed his arm, gave his hand a gentle squeeze, “Are you ok?”

Joshua nodded. “You think this is going to stop?” They both knew the answer to that. There appeared to be no let up in sight. He grinned at her, “You ever made out in the back of a car?”

Grace giggled. “Depends on what you mean by made out?” She inched closer. “If you mean, cuddled,” she burrowed into his arms, “or kissed,” she brushed her lips against his jaw line and then against his lips before she pulled back and looked him straight in the eyes, hers twinkling, “then, yes, I made out.” She inched closer, her hand dropped lower, to the zip of his jeans, “but if you mean did I ever...”

Joshua did not let her finish the statement, his hand held her hand against his groin as his lips captured hers. They kissed deeply. "As my bones are ancient, the car isn't big enough, and there's a perfectly good bed in there," he nodded toward the house, "Let's go in."

Grace smiled. "Spoilsport."

He grinned as he reached past her. "I'll open up." He retrieved the keys from the dash board, "No point us both getting wet, Steve must have a mac or broly or something in the house. I'll be back for you."

The briefly opened door let in a blast of air and a brief deluge of rain. He was gone ages, and trying to peer through the rain lashed, breath steamed windows was pointless. She could vaguely make out his blurred outline. The window was misting up. But she could still see his white t-shirt. He was still at the front door. Surely he should be in by now? Why was he still outside? She waited a couple more minutes. Then, after a brief hesitation, she opened the door and raced to him. She was soaked in seconds. The rain had not eased and the down pour had soaked through her long sleeved cotton t-shirt to mold the fabric to her skin.

"What's up?" She crossed her arms and rubbed her hands along her arms.

"Don't you ever do what you're told?" He growled. "I said wait in the car." He continued to wriggle the key in the lock. She stayed where she was. Going back to the car wouldn't achieve anything. She was already drenched.

"Damn." He looked at her, standing there, dripping, the rain lashing her blue t-shirt to her, her jeans darkening as the water soaked through the denim, her hair plastered wetly to her skull. "It's jammed." He explained and the frustration was clearly evident in his words.

"What?" She asked as she pushed rain soaked hair off her face. The water continued to run down her face.

Joshua flicked back a strand of hair that was causing a rivulet of water to run straight into his right eye. His clothes were saturated and clinging to his skin. "The damn key is jammed. It won't open." He told her flatly as he folded his arms and stared at her. "I suppose you want to try it?" He asked, sounding more than disgruntled.

"Not really." She told him, recognising the signals, not a happy guy. Perhaps she should opt for the practical, for teasing would no doubt get her another verbal blast. "Is there a back door?"

"Yes of course." He snapped as he flicked another dripping wet lock of hair off his face. Why was it that women asked the most illogical questions? How many houses didn't have back doors. "Now why didn't I think of that? Probably because it's locked from the inside."

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of...."

"So?" He interrupted. "You want to break in?"

"No." She raised an eyebrow at his tone and then grinned boldly when he continued to stand there glaring at her, looking like a wet, bedraggled, irate lion. "I just thought you might have had a back door key too."

"If you wanted a boy scout you've got the wrong man." He sounded fed up. Grace did her utmost not to laugh. She doubted whether he'd find it amusing. She bit her lip and turned her face away from him. He let out a huff and said disgruntledly, "The key is apparently hanging on a hook by the inside of the kitchen door."

"Oh." She shrugged and tried to hide her smile. Why the whole situation was so amusing was beyond her. But it was. They were standing in teeming rain, soaked to the skin, he was grouchy as hell and she found it amusing? She must be going mad.

He took a deep breath and then, to her surprise, apologised. "I'm sorry. I'm acting like a...."

“Wet, irate tiger. Forget it.” She turned back to face him and gave him one of her best smiles. “It’s been a long drive and this on top of everything, it’s understandable you’d be a bit testy.”

“Testy?”

“Umm, does upset sound any better?” Grace pushed her wet hair off her forehead as she smiled at him. Her action reminded him that they were still standing in the rain.

“No, testy is probably more accurate.” He admitted. “Go back to the car.” Joshua took her by the elbow. She should have stayed in the car. Warm and dry. “I’ll break in.”

“Why?” Grace was soaked through, her hair was plastered to her skull, and she was starting to feel decidedly uncomfortable. But she had a plan of action.

Joshua looked at Grace as if she had gone senile. She seemed to lack logic at the most inappropriate times, “If you haven’t noticed, it’s tipping it down out here.” He gestured dramatically with his hands. “And personally I’d like to get in and dry off. I don’t have a back door key, the front door is stuffed, the car is not comfortable enough for me to consider a long drive back to Auckland. I’m tired, wet and fed up. Oh and testy. And as far as I can see, my only option is to break in. If that isn’t ok with you, I’m sorry, not exactly a boy scout thing, but I’m going to do it. Chalk it up to being testy.”

She didn’t bother to acknowledge his sarcasm. Neither did she bother to hide her laughter.

“I don’t see anything remotely funny about this situation Grace.” He warned.

She bit down on her immediate response and squashed her smile. “Is there a bathroom?” She looked at the door as she spoke.

“What?” Joshua snapped irritably. She was off again. God help him. Joshua knew at that moment that life with Grace would never be humdrum. She found the most annoying situations funny, she had a mind that wandered off at tangents instead of working through things in a logical fashion and she never did what she was told. Life would never be dull.

“Is there a bathroom?” She repeated calmly, as if it was perfectly natural to stand in the rain and have a conversation about bathrooms with a man who was clearly reaching the end of his tether.

“You’ll have to make do in the bushes.” He told her brusquely. And much to his annoyance she laughed. “Grace.” He warned.

Grace tried to stop grinning at him, “No, no,” She began to explain, “Once, when we went to Whangamata,...

“Grace can’t this wait until we are at least out of the rain?”

“You really should learn not to interrupt.” She remonstrated and shrugged off the arm that had moved from her elbow to her shoulder in an attempt to pivot her round to face the car, “As I was saying, dad forgot the key. Except he said mom was supposed to bring it, and then they started to argue about it. You should have heard them. It was hilarious. They were...” She was only midway through providing the context for her plan of action when he began to glower at her. She hadn’t moved off the spot. Did they have to share anecdotes while standing in the pouring rain?

The fact that it was pouring with rain didn’t seem to matter to Grace. After all they were both soaked to the skin. Joshua stood watching and listening, wondering how he had fallen in love with such an illogical, aberrant, stubborn female. He knew better than to try to move her without appeasing her. He knew how stubborn she was, knew that he was likely to destroy their fragile relationship if he trod too heavily on her toes. But this was ridiculous. Enough.

“Grace.” He couldn’t help the exasperation that laced the word, “I’m drenched. You’re drenched. And though I haven’t been interested in wet t shirt competitions until just now, I’m not keen to stand out here in the teeming rain. It doesn’t look as if it is going to stop, so, if you want to share holiday stories let’s both get back into the car.”

Grace glared at him but continued to explain, “As I was saying, because dad forgot the keys,” Joshua groaned loudly as he decided that short of picking her up, no doubt kicking and screaming, he’d have to stand in the pouring rain listening to her telling him about the forgotten key incident.

“I haven’t forgotten the key Grace.” He reminded caustically as he jammed his hands on his hips and frowned ominously. “The bloody thing is jammed.”

“If you’d just let me finish.” She jabbed at his soaked shirt with her index finger.

“What is the point of the story Grace?” He chided sternly as he folded his arms across his chest and huffed with eloquent theatrics.

“The point is that I got in through the bathroom window.” She enlightened him smugly. “Our bathroom window had slats.”

“Grace,” He took her arm and dragged her along toward the car, “No doubt you were a young girl then.” He had managed to shift her all of two feet when his statement registered in Grace’s mind.

“You’re saying I’m fat.” She rounded on him, digging her feet into the soft water logged sandy soil, totally affronted by the insinuation. Of course she wasn’t fat, it was one of the things that really annoyed Sasha and Briar: the fact that Grace could eat a ton of anything and not put on weight.

According to Briar she had an abnormal metabolic rate. According to Sasha, Grace probably didn’t eat when no-one was around and only ate like a glutton to upset her sisters. Rain poured down their faces, their

clothes were sodden, they were drenched, and Grace was angry because she thought he thought she was fat.

Joshua howled with laughter, his resentment dissipating in the face of her indignation. "You aren't fat. Let's just say you are better endowed now." He winked. Suddenly the fact that they were soaked to the skin didn't seem a big deal. He hauled her to him and hugged her. Grace pushed out of his arms.

Grace stood, water teeming down her face, hands on hips looking every inch the outraged woman. "I was nineteen and about the same size I am now. Thank you very much." She growled indignantly before issuing a brusque cranky command. "Show me the bathroom." But she didn't wait for him, she stalked off in high dudgeon. Grace marched back toward the house and began to follow a path that veered toward the left side of the house. Still stewing, she headed round the corner of the house, marching blindly at a furious pace. She'd show him just how fat she was. The man was blind, totally blind. She was slim, curvy but slim. She hadn't put on weight. Probably lost it if anything. What with all the running around she did. She was probably at least a stone lighter. She didn't know for sure, as she hadn't checked her weight for over a decade. Fat. Hmmp.

Joshua quickly caught up with her. "You aren't fat Grace."

"Damn right I'm not." She threw over her shoulder but didn't stop to argue the point.

Joshua fought down his rueful smile. They walked past three windows before they reached what both recognised as the bathroom. The slats were similar to those at Whangamata. Grace flashed him a withering smile. He held his answering smile in check. Together, in silence, they gingerly slid the glass panes out of the metal brackets and laid them on the grassy verge.

When all ten slats were out, she turned to him and said, "Would you like to try?" She knew full well that Joshua's bulk would never make it through the small window.

He smiled, “Ladies first.”

“I’ll need a leg up.”

Joshua shrugged and stifled a grin. He’d make it up to her. Grace pushed several wet strands of hair from her face and waited for him to crouch down. Lacing his fingers to form a step, Joshua gave Grace a leg up. She braced her hands on the window sill and pushed, lifting her leg and hooking it over the window sill. Joshua gradually straightened. He knew he’d never hear the end of this. He was also amazed at just how agile she was. A veritable rubber band.

“See you soon.” She slid one leg into the space created by the window and then inched through the small space into the tiny room. “Although,” she muttered angrily, “I should leave you out there after that fat comment.” She had to duck her head and scrunch her shoulders, but she made it. She disappeared into the bathroom. Several minutes later she opened the back door to him.

“Fat, hmm?” She challenged, grinning smugly, reproach replaced with mirth.

“Beautifully endowed.” He amended as he dropped her overnight bag on the floor inside the house and leaned toward her to kiss her briefly on the mouth, before she could move away. “Just perfect.” He muttered happily as he headed back out again.

He made several trips to the car, carrying in their groceries for the week and their baggage. They certainly weren’t going to starve. Grace stacked the foods from the grocery bags in the fridge and in the pantry in the kitchen. Joshua had shopped for an army platoon rather than just the two of them. Unless he was expecting others.

“Who’s joining us?”

“No-one.” He frowned as he put another bag on the table. There she went again. Another illogical question.

“Who’s going to eat all this?”

“Us.” He disappeared out of the back door again. Ok, so perhaps her question hadn’t been quite so illogical given the amount of food. Grace hadn’t found any linen or towels in any of the bags Joshua had carried in, so she had simply got on with unpacking their supplies and waited for him to return from the car. She was beginning to feel cold as her wet clothes clung to her.

“Here.” He retrieved a towel from one of the holdalls, and handed the towel to Grace. Grace took the large bath sheet and briskly rubbed her arms with the material.

“Thanks” She looked for her bag. Now she could dry off and get into some dry clothes. Joshua turned to leave.

“Where are..” She started to ask.

“Just getting some firewood in.” Joshua read the question before she could finish, “We need some heat in here, if we aren’t going to get pneumonia.” He found the shed keys hooked up beside the back door key and walked over to the door, “And get out of those wet clothes.” He went in search of some logs. The wooden shed was well stocked with dry logs of wood and he carried as many as he could back to the house. By the time he had returned, Grace had changed into a pair of leggings and a large over sized blue chambray shirt. She had the towel wrapped around her head and was rubbing her arms briskly. The first thing Joshua noticed was that she was bra less. He could tell because her nipples were pressing against her shirt. Then he noticed she was still shivering.

“Cold.” He came up to her and began to briskly rub her arms and back. “Better?” He rubbed for several minutes more.

Much better then better, Grace thought. This was bliss. She nodded contently. Her skin began to get pins and needles as the cold was swiftly replaced by warmth. But she wasn’t going to complain.

“Ummm.” She murmured as he continued to roughly stroke her skin and she continued to nuzzle closer.

He smiled, “I’ll get the fire started.”

“It has.” She quipped as she laced her arms around his neck and leaned into him, “I’m ...”

He didn’t allow her to finish the sentence. His arms snaked around her waist, pulling her to him, holding her tightly as he lowered his head. His lips touched hers, gently at first, and then more insistently. Her lips parted and his tongue skimmed past her teeth to meet her tongue. They tasted each other, devouring, sucking, pulling. When they broke apart Grace was much, much warmer. So was Joshua.

She tipped her head up to look into his eyes as she said breathlessly, “I didn’t pack for this weather. It is supposed to be summer.” Still wrapped in his arms she pressed against him. Her shirt got wet from the contact.

“Check the bedrooms, there must be blankets around.” He suggested. “I’ll get the Kent going.”

