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No Sex Necessary

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## ***Chapter One***

She sensed him at first. Bold and assessing. A lion on the prowl.

Swiveling in her chair, Tara searched the vast marble lobby of Charteris Developments for the man responsible for the unrestrained panic channeling through every fiber of her being.

Dark chocolate eyes, deep and mysterious stared blatantly back, the stranger's interest apparent. One ebony brow arched and the corners of his full mouth curved upwards slightly. It sent a prickling awareness creeping up her spine, when she should be thinking of something else—and definitely not lust! The hunt for the dreaded dollar should be foremost in her mind right now, not eye candy.

The air around her thickened with a scandalous lustful heat. Palpable. So real, she believed she could almost reach out and touch it.

The man picked up his briefcase and her gut clenched into a rigid knot. She swallowed hard. Surely he wasn't coming her way. Sparks of heat cascaded through her veins and the hairs on the back of her neck tingled. Flustered, she quickly turned away and yanked her jacket across her chest as if to protect herself.

From what ... or should that be whom?

The answer was easy. From herself.

She waited. Nothing happened.

Tara should have known better, but heck, what's a girl to do when she sees the hunk from heaven. She couldn't help herself. With utmost care, and not wanting to arouse his attention, she glanced over her shoulder, seeking him out, again.

Big mistake. Huge!

He was still there. Still staring. Still smiling.

Stupid. Don't draw attention. Don't look.

She dropped her gaze and self-consciously fiddled with her purse. She had to get away. Lurching from the low-slung leather chair she fled, locking eyes on the lift, willing it to stay open. Heat burned in her chest and her heart raced. She knew without turning his gaze hadn't shifted. It bored into her back even as she sped away, teasing, and absolutely tempting her to stop, turn round and look back.

Desperate to put space between her and the dark eyed stranger, afraid of the intense sexual tension his direct gaze created, Tara kept going.

She didn't want to feel it. How could a stranger create such an impact? It scared her.

Then it happened.

Two feet from the lift doors—thankfully still open—she tumbled to the ground in a heap.

"Damn."

"Do you need some help?"

His voice—a rich, velvety timbre wrapped her in its smoothness. Tara didn't have to look up to know it belonged with the eyes. It matched to perfection the stranger who had set her pulses on fire as never, ever, before.

Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to look up. "No," she answered, aware of the frantic beat of her heart.

"Sure you do." He took no notice of her decline and a hand slid around her elbow forcing her to look into his eyes. She began to shake.

"Come on. Looks like you've got a problem."

Tara couldn't think, couldn't formulate even a sentence, every syllable stalling behind the tip of her tongue.

"Your heel," he said nodding towards her shoes.

Tara followed his gaze. There, snapped clear off the base of her shoe was her heel, all three inches of micro slim and far too expensive heel, dangling at an angle that would force a contortionist into a sweat.

Behind her, the doors closed with a hiss and her escape route evaporated. She gave up, gave in, and sagged against the cool steel of the now closed doors.

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

He reached a hand out to help her up, and unless she was utterly rude, she had no choice but to accept it. She dropped her hand into his.

Her second big mistake.

She should have listened to her inner warnings. Don't look, and definitely don't touch.

The moment his long, lean fingers touched hers, she felt it. Hot. Searing. And tingling. An awareness that scorched right through skin and bone, to the very blood pumping through her veins.

It shouldn't be happening, but feelings and emotions she'd long ago battened down, erupted into life, despite her fighting them, wishing them away.

She held herself rigid as she hobbled, with the stranger's assistance to a chair, his arm reaching around her waist, fingers brushing beneath her jacket and against her silk blouse—so close to her skin.

She blanched. Her nipples had hardened of their own accord.

She shot her Mr. Knight in Shining Armor a quick look, making sure he hadn't noticed, and exhaling when she realized, thankfully, he seemed totally unaware of her state of arousal. His presence, however, was doing weird and seriously delicious things to her insides.

No. No. No. Concentrate Tara. Think of the job. Job. Money. Bills.

Once sitting, he crouched down beside her and lifted her leg, slipping off her shoe. His actions shocked her, but his touch shocked her more. Soft, almost a caress, it set the butterflies in her stomach into overdrive. He continued to examine the shoe. There were a few small nails spiking upwards from the heel. Holding the

sole and heel together he gave it a sharp tap on the marble floor. A loud staccato echoed around the foyer, drawing withering glares from passersby.

Tara gasped. "You can't do that," she protested.

"Just did," he said giving her a lazy smile.

Tara looked every which way, expecting to see the building supervisor heading their way. "Do you want the authorities to rush us any minute and toss the both of us out?"

He shrugged matter-of-factly and gave it another sharp tap. "All fixed," he announced and promptly placed it back on her foot. "Just like Cinderella." He smiled and stood up.

In the distance the town clock echoed. Damn. Just like Cinders.

"I'm late. Sorry. I mean," she stuttered, flustered. "Thanks very much, but I've got to go, an appointment." Giving him a curt nod, she headed toward the lift for the second time, holding herself ramrod straight; terrified her heel would snap again. Once was certainly enough. And being rescued by a dark stranger who unwittingly did seriously hot things to her insides, things she'd rather he didn't, was quite enough.

Definitely too much for you to handle.

Her plan failed. Twice. He slipped into the lift just as the doors closed. Damn. They were the only two in the lift. Just her luck. Thirty floors and counting. Tara willed the lift to speed up.

Fat chance!

She glanced down at the scrunched up newspaper clipping in her sweaty palm. She had read it over and over till the words were etched in her brain.

'Wife wanted. No sex necessary.'

The perfect job.

As the lift neared the 30th floor, she stuffed it back into her bag, tugging at the hem of her jacket, aware of the stranger's eyes boring a hole right in the center of her back - again. She didn't have to see it, to know it. She could feel it. Being aware of him was one thing, reacting like a cat on heat was quite another and the intensity of her reaction to him more than scared her. It was as if her body and her brain weren't connected; one operating independent of the other.

Her body screamed yes, yes, yes. Take me, touch me, and please kiss me. While her brain said no way. Forget it. No chance. She didn't know which to listen to.

Instead, she kept looking ahead at her reflection mirrored in the silver polished lift doors.

Tidy, presentable, sophisticated. Okay, a broken shoe, but hopefully her prospective boss wouldn't notice. She smiled. Thankfully, there was one thing in her favor. She might be dead broke, and only have her bus fare home in her purse, but she still owned one designer outfit to take her anywhere. Everything else had been sold. Had to be.

Tara crossed her fingers. She wanted this job—nope correct that—desperately needed this job, and prayed it would solve all her problems. It had to.

The monotone electronic voice in the lift announced the thirtieth floor. Nervous, her fingers bunched at her sides as the doors opened. She stepped out.

So did the stranger.

She turned to him and a sprinkling of fear slid up and down her spine. "Are you following me?"

"Would you like me to?" he shot back, giving her a broad grin.

Her lips parted, but she didn't have time to answer.

"Oh, good, there you are, and I don't even have to introduce you."

Tara recognized the voice and twisted round to face the octogenarian who she'd spoken to on the phone. Maude Charteris didn't disappoint her. Gold dripped from both wrists and each finger was adorned with at least one, large and very expensive looking ring and perfectly matched her clear, crisp and exceedingly autocratic tone.

"Maude," the man at her side pleaded. "Not now."

Color fused Tara's cheeks and her gaze narrowed, darting from the stranger ... her stranger, to Maude Charteris and back to him. "You know her?" she choked.

"Of course he does dear. This is your new boss."

The hunk. Her boss?

"Boss," They both spluttered.

Tara blanched for the second time in less than a few minutes and grabbed the edge of the closest chair as her knees began a dance of their own.

"Now, young man, I must be off. Take Tara into your office. You can't hold a job interview in the hallway."

"My interview is with him?"

"Of course. This is my nephew, Cole Charteris. He's the one I told you about."

"My knight," she spluttered, then seeing the sharp rise of his dark brows, realized she'd spoken aloud. Things were becoming decidedly worse by the second. The strained white line around his mouth thinned and he loosened his tie with short, sharp movements, flicking a button undone and pulling his collar away from his neck. Tara smiled slightly. Perhaps he wasn't faring any better than she was. The thought was rather comforting.

"Knight—as in shining armor," he chuckled. "Does that mean you're my Cinderella?"

Tara's lips pursed.

Don't do that. Don't smile.

Cole Charteris's smile was way too devastating. "Just don't call me Cinders and we'll get along fine."

"Cinders," she heard him mutter beneath his breath as she walked straight passed him into an office he'd directed her towards. "More like a goddess on heels."

Tara stilled, jaw dropping. Every inch of her face flamed scarlet. She went to speak, but not one single syllable came out. The second time in less than ten minutes this man had made her speechless. This wasn't good. She had to get this job.

Don't forget, the job comes first.

She snapped her lips closed, did an about-face, remembering a fraction too late her precarious position regarding high heels and wobbled ungainly into the lion's den.

"I'll be with you in a minute," he called after her.

Alone, Tara took a moment to gather her wits. That her knight, a.k.a. Mr. Hunk, turned out to be her prospective boss had some good points ... and some very bad points.

Okay. So he was easy on the eye. Good point number one.

But then again that could be bad point numero uno—big time. Mr. Hunk out there drew her like a bee to honey. How could she do her job, and keep her sanity?

And there was the sixty-four million dollar question, she mused.

But thoughts of money brought Tara up with a jolt. Money! Her big problem. She needed it. Lots of it if she were to survive. She needed it, and her father needed it.

Her gaze slipped towards the partially closed door.

Forget it. You've no time for romance. Do the job, get paid, and forget about men!

Satisfied she could battle the internal yearning inside her, Tara gazed around the room. An office said a lot about its occupant. This office was one hundred percent business and held nothing personal. No photos, no private collection of books. Nothing to indicate who Cole Charteris really was. She moved to the window and stared down at the congested lunchtime traffic below.

Workers rushed like small ants under the sweltering sun of Auckland's summer. The heat had hit with a vengeance and soon the normally lush green city would be baked dry from the heat, and city dwellers would take respite at the many beaches.

Raised voices echoed from the corridor. She couldn't help but overhear.

"You must be mad."

"Now, dear boy, don't get agitated. This is for your own good."

"Maude, sending me to school was for my own good, even drumming me into the Boy Scouts could be considered good, but what sort of woman would answer something so blatant?"

Someone desperate, Tara cringed.

"What on earth prompted you to write the blasted thing in the first place?" he demanded. "I hope you don't expect me to marry her?"

Marriage? No way. Tara screamed silently. Once was enough.

"It's meant to be temporary," Maude countered. "And purely for effect. Howard is such a solid, conservative type, this way, with Tara on your arm you get him on your side and his daughter off your back," the old woman chuckled.

Silence reigned for a few seconds, before Cole Charteris continued, his tone yielding a fraction. "You've been like a mother to me, since ... well, for a long time, Maude, but don't you think this is taking your concern for my well-being a little too far?"

"Perhaps, but you've got to admit, Cole, having a fiancée, even temporary, is perfect. And Tara Palmer is everything you could want for this role."

"And you know what I want?"

"Go back to your office, Cole. Talk with her, you'll see."

Perfect. Someone thought she was perfect. Tara straightened imperceptibly, her confidence boosted by the thought. A second later Cole Charteris strode in, stood behind his desk, bunched fists resting on the exquisite mahogany desk. He said nothing and Tara's nerves re-ignited.

Her father's words rang in her head. 'Defense is always best'.

Shoulders back, chin tilted up a tad higher, she spoke. "It seems you weren't expecting me?" she said offering him a way out. His lips twitched slightly. Not a smile, thank goodness. Tara wasn't sure she could cope with another of those dimple-making smiles of his.

He didn't take advantage of her offered opportunity however, which surprised ... and more than a fraction delighted her, as she waited and watched him. She wished she could read behind the dark unwavering stare he sent her way, while the all too familiar flutter of her barely suppressed nerves re-launched and her confidence took another battering.

In the ensuing silence, she quickly tried to sum up the man whom she hoped would employ her.

Cole Charteris commanded a powerful presence; one she recognized could easily thwart the unsuspecting. He wore an aura of success and was definitely one hot male!

Too hot for you to handle.

"Ms Palmer, I believe," he said with sudden, taut drawl. It shivers down her spine, but determined to down fighting, at least.

She smiled back. Two could play this game. "Mr. Charteris, I presume," she countered formally.

There was another faint twitch of amusement on his lips, outlining the dimples in his cheeks.

Her knees buckled. Oh boy! She was a sucker for dimples. Blast the man. Why couldn't he keep up the grouch factor?

"Sit down."

She sat.

This man unsettled her, in more ways than one, but an unbidden picture of her father lying in bed, struggling to speak, strengthened her resolve. She would cope. In fact

she'd do better. She would land this job. Flipping burgers at basic wage for hours was honorable employment, but if she were to get out of this dire financial mess, it would never be enough. There was nothing left to sell. She would provide for her father, whatever it took. Her palms felt sweaty and she took a steadying breath to waylay her rising nervousness.

Tall and broad-shouldered, with muscles not even his Armani suit could hide, Cole Charteris looked like an athlete rather than someone who sat behind an office desk. Hair the color of charcoal and luxuriously wavy,

feathered the rim of his crisp white collar. But it was his chocolate brown eyes, which seemed to camouflage his thoughts and gave him a somewhat devilish appearance that held her captive. They seemed to pierce her soul, and mind.

She blinked. Fantasy. Pure imagination. But she sure did hope not. If Cole Charteris could read her mind right now, it would be scorching hot.

"Right, Ms. Palmer, let's get this straight. This charade of an advertisement was not my idea."

"In that case, I'm sorry for taking up your valuable time." Tara went to stand up.

"Where are you going?"

For a moment in time her eyes shuttered as she tried to drown out his sharp, cutting tone. It reminded her of things she never again wanted to think of. A spike of panic shimmied down her spine and her bag slithered to the floor, spilling its contents over the plush carpet. Tara gasped. Humiliation burned her cheeks. She bent and picked up her meager possessions. A purse with a few coins, a lipstick down to its last dregs. No more, no less.

The telltale sting of tears pricked her eyes, but she refused to give in to them and tried to ignore the powerful male presence beside her.

When a hand covered hers, she halted. Cole's touch burned into her, stirring a deep need within, one she didn't even know existed ... until the second his eyes had caught hers in the lobby.

"Have you got everything?"

She nodded mutely, and snapped her purse closed.

One hand cradled her elbow as he helped her up. "I've upset you."

Tara swallowed. Stand tall, fight on. "Yes, Mr. Charteris, you have. I've given up my time to come here for an interview, which it seems isn't about to happen."

"I'm sorry. Look ... ah ... Ms. Palmer, sit down."

Tara searched his face, remembering the week-old business papers she'd borrowed from the library to read to her father. Everything Cole Charteris touched turned to gold, and according to the woman's magazines he was a veritable Adonis.

Gratefully, Tara sank into the chair and mentally counted to ten, garnering courage. "It's okay, I understand. It's a mistake."

"It was. Maude has been ah ... over enthusiastic," he agreed. "However, my great-aunt has made me realize the benefits of the situation."

"She has?" Hope stirred in Tara. She shifted to the edge of her chair, praying to the heavens for a reprieve.

Cole shrugged. "Though God knows why." He seemingly stalled then, fiddling with a few business papers, his gaze lowered.

Blast it. She wanted to look into those dark eyes of his, see if she could figure out what the heck he was thinking and try and find a way to turn this disaster into a success.



Finally, he ceased his internal musings and leveled a direct gaze on her. "Right now I'm in the middle of a deal. My partner advocates marriage and family values. The trouble is he has a daughter who thinks I'm her future husband."

"And you want to escape the daughter's clutches?"

A deep frown creased his brow, his discomfort apparent. "You could say that. I also want the deal."

Tara couldn't help wonder which one he wanted more. "And you'd do anything for business?"

A hint of a smile tempted the corners of his mouth, before disappearing, replaced by a steely glint in his eyes. "Business is business, Ms. Palmer. Don't forget that."

"Oh, believe me, Mr. Charteris," she said emphasizing his name, "I could never do that." "Good. Now, I need you to act as my ... er ... fiancée for a time. Say a couple of months." Tara's heartbeat did a double flip. Yes! The job was still on.

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Tara Palmer was a beautiful woman, Cole acknowledged as he eyed her with blatant curiosity while she read the contract. The moment she'd walked in the door his gut churned, his body achingly aware of her beauty, and his desire. He had spied her in the lobby and instantly craved to unwind the golden sheath of her hair from the confines of its chignon and let his fingers run through the silken strands. What would she look like with it down around her shoulders?

Naked!

Whoa, Charteris! Business first.

Lost in thought, he eyed her from top to toe.

Elegantly dressed in a suit which he guessed would have cost at least several thousand dollars, along with a matching bag and shoes, he couldn't quite figure out why she wanted a job like this. Unlike his aunt, Tara's jewelry was minimal, but obviously expensive.

Greenstone earrings, the native equivalent to jade, dropped from her ears and a matching brooch was pinned to her jacket. Tara Palmer screamed money—and lots of it. Yet, beneath the surface there was a certain sense of urgent desperation, a despondency she struggled to hide. He wondered why someone so seemingly self-assured and privileged would answer such an audacious advertisement. What could be so critical and imperative to necessitate such action?

Tara was an anomaly—and she intrigued him.

The sound of her cough brought Cole back to the present. He tried to look nonchalant and ignore the persistent ache in his groin. He glanced down at the contract and frowned. One of the most intriguing things about Tara was her address. Although, dressed to the hilt, she lived in the poorest part of the city. It didn't compute. Something wasn't quite right.

He offered her an easy smile. "I've made my decision." He wasn't about to tell her he'd made up his mind the moment Cinderella had walked into his office. He knew she was right for the job.

But you don't want a fiancée.

So? He desired Tara. His body had reacted the instant he saw her and continued to stir. It would be interesting to have her around.

"So what do you say, Tara?" he queried, trying to censor any sign of optimism on his part. He watched for her reaction.

Emotions flickered across her face. "It seems okay," she said a trifle cautiously.

Cole's heartbeat hesitated a fraction. "You're having second thoughts?"

"No. Just a bit confused. One minute the job is off, now on. But, yes," she nodded. "I want the job."

"Good." The deal was done. All business again, he stood. "So we agree you're to move in on Sunday."

"I still don't see why."

"It looks more convincing," he said simply. "It's purely a business deal. You need a job. I need a fiancée. Think of it as a live in position."

"Just as long as you remember the other aspects of our deal."

"Oh, I remember," he countered. "It's all there in black and white," he said pointing to the contract. "I have a housekeeper, you'll be perfectly safe by the way. Now, how about you call me Cole, we're engaged after all." Tara's flush made him smile. He liked this about her. Not many women blushed these days and he found it rather becoming.

She rose and held out her hand. He shook it and for a moment stared into her eyes as he watched them darken to a deep and stormy blue, the kind where you'd stand on a beach, watching the tumultuous waves and the horizon blend as one. Were there as many facets to this woman?

Opening the door for her, Cole followed her towards the lift watching her graceful walk across the carpet. He let his gaze wander up her legs, over her petite derriere which he was sure would fit perfectly in his cupped hands. So mesmerized, he didn't register she'd halted and walked right into her. His hand shot out to steady her as she turned to face him, hands caressing her silky smooth skin.

He felt it instantly. Scorching hot. Teasing. Arousing. It shot through him; a bolt of liquefied lust. He stared down into her eyes; eyes which mirrored her emotions—and his, witnessing surprise and wonderment and definitely one hundred percent desire.

"Did anyone ever tell you your eyes are like the depths of the ocean?" he said, knowing the moment he said it, it sounded like a pathetic pick up line. However, to himself, he admitted they were eyes he could drown in. His hand brushed across her smooth peaches-and-cream complexion and another pink tinge blossomed on her cheeks, but she didn't move.

He slid his index finger down her cheek, heard her soft draw of breath as the tip of his finger came to rest at the corner of her delicious mouth. Her lips parted, her tongue slicking over the nub of his finger. For a minuscule second Cole wondered what it would be like to kiss her.

Then, as his lips brushed hers, he witnessed the flicker of surprise in her eyes. He smiled. Surprise in business was always good.

When she didn't pull away, he wrapped her in his embrace, seeking and savoring the engaging sweetness of her mouth. His brain registered her whimper of pleasure, a sound that thrilled him.

Finally, she pulled away and he too drew back. He witnessed the quick rise and fall of her chest as she struggled to breathe, her enlarged pupils, their color almost a blue-black.

"That, Cole Charteris," she rasped, poking him hard in the chest, "was definitely not part of our deal. You get a pretend fiancée who, to everyone else is the real thing."

He didn't move. He couldn't. His body and his brain were too stunned. Tara Palmer tasted wonderful, her kisses...

"Remember one thing," she said sharply, interrupting his erotic thoughts. "This engagement is fake, make believe."

"Kissing you was real," he countered. "You were just as involved as I was in that kiss, Tara."

A loud hiss escaped her pursed lips a split second before she turned abruptly from him.

Hell and damnation! He'd done the one thing he knew was off limits. He didn't want to scare her off. Right now he needed her.

Yeah, and not only for the Howard deal either. Cole wanted to slam a fist into the wall. Instead, he remained rooted to the spot and watched as she turned to walk away. He reached out and grabbed her arm. "Look, I'm sorry, Tara." He hesitated. "But, you can't deny it was enjoyable."

Heat stained her cheeks and her eyes flashed.

Yep, even angry, she looked sexy, but he decided, now would not be a good time to tell her.

"It may have been enjoyable, but we have a deal, Mr. Charteris. I'll pose as your fiancée. I'll even move into your home so the charade looks 'real', but let's get this straight— the deal says no sex necessary."

Cole struggled to keep a straight face. "You're acting as my fiancée. What about in public? Besides, is a kiss sex?" he challenged.

"I may be your fiancée, Cole, but out of the public eye I'm Tara Palmer and nothing to do with you. In public we'll do what is necessary. This is a job, pure and simple. Got it?"

"Wow, the mouse roars." he chuckled.

"Don't joke with me."

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted, unable to resist a final teasing smile.

The lift arrived and she stepped in. She turned to face him, but said nothing as the doors closed.

"At least she called me, Cole," he said. "Maybe this isn't such a bad idea after all."

Yep, it was to his advantage. All business. No ties. No commitment.

## ***Chapter Two***

The job was hers!

So why wasn't she excited, or at the very least, happy?

As the lift dropped to the ground floor, Tara raised a trembling hand to her mouth. It tingled beneath her touch. She could still feel the warmth of Cole's lips on hers, the ardent yearning his caress stirred. It was disconcerting such a fleeting embrace could catch her so off-guard.

A warning shiver shot up her spine. "Careful does it," she murmured. She couldn't handle someone like Cole Charteris. He was too....

Too much. Too sexy. Too dynamic ... and definitely just too darn good looking.

What on earth had she got herself into?

Okay. So it was a farce and he was too well known to make foolish mistakes.

You could back out.

Tara grimaced. She could, but knew she wouldn't.

The lift hissed as it eased to the ground and she stepped out to the marble and glass foyer. She glanced over to the chairs where she had first felt his presence, almost an unspoken touch.

Tara shook her head. "Get it together Tara," she chastised verbally. Her nerves were shot, every muscle taut and aching with tension. She had to get away and clear her mind.

Outside, the heat rose up in waves from the pavement, burning into her chilled bones. She lifted her face to the sun and closed her eyes for a second, letting the warmth invade, only to be abruptly jostled by a passerby and brought her sharply back to the present ... and her dilemma. It was no use standing about; she had to get herself organized.

Cole Charteris was an unknown commodity, un-charted territory. She wasn't sure she was up to the dynamics of Mr. Charteris.

Too bad. For her father's sake, she had to be. There was no other choice.

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Sunday dawned like a bad omen. Tara peered out the tiny window above her kitchen sink toward the bulging steel gray storm clouds brewing in the west.

Trying to keep cheerful in light of the daunting future, she hauled her cases outside to where her derelict Honda waited. She stowed them in the trunk and went back into the apartment for one final look.

There wasn't much. A rickety table which struggled to stay upright on four uneven legs and two plastic outdoor chairs. But then, she hadn't needed more than two; no one ever came to visit. Her father couldn't, nor the friends she had left behind in Sydney. Those friends had long gone, disappearing into the woodwork at the first inkling of scandal.

And definitely not Daniel.

Nope, no one contacted her any more. Her social life had ground to zip and besides, she'd spent most of her time caring for her father, struggling to make enough money to pay for his care. Life in New Zealand, away from the glaring publicity of the journalistic vultures in Sydney was far easier, although it was also lonely.

She didn't mind lonely. Not really. All she wanted was a magic wand.

Cole's secretary had phoned and given her details of where and when to arrive. Tara grimaced. Talk about keeping it on a professional basis. Though, right now, the less contact she had with him, the better.

Too soon, it would be just her ... and him! Alone!

It's a job, Tara. Remember that!

And she did remember, in fact she'd been using it as a mantra for the last twenty-four hours. Every hour, on the hour as her stupid, stupid brain churned out a constant internal video of memories and sensations ... all about him.

Damn! This was going to be hard. Harder than she expected. Or wanted.

"Just a game. A fake fiancée," she said once more. She only hoped Cole would.

Automatically, her teeth grazed across her bottom lip and a flush crept across her cheeks. She could still feel the tingling temptation his lips enticed, the taste of him, smell the hint of his aftershave. It was sinfully intoxicating.

He was practicing!

"Cole Charteris needs to practice his kissing technique? I don't think so." That one single kiss had set her world off its axis. Damn it.

And she didn't want it to. Didn't want kisses, didn't want touchy feely stuff.

Nope. No way.

She'd done love, done and dusted it. That part of her life was over and definitely out.

When a raucous cacophony of barking from the dog next door interrupted Tara's thoughts she gratefully accepted the disruption. She'd spent too many hours reliving....

"Get on with it." Why was she mooning about the man? It was a job for Pete's sake, she thought shaking her head.

Time to go.

Snatching her handbag from the table, she spun on her heels and strode out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her. Forget feelings. They only get damaged, beyond repair.

She refused to look back.

Settled in her dilapidated Honda, she sucked in a couple of deep breaths. "Okay, so maybe I'm feeling more than a tad nervous." Accepting Cole's invitation to move into his house would enable her to save more, at least it was how she justified her actions as she struggled to grapple with the consequences. It was a job, pure and simple. Besides, there was a housekeeper, a chaperone of sorts.

Just as well it's sharing and not living together!

Whoa! Tara reigned in her thoughts. That was a concept she had no desire to even consider.

Liar!

Thirty minutes of Sunday drivers who didn't care who they held up, left Tara frazzled as she drew up outside Cole's home. Needing a few minutes to calm down, she switched off the engine. The motor silenced and she gazed up the long driveway.

She was impressed, which she acknowledged took a lot. Brought up with the proverbial silver spoon in her mouth, she had been used to mansions, and butlers, along with a silver service lifestyle ... until.

No! No! Don't go there. She slammed the memories down. She wouldn't think of them. Couldn't. It hurt too much.

Oh, definitely not because of the loss of money. That didn't matter. But what the loss had done to those around her. The ones she loved, and one in particular who she had thought loved her.

She stared up the long rose lined driveway towards Cole's home. The standard roses stood to attention as if they were guarding the entrance and led the way to a Porte Cochere overhanging the front entrance.

Tara's stomach twisted and goose bumps dotted her arms. She cursed and pressed a hand down hard on her belly.

Remember, Dad. He needs you. You can't let him down.

She repeated her mantra in silence, praying it would go some way to settle the war of words going on in her brain.

It didn't. Her stomach knotted. She wanted to run. Far away and over the hill! Nevertheless, she restarted the car and drove down the drive, parking beneath the covered entrance. The moment she switched off the engine, the door opened. She swallowed hard as her new boss strode towards

her and she bit down on her rising panic.

"Welcome to my abode," Cole quipped.

"Said the spider to the fly."

One ebony brow rose. "You think I'm a tarantula?"

Tara monitored the teasing glint in his eyes, but remained silent. One wisecrack for the day was enough. Exiting the car, she grabbed her bags.

"Here, let me," Cole took them from her; his closeness firing those wayward senses of her once more. Darn it. His voice was like warm velvet and sent a ripple of excitement through her veins. He oozed sex appeal.

Damn the man.

Steady, girl.

She followed him as he carried her cases inside, her gaze traveling up and down his rear view. Cute butt!

"Tara Palmer," she whispered, "get a hold of yourself." Her reaction to him shocked her. It shouldn't have. She'd been thinking of the man non-stop for the last week. It also made her wonder if perhaps Daniel's abusive denigration of her sexual appeal and appetite could have been wrong.

And you're going to use Cole to find out?

No way! Forget that idea right now. Sweat beaded her brow and she roughly wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. She could do this. She could.

The house was elegant, but homey. The housekeeper guided her to a room upstairs. Blue and white toile papered the walls and a four-poster bed, crowned with a myriad of cushions took center stage. Tara smiled. Pure decadence.

She threw herself onto the bed and wallowed in its spongy comfort. It had been a long time since she'd allowed herself such comforts. A furnished apartment didn't always come with comfortable furniture, she rued, thinking of the lumpy mattress back at the apartment she'd relinquished.

A knock sounded at the door and she jumped up, feeling like a guilty child caught playing when they should be working. She crossed the room and opened it.

Cole stood in the doorway. "Everything okay?"

Like lightening her nerves ricocheted, yet again. She licked her lips and brushed a strand of golden hair away from her face. "It's fine. Thank you." Tongue-tied, her voice sounded stiff and unnatural.

"When you're ready, come downstairs," Cole said, and without preamble he simply turned and left.

Tara answered, though biting down the urge to salute. "Yes boss."

Mid-stride, Cole tossed a scowl in her direction, chocolate brown eyes darkening as they focused on her. For a moment the flicker of something unrecognizable shadowed across his eyes. Then it was gone.

The sharp change of mood in Cole frightened her. The relaxed and friendly banter on her arrival had vanished. Hastily she shut the door. Retreat was the best policy—a lesson she'd learnt from Daniel all too quickly.

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Retreating to his study, Cole paced the room. The room was his sanctuary, the wood lined walls and luxurious leather chairs giving the room an aura of masculinity. Normally, the room soothed his weary brain, but right now it did absolutely nothing whatsoever to assuage the suffocating turmoil plaguing him.

Why the heck did she call him boss?

It's business, remember.

He remembered.

Try harder.

Hands deep in the pockets of his jeans, Cole continued to pace, his mind stuck like a broken record on the blond nymph upstairs. Tara was already under his skin. It was like an itch he needed to scratch and wouldn't go away.

Okay, so he'd become used to the idea of a fake fiancée, thought it would be easy. "Huh! That'll be the day—what a joke." Damn. He didn't like it one little bit that the joke was on him. The moment Tara arrived, any idea it would be easy having her around had disintegrated.

He glanced at the French travel clock above the fireplace, and cursed. "She's only been in the house half an hour." And already he was on edge.

Who was he fooling? It wasn't Tara. It was him. Or at least, if he were honest, it was what she did to him. She made him think things he didn't want to think and made him damned uncomfortable.

"You wanted to see me."

Cole spun round. She stood in the doorway, a look of terror etched across her heart shaped face. Immediately he felt contrite. One part of him wanted to call the whole charade off, the other, if he was truthful, and he wasn't sure he was up to the truth, wanted to wrap her in his arms and kiss her senseless. Over and deliciously over again.

He battled internally and fought to stifle both emotions. Sentiment and involvement didn't last and it would pay him to heed such a critical reminder.

"Come in." He indicated the seat beside the desk and once Tara was seated he eased his tall frame into the leather chair opposite her. He looked straight at her, noticing as she licked her lips for the umpteenth time, moistening her coral lipstick. It shimmered beneath the tip of her tongue and he groaned in silence.

Tara's nerves were beginning to show. Hell, so were his. He took a deep steadying breath and exhaled; unclenching fists he had no recollection of bunching. "If this is going to work, we've got to get a few rules settled," he finally said aiming for a fraction of control.

She inclined her head.

What now?

What rules?

Cole didn't have a clue. How could he have it so together in business meetings but with Tara he fell to pieces on the spot?

"This is a new journey for both of us," he finally said.

She smiled then, and he choked back another groan. Yep, this was going to be really, really hard.

"So what do you have in mind?" she asked.

Oh baby, you don't really want to know.

"How about dinner?" he questioned before he had time to think.

"Sounds easy."

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it?" As her smile lit on him, Cole found himself beginning to relax. Maybe this wasn't going to be too bad.

No designer suit today, exchanged instead for Levis, a tailored white shirt and black ankle boots and, he noted, with a degree of surprising disappointment, she had tied her hair back in a ponytail.

Cole's fingers flexed at his side. What he wanted was to see it cascade around her face, to let loose the golden strands. He jolted from his chair and turned away from her, dragging a hand through his hair. Watch it, Charteris. It was a warning he needed to heed.



He held a hand out to her, waiting and wondering if she would take it. Hoping she would. "Come on, let's go."

An unconcealed curiosity flickered across her heart-shaped face ... the nanosecond seemingly drawn out. He held his breath. Still waiting. Still wondering.

Then she reached for his hand and Cole exhaled, the tension he had doggedly refused to acknowledge melting away. He wrapped his fingers over hers.

It could have been a mistake. Could have. But wasn't. Her touch was warm and comforting, and felt very right. He gave her a tug and pulled her from the chair. She stepped close to him and he inhaled her perfume. "Givenchy?" he queried.

