

## Chapter 1

It crashed. For a fleeting second Sasha sat motionless, her brow creased in a malevolent frown while her thoughts raced silently through a host of scenarios. She jabbed the switch at the back of the machine and willed it to restart. Nothing. She leaned over the machine and found the tiny little indent for an emergency boot up. Nothing. She counted to five then muttered a few obscenities. When that failed, she did what she considered any normal person would have done under the circumstances. She walloped the side of the computer with the flat of her hand and waited expectantly.

Nothing happened. The screen remained totally blank. Not a whir, not a bleep, nothing.

“Stupid bloody machine.” Sasha mumbled in frustration and automatically reached, past the clutter on her desk, for the phone. The handset was buried beneath a pile of loose-leaf papers which promptly slid to the floor as her fingers delved past. Sasha rolled her eyes, swore furiously through clenched teeth, frowned even harder and watched the papers settle into total chaos.

The once ordered pile of coded results now lay in complete disarray. She let the papers lie, though she was tempted to kick them into further chaos. Just before she succumbed to the impulse, a fleeting thought registered. She hoped she'd paginated the sheets, without page numbers there would be no way to make sense of the jumble on the floor. She ignored that problem and reached for the phone. One crisis at a time. She was only human, one crisis at a time.

What a day, and it had only just started, Sasha mused, as she used her index finger to jab vehemently at four digits for the internal call. If the force used to jab the keys could travel down the phone line the person who answered the call would have been knocked out cold after the first digit. The phone rang for several seconds.

Sasha simmered and waited, glaring at the pool of papers on the floor. She used her foot to nudge the papers into a loose stack. Then the phone was answered and she forgot all about tidying the pile on the floor.

“You said you fixed it.” She stormed as soon as the phone was answered and she’d recognised the voice at the other end. No preamble, no niceties, just bluntness.

Henry recognised her voice instantly, though the tone was new to him. “I did.” He replied calmly. Totally unfazed. As a computer technician at a University, he was used to dealing with irate academics. Though this was the first time he’d had to deal with an irate Sasha. Usually she was calm, rational, and pleasant.

“It’s stuffed!” Sasha wasn’t the diplomatic sort. Though once again, as far as Henry was concerned, she always had been. Sasha glowered at her machine while she said, “Totally dead.”

“Impossible.” Henry stated in his usual cool-headed imperturbable tone. The only thing more composed than Henry was his computer.

“Henry!” Sasha hollered in exasperation. At the other end Henry moved the earpiece away from his ear for a fraction of a second, he stared at it as if it had just bitten him. Sasha never yelled. Never. But she was now. Tentatively he propped the phone against his ear. She was still talking. Hollering. “Take my word for it! I’m sitting here glaring at a screen that is totally blank, nothing on it, nada, nil, zero, total zilch.” The words were fired rapidly into the mouthpiece. “I am not imagining it!” She continued to scowl at the blank computer screen, willing it to flicker back into life. Not surprisingly, it didn’t. “It is not a figment of my over excited imagination. It is simply stuffed!” She frowned at the screen. That was the problem with machines, they didn’t react to emotion. You couldn’t fix them with a scowl, coerce them with a stare or persuade them with a smile. Damn things! But the technicians, well they were another matter altogether. “And you will be too if you don’t...”

“Sasha” Henry interrupted her. He was smiling, she could hear it in his voice. It was all right for him to smile. He wasn’t sitting in her place, glaring at a dead computer and goodness knew how much damage to the software. He didn’t have three zillion things to do on the machine. He didn’t have a computer that thought vacation time included it.

Exasperated, frustrated and totally pissed off, Sasha listened as Henry continued talking to her in his usual unflappable way.

“There’s nothing wrong with the machine. I fixed it, I checked it, it’s....”

“Stuffed!” She rudely inserted, “Just like you will be if you don’t get your brain into gear and get over here to re-fix it!” With the threat issued, she blithely hung up the phone. Well that was slightly better than hurling the machine out of the window!

Slowly her lips began to curl upward and she began to smile. Although, if Henry couldn’t fix her computer, she would only smile if she was allowed to take a rock hammer to it. The temper evaporated as she imagined the sight and reaction that would create. No doubt she would attract a crowd as she pulverised the useless machine. What was the point of having a machine that switched off whenever it felt like it? She wondered if she could sell tickets when she took her hammer to the computer. That way she’d raise enough funds to buy a newer model.

Poor Henry. She had never been mad with Henry before. And she doubted whether she would ever get, and stay, mad at Henry. It simply wasn’t possible. He was so laid back, at least he kept his shadow company. But she could pretend to get mad, and it felt good to exercise some of the antipathy she felt for the computer! Henry was a computer boffin, so the next best thing to getting mad at a machine, was getting mad at the computer support. In this case poor Henry.

She knew he'd be right over, because he was Henry, reliable as clockwork. Her temper evaporated as quickly as it had surfaced. She was back on an even keel. She would no doubt be seeing Henry in less than two minutes.

Henry, a man in his late forties, liked her. He didn't fancy her, he just liked her. Liked the way she got on with things, the way she pulled her weight, the way she teased him and the way she took the time to talk with him. She normally didn't behave like an abominable whizz kid, which by all accounts she was. He liked her because she took the time to chat about Star Trek, took the time to pass on new urls to web sites she thought he'd like, took the time, normally, to be nice to him. Most people were only nice to him when they wanted something. And when Sasha had first arrived at the University and he'd been assigned as her tech support, he'd expected her to be like the others. Having seen her at a distance on her induction day, he'd reassessed. He didn't expect her to be like the others, he expected her to be worse. She was beautiful and he assumed with that beauty came a personality used to getting its own way. However, he'd soon had to reassess. That first view had been misleading. She'd worn a navy suit, white blouse, navy mid heeled shoes, navy handbag. He'd only ever seen her that coordinated on that occasion. From the first day she started working in the lab and he'd been sent over to set up her machine, she'd worn scruffy trainers, and ill fitting, ill matched surfing shorts and baggy t-shirt. Her mid length hair was in a ponytail and her lab coat was baggy and stained. He'd arrived to load software and run through safety checks on her machine, and instead of leaving him to it like all the others, she had sat and chatted. Not about her, but about him. What was it like working here? What did he enjoy doing here? He'd had a Star Trek t-shirt on, so she'd asked about that. And having spent almost all afternoon in her office, fixing her machine while she talked to him he had come to realise that while other people saw a vogue model when they looked at her, she didn't care about her appearance at all. After that first

afternoon she had stopped by his office almost once a week, just to talk. For the first few occasions he had talked to her waiting for her to add the ‘Oh by the way could you do whatever for me by yesterday’ request, but it had never come. She simply came, talked for a short time, and then headed off to her office.

That’s why he had fixed her machine so quickly when she had reported it defective. Because she didn’t expect it.

A week ago, it had suddenly turned once legible script into a demented version of hieroglyphics. Henry had fixed it in a day. Most of her colleagues were waiting for him to sort out their technology related problems. And he’d get onto them, in order of priority. Eventually. But Sasha was different. Most of her colleagues didn’t take the time to talk to him, to rib him gently or discuss science fiction. Sasha did. And she did it for no other reason than friendship.

For over a year, whenever she was passing by his office, she’d drop in for a quick chat, even if she didn’t have a computer job for him to do. Sometimes she’d drag him off for coffee, or sometimes she’d just stop and talk for a few minutes. Or if she’d stumbled upon a new Internet site that she thought he’d like, she’d email him the address. Usually he already had it. But that wasn’t the point. He liked the idea that she was interested enough to take the time. She made him feel important. Her colleagues on the other hand only stopped to talk with him if they needed something done. Usually something that needed to be done yesterday.

Sasha’s presence also gave his ego a boost. For a man who had always been called a nerd, having a beautiful, intelligent, charming woman talk with him without reducing him to a mass of babbling jelly, gave him confidence. It also gave him status. Everyone in the workshop noticed that the nerd talked to Sasha. And everyone could see that Sasha was glossy-magazine-cover-beautiful. Since Sasha had arrived at the Uni, his

social circle had widened. Not by much, but sufficiently for him to notice. Sufficiently for Cara, Prof. Helmeworth's secretary to notice him. Everybody noticed Sasha, and as he was often in her company, it wasn't long before people noticed him. He was close to plucking up the courage to ask Cara out. Sasha kept encouraging him to do it. But he was still not sure whether he could handle the knock back. He thought Cara liked him, and Sasha thought Cara liked him.

Still smiling, Sasha flicked the switch on her computer. She'd have to apologise for being so rude. Poor Henry. He was probably wondering if she'd hit herself on the head with a rock hammer! How else would he account for her uncommon outburst? Sasha waited, watching the blank screen. Still nothing. Good. Having summoned Henry, she'd hate for it to be just a temporary blip! That would be too embarrassing for words, especially after the way she'd just spoken to him. The poor man was probably trying to figure out whether she'd had a lobotomy or a twin tucked away all this time.

“Sasha!” Sam, her postgraduate assistant yelled ominously from the laboratory as Sasha continued to mull over Henry's shock. Sam sounded frantic. That puzzled Sasha. Sam was usually mellow and totally unflappable.

Sasha stepped over the pile of papers that had fallen to the floor, grabbed her lab coat, left her office and entered the adjacent laboratory. She was surprised to see the tall lanky young man racing around the lab, hitting switches and swearing profusely. He was normally such a cool-headed, moderate, man. A perfect foil for Sasha. Though they did share a penchant for untidiness. The clutter of the laboratory testified to that fact.

He mouthed a litany of swear words as he raced around two benches. The remnants of a smile left Sasha's lips. Something was very wrong. Seriously wrong if Sam was in such a flap. What was the matter with today, was it Friday the 13th or something?

As she started to shrug into her lab coat she intuitively glanced across at the cathode ray oscilloscope. Nothing. The CRO screen was blank. It should have had a faint line tracing its way across the green grid-faced screen. Instead it was black. No screen, no blip, nothing. This was dire.

“What’s going on?” She questioned Sam automatically as she flew into the room.

They had problems. Severe problems.

Instinctively she pulled on her once white lab coat, ramming her arms through the sleeves. The coat remained unbuttoned as she tapped frantically at three switches on the CRO. Nothing. She twiddled two knobs, waiting for it to respond. It didn’t. She rotated the small machine to glance at the cable protruding from its rear metal casing. Everything looked intact. Nothing had come unplugged, accidentally disconnected. No it all looked intact, secure, and in theory in working order. She pushed her sleeves up her forearms, a sure sign of her agitation, and then looked around her.

“Power’s gone down.” Sam told her as he continued to race across the room.

“What?” Sasha dashed over to a wall that housed a large switch. It was an automatic reaction. The switch provided access to their back up power generator. “Have you hit the back up?” She queried just before she pounded the blue switch with the force of a sledgehammer. Nothing happened. Sasha could see the CRO screen from where she stood, and it was still resolutely blank. Of course, she should have realised that Sam would have already tried the back up. He was an intelligent man that’s why she’d given him the postgraduate scholarship to work on her project.

“Failed.” Sam reported as his head disappeared into a laboratory cupboard at floor level. An array of items flew out as he discarded them in a hurry and without a single thought to having to tidy up later.

“Shit!” Regardless of the information Sam had given her, she hammered the blue button with her flat palm several more times. “It can’t fail! That’s why it’s the bloody back up!” She shouted to no one in particular. Sasha’s language was a consequence of her working environment. If she was going to fit in with the men who worked in material science, she had to walk, talk and work like them. She continued her litany of profanities. Still nothing happened. The CRO remained blank. Her mind raced through possible causes to this dilemma.

“Check the....”

“I am!” Sam answered before she had a chance to complete the sentence. “I need a torch.” He found the torch and let the cupboard door slam back into place. “The basement will be pitch dark.” The three tins of paint, two hammers, one screwdriver, and an assortment of rocks remained strewn on the floor where he had discarded them. So much for safety.

“Kia Ora!” Called Henry good naturedly and totally oblivious to the panic. He ambled into the lab with his customary leisurely gait. Sam rushed past him in demented haste.

“Hi.” Sam replied automatically as he raced by. Henry raised his eyebrows in silent question. “So where’s the fire?” Henry called as Sam ran down the corridor at breakneck speed. “You shouldn’t be running in the lab!” Henry added cheekily as he strolled further into the lab, moving toward Sasha who was fiddling distractedly with two cables.

A few months ago he would never have considered talking so much. He would have listened quietly to the complaints about the computers and then taken the machines away for a service with little more than collection details. He’d never have had the confidence to make small chat, let alone back chat. But Sasha had changed that. He wasn’t sure why she’d taken an interest in him, but was just pleased she had. Initially he’d been wary, thinking she was trying to charm him into working



for her. But he soon realised that she just stopped to chat, like a friend. Never actually wanting anything, just passing some time with him. They became friends. An oddball combination.

He knew of Grace, from when she used to work at the University, but he'd never met Briar. Though he felt as if he knew her, having listened to Sasha's stories about her. As an only child he was fascinated by the way they interacted. He liked hearing about her family. She liked teasing him. Gently, almost as if she was trying to coax him out of his shell. And he was emerging slowly. A year ago he would never have dreamed of teasing a woman who looked like the women on magazine covers. But with Sasha, he felt he could. He smiled benevolently at her.

"So it's not just me you have scurrying about!" Henry remarked with a hint of a smile as he sauntered into the room also known as the materials laboratory.

"I haven't got time for this Henry!" Sasha warned without even glancing up at the man. There was so much at stake here. So many hours of hard, tedious work. The mere thought of repairing the damage caused by any time delay in restoring power was enough to cause a headache to take root.

"Oh?" Henry glanced around in amusement as his eyes took stock of the shambles. "May I remind you, that you summoned me." His eyebrows rose as he took in the state of the floor, noting the discarded items Sam had left lying around and frowning at the mess. "I was threatened with death to get here, and now I'm threatened when I arrive!" Bushy eyebrows quirked at her, but she didn't see the action, she was too busy concentrating on her immediate task.

Her computer could wait. Whatever hadn't been saved on that machine was unlikely to be recovered, so it wasn't worth her while worrying about it right now. But the experiment was not so easy to deal with. There were too

many worrying possibilities that a power failure could create. Too, too many.

“This isn’t like you Sasha.” Henry mumbled half-heartedly when she still hadn’t responded to his lighthearted teasing. Sasha always teased back. He had gotten used to that. A beautiful woman flirting was great. “Not like you at all.” He muttered dejectedly as he propped his shoulder against a doorframe and contemplated her preoccupied frame of mind.

Sasha’s laboratory was very different to Henry’s workspace. Both were considered laboratories. This one was cluttered. Benches were stacked with metal frames, old CROs, new computers attached to cables leading to experiments in fume cupboards. Disorder. So unlike his own pristine white lab. But then, what did one expect from material scientists? These guys reveled in grit! Except, Sam and Sasha seemed to revel in chaotic grit. Their laboratory was never tidy. He wondered how they got through the annual safety audit.

“We’ve lost power.” Sasha informed him rapidly as she flicked off two switches. She sounded disgruntled and worried. He could understand why. Power kept this place going. No doubt experiments and long-term investigations were at risk. Quite possibly all her research. He understood her reaction, because he knew how hard she worked and he knew how crucial her experiment was to her research grant. So he made allowances for her behaviour.

“So it isn’t the machine.” Henry sounded relieved, and accusing, but his tone was wasted on Sasha. She was classified as gifted, and could usually manage to juggle several ideas or conversations at one time. But not today. Not now. Now she was totally preoccupied by the experiments at stake.

“Yeah. Sorry. I don’t think it’s the computer. I haven’t checked it. But.” Sasha tailed off as she unclipped several tiny rectangular glass plates and scrutinised the fine coat of pale yellow powder. “There’s been a power failure.”

She explained offhandedly as she continued to study the glass slide. If only she could see to their atomic level. She frowned and began to unclip an assortment of cables. She discarded the clips by tossing them across the bench in the general direction of a large metal tin. They missed their mark and landed a few inches away, joining more discarded paraphernalia.

“The rest of the Uni still has power. My workshop was fine.” Henry frowned as he considered that bit of information. “It’s localised.” He finally informed her in abstracted tones, as he speculated on her disclosure. He removed his round-rimmed glasses and began to wipe them with the edge of his pristine white t-shirt. “I walked through A block, there were lights on in there too.” Logically, he worked through her claim that there was a power failure. He placed his glasses back on and peered at her.

“Well there aren’t any in here.” She demonstrated, with just a faint trace of irritation, as she deftly flicked at the light switch. Nothing happened. “See!”

“Funny that.” Henry said thoughtfully, then shrugged as he agreed with her assertion. There wasn’t any electricity in this lab that was for sure. Perhaps he should offer to help. Though he doubted whether there was anything he could do. Their fields of endeavor were so different. But he had to offer. “Anything I can do?”

“Not really much any of us can do. Sam is seeing to the back up generator.” Sasha unplugged another glass plate and discarded it with a murmured curse. “Why the hell they call it a back up when it doesn’t fucking back up is beyond me!” She stopped suddenly for a brief second, as if she’d received sudden divine inspiration and, to Henry’s amusement, she raced across the room, pushed aside a small stand of rock-laden samples and reached behind several cables. Henry watched her with a bemused calmness. She was acting strange today.

Sasha stretched for the main power switch and flicked it off. The last thing Sasha needed was the luminescent

plates to take another power surge when power came back on. Best to just disconnect totally.

Henry scowled but said nothing as she continued to mutter a stream of obscenities. This was so unlike her. His Sasha was light and jovial, friendly and laid back. He'd got used to her ripe language, but she was usually easy going. This Sasha was hyper. Emotional and distracted. He thought she looked ready to cry, then angry, then she'd look mutinous, then intent, that was followed by a bout of activity as she raced to do something. Henry had noticed the pattern.

Sasha was ready to scream in frustration as she realised that the longer this went on, the greater the possibility of her research being scratched totally. A quick look at Henry nipped the scream in the bud. The poor man was totally poleaxed by her language and antics. Poor chap.

Sasha was jostling with her thoughts, her research was in serious jeopardy. There would be contamination to deal with, plus delocalised atoms, quite possibly this was the end of the whole experiment. They were so close. So close to collecting their final results. It could not fail. Not now.

Henry was still waiting. She turned to him as she said, "Sorry. What did you say?"

"Do you want me to help?"

Sasha started to shake her head, and even managed a rueful smile then she changed her mind. "Actually Henry, find out what's happened to this block." She shrugged apologetically at him, "Sorry about dragging you over here. And sorry about the language."

He shook his head to wave aside her apology, "I'll see what's going on." He offered sympathetically as he recognised the old Sasha.

"And sorry about snapping at you." She was on a penitent roll. He held up his hand. "Thanks." She smiled absently, her mind already on the task ahead. It was only

as he went to push the lab's swing door open that she recalled her earlier behaviour when she'd summoned him, "Oh Henry, er, sorry about yelling down the phone earlier too." So much for gloating. "Sorry. I was out of line." She repeated sincerely, proffering a pallid smile.

He shrugged her apology aside and bestowed her with a smile of his own. "Good to know you aren't perfect!"

"Yeah, right!" She grinned. "I'll give you a call if the computer is still down, ok?"

He nodded, and then he was gone.

Sasha peered at the nearest glass plate intently. She studied the fine coating. It looked fine, but then it would, wouldn't it? On the macro level it would look perfect, it was just those millions of tiny atoms that she had to worry about! Wondering if they had shifted and created any gaps or fractures. Damn. Why couldn't she research large-scale tectonic plate movement, why settle for miniscule totally unobservable packets of quanta?

This was going to set them back. Mentally she ran through the possible options her research project now faced. There were a few options open. But they'd have to work fast. And they needed a few miracles.

They needed to check the plates, see which should be discarded, reconnect....

The phone rang and it interrupted the downward spiral of her thoughts as she worked through the next phase. Sasha raced into her office to answer it.

"The back up is ready to go, I think you should switch....."

"Done it!" She replied, having anticipated Sam's request, "Hit the switch."

"O.k, see you in a sec." The phone line went dead. A second later her computer blinked back to life. It started the opening sequence again. She keyed in her password and waited for it to give her access to her files. Hopefully she hadn't lost much. She normally saved her work as

she went along. So she should only have lost a few lines, maybe a paragraph at the most.

The window opened to reveal her work. Sasha sighed in relief, one less thing to worry about.

The phone rang again and Sasha reached for it automatically as she continued to scan her screen. It was Henry.

“The contractors turned it off.” He told her without any preamble. “Just met one of them. He said the Science Faculty was notified weeks back about the cut. Something to do with the next stage of development. They’ve got to put a cable down in...”

“What?” Sasha forgot all about reading the work on her computer. “No one told me.”

“Just passing on the message.” Henry replied calmly before asking, “You want help up there?”

Sasha’s mind was on other things. “No, no,” She murmured absently, “and thanks Henry. Thanks.”

“Give me a yell if you need help.”

“Yeah, ok. Thanks.” She said vaguely. Sasha hung up the phone and glowered at her machine for all of two seconds then, biting her lower lip in thoughtful concentration she headed for her filing cabinet. Vehemently she yanked it open and retrieved a folder. She recollected receiving a memo about a power cut, but that wasn’t due for several weeks. Not unless there had been another memo sent. Surely she would have remembered and it would be noted in her desk diary. She would have a reminder of something that important written down. She wasn’t stupid, untidy maybe, but not stupid. And not making a note of something as important as a scheduled power cut would be simple stupidity.

Sasha sifted through the slips of paper. Hopefully she had filed it correctly. Hopefully she hadn’t binned it. No, she hadn’t, and there was just one memo about the power cut, no further memos. She checked the folder again. Then

she looked at the date stated. The power cut wasn't due to happen for another twenty days. Twenty days! Twenty days! She flipped open her desk diary with suppressed fury and she scanned the entries. She double-checked it. There weren't any notes about a date change. She checked her calendar diary on the computer. Nothing noted in there either. Twenty days! Sasha was furious and getting angrier by the minute. With barely restrained rage she picked up the phone and punched in four numbers.

The Science faculty departmental secretary answered on the third ring.

"Amy? Sasha here." There was no prelude, in typical Sasha fashion she went straight to the point, except this time there was just a hint of ire in her tone. "Do me a favour and check the notice board for me. See if there's a notice about a power cut to B block scheduled for today."

"Don't think so." Amy responded automatically in her usual smiling voice. "But I'll go and see. Hang on a sec." Then she was gone. Sasha could hear the metal heels of Amy's shoes clicking on the tiled floor as she left her desk to walk to the large wall that faced it. Amy was short and she compensated for her height by wearing the spikiest, highest heels she could find. Minimum three inches. How the woman didn't pitch forward defied Sasha's understanding of physics.

As she waited for Amy to return Sasha put the memos back into the folder and replaced the folder in the filing cabinet. A sure sign that she was furious. Far too much control. Far too tidy.

A couple of minutes later Amy was back on the phone.

"No, no power cut for today. There's one scheduled for later this month, the twenty second to be precise." She told Sasha calmly, "The memo's dated six weeks ago. What's the problem?"

“It’s off!” Sasha fumed, her temper well and truly unleashed. Heads would roll! The indignation that had been bubbling away ignited.

“What?” Queried the surprised secretary.

“The bloody idiots have cut power to B block.” Sasha pinched the bridge of her nose, as she fought to hold onto her temper and think about what she should do next. “Look, I’ve got to go. Thanks for checking it for me.”

“No bother.” Amy replied as they both hung up.

Sasha raced out of her lab. “Be back in a sec!” She told Sam as she flashed past him in the corridor, “Get checking on the plates, o.k.?” She called to him just before she ran down the first flight of stairs, taking them two at a time.

Sam nodded, but Sasha wasn’t looking and the fire doors had swung shut anyway. Sam continued briskly toward the lab, his mind already on the procedure he’d have to set up. Why is it that everything happens at the same time?

His wife was expecting a baby, any day now, and this morning she said she felt uncomfortable. Uncomfortable? What did that mean? Nothing major she’d reassured him as she’d pushed him out of the door. Nonetheless he would rather be at home with her. He had come in with the intention of asking Sasha for the day off, he knew she’d let him go. But he had come in because he just wanted to check on his experiment. Just take a reading and then go.

It wasn’t as if there was much to do. Nothing really, just do a random sample check, fill in the record sheet and leave. He knew that Sasha was hoping to catch up on her paper work. She had an article due to be submitted soon and she had a proposal to write to get their funding renewed for next year. The last thing he’d expected was this calamity. It was probably the last thing she was expecting too. He wondered where she had raced off to.



If they had switched off power they could damn well switch it back on and Sasha was going to make sure that they did it now. After she'd dealt with the idiot who had shut her down in the first place. Power mad maniacs.

## Chapter 2

The palm of Sasha's right hand hit the portacabin door with such force that the door swung savagely, reverberated as it thudded against the wall, then swung forward again with continued momentum. She palmed it off. Her outstretched arm holding it at bay.

Eight pairs of stunned male eyes focused on her. No one moved and silence descended for all of two seconds. Riveted to the spot they watched the drama unfold.

"Right!" Sasha hollered loudly. "Which idiot is the boss?" She planted her hands on her hips and turned to bestow each and everyone with a measured look.

Not exactly the most tactful way to ask for information. It resulted in none being provided.

That simply incensed her further. She glared at each man in turn. Her stormy countenance not lost on any of them, but still no one moved. None of the large men appeared to have taken a breath since she'd entered! They stood transfixed, their eyes wide and mouths slightly agape with shock. It would have been comical if she'd stopped to take stock of their astonishment. She was too angry to notice their bewilderment.

"I said, " deliberately quiet, totally unaware of the real effect she was having on them, "who's in charge?" She had their undivided attention, but what she wanted was information.

"Winiata." A young voice finally squeaked, as the remaining seven burly men watched her in total silence. They still hadn't moved. Not one inch, not one blink.

Sasha scanned them again, derision in her jet black eyes. "And where is he?" She demanded with just the right amount of quiet insolence, banked down anger and the hint of a threat, to have them staring at her apprehensively.

They shifted uneasily. None of them were less than six feet and none of them weighed less than thirteen stone, but each one of them was in shock. It wasn't often a drop dead gorgeous woman came looking for the boss. Dazed and mesmerised they simply stared at her. A few even looked concerned. This was one quietly furious woman standing in front of them. And experience had taught them never to mess with angry women. Especially the quiet ones.

“Well?” She asked again, ice lacing the word, as she once again succumbed to the escalating anger. Jamming her hands on her hips, pushing the lab coat open to reveal a large baggy lurid t-shirt and equally loud surfie shorts, she adopted a no-nonsense stance. No mean feat given the outrageous attire she had on.

“He’s not here.” The same brave voice squeaked.

“Oh how convenient!” She snarled softly, her voice dripping sarcasm. Then she focused on the young man who had volunteered the information. “Where is he?” She demanded, her jet black eyes pinning the man to the spot.

He squirmed. Literally. She glared and advanced. Not far, just a bare inch or two. It was enough.

“In the last cabin.” She was quickly informed.

“Thanks.” She threw the word at him disdainfully, pivoted and marched out in two furious strides. The door remained open.

The men relaxed visibly, their shoulders slumped, their breathing resumed, their eyes remained puzzled. Collectively they started talking.

“Shit! She was steamed!”

“Bloody hell, what got into her?”

“She’s gonna kill him!”

“Thought they were quiet types!”

“What the fuck has Harve done?”

“She was gorgeous!”

Seven pairs of eyes turned to stare at the young man who had volunteered that last statement. Then they laughed loudly and began teasing him about his taste in women. Amiably, they returned to their snacks and coffee, rehashing the unexpected visit and the best facets of their beautiful, if a touch irate, visitor.

In the mean time Sasha had reached the end portacabin. Once again she pushed the door open. Once again it moved with unrestrained force, only this time it slammed against a metal filing cabinet before swinging back toward her.

The door sent the potted African violet that had been sitting on the filing cabinet, hurtling toward a blonde woman sitting at a nearby desk. Instinctively, the blonde dived to reach the plant. She caught it. Just. There was mud on her silk shirtsleeve, mud on her desk and mud on her paperwork.

Sasha noticed the results of her handiwork but she was too provoked to apologise. She scanned the rest of the room in the time it took the woman to catch the potted plant. Beside the blonde woman, who Sasha had erroneously nicknamed -I'm too sexy for this job- was a large blonde man perched on the edge of the desk.

A large metal nameplate was placed squarely on the desk. The name read Harve Winiata.

She had found her man. A pulverised man by the time she'd finished with him. The fact that he was a giant seemed to make not the slightest difference. It simply failed to register that he was at least twice her size. What did register was that he didn't look like a Harve. He didn't look like a Winiata either. But that's what the nameplate on his desk said. Probably fourth generation Maori, she thought as she advanced.

He had been perched on the front edge of the desk but as she'd stormed in and the plant had hurtled through the air, he got to his feet. The shock he'd felt, and she had

seen, when she entered the portacabin, had been replaced by a cool facade of calm, a degree of challenge and eyes full of indignation held in check.

The startled cobalt blue eyes settled into open objection, but he said nothing verbally. His eyes were doing all the talking. And she could read the message, she just chose not to take any notice.

“You can’t barge in here!” Ms ‘I’m-too-sexy-for-this-job’ snapped at Sasha, as she carried the potted plant to safety. Another filing cabinet. She placed the African violet gently on the cabinet well away from the door and then glared at Sasha.

Sasha flicked the woman a measured glance that clearly told the blonde that she didn’t care about her opinion on any subject. Then she focused on the giant. David and Goliath she thought, or in her case, Sasha and Winiata. And like David, she was going to hammer this guy.

“I suggest you apologise.” The Nordic blonde giant finally informed her in a deceptively passive voice. The blonde woman was dusting ineffectually at the mud on her sleeve. Sasha kept her eyes on the man. So, he was the boss, used to issuing orders. He had that stamp of authority. Yes he was definitely the boss. She heard it in his voice. Calm authority.

It was wasted on Sasha. She took a deep breath as she prepared to launch a vitriolic attack. She had plenty to say to him and she wanted to do it in one breath! Her eyes remained trained on him. Although his deep blue eyes clearly showed anger, his voice was cool, almost as unruffled as Henry. Almost. There was, nonetheless, an impression of implacability underlying the instruction he’d just issued.

“And I suggest you listen, you incompetent jerk!” Sasha informed him audaciously, deliberately ignoring the command in his voice and the anger in his eyes.

The giant looked momentarily bewildered. The effect was fleeting, as fury replaced the dazed look. His eyes

grew thunderous. Blue sapphires blistered into lightning strikes, then sparked ominously as he fought for and regained control. Clearly, being challenged was a first for him.

“Look,..” He began to say in a tone of voice that Sasha was sure had quelled many in the past. It failed with her. She was beyond intimidation. Her thoughts were clouded by the devastation that surrounded the remnants of her work. Work that was crucial to her had no doubt been lost. And as far as she could see, it was all because this man thought he was omnipotent. Anger resurged, she was beyond warning. Beyond caution.

“No, you look. You despot!” Sasha advanced on him, “You can’t just switch off power when you feel like it, you autocratic numskull!” She jabbed a pointed finger into his hard shoulder as she spoke, he turned his head and looked pointedly at her hand before his eyes returned to her face and her livid jet black eyes. Sasha refused to move her finger off his body, even though his eyes had conveyed the order loud and clear. The blue gaze went glacial.

Sasha was too angry to be unnerved by his words, his stature or his gestures. Again momentary astonishment registered as he realised that his arctic countenance was having no effect. Sasha saw his confusion just before he turned away. He backed away, moving around the table.

“I don’t know what you’re rambling on about but...” He began to challenge her in a furious, but still controlled voice.

He was about to find out in no uncertain terms what she was ‘rambling on about.’ Sasha was intent on getting her own anger and frustration addressed. The more she thought about the careless way her work had been destroyed the more emotional she became. And more articulate, in a surfer cum material scientist sort of way.

“You, you toad-faced, tight-assed, paper shuffling, conceited imbecile, have switched off power to our

building.” She ranted, menace in her very stance, “Twenty days too bloody early!” There was no mistaking her fury.

If her words weren’t conveying her thoughts, the jet black eyes were certainly leaving him in no doubt. This woman was incensed. Possibly mad, but unambiguously furious.

“Too bad you destroyed my work.” She berated him in full-unleashed temper, “I’m going to have your guts for garters!” She threatened as she advanced. “That way, the next time you want to play God, you might think twice, you pompous lowlife despot!”

Sasha pivoted before the giant could string a sentence together. By the time he had the words formed Sasha had stormed out of the portacabin. She left a silence in her wake as two people struggled to keep everything in perspective and come to terms with the challenge her storm had left.

It took several seconds for James to think coherently. Then outrage pulsed through him and wrath swamped every single cell in his body. He couldn’t remember being this livid. The woman was stark raving mad! And she’d backed him behind the desk, advancing on him like a maniac! Backed him round the desk! Him!

Self-protection, he assured his hurt pride, there was no way to figure out her intentions. He should have tossed her out. He could have, she wasn’t very big, tall maybe, but quite skinny. He should have picked her up by the seat of those ludicrous shorts and tossed her out. She was a truly demented, wrongly opinionated, incongruously dressed, shrew.

And she’d backed him round a bloody desk! That really rankled.

“Who the hell was that harridan?” He finally asked in tones that would have frozen an oasis in the desert. James kept his furious eyes trained on the door of the

portacabin, almost as if he was expecting Sasha to storm back in.

Students these days simply didn't know the meaning of the word respect. But by the time he finished with her she would. It would be engraved in reverse on her forehead, so that when she looked in a mirror every morning she would be reminded. Respect.

"I don't know." Casey replied hesitantly, coming out of shock. She was mortified. She'd never seen or heard anyone talk to James like that. Never. He was a cordial man. She doubted whether anyone had ever spoken to him in that tone of voice. They'd have to be either very stupid or incredibly drunk.

James frowned, then glowered as his mind sifted through the insults Sasha had hurled at him. What a vocabulary. When he found out who that mad woman was, he was going to have her committed. For good.

"What power cut was she ranting about?" He asked quietly. Too quiet. His anger restrained for the time being, he began to string together some of the information she had hurled at him. That absurd female had just bought herself a whole heap of trouble. More than she could possibly imagine, let alone deal with. But first he needed to deal with her accusations.

"We cut power to B block, the material science lab." Casey said calmly, "And we informed them weeks back." She added quickly when she saw James frown. The frown disappeared.

"You have proof of that?" His eyes narrowed on her.

"Yes, of course. I have a copy of the letter we sent the head of department and his acknowledgement."

"Find them!" James ordered as he got his simmering anger under control.

That little science firebomb had pressed self detonate. Just who the hell did she think she was? Coming in here, slamming in here, ranting like a deranged virago, flinging



insults, backing him around a desk. He'd see to it that she received a reprimand, no student should be allowed to get away with behaviour like that. Why wasn't she on vacation anyway?

### Chapter 3

Sasha had reached Professor Harper's office in the time it took Casey to find and hand the memo to James. Though calmer, Sasha was still furious, and now, as things began to return to normal, she was a trifle embarrassed by the scene she had just staged. She knew she had overreacted, but the thought of all that lost work, the needless waste, the time, the energy..... her anger began to resurface.

Sasha spoke to the head of department's secretary, "Is he busy?" She asked Sheena, the grey haired lady, "It's kind of an emergency." Sasha pushed as she grappled to keep her fury in perspective.

Sheena smiled accommodatingly, she recognised urgency. "I think he's free. I'll just check."

While Sasha waited for the secretary to return she thought about how she could have better handled that meeting with Winiata. She should have taken time to calm down, gone in there quietly, and told him she was going to sue for damages to her work. Ranting and raving did nothing, bar release the tension and frustration she felt. No, she should have handled that meeting more productively.

A few seconds later, Sasha was in her head of department's office. The room was large. Two walls were shelved from floor to ceiling and the shelves were bulging with books. In one corner of the room was a work desk, toward the front of the room was a large round Rimu table with four chairs and closer to the window was his computer. Apart from the shelves of material, the room was relatively uncluttered. On his desk were some folders, two photographs and the phone. It was a tidy office, so unlike Sasha's.

Her head of department had the appearance of a typical male scientist; bespectacled, grey haired and a trifle eccentric. But he was fair. Sasha liked him.

Sasha took the chair he indicated and began explaining the situation even before she was comfortable. She related the events and presented her folded memo.

“Look.” She stood up agitatedly to hand him the folded A4 sheet. “It says the twenty-second of August, that’s twenty days from now.” She folded her arms across her chest as she watched him scan the memo. He was nodding sagely. Sasha continued, “Amy checked the notice board too.” She was picking up steam as the ramifications of the power cut surfaced once more. “I want that man’s butt kicked from here to Antarctica! And I want to be wearing hobnailed boots when I do it!” Her jet black eyes flashed as her frustration resurfaced as anger. “Either that, or he forks out wads of cash to compensate my project.”

Professor Harper’s bushy white eyebrows rose in silent question, but he also smiled gently in understanding. Sasha was one of his youngest lecturers, but she was also one of the most gifted researchers he had ever managed to persuade to work in his department. Her publications record was a testament to her credibility within the science community.

“Did you use the back up generator?”

“Sam tried.” She said in resigned despondency, “But it failed. Although Sam’s just fixed it!”

Professor Harper grimaced. He could hear the distress in her voice. “Have you lost much?” He retook his seat, his eyes pensive as he bridged his fingers. This had the makings of a research calamity. He knew her funding was dependent on the success of this small-scale pilot trial. He also knew they were near to completion. He doubted whether her funds would stretch to re-embarking on the experiment from scratch.

“Difficult to say just yet. I’d say a fair bit!” The thought made Sasha desperate and furious. “If we do manage to connect it up, I am going to attach the leads to that man’s balls!”

Professor Harper's eyes widened but he hid a smile. He could understand her frustration and he had long since got used to Sasha's bluntness. He had known exactly what he'd be getting when he had head hunted this young woman. Bluntness, honesty and straight talking. He liked that. That and her research record. She was good. Good enough to have three Universities offer her tenured lectureships before she had completed her post doc. He knew she had chosen this University because of family ties and her association with the area. It was her home ground.

"In the mean time, I'd better get back and help Sam." She stuffed her hands into her white lab coat, looking sad, deflated and dejected. Before she reached the door, she turned, sighed and said with genuine sincerity, "Sorry about the language!" She added, almost as an after thought, "I think it comes from working with guys all the time!"

Professor Harper smiled sympathetically, "That was tame. You should hear some of our students when they fail!"

Sasha sighed wanly just before she left the room and shut the door. For a few milliseconds she wallowed in self-pity, her shoulders hunched, her head bowed. Then she cast a fleeting woeful look at his secretary who smiled regretfully in return.

Sheena watched Sasha go, smiling in bemusement at the odd combination of clothing Sasha was wearing. It never failed to amuse Sheena, how such a clever young woman could never co-ordinate her wardrobe. Sasha obviously had no dress sense what so ever.

Sasha walked out of the room and raced down the corridor. B block was deserted. The only people, from this department, working during this holiday break were Sasha and Sam. But, if the power cut had destroyed their experiment, they would be taking an enforced holiday. Funding for the project was short term and she doubted whether the Grants committee would be too pleased to

hear that she needed more time and more funds. Damn! They had been so close to finishing.

Sasha pushed open the fire door and strode purposefully along the corridor. Well, she mused quietly, the construction company would just have to front up for the funds. She'd sue them! For every last cent of her project. Feeling slightly better, she entered her laboratory and saw Sam hard at work.

Like her, he was wearing trainers, blue shorts and a T-shirt, over which he had a white but stained lab coat. Unlike her, his clothes coordinated. At least his shorts and t-shirt made some attempt to compliment each other.

"I got started." Sam told her matter of factly as she came into the darkened lab. He hadn't bothered to turn on the lights. Sasha hit the switches automatically as she walked past them. The laboratory was immediately flooded with fluorescent lighting.

"Great." Sasha enthused robotically, "Connect up the CRO and start checking the plates." She rummaged in her pocket for the memo, then she crushed it angrily and tossed it into the waste paper bin as she walked past it. The crushed sheet hit the side of the bin and rolled along the floor. She stooped to pick it up and toss it back into the bin. Nothing was going right today, nothing! "We'll need to check our dead plate rate."

Sam frowned at her solemn grimace and quickly headed for the cathode ray oscilloscope, leads and crocodile clips. Sasha delved into her handbag, extracted two paracetamols from their foil covers and popped them into her mouth, swallowing them dry.

"So what's the story?" He asked as he dumped the equipment on the wooden workbench. Using his forearm he pushed some of the other equipment out of the way. He moved two clamp stands and eased the oscilloscope toward the socket. There was barely room to sit the small television size screen on the bench top. He plugged it in.

“I don’t know what the story is!” She said vehemently as she cleared more paraphernalia off the bench to make room for the glass plates. “Incompetent jerks! The idiot cut off power twenty days early and he didn’t bother to tell us.” She glowered ferociously at the machines. “Let’s just say that I had a few things to say to the imbecile.”

“Ah!” Sam said knowingly, a smile touching his eyes, “You kicked butt eh?” His lips quirked as he imagined her reaction.

Sasha’s temper evaporated as quickly as it had arrived. She grinned in remembrance, “Yup, and it was prime butt! Cute. I was a bit over the top.” She owned up and her grin widened, “You should have seen his face!” She told Sam with a rueful smile, as she placed a stack of small glass plates on the bench in front of Sam, “This great big gorgeous blue eyed spunk of a man being taken to task by a dainty little thing like me!” She winked facetiously at Sam. Sam snorted. Sasha could not be described as dainty by anyone, unless they had a superb imagination or incredibly poor eyesight. She was tall, and willowy, nowhere near diminutive. Her humour restored, Sasha continued to explain “You should have heard my language. I didn’t think I knew when to use such words! I didn’t even stop to think. I probably was a touch overboard.” Instinctively, she set about connecting up plates, hooking up the CRO to the glass slides. “And he was a hunk! I mean a real hunk. A bit too beefy for my taste, but gorgeous nevertheless. Eyes the same colour as hydrated copper sulphate crystals.” Sam chuckled. Only a materials scientist would draw comparisons with minerals. Sasha flicked a switch on the CRO and connected up two leads as she continued to recount the experience. “Mind you, there was this well built blonde in attendance too! His secretary.” Her tone insinuated the secretary did more than the filing. Sasha looked over the top of the CRO to find Sam still grinning as she rattled on, “Just goes to show, the man really was dud up here!” She tapped her temple with her index finger. “All brawn and no brain!”

Sam laughed. He'd been working for Sasha for almost eighteen months, from their stint down in Dunedin up to her move here, and he had enjoyed every minute of it. She was fun, had the most amazing ideas, was quick to share praise and give credit where it was due, but she didn't suffer fools gladly. He'd never been on the receiving end of her temper, which he admitted he'd never seen, but she'd told him about it.

When he'd applied for the post, she'd asked him how he'd cope if she threw a tantrum. He said he'd laugh or duck! That was enough for Sasha.

Over the last few months Sam had seen what she could do with a silent glance and he pitied the foreman she'd taken to task. The guy was probably squirming in a corner somewhere, trying to pick up the pieces and get his shattered ego together. Poor guy. Sam had never seen her tear a strip off anyone, but he could imagine her doing it, because Sasha could sear with a single look. The poor guy was probably suffering from multiple burns.

Having vented her anger Sasha had just as quickly returned to her normal even keel. As her family knew, when Sasha lost her temper, she really lost it, but it never lasted long. And thankfully, her temper very rarely surfaced.

The phone rang and Sasha, being nearest, ambled over to her office. "He was cute!" She drawled as she reached for the phone.

"Hell, I hope that isn't Raewyn!" Sam muttered in a panic. Raewyn was Sam's wife.

"Knowing my luck..." Sasha teased as she placed the earpiece against her ear, grinning at his look of utter dread. "Sasha Carvalho speaking."

She shook her head at Sam as she listened to the voice at the other end. It wasn't Raewyn. Heaving a sigh of relief, Sam returned to the task at hand. Colour returned to his face. He cleared more bench space and continued to plug in leads. He flicked switches and rotated dials

until a faint green line blipped across the screen. He adjusted the line until it was a smooth thread, just as he wanted, just as it had been not more than half an hour ago. Then he began to hook up tiny glass plates coated in a fine cream powder film, attaching the crocodile clips to set points on the glass plate.

In the meantime Sasha's grin had slowly dissolved into a scowl. Pensively Sasha replaced the phone, she picked up her bag and turned to leave.

"That was Harper. He wants to see me in his office, now." She emphasised the last word.

Sam picked up on her tone. "Serious stuff." He stated rather than questioned. Sasha nodded absentmindedly, her mind rehashing the conversation. Prof Harper had sounded rather formal, as if he had an unpleasant task ahead and as if he had someone with him. He hadn't said much, just summoned her over to his office. Now.

"Sure sounded like it." Her brows furrowed as she left the lab. Once more Sasha made her way to her Head of Department's office. On this occasion she took her time. She'd been ordered over.

That worried her. Being summoned to his office. It was a first. But her mind didn't stay with that thought. She was mentally trying to work out what percentage of plates needed to be intact for the experiment to still be valid and reliable. The response rate would have to be good, or they would have to start all over again.

Sheena seemed somewhat sheepish when Sasha came in. "Prof Harper said to show you straight in. They're expecting you". Sheena muttered a rather hurried "Sorry" just before she ushered Sasha into the room. Sasha didn't have time to dwell on the apology, nor the fact that the secretary had said 'they'. But as Sasha walked into the office she saw two men in the room.

Prof. Harper and the blonde giant, Winiata. No wonder she'd been ordered over. No doubt he had complained about her behaviour. That was to be expected, she



admitted to herself, given her hostility and her remarks. She probably owed him an apology for her behaviour. She should have handled the situation with more decorum and tact. None of those thoughts prevented her from glaring belligerently at Winiata! As soon as she recognised the spurt of reckless behaviour and the futility of her hostility she turned to face her head of department. Her body language was still hostile but she hoped that if she didn't look at the blonde giant she would manage to hold onto her temper.

James took that moment to look her over. He'd been too incensed and indignant the last time he'd seen her to really take stock of her.

This time he took note of her jet-black hair. It was pulled into a loose ponytail, but strands had escaped. It had the appearance of haste, as if she'd quickly dragged her hair into a ponytail, without much thought as to its tidiness. She wore no makeup and her skin was flawless. He took in the golden brown skin, heart shaped face, ebony dark eyes, high cheekbones, full lips. Yes, he conceded reluctantly, she could pass as pretty. Nearer gorgeous a tiny voice nagged him. He frowned.

She was not his type. Definitely not his type. Too aggressive for a start. Too mouthy. Too volatile. And absolutely no dress sense! The woman was a walking fashion disaster.