It was some minutes later that he finally managed to light the fire in the Kent free standing fireplace. The large metal box was old, but it managed to throw out a lot of heat. He adjusted the vents on the front and waited for the logs to start blazing before closing the glass fronted door. It was a small cosy room and the heat the fireplace could generate in a few minutes would soon disperse the damp chill that was still in the air. Grace returned with two wool blankets. The fire had just taken and was sending a faint smell of burning manuka wood and scorching dust through the room. She placed one blanket on the couch and wrapped the other around her shoulders. Without batting an eye, Joshua began to strip off in front of the fire. He had already kicked off his boat shoes. He peeled off his T-shirt, unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans and eased them down his hips. Then he stepped out of them and calmly slid his navy boxer shorts off. Grace watched in a trance, as he rubbed himself dry. He pulled another T shirt and a pair of shorts out

of his bag. He turned to find Grace staring at him, with her mouth open in astonishment so he paused silently in the doorway an eyebrow cocked in silent question. He had his damp jeans and shirt in one hand, a towel on his shoulder and his dry clothes in the other hand.

“You o.k.?” He asked, as if it was an every day occurrence for a man to strip naked in front of her and then stand there, totally exposed, fully aroused, holding a mundane conversation.

“You aren’t shy are you?” She finally croaked. Her eyes now back on his face.

His eyes narrowed as understanding dawned, “I didn’t think you’d mind.” Then he dropped the wet clothes onto the floor and pulled on a pair of shorts, before saying dryly, “You’ve seen it all before.”

“Yes.” She stumbled into chagrined silence. “Hmm.” Groaned Grace as she pulled the blanket closer to her. She edged toward the fireplace, turned and faced it, clutching her blanket tightly with her left hand, and holding her right palm out toward the emanating heat. She wasn’t sure what else to say.

Silently he walked up to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “You, future Mrs De Souza are a whole heap of contradictions.” He turned her slowly to face him and standing in front of her he took hold of the blanket edges and pulled her to him. Joshua kissed her forehead, her nose and her lips before he said, “Tonight we will make sure that you don’t get embarrassed just looking at me.”

“I don’t get embarrassed looking at you.” She mumbled into his chest.

“No?” He quizzed, “then that open mouth stare was, er, let me see, admiration?”

She peered at him from beneath her lashes and then said, “Yes.” She held his gaze when his eyes widened and his brow quirked. He could see that she was thinking about something. He could see it in her eyes. She was planning something. He was beginning to read the signals.

Joshua beamed and then shook his head, “Grace.” He said encouragingly hoping to prompt her into speech. She was planning something. He just knew it.

“Want to make out?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

He took her hand and led her to the sofa that pulled out into a bed. He tugged at the lower cushions a couple of times until the couch opened out into the bed. He placed his blanket on the surface. But before he had a chance to do anything else, she had pushed him down. He lay there, sprawled against the soft wool, a tantalising question in his twinkling eyes, part astonishment part query. He didn’t have to wait long for the answer. Her blanket fell in a heap around her feet as she came nearer. Joshua’s eyes invited her to come closer. Grace kept her eyes on him as she came and stood a few inches from the bed. She had her eyes firmly trained on his as she very slowly began to edge the waistband of her leggings down past her hips. Slowly. Very, very slowly. The lycra reached her ankles she stepped out of them. That left her thigh length shirt. He might have been cool a few minutes ago, but right now he was close to super heated and she was still strategically covered. He groaned silently as her slow strip tease continued. She began to unbutton the chambray shirt from the top, deliberately sedate, serenely exposing skin. But not enough skin. He caught fleeting glimpses of her breast. Golden skin, smooth golden skin. He was no longer cold.

“Watching you is driving me insane.” He gritted, fighting to keep his body under control. A lost battle. He was hard, tenting the cotton, straining to be free. He couldn’t wait much longer. As soon as the last button was undone, he pulled her to lie on top of him. She went willingly, chuckling nervously. His fingers lightly stroked against the underside of her breast and he groaned. His left hand moved in sensuous circles to caress her hip.

She was lying between his legs, feeling him pressed hard against her, savouring every sensation. She pressed against him, rubbing against

him, his eyes glazed. Their eyes were dilated but focussed on each other. She slid down, he let her go. She needed no further encouragement. She followed the path of her hands with the touch of her lips. Sheer instinct and the need to get near him dictated her actions. Even though she didn't know it, her very inexperience was turning him on. The muscles just above his shorts clenched as she brushed them. She liked the feel of that tension, liked the way the muscles trembled when she let her tongue lightly trace faint meaningless symbols on his skin. She tugged at his shorts, inching them slowly down, baring more skin to explore. Joshua was breathing hard. His chest rose and fell erratically as he fought to keep some degree of control. Damn it, he was going to come before she even got to him he thought, just before she pressed a hard licking kiss against his flat fluttering stomach. Then she was moving again. His whole body shuddered.

“You’re beautiful.” She told him huskily as the shorts were pushed further down his hips. He had enough brain power to remember to lift his hips to help her ease his shorts down his thighs. Cool air touched his heated skin. A shiver of lust ran through his tall frame.

She looked up at him then, briefly, seeing his parted lips, the tiny muscle clenching at his jawline, hearing his troubled breathing and looking into dilated eyes. His hands tangled in her hair, when she kissed him, trying to still her roving, fervent, but gentle mouth. She mouthed his balls, then returned to rim him with her tongue. She had never done this before, but given his reaction what she was doing must be right. So she continued with her on site education.

Joshua was a quivering wreck. He hauled her up before he lost it. He pulled her to him. Mustering his diminishing strength he was about to roll her over, when she stopped him, with an emphatic, “No.”

He looked poleaxed and confused, but he obliged automatically, as he began to question her command, “But I..” He looked at her in total bafflement, “I thought you wanted...” His voice was hoarse as he battled to make sense of her change of mind.

His body was ready to explode. But he had been brought up to respect a woman's right to change her mind, to say no at any point.

She sensed his confusion, intuition told her he was struggling for self preservation, so she quickly explained, "I've always wanted to make love in front of an open fire, in a deserted cottage, with the sea roaring in the background." She smiled down at him and shyly admitted, "With me in charge."

That stopped his panic. His eyes roved over her flushed body. She was as aroused as him. The panic dissipated as quickly as it had arrived. A big broad sexy smile slowly covered his face as he realized she didn't want to stop.

Joshua swallowed convulsively as he took in the expression in her eyes. "I'm all yours." He whispered hoarsely wondering how long he'd last if she continued the way she had started.

She dictated the pace. Forced the perimeter to boundaries she had never known existed. Boundaries Joshua thought he'd never survive. She tasted and touched, but every time he went to surge into her, to resume control she lifted her hips out of range, swiftly moving a few inches out of reach. She maintained this touching, grinding, kissing, stroking until she could feel his muscles coil and tremor. He was working very hard to hold onto some semblance of control. She lowered herself. Then lifted. Hovering, then lowered again, enveloping him in her tight sheath. She watched his eyes as she repeated her action over and over. She knew the exact moment when he decided he couldn't wait. It was a fraction of a second before she rode him hard. Clutching her hips with both hands, he held her fast, and then thrust, he entered her deeply, shouting her name hoarsely. The dynamite seemed endless. His heart hammered like a pneumatic drill as it crashed against his ribs.

"Grace." He breathed into her ear as he wrapped the blankets around them tightly, "I'll need a year to recoup my strength." He came back to earth slowly and she didn't fight the possession of his gentle mouth as

it took hers in a lethargic kiss. Drained beyond belief, it took immense will power to find the energy to move. He was wrung dry.

His eyes feathered shut as he fell sound asleep.

She smiled contentedly, snuggling into his chest where she mumbled “I love you.” Her words were a breathless whisper.

Joshua didn’t hear her.

They awoke late. Very late. Grace was wrapped around him, her leg thrown over his, her arm flung across his chest with her head just below his neck, tucked in securely. He had his arm wrapped around her firmly. Sometime during the night one or other must have wrapped the blankets more securely around them, for they were now cocooned within. Strangely, although confined, neither had been uncomfortable. Waking up was as sensual as making love, hair roughened skin grazed hairless skin and their actions sensitised each other into instant response.

“What are you thinking about?” Grace lifted her head off his chest and propped herself up on her elbow so that she could look at him.

A warm red suffused his neck. He was blushing. That puzzled Grace.

He coughed to clear his throat. “Er, what makes you ask?”

“One minute your heart was beating a nice humdrum staccato, and the next it started hammering as if I’d just injected you with adrenaline or something.” She grinned, “And now you have turned my favourite shade of red.” The fire was still glowing and the room was pleasantly warm. It had stopped raining, and light filtered in through the gap between the drawn, printed, light weight curtains.

“Come on I’ll show you how to work the shower, Riah said it was a bit of a hassle.” Joshua mumbled happily into the top of her hair as he continued to stroke her temple and brush against her body.

“You’re trying to side track me.” She replied happily and stretched slowly. “What were you thinking about?”

“Can’t a man keep his thoughts to himself?”

Grace felt guilty for pushing him. She hadn’t meant to make an issue of it. It had simply fascinated her, the way his heart began to race. One minute it was following a steady rhythm and the next it was as if he’d just sprinted. She inched away. “Yes, of course, sorry.” She mumbled as she pushed off the bed. She’d never the get the hang of this after sex communication. What were they supposed to do, not get intimate? Not ask personal questions?

His hand snaked around her wrist, effectively preventing her from going any further. “Grace,” he swung his feet off the bed so that he was sitting on the edge. He tugged her to stand between his legs. His fingers forming a band around her wrist. “I didn’t mean to sound grouchy.”

“I didn’t mean to nag.”

“You didn’t.”

“I didn’t huh?” She quirked a look at him.

“I just wasn’t expecting a mind reader.”

“I haven’t a clue what you were thinking about.”

“You think we can buy a copy of the Kama Sutra out here?”

“What?” Grace burst out laughing. “What’s that all about?”

He grinned, “I was thinking we could make the best of you being so flexible.”

Grace looked stumped for all of two seconds then she gave his shoulders a hard shove and fell with him to lie on the bed. They were both grinning. She kissed him.

“That’s the problem with you computer types. Always need a manual with diagrams. No imagination. No creativity, nooooooo”

Joshua rolled her onto her back and began to show her just how creative he could be and how supple she was.

It was a couple of hours later when he mumbled, “Creative enough?” Pleasantly lethargic. Content. Replete. It took a while to get out of the makeshift bed. “Come on.” He tugged her arm, “Time for a shower.”

“I’m too tired.” She snuggled deeper into the blanket.

For a moment he hesitated, then he tugged the blanket and wrapped it around her. He picked up his victim and unceremoniously tossed her over his shoulder.

“Hey.” She struggled to come upright.

“Now don’t make a habit of this Grace. When we get married, I’ll expect you to be up at six, making my breakfast.”

“In your dreams.” She mumbled into the blanket that had fallen over her head. With her arms pinned by the cocoon there was little she could do. Joshua marched off to the shower, listing all his expectations and patting her bottom as he went.

It was very late in the afternoon when they finally left the house and went for a long stroll along the beach. It was a glorious day, bright blue skies, cloudless, and warm. They walked to the opposite end of the small secluded bay. It took about an hour. Then they sat on the rocks and watched the waves crash against a rocky outcrop. They probed, supported and challenged. Enjoying their time together. It was idyllic. Then, holding hands they walked back toward the beach.

Joshua cooked dinner, a light salad and steak. Grace set the table. They talked about their work. Slowly learning more about each other.

“It’s getting late.”

“Hmm.” Grace purred contentedly. “Today’s been wonderful.”

“It isn’t over yet.” He tugged her to her feet. “Come on, bed time.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I suppose this was on your list of demands that I couldn’t quite make out this morning.”

“I’m in charge now.” He advised her, his meaning not lost on Grace.

This time they used a bedroom.

Grace and Joshua visited local tourist spots and took in the indigenous historic sites. They visited the Marae, read about the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, marveled at the hollowed out canoe and took a day cruise around the bay. They swam in the warm ocean water that lapped a few yards from the back door of their bach and they made love on the beach. They talked, walked and swam. Hours disappeared as they both relaxed. They cooked, they ate and they made love. That was the pattern for the week. Sheer lotus eating existence.

On Friday Grace had her period. She had been dreading the advent of this day. She woke up knowing that it signaled the end of their agreement.

“I’m not pregnant.” She told him after breakfast. He looked at her, and Grace caught a fleeting glimpse of sadness. “I guess that means we don’t get married.” She said softly. She needed to give him an out. Just in case he needed it. It was her inexperience and his sense of chivalry that had led to this compromise.

He froze. Then, with his back to her he said, “We should give it a while before we let everyone know that we’ve broken up.” His words

were flat, but he wasn't looking at her, so she couldn't tell what he was feeling. "Maybe wait till after Christmas or something." Joshua wanted to yell in frustration. "I'd hate to ruin Christmas."

Grace wanted to cry. If only he'd said that it didn't matter, that he still wanted to marry her. If only. Even, if he just said he wanted to go out with her. Perhaps she should ask him. She was liberated. She should ask him. The words didn't come.

"I guess." She agreed quietly.

"We should see each other. It would look a bit odd if we just stopped. We'd have a lot of explaining to do." Why had she been so keen to tell him about her period? Surely the last couple of days had shown her how in tune they were to each other.

"Yes. I suppose." She mumbled. So their love making was nothing more than sex for him.

"If we gradually ease off, we won't have to deal with an inquisition." Joshua wanted to shake her. Why was she doing this? Why the hell did they have to break off? They got on well. There was passion in their relationship and even when she was asking irrational questions they had great conversations.

"I guess." Grace was trying desperately to hang onto a shred of composure. So, it was just sex. He was treating splitting up objectively. Dispassionately? Clearly he'd only pushed her into accepting his proposal because he felt guilty. She didn't want them to stop seeing each other, but she couldn't beg. Could she? If only he'd say that he didn't care about the pregnancy. If only she had the courage to make an overture. If only.

He loved her. She certainly wanted him. She must love him. She must. Why didn't she say so? Women always did.

"I'll go pack." She stated quietly and left Joshua gazing out of the window.