"Chanel," she countered, laughing.

"Figures."

She looked at him questioningly. "Why?"

"Your suit was Chanel."

"A man who knows designer labels. I'm impressed."

"Nice to know you've a good impression of me."

Yep, it was going to be okay. In his brain, however, a familiar voice chimed. Keep it business-like. \*\*\*\*

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"Are you trying to impress me?" Tara asked as they started on their entrees..

Cole looked up from his French onion soup, a spoon halfway to his mouth. "Am I?"

"No," she said flatly. "Wealth doesn't impress me. I don't need it."

"But you need this job?"

She nodded and dropped her gaze.

"Why?"

Her gaze left the sliver of smoked salmon she was toying with to level with his. "You advertised."

"Correction, that was dear Aunt Maude's particular deed."

"Maybe," she said with a tight smile, "but you offered the job, and I'm here."

"That's what I can't figure out. You're a beautiful woman, Tara. You could do other things. Why did you...?"

"Why did I stoop to this level and sell myself," she interrupted, unable to stem the sharp tone in her voice.

"I wasn't under the impression I had, actually. It's a job isn't. Simple as that."

Cole looked at her with those dark velvety mocha eyes and she felt as if she was drowning in their depths. "Some people don't have a lot of options. I could say it's honest employment, but then we both know that's not quite true, don't we?"

"It's not illegal."

"No."

"But your suit must have cost a fortune. It's obvious you've got money."

"No, Cole, I don't have money." Her gaze wandered off into the distance and though Cole remained silent, she felt his intense scrutiny. "Money," she scoffed. "Doesn't bring happiness. I know that better than anyone."

"But you took this job because it offered good money."

"True. Sometimes there's no other way. You offered. I needed. Case closed," she said, trying for nonchalance.

She stared down at her plate, praying the debate would end. She wasn't about to discuss her motives with anyone, least of all Cole Charteris. She had no desire to have the scandalmongers to start up again. Couldn't risk it.

## ***Chapter Three***

Under the dazzling rose quartz droplets hanging from the bedroom chandelier, Tara gazed at her reflection in the silvered Venetian mirror. She could hardly believe the reflected image. Over the few weeks she'd been acting as Cole's fiancée, it seemed as if a miracle had been wrought.

Gone was the constant furrowed brow the incessant ache in her stomach from lack of food, and eternal worry. She spied the crystal beaded evening bag lying on her bed. Tucked inside was the bankbook she never let out of her sight. Her mouth curved up as she thought of the amount she'd managed to accumulate. She turned back to the mirror, catching sight of the gleam in her eyes. It shocked her.

Others might think her mercenary and that money was the cause of the glint, but they wouldn't be more wrong. The cause was her success. She had done the one thing she had set out to do. Help her father.

She had the money to employ one on one care for him now. She smiled. This job had been more than fortuitous and had set things up so that her father's care was certain for at least the next year.

Now, she could leave. Had to. She'd played fake fiancée, but had begun to feel far too much. And feelings only spelt disaster and heartache. She wouldn't go through that again. Tonight, she'd tell Cole goodbye.

Right now, however, she still played the game. She and Cole were off to an art show for an up-and-coming artist.

The elite of Auckland had seemed enthralled with the phenomenon of herself and Cole. Parties and social climbing however was a bore, but as Cole's fiancée, something she put herself through. Sure, it was nice to have a reason to dress up, play lady, and visit the homes of the beautiful people. In reality it meant nothing to her. What was the saying? Been there, done that. She didn't need to do it again.

Instead, she focused on one thing only—her father's needs.

The game was over, which was just as well. So far she'd managed to sidestep the glare of the paparazzi and their constant barrage of cameras. A bag held up, a hand, a wave, dropping her head so that her hair fell in a veil in front of her. All done so that whatever photos they did garner, were in fact muted and didn't show who she was. But how long could she keep it up before someone realized who she really was?

Using her mother's maiden name had helped. No one knew Tara Palmer. Thankfully. And she certainly didn't want anyone snooping around, especially one person in particular.

"You ready?" Cole called, knocking on her door.

The silver backed hairbrush slid from her hand and clattered onto the dressing table knocking her remaining bottle of perfume across the dresser. With suddenly shaking and clammy hands she righted it, wiping up the golden liquid with a tissue. She caught her reflection in the mirror again. Her face was flushed; eyes bright with expectation, while she became increasingly aware of a bubbly excitement taking hold in the pit of her stomach. She bit hard on her lip and told herself to settle down.

Yes. It was definitely time to end this game.

"I'm ready." She grabbed her shawl and bag from the bed as Cole entered. Immediately she felt dwarfed as his towering frame filled the room. Taking her shawl he draped the mohair wrap, which once belonged to her mother, around her shoulders, fingers brushing against her bared shoulders. Tara's breath caught in her throat, and her eyes shuttered for a moment as his touch sent a shiver down her spine.

She didn't dare look at him. Nor did she dare think about how it felt. She didn't dare want his touch. Wanting would be fatal. It always was. Better to leave before touch led to disaster. Safer.

Cole's fingers slid over the soft textured shawl. "It's lovely," he said, his tone muted, silk sliding over velvet. Even though she knew he talked about the shawl, his eyes, however, never remained on her face and Tara felt suddenly tongue-tied, every inch of her aware of this virile man in front of her. Grateful he stepped back, she held herself rigid as she walked past him.

She might be stiff and unyielding on the outside, but her insides were a chaotic ramble of emotions and sensations, each one bombarding her one after the other till she thought she'd slither to the floor in a heap.

Dear God, how could he affect her so? No one else had.

Her heart raced. She needed to escape the confines of her room where he dominated against the backdrop of her bed. It was suffocating. It was....

It was nothing of the sort, and she knew it. It was purely Cole Charteris. His presence intoxicated everything and everyone around him.

And it scared the heck out of her.

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"So what do you think of this masterpiece?" Cole whispered in her ear as they shifted through the crowded gallery.

His warm breath fanned her skin and took her breath away.

Again.

Damn it. He seemed to be always doing that. Just by ... being.

Not good. You need to keep things professional and circumspect. Remember.

Oh she remembered. Tonight it would be ciao baby. That she absolutely had to remember.

She should, however, have been relieved she could escape him, could go on with her life, and live it away from the glare and spotlight of the world that was Cole Charteris'; a world which had once been hers.

Should have.

And she was, but she was about to say goodbye to him, and, damn it, that made her ... sad.

Nevertheless, she could hear clearly the amused tone in Cole's voice as he discussed the art in front of them; seemingly unaware of the folly beleaguering the woman he called his fiancée.

Tara needed to get back to business—for now.

She turned and eyed the canvas. Dark and shadowy, with scarcely a hint of light, the painting had been given the title, 'Second Coming'. "I can see how it gets its name," she commented at the dowdy masterpiece.

"Do you think the artist is ghoulish? Perhaps she has a penchant for everything morbid?"

"Shush," Tara slapped him on the arm. "You could be right, but don't say it too loudly, the woman over there is its creator."

Cole followed the direction of her gaze and stared in mock horror. "Morbid would be apt," he assessed, staring openly at the artist. The woman stood rigid, her back to the congregating audience. "Is she trying to ignore possible buyers? Not something I thought an artist hoping to sell to an adoring public would do."

"Apparently she's anti-social."

"I can see why. Her hair has to be at least five inches tall."

Tara smiled at Cole's description of the punk hairdo. Dyed purple, with two stripes of hospital green on either side, it stood as ramrod straight as its wearer. "I'd hate to think how much she pays for hair spray."

"Cole, darling. What a surprise. Not your idea of a fun-filled evening I would have thought."

Tara turned toward the syrupy voice, aware of Cole's stiffening response. Gliding towards them was a goddess on heels. The woman embraced Cole and kissed him—soundly— leaving a scarlet lipstick stain on his mouth.

"Alicia," he answered, his voice monotone and emotionless.

Alicia Howard? Tara eyed the woman. Stunning. Sleek. Sophisticated. All in one package. Not fair! Cole's nemesis, and her competition.

With bronzed skin and copper-red hair hanging in corkscrew curls down her back the woman was a lioness. Money seemed no problem, Tara surmised as she assessed the woman's head to foot designer outfit. Obviously the day the lioness descended on the stores, the shopkeepers slept soundly that night.

"So who do we have here?" Alicia faced her, but kept a possessive hand on Cole's arm. She eyed Tara up and down with barely concealed disinterest, her smile pasted on obviously for Cole's benefit. Tara looked from the woman and back to Cole, but the dratted man seemed unaware of the undercurrent emanating from the woman who adorned him like an upmarket bimbo.

Deciding take on the she-cat head on, she held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Tara."

The redhead looked down her patrician nose at the outstretched hand. "Ah, the little woman," she purred, turning to Cole. "Cole darling, I had heard, but I couldn't believe it. You, of all people. Engaged."

"Believe it," Cole snorted.

"But darling, we were..."

"Were what, Alicia? All imaginary. Have you spoken to the psychiatrist about your problem?"

The redhead stiffened, lips pressed together in a thin glossed line. Tara listened to the narrowly concealed sparring between Cole and Alicia. Perhaps the effervescent man-eater was used to blatant put-downs, because it definitely seemed to be water off the proverbial duck's back.

"Now, now darling, don't be petty. I suppose if you want mince instead of fillet mignon, it's your choice." And, with a derisive sniff, Alicia Howard turned on her wafer thin heels, giving her copper curls a flick with a scarlet nail-polished finger and sashayed away.

Thank God that was over. Tara exhaled her relief. "Wow, that is some exit, but then, Cole, darling," she said smiling as she mimicked the departed vixen, "that sure was some put down."

Cole simply snorted. "Sometimes, sweetheart," he said playing tit for tat, "it's the only thing Alicia Howard understands. She may look delicate, but that she-cat can eat the wimps of this world for breakfast without a backward glance if it forwards her agenda."

Tara frowned. "Agenda?"

Cole retrieved two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter and passed one to her, downing his own in one gulp. "Yeah. Alicia has only one thing on her mind and that's marriage."

Tara choked on her champagne. "And I'm supposed to protect you from her."

"Alicia is determined. You'll have one heck of a job."

An awkward smile curved the corners of Tyler's mouth. It was a job she intended to relinquish in ... She glanced at her Rolex. Exactly two hours. Then she'd be gone, back to nowheresville.

Hiding, don't you mean? Hiding from life, Tara.

"I thought marriage was the last thing on your mind?"

Cole finished his champagne and placed his glass on the table next to them. He turned to her and stared intently, as if he hadn't seen her before. His nostrils flared, his mouth turned down in a grimace. "It is. Marriage doesn't enter my vocabulary, Tara. Not ever."

"Then why the charade of our engagement?"

"Business, remember," he snapped.

"And business comes first?"

"You've got it." Just then, someone drew his attention from across the room and without another word, he walked away.

How rude!

How like Daniel.

Tara shuddered at the comparison and had to fight an instinctive fear that always threatened any time she thought of her ex. Waves of nausea bombarded and tears welled.

Damn Daniel.

It seemed so long ago, yet, even now he had the ability to frighten her, catch her off-guard. Even in thought.

Tara stared across the room towards the reassuring presence of Cole. He was, she reasoned, different in a million ways from her ex-husband.

Certainly they were both successful, but Cole Charteris rose above everyone, including Daniel. In fact her ex could never match Cole. Not in a million years.

Whoa! Hold that thought. What the heck was she doing, comparing them. And putting Cole on some sort of pedestal ... as if she ... liked him!

No. No. No. That wasn't going to happen. She couldn't. Shouldn't. And she wouldn't, she reiterated! Didn't they say, once bitten, twice shy? Well she'd not just been bitten, but had an enormous chunk taken right out of her.

Nope. Keep safe. Keep distant. That was her motto—for always.

Keep it business first. That she could handle because it was exactly what she wanted. Business—forget the pleasure.

Daniel, on the other hand sought the rewards of success, but not the hard work that went into achieving that success.

Happy to simply watch events around her, and not have to ask awkward questions, Tara found her gaze constantly reverting to Cole across the room. Every now and again, he glanced in her direction, dark, brooding eyes holding hers, offering her a smile, a wink. It sent shivers of pleasure through every skin cell.

He worked the crowded room well, a seasoned networker. She wondered why a man like Cole had such an abhorrence of marriage, and distrust of women. It didn't make sense. He was definitely hunk material, and there was an aura of intense sexual energy about him Tara knew would draw any woman he chose. Certainly a heady mix for any woman.

How different he was when relaxed. Gone were the deep furrows and corded tension ready to pounce as if a lion on the prowl. He was a very handsome man and in fact, handsome seemed an entirely inadequate word to describe him.

Tall, muscled, intelligent, articulate and one hundred and fifty percent sexy summed up Cole Charteris. But as his roll of laughter filtered across the room to her and she witnessed his tension ease, her own increased to uncomfortable proportions.

Escaping the crowded gallery, she entered the powder room. Under the blaze of a crystal chandelier, the gilded room dazzled. Designed to create a Louis XIV aura, awash with gilt, it made Tara wonder if the decorator had a bulk deal on tacky. Despite the over the top decor, she eased herself onto the scarlet chaise and slipped off her shoes, dropping them to the floor. Blood surged to the tips of her toes and she groaned aloud, flexing them. Strains of Debussy filtered through the speaker system and her eyes fluttered closed.

"Can't hack the pace, it seems?"

Tara jolted alert.

Vitriolic forest green eyes stared down at her from a face pinched with irritation. The old adage of meeting your foe eye to eye had never been more valid than right at this moment and Tara struggled to her feet to meet her Alicia Howard.

Shame about the eye-to-eye bit, however, there was no way she could meet this Valkyrie eyeball to eyeball. She glanced down at Alicia's viciously spiked high-heeled shoes. Unshod, Tara was totally disadvantaged, but she resolved not to buckle under fire. She tilted her chin up, ready to take the devil on.

Warrior Tara! Somehow though didn't quite ring true.

The redhead was not a happy camper and Tara pushed her shoulders back, ready for the attack she knew would come. Alicia was a female version of Daniel. Aggressive, vocal and powerful, and also used to always getting her way. The Howard clan history went before them. Some of it not particularly pleasant. Rich beyond belief they were used to the subservience of others, as if it was their right.

"You won't be able to handle, Cole," the redhead stated baldly.

Tara's stomach lurched. Okay, here we go. Bring it on, baby! She vowed to remain calm ... well, sort of. "I beg your pardon."

"Pardon," Alicia mimicked. "How proper you sound. You're not what Cole needs, you know."

"And I suppose you think you know what's right for Cole?"

Alicia didn't answer straight away, her attention caught briefly by her multiplied reflection in the parade of mirrors. She preened visibly, trailing a hand over her flat stomach, smoothing unseen wrinkles from her outfit. She smiled at herself before turning back to Tara. "Of course. Cole and I go along way back. I can give him what he needs," she said, her tone hostile, and boastful.

Tara understood the challenge. It made her more determined, though why she didn't quite understand. "Then why isn't he with you?"

"How territorial of you, but there are a few things you need to remember." Alicia's voice crackled with acerbic laughter, the brittleness setting Tara's already strung out nerves further out on a precipice, as her resolve took a battering. Alicia fought dirty.

Tara's hands began to tremble, so she hastily folded her arms across her middle, trying to imitate disinterest. Inside, a war raged against the woman's vitriol. She wanted to scratch the woman's eyes out, she wanted...

Bitch!

"A man like Cole might think he wants a sweet thing like you beside him, but in bed, he wants excitement, he wants hot, sizzling, pulsating sex." Alicia's lips pursed over the word sex, almost a purring sound of a cat on heat. A thin, red-lipped smile caressed her mouth. "I don't think you, Tara darling, could ever offer Cole that! Do you?"

That! That! Sex. Hot sex. The words ran amok in Tara's brain.

Sex. Hot and exciting sex!

Not from you, baby! Not you. Never you.

She squeezed her eyes closed. Damn him. Damn. Damn. She swallowed back a sob, willing back the tears she knew threatened any second. She would not cry in front of this bloody woman. Never! But it wasn't Cole she cursed. Never him. But another who had destroyed her, chastised her as ... frigid.

Slowly, she opened her eyes only to be rewarded with Alicia's smug, and far too beautiful face as she stared down her supercilious nose at Tara.

"Cute, little girls like you don't do sex, do you?" Alicia advised as if she knew Tara's dark secrets. "Cole wants a woman in his bed who can match his needs. Stroke for stroke. Who can tempt him, tease him ... excite him. Can you?"

Alicia's brutal question slammed into Tara full on. Hard. Unrelenting. Cruel.

True!

Dear God it was true. She didn't want it to be, but it was, unequivocal and total.



There was something wrong with her.

"If you're waiting for a wedding, Tara, sweetie, you'll wait a long time. It won't happen." With that, Alicia elbowed her out of the way and made her sultry exit, while a grateful Tara sank back to the chaise, her breath escaping with a shuddering hiss.

She stared at the swaying door. "It's a good job Cole isn't interested in me then"

Weddings weren't part of their game. Neither was sex. She didn't do sex.

Love? Marriage? None of it was for her. She'd tried love once and look where it got her—Daniel's scathing taunts denouncing her sexual ability, belittling her until her spirit was scarred, emotions in tatters.

Left alone, her past rose up and swamped her with sad memories she had tried so hard to drown. She stifled a sob and bit down hard on her fist. What was the use? She could never compete with the likes of Alicia Howard.

Do you want to?

Did she? Tara shook her head. She didn't know what she wanted. Not really.

Oh, yes you do. You want to be strong. Independent. And most of all, keep out of the limelight.

Five minutes. Ten. It ticked by one, drawn out second after the other allowing Tara time to recharge her shaky spirit. When another woman entered the elaborate powder room, she hastily fixed her makeup and dredged up her courage to return to the gallery, enveloped by the noise and bustle the moment she walked into the expansive room.

This way was better. Employed to act the part—with no complications.

Tara located Cole straight away. It was as if he was a magnet and she the metal drawn naturally to him. Dampening down her still roiling irritation at Alicia's intrusion, she strived to bolster her fledgling courage as she walked over to him.

He turned and offered her a smile and her knees buckled. He shot out a hand and grabbed her elbow. "Too much champagne," he joked, sending another devastating smile in her direction.

Her cheeks burned under his scrutiny.

"What do you think?" he asked, pointing out a vivid canvas in front of him.

Reality dawned as she glanced from the canvas and back to Cole. "You bought it?"

He nodded and mentioned a price.

"It's exorbitant. You're joking, right?"

"Why? Don't you think it's any good?"

She eyed the artwork. "I'm no connoisseur. If you like it, I suppose it's okay. But..." she frowned.

"You don't approve?"

"It's..."

"Just money," he interrupted. "I would have thought you would approve since money is so important to you."

"Why do you bring it down the acquisition of lustrous lucre, Cole?"

"Me?" He leaned toward her and her senses spun, nipples peaking beneath the fabric. "You're the one who wants money, or is the salary I put into your bank account each week a figment of my imagination?"

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The drive home seemed interminable. Cole kept his attention focused on the road and remained silent. Tara glanced sideways at him. There was a firm set to his jaw and his grip on the steering wheel so tight his knuckles had turned white.

What on earth was wrong with him? If anyone should be upset, it should have been her. After the burst Alicia had given her, and Cole's accusations regarding money.

"Sh..," Cole yanked the steering wheel to the left, slamming his foot on the brake. The tires screeched and the car came to a grinding halt, jolting Tara forward with brutal force against the seat belt. He leant forward, hunched over the wheel and peered into the darkness. A puppy scampered past the Jaguar; unmindful it had sidestepped death by millimeters.

Tara rested a hand on Cole's shoulder, immediately aware of the flex of his muscles beneath her fingertips. Touching was a mistake, though she left her hand where it was. "It's okay. The dog's fine."

"Damn the dog."

Tara flinched and pulled back as anxious memories of Daniel's anger returned, erupting out of the darkness and re-igniting her urge to flee. She shifted to the far side of her seat, almost hugging the door. "Take me home, please." Her voice quivered, mouth dry, throat thick and choking with a barely contained black-hearted dread.

For a few brief moments Cole remained unmoving and then without speaking he started the engine, easing Tara's disquiet.

Within minutes they turned into the sanctuary of the floodlit driveway and she sighed with relief.

"Is my company so bad?" he drawled as he brought the car to a halt.

Tara willed herself to speak. "No. It's...." Words refused to form, but she needn't have bothered because Cole didn't wait to listen. With a muttered curse, he wrenched the car door open and jumped out, slamming it in his wake and strode inside.

Not for the first time that evening, Tara sought solitude, needing time to soothe her jittery nerves. She sat silent, willing her pulsating heartbeat to slow and took several deep and calming breaths. She wished she could remain cocooned in the car, wrapped in its luxurious solace, but as the first droplets of rain sprinkled on the windscreen, she forced herself back to reality. It was time to go inside. Time to face her future.

## ***Chapter Four***

"Damn," she muttered, turning the pillow over for the hundredth time.

It was no use.

Sleep, was as elusive as snow in Auckland's sub-tropical climate, an event which happened only once every fifty-odd years. Flipping onto her side, she peered through the French doors, out to a balcony that overlooked the garden and pool.

Pearly incandescent light filtered through the lace curtains and danced across the floor, lighting the room like a fairy's cavern. The moon was full, a sign the tides would rise to their highest and ebb to their very lowest over the next twenty-four hours.

Thoughts of the beach made Tara homesick. It was a long time since she'd walked along the sand, think of nothing in particular. Since her father's stroke life seemed like one continuous high tide; where she was drowning in endless worries about his recuperation, and the money needed to help him. Good rest homes where the physiotherapy was top-rate didn't come cheap.

Realizing sleep wasn't about to happen, Tara tossed aside the bed covers, swung her feet to the floor and headed to the kitchen. Perhaps a hot chocolate would help. An early childhood memory of her mother making the rich chocolate drink, topping it with a soft-centered marshmallow brought a smile to her face.

But that was before.

Before her mother died.

Before she married Daniel.

Before everything went wrong.

It seemed such a long time ago. A lifetime ... almost.

As her footfall padded over the tiled kitchen floor, the sound of the German clock hanging above the sink echoed in the silence. Goose bumps traveled up her arms. She'd forgotten her dressing gown and the thin silk nightdress was no match for a chill that slid across her bare skin. She flicked the light switch and the kitchen lit up.

Crammed with every modern amenity, the room nevertheless managed to achieve a sense of country style amidst a concoction of stainless steel elegance. Working quickly so she could scurry back to bed, she filled the kettle and retrieved the milk. She stepped to the pantry and pulled open the double doors.

"What's going on?" Cole's deep voice boomed out, making her jump, the marshmallows sliding from her fingers to the floor and sending pink and white dots scattering around her feet.

Dressed only in pajama bottoms, Cole leant against the pantry door. One look at him and her body reacted, a tight coil of heat pulsing in her center. "I ..I," she stuttered, unable to find her voice.

"Couldn't sleep?" he prompted.

Flushing under his gaze she snatched the marshmallow packet from the floor and brushed passed him, annoyed her cheeks burned with ever increasing awareness. "Something like that," she replied, refusing to look at him. "I thought a hot chocolate might be easier than counting sheep. Want one?" she offered.

What was she saying? She should be telling him she was leaving. Not offering to play domestic goddess. But somehow the words wouldn't come. When she'd entered the house sometime after Cole had abandoned her in the car, there was no sight of him and presuming he had already gone to bed, there had been no way she had been prepared to follow him, and enter that particular room in the house. Oh, no siree, she wouldn't go into the lion's den.

"Sounds good. Sheep don't really do it for me either," he admitted with a wry grin.

Tara quickly turned from him. Those smiles were way too seductive.

Standing with her back to him, she hurriedly spooned the chocolate into two cups, and poured in the boiling water. "Marshmallow?"

"Why not. Something soft and lusciously sweet just might do the trick."

Tara's body's resistance sagged. Oh, grief. Soft and luscious. His words were all that ... and more and with every passing second they edged beneath her miniscule resistance.

Straining to keep her emotions in check she turned to Cole and held out the steaming cup of hot chocolate. In an instant she knew she'd made a wrong move, something she always seemed to be doing where Cole Charteris was concerned. She looked down at her nightdress. It hid nothing. Her breasts were starkly apparent; nipples peaked against the silky fabric.

The knots in her stomach clenched even tighter as she fought

a battle not to simply turn tail and run.

She stared at Cole. Why didn't he move away?

Please move away.

The silence expanded between them and her breath froze in her throat. Anxious, she gnawed her bottom lip. And waited. And prayed.

Acting as if nothing was wrong, that no raging heat bounced between them, Cole took his cup and Tara's breath escaped in a slivered whoosh as his fingers slid passed hers.

"Sleep seems to have evaded both of us," he said raising the cup to his mouth.

Tara dragged her gaze from his and sipped at the hot liquid, feeling it burn her throat.

"I shouldn't have been so rude. I'm sorry," he said.

She eyed him with suspicion, but felt no joy seeing his discomfort.

"It's not my business why you need money, or what you do with it."

"No, it's not," she agreed.

Now! Say it now!

"Cole ... I..."

"And I shouldn't have taken my temper out on you," he interrupted.

She nodded in agreement, aware of the sense of urgency egging her on. Say it. Say it.

"You're not making this very easy for me, are you?" he quipped, giving her a sheepish grin.

"Why should I? Besides, what made you so grumpy in the first place? Was it seeing Alicia?" she challenged.

Cole laughed, a full-bodied throaty sound that sent a ripple of shivers instantly chasing up and down her spine.

Whoa, Palmer. Hold it together.

"Alicia has marriage ideas. Unfortunately, she won't take the hint."

"So I gather. Perhaps you haven't hinted loud enough."

"Oh believe me, I've tried. The woman is only interested in money—and marriage, and not necessarily in that order."

"Which is something Mr. Charteris you seem to believe of all women," Tara accused, surprised at the vehemence she heard in her voice.

"Is that what you think?"

Her shoulders sagged. Did she? She'd said the words, but in truth she didn't know really what she thought any more. One minute her escape was on the tip of her tongue, the next gone, and her relief that it had vanished, overwhelming.

But you know what you feel. Go on, admit it.

Stay? Or go?

"It all comes down to money doesn't it? The haves and the have nots. Though the haves don't really realize what they have." Until it's too late, she thought sadly. The threat of memories spiked at her sub-conscious, the anger and frustration, tangling with unending hurt and sadness forcing the words from her lips. "Then there are those that want. Who will do anything to get it, not caring whom they hurt in the process," she said, her voice low and thick with sarcasm.

"You Mr. Charteris, seem to lump all women in the same category. Talk about a one-track mind."

Cole suddenly chuckled, the tension evaporating from his hardened jaw and his stance relaxed. His amused tone catapulted Tara from the past and tossed her instantly into a world of uneasy thoughts and emotions.

"Sweetheart, there's more than one thing on my mind."

Tara regarded him for a puzzled second. A sixth sense warned her she should walk away while she could.

Come on, Tara, make up your mind.

She didn't move. Instead, it was as if a powerful force pulled her towards him, one she couldn't resist, taken over by someone other than herself, by Cole, despite her wishes.

Or was that because of them?

But who was she trying to fool? She wanted Cole to hold her, and kiss her. The seconds on the old clock ticked loud and clear and with each one, the reality of her admission sank in. Alarm bells rang in her head. She wanted to ignore them all.

Are you brave enough?

Was she? Tara let her gaze roam across Cole's broad and very bare chest. The wiry coils of black hair sprinkled over the finely tuned muscles, the rise and fall of his breathing. Fast. Faster. Hotter. Her gaze darted up to his face, but his expression seemed unreadable. Nervously, she licked her lips, as she took in the length of his flat torso to the waistband of his pajamas, slung low on his hips.

Oh hell. This couldn't be happening.

Why not? You're a woman and he's a man.

Should she? She wanted to. But fear is an insidious thing, cutting to the core.

No man wants a dead fish in bed.

Daniel's taunt. It echoed in her brain. Loud and clear. Accusing. She shrank back, shutting out all hope, all desire. She couldn't trust herself. Not again. Trust equaled hurt.

"Tara?" Cole's husky tone dragged her reluctant attention and she lifted her gaze to focus on his face, centering on the soft curve of his beautiful mouth. She could scarcely breathe, or move, and her knees began to buckle. She clasped the kitchen bench to steady herself.

Cole sipped at his hot chocolate, the melted marshmallow lining his upper lip. Tara giggled, filled with an irresistible urge to lick it off. Instinctively, she traced a path over her own tingling top lip with the tip of her tongue, aware as Cole followed her every move.

Dear Lord, what was happening to her? She wanted to touch him, to let her hand slide over his slick bronzed skin, to feel the texture. She wanted....

She shook her head, but it was too late and before she could utter a single word, his mouth hungrily covered hers.

Kisses.

Lots of them. Each one a beguiling, search of her mouth, her senses, the tip of his tongue probing the corners of her mouth, stroking the sensitive inner softness. A soft mewling sigh echoed around her. Her sound?

She wound her arms round his neck, fingers threading through his wavy hair. She didn't want to let go. Excitement flared, escalating as he deepened the kiss, playing havoc with her senses, firing every ounce of need that grew deep down inside her. She leaned into him and felt his hardness and recognized the depth of her own raw aching want. Knowing it was mutual made her smile secretly.

It didn't last. In the corner of her mind she heard a sound. It echoed, over and over and pulled her reluctantly back to reality. The clock struck midnight.

Tara gasped and pulled away. Cinderella's ball was over.

Her mouth burned from Cole's kisses, her breathing a rapid rat-a-tat. "We can't," she whispered, unable to look Cole in the eye and wrapped her arms across her chest in some ill-conceived act of defense. "It's not in our contract."

Cole turned from her slightly and leaned against the pantry door. Tara watched him. The muscles across his back flexed as he dragged in a lungful of air, his fingers flexing and unflexing at his sides. He spun back to face her, the raw stain of heat coloring despite his tan.

"Damn the contract, Tara. Don't deny what you felt."

He sounded desperate, disconcerted, but she wanted to shut it out, discount that same desperation she too felt. She squeezed her eyes closed. Just for a moment. A moment to sort out the emotions spinning inside her brain ... and her body; emotions she was too scared to really admit to.

Scared because....

Her eyes flicked open and she tilted her chin defiantly, aware of what Cole would see—her well-kissed lips, swollen and still sweetly tender, her nipples thrusting beneath the silken sheath. "You're my boss, Cole Charteris. You said no sex necessary," she reminded him.

Cole cursed and dragged a hand through his disheveled hair. "You want to deny this?"

Deny it? Deny the taste of him still on her lips, the feel of his hard body against hers.

Yes. She would.

"I have to," she said with a conviction she desperately wanted to believe. She'd already had one relationship where business became more important than she was. She would not make the same mistake twice. Would never become the punch bag of love versus money. It would be fatal and she had lived through fatal before—just.

Cole took a step towards her, but Tara held up a restraining hand. "Don't come any closer." She knew if she let him hold her again, it would destroy any last vestige of willpower and bring it all crashing down around her. She had to deny herself. If Cole found out, knew what a failure she was. "It's better this way."

It was only a kiss.

Only!

There was nothing only about Cole's kisses. And that was exactly why she had to deny it! Deny him. And deny herself.

"If you don't honor our contract, Cole Charteris," she warned, wagging a finger at him, as she tried to steady her shaky voice, "I'll walk out on our deal."

What a joke. She had already been about to walk.

Tara, however, refused to listen to her chastising conscience.

So okay, you're staying. But you try denying Cole's kisses, Palmer!

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Cole fumed.

If Tara thought he would plead and beg her to change her mind, she was mistaken. "If that's the way you want to play it," he snapped. "I have never begged for a woman's attention, and I won't start. The contract stands, Ms. Palmer. I'll keep my hands to myself. You don't have to worry about your virtue in my presence."

Even to his own ears, he sounded like a little boy scorned, but her rejection rankled. He couldn't deny his attraction. Their kiss sizzled, the air between them scorching, the rampant desire spreading through his body and igniting everything.

He glanced towards her. She'd taken refuge by the window. He didn't like this scenario one little bit, but if she wanted to play the virtuous queen, then he'd play it her way.

Oh, yeah, right. How many cold showers, Cole?

An agonized groan slipped from Cole and Tara turned to him.

A mixture of sweet innocence and sexy siren, at this very minute he wanted to tear the silken concoction from her delicious body and make love to her right here in the kitchen. His gaze trailed down the smooth outline of her sexy come hither shape. He felt himself harden even more. He was ready to explode.

His hands itched to trace her lace-clad breasts, to cup her derriere and lick her sweet skin.

Dear God, he was in sexual hell!

For a long, drawn out second, Tara simply stood and stared up at him, unaware her moistened lips had parted, baiting him to kiss their sensual softness once more. It took all Cole's willpower to prevent himself from pulling her into his arms and kissing her senseless. He gritted his teeth, jaw tightening as his control tested him to the nth degree and he resisted the fervent urge to surrender to such unbridled passion.

Cole knew she was his; it would take no more than a kiss. He'd felt her tremble in his arms, heard her soft whimpers of pleasure as he held her. But what use was it to persuade her, knowing her mind wanted to resist?

Damn it. Why choose now to be chivalrous, Charteris?

But there was no way he wanted an unwilling bed partner. If he made love to Tara, it would be mutual, he resolved.

He would not beg.

Ever.