She wore a very loud fluorescent t-shirt, which made no attempt to match the equally loud motif swirled shorts. She was sockless, and her trainers were shabby. The lab coat hanging open was stained and had several small holes. She looked a mess. A beautiful mess, the same small voice nagged. He frowned again.

How could he have been intimidated by this wreck? He shook his head in disbelief. How could she be a lecturer? What kind of an example was she setting? How old was she anyway?

In the time it took for her to arrive, having been summoned by Prof Harper, James had tried to deduce her age. Four year degree, at least three years for the doctorate, a couple of years for her post doc, if she started when she was eighteen, she'd have to be at least twenty seven, he glanced at her again. He shook his head in skepticism, she looked no more than eighteen and she behaved like a tantrum throwing two year old with a vocabulary from a sleazy bar!

The Prof told him that she was a member of his staff! Staff? The woman looked like a psychotic student. A demented underage student at that.

Sasha tried to calm down and remember that she was supposed to be a lecturer at this University and not a three year old on their first day at kindergarten. And she tried to remember that she had been recklessly rude. Therefore in all good conscience she should apologise for her behaviour. Sasha knew that. She was just trying to find a way to say the words without her feeling as if she was swallowing rusty nails.

“Is he here to apologise?” Sasha asked the Prof in a strained voice, but didn't give him an opportunity to answer, “Because I also want....”

The blonde giant snorted as he interrupted sanguinely, “I'm here to receive an apology.” He threw her a derogatory look, his eyes openly insulting, his lips curled in a whisper of a sneer. James made sure he sounded insolent. It was the top to toe scrutiny he subjected her to that had her reacting instantly.

“In your dreams!” Sasha snapped bluntly, as she shoved her hands into the pockets of her white lab coat. She thought she might just use them to wipe that smug expression off his face. “If you want to play Boss you deal with the flack!” She flung at him rashly.

He had ruined her work because he couldn't be bothered to follow the instructions he had initially dispatched.

“Dr Carvalho!” Prof Harper cut in quickly, sensing a degeneration in the difficult meeting he intended to chair. Both antagonists seemed to have no inclination to meet half way. He could understand Sasha’s frustration, but he was also now aware of where the fault lay. Things were going to be difficult.

Prof Harper indicated for Sasha to take a seat. She did. But her eyes never left those of the blue eyed blonde man. She was sure he intended to rile her. They both began to display the behaviour of sulky children. She read the surly message conveyed by his eyes. Clearly rebuking. She glared. He smirked and cocked an eyebrow in a show of deliberate challenge. She pursed her lips but said nothing.

The temerity of the man, Sasha seethed. Her mind raced. Logic began to seep through her anger.

There was something wrong with this scenario, Sasha acknowledged to her inner chaotic thoughts. She should be the one mocking him, in anticipation of the pay out. He should be quaking. He was at fault. She could sue him. She would sue him if her work went down the toilet.

Yet, here he was smirking at her. He was the one sneering, baiting her, unquestionably at ease. For a man who was about to be hauled over the coals, he looked remarkably calm. Too nonchalant. Too sure. Too calm.

Something was definitely wrong.

She didn’t have to wait long to hear the bad news.

“I’m afraid there has been a mistake.” Prof Harper stated baldly as he noticed the silence was simply allowing them to continue baiting each other.

“Yes, I know!” Sasha, never one to wait her turn, and goaded by the arrogance of the man watching her, launched into speech with the rashness that seemed to characterise her behaviour today. Impudent and undaunted she lashed out, “He made it!” She flicked him one of her supercilious looks. He smiled at that shred of

infantile behaviour. More of a smirk than a smile. More of an arctic smirk. The nagging thought returned to haunt Sasha: there was something wrong, desperately wrong.

Sasha decided she had better hold onto her tongue and let Prof Harper finish what he had started to say. Her smartalec comments were forever getting her into trouble at home, this was not the time to start delivering them at work. She blamed the blonde giant. He was getting to her. Though she couldn't fathom out why. She'd never been this audacious and headstrong at work.

"I'm sorry." She apologised quickly, holding up both hands in a gesture of apology and compliance, as she turned to look at her superior. "I won't interrupt again." Sasha tucked an errant lock of hair behind her ear. That drew her attention to the fact that she probably looked a mess, while that man looked immaculate.

The blonde giant laughed, but there was no amusement in the tenor. Sasha threw him a warning glower but said nothing. She returned her attention to her head of department. Perhaps if she didn't look at her antagonist she wouldn't get riled. But he was irritating her. Him and the feeling that this whole scene was faulty made her frown. She caught her lower lip between her teeth. Something was off kilter. But what? She began to revisit the scenario.

Power to her lab had been cut. The cut was twenty days too early. The idiot beside her was responsible. She had told him he was responsible and she had reported him. It was all so simple. So why did she still have this nagging feeling that something was seriously wrong? And that she was at fault?

"Sasha," Prof Harper began once again, his voice soothing, his mind anticipating the next few minutes. "I think you ought to look at this." Prof Harper reached over toward her and handed her a sheet of paper. Sasha took it, her eyes flicking to Prof Harper in concern before she looked at the memo. She began to read it slowly and carefully.

It was the original letter. A letter from the Lonergan Construction company addressed to Prof Harper and it was dated six weeks ago. It informed him of a power cut. For the 2nd. That was today.

Today!

Sasha's eyes widened in dismay and alarm. She checked again, yes it was definitely for today. The date was emblazoned on her brain. She knew today's date, and this letter had it.

"The mistake was ours." Prof Harper admitted gently when he saw her puzzled expression.

Sasha's stunned eyes flew from the memo to meet apologetic grey eyes. "Ours?" She asked in bafflement. "But my memo.." She trailed off lamely not handling the situation too well.

This could not be happening. Not now. Not here. Not with him. No! Not after all she'd said. What was today? April fools day? Oh hell! The world tilted and Sasha wanted to jump off. This was not the way things should be going. Not now. Not here. Not with him!

"The original Lonergan letter was sent to the typing pool," Harper continued to explain slowly, seeing the dawning comprehension appear before he had completed his explanation, "the typist must have hit the number two twice. Instead of the second, we ended up with a memo going out to everyone in the department indicating a power cut for the twenty second." He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose before saying. "We made a mistake."

Sasha closed her eyes as she recalled the last hour. Colour drained from her face when she remembered the things she had said, the names she'd called him. It was too late to retrieve them. Far too late. And she had blazed in here, arrogantly sure that she was in the right and the blonde giant was in trouble. How quickly the world spins!

She sighed in total mortification and peeked a look at the man beside her. The giant in the corner was still smirking. No wonder.

She had made a total ass of herself. Good one Sasha! She knew she'd have to apologise. But it didn't make it easy. She knew she was in the wrong.

She collected her thoughts and began to construct an apology but before she could string her sentence together, Prof Harper decided to tell her how the situation now stood, "I know you were rather distressed earlier on, and I fully understand." He hesitated, looking expectantly at the other man in the room. But the other man kept his eyes firmly trained on Sasha. There was going to be no give there. "I have tried to explain the situation, clarify the reason for your unusual burst of temper. I know how circumspect you usually are." Prof Harper sighed as if the task ahead was going to be difficult, "but, we have received a complaint from Mr Lonergan."

Lonergan? Sasha's mind tested the name, it sounded familiar. Then she remembered the logo on the trucks, the cabins, the equipment, the letter. Lonergan was the construction company and clearly the name of the owner.

Sasha's eyes snapped open wide and she glared at the blonde giant. She wouldn't have pegged him as a snitch, but it hadn't taken Winiata long to squeal to his boss. Wasn't he man enough to deal with one angry woman? She conveniently forgot the fact that not so long ago she too had gone to her boss to complain. But she had visited Winiata first! And look where that had got her, a tiny voice nagged.

Sasha glowered belligerently at the blonde man, before turning her back on him in a show of utter contempt. She faced her head of department. "I'm so sorry." She offered, genuinely contrite. "I was upset. No excuse. I know."

She felt a total washout as the adrenalin rush abandoned her and the headache she'd been trying to ward off

returned with a vengeance. The back of her neck tensed and anxiety took over.

Today was just an unmitigated disaster. Calamity after calamity, and it wasn't even mid-day yet. She had yet to apologise and she still had a project to recover.

Sasha shrugged, knowing that there was more to come, "So now what?" She asked despondently.

"That rather depends." Prof Harper stated sadly, flicking a surreptitious look at the man who had sat quietly to his left. A man who appeared to be waiting and watching Sasha with a detachment that bordered on the antagonistic.

"On what?" She frowned as she wished once more that she'd stayed in bed today. If only she was blessed with her older sisters' character. Grace could stay calm in the most trying of situations. She had the patience of Job and she took into account every possibility before reacting. If only she was as cool-headed as Grace or for that matter, as reserved as her other sister, Briar. Instead she was the only one in her family with a tendency to act first and ask questions later. So why, oh why, saddle her with a temper too?

"On whether Mr Lonergan will accept your apology." Prof Harper explained gently as Sasha continued to quietly devise a way out of the appalling mess she had created and propagated.

Sasha returned her attention to the blonde giant, "You want me to apologise to your boss?" She issued the words with the faintest hint of rancour and a trace of acrimony. Her tone almost insinuated that he was a vindictive, petty, wimp of a man. Though she did try very hard not to let all her exasperation show, a fair amount surfaced in the question.

Surely she could just apologise to the blonde giant. He'd love that of course. She had torn a strip off him. She could apologise to him. If she made it flowery, wouldn't that do? Why involve the boss? They could sort it out

between the two of them, amicably. She could grovel and he could gloat.

Then she could return to her lab and get on with the more pressing need. She needed to get her experiment back on track. She had things to do and pandering to an unforgiving man was not part of her plan for today. If she could just apologise to him, quickly, she could get out of here.

She thought her wish had been granted when the blonde man spoke. "I want you to apologise to me and" There was mockery in his eyes, "Casey." He kept his tone deliberately neutral, knowing it would annoy her, "And if she is willing to forgive and forget your unprofessional impudence, egotistical rudeness and psychotic insolence, then I might," He smiled nastily, "just contemplate not pursuing the matter any further." He savoured his forthcoming comment. "Although I must admit that I am seriously considering legal action. Your behaviour was unwarranted, ill informed and downright obnoxious. For an academic you have the manners of a sewer rat and the finesse of a beached whale."

Their eyes met and clashed. His blue eyes were victorious. Her ebony eyes were furious. Sasha was half tempted to tell him to go jump. Spiteful, malicious, hateful man. He read the words in her eyes almost as if she'd spoken them aloud. He smiled. She glared. It was all eye contact.

She sensed Prof Harper frowning, could almost hear him signaling her to back off. There was no choice. She could feel the Prof willing her on, silently calling on her to show some restraint. She had no choice.

Taking a deep breath and fighting hard to keep any trace of sarcasm out of her voice she said, "O.k. I apologise Mr Winiata." She had to battle with herself firmly, not to add, 'satisfied?' The temptation was so great that she bit down firmly on her bottom lip as soon as she'd said the word apologise.



This time he really did sneer at her. Then in his most patronising voice he said coolly, “The name is Lonergan.”

“Lonergan.” Sasha snapped the amendment robotically before comprehension hit her. Bombshell number two!

Anger fled, her poise deserted her, and every nuance of *savoir-faire* seceded. Mortification settled in. “Oh shit!” Her eyes widened incredulously for a fraction of a second before she buried her face in her hands, muttering forlornly, “I knew I should have stayed in bed today. This is a nightmare, pinch me, pinch me!”

Both men heard her. The older man smiled, the blonde man didn’t. Both waited for her to collect herself.

Slowly Sasha emerged from the protective cushion of her hands. This was getting worse by the minute. What a way to stuff things up! In how many ways could today go wrong? Next he’d be telling her he was on the funding committee! Probably the chairperson. She wondered if she was qualified to do anything else, because she was doing a good job of shooting her present career in the foot. She was ready to concede defeat and go home.

“When you’re ready,” The unsmiling one told her contemptuously, “we ought to see whether Casey will accept your humble, abject, sincere apology.”

Understandably he sounded irritated. James had read every single emotion in her eyes. They really were very eloquent. He knew exactly when she had acquiesced.

Sasha got to her feet slowly. Understandably she was loathed to go anywhere with him. Hitherto unfelt lethargy swamped her as adrenalin gave way to fatigue. She was living a nightmare.

Mr Adonis Lonergan was a contemptible jerk, a hostile, unforgiving, arrogant man! And she had chosen to verbally attack him. She couldn’t even do that right! She’d got the wrong man, the wrong end of the stick and

the wrong response! It was a hell of a day. And it wasn't over yet.

When she thought about her sisters' reactions to this debacle, Sasha's temper evaporated as quickly as the dew on a sunny morning. She knew what their reaction would be. That was if she ever got round to telling them the whole story. If she got over her embarrassment. She knew they would find it hilarious. They would probably call it another Sasha foot in mouth escapade. It would be added to the Sasha lore! But Sasha lore only involved family, this time she had taken it to work.

She smiled dejectedly at her head of department, "I really am sorry about all this." She told him in abject candid regret. "I don't lose it often, but when I do." She shook her head dolefully. "Mouth goes into action before brain gets into gear!"

"I'm sorry we got it wrong in the first place. I think we all have to take some share in this catastrophe." Prof Harper replied, his eyes conveying his understanding and regret. "Have you lost much?" He knew how much was riding on her research. Knew that Sasha was no doubt keenly aware of the high cost of having to start again, if indeed there were funds to do that. They could arrange a meeting later to discuss the ramifications of this fiasco. But right now he knew they had to address the threat of a report against her.

"Don't know yet." She replied factually, "I've left poor Sam checking the plates."

"Well once you've spoken to Ms Hett you can get back to it. Make an appointment with Sheena to see me when you know more. I hope everything works."

"So do I." Sasha muttered with feeling.

Prof Harper sympathised. He held the door open for Sasha and James Lonergan to precede him out of the office. James let her step out first. She didn't acknowledge the gesture and that, for some inordinate reason, made him hostile again. Ill-mannered sulky brat!

Sasha smiled wanly at Sheena. Again the receptionist mouthed, “Sorry” Sasha shook her head, shrugged her shoulders and produced a smile.

In the mean time James shook the older man’s hand.

“Come.” He ordered briskly but without waiting for Sasha he walked out of the secretarial office. Come. The order rankled with Sasha, but she was in no position to argue. She’d dug herself a deep enough hole as it was.

He walked slightly ahead of Sasha, not bothering to even check and see if she was following. She followed. Trailing a couple of paces behind him. Clearly he didn’t want to talk to her and he didn’t want to walk with her. That suited Sasha just fine. She didn’t want to talk or walk with him either.

Didn’t he realise she had other more pressing things to do at this precise moment? Apologising to his secretary was not high on her list of priorities. She took a deep breath, as she acknowledged a few facts. Yes, she’d made a mistake, yes she’d been rude, yes she owed them apologies. But surely she could do it later. Right now she had a project to see to. It, unlike her apology could not wait. She fought down the rising animosity. She couldn’t afford to make things any worse. And she did owe them both apologies. She could take the time to right the wrong.

One date blip and her work had been destroyed. It could be the end of the project. It probably was the end.

## Chapter 4

James revisited the scene in the office. It had gone a lot better than he had anticipated. Much, much better. He'd headed straight for Harper's office once Casey had found a copy of their office memo. The brief walk across the car park was insufficient time to pacify him. He could remember every single word she'd said.

By the time he reached the office he was ready to have the student formally reprimanded. Prof Harper's secretary had shown him straight into the man's office and within a few seconds he had made a stoic complaint about the abusive behaviour of one student at this University.

James had described the situation and before he had a chance to describe her, Prof Harper had corrected one misconception. She was not a student. She was an academic. She was University staff! She looked like a student. She dressed like a student. A demented, deranged student, but a student nonetheless. She certainly hadn't behaved like a lecturer either. Once James had recovered from that shock he had simply become more determined. A lecturer should exercise more restraint.

Harper had tried placating him, but James had insisted on an apology from the woman herself, or he would seek a formal disciplinary hearing. She wasn't going to get away with insulting him and have someone else excuse her behaviour or make her apologies.

The fact that she was overwrought was inconsequential. She was an academic. She should have demonstrated professional composure. Yes, her research data may have been destroyed, but it was not sufficient grounds for disparaging other people. Especially when they weren't at fault. It was about time she learnt that.

James had considered hearing her apology and he had intended to let it go at that. But that was before she walked into the office. She had been so damn supercilious when she'd entered the room. Her actions,

her stance and her eyes had baited him into reacting. For a normally imperturbable man, he found himself, once again, reacting to her demeanour. He could not explain his reaction to her.

Even worse, he wasn't terribly impressed with his approach.

Her earlier abuse triggered his animosity. Enmity resurfaced. At that moment he seriously contemplated making an issue of her behaviour. Having her hauled in front of the University disciplinary committee seemed like the best option. She was used to wheedling her way out of situations that was clear. The Prof hadn't stopped making excuses for her, since James had stalked into his office several minutes earlier.

It was about time she faced up to the consequences of her actions. At her age, and in her profession she should be shouldering the responsibility.

Forcing her to apologise to Casey had, he thought, been the only avenue left to him to keep the whole episode in proportion without losing face, or letting her off lightly. Why and how she had managed to rile him he didn't know. But she had. Far too easily.

Harper was wrapped around her little finger. The man couldn't stop excusing her behaviour. That fact also annoyed James. Everyone seemed to apologise, except her.

Belligerently, James turned to see if she was still following. He didn't know her well enough to say whether she would have absconded! Sasha was behind him, her hands jammed in her lab coat pockets, her shoulders hunched. He waited for her to get closer.

Then James realised that she was laughing silently. He could see it in her eyes, in the quirk of her lips. She was laughing at him. The stupid woman had the nerve to find this funny.

James nearly had a fit! He was sorely tempted to do something rash. He fought the urge to yank her to him and shake some respect into her.

Sasha was unaware that her retrospection was getting her into further strife. Once more on her usual even keel she was reviewing this morning's scenario. Her role, her temper, her rudeness. And with her usual blunt honesty had realised what a pig's ear she had made of everything.

Sasha was intensely relieved to know that the official complaint would be dropped if she apologised. With a wonderful sense of respite, she began remonstrating with herself: Don't just yell at anyone, she told her inner self, pick on the boss! Hell! Don't just yell at him, swear at him, use some choice names and make sure you have an audience!

What a joke! Well, when she blew it, she really blew it big time. She was lucky he wasn't going to town about it all. She'd write a formal letter of apology. Just to pacify him of course. She smiled, no it wasn't to pacify him, it was because she owed him a full apology. She had been way out of line. Way, way out of line. She didn't have to lower herself to calling him names. She should be above that sort of response. She had over reacted. Thinking about her lost work had made her over react. But that was no excuse for rudeness. She knew that.

She would send him a written apology, and one to Prof Harper for all the hassle she'd created. She'd pay for any dry cleaning his secretary's clothes needed. No doubt the department would cop some flack. All because her mouth did not communicate with her brain. She was lucky she still had a job.

She couldn't help laughing quietly as she remembered the way she had barged into the portacabin and insulted him. It was either laugh or cry.

Briar and Grace would have a field day over this. Her two older sisters were forever telling her, her mouth

would eventually get her into trouble. And it had. Big trouble. She smiled. Now she had to bail herself out.

“If you find this so damn funny,” He growled, startling Sasha from her reverie, “wait till you see what I’ll do if Casey doesn’t accept your apology.”

“What?” She blinked as she surfaced from her thoughts. What was he going on about now? The man was as irrational as she had been earlier. What was he ranting about now? She hadn’t done anything else. Not as far as she could remember. She’d kept her mouth shut for at least five minutes, she was following respectfully, and she was going to apologise. Now what?

He turned to stand in front of her. They were in the middle of the car park. It was largely deserted, bar one or two cars, there was nothing else in sight.

The tall blonde man, who wouldn’t look out of place playing for the national rugby team, wasn’t smiling. He even looked as if he never had, and never would. The slim woman, who dressed like a surfer reject, was standing in front of him frowning, wondering what the problem was.

As far as Sasha was concerned he was the equivalent of a living bulldozer. And at the moment a frighteningly grim bulldozer. What was the matter now? What more had she done?

He jabbed his index finger into the lapel of her barely white lab coat, and she staggered back an inch. She looked at his finger, then looked at him in confusion.

“You think just because you’ve got Harper wrapped around your little finger you’ll get away with behaving like a temperamental diva and tantrum throwing two year old all rolled into one. Well, here’s a news flash for you.” He stepped closer, towering over her, she arched back, but kept her feet rooted to the spot. Their faces were separated by two inches at the most. His nose was almost touching hers, his eyes were scalding, his tone was livid, “You are the most stupid woman I have ever

met! Laugh all you want now, because by the time I've finished with you, you won't remember the last time you found anything remotely humorous." He gritted every single word through clenched teeth, before he spun around to continue walking toward the portacabin .

"Don't threaten me you great ox." Sasha hurled at him, as the temper that had been recently leashed, a temper dormant for a couple of years, a temper usually so rare, surfaced irrepressibly once more. She threw caution to the wind, even though she hadn't meant to utter the words. Her brain had not issued the command to speak, her soul had.

James spun back instantly. Advancing on her with clear threat. Sasha didn't move. She couldn't. Her brain was telling her to run, but once again, as it became more apparent by the minute, whenever he was present, her brain said one thing and she did the opposite.

She was thinking the words, but she didn't have to say it out aloud did she? Shit, he looked ready to throttle her. Sasha braced herself.

This time he stopped a bare inch away from her, crowding her personal space, mentally crushing her, towering over her. They were toe to toe.

"What?" The word was ice cold, punctuated with immense challenge, and laced with measured frigid control. He had heard her, he knew exactly what she had said, but he was giving her an option to pretend otherwise.

His words, his stance, his presence, should have intimidated Sasha. They didn't. He dominated her space, a giant over her, his chin a bare inch away from her nose. His breath fanning across her cheeks. Sasha held her ground.

"You heard me." Sasha lowered her voice to a whisper but her coal black eyes continued to hold his intimidating gaze. She wanted to apologise before this got any more ridiculous, but the words just wouldn't leave her mouth.



Not when he stood there glaring at her as if she was an insidious defective slug that was close to being squashed. She had lost her temper far too many times today. The last time she lost her temper was a couple of years ago. But where he was concerned, her temper was developing into a series pursuit. She tried very hard not to provide another episode.

Cobalt blue eyes turned almost black as he kept a very tight rein on the anger building within.

“I heard you.” He barked furiously. “I just didn’t believe you could be that obtuse. Your moronic stupidity, hotheadedness and gutter language landed you in this situation. I wouldn’t have thought any sane person would have sought to compound their ineptitude. But then I’d hardly rate you as sane.”

Their eyes blazed at each other. Fierce, turbulent anger fanned out to consume the other. In their eyes, were simmering and clearly drawn breached battle lines.

Sasha took a deep calming, cleansing, breath. She closed her eyes for a fraction of a second, then slowly let out her breath. This was getting out of hand. They were reacting abrasively, at every turn, over the tiniest of things. Someone needed to back off before the whole thing became absurd. It had to be her. She knew that instinctively. She had initiated this disaster, she should close it.

“I said I was sorry.” She reminded him plaintively as she tilted her head to look up into his face, so that he could see the genuine regret. “What more do you want?”

He snorted derisively, ran a hand through his blonde hair and glared, “Yeah, right! But words obviously come easy to you.” He returned glacially.

“Look,” Sasha tried to pacify him and explain her point of view. Why she was desperate for him to understand was beyond her, but she wanted him to know why she’d over reacted. So she started to explain, “I’ve probably lost my entire project, I was under pressure. I got

emotional.” Unconsciously she laid her hand on his arm, preventing him from moving away, “I shouldn’t have lost my temper. I rarely do,” She smiled, giving him her best shot, “but today has been a bad day and unfortunately you caught the brunt of it.” She trained her eyes on his, trying to show him how genuine her regret was, “A bad move. I know, but, I guess what I am trying to say is ....”

He shrugged off her hand and took her arm firmly, his fingers holding her lab coat covered flesh, “Don’t try it.” He advised biting and began to tow her along.

She was foolish if she really thought he’d fall for that paltry attempt to win him over. That mediocre coquettish speech might have worked to get her off the hook in the past, but not with him and not now. A few paltry words, a weak explanation, openly flirting, a tepid smile. She was trying to bewitch him into forgetting about her rudeness. Fat chance! He wasn’t that easily swayed by a pretty face. And certainly not one with such a caustic tongue.

“Try what?” Sasha asked, all thoughts of conciliation fleeing as he continued to drag her along behind him and she wrestled to pull out of his vice like grip.

Sasha trotted to keep up with him. He was striding furiously toward the portcabins, making no allowances for the difference in their strides. She tried to pull out of his iron grip. A wasted effort. She hoped no one was watching this. Being dragged along like a recalcitrant child was simply adding fuel to a fire she had only recently banked.

“Try to sweet talk your way out of this.” He enlightened her as he shook his head in disgust. “You blew it.” He snapped with gale force rancour. “Now deal with it. But you can forget that flirtatious bullshit! And don’t try to pathetically wangle your way out of this by using your looks. Those tactics won’t work.” They’d reached the far side of the car park.

Sasha was reeling from the verbal onslaught. Too stunned to retaliate immediately, wide eyed, she just listened as he continued to use her for target practice.

“Those tactics might work with your boss,” He sneered offensively, “I’ve no doubt it’s worked in the past with most of those misguided desperate guys who happen to find themselves in your miserable but honey baited trap. Just batting those long sooty lashes and feigning cuteness probably got you where you are today, but don’t try it on with me.” They’d reached the portacabin. Sasha staggered to a stop. She was still dizzy from his tirade. But he hadn’t finished. He audaciously gave her a quick flagrant top to toe survey and then dismissed her as if she was repulsive slime. “I’m not interested in your lap dancers body, or your trailer park social skills ok?”

Sasha was absolutely livid. How dare he suggest she had used sex to reach her current position? How could he? If she had wanted to impress men, she certainly wouldn’t dress the way she did. Didn’t he notice anything? Pontificating boorish jerk. She hated him with renewed compulsion.

Before she could say a word he propelled her up the two stairs and into the small room. She stumbled in, turned and glared antagonistically at him. He ignored the look. She took a second to get her temper under flimsy control.

“For your information,” She spun around to face him, and advanced on him as he stood framed in the doorway, “I am a bloody good researcher and I earned my status just like every other damn male material scientist!” Her eyes flashed like molten coals, but her voice was ice cold.

“I don’t give a shit how you got and keep your qualifications.” He sneered the latter. He was impressed by her control, given the temper flashing in those jet black eyes.

Casey watched, with round eyes and a wide-open mouth. James was never rude to anyone. He was a firm, fair, considerate man. She’d seen him deal with late

deliveries, slack workmen, pretentious businessmen and over attentive women, but he'd never once been rude. He kept calm, level headed and dealt with the situation rather than the person. So this was like seeing a new man altogether.

“Dr Carvalho has something to say.” He drolly told Casey as he brushed past Sasha, leaving her smoldering where she stood, just inside the cabin. He headed for Harve's desk and perched on the edge. James folded his arms and waited. Sasha took a deep breath, clenched her fists and rallied the remnants of her normally genial self.

Slowly she faced the occupants of the room, she glared at him, it was a reflex, then she cloaked the animosity with a heavy shield of self-control. James was impressed again by the way she resurrected her self-control. Up until a few minutes ago he had seen little evidence of any self-control.

“I have worked very hard to establish a career in material science...”

“You should have bloody well thought of that before you decided to shoot your mouth off earlier. And before you continue with that bullshit, let's just get on with what you have to say to Casey. When you are ready Doctor.” He prompted, and his eyes narrowed into challenging slits.

Doctor? Casey was surprised. The woman didn't look old enough to be a student, let alone a doctor. While Sasha tried to quash her temper and construct a suitable apology, Casey took a closer look.

Casey studied Sasha very carefully. It was almost as if this woman didn't want you to see the woman. The long shapeless white lab coat with several dirty marks and stains would have made any other woman look drab. And if that failed, the luminescent surfie shorts and totally mismatched t-shirt should have assaulted one's sensibilities. She looked like a cross between a manic scientist and a radical surfie.

This woman had no dress sense. But intuitively, Casey thought it was a deliberate ploy. A wasted ruse. For on the woman standing in front of Casey, the clothes were soon forgotten if one looked at her face. Beyond the exterior appearance swamped by her apparel was a beautiful and, if the eyes were anything to go by, intelligent woman.

Casey took detailed notes. Sasha was tall. And going by the shorts, her legs went all the way to her temples! She had glossy jet black hair that was half tied in a bunched pony tail, so it was difficult to judge its length, but Casey imagined it to be just on her shoulders. Almond shaped, almost black eyes were framed by the most incredibly long thick black lashes Casey had ever seen, and they didn't appear to have any mascara. Her amber skin was flawless and totally bare of even a fleeting trace of make up. No lipstick, no foundation, no powder, no eyeliner, nothing.

The woman was catwalk material. What was she doing masquerading as a scientist? And why was she deliberately dressed to disguise her assets? Casey had no doubt whatsoever that it was a careful disguise, no one could manage to dress so carelessly.

Sasha was totally unaware of the scrutiny. She withdrew her hands from her coat pockets and crossed them defensively in front of her. Apologising was harder than she had expected because she was still furious. And that was down to that great ox who had dragged her in here. She moistened her lips before starting to apologise.

Cobalt blue eyes watched her intently, pinning her to the spot, challenge and sublime arrogance in his very stance. Well she had brought this on herself, so she would just have to deal with it. But she didn't have to like it!

Taking a deep breath Sasha began to voice a stilted apology. "I've been ordered to apologise to you for my rudeness earlier today. I.."

“Perhaps you’d like to start again.” Sasha flicked him a hostile glare. James continued in the same icy tone, “I believe you *wanted* to apologise for your unwarranted, ill mannered, foul mouthed, gutter behaviour.” She was reminded.

Sasha dug her fingernails into her palms and refocused on the blonde woman. Quietly she continued, “I don’t ...” Her apology was interrupted by the sound of the phone ringing.

It was a timely distraction, for even Sasha could tell that her apology was not appeasing the giant. He’d come off the desk that he had only just recently perched on and his eyes were flashing warning signals.

A tiny voice in the back of Sasha’s mind said -saved by the bell. She stopped talking and glanced at the phone, expectantly, silently encouraging James to reach for it. Her action wasn’t lost on him. James reached for the phone, but kept his eyes trained on her, and Sasha waited as he listened to the voice at the other end.

“Carvalho.” He said curtly as he held the phone toward Sasha.

“Me?” She queried in confusion as she gave him a quick glance just to check that he really did mean her.

James nodded brusquely. Sasha walked over to take the call, smiling inwardly, so she really did have a guardian angel. Although going by the guarding so far today, the angel had obviously slept in. Better late than never.

Sasha reached for the phone. He dropped the cordless in her outstretched hand. She caught it clumsily, glared but said nothing, he quirked an eyebrow at her reaction.

“Sasha speaking.” She informed the caller. Then she listened quietly for a few seconds. A slow smile gradually smothered the frown. She beamed into the mouthpiece.

James watched the genuine smile bloom. Even white teeth appeared. Her eyes began to sparkle. James stared.

There wasn't much else he could do. She was lethal when she smiled.

She was an incredibly beautiful woman. Irritating, hostile, abrasive, but beautiful. His eyes flicked toward Casey, and noticed that she was also staring at the other woman.

“Just go!” Sasha stated emphatically, “Yes, fine. Now go!” She beamed, completely unaware of the impact of her smile on the other occupants in the room. “Sam, get going! You shouldn't have come in. Yes, yes, yees! I will. Now go.” She repeated when Sam at the other end of the phone had continued to dither. She listened attentively, “Yes, ok. Love to Raewyn. If you are still there when I get there, there'll be hell to pay.” She threatened amicably. Slowly she placed the cordless on the desk, muttering, “Some guardian angel.” Having forgotten all about her incomplete apology, she walked to the door.

“Haven't you forgotten something?” James barked when he realised that she wasn't stopping.

Sasha stopped. At the door she turned and shrugged her shoulders at him. “Just sue me!” She told him flippantly as she stepped out into the sunshine.

For a second she simply stood at the bottom of the two steps, basking in the glow of the midday sun. Roll on tomorrow. She took a deep breath, let it out in a loud sigh then turned and strode quickly toward the first portacabin.

She popped her head into the portacabin she had entered earlier that day. There were only four men there, but she made her apology any way.

“Hey!” They all stopped and turned to watch her with a trace of caution and a reasonable amount of indecision. “I'm sorry about earlier. I was in a foul mood. Could you tell the other guys? I was out of line. Sorry if I upset anyone.” She smiled.

They were equally speechless on this occasion. Once again, she left them completely shell shocked for a few seconds before they began to speak at the same time!

“What was that about?”

“She apologised.”

“You think she found Harve?”

“Bloody gorgeous when she smiles!”

This time three pairs of eyes focused on the young man. He went an interesting shade of beetroot and they once again started teasing him about his taste in women.

Sasha broke into a jog as she ran toward her block. She was in time to see and wave to Sam as he drove out of the car park.

It was going to be a long haul. Just as well there was no one waiting for her at the cottage.

Luke wasn't due till late tomorrow and Briar wasn't due till the weekend. Her prospective brother-in-law and her sister were both in Otago. Briar was on her final round of talks. This time she was speaking to medic students about her work as a UN doctor. Luke had flown down to the southern city to be with her. He was besotted, there was no other word for it. He loved her. But both had demanding careers and making time to see each other was important to them.

With Sam gone Sasha was expecting to be in the lab overnight, if there was anything to salvage. At least over night, she amended as she mentally computed the average length of time it would take to check each plate and then multiplied it by the number of plates to check. Oh, the joys of research!

She reached the lab a few minutes later. The CROs were blinking, a faint line beeping a trail across the screen. That's the way they should have been this morning. Was that only a couple of hours ago? After reading Sam's scribbled note Sasha settled down and began to work through the slides.



## Chapter 5

At eight that evening, Ken, the security guard made the first of his evening rounds. He was used to the whimsy and determination of people who worked at the university. He often came across students and staff working on projects late into the night. Finding Sasha still working in the materials laboratory came as no surprise.

“You signed in to work late?” Ken asked as he came further into the lab. His khaki uniform was a snug fit over his portly Maori body. Sasha had yet to meet anyone who looked less like a security guard and more like Santa Claus. She grinned at him, but it didn’t conceal the tiredness in her dark eyes.

“Fraid so.” She stood and stretched, then picked up her purse. She’d been waiting for him. It seemed like hours.

“Have you booked someone to accompany you to your car?” He asked as he came closer. It was University policy that female staff and students working alone at night should request someone to accompany them to their car in the car park.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary.” She told him as she arched her back and waited for the bunched muscle to release the spasm, “I think I’m going to be here all night.” He frowned. She shrugged. “You couldn’t get me a couple of those large chocolate chip biscuits from the machine, could you?” She handed him the necessary coins before he had even agreed. She hadn’t eaten since early that morning and breakfast seemed like a long long time ago.

“I won’t be back this way until,” he hesitated as he tried to work out his route and schedule, “around one.” He finally warned as he accepted the money.

“I’ll still be here.” She replied tiredly, still stretching.

“You should be at home or at a party!” Ken told her, “Why you want to lock yourself away in this dingy lab I don’t know.”

Sasha was used to his comments. He’d been telling her the same thing since day one! She should be out there living life instead of burying herself in research with rocks! She should find herself a man! She didn’t take offence, though she was sure her sister Grace who lectured in women’s studies probably would! Ken had a heart of gold and he apparently told everyone, male or female, when he found them working late, that they should be at home or finding themselves a spouse.

“Hey, on days like this I am tempted to chuck it all in! So don’t push it.” She told him lightly, although her words masked her exhaustion, her eyes didn’t.

“Yeah. We heard about your little run in with the construction boss.”

“You heard eh?” She had the grace to look chagrined, “You should have heard what I called the man!” She grimaced as she remembered, “I don’t think my mouth even knew what it was saying until it was said!” She put her purse back into her lab coat pocket, “I’ll probably be disciplined over the incident. I deserve it.” She conceded, “He settled for an apology. Well, at least I think he did. I was way over the top.” She frowned as she remembered nothing had actually been settled, because she hadn’t apologised. Well, she’d worry about that some other time. Tonight she had to ensure that she still had a viable research project.

“Yeah I heard.” He smiled at her with open curiosity. As far as he knew everyone liked Sasha. She worked hard, she was funny, she was friendly and as far as he knew, she’d never been rude to anyone since she’d been here. Her students liked her, her colleagues liked her, and the cleaners had given up on her, but still liked her. He looked around at the untidy lab.

“What didn’t you hear?” Sasha teased as she rubbed the back of her neck and arched her back again. She moved another stack of plates closer to her workspace.

Ken smiled, “Good grapevine!”

Sasha gave him a pocket version of her side as she inserted another couple of test plates into the circuit she’d set up. He was laughing loudly by the time she finished telling him about her day.

“Hey, it wasn’t funny. He certainly didn’t think so.”

Ken chuckled then checked his watch. “I’d better keep going.” He said as he headed for the swing door. “See you later. Or better still, go home!”

Sasha watched the door swing shut and then returned to clipping in another plate and reading the value off the CRO. It was monotonous and tiring. She knew it was going to be a long haul. She was already lethargic.

Doing battle with a giant was exhausting. Doing battle followed by a long stint on a repetitive task was draining and demoralising, especially when one knew there was every chance that it was all going to be fruitless.

Sasha worked on. She was keeping a mental tally of the plates and percentages. They were still in the safe zone to continue the research, but she couldn’t afford a higher drop out rate. The quicker she checked the plates the better her chances of the project continuing.

Harve Winiata, a large Maori man, placed the detailed plan on the bonnet of his car and held the unfurled end with the palm of one large hand as he explained the finer details of the next phase to James. It was seven in the morning. The two men were engrossed in the task. The construction was on schedule.

The University was quiet and the car park almost deserted. There was plenty of light and it was pleasantly cool, very mild for this time of the year.

Harve turned to point at one of the structures that was going to have to come down when his eyes focused on a

figure sprinting across the car park. Automatically he stopped talking as he tracked the flight of the woman. At least he thought it was a woman. Nowadays it was difficult to tell, what with men having long hair and women wearing loud ill matched surfing gear. But he watched her speed past the portacabins.

James also stopped studying the plans and followed the woman's flight. He recognised the figure instantly and he tensed in automatic reaction. You couldn't forget those clothes. Even if you tried to forget the woman. And that had proved to be very difficult last night. He could remember the smile. Even now he could see how it lit up her eyes. She was beautiful when she was angry, but she was gorgeous when she smiled. Pity about her character. He watched her race across the car park.

Sasha hurtled past the few cars, totally unaware of being watched, she was running flat out toward the security hut. Her lab coat flapped against her thighs and her hair was in total disarray. She took no notice of anything around her. She was far too intent on getting the key from the security guys. She didn't see the two men watching her.

"What d'you think's going on?" Harve asked when he saw her disappear into the small building at one end of the gate leading to the car park. "Fire?"

"With her it's hard to tell." James growled. "She's loco!"

Harve spun around to look into his friend's eyes. James wasn't joking. And he didn't seem too pleased either.

"That's a bit harsh." Harve stated quietly as he took stock of the look in his friend's eyes, and the body language. "You know her?"

"That was Dr Carvalho." James curtly informed his foreman.

Enlightenment dawned in Harve's eyes. The vehemence in James' voice made some sense. Casey had filled him in on 'the visit'. The young woman's visit yesterday had been a talking point for several hours. First Casey told

him, then the workmen mentioned it, one at a time, by the end of the day he could have written a screenplay about the incident.

Though James' version had yet to be voiced. According to Casey, James had been speechless the first time. It wasn't often one saw James speechless. But apparently, for a few timeless seconds, that was exactly what he was, speechless. The second time, James had been rude. That was a novelty too. Harve was sorry he'd missed the day's events.

"You guys had a bit of a do yesterday." Harve said conversationally wondering how he could get James to tell him his side of 'the visit'.

"A do?" James snorted, "The woman ranted and raved like a demented shrew. If she'd stopped to check her facts..." he trailed off as the 'demented shrew' raced past them again. Both men, once again, observed her headway in total silence, their eyes tracked her until she disappeared into her building.

Her white coat flapped wildly behind her, revealing her clothes. James noticed that she was still wearing the same, totally incongruous, shorts and t-shirt. The woman had no common sense, dress sense or concern for personal hygiene. Feigning boredom, he turned back to the paper work lying on the bonnet of the car. Deftly he unrolled the plans that had coiled automatically when the men had turned to watch the deranged doctor.

"Casey said she had you speechless." Harve grinned at his boss, hoping to prompt James into continuing with his explanation of 'the visit'. "Now that I'd have liked to have seen."

"What would you have done if some lunatic female stormed into the cabin and called you an amphibian dope?"

"She didn't?" Harve's eyes rounded in disbelief and he worked hard to keep the laughter to himself.

“Her language was a bit more colourful.” James enlightened his temporarily mute foreman.

Harve lost it. He guffawed until tears streamed down his heavily lined face. He clutched at his sides, trying to stop the stitch that had developed.

“Harve I didn’t find it at all amusing then and I still don’t.” James remonstrated firmly.

“No. I bet you don’t.” Harve stemmed his laughter and wiped the tears off his cheeks.

“Especially as she thought I was you.” James thrust angry fingers through his blonde hair.

Harve grinned at his boss. “What are you so mad about?” He teased, “If she wasn’t talking about you.”

“Just get on with this Harve.” James commanded, noting that his foreman was enjoying gently hassling him. Although Harve gave up hassling his boss, he was not easily swayed from the topic of Dr Carvalho.

“I was in early,” He told James, as he smoothed the roll of architect plans. “but the green Mitsubishi was already here. I asked the security guy about it, met him as he was going off duty. He said it was hers. She’s worked over night because we cut power.”

“They were informed!” James snapped forcefully, not happy with the guilt trip that was beginning to descend. It wasn’t his fault that her department sent out a memo with an incorrect date. They’d been informed well in advance. What was he supposed to do, go round to every staff member and check that they had been given the right information?

“Yeah. I know. But that is quite a shift she’s put in.” Harve stated, before he frowned and muttered, “She should have been at home.” Murmuring beneath his breath he continued, “This place isn’t safe for a lone woman at night.”

“Don’t you start defending her.” Exasperated, James rounded on him, “I had enough of that from Harper

yesterday and the lads.” He glared at Harve. “The woman has guys eating out of her hand within seconds. Our guys couldn’t stop talking about her yesterday. That young guy, Rivens, thinks she’s gorgeous” he mimicked the young lad’s tone, Harve grinned, “And you haven’t even met her and here you are worrying about her.”

Harve flicked a piercing look at his boss before he stated. “But she didn’t leave an impression on you.” Harve reflected pointedly.

“I listened to a shrew with the vocabulary of a pimp, what kind of an impression do you think she left?” James flashed him an irritated glance.

“Oh, I just wondered why...”

“Get on with this Harve. I’m still thinking of officially reporting her behaviour. You aren’t helping her case.” James growled as he smoothed out the large sheets of paper.

The two men returned to the task at hand.

Several hundred metres away, two floors up, Sasha was rapidly disconnecting leads and reconnecting a new CRO. Her numb fingers suddenly found new life as they flew over several small glass slides, clearing space for the new CRO.

There was no time to waste. She flicked a switch to turn the new machine on, watched as the lights appeared, waited for the beep, plugged in two leads, attached the crocodile clips to the glass plate and waited for the line to register and show some decay. The machine gradually came to life.

Sasha checked to see if it was calibrated, then she took the reading, checked it against a grid of figures and began to reclip other plates.

Her head and eyes ached from staring at a luminescent green screen, her back spasmed from sitting on a hard wooden stool and her fingers felt arthritic from snapping crocodile clips on and off glass plates.

She was bone tired but still sufficiently alert to notice the CRO's erratic behaviour about half an hour earlier. She hadn't anticipated it giving up the ghost altogether. There weren't any spare CROs in her laboratory and in order to find one she had to search the other labs.

She had been praying that nothing else would go wrong. Her mind would still occasionally drift back to the run in she had with Lonergan, and that was enough to keep her alert. She willed the machine to behave itself. Unfortunately it decided to ignore her silent pleas and five minutes ago it gave up the ghost. The machine has simply stopped, the green trace light disappeared slowly, fading away, and the screen gradually lost its luminescence. It felt remarkably akin to her own energy, gradually dissipating. The lethargy lasted two scant seconds, then adrenalin kicked in and her brain began to function beyond automatic.

She had raced, heaven only knew where she got the energy from because she certainly didn't feel energetic, but she had raced to find another CRO. She flew down two flights of stairs, out of building B, along the almost deserted car park, down the pathway to the security cabin. All because she needed to get the keys to the labs in block C.

She knew they had a store of CRO's and she needed one. Desperately.

Having got the keys she sprinted back, past her building, down the path to block C, she scribbled a note to explain that she'd borrowed machines, collected two CROs, one for another emergency, just in case. Then she raced back to her building. Clumsily trying to juggle the two small boxes, desperate to get back to her lab as quickly as possible.

It was hardly surprising that she was breathing hard. She was surprised she was breathing at all. By her reckoning, she should be at least unconscious. Nearer death, going by her blood pressure. Her pulse was still racing as she dragged some more plates closer to the new CRO.



She couldn't afford a time delay. The longer she waited to test the thin coatings on the small glass plates, the greater the number of plates would have degenerated and consequently have to be discarded. That was something she couldn't afford if she was to have a representative sample. And she needed a representative sample or the investigation would fold.

At the moment the fail rate was 15%, any higher or closer to 25% and she would have to close this project and start all over again. If the plates had taken a power surge when power was cut, that energy would wreck the coatings. Each plate would have to be checked before being hooked up to the trial grid.

The thought of putting her work back six months while they remade the slurries and coated the plates with thin films did not appeal. And now that suing the construction firm was not an option, and knowing that her research grant was unlikely to be extended, she couldn't afford to restart anyway. The funds simply would not exist. This was a do or die situation, and by the looks of things, she was going to die fighting or fused to the wooden stool!

She put the keys to C block on the first bench, security had offered to collect them later.

As soon as she had checked the plates she reconnected them into test positions. Once again she began to record the decrease in voltage over a period of time and to measure the light given out. She slid painfully back onto the stool. Her muscles protested immediately, she blocked the pain.

She was back into the routine of unclip, slid out old plate, slide in new plate, reclip, measure, note reading, unclip.... It was sheer will power that was keeping her going, that and the thought of having to find the funds to repeat the experiment. It was also amazing the energy that two chocolate chip cookies could sustain! That was all she had eaten in the last twenty-four hours.

