

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



*Sinful
Intentions*
AMY REDWOOD

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Amy Redwood

A jilted bride, a wolfishly sexy stranger, one sinful attraction under New Zealand's sun.

When Katherine finds out her fiancé cheated on her, her heart is bruised. With a mission to get her life back on track, she takes the first flight to Auckland, New Zealand. And bumps heads with a sexy stranger. Their attraction is instant, powerful and undeniable. Taking a vacation from being a good girl, she succumbs to this sinful stranger who pushes the limits of her sexual needs as he explores every inch of her body. No strings of course.

Trent seduces her...in a bed, at the beach, in a truck, against the wall...until the wolf within him lifts its head and pays attention. Suddenly, after a tiny bite, it's everything but no-strings.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

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ISBN 9781419929489

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Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication July 2010

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SINFUL INTENTIONS

Amy Redwood

Chapter One

"Welcome to New Zealand, Miss Miles." The customs officer returned Katherine's passport.

"Thanks," she said, scratching her finger absentmindedly, and headed toward the sliding exit doors. Since she'd departed from JFK Airport, the empty spot on her hand had started itching and gotten worse during the twenty-three hours of flight.

It was as if her skin missed the three-carat, princess-cut ring.

Fuck you, Simon.

Warm, humid wind blew against her face as she left the airport hall. Bright floodlights turned the night into a fake day.

She scanned the area outside the airport, wondering if cabs were a rare commodity in Auckland. About to return inside the terminal to find a phone—or a bench to crash on—she spotted a beacon of hope. Fifty yards away, a bright yellow sign flickered on, off and on again on a cab's roof. Wheeling her suitcase along, she stalked toward the cab as its engine roared up. She doubled her speed—under screeching noises of protest from her suitcase. With a faint crunch, it swayed and toppled over.

Unbalanced, she tripped, skinning her knee as she fell.

Crouching, she examined the damage. One of the little wheels had broken off, effectively sweeping her off her feet. Muttering a few choice words, she shut her mouth as hard footsteps echoed on the pavement.

"You okay?" a deep voice asked from above her head.

"Not lately," she said under her breath, keeping her head down. "I'm okay, thanks for checking though," she said louder, praying that whoever stood behind her would get lost. "I'll just sue the suitcase company."

"Good luck," he said, and walked on, a low laugh in his throat.

She gave a sigh, straightening up again, looking after the guy who was heading, tall and broad-shouldered and with a perfectly working suitcase, toward *her* cab.

"Hey, hands off my ride!" Mentally marking him as a dirty car thief—if one with a sexy laugh—she ran after him as fast as knee and suitcase allowed, closed the remaining distance and skidded to a halt when she drew level.

Catching her breath, she tapped on his shoulder. "Excuse me, but—"

"Yes?" He turned around, one eyebrow raised quizzically. His dark gaze skimmed over her face, chest, down to her legs. "How's the knee?"

"I saw it first."

"Saw *what* first?"

Still slightly out of breath, she stepped over to the car's trunk, opened it and hurled her suitcase inside. "The cab," she said. "I saw it first." She shut the trunk with a sharp, final-sounding snap and went for the back passenger door. But as much as she tried, the door remained closed. She knocked at the window, wondering what was wrong with the driver.

"This side is open," he said, leaning against the door, evidently enjoying himself.

"Just as well," she said, stepping around the car, trying to find her inner calm. "Then step away from the door."

"Or else?" A smile played around his lips.

She gave him the coolest top-to-bottom scan she could pull off, realizing a little too late that she was checking out an exceptionally striking exemplar of car thief.

Damn.

She'd had it up to *here* with guys like him.

Fuck you, Simon.

Working her nail over her itching ring finger, she caught his gaze, held it for a moment. If he thought he could steal her cab away from under her nose, then it was maybe time to play dirty. She didn't like it, but she really wanted to get into her hotel bed and sleep.

"Look," she said, giving him a calculated shy smile and, for good measure, tuned her voice to a soft timbre, "I've just been on a plane for *days* —"

"So was I."

"But surely *you* don't feel frightened waiting for another cab in the middle of the night." She placed her hand lightly on his shoulder, sure to catch him by his manly pride. Unexpectedly, her heart skipped as the warmth of his skin seeped into her palm.

"I don't buy into the damsel-in-distress act, sorry." Gone was the spark in his eyes and he wore a much cooler expression. "But I'm sure that kind of manipulation usually works for you."

"Ah, screw you," she said under her breath, and snatched her hand from his shoulder, hearing another low laugh coming from him. Well, she had misjudged him. Or she was a lousy actor. Or both.

"You're a Yankee," he said.

"Gosh, what gave it away?"

"Your horrible accent."

"Now aren't you clever." She refrained from kicking his shin. "And you must be one of the famous local blokes known worldwide for their polite helpfulness."

"Thanks, yes, born and bred New Zealander, and we're not only known for our helpfulness."

He had the nerve to wink.

"Funny." She scowled up at him until the corners of her mouth lifted because his grin was contagious and she was becoming tired of being a bitch.

The car honked twice and they both looked up, startled. After a quick glance at her, he stepped to the driver and talked to him in a low voice through the rolled-down window, leaving the door unguarded.

Moving quickly, she dropped into the cab's backseat. "Downtown, Metro Hotel. Fast, please. Extra tip if you manage to drive over the guy's feet," she said with a grin before her conscience kicked in. "Just kidding," she added hastily.

The driver's chuckle was the only response, but the trunk was being opened and closed again. "You got to be kidding," she murmured, and sure enough, the guy squeezed into the seat next to her and shut the door with a snap.

"I heard you're heading for the city," he said, and gave the driver a tap on the shoulder. "That's my direction too. Let's share the ride."

"I don't *want* to share the ride." She tried in vain to create more space between them. With him sitting next to her, the seat was much too small and he invaded her personal space. The engine roared, and with a squeal of wheels, the cab sped up and headed north toward Auckland.

"I hope you're not a serial ax killer or something," she said, and moved her legs farther away from his, but their knees still touched.

"I was just thinking the very same thing about you," he said in a mock grave voice.

He smelled kind of nice, which wasn't helpful, and her skirt had ridden up her thighs. She wiggled as casually as possible to tug it down. The speed made her dizzy and the first pangs of a headache hit her temples. The impression that they drove on the wrong side of the road didn't help either. Damn that left-sided traffic. She closed her eyes, wishing she could be at home in her bed.

With Simon.

Fuck you, Simon.

She jerked her eyes open as her I-am-feeling-sorry-for-myself mood threatened to result in angry tears. God, she really was pathetic.

And if she wasn't careful, she would ask the guy next to her for a few comforting words and a cup of warm milk. She shot him a side-glance and hastily looked away when she caught his gaze.

Good-looking bastard.

Like Simon.

She wondered if he shared Simon's love for strippers.

Scratching her itchy ring finger, she gazed outside the car window. The gray landscape rushed by as the driver shifted gear on the motorway. A new moon graced the cloudless night and stars dotted the sky with unfamiliar patterns. She couldn't grasp the reality that she had once lived under these southern stars.

"Stop that," he said, "if you don't want to lose your finger to a nasty infection."

She jumped when he covered her hand with his own. He gave her a slight squeeze, his hand warm and sure, his long, slender fingers slightly callused. His touch made her stomach do a curious little flip. Then, with a last pat, he pulled his arm back.

She grimaced when she saw that her skin was indeed a raw, angry shade of pink. If she wasn't careful, she'd claw off her ring finger.

"Mossy bite?" he asked.

She drew in a deep breath. "Scum fiancé," she said on an exhalation.

"Usually no treatment for that."

"Indeed," she said, wishing she had kept her trap shut. But what did it matter? He was just a stranger. Who gave a damn what she told him?

"You didn't keep the ring?"

"Nope, didn't keep the ring." She had once thought that Simon's love for her was as deep as the diamond's fire was brilliant.

Hah.

"I guess it wasn't amicable?" he asked.

"Why the hell do you care?"

"I don't."

"I'll tell you what it was," she said, her stomach clenching with unresolved anger. "It was Miss Stripper in the nightclub with the pole."

"She killed him with a pole?"

"Oh, I *wish*."

"Well," he said, attempting a stretch and bumping his shoulder against hers, "I'm sure he's missing your sunny personality already."

Despite everything, she laughed. "I'm sure he does."

If he realizes I'm gone yet.

She turned in her seat and faced his dark-eyed scrutiny. "You're a guy, right?"

"Most of the time," he said, grinning.

"That was a rhetorical question. What do you mean with 'most of the time'? You're not gender confused, are you?"

"Sorry, my bad. Yes, I'm definitely male at all times."

"Gay?"

"Would you prefer to share the cab with a gay guy?"

She thought for a moment. "Maybe. No offense."

"None taken."

"So?"

"So what?"

"Are you gay?"

He leaned in, brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and whispered, "Can you keep a secret?" When she nodded, holding her breath because he was suddenly so close, he said, "So can I, Yankee."

She let out her breath when he leaned back in his seat, her heart beating in her throat. "I don't get you," she said, shaking her head, trying to ignore that her breasts had tightened to a strange, tingling tenderness. "Anyway, can you tell me why guys find strippers so irresistible?"

"Don't generalize. But to give you an answer, and I'm not necessarily speaking for myself, I'd say they simply like to look at naked women."

"I have no issues with *looking*."

"I see," he said after a moment. "Will you forgive him?"

She didn't answer. Couldn't have answered if she wanted to. She had no time, really, to mope after her rat of a fiancé. She had *business* to do in Auckland.

If Simon wanted her forgiveness, he would need to find her first. And if he loved her, he *would* find her. And if he did, she would know if *she* still wanted him. For now, she was glad she wasn't in the same city as Simon anymore. Not even in the same hemisphere.

Instead, she was sharing a cab with a strange, annoyingly handsome man who had started to stare at her legs when he thought she wasn't looking.

And his gaze did very odd things to her body, she thought, resisting the urge to check if her nipples showed through the blouse she was wearing. They wouldn't. She wore a goddamn bra for crying out loud.

She stopped herself from fidgeting and straightened her posture as the car drove over a pothole in the road. She slammed against his shoulder and grasped his thigh for hold. His leg was muscled, hard, twitched under her palm, and his arm came around her shoulder as if to steady her. The impact shook through her like a bolt of lightning and made her wide-awake in an instant.