## ***Chapter Five***

It had been a hell of a day and the blistering heat hadn't helped Cole's temperament. He sank into the comfort of his Jaguar and offered up a silent prayer, thankful for the modern convenience of air conditioning as he flicked it on. An icy blast hit him in the face and his eyes shuttered for a moment as he enjoyed the cool draft.

Today, from the second he arrived at the office, everything had gone wrong. Not only had his company been required to function for several hours during a power outage testing the backup power source, but also he'd had to deal with Paul Howard trying to slow the deal.

Cole chaffed at the bit. He wanted to get things going. The livelihoods of hundreds of workers depended on this deal; depended on him and he took his responsibilities seriously. Buying up and stripping business just to make a fast buck wasn't his idea of business. He liked to see growth and development. Prosperity, not just for himself, but all concerned.

As he eased the vehicle into the evening traffic, the stress of the day slipped away. He was grateful there was nothing to take him away from home tonight. No socializing; having to put on the front people seemed to expect from the man, the country crowned the Midas Man.

He frowned into the passing traffic, remembering the dreadful article that bestowed such a moniker. It was a title he hated and had never sought, nor wanted, but the publicity hadn't hurt and gave his company a higher profile, bringing investors out of the woodwork. He'd put up with some discomfort if it furthered his aims.

Heading toward home, Cole punched the button on the CD player and the whimsical symphony of flute music echoed around him, soothing his frazzled disposition. The sweetness and light of the melody reminded him of Tara. Cool, calm and collected.

Until you kissed her.

Cole's lips twitched into a tight smile. Then neither of them were in any way calm.

The fragrance she'd worn the previous evening permeated every inch of the car, and his brain and he gripped the steering wheel with knuckle-white intensity as his body lurched with barely controllable desire. He'd tried hard not to touch Tara, despite the overwhelming need roaring through his veins every time he saw her.

Oh yeah, he wanted to touch her—every part of her. A lot! But the promise in the contract had come back to haunt him. It had been two weeks since they'd kissed in the kitchen and it had been absolute hell—but he admitted, with some smugness, he'd kept his promise. He always kept his word, though he was ready to admit it hadn't made life easy. What was wrong with him that he had to lust after what he couldn't have?

In bumper-to-bumper traffic he drove over the Auckland Harbor Bridge—nicknamed the Coat Hanger, which was certainly apt as the bridge that linked the northern isthmus to the city looked very similar to a wire coat hanger. He glanced between the bridge's railings and down to the waves below. White tips frothed as they lapped in the onshore breeze, gulls soaring skyward, dipping beneath the bridge's span.

In years past, the northern suburbs had been a holiday spot for city residents, but the addition of the bridge in the late 50s had changed all that and today the winding volcanic bays on the city's northern shores housed an eclectic mix of homes.

Taking the off ramp towards Takapuna, Cole spied the Victorian bungalows, all in pastel colors and many, because they had been built by immigrants from the Northern Hemisphere, faced the wrong direction for the sun.

He turned the car toward the beachfront, driving past the outdoor cafes and bistros, which were already filling up. Finally he drove into his street. It was such a quiet avenue, lined on both sides with poplars and a colorful myriad of geraniums that tangled their way up the telephone poles.

As he parked in his driveway, a broad smile lit Cole's face. He was pleased to be home.

Home meant Tara.

"Honey, I'm home," he called out as he walked into the kitchen.

Tara spun round, eyes wide as saucers, face instantly bleached of color. The knife in her hand stabbed at the air between them.

"Whoa." Cole held his hands up in surrender. "You okay? You've gone very pale." He stepped toward her, but she retreated against the kitchen bench. The knife tumbled to the ground and his gaze flickered to her shaking fingers. She followed suit and quickly shoved her hands into the pocket of her apron. She looked left and right, like a caged animal seeking escape.

Confused as to what was going on here, Cole took a step back to give her some space and loosened his tie and unbuttoning the top two buttons of his shirt. "What's going on?"

Tara didn't answer straight away, and still shaking she retrieved the knife.

More than ever, Cole realized, what an anomaly she was. Sophisticated and elegant one moment, then at times, like now, she retreated into her shell, a child hiding, desperate for protection. But the question that needed answering was protection from what, or whom?

"You just ... surprised me, that's all," she offered.

Cole knew it was more than that. Who stabs at someone, just because they walk into a kitchen? He wasn't about to play the psychobabble game with her however. Grabbing a beer from the fridge, he tugged at the tab and lifted the can to his lips and swallowed greedily, glad of the refreshing chill after the sweltering heat. He glanced over his shoulder at Tara.

Head down, she silently concentrated on the lettuce in front of her. He went to speak, and then slammed his lips together. Whatever was going on with Tara, he didn't want to get involved. He didn't need someone else's problems.

And not Tara's because she had reminded him in no uncertain terms theirs was a business arrangement.

Keep it strictly business!

Hard to do when his body screamed every time he was close to her. But business it was. He hadn't clawed his way to the top of the game, to fall at a woman's feet. Taking his can with him, Cole strode up the stairs two at

made for his bedroom. Business versus lust. Cole wasn't sure which would win. "Shit." His curse accompanied the slamming of his

bedroom door.

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Showered and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, he couldn't shake off the vision of a terrified Tara when he first arrived home. It brought out the most innate of human responses in him. To protect her. To hold her. Care for her. Never before had he experienced such an overwhelming response. What seemed natural in others, felt alien and the intensity of these new feelings scared the hell out of him.

Outside the kitchen his stomach grumbled as the aroma wafting from the other side of the door assailed him. About to enter, he hesitated, hearing Tara's movements inside. He didn't want to scare her again, but hell, this was his home too. He coughed loudly and pushed the connecting swing door and entered the kitchen.

She looked up and smiled at him.

Cole's jaw dropped. Where was the scared kitten?

"Ready?" she asked. She held a large bowl of salad in her hands.

Cole looked from the salad and back up to her soft peaches and cream complexion. Her violet eyes shone brightly, showing no fear. He grinned and his mood lightened. "I'm starved. I know I said Mrs. Bates would be here, but I wasn't to know her brother would have a heart attack," he said, by way of a feeble excuse.

Tara shrugged as she sat down at the small kitchen table. "It's okay. I like to cook."

He chose a bottle of wine from the rack and deftly opened it and poured them both a glass of chardonnay. Saluting her with his glass, he took a sip and looked over the crystal edge at her. Playing hostess, she dished up the salad and succulent strips of char-grilled beef. A tentative smile tilted the corners of her sweet, kissable mouth and she looked up at him questioningly, head tipped slightly to the side, a pink blush coloring her cheeks. "What?"

"Nothing. Just relishing the thought of a good meal. I'm glad you like to cook, though must admit," he said truthfully, "I just hoped you wouldn't offer me tofu or something imitation."

"You mean you're a real meat kinda guy?"

"Yeah," he grinned, and another blush tinged her cheeks.

That was another incongruity about Tara Palmer. Blushes, he would have thought were for teenagers and naive schoolgirls. Tara was twenty-five and divorced, although she'd never mentioned her ex, once. Blushes didn't seem to go in hand with divorcees. But, heck, what did he know?

You thought you knew women!

Maybe not, he admitted quietly.

He took another sip of wine, savoring its rich texture as he sat down opposite her. He was puzzled and it bugged the heck out of him. One minute he thought she was the perfect hostess, the epitome of elegance and sophistication, the next she's...?

Hell, what was getting into him? He sounded fanciful. This wasn't him. This was someone else talking. Frustrated with the way his thoughts were progressing, Cole chose instead to ignore them and picked up his fork and stabbed at the steak.

"Do you like it?" she asked tentatively.

"Yeah, great. I could eat a horse right now."

"Didn't you have lunch?"

"Na, forgot." He carried on, slicing a morsel of the steak and began chewing, relishing the taste.

"You shouldn't forget to eat, how can you manage to do a day's work and not refill the engine," she said reprovingly, reminding Cole of his.... He slammed that thought right down and his knife clattered to the plate. He looked directly into her eyes. "You sound like a nagging wife," he snapped, cursing the moment the caustic words slipped passed his lips and he witnessed Tara pale visibly.

Her hands fell to the table. They began to shake. Again.

Oh, hell. "Look, forget it," Cole said trying to lighten his tone, realizing he still sounded like some man from mountain. "I'm not used to people fussing over me."

"Forget it?" Tara whispered. "I wish I could." The words were directed at him, but she couldn't have been further away from him if she tried. She stared into the distance behind his shoulder, seemingly seeing nothing. Cole wished he could bite back his words. "Look at me, Tara."

Her eyes remained cloudy, a hint of pain and sadness washing across their darkened depths.

"Please." He reached a hand out to her, lifting her hand in his. Her fingers were icy to the touch, stiff and unyielding, but slowly, like a shadowy veil, her lashes lifted, violet eyes moistened with unshed tears. Knowing he was the cause of those tears, he felt ashamed. "Oh hell Tara, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you." He dropped her hand and shoved his chair back and stood up, dragging a hand through still damp curls. He felt defeated, unsure what to say, or do. It was such an unfamiliar sensation, it scared him.

Where was his renowned control?

Gone, buster! You're out of your depth. One tear and you're history.

Reaching for his glass he took a gulp and swallowed its contents. Tara simply stared up at him, her mouth slightly parted, lips tainted by wine glistened with enticement. It was an inviting picture and his groin swelled.

So much for containing his urges where Tara Palmer was concerned he concluded.

Try the other way around. The urges and Tara were controlling him.

"Look, I'm not good at this marriage thing," he offered.

"We're not married," she countered.

Cole's resistance slipped another notch. "Yeah, well you know what I mean. Families and the husband thing isn't my cup of tea. I'll never marry."

"So I believe. They say it takes practice."

Her clipped tone surprised him.

"Practice. Huh! I don't think so." Cole placed his glass on the table with controlled precision. "It's the way it is. Will always be," he shrugged and with a curt nod, strode out of the room, leaving the swing door banging, uncaring if it scared the devil himself.

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Cole took refuge in his office, but for once the piles of paperwork he'd brought home remained untouched. He couldn't concentrate, couldn't make head or tail of the columns of figures before him. He was obsessed, but not with percentages or deadlines, or the many projects he had on the go. Tara blotted it all out. Tara with her parted lips and soft breathless sighs.

He should apologize to her, but hell, no one was going to force him into anything, least of all marriage.

Who said anything about marriage? It's your game, remember.

Cole felt as if his back was up against the wall, but unsure who actually forced him there. The thought that it could be of his making wasn't pleasant. Nothing made sense tonight. He didn't make sense; his thoughts, the constant need and sense of urgency slamming through his body with a relentlessness that frustrated the hell out of him. Nope. None it made bloody sense.

Slumped back in his leather chair, his eyes drifted closed, blanking out the world. At least he tried to. Blond hair and violet eyes slipped beneath his eyelids.

A temptation that teased relentlessly.

It was no use. He'd have to call off the fake engagement. Too bad if Howard pulled out of the deal. He couldn't handle it any more. All he could think of was Tara. Skin to skin. Her lips on his.

You want to get rid of Tara?

Hell no.

His eyes shot open, shocked by his immediate answer. Was he sure? And, more to the point, why was he so sure?

Cole's mind whirled. Visions of Tara in her nightdress, the outline of her body beneath the see-through fabric, her gentle smile when she didn't know he watched her. The way she flicked a tangle of curls away, twining one in a corkscrew around her finger.

No! No way did he want to get rid of Tara. In fact, he had to admit, he liked having her in his life. Coming home, knowing she was here, waiting for him, made it all worthwhile.

Tension pulsed in his shoulders and neck and he felt the mother of all headaches coming on, but there was no way he could purge the vision of Tara out of his mind, or eradicate the delicate sensation of her touch against him.

The sight of a black and white photo poking out from behind some legal books on the bookcase caught his attention. His parents.

Cole snorted. As if they deserved such a title. He may be their progeny, but were they his parents? No way. Maude had filled those shoes, while his parents flitted out of his life as if they had no cares. And in truth, they didn't. Not one, and certainly not him.

With reluctant dread, he dragged himself out of the chair and walked over to the cabinet and picked up the photo. The ever-youthful faces of his parents stared back.

His mother had been a beauty. Her dark hair and eyes were her gift to him. Cole's gaze traveled to his father and he grunted with derision. In the photo, his father stood beside his mother. It was the closest they'd been together in years! Their love of a good time and seeking the next thrill had taken them to opposite ends of the earth.

What had they given him?

Nothing!

There was no way he would mimic their disaster, recreate the catastrophe they inflicted on his childhood. "Never," Cole spat. Marriage is for idiots and if nothing else, he was no fool.

"Damn them." With a harsh exhalation, Cole slammed the photo down. The crack of shattered glass broke the silence.

Staring at nothing, though every inch of his past snagged at his memories and tightened their claustrophobic hold on him, Cole lost track of time.

Finally as seconds became minutes and the numbness wore off replaced by a stark pain of rejection, the hurt and confusion of childhood, he bent down and picked up the broken glass, not really seeing them until a jagged slither sliced through his finger, sending a searing pain across his fingers. He swore loudly and watched the blood ooze between his fingers, dripping onto the floor. Struggling one handed, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped the cut and tried to gather the remaining bits of glass.

A tentative tap on the office door pulled him back to the present. The door opened and Tara peeked in.

"I heard you call..." She caught sight of his bandaged hand and hurried over, lifting his hand in hers. "Are you all right?"

"Just a cut." He shrugged. Despite anger hovering beneath the surface at his stupidity, not for cutting himself but at remembering what he had long tried to forget, and at his parents, and their disinterest in the boy he had been, the base note of sandalwood in Tara's Chanel perfume enveloped him the moment she stepped closer. It intoxicated his senses, eradicating everything else.

With a sensitive touch, she unwound the bloodied handkerchief, screwing her nose in distaste at the now soaked makeshift bandage. She leaned forward and surveyed the damage. Her warm breath fanned his fingers and he swallowed hard. This wasn't getting any easier. The ache in his nether regions intensified and the sense of anticipation was almost unbearable. He forgot his pain.

And he thought he could keep the urge levels below boiling point!

His gaze lazily roamed down the creamy curve of Tara's neck, to the 'V' of her shirt that gaped slightly, giving him a view of the swell of her breasts beneath the pure white lacy bra. Cole gritted his teeth, struggling to dampen his heated interest. Just looking at her stoked an already out of control fire. He ached to touch her.

You made a promise not to touch.

Yeah. Yeah. More fool him.

"It doesn't look too serious. What on earth were you doing?" she asked, not taking her eyes off his wound.

"Just like a wife," he bantered, least he make a fool of himself and begin to drool.

Tara stiffened, blinking several times, before she looked up hesitatingly at him.

It set Cole's internal alarm bells ringing. "It's okay," he reassured quickly. "Only joking." He couldn't help but wonder what set Tara off so easily? Again. Had she hated marriage so much?

A pink tinge flushed her cheeks and nervously her tongue glided over parted lips. She said nothing and Cole was no more educated as to what went on inside her head. His gaze rested on her soft kissable lips and he offered up a groan in painful silence as his control slipped once more. This time though instinct took over and he lowered his head and his lips sought hers.

Gentle at first. Lip to lip, soft and enticing. Seeking, persuading until she relaxed.

It felt so good. It felt just right. Pure fantasy. His fantasy.

Beyond anything else, Cole couldn't think, only feel. His tongue sought entrance to her mouth and as its tip touched hers, it was as if an explosion went off in his body. He deepened their kiss and crushed her to him, her breasts rubbing against his chest, sending shock waves through him. This was good. This was hot!

Cole wanted her. A lot!

"We keep doing this," she whispered.

"Mm, nice isn't it? Think of it as practice." He let his lips do the talking and sought the tender curve of her neck, kissing a trail down to the hollow at the base of her throat as her head arched back. His fingers found her sensitized buds and he rolled a nipple between two fingers while his other hand cupped the nape of her neck, tangling in the mass of her silky hair. He wished he could feel her skin. He wanted to rip the clothes from her body.

Cole was in heaven.

"Practice makes perfect," he murmured.

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Tara stilled and became rigid.

Perfect!

The word rang in her head, over and over, chastising, abrading, accusing. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts, feeling Cole's fingers still on her overheated body,

despite the ice chilling every inch of her veins.

She struggled to untangle herself from his embrace.

That one word soured everything. Ruined his kiss and sent her hurtling back to a previous life, a life of mental torture where Daniel constantly castigated her inadequacies. A life she desperately wanted to forget but couldn't.

With it came fear, laced with a burgeoning apprehension that swamped her. She gulped in draughts of air and tried to strangle the rising tide of nausea threatening to overtake any moment. Her mind reeled with confusion. And memories. Painful. Brutal. Soul destroying.

She had to regain control. Had to.

Confusion stormed her brain, her senses, but somehow, from the depths of the crushing tormenting memories, she found courage from within.

She faced Cole.

Cold, proud eyes returned her gaze. Blinking momentarily, she wished it all away. Him. Her. Their contract. She'd been a fool to think she could do this.

To kiss.

Every time she thought she could ... move ahead, forget the past, forget the belittling words that scarred her brain, and esteem, the past and ... him ... reared its scornful head. Hope died.

Hands now at his sides, Cole stared at her. His breathing was shallow, but the hint of desire still remained in his darkened gaze. It burned into her from just two steps away. Burned and shamed.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice a mere shadow of sound.

"Sorry?" He spun away, then right back again. "And here I was thinking you were enjoying my attention. Or are you going to deny it again, Tara? Do you enjoy teasing? Is that it?"

"I..." she stuttered, stumbling for the right words, any words. "The deal, remember? You broke it," she said defensively, steadying her suddenly shaking hands on her hips.

"Why are you bringing up that bloody contract again? You didn't seem to mind kissing me."

"Cheap shot, Cole. It was you who kissed me. You broke the rules."

"Bloody rules. Okay. You want to keep your little contract intact; I'll make sure it never happens again. There won't be any more practice, Tara. Bet on it."

Anger churned in her gut. Anger at him. Anger at herself. "It was you who instigated the contract in the first place," she countered, though she didn't mention she'd demanded the 'no sex clause'.

"Don't remind me." And without a backward glance, Cole exited the room.

Silence. Total. Sad. For a few moments, Tara did nothing. She didn't breathe, or move. She only thought. Sad thoughts. Lonely thoughts.

So that was that. No kisses. No touching.

Just as you wanted it, Tara Palmer

About to leave the office, her foot scraped on something. She bent to retrieve it. Two scraps of a black and white photograph were stuck together. Flicking on the brass desk lamp, she held the pieces close to the light and studied them. It was of a woman and man. The woman was the image of Cole. Or was it Cole who was in her image?

"His mother?"

She ran the tip of her finger over the crumpled and torn pieces, tracing the features that were Cole's. It was obviously taken some time ago. Was Cole's distaste for the people in the photograph the reason he wouldn't play happy family? Never once during their conversations had he mentioned his parents. Where were these people? Why weren't they in his life? And, more importantly, Tara thought, as she laid the remaining scraps of the photograph on the desk, why had the picture been destroyed?



## ***Chapter Six***

"Go, you stupid hunk of metal," Tara cursed and pumped the gas pedal once more. She edged forward on the car seat, clutching the steering wheel and prayed as she tried again, flicking the ignition. It remained dead. Annoyed, she kicked the door open and got out, moving around to the front of the car. She yanked open the hood and stared blankly at the mass of wires and tubes.

"Need any help."

Glancing over her shoulder, Cole walked toward her. She took in his powerful physique. He was taut and controlled, like a lion on the prowl. She wasn't sure she'd want to be the hunted. "Not unless you've got a degree in car maintenance," she quipped wiping her suddenly damp hands down the sides of her jeans.

Bending over the he checked the engine. "Have you checked the gas?"

She laughed. "Sure, I can at least do that. I may be blond, but there's more than one brain cell in here," she said, tapping her head.

"Oh, I've no doubt, Palmer," he acceded.

Palmer? A wave of guilt swirled in the pit of Tara's belly. She'd been dishonest about that one little fact.

Purely self-protection, remember.

She pointed towards the engine. "There's plenty, plus water and oil, but this lot means absolutely nothing. My comprehension of the combustion engine consists of checking the oil and the water and filling the stupid thing with gas."

"That statement sort of deflates the blond and brain cell theory."

"Yeah well, can you see yourself doing nails and knowing everything about every designer this side of ... well everywhere?" she challenged.

"Do you?"

She nodded. "It might not be much, but I've a good head for facts and figures, and fashion interested me as a kid, so I learnt all about the designers."

"Ever considered teaching?"

Oh yes, she had, but love had stuck its nose in, and ended every dream she'd ever had.

For a few minutes Cole silently checked the mechanics, then he straightened. He gave her a lopsided grin.

"Sorry, looks like a garage job."

"It can't be. I need to get somewhere." Tara glanced at her watch. She didn't have much time. How far was the bus stop?

Cole eyed her with speculation. "Got a date?" he drawled.

She heard distinct disapproval in his voice and bristled. "None of your business."

"If you're engaged to me it is."

"Our engagement is purely imaginary, remember, Cole, darling."

"Not according to the real world," he shot back. His jaw tensed and he seemed to be struggling for control. It set Tara's nerves on edge and she stepped away.

"Look, it's not a date, it's..." Her voice trailed off as she prevaricated. Did she want to tell him where she was going? She shrugged, offering the best noncommittal excuse she could. "There's no man lurking in the wings ready to take your place."

The fact that Cole visibly relaxed only served to stoke her confusion even more. "Why are you bothered? I'm nothing to you except a temporary fiancée."

A flicker of annoyance crossed Cole's eyes, but within the blink of an eye, it was gone. "If you wait a couple of minutes, I'll grab my keys and drop you wherever you want to go," he offered.

"No!"

Cole stalled mid-stride and turned slowly. His gaze leveled on her. "You said there's no Lothario waiting in the backdrops, so where's the harm?" he shrugged. "Surely a friend can drop another friend off?"

"Are we?"

Seconds ticked by and his intense and darkly brooding gaze held hers prisoner. A tingling coiled in the pit of her stomach and her heart skipped an erratic dance in her chest. She waited for his answer.

He lifted a hand to stroke the side of her face. "I hope we are."

Held captive by his touch, Tara found herself leaning into his caress. It wrapped her in its invisible warmth, but as a dog barked in the distance it brought her crashing back to the present and she jerked backwards.

Flustered by her reaction, she fumbled with her handbag, not wanting Cole to see how much he set her on fire. She turned away. "I'll wait."

Waiting was good she reasoned. It gave her time to gain some semblance of normality. Her nerves were on edge, but that wasn't the worst of it. Her body ached for more of the same. More of Cole touching her who was something she shouldn't let happen.

No way.

Drawing on her will power she vainly tried to steel herself against the warring emotions inside her head, and her body. If she gave in she would disappoint him and that would be her worst nightmare—to have him touch her and to disappoint, as she would—eventually.

She always had.

Daniel warned her many times; till it was instilled so deep in her it seemed second nature. To this day she heeded his warning. His disappointment had been so real, so threatening. It had destroyed her. So it was best she didn't succumb to the sensual Mr. Charteris.

Better for whom?

But Tara didn't have time to ponder that particular question as Cole returned with his car keys in hand and in minutes she was sitting beside him in his sleek Jaguar. The car purred. Her insides purred and she definitely couldn't relax.

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"This exit," she said pointing to the off ramp coming up before them twenty minutes later.

Cole veered to the left, and they exited the motorway, Tara directing him through the suburbs.

"Stop here."

He did as he was told, but she didn't miss his surprised expression. Was it any wonder? The neighborhood wasn't particularly salubrious and alarm bells were sure to be ringing.

Tumbledown houses squashed side-by-side, broken fences; front yards strewn with rubbish and car wrecks gave the area a seedy and decaying air. Tara squeezed her eyes closed, trying to blot out the depression the squalid scene roused in her every time she came to visit.

"Are you sure this is it?" Cole's caution tainted his question.

"It's close enough," Tara responded matter-of-factly fumbling with the door handle. She had to escape before he started asking unanswerable questions.

She scrambled out of the car. "Thanks, don't wait, I'll get a taxi home." She slammed the door closed, not waiting for his answer, knowing he would try and argue.

But this was her world, a world she didn't want to share with Cole. Turning her back on him, she walked away, shoulders stiff, head held high as she strained to remain proud amidst the debris that had become her life. The moment she turned the corner however, her resolve dissipated and her pace slowed. She hated this world.

The sight of the surprisingly pretty flowered path leading to the rest home though brought a strained smile to her lips. It always did. The myriad of roses, lavender and clumps of petunias were beautiful.

Tara's gaze shifted from the garden to the quagmire of lives that nestled the rest home, and returned to the garden. "Beauty surrounded by the beast," she murmured

With a smile pasted on her face, she entered the rest home and made her way down the maze of narrow corridors to her father's small room. She tried to ignore the pungent stench of ammonia ... and something else she'd never quite been able to put a name to. It permeated the entire facility. The odor of withering old age—and death.

With her smile stretched to the limit, she entered her father's room. "Hello, Daddy."

He turned toward her; a crooked smile lit his face. It broke her heart to see the once vital and strong man, reduced to a living shell. She steeled herself against the threat of tears and bent to give him a kiss on his wrinkled cheek, clasping his withered hand in hers. It was cold and the purplish veins stood out against the mottled skin of age.

"Arh..." he grunted. It was all he could do since his stroke. He could barely talk and movement was severely restricted along with facial expressions as crooked as his aged body. Just looking at him made her want to weep, but she resolutely held firm. She would never cry—at least never in front of her father.

"Daddy, let me tell you about someone I met..." And for the next hour Tara wove a picture of her life, bringing the outside into her father's restrictive world.

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Cole watched with admiration as Tara walked away. This wasn't a safe area. "Where the hell is she going?" he muttered under his breath. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a couple of scruffy characters loitering not far away. He shifted uneasily, keeping one eye on the youths, the other on Tara. Without warning, she turned the corner and he lost sight of her.

"Damn." Now what? Moving quickly, he exited the car, clicking the automatic lock and strode off after her. She may not want him here, but too bad, he thought, she needed looking after.

Says who?

"Me." His ready answer surprised Cole at how easy and natural it felt to want to protect Tara. He rounded the corner and for one frightening moment he couldn't see her. He upped his pace over the uneven pavement. He dashed off after her; mindful he should keep a degree of distance so she didn't spot him. "Just call me Magnum PI," he chuckled to himself.

He came to a halt at the edge of a flower-strewn path and eyed the scene suspiciously. The garden looked out of place in such a broken down neighborhood. Flowerbeds lined either side the path, and the aroma from a vine of radiant sweet pea trailing up a trellised fence assailed his senses. Staked into the ground, beside the vine was a sign.

Merrifield Rest Home.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Confused, but determined to find out, Cole walked into the rest home. Tara was nowhere in sight. He went up to the enquiry counter.

A matronly gray haired woman with a face softened by time peered at him over the top of semi-circle glasses. She reminded him of his school nurse years ago; a woman of great knowledge, who always knew what a recalcitrant child had been up to or was about to be up to, and often as not, before the child knew themselves.

"Can I help you young man?"

Her rather stern voice brought him abruptly back to his situation. "I hope so. I'm here to find..." his voice petered out. Who exactly was he here to see—he didn't have a clue. "I'm trying to find someone by the name of ... ah ... Palmer. It was a bit hit and miss. He could only try.

Will she thank you afterwards?

Cole refused to consider that particular scenario.

"Palmer you say?"

He nodded.

"No one here of that name."

"But..." He wracked his brain. "The woman who just entered. Blond, tall."

"Gorgeous," the woman added with a cheeky smile.

He smiled back. "Uh huh."

The receptionist trailed the tip of her pen down a list of names. Cole craned his neck to see the file of names.

"Now, now young man, don't be sneaky," she said, playing to his guilty shrug.

Cole couldn't resist a chuckle. "Just trying."

The woman tapped him playfully with her pen. "You, young men. Always trying to flirt," she sighed wistfully, giving him a flippant wink.

His jaw dropped. She winked at me! "Think you might be doing a bit of that yourself," he laughed.

She laughed with him and crooked her finger, beckoning him to follow her.

He did as he was told and together they walked down several corridors, all depressingly painted and smelling the same. They came to a halt at the head of another narrow corridor.

"Down the end, last room on the right," she pointed.

Cole nodded and smiled his thanks. Now what? What was he doing here? What was he going to say? Did he think it his right to check up on Tara?

Then what's the point of following her like this?

Protection, Cole replied silently.

Standing ramrod straight, he fought an internal battle as to what to do. A young nurse, carrying a load of freshly folded linen walked passed, eyeing him with obvious interest.

In the past he would have lapped up the attention. He wasn't oblivious to the fact women were interested in him. Hell he was a hundred percent male. He enjoyed it. But since Tara had moved into his home the thought of a different woman each month was decidedly off-putting.

Shrugging off the reality of his past, and with a dread he couldn't quite douse, he walked toward the room. A few feet short of the entrance, he came to a halt. Tara sat with her back to the door next to the bed of an old man whose face was twisted from a stroke. The scene was so private and intimate Cole decided to remain outside.

"Don't worry Daddy, I've nearly got enough. Then I'll get you out of this dump."

The man grunted. She reached over and wiped his face with a handkerchief.

Daddy? Tara's father? What was he doing here? From the distance, Cole took a closer look at the man, trying to see some resemblance in the withered and twisted face.

"He's a nice man, Daddy. You'd like him," Tara said. Her voice sounded wistful. "In some ways he's rather like you. All business."

Cole leaned back against the wall, overpowered by an odd sense of disappointment. Did she really think that? And he'd accused her of being money grubbing. How could he have got it so wrong?

Easy. You put everyone in the same basket as yourself, Charteris.

Believing retreat his best option, Cole backtracked. At the entrance, he spied the receptionist again and this time didn't hesitate and walked over to her. "How long has her father

been here?" he asked.

"About six months? It's very sad."

"Why?"

"He needs more physiotherapy care than we're able to offer. Lack of funds you see."

"Funds?"

"Rest homes are expensive to run. Good nurses aren't cheap and the population is getting older by the year. We're always full to capacity."

"I don't understand. How does this affect him?"

"Intensive therapy is something we can't offer. The home can afford one full time therapist and she does her best, poor dear. She can only give him a couple of minutes a day sometimes. If he is to improve, he needs comprehensive therapy."

"What sort of recovery is he capable of?"

"He looks worse than he is. His lovely daughter comes all the time, though just lately, she's only come on Sundays. Without more therapy, his recovery will be negligible." The receptionist suddenly pulled back and looked side to side. Guilt marked her face. "I really shouldn't be telling you this. Are you a relation?"

A broad smile lit Cole's face. "I'm his daughter's fiancé."

## ***Chapter Seven***

"Marry you!" Shock reverberated throughout every part of Tara's being. "You are joking?" Incredulous at Cole's surprising proposal, she glanced at his unsmiling face.

He was serious. And he stared right back. Deep and darkly penetrating eyes, shadowed by lashes that any self-respecting woman would give her eyeteeth for.

Cole Charteris was a hunk. He also wanted to marry her.

Feeling decidedly uncomfortable under his microscopic analytical inspection, she averted her gaze and walked over to the window. Outside the world turned and babies were being born, life carried on, while inside she felt both elation and intense fear. A confusing mixture she couldn't douse.

She sensed his nearness before he actually spoke and the hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention. She shivered and hugged her arms across her chest as the tip of her tongue slipped over her trembling bottom lip.

"If I remember correctly, darling, you declared marriage a waste of time. Besides, this engagement thing of ours is only temporary," she said.

"It's the solution to everything."

"You make it sound like a business arrangement."

With a surprising gentleness Cole rested his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face them. "Isn't this what we've had so far? Is it so terrible?"

As she tried to make sense of the flood of overheated emotions scattered in her chaotic mind, she agreed reluctantly. "No, I suppose not, but where the heck did this idea come from?" she challenged.

He didn't answer straight away, but walked over to the drinks cabinet. "I think we need a drink."

Tara made to decline, but Cole waved her silent words away. "You look as if my idea has been a shock," he said as he poured them both a brandy. His face a mask of resolve, he handed her a crystal goblet. She took it, and took refuge on the sofa. She wished she could emulate his same self-assuredness. She had—once. Before Daniel. It seemed everything was either before Daniel, or after. Her ex-husband had a lot to answer for.

She sipped at the golden liquid, letting it sear a path down her throat before she looked up at him, finally answering his question.

"You didn't think it would be?"

"You agree we get on well."

Any calm or reason she struggled to hold, withered. "But is that enough for a marriage?"

"Some have been made on less."

"But..."

"Look," Cole interrupted. He slammed his tumbler down on the coffee table and the golden droplets pooled on the small table. "If you don't want to, forget it."

"No! It's not, it's..."

"What?"

Tara parried for time. "It's so sudden. You've caught me unawares."

"I know," he admitted. "Me too." He gave her a sheepish grin and her stomach coiled, skin prickling pleurably. Her heart fluttered and her body yearned for his touch as a warm and sensuous intimacy overtook her sensibilities. Cole Charteris weakened her control.

"Let me be frank. Yesterday, when your car wouldn't start and I drove you to your appointment, I followed you inside."

Her jaw dropped. "You had no right. Why?"

"Safety."

"Don't be ridiculous. I was quite safe," she said, knowing it wasn't quite true.

"The area isn't exactly salubrious, Tara. I was concerned for your safety. It wasn't some devious action on my part. When I realized you had entered a rest home, well, curiosity got the better of me."