The phone rang. Earlier, Sasha had moved it closer to the bench, so she didn't have to go to her office and didn't have far to reach. She could still maintain the pattern of clip, read, unclip.

"Sasha?" Sam sounded euphoric.

"Kia Ora Sam." She replied in the usual Maori greeting as she settled the phone between her shoulder and ear.

"It's a girl!" He shouted elatedly.

"Brilliant! Congratulations. How's Raewyn?" Sasha fired at him, forgetting all about her experiment. She gripped the phone. A surge of excitement subdued her tiredness and pain briefly. Life rushed back into her sluggish aching muscles.

"Oh she's great. Pretty long labour. But they are both fine." Sam continued in exhilarated tones. "She is so wrinkly."

"I don't think you should describe your wife in those terms." She teased.

"Not her, the baby."

"I know, you lummo!"

"She's a beauty."

"What time, what weight, what name?" Sasha questioned, wanting all the details.

Sam laughed, "Just after midnight. We're calling her Sarah, and she weighed four kilos exactly. She is beautiful!"

Sasha smiled at the sound of paternal pride.

"Well you've just made my day." She told him.

"Yeah, that's what Raewyn's folks said." He took a deep breath, "She is so adorable!" He laughed, "And so beautiful."

Sasha laughed, ecstatic.

"So how are things there?"

“Fine.” She lied automatically, “I’ve almost wrapped it up.”

“Really?” He sounded so hopeful, “ You don’t need me to get back there?”

“Now? What for? By the time you get back here I’ll be all done. In fact I’ll probably be in a hot tub, having a warm bubble bath. It is all under control.”

“You sure?”

“Sam get back to Raewyn, give her a big hug from me and kiss Sarah. I’ll see you here in a week’s time!”

“A week?”

“You want longer?”

“No, no, I thought, maybe tomorrow.”

“A week. Not a second before, or you are fired. I’m spending Saturday in bed. It will be back to tracking again and we aren’t needed for that, once I hook up all the plates, the computer will do that. So a week at the very least. Call me at the end of the week to check.”

“Ok.” He sounded hesitant.

“I mean it Sam!”

“Yeah, yeah, ok.”

“Right, I’ve got to go, I want to get out of here as soon as possible!” Sasha told him.

“Got the message. I’ll see you in a week. And Sash, thanks!”

“No problem. Now get off the phone! Bye!”

No problem? Forlornly she looked around her. A spurt of self-pity washed through her. Sasha looked at the row of small glass plates waiting to be tested for reliability. At the rate she was going she’d be here till at least two am tomorrow. If she was lucky. Later if things went wrong. Again.

Swearing loudly into the empty room she automatically slipped the tested and verified plate out of the holding clips and slid another into place. Two am tomorrow, two am tomorrow, the thought reverberated in her mind like a ricocheting threat.

The next time any man proposed to her she was going to accept! She was going to stay home and have babies, drink gin and tonics and have the neighbours round for barbecues. She was going to crochet, paint water colours, and garden, do anything that didn't involve sitting in a laboratory. Sitting alone on a hard wooden stool, in a deserted lab was not the way to spend Friday nights.

## Chapter 6

“Sorry I was so late.” James apologised once again, as he walked with Harve back to their cars. They had just locked the portacabin and James knew that his delay had made Harve late for his anniversary dinner, it was just coming up to six pm. “You wouldn’t believe the traffic.” He shook his head. “I hope Aroha doesn’t hit the roof.”

“She’ll be right! I gave her a call to tell her I was running late.” Harve had his arms full, carrying rolled up plans, “I wanted you to ok the next phase and see where we were going to put the pipe. I think it will work.”

James nodded, “Get it checked with the clerk of works before you start anything though. And the dinner is on me.”

“Ok to the clerk. No to the dinner.” They reached their cars. It was almost six on a darkening Friday evening and there were four cars in the car park. Harve recognised Sasha’s car instantly. “She’s still here.” He sounded appalled as he spoke his thoughts aloud.

Both men knew who ‘she’ was. James, much to his disgust, couldn’t shift her image out of his brain. When one of the guys had switched on the welding torch he remembered her feistiness. When the radio blared out an old beach boys’ song he thought about the woman in surfer gear. When the lights switched from green to red he could see her temper flash in her eyes. When his lunch date smiled at him, he found himself comparing it with the smile of a woman who called him a despot amongst other things.

The jet black, almond shaped eyes, the jet black glossy hair, long, long legs. He couldn’t shift the images. And that annoyed him. Annoyed him immensely. There was no way in hell he was attracted to a shrill tempered virago. And if he was, he was just going to ignore it.

Harve looked over in the direction of B block again. Power had been reconnected to it and the only floor that

was lit was a section of the second floor. She was still here. Still working.

“As I said there is no accounting for that eccentric, loud mouth, ignorant hellcat.” James informed the older man as he popped open the boot of his car without even looking at B block.

Harve frowned in paternal concern as he glanced at his watch. “Well, by my reckoning she’s done about thirty six hours at least.”

“As I said she’s crazy. Totally.” Thirty six hours? Why hadn’t she gone home? There must be someone waiting for her. He couldn’t believe that someone with her looks would be solo. Though her temper might see to that.

“I think I’ll go check on her.” Speaking his thoughts aloud, Harve began to walk away. He didn’t like the idea of a sole woman putting in that kind of a shift. What if something had happened to her?

“What?” Demanded James incredulously causing Harve to stop a few feet away from him. “You are running late for your anniversary dinner, and you want to go check on someone you haven’t met? Harve?” He shook pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you mad? I don’t want Aroha yelling for my blood because you didn’t get there at all. Believe me, your Dr Carvalho can take care of herself.”

“I’ll explain to Aroha” Harve shrugged and turned once more in the direction of B block.

James muttered in irritation, then said more loudly. “It’s your anniversary dinner.”

“I won’t be long. I just want to make sure she’s o.k.”

“Harve!” James snapped and ran agitated fingers through his blonde hair, as if he couldn’t believe what was happening. Harve stopped abruptly and turned to face James. Harve had a soft heart, and two daughters.

“If she was my daughter I’d like to think someone was looking out for her.” Harve realised he was still carrying the plans.

“She has heaps of men falling all over themselves to look out for her!” James told him bluntly. This was unreal. She had men fetching and carrying, she had them scurrying about for her and she even had men she hadn’t met, feeling sorry for her. Harve was already wrapped around her finger. What ever that woman had, she should bottle and sell it!

“I’m not going to argue with you James.” Harve opened his boot and roughly threw in the rolls of paper. They were safely encased in tubes of cardboard. “She may need some help.”

“Yeah she does, but you aren’t a psychiatrist.” James told him in disgust and ire.

“I’ll be two minutes. I’ll just make sure she’s ok, that’s all.”

“I’ll go.” James capitulated with loaded resentment when he realised his foreman was serious.

After all it was his fault that Harve was going to be late in the first place. He wanted the plans explained. It took longer than expected, plus he’d been late. Any later and he knew Aroha would have his guts for garters.

“You will?” Harve sounded incredulous. He came toward James, and looked closely at James for a moment and then seemed to come to a conclusion. But before he could add anything, James spoke.

“Yeah, I will, and there’s no need to look at me as if I intend to drive off as soon as you’ve gone. Although that sounds like a perfectly reasonable and sensible idea to me!” He warded off Harve’s interruption, by holding up both hands. “I’ll go. You go home.”

Still Harve stood and waited.

“Go on.” James prompted as he moved rolls of paper work into the loaded boot of his car. He slammed the boot shut, a sure sign of his controlled temper, and then he strode over toward B block. He muttered under his breath as he walked. Bloody annoying woman. She’d

ruined last night. Given him nightmares, that smile of hers! Now it looked as if he was going to have another evening ruined.

“And be nice to her!” Harve called loudly, a smile in his voice.

James gave him the bird and kept walking.

The lab was deathly quiet when James pushed open the swing door. It was fully lit and when he stepped into the room, he also noticed that it was incredibly cluttered. Heavy machinery vied with rows of glassware and metal implements. He recognised some of the equipment from his time as an engineer. But he didn't ever recall working in such an untidy lab. He took two steps into the room, expecting at any moment to be yelled at. Not a peep. He let the door swing past him. It creaked. Still not a sound came from the lab.

He rounded a work bench and saw her straight away. She had her head pillowed on her arms and was either unconscious or fast asleep. James reached her within a few strides and realised that she was sound asleep. There was an immense sense of relief. He couldn't account for it, but he felt it all the same. It was quickly replaced with anger.

Crazy, stubborn, foolhardy, bloody woman. If she was this tired then she should be at home, in bed.

He shook her shoulder gently and she shot upright, almost falling off the stool in the process. James held her shoulder firmly to prevent her fall.

Instantly awake she glared at the man in front of her, while she fought off spasms of shooting pain in her taunt muscles.

“What the hell do you want?” Sleep did not dull the vehemence in her voice. She stifled a yawn and then rubbed her already blood shot eyes briskly with the heels of her hands.



“Harve insisted I check on you.” He made no attempt to conceal the ire in his voice. It was a chore, that much was evident in his tone. “And going by that tongue of yours I’d say you’re just perfectly normal for you. Stubborn, dumb and insolent.” James taunted then released her shoulder, like a scalded cat, when he realised he was still holding her.

Sasha’s muscles screamed in protest when she reached for the bench to stop herself from falling. The sound of an alarm clock registered. Sasha reached over and hit the top button with the palm of her hand, the shrill beeps ceased. She imagined it was him.

“Fine, you’ve checked. Now piss off!”

She put some distance between James and herself before she treated him like her alarm clock and whacked him! Hard. Walking was painful. But she needed the distance. Pain twisted through every fibre. Shards of what felt like crushed glass pressed into every moving muscle. Her eyes felt like they had been sprayed with pepper.

“Go home Doctor.” She was advised.

Sasha placed her hand in front of her mouth as she yawned again and then raked a hand through mussed hair as she stretched. Exhausted muscles shrieked their protest and she winced but kept the stretch. She knew she had to make sure her muscles were exercised. She’d been sitting for hours at a stretch. Sasha ignored James as she gingerly walked away from his imposing bulk and disappeared into a small room just off the laboratory.

He watched her in silence when she returned with her hand bag and proceeded to walk out of the lab. Neither said anything.

Relief and astonishment mingled. For a moment James was stunned. She was actually taking his advice. Without any argument either. Now that was unexpected. So the woman did have some common sense after all. Not much, but a bit more than he had given her credit for.

Thank goodness for that. At least he didn't have to deal with yet another scene. And he could go home.

It had been a hell of a day. Nothing went according to plan. He was late to his meeting with Harve, the wrong pipes had been ordered and they were needed in a week. He was looking forward to the evening.

His evening, with a bit of luck, involved a last minute date if he got home in time to phone Eloise. Things were looking up. She also worked at the University, as a lecturer in English literature. A real academic, with professional attitudes, refined manners and a conventional dress code. Unlike the one who'd just walked out of the room.

James had met Eloise a month ago, she was on the buildings and property committee. They'd had coffee together after the meeting, and he'd followed up with a lunch date. They'd swapped phone numbers, and when she gave him her home phone number she had told him to call round on Friday if he was back in the neighbourhood. He was, and he fully intended to visit or take her out this evening. Eloise was exactly the kind of woman he usually dated. Petite. Beautiful. Sophisticated. Elegant. Charming.

Eloise was everything the deranged doctor wasn't. Eloise was adept and competent, he doubted whether she would have flown off the handle, jumped to the wrong conclusions or shrieked like a shrew. Eloise was poised, attractive, and her clothing was tasteful. Eloise would have easily passed as Nicole Kidman's double. She had a glorious mane of red gold hair, stunning green eyes and a figure most women would kill for. They'd had a couple of dates during the week. She was elegant, intelligent, conservative, charming and beautiful.

He watched the door of the lab swing. Sasha had walked out. He grinned. He hadn't planned on any further contact with motor mouth. Thank goodness she'd taken his advice and gone home. Now he could follow suit and tell Harve that he'd encouraged her to go home and she'd

taken his advice. Miracle of miracles. She could have been a touch more gracious, but that was expecting too much.

The swing door swung to a standstill. James looked around him. He saw familiar items. A degree in engineering had provided him with numerous opportunities, over four years, to sit in labs like this one. Memories surfaced as he idly glanced around the room. He had spent hours perched on wooden lab stools like these. James picked up a glass stirring rod and twirled it idly as he took stock of the lab.

He noticed the CRO was still on. He walked over to it, wondering whether she had forgotten to switch it off. He peered at the screen and the connections, trying to decipher what it was all about. He hadn't a clue. A faint line traced its way across the screen. Nothing more, nothing less, just a pale green line across the screen.

James half contemplated switching it off, then recalled the scene she'd instigated when they had switched off power yesterday. James wasn't about to put himself in the same boat again. Better to leave well alone, although he noticed that she hadn't tagged it. Without a tag, the security guards would switch it off for safety reasons. Well rather than him, was his final thought as he sauntered toward the swing door.

His fingers hit the light switch and the room darkened immediately. At that precise instance, the door swung open and hit him soundly in the shoulder. James swore loudly as he grasped the door to stop it rebounding.

"What the hell are you doing?" She demanded as she brushed past him and automatically reached for the light switch. Sasha was grateful that he was around, she needed something to take her mind off the pain. Her muscles would no doubt take weeks to relax.

"I thought you'd left." He flared angrily as he massaged his arm. This woman was a nightmare.

“You? Think?” She asked insultingly as she stepped away from him. Challenge and defiance was written in her stance. “And before you switch anything else off, which you and your firm seem overly keen to do, why don’t you just leave me in peace to get on.” She flashed him an insincere smile. “I’ve had a rest, I’ve freshened up and now I am ready to go. So get out!”

Even though James was incensed and suppressing an urge to haul her out by the seat of her ludicrous pants, he noticed that she had indeed combed and retied her hair and that her face had been washed. She had even brushed her teeth, he smelt the mint toothpaste as she’d snapped at him.

In her eyes he saw very clear indications of the tiredness she was trying to stave off. She was used to working overnight in the lab, that much was clear from her preparedness for such an event. But doing a 48 hour shift was ridiculous. Her eyes were red and she looked beat. She should go home. Any sane person would go home.

“Go home. You’re far too exhausted to do any good here.” He told her bluntly and waited for the angry response. He knew it would come. She didn’t disappoint him.

“When I want your advice I’ll ask. But don’t hold your breath.” She marched into the little room and returned a few seconds later. He was still there. “Would you get out of my face please?” Sasha pushed past him as she walked back the bench. At least shouting at him was helping her mask the excruciating pain that throbbed through her weary muscles.

James lost the last vestiges of patience. He couldn’t be bothered to negotiate with a vile tempered harpy. He’d done what Harve had asked, he had checked on her and she was in fine form. Now he was going home, to get ready for a date with the charming, exquisite, refined Eloise. His conscience was clear. He’d come, checked on her and was leaving before he strangled her.

“Suit yourself.” He snapped before turning round and storming out. Sasha rolled her eyes and shook her head in disgust, but he saw neither action. The door swung shut.

It took the length of the corridor for his anger to dissipate. James rationalised the situation by the time he reached the stairwell. Bloody woman! He dragged a hand through his blonde hair, ruffling it into casual disarray. What would it take to make her see sense? He braced his hand on the stair rail. He couldn’t just leave her there. Why not? He ignored the inner voice. She was exhausted. He hit the wall with the flat of his hand, swore for a few seconds and then let out a long sigh.

After several seconds he turned around and headed back for the lab. He silently chanted a mantra. Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm, stay calm!

It was quiet, just a faint clicking as metal hit glass. He pushed the door. Sasha looked up when the door swung open. Not again. She really could do without this hassle. Especially from him. She was too tired to fight. She was beyond tired. She was running on fumes. And she couldn’t cope with him in her present state. He irritated her, her mind registered that fact, but her heart also hammered whenever he came within a few inches, and she knew it wasn’t anger causing the adrenalin rush. No, it was more. And that was the trouble. She fancied a guy who irritated the life out of her.

She raised a questioning eyebrow, but held her tongue. He looked determined. She knew she hadn’t been polite, nor accommodating, or open to advice, but he didn’t have to look so resolute. She braced herself, deciding it was better for her to take the offensive.

“I’m not in the mood for another lecture....”

“Can I help?”

James wasn’t sure quite why he was offering to help. He knew he needed his head read. Knew from her incredulous look that she also thought he needed his head read. That was one thing he admired about this woman,

the fact that her emotions were on her sleeve. What you saw is what you got. Whether you liked it or not. She had eyes that gave her thoughts away.

“What?” She squeaked in astonishment as he came further into the lab.

“I said, can I help?”

“You’re joking.” The words escaped before she had even thought about them. Him? Help? He, well his company, inadvertently had caused this problem in the first place and now he wanted to help. “You want to help me?” She asked in a more moderate, though still incredulous, tone of voice.

“I hadn’t realised you were hard of hearing!” he said with a grin.

“I hadn’t realised you were half baked!” She replied flatly.

James decided to step over that minefield. He came closer, picked up a few leads, “I’ve used this equipment before. I have an engineering background.” He enlightened her as he replaced the items he’d picked up.

Why was he offering to help her? He had plans to spend the evening with a more accommodating, pleasantly gentle, highly sophisticated woman. His type of woman. They would have a nice meal somewhere, a bottle of wine shared, some coffee, pleasant conversation, delightful company, and maybe even sex. So, why was he still here? With her? Not his type of woman.

Still she just looked at him, looking for an ulterior motive.

“Show me what to do.” His blue gaze pinned her. She stared, she could feel her thought processes fade away, as she drowned in piercing cobalt blue eyes. They weren’t scowling, glaring or intimidating her. Her mind went blank.

It was a very unreal feeling. One she wasn't used to. Totally new, absolutely frightening. Definitely not adrenalin. She couldn't work with him. Definitely not.

"Well?" He prompted when she had continued to just look at him.

"That won't be necessary." She replied stiltedly as she snapped herself out of the trance she felt drawn into.

She was just tired, that was all, sheer tiredness. There was nothing attractive about him. Nothing. He had gorgeous eyes, a great body, and a wicked smile but beyond that, nothing! She had never been interested in appearances, never. Not him. Not now. No.

"Stop playing the martyr." He replied in reasonable tones as he straddled a stool far too close for Sasha's comfort.

She edged away. He noticed, but said nothing.

"Look," She felt hemmed in, she needed space, she got to her feet, muscles thundered into awareness, but she had more immediate concerns "I know you probably feel guilty about the...."

James shot to his feet, the stool tipped over, he ignored it, "What?" He roared contemptuously, and it was loud enough to drown out the clatter of the stool hitting the floor. "I don't have anything to feel guilty about." He moved in closer, backing her into a corner, closing all avenues of escape.

The woman really did have a knack for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. She might look like an angel but she had the mind of the corrupt. And how did she manage time and again to find the right button to press?

"You cut off our power." She retaliated, when she realised that her back was pressed against the work bench and that he had placed his arms on either side of her. Caveman tactics. An intimidating maneuver. He knew exactly what he was doing to her, of that she had no doubt. She didn't like it one little bit. But instead of standing her ground, she leaned away.

”You guys were warned in advance.” He bellowed, even though he was a scant inch away from her face. “I can’t help it if some academics can’t bloody read and type simple fucking English.” He flared. “Next time we’ll leave it on for you to electrocute yourselves!” He removed his arms when he realised that he was caving in to her taunts.

James took a deep breath and glared at her. Sasha stuck her chin out, folded her arms and glared back. Slowly he realised he had stopped focusing on her temper and was taking stock of her almond shaped eyes and even more alarming, her perfect mouth. He began leaning in toward her. Then caught himself. She was so not his type. What the hell was going on here? He shook his head.

Sasha misread that movement. She took it as a warning. “I’m not in any mood to argue with you Mr Lonergan.” She inched off the work bench, relieved that he had backed off.

“I don’t believe it. You are always argumentative.” He grumbled as he spun away, raking a hand through his hair and taking a deep breath. Then he pivoted back, his eyes making contact with hers. “Your middle name is probably cantankerous. You are the most ornery, rambunctious, wild, ill mannered, unruly, rude, recalcitrant...” he was on a roll and he was moving in her direction again.

Sasha watched in open mouthed shock as he continued to advance on her, both literally and physically.

“I’m not!” She hissed defiantly when she realised he had a whole glossary on the theme. He was closing in on her so she side stepped him quickly. She wasn’t about to be trapped again. He spun around, following her progress with narrowed eyes.

“Sure as hell are!” He retorted and continued to track her. “You’re doing it again. Right now.”

“It takes two.” Sasha looked ready to thump him. She folded her arms and stared at him in hostile silence. She



stopped backing away from him and stood her ground. Her eyes flashed indignation. Her mouth stayed shut.

“Now, are you going to show me what to do, or do I carry you out of this room kicking and screaming?”

“Try it.” She challenged in a bare whisper.

She saw him think about it. Then she watched him regulate his breathing and control his temper.

James seriously considered physically picking her up and carrying her out. No doubt she would kick up hell if he did that, but he was tempted. She was feisty, he knew that. She was obstinate, that much was demonstrated. But she was also bone tired, and that didn’t appear to have registered in her consciousness. That thought mellowed him.

“I am not averse to throwing you over my shoulder and carrying you out. But, I came to help you.” He reminded her pseudo pleasantly. “This,” he gestured toward the bench, “Finishing whatever is obviously crucial.” His tone was gentle, as he added, “Two of us could finish this a lot quicker. It’s as simple as that. Now do you want my help or not?” The words were delivered in a careless nonchalant tone, but his eyes were verbalising his intention to carry out his threat if need be. It was not an idle threat.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want to help?”

“I don’t owe you an explanation. Do you want help or do I carry you out?”

Sasha held his gaze. His stare never wavered. She could see that he fully intended to carry her out if need be. That made her indignant because she knew that he would succeed if he tried. He was bigger, and she was drained.

“Fine.” She conceded without much grace. She hadn’t come this far with her research only to loose it all

because of one intimidating bully. She poked her tongue at her cheek, as she thought about the work that had been lost.

“Fine, what?” He cocked an eyebrow at her and his cobalt eyes continued to hold her transfixed. But at least he was almost smiling.

“Fine, if you want to spend your Friday night playing with CROs who am I to stop you.” She dropped her gaze and pretended to look at her screen. It was as she’d left it, a faint green light gliding across the darker green grid. But it was impressed with his reflection. Damn. “Obviously you don’t have a social life.”

He checked the smile. Not exactly the most generous thank you he had ever received. But then what was he expecting? She was simply running true to form. Accusations not apologies were her forte. Rudeness and temper her hallmarks. She wouldn’t know graciousness if it announced itself. So why was he offering to help her? Before the thought could rattle him he righted the wooden stool he’d knocked over earlier.

“So start explaining what you want done.” Once more he straddled the stool.

Instinctively, Sasha moved away. She worked with guys all the time, but this one cramped her personal space, it wasn’t something she was used to. Not this type of awareness. Perhaps it was shame. She wasn’t proud of her behaviour, her unconscionable attack on him had been churlish and she was in the wrong. She felt nervous because she was humiliated. Yes, that was it, she was mortified that she’d made such a fool of herself. Pleased with her analysis she prepared herself to work alongside him.

Feigning nonchalance Sasha walked stiffly over to pick up the spare CRO. She dragged along some leads as well. She had to reach past him to connect up the CRO and she took extra care to make sure she didn’t make any contact with him. He didn’t budge an inch. She gave him a

pointed look. He looked right back at her. She could see the challenge in his eyes.

“Do you mind?” She asked acerbically, when he continued to hold his ground and forced her to reach over his arm to get to the socket on the wall.

He moved his arm, but smiled knowingly, “Am I making you nervous?”

Sasha sent him a speaking look, but refused to answer such a loaded question.

Pointedly she said, “We’re working on electroluminescent materials. For flat screens.”

Sasha reached behind her to retrieve a two inch glass plate, “These have been coated with sulphide slurries and we’re measuring the rate of decay.” She gave him the plate and he scrutinised the slurry as if it was a precious metal. “Your power cut may have caused a surge,” He ignored her deliberate provocative jibe, “so we need to check the plates before we reconnect them to the test bracket.” She attached the crocodile clips, “Just take a note of the voltage, if it’s over this,” she indicated a small line across the screen. “bin it.”

She flicked him a look. “It’s monotonous and as you can see,” She gestured toward the bin full of broken glass plates. “a touch demoralising.” She placed a heap of glass plates beside him, “ok, go ahead, I’ll watch you do a couple.” Folding her arms across her chest she waited for him to do just that.

James flicked her a sardonic look, it didn’t exactly need the brains of Einstein or the brawn of Stallone to clip, read and unclip the plates. He didn’t move, but his eyes very eloquently told her what she could do.

“Am I making you nervous?” She asked sweetly, holding his look with clear mockery.

The question wasn’t lost on James. He couldn’t help the grin. Still grinning he turned to face the screen. Sasha watched as he did a few slides. Long fingers clipped the

plates on, he noted readings and then unclipped the crocodile clips. He was dexterous, sure, and his movements were economical. No wasted energy here.

She noticed that his fingers were ring less. That didn't mean that he wasn't married. Married? What did that have to do with her? Since when had she started looking at men to see if they were single? Let alone men who provoked her on purpose.

Angry with the track her thoughts had taken she snapped, "Great." He flicked her a doubtful look. She pointed to a slip of paper. "Every batch of ten you verify note on here. Clip them into the bracket as you go along. Any you discard note here. If we reach that number, the minimum limit, we stop."

"Why?"

"Because if we've lost more than a quarter our research is invalid."

James wished he hadn't pursued that line. She was glowering at him again. He had to remind himself that it wasn't his fault.

Sasha shifted her stool, moving it even further away from him. He noticed the stratagem, she ignored the ironic look he threw her. She was not the insecure type, well not until she'd met this man.

She rushed into speech to cover her sudden paranoia.

"I calibrated your machine earlier this morning. It was a bit of a panic actually. The one I was working with died on me. Probably reflected the way I was feeling." Her muscles protested as she prepared to sit down.

Judiciously she gave every muscle time to brace for the shafts of penetrating pain. Shards of agony pierced through her sentient state. She shifted on her seat as her body complained and her mind recognised and rebelled against the position it had been forced to adopt recently for quite lengthy periods of time. Every single muscle seemed to throb in agonising protest.

James watched her covertly. He saw the severity of pain she was doing her best to conceal. He could hear the suffering in her voice, and could see it manifest in her actions. He wanted to drag her home. Obstinate woman. He should have picked her up and taken her home. She was too stubborn for her own good.

Clearly her body had had enough, the signals were there. He'd seen the quickly hidden grimace when she had gingerly lowered herself to sit on the hard wooden stool. He saw her blink back tears. He'd watched, surreptitiously, the way she had shifted cautiously, moving prudently, trying to find a more comfortable position. From the strain he saw in her posture, there clearly wasn't one left.

She was a wreck. Sheer indomitable will power was keeping her going, that and the stubborn streak she possessed. The woman did not know the meaning of the words temperate or reasonable.

She should be at home, in bed, or soaking in a hot tub, or having a massage. The images his thoughts conjured up had him snapping at her, "Bloody pigheaded!"

She flicked him a derisive look but said nothing as she continued to dexterously check the connections of her own CRO again. Her fingers felt arthritic. The tedious repetitive activity of the last thirty hours were taking their toll. She was working on sheer reflex, fighting the exhaustion and pain.

They worked in almost total silence. For about an hour neither of them said anything. In that period of time the only other sound was the clicking of metal against glass every time they changed plates. An hour later he asked about a test plate that registered very close to the calibration line.

"Is this one ok?"

Sasha moved slowly and cautiously as she leaned across to look at his CRO. She tried to keep all actions to a minimum. James squashed the insulting remark he was

about to make when he saw the effort it took for her body to move those few scant inches. Her dark eyes were fathomless pools of pain.

She shook her head. “Bin it.”

The signal was too close to the line.

The plate was discarded. Painstakingly slow she moved back to be in a position to view her own screen. She was almost at the end of her physical and mental limits. Every single transition was excruciating, like having shards of glass ground into the muscle.

“Kia Ora!” Called Sam as he sauntered into the laboratory. “You still here?” He shook his head in mild reproach.

“Don’t start Sam.” Sasha warned him with a smile that had taken a lot of effort. Sam held two chocolate chip biscuits out to her.

“The guys said you were still here. Thought I’d get you your rations!” He glanced across at James, “Didn’t realise you had help.”

Sasha rolled her eyes at him. She knew exactly what was going to happen when she told him who her helper was. The rumour mill would have a field day.

“Sam this is James Lonergan.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “The one you...”

“Yes, thank you Sam.” She cut him off. James smiled at the security guard. Sasha began to get tentatively to her feet. She needed her purse. “My bag’s in the office. Hang on and I’ll pay you for those cookies. I am starving.” The frissons of pain had her clenching her hands, as she fought the tears.

“Then go home.” Sam told her bluntly.

“My sentiments exactly.” James added his two cents worth. “You try telling someone idiotically obstinate to do something sensible.” Sam chuckled. Sasha was almost on her feet. She ignored them. It was taking an immense

effort just to move. Swearing under his breath, James reached for his wallet. “How much are they?” He nodded toward the biscuits.

“Two dollars each.” Sam handed over the biscuits.

“Don’t you dare pay for them.” Sasha protested, having finally made it to her feet.

“Sit down before you fall down.” James handed Sam the money. “We can settle this later.”

Sam thanked James, then announced, “I’d better keep going. I’m running late tonight.” He shook his head, “And you go home, soon!”

“As soon as I can.” Sasha promised and began to inch back toward the stool. “Thanks Sam.”

“No problem, but I’m not bringing you another tomorrow.”

“She won’t be here tomorrow. I’ll see to that.” James told the security guard. Sam grinned. Sasha glowered but said nothing.

Two hours later, when his body began to protest, James stretched. The muscles along his lower back screeched in complaint. He glanced across at her. She was taut, her muscles frozen in what he knew must be intolerable agony.

“How long have you been doing this?” He completed his stretch and turned to face her. He was tempted to give her shoulders a massage. But he wasn’t sure whether that would cause more pain. And he wasn’t sure about her reaction. He hunched his shoulders then pressed them back before he rotated them. He felt the knots and knew he’d be sore from sitting for so long.

“What?” She asked without turning her head as she continued to mechanically change the glass plates. She’d always thought she had a well padded butt, but now she knew better. All she felt was the bone of her posterior pressed against the wood of the seat. She ached all over. Ache was too tame a word she decided. She felt as if she

was being branded. Her fingers cried out for respite, her back throbbed from the pain of sitting on a hard seat for so long, her eyes were red and sore from being forced to stay open and peer at a thin filmy incandescent line.

She wanted to curl up and go to sleep. No, not curl up. Stretch out, lay languidly prone. Allow someone to decadently knead out all the knots and kinks. Someone with firm hands, to massage deeply. Someone with long fingers to caress and loosen up the tightly bunched fibre masquerading as her muscle. Some one like Lonergan.

Startled she shifted abruptly. Damn. Her body screamed itself into awareness. Unbearable pain shot through, touching every nerve ending with a torrent of flames, almost reducing her to tears. She bit down on her lip. The spasm worked itself through.

“This research?” He prodded, as he arched his back. Sasha caught sight of the movement in her peripheral vision.

She studiously avoided looking at him directly, she said, “I’d hoped we were almost finished with it.” She wanted to shrug, but knew instinctively that it would cause immense pain. “I got the contract about a year and a half ago.”

“Does it have any practical use?” He couldn’t resist baiting her. She appeared to be able to concentrate so easily on her task, while he had been working hard to keep his mind on the mundane repetitive task, rather than dwell on the shape of her mouth, anticipate what it would feel like to kiss her.

He had been fantasising about that full bottom lip. Imagining the way he could kiss her. Trying hard not to put thought into action. He had given up trying to fathom out why he wanted to kiss this woman. Exhaustion.

She snorted at that, “Of course.” she threw a plate into the bin just as James also tossed his plate in. “They’re the materials in flat screen televisions and things.” She threw



him a haughty condescending look, before she made a note of the discarded plate.

He grinned, then reached across and added his discarded plate to the list. "I read about it somewhere. Some problem with trying to get the red colour to last or something. A zinc phosphor base with added impurities." He met her statement with an insight she wasn't expecting.

Sasha stopped unclipping the plate and turned, very slowly, to look at him in total amazement. He chuckled at her surprise. She had amazingly eloquent eyes. Her absolute disbelief was written clearly in those bloodshot eyes.

Abashed, Sasha smiled. It was the first time she had smiled at him. A smile just for him. The mouth he had been thinking about for the last two hours formed a smile that was divine. Gloriously divine. No wonder men keeled over.

James was winded. He felt as if he had just been kicked in the gut. Breathless. The woman was lethal. He shifted his cobalt gaze off her lips and back up to her jet black eyes.

"So you read research journals." She gibed, teasing lights glinted in the jet black pupils. "Who'd have thought it. I figured all you construction guys read were top shelf magazines."

"Sure, like I figured you were the quiet docile type." He fired back automatically, his eyes now totally enthralled by the alluring woman in front of him. Even though exhausted she could still ensnare. It was her eyes, he decided, or perhaps her mouth, or that smile.

No wonder all those guys; the professor, his construction workers, the security guard fell over themselves. She must have smiled. James knew how they felt now. He was trapped, moth to a candle, total fascination.

Sasha laughed, knowing he was teasing her, she suddenly felt quite liberated. He smiled.

For a minute Sasha stopped working, she rubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hand and then stretched very, very, slowly. James swallowed as he watched her stretch. Sublime grace, so unembellished and candid, a feline seductiveness that she appeared to be totally oblivious to. That, James suddenly realised, was her power; her innocence in the face of such raw sensuality. Not just her smile. Her natural allure was the fact that she didn't realise the impact she had on mere mortals like him. Felled by innocent seduction.

“Unusual name, Carvalho?” James rushed into speech, suddenly vigilant about his reflections and analysis of her psyche and disconcerted by the fact that he was being sucked in.

Sasha being used to this line of questioning, simply said, “Why don't you just ask where I'm from?”

Most people were confused by her Portuguese sounding surname and her Indian appearance.

“I assumed you were kiwi.” He retorted sublimely flippant. She would be a New Zealander.

“I was born in Uganda.”

”Doesn't explain the name.” He objected blithely.

“I'm Portuguese Indian.”

“Goan?”

Once again Sasha turned to look at him in amazement. “You've heard of Goa?” She inquired in surprise.

“Small section of land in India ruled by the Portuguese since the fourteenth century, taken over by India in 1961, considered to be a hippy's paradise since the 70s, glorious beaches, has a drugs problem due to the tourist culture and corruption. Yeah, I've heard of Goa.”

He summarised what he knew and smiled smugly at her look of awe.

“Well you sure do read some diverse stuff.” She capitulated candidly. “I’m impressed.” She added honestly.

“About ten years ago some mates and I planned on going there as part of our OE, but we did Europe and a few jaunts through Africa, then ran out of money. So we had to come back to Godzone!”

“My overseas experience was a total calamity.’ Sasha told him ingenuously, “But I did manage to get to Goa.” She shook her head sadly, “It was so sad. So much squalor and poverty living alongside grandiose hotels catering to the tourist dollar, franc or pound. The locals were excluded, the waste dumped in their back yard. It was horrible.”

He nodded, “So I heard.” He tossed away another plate. “Pity really. Heard it was the closest thing there was to paradise.”

“That’s what dad used to say.” She agreed wistfully.

“So you were born in Uganda?”

Sasha nodded, “We were part of the group that got kicked out by Idi Amin.” She carefully slid in another plate and clipped it to the electrodes.

“Must have been rough.” She heard the sincerity.

“I don’t remember much of it. I was a toddler.”

“What brought you to Godzone?”

“Oh, Dad knew a Goan guy here. They were apparently really good friends in Africa. I think they’d been best men at each other’s weddings or something. He’d emigrated years before. New Zealand was one of the nations who offered to take in a quota of refugees. So we came here.”

“You seem to have coped well.”

Sasha grimaced in remembrance. “Things were a bit tough for a while. Dad had to retrain. His teaching

qualification wasn't accepted here. But we did ok after that.”

Sasha handed him another pile of glass plates as he had finished the pile she had given him earlier. He noticed that she had no ring jewellery.

“You aren't married then?” James changed plates quickly. Why the hell had he asked her that? His thoughts had materialised as words and he wasn't quick enough to stop them escaping.

Sasha giggled at the frank question. “Are you chatting me up?” She teased, unexpectedly pleased.

“Not bloody likely!” He torpedoed the suggestion with so much force and conviction that Sasha was momentarily stunned.

She released the crocodile clip violently. The glass plate disintegrated with the impact. Disgusted with herself she hurled the remnants of the glass plate into the bin. Stupid, stupid, stupid, she remonstrated with herself. He was hardly likely to chat up a woman who had been so recklessly insulting.

“I thought Indian women marry young. I was surprised to see you weren't wearing a ring.” He continued, ignoring her body language. She was giving out humiliated but angry signals, which he was picking up clearly. Obviously she was furious again. Him and his big mouth.

“Well you thought wrong. I'm Goan for a start.” She mumbled quietly, totally demoralised, “And I am young!” She muttered as she flung two more shards of glass into the bin. She slid another glass slide beneath the clips. This time she was more careful as she attached metal to the plate, readying it for the check.

James glanced surreptitiously across, noticed that she was glaring at the CRO and decided that he'd better not say anything. They had been talking amicably until that thoughtless remark of his.

They resumed working in silence. Half an hour later she broke the silence when she suddenly said, “Thanks. You can go now.”

Her dismissal was out of the blue and it caught James totally unprepared. He turned to study her, glanced past her, saw the stack of glass plates still to be done and scowled at her in puzzlement.

“What about those?” He questioned, nodding at the glass plates beside her.

“I’ll finish up.” She stated indifferently and didn’t even bother to look in his direction. She was exhausted. And he’d been here a while. It had been good of him to offer, but he probably had plans for the evening. A date. He was bound to have something organised. She should release him from this.

“Why are you trying to get rid of me?” He questioned in restrained feigned calmness.

“It’s Friday night. You’ve probably got plans for this evening.” She stated haughtily as if she was doing him a favour. “Don’t let me keep you.” Still she didn’t look at him.

He laughed.

“Well,” This time she did turn to face him, it was a slow painful movement, “I mean, thanks and all that,” James quenched the sarcastic retort when he saw the tiredness and pain clearly etched in her eyes. “But I think you’ve more than made amends.” She even attempted a token smile.

“Not again.” He refused to take the bait, “I’ve got nothing to make amends for. It was your own department who screwed up.” He reached past her to retrieve a small pile of glass plates. This time she didn’t even make an attempt to move away from him, his hands brushed past her shoulders. He was tempted to shake some sense into her. He could only begin to imagine the pain she must be in, given the reaction his own muscles had just registered.

“And you still owe me an apology.” He took another plate. “Now stop trying to rile me and let’s get this finished.”

“I can finish it.” She replied stubbornly but she sounded tired.

“And we can finish it together in less time.” He retorted passively. He had her measure now. She shrugged slowly then turned with careful deliberation back to her CRO. Not quite as obstinate if handled well. He could deal with her brand of hassle. James smiled at the small victory.

They finished just after ten that evening.

## Chapter7

Sasha let out a whoop of unabashed delight when the last plate had been tested, then she sighed in relief and finally she groaned as her body made certain her mind knew exactly what it had been through.

Unbearable agony and deep seated fatigue swamped her. Muscles she had forgotten, deliberately banished to the farthest recesses of her mind were suddenly acknowledged. Their existence charged through her mind with searing intensity as they twinged into life. Aches Sasha had ignored for more than two days, burst through her exhaustion. Sasha closed her eyes and literally sagged, muscles spasmed in grievance and undiluted pain registered with every nerve, the result was sheer unadulterated agony.

All of it showed in her face as she clenched her jaws against the worst of the waves of torture. Her eyes watered. Using the heels of her hands, Sasha brushed away the tears that escaped. James did not notice, he was too busy stretching muscles that were registering their objection to the position he'd taken for the last couple of hours.

A minute later Sasha braced herself and tentatively got to her feet. Sasha waited a few seconds for the next wave of pain to subside then she turned her face toward him and mustered a genuine smile. "Thanks for helping me." She attempted a stretch, hunching her shoulders forward and then back, the pain was excruciating. Now if she could just take a step. It was torture just standing. Pins and needles warred with stiffness. Shockwaves of pain cascaded through every fibre.

Pain and tiredness mingled. She thought about simply sleeping in her office tonight, and head home tomorrow. She was out on her feet. She had done several overnights before but none of them had been more than twenty hours. A forty hour straight session was not

something she ever intended doing again. She hoped she never had to.

“No problem.” He frowned at her, seeing the fatigue in every fibre of her body and the soreness she was striving so hard to hide. She was physically and mentally debilitated. He could see intolerable agony mirrored in her jet eyes.

They had both shared the chocolate chip cookies that Sam had brought Sasha, but apart from that they had eaten nothing. If that was all she had been eating over the last two days she must be starving as well as exhausted. He’d only been here just over four hours and he was hungry, and his muscles were registering undiluted pain. She’d been here forty hours, how the hell was she still standing?

Part of him wanted to yell at her for such obstinacy and the other half wanted to wrap her in his arms and hug away the agony he saw.

“I’ll drive you home.” He told her curtly, trying to banish his thoughts and summon some good old fashioned protective antagonism.

“There’s no need,” She replied as she automatically switched off the CROs at the power mains and inched gingerly toward the far bench. “I’ve got my car here.” She stifled a yawn and arched her back tentatively. Her muscles screamed in silent pain and she froze into immobility to allow another frisson of torture to fade. She was going to be very sore for a long time.

”You aren’t in a fit state to drive.” James told her bluntly. He was tempted not to even bother to reason with her. James was ready to do what he should have done several hours ago. Pick her up and carry her out of here.

To his surprise, Sasha agreed with him. “Yes. I guess you’re right.” She stifled another yawn as she discarded her white lab coat, throwing the garment onto the bench. “I’ll call a cab.”



The lab coat slid to the floor, but Sasha didn't even attempt to retrieve it. She doubted she could bend and even if she did, she probably wouldn't be able to stand upright again. She certainly wasn't going to risk trying it. Not with the audience she had.

Automatically James reached for the lab coat, he folded it and placed it on the bench. "Stop being obstinate." Once again he studied the incongruous t shirt and overly loud shorts. Was this woman blind? The clothes were disheveled, she had been living in them for the last two days, but it wasn't just that. It was the fact that they were so glaringly uncoordinated. They clashed dreadfully. She had to be colour blind. That was his only explanation for her incompatible items of clothing.

Sasha caught his bewildered look as he continued to stare at her clothes. She grinned at him, knowing exactly what was going through his mind, "Well, as you asked so chivalrously, you may drive me home." She mocked.

He quirked a brow in recognition of her tone. "So graciously accepted."

It took a few minutes to switch off other electrical apparatus and to ensure that the right tags were left on some equipment for security verification. Initially she began to gingerly make her way round the lab to tag apparatus. By the time she had tagged the first one, James had discarded all notions of patience. He snatched the tags out of her hand, knowing that asking her if he could help would result in yet another discussion.

"Just tell me what to write and where to attach them." He ordered.

Sasha almost forgot her aching muscles as anger once again took hold. Just who the hell did he think he was?

"Don't even think about arguing with me." He told her brusquely before she could frame her sentence, "Because if you start, I will carry you out of here and to hell with your experiments." He moved closer, "I should have

done that hours ago. You're out on your feet and too bloody stubborn to admit it. So tell me what to write."

For a few tense seconds, both of them simply stood and glared.

"Now." He added coolly when she seemed inclined to wait him out.

"Overnight. 24" She snapped. "And you can attach it to that" She pointed at a quietly bubbling column that was in the fume cupboard. James ignored her tone as he turned to write her instructions on the small card. "I have to sign it or would you like to forge my signature?"

James couldn't help muttering "You really are the most ungrateful, rude bitch I've ever met." He thrust the wad of small cards at her. "Sign the bloody things."

Sasha did more than sign them, she completed the instructions to three more cards and then said, "The first goes on that bench, the second on the third retort stand in fume cupboard at the far end and the last one you can attach to yourself!"

James glanced at the third card before crushing it and shoving it into a pocket. "Not very original." He told her as he set off to attach the other two cards.

The experiments were back on schedule. That thought lightened her step as Sasha collected her duffel bag and her folder of notes. He was waiting for her by the door when she stepped out of her office.

"Ready?"

She nodded and held out a five dollar note to him. "Here."

He looked at the money, and then looked her in the eye. "Don't push your luck."

"It's for the biscuits." She reminded him.

"I know that. I can afford a few measly biscuits." He stood by the door. Sasha rolled her eyes, thrust the money

back in her purse and began to move toward him. She was, mentally and physically, too tired to argue.

Judiciously, allowing each spasm of pain to gorge its way through stiff muscles, she preceded him out of the lab. She walked awkwardly and very slowly, every move a painful reminder of muscles she had taken for granted.

James watched her with a fair degree of frustration. He wanted to pick her up and carry her, but he knew just what that would get him. Given the message on the tag, probably a retort stand up his ass or if he was lucky, just a black eye.

They switched off the lights as they walked slowly along the corridor. Minutes later they were out in the fresh but bracing air. Sasha shivered as the night air rifled through her flimsy clothing.

“This way.” He instructed tersely as he noticed her reaction and once again recalled her obstinacy. “Here.” He draped his jacket over her shoulders.

“Thanks.” She felt his warmth seep into her. “Who’d have thought after my little scene, that you’d have bought me dinner, given me your coat and would be driving me home on a Friday night?” She mused loudly and into the darkness as they walked ponderously toward his car. Without thinking she said “Didn’t you have a date for tonight?”

“None of your business.”

Sasha held her tongue.

Even though he wanted to hurry her along, they walked very slowly toward his car. James noticed how she moved cautiously, allowing her muscles to renew their acquaintance with movement. Once again he wanted to pick her up and carry her, but he wasn’t sure he’d be able to deal with the response, either hers or his.

She shelved her pride “I’m sorry about the things I said to you.”

“Yeah.” Was all he conceded.

“My mouth goes into action before brain gets into gear sometimes.” She continued.

“Really.”

They’d reached the car. He opened the passenger door. It took several painful minutes for her to persuade her body to contort and fold, in order for her to get into the car. Joints protested, muscles cramped and pain roared through her. She was in tears as tiredness and soreness warred for precedence. Once in the car, she put on her seat belt and sighed in relief as the leather seat cushioned her bottom. She dashed away the tears.