Nice, firm grip, Trent McGregor thought, biting down laughter. The mortification on her face was priceless as she stared at her hand on his leg. An inch higher and she would have had him by the balls.

"Sorry." Regrettably, she snatched her hand away.

"No need to be sorry." Keeping a straight face wasn't easy but he managed. "Or did you feel me up on purpose?"

"What? No. I haven't—" she stammered, but caught herself. "It was a reflex."

"I know," he said. "I just had to double-check." She opened her mouth to reply, but evidently thought better of it and merely turned her back on him, slipping away from under his arm.

She smelled of heartbreak, unfulfilled lust and, for some odd reason, of lilacs.

And—she might not have noticed yet but he sure as hell had—the chemistry between them was almost palpable. A sexual spark that was impossible to ignore or resist.

He had no idea what brought her to Auckland, but it was as if she had strayed from the right path and he was the big, bad wolf waiting.

Literally.

Chapter Two

After the long flight, all Trent had initially wanted was to get into his apartment and between the sheets.

But it wasn't just the flight that had tired him out.

The last weeks had been tough. "McGregor, I want you here." His partner from the New York office had been insistent on the phone. "You're the best, and he's one of our best clients." Yeah right, he had thought, but had taken the job anyway. All his energy had gone into his career in the last years, and he was ready for a long break from work.

And what better season than summer to take some time off.

He shot another look at the Yankee girl. She looked like autumn, cold and stormy. Anger issues on top of it, he thought. She wore her dark hair in a kind of bun at the nape of her neck. A few escaped strands curled unruly around her face.

She looked the very picture of the uptown girl in her smart clothes and her flawless skin. He let his gaze travel once more along the length of her legs. He bet her major interests were shopping, beauty spas and driving her fiancé crazy—ex-fiancé, he corrected himself. What a stupid prick that guy must be—if he couldn't stay faithful, why propose?

And why marry when there was fun to be had without the strings?

At least that had been his motto for the last decade. Now he was no longer so sure about his way of life. He wouldn't mind settling down with a wife and children. A quiet, relaxed life with a mate. Another shifter, no question. Someone cheerful and easygoing and smart and—God, not as high-strung and complicated as the woman beside him—but someone compatible.

Someone like...Vivian.

If his job had taught him anything, then it was that a successful marriage was based on a longtime friendship and trust.

He looked at the Yankee. Her scent was wickedly delicious. Her skirt had moved up her legs again, exposing a tantalizing bit of thigh, and he felt himself grow hard. He'd made this summer the last one to enjoy his bachelorhood and the chase.

Then he'd marry Viv.

* * * * *

Katherine had tried to relax but failed miserably.

Every time the car turned a corner, their shoulders touched and his thigh rested solidly against her leg. It was strangely intimate. A shiver ran over her skin and, ever so slightly, she pressed her leg closer.

"Look, almost there." He pointed out of the window.

Sure enough, city lights twinkled in the night. Auckland's highest tower, the biggest in the southern hemisphere, stood like a giant torch in the sky.

The cab had left the motorway and slowed down, driving through empty streets. It was peaceful at this time of night. They passed dark parks, closed cafes and small shops. The driver came to a halt, right in front of her hotel. Brilliantly lit, the lobby sparkled into the night.

A sigh of relief on her lips, she climbed out of the car and drew in a deep breath, inhaling a rich jasmine-like scent. Countless shrubs with creamy-white tubular flowers grew in front of the hotel. The haunting perfume of the night bloomers had attracted insects, which frantically fluttered around the delicate petals.

A large, velvety-green moth kept on bumping against the glass doors of the lobby. "Me too," she said quietly to the moth—all she wanted was to get inside. She closed her eyes and saw herself already tucked up in bed after a hot shower, but when she opened her eyes again, she saw *him* unfurling gracefully out of the cab, wearing dark denim, a button-down shirt under a thin leather jacket. His hair was short, dark like his eyes, and his face had the roughness of an unpolished diamond—her girlfriends would drool all over him.

Looking at him was like drinking a shot of espresso—she wasn't remotely tired anymore. He had edges to rub against, she thought, and lifted her chin when he stopped in front of her.

"Since I stole your cab, I paid the driver."

She met his gaze and all energy to argue drained away. "Thanks." She held her hand out to say goodbye. His hand closed around hers, in his eyes the sparkle of a smile. His touch zinged up her arm, tightened her breasts and sent a quiver between her legs.

As if burned, she let go of his hand.

He gave her another thoughtful look, returned to the car's trunk and gathered her suitcase. She opened her mouth to protest then closed it hastily when a moth came fluttering against her face.

She waved the moth away, saying, "What the heck do you think you're doing?"

"Carrying the suitcase to the room." Her suitcase in his hand, he walked toward the hotel lobby. "Much too heavy for you."

"They have people for that," she called after him, but he didn't even hear her anymore.

She stared after him. Not that she wasn't grateful for help, but was he hitting on her? Her heartbeat increased, seeing him standing in the lobby, clearly waiting for her

to come after him. A jolt of excitement surprised her. The possibility of running her fingers again along his muscled thigh kicked up something low in her stomach and heated her face.

She glanced at her hands.

No ring graced her finger and his attention clearly stroked her bruised ego. She scratched the spot where her engagement ring had rested.

"Fuck you, Simon," she said quietly, and headed into the lobby to check in. "Time to get even."

* * * * *

They had taken the elevator to the tenth floor where her suite was located. The silence between them settled heavy on her skin, and she was afraid he would hear her too-fast heartbeat.

Holding the plastic keycard, she found the right number and opened the door to a pitch-black room.

"I can handle the rest from here." She stretched her arm out to get her suitcase, but he pushed past her, found and switched on a green-shaded desk lamp and placed her suitcase in the middle of the dimly illuminated suite.

O-kay.

"Are you always so straightforward?" The door closed with a soft thud as she stepped after him into the room.

"Only with Yankees." His dark gaze moved over her body and shivers erupted all over her skin. "Now that I've taken care of the suitcase, anything else you need help with?"

Yes, help me take off my clothes.

Damn it, she had waited for him to make the first move and take the decision out of her hands, yet he wanted an invitation. But her earlier excitement was replaced by tightness in her throat and courage failed her.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea..."

"Depends on the idea." He took a step closer, another one until she had to tilt her chin up to meet his gaze. "I'll make damn sure you'll enjoy the one I have."

"You're pretty full of yourself, aren't you?" His warm breath against her face, she shot a quick glance at the bed. It stood in the corner in front of what appeared to be windows but thick curtains were drawn. The snow-white linens looked crisp and cool.

She couldn't do it. One-nighters weren't for her...were they?

"Let's try something," he said so quietly she gazed back at him.

He had a good mouth. Wide with a nice bottom lip. Simon's was thinner, she thought, and froze when he wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her close. The front of her thighs, hipbones, stomach touched him as he held her tight. Her breath

left her with a soft gasp as she found him hard. His mouth touched hers ever so lightly, as if he were afraid she'd bite.

Beard stubble on his chin grazed her skin, the feeling of his lips on hers unfamiliar but...pleasant. More than that. She angled her head, parted her lips to his, a moan at the back of her throat. She hadn't expected him to kiss her like this, so gentle. Yet her heart thumped in her throat and a couple of butterflies took flight in her stomach. Lifting her arm, she cupped her hand around his neck.

"See," he said against her lips, "that wasn't so bad, right?"

She let out a breathless laugh. "I still think you're pretty full of yourself. And I have no idea why I...why I..." Heat rushed to her face. She wasn't comfortable admitting that the sensation of his hard cock against her stomach while he was kissing her had made her panties tellingly damp. "Frankly, I don't know why you turn me on."

"It's chemistry," he said, his grin showing her he wasn't taking her rather blunt words amiss. "Or let's call it lust. But in any case, it would be a shame not to act on it."

"Lust," she repeated, feeling a bubble of anger rise inside her. "I fear I'm not good at giving in to lust with random strangers." Simon was though. He'd felt no qualms in fucking a complete stranger mere days before the wedding. Anger gripped her gut tighter, heated her face. "But I sure as hell can learn." She reached out and grabbed a handful of his shirt. "Fuck me," she whispered, a thrill running down her spine and hitting her core at hearing her own words. She fingered his shirt, but her hands were too shaky to open the buttons so she tried ripping the shirt open.

"Hold it right there," he said, catching her hands. "You can't rush proper welcome sex."

"Welcome sex?" she repeated. "What—"

"We're going to have welcome-to-Auckland sex," he said with a laugh, and drew her hands behind her back, arching her slightly. "But we'll do it slowly."

"No, I want it fast." Before she lost her courage, before she regained her wits, before the aching need to feel him inside her disappeared. She freed her hands and cupped him, had him cursing as she stroked his erection. "Oh Lord," she whispered, running her palm once more over the thick bulge.

He laughed, shrugged out of his thin leather jacket, threw it over the next chair. Before she knew it, he'd wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her. "Let's cool you off." He marched toward the bathroom.

"No!" she yelled. "I don't want to cool off or I'll—"

"What? Lose your nerve?" He set her down in front of the wide shower and switched on the water. "Don't worry about that, won't happen."

"How do *you* know," she said, crossing her arms in front of her breasts. "I might just change my mind again."

"Well, it's not that you're not allowed to do so," he said, starting to open her blouse from the top, "just say the word while I get you out of your clothes." He uncrossed her

arms, working the buttons until the last slid through its hole. He took a step back. "On second thought, I want to watch you take them off."

She mutely shook her head, almost vibrating with tension. "I'm *so* not going to strip for you, 'cause I'm not a, not a —"

"Stripper?" He had the nerve to wink as if it were a joke. "Come on, Yankee. We both know the reason you decided to jump me. Let's have a little fun while we're at it." He pulled his shirt from his pants, opened it with steady fingers, shrugged out of it. He hung it on a hook behind the door. She caught a glimpse of a large tattoo on his left shoulder blade, but before she could make sense of it, he'd faced her again. "Your turn."

Steam started billowing through the bath as she stared at his bare, muscled chest and over his ripped stomach.