It suddenly dawned on her what he was saying. "You followed me into the home?"

At least he had the decency to look guilty. "I couldn't figure out who you'd be visiting. You never talk about any relatives, so I did some digging and followed."

"To my father's room?"

"I only stayed a minute, but it was enough," he admitted.

"Enough to what?" she accused. "Enough to laugh at some poor old man who can't look after himself, enough to condemn me for leaving him there."

Cole's eyes widened with hurt. "You think so little of me?"

She looked away. She knew better. Cole Charteris wouldn't stoop to the level of other men. To Daniel's level.

"If you think so bad of me, then maybe the idea of marriage isn't possible and we should forget it."

No! No! She jumped up from her seat. "I ... oh hell I'm making a mess of this."

Cole took the two steps between them and was beside her in a second. His warm fingers rested on her bare shoulders and he pulled her to him and wrapped his arms about her, sending waves of pleasure through her veins. She sank into his embrace and exhaled.

Emotions, fears, exhaustion, everything that had bombarded her for months on end and not just since her father's failing health, but before ... when scandal and deceit attacked with vengeance, ripped through her. Painful. Brutal. And so very sad.

Tara squeezed her eyes closed, blotting it all out, wishing it away.

Then she felt it. Felt Cole's arms around her, holding her. Holding tight.

Safe.



He lowered his head to hers, whispering. "You smell delicious."

Tara wanted to believe it, but her brain was befuddled and grappled with an ongoing assault of emotions. She was confused.

About her past.

About her future.

Cole holding her, asking her to marry him.

She leaned back and looked into his face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have accused you."

He made an effort to smile and the golden glints in his eyes flickered. "I've been accused of many things in my life, Tara, but cruelty isn't one of them."

"I know. It's just since dad's stroke I've had a difficult time..."

"Don't you think you ought to tell me about it."

Instinctively, she stiffened. She wanted to hold back, unsure how he would react, wondering if he would understand if he knew the truth.

These days she went by her mother's maiden name, and Cole hadn't doubted her. Would it matter if he knew who she really was? She knew she had to open up and tell him, trust him. With a sigh of resignation, she began to talk about her past.

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"So what you're saying is, your father Vincent Fraser is head of Fraser Equities."

"Fraser Equities doesn't exist anymore," she reminded him.

Cole chewed over this bit of information. "Yeah, I heard, though I'd no idea he'd moved back to New Zealand."

Distinctly wary, she said. "That's the notoriety of a failed business. Everyone's heard something. No one knows the truth."

"Then tell me."

She took her time. It was extremely important to her that Cole knew the truth—and believed it.

"My father was ill advised. I hadn't realized he'd not been well. Blood pressure," she explained and then hesitated, deciding quickly she wasn't going to tell Cole every bit of information. Some of it was hers alone. Her shame.

"Dad hid his deteriorating health problems and began to rely on one of his ... ah ... employees, giving the man more and more power." Tara's stomach churned in knots at the thought of just who the man had been. What he had done. She carried on. "My father relied too heavily on someone who ultimately didn't know what they were doing."

"And it ended the company?"

"That's about it," she grimaced. "One day Fraser Equities was thriving, the next," she clicked her fingers. "Poof. It disintegrated."

Surprise and disbelief criss-crossed Cole's face. "All that work, those years," he said.

"You think it sounds farfetched? Sure, it didn't happen overnight, but bit by bit, the company's collateral was eaten up, whittled away until creditors called for payment forcing my father to liquidate everything."

"Presumably at a very reduced rate."

Tara shuddered at the memory. "Once word got out, the vultures converged. But then, it's business, right? Everything went at bargain bin prices and the company my father loved to distraction dissolved."

Tara stared straight ahead as revolving memories of the death of her father's beloved company returned to haunt her. Returned? What was she thinking? They'd never left. Nor had those other memories that sought her out in the dark hours. They were ingrained.

"His stroke," Cole prompted.

Tara sucked in a deep and steadying breath and stiffened. "Daddy's blood pressure shot up more and more until his body couldn't take it and he had a stroke." Unable to stop the tears, even if she tried, she instead gave way to them, relieved. "I haven't told anyone before," she sobbed openly, taking comfort in Cole's warmth as he wrapped his arms securely around her. "I'm glad it's you."

"So am I. Sorry I was devious," he confessed.

A flicker of a smile tugged at her mouth. "It's okay. It's not your fault. For months I've kept the whole sorry saga to myself, too scared to mention exactly who I was to anyone."

"Is that the reason for the name change?"

She gave him a brief nod. It had been one reason. But there was definitely another. "The tabloids did their utmost to find me. So I figured it easier to change names."

"And is it why you moved to New Zealand, escaping Sydney?"

She nodded again. "You don't need to tell me the suburb where dad's rest home is a slum. I lived in a cheap apartment just down the road before..." She blushed then, dropping her gaze momentarily. "Well before we started this game, it was all I could afford. Daddy's rest home fees are exorbitant and I have no skills."

"That place is expensive? You've got to be joking."

"I wish. It doesn't look much, but it is all I can afford."

"The nurse at the home says your father needs better therapy."

"You checked up?"

Cole held up both hands in surrender. "'Fraid so. Guilty as charged."

"It's okay," she admitted. "Actually it's quite nice to have someone look out for me occasionally."

"Only occasionally?"

"There is no one else, Cole," she said with bitterness. "I'm my own person now."

"You're a strong woman," he agreed.

She smiled ruefully, delighted at his admiration. "Thank you. Hearing you say it means a lot to me."

"It's true. Not many women would cope with what you've had to endure, losing everything, struggling to survive, not only for yourself, but to care for a dependent. It isn't easy."

"No it's not."

"Is this why you applied for the job?"

"Yes." Overtaken by a sudden shyness, she looked through the veil of her lashes at him. He seemed thoughtful and for several minutes remained quiet. Not for the first time, she wondered what was going on in his mind. She wished she knew.

"So what about it?"

"Pardon." Tara jolted, her gaze drawn to the magnetic depth of Cole's smoldering dark eyes. "About what?"

"Our marriage."

"You mean you really want to marry me?"

"You thought I was joking? I wouldn't joke about something so serious."

"No, of course not..." Confused, and more than a bit frightened, Tara didn't know how to answer. Wasn't one disastrous marriage enough? Did she love Cole?

Love! Love is humbug, she scorned silently.

What good had love done her?

None.

Cole's statement that marriages had been made on less replayed in her mind. "A marriage of convenience? Could it work?" she spoke aloud, though not intending to.

"You don't have to decide now."

"Are you offering me a reprieve?"

"Do you want one?" he countered.

"What sort of marriage do you want?" Tara held her breath, and waited, unsure what answer she wanted from Cole.

"A real marriage."

His answer shocked her. "You can't, you're against marriage."

"We've had a business arrangement which has been okay so far. So why not take it a step further."

"And make it real?" Oh dear heaven. Real. He wants real.

You don't do real, Tara, her sub-conscious reminded her.

She hesitated a moment. Her cheeks turned scarlet before she even said the word. "Sex?" And he wants real!

"Yes, I want our marriage to be real, Tara. You can't deny our attraction."

"Attraction yes, but love?" she queried.

Cole snorted his disdain. "Love and sex don't necessarily go hand in hand, Tara. Besides, love doesn't last. I've been a party to that."

"Your parents?"

His brows rose, obviously surprised she'd fathomed his past without him uttering a word. "Keep my parents out of this."

"But..."

"But nothing. This has nothing to do with my parents. This marriage will be a partnership, simple. You marry me and get a good deal for your father, security and money."

And she, damned to a loveless life?

But then what was in it for Cole?

Just sex!

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Cole saw Tara visibly pale and his brows furrowed in confusion. He thought she'd leap at the opportunity.

And why not? It was in her favor.

Why not just give her money? No commitment. No marriage required.

For a moment he couldn't drag his gaze away from hers, the thought of life without her, empty and alone. It was an anathema and the idea of a mistress held no allure. Dare he trust his emotions? Emotions screwed everything up. Love always confused everything.

Keep it simple. Keep it business.

"And you?" she prompted, jolting him back to the stark reality of his proposition. "What do you get?"

Cole hesitated, resting his gaze on her. Sweet Tara. Caring, comforting, companionable, Tara.

Don't forget deliciously sexy and so very desirable.

His eyes shuttered as he tried to blank out dangerous thoughts.

Lust, not love is all that is permissible—remember.

"You get Alicia off your back," Tara finally answered for him.

"It isn't like that?"

"Isn't it? You want marriage, but no emotion, no commitment other than financial. A business deal with all the attributes marriage can offer. I assume you want children."

He stiffened.

Did he? Could he trust himself to be a parent? Was parenting genetic? Cole couldn't stand the thought that he would imitate his parents.

Useless.

He battled to articulate his thoughts on their marriage, a real marriage where love played no part. A tangled web of desperation and urgency, raw, untempered and very unnerving fought for supremacy deep down in his gut. He waited for Tara to speak. And waited. Why did he need this?

It's for Tara. Not you, his sub-conscious chided.

He didn't take his eyes off her, watched as her mouth opened and shut several times, though nothing came out. She let her tongue slide over dry lips and nervously looked up at him.

Cole wanted to kiss her. He wanted to hold her. Protect her.

God, he was drowning. Out of control. And yet, he couldn't back off, or steer down a different path even if he wanted to ... and he wasn't sure if he wanted to.

Maybe. Maybe not.

Suddenly, the wash of fear that had colored her eyes to the deepest of purples disappeared. She lifted her chin and Cole found himself edging closer, almost leaning forward as if everything hung on the next second.

It did. And God how he wanted it over. Business was a breeze compared to this.

But this is business, remember!

Business be damned. This was lust! Hot. Needy. And very blatant.

"Yes, I will marry you."

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Tara retreated to her bedroom. She needed peace and solitude. She needed space between her and Cole Charteris!

With a degree of despondency, she castigated herself for not telling the truth. Trouble was, that particular truth hurt too much. It was a fragment of her life she preferred to remain buried and forgotten.

Cole's proposal had caught her completely off-guard. Why would he propose, especially after declaring in the interview weeks ago that marriage would never be part of his life, and this merely a game.

What had brought about the change? As she soaked in a bath of lavender scented bubbles, Tara mused over several alternatives.

Desperation?

Nope. A man like Cole could never be desperate.

Sex?

Damn. Her nipples pebbled instantly beneath the soapy bubbles, breast aching for ... She shut that thought down. Cole Charteris didn't need to 'hire' a gal for sex. The man was a hunk; a definite babe magnet.

As the water cooled, Tara had no answers, rejecting every idea as too out there to be realistic.

The man's brilliance at business she understood, but this other Cole confused her, and scared the only semblance of calm she'd managed to rally to her unsteady defenses. He was correct however, when he said

they had become friends. Their evenings spent at home were enjoyable. Barbecues by the pool, picnics at the beach or just lazing around and discussing his day, and especially the imminent Howard deal. He spoke with fervor about the forthcoming amalgamation.

"If it doesn't go through, it'll mean disaster to the community."

"Surely not?"

"Look at it this way," he advised. "An amalgamation like this one where basically a new community evolves over time means thousands of jobs. Builders, plumbers, electricians, not to mention contracts to road crews. Plus, it will lessen the need for some workers to commute. Today's technology means many can work from home and this new suburb is being built with everything that is required."

"That's a lot of planning."

"Yeah," he agreed.

"You thrive on the challenge," she said smiling, hearing his enthusiasm.

He offered her one of those cheeky grins of his she had come to recognize—and enjoy. "Guilty," he said. "Howard brings experience with him, although I'm not so sure about his understanding of a community's future needs," he added, fingering the pile of paper work in front of him he'd long since abandoned.

"You've got problems?"

"Howard isn't a forward thinker. Communities like this need to be planned in detail. People no longer want to sit on the motorway, stuck in traffic snarl ups for hours, just to get to work."

"This is where technology comes in."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Most jobs have a technological component in them. We need to design environments with this in mind."

A smile tilted the corners of Tara's mouth with memories of their discussion playing like a recurring video as she dozed in the bath. Cole involving her in his hopes and dreams, while she listened, bewitched. Relaxed.

She couldn't remember the last time she had been so relaxed with a man ... and certainly not with ... No she wouldn't go down that track. Not again.

Cole Charteris is entrancing, admit it!

Leave me alone! Tara sank back into the cooled water. How desperately she wished her internal voice would switch off. Just go away.

Chicken! Go on admit it.

Admit what?

An icy blast ricocheted down her spine, chilling her to the bone, a sickening pall settling over her. Realization dawned— clear as the proverbial bell. How could it have happened? When? It had snuck up on her.

No it hadn't. She'd simply been blind to it. Ignored the teasing hints. Ignored her mind, and body.

Was it true? Did she love him?

Yes, yes. Absolutely.

Overwhelmed by her discovery, wanting to smother it, she sank beneath the soapy water uncaring that the once warm water was now stone cold.

Just like her heart. Cold and filled with fear. She loved and yet she felt dead, and afraid.

The new realization wouldn't go away however much she wanted it to.

Without a doubt, and without reservation, she finally admitted the truth as she came spluttering to the surface and reality.

She loved Cole Charteris. Desperately. Madly. Totally.

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"What the hell got into you, Charteris?" Cole groaned as he sat in the darkness. He twirled a brandy goblet between fingers, then leaned forward and grabbed the bottle to refill his glass. He took a gulp and tossed his head back, enjoying the sharp burn as it slid down his throat.

Outside, the night covered his world in an inky blackness, the stars obliterated by a blanket thick layer of cloud. A mood of suffocation overtook him. He stood and walked through the French doors out onto the patio, sucking in a gasping breath of fresh air. It was sweet, with the heady fragrance of exotic flowers.

He needed to get away, to think, but his chaotic thoughts followed him. There was no escape. They crowded his brain, egging him on, teasing his body.

Walking away from the house, he passed the pool and across the lawn to the secluded garden at the rear of the property. In daylight it was an oasis of sub-tropical beauty with a myriad of colorful hibiscus, oleanders and gardenia flowering between a copse of native beauty. Tonight it was blacked out, a place of solitude and shelter and he took needy refuge. The problem was the tumultuous uproar in his head stayed with him and the sanctuary failed to proffer any peace.

Slumped on a concrete garden seat, he stared into the darkness, ignoring the beauty of the distant cityscape. He dropped his head into his hands and silently challenged his rash action. What made him propose? Marriage for God's sake. The one thing he vowed he would never consider, never recreate the hell of his early days. Never become his parents.

Tara! That's why.

It was a surprisingly easy answer and that scared the hell out of him. Could he be persuaded so easily? Was his lust so urgent his brain ceased? His control obliterated. The simple answer was yes. But seeing Tara with her father, hearing her story of pain and struggle had roused such deep feelings within him. He needed to protect her and, if he was truthful, the spiraling intensity of his emotions had been with for some time, despite an eagerness to blank them out and deny their existence. Deny his lust.

Lust doesn't survive. What then?

Again his feelings for Tara had overtaken everything else. He could no longer stand around and see her struggle.

And so you proposed marriage?

Cole's gut churned. Marriage! The one single word that had the ability to strike fear in his heart. \*\*\*\*

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A new day.

A new awareness.

And a deep sense of uncertainty.

Tara headed toward the kitchen the next morning uncomfortable with the knowledge that Cole was still home. Would he laugh, say his proposal was a joke? Should she give him the chance to pull out?

Did she want to?

Definitely not.

Outside the kitchen she hesitated, alert for any sound. But all she heard was the thud of her heart pounding. She pulled herself upright, her father's words of 'stand tall, be proud', rang in her ears. She pushed the swing door open and entered the kitchen.

Cole sat at the table, the daily newspaper scattered in front of him. When he saw her, his glass of orange juice stilled half way to his mouth and for a fleeting second, he looked at her with something akin to desire. Within the blink of an eye however, all visible emotions vanished, making her wonder if she had been imagining things.

You wish!

Did she? She wasn't certain what she wished. She had wished once before. Thought her fairy godmother had granted them, only to wake up to a living nightmare.

"Good morning," he said. His tone was tempered and controlled. Just like the man. Shame she couldn't say the same about herself. Inside she quaked with uncontrolled nerves.

"Morning." Succumbing to those very nerves, she scuttled to the kitchen bench, giving herself space and a few precious moments to batten down her overwrought senses. With quick, precise movements she dished up cereal and yogurt for herself and sat down opposite him, grateful for the table between them.

Or what? Reach over and touch. Reach over and kiss him.

All of the above!

"I trust you slept well?" he questioned.

Tara offered an indiscriminate shrug. "Not really."

"Sleep again seems elusive for both of us then."

Her cheeks reddened under his scrutiny. She lowered her head. Best to concentrate on food, not love.

"I never realized cereal could be so interesting," Cole chuckled. "Look at me, Tara. Please."

His pleas tugged at her. Cole Charteris begging. She lifted her gaze to meet his.

"Don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not, I..."



"Then what is it? Yesterday, you didn't seem so hesitant. Are you having second thoughts?"

Tara blushed, embarrassed, but shook her head nevertheless.

"I've booked the celebrant—Saturday week."

Her jaw dropped at Cole's announcement. "Saturday."

"You approve?"

"Yes ... I..." All of a sudden, as she faced him and saw his beaming smile and her worries faded, slipping away inch by gentle inch until a warmth pervaded in their place. She relaxed. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

"Nope. Eleven a.m. Saturday. Then we can start the honeymoon."

Announcement over, Cole folded his newspaper with precision, tucked it under his arm as he stood. He bent towards her, his lips so very close and she found her eyes drifting closed, her body rioting at the thought he might kiss her.

She wanted him to. Desperately.

And yet, one part of her, a part she didn't want to acknowledge backed away. Fast.

Then it was too late and Tara quietly reveled in that fact. Cole's lips touched hers gently. Sweet and delicious. A lingering caress. A kiss to remember.

Then it was over and Cole Charteris, the man she was about to marry spun on his expensively clad heels and exited the kitchen.

Bewildered by his hasty retreat and the speed at which her future husband had organized everything, she sat immobile, unable to think. Only feel.

It felt good. Very, very good in fact. Exciting. Tempting.

And frightening.

Seconds ticked by and then she began to shake. She dropped her spoon and pushed aside her bowl of cereal.

Honeymoon!

Dear God! The word struck terror right through her. Her stomach heaved and she could taste the bitter metallic tang of bile as it rose in her throat, forcing her to gag.

What had she done? Why had she agreed to marry Cole?

Because you love him, her sub-conscious reminded.

But a honeymoon? She couldn't do honeymoons.

Daniel's goading insults rose to haunt her. "Our honeymoon wasn't much use."

She and Daniel had only been married a short time, their so-called honeymoon barely over when he spent his anger on her. Whenever they were alone his fury was fuelled and she became the receptacle for his anger.

At first, it was just verbal.

"Just," she mouthed. 'Just' never lessened the viciousness.

Alone in the kitchen, Tara tried to corral her tumultuous emotions and rationalize her thoughts. Even now her ex-husband's derision hurt deeply. Dug at her self-esteem.

At the time, she'd felt powerless to do anything about his abuse and hadn't wanted to tell her father her new marriage had struck problems. Instead, she kept quiet. Like so many other women.

Sadly, her silence intensified Daniel's frustration and he took every opportunity to taunt her.

She wasn't a good wife.

Wouldn't give him what he needed.

A cold fish.

Frigid.

The jeering continued, dragging her down, belittling, reducing the Tara she had been to a nobody. She had desperately struggled to clutch on to the old Tara.

Like most abusers, he apologized afterwards. "What thug doesn't?" she murmured as her fingers unconsciously rubbed the small scar above her eyebrow caused by Daniel's 'exuberance' with a vase.

And, like so many abused women, she did her best to hide the damage, the rawness of her hurt and internal pain.

Two years later, Daniel may have been out of her life physically, but she struggled on a daily basis to keep the scathing demons at bay, long ago recognizing the damage was still raw and bleeding.

Now she had agreed to marry Cole. She fought to allay her fears. "Remember, you love him."

Three words. Simple words. Words she repeated like a mantra all day long as she fought to stave off an attack of pre-wedding jitters.

She loved Cole Charteris. It was very simple. She hoped.

## ***Chapter Eight***

The day was glorious, with spring melding into a Southern Hemisphere summer. Christmas on the beach where the exotically scarlet flowering Pohutukawa trees lined the coast lay ahead. Summer meant barbecues and sailing on the harbor. Nicknamed the City of Sails, Auckland came alive in the summer; hosting the largest regatta this side of the equator.

Automatically, Tara crossed off the date on the calendar.

Two days before her forthcoming nuptials. 'W' day.

For the last few days, she had succumbed to nerves and for the most part remained quiet, trying to keep her mind off the event. She failed dismally.

Thankfully, Cole had taken charge and organized everything; the celebrant and caterers who were to serve the small circle of friends he had invited. She had refused to invite anyone.

There was no one. Not anymore.

"You are going shopping?" he asked, looking at her over the rim of his morning coffee.

Shopping was the furthest thing on her mind right now. "I don't need a new outfit."

"Cole offered her one of his crooked grins, tinged with that devilish amusement she'd come to recognize. He eased himself back into his chair. "A friend of mind told me once not long after he married, he was out shopping with his wife. They passed a store and she admired a dress in the window.

He offered to buy it for her. The new wife said no, saying she had plenty of clothes. Now, some twenty years into the marriage he still jokes his wife has plenty of clothes and doesn't need any more. So how about it, humor me. Tell me you've got plenty of clothes in twenty years."

Twenty years. Married to Cole.

How could she refuse him when he smiled like that? It caught her every time, somewhere deep inside her; a place where he shouldn't be. It scared her.

She held her hands up in surrender the magnificent multi-carat diamond sparkling on her finger. "What can I say? Okay, I'll do as you ask."

Cole reached for his wallet and flicked it open and handed her a wad of bills.

She eyed the money with distaste. "No!"

"No?"

"I mean it, Cole. If I'm to go shopping for a dress for our wedding, it's my responsibility, and mine alone. I'll not accept your money."

For a moment, he said nothing, his hand still outstretched clasping the money. She waited, wondering how he would react and witnessed the flicker of hurt in his eyes.

Softening, she said. "Acting as your fiancé in a paid job is one thing, but taking your money when we are getting married for real, is entirely different."

Grudgingly, he shoved the money in his pocket and stood. He smiled. It was another devastating grin. "You know, Ms. Palmer," he acquiesced. "You're pretty darn special."

Reaching for her, Cole wrapped a hand around her waist and pulled her to him. "And you smell awfully good, this morning."

"My mood was for Chanel." She didn't mention however, that it was the last of her perfume. Perfume had been a luxury she could scarcely afford for a long time. Debts didn't allow a gal to smell good.

"Mood? Hmm. My mood is for Ms. Palmer."

Tara she knew instinctively he would kiss her. She willed it and tilted her head upwards, lips parting slightly—and waited.

It seemed an eternity.

Will he? Won't he?

Please.

Tara's gaze linked with Cole's; a silent message passing between them. This is for us. For now. For ... His lips brushed hers. Sweet. Tender. Endearing. Belying the flash of desire she saw etched in their passion-filled depths.

Tara's eyes closed.

Yes! She thought she had imagined this ... feeling. The wave of calm, and need and a yearning clawing for release. It happened every time Cole kissed her. She recognized that now. Admitted it with a tinge of diffidence.

He held her hands in his; thumb massaging a circle in her palm.

A simple touch. Sensual.

Then he pulled back and his velvety chocolate brown eyes sought hers again. Tara let out a heavy sigh and tried to hide her disappointment.

Kiss me again. Go on.

Pretty please!

"We seem to be practicing again."

Words stalled behind the tip of Tara's tongue. She wiped it across her lips, heat bursting through her veins as she recognized the taste. The taste of Cole.

She definitely didn't want Cole to stop kissing her. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck, fingers trailing through his thick wavy hair and brought his head toward her. "Kiss me, Cole Charteris."

"Ah. A woman who knows her own mind. Definitely something a man could get used to."

"So make sure you obey," she admonished, shocked at the playful tone of her own voice.

But like a good boy, Cole did what he was told. Thankfully. And once more, his lips sought hers; a whisper-soft touch, trailing down the curve of her cheek. Her nipples hardened as her body scraped against the hard plane of his chest. A pure invitation, and one Cole heeded.

He tugged at her t-shirt and pulled it free of her skirt, slipping his hands beneath the fabric.

Tara's skin burned with a passion she had never felt before as his hands wrought havoc on her body. The intensity scared her, and at the same time sent an exhilarating fire racing through every part of her. She swallowed hard, biting back a groan of pleasure, the very center of her slick and aching with need.

With adroitness demonstrating his expertise, something Tara refused to acknowledge, Cole slipped her t-shirt over her head, tossing it to the floor. For a long moment he simply stared at her, a slow burning smile curving the corners of his delicious mouth.

"Beautiful," he murmured, as he began to trail kisses down her throat to the 'V' between her breasts. With his free hand he slipped the straps of her bra down her shoulders, tugging them so that he bared her breasts. Cool air bit her skin while his flurry of kisses roused her to fever pitch, firing a shiver of urgent need to the very tips of her toes.

Tara had no idea who pulled away first, but as his body left hers, she felt an overwhelming sense of aloneness. With him, she felt whole. Together they were more than a team, they were united.

"I've got to go, sweetheart," Cole whispered into the coiled mass of her hair as he held her too him. His voice was thick with desire. Good, she rued, though undeniably shocked by the fact that she had caused it.

But she was disappointed. She didn't want him to go. She wanted him to stay ... and play.

He had called her sweetheart. On his lips it sounded wonderful.

"Go and get your dress, but don't forget we're heading out on the harbor this afternoon," Cole reminded her. "The Sirena is ready. Maude will meet us at the marina."

With one last kiss that left her breathless with longing, Cole departed. Tara crossed the kitchen to the window, still shocked that she had lost herself so ... so much. Heavens, they were in the kitchen, and making love.

Lordy!

Tara stared outside towards the driveway watching Cole back the car out.

You'll never interest any man!

Daniel's scornful taunt broke into her thoughts once more. Would she ever be rid of him? Go away! Leave me alone, she pleaded. Stumbling from the window, Tara sank onto one of the seats at the kitchen table. What was she doing? Who was she trying to fool? Could she be a wife to Cole? "Damn you, Daniel," she cried as unbidden tears began to cascade down her cheeks. Roughly she brushed them away. But they refused to be staunch. No matter where she was, Daniel continued to haunt her. Cheating her of ... everything. He always had.

Hugging her arms across her chest, she rocked to and fro, desperately seeking respite from her tormentor. "Please God," she prayed. "Let it be all right."

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"This dress is perfect on you," the sales lady pressed as she hovered like a bee coveting the honey pot.

Tara stared at her reflection in the mirror. Uncertainty creased her brow. She turned this way and that, pulling at the fabric with a nervousness that couldn't be veiled.

"Madam, believe me he'll love you in it."

"You think so?"

The woman's head bobbed vigorously.

She eyed the dress once more. A rich cream with shoestring straps, the soft folds draped in an A-line from her hips to float around her ankles. Individually stitched seed pearls edged the straps and across the bodice. But it was the artfully draped sweetheart neckline which caught her attention. She had never worn anything cut so low. Daniel would never have allowed it.

She frowned at the intrusive memory. "I won't let him. I'll take it," she declared mutinously. She refused to let Daniel into her head.

Laden with her purchases, her feet raced over the cobbled street lined on both sides with upmarket boutiques. A tight smile stretched at her mouth. She had managed to overcome the urge to put the dress back on the rack and ignore the exorbitant price tag,

You only get married...?

Shut up!

She knew the saying. It wasn't true in her case. Her marriage to Daniel had been only too real, despite the fact she would rather forget her three years of hell. Even today, as she had pirouetted in front of the mirror in the shop's changing room, her emotions raged an internal battle.

Should she?

Shouldn't she?

After her last fiasco, she had vowed and declared, never again.

That was B.C. Before Cole.

Despite her overpowering fear of failure, fear she would disappoint Cole and earn his scorn, she had agreed to marry him. He wasn't cruel—not like....

Tara shook her head. Damn it. Damn him.

Her gut churned, the sharp tang of fear that really had never left soured even more. Seeking refuge in her car, she turned the radio on full blast hoping to drown out her morbid thoughts.

Cole and Daniel were opposites. She loved Cole. But, she was also a realist. Cole didn't love her. She hadn't been able to figure out why he proposed their fake engagement become real, and his excuse that it was because of her father, and a financial deal only added to the unending turmoil roiling inside her. He had said he wanted a real marriage. So just where did real fit in with financial?

She had thought she had loved before.

She should have known better. But hadn't. And that marriage had become more money than love.

Would it work the other way round, and a marriage based on money turn to love?

Love? Love meant sex. And she was no good at sex.

Oh, she might lust, might enjoy Cole's kisses, but Tara knew, just as Daniel had known, she didn't do sex.

Plagued by doubts, and the constant fear that her body would once again betray her, she drove toward the marina. Having detoured and dropped her gown off at the house, she'd only just had time to change into a pair of navy crop pants and a blue and white-striped t-shirt, and grab a cap and sunglasses. She hoped she wasn't too late. The marina was tidal and if the tide change was too far-gone, they may not be able to get the boat launched in time.

Waitemata, the Maori word for sparkling water, proved to be extremely apt. Today the waters glistened under the clear blue sky and brought a smile to her face.

Locking the car, she rushed along the pier, determined not to glance down to the churning tide below the slatted planking. It was an irrational fear, but as a child recurring nightmares of slipping through the gaps on such a wharf had haunted her for weeks.

"Very sea worthy," Cole called as she came alongside his launch.

Tara twirled round and received his wolf whistle. "Yep, you can be first mate." His gaze narrowed on her, raking her from head to toe, eliciting a fission of heat that raced in tandem with his stare.

Flushing pink, Tara dropped her hand in his as he helped her on board. He pulled her to him, his voice warm and sensual and sent goose bumps down her arms. Her heart jumped with excited anticipation.

"Welcome to the Sirena. Would you like a guided tour?"

The vindex styled launch was forty foot long and had been built by old-fashioned craftsmen. Able to sleep six, there was a small galley along one wall of the saloon, with banquette seating and a pull-up table opposite. At night the seating in the saloon could be pulled out and made into extra beds.

Following Cole up the few narrow steps onto the aft cockpit, she let out a sigh of relief. Being close to him in such a confined space asked too much of her; his powerful darkly handsome presence overpowering, exciting and frightening at the same time.

Go on. Admit it.

A hint of a smile played at the edges of Tara's mouth. She eyed Cole who had turned to answer his mobile.

The whole time he was showing her the interior of the launch, what she had really wanted to say was ... 'enough, make love to me, here, now'. She wanted to put her arms around his neck, hold on tight and blurt out her pent up fears, and her love for him.

Yeah, right. Go ahead and do it. Frighten the man away.

She hadn't of course. Once again she kept quiet. Fear of the unknown—and known holding her a captive of her past. The irony of her wayward thoughts didn't escape her. Where was the frigid woman Daniel accused her of being? The woman he said could never entice any man.

"Penny for them."

Tara jolted back to reality—and what a reality. Heat flushed her cheeks; her breasts suddenly aware of his gaze on her, and her skin tingled with a prickling intensity. "They'd cost you a lot more than a penny," she joked.

But Cole's expression instantly turned stormy, his eyes narrowed, darkly accusing. It was as if her words had poured ice over him. Realizing what she'd said, her cheeks colored. No wonder he thought she was money grubbing. "You've got it wrong, Cole. This was a job remember."

"Not now it isn't."

"No it isn't. "

"Hello everyone, am I late?" Maude Charteris trilled from the wharf. Her arrival hindered any opportunity for Tara to correct Cole and she pivoted around to see the bejeweled woman trot alongside the Sirena. Dressed in a long flowing scarlet dress, with a large straw hat and glasses and the ever-present strands of gold chains and bracelets with diamonds hanging from her ears, Tara heard Cole's gasp beside her. She slapped a hand over her mouth, choking back a giggle.

"Don't say a word," he threatened and went to help his aunt on board.

Maude gestured wildly. "Isn't this wonderful."

It was indeed beautiful. Cole had gone to a lot of expense and trouble to restore the launch, the mahogany woodwork throughout the boat gleamed.

Maude patted her nephew's arm. "Clever boy."

"You make it sound like I'm still in shorts."

She laughed and clapped her hands. The gold bracelets clinked and the diamonds glittered under the strong summer sun. "It seems like yesterday," she said with a wistful sigh.

Cole rolled his eyes in mock horror.

It didn't take long before he had the launch under way and with the wind whipping through her hair, Tara sat alongside Maude up front. She had no idea where they were heading, and didn't really mind. For once, it was nice not to worry, merely to sit back and enjoy. A chance for her to relax didn't come very often and she eased back against the wheelhouse window.

Shading her eyes with dark glasses, she slathered a layer of sun block on her fair skin and once they were truly under way took pleasure in pointing out the islands.

Rangitoto, the dormant island volcano lay only a few miles from Auckland's downtown.

"Did you know that viewed from above, the island is almost circular?"

Tara related various bits of information, but it wasn't long before she realized where they were heading. She twisted round to face Cole and gave him a beaming smile. "Kawau?" she said, crossing her fingers behind her back.

He nodded.

"Thank you," she said and really meant it. "It brings back some special memories—before my mother's death, before the move to Sydney, before...." For a moment, her eyes shuttered, blinking out the past. Damn the past. Damn it to hell.