They cleaned and tidied the house, restocked the wood supply and Joshua replaced the front door lock, before they left. He'd bought a new lock when they'd gone into Russell on Wednesday. While he fixed the door, Grace took a walk along the beach. When she returned, he'd checked on everything and then they left.

The drive back to Auckland reminded Grace of her first trip with Joshua. On that occasion he had also switched on the radio, effectively cutting out any talk. The return journey had seemed longer than the journey up to the bach. Neither of them spoke much. Both of them were waiting for the right time. It never came. He drove straight to her parent's house. They were both home and together they came out to greet Joshua. They all stood in the driveway and spoke for a while, talking platitudes.

After about five minutes Grace said, "Well, I guess you want to get going."

Ben and Angie exchanged silent looks.

"Yes. I'd better." He replied stiltedly as he walked around to the boot of the car and retrieved her travel bag.

"Won't you stay for dinner or something?" Angie asked in a desperate attempt to keep him there.

"Thanks but I'd best get going."

Angie flashed her husband another message.

"We'll take your gear in." Ben told his daughter as he sensed the tension and picked up on his wife's silent order. He reached for the large bag and began to walk back to the house before Grace could disagree. "See you soon Josh." He called over his shoulder, hoping that was the case.

“See you Josh.” Angie said as she brushed his cheek with a kiss and then followed her husband back to the house.

That left Joshua and Grace standing nervously beside the car.

“They’re not known for their tact.” Grace finally said as her parents disappeared into the house.

“I had a great time Grace.” Joshua responded, ignoring her previous statement.

“Me too.” She replied and smiled tentatively. It was almost as if they were on their first date, wondering if there’d be a second.

“Call me when you get back from Whangamata.” He ordered, “And you are not to go back to the cottage if that maniac hasn’t been traced.”

“Yes dear.” She replied cheekily.

He kissed her cheek. “I mean it.”

“Yes. I know you do.”

“If they haven’t got him, tell your folks. Tell me. We’ll work something out.”

“They’ll get him.” She pulled out of his arms.

“Grace.”

“I’ll tell them if he isn’t caught by the time we get back. He’ll probably stop anyway. He’ll get bored.”

“No risks Grace.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “You are bossy.”

“Your point is?” He teased. She quirked a brow. “Don’t be stubborn ok?” He stated, “if they haven’t traced him, call me.” He began pulling her to him, “we’ll sort something out.” Then he was kissing her lips. With her breathless he let her go and opened the car door. “Give me a call, ok?” The window scrolled down and just before he pulled away, he said, “Grace, this isn’t the end with us.”

Chapter 14

Grace and her parents left for Whangamata the next day. Sasha was going to drive up from Wellington during the week, and meet them there. There was no phone at the family bach and for two weeks, Joshua neither heard from, nor saw, Grace. Why hadn’t she phoned? Not even a call on Christmas day. He’d hoped she’d call. But she hadn’t. If he knew where the bach was he would have driven down. He was like a bear with a sore head, at least, that was the way Mariah described him to Steven. He snapped, talked when he had to, and scowled for the most part.

Grace was equally unhappy. But if they were going to split up she didn’t want to make things harder than they already were. By the time she and her parents had left for Whangamata she had convinced herself that his kisses in front of the house had been to keep up appearances.

“You want to talk about it?” Sasha asked, the day before they were all due to head back to Auckland. It was obvious to Sasha, and her parents, that Grace had been preoccupied for most of their holiday. Grace agreed to all their plans, but, unlike her normal self, didn’t suggest or modify any. So, in cahoots with each other, Ben and Angie had disappeared into town almost ten minutes ago, leaving Sasha to work on her older sister.

“Have you ever been in love?” Grace braced her elbows on the balustrade of the deck and looked out across their small garden.

Sasha grinned, “First with Jimmy Hirtle, I think I was six. Then of course there was Nick Tarant, but he was going steady with Aroha Weihepena. So I only fancied him at a distance. I think Sean Marsh was next, he of the gorgeous grey eyes, but he only looked at Bri, then Reed Hunter, he was cute, good kisser too, but it turned out he was gay. Oh, I forgot, Neihana Ardson, I drooled over him for weeks, until I saw him kissing Ariel. Do you remember her? She had breasts when the rest of us were still wondering what we had to eat in order to develop.” Sasha grinned, “Oh, my biggest crush was on Danny Sinclair.” Sasha came and stood beside Grace, but leaned her back against the wood as she faced their the French doors.

Grace chuckled half heartedly, “I’m not talking about crushes. I mean have you ever really been in love?” She glanced across at Sasha, and wondered whether this was the right thing to do.

Sasha pushed her hair off her face as she considered her sister’s question. Then she shook her head, “No.”

“I’ve never felt like this before.” Grace sighed loudly as she stood turned and headed to the other side of the deck and began to look sightlessly out at the Harbour. It was a beautiful view, giving clear access to the headland and the estuary. But it was wasted on Grace that morning. She took a deep breath then said, “I love the man.” She sighed audibly “I love him and it scares the living daylights out of me.” She turned to face her sister, “I love him, even when he’s a pain in the neck, prime time bossy grouch.”

“Sounds like love. I’ve never seen him grouchy. It must be you.” Sasha teased.

“What am I going to do Sash?”

“I don’t see what the problem is.” Sasha strolled toward her sister and stood a few feet in front of her sister as she asked gently “Have you told him you love him?”

Grace pushed her hands through her already tangled hair, “Me?” She shook her head as she turned and braced her back against the rail that ran the length of the upper floor deck.

“Yeah, you.” Sasha turned and headed for the bench and wooden seats, her voice gentle, calming. “Why not?”

“I know I love him, and I want him, desperately, but,” Her voice petered out into nothing, leaving the sentence hanging in the air.

Sasha straddled the bench and sat on the old wooden seat. She looked straight at Grace, “But what Grace?” She prompted gently.

“What if he doesn’t love me?” Grace asked and Sasha could see how much it cost her sister to voice her unease.

Sasha snorted inelegantly. “Are you nuts? Of course he bloody loves you.” Sasha answered bluntly, “The man is mad about you. He puts up with your bossiness, your stubbornness, your nonsense. If that isn’t love I don’t know what is.” Grace smiled, as Sasha had intended her to. “Honestly Grace.” Sasha had not finished, “He takes you away for weekends, weeks even. He practically hangs on to your every word. He’s forever trying to touch you. He deals with your sass. What more do you want?”

“I think he wants me.” Grace conceded in a wry voice before tacking on lamely, “He’s in lust with this delectable body.”

“Don’t kid yourself. If he wanted a delectable body, he’d have taken mine.” Sasha teased audaciously and grinned cheekily at her sister.

“O.k. then, he lusts after me.” Grace retorted, then shook her head, “But love? I don’t know. He’s never said anything.” She threw her

sister a questioning look, “Aren’t you supposed to tell someone you love them?”

“Like you, you mean?” Sasha pressed her point. “Have you told him?”

“Shouldn’t he have said something by now?”

“Sounds like he is the demonstrative rather than talkative type.” Sasha stated in a sanguine tone. “I’ve seen you guys kiss.”

“Since when have you become such an authority on this subject?”

“Oh, since my ugly older sister brought home this gorgeous guy and he didn’t even give the more beautiful, talented, charming, younger, wittier sister, a second look. That, plus the fact that he told the family he wanted to marry you.”

“He thought I was pregnant.” Grace admitted miserably.

“Hmm. Thought so.” Sasha was thinking out aloud. “But nobody said anything”

Grace smiled. “What did you want? A radio broadcast?”

Sasha grinned. “Better make sure you marry him. I’m not having my sister seduce poor defenseless men and then leave them to suffer in today’s society.”

“Puritan.”

“Tart.”

They smiled. Grace chewed on her lower lip as she wondered whether to carry on with this discussion. She headed for her sister and sat astride the bench seat, facing Sasha.

“This is so stupid.” She brushed at an imaginary speck on her t shirt, “I’ve never felt like this before. I’ve never felt like I’ve been missing out before. I can’t imagine not being with him. I feel this huge gaping hole whenever I think that we aren’t going to be together. Honestly, it feels like my heart just becomes a worthless leaden rock. I just can’t imagine life without him. And at the same time I am absolutely petrified of telling him I love him. Just in case he runs a mile.”

“He won’t.” Sasha told her. Without hesitation Sasha leaned over and rubbed her sister’s arm in comfort.

“I never expected this Sash. I mean, it isn’t as if I haven’t been out with some cute guys...”

“And some duds. Remember Ian?”

The two sisters looked at each other, grimaced and then burst out laughing.

“He couldn’t help it.”

“Yeah, he could. Ugh!” Sasha cringed. “Thank God for Joshua.”

“I do that every day. Me? Ms independent- I-can-manage-anything-do-anything-without-having-to-rely-on-anyone, has realized that I don’t want to, not without him. It scares the living daylights out of me.”

Sasha didn’t say anything. She just listened.

“I want to have his children. Me? I’ve never been clucky. And now, I spin fairy stories about us living together. I have discussions with myself about whether I’d keep my name for academic purposes or whether I’d take his.” She laughed nervously. “I mean, how stupid is that?”

“Grace, you love him.” Sasha stood up, threw her sister a knowing smile and said firmly, “Tell him.”

“I’d be humiliated if it’s one sided.”

“And you call yourself a feminist. Equal rights huh? You want him to tell you first.” Sasha mocked gently, before saying compassionately but firmly, “Tell him.” She smiled gently at her sister, then whispered, “I have this gut feeling that he loves you.”

“You think so?” Grace sounded hesitant. Sasha nodded vigorously.

“Yeah, I think he does.” She insisted. “Ask him.” She gave Grace a ferocious hug.

“I’m not sure.” The years of doubt were difficult to kick. What if Sasha was wrong? What if it was just sex?

“Ask him Grace.” Sasha ordered more forcefully. “And I’m not wearing some fluffy peachy bridesmaid’s dress.”

“Right.” Grace switched moods, “You’d want to wear some obnoxious surfie gear and probably carry hemp instead of a bouquet.”

Sasha didn’t take any offence, “I’m just warning you in advance, no frothy, frilly pink stuff.” She linked her arm through her sister’s, “And I get first pick of the groomsmen.” Grace rolled her eyes as Sasha continued, “You know what will happen if Briar gets there, none of them will even give me a second look.”

“Yeah right Sash.” Grace replied facetiously.

“Promise Grace. I get first pick. Promise.”

“If, and that is a mighty big if, if Josh and I get married you can have first choice of a groomsman. Satisfied?” Grace got to her feet.

Sasha nodded. “Dad said he had a cute brother!”

“Idiot.” Grace laughed then gave her sister a hug. “Thanks.” Arm in arm both women headed back into the house. “So was it your idea or did mum and dad put you up to this?” Grace challenged as they entered the house. Sasha raised questioning brows. “For you to have this chat with me?” Grace supplied, knowing full well that her sister knew exactly what she was talking about.

“What chat?”

Grace chuckled.

When the Toyota pulled into the drive another car was already parked there.

“Poor love sick man.” Sasha teased Grace in a whisper. In reply Grace dug her elbow into her sister’s ribs. “Ouch. Grace. That hurt.”

“Good.” Replied her sister without an ounce of remorse. Grace was pleased to see him. Pleased didn’t even begin to cover it.

Joshua sat in the Jag, tapping the steering wheel in time to the music filtering from the car radio. He smiled and got out of the car when Ben parked the Toyota beside his Jaguar.

“Compliments of the season.” Angie said with a smile in her eyes, before she reached up to kiss his cheek. “Don’t tell me you were just in the neighbourhood.” Angie teased gently.

He laughed, taking the banter good naturedly, “No,” He told her honestly, “Luke and I played a round of golf this morning at Titirangi, when I called round your neighbour said you’d be back around fourish.”

Sasha gave him a smacking kiss on the lips then sauntered past him, wearing yet another pair of ludicrously loud beach shorts and a T shirt that made no attempt to match it.

“Happy New Year gorgeous.” She called happily, “Here to see me or the old hag?” Sasha asked as he walked bemused toward the car.

He shook his head at her, but couldn’t stop the smile that escaped. “Happy New Year Sasha. I’m here to see your lovely sister.”

“Briar back then?” Sasha yelled loudly from the door way, deliberately misreading his comment, for which she earned a chuckle from him. She dressed like a hallucinating surfer, bantered like a bar room comedian and he liked her.

“Just ignore her.” Grace advised him as she too disappeared past him, carrying two large holdalls.

Joshua watched her go. He’d come all this way, waited all this time and he didn’t even get a ‘hello’ kiss? No Happy New Year greeting? She hadn’t missed him as much as he’d missed her, that much was obvious. No kiss? Just one kiss? His silent question went unanswered as Ben summoned him over.

“Joshua.” Ben called just before his head disappeared into the boot of the car. “Happy New Year son.” Ben hauled another two bags out of the car boot, “No point just standing there. Take these.” Joshua reached Ben. He handed Joshua two of the larger bags. Joshua took them automatically.

“Where do you want me to put them?”

“Follow the others.” Ben said offhand as he reached back into the boot to retrieve another tote bag.

With a bag in each hand, Joshua headed for the house. He met Sasha on her way out.

“Ah hah.” She stood at the door, barring his way, “So you do workout. Look at all those rippling muscles.” She leaned toward him and

squeezed his upper arm, giggling and murmuring in comical admiration, “HMMMMM. I bet you eat heaps of spinach.”

“Leave him alone Sash.” Grace ordered as she brushed past her sister to get past them both. Joshua frowned.

“Are you sure you want her? She’s bossy.” Sasha told Joshua in a mock serious tone, “I mean, I’m younger,” exaggerating the movement, she batted her eyelashes at him, “Better character,” She winked saucily, “Heaps better dress sense.” She ran her hands over her shorts, and then sashayed toward him “And a better kisser.” She puckered up. Defensively and automatically, even though he was grinning at her antics, Joshua stepped back and straight into Grace.