The faster she stripped, the faster she would get her hands all over him. She wiggled her shoulders and let the open blouse glide to the floor.

"The bra too," he said, sounding hoarse.

She'd never felt like a tease, but she did now. "What," she said, "this thing?" She ran her fingers underneath the straps, pushed them from her shoulders. She turned her back to him, opened the clasp, let the bra drop. She cupped her breasts into her hands and turned to face him. "Your pants."

He kicked off his shoes, unbuckled his belt.

She stared at his boxer briefs as he shrugged out of his pants, shocked to feel a needy twinge in her pussy. Her hands fell to her sides, leaving her breasts naked to his eyes. She heard a deep rumble in his throat, or maybe it was just the shower, but she kept her gaze on the outline of his thick, hard cock and kicked off her heels. He shouldn't be able to turn her on like this, but damn, she wanted to know how tightly she would fit around him.

"I'll enjoy getting you all wet." He nodded toward the steamed-up shower and grinned.

"I'm already wet," she whispered, seeking his gaze.

"Skirt." The amusement in his eyes had changed to raw lust. "And you'd better be quick about it if you want it to stay in one piece."

Her hands shook when she unzipped her skirt, shimmied out of it. She picked it up, threw it toward him. "Here, my skirt."

He snatched it up in one hand, scrunched it in his fist.

She slipped her fingers inside the waistband of her panties, tugged slightly. "Want my panties too?"

"No worries, I'll take it from here," he said, taking such a quick step toward her that she took one back. He tossed her skirt in the bathtub. Water hit her shoulders as she backed away from him and into the shower.

Tipping her head into the stream of water, she let out a sigh of pure bliss. Blindly she removed the pins holding her hair up and let it slick down her shoulders. She heard the shower door snick shut and opened her eyes.

The shower spray hit the dark hair dusting his chest. For a second, her gaze dipped to his cock resting erect against his flat stomach. Weak at the knees, she lifted her face to him. Tiny water drops clung to his lashes. "Hi," she said quietly, marveling at how comfortable she felt sharing the shower with him and how uneasy she'd been in the cab just moments before. Probably her biggest change of heart ever.

He gave her a predatory grin and slapped his right hand next to her head against the shower tiles. "Hi, Yankee, you look good almost naked." He wrapped his free hand around her waist, drew her close.

Her breasts flattened against his chest, his cock hot between their wet bodies. She closed her eyes again when he lowered his head. Finding and kissing a spot underneath her ear, he made a rough sound in his throat that had her shivering in anticipation of how he would sound when he thrust inside her. She moaned when he closed his hand around her breast, teased her nipple.

"Point of no return," he said, his voice rougher than before, the grip around her breast firm and demanding. "If you've changed your mind I'd love to hear it now."

"Because you won't take no for an answer later?" she asked, raising her eyebrow.

"Because you'll tell me to stop and I won't listen," he said with a smirk, and leaned in. "So make of that what you want."

She rose on tiptoes, meeting his kiss halfway. Need slammed into her body as she tangled her tongue with his, her breath coming in short, hard gasps as his kiss turned possessive and deep. "More," she said, grasping his shoulder and trying to pull him in to her again as he broke the kiss. Water streamed over her face, into her eyes, but she didn't care.

When he went to his knees, she sucked in her breath. Water poured down on him, slicking his hair to his head, and he hooked his fingers into the waistband of her panties. He tugged them over her hips in one smooth motion and let them drop to her feet. She braced her hands against the wet tile when she realized he'd stayed on his knees.

The first flick of his tongue against her clit had her groaning out in pleasure. Her thighs started quivering as he gave her another lick, and this time she was sure the deep rumble had come from his throat. It was an animalistic, primal sound and a chill ran down her back.

"Spread your legs wider," he said, tracing a finger through her folds. She could feel his warm breath against her skin as his mouth took her again. Digging her nails into her palm, she spread her legs for him, crying out as he sucked at her clit. Like a reflex, her hips moved tighter against his face. A deep ache spread in her belly, powerful and agonizing in its intensity.

"Don't," she pressed through her teeth as he slipped one finger inside her pussy. The shallow thrusts made it worse and she moaned out her frustration.

"Does that feel good?" he asked, and thrust two fingers inside her and slowly moved them in and out.

She clenched around him, willing him to move faster, and groaned when his tongue flicked at her clit. "No," she moaned, wondering how satisfying it would feel if instead of his fingers he would push his thick cock inside her pussy. She cried out as he pumped three fingers inside her, his mouth sucking her clit.

He began pounding his fingers into her and pleasure peaked instantly and fast. She screamed out as her orgasm caught her by surprise. Her pussy convulsed around his fingers as he drove her on. She tunneled her fingers into his hair as another ripple of intense pleasure coursed through her body and made her legs quiver.

"Goddamn it, stop," she breathed out, relieved when he rose to his feet.

"Let's get you somewhere horizontal." He switched off the shower, grabbed a towel and ignored her stream of swear words as he swept her up in his arms to carry her out the bathroom and toward the bed.

Chapter Three

She landed unladylike onto the bed, bouncing slightly as her bare ass hit the mattress. The faint scent of lemony laundry detergent wafted up from the bed as she grabbed a pillow. While her knees still felt as if they were made of jelly, she didn't appreciate that he treated her as if she had two broken legs.

"Here," she said, waving her foot in the air, "I'm perfectly able to walk alone." She aimed, grinned when the pillow hit him square in the chest.

"I'll try to keep it in mind the next time," he said, rubbing his chest where she'd hit him. "Good shot, by the way." He threw a bath towel toward her, which landed on her stomach and covered her to her knees.

"We both know there won't be a next time," she said quietly. "Right?"

He threw her a glance, a calculating look in his eyes. "Well, you might not be able to keep your hands off me after tonight."

"You really are full of it."

He'd switched off the lamp and opened the heavy curtains, revealing floor-to-ceiling windows. The city lights illuminated the room better than the desk lamp and she wondered if he knew how romantic his gesture was. The view couldn't compare to downtown Manhattan, but her breath still caught, oddly pleased that he evidently took the time to set a mood. Or maybe he hadn't thought at all and acted on impulse, she thought dryly.

She propped herself up on her arms. Drops of water ran from her forehead over her cheeks and she brushed her wet curls away from her face. Again she spotted the tattoo on his shoulder blade but it was almost as if he ensured that she didn't get a good look at it. Maybe he'd gotten it while he was drunk, yet she couldn't imagine him losing control like that.

She drank all of him in, from his dark hair, to his obsidian eyes, wide shoulders, trim hips. A tingle of nerves spread through her belly, mixing strangely with the deep lust she still felt deep within her. She loved the sight of his muscular thighs as he walked around the room—he took a silver foil square from the inside pocket of his jacket—but what had her slightly worried was that his cock looked almost bigger now, outside the shower.

"Thoughtful," she commented, grateful for his action. "So they come in your size too?"

"Tailor-made," he said with a grin, and stopped at the foot of the bed, looked at her with a hunger that was incredibly flattering—but even more arousing. "Are you feeling cold?" he asked, his gaze roaming over every inch not covered by the towel.

She brushed over her arms, smoothing down chill bumps, but they were all over her skin. Her nipples stood erect and ached to be touched. "Not cold," she whispered. "I just want you."

His eyebrow jumped up slightly as if he was questioning her words. "What you want, Yankee, is *revenge*."

She winced, his words stinging. "You're not one to sugarcoat things, are you?" He didn't answer, didn't need to. Revenge was a fucked-up motivation, but how often in her life had she taken the highroad?

Too often.

She held his dark gaze, studied the curve of his full lips, the line of his jaw. She really wanted him. Yes, she needed the release, wanted it badly, but no one else would do right now. She wanted him on top of her, his cock thrusting inside her, his mouth everywhere. And for all her second-guessing and doubts, she somehow knew she wouldn't regret this night. "I want you," she repeated, her voice steady. "And we're done discussing this."

"Yeah, we're done talking." His mouth twisted into a smile, the first time she'd seen him smile like that, not grinning, mocking, teasing, but a smile that dimpled his cheek and lit up his eyes. He wrapped his hand around her ankle as he sat down on the bed, the mattress yielding under his weight, the sheets crumpling. Drops of water still clung to his chest and her throat went dry when his hand slid up her leg and under the towel.

Leaning forward, he let his hand glide over the inside of her thigh. His gaze locked into hers as he reached her center. "Damn," he groaned, trailing one finger lazily through her slick folds as if he had all the time in the world.

It was sweet torture, the way he circled her clit. "I need more," she whispered, closing her eyes, moving her hips to the rhythm of his slow touch.

A crinkle of foil and he tugged at the towel covering her hips, exposing her. She felt the mattress shift as he moved up the length of her body. He braced his hands on either side of her shoulders, his breath warm on her face.

She stared up, confused to see a flash of yellow light sparking in the depths of his dark eyes. She reached out to touch his cheek, but whatever she thought she'd seen was gone. Rough stubble met her fingertips and she moaned when he lowered his hips to hers, his cock resting hard against her stomach. Heat from his body seeped into her bones, cloaked her in an embrace of warmth.

His mouth came hard on hers, unexpectedly, claiming her with a dominance that took her breath. Her hands flew up, her palms pressed against the flex of his chest muscles. She might as well try to move a pillar, he didn't budge an inch. He plunged his tongue deep when she parted her lips to inhale. He took her breath, took her wrists as she dragged her nails across his chest. "Stop," she moaned, feeling his teeth nip into her bottom lip, his weight crushing her into the mattress.

A deep moan rose in her throat as he pulled her arms above her head, pinned her down with one hand. She hadn't expected this kind of strength, and when he closed his

hand around her breast, pinched her nipple hard, she screamed as sharp pleasure shot from her breast to her clit. Her pussy clenched in anticipation. "Please," she whispered, struggling to free herself. "I need—" He covered her pleading words with his mouth, kissed her almost cruelly.

At this moment, she'd have done anything he asked of her if only he made her come. Her hips bucked against him, her pussy drenched with her juices. He reached between them and his cock slid between her thighs, rubbed against her folds. Her breath came in hard and fast gasps, and she was all but sobbing with need.

He moved his hips slowly, applying just enough pressure on her clit to drive her lust higher but never allowing her to peak. And when he fisted his hand into her hair, thrusting his tongue into her mouth, she kissed him back with the same intensity.