Mindless of the rocking sensation, she stood up and gripped the railing and made her way toward Cole. "Thank you," she said again, and standing on tiptoes she kissed his cheek.

Cole looked at her with a degree of surprise across his dark gaze, unbalancing his normally sure stance for a fleeting moment. Then he shrugged, seemingly to toss off whatever was worrying him and propped himself on the wheelhouse seat. He draped his free arm across her shoulders.



She leant into his embrace. It felt good. Really good.

It felt as if she had come home.

## ***Chapter Nine***

The blue-green water lapped against the moored launch. Pulling herself up the boat's boarding ladder, Tara shook the salt water from her hair, twirling it as she wrung out the excess.

"You look delightful, my dear. Like a woman in love," Maude called to her.

Tara's hands stilled. What could she say? That she was in love with Cole, but he didn't love her. To tell Maude the truth, would be to break the woman's heart. The older woman thought she had instigated the match of the century and her matchmaking was a breathtaking success for both parties. Okay, so she had only started as a fake fiancé. Maude believed it had become true love.

Wrapped in a spare towel, she sat opposite Cole's great aunt.

"I'm so glad you were the candidate. You're just the person he needs. And now, well, I'm ecstatic, of course."

Tara tried to keep her voice calm, and hide the lie. "I am?"

"Oh course, I can see he loves you. The boy needed a push in the right direction."

More like a shove Tara thought. "Are you sure you're not seeing this through rose-colored glasses?"

Maude chuckled. "Definitely not." She reached over a bejeweled arm and patted Tara's hand, her collection of bracelets clinking with every movement. "Your wedding may be rather hurried, but let me tell you, my nephew never does anything he doesn't want to. Stubborn to the core."

Tara laughed at Maude's insight. "Stubborn is right. He's a typical male, wants to get his own way." She didn't want to disappoint the older woman, but Cole didn't want a fiancé, or a wife. But she could never dispel Maude's romantic notions; that their marriage was purely and simply business.

Yes, but Cole had suggested both 'jobs'—playing fiancé, and now wife.

A tiny frown centered between her brows. Cole confused her. The man seemed to be content to do something he declared he would never do. Why?

"You, my dear, will be able to wrap him around your finger."

Tara snorted, unable to hide her skepticism. "I doubt it."

The octogenarian however merely chuckled, while Tara held her ground under the woman's accessing gaze. Maude was a shrewd cookie and sitting beneath her unwavering scrutiny unsettling.

"Cole never does anything without thinking it through, Tara. Marriage may not have been on his mind before you came along, but you changed him."

"Why does Cole hate the idea of marriage so much?"

For a second, the woman's eyes misted over and she shuffled in her seat as if discomforted by the line of questioning. She stared out over the harbor before returning her gaze to Cole who swam a few meters from where the boat was anchored in the deep curve of Mansion House Bay. Above, a seagull cawed as it hovered, before dipping to the water and coming up with a sprat in its beak. "It's a mindset, my dear. You'll have to ask him," she said. And that was it. The matter, apparently, was closed and Tara was none the wiser.

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Despite niggling concerns after her discussions with Cole's aunt, their time on the harbor was a great success. They'd dropped Maude at her apartment and now headed towards home.

"How about we go visit your father, check he's settled in. You can introduce your future husband."

Tara tensed. Husband. Her husband. The word held so much. She flicked a gaze in Cole's direction as she struggled to find the right words. "I don't know if I've actually said thank you, but I am truly grateful you know."

Cole shrugged as if it was of no consequence, making her angry. His dismissal of her thanks hurt. "Did you have to do that?" she accused.

"Do what?"

"Don't give me that, Cole Charteris. You know what I mean. Shrug. Every time I try and say thanks about something, which seems quite often at the moment, you shrug your shoulders. Why? It's as if my feelings and thoughts don't count."

"Don't be absurd." He snorted, but kept his eyes on the frantic rush hour traffic around them.

"Absurd? How can my feelings be absurd? They're mine. I own them."

"What the heck are you trying to say? I'm trying to drive here, can't this wait."

Tara exploded. "No it darn well can't."

"Don't yell."

"I'll yell if I want to."

"Now you're sounding childish. Calm down."

Tara fumed inwardly. "I don't want to calm down," she said struggling to speak slowly and precisely, "and I sure as heck don't like being told I sound childish."

"Of course you're feelings count, Tara. Why else would I be doing these things?"

Why else? She really didn't have a clue. Cole kept that part of him secret, and no amount of questioning to his aunt had revealed anything else.

"In less than twenty-four hours you and I will be husband and wife. I do these things for you. You are going to be my wife."

Her jaw dropped.

"There's no ulterior motive, Tara," he stated simply.

She slammed her mouth shut. "There isn't?"

"No."

Then why? Why marry? If guilt was Cole's motivation, guilt that he had money and she didn't, then why not give her some money. Why not pay for her father's keep. Not that she would ever have accepted it.

Then why marry him?

Confusion reigned—though not really if she allowed herself to be honest. Not deep down.

Feeling both guilty and silly at the same time, she remained mute for the rest of the journey. His admission that he'd done it for her because she was about to become his wife, was, to say the least, astounding. And frightening. Still.

As the car sped the last few miles toward the new rest home he had arranged for her father to be transferred to, Tara dug deep into her memories of her marriage to Daniel and tried to find even one time Daniel had done something for her, and her alone, because she was his wife.

She came up empty.

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As they drove up the driveway, the sun took its last look at the day and dipped into the horizon sending streaks of coral and ruby across a cloudless evening sky. Cole brought the car to a halt.

"Are you sure don't want to stay. I feel bad, as if I'm turfing you out of your own home," she stated.

He turned and grinned at her and the very air around them sparked with an ever-increasing awareness that had amplified with each passing kilometer towards Cole's home. They didn't seem to need words. Tara only needed touch. Cole's touch.

His aura of virility powerfully potent, it set her senses reeling. It was as if she could reach out and touch it.

Touch. She smiled a gentle and secret smile. It all came down to touch. Touching him. Touching her. Would that be enough to cauterize the band of fear that held her back?

Tara's gaze rested on his lips—lips that were soft and sensual. Demanding. Lips that wrecked havoc and pleasure all at one time.

"Never mind," he grinned. "Traditions of the night before the wedding have to be kept."

"I could go to a hotel," she argued.

He lifted a finger to her lips, tracing them ever so softly. "Shush. No arguments."

Tara's heartbeat leapt as the tip of her tongue came in contact with the nub of his finger. For a flicker of a second his eyes darkened, and held hers as she witnessed passion brimming in their soulful depths. Her heart sang with joy.

"I'm staying with Mike Harrow, my best man."

"Are you sure?"

"You're concerned for me, Ms. Palmer?" he questioned, still using her mother's maiden name she'd used as way of deception. Thankfully, it didn't seem to bother him that she had done so, acknowledging her need for privacy in light of her father's illness and his business collapse.

A stain of heat edged up her neck. Concern? It was more than that, she acknowledged. She loved him. Simply thinking it, butterflies skyrocketed in her stomach at the thought. "I..." she stuttered and her lips parted.

Swiftly, Cole took advantage and his lips slated over hers, an encompassing kiss. Sweet. Gentle. Total.

The moment his lips touched hers she realized it was totally different from the gentleness of their previous kisses. This was passion with a capital 'P'. This set her on fire, set her heart racing and aroused her like never before.

She reveled in it.

Passion! She could do passion.

She leant back against the car seat and Cole followed, pinioning himself against her. Automatically, her legs parted and he angled his body between them. He was a natural fit.

Perfect.

His hands found their way beneath her t-shirt, fingers brushing against her heated skin. She groaned with pleasure. It was delicious, a powerful aphrodisiac.

It was hot!

Cole switched from one breast to the other, continuing an erotic trail of little kisses down the curve of her neck. Her back arched and his lips sought the nub of one breast through her t-shirt. She gasped as the wetness of his tongue circled the sensitized bud and she pulled him closer, delighted that her actions had set fire to him.

She wanted his touch. Needed it, and for the first time she felt in control. Of him. And of herself.

Cole's lips sought sanctuary between her breasts once more and she pressed backwards.

"Ow!" Her cry rent the confines of the car and he stilled. The door handle had dug viciously into her side and roused her unwillingly back to reality.

Cole pulled away and for a moment she struggled to gather her wits, overwhelmed by a sense of abandonment as he eased away, his face flushed and serious. Then she caught sight of her own state of undress and scrambled with as much dignity as she could muster in the confines of the car and yanked at her clothes.

"Practice makes perfect they say," he said, his tone clipped.

Tara gasped.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to act like some gauche schoolboy." His posture was rigid, face a mask, but it only served to intensify her sense of discomfort. Blood rushed to her head and she wanted to be sick. The car was claustrophobic. She had to escape. Fumbling, she found the door handle and jerked it down. The door opened. "I ... I'll see you tomorrow."

"There's no need to be embarrassed, Tara. It isn't as if we've not kissed before."

"Kissed. It was more than kissing, Cole."

"Mmn," he agreed. But his gaze remained hooded and unreadable. The shutters had come down and he had drawn within, closing off from her.

There you go, unable to keep him interested and you're not even married.

Shut up. Shut up!

She had to get away. Escaping, Tara ran to the front door, too scared to look back, afraid at what she would see in his eyes. Afraid of what she would have to admit to herself.

You're making a mistake. Again.

"You'll disappoint every man, Tara." Daniel's taunting tone droned with incessant repetition in her ears.

Tara slammed the door to shut it out.

Tomorrow wasn't far away. Tomorrow was her wedding day.

## ***Chapter Ten***

"No one will ever want you. What use are you to a man?" The harsh words scorned, searing her brain just as pain ripped at her heart. "You've not got one sexy ounce in your body. Think you can satisfy a man. Never!"

"No!" Tara screams cut through the night. "Get away." She fought hard, pulling at the constricting confines that immobilized her arms and legs, hindering her escape. The interminable voice was suffocating. No one helped her. Alone and very scared, surrounded by an ominous and enveloping darkness it sheathed her in a total and consummate fear, sucking her downwards.

Fleeting, the shadowy figure of her father stood to one side, his mouth gaped in a twisted slant. She reached out to grasp at him, to anchor herself to him as if a life raft in the midst of a tangled mass of nightmares. But just as her vision blurred, her father disappeared from sight.

Her voice came a quivering wail. "Where are you?"

But there was only silence until a voice began reciting in a monotone, the words jumbled and confusing. Tara struggled to understand what was being said, her mind was like quicksand. Her head fell sideways, as if she sought recognition of the speaker, but a moment later the voice too blurred and became harsh.

"No deal, no deal! The marriage is off. Used goods. No value. You'll disappoint. Disappoint, disappoint."

Over and over the words shrieked in her head, piercing the fragments of her defenses. Escape proved futile. Then out of the darkness, through a brilliant light at the end of what seemed like a never ending tunnel, the voice and face became one.

Cole!

Tara thrashed from her constrictors, reaching for him, pleading with soundless words for his help, but as a loud, splintering crash echoed through the darkness catapulting her into a frenzy, twisting and turning she bolted upright gasping for breath.

It was a nightmare.

Heart thumping in her chest and her throat choked with fear, Tara scanned the room, struggling to regain consciousness and blinking, as she grew accustomed to the dim light. There were no monsters and the dark, foreboding shapes recessed from her imagination. Once more her room became whole.

"It's only a dream," she repeated as she vainly tried to calm her speeding pulse. Sweat broke out on her forehead and between her breasts as she sat amidst the tangle of bedding. She tossed them back, grateful for the cooling breeze as it wafted across her clammy skin and she battled to concentrate on reigning in her panicking senses, willing her heartbeat to slow.

Bit by bit, the thrumming in her ears disappeared and she swallowed back her fear. She remembered the advice her father gave to her when she was a child, and had a nightmare.

"Turn the pillow over, sweetheart, and the beastie can't get you."

Oh, how she wished it were true. She threw the pillow across the room.

When would it be over? Daniel may not be around anymore, but the damage he'd done was ever present. "Why did you do it? Why, why?"

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"Some bride," Tara wailed, as she looked at her reflection in the gilt-edged mirror. Too much sniffing and crying after her dreams had wrought havoc and left her eyes red-rimmed. Her nose looked no better.

"Don't worry. A bit of extra makeup will do wonders,"

Maude fussed as she dabbed foundation under Tara's eyes. "At least the dress is okay." "It's more than okay," the older woman enthused. "You're

a beautiful bride. Cole has made a wonderful choice." Maude's

encouragement was meant to bolster her wavering spirit. Tara wasn't so buoyant. "I just wished I felt more bridal." "Nerves my dear. How more bridal can that be?" "I suppose." She took another glance in the mirror at

herself. Thanks to Maude's handiwork, the red puffiness had miraculously disappeared. She smiled and tried to jolly her composure. Maybe Cole's great-aunt was correct. Maybe

that's all it was—pre-wedding jitters. She certainly hoped so. "Time to go. Your husband is waiting downstairs." Tara gulped and Maude gave her a reassuring pat on the

arm. "He does love you, you know. Sometimes, however, I think my nephew is a bit blind to what love really is." Maude gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Give him time, my dear. Time is all he needs."

Time? But would Cole give her time?

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As his bride to be approached the bottom of the stairs, Cole's eyes widened in wonder. Dressed head to foot in cream and pearls, the gown molded to Tara like a glove. Atop her head she wore an antique mantilla, which grazed her shoulders. It had belonged to Maude. If the mantilla was borrowed and old, Cole wondered what the blue would be. He grinned mischievously, delighting in the thought of finding out.

With her slow rhythmical steps in tune to the wafting melody from the string quartet, he couldn't take his eyes off her. He felt instant desire and silently cursed his raging hormones. Now was not the time. But later—absolutely.

Tara reached his side and he took her hand in his. He felt her tremble and gave her a reassuring smile. Her eyes twinkled up at him. Just then the celebrant, an old family friend, gave a warning cough and both he and Tara turned to face the woman who was about to join them in matrimony.

Cole tried to concentrate on the celebrant's words. It proved impossible. Not only did his bride look ravishing, setting his pulses on edge, but also he was amazed by the overwhelming sense of protection and caring which overtook him the moment she walked the short distance towards him. Gone was the warring inner turmoil which plagued him the last two nights, turning his sleep hours into a long, wakeful war of words.

They had been the same words spoken by his parents during one of their interminable arguments. Words he'd heard before they'd disappeared into the sunset. "Marriage is always a mistake," his father had yelled at his mother. His mother had not refuted the claim.

Cole glanced at Tara. She held her head high, resolutely staring straight ahead. A sense of calm settled over him and all the bitter anger from his past disintegrated and no longer holding any meaning.



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"Great you two," Mike enthused as he clicked away with his Nikon.

Cole grimaced. He disliked his photo being taken, but gave in as propriety demanded. This was after all his wedding day.

"Hey cheer up buddy," Mike smiled. "At least I'm not a tabloid photographer."

"Small mercies." Cole scanned the large lounge, seeking out his wife.

The unspoken word rolled around on his tongue.

Wife. It sounded.... He wasn't quite sure how it sounded, not certain he wanted to know right now. Time. He needed time.

Tara stood with her back to him, the deep V scoop back of her dress clearly visible, the lustrous seed pearls as creamy as her skin. She talked to his great-aunt. He walked over to where they stood and draped an arm across her shoulders and bent his head towards her and whispered into the curl of her ear. "It's time we left. I've arranged for the helicopter to be ready at seven p.m."

She stiffened imperceptibly. Or was it his imagination? A hint of sadness stirred behind his chest. It didn't bode well for their marriage.

Enough! Cole dampened down such negative thoughts. They needed time. Just time. Besides, there was no turning back. He gave Tara a reassuring kiss on the cheek and his nostrils flared as he inhaled her signature perfume. "Mm, you smell nice."

"Th ... thanks," she stuttered.

He drew back slightly. "Don't worry, sweetheart. We'll be okay."

"Will we?"

She sounded scared and it alerted his sense of protection once more. He hugged her to him, trying to reassure her but her skittery response only alerted a wariness in him that refused to die down.

He rested his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Remember it's new for both of us, Tara. It'll take time."

There was that word again. Time. Cole had an impatient nature. He wasn't sure if time would be on his side. He kissed her. Felt the instant fission of a hungry passion rise in his loins.

Mike swarmed up behind him and he felt a sudden jolting slap on his shoulder. "Wait till the honeymoon starts you two."

He sprang away from Tara, a flush staining his cheeks. He felt like a guilty schoolboy being caught doing what he shouldn't. Heck, she was his wife for heaven sake.

"The car's arrived," Mike advised.

"Car?" he parroted.

"Yeah, you know, automobile. Man," Mike grinned, eyes darting to Tara and back to him, "have you got it bad, buddy."

Cole offered a derisive grunt. "Keep your opinions to yourself, buddy," he threatened. He turned to Tara, ignoring his best man's cheesy grin. "Have you got your suitcase?"

Tara nodded in the direction of the lobby, where he spied her Gucci case.

Crooking an arm through hers, he eased her around the room as they said their goodbyes. She didn't say much, and wore a rather strained smile that only incited his unease. He left her to say goodbye to her father and noticed her visibly relax as Maude assured her she would look after her Vincent and take him back to the new rest home. As she went to pick up her handbag, the same one she had used the day she'd come for the interview, Cole couldn't help but smile. How his life had changed.

Yeah, but why? You didn't have to marry her. Bed her, not wed her!

Cole choked back an oath and frowning, took one last glance around the room at the guests who had come to wish him and Tara well. He had no real answer as to why he proposed and definitely didn't want to go down the road of analyzing, even though his own subconscious had put him through hours of mental torture leading up to today's nuptials.

Seeing Maude across the room, he stopped. Draped in her standard cluster of guilt, she fussed over Tara's father. Maude was his only relative.

Not true.

Well, maybe not he conceded, but she was the only relative he acknowledged. He had declined in no uncertain terms to invite his parents, regardless of Maude's very vocal pleas.

"Come on mate, the driver's ready, so unless you want to swim to Waiheke, you better get a move along." Mike hurried off to the waiting limousine loaded down with their cases. Cole caught Tara by the hand. "Ready Mrs. Charteris?"

For a moment, she looked startled and her eyes widened. Wordless, she looked up at him. She nodded.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road."

As their vehicle sped away, taking them to solitude and privacy, the irony of his words weren't lost on him.

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The blades of the helicopter roared to life and a violent attack of nerves struck Tara.

Cole leaned toward her. "Here, you'll need this," he mouthed with a crooked grin, holding out a headset. Warm fingers brushed her cheeks as he swept strands of hair away from her face and positioned the headset. He flicked the mouthpiece so it was horizontal in front of her. His warm voice echoed in her ear. "Can you hear me?" he asked.

She nodded.

He tapped a finger on her mouthpiece. "You can speak you know."

"Testing, testing, one two."

"Okay Mrs. Charteris," he grinned. "Hear you loud and clear."

Just then, the helicopter loped off the ground and she grabbed his hand, gripping tightly. He gave her a reassuring smile. Within seconds they hovered several hundred meters above ground and circled, before

turning towards the gulf islands and leaving the suburbs behind. A crackling sound flickered in her headset. She turned to Cole.

"It won't take long, about twelve minutes," he said. "This is the company's Squirrel helicopter. Normally it takes up to six passengers. Keep looking out." He pointed to her right. "We'll fly past Rangitoto in a few minutes."

Turning to the view, she spied the volcano, a pyramid from all angles resting in a blue-green sea.

As he leaned closer, Tara stiffened. She sucked in a breath, aware of her husband's every movement. Her back touched the hard plane of his chest and he reached an arm out beside her and pointed.

"It blew up about six hundred years ago, now it's dormant."

Just then, the chopper darted sideways and it began to descend toward the epicenter of the volcano. Tara rested her head against the chopper's window and peered out, awestruck.

"Like it."

"It's wonderful."

"Don't worry, it won't erupt."

She caught his amused grin. "You never know when things will go awry," she retorted.

"I'll protect you." Cole's tone sounded so serious. The amusement in his eyes dulled, though his words were reassuring. She took comfort in them. No one, apart from her father, had ever offered to protect her. Not even Daniel.

Tara squeezed her eyes shut, determined to blank out all thought of her ex. He wasn't worth it. This was a new beginning.

As they left Rangitoto behind, the helicopter turned thirty degrees and headed across the gulf. The downtown skyline disappeared, although the towering vista of the Sky Tower still dominated the cityscape even from this distance.

Just then, Tara felt the helicopter begin to descend and once more she became entranced. "Oh look," she pointed at a cream stucco building spread out below.

"You like it?"

Her head snapped around and she looked at Cole, questioningly, hearing the expectancy in his voice. She took another quick glance at the building the helicopter was obviously heading for. "It's...."

"It's mine," he said, finishing her sentence. "Well, actually, it's ours. Yours and mine."

Not really, Tara knew. She'd signed the pre-nup. She would never contest anything. She came with nothing. She would go with nothing.

A girl had her pride.

Within a short space of time the helicopter landed and Tara, with Cole at her side scurried out of the beast. Breathless with excitement, she straightened and turned to watch as the helicopter did an about face, whipping up a blustering wind as it took off back towards the mainland.

They were alone. Suddenly her nerves erupted again, dousing any sensation of peace in a thick and choking insecurity.

"Tara." Cole whispered her name. The sound of his voice pulled her back to the moment and her head shot up. He stood close. Very close.

He trailed a finger down her cheek, a trait of his she had begun to enjoy. Her heart leapt behind her ribs. Excitement escalating. Overriding everything.

She hoped.

Flicking several strands of her hair aside, he tucked them behind her ear. He searched her face for a moment, as if looking for something. She wondered what he saw.

"Come on, Mrs. Charteris, let me show you around." But before she could move off, Cole cupped her chin, his fingers tracing a fire across her electrified skin. Dark eyes stared down at her, their depths glinting with jewel-like diamonds. "Did I tell you, you looked beautiful today?"

She held her breath. Waiting. His nearness made her stomach knot with tension. He smiled and the unremitting suspense she'd been struggling to overcome all day, evaporated in an instant. When she exhaled all her nervousness had disappeared, wiped out by his comforting embrace.

"Several times. But then every woman likes to be told they look beautiful. So you can say it as often as you like."

Nerves? What nerves?

"I'll try and remember that," her husband teased. Taking her hand in his, he linked his fingers through hers, and held her close as he led her toward the house.

Styled along the lines of a Tuscan villa, the creamy clay colored stucco walls and terracotta roof tiles gave the home an exotic ambience set amidst the rolling hills of a once volcanic island. Flicking the bolt down on a black wrought iron gate, Cole guided her into a walled courtyard.

Tara came to a halt, her breath escaping in a long-held whoosh. "It's gorgeous," she enthused as she gazed around in wonder at the lovely setting. Blue and white mosaic tiles covered the entire courtyard while along three walls were planters, each containing an espaliered creeper. Jasmine on one, a flowering passionfruit vine on another and on the third, a scarlet bougainvillea. All thrived in the island's sub-tropical island climate.

"This is truly paradise"

Cole simply squeezed her hand and she continued her exploration.

In the center was a two-tiered fountain tiled in small colorful mosaics. Water spouted from an inverted conical brass tap and trickled down the tiers.

Tara's gaze returned to Cole. Arms folded across his chest, he watched her.

"Did you design this?" she asked.

He nodded.

Walking over to the fountain she dipped her fingers in the cool, clear water. "I'm waiting for the music to start. It sort lends itself to a quartet, don't you think."

Cole chuckled and an easy smile tilted the corners of his mouth. "I suppose we could invite the local orchestra to provide the backdrop, but," he said as he closed the gap between them, not taking his eyes from her face, "I'd rather we were alone."

Alone.

Together.

Tara swallowed hard and her eyes came to rest on the spiraling dark hair above his open neck shirt. She licked her lips, nerves attacking her confidence once more. Damn it. She wished they'd just go away. Forever.

Thankfully, her new husband seemed not to notice her unease. "Come on, I'll show you the rest of our abode," he said, gesturing for her to follow him.

Silent and battling her increasing internal agitation, she followed him around the house. Grand in size, it however still afforded a sense of homeliness, nothing pretentious or ostentatious.

Terracotta tiled floors had been laid throughout and the walls were painted a clotted cream, though a few feature walls had been picked out in rich aubergines and rust-reds. Delighted as she was with the lovely home, she couldn't shake off her case of the jitters.

Would she please him in bed?

What if she didn't?

Would he scorn her in the same way ... She stiffened. Tara realized she couldn't go on this way and forcibly coerced her brain to shut down. She wouldn't—couldn't go down that track. She had to find a different focus.

That proved easy. Her husband. As he opened up the house, she found herself enjoying watching his precise movements, the way his long fingers worked quickly and efficiently. He'd been the same as he caressed his boat to life.

Would he caress her in this same way?

She imagined those fingers, twining through her hair, the feel of them on her heated skin, stroking, arousing...?

"Do you want dinner?" Cole's sexy tone interrupted her thoughts, startling her from her heated thoughts. Heaven help her if he could read her mind.

"Ah ... no, maybe a shower first."

"Sure," he agreed. "This way."

Cole carried her suitcase and she followed him up the stairs. He hesitated by an open door. "This is our room."

Tara couldn't help but notice the emphasis on 'our'. Or had she become paranoid. The fact that she was fretting like a Victorian vestal virgin hadn't escaped her.

She was no virgin ... but ... Oh dear Lord. If only she had never married. Never....

Just talk to him. Tell him, her sub-considered proffered.

Yeah. As if she was going to come out and tell her husband of two hours his new wife was frigid. How would that go down?

Tara mumbled her thanks and went to pass him, but his hand shot out and stopped her path.

"You okay with this, Tara?"

Was she?

"I won't rush you."

Suddenly the floor seemed far more interesting than looking at her husband.

"Look at me, Tara." She heard the plea in his voice, and couldn't refuse him. She never could. She looked into his intense eyes, held captive by the myriad of emotions and fire she saw there.

"It'll be okay. I promise."

She hoped so. He had promised.

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Showered and dressed in a lime green dress, the spaghetti straps too thin for her to wear a bra, Tara made her way downstairs.

Cole was in the kitchen, a tea towel tucked into the belt of his jeans. He had his back to her, washing vegetables under running water. For a moment she stood in the doorway and looked at her husband.

Broad shoulders, with a wide muscled back that tapered down to narrowed hips and strong, long legs, he was a sight, she admitted as she acknowledged the coil of heat pervading her womanhood, she would never tire of. Her husband sure was one good-looking fellow. As he turned from the sink, holding the dripping lettuce, she stepped into the kitchen. "You make a good kitchen maid," she laughed, her relief immediate and lightening her mood.

"I try to please."

There was no denying the unmistakable double edge to his words and her stomach fluttered as the beginnings of her nerves resurfaced. Deciding she needed to keep busy, she worked alongside him as they prepared the dinner and while she finished off the salad, he prepared the steaks and opened a bottle of Cabernet. He passed her a glass.

The ruby red liquid swished in the glass, glinting under the kitchen lights.

"To us." He proposed and held up his glass.

Acknowledging his toast, her glass clinked with his. She bent her head and inhaled the aromatic wine; its strong cherry essence hinted at the oak casks in which it had matured.

"It won't bite," Cole chided. "And neither will I."

She eyed him with a cynical gaze. She really didn't believe him. Cole Charteris would definitely bite.

Would she bite back? What would he taste like?

"Look, Tara, if we're to make this marriage work, we've got to feel comfortable in each other's company."

"I do." she whispered. "I'm not afraid of you."

Not you. Only marriage.

She didn't add, that what she feared most of all was failing. Failing him. Failing herself. She didn't want to add another failure to the bedpost.

That test however had yet to be set.

"Come on, let's eat."

As they sat in the rimu-trimmed kitchen, there was a wariness hiding behind the golden flecks of Cole's eyes. It set her on edge and she could scarcely swallow a mouthful.

He said he'd take things easy. How easy?

Gulping another draught of the heady wine her mind raced over every conceivable outcome.

The clatter of Cole's cutlery on his empty plate and the sound of the wooden legs of his chair scraping against the tiled floor as he pushed the chair back brought her up sharply.

"How about a walk?" He stood and held out a hand.

She stared at the long tapered fingers and the corded muscles of his forearm, admiring his strength.

Without speaking, she set her hand in his and he pulled her to her feet. In silence, he led her out of the house, down a pebbled path towards the beach.

"I didn't realize you were so close to the beach."

He gave her a quizzical look.

The reverberation of crashing waves could be easily heard from outside the house, but since they arrived on Waiheke, her mind had been elsewhere.

Yeah—in bed with Cole.

Her lips pursed at her own reasoning. This had to stop.

"The island is almost all beach. Quite a few people commute to the city via the 'Quick Cat'. Others make it a weekend retreat."

"Like you?"

"I built the house a few years ago, after an extended stay in Italy. I wanted to recreate the relaxed atmosphere."

"You've certainly achieved it," she agreed, though didn't say she could never imagine Cole relaxing.

Down the winding path, her hand still clasped in his, Cole guided her to the beach. It wasn't large; a crescent shape with a craggy headland of rock and tussock jutting out one end and, except for a few cawing gulls flying overhead, the beach was deserted.

She slipped off her sandals and dug her toes into the still warm sand for a few minutes. Then, in companionable silence, she walked beside her husband, enjoying the soft breeze blowing in from the ocean.

"Last year there was a colony of small penguins. I found them while out walking. Something must have happened to the mother because the chicks were starving." He pointed toward a promontory.

Tara listened as Cole told her about the chicks and having to contact the Wild Bird Life people. "How wonderful."

He looked down at her, a flicker of wry amusement on his face. "You seem surprised."

"No, it's just a facet of you I haven't seen before."

He shrugged and his hand fell away from hers. He turned from her and faced the crashing waves as they rolled in an onshore breeze. "I suppose this is where I ask what you actually think of me."

Silhouetted under the moonlight, Tara saw him stiffen. The sharpness of his tone surprised her. Did he really care what she thought of him? She lifted a tentative hand and placed it on his shoulder. He must have been holding his breath, because at her touch he exhaled in a loud hiss. "You do come across as all business, and not much pleasure. Sort of a workaholic. Maude said...."

Cole spun away from her. "No don't tell me. I'd hate to think what rumors she's been spreading."

"She cares for you a great deal, Cole."

His expression died as he turned toward the ocean and looked out across the silvery-black water. He took a few steps into the surf, ignoring the foaming water as it lapped around his feet. "Yeah, she does. She's my only relative."

"Only?" The word was a soft caressing whisper. Tara looked at her husband, standing ankle deep in the frothing waves, uncaring as it soaked his jeans. There was a soulful expression to the man as he stood at the edge of the tide. "Don't worry, Maude didn't give away any family secrets," she said, trying to lighten his mood. Oh, but how I wish she had. Maybe then, she would be closer to understanding the man who only a few hours ago had become her husband.

A gust of wind whooshed along the beach and she shivered audibly, goose bumps dotting her bare arms.

Leaving the surf, Cole pulled her into his embrace. His hands rubbed up and down her arms making her skin tingle. Her breath caught in her chest and waves of pleasure spiraled through her. Instinctively, her lips parted and she looked up at him. In that moment, the rhythm of his hands slowed to a sensual caress and a heady warmth radiated from his body to hers. He leaned closer, his breath fanning her skin.

Tara inhaled the exotic fragrance of his aftershave. She wanted to bury her head in his scent. Hold on tight.

Never let go.

Nervously, she wiped the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip.

"When you do that," he said, voice husky with passion, "it makes me want to bite it." He lowered his head a fraction.

Tara's eyes widened and her breathing stalled. He was going to kiss her. With a sudden fierceness she realized she wanted him to kiss her. Desperately. Again. And again, and again.

He brushed his lips across hers.

All at once it seemed she couldn't get enough of him. She reveled in his touch, feeling the solid, flat plane of his chest. Every part of her sizzled with a burning need. She wanted to tear his shirt from his body. With



more courage than she had ever experienced, her fingers trailed over the sharp angles of his collarbone and down to the buttons of his shirt. An intense excitement bubbled inside Tara, a sensation she had never experienced before.

Except with Cole. Only him.

A shudder of heat rippled from her toes to her fingertips as she unbuttoned his shirt, slipping her hands beneath the fabric. The texture of his skin against the pads of her fingertips was a heady aphrodisiac and passion and desire intermingled.

Emboldened, she dipped her head and laved her tongue trail across his heated skin.

He groaned. "This wasn't how I envisioned our wedding night."

Mortified at her stupidity, she stilled. She shouldn't have come. Should have turned him down. Damn. What a fool!

She didn't want to ask, but had to "What do you mean?" Her breath sounded husky with passion, laced with a fear that once more gripped her heart in a powerful clutch. For one fleeting moment she couldn't breathe, tossed back to those years of torment, to the constant haranguing. Useless. Sexless. An ice maiden.

Was she woman enough for her husband? Would she ever be?

"Come on, I have other ideas." Cole grabbed her hand, but she held firm and refused to budge, digging her heels into the sodden sand beneath her feet.

He turned, a quizzical expression on his face.

"It's okay, I understand," she said as a way of pre-empting the excuse she knew he would give. She didn't want to witness it though, and looked away.

"Understand? Baby, what did you think?"

But Tara couldn't answer, too embarrassed to voice her shortcomings. Roughly she batted away the threat of tears with the back of her hand.

"Oh, sweetheart,"

Two simple words.