“Sash.” Grace hollered loudly at her sister, “Let him get by. You are holding him up.” Grace had two large grocery bags in her hands, she jostled past Joshua, threw him a disgruntled look and carried on down the hall.

“I was just telling him that I’m a better kisser than you.” Sasha told Grace, as she let her pass them. She winked boldly at Joshua. He smothered a laugh.

“In your dreams.” Grace retorted totally unfazed by her sister, then she stopped, turned and addressed Joshua, “Are you going to stand there grinning all evening? Those go to the laundry.” She told him pointing at the bags in his hands, “Down the corridor, second door on your left.” Then she was gone in the opposite direction.

His grin vanished. He stood there for a second muttering under his breath, “She doesn’t care that you are making a move on me.”

Sasha heard him, for the first time since he’d known her, she turned to look at him with a serious, contemplative expression on her face, “Oh, she cares.” Sasha told him quietly and earnestly and then stepped past him, “And if you think that was me making a move, you’re naive. I just wanted to know if you cared as much for her.” She was gone before he could ask her to qualify that statement.

He followed the directions Grace had given him and took the bags to the laundry. He left them propped by the washing machine. By the time he returned to the car-unloading-scene it had changed. Grace, Sasha, Ben and Angie were huddled together, laughing and crying at one and the same time. He stood waiting, unsure what to do. What had happened? Were they upset or pleased? Angie noticed him first.

She smiled tearfully, “Don’t mind us.” She told him, “We’ve just had some good news. A letter from Briar. It was waiting for us.” She held up a pale blue aerogramme as if that explained everything.

Ben explained further, “She’ll be here in just over five weeks.” He too had tears in his eyes, “She’s been gone about two years.” The women were all beaming happily, lost amidst fond memories. Anticipating her arrival they were already making plans. Two years since they’d all been together. Two long years for a close knit family.

“I’ve got some good news too.” Joshua grinned, caught up with the euphoria of the moment. The group disbanded. Joshua turned to address Grace, “They’ve got the jerk who sent you those obscene notes. Had him all the time.”

Ben, who had just placed more bags and gear in front of them, ready for his band of helpers to carry into the house, stopped immediately and focussed with laser sharp accuracy on Joshua. Angie stopped midway to picking up a box of groceries and stared at Joshua. Sasha’s eyes widened in reaction to that bit of news.

“Really?” Grace broke into a laugh of relief, forgetting the presence of her family.

“What jerk?” That was Sasha.

“Obscene notes?” Chorused Ben and Angie.

There was silence as Ben, Angie, and Sasha stared first at Grace then, seeing that she wasn’t going to say anything, turned to Joshua. They knew Grace well enough to recognize that stubborn streak kick in, and

her features had adopted that blank I'm-saying-nothing look. Their only option was Joshua. He looked decidedly uneasy. Yes, he was their best bet.

"Well Joshua?" Ben prompted, his voice once more that of the strict teacher. All efforts to empty the car boot temporarily came to a halt. Three inquisitive people stood around waiting for action from the other two silent members. "Joshua?" Her father repeated in his best disciplinarian voice.

Joshua did his best not to squirm.

"Stop hassling him." Grace jumped in to defend Joshua because she knew he wouldn't defend himself. She knew her family, they were equipping themselves for an interrogation and they had targeted Joshua. The poor man wouldn't know what hit him.

"Then you tell us." Angie suggested firmly.

"After we've unloaded." Grace hedged, she knew it was going to be stormy. She knew them well enough to know they would be upset. That was precisely why she hadn't told them anything. But they were also going to be upset because she hadn't told them.

"Now." Commanded her father in a voice that brooked no argument.

Not that Grace was going to give in gracefully, "Dad, it's no big deal." She tried stalling "And anyway they've got him." She tried placating. "It's over." Neither ploy worked.

"Now Grace. In my study." The orders were issued in an imperious tone. "Sasha finish unloading." He moved away from the car.

Grace grimaced. "I'm thirty, not thirteen." She reminded her father as she nevertheless followed him into the house.

Ben ignored her comment as he flicked his prospective son-in-law a disgruntled look “You too.” Ben insisted autocratically.

Angie followed automatically without being asked or ordered. Sasha watched them march away and sighed volubly. She heaved a particularly heavy bag out of the car boot muttering to herself about the unfairness of it all. No doubt someone would tell her all the details eventually. But she wanted to hear them now.

They entered the study in a steady procession. Grace flopped into the large wicker chair, it creaked as she settled into it. She took up a studied pose of indifference. Her father strode to his desk where he folded his arms and waited. Angie stood beside her husband. Joshua stood silently beside Grace. This was a novelty for him. Usually he was in Ben’s position, waiting for Zac or Riah to explain themselves. How had he managed to get mixed up with such a tight knit, volatile family?

“Right.” Ben decreed, “Start talking.”

Grace sighed expressively and for effect, “This is ridiculous dad.” She, unlike Joshua, had been through numerous ‘start talking’ sessions with her parents. From their folded arms, their terse tones and their demanding eyes, she knew she was in trouble. From previous history, she knew that she was in for a rough ride, so she began playing for time. Hopefully she’d think up something placatory.

“Grace.”

“I received a few letters, that’s all.” She shook her head in a dismissive gesture, signaling it as a non-event and nothing of any consequence. The strategy was ignored.

“What kind of letters?” Her father snapped.

“The usual.” Grace hadn’t finished trying to delay the inevitable. She strove to sound apathetic. It fell on deaf ears.

“Grace. What kind of letters? How many? When?” Her father was asking questions as if she was a naughty child in his class. Grace flashed him a look to tell him so. “I’m waiting Grace.”

She rolled her eyes in disgust but decided to start co-operating, “I guess,” She began in a glum voice, adopting a hard done by expression, “I personally received about half a dozen, the police intercepted the rest.” She added matter of factly, “A few weeks ago. They were just threatening.” Feigning nonchalance, she settled back into the seat, folded her arms and waited for the volcano to erupt. Joshua wished she hadn’t added that last statement. And he certainly wished she had chosen to be a touch more sensitive about it.

“Just threatening?” Angie barely whispered, then sat heavily as the menace of the situation registered.

“And you knew about it?” Ben turned his anger and anxiety on Joshua. Ben was ready to shout the place down. He was furious.

“Don’t yell at him Dad.” Grace jumped in instantly, defending Joshua almost instinctively. “He had nothing.....”

“Grace.” Joshua interrupted her quietly. It was his tone that stopped her. He took control of the situation. Perhaps her father would not be able to ride roughshod over Joshua. Grace clamped her mouth shut.

“Nice trick.” Ben said noting the fact that Grace had stopped stalling. Ben waited for Joshua to resume the account. Grace glared at both men.

“You knew our daughter was in trouble and you didn’t tell us?” Ben emphasised ownership as he addressed Joshua in a chillingly formal voice. His eyes pinned Joshua to the spot. Joshua fought off the urge to squirm.

What could Joshua say? That he had told Grace to tell her parents? That she had refused? Joshua held Ben’s gaze as he said “Everything possible was being done. It was under control.”

“My daughter was vulnerable, some demented man was sending her hate mail,” He roared, before checking his anger, and adding ominously “and you call not telling her parents doing everything possible and keeping it under control?”

“He told me to tell you.” Just as she thought, Joshua was about to be fried, Grace shot to her feet. “Several times. I decided not to. I...”

“Grace sit down.” Joshua took her by the shoulders and made sure she followed his order. He wasn’t about to let her go into bat for him again, didn’t she think he could cope with a minor altercation? “We,” He stressed, addressing her parents but looking at Grace, “didn’t want to worry you.”

“I decided.” Grace stressed again. “He wanted me to tell you.” She restated. “Stop hassling him.” She demanded, then added. “It has nothing to do with him.” Joshua was getting ready to haul her to her feet so that he could gag her mouth.

“It has everything to do with me.” Joshua corrected resolutely. “Everything.” He said quietly but his tone was adamant. It was not lost on anyone present. His eye contact meant that Grace knew exactly who that last comment was addressed to. Then he turned and faced her parents, “We discussed it and decided not to worry you at that stage. I took Grace’s safety into consideration. I decided...”

“It was....”

“Grace.” Joshua issued the warning calmly, but did no more than pause. She pouted but said no more.

Ben banked down a smile then frowned heavily. Things, events, changes in plans, were beginning to make sense “So that’s why you went off to the Bay.” Much of the last few weeks began to have significance.

“I was going anyway. I wanted Grace with me.” Joshua decided he’d better start digging themselves out of the mess Grace had created. She

might have a genius IQ, but she didn't know how to handle her parents. She really didn't know when to admit defeat and concede gracefully. Stubborn, independent, lovable scrap.

"You should have told us?" Ben remonstrated with Grace.

"You'd have worried." She replied simply as she flashed both parents a mutinous look.

"That's our job." Her father retorted emotionally. It was then that it dawned on Ben that she had turned to the man who was going to take care of her. She was already, unconsciously perhaps, but already nonetheless, trusting Joshua with her life. And he was taking that in his stride. Ben knew it would be no easy task, his daughter was far too stubborn to agree to mollycoddling. Ben wasn't sure that he was ready to let go of his oldest daughter. Not yet. But he knew Joshua was the man for her. Ben looked searchingly at his daughter. She was no longer just their daughter. His daughter. Ben moved closer to her. He hugged her tightly, knowing that things in the family were changing, not for the worse, but changing all the same. He wasn't sure he was ready for the change, even though he had been trying to engineer just such a change for so long. She was his daughter.

"Next time let me worry ok?"

She nodded gently and conceded, "There won't be a next time." She kissed his cheek.

"You can't get round me that easily." He admonished, "I want to know everything about this, and I want to know now."

Angie settled down beside her husband. She was still worried.

"Sit down Joshua." Ben told him, "You aren't going anywhere."

"This is OTT."

“No Grace. It is not over the top. Now start talking.”

Grace sighed dramatically. “This is ridi..” She began then sighed when Joshua silenced her with one warning look.

“I’ll explain.” Joshua interrupted. “Grace is likely to whinge for hours and tell you absolutely nothing.” She glowered. Joshua quirked a brow then began the explanation.

It took over fifteen minutes for every single detail of the letters, and the suspect, to be retold in sufficient minutiae to inform and appease Ben and Angie.

They talked about Bill, the father of the student Grace had got into a refuge centre. He held Grace responsible for his daughter’s behaviour, and the fact that he was charged. As far as he was concerned she would pay. While in gaol he used his visitors to post his letters. It was a combination of good luck and sheer persistence. Luke’s investigator had eventually worked through possibilities and asked the wardens to keep an eye on Bill. A warden had intercepted a letter. The letter addressed to Grace was opened it. The letter wasn’t signed. They kept it. After that the wardens covertly watched him until he handed over another letter.

“Thanks everyone.” Sasha groused facetiously when she strolled into the study to see her parents, Grace and Joshua sitting and calmly talking. “I finished unloading the car, loading the washing machine, refilling the pantry and sorting the trash. Shall I make the beds, Hoover the hall and get dinner on, or would you all like to contribute?” She had expected to find herself amidst a full scale fracas between her sister and parents. That’s why she had left them to it. But when she passed the study there hadn’t been a sound. “What ever happened to everyone pulling their weight in this family?” She queried, as she flopped onto the settee beside Grace.

“Sash don’t exaggerate.”

“Says someone who didn’t have to carry in three dozen plastic bags, six holdalls, and two boxes of rubbish.” Sasha exaggerated wildly. “Says someone who is sitting around drinking gin and tonics while I lugged all the stuff into the house.”

“Thank you Sasha.” Ben got to his feet, ruffled his younger daughter’s hair and walked over to the bar to get her a drink. “I knew I could count on you.”

“This isn’t a g and t.” Corrected Grace blithely raising her glass aloft.

“So?” Sasha prompted, ignoring her sister’s teasing, she wanted to know what had happened, and no one seemed to be in a rush to tell her, “Is anyone going to tell me what happened?”

“No.” Angie, Grace and Ben chorused at the same time and then fell about laughing. Joshua smiled at Sasha’s grimace.

“Hah-hah.” She pouted. “Come on. You guys always do this to me. Tell me.”

Ben poured Sasha a drink. Joshua gave her a potted account. By the time they had rehashed things it was almost dinner time.

“I think it will have to be takeaways.” Angie said regretfully.

Joshua got to his feet, thinking this was his cue to leave.

“Where are you going?” Sasha stalled him.

“I’d better make tracks.”

“Not yet.” Angie smiled, “It’s no trouble, Sasha will get takeaways, stay and join us. Unless someone is expecting you back soon?”

“No.” Zac was out with Shelley. Joshua hadn’t got as far as thinking about dinner.

Sasha started grumbling again. “Why me?”

Joshua grinned at her. “I’ll go.”

“Mum’s already told you to join us.” Grace frowned at him.

“I meant to get takeaways.”

“Oh.” Grace shrugged nonchalantly and ignored his teasing smile. “I’ll come with you.”

Ben flicked Angie a smug smile as Joshua and Grace got up to leave.

As they walked to the car Joshua said, “Sorry about dropping that bombshell.” Acknowledging his part in letting the cat out of the bag. “I wasn’t thinking too clearly.”

“I should have told them earlier.” Grace finally admitted, “I’m relieved they’ve got him.”

“So am I.” Joshua opened the passenger door, “I just knew you were going to make life difficult. Probably insist on going back to the cottage even if they hadn’t caught him.”

“Not necessarily.”

He quirked a brow.

“Well, ok, I was.” She conceded, “I do have a job to do. I can’t hide forever.”

Joshua closed the passenger door and quickly walked to the driver’s side. That was exactly what he thought she’d do.

“You’re too stubborn.” He said as he got in.

“I know. I can’t help it.” She sounded so forlorn that Joshua had to laugh.