His hand brushed down her neck, traced the curve of her breast. "Spread your legs," he said, his voice rough and deep. She let her legs slide from his waist, hadn't even realized she had wrapped herself around him in the first place. He propped himself up on one hand, releasing her wrists, and kept his gaze on her face as he wrapped his hand around his erection. The head of his cock prodded at her pussy, slid in just a fraction.

Just when she feared he would take it slow, he drove his cock deep into her pussy. She cried out at the sudden sensation of his thick cock stretching her wide. He groaned, holding perfectly still, yet she felt him shake slightly before he lowered himself to her, his pelvis flush against hers. He kissed her, gentler, exploring the inside of her mouth while he fucked her in long and slow strokes. She gripped the sheets, wishing she could see how his cock slid in and out of her, how he filled her so perfectly.

Choking back a moan when he thrust faster, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her nails digging into the skin. She tipped her head back, enjoying how each thrust drove her closer to her climax. Again she felt a shudder going through him, all the muscles on his back tense. If he was holding back, she didn't appreciate it. "Fuck me harder," she whispered, raking her nails down his back and flexing her inner muscles to grip his cock tighter.

He laughed quietly, his hand cupping her breast. When he pulled out, she made a noise of protest. "On your stomach, Yankee," he said, and pinched her nipple hard. Stars exploded in front of her eyes, and before she had a chance to move, he flipped her over and ran a hand over her ass.

"Hang on," she said, struggling to turn around again so she could feel his weight while he was inside her, but he held her in place by her hips, pulled her up to her knees with unrelenting strength. "I don't—"

"Yes, you do," he said, parting her wet folds with his cock. He pushed in slowly, letting her feel each thick inch as he sank to his balls into her pussy. "Such a sweet cunt," he muttered under his breath. "So tight."

She sucked in a breath, partly because no one had ever told her she had a sweet cunt and partly because the feel of him was different from before. And when he moved,

she groaned out as heat surged through her. He penetrated her deeper than before, and when he told her again how tight she was, how wet her cunt, how hard she made him, she felt the last shred of her inhibitions dissolve into raw lust.

Feeling how tight she was around his cock, she raised her ass higher, craving more of the incredible friction, the heat. She didn't want it to end, but she took each stroke hungrily, hearing herself begging for more. He pumped his cock into her, giving her exactly what she wanted. He fucked her fast, pushed into her harder, deeper, pushed her over the edge.

She cried out, her cunt convulsing uncontrollably as she clung to the waves of pleasure running from her core through her entire body. He thrust into her, pulled her against his groin. She heard a primal growl, a rough shout as he came, his cock pulsing and throbbing inside her, his hands gripping her hips.

For a few harsh breaths, he leaned his forehead against her back, pressed a kiss against her spine, then he pulled out, leaving a feeling of emptiness inside her. She sank to her stomach, buried her face into a pillow.

The mattress bounced slightly as he moved away from the bed. She heard him inside the bath, heard the toilet flush as he discarded the condom, heard him use the sink, heard the metallic clink of a belt buckle as he put on his clothes again. What had she expected, that he'd stay for breakfast?

Slowly, her breathing calmed, her body quieted, her thighs stopped trembling.

Still, she didn't hear him return and jumped when he touched her shoulder. She turned on her back, gazing up at him as he closed the buttons on his shirt and then shoved it into his pants. He crouched, stroked his finger over her cheek. "Don't cry."

She hadn't known she had been, but her cheeks were wet, her lips salty, and more tears spilled, her stomach a tight, tight knot. And she didn't know if it was because she felt as if she had cheated on Simon or because he had on her, or because she wanted this stranger, this man she'd known for only a night, to stay.

* * * * *

Trent left the hotel and was glad to see that Bill still waited. He climbed inside the cab.

"Thanks, Bill. For picking me up from the airport and for driving her," he told the driver with a pat on the shoulder. "And I guess for waiting."

"Don't mention it. But quadrupling the usual fare sure helped." He checked his watch. "It's been over an hour. That's a long time to help a lady with her luggage." Bill laughed.

"Bill, if it's not too much to ask, I'd love to get home now."

Thankfully wise enough to take a hint, Bill started the engine and navigated skillfully through the streets. He was the office's unofficial driver, something like a mascot—he came with the inventory. Doing the odd job here and there, Bill had already

been in the law firm of Kingsley & Monhollon before Trent had worked his way up to become partner. Today, with offices in New York, Tokyo, Sidney and Auckland, they were major players, but Trent still stuck to the tradition of using Bill's taxi if he couldn't use his own car.

And for the first time, it had kind of brought him luck.

Trent worked his hand through his still slightly damp hair. Her tear-streaked face turned up his mind and her scent was still fresh in his memory. Whatever he'd expected when he'd followed her up to her room, it hadn't been this.

Normally he wouldn't complain about good sex, but it had been almost too...good. The way her body had yielded to his touch, how she had tasted on his tongue. How desperately he'd wanted to please her just to hear those needy little sounds she made at the back of her throat. The smell of her skin. The way he'd almost lost control when he had thrust into her. So wet. So tight and hot.

Her face kept on appearing in his mind up to the point where it was starting to annoy him. Her eyes, he thought. Amber eyes...light brown, with specks of yellow. No, not yellow. Gold, as if tiny golden confetti were scattered over her iris.

And he still felt bad about leaving her alone instead of pulling her into his arms and holding her until she fell asleep.

But he never stayed the night over.

He understood where the tears came from. She was either guilt-ridden or simply emotionally exhausted. From her initial reaction, he doubted she'd ever had a one-night stand before. She seemed the kind of girl who was wine and dine and given gifts to before taken to bed.

But she'd gotten what she wanted, he thought. She got herself her revenge fuck. It would set her conscience free to forgive her fiancé and get the fairy-tale wedding she had undoubtedly dreamed about since she was a little girl with a pink ribbon in her hair.

What he wanted was to drive back to her and lick his way up her legs. What he would do was stay the hell away. There was something about her that touched him, made him care just a tad too much. However good the sex, he feared it wouldn't be uncomplicated summer fun. She had too much emotional baggage and he didn't care to get involved.

* * * * *

Katherine woke with a start.

She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, stretched and checked the clock on the nightstand. "Damn, why didn't they wake me?" She had requested an early morning wake-up call last night at the reception, but they had chosen to ignore her wish. She jumped up.

And noticed her nakedness.

She waited for shame to rise within her, for embarrassment, for regret.

Nothing came.

She cast a glance through the room—the open bathroom door with her blouse and bra on the floor, the open curtains, the suitcase in the middle of the room, the pillow she'd thrown at his chest and now lay at her feet. She picked it up, pressed it against her breasts. She caught sight of herself in a mirror above the dresser.

That's how a woman looked the morning after being thoroughly fucked by a stranger. He probably had welcome sex with all the women he met at the airport, she thought with a wry smile. Her eyes were red, her dark hair a curly mess, but her skin glowed. Whatever had made her bawl her eyes out last night, the sadness was gone, replaced by a strange kind of energy.

For a moment, she considered calling Simon, telling him where she was, telling him everything.

Fuck you, Simon.

They might be even now, but it didn't change the fact he had cheated on her during his bachelor party. Thinking about what a fucking cliché that was almost killed her. Then she moved, winced when she felt her sore muscles. Evidently, she really *could* have great sex without being in love, without even knowing the name of the guy.

Maybe that was what had made it so insanely, mind-blowingly good.

She could almost hear his deep voice and feel his hands around her waist again. Once more, heat rushed through her veins, warming her insides. If only he had stayed the night...

But she'd already gotten even, there was no getting *eveniest*.

She let herself fall on the bed again, caught a glimpse of silver between the sheets. Nothing said reality like finding an empty condom wrapper in one's bed.

Trying to focus on her schedule for the day, she got up and opened her suitcase, the air-con chilling her skin. She found her handbag and searched for her notes with the contact details for the property agency. She found the paper, grabbed the phone, dialed and drummed her fingers on the desk.

"Trend Property Maintenance, how can I help?" answered a bored female voice.

"This is Katherine Miles." She heard a radio in the background. "I'm calling about the house on Chatham Road, Devonport. I sent an email about two days ago to cancel the maintenance contract and to notify you I want to pick up the keys."

Silence greeted her on the other end of the line, and then she heard paper shuffling. "Yes, we received your notice."

"I want to put the house on the market." Katherine verified her identity by answering a string of questions. "So, where can I pick up the keys? Your office?"

"Jason is, was, the agent for your property. There's a note in your file saying that he left the keys with the next-door neighbor."

"He gave the keys to the neighbor?" Unbelievable.

The woman laughed. "We tend to trust people."

Katherine massaged her forehead, searching for words.

"Are you still there?" the woman asked.

She nodded then quickly said, "Yes."

"The note also says that you should call him back. He knows people who are interested in buying. Actually, his exact words are, 'Don't sign up another agent, call me first.'"

While buyers were exactly what she wanted, she found this Jason unprofessional. Although, this was Auckland, not New York. Maybe things were different here.

"I'll call again." She hung up.

Searching through her handbag, she pulled out the only picture she had of the house of her childhood. The worn photo showed a Victorian villa, a cottage garden with old-fashioned roses, a white picket fence and a rocking-chair veranda. It was a romantic dream come true. Well, at least if one was into that style, which she wasn't.

But her mom had been.

She couldn't remember that she had spent her first years living in the house. Happily so, she was *sure*, until Jack had come and ruined everything.

The property market in Auckland was still booming. The villa was in a top location, the style sought-after. She wanted the highest possible offer and she was here to get it.

And she'd use the money to build the foundation of her new life. Her own firm, her own decisions. Without Jack butting in, or Simon, or any other man who tried to tell her how to live her life.

* * * * *

After a quick shower followed by breakfast, Katherine jumped into a stranger-free taxi and headed north to Devonport. Twenty minutes later—after the driver had cut every corner—she arrived at the right address with a queasy stomach. The website she had browsed at home had described Devonport as a *Charming historic seaside village with unique heritage, cafes, beaches and spectacular views over Auckland's harbor and city*.

As a child, she hadn't noticed most of it. Now that she was here, she could check off each description. After the driver had dropped her off, she pulled out the photo from her handbag and walked along the street, looking for the right house number.