James swore silently into the darkness as he walked round the bonnet of the car. She was in agony and paying the price for her obstinacy. He should have carried her out hours ago, kicking and screaming if need be. She clearly didn’t know what was in her best interests. Bloody pigheaded!

James started the car, then with the engine idling turned to face her. “You are the most mule headed, perverse female I have ever met. Your body clearly had enough several hours ago. Why the hell couldn’t you just pack it in and go home? Your ego must be the size of the Harbour bridge if you think keeping your research going is crucial to the development of mankind and worth risking your health. You need a minder, someone who will ignore that ridiculous streak of obstinacy, some one who will beat some sense into you! You are...”

Sasha reached for her seat belt. “Excuse me.” She yelled loudly to stop the tirade, “I realise you haven’t quite finished, but if I’d known your offer of a ride home came with the lecture I would have chosen to walk.” She fumbled with the seat belt, in her haste, failing to snap it open.

“If you get out of this car I will physically pick you up and toss you into the boot.”

“Try it!” She snapped in frustration, anger and sheer wrath.

“Just give me the directions to your home.”

“Get stuffed!” The seat belt finally clicked undone. His hand reached automatically for the belt clip, he grasped it firmly, effectively keeping her in her seat as he tugged it hard against her chest. His face was inches from hers.

They glared at each other for a full minute.

“Where do you live?” The words teased across her face, she could feel the anger corralled within.

She continued to glare but said nothing.

“I’m going to give you one more chance. Take it.” He gritted and inched closer. “Where do you live?”

Tightlipped with pique, she gave him instructions to the cottage. James put the seat belt clasp back into the slot with barely restrained anger, he flicked her a silent pugnacious look and then put the car into gear. They left the University car park in tangible hostile silence.

Their truces never seemed to last long. How the hell had he got involved with such a stubborn woman? Involved? He wasn’t involved with her. He was just seeing her home, and that would be the end of their interaction.

Sasha lived just beyond a small town called Cambridge. A fifteen minute drive if that, but, she was sound asleep within minutes of the car moving out of the car park. She must have been working on adrenalin and will power, James finally decided, when he glanced over to look at her. She was sound asleep, her head cushioned by her shoulder, breathing quietly and regularly in deep sleep as fatigue finally took over.

The journey to the cottage was brief. There was very little traffic on the back roads she had curtly directed him to take. The only time he’d stopped was to open the gates leading to an unsealed road which led to her cottage. Even bumping along the uneven rutted dirt track did not wake her. She was out.

Fifteen minutes after leaving her laboratory, he pulled up in front of a small single storey house.

The lights were on.

That surprised James. Perhaps he had the wrong place. James was about to wake her to find out if she lived here, when he changed his mind and decided to knock at the door. He got out of the car and walked up two low steps onto the small verandah and over to the door. He knocked loudly and waited.

A few seconds later the door was answered by a tall man, who James assumed was Goan. There weren't that many Goan people around, so James deduced he was at the right place.

"Mr Carvalho?" James inquired, realising this man was too young to be her father and knowing that Sasha wasn't married, he presumed that he was a brother. Wishful thinking. The man looked quizzically at James.

"No, I'm Luke Montoya." The tall man told him. "Can I help?"

"You live here?" The question had escaped without volition, and the tone was registering on the suspicious side.

"Sometimes." The tall man responded flatly, giving very little away. They stood almost eye to eye, questions waiting to be asked, each man taking stock of the other. Warily cautious.

James finally conceded "Does Dr Carvalho live here?"

"Normally." Luke narrowed his eyes in concern. "She isn't here at the moment." Was this an old boyfriend of Briar's? And what was he doing calling round at this time of the night? Luke adopted a closed off expression.

"She's asleep in the car." James announced. For some unexplainable reason James was angry once again.

"Really?" As far as Luke was concerned, Briar was in Otago. He knew, he'd left her there barely five hours ago. There was no way Briar was here. Luke had taken the last flight out. Logic worked its way through, and Luke came to the conclusion that this man was talking about Sasha.

Luke had assumed she was asleep in bed. He hadn't bothered to check, because it was late and he'd just got in.

"Yes, really." For some reason James wanted to strike the man, his tone conveyed his thoughts. "She's just done a two day shift at the lab. She's exhausted." He announced with barely contained hostility that verged on the accusatory. Why hadn't this man stopped Sasha from working such ludicrous hours? Or at least been there with her. Why hadn't she told James about Luke Montoya when he'd asked if she was married?

Luke was already stalking toward the car, muttering angrily beneath his breath. He opened the door and reached into the car to undo the seat belt. Without any preamble he lifted her out of the car and strode back toward the house.

Sasha slept on.

Luke mumbled furiously as he walked toward James. "Carvalho women!" He stopped beside James. "Thanks for bringing her home." He indicated Sasha with his head, "Too bloody headstrong." He muttered with feeling. "Hope it wasn't out of your way."

"I live nearby, on the other side of Cambridge." James feigned casualness. He didn't like the way the other man had taken command, had taken her. He didn't like the way he was holding her. As if she belonged there. He just didn't like the other man at all. He seemed too familiar. James was furious with himself. Why was he getting so uptight about it? She was not his concern.

"Thanks. I'm going to read her the riot act when she wakes up." Luke told James. "If she wakes up."

James was at a loss, he wasn't sure what to say. He had several questions that required answers, but he knew he had no right to launch an inquiry. He shook his head. "Personally I suggest you drill some sense into her."

"I'm tempted." Luke responded with feeling.

“Good night.” James turned and headed back for the car. He heard Montoya’s automatic response but didn’t stop to acknowledge it.

Why hadn’t she said she was living with someone? Why should she have said anything? What did it matter to him anyway?

Surprisingly, an uncomfortable feeling gnawed intensely, insistently nagging, as he drove home. He recognised jealousy. He couldn’t fancy her, could he? He’d be insane if he did. He wasn’t mad. Not yet! No he didn’t fancy her. He was just tired. He felt sorry for her. Yes that was it, he was sorry for her. And he wondered why that guy hadn’t put his foot down and stopped her from working that ridiculous shift. Why hadn’t he gone looking for her when she hadn’t come home? He could have helped her. James knew he’d have been at the lab instantly, not sitting at home, waiting.

As James drove up his driveway he noticed the lights were on in the main house. He tried to shift his mood, took his time unloading the boot and walked slowly through the garage to the door at the far end. It connected to the utility room and from there to the kitchen.

“Hey!” Nathan kept stirring the pan but turned to greet James, “You’re either late home or early back from a date.” Nathan grinned, “Speaking of date, someone called Eloise phoned. She left her number, asked if you’d phone her back when you got in.”

James threw his jacket on the back of a chair and headed for the wall mounted phone.

“She left her mobile number.” Nathan nodded at the pad on the breakfast counter.

James dialed the number and waited. As he waited he asked his brother, “What are you doing here?”

“On my way to the Coromandel, thought I’d detour, see....”



James held up his hand to stop his brother, “Hello Eloise, James here.” There was a smile in his voice as he listened to her reply. “No, just got in.” There was silence. “Yes. You could say that.” Another silence. “Now?” He glanced at his watch, just after half ten, “Sure.” He hesitated then said, “Why not come here. I’ll put the coffee on.” Another silence. “You don’t have to do that.” Again a pause. “No, I haven’t had time to eat.” He smiled. “That would be great. But don’t go to any trouble.” He waited. “Ok, ok. Great. See you in fifteen minutes.” He hung up.

Nathan looked at the saucepan of scrambled eggs. “I was putting some scrambled eggs on toast. You want some?”

James shook his head. “No. Eloise is bringing supper.”

“Ah.” Nathan paused, then added, “You ok?” He looked intently at his brother. James nodded. “You don’t seem happy about something. You could have always ignored the message to call back.”

“What? Why?”

“To avoid her.”

“Why would I want to avoid her?”

Nathan shrugged. “OK, let’s start this conversation again. Is it a work or women problem?”

James smiled as he ran a hand through his hair, “Both.”

“That’s why you’re late.”

James nodded. “I’ve just spent the last four hours helping a shrill tempered virago, who was too stubborn to see she was exhausted, is so vitriolic she makes paint stripper taste like chocolate ice cream, is so pig headed she can’t take well intentioned advice. And she has the social skills of a wart hog.”

Nathan opened his mouth, then closed his mouth. Then he sputtered.

“Oh, yeah, and earlier she called me a tight assed paper shuffling conceited despot!”

Nathan's mouth opened, closed, opened, again, and then he just shook his head and laughed. "What? You are going to have to explain all that again. I didn't make head nor tail of it."

James turned a chair, straddled it and sat facing his brother. He rubbed his face then propped his elbows on the chair back and laid his arms along the back.

"So?" Nathan prompted. "Start at the beginning. Who are you talking about?"

"The beginning." James mulled as Nathan cut into his toast and scrambled eggs. "Dr Sasha—I'm so wonderful-everyone-does-whatever-I-want-when-ever-I-want-however-I-want-because-I-am-a supermodel-working-as-a-scientist-Carvalho." James told his brother, who nearly choked on his eggs.

Nathan stopped spluttering, got up, got glass from the cupboard and said. "Dr Sasha Carvalho. You want a drink?" He reached in for another glass.

"I need a double whisky." James told him Nathan ignored that request, and filled both glasses with water. "Put the kettle on would you." Nathan put the glasses down on the counter and filled the kettle.

"So who is she? What does she look like?" He plugged the kettle in and flicked the switch.

"Dressed or undressed?" James wished the words back but too late. Nathan grinned.

"You've seen her undressed?" He challenged with a raised eyebrow. "Fast work bro!" Then he picked up the two glasses.

"No." James admitted. Not in real life. "She's tall, for a woman, about 5.10, maybe over. Stunning. Goan. Black hair, black eyes, olive skinned."

"Built?" Nathan prompted, given the lack of information he was getting.

“Haven’t a clue. She was wearing a stained, tatty off white lab coat, over ill matched, ill fitting surf shorts and this ludicrous t-shirt.” James scowled as he remembered.

“What does she do?”

“Materials scientist.”

“So how did you meet her?”

“Not through choice, I can tell you.” James reached for the glass Nathan had put in front of him. “She barged into the portacabin two days ago, practically threw mud at Harve’s secretary and then started to rant at me about cutting off power to her lab without giving her notice.”

Nathan put the fork of scrambled eggs down. He looked at his brother. “And.”

“And it turned out that a, she thought I was Harve and b, her department had been given notice.” He sipped his water, and before Nathan could prompt him to continue he said, “We told them the 2<sup>nd</sup>, their admin people sent out a memo with 22<sup>nd</sup> on it. The confusion stuffed up an experiment she was running.”

Nathan nodded. “Can see why she’d be mad.”

“She should have checked her facts. Instead of acting like a hallucinating two year old having a full blown tantrum.” James got up, refilled his glass. “We’d chosen this week, because most of the people in that block were away on their hols. She’s the only one with a lab there. She had six weeks notice.”

“Except she didn’t.” Nathan pointed out.

“Not our fault.”

“So what happened?”

“I complained to her HOD, thought she was a student. She, unlike Eloise, doesn’t know the first thing about being an academic. Doesn’t dress like one, doesn’t behave like one and I’d say doesn’t have the brains for one. But looking like she does, I guess none of that matters. Even when she was hauled in to explain, you’d

still think she was the one hard done by. She has men eating out of the palm of her hand. She just has to breathe and they practically swoon at her fucking feet.”

Nathan pushed the scrambled eggs away. They’d be cold by the time he’d get to them, and eating them he’d probably choke, if James carried on.

“So then what?”

“I asked for an apology.”

“And did she apologise?”

“Not exactly.” James muttered. The door bell rang. “That must be Eloise.” He got to his feet.

“So how did you end up working with her this evening?”

“I’ll tell you later.” James strolled toward the front of the house. Nathan frowned. Then he picked up his cold scrambled eggs and scraped the congealed mess into the bin.

A few minutes later, James walked back into the kitchen, preceded by someone who looked like Nicole Kidman. Her red gold hair was a mass of ringlets. Her green eyes, were carefully and artfully coloured to bring out the shape. Her lips were coated in a burnt orange lipstick. She was dressed in a beautiful black cocktail dress that just skirted her knees, left her shoulders hosting two shoestring straps and covered her body like a second skin. Nathan flicked a look at the woman and then James. Well at least he knew what took them that long to make it from the front door to the kitchen. James was wearing some of her lipstick.

“Nathan, this is Eloise. Eloise, my brother Nathan.”

With ingrained confidence she held out her hand. Nathan shook it, smiled. Her slim fingers were cool and her clasp was light.

“Hello.” He grinned.

“Hello.” She replied conservatively “I brought supper.” Though she showed him the bags, he got the impression that she hadn’t been expecting him to be here.

“Very kind.” He said, then thought he should help his brother. “I kind of dropped in on James, unexpected. On my way to the Coromandel.” She said nothing. “You live locally?” he asked.

“Not far.” She replied then placed the bags on the breakfast counter. With her back to Nathan, and with a twinkle in his eye, he tapped his lips as he looked at his brother. James glared, but wiped surreptitiously at his lips before she saw him.

“Why don’t you two head for the lounge. I’ll get the coffee on.” James held open the door, “Nathan is a writer. So you’ll have something to talk about while I get this organised.”

Nathan headed for the door.

“Coffee, or tea?” James asked.

“Coffee would be absolutely fabulous.” She purred.

“Tea for me.” Nathan replied and banked his grin. Then they both left the room.

James rubbed at his lips. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t kissed her before. And it had been pleasant enough. But it lacked something. Flashing jet eyes materialised. He swore softly. Angry with himself he reached for three mugs. Got the percolator on and opened the bags of supper that Eloise had brought.

Five minutes later he took supper through to the lounge. Two hours later, he went to bed. Alone. Nathan had excused himself very quickly, after drinking his tea, on the pretext of leaving early tomorrow. James thought it was his brother’s non too subtle way of leaving Eloise and James alone. Nathan, on the other hand, did it because he found Eloise to be tedious and a snob. When he told her he wrote thrillers, she smiled at him as if he was to be pitied. She’d never heard of him, but she didn’t

tell him that, instead she had been patronising and pretentious. She offered to put him in touch with her academic publishers. She apparently had published several books on medieval literature. She then launched into a monologue on the difficulties aspiring writers had and how often she had been approached. She offered to help as he was related to James.

## Chapter 8

“Afternoon lazy bones.” Luke called as Sasha sauntered sleepily into the through-lounge.

“When did you get in?”

“I carried you in last night. You were dead to the world.”

She stifled a yawn and continued walking toward him. “You could have at least undressed me.” She told him as she moved past him and into the kitchen. “My clothes stink!”

“You’re telling me!” Joked Luke. “I’m not surprised he didn’t want to carry you in.”

“Who?” Another yawn was quickly stifled. She knew exactly who. Her dreams were filled with ‘who’.

“Your blonde knight.”

“You met him?”

“Yup.”

Sasha peeked round the door, and chewed on her lower lip, “Did I really smell that bad?”

“Hey, you’d put ripe camembert to shame!”

“I’d had a busy couple of days actually.” Sasha growled defensively. Her brow furrowed as she wished for the umpteenth time that she hadn’t accepted the lift home. She should have taken a taxi. She’d probably drooled in her sleep, snored, and as Luke had just confirmed, spending a couple of days in the same clothes didn’t exactly leave one smelling of roses.

“And you didn’t have time to change?” He grinned at Sasha, sensing her rare lack of self-assurance, “Gross Sasha, real gross!”

Luke saw her frown deepen. “Was it really that bad?” She asked pensively her voice bare of the usual Sasha flippancy.

Luke was half tempted to say yes, tempted until he saw the look in her eyes. He had read similar messages in Briar's equally expressive eyes. He had found out, the hard way, that these women were a mass of contradictions; outwardly confident, inwardly self-conscious. But seeing Sasha without her usual confidence was a novelty. She was usually sassy, always able to deal with everything, generally flippant. Sasha rarely took anything seriously. He looked more closely.

"No, Sash, I was just having you on." He smiled at her, "You and Briar would have strung me up if I had undressed you for bed." He decided that it might be a good idea to change tack. "Although I was tempted to wake you to strangle you! What do you think you were doing? A forty eight hour shift, the blonde said. Are you nuts? We can't leave you for a minute can we?"

"Stop making a fuss. It was only forty hours!"

"Shit!" He threw her a reprimanding look. "You were dead to the world and had to be driven home? And who was that guy who brought you back?"

Sasha grimaced wryly "You won't believe the last couple of days I've had." She pushed long strands of jet black hair off her face, tucking the lengths behind her small ears.

"Are you stalling?" He taunted happily, seeing her eyes had once again resumed that deep twinkle only Sasha had.

"No, but I'm having a shower first."

She returned some twenty minutes later.

"Still stalling?"

"No," she pouted at him, before returning to the kitchen to pour herself a strong black coffee. "You want coffee?"

"No, and stop stalling." He called loudly from the other room. "Who was he?"



Sasha strolled back into the room, her dressing gown wrapped loosely around her, her hair still wet from the shower she had taken. She looked very young as she crossed her legs and sat on the sheep skin rug on the floor.

“His name is James Lonergan and he owns the construction operation. You know, those guys developing the new site.”

Luke nodded. “So?” He prompted wanting further details.

“So,” She continued after wiggling her eyebrows at him, “We sort of met a couple of days ago.”

“Fraternising with the workmen eh?” He was grinning at her, “You picked him up? I thought that wasn’t your style!”

She threw a cushion at him, “Actually I kinda lost my temper.”

“You lost your temper?” He sighed loudly, “Hey, why didn’t you give notice? I want to be there. I’ve heard heaps about that formidable temper!” Luke had indeed heard about Sasha’s rare but infamous temper. Once, when Briar was in a temper, he’d commented on how easy going Sasha was, and wondered why Briar hadn’t picked up some of her sister’s easy going virtues. He’d expected Briar to go ballistic. Instead she had laughed. Briar had taken great pleasure in telling him that Sasha had the worst temper in her family. But he had never seen her temper. Never.

“It’s not that bad.” She smiled at his look of disbelief. “Well, not normally!”

“That isn’t the way Briar or Grace or your folks tell it.” He reminded her with a hint of a challenge. “They say, rare, but impressive dynamite.”

Sasha’s lips quirked. “Actually this was dire.” Her smile turned to a pout, “I mean, one hundred per cent prime time total stuff up!” Her smile disappeared and two

creases marred an otherwise smooth brow, “In fact I might need your services as a lawyer.”

“Sounds good.” He prodded and waited for the details. “Tell me more!”

“I called him a toad, a jerk, a despot, an imbecile and a numbskull I think!”

”Who?” Luke sat upright, “Loneragan?” Shock was clearly evident in his dark eyes. The teasing glints in his eyes were replaced with avid earnestness. This was getting interesting.

For Sasha to call anyone names was possible, she usually addressed her family through pet names, but that was normally in good humour. But for her to insult some good looking guy, in anger, was something else.

All the men he’d ever seen in her company couldn’t help themselves. They fell all over her. She’d never have to insult them. She’d smile and they’d keel over, she’d speak and they’d sit up and beg, and if she was to just look at them for longer than two seconds, well there was no telling what they’d do for her. She’d never have to yell at a man.

”Yeah.” She scowled with revisited discord. “ ’Cept I didn’t stop there.”

”Oh Sash!”

“I just got carried away.” She quirked her eyebrows heavenward and rolled her eyes as she recalled the scene.

Luke was stunned. “Why?” This really wasn’t the woman he had come to know, as he had shared time with her sister and their family. This was a totally different person. The Sasha he knew was laid back, easy going and jovial.

Obviously something had gone wrong. Very wrong for her to lose her laid back equilibrium.

She sighed, remembering the episode as if it had happened a few minutes ago. “They cut power and..”

“Who did?” Luke asked trying to get all the facts. As a lawyer he was trained to be logical, gather all the information, then make an informed decision.

“The construction guys. They turned off the power to my building. The memo I had,” She stressed the latter as if it was the most significant aspect of the tale, “said it was due for the 22nd, but they’d cut it off on the second.” she shook her head, “So I stormed over there to have words with the foreman. That’s reasonable, under the circumstances, isn’t it?” She flicked Luke a questioning look.

He quirked a brow in response. “And?”

“Well,” Sasha shrugged, her self-assurance fading, “He wasn’t there and I ended up yelling at Lonergan.” Why did that sound so lame, now?

Luke hooted with laughter.

“I thought he was the foreman.” She tailed off lamely. She wrapped her arms around her waist and watched as Luke tried to prevent a stitch as he was laughing so hard.

“Good one Sash!” Luke’s sense of humour took over. He could imagine Sasha in full swing, based on descriptions her family had provided. He had yet to witness this rare event. But he could imagine that she would have been furious.

“Oh it gets better.” She told him candidly. Might as well get this over now. Luke would tell Briar and that would stop Sash having to repeat it and feel like a total idiot. Not that it would prevent her sisters from rubbing it in. “Apparently the construction firm had sent a letter about the power cut,” She glared at the rug and avoided Luke’s eyes, “with the right date on it, to the department.” She buried her head in her hands as she recalled the fracas of two days ago. “The power cut was for the 2nd.” She glanced up to see whether Luke was keeping up with the plot. He looked none the wiser. “Except the department’s typing pool typist hit the two twice! And no one checked

before the memos went out to the faculty staff or onto the notice board!” Sasha sighed.

Luke howled with unrestrained laughter “Oh God!” He finally stopped, just long enough to add, “I take it our man Lonergan has a sense of humour.”

“I don’t think he saw the funny side of it.” Sasha shook her head as she corrected him balefully, “You know me. By the time I’d calmed down and had time to review the whole day, after being summoned to the Prof’s office where I was officially reprimanded and advised to apologise.” She pushed strands of hair off her face as she finished off explaining what had happened, “Well, anyway, after all that, Lonergan was marching me over to Winiata’s secretary, to apologise to her” Sasha tried not to smile as she remembered the fiasco that followed. “But by this point, the whole debacle caught up with me.” She took a deep breath then continued, “I mean it really was a pigs mess, wasn’t it? I was actually thinking how Briar and Grace were going to find it hilarious. If and when I got round to telling them. And they’d probably tell me I deserved it. So there I was grinning about the whole farce.” Sasha twirled a lock of hair and bit her lip before saying, “But, Lonergan noticed me laughing. He did his nut.” She frowned. “I tried to explain, but he just accused me of trying to get round him.” She flicked Luke a glare to stop him laughing, before she added indignantly, “He had the gall to suggest that I slept my way to my career. Do I dress like I’m trying to use sex to make my way to the top? Ohhh, I could have decked him.”

“Ahh!” Luke said in an understanding tone, he knew how hard the three sisters had worked to get to where they were. He knew a bit about their start in this country. They’d had a tough childhood, making do with limited resources and quite dramatic changes in lifestyles. The girls had done well, as his prospective father in law had told him numerous times, and Luke agreed. They had, through sheer hard work and inherent intelligence.

Luke frowned in confusion. Things still didn't add up. "I think you missed something out."

"What?"

"How come he gave you a ride home?"

"Long story, but the gist of it is that his foreman insisted he come up and check on me. I think Sam, you know the security guy, the one who looks like Santa," Luke nodded blankly, but he knew better than to pursue that red herring, "well I think he told them I'd stayed over night."

"So?"

"So, he came to see if I was ok."

"A new age man!" Luke suggested sarcastically, while his male brain told him it was more likely that Lonergan just needed an excuse to see her again. Not much had changed after all.

"What?"

"Compassionate, caring, considerate!" Luke replied, knowing it was unlikely. More likely the guy fancied you.

"Bull! He just felt guilty!"

"Sasha he has nothing to feel guilty about." Luke pointed out rationally.

"He could have told me he wasn't Harve Winiata before I started doing my non compos mentis act!"

Luke grinned at her. "Life is never dull with you Carvalho women! I'll give you that! How the Goan community ever missed your formative years I don't understand. How I'm going to cope with the ones to come should be interesting!" He pointed to the corner table, her duffel bag lay on the table. "Our man compassion dropped off your hand bag and car earlier today."

"Really?" Sasha sounded dubious. She'd forgotten about her things.

“Yeah, he phoned, real early, to ask if it was ok if he delved into your bag for the keys. You left your bag in his car.”

“I left it?” Sasha questioned pointedly.

“Ok, I forgot to retrieve it when I carried you in. I was too busy trying not to strangle you!”

Sasha snorted but refrained from saying anything.

“Anyway, he drove the car here this morning and one of his men gave him a ride back.”

“Oh!” Sasha was momentarily flustered. “He shouldn’t have gone to all that trouble.” She thought he’d have done his best to avoid her.

“Actually Sasha, I think he was hoping to see you. He may be another conquest.”

“Sure, and Everest is below sea level!”

“No, seriously. I had the answer phone on and he sounded kind of hopeful when he started the message that was until I answered the phone. And he definitely grilled me when he dropped the car round this morning.”

“You have a fertile, warped, imagination.” She remonstrated affectionately, secretly pleased to hear that Lonergan might be interested. Then she remembered how he’d torpedoed her question about chatting her up. If he’d been interested, he’d have taken the line she’d thrown him.

“We’ll see.” Luke stated calmly, “All I know is the guy was checking me out. Had I known you long?- that kind of stuff.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Oh this and that!”

Sasha hurled another cushion at him. He ducked, but continued to grin at her.

“What’s there to tell? I didn’t give any secrets away.” He told her, smiling at her sulky expression.

“I don’t have any to give away.” She remonstrated brusquely.

“So I kept him guessing!” Luke teased without a shred of remorse. “It’s good for his soul!”

“I’ll remember to tell Briar you think it’s good for the male soul to keep them guessing.” Sasha threatened with her usual impudence. Luke’s smile disappeared and he groaned silently.

Early on Monday morning Sasha returned to the University. She collected her mail and then headed for the far portacabin.

Casey glanced at the door when she heard the firm knock and was clearly surprised to hear and see Sasha at the doorway. Casey braced herself for the meeting. Sasha chuckled ruefully at the blonde woman’s reaction.

“Can I help you?” Casey asked in a wary tone that suggested she had no intention of doing anything of the sort. Sasha smiled. She didn’t remember insulting this woman directly, but then, she probably said a lot of things she couldn’t remember. She did recall the flying flower pot. She saw it sitting in a new spot, well away from the door. Safety.

“I’m looking for Mr Lonergan.”

Casey quirked a brow at that, then she shrugged noncommittally. “He isn’t here.”

“When are you expecting him?”

“Difficult to say for sure.” Came the cool reply.

Sasha knew when she was being given the run-around. Hardly surprising after her last visit here.

“I see.” Sasha placed the bottle of wine on the desk. “This is for him.”

Casey snorted in disbelief and couldn’t help but exclaim, “You think a bottle of wine is going to pacify him?”

Casey shook her head. “The University might not look kindly on bribery. You should have been more,” She selected her words carefully, “thoughtful a week ago.”

“You’re right.” Sasha stopped smiling. “If I’d done some thinking, I wouldn’t owe half the campus apologies for last week. But the wine has nothing to do with my atrocious behaviour. It’s a thank you.” She spoke quietly, taking time to prop the small card against the bottle. “The disciplinary action is a matter of process. I doubt whether a dozen bottles of Bollinger would pacify him. My tongue got carried away.” She conceded honestly. “I deserve the complaint. I have to deal with that.” She shrugged, feigning an indifference that she was far from feeling. “But this is to thank him for his help on Friday night. I would have been stuck there for another twelve hours.” Sasha settled the card against the bottle, “Could you see that he gets it? Thanks.” Then she pivoted, ready to leave. She stopped, hesitated then turned and faced Casey, “And I don’t think I got to complete my apologies last time. I’m sorry about the plant and your blouse. I’ll pay for it to be dry cleaned. Send me the bill.” She stepped out of the portacabin.

Once again she left Casey at a loss for words. Casey had her pegged as a spoilt, undisciplined brat. She shook her head as she realised she would have to redefine Dr Carvalho. Casey was also confused by the fact that James had helped the woman. After their last meeting, Casey would have put money on the fact that Dr Carvalho was the last person James talked to, unless it was at a disciplinary meeting. She did not understand men. He had helped?

Sasha’s earlier good humour vanished as she realised she really was likely to be disciplined if he decided to follow the grievance procedure through the University’s council. Subdued, she headed for her own lab, head bowed, shoulders stooped, hands jammed in her pockets.

In her mind she was methodically working through the worst and best case scenarios. The extremes being she’d



be out of a job, her career in shreds, the best outlook was he'd forget it and she could carry on. Ever the optimist she began planning for the best!

She donned her stained white lab coat, buttoned it up over yet another pair of loud beach shorts and equally incongruous t shirt and set about monitoring her tests. It needed to be done, just to ensure that the trial was indeed still feasible. She worked through the task methodically. But her mind was elsewhere. Her optimism began to wane as she recalled all their shared scenes.

Surely he wasn't going to take her before the council. She could kiss her position goodbye if he did. Forget any prospect of a career as an academic. Forget the research base she had established. Why did she have to lose her temper? Why then? What would she do? Work on an oil rig someplace? Positions for materials scientists didn't grow on trees and she doubted whether any employer would hire a woman who couldn't hold onto her tongue or temper.

Eventually she worked herself into such a state that she couldn't concentrate on even the mundane task of writing up simple time codes. She couldn't focus on the task at all. She stopped working on the experiment and set about tidying the laboratory.

She cleared bench space, put equipment away, discarded old samples, and wiped down work surfaces. It was therapeutic. The lab was nearly pristine. Harry would be impressed, this almost rivaled his own workspace. Almost. She began to sort out the stores of equipment and samples.

At one o'clock, James walked into the lab. He looked around, expecting to see someone. He could hear activity. "Hello." He called loudly as he strolled into the room, noticing instantly that the lab was much cleaner and tidier than he remembered it.

There was clear clean bench space for a start. The sink was stacked full of clean glassware that was at present

draining, and the bins were jammed full of discarded materials. It looked as if someone was planning a move, tidying and generally sprucing up the place. That speculation brought with it unsettling alarm.

He wondered if Prof Harper had indeed decided to fire her. For an uncomfortable second, James was aghast. Then reason returned and he knew that she could only be fired if he decided to push ahead with a disciplinary proceeding. Unless there were other episodes in her academic history. James dismissed that idea, the Prof had been very supportive of her.

He surveyed the room and caught sight of her huddled at the far end of the room. Her head was buried in a floor level cupboard, with only her bottom and legs visible. There were stacks of jars around her feet.

Sasha instinctively turned toward the intruder's voice, "Shit!" She muttered vehemently as she recognised the voice. Her elbow knocked the wooden shelf as she tried to quickly crawl backwards out of the deep recess of a floor level cupboard. That's all she needed today; him telling her it was all over. Probably came over to tell her in person.

Well, she had behaved badly and she deserved what was coming. But she could show that she could, when the occasion warranted it, be a well mannered academic, instead of a loud mouth shrew. She took a moment to get her brain into gear and to calm her rapidly hammering heart.

"Kia Ora!" she replied more loudly for his benefit, hoping he hadn't heard her first reaction. Slightly apprehensive, well, more than slightly, she stumbled to her feet. Was this it? Perhaps he wasn't here to give her his decision. Would another attempt at an apology help the situation?

She dusted at her knees, before she glanced anxiously at him. He seemed happy, he was smiling at her. That

worried her even more. James came closer. Sasha braced herself for the worst.

His smile seemed more natural than the smirk she had suffered when she'd been escorted back to the portacabin. Was that only a few days ago? She waited for the bombshell. This was worse than having teeth pulled! Shit, she wished he would just say something. Sasha heard her heart hammer loudly. She tried to remain calm. She clasped her hands tightly behind her back.

“Thanks for the wine.” He stood beside the workbench and flashed her a bone melting smile.

Relief, mingled with astonishment, coursed through Sasha. She felt like a beached whale. Sasha shrugged. It was a ruse to hide her bewilderment. Suddenly shy she glanced down at her scuffed trainers.

Feeling shy was a rare occurrence for Sasha. She was flustered which made matters worse. He was being nice to her. Now what? And why?

“Pleasure.” She finally announced, a touch too brittle. Idiot, she silently berated herself, as the trite word registered in her brain and some of her self assurance surfaced.

His lips quirked as he realised she was finding it difficult to gauge his mood. “This place looks spotless.” James continued to glance around her laboratory, giving her time to find her equilibrium. He noticed the room was organised. Not so many gadgets on the work surface, fewer clamp stands lying around, more uncluttered bench space. Less chaos and more order.

“Yes.” She was beginning to sound like an idiot even to her own ears. Why couldn't she at least come up with something less mundane? Why the hell was she so uptight? Get a grip, she told herself.

“Have you had lunch?” James asked casually as he feigned interest in her almost pristine laboratory. James picked up and twirled a glass rod, he needed the

diversion as he waited for her answer. He was trying to appear nonchalant, but she was making him fidget. He put the glass rod down. This was ridiculous. Why was he nervous?

Sasha glanced at her watch. Her mouth automatically went into action. “Whoa! I hadn’t realised the time.” Sasha squealed and then grinned, her normal laid back, informal, cheery disposition back in force. “I was going to work till midday and then skive off for the rest of the day. There is only so much cleaning one can take!” She admitted diffidently, forgetting who she was talking with and reverting to the Sasha of old. She put the glass rod back in the tray. She hadn’t spent all this time tidying up just to have him walk in and start messing it up again. She moved the tray of rods out of his reach. James hid his smile. “Doesn’t time fly.”

“I take it that means you haven’t eaten yet?” His lips twitched as he watched the puzzlement in her eyes increase. She was uncertain. That was a first. He had seen her angry, contrite, feisty, shattered, and weary, but vulnerable was a new one on him.

“No, not yet. I’ll grab a sandwich later.” She replied evasively. Why didn’t he just get it over with, tell her what he was planning on doing? Would she have a job at the end of the semester or not? Would she have a job at the end of the week? And why the hell was he talking about food?

She didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“How about lunch then? At Olivia’s, it’s a BYO,” He held the bottle aloft. “Share the wine.” His lips widened into a smile when her puzzlement was replaced with sheer undiluted incredulity. She even looked, albeit momentarily, devastated.

Sasha was stunned into limbo. Her brain was telling her that he had just asked her out. Albeit a lunch date, but a date. And that fact just didn’t compute with their relationship to date. The chances of him asking her out

were probably slimmer than her chance of winning the Nobel peace prize. She had to remind herself to close her mouth. He was grinning at her. And waiting for a response.

“Me?” Sasha squeaked the first thing that came into her rattled mind. “At Olivia’s?” She knew she sounded incredulous and was sure she was doing a good impersonation of someone with a poor face lift, her eyebrows were probably nearer her hairline, her jaw probably half way down her chin. “With you?” Flustered, Sasha voiced the questions in a skeptical tone. Her brain had already told her it was part of a joke. He was winding her up. He must be. Why ask her out?

“Yes.” James agreed and watched a heap of emotions flash through her easily readable dark brown eyes. There was disbelief, suspicion, surprise, skepticism, astonishment, caution, evaluation, amazement, consideration, inquisitiveness and finally wary capitulation. She was incredibly expressive. He wanted to look deep into those eyes when he was deep within her. That thought immediately hardened his body.

James had spent his entire weekend thinking about her. Thoughts that had frustrated and annoyed him. He had dreamt too. The woman irritated the life out of him but he couldn’t forget her smile, her eyes, her passion, her fury.

“Don’t you have to book?” Sasha asked in a distracted voice, still saying the first things that came to her mind. Sasha couldn’t fathom it out, had no way of justifying her feelings, but she wanted to go to lunch with him.

The man had probably put into motion a chain of events that would most likely see her kicked out of this University. Added to that fact, she and he had yet to survive more than a few minutes in each other’s company without insulting each other. So why was he asking her out and why did she want to go? For some inexplicable reason, she really wanted to go.

“I heard it was quite up market.” Sasha feigned composure, but beneath the surface she was rattled. Well and truly rattled.

James was standing in front of her, nonchalant and completely at ease, as if asking her out was a perfectly normal event. Sasha on the other hand had clammy palms, a heart that was racing and a brain that had stopped functioning a few minutes back. He would have probably said that was the case several days ago.

Them on a date? They were the same two people who, only days ago, had been belligerent and pugnacious. And now, now he was asking her to go on a date with him. Taking her to Olivia’s. That floored her. A date at Olivia’s, with him. She had to keep repeating those facts to herself just to make sure that she had that data!

Sasha fought down the urge to pinch herself to see if she was still in existence, in this world and time frame. That might look a touch odd. She needed an alternative discreet antic. Sasha dug her finger nails into her palms. They registered pain, so she decided she must still be on Planet Earth. The mantra of facts began once again. A date at Olivia’s with him. He had asked her to lunch at Olivias!

She’d never been in the place, but had seen and heard enough to know it was up market. Way beyond her experience and pocket. Olivia’s was local and renowned. Tables were highly sought.

And he wanted to take her there for lunch?

Sasha was numb. “Do you have a twin?” She finally asked.

Now it was his turn to look confused. “A twin?”

“Yeah, a twin?”

“No.”

“Oh.” She shrugged. He looked baffled by that short conversation. She said nothing. He wondered if she had forgotten about Olivia’s.

“So, about Olivias, shall we go?”

So he didn't have a twin, she wasn't in dream time, and he had asked her out. Well, she'd best make the most of it!

“Sure.” Standard Sasha nonchalance returned, “But don't you have to book?”

Sasha jammed her hands into the pockets of her buttoned faded lab coat as she waited for him to answer her. She did not know what to make of this situation. She found herself crossing her fingers, hidden from sight, and waiting pensively for his response.

James banked down the ‘yahoo!’ that was thrumming to escape. Plan A was working. She'd said yes. Yes!

“Normally. But it isn't busy at lunch time.” He sounded sure. “We can always phone if you don't believe me.” He added when she still looked far from convinced.

It wasn't that Sasha didn't believe him. She was still puzzled about his motives. Why ask her to lunch? The big set down? Somehow she knew that wasn't part of his character. She caught her lower lip between her teeth as she frowned in studied thought.

“Shall I phone?” He prodded her, misreading her hesitation and wanting to get some form of assurance from her.

Startled, she stammered into speech, “No, no, let's go.” She started to unbutton her lab coat as she realised that she had agreed and they would be going to lunch. A lunch date with him. Wait till she told Bri and Grace. Luke of course would gloat. But Sash didn't care. She was going on a date. Then, suddenly she stopped and glowered in disgust. “Uh, I think I'd better take a rain check.” Sasha whispered despondently.

James went from elation to consternation in two seconds flat. “What?” He had been silently congratulating himself on his effective maneuvering technique. It had been a lot simpler than he had anticipated. Too simple. He should

have known better. Especially with her! The woman was so damn unpredictable. He'd managed to get her to agree and she changed her mind in the blink of an eye. What the hell was the matter now? One minute they were all set to go, the next there was turnabout. Indecision he could cope with, but this was ridiculous. The thoughts raced through his mind as he sighed loudly and tried to find the right words.

James began to glower fiercely at her. Well that sure was a short lived truce, if it had been a truce at all. Sasha's shoulders sagged stoically. She'd blown it. Again.

"I don't think they'd let me in," She owned up as she glanced at herself disparagingly "not the way I'm dressed." She enlightened him quickly as she flashed him a look at her attire.

Damn, damn, damn! For the first time in her life, Sasha wished she'd made the effort to dress like the lecturer she was meant to be. Or at least check the combination of the clothes she wore. Or even just wear a decent pair of shorts. The lurid orange t-shirt with the lime green and purple logo, did not even make an attempt to compliment the white and pale pink surfie knee length shorts that bagged at her bottom and had a crotch that was half way down to her knees. And the trainers on her feet would have been rejected by Oxfam. She looked like a demented colour blind surfie with a bad hair day.

They were not the kind of attire one would wear to a rather expensive restaurant. Not the kind of attire anyone should be caught dead in. Especially if there was a gorgeous blonde guy asking you for a date. Well it was no good making a mental note not to get caught out like this again, because this opportunity was unlikely to occur again. The probability of him asking her out another time was slim to nil. She was under no illusions that this was likely to be a regular event. He was simply offering to share the bottle of wine she had bought him. Her mind raced into dramatic overdrive. She simply couldn't go



around irritating the life out of him in order to buy him bottles of wine so that he'd offer to take her to lunch!

Sasha was going to change her wardrobe. She made herself a mental promise. From now on she would wear clothes that complimented each other! She'd ask Briar to go shopping with her.

James looked her over. The fierce scowl evaporated. She was the only woman he knew with such an appalling dress sense. The concoction she had thrown together would have given the average woman heart palpitations.

There really was no accounting for taste and Sasha certainly didn't have any when it came to her clothes. But she was also a woman who didn't seem to care. Pity. Because she was right, Olivia's would never let her near the doorway let alone into the restaurant. She'd be better off wearing her lab coat out in public!

James continued to study her clothes, they were calamitous. What a combination! He could understand how the maitre d' might not think it appropriate. He relaxed. At least she hadn't changed her mind just to be ornery.

Then he looked her over. Not her clothes. Her. She was the only woman, that he knew, who appeared to get away with an atrocious dress sense. He hadn't even noticed her clothes this time. He must be getting used to her dress code. It was just part and parcel of the woman. A beautiful woman. In his experience anyone with half an ounce of her attributes would have been flaunting them, not burying them beneath grossly mismatched ill fitting clothes.

"You aren't colour blind are you?" The words had escaped before he had even thought them. He looked appalled as he waited for her reaction. He was half expecting her to launch into another visceral spirited attack or, at the very least, he was expecting her to thump him!

His look of alarm, combined with the tone, were enough to have Sasha chuckling happily. Sasha tried to stop laughing long enough to explain. He looked relieved by her reaction to his thoughtless comment. His own lips curved into a smile. She was so unpredictable. Any other woman would have taken his comment as an insult. Sasha laughed.

“No.” she finally articulated and though the laughter had stopped, her eyes were still smiling. “I’m just lazy!”

He looked none the wiser, if anything his forehead furrowed as he mulled over her last remark.

“I normally grab the first thing that comes to hand.” She explained ingenuously. “I do occasionally make the effort. Luke says it’s probably a throw back from when I was a kid. I got all the hand me downs and it never seemed to matter that they never quite fit or matched. I guess I never took dressing seriously.” She didn’t see James frown when she’d mentioned Luke’s name, she was too busy reminiscing. “Until I was fourteen, I think I had two dresses, for good wear, but normally I got the dungarees, or old jeans, usually patched ‘cause Grace and Briar had them before me!” She shoved her hands into the pockets of her shorts, and shrugged nonchalantly. “I guess I’ve a penchant for just wearing what comes to hand, without thinking about how they look. And I guess spending my teenage years surfing didn’t help the cause. All my spare cash went into surf gear, rather than dresses. But, who cares.” Sasha sighed as she worked her way through her reasoning, remembering the hard times when she was a little girl, “Although I don’t see what all the fuss is about. I mean what I wear covers all the right bits, right?” She grinned, she wasn’t going to explain that she also didn’t want to draw attention to the fact that she was female, especially working in a predominantly male field. “I guess Luke’s probably right.”

Luke. James had had a long chat with the man. Though, given that they had spoken for at least five minutes, he knew even less about her now than he had before he’d

started subtly quizzing the man. He was sure Luke had been deliberately vague. Just as he was sure the man was enjoying watch him squirm. And, to make matters worse, the whole conversation had simply unsettled him. He was still none the wiser about the connection between the two. They lived together, but did they *live* together, that was the question. As far as James was concerned, Luke was like a clam, he gave very little away. Five long, fruitless frustrating minutes.

James decided to steer the conversation as quickly as possible away from any links to that man. “Well,” James racked his brains, “How about we go to Garfunkels, grab some takeaway, and head down to the river for a picnic?”

The idea took form as he spoke. A good plan. A brilliant plan. Just the two of them. All to himself. No people, no bustle, just the two of them. Brilliant plan, he commended himself on his quick thinking. It could be perfect.

“Sounds good.” Sasha enthused immediately with one of her friendliest smiles. “But, you really don’t have to do this you know.” Her actions did not corroborate her words. She tossed the white lab coat onto a nearby stool. Once again it slid off the bench and settled in a pool on the floor.

He reached for the lab coat, folded it and placed it on the bench top. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He retorted pretending to seriously consider the matter. He saw her get anxious, momentarily, as his words penetrated her confidence. Her exuberance wilted a fraction. “I could take Harve!” He tacked on quickly. “But he doesn’t have your dress code, crazy sense of humour or infamous temper.” He grinned at her boyishly, “So he’d be quite boring!”

Sasha giggled. Sasha never giggled, she considered giggling to be servile and childish. But she was a bundle of nerves, so, she giggled.

Secretly she was relieved. She wanted to go to lunch with him. Wanted it with an acute sense of desperation.

That desperation had registered when he sounded as if he was about to withdraw his offer. She felt ridiculous. She was never desperate to go out with a man. Never until today, a soft voice mocked in the back of her mind.

“Come on, let’s go,” He eyed her clothes with feigned apprehension. Or was it feigned? “before I am tempted to take him.”

Sasha didn’t have time to really think about it. He reached for Sasha’s arm while she wondered about the prudence of this jaunt.

Perhaps she ought to ask Briar to go shopping with her. Briar dressed well. Conservatively, but well. She would never be caught wearing unco clothes. Wearing surfie shorts would be an anathema to Briar. And Briar wouldn’t have paired them with a totally outlandish T-shirt either. Sasha glanced at her attire. Even her trainers were scruffy. She was going out with a gorgeous man and she looked unkempt and outlandish.

Sasha frowned. James missed the expression on her face. He was following behind her as she switched off all the necessary switches and preceded him out of the lab.

His eyes took inventory. She had legs that seemed endless, golden brown legs, the tops of which were swamped by overly large bizarre shorts. He checked his rueful smile. She was the most unconventional woman he had ever met. None of his previous girl friends would have been caught dead or alive out of the house wearing such outrageously ghastly clothes.

Except on Sasha they weren’t unbecoming. In fact most people forgot about her clothes as soon as they looked into her eyes, or watched her move, or saw her smile. This woman could wear a bin liner and still look good. James hid his smile as he silently observed the woman in front of him. She was going out with him.

Sasha was very conscious of her appearance. Suddenly she became uneasy. Who in their right mind, other than a surfer, would want to be caught on a date with someone with her dress sense? Or lack of.

Too late to worry about that now.

They walked in noticeable silence down two flights of stairs and along a corridor. Sasha was too caught up in her newly grounded pessimism and James was contemplating her figure.

Her legs were endless. Slim shapely ankles disappeared into scruffy trainers. Her baggy shorts did not hide the fact that she was slim. The t shirt billowed in the breeze. No one could accuse her of trying to draw attention to her figure, she seemed to do everything to hide her shape. He wondered if she was embarrassed by her shape, and wondered why?