He leaned over and kissed her briefly on the lips. “Happy New Year.” He’d finally collected a kiss, even if he was the one who had to initiate it. The Chinese takeaway was five minutes away from their house. “You had a good break?”

Grace nodded. “Yes. We all needed the time.”

“Must have been quite busy.”

“No, we just lazed around. Let me clarify that, mum, dad and I read, and pottered, Sasha surfed till the waves got flat, took the canoe out when that happened, came back for a quick bite to eat, then caught up with all her old flames. Typical Sash, that girl wouldn’t know how to take things easy.” Grace finally picked up on his tone. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Joshua, if you’re upset about the way I dealt with things say so.”

“I’m not. Though you weren’t exactly diplomatic.”

Grace ignored that red herring, “Well then, what’s the problem?”

He reversed the car into a parking bay, “You didn’t phone me.”

“You missed me?”

He turned off the ignition and faced her. “Yes.” He nodded. “I did.”

Grace smiled at him slowly, then leaned closer to him. “I’m sorry I didn’t phone.” She’d thought about it several times.

While they waited for their order to be met he asked her on a date next friday. Without any hesitation, Grace agreed. They returned to the house twenty minutes later with several cartons.

Grace was still on holiday, but she wanted to go into the University to sort out next terms lectures so Sasha and Grace drove to Hamilton the next day.

“You didn’t ask him?”

Grace knew exactly what her sister was talking about. “I haven’t had time.” She stated offhandedly.

“Hmm.” Total disbelief.

“Well, I haven’t. I couldn’t just say, in the middle of dad’s lecture about the letters, oh by the way, Josh, do you love me?”

“You went for takeaways.” Sasha reminded her.

Grace groaned. “And you think that was the right time? I’ll have a lemon chicken, beef in oyster sauce, sweet and sour vegetables, two fried rice, eight dim sims and, oh yeah, Josh do you love me? Yeah right Sash.”

“What about the drive? You’re stalling.” Grace snorted at that suggestion. Sasha grinned, “For what it’s worth, I think he does.”

Chapter 16

He drove down to Hamilton on Friday and they went to the cinema. “I was expecting Sasha to be here.” Grace flashed him a speaking look. He laughed.

“She’s gone surfing with her mates this weekend. Whangamata. Feel in need of a chaperone do you?”

Joshua hesitated, “Yes. But the cinema is pretty public, that should keep you safe.” He took her arm, “What would you like to see?”

“I’m not sure.” She closed the door behind her. “Anything romantic on at the moment?”

Joshua groaned. “I suppose science fiction is out?”

Grace shook her head, “No, I can cope with a scifi movie. Though I should warn you I cried at ET.”

“ET?”

Grace nodded, before continuing, “I won’t go to a horror movie.”

“Ok, horror movies are out. What about comedy?”

“Yes. But subtle humour rather than slapstick.”

“Picky.”

“You asked.”

An ordinary date. He bought the tickets, she bought the popcorn. They talked through the ads and then settled to watch a comedy that neither of them was really interested in. But for appearances sake they sat through it, their fingers laced, their eyes on the screen.

Coffee was an automatic next stage. Coffee made, and drunk, Joshua asked if he could stay the night. He asked nervously, she agreed shyly, and fortunately, for both of them, he stayed.

A shaft of light tickled her eyelids until Grace sleepily forced her eyes open. But she was reluctant to wake up. She burrowed deeper, snuggling against the body beside her. A warm male body to cuddle up to. She closed her eyes and drank in the intimacy, reveling in the fact that they had gone past the stage of coyness.

“You keep that up, and you and I are going to be exercising early.” Joshua whispered against her skin.

Grace tipped her head back and turned toward the voice. Firm warm lips teased at her ear lobe before kissing her cheek. His tongue tracing faint circles as he moved his lips along her jawline.

“I like exercising.” She told him impudently. The hand that was stroking up and down her spine moved higher to hold her head whilst he kissed her soundly.

“Me too.” He whispered then rolled her. “Lots of exercise.”

“Perfect.” The smirk in her voice was swallowed as his lips retraced their path back to her face and her parted mouth. That was the end of lucid conversation that early Saturday morning.

It was way past mid-morning when Joshua finally made it into the kitchen. He’d showered and as the kitchen was between the shower and the rest of the house, he had to walk through the kitchen to get back to the bedroom and his clothes. As he sauntered past, with a towel around his hips, Grace couldn’t help voicing the question that had been revisited in her thoughts for days.

“Why exactly did you suggest marriage?” The question had been with her ever since her talk with Sasha. She needed to know. But she wasn’t sure how to ask. And she wasn’t sure when would be a good time? Before sex? During? After? Time to be bold. Enough of this guess work. Now seemed like a good time. They’d been great in bed, they were always great in bed.

It was the last thing Joshua was expecting to be asked, so his response was semi-automatic. “Lots of reasons.” He shrugged not realizing just how important his answer was. What a crazy question to ask after such a fantastic night. It was obvious, surely.

“Like?” She questioned bluntly. She was going to wait this out. She needed to know. Joshua looked her over, frowning in genuine puzzlement. What had brought this on, he wondered. How ready was she for the truth?

He stalled. “Why don’t I get some clothes on. We can sit outside and talk.”

It wasn’t the right answer. He could see it in her face. She turned away from him. Well Sasha was wrong, Grace admitted to herself as she put aside her feelings of loss. If he was already in love with her, he would have told her. She had just given him the perfect opportunity. Especially after last night. He might want to sleep with her, but he didn’t love her. If only he did. But she couldn’t let him see just how much she’d needed the words, not when he wasn’t feeling the way she was. She strove for indifference. “Forget it. I was just curious that’s all.” Her voice sounded calm.

“O.k.,” He grimaced, seeing that he’d lost this round, knowing that she wasn’t going to take note of anything he said now because he’d blown it. “You’re fun, you’re sensitive, compassionate, caring, loyal and stubborn, a great kisser, terrific figure, you’re great to be with, though a touch illogical, you don’t cling, you aren’t after my money, you’re intelligent, you’re attractive and we have good sex.” He rattled off what ever came to mind. He could tell that he had floored her and his

lips twitched as he tried to suppress a smile. “Good enough reasons?” He asked flippantly when she still hadn’t spoken.

“You can buy good sex at the corner of Queen’s and Ruawhine.” She snapped having finally found her voice.

“Oh really?” Both eyebrows rose in teasing union.

“Look, I don’t really know why you were hassling me into marrying you, for all I care you can go marry Lysette.” Now why had she said that? She certainly didn’t want to give him the impression that she was jealous. The way she was going, that would be the only conclusion he would draw. And he’d be right.

He quirked a brow at her, “She happens to be married to Craig.”

“From what I’ve seen and heard so far, that is very short term.” Grace flung at him distastefully. He noticed her eyes suddenly dim, as if a light had been extinguished. A thought that had niggled away at her for along time resurfaced. “Are you still using me to hold her off? ” She finally asked in a hushed voice.

It had never occurred to Joshua. How could he be in love with some one so illogical? He’d given up trying to fathom out the way women’s minds worked, let alone their logic, but up until now he’d always thought he’d been able to at least keep up with the conversation. With Grace he was beginning to wonder.

“No.” He stated emphatically, knowing instinctively that this was an important point to make.

“Really.” She retorted flatly and folded her arms in a defensive move.

Joshua’s eyes narrowed at her lack of trust. Slowly he came toward her. Grace held her ground. She was not going to back away. She squared her shoulders and braced herself. He stopped well inside her personal space.

“Is Lysette around now?” He asked in dangerous tones. His exasperation was visible in his eyes and in his voice.

“No.” Grace murmured quietly, really unsure about the direction or point of this conversation. Why was he exasperated? She was the one who should be. Her chin came up in defiance. “So?” She challenged belligerently.

“So.” He moved nearer and took her into his arms. Then he kissed her. It was a kiss that shattered her. A deep hungry kiss, that gave and took with no half measures, a kiss that delved deep into her soul, while baring his, a kiss that swirled her blood like a raging tornado, a kiss that turned cognitive processes into nonsense. Slowly he stepped away from her, noticed her eyes were still shut, her lips swollen and parted. He hauled her to him and squeezed her tight.

“You are a real piece of work.”

Her eyes snapped open. “What?”

“Fearless and insecure.” He murmured into her ear. Grace pulled back.

“Am not.”

He picked her up, “Are so.” He carried her to the bedroom.

“Am not.”

“Are so.” He whispered in her ear, nibbled lightly and then set her down, “But I think I like that contradiction.”

Two hours later, around mid day, Grace was stacking dishes when he sauntered back into the kitchen, a towel wrapped around his hips. Two showers before the day was even half way through. He smiled. The second shower had been more than necessary, his body had been slick with sweat, and his skin salty to taste.

“Any chance of getting something to eat? I’m starving.”

“If you put some clothes on I might deign to feed you.’

His eyes twinkled as he mischievously moved toward her. He only intended to tease. Grace backed away. The man was insatiable. Grace moved around the table, “This is silly.” She told him.

“Uh-huh.” He agreed and moved a chair out of his way, “Come here woman.” He growled sexily.

“Joshua stop this at once.” Grace flicked a brief look at her exit route.

Perhaps there was still enough energy left in him for another short spell in bed. “Try it.” He challenged.

She did. He caught her. She squealed as he lunged for her.

“I win.’ He said triumphantly. Then without saying a word he picked her up, again, and tipped her over his shoulder. She was bent at the waist and half dangling down his back. He patted her rump. “Back to bed I think.”

“Joshua. We can’t.” She squirmed, “Put me down you great oaf.”

“Oaf.” He simulated outrage and patted her bottom again, with a touch more firmness. As he walked his towel loosened and with both his hands otherwise engaged, the material slowly began to slide off his hips. Grace reached for it. Her fingers touched his skin instead as the towel fell to the floor.

“Feel free to touch.” Joshua told her as he walked toward the bedroom. “You owe me heaps of touching. Time to collect.”

It was mid afternoon when they finally found themselves back in the kitchen. After yet another shower, taken together, with much

bantering, light petting and free kisses, Joshua and Grace were clothed. They jointly raided the larder.

“I am ravenous.”

He groaned, “Not again. I need some time to recuperate.”

She flung him a speaking glance. “I don’t recall carting you off to the bedroom, tossed over my shoulder.” She said in mock disgust. “Maniac.”

“But you love me anyway?” He winked.

She groaned but went about looking for something they could eat.

“Pack some clothes.” He told her just as Grace spotted the Carrot cake.

She took it over to the counter and Joshua followed her. “Why?” She asked as she retrieved the cake and sliced a large portion for Joshua. She placed the wedge on a plate and handed it to him with a fork.

“We’ll spend tonight at my place.” Because he was looking at the large segment she had given him he missed her look of pique.

“Why, thank you for the invitation.” She said sarcastically as she placed a smaller wedge of carrot cake on a plate for her.

Joshua ignored her tone. “It makes sense.” He told her before biting into the moist cake. “Umm, this is good.” He murmured while still munching.

“For whom?” Grace demanded, answering his first comment, before she bit into her slice of cake.

“I told Luke we’d meet him for dinner and drinks.” The casualness was lost on Grace. The man really didn’t know when to start pacifying.

Who did he think he was, trying to organise her social life? “Oh really?” She queried. The temerity. She didn’t give him a chance to answer, “Yes, well, as I said, thanks for the invite, but no thanks. Sleep with them a couple of times and they think they own you.” She ended with a large measure of disparagement.

Her tone and words registered. He frowned, clearly he’d worded things badly. She was prickly. Life was not going to be dull, that was for sure.

“I meant to ask last night.” He tried to appease. Too little, too late.

“I bet.” Grace glared at him with her mouth full. She swallowed then said, “I’m not going out with you this evening.”

“You have other plans?” The attempt to pacify hadn’t lasted long. He decided to take charge of the situation. A bad move.

“No.” She snapped “But that is beside the point.”

“Stop sulking Grace. We’ll leave in an hour. I need to get home and get changed.” Her exasperation was noted and ignored.

“I’m not stopping you.”

“Grace.”

“Look, you chauvinist, you’ve skipped time zones. In this day and age women have choices. You can’t just dictate my weekend to me Joshua. I’m not going anywhere with you. You could have at least had the decency to ask me rather than tell me what you’d decided for my weekend. You are a prime time Neanderthal”

He stood, arms folded across his chest, listening and watching avidly while she ranted.

“Neanderthal?” He smiled as he mulled the word, she glowered, he laughed, then he changed tack, “Grace,” His calm tone should have alerted her. He came and stood beside her and continued quietly, “I thought it would be a good opportunity for us to get to know each other. I know you can cook, you are good in bed and if our children are anything like you, they’ll be stunners.” He kept the smile well hidden and waited. He didn’t have to wait long. Barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen. The words splashed through her mind blazed in highlighted red. She was livid. “And” he continued in his becalming voice, “I love it when you get mad.” He couldn’t help the grin, “Your eyes are magnificent.” He continued as his grin widened and her anger dissipated. “And with you, making up is so much fun.” He chuckled, “Now put the knife down Grace. I was only teasing.” He was grinning at her, backing away as she advanced. She was smiling, but advancing.

“You are incorrigible.” She spluttered, breaking into a grin herself when she was two feet away.

“I wasn’t aiming to dictate. I was going to ask you last night, but you side tracked me. Luke asked if we would make up a foursome. I said yes, provisionally, told him I’d check with you. If it’s a big deal I’ll phone him and say no.” He sounded so amicable and believable.

“And if I said no? You’d take that “Miss Fly-me” I suppose.” Suddenly she felt secure enough to tease.

Joshua laughed at her reference. Grace was jealous. She really was jealous, there was hope for him yet. All he needed to do, was make her see that she cared for him. That what they had was more than sex.

“Depends.” He teased when he noticed she was smiling. She punched his shoulder lightly as she chuckled. He kissed her soundly. They came up for air several seconds later and grinned at each other.