There.

Her first impression was that the villa matched the photo to a tee.

She took a few steps closer, welcoming the slight breeze playing with the hem of her summer dress. Auckland's sun beat down mercilessly and she shaded her eyes against the glare.

Yes, it was the right house, but her first impression had been dead wrong. The cottage garden with its roses in bloom was a mess of overgrown shrubs and weeds. The

white paint on the house was a faded gray and the picket fence weathered with patches of moss and rot.

The glorious Victorian villa from her photo was in reality abandoned and depressing, and she clutched the picture to her chest, staring aghast at the house. So much for maintenance – what exactly had she paid for all these years?

She wondered if the rooms inside the house were in any better condition. “Hope dies last,” she said, and tried to open the fence gate. Locked. Climbing over would be easy. The fence reached only up to her waist, but on second thought, she decided to collect the keys from the neighbor first.

On her left side was a white weatherboard house with a large garden, groomed shrubs and a vegetable patch. The house looked immaculate next to the old villa. A painted green sign, *Ada’s Boutique Bed & Breakfast*, hung in the front yard. On her right was a modern bungalow. More than five cats dozed in front of it.

She sneezed and turned away from the cats. It didn’t matter how many times her doctor assured her her allergy wasn’t triggered by the mere sight of cats, she wasn’t buying it.

She approached the neat house on her left and walked under the green sign toward the door, ready to knock. Surprisingly, the door was already open.

“Come in, dear. No need to knock!”

“I’m here for a set of house keys,” she called, feeling as if she owed some kind of explanation before she stepped into the house. It was spotless. She caught her reflection on the polished floors, and a faint lavender aroma hung in the air. She wondered if she should take her shoes off but only brushed over the wrinkles in her dress to smooth it out.

“I saw you from my window. I’m Ada. So you’re my new neighbor then?”

Katherine returned Ada’s greeting smile, shaking her hand, noticing that Ada was just as immaculate as her house. She was tall, with short gray hair and her smiling face spoke of countless hours of garden work. Indeed, that was where she seemed to come from, holding scissors and cut flowers in her hands.

“Nice to meet you, Ada. I’m Katherine Miles. Sorry to disappoint, but I won’t be your new neighbor.”

“Oh, but the agent told me the owner would pick up the keys.” Ada arranged the flowers in a vase on the mantelpiece.

“Yes, that’s true. I’m here to sell the house though.” How was she supposed to find buyers for the run-down disaster?

Ada moved farther into the house, waving her to follow. “I have tea on the stove. Have a cup and tell me all about it.”

Katherine sighed, but there was no polite way to decline. If she had to drink her way to the keys, so be it.

She followed Ada into the kitchen and sat on one of the chairs at a square, well-worn wooden table. From there, she looked into Ada's huge garden, which included a small cottage house. She mused that these were the bed and breakfast rooms.

"The villa needs some TLC, don't you think?" Ada poured tea into mugs.

Katherine accepted her mug with a nod, asking, "What's TLC?"

"Tender Loving Care of course."

Katherine laughed. This was exactly what the house needed. A lick of paint, cleaning up the garden...that's what she should do. Otherwise, the house wouldn't bring enough money on the market, but some TLC...

Yes, she liked the idea.

Besides, what else was there to do? She sure as hell wouldn't fly back home to get married. She studied the garden cottage. "Ada, I saw your sign at the front door. You run a B and B?"

"Oh yes. It's vacant at the moment because a couple canceled to stay longer on South Island. Honeymoon," she added with a sly smile.

If this wasn't a sign... Her own honeymoon would have been to the Bahamas, but who cared?

"Fantastic," Katherine said, her mind set. "You know, you're right. I need to do up the house before I get a sale. It would be great if I could stay in your rooms." Perfect solution. She avoided the hotel, which would have reminded her forever of her night of sin, *and* she was closer to the villa. She was sure Ada's small cottage in the garden was as neat and tidy as the rest of the main house.

"Course you can." Ada beamed and pointed to her garden, and Katherine knew she had been right about the cottage house. "It's a sleep out, just one room and a bath, but I make a mean breakfast and you can use my kitchen anytime you want." Ada got up and opened a door directly leading into the garden. "Go on, have a look."

* * * * *

Katherine stepped over the doorstep into Ada's sleep out and stood immediately in front of a huge bed with beautiful wrought iron head- and footboards. The comforter was covered in pillows of various sizes, all of them with flower patterns. Next to the bed was a table with a modern, cordless telephone, oddly out of place in front of the old-fashioned tea rose wallpaper.

She sat down on the bed and phoned the hotel to arrange for her suitcase to be sent to Ada.

A small desk with a chair on the long side of the room invited guests to write postcards. A sturdy dresser with a mirror completed the furniture. On the walls hung a few framed photos, and she laughed when she spotted a small cupid statue in the corner. Behind a narrow door, she discovered a bathroom complete with shower, fitted out with golden fixtures.

A honeymoon hideaway if I ever saw one.

With a last amused look, she closed the door behind her, spotted that the cottage even had its own small path leading directly to the main street and walked back through the garden to the door leading into Ada's kitchen. Turning the handle, the door pushed open from inside and an overly excited Labrador bounced into her.

"Ouch!" she yelped while the dog jumped, barking, onto the lawn. Steadying herself again, she laughed, stepping into the kitchen. "Ada, your dog is—"

She shut her mouth as she looked into a familiar pair of dark eyes. Heat shot into her body, lightning up her nerves. He stood two steps away, a mug in his hand, and she was at a loss for words.

He wore jeans and a tee, and his stance was casual enough, but he gripped the mug so hard that the muscles in his arm corded. He blinked, shaking his head, and sat down at the kitchen table, choosing the same chair she had sat on a few minutes ago.

"Katherine," he said quietly, her name rolling over his tongue in a way that made the breath catch in her throat. "Christ, Yankee, you just took five years of my life."

When she didn't answer, her heart jamming against her ribs, he said, "And I meant that in a good way."

"How come you know my name?"

"My aunt told me her new neighbor was drinking tea with her." He took a sip from his mug. "Miss Miles," he said, a diabolical grin on his face, which clearly told her he had recovered from whatever shock he'd suffered from seeing her again. "You look a bit pale. Didn't you sleep well last night, Katherine?" he said, again rolling her name over his tongue with obvious pleasure.

Blood rushed into her cheeks and she couldn't stop the sensual images that flooded her mind, couldn't stop her body reacting to it. It was as if her skin were too tight and she would burst at the first touch of his hand.

He studied her over his mug, stripped her with his gaze, and she breathed a sigh of relief when Ada walked into the kitchen and broke the tension.

"Good, you've met my nephew already."

"No," she said out of impulse.

"Yes," he said at the same time.

She could have smacked her forehead. Ada meant here in the kitchen, not somewhere else. She heard his barely suppressed laugh, and Ada looked confused.

"What I mean," Katherine said, searching for the right words, "is we don't know each other. But we met at the airport and shared a taxi."

"Shared a taxi?" Ada asked even more puzzled. "Why, Trent, didn't Bill pick you up as usual?"

"As a matter of fact, he did," he answered, his voice cautious.

"Bill," Katherine said slowly, looking at him, but he avoided eye contact, finding the contents of his mug deeply fascinating. His presence scraped at her like fingernails on a blackboard. Still, he was the reason her panties were uncomfortably damp all of a sudden. "Ada, can I have the keys, please? I haven't looked inside the villa yet."

Ada nodded, crossed the room and fished in an old porcelain sugar bowl. When she found the keys, she placed them into his hand. "Trent, why don't you go too?" Ada turned to her and stage whispered, "He's dead useful for house repairs. Maybe he can give you a hand?"

All kinds of dirty images sprang to mind as she repeated Ada's innocent words in her head. Her gaze turned to him as he left the kitchen without looking in her direction. Stunned, she heard him opening the front door and with a click, it closed again.

Absolutely not.

She went after him and found him at the picket fence, searching for the right key to fit the lock at the gate.

"I don't need help. My keys, please."

"You heard my aunt. I can't say no to her."

She gazed into his face, transfixed on the curves of his mouth and noticed a faint scar running along his jawline that she hadn't noticed before.

"You," she said, "let me make a fool of myself by not telling me that was your cab, your driver to begin with. You are despicable."

"Yes, I know," he said with a sigh. "Would you prefer me to be a gay serial killer?"

"My keys, please."

"My aunt moved into her house about five years ago, and ever since, I've wondered about the villa. Such a shame that no one lived there all this time. Let me have just *one* look inside the house."

"Nope."

"You're just being resentful, Yankee. And you were a pretty cute fool, if that helps," he said.

"It doesn't help," she said, but it was no use. He made her smile, made her stomach flip-flop. And she couldn't deny it, she was more than glad to have bumped into him again.

She heard the sound of a key breaking in the lock.

"Well," she said dryly. "I *told* you to give me back the keys."

"True." He jumped over the fence with ease and then held out his hand. "Sorry, I'll take care of the repair."

She ignored his help. He'd made her come with his fingers last night. Touching him wouldn't make her current situation any easier. She was already half on the other side when her shoelace tangled up at the fence. She lost her balance, but instead of falling

into the weeds, his hands gripped her waist, holding her like the night before. She steadied herself and looked up into his eyes.

"Hmm, this feels familiar. Have we met before?" he asked, giving her a squeeze before he released her. She couldn't move a muscle and watched him walk away, unsure if she should be disappointed or relieved that he hadn't made a move to kiss her.

Slowly, she followed him along the graveled footpath twisting through the garden. He had vanished, and she took in the unkempt mess of wild flowers, shrubs and weeds. Rosebushes were in bitter need of a trim, but the scent of lavender drew her closer to the tiny purple flowers. She let her fingers glide through them, plucked a handful and rubbed them between her fingers.

"You like lavender?" His deep voice behind her startled her out of her thoughts.

She didn't turn around and just nodded. "It reminds me of... I don't know. I just remember the smell." The scent of lavender was the only thing she vaguely remembered, besides that, she could have sworn she'd never set foot in this garden before. She turned to him. He was close, and she jumped when he took her hand where she held the crushed flowers. He lifted her hand to his face and breathed in.