That was all it took and the look of undiluted, raw desire mirrored in his dark smoldering eyes. Tara buried her head in the dip at the base of his throat and immediately felt the erratic throb of his pulse. One hand held her to him, the other smoothed repeatedly over her hair, as he murmured endearments. His actions stirred her wayward thoughts until finally she gave way to tears.

Tears for lost pride. Tears for her life, for what was, and what would, could—never be.

"My idea for our wedding night wasn't to make love on the beach, though to be truthful, I'd be quite happy to have your glorious body anywhere, anytime."

Tara eyed him with suspicion. "Are you making fun of me, Cole Charteris?"

"I thought our kisses and the way your body reacted to mine was more than fun, sweetheart. It was...." He pulled her into his embrace once more, his lips doing delicious things to hers.

It felt right. He felt right. It was as if she'd come home. "Perfect," she whispered.

"Sweetheart, you're perfect. You know what they say?"

She shook her head.

"Practice makes perfect. And I intend we start practicing."

In one swift movement, Cole scooped her up and cradled her to him. Under the moonlight she spied droplets of perspiration dotted across his chest. They were a silent call to something inside her she couldn't deny. Bending forward, she licked at the slick beads. A shudder ripped through Cole, delighting her.

"Let's go and practice, sweetheart."

How could she refuse?

Tara wasn't sure how long it took them to get back to the house because they stopped too many times to count as her husband's lips sought hers. Willingly, she succumbed to the drugging passion of his touch.

As they entered the house, he eased her down the length of him. A sigh slipped from her lips. She didn't want to lose his touch for a second, but to stay wrapped in his arms forever.

"As much as I want to ravish your delectable body right here and now, my sweet," he rasped. "I don't think a bed of sand is conducive, hmm." He winked, pointing to the sand sprinkled around them.

Except for the sound of crashing waves on the foreshore and the constant click of cicadas, the house was silent. No traffic, or city life. They were alone. With her hand still enclosed in his, Tara followed him upstairs. In their bedroom, Cole flicked on the light, the brazen glow forcing reality to the fore. Suddenly Tara wasn't so sure. Where the darkness of night had hidden her deepest fears, in the glare of a lit bedroom, where the king-sized bed dominated, she wasn't so sure.

"Sweetheart, a shower..."

Like a child being told what to do, though the intense sensual need hurtling through her was certainly no childish whim, Cole lead her to the bathroom and turned on the faucet.

"I'll get some more towels," he said and left her alone.

Grateful for the respite, she quickly stripped and stepped into the shower and stood under the jets of hot water. Her eyes slipped closed, though every other sense—smell, sound and especially touch seemed intensified as she lathered her skin with the creamy soap, her skin tingling with anticipation. A tiny squeaking sound alerted her and her eyes flicked open instantly.

Cole stood at the open shower door. Naked! Heat flooded Tara's cheeks as her gaze roamed over his nakedness.

Knew it. He's an Adonis, her sub-conscious butted in.

"May I?" he queried, with a wicked grin.

Entering, he closed the glass door behind him and stood beside her. He towered over her, making the shower cubicle shrink. All this however was only a vague passing thought. She couldn't take her eyes off the magnificent man standing beside her.

Her husband. The words had a certain ring to it!

"I think our practice was interrupted." He took the soap from her hand. "Here, let me." Gently he turned her around so her back was to him and began to lather her body, fingers kneading the tight muscles. Every touch, every single second his fingers grazed a slick path across her skin heightened her pleasure and her eyes shuttered once more. She leant back, resting against him as her mind emptied—except for one thought, and feeling. Cole and his touch, and the magic he wrought over her body.

"You like this?" he whispered, wrapping an arm across her. His arousal pressed into her.

Unable to find the words, Tara simply nodded.

Cole's touch lowered and he sought the cleft between her legs. She arched her back further as he shifted his hold on her and began a tortuously erotic path, lathering her stomach, moving upwards to cup her breasts.

"And this?"

A lust-filled moan of ecstasy fled from her lips as his fingers caressed over each, tugging the sensitized buds. "How could I not?" she responded. It was delicious. "I can't talk; only feel." Feel her husband's hands on her body, rousing her to fever pitch. His mouth reached for her earlobe and nipped it between his teeth.

"Definitely heaven," he groaned.

"True. I feel as if I've died and gone to heaven." Rousing herself from her erotic stupor took immense effort, but she had to do it, now, while she had the courage—while she managed to douse the past. Today, right here, right now was her future. She wanted desperately to grab hold of it. Take hold of Cole. She turned and faced him. "I want more, much more, Cole Charteris," she stated blatantly.

Cole grinned with unhidden delight.

"I want to touch you," she said. Tara watched him, aware of the molten heat radiating from him ... to her. Her husband was on fire for her. A secretive smile tugged at her kissed mouth. Good! "All over," she reiterated. "It's my turn, husband." She offered him a mischievous smile, surprised and elated at her lack of inhibition.

It was a first. But then, the feelings and emotions she felt at this moment too were a first. Nothing in her life could equal this.

Cole dropped his hands to his sides as if offering himself to her. The golden glints in his eyes darkened to a deep and lustrous amber. "Be my guest."

Tara almost purred. "I feel like the cat who's got the cream."

"Then lick me."

Oh, dear God. Taken aback by his request, she hesitated, but one look into his eyes and seeing the raw and blatant desire, candid and inviting, she could resist no longer and did exactly that.

Resting her hands on his chest, the wiry texture of the hair an abrasive aphrodisiac on the tips of her fingers, she trailed her tongue across his chest with slow, definitive strokes.

His body jerked, sparking a renewed fear coiling in her gut. She lifted her gaze from beneath the shadow of her heavy lashes and looked up at him with uncertainty. Had she gone too far? Disappointed him?

Not that. Never that. Please. Heat turned to ice and she pulled back abruptly.

"Baby, don't stop," Cole groaned through gritted teeth. His fingers gripped her shoulders, edging her closer. Sweat beaded his brow, every muscle in his face stretched taut with barely controlled tension. For one second, then another, Tara did nothing. She simply looked at him. Really looked.

He was ... beautiful. Powerful and strong. And he wanted her. His arousal spoke a silent plea. Screamed it. Just as did the raging need escalating within her, craving release.

Elated with the knowledge she was able to arouse him, Tara brushed her fingertips over his chest before she began to dot kisses down his torso.

Cole clasped her head with gentle hands, tilting her head so that she gazed into his heated expression. "If you continue, I don't think I'll be able to control myself."

"Who said I want you to?" she countered with a teasing smile.

A deep and rumbling laughter spilled from Cole's throat. "Woman, you'll pay." He pulled her up, her body brushing against him.

She offered him a cheeky grin, flicking her damp hair away from her face. "I hope so." And gave him a wink.

Who was she? Who was this person she offered to Cole?"

Tara couldn't help but be amazed at her behavior. It enveloped her in a deep sense of satisfaction. She couldn't remember such sense of being provocative and assertive as she did now, wanting so much to be united, aroused beyond return. And believing she could give, and take.

Cole took charge. In quick succession, he snapped the faucet off, taking them both from the shower and wrapping her in a huge, fluffy white bath sheet, before, once more, lifting her in his arms and carrying her toward the bed.

With a tenderness she still found surprising in a man as hard-nosed as he was in business, he laid her down on the bed. He knelt beside her and used the towel to pat her dry.

"You're beautiful Mrs. Charteris. A sexy seductress, exotic, glorious..." Cole's words trailed off as his lips sought hers with a fierceness that sucked all the air from her lungs.

Heaven had arrived.

He moved onto the bed, edging his hard body over hers and Tara found herself swept up by desire, kiss after kiss rousing her to the edge, and beyond. Her legs parted and he slipped in between them.

"Perfect," he rasped in her ear. "Just as if we're made for one another."

Made for one another.

It was Tara's last coherent thought as Cole united them and the escalating excitement of their joined bodies overtook.

Tara's senses took over. Her legs wrapped round him, locking him to her, willing him to deepen his thrusts. She rose up to meet them, joyously reveling in the epitome of pleasure and as their union escalated, the ecstasy culminating in a rhythmic explosion, so intense, Tara couldn't speak, couldn't think. She could only feel.

This wasn't sex. For Tara, this was making love, beautiful, erotic and fulfilling love. \*\*\*\*\*

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Cole's long, lean body lay stretched out beside her with only a sheet covering one leg. He draped one arm over his eyes, the other propped under his head. As he slept, Tara couldn't take her eyes off her husband.

Her husband.

Just thinking it stirred a joy deep down inside her. A smile bloomed slowly. But it was a real smile—true—honest, and heartfelt.

Her gaze locked on him, traveled over the planes of his face, softened by the unconscious realm of sleep. There was a faint shadow of stubble over his jaw. She wanted to reach out, touch it. Touch him. A flurry of unbidden goose bumps sprinted across her sensitive skin and switched right back on the video of Cole ... the moment he'd lowered his mouth, kissed her and oh dear lord in heaven.... kissed her womanhood. Seeking. Tasting. Pleasuring Oh, Lordy!

Now as his breathing unleashed a gentle snore, Tara delighted in watching him without him knowing it.

It had been all about touch.

Still was.

She wanted to touch him. Couldn't resist. Wiping the tip of her tongue across lips that were still kiss-swollen and tender, she trailed her fingers over his chest, down to the.... Tara colored, remembering their passion. So much pleasure in one night—Cole reaching for her, wrapping her in his arms, loving her, letting her love him.

And she had gone willingly and rejoiced in the fact that he had enjoyed their lovemaking as much as she had.

The realization was overwhelming. She was in awe of her actions. All reticence evaporated.

"Don't look, if you can't afford it," Cole suddenly chuckled. His eyes remained closed, though a decidedly wicked grin spread across his face.

Tara jerked her hand back. "You're awake," she accused.

He flicked one eye open. There was an unmistakable twinkle in it. "A lovely way to wake up, Mrs. Charteris." The sheet completely fell away. There was no mistaking his intentions. "See what you do to me."

Tara's lips parted and her throat was suddenly choked taut with anticipation. Again? Could desire be rekindled so soon, so fast, and so very, very hot?

Yes! It had. It was. She was.

With a burst of action, Cole rolled onto his back and pulled her with him. The unmistakable swirl of moist heat in her loins, as her hips thrust against his indecently potent arousal was instant. She straddled him.

"Venus rising." He cupped her swollen breasts, rubbing the pad of a callused thumb across an already sensitized peak firing waves of heat to spiral through every inch of her. Her lids lowered and she savored the delight of every sensation.

"Do you like?"

"You need to ask?" she countered. She liked—a lot.

Cupping her derriere with his hands, Cole lifted her up a fraction, and then guided her down slowly, bit by teasing bit, easing her over his very aroused erection.

She wanted him all. Now!

Tara savored the feel of him inside her, the gentle rocking movement, and the thrust as he edged deeper and deeper.

"Faster," she pleaded, barely able to control the fever taking hold.

Cole chuckled. "Wait."

"Damn it, you're enjoying this," she accused. She didn't think she could wait, her need overriding every single thought and word. "What I need from you, husband, is action. I don't need words; I need your touch."

"Like this?" His fingers kneaded her buttocks, letting her slip lower and infinitely lower down on him.

Oh, Lordy! Tara's eyelids fluttered and her head lolled back and forwards. "Yes. Like that." She didn't recognize her voice. It came in a haze of sensations. Strident. Pleading. Needing.

But Cole didn't go any faster. Tara was in heaven. She was in ... ecstasy. And desperate.

Sensation after sensation rolled over her like waves on the beach and an instinctive need overtook. Finally, he slid her to the hilt of him.

She grinned. This is what she had been waiting for.

United as one, they came together. It was a force stronger than any words, stronger than any doubt and as never before, the turbulent ardor overtook with the fiery passion of her orgasm as it rocked her to the very center of her being.

She had found love.

She had found passion.

She had found Cole.

## ***Chapter Eleven***

The honeymoon was over, but life, Tara mused as she watched Cole swim another lap in the pool was pure bliss. His sleek form powered through the lapping waters. A satisfied smug smile lit her face.

She had many blessings. One of them being that Daniel's taunting words barely entered her thoughts these days. Her inner torment ended the night she and Cole made love. Knowing she was the cause of Cole's passion had at long last purged Daniel's words.

She loved Cole with all her being. Any fears of not being woman enough for the virile, Mr. Cole Charteris were long gone, evaporated by the passion they shared night after night, and watching the glimmer of desire in his eyes as her hands and body took control and brought his passion to an erotic and pulsating conclusion.

Yep, life was wonderful and she absolutely refused to contemplate anything else.

They'd been back from Waiheke for several weeks. Cole refused all invitations to socialize. "I just want you to myself," he said repeatedly.

She didn't disagree, happy to have her husband to herself, enjoy their cocooned life at home. He went to work, but most days came home early.

Not busy with having to forage to support herself and her father, she enjoyed the respite, though she had started a business plan. Public relations. It was what she was good at.

Arranging social functions. Playing hostess. She'd been to enough of them. First at her father's side, then Vincent Fraser's protégé, who quickly became her husband.

It had taken Cole's encouragement to make her realize that she could turn her social skills into a business. It would be hard work, but loving Cole filled her life and had given her confidence. Just then, Cole pulled himself out of the pool and walked towards her. Droplets of water shimmered under the sun as they slid off his sun-browned body. He moved like a panther on the prowl, all power and toned muscle. Her heartbeat quickened, throat thickening with emotion and she licked her arid lips.

He stood in front of her, the sun at his back, highlighting him like a towering god. Adonis sprang to mind. "If you lick your lips in that delicious way, sweetheart," he drawled, "I'll think you have other ideas."

Tara caught the amused twinkle in his brown eyes. "Maybe."

"Good." Swiftly, he pulled her out of the pool chaise and into his arms. Her body braced against his, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. "Wanna' see what you've done to me, with those sweet teasing lips of yours."

The rapid pulse of Cole's heart thrummed beneath her hands as they rested against his damp chest. Mute, she nodded and his fingers wrapped around her right hand, and pulled it down the length of his torso stopping at the waist of his swim shorts.

Tara couldn't take her eyes off his face, and felt herself drowning in the depths of his erotic and teasing gaze. "See," he said, and her hand slid lower, wrapping around the thick corded length of him. He let out a deep throaty groan and his eyes shuttered.

As if in slow motion, she slipped down to the sun-heated tiles. They warmed her back, but not as hot as the blood that raced through her veins.

That was scalding.

Reaching up, she entreated him to come to her.

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Driving to the rest home, Tara mused over the route her life had taken. "Who would have believed it?" In a few short months her life had changed completely. She caught a quick glance of herself in the car mirror. Sparkling sapphire eyes reflected back.

"It must be love," she giggled, and the ever-present thoughts of lovemaking circled her heart. She couldn't help but smile as she remembered Cole's parting comment that morning.

"Better get me some vitamins today," he'd advised. "You're wearing me out woman."

Tara flushed under his sexy gaze, but for a moment, felt the telltale prickle of fear. Was she too enthusiastic? Too brazen?

He read her concern. "I'm not complaining. What man would when his wife loves him to death," he chuckled and pulled her too him.

Then he made slow, delicious love to her, culminating in another awe-inspiring union.

Life was definitely more than good.

As she directed the car to the off-ramp and through the streets of the up-market suburb and the rest home, she thought of their morning together.

The depth of her love for Cole continued to surprise her. She could never, ever get enough of him. The feel of his body next to hers, his hands on her, rousing her to fever pitch. To her, it was like the wonder of life. Just knowing he was beside her at night, even in sleep, fulfilled her.

Parking the car in the only available space left, she quickly locked it and made her way to her father's new suite of rooms. This too, she mused as she looked around while walking down the sunny corridor, was a wonder. Cole, as promised, had arranged for her father to move to a better facility.

Weeks before her father had been unable to utter a coherent word. Now moved to a facility where the physiotherapist was ever present he had made a remarkable recovery. The thought of it brought a lump to her throat. After her mother's death, her father was her only relative. The only one who cared for her, and loved her.

The only one?

Did Cole love her? Did he?

Tara didn't know. Their love was spectacular; Cole's love making decimating what had been a constant emotional roller coaster. He had made her confident in her sexuality. Taught her to love, and give love.

Was that enough?

She'd entered this marriage with her eyes wide open. At least she had thought she had. But now, despite the intense happiness that overrode everything, there was a hint of sadness, an ever-present 'what if'. Would he ever love her? Could he?



She simply didn't know the answer, and it was this fact that frightened Tara. If Cole couldn't ever love her, would he find someone else to love? Leave her. Alone again.

Now she had found him, Tara didn't want to lose him. Not ever.

But was good sex, correction great sex, enough? Would it hold him to her? Surely nothing could destroy what they had?

Outside her father's room she hesitated a second. She straightened her skirt and top, pasted a smile on her face, and then entered. "Hello Daddy."

Her father beamed his joy at seeing her. There was a rosy glow in his cheeks and his eyes twinkled with delight at seeing her. "Hurro," he said, groping for words.

"Oh Daddy, that is so good," she whispered hugging him to her. She sat down and held his bony hand in hers and smoothed his bedclothes. He seemed so frail. So different from the father she remembered, the father who was strong and vital. Successful.

"Fussing," her father croaked.

Tara laughed. "It's lovely to have you to fuss over Daddy."

"Cole?"

"Cole's at work."

Her father frowned. "Love him?"

She knew she couldn't pretend to not understand her father's question. He gazed at her, eyes eager and waiting for her reply.

"Yes, Daddy, I do. I love Cole."

"Gooooood."

She brightened. "It is good isn't." And it was. It felt right. "I love him so much, I just wish..." Her words trailed off.

"Better."

"Better?" she looked at her father, trying to understand his one word sentence.

"Daniel no good."

"No good for either of us, Daddy."

Her father nodded. His struggle to talk was tiring him. Retrieving the soft chenille bed-cover she wrapped it around his legs, tucking it in at the sides. She whispered, "Keep warm, and rest. I'll just sit here with you."

"Luv you."

"Oh Daddy, I love you too."

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"Love! What the hell is it?" He slammed a hand on the steering wheel, frustrated that the traffic had barely moved for the last ten minutes. He tried to concentrate on where he was heading.

And failed.

It however was a close call. Exiting the rest home car park, he saw Tara arriving to see her father, spied her in the car's rear mirror. He hadn't stopped.

It wasn't that he didn't want to see his wife. Normally, one look at her and he was a wrecked man. She overwhelmed him with a cataclysmic desire that showed now signs of abating.

But ... And it was this, which brought his thoughts back to his visit with Vincent Fraser. He wasn't trying to be secretive; he just wanted to find out about his wife.

Why not ask her?

He couldn't. Which was just plain stupid, but for some reason he was afraid to ask her.

His marriage delighted him. She delighted him in all ways. She was warm, loving and responsive.

What more could a husband ask for?

Again, he had no answer. But his gut warned him, there was something missing.

Now, as he exited his car and headed inside the rest home, knowing he'd acted like a fool skulking to avoid his wife, Cole wasn't quite so sure it had been a good idea. Vincent Fraser's body might be damaged, but his mind was one hundred percent alert, especially where his daughter was concerned.

"Loooove Tara?" Fraser asked, drawing the word out, taking Cole by surprise a few minutes after he sat down at his father in law's bedside.

"Pardon?"

"Loooove my daughter."

Cole played for time. "You're asking if I love her?"

Vincent Fraser nodded with enthusiasm and Cole gulped. A deep gnawing pain churned in his gut as he struggled to find his voice. He looked away from the old man, suddenly finding intense interest in the weave of the gray carpet. He was a child again. His parents' screams rattling through the entire house. Finally, he returned his gaze to his father in law. He shrugged "What's love?"

Fraser's face fell and Cole felt an instant sense of guilt. How could he have done it? Disillusioned the old man. Muttering a hurried goodbye, he escaped Fraser's canny scrutiny and bolted out the room as if the devil was chasing at his heels.

Which he probably was—his own personal devil, that is. Fear.

## *Chapter Twelve*

A portent of thick turbulent gray clouds draped overhead, their cloying presence shadowing Tara's mood all day. She stood at the window looking westward and eyed the landscape with trepidation.

As the afternoon drew to a close and the sun began its downward journey, a few spatters of rain danced against the window. The temperature dropped with a sudden force making Tara shiver, and within minutes the few raindrops became a deluge.

With a depressing sigh, she gave up staring up at the disheartening sight and turned away and headed for the kitchen.

Nothing improved her mood, or dispersed her morbid thoughts. It was as if she could sense something dreadful was about to happen. Finding herself back in the lounge, she put her coffee on the small table beside her, and tucked her feet under her, jumping at the slightest noise.

Seconds turned to minutes, and then hours, until finally unable to concentrate, her melancholic mind-set firmly entrenched, she wandered room to room.

"What the heck is wrong with me?" she groaned, sinking into one of the cane sofas in the sunroom. She and Cole were getting on fine. Okay, so he hadn't said he loved her, but she had enough love for both them—she hoped.

Once again though the pervasive questions stormed her defenses.

Would it ever be enough? Would he love her?

She squeezed her eyes closed, battling to stem the threat of tears. She desperately wished she could hide from those particular questions.

It had to be enough. It was all she had right now. Maude said give Cole time. Time was the answer to all her insecurities—she hoped.

A rumble of an engine caught her attention.

Cole?

She rushed to the window, but hid in the folds of the curtain, so he couldn't see her. She stared transfixed at her husband. And he was hers!

Buoyed by his arrival, her gloom evaporated. Life was good! She had to believe that.

"Honey, I'm home," he called chuckling as he strode through the front door.

She raced to greet him, delighted when he wrapped her in his arms. She lifted her face to his kiss, pulling away for a second to gaze into his adoring face. She would never tire of looking at him, she mused. He was so darn sexy.

"Penny for them."

"You wouldn't believe them." Tara parried.

Cole bent his head and his lips brushed against the soft curve of her neck. "Wanna bet."

But he gave her no time to answer as he laid a trail of feather light kisses over her already electrified skin. It set her pulse skyrocketing and her body arched toward his. Their hips collided and she felt the brush of his manhood beneath the taut fabric of his trousers. "Baby if those thoughts of yours are any where near the same as what's racing through my brain right now, then we're in trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Yeah, 'coz it means dinner will have to wait. I'd rather die of starvation, than not follow up on our mutual idea."

"What makes you so sure it's mutual?" she countered.

Cole's lips sought the tip of her breast, licking it through the fabric of her dress. "This tells me." And let out a deep-throated groan as he shifted from one breast to the other.

His touch was everything. It set her on fire and a raw, molten need flooded every fiber of her body with an intense desire to be fulfilled. The metallic ping as he expertly slid the zipper of her dress down set her excitement to boiling point. Next to go were the straps. There was a hungry yearning etched in his eyes. It matched her own need and as his lips sought hers once more her body stated its pleasure and greedily took what Cole was offering.

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"We're going to be late—again." Tara emphasized as she looked across at her husband. Naked, in all his glory, he lay languorously on the bed beside her, a salty sheen of perspiration glistening his superb body.

"Yeah, but it was worth it." He winked. "Don't you agree?"

Hauling herself up from the bed, Tara gave him a saucy grin and headed to the bathroom. "Come on lazy bones, the Brownlee's soiree awaits."

Cole groaned. "Socializing, after this? You've already worn me out."

"Oh you poor darling. Perhaps I should ration your ah ... bed sport," she chuckled, enjoying their happy banter.

"Just try it. Besides, my darling, I do believe you want my body as much as I desire yours."

Tara simply offered him a cheeky smile as she closed the bathroom door. Flicking on the bathroom light, she turned on the hot tap for the shower.

"We'll be late," she called through the closed door.

"Tough."

"Cole Charteris where's your social duty."

"Back here in bed, where you should be, wife," he countered with a deep chuckle. Hearing it sent a shiver of heat racing up and down her spine. How she loved the sound of Cole's laugh.

They said laughter was the best medicine. Perhaps it would be proved correct. She'd been fixed. Her body's responses to her husband's lovemaking told her so.

As the fine hot spray of the shower created a steam in the ensuite, offering a misty ethereal haze, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. A rose-pink blush tinged her skin and her lips were swollen from his

sweet intoxicating kisses and hair mussed from the tangle of Cole's hands as he'd woven his fingers through it. She traced a path across her lips and felt them tingle.

"Cole's mastery," she whispered.

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The Brownlee's home was lit like a Christmas tree.

"If I fall asleep give me a nudge," Cole said with distinct boredom as he exited the Jag parked amidst a row of expensive cars lining the Brownlee's driveway.

"Cole Charteris, you're meant to be on your best behavior."

He gave her a lopsided grin, one that said, no way baby. "Aw shucks, do I have to? I already gave you my best," he said cheekily, letting his eyebrows wiggle suggestively.

She couldn't help but giggle, and tapped him playfully on the wrist. "You never know who might be here, so network, network, network."

"Yeah, yeah," he parried. "Nag, nag."

Tara halted, as if doused in ice water and Cole turned back to face her.

"What's wrong?"

Tears threatened and she struggled to staunch their flow. "I..." she stuttered. "Nothing." She slammed her mouth closed.

Daniel called her a nag. Was she? She thought it was gone. Evaporated because of love. But no, one word and the haunting words came back in a crushing rush. Now, for the first time in many weeks, she was flooded with a fierce doubt.

Old insecurities rose out of nowhere as waves of panic threatened to overwhelm her and any semblance of calm disappeared as memories resurfaced. Not again, she wailed in silence. Please leave me alone. Hadn't he done enough?

From the corner of her eye, she caught Cole's inquisitive gaze and swallowed hard, battling to bury her rising dread. She took a few deep breaths to steady her shattered peace, determined not to give in.

Marriage had changed her, although up until the very minute she'd walked down the staircase to a waiting Cole, she'd been wrought with vicious insecurities. Loving him had drowned them out. Until now.

It wasn't fair.

"Tara?" Concern marred his face and she stiffened. She wanted to run. Fast. Far away. Run from the hurt. The damage.

No you don't—you love him.

True, but was it enough? The same old question. Still unanswered.

Nag, nag, nag.

Forcing herself not to flinch when she Cole's firm touch tilted her chin so that she faced his searching gaze, her heart did a flip-flop. How she loved him. His touch. The pure, male smell of his body. The glimmering

flecks in his eyes and the tiny crinkles at the corners. Everything about him. Her gaze slid to the full line of his mouth and she again felt the tingle on her lips.

"You okay?" he repeated as he wrapped an arm about shoulders. He pulled her gently to him.

Unable to find her voice, she simply nodded. She needed to get a grip on things.

"Come on." He gave her a reassuring squeeze as he led her toward the mansion.

Sarah Brownlee descended on them the moment they entered. "Welcome, my dears," she said ushering them in.

Resplendent in a rainbow of chiffon, Sarah's hair was a matching set. The ebullient woman was as vivacious as her clothes and Tara found herself having to stifle a giggle as Cole's firm grip on her elbow came as a warning.

"Delighted you could make it after all," Sarah enthused. "You don't mind if I borrow this hunk of a husband of yours for a moment?"

Unfortunately, her hostess didn't give her the chance to reply and promptly dragged Cole away leaving Tara to stand by and laugh as she watched his comical expression as he scurried in Sarah's wake, mouthing 'help'.

"You're a big boy, Cole. You can look after yourself."

Left alone, she eased her way through the throng of chattering guests. She recognized a few, and nodded politely, but chose not to enter into idle chitchat.

Instead, she tucked herself into a corner of the large room and sipped at her champagne and tried to appear interested in her surroundings. The decor was as vibrant as their hostess, yet it didn't seem out of place.

Perhaps it was because of the owner, or was it the other way around, she mused? The owner matched the house.

From across the room, she caught a glimpse of red haired Alicia Howard. Instinctively, Tara pushed herself against the wall, wanting to burrow out of sight. Too late. Alicia had seen her and with a well-practiced haughty manner, gave her a withering look. According to the newspaper's society column, Alicia was a regular on the party circuit.

But in the blink of an eye, Tara's evening had become her worst nightmare.

Someone else was here. Someone she never wanted to see again.

Her ex-husband stood across the room. Staring. His mouth was thin, down turned in a sneer. Tara wondered what she had ever seen in Daniel Overton. There was a slickness about him, false and pretentious. She hadn't seen it all those years ago. Instead, her innocence had been charmed, and seduced.

Tara blinked away the memories to no avail. They were ingrained.

She also hadn't recognized Daniel's narcissistic tendencies. His desperate need to be the center of attention, for everything, and everyone to be focused on him.

He had veiled his inability with charm, and destroyed everyone around him.

She didn't want to watch him, but couldn't take her eyes off him. He sauntered up to Alicia, kissing her on the cheek, hands sliding up and down her back. Tara gagged audibly and fought to hold down the rising bile in her throat.

Her knees began to shake and she felt the blood drain from her face as her vision blurred, but not enough to douse out the scene in front of her.

With precision, that belied her shaking hands, she put her champagne glass down on a side table before she slopped the contents on Sarah's very expensive Aubusson and huddled into the small alcove, taking sanctuary. She wanted to hide, to be invisible. However, try as she might, she couldn't draw her gaze from her ex-husband. He looked thinner. Worn out.

Do you care?

No!

Tara watched Alicia drape herself over Daniel, her scarlet lips pouting as she seductively nibbled at his stubbled jaw leaving a slash of red lipstick imprinted on his sallow skin. It was like blood.

With dismal clarity, Tara realized Daniel's presence still had a perverse control over her thinking. She wished it wasn't true. But it was.

Rooted to the spot, though her mind continued to whirr, seconds ticked by and a drowning sense of claustrophobia threatened.

She had to get out. Right now.

Frantic to escape, she searched the room for Cole. She couldn't see him, but spied the open door leading to the patio. The darkness drew her like a magnet and she quickly headed toward her escape, grateful as the night enveloped and protected her in its shadowy depths.

Irrational as her fears were, she needed to be alone so walked further into her new sanctuary, praying the solitude would rescue her scattered emotions. Seeing Daniel re-ignited all the hurt and anger, bringing the pain rushing back.

Ignoring the chilly night breeze and trying not to draw attention to herself, she walked briskly down the path, away from the chattering guests, and the blazing lights, guided instead by a single thread of moonbeam.

Finally, as she reached the edge of the garden, she found a stone bench and slumped down, grateful for its welcoming support. All around was quiet, except for the erratic pounding of her heartbeat as it resounded in her ears. It mirrored the out of control feelings that raced through her mind.

"Running away, moneybags?"

Tara's head jerked up and her stomach knotted automatically. An instant fear took hold and the acidic and unrelenting dread soured her mouth.

Barely three feet away, a sneer marring a face she once thought perfect, stood Daniel. But it was his relaxed demeanor, which set her nerves on edge and her mind in frenzy. How could she have got forgotten? Daniel always looked calm before the storm. Before an attack.

Sweat beaded her brow and she clenched her fists at her side, oblivious of the pain as her nails dug into the soft flesh. Desperate to clamp down on her panic, she knew she had to stand up and face him eye to eye, but uncertain if her legs would support her, or buckle beneath her like bits of balsa wood.

Suddenly, she snapped. "Don't you moneybags me," she shot back, the sound of her sharp tone thankfully buoying her self-confidence.

She stood up to face Daniel and took a step toward him. She wasn't going to cave in under his terror any more. "What are you doing here?"

Daniel's lips thinned. "You saying I don't belong among society, Tara darling?"

Tara cringed. She hated hearing her name on his lips; it seared her soul, tearing her apart. "Go away, Daniel..." She cut her words off. She wouldn't plead. Never again would she stoop to the level he enjoyed. Somewhere, somehow, a new strength burgeoned deep down inside her. She needed it right now. Would use it to stand up to this bully.

With the ease of a panther on the prowl, Daniel closed the gap between them. She jerked backwards, but the hard, abrasive surface of a felled tree stacked behind the bench blocked any effort of retreat. She looked every which way for escape. Nowhere. Like a hunted animal he had cornered her.

Battling to hold onto the vestige of her new found boldness, she tilted her chin up, defiantly looking at him. She would not cower she vowed. She wouldn't—despite the fact that inside she shook like jelly.

There was no warning. Daniel sprang toward her, grabbing her wrists in a vice-like grip. Struggling on her part proved useless, his hold on her brutal. He leaned towards her, his face only inches away. The pungent sickly sweet aroma of whisky on his breath hung in the air between them, causing her stomach to heave. She averted her face, but he clasped her chin and dug his fingers viscosly into her flesh, forcing her to face him.

"Am I so ugly, you no longer want to look at me?" he jeered. "Alicia doesn't think so."

A hiccupped sob forced itself from between her pursed lips. "So go to her. I no longer care."

If she was hoping to offend him, she was sorely mistaken. Nothing she said could say would have any affect on him. It was as if she was talking to stone and his thin lips stretched into a derisive smile.

"Such combative words, darling." He trailed a forefinger down the side of her face, uncaring as his long, nicotine stained nail dug into her cheek.

As the first trickle of blood oozed from the scratch, Tara gritted her teeth. She forced herself to remain rigid and not flinch under his assault, knowing from bitter experience it would invite further torture. Her resolve was strong—she only hoped strong enough.

"If it's Alicia you want, feel free to go and pursue her."

Daniel laughed, but even in the moonlight, he wasn't able to hide the strain his debauched past had worn ragged into a face she had once thought handsome.

"Do I detect a hint of jealousy?"

"You must be joking. She's free to have you. You are the last person on earth I would want to be stranded with."

"So it would seem. Of course you have another fish now."

"Fish?"