“Where do you get your clothes from?” He asked as they made their way through the car park to his ute.

“According to my sisters, a rubbish tip.” She retorted automatically.

James laughed. “I take it they don’t share this unorthodox taste in garb.”

“Uh, well, uh, no” Sasha stumbled into speech as his words emphasised her own pessimistic concern about her attire. “Grace wears kind of different clothes, but they are usually her designs. And they are striking, rather than a collection of aberrant colour schemes.” With a smile he opened the ute door for her and waited for her to clamber in. “Briar is much more conventional I guess.” Sasha mumbled ingenuously as she settled into the cab of the ute. He realised she sounded disgruntled about her sister’s ability to co-ordinate her wardrobe.

“Well no-one could possibly accuse you of being conventional!” He shut the door before she could string a reply together. Things were going well, they were teasing each other. Wonders would never cease.

“Surfie gear is pretty conventional.” She told him when he stepped into the ute. His lips twitched as he suppressed a smile and reached for his seat belt.

“Not the way you wear it!” He responded in the same jovial vein and threw her a quick top to toe inspection before turning away to insert the key into the ignition.

Sasha frowned in earnest. Perhaps he was embarrassed by her gear. She unfastened her seat belt. This was a mistake.

The sound of the buckle unclipping had James turning round in an instant.

“What are you doing?” His eyes conveyed immediate apprehension. She was getting out. That much was obvious. But why? What the hell had happened now?

“This isn’t a good idea.” She shrugged nervously and gradually fed the temperamental seat belt back into its rewind mechanism.

“What?” Apprehension became dismay. That was twice in the space of ten minutes that she had tried to back out. Too damn mercurial. He reached for the seat belt and stopped her moving.

Sasha shrugged but didn’t maintain eye contact.

“Why?” He pushed, his tone conveying bewilderment. “Hey, I think I deserve an explanation.”

She turned and looked him straight in the eye, saying with assumed equanimity “You don’t want to be seen with me in public.”

He muttered quietly. His hand stayed her arm as she turned to reach for the door. “What gave you that idea?” She shrugged aloofly, struggling for some degree of aplomb. “Look, I wouldn’t have asked you to lunch if I didn’t want to take you to lunch.” James wracked his brain trying to determine what had brought about her change of mind. Then it hit him. Her clothes. She had taken his comments seriously. “I was teasing.” He reached across to take her shoulders and turn her to face

him. "I was teasing you. I thought you realised that. Your dress code is.." He ransacked his mind for a tame adjective, "different." he tacked on lamely with a rueful smile, "But it doesn't embarrass me. Really. Makes a change to go out with a woman who doesn't care about her appearance!" He closed his eyes as his own words registered. She would take offence. He just knew it. The way it had come out, who wouldn't? With abject penitence he said, "I'm digging myself an even bigger hole aren't I? I didn't mean that the way it sounded." He muttered beneath his breath and let go of her shoulders.

"Let's go." She re-clipped her seat belt. "After that comment, you deserve to be seen in public with someone with no dress sense."

He turned to look at her, and then grumbled, "This is like being on a roller coaster."

"What?" She quirked him a measured look.

"Nothing." He put the ute into gear and released the hand brake.

A few minutes later they left the university and drove in companionable silence toward Bridge street. James glanced briefly across at Sasha as they waited at a set of red traffic lights. He tried to gauge her reaction to a potentially touchy subject.

"I'm not sure I should risk asking this." He flicked her a searching look.

"Ask me what?" She swiveled her head to face him.

He sounded a mite worried about the outcome. "Your work." He said as he shifted the gear stick and put the ute into motion again. "What's the situation?"

"Doesn't that rather depend on whether you've got me the sack?"

"I was talking about the phosphors."

Sasha beamed at him, a mixture of relief and euphoria. Within the confines of her seat belt she turned almost

completely to face him. Her usual frank passion for her work, work that many would consider boring, infiltrated her voice as pure delight, "I think we're going to be o.k. I connected all the plates onto the test circuit again. We discarded about twenty percent, so it's a bit too close for comfort. But I'm counting on no more sudden problems." She looked across at him, saying innocently while being deliberately provocative "You aren't planning another surprise cut are you?"

He flicked her an anxious look which quickly changed to a gently mocking smile when he saw her grinning at him. "Depends." He retorted obligingly, just as they turned into Ward street, "On whether they toss you out or not. No point in another power cut if there isn't anyone around to rile."

"I wasn't riled." She laughed when he raised his eyebrows. "Bloody furious, maybe, but not riled."

It was his turn to laugh at that understatement. "I'd never have guessed." He glanced fleetingly at her before he added, "I thought you handled the situation with all the tact, wisdom and finesse warranted by someone in your position."

This time Sasha flashed him a quick uncertain questioning look and noticed, with relief, that his lips were twitching with suppressed jocularly. He was teasing her again. Respite mingled with bewilderment.

"You scum bug!" She chuckled and without giving him a chance to address that adjective added, "Ooh, there's a park." She pointed out a vacant parking spot. "That was lucky."

"For you." He flashed her a feigned glare. "Scum bag huh?"

"I didn't call you a scum bag." She responded as he deftly began maneuvering the car into the parallel parking spot.



He flicked her a questioning look just before he neatly slotted the car into place. He put the hand brake on and turned to face her. “Really?”

“I didn’t.” She replied with just the faintest hint of a smile as she unclipped her seat belt and helped it wind back. “I called you a scum bug!”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“No.” She retorted glibly and stepped out of the ute.

The parking spot on Ward street was a few yards away from Garfunkels, so they didn’t have far to walk. Sasha being nearest the meter put fifty cents into the slot before James managed to delve into his pockets for coins. He gave her a shrewd look, saucily she winked at him.

“You’re incorrigible.” He shook his head at her, then smiling happily he took her arm and escorted her to the restaurant.

That was a novelty. Sasha had never had a man escort her in that proprietorial way, his hand firmly at her elbow, guiding her, protecting her. It was a novelty she could get to like. Too much. It felt good. Feeling as if you belonged. And the skin of his hand on her elbow was more than pleasantly soothing.

He released her elbow when they walked up the short flight of stairs in single file, shifting to the side to allow people, on their way down, to pass them. James followed a scant breath behind her, with the advantage of one stair difference she could feel his breath against the back of her neck. It felt like a butterfly caress. There went her heart again.

## Chapter 9

There was a queue in the restaurant. There always was. But the queue moved. Very slowly. But it moved. James and Sasha joined the queue.

“I remember this place when it wasn’t that trendy.” He told her as they shuffled a few inches closer to the wooden trays.

Sasha quirked a brow at him, “I hadn’t realised you were that old!” She smiled appealingly, knowing she was safe from retribution in a public place. He read the sassy tone and her misplaced belief in public impunity.

“Watch it.” He forewarned her, chuckling all the same as he acknowledged her temerity.

They reached the food counters. A three shelved, glass fronted servery. He gently maneuvered Sasha to stand in front of him. “Share a tray?” James put a tray on the ledge that ran alongside the shelved food.

She nodded absently as she looked into the nearest hive. The array of food was imaginative and never-ending.

“Stack it on this one” He suggested as he slid a glass partition open and reached into one of the shelves to remove two bran muffins. He placed both on the tray.

“Do you like chicken and apricot?” She was already reaching for them before he answered.

“Love it.”

Sasha extracted two cling film wrapped apricot and chicken filled croissants and placed them on the tray. The queue moved again and James and Sasha shuffled along, following the herd. But unlike Sasha, James continued to reach into shelves in order to retrieve rolls, muffins and fruit. Sasha watched in silent amusement as he started building a stockpile on the tray.

She finally spoke up when the tray was almost fully laden. It had two bran muffins, two croissants, two slices of banana cake, brown rye rolls with salmon, water cress

and cucumber, a couple of crusty roles filled with ham and salad and a selection of fruit.

“Hey!” She looked at him in addled amusement. “Who else have you invited?”

James took her question seriously and he scowled at her. Why the hell would he invite anyone else? He’d spent the whole weekend trying to come up with a scenario to meet her again. He’d gone on a date with Eloise on Saturday night, and had spent all evening comparing Eloise’s views with how Sasha would react if she’d been on a date with him.

He even told Nathan about her on Saturday morning before Nathan left for the Coromandel. His younger brother thought that she sounded like an intriguing woman. Nathan thought he might use her as research in his next book. He needed a strong, interesting, gorgeous woman. By the end of Saturday evening, having been bored senseless by Eloise, James was of the same mind.

Sasha was unorthodox, outspoken, feisty and gorgeous. By Sunday morning he had a plan. But he hadn’t put it into practice because she had neatly presented him with a better opportunity. He sure as hell wasn’t going to waste it by inviting anyone else along.

“No-one.” He informed her solemnly, placing an apple on the tray.

“Then who is going to eat all that?” She gestured toward the stacked tray.

“Us.” He stated unequivocally wondering at her puzzlement.

“You’re joking.” Sasha told him flatly, lightly slapping his hand away as he moved to open yet another flap to grab a piece of carrot cake. The familiarity of the gesture escaped both of them. To Sasha it was a natural reaction, to James it was just Sasha. Always blunt. Always responsive. Always audacious.

“That lot would keep the entire science department going. Or Grace.” Sasha surrendered, seeing that he had no intention of stopping. He had simply reached past her shoulder to delve into the cubby hole she was trying to block. He winked as he retrieved a crab and egg wheat meal sandwich which he then added to the already loaded tray.

“Grace?” He asked distractedly as he deftly slid out another slice of carrot cake, ignored her upraised eyebrow and speaking glance and reached in for another slice.

“My sister.” She reminded him. “You both, obviously have similar eating habits. Either that or a bad case of worms!”

He laughed.

“She’s pregnant. What’s your excuse?” Sasha challenged impudently.

James laughed again. “For a first date you aren’t being very sensitive.” They reached the cashier.

“Date?” She pivoted and he bumped into her.

“Yeah.” He grinned at her astonishment. “We are going out to lunch. That’s a date in my book.”

“Eat in or take away?” The young man asked politely, not batting an eyelid at the overly stacked tray.

“Take away.” James told him automatically.

Sasha’s brain replayed the conversation she was having with James.

The young cashier started to total up the purchases, whilst another assistant bagged the goodies, both were totally oblivious to Sasha’s shattered equilibrium.

“Thirty three dollars and twenty cents please.” The young lad announced as he helped his friend stack the last of the food items.

Sasha reached for her purse and extracted a five dollar note and a ten dollar note. She began rummaging for change.

“What do you think you’re doing?” James asked Sasha, as he retrieved his wallet from the rear pocket of his jeans.

“Paying my half.” She told him matter-of-factly as she held the dollar notes out to the cashier.

“No you’re not.” He informed her succinctly, shaking his head at her as he handed the cashier thirty five dollars. The teller looked from one to the other, waiting in patient and amused silence for his customers to settle the argument.

“We are going Dutch.” Sasha clarified her statement as she tucked the notes into James’ shirt pocket.

Smiling to himself, the cashier started ringing in the thirty five dollars.

James took the notes out of his pocket, took Sasha’s left hand and placed the notes in her open palm. Curling her fingers around the folded notes he said, “No, we are not.” They were a bare couple of inches apart. “I asked you to lunch.”

“Now just a...” She tipped her face to look up at him, her eyes glinting radiantly at him, a smile on her lips as she began to take issue with his command of the situation.

He couldn’t resist. It was just too tempting. Too, too tempting.

He leaned toward her and kissed her. It was impulsive. And it was brief. He was doing it before he had even thought about the repercussions. If he’d thought about it, he’d never have done it! And he was pulling away before he’d finished thinking about kissing her.

It was a light, fleeting kiss. But it stunned Sasha into silence. For the first time in her life she was speechless.

The kiss forced James to re-evaluate the prudence of that instinctive move, because he wanted more. A deeper, longer, full on kiss. Now that he knew how she felt, how she tasted, he wanted more.

“Your change.” The cashier tried to hand James his small coin change.

“Keep it!” James advised him happily, as he picked up the brown bags of food. He nudged Sasha’s shoulder, “Grab some of these will you.” seeing her follow his instructions without a question. His lips quirked as he took Sasha’s elbow in his other hand and ushered her out.

He was feeling immensely pleased with himself. She looked dazed. His kiss had left her dazed. A simple peck on the lips.

He chuckled with newly found exhilaration. “If I’d known that was the best way to stop you raving, I’d have used it a week ago.” He told her with charming cheek.

That snapped Sasha out of her stunned reverie.

“You wouldn’t have dared.” She said quietly, still recovering from that brief kiss.

She shook her head in an attempt to clear the haze. She was still not sure whether what she had felt a few minutes ago had been real. She peered up at him. He looked in command, totally unflustered, quietly confident, while she was reeling from the most delicate, brief kiss she had ever received. And it wasn’t as if she hadn’t been kissed like that before. His lips had barely touched hers, they had only rested on hers for a fraction of a micro second. But, the jolt was enough to unnerve her.

There were two things that registered in her mind. First, her sisters were going to have a field day when she told them about this little escapade. She knew she would tell them. She needed their advice. And second, her reaction to James was unexpected. Totally unexpected. He was a good looking guy, but she had been kissed by good looking guys before and not felt in the slightest bit

zapped. One paltry flippant kiss and she was dizzy, spineless and bemused.

“Yeah, you’re right.” He conceded as he preceded her, in single file, down the stairs. She heard the smile in his voice. Once outside, he took her elbow with his free hand while his other hand clutched the passle of brown bags, and he walked her over to the ute. They reached the ute without saying another word, and James let go of her elbow in order to unlock and open the door for her. She smiled nervously at him.

“Don’t start panicking now!” He said cheerfully, “Sex in the park isn’t on the menu this afternoon!” He chucked her under the chin and winked wolfishly. His confidence was escalating. If her bemused expression was anything to go by, he was on the home straight. He grinned at her before adding, “That’s second date stuff!”

Sasha snorted at that comment. “Dream on!”

He handed her the brown bags and closed the door. James smiled broadly as he walked to the driver’s side. He felt as if he was dreaming. She was attracted to him. That much was clear. Things were looking good.

Sasha relaxed. She was going to enjoy this afternoon. She knew it. She just knew it. She counted the bags of food. Anything to get her emotions back on an even keel. Five brown bags of food for two people. It seemed excessive.

It didn’t take long to drive along the winding, aptly named, River road. They headed north, pulling into a car park about ten minutes out of the city centre. A well sign posted path led down to the Waikato river. There was the only car there. That suited both of them. They hopped out of the ute and made their way to the rear.

Surveying the locale James spotted a large willow tree several metres away from the river bank. “The Willow looks like a good spot.” He popped open the hatch.

Sasha nodded, put her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes from the glare and made a quick study of the locale.

It was quiet, beautiful and just perfect for a romantic picnic. Her lips twitched into a smile.

James handed Sasha bags of food, then he reached into the back of the ute and retrieved an old tarpaulin. “This will have to do.” He draped it over his arm and reached for the bottle and remaining bags of food.

They strolled down to the tree in amicable silence.

“Here?” James indicated a spot under the drooping branches. It afforded some privacy. A bit of seclusion.

Sasha nodded, “Sure. I haven’t been here in years,” She told him as she placed her bags on the grass “though it doesn’t seem to have changed much.” It was a quiet stretch of the river. The rowers didn’t come this far, and the cafe scene was located another half mile up the river. The parkland was fairly well established, with bbq facilities and bench seats. But the spot James had chosen was closer to the water line and slightly more isolated.

“I’ve been here once before.” He put the bottle and bags beside her pile of bags.

“You aren’t from Hamilton then?”

“Cambridge born and bred.”

“Really?” Sasha queried with genuine surprise.

James opened the large tarpaulin and spread it under the natural shelter. Sasha waited for him to smooth it out before dropping to her knees.

“How old are you?” She asked without the faintest trace of tact as she gave the bottle to James, who miraculously conjured up a Swiss knife with a bottle opener.

“How old do you think?”

Sasha peered up at him, using the opportunity to really look him over. He was gorgeous. When her eyes met his he raised an eyebrow. Sasha, blushed, imagining he could read her mind. She dropped her gaze and focused on his belt buckle.



“Er, about 32 ish.” She suggested, babbling her way through mortification.

“You got that from staring at my crotch?”

Sasha’s eyes flew up to meet his teasing look.

“You rat bag!”

“Now, now.” He handed Sasha a bag of fruit.

“So, how old are you?” Sasha began to peer into the bags. “We’ll never get through this lot.” She mumbled as she laid the food out.

“32.” He told her, “Is it important?”

She handed James one of the serviettes the cashier had tossed into the bags. “I was just thinking that you’d be about Grace’s age.”

“Oh?”

“When we were little we lived in Cambridge, well just outside, so you’d have gone to school together.”

“I went to a private primary school. Then Cambridge Boys Grammar.”

“Oh.” They had definitely bought too much food. “Well that counts us out. We couldn’t afford private primary schools. We all went, on scholarships, to a girls school in Auckland.” Sasha settled her back against the tree. James swore under his breath. Sasha looked up at him in puzzlement. “What’s up?”

He pointed to the open bottle. “I meant to pick up some plastic cups from the coffee machine!”

“Oops! Not a very good education, no glasses for wine, hmm, should have gone to finishing school.” Sasha grinned blithely and muttered sagely. “The eminent man is forgetful.”

James caught her eye, there was a fleeting glimpse of uncertainty, then his lips quirked and the look in his eye was replaced with challenge. “Straight from the bottle.” He dared her as he handed her the bottle.

“You’ve got to be kidding.” She snorted disdainfully but her eyes twinkled. “I’m not swilling a forty dollar bottle of wine as if it was a diet coke.” Feigning a scandalised disposition she refused to take the bottle.

“Someone with your dress sense can’t be a snob!” He scoffed lightly, but there was more than a hint of challenge in the sentence.

Sasha blushed, her dress sense bothered him. She was suddenly ashamed, and she rose to the bait. She reached for the bottle, practically snatched it out of his hand. Then he bobbed down to kneel on the rug facing her. He waited. Sasha looked at the bottle, as if it would miraculously produce some glasses. None appeared, so she resigned herself to drinking expensive white wine straight from the bottle like a tragically desperate alcoholic. He tried not to smile at her gloomy expression.

Then she looked him straight in the eye and said, “Cheers!”

She kept her eyes on him as she put her lips to the mouth of the bottle, taking in an inch or so of the neck, and then allowed a fair measure of Chardonnay to fill her mouth. Slowly she downed the mouthful. Wine dribbled down the side of her mouth as she removed the bottle from her lips.

She saw his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. James felt a tightening in his gut as he watched her actions. His smile vanished and his whole body hardened. Sasha dashed away the escaping droplets with her fingers, chuckling in vulnerable embarrassment as the liquid ran through her fingers. Sasha nervously ran her tongue around her lips. His eyes focused on her mouth, watching the tip of her tongue trace the outline of her mouth.

Instinctively, he reached for her hand and gently licked the wine away. Sasha nearly melted into a puddle. His tongue traced faintly across the surface of her skin as his lips applied just the faintest hint of pressure. She was

sliding into oblivion. Oblivion to everything but the action of that mouth.

“Here!” She squeaked as she thrust the wine bottle at him. Nerves, panic and sheer desperation to steady her equilibrium. No sex in the park, he’d said. What the hell did he call what he’d just done? Sasha’s lower abdomen was fluttering wildly.

He took the bottle, his eyes flicked from her mouth, to her eyes, and then back to her mouth. He kept hold of her hand and with his other hand he put the bottle to his mouth. She swallowed as she read the message in his eyes. Then he smiled, a deliberately slow, provocative smile, before taking another long sip. Sasha’s composure evaporated. He kept his eyes trained on her as he swallowed another mouthful of the wine. He mimicked her actions, dashing away traces with the back of his hand, before his tongue licked provocatively at his lips. Sasha couldn’t look away. Her eyes dilated. Her breathing froze.

Very slowly he lowered the bottle to the grass and then he moved slightly, inching tantalisingly toward her. Sasha swayed toward him. It was an instinctive movement.

She knew he was going to kiss her. She could see it in his eyes. Nervously she moistened her lips, knowing that this wasn’t going to be a fleeting touch. She waited in limbo as his head lowered toward her. His palms braced themselves against the tree on either side of her face. His head descended another inch. Tormentingly slow. He was giving her a chance to object. She could see it in his eye. She was waiting desperately for the contact. He could see it in her eyes.

James focused wholly on her lips, his own parting in readiness. Sasha quivered at the look of elementary, raw hunger that flashed in his eyes. Her eyelashes fluttered shut, her lips barely parted in suggestive invitation.

The moment was lost.

A loud squawking startled them apart seconds before they'd closed the last two breaths. Rattled, Sasha opened her eyes. James levered off the tree and backed off.

Their instinctive action diffused the charge of the moment.

Two young children and their mother raced along the bank, passing the tree without a second glance as they chased a large Labrador-cross. Their dog was stalking ducks. Bedlam reigned for several minutes. The loud fracas dismissed any residual vestiges of amour.

The near kiss was lost.

It was several minutes before the dog was caught, chastened and released. In those minutes, Sasha and James returned to speculation and rationality. Judicious thought overwhelmed risk.

They'd only recently met. They'd argued more than they had talked. They had nothing in common. Both were reasoning their way through what may have been. Beyond this desire that both felt, but did not acknowledge, they had nothing in common. Nothing. Both of them registered similar deductions, neither came up with an explanation.

James flashed her a quick glance. How would she react if he took up where they left off? She had moved several feet away. The moment was lost. Should he apologise for what might have been? He was saved from considering it when she spoke.

“Well at least there will be heaps left for the ducks!” She tried to bring them back to neutral ground. If it took all her will power, she was going to do it, pretend that nothing happened, or was going to happen.

He quirked a brow at that statement. Then decided to play along with her. “What makes you think we won't finish this lot?”

That had been close, he doubted whether he would have settled for just a kiss. His jeans were uncomfortably tight,

clear evidence that he would have been pushed to stop at just one kiss.

“You must be starved.” Sasha let out a breath. She was relieved, he was going along with her lead. Pretend nothing had happened. Nothing had happened.

Sex in the park was not on the menu.

“I am.” He picked up a croissant. Sasha went bright red. She knew he wasn’t talking about the food. So much for playing along with her lead.

“Come on, I promised. No sex today.” James was entranced by the flush that crept up her neck and suffused her cheeks. “And yes, we nearly broke that credo a few minutes ago.” He shrugged, as if it was nothing major “Put it down to wine on a empty stomach.”

Sasha reached for a muffin and made a great pretence of eating it. Things were moving too fast for her. Even for her. Yes, she was attracted to him. But she also knew very little about him. She didn’t give in to lust. Never had. So why now, and why with him?

“Sorry.”

Sasha finally raised her eyes.

“I’ve embarrassed you. That wasn’t my intention.”

“Forget it.” She flicked him a brief hesitant smile.

The woman, children and dog returned. The dog was on a leash and the children were talking animatedly, laughing and talking nineteen to the dozen. The awkwardness between Sasha and James passed as the group moved on by.

Two hours later James and Sasha were still down by the river. Both were lying on their sides, arms propping up their heads as they laughed, joked and argued about everything and anything. There was heaps of food left, and most of it had been forgotten because they were too busy talking.

Initially James worked hard to keep things light, he didn't want to ruin things now, not when things between them were going well. As the minutes passed, and she relaxed, James realised she was easy to talk with, and incredibly intelligent. He deliberately introduced controversial issues and she good naturedly debated her case. Shit! She could argue! He played devil's advocate and watched her take the bait. Her eyes lit up, her voice became animated, her body language was arousing. She was unique. He realised they shared many viewpoints. But they also disagreed on several. She loved Jazz, he liked Rock. Much to his amusement she liked musicals whereas he loved Opera. They both voted for the same political party but he thought the current leader was weak and she thought he was doing a good job under the circumstances. They were both Catholic, but she went to Sunday mass weekly and the last time he'd heard mass was at his sister's wedding. They both liked dry white wines. They both thought the All Blacks coach should be fired. They both had the same sort of humour. They both liked seafood.

"You must have been on the school debating team." He lay on his side, head propped by his hand.

"No!" She rolled onto her stomach but turned her head to face him and gave him a whimsical smile. "But I have two older sisters. You have no idea how hard it is to argue against two brain boxes!"

James smiled. "And you aren't?"

She rolled her eyes, "I'm talking gifted! They got into St Hilda's on scholarships. And you know how tough those are. I got in because the school figured it must be a genetic thing!"

He chuckled. "Yeah, right, Sasha."

"It's true." She brushed away a few specks of grit that lay on the tarpaulin between them, "I didn't even have to sit the exam. Family connections, they said, so I could attend. Typical! I have two sisters who get in on their

own merits and I get in because of them. Grace has a double doctorate in law and psychology and Briar worked for the UN! What do I do? Play with rocks!”

“Which you love.”

“Yeah.” She agreed. “I do.”

“No brothers?”

“No.” Sasha turned to him, “What about you?”

“There are heaps of us.” He rolled onto his back, laced his arms behind his head and gave her a potted history of his family.

They moved onto other topics. They shared many similar views, and had the same basic beliefs. It felt as if they were old friends. Talking as if they had known each other for years. They forgot the rest of the world.

James steered away from very personal issues. He had no intention of reminding her about Luke and right now, he didn’t want to know. So he kept off relationships. No prods, no subtle questions, he veered completely away. The closest they came was talking about their siblings.

Being with her was exciting and relaxing. James found the combination strange and exhilarating.

It was nearing five o’clock when James reluctantly admitted that he had things to do back at the University. He had a meeting later. But he was reluctant to leave. Slowly, deliberately stalling their inevitable departure, they began to put the leftovers back into the bags.

“I’ve enjoyed being with you.” James murmured as he shook out the tarpaulin. Sasha took one end and walked it toward him, when she reached him she handed him the edge, helping him fold it.

“Me too. Who’d have guessed!” Sasha told him without any guile, as she bent down to pick up the other end and repeat the folding process. “Thanks for inviting me to lunch.” She said sincerely as she reached for some of the leftovers. “It was a terrific way to spend the afternoon.”

“It was.” He draped the tarpaulin over his shoulder and picked up some of the brown bags of remaining food and the empty wine bottle.

They smiled at each other. Subconscious messages flashed across. But they didn’t act on them. Too early, too soon. They both knew there was more to this afternoon than a picnic by the river, but neither was ready to risk pride or caution. Too much was at stake for any wrong moves.

In amicable silence, Sasha and James carried the empty bottle and the bags of food back to the car.

“Sorry to rush you.” James placed their gear in the boot. “It’s just that I have a meeting scheduled for half five.”

“It isn’t really a rush,” Sasha shrugged, “we’ve been here hours. I should be getting back too.” He opened the passenger door for her, and waited for her to get comfortable before closing the door.

They talked about the buildings James was constructing at the University. Apparently they were close to completing the third of four phases.

They arrived back at the University ten minutes later. James parked the ute beside her own car and turned in his seat to face her.

“Here we are.” Reluctant to lose what they both felt was the start of something important, neither was ready to leave.

“Yup.” She made no move to undo her seat belt. He was pleased.

They sat talking for a while. Desperate to keep the connection. They continued to banter.

Sensing the intense and unexpected desire, but lacking the security needed, neither said anything of immense consequence. Several minutes later, James glanced in his rear view mirror.



## Chapter 10

“Damn!” He muttered in resigned tones. “She’s early.” Sasha wanted further enlightenment and her eyes told him just that. “It’s complicated.” James told her, as he unclipped his seat belt and let it slide back into its loop.

James opened his door and stepped out, leaving Sasha wondering what was going on. James was by her side by the time Sasha had stepped out.

Sasha automatically looked toward the rear of the ute. A tall striking red head was moving in their direction. She wore a long cream dress, clearly designer label, but that simply added to the impact the woman would have created anyway.

She was confident, you could see it in her walk, in the way she carried herself. Suddenly she made Sasha feel insignificant. For the second time that day Sasha wished she’d taken the time to dress more conventionally. The sparkle went out of the afternoon and her eyes failed to hide the sudden lack of esprit.

James watched Sasha’s eyes as she looked at the woman. “I’m not involved with her.” He felt compelled to explain quietly when he saw the twinkle in her eyes suddenly fade away. He’d phoned Eloise on Sunday, to thank her for the dates and to call it quits. She’d insisted on meeting him today to talk it over.

“Oh.” Sasha whispered, her heart in her voice. She kept her eyes on the woman stalking toward them. This was none of her business, but she felt jealousy streak through her with a vengeance. The feeling was new. Raw and new. But she recognised it.

He watched Sasha carefully, wondering if he might see some of the jealousy he felt whenever he thought of her with Luke.

Sasha caught her lower lip between her teeth, her eyes noticing that the woman was smiling as she approached. Sasha was impulsive, she knew that, but what she was

about to do wasn't impetuosity. It was sheer, clearly thought out, madness. "Good." Sasha breathed in an undertone, half frightened by what she was about to do and half amazed that she was even thinking it.

"Pardon?" He asked the inevitable question in obvious confusion. Sasha was waiting for that reflexive response. Waiting and scared. Before her courage deserted her totally, she moved closer.

She stood on tip toe, reached up to rest against James, linked her hands around his head and neck. This was sheer folly. She hesitated for a brief fraction of a second, as the full implication of her intended action sank in.

But she had to do it. Her logical scientific brain was being overruled by her unwise heart and soul. All for the sake of a man. Her man.

It was a new experience.

She exerted enough pressure to pull his head down toward her and then placed nervous lips against his. The whole move took less than two seconds. The kiss exploded to last more than thirty!

It had been simmering since they'd set up the picnic several hours earlier. The pent up need prohibited, curtailed by the interruption of dog, duck and kids, the repressed urge to stop talking and start kissing when they had been sitting on the rug talking about politics, sport and weather. Every suppressed moment collided into one headlong rush of passion laden adrenalin.

It was a kiss that had waited all afternoon to erupt and a life time to breathe. Given a chance to develop, it rapidly escalated out of control. Unquenchable hunger drove them closer together and Sasha felt herself being crushed to him as she relinquished charge of the kiss. James assumed control of the ingenuous kiss and converted it into full on sex.

His hand flattened against her bottom, hauling her up to meet clear evidence of his need. Her mouth was

consumed. Tongue, lips and teeth clashed, stroked and surged against each other. This was not a timid kiss. Rough desire vanquished tame rationality. Sensibility surged into raw passion leaving both of them stunned.

When they pulled apart, they were breathing hard. Cool air fanned against heated skin.

This was confusing. Earth shattering confusing. Sanity returned with a vengeance when James looked at her swollen lips and his mind wondered what she would look like after they made love. That lucidity brought with it thoughts of the man who already knew. Luke. Desire was replaced with envy and anger.

Sasha was reeling. Baffled by hitherto un-experienced feelings. She'd been kissed before, she knew what to expect. But that wasn't an average kiss. This reaction wasn't expected. The kiss had been shattering, bone melting, brain withering, completely devastating. That wasn't a kiss, that was unconditional sex. She had never been kissed like that. Never.

She kept her eyes down, sure that the shocked, naive confusion she felt, would be stamped all over her face and written in bold highlighted letters in her eyes.

“What the hell would Luke say?” The question was torn from James, as if he had wanted to hold it back, but had no choice in snarling the words.

There was delayed awareness to his question. Her one word response more a reflex reaction to a familiar name than a real quest for clarification.

“Luke?”

Sasha was fighting to regain her composure. When was the last time she had been kissed to the extent that she could not recall how to string a simple answer together? She was having trouble controlling the surge of sensation she still felt. She had never kissed anyone like that. Not full on, out of control, desperate, no finesse. That type of

reaction was new. She felt raw, emotionally raw. And defenseless.

They might as well have been having intercourse in public.

“He’d probably give me a hard time and then forget about it.” She stated automatically, truthfully and innocently. She failed to see his reaction to her words. She was reliving the kiss. It was proving difficult to banish her reaction from her mind.

One kiss. She had known, almost anticipated it would be like that when they had almost kissed by the river. But reality was so much more shattering. Just one kiss. Her senses were swimming, her equilibrium still trying to establish itself and her reasoning nowhere in sight.

The last time she’d been kissed she had been in command. She could have withdrawn at any point. It had been fun, no more, no less.

There had been no control in the kiss she had just shared with James. No polish, just vulnerable heart wrenching invasion. No discretion, subtlety, no control. Just mind stripping awareness, awe and wonder.

James reached normality much more quickly. Luke’s name had a tendency to sober him fast. Her words were the equivalent of a bucket of ice water. They brought rationality instantly. They also infuriated him. He did not date women who were already involved, seriously involved with someone else. He’d fought this attraction. But she wasn’t playing fair, she’d kissed him. She’d initiated it.

How could she treat this whole thing so casually? Their kiss confirmed one matter. She was not innocent. She couldn’t possibly kiss like that if she was. And he knew exactly where she was getting that experience. Bloody Luke .

“I don’t believe you.” He hissed in a furious whisper, noting that they were still at a safe enough distance not to

be overheard. “Do you shag anyone in pants?” The insulting words were deliberately abrasive.

“What?” Normality returned in a sudden gush as the derogatory question and tone registered. Her eyes flashed to his as shock and fury vied for space. This was outrageous. What was he talking about? One minute he was as turned on as she, and the next he was slating her. Confusion mounted. But James wasn’t giving her time to deal with the snide question.

He shoved his shirt roughly back into his trousers. The action registered with Sasha. She must have caused that state of deshabelle. Red suffused her face. “Me, I’m selective.”

James pivoted and stormed off. How the hell could she kiss him like that when she was living with someone else? She was sleeping with another man. Yet she had kissed him like a lover. The woman had no principles! James had to get away. Fast. Before he really ripped into her. Her kiss had derailed him, her morals were demolishing him, her passion was haunting him.

Sasha stood transfixed for a long, long time while his words sunk in and reverberated. Shell shocked she simply stood and watched as he marched off toward the red head. She let the full impact of his insinuation stoke her reaction into fury. How dare he! His words throbbed through her brain. Any vague thoughts about their kiss being special were rapidly extinguished.

He took the woman’s elbow and led her toward the row of portacabins. He was talking, she was listening. Sasha watched the two as they disappeared into the portacabin. That released Sasha from her trance. Rage pulsed through her.

Taking a deep long breath she tried to rein in her outrage. The last thing she needed at this moment was another display of her now infamous temper. The threat of a meeting with the disciplinary council would become a reality. She knew that. But she was close to throwing it

all away. She was ready to march after them to give him the full measure of her fury.

She calmed down. Slowly. Sasha hadn't moved off the spot. She was incapable of movement. Fury, yes, but movement no. She stood rooted to the spot, a good imitation of a bronze statue, the only give away, her eyes. They slowly misted with tears as she fought anger, humiliation and pain. She waited for the waves of misery to cease. Sasha wanted to dissolve into oblivion.

Sasha was about to head for her lab when she saw him emerge with the woman. Mortified that the woman had seen Sasha make an exhibition of herself, Sasha turned and fled for the administration building. It was nearest.

Once she cleared the car park, she walked briskly toward the two storey glass fronted building. Out of sight of James and his associate. For the umpteenth time, she wondered how she could have kissed him like that. The man was reporting her for misconduct. What would he add to that report now? Propositioning? She took a calming breath as she walked slowly up the stairs leading to the staff room.

She pulled the door open, bemused and totally miserable. Her face mirrored her confusion. She walked along the corridor on automatic pilot, heading toward the staff room from sheer practice. Luckily she didn't meet anyone along the way. She wasn't sure whether she could string a greeting together, let alone hold her head up. For a normally confident woman she was suddenly bereft of her usual composure.

Sasha checked her pigeon hole for mail, collected her messages and informed the receptionist that she'd be working from home tomorrow. She couldn't stay here. She was going to give this place a wide berth, things were getting complicated. Perhaps it was her time of the month. Her hormones must be playing up. Why else would she over react to a kiss?

As she walked to her car, her mind went into overdrive and hit panic. She insulted the man. He was taking her to a disciplinary council. She kissed him. Where was the sense in all that?

Common sense, that was all she had to use, a bit of common sense. A tiny smidgen of self-control, that's all she needed. Surely she had a minuscule amount of self-preservation, surely? Instead she made an idiot of herself. A class one, prime time idiot.

She was going home. To hide.

Sasha climbed into her car, tossed her mail onto the passenger seat and then slammed the car door. For Sasha this turmoil was unusual. She tugged her seat belt into place with suppressed ferocity and tried to settle her chaotic thoughts. A couple of minutes later she drove despondently out of the car park. What was the matter with her?

Sasha returned to the University on Wednesday. She was, she thought, ready to handle a meeting. Not that she had any intention of seeking him out, but just in case... she knew she would cope. She hoped she could cope. She needed to cope. She certainly couldn't keep hiding. As it was, Luke was getting curious.

Luke drove her to the University, because Sasha's car was being serviced. The gear box had given up the ghost. So for a couple of days she was car-less. It made life difficult, living out of town with no transport. She was having to rely on Luke and Briar to ferry her around

Briar, Sasha's sister, had been home for a couple of days. After dropping Sasha off at the University, Luke was going to drive Briar to Auckland. They were going to visit her parents and then Luke was taking Briar to the airport. Briar was on her way to yet another conference. Since her return from UN duty she had been invited to be a guest speaker at numerous conventions. She had set herself a time limit, because when she married Luke she

was going to stop traveling so much. She wanted to be with him.

“You sure you’re o.k.?” Briar asked once again as she flicked Sasha a questioning look. Briar was worried, seriously worried. Sasha was normally the exuberant member of the family. But over the last couple of days she had moped around the cottage, rarely smiling, mostly lost in thought and frequently cursing in muttered undertones. Totally unlike the Sasha that usually drove her to distraction with ribald teasing.

The real Sasha was nowhere to be seen. Something was worrying Sasha. But neither Luke nor Briar had been able to prise the problem out of her.

Luke had tried teasing Sasha into telling them what was going on, but his usual tactics had failed to draw her out. She was tight lipped. Briar had watched her sister brood for the last couple of days and all her attempts to get her to talk about the situation had failed. Sasha was keeping what ever was worrying her, to herself. That concerned Briar. Their family always talked through difficult problems. But Sasha wasn’t talking.

Sasha gave her sister a kiss, “I’m fine.” She smiled. “Really.” It was a poor imitation of the real thing.

“Just lusting after that Lonergan guy, I’d say.” Luke quipped on an intuitive wild shot as he looked in his rear view mirror. Sasha stuck her tongue out at him.

“Yeah, yeah.” She agreed sarcastically as she pulled her small back pack toward her. “Which sane person wouldn’t? The guy is only thinking of reporting me to a disciplinary committee!” She made it sound as if Luke was talking about pigs flying. He was too close to the truth.

“I thought you said that was sorted.” Briar turned in her seat to face her younger sister, her eyes conveying curiosity. “Sasha?” She prodded and waited for her sister to comment. Perhaps this was the problem. An incident like this could terminate Sasha’s contract at this



University. It could mean the end of her career. It was a major issue. What if he was going to report her sister?

“It is sorted.” Sasha confirmed, “I..”

“Are you sure?” Briar interrupted, her eyes concentrating on reading Sasha’s reaction. Briar was far from convinced. For a start, Sasha had not looked her in the eye when she had told her the issue was resolved and secondly Sasha sounded a touch too brittle. Sasha was never brittle, she was too self assured and confident. But her voice had held a definite trace of apprehension. Well hidden, but there none the less.

“Yes.” This time Sasha was firm. Briar looked as if she was gearing up for a full scale interrogation, and Sasha wasn’t ready to tell anyone about how she felt. The whole thing was still too raw, too new and too depressing.

“Then what’s the problem?” Briar fixed Sasha with a ‘no-stalling’ look.

Thinking quickly, Sasha fished through her repertoire of possible reasons, “A grant. I’ve been waiting to see if I’ve been short listed for an award. I should have heard by now.”

Luke quirked a clearly disbelieving look at her, but he said nothing. When she was ready to talk about Lonergan she would. But right now she wasn’t going to and he wasn’t going to push. He knew something was going on and he knew that it was bothering her. He’d tell Briar about his new hunch on the way up to Auckland.

“Really?” Briar questioned sympathetically.

Sasha nodded, pleased with her quick thinking. She wasn’t ready to handle a Lonergan reaction inquest right now. Just thinking about the situation was enough to have her hands going clammy.

“It’s probably just been delayed in the mail. I’m sure you’ll get it.” Briar added encouragingly. “Wait and see.”

“Don’t have much choice.” Sasha grimaced, before she firmly steered the conversation toward a less stressful topic. “Anyway, you two had better get going.” Sasha leaned forward to kiss her sister again. “Take care.” She opened the door of Luke’s Jag and stepped out on to the pavement.

“Yeah, I will.” Briar smiled, “And don’t celebrate until I get back!”

Sasha nodded and reached to close the door.

“I’ll pick you up around six, o.k?” Luke reached past Briar to remind Sasha of their arrangement for later that evening.

Sasha nodded automatically. “Yes. If I’m not down, come and get me.”

She waved to Briar and Luke as they drove back down the way they’d come. Furtively she glanced around the car park and was relieved to see that James’ ute wasn’t there. Good. Now that she was actually here, she wasn’t sure she could cope with seeing him again, not just yet. It was too soon.

Every time she thought about that kiss she felt a rush of excitement. And the trouble was that she was having a great deal of difficulty forgetting about it. She shouldn’t have kissed him, that was all there was to it. She wouldn’t be in this predicament now if she’d exercised caution. When was she going to learn?

Sasha collected her mail from her pigeon hole and without looking at the small bundle of internal and external mail she returned to her office. She put the pile of letters and papers down on a workbench as she checked her experiment. Once she was sure everything was working as it should, she headed for her small office where she began to open the envelopes in no particular order. She was working on automatic pilot. She had been for days.

Sasha muttered a hopeful prayer when she opened one particular envelope. She had been short listed for the award and was invited to take part in the selection interview. In the sanctuary of her office, Sasha whooped loudly with joy and did a brief jig, conforming to her true character, which had not been in evidence the last few days. She began to think about her project. Her luck must be changing. Finally.

Ecstatic she re-read through the details; she had to prepare a twenty minute lecture to be given in front of the selection panel and an open theatre audience. She knew that the foundation awarding the grant, used curriculum vitae to short list candidates. She also knew that the interview panel would not be given the details and the final decision rested on the presentation.

Neither the candidates nor the panel knew of the other until the day of the presentation. That way there was no opportunity to ‘persuade’ judges prior to the presentation. She had a good chance. Full of renewed vigour, Sasha switched on her computer. With meticulous care she began to cull together a short presentation.

“Hi.” Called a familiar voice, disrupting Sasha’s train of thought.

“Hi ya yourself!” She replied grinning at Sam as he ambled into the lab. It was contagious, he grinned in response as he came nearer.

“Want to see some photos?” He had thrust the folio at her before she had a chance to answer.

She chuckled, “Sure, why not.” Sasha had been to visit mother and baby and had seen his beautiful daughter. He had promised to bring in some photographs, and this clearly was that time. They spent several minutes describing the little baby girl. Sam already had all the finer details down pat.

“She has the most incredibly long legs. Her mother’s!” He flushed with pleasure, “And these long, long fingers,”

He gestured with his hands, “I think she’ll be a brain surgeon!”

Sasha grinned and reminded him of his previous career choice “I thought it was a piano player.”

“No money in that!” Sam retorted smoothly as he replaced the photo in her hand with one of the baby in an almost identical shot, except this time her eyes were open.

“Isn’t she just beautiful?”

Sasha nodded.

“See that lock of hair,” he pointed at a tiny tuft, Sasha nodded as expected, “it is so soft! And it just curls, so naturally.” Sasha smothered her smile.

And so it went on for the next twenty minutes. When they came to the end of the thirty six snaps with running commentary, and she saw that he was about to lapse into another eulogy on the merits of his baby, Sasha held up her hands.

“Ok, ok, you can have the day off!”

He looked affronted.

She cuffed his chin. “Just kidding!”

“You mean I can’t?”

She sighed in exasperation, “As it so happens you can! I’ve checked the plates, they are back in the frame. I am writing my presentation. So, as you can see, there is nothing for you to do. Hey, I even tidied up, so you might as well go home.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. I was going to video her sleeping today!” He conceded proudly as he put the photos back in his back pack when he froze. “What presentation?”

“Oh,” She shrugged nonchalantly, working up to her moment of glory, “the Whiterose Foundation.”

Sam hollered with joy. “You got it. You beauty!” He hauled her into a bear hug and smothered the breath out of her. She thumped his shoulder. He released her.

“I haven’t got it, yet.” She corrected him as she flexed her shoulders, “That’s why I’m doing this presentation. ”

“I’ll help. I’ll have to stay.” Sam put his backpack down on the floor and began to shrug off his jacket. “Short listed for the Whiterose, wow.”

Sasha picked up the backpack , “Oh no you don’t.” She thrust the bag at him, “You’ll probably find ways to insert the words, beautiful baby, every ten lines, or knowing you, every second word. No thanks. I can do this on my own.” She turned him around and pushed against his back, as she propelled him toward the door. “You can go home, thanks very much.”

“But Sasha...”

“No buts, just go!” With that she pulled the door open and did a low bow.

“Are you sure?” He stalled, half tempted to stay, but itching to spend more time with his wife and baby.

“Hey, I was giving presentations when you were knee high to a grasshopper!”

He shook his head, “Yeah, as if!”

“Go home Sam. I can write a measly presentation on my own thanks. I’ll show it to you when you come in next week, ok.”

“Next week?”

“Why? You’ve got something else to do here?”

“Well...”

”Sam, we are on vacation, go home. There is nothing to do here. We were only going to tidy up during this vacation, and that, as you can see, has been done.” She smiled at him to soften the words. “If you stay you’ll only mess it up again.” He snorted at that comment. “So

go home, take the week off, or work from home, write the next research proposal, whatever, just get going!” She folded her arms as she added, “Give them both a hug from me.”

“Thanks Sasha.” He smiled slowly, “Give me a ring at home if you need anything, ok.”

“No problem.”

By six o’clock, Sasha had collected a heap of papers. She was going to read through them in order to select suitable sections to inform her presentation. She gathered the articles together, and made her way out of the lab. Sasha was still ecstatic about this grant. It was a prestigious award and her ego felt suitably jaunty. Even if she didn’t get it, just to be short listed was a buzz. She hummed to herself as she made her way down the stairs. Wait till she told her family.

She knew exactly what line she was going to adopt with this presentation and she knew she’d have to get Briar or Grace to go shopping with her, preferably Briar. Grace tended to verge on the slightly unorthodox when it came to clothing. Briar on the other hand was a conservative Vogue dream. Plus Grace was pregnant, and Josh was over protective. So, Briar it was.