“See, I told you making up was fun.”

“Wake up sleepy head.” A male voice whispered seductively into her ear. Grace twisted away, she was having such a nice dream.

“Not yet.” she said sleepily, snuggling deeper beneath the quilt. He disappeared with her, both heads no longer visible on the pillow.

“I’m cooking you breakfast. What do you want?” He asked as he nibbled lightly on her ear. Slowly Grace turned over, lazily she opened her eyes and stifled a yawn. They had burrowed into the bed and were facing each other, their noses a few scant inches apart.

“What are you offering?” She questioned suggestively.

He groaned, “I need food. You tire me out.” Then he threw the quilt off his side and got off the bed, “I’m cooking breakfast. High cholesterol stuff.” He told her as he tugged on his shorts, “Eggs, bacon, sausages, tomatoes, French toast, cereals, what ever you want.”

“Great.” She replied watching his chest and arm muscles ripple as he stretched like a well fed cat.

“What do you want?” He turned to find her staring at him and his eyes dilated at the look she was giving him. He felt his body react. This was impossible.

“The lot.” She rolled over and left him staring at the back of her head as she pummeled her pillow and cuddled it beneath her head.

He laughed, “How you aren’t the size of a truck I don’t know.” He tucked the quilt more securely round her and took the opportunity to kiss her hair. A mistake. Her neck was so close. His lips nuzzled along her neck, down several vertebrae.

“You sound like mom. She says that too.” She moaned the words as shivers streaked through her. She squirmed as his tongue drew circles around each tiny bone.

“And what do you tell her?” He lifted his mouth away from her overheated skin.

“I used to tell her that I was too busy to put on weight.” She sighed as his lips went back to work.

“Used to?” He’d levered off her and got to his feet.

She turned onto her back and smiled impishly at him, “Now I tell her I am exercising regularly.”

He got back into bed.

Breakfast became brunch. He was in the kitchen when the front door bell rang. Zac was away for the weekend, so Joshua went to answer the door. He’d contemplated letting it ring, in order to allow whoever it was to assume no one was in. But his conscience got the better of him. Muttering to himself he answered the door.

Grace, having heard the bell peal incessantly, eventually got out of bed and padded to the stairs. She was about to yell at Joshua to get the door. She was supposed to be the guest. She couldn’t answer the door, certainly not dressed in the duvet. She was just in time to see him reach the door. Smiling at the apron still tied around his waist, the back of him bare to the hips, where his boxer shorts sat low. She turned to go back up the stairs when she heard him say,

“Lysette? ”

That one word had the power to knock Grace sideways. What was that woman doing here on a Sunday morning, ok, late Sunday morning. Grace was about to find out.

“Darling.” Lysette began by way of introduction and then stepped into the house, “I’ve left Craig.” She announced dramatically and threw herself at Joshua.

Grace almost sank to her knees. She gripped the stair rail tightly to keep upright. Shit. He was going to take her back. No, he couldn't be that stupid. Grace went from a state of anger to panic back to anger again as she listened from her vantage point.

"Don't make the same mistake I did. I shouldn't have used Craig, I thought you'd admit you wanted me. I know you do. We don't have to lie to each other about the way we feel Josh. I'm leaving Craig. Don't marry her."

There was silence. The silence drew Grace. She leaned over the banister, to peek, and was just in time to see Joshua and Lysette break apart. Her whole world came crashing down. It fragmented into tiny shards. Painful shards that pierced her soul. They'd been kissing. For two brief seconds Grace stayed exactly where she was. Rooted in paralysed shock. The thundering sound in her head finally fell silent. The blood that pounded was now a result of sheer rage, not hysteria, not trauma, just unadulterated anger.

She flew up the stairs and fought hard to stop the tears. She flung her clothes on and those she wasn't wearing she threw into the over night bag. She reached for the phone and dialed. She looked a state when she glanced in the mirror, so she took the time to brush her teeth, comb her hair, put on some lipstick, straighten her clothes and to assume an air of nonchalance. The harder she fought to stop herself from crying the angrier she got. So much for Sasha's idea. He wanted Grace alright, but he didn't love her. She was a stop gap measure. A carefully concocted plan to get back that, that, dumb, vain woman. Grace jammed on her boat shoes and yanked up her overnight bag and then stormed down the stairs. As she reached the bottom step she commanded her inner self to take control.

Years of training paid off. Her rapid breathing steadied, her eyes though still red and clearly hostile were no longer shooting poisoned arrows and her mouth was being schooled into saying the minimum.

“I’m off Joshua.” Her voice sounded almost normal, but within herself she felt a temper begin to simmer. “Morning Lysette. Craig not with you?”

He looked nonplussed. Lysette stood quietly. They had been talking in the hallway. Standing a couple of feet apart, but as far as Grace was concerned they were still in each other’s arms.

“Where are you going?” He came toward her, confusion in his eyes.

“Some one ordered a cab?” A voice called through the open door. Grace sent up a silent prayer of thanks and picked up her bag again.

“I did.” Grace flashed a fake smile at Lysette and walked briskly to the door. Lysette moved to stand beside Joshua, a triumphant smirk in her eyes.

“Grace?” Joshua eased Lysette aside.

“Let her go darling.” She suggested smugly.

He ignored her as he walked after Grace.

“Where are you going?” He asked her as the cab driver put her bag in the boot of the taxi. She was already in the car.

“To mum and dad.” She slammed the car door. Joshua jumped aside, the door nearly clipped him.

“But you can’t...”

“Just watch me Josh.” She snapped. Control she’d had difficulty holding onto left her in those few seconds. The driver was in his seat, “Ready to go when you are driver.” He glanced over at Joshua. “Now, thank you driver.” Grace reminded him pointedly. The man put the car into gear and reversed it along the drive way.

Joshua stood, staring in frustration at the disappearing car. Once it had disappeared, his brain went into gear, he raced back into the house.

“Josh...”

He kept going, walking past the woman trying to get his attention. Joshua phoned Craig

“Your wife is here. Collect her.” He snapped when Craig answered the phone. Lysette, who had followed Joshua into the study burst into tears. Joshua ignored her as he continued to listen to the man at the other end. “Fine.” He bit out curtly, “Five minutes.”

Craig arrived less than five minutes later. He was disheveled, and clearly angry.

Lysette jumped to her feet the minute both men had entered the study.

Joshua barked at Lysette to sit down. He’d had enough of the simpering woman, five long minutes of her company. He told her to stop bawling, told Craig to start talking and told them both that he was leaving. “Close the door on your way out. Her car keys are by the phone.” He strode out of the house. Now, to sort out his love life.

In the car, Grace and the taxi driver were holding an animated discussion about two timing men. Or at least Grace was talking and the driver was making all the right noises. The driver was rather relieved when, twenty minutes later, they arrived at her destination. He had a feeling that she was about ready to burst into tears. He never knew how to handle crying women.

Chapter 17

When Ben opened the door to his eldest daughter he found her standing there with tears streaming down her cheeks. She made no effort to hide her anguish.

“Grace? What’s happened love?” He pulled her into the house and to him, holding her close to him.

Angie appeared. She frowned and looking worried came over to her daughter. Grace flew into her mother’s arms.

“I’m an idiot.” she hiccuped. “I can’t believe I threw myself at him.”

“It’s alright, it’s o.k. ” Her mother cooed and soothed, “Come on, come on. That’s enough now, come on Grace.” She kept holding her daughter and murmuring over and over until Grace stopped sobbing. Angie took her through the house onto the back deck and Ben followed. Ben hurriedly pulled out a chair for Grace to sit in.

Grace brushed her tears away with the heels of her hands. “I must look a real sight.” She sniveled as she wiped the remnants of tears away with her finger tips. She did look a sight, her eyes were red, and puffy, her hair was in disarray where her mother had stroked and calmed, and she was sniveling.

“I’ve seen you look better.” Her mother told her.

Ben handed Grace his handkerchief. She blew noisily.

“How can I love a man who has got less intelligence than the whole flea population in New Zealand.” She grimaced “And is even less faithful and honest and ..” She started to cry again.

It was many minutes later that Grace finally calmed down and told her parents what she had stumbled upon.

“Oh darling, I don’t think he’s interested in Lysette.” Angie told her as she kept her arm around Grace’s shoulders.

“So what are you saying? That he goes around kissing any female who turns up for breakfast?”

“Grace. The man loves you.” Ben told her.

“Damn funny way of showing it. Kissing that blonde tramp.” She retorted angrily. She felt miserable, jealous, angry, hurt and so confused. How could he? How could he do that to her? He knew she was upstairs, he knew....

“I mean, I really love him dad. I’ve done everything to show him how much. I love him. Why me? I hate this. I...” She started crying again.

“I don’t know what this is about but I am going to find out.” Ben stated as his daughter once again tried unsuccessfully to stop crying.

“Where are you going?” Grace asked when her father stood up.

“To talk to him. Or give him a swift hard kick up his backside.”

“Hello?” Called a deep male voice which they all recognized instantly.

“Oh good, he’s saved me the drive.”

“I’m not here.” Whispered Grace frantically, flying to her feet, scrubbing at her eyes and wiping her nose, all in one moment.

Too late. He came round the corner.

“Good. You are here.” He actually sounded pleased to see her.

“Of course I’m here you obtuse man.”

Her furious eyes flashed angrily as he came nearer. So she was a sight, but if he thought he could just turn up and pretend, he had another thing coming.

“Grace.” Angie remonstrated, but she too flashed Joshua a speaking glance.

“What do you want?” Grace demanded angrily. She wrapped her arms around her midriff and stood there glaring at him.

It would have been difficult not to notice that she had been crying. He was tempted to just take her in his arms and kiss the evidence of her tears away. But then he remembered what he’d been telling himself all the way over here. If he hadn’t relied on his ability to demonstrate his love for her, to convince her, they wouldn’t be in this mess now. No, he was going to spell things out. Make sure she knew exactly what he felt, and not leave her to figure it out. He had spent months showing her how much he loved her, now he was going to tell her.

“Why were you crying?”

“None of your damn business.”

He raised his eyebrows at her tone. “I want to talk to you. You flew out of the house without any explanation.”

Ben moved toward his wife, “Angie, I’ll take you to golf after all.” He took his wife’s arm and began to walk toward the ranch slider. Angie let herself be led away after she had flashed her husband a questioning glance and received an answer all in the space of a second.

“Dad.” wailed Grace in dismay. Her panic was visible to everyone.

“Be nice to him Grace.” Her father said cheerily.

Joshua stepped onto the deck. As Ben passed Joshua, he stopped to whisper, "Upset her again and you'll need a dentist." Then Ben stepped through the doorway and was gone. Joshua waited until he heard the car pull away. Grace initially waited for Joshua to say something. But when he still hadn't spoken after several seconds her apprehension, mixed with anger, took over.

"I don't have anything to say to you." She told him. She was not going to let him get near. Every time he touched her she thought he had to love her. No-one would touch someone with that much gentleness, that much passion, unless they were in love. But she knew she was wrong. She had seen it with her own eyes. She had been blinkered. But that was in the past. Not any more. No more.

"Oh, I think you do." He replied calmly. "Let's start with why you went racing out of the house?"

Grace looked at him as if he was an imbecile. "You expect me to wait in line while you dish out breakfast kisses I suppose." She asked carelessly sarcastic.

"What are you talking about Grace?" He shook his head at her as if what she'd said made no sense. That made Grace mad.

"Nothing." She stiffened when he moved nearer.

He was going to pretend nothing happened. He probably thought she hadn't seen them kissing. Lying, unfaithful, deceitful.... His next question flattened that theory.

"Does this have anything to do with Lysette kissing me?"

"Oh, there's a difference is there? You weren't kissing her?" She questioned contemptuously. "Funny that, I definitely saw your mouth on hers."

"I didn't kiss her." He stated emphatically as he came closer.

“Yeah, I could tell. You were fighting her off, right?” The glare she threw in his direction stopped him advancing further.

He sighed, “This is ridiculous.” He growled in frustration, turning on his heel. She wasn’t going to listen to anything he said right now, because she was too angry. “When you calm down, we’ll talk.” He jumped down from the deck, and turned to holler, “How I can love such a blind, stubborn, hotheaded, illogical woman is beyond me.” Then he was gone.

Grace stood there with her mouth open in astonishment and her eyes wide in amazement. Love? Did he say love? No, he didn’t. She ran the sentence through her mind over and over. Yes he did. He said he loved her. Or at least she thought it was her. She wasn’t stubborn, nor hotheaded, and she certainly wasn’t blind. Well not anymore. A slow warm smile settled on her lips. It was only as she heard the car wheels crunch on the metal drive way that she snapped out of it. She flew into the house, racing for the telephone. Why was it whenever you needed a car it was never around. Twenty minutes later she was back at his house.

The door was answered by Zac before she could even press the door bell or use the door knocker.

“You’re back.” She said automatically, startled to see him at the house, her trepidation momentarily forgotten as she spoke to Zac.

He threw her a cheeky grin, “Is that going to be a problem?”

She hesitated. Now that she was here, she wasn’t sure what she was going to do. She hadn’t a plan. Indeed she hadn’t been thinking about what she would do, she had just mulled the word ‘love’ over and over until she had arrived at the house. And now that she was here, she was terrified.

“He’s in there.” Zac pointed to the study, “Stormed in a few minutes ago.” Zac had a box of chocolates in his hand. “You two had a row or something?”

“Or something.” She agreed.

“Well, sorry I can’t stay to referee.” He teased, though he didn’t sound in the least bit sorry. “I’m meeting Shelley’s folks for lunch.” He rattled the box of chocolates, grinning cheerfully. “Don’t look so worried. What can he do?” He added when he saw her nervous smile.

“I hope her folks aren’t diabetic.” She took the opportunity to get even.