"When I was a child," he said, "I picked a bunch for Ada from her own garden. I ruined the whole shrub with my scissors. She dried them and put them everywhere in my room. The smell lasted for months. I still hate lavender," he said casually, and let her hand free.

She opened her fingers and let the flowers fall out, wishing she could stop the flutter in her stomach. She shook out her hand, angry with herself, but couldn't ban the memory of his touch.

He had walked several yards away and called over his shoulder, "Come on. I managed to open a door without breaking it." Not waiting for a reply, he disappeared into the backyard.

She followed, found him standing on a porch, his face cast in the shadow of a large weeping elm. "After you."

She hesitated for only a second before she walked through the weathered back door and stepped into a large kitchen. She didn't remember the room, couldn't see herself sitting at one of the old wooden benches. Couldn't see her mom at the sink, doing the dishes, or opening the old oven to cook a roast. No memories, none. She hadn't expected to, but it still left her oddly sad.

"Hey, Yankee," he said quietly from behind her. "Did you think of me when you woke up this morning?"

His voice made her stomach tighten and she turned, looked at him as he stood in the doorway. He came toward her, the door swinging shut behind him. It wasn't hard to guess what was on his mind. She could see it in the swagger of his walk, the glint in his eyes and the bulge in his jeans.

Chapter Four

She shook her head, holding out her hand as if to ward off a wild animal. "You stop right there. This is not —"

"Shut up," he whispered, pulled her close, backed her up until the sink pressed against the small of her back. "I didn't plan this, but it's too damn impossible not to."

Grabbing his shirt, she pushed against his chest, trying to break his iron grip. He had her so solidly cornered she couldn't twist free of his hold. When she opened her mouth to tell him no, he kissed her, tongue delving deep as if to reclaim her, his hands shoved into her hair. A rush of sensation, of want and need, flooded her body. She stopped pushing, pulled him closer instead, aching dizzy with desire. He was hard against her, hard everywhere and smelled of a lemony scent and coffee, and like last night, all heat and power.

He shoved his knee between her thighs while he pulled up her dress. Her panties slipped down her knees as he tugged them down without finesse. He cupped her, his palm pressing against her mound. Her pussy clenched deep inside, the ache painful in its intensity. His palm was wet from her juices and there was no denying that she craved him desperately. She knew it, and he knew it now. She spread her legs and made a low sound as he ground against her slick clit.

"Fuck," he said in a strained voice, seeking her gaze. "I wasn't thinking this through."

Before she could ask what he meant, she sucked in her breath as his fingers started rubbing her clit. She gripped his shoulders, arching into his hand. Round and round he moved, faster, harder, and her head fell back, clinging to him, dimly aware of the noises she made. When she reached for his crotch, feeling his hard cock inside his jeans, he brushed her hand aside, a rough groan in his throat.

She grabbed his neck, pulled him into her. Stabbing her tongue inside his mouth, she bucked against him. She could feel the tension building, climbing with rapid speed as he applied more pressure to her clit. She craved more, craved to feel him thrust inside her and fill her pussy. Fill her cunt with his thick cock like last night. But when he returned her kiss, thrusting his tongue inside her mouth, matching the movements his fingers made on her clit, heat surged, a stroke of white-hot pleasure whipping through her body. She cried out her release, shuddered in his arms, felt sweat slick down her spine.

Her breathing returning close to normal, she relaxed against his chest, closed her eyes because she couldn't look at him, her emotions too raw. Tears pricked at the back of her eyes, but she held them in, if barely. He steadied her, sank to one knee. He lifted

the hem of her dress. She gripped his shoulders, sucked in her breath as he touched the tip of his tongue to her center, licked.

"Goddammit, Yankee," he growled. "I'd do anything right now for a condom." He tugged her panties up and rose. "Look at me," he said, holding her chin, forcing her to look him straight in the eye.

She blinked at him, cheeks prickling hotly, and felt wicked and ashamed and bold at the same time. And very, very sated. "You do that well," she said, "even though there was so little in it for you."

Her studied her, took a step back. "You're not going to cry this time, I guess."

She shook her head, her chest tight suddenly. "Why would I cry?" she asked, holding her head high, "I'm not engaged anymore. I'm free to do whatever I want."

"And I'm sure that's exactly what you told your stripper-loving fiancé," he said, and walked out of the kitchen into the adjoining room.

She balled her hands, stalked after him into the next room and suppressed the urge to sneeze. "Why do you even care?"

"I don't, you do."

"Ah, shut up," she murmured, drawing in a deep breath, hearing him chuckle. "What's that smell?" she asked, careful where she placed her foot. There were gaps on the floor and dust and grime so thick she couldn't identify the floor's material, though she guessed rotten wood, which would explain the smell.

There was a grand, open fireplace where an old bird's nest rested and, after a closer look, a very dead rat. She walked around, careful not to touch anything and gazed up to the high ceiling.

"What's that?" She pointed up.

"Pressed steel ceilings," he said. "I guess 1890s."

He knelt and brushed away the dust on the floor. "Look, tongue-and-groove. Matai or Rimu wood." He got up again, pointing to the windows. "Stained-glass windows." He stepped over for a closer inspection. One window was broken, and she could see the stains the rain had left on the floor underneath.

"Let's look at the other rooms." He disappeared behind wide French doors.

She followed and with each step, her heart sank deeper.

It was worse than she had expected.

Bedroom doors didn't close or were altogether nonexistent, damaged walls everywhere, and the overall odor reminded her of mildew and mouse droppings. Faded tapestry hinted at better times, but these times had gone a long time ago. No need to look at the bathrooms. She was sure they were a complete catastrophe.

She couldn't even remotely imagine that she'd once lived here with her mother. She returned to the kitchen, avoiding the skeletal grin of the dead rat in the fireplace.

She felt no qualms over selling this house.

He wore a rapt expression as he knocked hard against the walls. Great, maybe the house would just collapse, saving her from the impossible task of selling the wreck. She could collect insurance instead. Or maybe she should sue the maintenance company, but what a headache *that* would surely turn out to be. She should have rented out the house instead of leaving it empty all these years.

"This place is a gem," he said with so much reverence, it turned her stomach.

"This place is horrible," she replied, eyeing the enthusiastic look on his face and not liking it one bit. "Actually, that's wrong," she said. "Calling the house horrible doesn't come close to the truth."

He stared at her, smiling. "Don't you realize, this must be one of the last Victorian villas," he said, and swept his hand around, "with floors, ceilings, windows and rooms uniquely intact. The house is living history."

"Completely my point," she said. "I need a quick fix to get everything in shape, to modernize it." She swept a hand through the room. "Apart from the disgusting smell and broken walls, your *history* is dirty and plain rotten. The bedrooms are too small and especially the kitchen..." The house wasn't worth half of what she'd imagined and she would need a lot more than TLC to fix this mess.

"You are joking," he said, looking thoroughly bewildered.

"This house is a graveyard for mice and birds, not a place to live. *Of course* I'm not joking." She glared at him, willing him to see her point. "Without this hideous fireplace the other room would be open, with more appeal. I want some walls down and why not combine the two small bedrooms."

She walked back into the kitchen. "These windows...pretty and all, except there isn't enough light coming through," she said, stopped in front of him and pointed upward. "Pressed steel ceilings—do you know what century we're living in? They have to go too. When I'm done with this house, it will be clean-cut and airy and contemporary. I want the highest possible offer." Who was she kidding, any offer would actually do.

He stared at her, his dark eyes distant and gradually losing the fiery glow she had seen all morning. He took a sudden step toward her, and she took one hastily back.

"Tell me," he said in a strangely calm voice, "why do you think you can come to my country and plan to destroy a piece of history for profit?" He stood with crossed arms before her, tall and threatening. "I won't let you do it."

His anger radiated toward her as he took another step closer. A cold tingle ran down her spine and she moved away until she stood with her back against the sink.

The feeling was familiar, the edge of the sink pressing against the small of her back, but he didn't lean in to kiss her.

Her shock at his strong reaction ceased. She pushed away from the sink and lifted her head. He had managed to frighten her, something she wouldn't allow to happen again. Only inches between them, his breath was warm on her face. She didn't flinch away from his cold eyes.

"You won't let me do it?" she repeated quietly. "You won't let me do it?"

"Yes," he said, and placed both hands next to her on the sink, trapping her, intimidating her. "I won't let you destroy this house."

She pushed him hard in his chest. "Step away from me." The look in his eyes changed to confusion and he put more distance between them. "You think you can tell me what to do just because I've let you *fuck* me?"

For a second she thought he might argue, but he turned away, dropped the keys on the floor and walked out the house without a glance back.

She sank to the floor, taking a few deep breaths. She noticed that her hands trembled and she hugged herself. She strained to understand why she had ended up sitting—*shaking*—on the floor.

His anger had hit her out of nowhere. It wasn't that she didn't see his point, but that was clearly overreacting on his part. Geez, exactly in what world was he living? She had neither the money nor interest to invest in fancy renovations. She wanted the house sold, sooner rather than later. For that, all she needed was a touch-up, a modern feel. Surely other people did that all the time. What was so wrong?

The nerve of him. She picked the keys up from the floor. To his credit, she didn't believe he had realized how vulnerable she had felt with him towering over her as if he were about to bite her head off.

She stood up, brushed away the dust on her dress and left the house. She walked over the back porch into the garden and stopped dead short. He stood at the fence, but not alone.

She was sure she looked at the owner of the bungalow, the one with the cats. The woman was blonde, her limbs slender, her focus on his face. She talked animatedly with him, one hand rested on his shoulder, and she wouldn't be surprised if the woman swooshed a tail.

Katherine sneezed.

The woman's attention snapped around. "Hi there," she called. "I just asked McGregor why he's running around in the old villa's garden. I guess you're the owner?" She smiled, showing very white teeth.

Katherine stood a few seconds without moving and then slowly walked over to them, staring at his shoulders and dreading being close to him again. With as much possible distance, she stopped next to him. "Yes, I'm putting the house on the market."

"Katherine," he said, his voice flat, "this is Susan, she's in real estate."

Susan gave him her full-toothed smile, but her eyes stayed focused on Katherine. "Lovely," Susan said. "I have an expansive client base, and people are just dying to buy in this area." She produced her business card with a flick of her hand.