"I hear you've married again. Lured the Midas Man into your net. How you achieved it, I have no idea. Your ... ah ... enticements, and money," he said with disparaging amusement as his gaze slid up and down her length in a slow and intrusive perusal, "are few."

Anger burned in Tara's gut. She swallowed it back. If she showed her anger, it would only fuel Daniel. "You leave Cole out of this."

Daniel's face closed in on hers. His smile spread even thinner, as a dark brow arched. "So that's how it is?"

Damn! "I don't know what you mean." She went to push him aside, but he was too quick and lowered his lips to hers.

Dear God. Not again. She couldn't move. Her mind screamed no, her body held captive. He clasped a hand to the back of her neck and pulled her to him. There was no way out, never had been, always an uneven fight. Daniel loved a fight. Any effort to get away would only serve to arouse his lust. There was no way to escape his kiss.

Go limp. Give him the opposite.

From years of practice, Tara dropped into autopilot and her body sagged. Unfortunately, because the tree was hard up against her back, her body leant into his and Daniel pressed himself forcefully against her.

A choking, sour bile rose in her throat, clogging her airways. She wanted to be sick, but forced herself to remain limp in his grasp, praying her tactics would work.

After a few minutes, Daniel lifted away from her, rubbing the back of his hand across his lips. A moment of elation ricocheted through Tara.

Hatred glittered in his red-rimmed eyes. "Bitch. Don't play games with me. Think you can turn it on with your husband," he scorned.

His bared teeth made her think of a hyena. He leant hard against her and his abrasive fingers trailed over her jawbone, down to the juncture between her breasts, viscosly pinching and bruising

Tara strained to fill her lungs. Her mouth opened and shut, but no sound came out.

"He will tire of you, princess. Just as I did. Like all men will. You're no good for any man, not woman enough."

"No! You're wrong." Wildly, her head shook side to side, denying his scathing taunt. "It's not true."

"Isn't it?" His laughter echoed a hoarse was and scornful rasp. "Give it time, darling. Your husband will find someone else to interest him, just like I did."

With one final swift and vicious assault, Daniel smothered her lips with his and kissed her. Then he left.

And Tara died inside. Everything she'd built up these last few weeks. The hope. Confidence. Belief ... in herself, and Cole. Gone. Decimated. And it only took a few brutal moments in hell.

Heart thudding in her chest, she sank to the seat and screwed her eyes shut, wanting to blank it all out. Every sound around her escalated. She waited. Would Daniel return, decapitate every last vestige of.... it all.

The seconds ticked by. Slowly she garnered courage to open her eyes. She peered into the darkness, praying she wouldn't see her tormentor, relief instant. He'd gone. Sagging against the tree, Tara finally allowed herself to give in to the onslaught of heart wrenching sobs, thankful to be free.

But was she? Freedom came at a cost. The appearance of Daniel had taught her that succinctly. She would never be really free. Freedom would only come if she left.

As her crying eased, a semblance of composure returned. No way she could go back to the house and mingle as if nothing had happened. She wasn't that good an actress. She wanted to go home. She had to find Cole.

She needed to think. Decide her future.

With shaking fingers she tugged at her dress, wrapping her evening wrap across her shoulders and neckline hoping to hide the ravages induced by Daniel's hateful attention.

Creeping toward the house, grateful the blaze of lights highlighted the one person she needed, she spied Cole standing with his back against the patio doors, a glass in one hand.

Daniel's cruel words echoed repeatedly as she approached her husband. She choked back a sob and rubbed at her still stinging eyes. She could do this. She had to. Shoulders back, she tucked her small beaded evening bag under her arm and walked up to Cole.

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Cole cursed muttered under his breath. "Look at her. So smooth. Traitor!" The moment he said the word, Cole hated himself. But he'd seen it, seen her. His gut churned, bile searing a path to his mouth. He could taste it. Still taste her.

"Sh...!"

Tara walked toward him. His wife! She came up to him and stood staring, a doleful expression in her almond shaped eyes. Innocent? No. She had betrayed him. His brow furrowed and eyes narrowed as he searched her face. Her face was flushed, eyes haunted ... almost.

Were those tears? Na! More like crocodile tears. But as the fragrant aroma of her perfume assailed his senses, they flared and he felt the telltale pulse in his groin. He ground his teeth. Fight it, he demanded in silence. Fight hard.

Traitor!

"Cole, can we leave?"

"If you wish," he snapped. He didn't wait and spun away, uncaring if she followed him or not.

Liar. You care.

Cole's fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. He didn't care. Wouldn't.

He strode towards his parked Jaguar, distancing himself from his wife, unable to staunch his fury.

As she seated herself, he revved the engine. In no mood to speak and the door barely closed, he let go of the brake and the car took off, a squeal of tires as he raced down the drive and out onto the road.

Surrounded by silence, he carefully avoided glancing in Tara's direction, keeping his eyes on the road. Within minutes they were home. He switched the ignition off, unbuckling his seat belt in quick succession and opened the driver's door to step out.

A long tapered hand reached out and touched his arm. He froze, eyes shuttering, his lungs closed, bursting to explode as his jaw clenched and he mentally counted.

"What do you want, Tara?" he finally said, falling back to his seat.

She looked up at him, her cool sapphire blue eyes darkening to deep violet. For a fraction of a second Cole thought he saw pain stamped in those eyes, but he blanketed his own and shut it out. He would not look, would not concede. He hurt. Why he hurt so much confused—and scared him.

"You're angry?"

He snorted and his gaze dropped to her manicured hand still resting his jacket sleeve. "Too damn right, sweetheart." He saw her flinch and her hand dropped away as she blinked several times as if trying to stem her tears. "Why wouldn't I be? I'm not some wimp you can cuckold. If you think you can have the proverbial cake and eat it too, Tara Charteris," he drawled. "Then think again. It won't happen. Not while you're married to me."

He saw her shock, and the silent admission of guilt as it crossed her whitened face, the moment before she spoke. "You followed me?"

"I saw you heading into the garden. I came to check you were okay. Little did I realize you were having a liaison."

Not waiting to listen to her pleas, knowing he'd weaken the moment she batted those incredibly long lashes at him, firing memories of her lying with him, flicking them across his heated skin, Cole stormed inside and slammed the door behind him.

He walked straight into his office and snatched up the crystal decanter and poured a whiskey, swallowing it in one gulp. Maybe the burn would evaporate his pain; drown out the taunting words of 'I told you so'.

Marriage is a mistake.

Marriage to Tara....

The clink of crystal hitting the kauri sideboard reverberated around the room as he slammed his glass down. He cursed loud and violently.

Face it buster, you made a mistake. Should've stayed single.

Cole replenished his drink, taking this one more slowly. Now he knew for sure. It couldn't be ignored though he had tried.

"Cole?" Tara's tremulous call brought him up sharp; his glass stilled mid-air. He exhaled and his shoulders sagged. "Not right now, Tara."

"Yes, now."

Her curt demand surprised him. There was a strength in her voice he hadn't heard before. He nodded, not trusting his words. He nodded in the direction of the leather chair opposite the desk.

For a second, he saw her hesitate. "I'd rather stand," she said as she stepped closer to him.

Cole jerked backwards; the tantalizing aroma of her perfume that was an ever-present reminder of her caught him off guard. Inside, he warred with his wanton desire.

Shit he was a mess. One part of him wanted to ring her neck, the other wanted to curl the golden strands of her hair around his fingers and lose himself in her body. Nights spent in her arms, her legs snugly wrapped around his, the soft mewling he had come to know as he suckled her breasts, taunted him. Always.

A raging thirst took hold of him and he gulped the remains of his whisky. He took a deep breath and with determined concentration, placed the empty tumbler back on the desk. Folding his arms across his chest, he turned to his wife.

Her face was drained of all color and she nervously chewed the soft pad of her bottom lip. Memories of Tara nipping his earlobes flooded his brain and stirred his body. Damn his traitorous body. He had a hard on that nothing would diminish—except Tara.

No. That wouldn't happen. Cole shifted uncomfortably against the desk as warmth flooded his loins, threatening his sanity. But the stark and unbidden picture of his wife with another man brought him back to a distasteful and gut wrenching reality.

"Anything you want to tell me?" he drawled, noting with a deepening sense of misery she wouldn't look at him. Her gaze was everywhere, but on him. "I believe you had a meeting tonight."

"I don't know what you mean."

His wife's denial worsened his confusing desolation. "Come on Mrs. Charteris, or have you forgotten, you are my wife."

"I haven't forgotten, why would I?"

"Yes 'why' would seem to be the operative word here, sweetheart," he chided. "How about ex-husband. Ring any bells?"

Tara's eyes widened, shock registering and her face flushed pink. "How ... did you know," she spluttered.

"So I was right. It was him?"

Tara nodded and her head lowered.

"When were you going to tell me?"

He waited. And waited. But Tara remained mute. He swore ruthlessly and pushed away from the desk. "I should have listened to my own advice. You're just like all the rest."

"What rest?"

"Oh hell." He dragged a hand through his hair. "What the hell does it matter who or what any more." He turned on her. "We're married, Tara. Don't forget it. There's no way you can be hot to trot with your ex husband, not now, not ever," he roared.

"Who told you I was with Daniel." Tara demanded, fronting up to him.

"Alicia."

"Huh! And you believe Miss Man-eater," she shot back. "The likes of Alicia Howard would lie to their own mother if it would get them what they want." Tara's laughter echoed with derision and his gut heaved. "She wants you Cole. You, darling," she said her words taking on a caustic tone, "are her prize catch."

For a moment, Cole was speechless. Everything Tara said was true. It had been one of the reasons he'd employed her in the first place.

Yeah, but now you're married. Things are different.

"You're forgetting one thing. I saw you with him. I saw kissing."

He saw her visibly shake. Instinct in him wanted to cradle her to him. Hold her. Kiss her. He did nothing.

"Got your attention?" He knew he'd hit the target, but felt no jubilation. "It was quite a clincher."

"It wasn't like that. Daniel cornered me."

"That's a different way to put it." He watched the play of emotions on her face.

"You've got it all wrong, Cole. It was..."

"Enough," he spat out. "You're talking to the wrong man if you think to ease out of this one. Don't forget I've heard it all before, by the best. My parents knew every marriage excuse ever invented." Mentioning his parents only served to sour his mood even more.

You're wrong, Charteris.

Cole ignored his inner voice. Inside, he was dying as the room began to choke the life out of him. He had to get out. He needed space. He didn't want to listen to excuses. Excuses had been his parents' way of absolving their actions. Without a backward glance, he strode through the French doors and out onto the patio. The hum of crickets rubbing their back legs rose up around him, the noise crowding in on the tumultuous riot of words in his brain.

The partially shaded moonlight gave the garden an eerie glow as he walked into the garden. Half way across the meticulously manicured lawn, Cole grunted when he realized the irony of his location. It might not be where he spied his wife's rendezvous with her ex-husband, but here he was, the cuckolded husband, taking refuge in his own garden.

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"Morning," Tara walked into the kitchen. She tried to sound confident, but her insides were a roiling mass of nerves.

Cole stood at the counter, coffee cup poised, about to take a sip. His eyes narrowed on her as she entered and a telltale blush stained her cheeks as a different part of her anatomy burned.

She took a long, hard look at her husband. Bare to the waist, worn jeans molded his dangerously sexy and muscular legs. The brass button on the jeans was undone. She eyed the coil of black hair tapering down his torso, disappearing into the undone waistband. Throat parched, she licked her lips. It was incongruous. Despite their argument last night and the frustration she felt, he still had the ability to arouse her, his attraction hadn't diminished.

"Looking at me with that come-hither number, sweetheart isn't going to change facts."

Tara's jaw dropped. "I don't know what you mean."

"I wasn't born yesterday."

Not understanding Cole's reasoning, she frowned. She stepped closer, but he stiffened. His knuckles wrapped around the coffee cup turned white.

"Cole?" She had to make him understand.

"Stay where you are. Don't try and sweet-talk me, Tara. It isn't going to work,"

"But..."

"No buts. Nothing. I saw you with Daniel last night. Snogging in the bushes."

"Snogging. Don't be so disgusting."

"Huh! You've got a nerve. How the hell do you think I felt seeing my wife of—how many weeks is it now?" he shot at her. "Seeing the lovely Tara, arms pressed up against some man I've never seen, her lips in sync so to speak." Cole slammed his cup down on the kitchen bench, black liquid spilling onto the counter.

Shocked by his harshness, Tara crossed her arms over her chest protectively. She'd never seen this side of Cole before. It ... dear God it frightened her. She couldn't survive another Daniel.

"I told you last night Daniel cornered me. I couldn't get away."

"Yeah, like you tried hard, Tara. So hard, you had to wrap those lovely long arms around his neck. It's me they should have been around. Not another man."

"They weren't," she pleaded. "Well, not in the way you mean, Cole. Truly."

"And I'm supposed to believe you?"

"You're my husband."

"Yeah, and you're my wife, or have you forgotten?"

She sniffed back tears. He wouldn't look her in the eye. Somehow, she had to try and convince him. "Cole," she whispered, moving closer once more. "You talk about believing. What about trust? Are you going to believe Alicia, over me?"

A flicker of doubt crossed his face and her hopes rose. Would he believe her?

Or you'll lose him.

She closed her eyes and tried to blank out all negativity. When her fingers caressed the bristling stubble on his chin, he stiffened, but she refused to pull away, to give in to his stubborn resistance. "Cole, I married you. I love you."

"Hmph. Love." He wrenched away from her. "What the hell is that? It doesn't last. What we have is lust, Tara. Lust for your delicious body, which responds to my every touch. I only have to whisper in your ear and you're hot for it, sweetheart. But lust doesn't last. Do you hear me," he shouted.

He loomed over her and Tara shrank back, his threatening presence another stark reminder of her past.

"I've seen it all before. My parents were a prime example." He spun away from her. "Go away. Tara."

He didn't want her.

She'd told him she loved him and he didn't believe her, hadn't acknowledged her feelings at all. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she faced Cole's rigid back.

She longed to hug him, to feel his strong body against hers, his warmth penetrating her frozen core and listen to the beat of his heart which so readily matched her own rhythm.

But he had blocked her out, both physically and mentally. He wouldn't, try to understand. She took a step towards him, but hearing her footsteps he stiffened.

Faced with Cole's impenetrable stance, she ran.

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Cole eluded her completely.

She hadn't seen him in days, except when they crossed paths in the house. More distressing was the fact that he had moved out of their bedroom. She was lonely for him, reaching out in the long dark nights, feeling the other side of the bed. Empty. Cold

She was lonely not just his body, but his company, his mind. She missed their discussions where they'd bantered the pros and cons of various ideas.

"So here you are," Maude trilled as she came through the poolside gate.

Tara jumped up from the lounge and wrapped a sarong around her waist. "Hi," she said. Not wanting to upset Maude, she tried to dispel the misery she felt and pulled up a chair for the older woman.

"So what's this I hear about you and Cole?" Maude stated bluntly.

Tara stared wide-eyed, but snapped her mouth shut quickly.

"Oh you don't have to worry. My nephew hasn't said a word to me. However, the gossip line is busy. Word is you two haven't been seen around for a while."

"Do we have to be seen?"

Maude chuckled and reached a hand out patting her arm. "Call me an old busy body, but don't forget it was me who got you two together in the first place. I have a vested interest."

Tara struggled to smile and popped her sunglasses back on, not wanting Maude to see her pain.

"Perhaps if I tell you a little about my nephew, you might understand him a bit better."

Interest piqued, Tara edged forward on her seat.

"Cole's father James was my brother's child. James and Sophie, his mother, married too young. They were still teenagers. Oh they said they loved each other, they'd been going out since early teens," Maude added as an explanation. "But it wasn't enough. A child—Cole—came along and then Sophie was stuck at home. She hated it. While James was out partying, meeting new people, Sophie was at home with Cole. He was a sickly child and Sophie got no sleep. Then rebellion set in."

"Rebellion?" Tara queried.

"Sophie wanted to be part of the same world as James. At first, when she asked me to babysit, I happily agreed, until it became days before she came home again."

"You mean she left her baby with you for days at a time?"

Maude nodded and a sadness dulled her eyes. "I'm afraid so. I thought she'd get over her little fit of partying. I could see she loved James. But then one day, she didn't return. Neither did James. They up rooted and left."

Tara's jaw dropped.

"I can see you're shocked. It's no different to how I felt at the time. I was angry that James and Sophie could be so arrogant and uncaring for their son, so neglectful."

"What did you do?"

"Well in my huff, I applied for guardianship of Cole."

Maude shook her head, realizing she may have already said too much. "Listen to me waffling," she sighed. "An old lady's musings." Embarrassed, she fiddled with her dangling jewels and stood up. "I had better go, another society lunch you know."

Tara nodded. "Thank you for coming." She gave Maude a hug. "I understand better now."

"Humph," Maude grunted, but she smiled knowingly. "Sometimes we don't know what we have until we're about to lose it. Cole hasn't learned his lesson yet. He's too scared, in case he makes the same mistake his parents made. But Cole is not James, or Sophie. He's his own man in business. He has yet to realize it's the same in love."

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Maude's words stayed with Tara all afternoon as she wandered around the house, her sense of claustrophobia mounting, as the walls seemed to close in on her. Tara decided a dose of retail therapy was required and headed into the city.

Walking through the up-market shopping streets, she watched the hustle and bustle unfold around her. Everyone seemed busy—rushing somewhere.

Cole had been acting the same, never wanting to be in the same room with her if it could be helped. As she entered a room, he would curse under his breath and without looking at her, up and walk out.

Tara knew the Howard deal occupied his entire time as the final details of the merger were worked out. However, his actions and utter disregard for her was devastating. It was breaking her heart and not a night passed where she hadn't spent hours, tossing and turning in the cold, unfriendly bed, drowning her tears in her pillow as she went over and over the disaster of their marriage.

If shopping was meant to be a cure-all, then the fix it, hadn't fixed anything. She was still miserable and couldn't see any way to resuscitate her tenuous hold on her marriage. Exhausted, she searched a café for a vacant seat and sank gratefully into the chair, stored her parcels at her feet and ordered a cappuccino. She stared blindly into the passing crowd, blissfully letting the world go by.

What she really wanted though was to hop off, taking Cole with her, so the two of them could be alone to sort out their woes.

"Well, well the little wife is out shopping." Alicia Howard sauntered up.

Tara fumed, but gave the woman a smile nevertheless.



Alicia indicated the vacant seat at the table and promptly sat down. Not wanting to appear rude, realizing Alicia was the daughter of Cole's future business partner, she nodded and gritted her teeth. Why her? Why now? Leave me alone she wanted to scream, but kept mute.

Like a good wife? Where's your fighting spirit.

"How's the little wifey then?"

Tara gasped, shocked by the woman's vehement tone. "I beg your pardon?"

"It seems to me the wife isn't too happy. Can't hold your man perhaps."

"Don't be absurd." What did this venomous woman know? Was Daniel spreading rumors? Tara took several shallow breaths, trying to steady her nerves.

"It's a small social circle, Tara darling," Alicia crooned. "I believe the ex has been snooping, too. Cole won't like that. Many people would like to see you fall. You've taken the most eligible bachelor from us. Tut, tut." Alicia wagged a red-taloned finger at her. "Not a good move."

"And I suppose you're one of the women waiting in the wings," Tara countered.

Alicia's head tipped back and she let out a peel of laughter, her brilliant white smile seemingly un-natural.

Yeah and I bet the dentist made a mint out of her dental work, Tara thought with feline distaste.

"Of course. You snapped him from my grasp. Not very nice of you."

"So this is what it's about?" Tara wizened up. She let out a heavy sigh and discreetly wiped her damp palms down the sides of her jeans. Not a good idea to let Alicia see how nervous she was. The woman would enjoy it way too much.

"Jealous, darling," she cooed back. "Cole was never yours for the taking. You may have thought you could buy him with Daddy's money and the contract, Alicia, but Cole gives his love, it's not bought." Tara nearly choked on her words. He gives his love does he? Had he given his love to her? Since their fight and his accusations regarding Daniel, she very much doubted it would ever happen.

The realization depressed her.

"I wouldn't bet on it, Mrs. Charteris."

Alicia's words brought Tara out of her dream—tantamount to a living nightmare. The woman leaned forward, her exotic perfume cloying, making Tara want to retch. "Are you threatening me, Alicia?"

"Let's put it this way. Don't get too comfortable with the Charteris name." Her tone dropped. "Daddy's business deal with Cole goes through in one week's time. Your poor father is in a rest home, correct?"

At the mention of her father, fear spiked Tara's heart and goose bumps sprinted up and down her arms making her shiver with dread. "What's my father got to do with this?"

"You know what happened to your dear father, losing his business and all."

"That was ages ago. He's an old man and had a stroke."

"Imagine poor Cole if the business deal fell over. Thousands of jobs lost and the futures of hundreds of families destroyed. What it would do to your kind-hearted husband? He's such a soft-hearted fool," Alicia snickered.

"You're mad."

Alicia's smile disappeared, replaced with a dangerous glint flickering in her narrowed, ice blue eyes. She shrugged "Maybe. But I know what I want."

"Which is?" Adrenalin surged in Tara's veins. She was on the precipice of danger, waiting for the axe to drop.

Alicia trilled. "Haven't you figured it out yet? And here I was thinking you were smart." The woman's smile widened, though it never quite reached her eyes, which remained cold and lifeless.

Alicia reached a long scarlet finger toward Tara and drew the sharp nail over her hand, coming to rest by her glittering engagement ring "What I want, Mrs. Charteris, is Cole." Viciously, Alicia dug her sharp claw into Tara's hand.

"Ouch." Tara snatched her hand away. Blood oozed from the jagged scratch and seeped along her fingers, pooling on the white Formica table. Wrapping a paper serviette over the wound, she moved away slightly and placed her hands beneath the table. "You're stark staring bonkers. Cole doesn't want you."

"It's of no concern what he wants. I want him and you're going to give him to me."

"Over my dead body."

Alicia's brittle laughter again rang out around the café. "I wish I could arrange such an event, but it's a tad too messy. No, Tara darling, you're going to willingly move over and hand him to me."

Tara frowned. "This is a joke, right?"

"Give him to me, Tara."

Tara heard Alicia's blatant threat. The woman meant business. "Or else?"

"Or else his precious deal with my father will be cancelled."

"You can't do that."

"Can't I? Just watch. They sign the deal on Friday. Leave him, or suffer the consequences."

"You expect me to believe your father would cancel it on a whim from you?" Tara baulked.

Alicia offered a shrug. "Of course. Daddy only has me. I'm his darling daughter. He will do whatever I ask."

Tara found it hard to believe, but could she take a chance? If she ignored the witch, would she destroy everything?

Alicia Howard stood up, a benevolent smile pasted on her overly made up face. "Remember, Mrs. Charteris. Get out." Without a backward glance she strode away, leaving Tara staring wide-eyed and shocked to the core.

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For days, Tara paced the floor as she tried to figure out even the remotest idea of what to do. She came up blank. The deal was to be signed tomorrow and she was no closer to making a decision. Should she tell Cole about Alicia's threats? Would he believe her? Their relationship certainly wasn't at its best and Tara had no idea how Cole would react. He hadn't believed her in respect to Daniel. So why did she expect him to believe her about Alicia?

What was she going to do? She shouldn't kowtow to the ridiculous threats, but what if...?

"No! I won't." She looked up at the gilt-edged mirror above the sideboard and caught her reflection. Her hair was tousled and her expression wild and worried.

None of it would matter if she didn't do what Alicia wanted. Despite the woman's outlandish claim, Tara was of a mind to believe her. She'd seen the redhead wind her father around her finger, needling him till she got what she wanted. If she stayed, there was every chance Cole would lose everything he'd planned and strived for.

Cole was a man of deep commitment. Not only to family and friends, but dedicated to provide to those in his employ. The Howard deal would sustain many families for a considerable time. The new community needed a multitude of craftsmen, and it was Cole's intention to provide them.

Shame Cole's commitment hadn't extended to her.

If she left him, would it solve all the problems? Tara blinked back another stream of tears, and sank into the cushioned sofa, hugging her arms around her. An icy chill seeped through to her bones and the unending tears had left her exhausted. Tomorrow was the proverbial 'high noon'. She had to face reality. To stay and see Cole destroyed, as her father had been after Daniel had done his worst. Or...

"Damned woman," she snorted. Alicia and Daniel were of the same ilk. Greedy. They saw what they wanted, and took it, uncaring how it affected anyone else.

"Or go." The words came out in a whisper. To say them aloud made it only too real.

Go. The word was ominous, finite.

A loud peal of the phone echoed through the house startling Tara out of her deep-rooted nightmare. "Hello."

"Tara?" Cole. He sounded tired, his tone dull and lifeless.

Surprised by his call as it was the first time he had spoken to her in days, she fidgeted, straightening her hair and clothes as if he could see her, while she tried to gather her wits.

"Be ready at seven o'clock. We've got a dinner to go to," he ordered.

"You're not asking me, but ordering, Cole," she sighed into the mouthpiece. "Do you need me to go?" Right now, it was the last thing she wanted. She was leaving him.

"Howard likes to see a united front."

"We're going to the Howard's?" Tara sucked in a shaky breath.

"Anything wrong? I don't have time for any female hysterics at the moment, be ready, please."

The phone went dead and she was left with the receiver beeping in her ear. "Female hysterics!" she fumed. Then a soft smile lit her face as she remembered his last word. "He did say please," she whispered. And he sounded so very tired. Pain and concern squeezed her heart. Cole needed her.

Okay, she may not want to go to the Howard's for dinner and Alicia was the absolute last person on earth she wanted to play social get-togethers with, but, Tara Charteris would stand by her man.

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To believe dinner would be a pleasant affair would be to walk in blind.

"Tara, we're here," Cole announced.

She dragged her gaze away from the view out the car window and turned to face him.

A frown furrowed between his arched brows and dark shadows lay beneath his eyes. His expression proved unreadable. Every time he caught her gazing at him, he blanked away any emotion, shutting her out. It was only the soft pleading in his voice as he'd spoken to her on the phone that had made her realize he needed her. At least for tonight.

Surprise! He hasn't needed you any other way lately.

Tara's lips pursed. It may be true, but he was still her husband.

Yeah but for how long? What you going to do about the witch?

Tara had no idea. Time was running out—fast.

Half an hour making small talk and she was ready to head home. The inclusion of the effervescent Sarah Brownlee at the table was a windfall for what was a building up to be a nightmare evening.

Hovering at her side, Sarah caught her watching Alicia. "Don't worry about her." Sarah nudged Tara, indicating Alicia whose trademark scarlet nails raked a seductive path up Cole's forearm. "She's daddy's little girl."

Tara seethed in silence, but stalwartly refused to make a scene.

"I bet you'd like to go and scratch the witch's eyes," the effervescent woman chuckled.

"Right now it's those dangerous nails I'd rather rip right off her fingers," Tara countered.

"Cole can look after himself."

"I hope so."

Sarah wandered off and Tara was left on her own to watch Alicia slither her way into Cole's sight, vying for his sole attention. Was Sarah right? Could Cole cope with the likes of the malevolent and greedy Alicia? And if he could, why had he used her as a fake fiancé, then married her?

So many questions and so much doubt.

Alicia Howard had declared war. She wanted Cole simply because Cole had married another. Tara believed Alicia would stoop to any means to get her man and issuing threats was the vixen's first step in her plan of attack.

With her arms draped around Cole, Alicia turned to her and smiled. Tara felt sick to her stomach and the prick of tears welled. Tears seemed to be her constant companion of late.

Alicia raced towards the finishing line.

Not able to stand witness the woman stalk her prey any longer, Tara turned and walked away. She needed to think, though her peace proved to be short lived.

"Still around I see."

Tara spun round. She'd been followed. Alicia stood dangerously close; eyes wild like a fox about to devour its prey.

Determined not to weaken, her chin tilted upwards and she stared directly at Alicia.

"Are you thick, Mrs. Charteris? Didn't you get the hint?"

"Oh I got it all right."

"Time runs out tomorrow."

About to reply, Tara was left with her mouth hanging open, as Alicia waltzed away, hips swinging in a seductive sashay as she walked passed Cole.

But when Cole's unfathomable gaze turned on her, she wished once more she could get inside his head.

She loved him—and the thought just about choked her.

What was it they said ... love conquers all? What about one-sided love? And, more importantly, were her defenses against the formidable Alicia strong enough to hold their marriage together? Was half a cup of love as good as a full cup?

Too many questions.

And definitely not enough answers.

## ***Chapter Thirteen***

"You obviously know what all work and no play means." Maude Charteris strode into Cole's office, letting the solid oak door slam back on its hinges.

About to speak, but catching the fierce warrior-princess like glint in his great-aunt's eyes, he snapped his mouth closed and remained silent.

Maude positioned her ample frame down in the cushioned chair opposite him, fidgeting for a few seconds with her bag and dangling jewels. It gave Cole the chance to try and think straight. He'd been mooning about for days, instead of concentrating on the deal with Howard.

He eased back in his chair, wondering how he could put her off. Once his great-aunt had caught the scent of a problem and would be impossible to put off.

"So what's with you, my boy? I thought I brought you up better than this."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your wife."

A prickling fear sprinted down Cole's spine. He sat up straighter and swallowed hard. Panic coiled around his heart. "What has Tara been saying?"

Maude snorted. "You should look worried. Tara has said nothing."

"So."

"That's the problem. Your wife is mute where you're concerned. Heavens, you only married a short while ago. She should be gushing like all newlyweds."

"Gushing," Cole exploded. He pushed himself out of his chair and began to pace the room. "I don't want our marriage bandied about by anyone."

"Humph."

"I mean it. I know you got me into this fiancé cum marriage proposal."

"You should be grateful. She's a wonderful young woman."

Cole's heart softened as he saw the affect, talking about his wife was having on his great-aunt.

She affects you the same way, Pal. Admit it.

Cole struggled to shut out his internal voice. And failed. "I know." He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, looking down into her worried face. "Right now, Tara and I have a few issues to sort out."

"Few—huh! Better get round there now and sort them boy, otherwise you might have a cold and empty house to come home to, instead of warm and loving wife." And for the next ten minutes Maude championed Tara. Cole couldn't disagree with one word she said.

Then, thankfully, she left, leaving him to his musings and misery. He chewed over Maude's warning, until the chilling fear eating him ballooned and a wave of panic took hold. Innumerable sagas of 'what if' played in his mind.

What if Tara left? What if she stayed? What did he want?

Did he know?

"Enough!" He slammed his fist down on his desk, spewing papers in all directions. His secretary beeped a split-second later, but he flicked the ignore switch and screwed his eyes shut, blanketing out the world. The trouble was, its presence was invasive, continuously providing differing scenarios. Pictures of Tara; her sweet lips smiling at him, hands reaching out, wanting him.

"I love you." Her voice had been a mere whisper when she'd said it, but the words, finally, now rang clear in his head.

Cole's eyes shot open. She loved him.

Damn. Why hadn't he listened? "What a fool." He hadn't wanted to mirror his parents' pathetic efforts at marriage, and look what he'd done—mere weeks after being wed. "Turned my back on my wife."

He couldn't believe his stupidity. Without even realizing it, he had imitated his parents, letting the seeds of distrust and fear take over.

Scrambling for his keys, he wrenched open his office door. "Judith, I'm going out."

"But your appointments."

He shrugged on his jacket. "I'm not available." Too impatient to wait for the lift, he sprinted down the stairs to his car, ignoring the curious glances in his wake.

For once, he wished his sensibilities would let him speed. Grinding his teeth with frustration, his hands gripped the steering wheel. He was surrounded by a traffic snarl and a quick glance in the rear-vision mirror indicated there was no way out. Cars were backed up for miles and any thought of trying to sneak to either side was hopeless. There was nothing he could do. He had to wait and be patient while the patrol sorted out the jack-knifed truck blocking the lanes.

"Patience." He remembered a short paragraph about him in one of the business magazines. "When Cole Charteris wants to get things done, he makes them happen."

"Well not right now he doesn't," Cole moaned.

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The rat-a-tat-tat of Tara's elegantly tapered nails thrummed against the walnut side-table. The sound drove her nuts, but she couldn't stop. She eyed the phone with suspicion. It had rung at least half a dozen times this morning, and each time she answered, there was no one. Only breathing.

But she knew who it was.

Daniel! He'd started it all over again. When she'd found the temerity to leave him, Daniel had hunted her down. Just as he had the other night. He was the dog, she the bone, and he wouldn't leave her alone until he got what he wanted.

Trouble was, Tara didn't know what he wanted. So far, he'd said nothing.

The shrill of the phone sounded throughout the house once more, sparking her fear. Perspiration dotted her brow; her top lip and her palms instantly sweaty. She rubbed them down the side of her skirt, all the while the phone shrieked for attention.

Should she answer it?

Tara felt as if everywhere she were being hounded. Alicia wanted her gone, Daniel wanted...

And Cole. Cole didn't want her. That much had been plain for days. Her husband had resumed his silence.

She picked up the phone, punching the talk button. "Leave me alone, Daniel"

"Darling, very clever."

"I'm not your, darling. I am your ex-wife. Go away." Tara battled to keep her voice neutral. One hint to Daniel of the rising panic threatening to overwhelm her would give him the upper hand. It was time to fight.

"Oh I will ... soon."

"What do you mean?"

Daniel emitted a hoarse chuckle, a replica of chalk over a blackboard. Tara squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. Strong. Keep strong.

"Don't be thick, Tara. You have what I want."