He looked concerned for a minute, “Grouch.” He growled lightly. “Get in there.” He pushed her toward the study. Grace hesitated, her palms were clammy, her feet rooted to the spot. This had seemed so easy when she was being driven over, but now, to actually get in there and ask him to tell her he loved her once again, this was tough. “Go on Grace.” He urged. “Where’s that gutsy woman I know?”

“Figment of your imagination.” She smiled wanly, then taking a deep breath she opened the door.

“Not now Zac.” Joshua said without even looking away. He stood by the French doors, looking sightlessly out at the garden.

Now that she was in, what should she do? Her courage was beginning to desert her. For most of her life she had taken control, knew what to do and how to deal with situations. But with this man, she was always on the back foot. She didn’t know how to tell him she loved him. She couldn’t just blurt it out, could she? Grace shut the study door and took another step forward.

“I said..” his voice petered away when he turned around and saw Grace standing there. He saw the look of hesitancy, “What do you want?” He questioned quietly, his eyes holding hers.

She squared her shoulders and looked directly into his eyes, “You.” The word was defiant.

“Then come and get me.” He told her as his heart hammered. Grace rushed at him and he hauled her to him. The bear hug was ferocious. “About bloody time.”

“You’re squashing me Joshua.” She breathed.

“I’m about ready to throttle you.” He told her. “Do you know what you do to me? I can’t even think straight when you’re around. Me. I’m the most logical person, that’s how I write such bloody good computer programs, but around you, I can’t even reason properly.” Several minutes later they were sitting on a couch that Grace remembered from her first visit to this room. “She kissed me.” He told her

“From where I was you didn’t seem to be fighting her off.”

“She does nothing for me. She knows.”

“You call that logic?” She squirmed against him. She kissed his jaw line, “Josh, if you ever let her kiss you again....” She threatened.

“Your father will beat me to a pulp.”

“What?”

“He said I’d need a dentist.”

Grace laughed. “Good old dad.” She burrowed closer to Joshua. “Did Craig come and get her?” Grace asked him.

“Yes. He loves her.”

“What do you think will happen to them?”

“That’s up to them.” Joshua told her, “I’m more interested in what happens to us now.”

“What d’you mean?” She turned to face him. There was something in his tone that worried her. He sounded worried. He was worried. She could see it in his green eyes.

“I want to marry you.”

“So?” She frowned at him. Why was he anxious?

He laughed nervously, “So, do you want to marry me?”

“Yes.” She burst out automatically. “What did you think?”

“Think? You don’t mind us making love, but you weren’t too impressed when I asked you to marry me the last time. I wasn’t sure if you just wanted us to go on the way we have been.” He pulled her closer, “I don’t want to just sleep with you Grace. I want to share your life and I want you in my life. I want you to have my children.” He thought she was going to cry. “Don’t cry Grace.”

“You didn’t ask me to marry you last time. You told me. And that was because you thought you’d made an ex-virgin pregnant.” She tried to smile and he kissed her wet eyelids closed.

“I love you Grace. I want to spend the rest of my life showing you how much. Please will you marry me?”

“Hmm, well, that was better put.” She feigned pointed deliberation, and he cuffed her chin, “Yes.” She kissed him over and over, interspersing each kiss with the word yes.

They were married one month later.

Chapter 18

After their ten day honeymoon to Vanuatu, Grace continued to work at the University for the next four weeks. Joshua spent as much time as he could working from the cottage. When he couldn't use his lap top, he returned to the house in Auckland. They were going to have to make some decisions soon. Today he was back at home, he needed his more powerful Mac.

“Joshua?” Angie Carvalho sounded worried.

“Hello Mrs C.” He balanced the phone between his ear and his shoulder as he anticipated having to jot down a message and reached for a scrap of paper.

“Is Grace with you?”

“No.” He chuckled, “She does still work you know.”

“Yes” Angie bit her lip.

“She left a few minutes ago. She had to be at work by nine.”

“Oh. Is she heading for the cottage or going straight to work?”

“Uni I think. Why?”

“I wanted to pass on a message.” Angie began to worry in earnest. The police had told her not to, but her intuition countermanded that.

“What’s wrong?” The urgency was palpable in her voice, Joshua could hear it clearly.

“The police phoned. They actually tried the cottage and Uni. The Uni called us. Apparently he’s escaped.”

“Who?”

“That man who sent her the notes. He was sentenced yesterday and they were moving him to a more long term prison. They’d only just left Hamilton.”

“Shit.” Joshua understood the urgency. “He could be on his way to the cottage, or the university.”

“We don’t know for sure. He could go anywhere. The police think he’ll lie low. He wouldn’t be stupid enough to follow her. But, he could track her down. Ben is on his way to the cottage.”

Joshua swore profusely, then muttered. “I’d better get going.”

“Don’t take any chances.”

“We won’t.” He flicked a look at his watch, she’d been gone half an hour. She’d be about half way to Hamilton by now, “I’ll give you a call, when I reach her, ok?”

“Yes.”

Joshua replaced the phone into the cradle, turned to Zac, who had just walked in and said, “Stay by the phone. If Grace calls, tell her to go to the nearest police station.”

“What’s going on?”

“That bastard escaped.” He explained the situation briefly as he made his way out of the house.

Joshua wasn't sure what he was going to do. He just knew that he had to make sure she was safe. By the time he caught up with her she would no doubt be at work. Her father would have reached the cottage. She would be fine. He kept repeating that as he drove out of Auckland.

Grace had made good time. She reached the University car park early. She doubted whether she could keep commuting. It was getting too hard. For both of them. When Joshua stayed at the cottage, his work suffered, he couldn't access stuff from the cottage. When she stayed at his place, she was forever having to set off at the crack of dawn, and she really wasn't a morning person. Never had been. She stifled a yawn as she turned down Uni lane.

She pulled into the car park, it was deserted bar a few cars. Well, at least there were some perks to an early start. She didn't have to hunt around for a car parking spot. Grace popped the boot of her car and reached for her hand bag on the floor of the passenger side of the car.

She didn't see the man approach. She didn't have a chance to take any evasive action. One minute the car park was deserted, the next a large man was at her door.

"Get out of the car." She was ordered.

Grace dropped her bag and spun around in her seat to see who was screaming at her. She didn't recognize him. That didn't mean anything.

"What?" She stammered as she starred blankly at the man. He didn't repeat his instruction, he simply hauled her by her shoulder and hair, dragging her forcefully out of the car. She screamed.

"Shut the fuck up." He hissed, as she fell onto her knees and her palms when he let go. For a second she remained on all fours. Then she looked at him in shock. A scream lodged in her throat. Sheer terror swamped every single cell, freezing her into immobility.

A car screeched into view. It careered around the car park and came to a halt directly in front of her. Another large man got out. Grace forced herself not to cower.

“That’s the one?” He demanded. Her assailant nodded. “You asked her?”

“What for? It’s her. I know the photo.” What photo thought Grace as she was hauled to her feet.

“Ask her.” The other man ordered.

“What’s your name?”

Grace wondered whether she should tell him. She didn’t have a chance to decide. He slapped her hard across the face. Grace fell back to the ground.

“Tell him, or I’ll let him fuckin beat the shit out of you.”

“Grace Carvalho.” She stated quietly from her prone position on the ground. Once again she was hauled to her feet and shoved against the car.

“Get into the boot.” He ordered. Grace balked. “Get in, or he’ll put you in, bit by friggin bit.”

Gingerly Grace got into the boot of her car. Who were they? What did they want with her?

“Keys?” Asked the man in the other car.

“In the ignition.” He was told.

“Close the boot. Let’s get out of here.”

Grace was in shock. This could not be happening to her. They didn't mean to lock her in the boot of her car. They couldn't. Why was this happening to her? Why? Who were they?

“Keep your head down.” She was told but she doubted whether he cared if she followed his order, for he slammed the boot down. She lay on her side, scrunched into a foetal position, her knees pulled tight to her chest. She could hear them talking. Hear their muffled voices. Then nothing. She heard the other car drive off.

Her heart began to beat more normally. Close. They'd gone. She thought about screaming for help. Surely someone would hear her. If only security were watching this car park camera, they might have seen screen shots of what happened. She prayed someone had seen what had happened. Please come and get me. Please.

Plan B was to wait for people to arrive in the car park. She'd wait until she heard someone close, then she'd start calling for help. No point shouting herself hoarse if they were too far away. Wait, she told herself, wait. Just take it easy, breathe, take it easy.

All her musings were a waste of time when the car ignition signaled at least one of the men was still around. He put the car into gear and backed the car out of the car park. Grace was ready to cry. So much for her plans. Frustration vied with terror. What was going on? Why was she being kidnapped?

Joshua was still about fifteen minutes out of Hamilton, but, by his reckoning Grace should be at her office by now. He punched her number into his mobile. The phone rang for a few seconds before it was answered.

“Grace?” He barked before anyone could say anything.

“Er, Goodmorning, women's studies.” Said the startled female voice.

Shit. Her phone was still through to reception. “Has Dr D'melllo arrived?”

“No, but we are expecting her.” He was told.

“Is that Sheena?” He queried, not certain whether the phone was patched through to the general office or the reception desk.

“Yes.” The voice at the other end replied, “Is that Joshua?”

“Yes. Look, Sheena, she should be there by now. I followed as soon as I got the message.”

“She might have gone home.”

“She said she needed to be there by 9 and she wouldn’t have time to get to the cottage. Her father has gone there in any case.”

“Oh.” Sheena wasn’t sure what to suggest. She was the one who had taken the police message and passed it on. They’d said not to worry. He was unlikely to follow Grace. He wasn’t that stupid.

“I’ll phone Ben. He should be there by now. Could you check with security, her car should be parked on site?” Joshua was hoping she had stopped in town to pick up breakfast, may be. “I’ll call back in a few minutes.

He phoned Ben. She wasn’t at the cottage. Ben had just arrived. She hadn’t been there. There was no sign of her.

“Call the police.” Joshua told Ben. Then he phoned Sheena straight back. The phone was engaged. He tried a few minutes later, just as he was getting into the main drag of Hamilton. The traffic slowed him up. Eventually his call was answered.

“Sheena? Any news?”

“No. Her car isn’t here. But a security guy said he thought he saw her car pull into the car park when he was watching the screens. The car parks are monitored, but the shots are on a cycle. He thinks she

arrived. But her car isn't on any screen now. They are replaying the tapes for that camera."

"Shit." Joshua knew she was in trouble. He could feel it. Hold on Grace. Hold on.

"They are going to call me back."

"I'll get off the phone then. Here's my mobile number" He dictated the number. "Call me."

The traffic was slow. It inched toward the set of traffic lights two hundred metres ahead. Joshua drummed his fingers in agitation. They moved barely ten metres in two minutes. That was the trouble with having one main route into the city. State Highway one caused a bottle neck as it reached the city outskirts. They needed a ring road, at least a by pass or at the very least another main route into the city.

"Joshua." He barked into the mobile. "Sorry Sheena." He apologized as soon as he recognized the voice. "Sitting in this jam is driving me nuts. How can you guys call this a city with only one route in from Auckland?"

Momentarily sidetracked Sheena felt compelled to defend her home town, "There are other routes in, if you know the back roads."

Joshua snorted at that. "Yeah, whatever." He took a calming breath, "What have you found out?"

Sheena knew there was no easy way to tell him. "She's in her car. In the boot."

"What?" His bellow of rage was enough to have Sheena moving the ear piece several inches away from her ear. "Sheena? Sheena, are you there?"

She closed her eyes, took a moment to brace herself and then said “Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“They forced her into the boot, and one drove off in her car.” She couldn’t tell him they had hit Grace, thrown her to the ground, dragged her out.

Joshua was lucky that his car was stationary. He was unable to comprehend what was being said. “They?”

“Two men.” Sheena told him quietly. “Security have contacted the police.”

“I’ll kill the bastard. If he touches one hair on her head I’ll kill him.”

“Security said it wasn’t the same man.” Sheen knew instinctively who Joshua was referring to. “They’ve been given photographs, and it wasn’t him.”

“Probably part of the gang. Whoever helped him break out.” Joshua felt helpless. “I’ll kill him.”

“The police have put out a description of Grace and the car. Can you get to the station?”

“The bloody traffic isn’t moving. I’m stuck in this moronic queue. I don’t think I’m going anywhere, at least not for the next five or ten minutes.” He glanced up at the traffic ahead with barely suppressed fury and frustration, and then he noticed her car coming toward him. It was hers. He was sure. He wasn’t imagining things. He wasn’t. That was her car. It went by.

The traffic in the opposite direction was moving, but not that fast. He glanced in his rear view mirror. Yes, it was her car. “Sheena.” He yelled. “Her car just went past me.” He kept his eyes on the rear view

mirror, “Victoria and Raumati Road intersection.” He unclipped his seat belt, “Get the police.”

Sheena heard the seat belt. She knew he was leaving, “Joshua.”

But Joshua had tossed the mobile onto the seat and swung his legs out of the Jag. He checked the line of cars.

Her car was twenty metres away. It was her car. Wild elation overtook panic, subsumed rationality, and chased away reality. The car behind Joshua hooted. Joshua ignored the man gesturing wildly.

He raced toward her car. The traffic surged. He got within a few feet of the car. Close enough to see two men sitting in the front and one in the back. No sign of Grace. The congestion ahead eased and the car pulled away. Joshua wondered whether to chase after it. Several cars had started hooting. Her car disappeared.

Joshua raced back to his car. The man behind had rolled down his window and was yelling obscenities at Joshua, loudly and clearly.

Joshua took no notice. He jumped into the Jag, didn’t bother to clip his seatbelt, instead he checked the lights for oncoming traffic, seeing none, he spun the car around and took off in the opposite direction. He could hear voices on his mobile.

With one hand he reached for the hands free connections, as he used the other hand to steer the car through the traffic.

“Sheena?”

“Are you alright?”