Sasha giggled as she recalled the numerous occasions she had teased Briar and told her she would not be caught dead wearing those ‘daggy’ clothes, and here she was, getting ready to beg her sister to take her shopping. Perhaps she’d get some new clothes for next semester, time to freshen up her image. Look the part of a lecturer.

The car park was deserted apart from the two men standing beside a low slung sports car parked smack bang in the middle of the small car park.

Elation vaporised.

Sasha recognised James immediately, but she didn’t know the other man. Sasha also saw Luke waiting in his Jag, just beyond the sports car. Damn! What a way to end

such a good day. And why couldn't Luke have been more considerate and parked closer to her building?

Harve Winiata saw the young lecturer before James did. He did a quick inventory of her attire. She had discarded the white flapping coat and was wearing cut off jeans and an oversize white t-shirt. Very demure and almost normal. He stifled a grin.

"Why don't you ask her?" He turned to James as he nodded toward the woman approaching them.

"Shit!" James hissed beneath his breath.

"Just to show there are no hard feelings."

No hard feelings? He had plenty of those, they had been making his life damn uncomfortable just recently.

James scowled ferociously, but didn't answer. He continued to frown as he watched her walk toward them. He leant on the open door of the car, feigning casualness, adopting a relaxed pose he was far from feeling. Harve kept his eyes on his boss. Beneath the casual pose he saw alarm and something else he couldn't quite identify.

"After all you didn't get round to really taking her out." Harve stated matter of factly, but James wasn't listening, he was watching her approach them.

She had a sexy walk. Baggy t shirt, old jeans, those disreputable trainers and still she looked sexy. Why was she coming toward them? She had the whole damn car park and she was heading toward him. What the hell was the matter with her, couldn't she see? Or was she just thick skinned? He thought she was away, because he hadn't seen her car, yet here she was strolling toward him. Why? Hell, she wasn't expecting him to give her a ride home?

Sasha's arms were full of papers and she had placed her cotton jumper on top of the pile she carried. Her hair was caught in her standard bunched pony tail, but as usual, strands had escaped the confines of the band and they were now teasing her face. She kept blowing them off her

face as she walked, but they kept fluttering back. Her face was bare of make up and she was grimacing. It wasn't intentional, she just couldn't help it. Why did they have to park there and why were they watching her?

“Well, I'm going to ask her.” Harve stated flatly, thinking he was doing his boss, and long time friend, a favour. Harve levered himself off the car and straightened up ready to issue the invitation. James knew it would be pointless to argue. He also hoped she had the common sense to turn down the invitation.

Sasha was doing her best to ignore the two men. The only problem was that she had to walk directly past them to get to Luke. He should have parked closer to her building. Anywhere but in the direction of that sports car. She could walk all the way round the perimeter of the car park, but that would be obvious and she didn't want to give James the satisfaction of knowing that he unnerved her.

She could feel herself panicking. The nearer she got the more apprehensive she felt. They are just two guys, ridiculously she kept repeating that mantra to herself. Two guys, two guys, two guys. The closer she got to them, the more it sounded like a plaintive cry rather than a reaffirmation of a situation.

She knew she looked a mess, the cut offs were old, the t shirt was ginormous, it belonged to Luke, and her hair had escaped her hair band. Tendrils of black hair were now being whirled by the breeze onto her face and into her eyes. Looking a mess had never worried her before. She wished it didn't now, but it did.

“Kia Ora Dr Carvalho.” The large Maori man called to her. Sasha swallowed her dismay and forced herself to stop in front of the two men. A brief stop she promised her nervous psyche. An answering hello and then she was out of there.



“Kia Ora!” The last thing she wanted to do was to talk, especially to James. And not now. Not when she looked so unkempt, which she just knew she did.

But she appeared to have no choice. She tried for nonchalance. Smile she told herself. She grinned idiotically. She couldn’t just walk on.

“I’m Harvey Winiata.” The burly Maori told her, when she was within a few feet of them, and held out his hand. Sasha flushed to her roots. Oh great, this went from bad to worse. Now she had to face the man she had insulted and the man she had intended to insult and both of them knew it. Just great. In consternation she nodded acknowledgement, jostled the stack she was carrying and then shook his hand briefly.

“He’s the one you thought was an illegitimate amphibian imbecile!” James reminded her caustically.

Oh great, they were back to the beginning. Sasha’s arms gripped the papers tightly as she strove for nonchalance and recovered from that attack.

“Er, Doctor,” Harve started nervously, seeing that a war was about to erupt and that James was making no attempt to be nice to the woman.

“I’m sorry about that Mr Winiata.” Sasha smiled at Harve, then flicked James a nasty look. “I was going by appearance and demeanour at the time!”

“Oh, no hard feelings,” Harve told her jovially, missing the glare James threw Sasha. “We’re having a party Friday night.” He rushed into speech sensing that James was about to launch another mortar attack. Sasha was sure she looked somewhat confused by the fact Harve was sharing that bit of information, “We’ve got another big contract.” He enlightened her, but obviously not enough. She still looked baffled.

“Oh.” She smiled, “Well done.” She even sounded baffled by the fact that he had stopped her to impart that

news, rather than draw attention to the fact that she had been rude.

“Yeah,” Harve beamed at her genially, “We thought you might come.”

She went from baffled to bewildered instantly. Her eyes widened in questioning surprise. “Me?” Squeaked Sasha, her eyes still wide. She flicked a surreptitious look at James, wondering whether this was a peace offering. Unlikely, but...

She turned to smile tentatively at him. Perhaps she shouldn't have been so rude just now, he was offering an olive branch. She peeked up at him. His face showed no returning gesture of goodwill. Stone walled. It wasn't a peace offering after all, Sasha turned back to face Harve, her smile frozen in place.

“It's nothing big, just the guys who work here. But you've met some of them, and they thought you might want to party!” Harve was still smiling at her.

She racked her brains to form a suitable excuse. She wasn't going to any party if James was going to be there. She was recovering from her stupid phase. She had entered her rational, sensible, pragmatic phase. James did not feature in that matrix at all. “Thanks, that ...”

”Perhaps you should ask Luke first.” James butted in. His words held a definite trace of challenge. The last thing he wanted was her at the party. And she'd sounded as if she was about to accept. Deliberately he reminded her of the partner she seemed to be able to forget at the toss of a coin or a kiss. Two-timing shrew!

“Luke?” Sasha queried, her gaze once more back with James.

“Luke?” Harve reiterated in puzzlement. Who was Luke?

“You can bring him.” James stated with barely suppressed animosity. Sasha could see vibrant hostility in his cobalt blue eyes. They were dark blue black

sapphires, glinting furiously at her, sparing her none of his enmity.

“Oh.” Sasha reeled from the force of antipathy that emanated from him, “Well, er, sure. I’ll ask him.” She smiled tentatively before she turned toward the black XJS, “Luke!” She bellowed loudly much to the amazement of the men beside her. She signaled with her head. Beckoning.

A man, James recognised instantly as Luke, stepped out of the car. James hadn’t noticed him or the car before. He hadn’t given the sports car a look and he, unfortunately, hadn’t noticed the fact that it was occupied.

Luke was casually but immaculately dressed and he stepped out of the car with a lazy grace that James envied. James eyed him cautiously. Luke walked over to join the group of three.

“Sash.” Luke growled in apparent disgust as he drew nearer, “Do you have to yell across car parks?” He threw her an exasperated resigned look, “And that’s my T shirt you’re wearing.” He muttered in exasperation.

“Stop grouching.” She said as she thrust the papers she was carrying at him. He took the sheaf automatically. James knew he would. Sasha and Luke had an easy going kinship, that spoke of established relationship. They were comfortable with each other. James began to seethe. Futility vied with frustration. “And I found the T shirt in the laundry basket when I was ironing.” She tucked all the escaped wisps of hair behind her ear, a late attempt to look respectable. For a moment she forgot the two other men as she winked smugly at Luke.

She knew from her discussions with Grace, Briar and Joshua, that Luke had endured a painfully affectionless family life. He hadn’t experienced teasing, sharing camaraderie, something that the three sisters had had in abundance. Something they were all doing their best to provide. He might be marrying Briar, but he was getting her whole family whether he wanted it or not! They

included him in everything. Teased, challenged and loved. Luke had rapidly become part of that sharing family. That, as far as Sasha was concerned, included borrowing clothes!

Luke knew it was futile to argue the point, so he returned to the issue of his summons, “So why d’you call me?” He flicked a quick glance at the two other men. He’d recognised James from the moment he’d stepped out of the car, but he didn’t know who the other man was.

“Oh” Sasha dimpled with her usual charismatic charm, “This is Mr Winiata and Mr Lonergan, you know him.”

The men nodded warily.

“Anyway, they’re inviting us to a party.”

“Us?” Luke frowned in confusion as his eyes left Lonergan to focus on Sasha. “Us?”

“There is no need to sound so enthused!” Sasha retorted sarcastically and cuffed his arm with her usual sisterly affection.

“Er,” Harve stumbled into an explanation, things seemed to be getting a touch out of hand. “We’ve got a new contract, so we’re celebrating. Friday night, just a small party.”

During Harve’s spiel, James and Luke quietly sized each other up. James was broader and taller than Luke. He also seemed to be inexplicably combative toward the other man. He was trying to intimidate Luke. Not an easy feat. Luke had not backed away from a confrontation in years, his broken nose testament to his childhood battles. Luke wasn’t about to start backing out now, even if he did feel the blonde giant was unnecessarily concerned about his relationship with Sasha. Sasha was soon to be his sister in law and he had every intention of looking after his extended family. Luke’s eyes flashed a warning. James responded by squaring his shoulders.

“So?” Sasha prompted, sensing the unexplained hostilities. “Do you want to go?”

Luke shook his head, "I'm off to Otago, Friday." He stated, keeping his eyes firmly trained on James. James kept his eyes focused on Luke. Bellicose.

"You never said anything about a trip." Sasha accused spontaneously, wondering if he was inventing an excuse. And why were the two men flagrantly hassling each other?

Luke finally switched his attention back to Sasha, "Sasha, I don't tell you everything!" He stated bluntly, and seeing her reaction to his caustic response, instantly took the sting out by adding, "I only decided to go this morning."

"Oh." Sasha said softly. She turned to Harve, smiling, pretending to be despondent, "Thanks anyway" Relief coursed through her. It was short-lived.

"You can still go." Luke told her, misreading the fake despondency.

"No! I can't!" She squealed and then quickly found a more normal tone to add, "The car isn't due back till Saturday." Sasha launched into a hasty explanation. Her eyes flashing Luke a message.

"We can pick you up." Harve injected, missing all the undercurrents.

"Oh, no, I couldn't put you to that trouble." Sasha spoke quickly. This was getting out of control. She wasn't going to any party with James present, without an armed escort. She wasn't totally stupid, though recent actions would suggest otherwise.

"No trouble, I'll pick you up myself." Harve said amicably and with a jovial smile looked at all concerned as if he had done them a favour.

"Oh, look, no really!" She was beginning to panic in earnest, they were forcing her into a corner.

"Please." Harve cajoled with a hearty grin, "I know our men would thank me!"

Sasha chuckled at his audacious flattery. It sent Luke the wrong signal.

“Go for it Sash!” Luke told her, “What are you going to do Friday night, wash your hair?” His eyebrow quirked as he ribbed her. Once again he misread her cue. She’d wanted out. She glared at him. “Go, but behave yourself!” Luke pushed.

Reluctantly, Sasha conceded, muttering “O.k, thanks.” This was stupid, she told herself, stupid. Guaranteed problem, guaranteed hassle, guaranteed trouble. Stupid, stupid, stupid. “I’d love to come.”

They arranged times and details, then Sasha and Luke walked toward his Jaguar. As she pulled open her door, knowing they’d be out of ear shot of the other two men, she growled at Luke, “Fat lot of good you were!”

“What?”

“I didn’t want to go to that party.”

Luke grinned. “That is so not true Sasha!”

“I didn’t!”

She buckled herself in and Luke took the opportunity to start teasing her. “So what’s with you and Lonergan?”

“Nothing.” She snapped quickly and in unison with her seat belt clicking into place.

Luke flicked her a quick assessing glance and then beamed. “You call that nothing?” It wasn’t often that Sasha was rattled. Normally she was so even keel, it was impossible to get a rise out of her. So laid back, her shadow held conversations with her. But the last few days had been interesting. And all because of that blonde giant.

Luke wondered if James was ready for the Carvalho clan. Then he smiled, if James was ready for Sasha, the Carvalho clan would be a breeze!

“And how come I didn’t notice you wearing my t-shirt this morning? Is nothing sacred?” He teased.

“I had my jumper on.”

“Devious. Very devious.” He chuckled. “Now about Lonergan....”

“Just drive.” She snapped. “Unless you want to explain what all that macho crap was about out there.”

Luke laughed. Sasha fancied the man. It was obvious.

Once James had come on the scene, she had lost her rare but infamous temper, had moped around the cottage and from what he had just seen, she was clearly in lust with the guy. Luke had seen the way she kept sneaking looks at the blonde guy while he had been doing his utmost to pretend he wasn't interested. Luke had caught all the signals.

“Nothing going on between you two?” He put the car into reverse, and through his rear view mirror noticed that Lonergan was still watching them. “He fancies you.”

”Your one grey brain cell has expired.” Sasha retorted then murmured uncomfortably, “He hates my guts.”

“Get real Sasha. The guy is interested.” Luke said confidently, glancing over to look at her, before he turned the steering wheel. He maneuvered the car until it faced the exit gate. “Take my word for it. He's interested. That's why he was staking territory.”

”Sure he was.” She said facetiously, but her voice was full of wistfulness. “Shows how much you know. He practically snapped my head off the last time we met.”

“Frustration!” Luke retorted, flicked her a boyish grin and added, “I know you Carvalho women. You're enough to try a saint.”

Sasha pouted, “I'm going to tell Briar you said that.”

“She knows!” He laughed good naturedly. “And I'm no saint.”

“We know!” Sasha retorted.

## Chapter 11

Harve and his wife collected Sasha at her cottage, and drove her to the party. They regaled her with stories about James, but all that did was make Sasha more nervous.

This was not the time to wish for a good excuse to leave. Half of her wanted to be here, and the other half wanted out. This was the first time she had ever been in love, and she wasn't sure that she enjoyed the feeling. Not when the man she loved didn't return the sentiment.

By the time they arrived at the party it was in full swing, loud music was blaring from the open windows and clusters of people were milling around the doorway. This was a mistake, Sasha acknowledged as she took stock of the situation. She knew no-one here.

The party was more than just a few people. There were bodies everywhere. Pushing, shoving, gyrating bodies. Harve and Aroha introduced her as they made their way through the throng. Sasha smiled dutifully, and followed them into the house. She kept close to them. This was a mistake. She should never have come.

If only she could go home. Furtively Sasha glanced around. No sign of James. She relaxed slightly.

Harve introduced Sasha to several people her own age and she tried to mingle when Harve went in search of some drinks and Aroha was whisked away by an old friend. Sasha remained with the group.

She became a part of a faceless crowd, part of the whole, but an outsider nonetheless. She stood silently as the group talked about past exploits. She barely caught what they said, the music was so loud and her mind was elsewhere. It was hard going. The crowd thinned out as people moved away to mingle with others. Many of the women saw Sasha as a threat and were quick to drag their partners into the heaving mass of dancing bodies. Several of the guys were trying to decide whether to chance their luck. Sasha was debating whether to leave.



Time to summon a taxi, she decided as she glanced around. Harve and Aroha were dancing. Still no sign of James. She sighed.

“Dance?”

“Sorry?” Sasha turned toward the voice. She hadn’t quite caught what he said.

“Do you want to dance?” He repeated loudly in her ear and placed a hand on her butt before she could reply.

“Er, I was just leaving.” She smiled apologetically and quickly disengaged from his loose grip.

“You just got here!” It was an accusation, one that Sasha would not be able to defend.

“Er, yes, but I was...” Slowly she began to inch out of the room.

“Waiting for me.” A familiar voice.

Startled, Sasha spun around and cannoned into James. James grinned at her, his hand clamped around her forearm. The other man backed off. Sasha whirled around again, hoping to latch onto the guy, but he had made a swift exit.

Sasha closed her eyes and stifled the urge to scream. Things just weren’t going her way at all. Slowly she turned to face him.

“Enjoying yourself?” James stood by her elbow, he had practically yelled in her ear for him to be heard. He was dressed casually in black jeans and a Waikato rugby shirt.

“Er, yes.” Sasha lied, not quite meeting his eyes. How the hell did she get out of here now? With him so close?

“Liar.” He said gently, “Let’s dance.”

“Dance?” She hollered, looking at the crushed throng of people all swaying to the deafening sound. No, not a good move. Pressed up against him? She was not going to behave like an idiot again and the only way to avoid doing that was to stay away from him. She was not going

through that hassle again. Never. Maintain a nice comfortable distance she told her brain.

She didn't have an opportunity to dissuade him.

His eyebrows quirked, "Yes. Dance." He yelled back leaning even closer. Sasha arched in an attempt to keep some personal space between them. "Come on." He took her hand and pulled her into the room and into the throng.

He burrowed into the mass, his hand holding hers firmly, ensuring that she stayed with him, then he turned and pulled her into his arms. It was a swift move. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. Sasha found herself pressed along his length. His leg between her thighs, his hands stroking her lower back. So much for a nice comfortable distance.

He lowered his head to shout in her ear, "Do you own any dresses?"

Sasha was wearing a silk, tan coloured t-shirt and black linen shorts. For Sasha this was a minor miracle, the clothes complimented each other. They were close to normal too. The fact that they were still shorts and t-shirt had not registered.

She tipped her head back in surprise, "Yes, of course. Why?"

"I've only ever seen you in shorts and t-shirts." He told her candidly.

With absolutely no guile and charming frankness she grinned up at him, "Well at least this lot match!" She stood on tiptoes to whisper directly in his ear and body brushed his into staggering awareness. "I guess I'm the tomboy in the family." She enlightened ingenuously before she slid down his length and settled more firmly on her two feet.

James felt her movement like a whispered caress. "You don't feel like a tomboy to me." And to her amazement he pulled her closer.

The faint light from a neighbouring room cast mystical shadows and hues. Sasha thought she was almost in paradise. Perhaps they were on a one day cycle. One day aggro, one day enchantment. She melted into him, today was enchantment day.

They danced, totally out of synch with the loud heavy base of dance music reverberating against the bare wooden floor. They practiced shuffling slowly from side to side, swaying, still glued like limpets to each other, fused along their body lengths, and making no move to put any distance between each other.

In tandem they smooched, brushing bodies, breathing slowly, holding on tightly. Then, almost as if they had willed it, the tempo and volume of the music changed. Lights dimmed further and the music slowed to a romantic ballad. Couples shifted, murmured and changed their body positions into a more definitive embrace. James and Sasha were already two steps ahead.

James gently but firmly drew Sasha closer. She felt his blatant arousal rub against her abdomen and she tipped her head back to stare in consternation into blue eyes that had darkened to pitch. His head was moving toward her, slowly, aching slow. She watched mesmerised as his face blurred out of focus and her eyes lids fluttered to a close.

Then his lips touched hers. He kissed her. Long, deep and slow. Sasha pressed even nearer, desperate to accommodate him. She clung to his neck. Loving the feel of his hard body against her. They had stopped moving their feet and were tightly entwined. Tongues, hands, hips. Microseconds were used to break apart, breathe, change angle, and resume kissing. Hips pressed, tongues laced, and hands roved, their movements were drugging and gentle. Paradise.

When they finally stopped kissing he whispered, "Let's get out of here." His voice was incredibly hoarse. Sasha nodded, she was trying hard to breathe normally. But her heart hammered like a sprinter's after a hundred metre

race. She doubted very much if she could form words let alone utter them. So much for not getting involved. So much for distance. So much for sanity. Hell what a kiss!

James signaled to Harve; they were leaving. The older man acknowledged the signal and within minutes James and Sasha were out of the house. He hadn't released her. His grip tight, his intention clear.

Harve bent to whisper in Aroha's ear, "I told you." He stated smugly.

Aroha only just caught the back of James as he disappeared out of the door. He had his arm around Sasha's waist, and was holding her close to his side.

"I hope you're right. She seemed nice."

"I think the boss has found himself a wife."

Aroha cuffed his shoulder. "They've only just made up according to you, and you already have them married."

"I saw that kiss!" Harve grinned. Aroha shook her head but said no more.

James wasn't sure why he was doing this. He just knew he had to. She was in his blood.

He drove Sasha to her cottage in tense silence. Both afraid to tamper with what they had achieved and found. Neither capable of being honest, both too proud. But if he'd been thinking straight he'd have taken her to his house.

He switched off the engine when they arrived at her door.

"Coffee?"

He paused a second and then said, "If I come in, it won't be for coffee."

She nodded in complete agreement. "OK."

They were barely inside the house when he drew her to him. They both knew this was going to happen. It was meant to happen.

Dazed. That's how she felt. Without control, no rational thought, just this desperate need to touch, and that acute obsession to taste him, again. This was disturbing.

Very gently, very slowly he drew her to him, framed her face with his hands and nibbled gently on her bottom lip. Then one hand slid to her shoulder, the other to the back of her head, and his mouth fused wholly against hers. Brushing gently, rubbing firmly. Her mouth opened, and the kiss swung up a gear. He nipped gently at her lower lip, tugging it into his mouth, bathing it with his tongue.

Sasha felt boneless. Fluid.

Her silk t shirt came off first and he tossed it away without a concern for where it landed or how expensive it was. He kissed her and as he did, his fingers sought out the hooks of her skin tone lace bra. It took seconds to release the hooks, ease the straps down her arms and let it fall. The bra joined the t-shirt on the floor.

Sasha tugged his rugby shirt out of the waist band of his jeans. She had her mouth glued to his, but her hands were working frantically. On automatic pilot she undid the three buttons quickly. She was totally unaware of just how busy her fingers had been or how far they had wandered, until she touched his hair roughened chest and grazed taut male nipples. James shuddered in response and groaned as her nails inadvertently raked across them. Moving slightly away from her he roughly pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor. Immediately they moved back together. His hands cupping her breast, her hands clutching his head. He kissed her hard, enticing her lips to respond to the rough movement.

Breathing hard, he disengaged and looked straight into her eyes. Then he lowered his head and began to kiss her along her jaw line, down her scapula, hesitating for just a brief instant before moving in on her right breast. Paradise was phenomenal.

The sounds she made were incoherent, guttural, passionate noises. She would be hard pressed to identify

those sounds as her own. She breathlessly called his name the instant his breath touched the darkened areole, but when his tongue brushed featheringly moist against the nub she nearly screamed. Her legs buckled. Paradise had a kick.

His arms went around her bare back and he held her. Pinned her to him. Gave her a chance to re-establish her equilibrium, only to divest her of it totally two seconds later. His fingers unzipped her shorts, delved past the zip and pressed against the skin tone scrap of lace, brushing the lace against her flesh, rubbing against the tiny locus that shredded all thought. Sasha screamed as her entire being turned into a convulsed tidal wave. There was no substance in her legs, the only thing holding her upright was his arm banded around her waist.

In response James quickly picked her up and carried her toward the wide couch. He wasn't expecting her to be quite so responsive. To one finger. One pressing finger.

As he placed her on the three seater, he kissed her mouth again. It was sheer luck that enabled him to place her squarely on the couch, his attention was so focused on the kiss. Then he squeezed onto the couch to lie pressed against her. It was astounding, this feeling inside. It removed doubt, erased caution and communicated passion.

James wanted to be deep inside her, but he didn't want to erupt like an inexperienced school boy. Wham-bam-thank-you-mam was out. He wanted to make slow, tender passionate love for the next few hours.

Giving them both a chance to catch their breath, he lay beside her.

Things were moving too quickly. He needed to slow this down. He wanted long, slow, drugging love. But if they carried on the way they were going, if she kept reacting the way she did, he'd have no option. One trembling hand pushed black strands of hair from her flushed face as the other hand supported his head. He shifted his body

line into a more comfortable position. Sasha shifted to allow him more room.

Seriously, he offered her a choice. “Sasha, now’s the time to stop this if you want to.” He would die if she asked him to stop. His body was coiled so tight, his heart hammering so loudly, his ache so blatant, reigning it all in, stopping, would surely kill him.

She looked shy for a second, even innocent. He shook that thought away. She sure as hell didn’t kiss like an innocent, didn’t react like an innocent. Innocent? Living with Luke? Hardly. The thought brought with it a moment of lucidity.

She was involved with another man. He couldn’t do this, not unless her relationship with Luke was over. It had to be over. He couldn’t believe she’d lead him on, still maintain an old relationship. Not Sasha.

“Sasha,” James sounded as miserable as he felt. James gritted “What about Luke?” His eyes conveyed abject agony. But he couldn’t take this further, couldn’t take her to bed, not when, or if, she shared that with another. The thought of making love to her in a bed she shared with another man, cleared the passion induced haze and James shifted slightly away.

“Luke?” Sasha was confused, her brain was still addled, “He’s gone to Otago.” She said it matter of factly, but her eyes were questioning him. Why was he worried about Luke? Did he think Luke would stumble in on them making love?

“I know.” He swore under his breath, and backed off a bit more, “But what happens when he returns?”

“He’s not coming back this weekend.” She misunderstood. In her totally dizzy state, she wondered why James was so worried about Luke. James was present when Luke had told them that he’d be away. What was all this about?

Sasha saw anger surge in the cobalt eyes, as James began to pull away from her. He was withdrawing from her. He looked furious. What was going on? She began to panic. He was leaving. She could see it in his eyes.

“Well,” Sasha began, mustering all her faculties, knowing that she was loosing the momentum they had. He was going to leave, unless she did something, said something, and soon, he was going to leave. Clearly she wasn’t saying the right things. Obviously James didn’t like Luke. She remembered the way they had sized each other up in the car park.

Sasha ransacked her mind for something to say, somehow to placate him. “Hmmm, he isn’t always here.” She saw the fury reignite. Damn, she was making things worse, “I mean,” She rushed on quickly, panic in her eyes, “we could meet at your place when he’s around.” She knew the instant she’d said the words that they were the wrong things to say. But she didn’t know why.

James shot to his feet. She wasn’t expecting that. For a big man he moved fast. He towered over her as she lay on the couch, her eyes wide in apprehension and confusion. Dismay surged through her. He was livid. His blue eyes were almost black with rage, his hands by his sides were clenching and unclenching, and a muscle throbbed violently at his jaw.

“I don’t believe this!” He thundered furiously. How could he have been so easily manipulated? He buttoned his jeans. “You lie there calmly and tell me you’ll fit me in when he isn’t around!” James stormed over to pick up the black, yellow and red rugby shirt which was lying in a heap on the rug. He shoved his head through the neck opening and pulled the shirt down over his chest. His movements were controlled and furious.

“Why are you so angry?” Sasha questioned plaintively, as she tugged a cushion toward her and hugged it to her bare chest. She was dreadfully embarrassed. Having this conversation whilst she was semi naked just made things worse. Thank goodness she still had her shorts on. She



clutched the cushion even closer as she watched him put on his shirt. It was inside out, but neither of them noticed it. This was so confusing, he was livid and she didn't know why. She swung her feet round so that her toes touched the bare boards.

“Angry!” He bellowed furiously, “Anger doesn't even come close.” He strode over to the door, before he gave in to impulse, to go over and strangle the woman “I don't expect you to understand, but for what it's worth,” He was snarling every word, “I have no intention of shagging you just because your boyfriend is out of town.” He stormed back toward her.

Sasha was immobilised with shock. She held her breath. She could only stare wide-eyed at him as he leaned toward her ominously.

When he was nose to nose with her he said coldly, “I don't share.” Almost breathing the words into her, then he took stock of himself, he pulled himself slightly away from her, and lashed out in utter contempt, “He might be willing to share sexual favours. I'm not.” He spun around and stormed over to the door. In a few seconds he was opening the door.

Sasha's brain kickstarted back into action. She was beginning to think. Her outrage snapped her out of the dazed passive immobility that had rendered her so slow. Quickly, all the hostile, vile, sordid things he'd said, began to register. Her temper kept pace with each iniquitous accusation as it touched the sense making nodes in her brain. Her dazed state forgotten Sasha jumped to her feet, clutching the cushion defensively to her chest with one hand, she used her other hand to hold onto her shorts that had been unzipped.

He turned, they glared at each other.

James sneered at her as he grated through clenched teeth. “Get yourself a health check.”

He was out of the door before Sasha could even form the words she wanted to hurl at him. Furious bitter words

tumbled loudly into the empty room as the car fired up and James drove away. She raged at nothing, for the room was empty and he had gone. Probably didn't even hear the first syllable that she had bellowed.

Sasha went through rage, sheer unadulterated fury, and then shocked numbness. He thought she slept around. Hell, he thought she slept with her sister's fiancé. James was an imbecile! A total jerk. She was right in her first assessment of him, even if she had thought his name was Winiata. The man was an imbecile. She flung the cushion at the door, it didn't make a sound as it reached its target and dropped onto the floor.

There was calm surrender as her real feelings surfaced. Dejection was tangible. It hurt.

Frustration made her eyes smart with unshed tears. She sank back down onto the couch. Defeated, depressed and desolate. Her shoulders sagged as she buried her head in her hands. Waiting for life's kaleidoscope to give her a shot at happiness with him would be fruitless. He hated her. She loved him. Still. Sasha burst into tears. Why was he always making her soar one minute and fight off despondency the next? Tears streamed down her cheeks and she dashed them away as she got to her feet and retrieved her silk top. Hot angry tears kept falling. Sasha swore and cried at the same time. She couldn't ever remember feeling so bad. She was shattered. She pulled on the t shirt as she paced. Tears coursed. She eventually ambled over to the phone and dialed eight numbers. The phone rang three times before it was answered. In that time some measure of control returned and Sasha pulled herself together. But it was short-lived.

"Grace." She wailed as soon as she heard the familiar voice at the other end.

Grace had barely finished her opening greeting. "Sasha?" Grace was immediately worried. Sasha, crying, those two words didn't go together. And she wasn't just crying, she was sobbing uncontrollably. "Sasha?" She repeated, and only got weeping as a response. "What's happened?"

Sasha?” Grace was beginning to panic. “Sasha. Speak to me!”

The sobbing stopped long enough for Sasha to wail plaintively “James” and then once again she began to sob dejectedly.

“James? James who?”

“James the idiot I love.” she sobbed louder. Grace understood immediately. But she also knew this was no time to ask Sasha for a full history. Something must have happened just now.

“What’s happened?”

“He left.”

Past personal experience immediately put Grace in her sister’s shoes. “Sasha! Sasha!” Grace commanded, “What happened?” It was half an hour later that Sasha finally went to bed, the talk, interspersed with bouts of tears, was a temporary balm. Although the pain was still there. They’d talked the scene through. Grace listening, waiting patiently, while Sasha tearfully explained. Sasha told her everything. From their first meeting to the last exit scene.

“Give him time to calm down and then go talk to him.” Grace advised. “He just doesn’t know about Luke and Briar. Talk to him.”

“I can’t. How can he even think I’d sleep around?” She wailed in abject misery. “And with Luke. I mean I don’t know what Briar sees in the guy, he’s just average.”

Grace chuckled before she said, “And James isn’t, right?”

“It’s not fair Grace. I can’t love a guy who thinks I’m a slut. I just can’t.”

“You think you have a choice?” Grace asked.

“Grace! What am I going to do?” Sasha sobbed.

“You’ll know Sash. Go with your heart.” Grace told her gently, “It won’t be easy. But it’s worth it.”

Sasha sighed loudly. “But he hates me.” She whimpered.

“He’s just a bit confused at the moment Sash, you know guys, they think with their dicks at the best of times. Give him a chance to cool down, then tell him he’s got it wrong and watch him eat humble pie.”

“You think so?” Sasha asked woefully but at least there was a touch of hope in her voice now. A few minutes ago, she saw no future for them.

“Yes.” Grace stated firmly. “I do.”

“I’m not sure, what if he...”

“Sasha. What could possibly be worse?” Grace decided to attempt to humour her sister out of her melancholy state, “He already thinks you are a slut!”

“Oh, great!” Sasha groaned, but there was a hint of a smile in her voice. “And I thought I’d get some sympathy and good advice from you, should have known better.

“Heh, I’m dishing out the same advice you gave me not so long ago.”

“Pretty good advice it was too.”

“Yeah. So make sure you take it.”

“Hmmm.”

“Take it.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybe. Do it.”

“You are still too bossy!” Grace heard the smile in her sister’s voice.

“Yup!” Agreed Grace.

“I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“I was tossing and turning anyway. Probably given Josh a chance to get some sleep. I must drive him nuts. Imagine what I’ll be like when I’m eight or nine months pregnant!”

They talked on, mainly about Grace’s pregnancy and Briar’s impending wedding.

## Chapter 12

Sasha and James avoided each other for two weeks. Sasha because she was still hurt and nervous. And she hadn't found the confidence to challenge him. James because he was insanely jealous and wildly angry every time he thought about the situation and the woman.

Sasha wasn't quite sure how to broach the subject. She'd run through several scenarios in her mind, but each trial run sounded like a really pathetic encounter.

When they finally did meet neither was really prepared for it. It was also the first time James saw Sasha dressed 'normally' in anything other than shorts.

He felt as if someone had taken good aim and punched him in the gut. The woman was too attractive for her own good, let alone his. Anyone who looked less like a material scientist he had yet to meet. She looked amazingly business like and incredibly beautiful. He couldn't help but watch her as she joked with the three men she was with. He began to ache.

The dark navy blue suit she wore was cut to fit. And it fit beautifully. The navy was made less sober by the two fuchsia pink stripes on the cuffs of the jacket and hemline of the skirt. The hem line just grazed her knees. Long legs were encased in sheer stockings and on her feet were a pair of two inch heeled blue leather shoes. When James finally shifted his eyes off her clothing and looked at her face he noticed that she was also wearing make up.

He'd never seen her with make up before. Long lashes were coated with black mascara, making them longer and thicker, faint eyeliner drew attention to the almond shape of her eyes and faint bronze blusher drew attention to her high cheek bones. Her lips were a fuchsia pink. The woman could have just walked off a modeling shoot. James forced himself to look away. He concentrated on the voice beside him, but he made sense of nothing. He knew then, that he hadn't got over her. For the last two weeks he'd been telling himself that he'd had a lucky

escape, a woman who could openly have two lovers was not someone he was interested in knowing. He was wrong. He wanted her. Badly. Enough to take crumbs. Tiny crumbs. Just one kiss.

He wanted to kiss her. Hold her tight, and kiss her. Just one kiss.

Sasha noticed James the instant he walked into the auditorium. It was at that instant that Sasha gave up vague notion of having a chance. There were five judges, one of whom was James. She gave up any hope of winning this grant. She had forced herself to joke with her fellow candidates, trying desperately not to cry. This could only happen to her. What had she done recently? Broken any mirrors, walked under any ladders, crossed any black cats? No, so why was her luck so bad, and why did it always involve him?

After the initial hubbub died down, the judges were introduced to the short-listed candidates. There were four candidates, three men and Sasha. Sasha knew from the look he'd directed at her that her chances had dwindled to nil. He was still angry. He thought she slept around and he despised her. His jaw was clenched, those beautiful blue eyes became flinty, and his lips pursed.

There was a chance that she could win the vote of the other judges, but the decision had to be unanimous and after their last meeting, she knew she would not have James' vote. He looked ready to toss her out right now.

She felt near to tears. But then she felt near to tears every time she thought about James.

The effort that had gone into preparing for today, not only with her clothes, but more importantly with her presentation, all that time, all for nothing. Her shoulders sagged wearily as she remembered rehearsing her presentation over and over, in front of her parents, in front of Sam and in front of Grace. They all thought she was in with a chance, but then they would, wouldn't they? They didn't know who the judges were. The award

hinged on the presentation. Damn! She might as well pack up and go home now.

She was tempted. Then her courage and her true nature resurfaced. She hadn't made it this far by being weak, she wasn't going to start now. She was a damn good research scientist. So there was a major obstacle, but it wasn't insurmountable. She could do this, and she could do it well.

The head of the Foundation introduced each judge to each candidate. This was the first time either party was aware of just who was involved. Sasha recognised one of the other judges and she knew one of the other candidates, they had been to the same conferences. Suddenly she was fired up.

Tim Reeves was working on heavy metal extraction through the use of bacteria. Sasha thought she could compete with his work. She would be damned if she just let this go without a fight. She'd make the presentation brilliant, so brilliant that James would have to justify long and hard why he didn't vote for her.

The judges reached her. She nervously wiped clammy hands surreptitiously against her skirt and waited for Blair Vanders to finish introducing the judges to her. Blair gave them a brief biography of her research record. Sasha failed to record the names of the other judges. She smiled at them and tried to look in control and professional, but they didn't really register. She remembered the feel of James' skin as his hand took hers in a formal handshake. His grip had been firm. Luckily he had been the last one to shake her hand. Luckily, because she was now shaking like a leaf. She tried to think about other things.

“Stop shaking. You'll be fine.” Tim whispered encouragingly in her ear as the judges moved on to be introduced to the last candidate. Sasha turned and smiled at Tim, grateful for his encouragement and support.

She turned back to find James glowering at her. He turned away quickly.

Sasha and the other three candidates moved to take their places on the elevated platform facing the auditorium. The Foundation was making an award for young academics, hence none of the candidates were over 35.

The format for the presentation was simple. Each candidate had fifteen minutes to present their case, they then faced fifteen minutes of question time from the judges and finally ten minutes of open questions, from the full auditorium.

The whole process reminded Sasha of her doctorate vivre, which she had taken in Vancouver. Two years on and she was nervous. This was even worse than she remembered, but to gain her doctorate she hadn't had to face a man who vehemently despised her.

Sasha wiped her palms against her skirt as she waited for the judges to reach their allocated spaces. They headed for a long table assembled directly in front of the stage, but midway up the small auditorium.

Sasha was the third person to speak. By the time her turn had come, she was almost fully in control. James had been studiously blanked from her mind. She spoke passionately and eloquently about her work. She used a power point presentation to emphasise key points and addressed the whole audience. Questions put to her were generally vague and non-threatening, though there were a couple that she had to contemplate for a while before she was able to put forward a suitable response.

Overall she felt it had gone well. Nothing to be ashamed of, but she knew that Eric Peters, the man who had followed her had been simply brilliant. If she was a judge she would have voted for him. His ideas, his thinking, his talk were spellbinding. She thought him a genius.

By one o'clock it was all over. They would be informed of the outcome by post. Eric, Tim and Sasha shared



tentative, relieved smiles. The other man nodded curtly at them and then strode off. Not a friendly type.

“He’s a bundle of laughs.” Tim stated as they all watched the departing man. It released some of the tension of the previous hours. “Lunch?” Tim suggested.

Sasha and Eric nodded their agreement. Sasha, Tim and Eric left together. They walked into the heart of Auckland in pursuit of a cafe. It didn’t take long to find one. The small cosmopolitan cafe was on a side street off Queens street and though busy, it wasn’t too difficult to get a table. All three simultaneously placed their brief cases on the floor and shrugged off their coats which they draped over the backs of the chairs.

“I think Eric should get this,” Sasha teased as she took a chair he had graciously pulled out for her. “He’ll be able to afford it after he gets the letter.”

“Uh, no, I, er, I don’t think it will be me.” He told her in embarrassment, going faintly red, when Tim and Sasha quirked raised eyebrows at his statement, “I think it will be close.” He added diffidently.

“Not a chance mate.” Tim beckoned to a passing waiter with his hand, “You were streets ahead of us mere mortals.” Tim added generously for good measure.

Eric laughed self consciously. “You think it was good?” He asked hesitantly, as he removed his glasses and wiped them on the corner of his jacket.

“I think old tie face” Tim referred to their fourth short-listed candidate, “knew it and that’s why he was so boorish. Sasha and I, we’re here for the free lunch. The one you are shouting us.”

Eric chuckled, “I felt it was going well, but you never know about these things.”

Tim and Sasha exchanged speaking glances. Eric was so plainly unsure.

“If they don’t give it to you, I’ll picket their office.” Sasha told the shy young man. He smiled at her and she

grinned at him. “Then I’ll chain myself to their gates and if all else fails I’ll offer them my body in the name of scientific research!” She teased.

“It might work quicker if you started with the last option first.” Tim suggested dryly.

“Sexist!” She challenged lightheartedly.

“Realist!” Tim corrected glibly.

Sasha and Eric laughed.

A waiter took their orders and returned with three cans of ice cold coke and three glasses.

Sasha stood to shrug out of her jacket, “Although, Eric, take my advice, with your soon to be acquired high profile, you’ll have to fend off those groupies, you’ll need me to drape myself all over you, just for protection you understand.” She flirted amicably with him, batting her long lashes at him in an over dramatic gesture.

Eric laughed delightedly, “It will be my pleasure. I don’t know any beautiful women.” He stated artlessly and then blushed beetroot.

“Hey thanks.” She leaned over in typical Sasha fashion and kissed his cheek. “That was a lovely thing to say to me. And believe me if you see the way I usually dress you’d not be so quick to comment.”

“Come to think of it Sasha I think this is the most, er, how shall I put it, conservative? Yeah, conservative. The most conservative outfit I’ve seen you wear. And it’s coordinated!” Tim bantered quickly, sensing the other man’s discomfort. Tim and Sasha had known each other for years, met at conferences and done their first degree together.

Sasha laughed good-naturedly, “Big sisters. Grace insisted that my lime-yellow and green stripe shorts and the pink and white spotted top weren’t quite right for the occasion. I don’t see why not. I had a perfectly matched pair of running shoes! And anyway, did you see the tie that guy was wearing?”

They all laughed as they remembered the tie.

“The trouble with you Sash, is that you don’t know the meaning of the word coordinated.”

“Cheek!” She leaned over and jabbed his shoulder, “I really don’t see what’s the fuss. They keep me decent, why do they have to match?”

“See what I mean, Eric, total lost cause.”

The waiter returned with their orders.

“I was fascinated by the laser design.” Sasha told Eric, once the waiter had left, “Incredible idea, how did you manage it?” And so they launched into a discussion about his project.

The man came alive when he talked about his work and they talked for ages.

Around three in the afternoon, Sasha excused herself. “If you are down Hamilton way, stop in and say hi.” She told both men. “But not in the next couple of weeks, I’m on my hols. Finally.”

“Are you going to MRC?” Tim asked as Sasha got to her feet and shrugged on her jacket. She nodded. “Giving a paper?”

“Yes, thought I might just give the one I just did. Might as well get something out of all that preparation.”

“I’ll see you there. Are you going?” Tim asked the other man. Eric nodded. “How about we book into the same accommodation? Want to share?” It was common practice to share a motel unit, it helped cover costs.

“Sure, why not, let me know when you’ve booked it all. We’ll need a fourth. Make it cheaper.”

“I’ll see who else is going.”

“Ok, well, I must get going. See you guys.”

After protracted goodbyes, Sasha left them to it.

Eric watched her go. “She’s nice.” He fought the blush, “I mean I was expecting her to be a real cow. She looks like a model. I expected her to be, well, vain, I suppose.”

“Vain?” Tim laughed, “Not with her dress code.”

“She was stunning.”

“You want to book in with us for the conference?” Eric nodded. “Bring your sunglasses, she has atrocious taste in clothes. You’ll see.” Eric looked far from convinced. “And come prepared to do guard duty.” He began to tell Eric about the numerous conferences he’d been to with Sasha, and the effect she seemed to have. “My wife, Rianna, thinks I should lend Sasha my wedding band at the conferences, she thinks it would be easier than trying to help her talk her way out of compromising invitations.”

“I can imagine. She’s attractive and nice with it. Any sane guy would chat her up.”

“Take my advice, if you want to stay her friend, don’t!”

“Why? Is she gay?”

Tim hooted with laughter. “God no! Just fed up with guys throwing themselves at her. Rianna flattered with Sasha. That’s where I met her. Sasha and I were in the same study group, and Rianna lived on the same corridor. Rianna thinks Sasha dresses to put guys off. Not that it does. You can imagine what happens when she dresses as she was today. So come prepared to do guard duty.”

She was officially on holiday for the next two weeks and she had every intention of lazing around for that entire period of time. She was not going to think about work and she was not going to think about James. She had been doing that for the last few weeks. When she wasn’t reflecting on work, she was thinking about James. In fact thinking about James was beginning to override her thinking every waking moment. And that had to stop. Enough. He was not interested and she was not going to mope around. It had to stop.

## Chapter 13

She drove to her parents where she stopped to change clothes and to tell them about the selection process. Whimsically she stepped out of her suit and stepped into her loud shorts and t-shirt. She packed her backpack, hugged her parents and then set off to drive the three hours to Whangamata and the family bach.

The bach was just what she needed. Some time to play, do a bit of surfing, maybe finish painting that kayak, find some time to relax and hopefully use the time to forget him. That was going to be difficult. But after the way he'd looked at her today, she knew that no amount of talking was going to change his mind about her.

Silently, tears rolled down her cheeks. This was going to be a tough two weeks.

Sasha pulled the door wide as she opened it, "Briar!" She squealed in surprise, her oatmeal face mask cracking as she frowned at her sister. "It's late. What are you doing here?" She could feel the crumbly texture of the oatmeal flake off and drop tiny fragments on her ancient t-shirt.

"Acting as chaperone, although with you looking like that I don't think you'll need one." Briar teased and grinned cheerfully at her younger sister before glancing back over her shoulder, "Come on guys!" She called happily to the two men following behind her, "This could be the only time I get to look better than Sash, and I want witnesses." Then she turned to Sasha, "What's for dinner? I'm starving. I forfeited dinner for you." She accused as she tapped the face mask on her sister's nose. "It's done."

Briar strolled past her baffled sister, leaving her holding the door ajar. Luke came in next and smiled ruefully at Sasha, he tweaked her pony tail, kissed her on her lips and smiled. "Now I know how Josh felt." He stated cryptically as he strolled past her, not even batting an eyelid at the fact that his soon to be sister-in-law was

standing there with a pasty looking crumbly mess on her face.

“Hi.” James said softly as he came to the door. The oatmeal mask cracked completely as Sasha’s jaw dropped open and her eyes widened in stunned disbelief. Sasha prayed silently for the floor to open up and swallow her. God wasn’t listening. The disbelief was followed quickly by dreadful embarrassment and finally indignation as she remembered what he had called her.

She reached for anger.

“What are you doing here?” The demand was hissed at him. Flakes of dried oatmeal sprang off her face.

“I, er,” he hesitated, shifting uncomfortably, trying not to show the fact that, even with her standing there in a crumbling face mask, he was scared of rejection, “I thought you might want to know about the award.”