"I told you, it's over between us. The divorce papers declared that."

"Mere paperwork."

"Legal and binding," she reported.

He laughed again and Tara felt a fission of fear take hold of her. She was losing it.

"Dear, dear, Tara, you do hold yourself in high esteem. It's not you I want, and as I said, Charteris, won't want you much longer either, but as they say, strike while the iron's hot. And

I gather this iron is flaming"

"Daniel, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Money, darling. Lots of it. Yours, to be exact."

"I should have known. You're a greedy man, Daniel."

"I have expensive tastes."

"You live beyond your means," she countered."

"You have money. I want it. Simple as that."

A fragile sigh escaped her lips and she sank back on the sofa. When would this ever end? "Daniel, I have nothing."

"Your husband does."

Tara should have remembered her ex-husband's insatiable need for what money could afford him. Hers, her father's, but when that went through his own mismanagement, he of course moved on to greater pickings. Now he saw dollar signs again, he came back.



"That's..."

"What's his is yours, darling," he interrupted. "Use that body, get me some money." For the next few minutes, as she squeezed her eyes shut, wishing she didn't have to listen either, Daniel told her exactly what he wanted, and how he thought she should acquire it. "Get it, Tara. I have pictures. Your body sprawled for everyone to see."

Oh dear God. What photos? Tara's head began to spin, the threat of fainting all too real.

"Tara? You're very silent. Don't you believe me?"

"I..." Should she? Yes. Daniel would do anything. Use anything.

"I have some lovely pictures of your nakedness, satiated by sex."

Did she really want to know ... she asked anyway. "How?"

"You were asleep, just call it a fetish of mine, a hobby. My insurance for the future. I thought it might come in handy, and you see, I'm right."

Dear God the man had photographed her naked. When? It was as if he heard her silent question, when he answered.

"On our honeymoon. You were so eager for it. And I saw the opportunity, and took it. Business, remember."

Oh, she remembered. Tears streamed down her face. How the hell had she ever thought she loved him. "You disgust me."

"Too bad. I no longer care. But I do want your money. Get it for me, Tara, otherwise that husband of yours might see some photos."

"You wouldn't?"

Daniel's sluggish coarse laughter echoed down the phone. "Are you daring me? Silly girl, you should have learnt by now not to offer me a challenge. I always win, Tara. Tomorrow."

Should she?

Shouldn't she?

Her mind whirled with all possible outcomes and the consequences of her actions. She scrambled in her purse for the scrap of paper she'd written Daniel's instructions on. She found it scrunched up and stuffed into the very darkest corner, as if not wanting to be found.

"How apt," she snorted. Nevertheless, she pulled out the paper, smoothing it out. The number was discernible— unfortunately. "So there's no excuse," she reminded herself. "Just do it."

She grabbed her bag and headed for the door before her courage failed. No further than the front door, the phone once again peeled, stalling her progress.

Tara swallowed. Would Daniel phone her again, asking for more? Dear God she hoped not. There was only one way she could pay him, rid him from her life forever. And it had nothing to do with Cole.

Her fingers shook as picked up the receiver and visions of Cole's body lying next to her, played like a video in her brain. It assailed her senses and tore at her heart. Tears streamed down her face.

"Hello."

Alicia Howard's thin voice answered. "About time. So what have you decided?"

Tara went to speak, but no words came out, her surprise total.

"When are you going, Tara darling? Soon I hope."

"I..." Tara stumbled for a reply, words started and never uttered.

"Glad you've seen sense," Alicia purred.

"If you think I'm going, just to suit you, you're completely mistaken," she finally bit out.

"Now, now sweetie, don't get angry. Who is it for then? And besides I understand Daniel is back on the scene."

"Da ... what do you know about him?"

"Oh, lots, and lots, darling. I believe he has a new hobby. Photography."

Tara nearly dropped the phone. "You.... "Damn it why couldn't she get a complete sentence out.

But it seemed Alicia had the joy of answering for her. "Yes, I know. Daniel showed me. Very ... ah tacky would be the word for it I believe. I wonder what Cole would think of his wife in flagrant delecto in full Technicolor."

The moment worsened a thousand fold.

"Cole doesn't know," Tara bit out.

"Oh but he could. You see, Daniel is really rather kind. He has offered me a set of the photos."

"He wouldn't."

Alicia offered a brittle laugh. "Wouldn't he? Have you forgotten how ruthless your husband..."

"Ex husband."

"Oh yes. Ex. Just call it insurance."

Insurance. That had been the word Daniel used. The moment Alicia uttered it; Tara realized the woman spoke the truth. Dear Lord what was she going to do?

"And Cole?"

"How sensible of you. You agree he is better off with me."

"You must be joking. Cole would die surrounded by the likes of you. You'd choke the life out of him."

Once again, Alicia's brittle laughter echoed down the phone. "Hardly darling. Though there is a certain part of his anatomy I'd like to squeeze."

Bile, tart and acidic rose in a wave in Tara's throat, choking her. Waves of nausea washed over her and she had to force herself to breathe slowly and deeply as she struggled to steady her shaking. "Don't gloat. You've got what you want," she answered. The moment she said the words, Tara realized she'd given in. To

both of them. Alicia and Daniel. She'd sell her mother's diamond and sapphire brooch and pay him off. And walk away.

She didn't have the strength to fight any more.

"If the deal with your father doesn't go through, hundreds, if not thousands, will lose their jobs. I refuse to be the cause of it." And this particularly was something Tara couldn't stand to be the cause of. She'd seen her father's business collapse because of one man. Daniel had been her father's favorite. She had married him, and he had destroyed everything.

"How very altruistic of you darling. Have a sweet life. I'm sure Cole and I will." Alicia chuckled.

The woman's words echoed a million times over as Tara slammed down the phone and spinning on her heels she dashed for her bathroom and vomited until there was nothing left. No feeling. No tears. Only numbness.

With a cold facecloth draped over her forehead, she tried to collect her thoughts. Her heart raced and she felt decidedly woozy. Feeling, rather than seeing her way, she edged to the bed and lay down, thankful for its support as the mattress dipped under her weight. Her eyes shuttered and she waited for oblivion to override the turmoil. With her brain cells like mush she didn't think she could make one sensible decision if she tried.

Oh, but you have.

Tara's eyes flicked open. The damp facecloth tickled her fluttering eyelashes. She yanked it off and blinked several times, rolling onto her side to face the window. A gauzy lace panel fluttered in the breeze and outside the sky was a clear cerulean blue. Inside, however, she was freezing. She pulled the blankets over her, cocooning herself in their warmth and snuggled down.

You've got a job to do Tara. Or are you going to fail Cole?

Failure!

She bolted upright and the covers fell away. She wouldn't fail him. She loved him with all her heart, no matter what he thought he saw the night Daniel cornered her. With Alicia threatening to destroy Cole's plans, how could she stand by and see it all slip away?

She couldn't.

The decision made, she acted quickly. To do otherwise, would tempt her to rescind. Grabbing a suitcase from the top of the wardrobe, she hurriedly threw clothes into the case. She'd told Alicia she would leave Cole. The woman could try her utmost wiles on Cole.

"Fat chance." The Alicia's of this world held scant interest for him. However, she wasn't about to stand by and let all he'd dreamed of disintegrate before his very eyes, just because of her intractable pride. She'd seen the Palmer stubbornness in the foreground before when her father refused to listen to warnings about Daniel's trigger-happy spending.

"And look what happened there," Tara fumed as she closed the case.

For a moment, she stood back and let her gaze travel around the room. Memories of wedded bliss tore at her heart, ripping it apart and tears threatened to spill. She gritted her teeth to prevent herself from collapsing in a blubbing heap on the floor.

Beside the bed was a photograph of her, with Cole standing behind, his arms wrapped around her, comforting and loving. A sob hiccupped deep in her throat. She tore her gaze away. It hurt like hell, but this was what she had to do. She couldn't fail him. Refusing to look around the room again; she walked out of the bedroom toward the stairs.

She heard click of the door latch opening and halted on the staircase, resting her gaze on the front door. With his jacket slung over his shoulder, tie loosened and the top two buttons on his shirt undone, Cole stood in the entrance, the dark wiry hair at the nape of his neck contrasting starkly against the crisp whiteness of his business shirt. He wore a world-weary expression, a sadness shadowing his blackened gaze. He looked from her, to the suitcase still clutched in her hand and back to her face and dropped his jacket where he stood.

"What the hell is going on?"

Tara took the few steps to the bottom of the stairs, her now sweaty hand struggling with the heavy case. Determined, she looked steadfastly at her husband. "I'm leaving," she said, thankful her voice didn't falter.

"You're bloody what?" Gold glints scarred Cole's eyes and his face flushed.

Her fingers itched to soothe away the tired lines, to cradle his head to her shoulder, to whisper it would be okay. But it wasn't okay. Alicia Howard had seen to that. So too had Daniel. His blackmail the nail in the coffin of her marriage to Cole.

Tara stiffened her spine and her resolve strengthened.

"It's him, isn't it? Your ex-husband. He's put you up to this."

"Don't..."

Cole dragged a hand through his already disheveled hair and his shoulders slumped. "Go on, admit it."

"Admit what Cole? You've got it all wrong."

"Hah!"

Tara struggled to find the right words. Were there any right words when you're about to leave your husband? "You want both of us. Is that it?"

"No." Her gaze dropped to the floor. She hated seeing Cole so hurt and angry.

"Then how about you explain."

She hesitated. She wanted so much to tell him—about Daniel and the man-eater Alicia who would stoop to devious levels to get what she wanted. But what if either of them showed Cole the photos. Tara would never be able to live with Cole's disgust.

She took a fleeting glance at him. His face taut, anger fused in every unyielding inch of him. Would he understand her motives? Or scoff and pass it off, only to find Alicia meant every word. Then where would he be—destroyed because of some scheming harlot? Visions of her father, his face in his hands, shoulders slumped in defeat sprang to mind.

No, she wouldn't let it happen, again. She would not be the cause of another downfall.

Cole took a step toward her and she steeled herself, otherwise she knew she would jump into his arms. The rich aromatic scent of his aftershave sent shock waves of desire spiraling through. She yearned for his touch, aware as the stain of desire heated her cheeks.

"Yeah, that's right Tara, my wife," Cole scorned. "I only have to look at you and you blush with need, crave my touch."

"Don't Cole, please don't."

"What? Don't wait, don't touch me?"

Tara averted her face. She was afraid to look at him. She had to leave, let him think what he wanted. There was no way she wanted to see Cole's business world collapse because of her, to see him reduced, just as her father had been.

"Let me pass, Cole."

"Why, Tara?"

"It's for the best," she whispered. "Besides isn't it time you made your way to the hotel. You've a deal to sign."

Cole reached for her, gripping her shoulders. His fingers bit into her skin, but she felt nothing. She was numb. "I'm sorry. I know I've been a pain in the proverbial, lately. Seeing you with that sleaze bag the other night threw me. I jumped to conclusions," he admitted.

"I explained."

"I know, but," he spluttered. He glanced at his watch and frowned. "You're right. I've got to go and sign the deal with Howard." There was a sense of fear and urgency in his voice as he looked from her, to the door and back again. "Wait, please, Tara," he pleaded.

But Tara refused to react refusing to look him in the eye, and when a single tear trailed down her cheek, Cole reached out and wiped it away, sending a seductive shiver tearing

through her heart.

Then he left.

Counting repeatedly to ten like she used when a child, she gave him a few minutes. Suddenly, with a heart wrenching awareness, Tara realized Cole was gone—and not coming back.

Isn't it what you wanted?

She should have felt a degree of relief that Cole simply turned and walked away. He wanted her to wait, but time wasn't an expandable commodity. Someone else waited for her. Daniel.

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For once, Cole couldn't care less that he exceeded the speed limit as he raced toward the hotel and Howard. He felt as if he'd been pole axed.

Tara was leaving him and his sense of emptiness was all encompassing. Life, he admitted would be hollow without her. His mind pivoted, strangulating him as reality hit. There was no way he could deny it. Home and Tara, had become synonymous. One, without the other, didn't seem right somehow.

Go on, admit it. Or are you too scared?

Cole remained mute. Scared? Him? Too damned right.

He had mistaken her actions, but right until this precise moment, he hadn't admitted, even to himself, that there was one word that described his feelings. The word scared him. Or used to. That word was love!

He reached the hotel in record time, ignoring his screeching tires as he came to a halt. He wanted to get this over so he could go back to Tara. If it hadn't been for the jobs the deal would provide, there was no way he would have dealt with Howard.

The man's ditzzy bit of fluff he called a daughter was too much to handle, hanging off her father's arm, inveigling herself into his company. Cole shuddered. Nope, he had a lucky escape from the clutches of Alicia Howard.

Thank God for Tara. But then, things had changed. What he thought had been a good idea, having her along for the ride as a fake fiancé had turned his world upside down making him eat his own words. Now, marriage to Tara meant everything.

Tossing his keys at the busboy, Cole strode inside the hotel, taking the steps two at a time. "The sooner this is over, the better," he muttered as he came to an abrupt halt. His gaze scanned the vast marble columned lobby and his sense of urgency escalated by degrees. He wove his way through the throng of people, trying to spot his soon to be partner. Perhaps he'd already gone up to the suite.

"Cole darling, what a pleasant surprise." Felicity Smythe-Jones rushed up to greet him.

Cole sighed. "Not now, Felicity. I've a meeting." Cole gave her a curt nod, wishing to hell she'd just disappear. He wasn't in the mood to meet an old flame.

"Here for the Howard deal?"

His searching halted and he turned his gaze to Felicity. For the first time he really looked at her; painfully thin, her sharp features overshadowed by a thick coating of makeup. Cole wondered what he had ever seen in the woman? "How do you know about Howard?"

"I know Alicia very well. In fact I've just heard the news."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Cole groaned. "I don't have time for this, Felicity."

"You always were the Casanova type." Felicity patted his forearm with childish delight. "Such a secretive man, Cole Charteris."

"Secret." Cole's anger intensified. "What secrets? Felicity, I've got a deal to sign." And a wife to get back to. "Nice to see you. Some other time, huh," he said dismissing her.

"Not so fast, cowboy," she drawled.

Cole's fury rose rapidly. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Now, don't get all het up. Although I must admit you've given in very easily. I would have thought you would have fought harder for your woman."

"Tara?" A cold shiver of fear shot down his spine. He took the two steps between himself and Felicity in quick succession and gripped her bare shoulder with force. He bent his head close to hers. "What's this all about?"

She blinked several times. "She's still your wife, isn't she?"

His fingers tightened. "Still?"

Felicity struggled to wrench herself from his grasp. "My, my, you are masterful."

"What about my wife? I'm warning you, Felicity."

"Just keep the brute force to yourself, Cole Charteris," she whined rubbing a free hand over a bruised shoulder. "Alicia Howard has other ideas for you, Cole."

"Such as?"

"Marriage."

"Marriage!" Cole parroted, his voice rising several octaves.

"She's none too happy you got yourself hitched to Ms. Tara. None at all, and she intends to do something about it."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm already married." And he intended to keep it that way.

"You think I'm jesting?"

Cole looked at Felicity, barely able to conceal his loathing. "Just get on with it."

"Alicia threatened Tara. Told her to move out or she would make sure the deal with her dear daddy was canned. Better ask your wife's ex-husband too. I believe he's been in contact lately."

Cole's eyes widened.

"I can see you're shocked. Alicia is one tough cookie and you had better believe it. She'll use whatever means necessary, Cole. Your wife knows how much you set store by loyalty to the workers and their families. Where is she by the way?" Felicity sneered.

Cole saw the joyous glint in her eyes and was all but ready to throttle her. Felicity Smythe-Jones was vindictive. She was enjoying watching him squirm.

"Gone has she?" Felicity preened, her laughter brittle. "It's seems Alicia got her way after all."

Cole saw red. He didn't wait for the lift and raced up the stairs. As he reached the seventh floor lobby, his chest burned for oxygen and perspiration dripped down the sides of his face. But he was fused into action by an unwavering surge of anger and headed for the suite where he was to meet Howard.

He didn't bother knocking and shouldered the door open. His gaze landed on Alicia Howard, sitting like little Miss. Muffitt, so prim and proper, beside her father.

"You bitch."

Howard sprung out of his chair. "Now look..."

"No, you look, you imbecile. Your bloody daughter is a danger to society."

"You can't talk about Alicia like that." Howard boomed.

Cole pointed toward a suddenly very pale Alicia. "I can bloody do what I like. The witch has threatened my wife, trying to destroy my marriage."

"You've done a good enough job of it yourself, Cole." Alicia interrupted.

"Don't you Cole me, don't you ever speak to me again."

"Cole, you're upset. Sit down. Let's talk."

He turned his attention to Paul Howard. "Not bloody likely. The partnership's off, Howard. I'll not deal with the likes of her."

"But Alicia is not the deal."

"You're damned right, but she'd like to be," he glanced scathingly at Howard's daughter, pleased to see she was mute, her wary gaze wavering. "Alicia has ideas of marriage. With me to be exact."

Howard turned to Alicia, who had now taken refuge in the club chair behind her. "Is this true?"

Alicia's silence confirmed her guilt and Cole snorted. "The trouble is, Howard, your darling daughter has already put her plan into action, threatening my wife. Telling her she'd force you to cancel the deal, knowing my belief in my workers, unless Tara moved out of the matrimonial home—leaving the space empty of course for her to come and console me. Isn't it right Alicia?"

The sight of Alicia blinking back tears made Cole nauseous. "Don't give me those crocodile tears. You're only concerned about yourself." He swiveled and fixed his gaze on Howard. The man was ashen and slumped to the seat beside his daughter. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings, Howard. I'd rather bankrupt myself than darken your door. It may sound drastic, but I'll not mix with the likes of your daughter where my wife's safety is concerned."

"But what about the workers, the buildings, the community?" Howard spluttered, stupefied.

Cole heaved a sigh. What about them? "I'll do it myself if I can't bring another developer on board."

Cole did an about-face and left. He couldn't stand another second in their company. He had a far more important person on his mind.

His wife was the most important thing in his life. He just hoped it wasn't too late.

Acknowledging his fatal mistake, a bout of nausea hit him. Was she waiting for him? And what about the ex? Had she rekindled her love for him? Visions of the two of the secreted in the garden replayed as if some penny black and white movie.

Please, God, he prayed silently.

Okay, so he had made a mess of it all, thinking he could keep things on a business level.

Well, that didn't work!

And didn't he know it. Business! What a joke. All business, no commitment. Right now he couldn't care about business. Only Tara. He had to get home before it was too late.



## ***Chapter Fourteen***

Tara's foot tapped a tattoo on the asphalt as she waited. Daniel couldn't have chosen a more sleazy part of town, but then she supposed sleaze went hand in hand with blackmailers. Hugging her bag close to her chest as yet another drunk lurched past, his alcoholic and unwashed cologne assailing her nostrils in a fetid wave; she screwed her nose, and pushed her back harder against the wall.

Where the hell was he?

"Waiting for someone?"

Tara spun round. "You're late," she accused.

"Tough, sweetheart, just making sure."

"Of what?"

"That you're alone of course."

"You think I'd bring Cole with me? Give me the photos, Daniel."

"Whoa, not so fast. Where's the money?"

With shaking fingers, desperate to get away from such a public place, Tara unzipped her bag and dug deep for the envelope. Her fingers slid over the smooth parchment and at that moment every part of her turned to ice. She shivered.

Blackmail. The very word ripped at her heart. Would it ever end?

Instead of passing it to Daniel, however, she held it fast, keeping her hand in her bag. "How do I know you'll not ask for more?"

"You don't, but then, that's a gamble you'll have to take. Will your husband believe you?"

Would he? Her eyes shuttered. Cole. How she loved him so. Loved him enough to leave him. Loved him so much she would set him free to choose his life and not be forced because of her past.

"No. I won't do it."

"Give me that money, bitch. Give it to me." Daniel's grappled with her bag, wrenching at it, but she held fast.

"No. I won't. Leave me alone, Daniel. It's over. Over. Do you hear me?" Tara screamed and she stumbled backwards, but came up hard against the wall. Daniel loomed large over her. It was happening again. Her past came rushing head long to greet her. Brutal. Vicious. Never ending.

A fist. His fist. A blurred vision of faces and screams and shouts. Hers, tangled with.... Cole. Cole?

"Leave her bloody alone, you thug." Cole's fist caught hard across Daniel's jaw. Bone crushing bone. His head snapped back, blood pouring instantly from a split lip. He stumbled to the ground hard, pushing to get up, but Cole's heel came down hard on an outstretched arm, pinning Daniel to the pavement. "Stay where you are Overton, in the gutter where you belong. If you so much as come near my wife again, I'll have you arrested. I believe there are some funds you owe my father in law."

"All gone," Daniel spat back.

"The Court doesn't take that into account, Overton, it's the act of embezzlement that counts."

"You can't prove it."

"Can't I?"

Tara looked to Cole. Did he have such proof? He acknowledged her unspoken question, and held up a hand. She said nothing.

"Scuttle back to the dung heap you belong in, and don't you ever come near Tara again, do you hear me?"

Daniel seemingly hesitated for a moment, his pitiful gaze, sliding from Cole, then to her. For a moment Tara almost felt sorry for him. Almost. For the man he was, and could have been. That had disappeared, overtaken by greed, and ingrained jealousy of what he believed his right, and for the taking.

He struggled to his feet, shaking fingers brushing down his dirtied clothes. He looked no better than the drunks that had past her in the street.

"You win, Charteris." Daniel shrugged. "But don't say I haven't warned you. The bitch is frigid, doesn't have a sexy bone in her body. You're welcome to her." He doffed an imaginary cap at her. "Goodbye, sweetheart." And he spun away, walking away without a backward glance.

Tara watched him leave, unable to believe it was over. All over. All those years of fear. She went to speak, but Cole bet her to it.

"Get in the car, Tara."

"No!" Be strong, Tara. Strong. Give him up.

Oh, dear God how she didn't want to.

You have to.

"I won't take no for an answer, darling," Cole bit out. His face cold and hard, she didn't recognize this man. She looked up and down the now deserted street. Darkness had fallen, the street lights a dim golden glow.

"It's over, Cole. I have to leave." Leave you, she cried silently.

"No you don't."

"It can't be, Cole. We can't."

She couldn't think properly, her brain a whirlwind of thoughts and fears, clouding sensible thought.

Cole had come.

Think Tara. Cole was here. For her.

"Tara?" His voice was soft as a caress, the sound so beautiful. She hadn't thought to hear his voice again. It lit a light in her heart.

She lifted her wide-eyed gaze to his face. He looked dreadful. Skin gray, eyes dark and stormy with worry. Automatically she went to touch him, but caught herself in time and let her hand drop back to her side.

She couldn't touch Cole. If she did, all her resolve would crumble. She had to be strong, for Cole. It was all that mattered. "What are you doing here?" she asked defensively.

"I could ask you the same thing."

"Cole I told you already I wanted to leave. It's the best thing for both of us."

"You don't really mean it."

She didn't answer. Couldn't. She'd have to lie.

"Tara," he whispered, his voice gravely, the husky masculine timbre hanging between them. "I know why you left."

Be strong, Tara. "I don't know what gossip you've heard, Cole, but gossip is just that—rubbish."

"You mean Alicia Howard didn't threaten you, didn't say she wanted to swap places with you ... or else?"

Tara's mouth gaped in shock. "Who ... who told you?"

"An old friend. Plus I've had a PI on your ex-husband. The guy's a jerk."

A croak of laughter spilled from her lips. "You don't have to tell me. I married him."

"Yes, but you're married to me now, darling."

"Dar..."

But Cole cut her off and rushed on, his tone urgent. "I don't want lies in our marriage, I want truth and honesty in all things."

"I told you the truth. You didn't believe me."

But had she really told him the truth? Where was her honesty? Had she ever been honest with him? Color fused her cheeks and she felt the sudden sorrowful overwhelming burden of guilt wash over her.

"It's okay. We can start again. To trust." Moving quietly he stepped closer. Her nostrils flared as she inhaled the scent that was Cole—a blend of earthiness and an exotic and supremely masculine aroma that was her husband. Tara let her gaze roam over his face. The hard angled planes of his cheeks and the dark brows which often arched and mocked playfully, his strong jaw which grazed her own when he kissed.

Tara snapped back to reality. "No, I can't," she sobbed, wrenching away from him.

But his hand stilled any resistance. "Yes you can. We can." He pulled her to him and cradled her to his chest. "Overton won't bother you again. You don't have to pay him off."

Tara's head jerked up. "I..."

"I know, sweetheart. The PI heard about Daniel's hobby with a camera."

Oh, dear God. Tara squeezed her eyes shut. She didn't want to hear any more, her shame total. Heat scalded her cheeks, rising to burn her scalp.

"They didn't exist, Tara. At least not the kind of photos the creep hinted at."

"They didn't? But he wanted money. Lots of it."

"And he figured you'd give it to him, to shut him up?"

"I didn't know what else to do."

"You could have come to me?"

"You? How could I?" she stormed suddenly and pulled away? "You wouldn't even talk to me, Cole. You thought me a cheat. If I told you Daniel had some ... some sleazy photos of me what would you have said?"

"I don't know," he responded with honesty. "But there is something I do know, darling. I love you. This is our life, no one else's. It's one lesson I've learnt. It's not too late is it?"

The air was thick with expectation. His. Hers. Was it too late for them? Inside she desperately hoped not, but the old fear she'd lived with for so long still remained, holding her captive.

Failure. Fear of losing him. That same fear overrode everything else.

"I..." she hesitated. Could she give this man up? Walk away, without a backward glance, uncaring. "Let's talk."

"No. I have to know now, Tara. Are you leaving me?"

Was she? Could she in fact, simply turn around and walk out of his life. Right here. Right now.

"Tara, what is it? Please tell me."

"I..." she struggled to find the words. "It's him."

"Him? Who sweetheart. Is there someone else? Do you want..."

"No!" Tara almost shouted and twisted around to face Cole. Her lungs were bereft of air and she took a huge steadying gasp. She looked down at his large tanned hands. Such beautiful hands; hands which had wrought delicious pleasure. Tara picked one up in hers, cupping it, stroking the tapered fingers, feeling the calluses. She turned it over and stroked it in a sensual ritual. She could feel the hard bone beneath the skin's surface, feel his strength.

You owe him the truth.

It was now, or never she decided. She wanted Cole. No matter what. Holding tightly onto his hand for the security of his touch, she inhaled deeply—and began.

"Apart from my father, no one has ever cosseted me. Cared for me." Tara saw surprise on Cole's face. "It's true. People would hover around for my father's sake, or worse, for money's sake, but never, purely for me. No one wanted to do something just for me."

"Not even..."

"No," Tara interrupted. "Not even him. Daniel didn't care. Daniel never cared for anyone, except himself."

"You don't have to do this, sweetheart."

She tried to smile, and failed. "Oh yes I do. You said no lies in our marriage. Nothing hidden. You need to know the real Tara, Cole. Not the Chanel-suited woman who came to your office to play a role."

"You mean the one who put a no sex clause into the deal."

She offered him a weak smile at that. "Yes her. That Tara was scared witless."

"And now?" he asked.

She thought about that for a second, before answering. "Now I'm Tara Charteris, not quite a new woman, but definitely a whole woman and I have you to thank for it."

Then he kissed her, and time became irrelevant. The taste of him was exquisite, something she would cherish forever— no matter what happened.

Not wanting to, but knowing she had to, Tara pulled away. She had a story to tell. She put a finger to Cole's lips as he started to speak.

"Hush husband," she teased. "Let me tell you about the old Tara. At twenty-one I fell madly in love, or so I thought at the time. Unfortunately, I was blind to Daniel's self-indulgence. Daniel was employed by my father and it was through him Daddy's business was brought to collapse," Tara bit out with disdain. "One minute there was an empire which my father had spent years building, the next, gone—poof—in a puff of smoke. All because Daniel thought he was smart. Bad deals followed by more. However, it wasn't the worst. I, in my stupidity..."

Cole interrupted. "Sweetheart you're not stupid."

Tara choked back a laugh.

"So you married him. Everyone makes mistakes."

"Yeah, I suppose they do," she agreed morosely. "But not everyone marries their father's protégé, only to find out the so-called protégé is a fraud." For a moment, she found herself unable to speak and her voice trailed off as memories returned. A screaming Daniel, vicious and angry. She blinked back tears. "At first our marriage was wonderful. I thought the sun shone out of..." she blushed. "Well, you know what I mean."

Cole frowned, but nodded.

"It didn't take long. Daniel would stay away. First one day, then a week. I would phone work, only to be told he was unavailable."

"You couldn't ask your father?"

Tara's body jerked with a shudder as she struggled to focus on Cole. "How could I? What would I say? Daddy have you seen my husband? It was pride you see, and certainly pride was about to disintegrate before a fall."

A slight smile twitched at the corners of Cole's lips. "I think I know exactly what you mean."

"Mm." She knew he did. Cole's pride had taken a battering in the last few days.

"Go on," he encouraged.

"It wasn't just his absence which alerted me to things not being quite right. In ... bed, things weren't right either. Daniel would accuse me of being frigid, of not turning him on."

"You've got to be joking?"

She shook her head; strands of hair fell around her face, hiding her telltale blush.

The tip of Cole's finger lifted her face to his. "Sweetheart. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings by laughing, but Daniel must have been mad. You're one sexy lady, darling. You're all any man could ever want in a wife. All I ever want."

Tara's heart swelled. "That is the loveliest thing anyone has every said to me," she whispered.

"It's true. But then, would the words I love you, come in second best."

Tara's eyes widened and her lips parted with surprise. "You love me?"

Cole nodded and his eyes twinkled as he smiled broadly at her. "With all my heart."

For a time, the tale she was telling him melted away as he kissed her. It was as if he was trying to convince her of his love, though she didn't need convincing. All he needed to say were those words. It was enough.

Breathless, she pulled back and looked at Cole. The telltale shadows under his eyes bespoke his lack of sleep, his distraught search for her. Her hand rested on his chest. She could feel the rapid thump of his heartbeat beneath. It matched her excited pulse.

Those three words had changed everything. Obliterated the hurt and the pain of years, the fear of repeat, the fear of loving. Of failing. Of losing her heart, only to be condemned.

Everything had changed.

"Tell me one thing, Tara. Did Daniel hit you?"

Her silence screamed the truth and Cole's fists clenched, his control slipping several notches. "I'll bloody kill him."

"No, Cole. It's over."

"But..."

"You love me?"

"With all my heart."

"Daniel has gone—forever." As she uttered the words, it was as if a huge weight lifted off her heart and for the first time, a lightness of spirit beamed inside, giving her life.

"You know I must thank Maude."

Tara lifted her head slightly from Cole's chest. "Mm."

"She brought me the best candidate."

"But why offer marriage?"

"When I could have merely handed you a check," he teased.

Tara flushed pink and nodded.

"I suppose that would have been the easier route to take," he admitted, "but I realized it would mean losing you. I didn't want to take that chance. I had become used to my fiancée in my life and it was rather nice."

"Nice?"

"Mm," Cole drawled, letting his finger trace the outline of Tara's soft, sweet lips, remembering their taste, their touch and the erotic pleasure they'd given him.

"So nice, I wanted to make it permanent, though I kept telling myself it was purely business—without commitment. I thought it would be easy, when in fact I was already truly in love with you, though I hadn't recognized it. Seeing you with

Daniel stirred feelings I hadn't acknowledged that I love you Tara, deeply, totally."

"There's only one problem, Cole," Tara said with mock severity.

His heart stopped. She looked so somber that his gut churned with sudden tension. "Sweetheart I'll do anything, name it."

"Well, actually there are two things."

"Fire away."

"The Howard deal. Don't lose it. Go for it. Hundreds of people depend on your deal, not only you and me. Don't ruin it because of some petty grievances. If you cancel the deal with Paul Howard, Alicia wins. Let's prove her wrong, Cole. Sign the deal, make it the best new community out there and people will come from far and wide to be involved."

"Doesn't sound so hard," he answered letting out a sigh of relief. "But you said two things."

"Mm," Her smile widened as she snuggled closer to him.

Her hands reached for his shirt and pulled it out from the waistband of his trousers, warm fingers massaging his already sensitive skin. Desire shot into overdrive as her breath fanned his neck, making his skin come alive.

"Whoa, sweetheart. We need to move to ah ... more salubrious surroundings, because if you carry on like this I may not even be alert to hear your second request."

"Oh, but you will," she said offering him a teasing smile. "The contract," she whispered. "The one that stipulates 'Wife wanted, no sex necessary'. Do you remember the specific clause, darling?"

"How the heck can I remember anything when you do such erotic things with the tip of your tongue. Focusing on one syllable is damn near impossible."

"Ooh you poor thing," she cooed; dotting butterfly kisses all over his face. "Concentrate, Charteris, this is very important."

"Yes, ma'am. Anything you say."

"Good, that's what I like to hear. Now, any chance we could scrap the clause. Life without making love with you, Cole darling, would be um...."

Cole grinned mischievously. "Take it from me Mrs. Charteris, from this very moment forward, that specific clause has been detonated. I move that I spend hours making love with you. It's certainly on the agenda."

"Agenda agreed." Wrapping her hands around his neck Tara pulled him down to her, seeking his beautiful mouth and savoring the exquisitely powerful heady sensation of being a woman in love, who was loved in return.

"Making up for lost time?"

Tara grinned up at him. "You bet."

The End