“They’re heading toward Auckland. There are three men in the car. I think one is him. But I didn’t see Grace.”

“Oh God.” Sheena moaned. The phone was taken from her.

“Joshua, Ben here.”

“I’m tailing them. But I may have lost them, unless they are still in this traffic. Where the hell are the police?”

“On the way.”

“Tell them to alert Huntly and Thames, in case the car heads in either direction.”

“Ok.”

“Ask Sheena if they can turn off the dual carriage way at any point before the Thames-Huntly turnoff?.” He heard Ben talking to Sheena.

“No.”

“Well I haven’t passed them yet. So they are heading out of Hamilton.”

Ben relayed the information. Joshua could hear more voices in the background. “The police are here.” The phone was passed on.

“Mr D’Souza? Sergeant Peters, we met at the station a few months back.”

“I remember.” Joshua kept a watchful eye on the traffic.

“Pull over.”

“What?”

“We are in the air. We will spot them.”

“I can’t just stop.” Joshua heard the sirens approach. Two Police cars veered past him. The traffic stopped moving to allow the cars to pass. Joshua pulled in behind the Police cars. “I’m following the Police.”

“I don’t think that is a good idea.” He was told. “You aren’t trained for pursuit. Leave it to us. You could cause an accident. I’ll tell you as soon as they pull the car over.” He kept his voice calm, knowing that he had to get Joshua to stop.

“I can’t.”

“If we have to get one of our guys to stop to pull you over, that is one less car engaged in tracking those thugs. Pull over.”

“I can’t stop, but I won’t tail gate them.”

“Don’t chase them.” He was advised.

“I won’t.” He took a deep breath, and changed down a gear, slotting into the traffic flow, “Call me.” He flicked the mobile off.

Joshua did not stop following the car, but neither did he speed along in their wake. He did kept track of the Police. The overhead helicopter was also clearly in pursuit. He decided to keep it in his sights. It followed the right fork. The Police cars disappeared out of site as the road began to wind, clinging tightly to the curve and steep incline. The traffic was lighter on the side road.

Joshua followed. The road followed the natural outline of hills. Steadily the curves became tighter, and steeper, as the road wound its way up the steady incline. He noticed that the helicopter was hovering and the wail of the police sirens suddenly ceased. Something was wrong. Why had everything stopped?

Joshua didn’t have to wait long to find out. He rounded a bend, braked hard and skidded to a stop. The two police cars were parked at an angle to the road, their hazard lights on. They were deserted. Joshua

brought the Jag to a stop alongside the police cars, then he raced from his car. He glanced briefly around and heard their voices. They were scaling the side of the hill. He raced over to the steep bank and saw her car. It was crushed. The roof was caved, buckled, mangled.

He must have yelled her name aloud, the four policemen turned at the sound. Joshua slid down the bank, the soil loose, his footing unsure. He followed the path of destruction carved out by the car. It had rolled over a hundred feet, flattening shrubs along its way.

“Stay where you are sir.” He was advised. Joshua ignored the advice. Three police officers continued to descend, one waited for Joshua. The man put a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Just wait here. Wait.” He was told more firmly when Joshua almost pushed past the young man.

Joshua wasn’t listening. He tried to shove the man aside. The man held on. The other three had reached the car. One peered into the remnants of the concave roof. The two others walked around the car. One tapped on the boot. “Dr Carvalho?” Joshua heard the man ask. No response. The policeman tried again. “Dr?” Nothing.

“Grace.” Bellowed Joshua with all his might. The restraining policeman was startled.

“You know her?”

“My wife.” Joshua pushed past the young man and scrambled down the hill, rushing toward the car. “Grace.” He yelled. No response. One policeman was on his radio, requesting ambulances and the fire brigade, he finished by reporting on the situation.

“Three male dead”

By the time Joshua reached him all he caught was the word dead.

“She isn’t dead.” He screamed, and raced toward the boot of the car “Grace.” Joshua hammered on the rear of the car. Nothing.

The four policemen shared speaking looks.

“Sir. Leave this to us.” Stated a calm voice.

“She’s not dead. I’m telling you. She’s not dead. Grace. Grace.” Joshua turned anguished green eyes toward the nearest man, “Can’t you pop the boot?”

The car was too mangled and they were unable to reach the boot release mechanism. “We’ll have to wait. The fire brigade will cut it open.” One of the officers verified the request for an ambulance and fire brigade.

“That’s not good enough.” Joshua told them. He fought to remain calm, rational. Grace needed him. He had to think. “Where are the keys?”

“Keys?”

“To the car?” Joshua’s logical brain was back in gear. “The electrics are probably shot, but the lock looks ok. We need the key.”

One officer moved to the mangled front door, he reached past the body slumped across the seat and slowly extracted the keys from the ignition. He walked toward the boot, wondering whether he should order Joshua away while they opened it. He wasn’t sure whether Joshua would cope.

The boot unlocked easily enough. With a great deal of physical wrenching they were able to pull the boot open.

“Grace.” Joshua whispered as he took in the blood around her head. Blood that was smeared down her face. “Grace.” She was quietly still. Deathly still. He began to reach into the boot, but one man restrained him while another reached forward to touch her. They all held their breath.

“She has a pulse.” He said with elation, “Radio.” The man ordered, “faint pulse.” He grinned in relief at Joshua. “She’s alive. Where the hell is that ambulance?”

They all heard the wail of the sirens getting closer. Joshua reached into the mangled car. His fingers touched her cheek, brushed gently at the blood matted hair that lay against her face. “Grace. Hang in there sweetheart. Hang in there.” He willed her. Grace remained unconscious.

The medics took her vital signs, stabilized her by hooking her up to all sorts of drips and organized her removal from the car onto a stretcher, then directed the team of carriers and arranged the steady climb back to the road side, the fire crew helped. Joshua staggered up the hill.

Joshua clambered into the ambulance automatically. He wasn’t going to leave her side, not for one second. Not ever. Then he remembered his car. He handed his keys to the nearest policeman.

“Can you park it off the road?”

“I’ll take it to the station.” He was told. Joshua nodded absently at the man. They could have told him they would push it over the side and he wouldn’t have cared.

“Thanks.” He nodded, keeping his eyes on Grace lying on the stretcher, “Thanks.”

The man nodded. “She’ll make it.” He added comfortingly.

Joshua nodded as tears trickled down his cheek.

The ambulance doors were shut firmly.

Grace awoke to a splitting headache. Her eyes gradually drifted open. She peered into the dimly lit room, wondering if she was in a hotel. It

felt pretty plush. She turned her head and moaned aloud, in an instance Joshua raised his head off the bed and looked straight at her.

“Grace?” He whispered gently. She could hear relief in his voice.

“My head hurts.”

Joshua released her fingers, reached past her and pressed on a bell. “Ok hon.” He whispered. “They’ll give you something in a second.”

“I’m in hospital.” She finally deduced.

“Yes.”

Slowly she lifted her arm, it felt as if someone had squeezed and wrenched it. Pain hammered. “Ohhh.” She groaned as her body throbbed into awareness.

“Lie still Grace.”

“I thought I was going to die.” She muttered as everything came back with shocking vividness. Joshua squeezed her hand gently, brushed at her hair and leaned in close.

“Grace.”

The doors were pushed open and two nurses and a doctor came rushing in.

“She’s awake.”

The doctor smiled at Grace. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve rolled around in the boot of a car.” She replied feebly.

He smiled. "Came through pretty well." She was told, even though her body was telling her otherwise. "Let's double check." He came closer, "Perhaps you'd like to tell her family she's awake." He suggested to Joshua. "I won't be long."

Joshua squeezed her hand, brushed his lips lightly against her cheek, smiled tearfully and then left.

"I feel like I've got bruises on my bruises." She mumbled as she fought off a wave of pain and the queasiness it brought with it.

"Hmm, you probably have. How's the one on the side of your head feel?"

"They all feel awful."

"That was a pretty nasty crack you took." He took note of her vital signs, peered into her eyes. "But on the whole you came through remarkably intact."

"Intact?"

"No broken bones. Given the state of the car, I'd expected fractures at the very least."

"I'd braced myself when they started throwing the car around. I thought I was going to get car sick. I hate not being able to see where I'm going, it makes me car sick. Have to sit in the front." She stifled the hysterical giggle, as pain thrummed through her. Grace took a shallow breath, "It felt like we were climbing, or at least rounding corners. I thought I'd wedged myself in quite nicely, so I wasn't being slammed around. But I wasn't expecting the car to roll. I could hear the police sirens. I knew they were close. I knew those idiots would get reckless. I just knew."

He made a note on her file as he continued to listen to her steady voice. She was a strong woman.

“I felt us loose traction as we rounded a bend. I knew. I just knew that was it. I remember flying off the floor and hitting the lid of the boot. Then landing back on the floor. I must have been knocked out then, because I don’t remember how many times we rolled.”

“I’d say the crack on your head probably knocked you unconscious. Lots of bruises, but no breaks. That in itself is astonishing. Though your bruises are spectacular.” He grinned at her. She smiled. Then he asked her a few more questions, checked her eyesight, her ears, her pulse. “Do you feel nauseous?”

She started to shake her head, but the pain stopped that movement instantly. “Not really,” she finally muttered, “Just ache, throb, with these spasms when I forget not to move and then feel queasy.

Joshua returned just as the doctor completed writing some notes in her file.

“How is she?”

“Remarkably unscathed, all things considered. I’ll prescribe something for the pain, but we don’t want to mask it totally.” The doctor turned, “You need to rest.” He stated pointedly.

Grace smiled weakly at Joshua. Joshua nodded. “I’ll stay until her prescription arrives.”

The doctor nodded, then looked at Joshua “You should get some rest too.” Then he left.

“You look awful.” Grace told Joshua the minute the doctor was out of the room.

“I love you.” He reached for her hand, clasped her fingers in his hands and pressed kisses gently onto each fingertip as his eyes held hers.

A nurse entered the room. “Here we go, something for the pain.”

Chapter 19

Two months later Grace stopped working at the University. They had decided to live in Auckland. She had her head pillowed on his chest and a leg thrown across his thighs. It was a familiar state. “Grace?” He mumbled into her hair as he feathered his fingers through the silky strands. Her reply was distracted. He smiled. “You didn’t get mad.” She tipped her head back to look up at him. “When you saw Lysette in my arms.” He reminded. “You didn’t get mad.”

“Mmm.” She settled back down again, rubbing her cheek against his chest.

“How come?”

“What?” She murmured nuzzling contentedly, burying her nose in the light sprinkling of chest hair.

“You didn’t get angry?”

“You love me.” Her lips moved to within a hair’s breath of his distended nipples.

“That’s it?”

“I trust you.” She muttered into his neck as she inched up his body, “Should I have got mad?”

“No.” He nuzzled her forehead.

“Why did she ask you to dance?”

“How did you know she asked me?”

She grinned impishly. “I didn’t until now.”

His chest shook as he laughed softly, the action started tiny tremors in her own body. “She thanked me.”

Grace lifted her head off his chest, “What for?”

“Telling her to work things out with Craig.”

“Mmm, he’s a nice guy.”

“Oh he is, is he?”

“Yup. Very nice. And thoughtful.”

“That’s why you were having a very quiet chat with him in the corner, was it?” He tweaked her hair. “Because he is a thoughtful, nice guy?” She shook her head. “No?” He rolled her onto her back and pinned her arms above her head. His eyes waiting for her reply. “I think you’d better clarify the situation.” He was half sprawled over her and their bodies were mutually stimulating the other to rapid arousal.

Grace giggled. “Why?”

“Because I’m your husband.” He growled with pseudo menace.

“I’m pregnant.” She announced and watched the teasing lights, in the green depths of his eyes, disappear. They were replaced with shock, followed by awe, then complete delight.

He suddenly went still, then he gingerly levered himself off her. “You’re pregnant?” She nodded. “We’re pregnant.” It was a whisper

of confirmation. She grinned at him. “Pregnant.” He whooped loudly, then pulled her into his arms and smothered her in a fierce bear hug before releasing the embrace sufficiently to give her a sound kiss. “Thank you.” He crushed her to him again. “I’m going to be a dad.”

He began kissing her, questioning her, squeezing her, randomly inter-spaced as he got all the details.

“I’m three months. I thought with the accident and everything that my periods were out of kilter, but in reality I was pregnant!”

His hand went to her waist and he caressed her tenderly, “Our baby in there. A honeymoon baby. God, we are efficient.”

“I know.” She smiled and reached for his head. Pulling him down toward her. A tough baby. A baby who’d been on the ride of their young life, two months ago. “I thought we could tell mom and dad tomorrow. I was itching to tell you all night.”

“I shouldn’t have pushed you to organise this party.” A great party. “At your age you should be taking things easy.”

“At my age?” she cuffed his chin gently. “I’m not past it yet.”

He frowned, “How do you feel? Are you ok?”

“I’m fine.” She giggled. “Now don’t you want to know what Craig and I were talking about?”

“No, not at the moment. You always try and change the subject to deflect a conversation.” He whispered as his fingers began to touch her intimately, gently roving past her navel. “You love me, that’s all I need to know.” He kissed her navel, before saying in tones of awe, “We are going to have a baby.”

“We were discussing a joint wedding anniversary party for our parents,” she gasped, as his fingers moved lower, “aaahh.” She explained breathlessly. “It’s a surprise.”

“A baby.” He murmured. “Our baby.” His lips met hers as his hand stroked her stomach.

“Josh you weren’t listening.”

“Yes, I was. A party. Anniversary party.” He reiterated just before he kissed her. “I’m going to be a father.” Then he groaned as her words registered. “You are not organising anything, not in your condition.”

Grace winked. “Yes I am.” She feathered kisses over his face, smiling as she went.

“Grace.” He took her face in his hands. “Let’s discuss this logically.”

She rolled on top of him, smiling happily. “Tomorrow.”