"I'll think about it," Katherine answered, and took the card. "But I promised another agent to call him first."

"Well, if you haven't signed a contract with an agent yet, you can switch. I feel you could sell this baby at a great price once you do it up. It's a tad dated."

He gave a dry laugh. "I think you two will get along just *great*."

Katherine watched his back as he walked away. He didn't return to Ada's but instead entered an old four-wheel-drive truck and, with a roar from the engine, took off.

"You guys are old friends?" Susan asked, curiosity evident in her voice.

"Hell no," Katherine said. "And we never will be."

* * * * *

"Don't worry, I'll put it on your bill." Ada came out in the garden, carrying a golden-brown shepherd's pie dish and placed it on the garden table. "No, never mind," she said, and laughed. "I enjoy your company. Tell me more about the house." Ada poured out another glass of iced tea.

After a huge helping of delicious pie, Katherine couldn't tiptoe around the topic any longer. Ada had already asked twice. "The villa," she began, "well, you know how it looks on the outside. It's even worse inside."

"You still want to do it up yourself?" Ada asked.

Katherine drew in a deep breath. Whatever she would do, she wouldn't surrender her handy location next to the villa just because of *him*.

"I think I can clean up the garden, but I'll need professional help with the walls and floors inside the house. Any ideas where to get experienced contractors?" Katherine stifled a huge yawn without much success. They sat in the twilight with the last rays of sun nearly gone, and Katherine thought with longing of her bed.

"Let's talk tomorrow. You look dog-tired and I'm nagging you with questions. Why don't you have a good night's rest?" Ada shot a look at the sky, saying, "If it's not raining, I'm laying out your breakfast here." She pointed at the garden table.

Katherine thanked Ada again and gratefully left for her room. She undressed and slipped naked between the sheets, expecting to fall asleep in an instant, but kept thinking about the next day.

She'd need to find contractors for the building work, and she could start the garden cleanup. How difficult could it be? People sold property every single day. She turned from side to side under the sheets, once more trying to find sleep. Counting to one hundred, she sat up again. She'd go insane if she couldn't talk to someone.

She gazed at the phone, the urge to call Simon to hear his familiar voice, to confront him, to hear his lousy excuses, became increasingly harder to resist. She grabbed the phone next to her and dialed a long international number.

"Guess who?"

Her question was met with a surprised high-pitched scream. "Oh my God, where *are* you? Everyone is looking for you and I thought for sure you were dead or kidnapped or *worse* or —"

"Meg, chill, please. I'm not dead. I'm in New Zealand."

Silence greeted her on the other line. "Girl, what the fuck are you doing there? It's only days until your wedding."

Katherine couldn't help but grin, thankful Meg had pulled herself together to her usual self. "Have you seen Simon?"

"Have I seen —" Meg gave a short, sarcastic laugh. "He's been all but stalking me in the last days, sure I was hiding you or something. He has completely lost it, Kate."

Katherine chest grew tight. "Good."

Meg gave a sigh. "Is this a case of wedding jitters? Honey, I have the most gorgeous dress in my closet and I intend to wear it to your wedding. Kate, darling, talk to me."

"Simon," Katherine said, her throat growing tight, "cheated on me during his bachelor party."

After a pregnant pause, Meg said, "No. Way. In. Hell."

That's what I thought once too. "Someone sent pics directly to my cell. Believe me, they didn't leave a single doubt."

"And *who* sent you these pics, Kate?"

Katherine remembered all too well the shock, the pain, how she'd been paralyzed by the numbness that had flooded her body. "I don't know. Maybe the girl he was with, maybe one of his friends who felt I had the right to know."

"What did Simon say?"

"I got the pics the morning after the party. I was on the plane five hours later. I didn't *want* to talk to him, 'cause I might have *killed* him."

Meg let out a long sigh. "Kate, you are killing *me*. Are you sure it was him, sure the pics weren't airbrushed or something like that?"

There had been several images, close-ups, frontals, almost pornographic in detail, but the one of Simon, his pants around his ankles, fucking that woman from behind had etched itself into her brain. It was some consolation that one image had shown him using a condom. "I'm sure."

"I want to see them," Meg said quickly. "I just can't wrap my head around it."

"Meg, I am not showing you pics of Simon doing a stripper."

"Yes, you are. And then I'll take a cab, drive to him and cut off his dick for you."

Katherine closed her eyes. "After the first shock settled, I got really, really mad."

"Who wouldn't."

"I threw my cell phone against the wall."

Meg groaned. "'Course you did. I can still cut off his dick for you though."

Katherine smiled. "I might still want to do that myself."

"God, Kate, I am so sorry," Meg said. "But why run to the other side of the world?"

"It felt...like the right thing to do at that time."

"Can I tell him where you are, give him your number?"

"Yes," Katherine whispered, digging her nails into her palms, realizing that she wanted him to find her, wanted to talk to him, but on her terms. Simon knew she had ties to Auckland, knew about the house. She'd told him once, he ought to remember.

"You have to talk to him," Meg said quietly. "Let him know the wedding is off. The wedding *is* off, right?" Meg added, her voice cautious. "Oh God, what will Jack say?"

"He will be thrilled," Katherine said dryly. "He never warmed to Simon." Understatement, she thought. Jack *hated* Simon. The pure realization of it hit her like a fist. She let out a groan.

"Meg, I have to go." When Meg asked for her phone number, she gave it to her after a moment's hesitation and then hung up. Katherine stared at the wall, thinking about her already-written wedding vows, her dress, her friends, the cake, the three hundred guests.

She picked up the phone again, dialed the private phone number only a handful of people knew and sat straighter – old habits died hard – when Jack answered the phone right after the first ring.

"Jack, it's me."

"Katherine, you know I don't like you calling me that."

"I'm in New Zealand."

"I'm aware of that. Wedding's cancelled?"

She closed her eyes, swore under her breath. "I hate when you do that. Get your nose out of my life!"

"He's not right for my little girl, always known it."

"I'm not your little girl anymore. How could you? How could you let someone take images like *that* and have them sent to your *daughter*? They were disgusting."

"But I was right, wasn't I? Come home, I have a job waiting for you."

"I'm *not* going to work for you." She slammed the phone down.

When would he stop messing with her life? She couldn't believe Jack had spied on Simon. Then again, she could. He must have tried for months to dig dirt up on him. *Fuck you, Simon*, she thought. *Why did you prove my dad right?*

But the anger, the mad rage she'd felt for Simon had softened. The pain and hurt not as fresh as on the first day. Maybe it was the distance between them or because she was tired. Maybe she suffered from an emotional overload and had grown numb, or it was because she'd gotten much more than just even.

She looked at her hand. Her finger wasn't red anymore, wasn't itching. Maybe, and it was a very small maybe, it meant that she was ready to forgive Simon.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't quite ban Trent from her thoughts. His whole presence was...intense. She hoped that she would avoid running into him again. He might be Ada's nephew, but surely he wouldn't turn up each day to visit his aunt.

Chapter Five

The native birds outside the window made a racket no one could have mistaken for singing. The sun was rising, illuminating Katherine's room with soft beams of light. She kept her eyes tightly shut, forcing her legs not to jump up right away.

She pulled the bedcovers over her head to block out the approaching day. After another luxurious stretch, she climbed out of bed and tried out her tiny bath. The shower started with a low rumble but supplied gushing, hot water.

Toweling dry, she decided to ditch the hairdryer to save time. She threw the window shutters wide open, letting in the warm morning breeze, fragrant with the scent of Ada's cottage garden.

Through the open window she spotted the breakfast table laid out and heard her tummy responding. Must be the fresh air. She donned blue jeans and a black v-neck shirt. The grass sparkled with morning dew, tickling her bare feet, as she strolled to the breakfast table.

Ada had set the table with delicious treats. A pot of steaming tea, a basket of fresh rolls, fruit and homemade jam grabbed her attention first, directly followed by Trent, who came out the kitchen door, holding a mug. Looking up, he stopped so abruptly that coffee spilled over his hand. Swearing, he shook his hand.

"What the—" he said, and bumped the mug on the table. He sat down and stretched out his long legs. "*What* are you doing here?"

She couldn't believe it, not him again. What was *he* doing here in the morning? Was he homeless or what? Aware of her wet hair, and her naked toes digging into the grass, she simply stared at him.

"Ada didn't tell you?" she said at last, hating her self-consciousness. His presence ruined her breakfast. She continued standing in front of the table, the grass tickling her feet.

"Tell me what?" he asked, but then comprehension dawned on his face. "No—please tell me you haven't moved into..." He gave a sigh, took a sip from his coffee. "No, for some reason she didn't tell me you're staying at her B and B. If she had mentioned..." His voice trailed away, and she was perfectly aware what he meant.

If he had known, he would have stayed miles away.

He continued to study her over his coffee, his face not betraying his thoughts. He was clad in a white shirt, which brought out his dark eyes. Otherwise, he dressed in jeans, and he was also not wearing shoes.

The whole scene looked so domestic, so intimate that she considered fleeing back into her sleep out, but she wasn't ready to admit defeat. She figured that he wouldn't

leave the table anytime soon. She sat down, refusing to eat, while welcoming the teacup in her hands. His gaze was on her, and she tried to ignore the loaded silence.

Glancing through her hair, she saw he finally showed some nerves. He fidgeted with his shirt and a square label stuck out at the back of his neck. Her first reflex was to tuck it back in and her fingers itched.

On second thought, she closed her hands over the warm teacup, definitely not a good idea.

"Where's Ada?" she asked to break the silence.

"Walking Lucky," he answered, and she could sense he wasn't interested in small talk. She wished she had kept her mouth shut.

She poured herself another cup of tea and thought desperately what she should be doing next. She was hungry, but with him at the table, she couldn't bring herself to eat. Why couldn't he leave, didn't he have somewhere else to go? He didn't seem particularly busy, and she wondered again what he did for a living.

"I'll fix the fence gate after breakfast," he said in a clipped voice.

"There's no need—" she said, but he interrupted.

"I broke it. I'll fix it."

"Listen closely," she replied, not turning away from his cool expression. "I'm sure you can waste your time elsewhere. I don't want your help."