That wasn’t it at all, but to deal with her in her current frame of mind he needed something concrete. She looked furious. Ridiculously furious.

Briar picked up a loaf of bread she had found in the bread bin and began to slice it. “Sasha, go wash that muck off your face. At your age, your only hope is cosmetic surgery!”

Sasha realised that she was talking to James while her face was coated in an orange face mask that had hardened and cracked. Her clothing was even worse than normal, for her. She wore a pair of denim cut off shorts that should have been discarded years ago, a t-shirt that barely reached her midriff, her hair was wrapped in a scarf to keep it off her face and an odd pair of mismatched socks were on her feet. She hadn’t been expecting visitors.

Horrified, she fled.

Briar laughed, “Come in James.” She invited happily “I’ve found us some food.” She turned to him, “Have you eaten?”

He nodded absently as his eyes trailed Sasha's departing back.

"Oh. I hate the food on planes." Briar told him as she sliced cheese and placed it on the freshly baked bread that she had sliced earlier. "You want some hon?" She asked Luke.

Luke moved to stand beside his soon to be wife, "No thanks." He reached past her to get glasses, " But I could do with a drink."

"Give James a beer, he looks like he could do with it."

"I think he needs a whisky!"

"She wasn't that bad looking!"

Luke squeezed her waist. Briar chuckled.

Sasha returned a few minutes later. Her face was freshly scrubbed, her hair brushed to lie loose on her shoulders. Her shoulders were tense.

James had a bottle of beer in his hand, but he looked far from relaxed. His eyes darted to her face.

"Right," She said, "What are you doing here James? And don't give me that bullshit about the grant. They'll be sending out letters."

"Now, that is what I call a welcome." Briar chided sweetly. "The guy has come all the way over from..."

"Briar!" Sasha threw a fulminating glance at her sister, before she moved toward James.

"Come on Luke!" Briar called, as she balanced her plate of sandwiches "I'm bushed." She feigned a yawn and with one hand dragged him from his sitting position.

"Now, that's what I call real subtle." Luke told her as he followed, calling, "Night."

Then the door shut. Loudly. Briar being her usual subtle self.

“You haven’t been into the Uni to collect it.” James informed Sasha.

Sasha snorted inelegantly, “If the panel haven’t given it to Eric, you’re all nuts.”

“The optics guy? Peters?” He queried, having long since forgotten the scientist’s full name.

Sasha nodded, “Yeah.”

“We did.” He was surprised that she was taking it so well. “You don’t mind?”

“Course I mind.” She grumbled. Then she sighed and owned up, “But, well, he was brilliant wasn’t he. Fantastic idea. I’d wished I’d thought of something like that.” She shrugged then added “And he’s a really nice guy.”

James sipped his beer before saying, “You don’t think I voted for him to spite you?”

Sasha smiled whimsically, “No. If you didn’t vote for him you’d be stupid.”

There was a silence as they both looked at each other. Looking for clues, looking for support and looking for encouragement.

“Can we talk?” James finally asked.

“I thought we were.”

”Privately.” He stressed.

“This is.”

He shook his head, and said very quietly “I get the feeling that your prospective brother-in-law would like to deck me. And what I have to say will probably ignite the fuse.” He scowled.

Sasha smiled slowly and whispered back, “Josh is just like that. Really protective.”

“Josh?”



“Grace, her husband. Both my sisters have rather protective men. Protective about the entire family.” Sasha enlightened in hushed tones, “You should have seen how Josh put Luke through the hoops to make sure that he was serious about Briar. And Josh and Luke are almost like brothers.” She continued to whisper conspirationally.

“I have two of them to deal with?”

“No. I take care of myself.” Sasha said quietly. Once again they looked into each other’s eyes. “Why are we whispering?”

“Can we walk along the beach?” James asked in a normal voice.

“I’m not sure...” She replied in an equally loud voice.

“Sasha go!” Bellowed Luke from the bedroom.

Once James had gotten over the shock, he started laughing. Tension easing laughter.

Sasha glowered at the closed door, “Stop eavesdropping!” She yelled back.

“The walls are paper thin!” Her sister called back. Luke was about to say something when Briar kissed him.

James grinned. “I like her.”

“You’re too late.” Sasha informed him. That sobered him.

“Sasha, I..”

”Luke’s persuaded her to marry him.” Sasha interrupted lightly but deliberately loud.

”Persuaded? She begged me. Seduced me. Threatened me and bribed me.” Luke tossed back.

Sasha rolled her eyes in disgust, “Come on, the beach sounds like a great idea!” She led the way to the door, calling loudly for the benefit of Briar and Luke, “ Few people around, but with better things to do than eavesdrop!”

“We have got better things to do. We just don’t want you around to listen.” Luke replied.

Sasha and James both heard the sound of muffled laughter.

James opened the door, “After you.”

“This isn’t going to change anything.” Sasha announced as she preceded him out into the star lit night. “I have a terrible temper, am incredibly stubborn and strangely enough I hate being called a slut.”

Apart from apologising, something he’d already done, there wasn’t much he could say to that. He said nothing. They walked along the road, crossed it and then stepped onto the sand dunes. Sasha slipped off her flat espadrilles. James removed his boat shoes. They walked a few hundred meters. It was moonlit and easy to stroll on the packed sand as the tide was low.

“Let’s sit down.” His words echoed into the silence they had constructed.

She sat beside him. Drawing her knees up to her chin, she wrapped her arms around her legs and hugged the bare skin. It was almost eleven at night but there was plenty of light and it was pleasantly warm.

“You aren’t making this easy.” James announced quietly, taking in her profile, the set of her jaw, the aloofness she was trying desperately to maintain. He sat alongside her, close enough to touch.

“Just say what you have to.”

He kissed her cheek. Startled, Sasha turned to face him, her eyes entranced by the message in his. Then she began to lean away from him as his head came nearer. “I said talk.” She stalled, leaning away. Protection overdrive.

Her elbows sunk into the sand to give her support as she leaned away.

From past experience James knew this was his best course of action. Kiss her. It usually rendered her

speechless. And if he was to explain he wanted her speechless, until she'd heard him out. James took the chance.

“What do you think you're doing?” She was talking fast, flustered and not sure whether she wanted to do anything about this rapidly evolving situation. She wanted him to kiss her. No she didn't. Who was she kidding? Of course she did. Still she backed away. Reflex. Remnants of self preservation.

He kissed her.

Gently she subsided into the sand. Sasha's hands were jammed between their bodies, but she didn't even attempt to push him away. The intention was lost as her mind capitulated and her heart took precedence. His hands gently pushed against her shoulders, lowering her further into the sand, her legs straightened as his torso lay across her chest, stapling her to the sand.

She went with her instinct, moving to awareness that was emerging from depths she didn't think she had. Slowly the explosive kiss lightened into gentle nibbles and eventually into light fleeting touches. They came gently back down to earth.

James was exerting a control he never knew he had. He was hard, rock solid, but there were things they needed to talk about. Explanations that needed to be voiced. At least she was still responding to his kisses. Although response was too tame a word.

“Now we talk,” He sounded guarded but firm. “or I talk and you listen.” He corrected when she opened her mouth to start speaking. Sasha was slow to recover her equilibrium. She struggled to sit up. “Oh no you don't.” His head lowered and once again his mouth touched hers. He kissed her firmly, waited for her mindless response then stopped. He watched as she slowly opened her eyes, then said, “Just listen.”

His fingers laced with hers, holding her hands beside her head, trapped between his grasp and the sand beneath.

His tone brooked no argument. “I was wrong.” Sasha looked at him, suspicion flashed, but he was still talking, “I jumped to all the wrong conclusions. I know that, but you gave me the wrong information.” James was half lying across her, his chest barely touching hers, his eyes trained on hers, “How was I supposed to know he was engaged to your sister?”

She began to say something, but his warning glance stopped her.

“Every time you spoke it was Luke this and Luke that. The bloody man took up your every sentence. You were so easy with him.” Jealousy flared as he remembered the way he felt every time he saw Sasha with Luke. His arms braced so that he propped himself up as he continued to speak, “Every time I looked, he was there. Living with you. Carrying you. Meeting you, damn it, you even wore his clothes.”

“So?” Flared Sasha, deciding she really had to get her defence heard. “I did the laundry and I needed a clean t shirt, so I borrowed it. Luke didn’t really mind.”

”I did.” James stated in a controlled voice. “Do you know how I felt when you told me, you implied, that you’d sleep with me, behind his back?” He swore as he recalled how furious he’d been the night she offered to meet when Luke wasn’t around. “I was offering you my heart. You were offering me crumbs, left overs. I...”

“I wasn’t.” Sasha exploded bitterly. “How could you even think that?”

“Because my brain had taken up temporary residence below my belt.” He told her bluntly. “We were going to make love until you were deliriously senseless, I knew exactly what I was going to do. I was going to kiss every glorious inch of you inside and out. I was going to taste you, breathe you, until your taste, your scent, your very essence was forever etched in my soul.” Sasha’s eyes widened in astonishment. James smiled gingerly, “Now I have shocked you.”

“No, not shocked.”

He hesitated, perhaps now wasn't a good time to ask such a question. His mouth went into action before his brain registered caution, “Sash, how experienced are you?”

Her eyes widened even further, then pride took over and she snapped, “You can't ask me a question like that.”

“I just did.” He smiled ruefully at her. “From the way you kiss me, from my speculation about your relationship with Luke, I assume you are experienced.” He softened his voice. “But, are you?”

Sasha squirmed in embarrassment and hedged. “Depends on what you mean by experienced.” She had never planned on telling any guy that she was novice material. She was convinced they would think her an oddity in this day and age. Now she was being asked to provide a sex cv.

“Sash?” He pushed gently.

She wriggled frantically, “Get off me.” She demanded in embarrassed pique.

“Sash.” He encouraged softly and gently.

She flung the words at him with pent up embarrassment, “All right. I haven't slept with anyone. ok!”

He wasn't expecting total inexperience. He was dazed by the fact. She was a beautiful woman, she was as sexy as hell, she wasn't gay, and she sure could kiss! His eyes conveyed the surprise.

“Fine.” Sasha raged in furious humiliation, “I'm a freak!” She pushed at him in earnest, trying desperately to get away from this mortifying situation.

“Sash.” He consoled immediately, his hands holding her restless fingers, his body trying to still the raging commotion he could feel emanating from within her, “I just can't understand how anyone as gorgeous as you has managed to stave off all those guys. I bet heaps have come on to you.”

”Hundreds!” She hissed furiously.

James smiled at her. Then he kissed her.

“Hundreds eh?” he breathed against her lips.

“I don’t sleep around.” She finally confessed.

He caressed her cheek, “But you and I almost...”

”Well we didn’t” She interrupted fiercely.

“Almost. In fact as good as!”

“Almost doesn’t count. And I wouldn’t know about as good as.” She said primly.

James laughed, once again enchanted by her feisty nature. Sasha glowered furiously. “Sash,” He rubbed his nose against hers in a Maori kiss, the lay his forehead against hers. He sighed. Lifting his head he looked into her eyes, “You and I are definitely sexually compatible. But,” he paused as he looked straight into her moonlit ebony dark eyes, making sure his message was coming through loud and clear. “I want to get to know you.”

”Here?” She squealed in alarm, burrowing instinctively into the sand.

“I don’t mean have sex on the beach.” He shook his head as he realised he was going to have to spell it out. “Go out with me?”

“Us?” She whispered.

He nodded. “It kind of needs both of us to go.”

She rolled her eyes. “I am acting stupid, aren’t I?”

He smiled at her, his lips brushing against her forehead. “I want, for want of a better phrase, for us to go steady, Sasha.” He pulled away, “I want a relationship. I want to know what your favourite song is, what you like best about the weekends, what you taste like last thing at night and first thing in the morning. I can’t imagine life without you. I want you in my life.”

Sasha didn't know what to say. Her eyes darted to his and then away again, then back again. He wanted her.

"Sasha?" James asked in an uncertain whisper. "Will you go out with me?" The tension that snaked through him as he waited for her response was worse than wondering whether they would get the new contract his company had bid for. "Give us a chance?" There were always other contracts. There was only one Sasha. He wanted her in his life. The last three weeks had been hell.

Slowly Sasha nodded. James closed his eyes for a second. "Yes?" He demanded, wanting to hear the words as confirmation.

"Yes." She acquiesced. This was ridiculous. She murmured to herself, and then said more loudly "I'm not exactly easy to get on with. I've not had a real long term relationship. I've got a terrible temper. I.."

A smile caught his lips just before his lips captured hers. He paused for a fraction of a second. "I hadn't noticed." He hesitated a brief breath away from her lips, "And you sure can kiss!"

She opened her mouth to argue, and his lips took the opportunity to descend, her words were swallowed as their tongues fenced.

They returned to the house a couple of hours later, nearer one in the morning. They had kissed and talked. More talking than kissing, because James didn't want to lose control and Sasha was nervous. A rare occurrence for both of them.

The house was quiet when they returned, Sasha hesitated, wondering whether she should offer him her bed. James read the question before she could voice it.

"Not tonight." He whispered, just in case the other occupants of the house were feigning sleep. "But soon." When he made love with Sasha he did not want any monitors, accidental or otherwise, because he was going

to take her to screaming point. And this bach clearly had walls that were far too thin.

“I’ll show you the spare room.” She smiled.

Luke and Briar left early in the morning, James left later that afternoon, he had a flight to catch. He was going to his brother Nathan’s book launch. He extracted a promise from Sasha that she would be in on Monday night for his call.

James and Sasha met regularly when he returned from Sydney. He would call by her lab after work and they would go out. The pictures, the theatre, walks along the river, local restaurants, two rugby games, one with Briar and Luke in tow, to the boat races, to a University party, meals with her parents and a wedding rehearsal. He felt as if he had known her all his life. Yet it had been no more than two weeks.

He’d met the Carvalho clan on several occasions during the two weeks leading up to Luke and Briar’s wedding. Sasha’s eldest sister, Grace, had checked him out thoroughly, asking him questions he might have found highly personal under other circumstances. He learnt that this family were close. They were also blunt to the point of rudeness. But, he had answered all the questions Grace had thrown at him.

In apology, Grace’s husband Joshua had teasingly told him that she was practicing her parenting technique, in case their baby was a girl. Then Joshua had cleverly warned him off hurting Sasha. He’d already had that sermon in a less subtle form from Luke.

Sasha’s parents made him welcome. Her mother had probed gently, her father had adopted Grace’s technique. Sasha had finally told them both to ask Grace for her files, as she had asked virtually the same questions and had probably audiotaped the conversation so that she could scrutinise it in more detail later.



## Chapter 14

Three weeks after the fateful trip to Whangamata, Briar and Luke were married. James went to the wedding. The last time James had seen Sasha dressed up was at the funding interview. That was several weeks ago, and she had looked professional and elegant.

Today she was breathtaking. He couldn't stop watching her. He just hoped his tongue wasn't lolling around the floor as he drooled.

He wondered how someone with her looks had managed to hold off the guys. He had found out, from her family, who were only too keen to spill the beans, that she had never been short of boyfriends. But they had all been short term. And Sasha had never seemed terribly upset when they had gone their different ways.

James smiled as he saw her walk back into the hall. She took his breath away. He had to send a signal to his brain to tell his lungs to exhale.

Grace, now seven months pregnant, was glowing. With an understanding smile, James watched the man standing beside her, hover protectively. Joshua was clearly in love, and by the looks and fleeting touches he exchanged with his wife, the feeling was returned in full measure.

James shifted his glance to Luke. He was escorting his recently acquired wife back onto the dance floor. James watched the two people grin at each other, totally immersed in a shared joke. Briar rested her hand on Luke's shoulder and looked adoringly up at her husband. Another tactile match, James acknowledged as he watched Luke's arms tighten around Briar.

He knew them well now, because they had spent a lot of time at the cottage. He was used to Briar's shyness, Luke's dry sense of humour and the way they constantly sought opportunities to touch each other amused him, until he realised he was doing the same with Sasha. He'd twirl a strand of her hair, or brush his fingertips against

her hand, sneak a hug, or gently squeeze her arm as he brushed past.

James winked and acknowledged the smile Briar had just sent him.

As a couple they seemed to be almost opposites. Luke with his broken nose and scars was a far cry from handsome, while Briar was classically beautiful. Yet intuitively you could see and feel the connection that held them bound so closely together.

James sat at a table reserved for members of Joshua's family. They had entertained him while Sasha had dashed about doing what ever bridesmaids did at wedding receptions. James had one dance with Sasha, and that seemed like eons ago. He missed her.

He couldn't imagine a day without her. If he wasn't going to see her, he'd phone to talk. Phone several times. He was giving her time to get used to him, but he knew that they would soon be lovers. And he was mentally cataloguing all the things they would do together. He ran a finger round his collar, as some of the files resurfaced.

"You ok?" Asked Zac.

"Yeah, just a bit hot." He loosened his tie, "I think I'll go find Sasha."

"You think that will cool you down?"

The wryness in Zac's tone wasn't lost on James.

"I'll let you know."

His eyes scanned the room, looking for her. James looked for the over attentive mc. The man seemed to be sticking close to Sasha. They might as well have been joined at the hip. Where ever Sasha went, the tall blonde went too. He might well be a friend of Luke's but right now, James was ready to deck him. He wanted the other man to know that Sasha was with him. His thoughts crystallised in that second.

James paused for an eternal minute. She was more than a girlfriend He wanted more than that. Lover, friend, wife. All of that. He wanted her for his wife. The decision rocked him. Wife! The word echoed. Then he smiled. Wife.

Sasha Lonergan. No, Sasha Lonergan-Carvalho, or Sasha Carvalho- Lonergan, or Sasha Carvalho, as long as she married him.

“James?” Sasha stood before him, almost as if his thoughts had conjured her up for him, “Wanna dance?” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

He got to his feet instantly, his grin widening, “What a question.”

She took his hand and led him to the dance floor, where she pirouetted neatly into his arms and laced her hands around his neck. “I’m sorry I’ve deserted you for so long.” She smiled apologetically at him, “But, well, with Grace being pregnant and Josh being so protective, it’s..”

“It’s ok.” He told her, drawing her closer, “Zac is a laugh.” He folded her into his body.

“Yes, he’s a nutcase.” Sasha agreed, remembering just how totally barny Zachary, Joshua’s young brother, could be.

“Not too keen on your tail though.”

“My what?”

“Tom, or whatever his name is.”

Sasha giggled at his aggrieved tone. “You’re jealous of Tom?”

“He is a touch over attentive don’t you think?” James tried not to sound too jealous.

Sasha kissed his cheek and then whispered. “He’s gay!” She grinned. “His partner is over there.” She nodded toward the corner. “He’s pretty cute though.” She continued to smile at James.

“How’s Grace doing?” James decided to derail their current conversation. Sasha laughed.

“Fine, except she’s getting claustrophobic,” Sasha grinned mischievously, “Josh is trying to keep her wrapped in cotton wool.”

“So? She is seven months pregnant.”

“And a feminist.”

“Oh.” James muttered, not really sure why being a feminist had any bearing on the subject. When Sasha was seven months pregnant, he would wrap her in cotton wool. Keeping Sasha close to him, his senses took over as he pressed ardently against her. His mind dwelled on the image of her pregnant with his child.

“But, between you, me and the gate post, she’s fine about it.” Sasha tilted her head back so that she could look into his eyes.

“Carvalho women.” James grinned as they continued to sway to the music, totally unaware of the other couples on the dance floor. It wasn’t crowded, and if they had chosen to, they could have moved off that one spot. They didn’t.

“You look gorgeous in that dress?” He breathed into her ear just before he buried his nose in her hair.

Sasha reached up on tiptoe and whispered provocatively, “You should see how I look without it.”

“I’d love to.” He responded quick as a flash. Sasha giggled and pressed closer.

“Sasha, would you at least make a pretence of dancing.” Briar scolded as she and Luke danced slowly by.

Sasha grinned impudently, “Why?” She quirked a brow at her sister, “By all accounts you two never did.”

“That was Grace and Josh.” Briar retorted.

“Yeah right.”

The two men exchanged indulgent looks.

“Just dance will you.” Briar teased, “This is my wedding and people are supposed to look at me making eyes at my husband, not look at my sister making out on the dance floor.”

“Come along Bri.” Luke twirled his bride away.

Sasha sighed dreamily, “Luke thought Bri was ugly when he first met her.”

James couldn’t understand how anyone would consider Briar ugly. The woman could probably earn a sizable living on Parisian catwalks.

Sasha was still talking, “Bri, ugly?”

“He does appear to have changed his mind.” James placated as his eyes tracked the other couple around the dance floor.

“She did look a sight when she’d returned from UN duty,” Sasha admitted objectively. “But he shouldn’t have said so within her ear shot.”

“Ah-hah!” James said in dawning comprehension. Over the last two weeks, the person he had seen the most, apart from Sasha, was her sister Briar.

Briar shared the cottage with Sasha. And as he’d been seeing quite a bit of Sasha, he’d spent some time in Briar’s company.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“What?” Sasha demanded stubbornly.

“I was wondering if tempers were genetic and just how alike you two ....” He teased, letting the sentence trail off suggestively.

“Ohhh!” She punched his shoulder, “Men!”

“Women!” He mocked tenderly, grinning at her before he pulled her back into his arms and hugged her tightly.

They swayed for several minutes before he spoke again, “Sash,” He whispered quietly into her ear, his fingers painting lazy circles on her back.

“Yes?” The reply was dreamy.

“Will you come home with me?”

She pulled slightly away from him, to look straight into his eyes, “Home?” She had been waiting for this moment for weeks! For a woman who usually jumped before looking she had been very slow. She had waited for James to make the moves. But all she’d had were some steamy kisses that she thought were going to go somewhere, but hadn’t.

“Not home, Cambridge home, not there.” He stopped, took a deep breath and started again, “I’d like you to meet my family,” He said hesitantly, “will you come with me to meet them?”

“Meet your family?” She questioned in a bemused voice, “When?”

“We’re getting together in a fortnight. I’m going to be Godfather to my latest nephew. It’s his christening. The whole tribe will be there.” James knew he was prattling on. “I know it will be a bit daunting, meeting them all at once, but you can handle it.” He had to stop rambling on, but he couldn’t. It was as if a lengthy explanation would persuade her, or put off the inevitable moment when she’d have to say yes or no. “We rarely manage to meet up these days. Nathan tends to live and work in Australia, though he is thinking of moving back, and well,” He tailed off lamely. “Sash?”

Sasha knew James had two sisters and three brothers. Knew all but one brother was married. What if they didn’t like her? James saw the worry flash through her dark eyes, saw indecision and then saw determination.

“Ok.” She told him, nodding her agreement to give it added weight.

He let out the breath he was holding, “Great.” Then he pulled her tightly to him. “Great.” He repeated as he hugged her firmly.

They danced a while longer, and then Sasha was called away to attend to another minor round of bridesmaid duties. James returned to the table.

Several minutes later James left the hall to help Zac, Nick and Joshua prepare the bridal car. Nothing drastic, just a few streamers and tins.

In the mean time Sasha, Grace and Briar got together.

Sasha couldn’t keep her news to herself any longer. “I’m going to meet his parents.” She gushed, her eyes widening with incredulity.

“So?” remarked Briar, her eyes on her husband. Luke was dancing with his mother-in-law. Her husband. Briar glanced down at the gold band on her finger. Her husband.

“So,” Grace prodded Briar, with the wisdom that all older sisters were born with, “she’s going to meet the family.” She emphasised ‘the family’ for good measure.

Briar grinned as dawning comprehension brought home some ramifications.

“Is there anything more you want to tell us.” Grace prompted.

“Like what?” Sasha flashed her sister a baffled look.

“Like when did he propose, where, how,…”

“He didn’t propose.” Sasha squealed.

“He didn’t? You’ve lost me.” Briar turned to look inquiringly at Grace, “I thought you just said she was going to meet his family.”

“I am.” Wailed Sasha, “But that’s it. He hasn’t proposed or anything. I’m just going to meet the family.”

“Oh!” remarked Briar and threw Grace a withering look, so much for older sister wisdom.

“Have you made love with him?” Grace pried.

“Grace!” Squealed Briar before she started laughing.

“None of your damn business.” Shrieked Sasha before she started glowering.

Grace shrugged, “Don’t get stressed.” She replied calmly, “I just thought I ought to point out that Briar had to almost seduce Luke.”

“What about you and Josh?” Briar demanded in return.

“Your point is?” Grace grinned beatifically.

“And whose idea was it anyway, that I turn up at Luke’s place in my underwear?” Briar snapped.

“It worked didn’t it?” Grace replied “Though it wouldn’t have if you’d worn your usual white cotton stuff.”

“Take my advice, don’t listen to Grace.” Briar added, “Her master seduction plan almost had me standing stark naked in front of my now father-in law.”

The three women laughed as they recalled how close Briar had come to making a total idiot of herself. She had turned up to surprise Luke dressed in little more than sexy black lace body and silks stockings and had found his father waiting instead.

The band changed tempo to play a rock and roll number.

“Hey! Come on.” Sasha tugged at Briar’s hand. “We haven’t jived in years. Probably won’t get another chance for years.” Briar stalled, looking down at her dress and wondering how on earth she could jive in the layers of lace. “Come on Bri, just once.” Sasha pleaded as other couples began to move more actively to the beat.

“In my wedding dress?” Briar pointed out. “You must be joking!”

“Pleeeeeease!” Sasha tugged, “I’ll be gentle.”

“Ohhhhh! Fine!” Briar conceded and grinned. “But I’ll lead.”



“Hey!” Grace challenged and caught the arms of both sisters, “What about me?”

“You’re pregnant.” Briar and Sasha chorused instantly.

“So?” Grace latched onto their arms more firmly.

“Josh will kill us.” Briar added when Grace refused to release them.

“He isn’t here to see.” All three sisters turned to scan the room.

“Where is he?” Briar turned to survey the locale.

Sasha panicked, she tugged Grace and Briar toward the dance floor “Ok, let’s go, but nothing drastic for you.” She knew exactly where Joshua was, he was preparing the bridal car. Grace and Sasha propelled Briar onto the floor before she could begin to protest. “You lead Grace,” Briar told her firmly “and stand still.”

Smiling conspirationally, they sauntered onto the dance floor. Just the edge of the dance floor. They began demurely enough, but soon Grace had taken the lead and the other two were being sent back and forth, through spins and turns. Giggling and shrieking they whirled.

“Just look at them. They used to do that at home. Dancing in the lounge.” Angie smiled. Luke continued to dance sedately, ignoring the beat. “I think I’ll sit this one out, if you don’t mind Luke.”

“Sure.” He took her elbow and escorted Angie back to her table. He had felt a touch ridiculous dancing the waltz to a rock and roll number, but he wasn’t sure his newly acquired mother-in-law would appreciate being hurled around a dance floor.

Sasha, Grace and Briar continued to squeal and twirl. Within a few minutes they had an audience. The rest of the dancers stopped and formed a clapping, whooping circle around them. The girls didn’t take much notice, they were too busy having fun.

Briar had one hand clasping wisps of lace, while she was sent through twirls, Sasha had hitched her bridesmaid dress so that she could spin away madly, Grace remained in one place.

Joshua strolled into the room, pleased with the fact that the car was ready and that Zac and Nick hadn't been too carried away. He noticed the huddle of people and moved toward Luke and Angie who were standing on the periphery.

“What’s going on?”

“An exhibition.” Luke stated automatically and dryly. Joshua looked over the top of his mother-in-law’s head. What he saw had him swearing immediately.

“I’ll chain her to the bloody bed for this.”

His mother-in-law smiled at him but said nothing.

“I hadn’t realised you were into that sort of thing.” Luke joked.

“This isn’t funny. She’s pregnant. What the hell does she think she’s playing at?” He moved to push past the throng of onlookers.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Luke placed a restraining hand on Joshua’s shoulder.

“First I’m going to stop her cavorting like a demented fly, then I am going to chain her to my side until we get home, and then I am going to lock her in our room for the next two months.”

Luke grinned. “Wait.” He checked Joshua more firmly by holding him by his upper arm in a no nonsense grip, “We’ll need reinforcements. I’ll get James.” He turned to look for the blonde man. No sign of him. “Where is he? He asked Joshua. Joshua shrugged and tried to appear nonchalant.

“How the hell would I know? I have enough trouble keeping an eye on the antics of my wife.” He grouched.

Luckily James came in at that moment.

“There.” Joshua pointed him out. Luke headed over to the blonde man.

“What’s up? James asked when Luke drew level with him.

“An exhibition.”

“Oh?”

“Bri, Sash and Grace dancing.”

“This I must see.” James stopped, “Were you looking for me?”

Luke nodded. “Joshua is ropeable. He was about to drag Grace away.”

“Ah.” He could see the problem. “Understandable.”

“Yeah.” Luke grinned enigmatically, “But not a good idea without reinforcements.”

“Ah-hah.” James acknowledged. “Couldn’t you just instruct the band to play something mellow?”

Luke beamed. “Great. You take your woman, I’ll take mine.”

They walked toward the throng. Luke paused just long enough to tell the band what he wanted. Joshua watched them and noted Luke’s nod. Joshua began to make his way through the watching crowd.

The three men reached their quarry in synchronised harmony with the band’s change in tempo. The women stopped in confusion. The on-lookers cheered as the three men tapped their prospective partners on the shoulder and once they had turned, enfolded them in their arms.

Each man began to whisper into his partner’s ear. That raised a few more whistles.

Then the crowd dissolved as they began to take partners for the slow dance.

“You are grounded for your lifetime.” Joshua told Grace in a quiet voice that she recognised instantly as his livid

voice. He slowly maneuvered her toward the edge of the dance floor.

“You can’t ground a grown woman.”

“Watch me.”

“I was only dancing.”

“You’re pregnant.” They had reached the edge of the dance floor.

“That doesn’t mean I’m comatose.”

“Don’t push your luck Grace.” Joshua advised as he placed a hand in the small of her back and steered her toward their table.

“The next baby we have, you can carry to term. Then you can have the right to tell me what to do!” Grace snapped as she stalked off a few paces, then she turned and marched back to him. “If you hadn’t noticed, I was the one standing in one spot while Bri and Sash went bananas around me.” She pointed to herself as if her words weren’t conveying her ideas, “I was barely moving.” She jabbed his shoulder, “You’re a born autocrat.” She twirled around, ready to march off, then stopped again having decided she had something to spell out to him, “It was fun. I was with Bri and Sash. How often do we get a chance to do something like that?” She jabbed at his shoulder again, “But you don’t care about that.” She whirled around ready to storm off, having finally had her say. She didn’t get very far. Joshua reached for and took hold of her hand.

“Grace.”

“Let go of me.” She sizzled but did not turn to face him.

“Grace.”

“Let go.” She threw him a furious glare.

He gradually reeled her in. Then he took both her hands in his. “Sorry.” She didn’t look at him. “I’m over protective. I can’t help it. If anything should happen to you or the baby...” Since he’d been married to Grace,

she'd been kidnapped, been involved in a police chase and been in the boot of a car as it rolled down a hill. That day had nearly killed him.

“Nothing is going to happen, you fussy,- ouch! Ouch!” She put her hand to her abdomen and pulled a disgruntled face

“What? What’s the matter?”

“Your child just kicked me!” Grace grimaced. “Still is.” She took his hand. “Feel that. Still rock-n-rolling!”

A look of awe replaced his concern.

“He is going to be a full back.” Josh stroked his wife’s belly with loving gentleness.

“She is going to be a black belt something or other.”

“Great.” He lowered his head and kissed Grace gently and reverently.

On the dance floor, Luke and Briar were also whispering as they sashayed to the mellow music.

“I thought you were supposed to be the shy one.” Luke declared lightly. “The amount of leg you were flashing.”

“You reprobate. Looking at your wife’s leg.”

“Hmm! Not shy at all.” He murmured into her ear.

“It was Sash. She insisted.” Briar grinned unrepentantly. “It was fun.”

“Yeah it looked it.”

“Then why did you stop us?”

“I didn’t want you using up all your energy.” He winked, adding, “You’ll need heaps for tonight.”

Briar giggled. “I just hope you can keep up.”

He smiled enigmatically, “Keeping up, won’t be a problem.” He pulled her closer and Briar knew exactly what he meant.

A few metres away Sasha and James were also whispering.

“That, no doubt, was your idea.” James remarked calmly.

Sasha turned innocent eyes on him, “Me? Why me?” She grinned saucily, “It could have been them.”

“Briar is supposedly shy and Grace is pregnant.”

“What if it was my idea?”

“If it was your idea, you may want to bail your sister out.” He indicated Grace and Joshua with his head. Sasha could tell from the body language that they were having words.

“Typical male. Always over react.” She disengaged from James’ grasp. “I’d better go and explain.” She took his hand. Together they began to make their way toward Grace and Joshua. But while they were still a few feet away from them the scenario changed. They both saw the look of utter tenderness that passed between Grace and Joshua as he placed his hand on his wife’s abdomen.

James stopped Sasha. “I don’t think our timing is good.” He leaned to whisper in her ear. She smiled.

“Yes, I see what you mean. Let’s dance. Did you fix the car?” She moved back into his arms.

“Yes.” Then his mouth moved to capture hers.

At that very moment, Luke kissed Briar and Joshua kissed Grace.

Angie and Ben looked in turn at their three daughters and then turned to smile magnanimously at each other.

“You think we have enough savings for another wedding within six months?” Angie asked her husband.

“You think we’ll have that long?” Ben grinned happily.

## Chapter 15

James was away for the week. He flew back on Saturday and Sasha met him at Hamilton airport. She waited impatiently in the small airport lounge. She had missed him. Even with the daily phone calls, she had missed his grin, his teasing, his laugh, his cuddles. She missed him. And she was determined to seduce him on his return. She wasn't sure why he was waiting, but as far as she was concerned, the waiting was over. Today was the day.

There was quite a crowd waiting. So she stood just in front of the car hire desks, wearing her usual uniform of way-out shorts, totally unmatched t-shirt and those disreputable running shoes.

The flight came in just before seven.

James saw her as soon as he came through the gate. He winked at her and she grinned back. The denim cut offs were patched in all the right places with loud swatches of totally mismatched material. The shorts were also very snug, showing off long shapely legs and a firm bottom. James loved it.

Sasha sauntered toward him. James watched her approach. Totally uncaring that they were the centre of so much attention they gave each other a fierce bear hug and then kissed. They looked so incompatible, the tall blonde man in a conservative grey business suit and a slim dark girl in clothes a surfie would kill for.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“A good flight?” She asked with a touch of concern. He didn't look too good.

James picked up his luggage with his left hand and placed his right arm around her waist. “Quite smooth.”

They strolled out of the small airport foyer and into the heat.

“You look bushed.” Sasha told him bluntly, taking in his ashen skin and tired eyes.

“Hmmp!” He feigned heartfelt sadness, “And I was going to say that you looked great.”

She grinned impishly at him, “I wore this specially for you.” She told him, still grinning, “Just in case you’d forgotten me.”

He looked at her, cocking an eyebrow at that statement, “No chance.” He squeezed her to him, “Dressed like that, how could anyone forget you?” She punched his shoulder playfully and laughed.

They reached her car and she popped the boot open for him to dump his gear. She leaned far into the car to shift her stuff out of the way and make room for his small suitcase and holdall. She left James with a clear view of her rear.

“You do look great in those shorts.” He was smiling at her, she could hear it in his words.

Sasha spun round and grinned at him. Then she raised her arms and linked them around his neck, “You know Mr Lonergan, you sure do say the nicest things!” She faked a southern American drawl, then she kissed him tenderly. “Home?”

He rested his forehead against hers. “Yeah hon. Home.”

“You need some tlc.” she murmured as she opened the passenger door and then ran round the bonnet to the driver’s side. James got in, reached over and unlocked her door.

He looked tired, and even though the drive to his house only took twenty minutes he was out by the time they left the air port car park.

When they reached a set of lights Sasha looked over at him. He looked ill, not just tired, ill. The tiredness she’d seen in his eyes simply added to her intuitive feeling that he wasn’t well.



She gently shook him awake when they arrived at his house. She'd been here before and was still impressed by the clean open lines of his home. The house was beautiful, his design. It was stark, white, and had wide open spaces. The house was built into the side of a hill and overlooked the river. There were two wings linked by a central open plan rectangular area. The left wing housed three en suite bedrooms. The right wing had two studies, another bathroom and a small laundry room. The central area was split into two levels. The upper level had a kitchen and dining room separated by a breakfast bar. The lower level was a huge lounge with floor to ceiling windows. The two levels were separated by a Kent fire place. The view from the lounge was fantastic.

"I think you ought to go to bed." She told him as they entered the house.

"I want to talk." He muttered and stifled a yawn.

"Yes, I can see that." She pushed him toward the left wing, "Go get a shower. I'll fix us something to eat."

"The cupboards are bare." James told her, turning to apologise, "I meant to ask you to collect a takeaway on the way home."

"I got some groceries." She told him, still pushing him toward his room. "They're in the car. Did you think I always carry that amount of grocery bags in the boot?" She had come intending to stay the night, intending to stay a few days, and so she had brought some groceries with her.

"I'll get them." He dumped his bag and made to head back out the way they came. "I thought they were yours."

"Get in the shower James!" She ordered firmly, "I can carry a few grocery bags, but even I couldn't carry you, if you knocked yourself out. Get in the shower."

James recognised the fiery glint of stubbornness in her eyes. He knew when he was beat. If he'd felt well, it

might have been a different story, but right at the moment a shower was tempting.

“You want me to strip you and put you in the shower?” She demanded her arms crossed in front of her midriff.

“Now there’s an offer.” He chuckled weakly at her feigned look of anger, then he spun slowly on his heels and headed for his room.

“Yes, and you are in no condition to take me up on it.” She called after him.

He turned and winked at her as he came back toward her. “Oh, believe me hon, I’m in condition.”

“Go James.” She pushed him toward his bedroom door and then ran to the front door, smiling smugly to herself as she went.

A few minutes later, she had stocked his fridge with fresh vegetables, milk and the cheese he liked. She also put the bottle of dry white wine she’d bought, in the fridge, unlikely to need it in the next few hours. She put the kiwifruit, apples and nectarines in a bowl on the breakfast counter and then took the remaining grocery items to the counter.

Several minutes later, when she heard him saunter into the dinning area, she turned and handed him a plate full of scrambled eggs on toast. “It’s the best I can do.” She said.

He took the plate and headed for the table. “Thanks.” He forked a piece of the fluffy pale yellow clusters, “I don’t think I could keep anything else down.” He told her just before he swallowed the egg.

“You don’t look too good. Do you think we should get a doc?”

“It’s a stomach bug” He informed her before he swallowed another mouthful. “The oysters were off.”

“Oysters?” Sasha squeaked in mock protest, “You were having an aphrodisiac without me around?”

“Sash you weren’t there.” He sounded tired. “And anyway, I don’t need an aphrodisiac when you are around.”

She grinned, “I was only teasing.”

”Yeah.” He acknowledged “Sorry. I feel lousy.” He looked awful.

Sasha looked more closely at him. His face was pale, almost washed out and there was no sparkle in the cobalt depths. He looked dreadful.

“When did you have these offending pearl makers?”

“Night before last.”

“What?” She was scandalised. “Right I’m getting a doc over here now.”

“No, you’re not.” He put his fork down, leaving the eggs on the plate, “I just need some time out. I’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

“James, that will be over forty eight hours, honestly James,…”

“Sasha, I’m fine.” He told her as he pushed his chair away from the table.

“You don’t look it.” She moved round to stand by him, almost as if she thought he’d fall over. “Men, men, men!” She took his plate, “You haven’t even finished this.”

“I know, sorry hon.” He murmured tiredly, “I just can’t.” He smiled at her, “The first time you cook for me and I don’t eat it.”

“Don’t worry about it. Grace would probably say you had a lucky escape.”

“She told me you were an excellent cook. In fact, so did your parents, Briar, Joshua and Luke. I think even Zac and Nick said you were a great cook. I’ve been waiting for my turn to be fed by the chef in the family.” James gave her an intimate smile. “Sorry I didn’t do it justice.” He loved this woman. He knew she was worried, he

could see it so clearly etched in her eyes, in the way she kept rubbing her ring finger. She cared. His smile turned to a grin. “Thanks.”

“It was nothing!” She said, her eyes not meeting his.

“Sash,” She ignored him, “Sash” he continued, she glanced round to look at him and he smiled at her, his message in his eyes.

“That’s not fair.” She told him.

“What?”

“You know what.”

“What?” His eyebrows rose a fraction.

“Stop it James!” She was grinning now.

“You are beautiful.”

“Totally incorrigible, that’s what you are.”

“Totally whacked that’s what I am.” He followed her to the sink. “Look, I know it isn’t the kind of homecoming you expected, but I think I’d better go to bed.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and laid his chin on her shoulder, “Sorry .” He murmured into her ear. She twisted slightly, her eyes finding his instantly.

“Are you sure about the doc?” She asked him again.

“Sure.”

“Well then you’d better get some sleep, you look terrible!”

He disengaged, “Great Sash! Has anyone ever told you that you have a way with words?” He mused tiredly just before he brushed his lips lightly against her neck.

“Yup, the whole family have at one time or another. Then of course there was you.” She put the plate in the rack and turned to face James, “You really don’t look too good you know.”

James could read the concern in her eyes. Her frown deepened. He smoothed the lines away with his thumbs.

“I’ll look better in the morning.” He told her as he rested his forehead on hers.

Sasha pursed her lips because she didn’t believe him but wasn’t sure just how far she should push, then he smiled at her.

“Ok,” She finally conceded, “As long as you go to bed straight away.”

He chuckled, “You sound like a mom.” He turned and winked, “Are you going to tuck me in?”

“Damn right I am.” She pushed him out of the kitchen, into the hallway and through to his bedroom. He went willingly, “Now get into bed.” She told him before she turned to leave.

“Hey!” He looked surprised when he realised she was leaving the room, “Where are you going? I thought you were going to tuck me in.”

“I just want to use the phone. Get into your pjs.” She ordered.

“What makes you think I wear any?” There was just a touch of challenge in his words and he waited and watched for her reaction.

Sasha hesitated but she couldn’t resist asking, “Do you?”

He shook his head and grinned at her.

She shrugged, “Well just get into bed anyway.”

He began unbuttoning his shirt, “Who are you calling?” He tossed his shirt onto the bed before sitting down to undo his shoe laces.

“Briar.”

“Sasha!” He stopped unlacing his shoes, lifted his head and pinned her with a speaking look.

“She’s my sister. I can call her when I want.”

“Sash!” He reproached in wearied but resigned tones, “It has nothing to do with her being a doctor I suppose?”

“Well maybe a bit. Just because you’re too stubborn to see that you could be seriously ill.”

“It’s an upset stomach. I’ll live Sash.”

“No harm in asking Bri is there?” She queried with that innocent look that he was coming to recognise as one signaling a stubborn standpoint. “What’s the point of having a doctor in the family if you can’t call on their services every now and again!”

He shook his head, “She’s on her honeymoon!” He reminded her.

“No, she isn’t. They aren’t going till tomorrow. They’re at the cottage. And anyway, they’ve been having sex from dawn to dusk before they got married, so why they need a honeymoon is beyond me.”

James shrugged, giving up, knowing Sasha would not rest until she had checked with her sister. Sasha smiled. “I won’t be long. Get into bed.”

“Have you always been this bossy?”

“Yup!”

“How come it’s taken me this long to notice?”

“You’ve had other facets of my, er, charms on your mind.”

“And you’ve always been this modest?”

She shrugged contemplatively, “Only since this gorgeous blonde guy with these amazing copper sulphate blue eyes, started telling me he loved my cute butt.”

“Not just your butt!”

Sasha chuckled, “See what I mean?”

By the time she returned to the bedroom, James was in bed.

“So what did she say?”

“To make sure that you had plenty of fluids and didn’t dehydrate. And to check that you have seen a doc.”

James patted the bed, “Come here you.”

Sasha sauntered toward the bed and perched on the edge.

“I saw a doctor. He gave me some stuff and it’s working. I don’t feel queasy.” He tugged her to lie down beside him, “I just feel a bit washed out. Tired, Sleepy. Stuffed!”

“”You look it.” Sasha retorted as she burrowed closer, making herself more comfortable in the process. She rested her head on his bare chest, tucking her head just beneath his chin.

“You want to stay the night?” James murmured into her hair.

“Yup! Typical, you finally get round to propositioning me and you aren’t fit to do anything about it.” She slowly tipped her head back to look him in the eye, “I’m not going anywhere until I’m sure you really are ok.”

He ruffled her hair then smoothed it back down. “Don’t you think you’d be more comfortable out of those clothes?”

“No.” She retorted, giggling, “Unlike some people I know, I sleep in pyjamas,” She grinned at him, “and these are almost the same.” She snuggled nearer. “Now go to sleep.”

“You’re snuggling up against me and you expect me to go to sleep?”

“Yup.” She snuggled closer. Nestling intimately next to him.

He chuckled before saying, “If only I had the strength.”

He was sound asleep a short while later.

“Morning.” He stroked her hair as he whispered the word. She tipped her head up and her brown eyes met a smiling deep blue gaze.

“How do you feel?” Was her immediate question.

“Good.” He brushed his lips against her hair.

“Really?” She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand as she raised her head off his chest.

“Yeah, really.” He shifted so that he was almost lying across her, he felt slightly lightheaded. No real food in over forty eight hours did that. Either that or Sasha’s close contact. “And boy have I got an appetite.” His lips brushed lightly against hers. They kissed with their eyes open, watching the fire ignite in each other’s eyes. The kiss deepened.

James had to stop. He came up for air, “I feel so weak.” He offered by way of an apology. The words were promptly followed by a deep rumble as his stomach protested and demanded food.

“I’ll get breakfast.” Sasha told him as she rolled away, “Don’t get out of bed.” She ordered.

“Yes dear!” He replied in mock subservience. Sasha threw him a feigned withering look.

By the time Sasha returned to the bedroom the bed was empty and James was just returning from the bathroom.

“Had to.” He told her bluntly as she threw him a reprimanding look.

“Sure you did. You just can’t follow orders.” She set the tray down on the bed. He sat down in front of the tray whilst Sasha steadied it. “Eat!” She commanded as she poured a weak cup of tea for him.

“Isn’t that my t-shirt you’re wearing?” He asked as she handed him the tea.

She looked a bit sheepish before she mumbled, “Yes it is. I had a shower and couldn’t bear to get into the same clothes.”

He grinned, “I noticed you were bra less.” She went beetroot. He chuckled.

“Well I didn’t want to leave you to go home and get things, so I made do.”



He quirked an eyebrow. She stood up and lowered the waist band of her cut off jeans.

“Your boxers,” She showed him. She was wearing a pair of his blue boxer shorts, “but you didn’t have anything vaguely like a bra!”

“If I didn’t feel so weak you wouldn’t be wearing any of my clothes. Come here baggage.” He put the tea cup on the bedside cabinet and moved the tray off the bed, “I said come here.” He repeated softly when she danced out of arm’s reach.

“Now, James, you aren’t up to this.”

“Says who?”

The telephone rang. They glanced at it. Neither moved to get it. It rang incessantly, then the answer machine clicked on.

“James I know you’re back. Pick up the phone.”

Sasha quirked a brow. James groaned as he reached for the phone. “Hi Chrissy.”

Sasha winked at him “See you lover.” She called gaily as she left him to take the call.

“Who was that?” Chrissy asked.

“Sasha. I’m bringing her with me next weekend.”

“Yes, yes, I remember. About next weekend,” Chrissy continued without any preamble, “What time are you getting here? And how long can you stay?”

They talked about arrangements. The whole family were going to make it, including Nathan. He was flying in from Australia. Several minutes later James put the phone down.

Sasha popped her head round the door, “I’m just going to the airport. Got to drop Bri and Luke.” She smiled at him, “Will you be ok?”

“Give me a minute and I’ll come with you.”

“I think you should stay in bed.”

“If you think I’m letting you go anywhere dressed in those shorts, without me, you can think again.”

Sasha rolled her eyes, but conceded. “Ok, you’ve got fifteen minutes.”

Sasha had to leave him later that afternoon to head off to Rotorua for the MRC first day. She was giving a paper on the first day of the four day conference. But she wanted to stay with James. He looked better, she could see that, but she still wanted to stay.

Sasha and James drove to Waikanae the next week end. They set off early on Friday in order to spend the whole weekend with his family. Sasha had driven back late on Thursday night, straight after the final session. She knew James wanted to make an early start the next day. So she had left the conference before the evening meal.

It was a long drive. They stopped in Taupo to give James a break. They walked along the lake front and Sasha used the opportunity to buy a few more gifts for his family. She was nervous about meeting them. More than nervous.

They stopped for lunch at Waioru. The army town was largely deserted, though a few trucks and cars seemed to be parked in front of three small cafes. James had cleared the long stretch of the Desert road, a stretch of grim tussock countryside only made more bearable by the presence of awesome mountains. The mid afternoon sun had given them clear sight of a perfect cone shaped mountain.

But Sasha hadn’t been able to appreciate the vista, not when she had so many things niggling away at the back of her mind. Issues she didn’t know how to broach without sounding over anxious.

They’d stopped in Levin to have some tea and to give Sasha an opportunity to freshen up. They were about an hour away from Waikanae.

Sasha had selected her least outrageous jeans, because James had said to dress casual, and because she wanted to make a good impression. She had topped the black jeans with a pale cream blouse that belonged to Briar and she was wearing flat black ankle boots. All very demure for Sasha.

She had planned for this weekend carefully, enlisting her sister's help in finding and putting together an appropriate wardrobe for the weekend. Casuals to lounge around in, clothes for the Christening on Saturday, clothes for church on Sunday and traveling clothes. She wanted to create the right impression, and she knew her everyday habit of just throwing on whatever came to hand would not suffice on this occasion. Not when she had his whole family to impress.

James ordered tea and hot buttered blueberry muffins for both of them as they sat by a window table waiting for their order to arrive.

"When are you going to tell me what's bothering you?" He turned to look directly at Sasha. "You aren't the reticent type." He reached across for her hand to still her shredding the paper napkin. "What's up?"

"Just a bit nervous." She shrugged, but the nonchalance was too strained.

"Sash."

She looked at him, wondering if now was a good time to talk about this.

"Sash?" He prompted again.

"Do they know about me?" Sasha finally plucked up the courage. This was probably the last chance she'd have. Their next stop would be Waikanae. Then they'd be there. Too late.

"Yes." He glanced at her apprehensively, noticing once again that she seemed on edge. She nibbled the pad of her thumb as her eyes flicked up to meet his encouraging gaze. He'd been pre-occupied with his own thoughts until

now. This weekend was important. Things had to be just right. “What d’you think? I’d just turn up with you out of the blue?”

“They might not like me.”

“They’ll love you.” He smiled encouragingly at her.

“I hope so.” She replied softly.

“I know so.” He reached for her hand, “Trust me Sash.”

She nodded slowly.

“Just be yourself.” He told her, “And they’ll love you.”

She smiled “I should have packed my surfie gear, that would be a real test.” She offered him her plate as she changed the topic, “Do you want my jam?”

Half an hour later, they resumed their journey. They drove up a sealed road that wound it’s way through the hills until it came to the large white single storey wooden building. The house stood proudly at the end of the drive, a large wooden colonial homestead.

The front door opened and two boys came hurtling out.

“Uncle James, we beat you here!”

“We’ve been here for hours.”

They came to a halt beside the car door as James stepped out and gave them a hug, “But you guys cheated, you flew here!”

The boys laughed. “No we didn’t.”

“Yes we did!” Corrected the other.

“Not all the way, we didn’t” Retorted Tom

“Come on. ” Haydn decided enough time had been spent on that particular argument, so he tugged on James’ arm.

“You have to see him. He’s wrinkly!”

“Tom! Haydn! Give him a chance will you, he’s just got here!” A tall woman beckoned to the six year old twins.

“But mum!” Wailed Tom.

“I was just telling him to come see Hamish.” Replied Haydn.

“Well give him a chance to unload first.”

Sasha had clambered out of the car during the twins discourse. She stood silently and watched the exchange between James’ nephews and his youngest sister.

“Here guys, take this in.” James gave each boy a small holdall. Lugging it behind them they disappeared into the house. James turned to beckon Sasha to his side, “Sash this is my kid sister Catherine. Cath, this is Sasha.”

The women smiled cautiously at each other.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

They shook hands briefly.

Sasha relaxed. Catherine seemed nice. Catherine had watched Sasha watch her sons with James. It gave her a chance to study the woman James had brought to meet the family. The family were in for a shock. No-one was expecting a model. He’d told them she was a scientist. If Sasha is a scientist, I’m a martian, Cath thought as she did her best not to stare at Sasha. No-one had legs that long, nor skin that luminous.

“Here take this will you Cath. Sasha thought she had to buy presents for everyone.” He handed his sister another holdall.

Catherine smiled at Sasha, “Buying for the hordes in this family will bankrupt you, unless you own the store!” She turned and headed for the front door where she waited for James and Sasha.

James retrieved their weekend cases which he intended to carry himself. Sasha didn’t let him, she reached for her case. He quirked a brow at her, she returned the gesture. He grinned and took her case.

“I do have a reputation to keep up!” He told her in a whispered aside, “Dad would have a fit if a Lonergan man didn’t do the gentlemanly thing.”

Sasha produced an exaggerated bow, ‘Go ahead.’”

They followed Catherine into the house, “Chrissy is feeding Hamish. She said to show you where she’s put you both.”

Finally thought James, the moment of truth was getting closer. Soon. Soon. He could feel his heart pick up the pace. He grinned at Sasha. She smiled back.

James and Sasha followed Catherine down the cool bare wooden floored hallway, and then up a flight of stairs. Catherine showed them into a large room with a double bed.

It was a beautiful room that opened out onto a balcony overlooking the valley below. The view was super, acres and acres of rolling hills lay just past a small river.

“I’ll leave you to show Sash the bathroom and things. I need to check on those two scamps. Can’t leave them for longer than two seconds! See you later.”

Sasha moved to the window exclaiming, “This is beautiful.”

James didn’t say anything, he just frowned. Then he put his case down, and said, “Wait here.” He stormed toward the door but had barely taken a step through the open doorway when a voice halted him.

“You’re late! What kept you?” Boomed another female voice, “I thought you’d decided not to come down!” She gave him a hug, but looked over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of Sasha. Startled to find herself staring at a super model, Chrissy pulled back. The woman in front of her was no scientist. Where had James met her? Why was he masquerading her as a scientist?

“Chrissy, where am I sleeping?” James demanded without any preamble.

Chrissy's eyes widened at the tone and she flicked him an irate look. "Don't be so rude." Chrissy stepped past James and into the room. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

James glared at his sister's back, then said "Sash, my sister Christina. Chrissy, this is Sasha Carvalho. I told you I was bringing her." He stated pointedly.

"Hi." Mumbled Sasha, wondering what was going on.

"The materials scientist?" It had a hint of skepticism.

James ignored her question, he repeated the question uppermost in his mind, "Where am I sleeping?"

"There!" Chrissy pointed to the bed as she threw him a look that suggested he was being deliberately obtuse.

"What about Sash?"

"What is this James, twenty questions? Where else?" Chrissy pointed to the bed.

"I'm not sharing a bed with Sash!"

Sasha watched the storm brew and didn't understand why they were arguing. And why was James making such an issue about sharing a bed with her?

"What?"

The two siblings glared at each other.

"You didn't expect Jordan and Stella to share when he brought her." James reminded his sister pointedly.

"That was different." Chrissy retorted cuttingly.

"Like hell." He snapped.

"James what are you getting so stressed about? I've put you and your girlfriend in here, I.."

"You didn't put Cath and Robert in the same room and you didn't put Justin and Lisa together when they came to visit!" James bellowed in return as his plans began to crumble before him. This was going to be a disaster.

Sasha had no idea what all of this had to do with her sharing a room with James. She was perfectly happy to share. Had even anticipated it to some extent. She was finally going to get into bed with James, and if he didn't make a move on her, she sure was going to jump him!

"That was different and you know it." Chrissy yelled at her brother. Now Chrissy was mad. She looked Sasha over "They weren't lovers before their visit!" She snapped before she turned and marched furiously out of the room and down the hallway.

Sasha flushed to the roots of her hair as Chrissy flounced out of the room. She groaned in embarrassment and sank onto the bed. James raked a hand through his blonde hair and swore under his breath.

"Well I handled that perfectly."

"Why did you do that?" She asked in puzzlement. Why had he made such a big deal about sharing this room?

"Because she should have given us separate rooms." Once again he was angry.

"It's not a big deal James. We could share." Sasha tried to sound accommodating.

"No!" He disagreed vehemently. Then he saw the hurt in her eyes. "Oh, Sasha," He sighed, as he came and sat beside her on the bed, "This is not the way I wanted it to be."

"Why can't we share?"

He tipped her chin up and kissed her, "Because we start doing this," kiss, "and this," kiss, "and this..." They came up for air a while later.

"What would be so wrong about doing that?" Sasha asked when she was finally allowed to refill her lungs.

"Nothing would be wrong. Damn!" He stood up, turned around and stalked to the window, "So much for tradition. I wanted this to be perfect, and I've blown it." He glanced at her. "She did it deliberately."



“James, she probably thought she was doing us a favour.”

He shook his head, “Before they got married my brothers and sisters brought their partners to visit here. Chrissy gave them separate rooms. It’s like a family tradition now. We all joke about it. If you want to get married, you visit Chrissy first. She gives you separate rooms. It’s tradition. And she got it wrong. They were lovers.” He came and sat back down beside her.

“Partners?” Sasha’s mind stuck on that word, she had missed the rest. “Married?” She barely whispered as a dawning suspicion took form.

James smiled whimsically at her stunned expression “I’m going to marry you Sasha.” He told her softly and firmly.

“You are?” She whispered joyously her eyes flaring with emotion.

“I knew at Briar’s wedding that I was going to marry you.”

Her eyes widened, “Really?”

He nodded solemnly.

“Grace and Briar will have a fit when I tell them I didn’t have to seduce you.” Then she chuckled at his astounded expression. “We talked about it at the wedding.”

“You what?”

“Well, not in so much detail.” She laughed. “Briar said not to take any advice from Grace on the issue.”

“Why?” James was momentarily sidetracked.

“Cause Grace suggested that Briar turn up at Luke’s place dressed only in sexy underwear to get him into bed. When she arrived his father was there.”

James chuckled. “And she’s the shy one?”

“Exactly.”

He took her hands in his, and held them firmly. She could feel his hands trembling and knew that her own were equally shaky. Her grin disappeared.

“Will you marry me Sasha?”

“Oh James,” She breathed tenderly looking into his eyes. She wanted this with all her soul. “I’d love to marry you.” He whooped in delight and smothered her to him. Then his sister’s reaction resurfaced and Sasha knew she had to add, “But I can’t. Not now.” She stated tearfully.

The delight faded as he landed back on earth with a solid thud. “What do you mean you can’t now?” He held her at arms length and studied her eyes.

“I can’t marry you.”

“Why? You love me.” He challenged as if that was an issue

“Yes. Of course.” She cried, “And that’s exactly why I can’t marry you.”

“Sash. You aren’t making sense.” He wanted to shake her. “Why?”

She got off the bed and walked over to the window, “Families are important.” She mumbled softly. James had a feeling of foreboding, “My family had a tough time when we were refugees. We made it, because we had each other.” She turned back to face him, “Your family are close too. You thought your family would accept me, your sister hasn’t. I won’t be responsible for causing a rift in any family. Eventually you’d come to hate me for it.” She explained quietly.

“She does like you.” James felt the keen edge of desperation.

“You can’t force people to like me.”

“Give them a chance to know you. They’ll love you, you’ll see.”

“Are you sure about that?” Sasha sounded despondent, “Cath tried to hide it, but she doesn’t think I belong here.”

And we know what Chrissy thinks. When other members of your family brought prospective partners to her home she treated them with respect. She thinks I'm temporary, your lover, no more than that. That's a joke in itself isn't it? You won't sleep with me and she thinks we sleep together."

James took her in his arms as the tears she had tried to hold back cascaded over long black lashes. "I'm going to sort this misunderstanding out." He cradled her head in his hands just before he kissed her soundly. "Who says I won't sleep with you?" Then he backed her toward the bed and tumbled her onto it.

Sasha squealed as she hit the bed. James came down with her. Her smiling, him grinning, both of them a tangle of arms and legs. That was how Chrissy found them.

"Sorry. I heard a scream."

James bounded off Sasha, "Chrissy! I want another room." He demanded instantly before his sister could back out of the door.

"I'm not going through this again James." She said in exasperation, "I have all the family staying over, I don't have a spare room."

"You have the same number here as the time Justin got engaged. You managed to give him a separate room."

"That was different. I'm not going to justify my decision again. There just isn't room, ok!"

"No, it damn well isn't o.k." He snapped furiously.

"James, I..." Sasha tried to stem the angry argument.

"Butt out Sash." James retorted reflexively.

"Now just wait a minute..." Sasha got to her feet in fury.

"I'll take the shearers rooms." He announced as he picked up his case.

"I've put Nathan in there."

“We can share.” He strode out of the room leaving Chrissy glaring at his back before she turned to Sasha.

“Satisfied?” She snapped.

Sasha was horrified by the turn of events, more so by the resentment she saw in Chrissy’s eyes. “Pardon?” Sasha asked incredulously.

“Forget it. I haven’t got time to mollycoddle cover girl prima donas.” Chrissy strode angrily out of the room leaving Sasha speechless and distraught. Why was it people always saw no further than appearances? She’d been worried they’d be hesitant about James dating a Goan, she hadn’t anticipated them judging her on her looks.

Sasha had learnt early in her life that people saw her face and figure first, and then, if they bothered to stop, they found out she had a brain and a personality. The first time in years that she had bothered to make a concerted effort to impress and once again she was being judged on her appearance.

If there was any way of getting off this property Sasha would have taken it. Infact she was seriously considering her options when James reappeared. She had her head in her hands and was considering a gamut of excuses she could use. She couldn’t stay a moment longer. Not now.

“Sash?” He came into the room, saw her hunched and dejected and was instantly contrite, “Oh hon, I’m sorry.” He took her into his arms and held her to him, tight. “I’ve fucked this up, haven’t I?”

“I’m not staying.” Sasha stated quietly but firmly.

“What?” He held her at arms length.

“She hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you Sasha.”

Sasha couldn’t bring herself to repeat his sister’s words. She couldn’t do it.

“I shouldn’t be here.”

“I want you here.” He told her forcefully. He had no intention of letting her go. Not now, not ever. “If you leave, then I leave.”

”You can’t leave, you’re the Godfather.”

“I’m not staying without you.” He retorted without an ounce of remorse for blatant blackmail.

“That’s blackmail.”

“Damn right it is.” He kissed her hair, “Think it will work with my marriage proposal?”

She pulled out of his arms. “No.”

“No?” He followed her to the window. “They’ll come round Sash.”

“They love you and you love them. I’m not going to ruin that.” She hugged herself, “I meant what I said. No.” She said it with such finality that he once more stormed out of the room.

The rest of the evening was a nightmare. Everyone else, except for Nathan, the third brother, had arrived at the house. It was filled with laughter and loud talking. But though the family were polite to her, they were restrained. She’d seen the looks flash between brothers and sisters, parents and offspring.

Clearly Chrissy had told them her version of the afternoon’s events. Sasha felt more and more miserable. James stood beside her, but he was brooding. At the first opportunity she found, Sasha made her excuses and headed for bed. She heard the start of the argument the minute she left the room. James did not mince words.

She felt awful. The whole thing was her fault. She should never have come.

Nathan arrived the next morning and promptly began to flirt with her. He reminded her of Zachary. She didn’t take anything he said seriously. She doubted whether anyone did.

Chapter 16

Having missed yesterday's fireworks, he was the only member of the family who genuinely made an effort to make her feel comfortable. He even teamed up with her to distribute drinks whilst James and Eden, as God parents, were dutifully beside the parents and baby.

Nathan poured champagne into tall glasses ready to be circulated for the guests at the christening party. He was just opening his tenth bottle when James cornered him. Sasha had disappeared to find some more glasses.

"Nate," James warned, "She's with me."

"You wouldn't have thought so, for all the attention you've paid her." Nathan threw his older brother a withering look, "You brought a gorgeous woman with you, and the family treat her like an infection and you ignore her. What is with you?"

"None of your damn business. Just stop pestering her."

"Oh, I'm not pestering." Nathan stated blithely, kept his eyes on his older brother and taunted with no remorse whatsoever, "She's enjoying my company. She told me."

"Uncle James, Eden said they are waiting for you for photos." Trent, the oldest of his nephews was tugging James along before he had any chance to reply to Nate's comment. "Hurry up!"

Sasha and James said very little to each other during the day. At one point he came over to stand beside her and Nathan flashed him a cynical smile. James glowered. Everything was working against him. He was called over to join Eden to pose for numerous family photos. James was sure they were manipulating him, but with so many people around there was little he could do, bar cause a scene. And that wouldn't help Sasha. He flicked a sideways glance in her direction.

Damn it she wasn't even getting jealous. Here he was standing beside an attractive blonde and all Sasha did was ignore him. He was not happy with Nate either, the man was definitely trying his patience, and brother or no

brother he was likely to find himself with a broken jaw by the end of this evening.

By mid afternoon, after a protracted lunch, the children had scattered to play in the paddock beside the house and the guests had settled into small clusters. The house was full and yet Sasha felt isolated.

She made her way to the door and slid out of the house un-noticed. Or so she thought. James saw her go. He frowned, wanting to follow her and being forced to stand and pose for yet another family portrait.

Today was a rare occasion, the family hardly ever had opportunities to get together. None of them wanted to miss a photo opportunity. So James watched Sasha leave and took his position in the group. He'd pursue her as soon as this shot was taken.

Sasha decided to follow the children. She walked slowly, her heeled shoes not really suitable for tramping across a paddock. The children weren't as close as she'd thought. She could hear them, but the tree line hid them from view. She could hear them laughing and talking, so they couldn't be that far, she reasoned as she tottered toward the noise.

Then she heard a scream and after a moment's startled hesitation she began to run toward the sound. A few seconds later the twins came hurtling at her. They were yelling and crying at the same time. Had they been stung? Were there bees in that clump of trees? There weren't any poisonous animals in New Zealand apart from some spiders, but surely not a bite.

Sasha kicked off her high heeled shoes and clad in stockinged feet she raced toward them. Her stockings laddered immediately.

"What's the matter?" She demanded breathlessly as they reached each other. Her eyes took stock of their appearance, they looked fine, scared, but not injured.

“Trent’s fallen in the river.” Screamed one, she couldn’t distinguish between the twins.

“He’s dead.” Shrieked the other at the same time.

“Show me.” Sasha said anxiously. Thinking fast Sasha took one by the shoulder and pointed him in the direction of the house, “Get James. Go on.” She gave him a non too gentle shove toward the house and then she turned to the other twin and said “Show me where.”

Together they ran through the small clump of trees. On the other side was a small bank that led to the river. It was running higher than normal. She heard and saw two of the other children at the same time. They were crying, running along the bank crying and yelling Trent’s name.

Sasha sprinted toward them. Scanning the river as she ran, she could see Trent’s head bobbing up and down in the slightly swollen river. He was struggling to hold onto a large branch that had wedged against the bank. He was tiring and the branch was inching free of the bank. She ran along the bank yelling “Hold on, hold on.” The branch began to work itself free.

Sasha threw off her jacket and it fall to the ground. She ran straight into the river. The water was cold, but thankfully not as cold as it no doubt could get in early spring. When she could, she struck out in a frantic crawl. She had gone into the river several meters ahead of Trent and within a few seconds he came by. She struck out to reach him, swimming as hard as she could.

She caught sight of him and her hand reached toward him. He was just hanging on to the branch, fear in his eyes, tiredness in his arms. Then all of a sudden just before she could touch him, he slid into the water and disappeared. They were drifting fast, but she was swimming and he was being pulled by the flow. She saw his head bob up again, his arms flailing wildly and she surged with panicked desperation to reach him. She caught an arm and locked her cold fingers around his icy wrist.



Sasha gulped what felt like half the river, “Trent.” She wasn’t sure if she’d said his name aloud or merely thought it. He was spluttering and in his weakened state was letting her bear the full brunt of his weight. Years of surf life saving routines kicked in automatically. She pulled him to her as they continued to be dragged along, buffeted by the river. She hauled him closer, one arm under his armpits and across his chest. “Hold on.”

She tried to kick for the bank. It was hard work, and not having swum for a long time she was tiring fast. Her arms were beginning to burn and her feet seemed to be getting them no nearer to the lush river bank. Her lungs felt as if they were ready to explode. It had been a long time since she had practiced her surf life saving. Too long. She’d stopped surfing almost five years ago, but the ingrained training was keeping her and him afloat. But for how long?

She held onto him tightly, wondering whether to just drift, take the pummeling and drift, but she had no idea about the path of the river. Trent was cradled in the crook of her arm, protected by her body, and her legs were kicking frantically trying to get them to shore.

She willed herself to stay calm. She had to hold on, she had to. James would get them, he would.

A few seconds later she was aware of two male heads beside her.

“Let him go.” Nathan told her, trying not to swallow too much water. “I’ve got him.” They were bobbing alongside, keeping together. Being buffeted as the river carried them on.

James took her. Together they stroked their way to the bank and staggered onto solid ground. Sasha collapsed onto all fours as she gulped huge amounts of air to calm her racing heart, to quench the shortage in her lungs and to fight off the burning sensation in her legs. Shooting pains surged through her legs, as lactic acid set the

muscles alight. “Is, is he o.k.?” She asked in a laboured voice, her teeth chattering as the cold registered.

“He’s fine.” James flopped beside her, his breath laborious, his eyes pensive. “How about you?”

“I’m o.k.” She smiled weakly, still breathing hard. “You sure he’s o.k.?” Her tights were laddered, and her body trembled as the cold air plastered the silk shirt and skirt to her underwear and to her skin.

James looked over at the throng a few feet away from her. There was a large group of people around Trent. “He’s o.k. Thanks to you.” Trent was wrapped in blankets and with his father, Jordan, carrying him, the group moved quickly toward the house. Robert and Cath came up to James and Sasha.

“You o.k.?” Robert squatted down beside Sasha, as Cath handed them blankets.

Sash nodded. “How’s Trent?” Sasha asked through chattering teeth as Cath wrapped a blanket around her shoulders firmly and gave her a hug.

“Chrissy’s called the doctor. But I think Trent’s o.k. Cold, wet, but ok.” Cath smiled hesitantly. She rubbed the blanket briskly trying to generate some heat, trying to offer comfort. “Come on. You two should get back to the house too.”

Sasha stumbled to her feet. The battle to stay afloat catching up with her, she was drained. Her legs were weak, and not surprisingly they failed to support her, she wobbled. Robert caught her as she almost slid back to the ground.

“Whoops.” She smiled weakly, “Not used to all this exercise.”

James picked her up, “Come on.”

“Put me down.” She ordered automatically while her arms wrapped themselves around his neck and she burrowed into his shoulder.

“Ah hah,” He quirked a brow at her, “now I know you’re o.k. Argumentative as ever.”

He walked onward his arms around her waist and knees, her hands linked around his neck. Robert and Cath smiled at them then moved on ahead to catch up with the others.

“I thought I’d lost him.” Sasha whispered, voicing her thoughts, “When he went down, I thought he’d gone. Then he bobbed up, thrashing about and I just, only just reached him, only just.” She shivered. James hugged her closer.

“All that surfie experience?” He kissed her nose.

“I’m so unfit.”

“Fit enough.” He smiled at her.

“Pity I didn’t have my usual gear on! Bri will kill me when she sees what I’ve done to her clothes.”

“She’ll kiss you for saving my nephew’s life.” He corrected.

At the tree line Nathan waited for James and Sasha to reach him. He pulled his blanket closer around him, trying to trap some warmth. “You o.k?” He asked Sasha, his eyes scanning her face.

“Fine.” She tried to smile, but her teeth were still chattering, “But this Neanderthal insists on carrying me.”

The Neanderthal smiled but didn’t take the bait.

“That was a hell of a thing to do Sasha. Might use it in my next book.” Nathan knotted the blanket at his shoulder and fell into stride with James. “We saw you go into the water. Scared me witless I can tell you. We’d just cleared the trees when you plunged in.” He flicked her an admiring glance, “Took guts.”

“You guys did the same.” Sasha responded automatically.

“Yeah, but you saved his life.”

”You would have done the same thing in my place.”  
Came the reply.

”But the thing is, you actually did it. We’d have been too late. He’d let go of the branch. You saved him.”

”You would have....”

”Sasha!” Nathan interrupted with a chuckle, “Are you always this bad at taking a compliment?”

”Always.” James confirmed proudly, “It’s one reason why I’m marrying her.”

”I’m not marrying you.” Sasha retorted instantly.

”Sure as hell are.” He snapped back.

”No, I’m not. I told you.”

”Whether my family like it or not, we are getting married.”

”I’m not marrying you,” She cried and punched at his shoulder for added emphasis. Suddenly Sasha felt the cold.

”They’ll like you.” He bellowed in sheer frustration.

”I do.” Nathan chipped in, somewhat puzzled by this heated exchange. James glared at him. “I was trying to help.”

They walked on in silence. Further conversation was commandeered by guests and family as soon as they’d reached the house. They were thanking her and asking about her welfare in one breath. James shouldered past them and walked to the room she’d been given. He left Nathan to deal with the questions.

”Strip off and get under the shower.” He carried her to the ensuite bathroom, then turned on the shower dial, until the water ran warm.

”Not joining me?”

”Get in.”

”Spoil sport.”

He grinned, “We share when you agree to marry me and you will agree, Sasha. I’m not giving up.” Then he closed the door.

For a second Sasha just stood looking at the closed door, then she dropped the blanket and got undressed. Sasha stood under the warming jet of water, letting it gradually reheat her body. The events began to take their toll. She was shattered. Her legs were barely keeping her upright. She had acted on sheer adrenalin, and now that it had faded, she was left trying to muster the energy to stand.

She could see Trent’s head disappear beneath the surface every time she closed her eyes. She turned off the taps and stepped out of the shower cubicle. She dried herself quickly and wound a towel around her.

The bedroom was empty when she entered it.

“How do you feel?” James asked as he reentered the room. Sasha had her bra and knickers on and that was all. She didn’t make any attempt to cover up.

“Fine. Do you know how to knock?” She asked drolly.

“You can’t be a prude.” He winked. “Get into bed.”

“What for?” The suggestive tone was not lost on him.

“Not what you’re thinking.”

“I’m fine.” She told him again.

“Good. Now get into bed.”

“James...”

He picked her up, carried her a few scant steps to the edge of the bed and put her on the bed before she could even string her protest together. He placed an arm on either side of her when she made to roll off the other side.

“Stay there. The doc is on his way.” He lay half sprawled over her, his hands linked with hers, his chest pinning her to the bed.

“I don’t need a doctor.”

“Stay put Sash.” He let go of her hands and tugged one edge of the duvet cover up and over her prone body, tugging the upper edge to sit around her shoulders. Then he tucked the side edge under her. She wriggled, then pouted. He chuckled her chin and smiled. “Now wait there.” She was wrapped like a silk worm in its cocoon, snug, comfortable and curled.

“I feel like a mummy.” She flashed him an appealing look.

He looked her over, she did look like an Egyptian catacomb. But her squirming was a giveaway.

“You can be a mummy after we get married. I want three children. How many do you want?”

Sasha had never really considered how many children she wanted. A slow smile began. James watched her whole demeanour change.

“While you think about it, I’ll get the doc.”

That brought Sasha back to the present.

After the doctor had seen her, Jordan and Stella visited Sasha to thank her, as had almost everyone else. They had all trooped through the bedroom, because James wouldn’t let her up. She had sat, propped up in bed while every single member of his family had come in, just to see how she was and to tell her how grateful they were.

James stayed the night. Sleeping alongside her, her body held closely to his, he finally drifted off to sleep, wondering how he was going to persuade this headstrong woman to marry him.

Sasha was up early the next morning. She glanced across at James, slowly extricated herself from his arms and pulled the duvet cover over him. Then she tiptoed out of the room. Very quietly she made her way to the kitchen. There weren’t any sounds of anyone else awake, but then, it was just gone five in the morning.

She poured herself a glass of water and headed outdoors. It was going to be another glorious day. She leaned on

the balustrade, sipping her water, looking away into the distance. The remnants of a glorious sunrise filtered across the horizon, Sasha closed her eyes and savoured the scent of the early morning.

“Morning.”

Sasha straightened immediately and turned slowly to face Chrissy.

“Morning.” It wasn’t an enthusiastic greeting, but Sasha thought it would be churlish not to reply at all.

The blonde woman smiled hesitantly as she came forward. She braced her elbows on the white balustrade, settling herself within a couple of inches of Sasha, but concentrating on the far off yonder.

“Going to be a beaut day.”

“Yes.” Agreed Sasha non committedly.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Chrissy asked, as she pretended to survey the landscape.

“No.”

“You aren’t making this easy.”

“Prima donna syndrome.” Sasha shifted away, she had intended to maintain some degree of temperance, but her prima donna comment had tossed that intention aside.

“I want to apologise.”

“You don’t owe me an apology.”

“Yes, I do.” Chrissy replied emphatically.

“Look, pulling a child out of a river doesn’t change who I am.” Sasha told her brusquely, “I’m still me, the same person James brought here on Friday.” She turned to face Chrissy, her pent up pique over the turn of events this weekend, initiated by the woman standing in front of her, were finally being voiced, “This is who I am. I’m not a prima donna or a cover girl. This is me. Ok, I made an effort with what I wore, but I’m more than just this appearance.”

“I know.” Chrissy acknowledged softly. She took a deep breath before she went on, “I’m sorry.” Chrissy tried to make eye contact, but Sasha was looking away, “Haven’t you ever over reacted? I didn’t mean to, well, not initially, and initially not deliberately.” She looked regrettably at Sasha, “And not for the reasons you think.” She jammed her hands in her dressing gown, “I’d completely forgotten about ‘the tradition’. I was so caught up in getting everything organised for the christening. Making sure everyone had a bed, the catering was o.k, the church, I wanted every thing to run smoothly. I didn’t give James another thought. Then little brother comes in with this woman who looks like she models for a living and he begins to throw his weight around. Well it was obvious who was calling the shots.”

Sasha folded her arms defensively but refrained from saying anything.

“James is usually easy going. I mean he’s normally laid back, like Nate. But here he was demanding another room, as if that one wasn’t good enough. It had to be your fault. You’d probably insisted.” Chrissy sighed. “I knew you were lovers. I heard you in his bedroom the day I phoned.”

Sasha snorted at that. How little Chrissy knew.

“It doesn’t matter.” Sasha shrugged, pretending forbearance.

“Yes it does.” Chrissy stated emphatically. “James wants to marry you.” She came over to Sasha and stood directly in front of her. “Nate said you said no. Don’t you love him?”

“I love him.” Sasha said.

“Then marry him.”

“Yes. Marry me.” James stated baldly from the kitchen doorway.

“James!” Shrieked Chrissy, “Do you have to sneak up on me all the time?”



“If you weren’t rattling on so loudly you’d have heard me.” He quipped as he pushed open the fly screen door and walked toward them. His eyes were on Sasha as he kept coming toward the two women.

“You were eavesdropping.” His sister accused without any real rancour.

“Your point is?”

“Oh, you’re the pits.” Chrissy pushed past him, “Are you sure you want him?” She asked Sasha just before she stepped into the kitchen.

“I’ve wanted him all my life.” Sasha barely whispered, her eyes on James.

James froze for an instant, “Is that a yes?” He demanded softly as he came to stand a hair’s breath away.

Sasha grinned idiotically at him then gushed, “Yes, yes, yes!”

He whooped loudly, Sasha laughed as he wrapped her in a fierce bear hug. His head descended, bringing his mouth closer to hers, then he stopped and turned to look at his sister, “Make yourself scarce big sister.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll wait until your Godson can be page boy?”

She received no answer, James and Sasha were far too busy.

“No, thought not.” Chrissy said just before she disappeared into the kitchen, leaving them to kiss on her kitchen door step.

James took Sasha’s hand and strolled down to the far fence. “When I asked you to come down here this weekend, I’d made up my mind to marry you.”

”Pretty confident.”

He laughed, “Scared, petrified, terrified, if you must know. I was going to tell you about the family tradition when Chrissy gave us separate rooms. I had it all

planned. I'd explain the situation and then I was going to ask you. I would announce it today, after the christening, didn't want to steal anyone's thunder. The whole family would be here, it was all so perfect. The best laid plans of mice and men eh?" He squeezed her hand, Sasha was grinning like a demented cat. "I really blew it when Chrissy didn't go according to plan." He smiled in remembrance, "Nerves."

"It's sorted now." She could afford to be generous.

"I'm going to do this right." And saying that he got down on one knee.

"James, get up." Sasha caught her lower lip between her teeth as she tried not to giggle. "You'll get your jeans muddy, get up." He ignored her mirth. Instead he whipped out a ring from his shirt pocket. The laughter fled and her eyes widened before moving from the ring to meet his earnest eyes.

"Sasha," He held the ring out to her, "Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Sasha didn't wait any longer. "Yes," She said softly as she threw her arms around his neck and bent down to kiss him. Slowly he rose, taking them both into an upright position.

They received a loud round of applause, cat calls and whistles. Those who had stayed over were standing on the back verandah. Children, parents, grandparents all cheering and clapping.

Sasha and James broke off their kiss and laughed at their audience. Then he turned back to her and reached for her hand. "I love you." Slowly he slid the simple diamond ring onto her finger "All the women in our family have this style. It's based on my great grandmother's ring."

"You romantic." Sasha kissed him tenderly as she whispered the words.

The crowd resorted to whistles and banging of pots and pans! Slowly James and Sasha walked back to the group.

## Chapter 17

He slid alongside her on the bench seat and threw her a quizzical look. “What?”

“Nothing.” She replied with a hint of a smile on her lips and secrets in her eyes.

“Nothing?” He grinned, “You look like you’ve just won Lotto.”

“Not yet.” Cryptically Sasha added, “But you never know, the way my luck is going.”

“So are you going to tell me what you’re up to?”

“Yes.”

“Sash.” He warned when she said nothing more and simply grinned at him.

“I’ve booked us in.”

“You’ve booked us in?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Here?”

“Yes.”

“Under what name?”

“Mr and Mrs Lonergan!” She frowned at his line of questioning. She’d expected surprise, but he seemed to have other things on his mind.

“Presumptuous.” He didn’t seem too fazed by her scheming.

“I figured we had to keep up with tradition.”

“Oh?” He quirked a brow. “What tradition is that?”

Sasha grinned happily. “The Carvalho tradition.”

“Which is?”

“We seduce prospective husbands before we marry them. Ravish them actually.”

“Oh, that tradition.” He grinned wickedly “Ravish huh?”

“Yup, ravish.” She winked. “I’ve been thinking about it all the way up here. Got heaps of things in mind.”

“Well then,” He adopted a solemn tone, “I’d best let you get on with it.”

“You’ll need to get our bags. I don’t think you’ll have the strength to lift them by the time I’ve finished with you!” She challenged as she stood “We are in room 24.” Sasha reached for her purse, got to her feet and winked suggestively at him, “ Five minutes.” She gave him a room key.

James watched her go, and his smile widened before he got to his feet. Life would never be dull with her that much was for sure.

When James entered room 24 Sasha was no where to be seen. There was a bottle of champagne chilling in ice, a bowl of strawberries and two long stemmed glasses, but no Sasha.

“Sasha?”

“In the bathroom.” She called from the ensuite and he heard the shower going. For a second he hesitated. It had been a long drive up from the Kapiti coast and he could do with cleaning up too. He dropped the bags by the front door, locked the door with a brisk snap and then discarded his shirt as he walked toward the bathroom.

By the time he reached the bathroom he was naked. Without the slightest hesitation he slid the shower cubicle door open. She stood side on to him, her hair slick with water, her skin gleaming topaz. His eyes followed the direction of the jet of water. It sprayed onto her breasts and ran in rivulets down her chest, streaming over her flat torso, and cascading down the length of very long legs. Sasha watched his eyes as he studied her.

James was staggered. He could only stand and stare in total awe. Sasha smiled shyly at him but when she spoke

she sounded calm, “You sure took your time. I was beginning to feel like a wrinkled prune.”

With the reactions of an automaton James stepped into the cubicle, slid the door shut and turned the dial onto cold. Sasha squealed and shifted out of the stream.

“Why did you do that?”

James stepped under the cold water, “Because if I don’t get a cold shower right now, you are going to have the quickest fuck of your life.”

That immediately caused her to gaze at him. “Oh.” She whispered as she took note of his size. “Um, yeah, I guess.”

James swelled further under her gaze. “This is hopeless.” He murmured as she continued to stare at him. He turned the shower dial to warm, “Plan B.” Then he picked her up and deftly slid her left leg round his waist.

“James! Put me down.”

“Why?” He groaned as he adjusted her to him.

“Because I’m supposed to seduce you.” She laced her arms around his neck.

“Consider it done.” He told her as he helped her slide along his body.

“And I,” she took a deep breath as his head ducked and his lips captured hers. A long drugging kiss. Sasha arched in reaction.

“Take it easy.” He breathed, not sure if he was telling her or himself. Her nipples brushed against his chest as she pressed against him.

“Oh.” Sasha was nonplussed, things were moving a lot quicker than she had planned. They were supposed to shower, wrap up in towels, sit and sip champagne and feed each other strawberries and then make love on the rug. “We need to dry off.” She pleaded as her plan disintegrated.

“Hon, I’m generating enough heat to dry us off even under a running shower.” He bent his head and captured a breast.

“Ohhhhh!” She shrieked and arched into him.

James backed her against the tiles. Then he let her take some of her weight. Sasha stood on tiptoes, her hands stroking his back, fingers occasionally digging into coiled muscle as James continued to cradle and kiss her. Sasha almost slammed against the tiles when his hand cupped her and his thumb stroked the tiny bundle of hooded nerves. He caught her to him with his left hand as she more or less slid onto the cubicle floor. Gently he raised her leg again, bending her knee, coaxing her to wrap her calf around his back.

He eased her up against him, slowly maneuvering her so that he gradually penetrated. His right hand guided his way. Sasha’s nails dug into his shoulder as her body adjusted and slowly took him in. He moved gently, giving her time to get used to him, taking his time to kiss her, to ease her onto him. Sasha felt stretched as she allowed him to penetrate. Sasha was precariously balanced with one foot still on the tiles. He was half way into her when his hands moved to cup her bottom.

Sasha wriggled. James groaned.

“Sasha bear down on me. Go easy and it won’t hurt you too much.”

Sasha wriggled some more. James adjusted his stance to take her weight. He felt the barrier. They looked at each other. Slowly Sasha prised her nails out of his flesh and cupped his face. With their eyes open they kissed. Then she lifted her head, took a breath and held his gaze. James pushed and saw the pain flash in her eyes as he plunged in to the hilt. She saw the dismay well in his. He stopped. She took a breath, and felt her body stretch to accommodate the intrusion. He lowered his head and kissed her tenderly. Then they were moving again. Rocking gently, building slowly into a steady rhythm.

She was a snug fit around him. Very snug. Her abdomen coiled in tense surrender, waiting, fluttering, willing on the release it expected but didn't understand. Two minutes later, Sasha experienced her first orgasm. Bucking, screaming and clenching him to her, she convulsed to eventual lethargy.

Seconds later he moved easing her feet back onto the tiles. He turned the shower off and picked her up. "I don't think I have the strength to carry you far."

"Bedroom will do. Wait till I tell Grace and Bri my first time was in the shower." She mumbled happily.

He stopped dead in his tracks. "You wouldn't." He couldn't help the consternation in his voice.

"Why not?"

"Sash!" He warned. "You tell anyone what we do and where, and I'll make sure we only use the missionary position until you are senile." As they moved past the toweling rail, Sasha reached across and grabbed a bath towel.

"Spoil sport." She nuzzled his neck and wrapped the towel around his shoulders, "But then again, I might really like the missionary position."

James groaned in mock despair. "You'll never know until we try it will you?"

"Whenever you're ready, I'm ready for my next lesson."

"Aren't you sore?"

"Not yet!" She kissed his neck. James felt his legs go weak. They never made it to the bed.

They awoke late the following morning, because Sasha had been determined to experiment. They made it to the bed after they had sipped warm champagne. But sleep was many hours away.

Languorously she stood and stretched before reaching for the bath towel which she wrapped around herself.

“Sash.” He caught her wrist and stopped her moving away.

“Umm?” She slid toward him.

“I’d booked us into room 16.” He laced his arms around her back.

“Oh?” She tipped her head to look into his eyes. He could see that she was already contemplating more sex.

He chuckled, and his laugh brought her back to earth.

“What do you mean you booked us in to 16? When? Why?”

“Oh, before we left Chrissy’s.” He said softly and waited for her reaction. Sasha was speechless for all of two seconds then she hit him with her pillow. His muffled voice informed her from beneath the pillow. “I phoned and booked us in. You don’t think I chose this stop by sheer chance?”

“You sneak.” She rolled off him, taking the pillow with her. “You rotten sneak.”

“It’s the Lonergan tradition; lovers before we marry.” He caught hold of her hand and dodged another pillow hit. He rolled her, so that she was pinned beneath him.

Sasha started chuckling. “You are despicable.” She remonstrated as she squirmed. Then she froze and turned suspiciously toward him, “If you booked 16, why didn’t they tell me that they already had a booking for Lonergan?”

He grinned wolfishly at her, “Cause I booked it under Carvalho.”

Sasha’s mouth formed an O but no sound emerged for several seconds. Then they both started laughing.

“I cancelled it when I brought our bags in.” He added when they settled into a cuddle.

“Good grief! What will they think?”



He laughed, “I told them, you and your husband would be back in a couple of months.”

“What?” She squealed just before he laughingly kissed her.

## Chapter 18

“Uncle James!” A barely three year old female came and stood by him. She had dark green eyes, jet black hair and the most infectious smile he had ever seen. Already he could see her carrying on where her mother and aunts left off. Look out men, another feisty woman in the making.

“Yes Iona.” He drew her closer to him.

“The baby’s coming.” Those words were guaranteed to get a reaction.

James was out of the chair before she’d completed the sentence.

“Sasha?” He met Sasha as she waddled toward him and the front door. She was smiling beatifically. Grace handed him the packed bag. He took it automatically.

“You o.k.?” He asked Sasha.

She grinned as if this was a normal situation. “Just get me to the hospital.”

“You never did get dates right!” He mumbled in her ear as he placed a hand gently in the small of her back and helped her walk toward the door.

“Huh!” She snorted in reply as she stopped and turned to face him. “It’s you!” She jabbed at his shoulder, “Everything connected with you gets brought forward twenty days.”

“Me?” He gently turned her around and ushered her toward the door.

Joshua held his daughter Iona by the hand as he cuddled his year old son Liam in his other arm. James continued to propel Sasha along.

Sasha gripped his arm painfully as another contraction took its toll. “You ok?” James began to panic as Sasha panted for control.

“Fine.” Sasha took another breath. “Grace and Bri managed this. So can I.”

Grace laughed. “But we aren’t wimps when it comes to pain.”

James threw his sister-in-law a worried look.

“Huh!” Sasha snorted. “Nothing could be more painful than having you and Briar stitch me up when I was six.”

Joshua threw his wife a questioning look. She shrugged feigning innocence. He would pursue that later.

As Sasha and James reached the door, it was pushed open. Nick, Briar and Luke stepped in.

“The baby’s coming.” Iona told them, her voice full of awe, expectation and importance. “And you can’t stitch Aunty Sasha.”

Grace and Sasha laughed. Briar grinned. The men looked lost.

Briar placed the small holdall she was carrying just inside the door. Luke walked past her, carrying Landon, their two year old son. Nick brought in two bigger bags.

“You aren’t due for another three weeks are you?” Briar queried.

“Blame him.” Sasha pointed to James, “Always ahead of schedule, looks like it’s genetic.”

“What are you still doing here?” Luke asked, remembering all too well how he’d felt when Briar went into labour.

“We’re just going.” Sasha told him smugly before kissing her sleeping Godson’s cheek. “He’s so gorgeous.

“Sasha get a move on. I don’t think Briar is in any condition to do a delivery!” Luke replied. Briar was six months pregnant. “And Nick hasn’t qualified as yet.”

“Always bossy.” Sasha remonstrated, planted one last kiss on the sleeping boy’s forehead and then took another deep breath as another contraction let loose.

“Sash, could we get a move on please?” James suggested testily.

“I’m moving alright.” She pulled a face, “I can’t help it if all of them want to discuss it first.”

James ushered his wife out. “Just move.”

Grace, Briar, Luke, Joshua and Nick waved from the doorway.

James and Sasha made it just in time. Megan, their black haired, blue eyed daughter was born one hour and forty-five minutes later, during which time her mother had screamed the place down, cursed her husband for coming near her and threatened to flatten her sisters for not telling her how painful labour was.

When Megan was placed in her mother’s arms a few seconds after her birth, all of that was forgotten “Hello beautiful.” Sasha whispered as the baby opened her blue eyes and stared at her parents.