"Don't get me wrong, helping you isn't my intention." He took a bite out of his bread roll and licked jam from the corner of his mouth. "I'll repair it, simple as that, so relax. I'll keep out of your house."

"Good," she said, "except you should listen more carefully. I said that I don't need your help *at all*. Stay away from me." She pushed back from the table and knocked over her teacup.

He looked slowly up and their eyes met. "Rest assured that I have no desire to lay a single finger on *you*." His gaze dipped lower, centered between her legs. "You were about to leave." He sipped his coffee. "Don't let me keep you."

Katherine turned on her heel and escaped.

* * * * *

Trent spread out the tools to fix the gate in front of him, intending to finish his work as quickly as possible and then stay clear of, well, everything else.

Just as he put his hands to the damaged lock, he heard a piercing scream coming out of the villa. Her voice sent a chill down his spine, and he jumped up and sprinted through the garden toward the back door without a second thought.

When he rushed inside the kitchen, she sat on the floor, shaken, but in one piece. A clipboard was next to her on the floor, notes scribbled on it. She rubbed her hand,

looking wide-eyed at something. He followed her gaze and exhaled, relieved. She was pale around the nose, and he tried not to laugh.

"Why, you've met a giant weta."

"It's hideous. I've never seen such an insect before," she said, getting slowly to her feet again. The weta waved a long antennae, raising long, spiky back legs as if trying to attack, but otherwise didn't move.

"They're night active. You usually don't see them during the day," he said. "At least you didn't smash it. They are native and protected."

She shuddered and he could understand why, the weta was as long as his hand and looked like a mutant grasshopper out of a nightmare.

"Can it jump?" She stepped farther away.

"No, it's too heavy to jump," he said, still trying hard not to laugh.

"Well, I don't fancy having it in the house. It should get its ugly head out of here quickly, protected or not."

"They are completely harmless. There's no need to be afraid." He scooped the insect up in one hand. It walked up his arm. He let the insect crawl back into his other hand.

"Here, try it." He stretched his hand out, watching her face. She had recovered from her scare, but judging by the frown on her forehead, she'd become aware that he was back in her villa.

He could easily imagine her hissing at him, like a cat. Cat, he thought, Katherine.

Kat.

He knew he should get the hell away, but his legs wouldn't move. He loved to watch her eyes. Loved to watch how she replaced the warm, golden sparkle with coldness. How she put up her defenses. How she squared her shoulders for a fight. He suppressed a grin—she was ridiculously easy to read, and he knew exactly how she would answer.

"I wasn't afraid. Please leave and rescue someone else." Her pale expression had changed into flushed cheeks.

He hadn't expected any other reply. It was wrong to play with her, but he couldn't resist. He looked her over, taking in her wild curls, her breasts under the stretched shirt, down over her long legs, and smiled when he saw her dirty, bare feet.

He looked back at her face and into her cool eyes, but her scent was hot and sweet and, God yes, if he would slide his fingers between her legs he'd find her wet and ready.

Still, she was pissed off at him.

Maybe he had a thing for angry women. Maybe that was why he still wanted her. He wondered what she would do if he kissed her—if she would kiss him back or scratch out his eyes.

An angry fuck on the dirty floor, her nails scratching down his back.

His *Kat*.

He smiled. "I wouldn't dream of rescuing you," he said. "I was merely fixing the garden door when I heard a scream. Naturally, I assumed something bad had happened."

"Nothing happened, just...go. You are trespassing on my property." She stared at his arm where the weta crawled up again.

"You're not afraid?" He hoped she would give the right answer.

"Of course not." She stuck her chin out.

"Take it then, if you're not afraid. Or do you need help getting it out of the house?" he said, and her eyes widened. He had pushed her into two choices, both of them equally unpleasant. What would she do? Overcome her fear or swallow her pride and ask him for help?

"Give it to me." She held out her hand.

"Come to me and get it." He couldn't help it, it was too much fun pushing her buttons.

She pressed her lips into a thin line and took a step toward him. And another, until she stood next to him. He took her hand and held it next to his arm. She shivered and goose bumps erupted along her arm. He froze for a second. He'd pushed too far and it wasn't funny anymore.

If she was scared, who was he to laugh?

But it was too late to stop what he'd started. The insect had passed on to her hand, but he still held her hand and knew he should let go. She looked up and met his gaze, and he saw a few faint freckles around her nose he hadn't noticed before.

Her lips parted and her warm breath tickled his face. He leaned closer.

She snatched her hand away and stepped back. "It's ugly." She walked outside, carrying the weta on her outstretched arm.

He closed his eyes, slowly breathing out, and then followed her outside to return to his work at the gate. Looking over his shoulder, he watched how she released the weta into some shrubs. He tried to concentrate on the lock again, but after a while threw the screwdriver down and straightened up.

Come night, she'd find a wolf at her doorstep.

* * * * *

"Why is each and every contractor on vacation at the moment?" Katherine threw the pen she held into a corner, the clipboard following. She had spent the evening calling through the ads in the local business directory. If someone had picked up the phone at all, she had heard the same answer over and over again. She stood up and rescued the pen from the floor, the phone wedged between ear and shoulder.

"Sorry, miss, no one works if they don't have to. It's January. I got kids, right? Anyway, back February, but all booked 'til March," the man on the phone said not unkindly, but all the same, he had been the last building contractor in the phonebook.

She thanked him, hung up and checked her watch. She had left her phone number and address with a few contractors in case they felt like working, but her hopes weren't high. And in any case, she needed sleep and an early night was just the ticket to get her energy for the next day back. Her hands hurt, as did her knees. She'd spent the day on both, washing and scrubbing and cleaning. She thought she'd made a small dent in the mess that was her house.

Ada had given her the keys to her own garden shed, which contained a huge array of gardening tools. So tomorrow morning, she'd start tackling the weeds and overgrown shrubs.

After a quick shower, she slipped between the sheets of the huge bed, too exhausted to stand upright any longer. Sighing, she wished there was a TV to help her take her mind of things so she could fall asleep.

When a knock came at the door, she said, "Come in, Ada, it's open." If a little late for a visit, she thought.

"Now that's just dangerous, leaving your door open like that."

She gave a strangled gasp, her entire body surging awake. "What are you doing here?" she whispered, her heart beating in her throat.

Trent closed the door behind him. The lock clicked shut.

"Time to play, *Kat*."

* * * * *

He stopped thinking about wrong or right, stopped thinking that he should keep his hands off her. Just looking at her with her hair wet from the shower and tucked beneath the white sheets was enough to make him lose sleep and forget principles.

Even underneath all that shampoo and lotion she'd used, her scent reached him, made him so fucking hard. He was a man first and a wolf second, but right now he wanted to shift and see her with his wolf senses. His eyesight flickered, wavered for a few seconds. He'd need to watch himself, knowing that his eyes changed first when he lost control over his inner wolf.

He couldn't afford to lose control—it would scare her for life, scare her to death. One reason why he could only marry another shifter, another wolf like Viv.

But he'd been wrong about them—it wasn't chemistry.

It was a goddamn sexual addiction.

No need to turn on the light, he could see her clearly enough, even though the sun had set. He tossed the box of condoms on the bed and watched her flush a delicate shade of red. She wore a gray, thin-looking tee to bed, and he had no idea if she wore panties or pajama bottoms, but he intended to find out. And any moment now she'd

start yelling at him to get his ass out the door. He waited another couple of heartbeats, but she simply looked at him, lips slightly parted.

Standing at the foot end of the bed, he shrugged out of his shirt. "I'll make you want me," he said quietly. "And we won't talk about it, discuss or analyze it the next day. I promise." He loved her reaction—her eyes displayed the inner struggle between resistance and surrender.

"Like it was just a dream," she said, her voice hoarse.

"The best dream you've ever had, Kat."

She shivered, closed her eyes. "Yes," she whispered. "Because I'm not strong enough to say no to you."

Slowly, he pulled the sheet away from her, revealing her hips, panties and her long, long bare legs. She kept her legs close together but he wanted to see her, wanted her spread wide for his pleasure.

She drew her legs under her body, sat up on her heels. "In a dream, you can do anything, right?" she whispered, staring up at him in the dark room. She looked slightly lost, confused, and he felt a strange tugging at his heart, and then dismissed it. This was sexual, he reminded himself.

Just pure, raw lust.

He came over to the side of the bed. Her hair was still wet under his fingers as he brushed through the strands. He trailed lower, caressed her collarbone underneath the tee. For now, it was enough to see her nipples harden, but he'd taste them too, soon. "What is it you want, Kat?" He'd do anything for her, anything.

"This," she said, reaching out and opening the zipper of his jeans. "I want this." Hands hurried, she tugged and pulled until his jeans and boxer briefs landed on the floor. He stared down at her, her face just inches in front of his cock. Gritting his teeth, he choked back a groan. Her hand wrapped around his cock, stroked once. The pleasure the simple touch gave him brought him almost to his knees, but this wasn't about him tonight.

Carefully, he brushed her hand aside, gave her a little push against the shoulder. "Lean back. I want to pleasure you, not the other way around."

She shook her head, a defiant look in her eyes. "But you do," she said, closing her hand around the thick, heavy length of his erection. "You do bring me pleasure." She leaned forward, her strands of hair tickling his stomach, his groin. Before he could react, her mouth closed over the bulbous head of his cock. With a hoarse groan, he grabbed her shoulders as she sucked gently.

His balls pulled against his body, beneath the base of his cock. He was too goddamn close to coming, yet her lips and tongue moved along his shaft torturously slowly. "You're killing me," he pressed through his teeth, his fingers twining into her hair as she took her sweet time exploring him.

"And you're making me so wet," she whispered, her breath warm against his thigh. One hand wrapped around his cock, and she moved her other hand between her thighs.

Seeing her pleasuring herself while she sucked his cock almost made him come. Hell, not yet, he thought, fighting to hold back a few more seconds, but her mouth on him was just too sweet, too fucking good.

He grabbed her head tighter, trying to still her movements. "I can't hold back, Kat, I can't— Ah, fuck." She sucked him as if she were starving, as if it brought her the same kind of lust it gave him. Hearing her moan in her throat, he felt an electric charge race up his spine, his balls, heavy and taut. He arched his hips as she took him deeper into her mouth. Feeling her tongue swirl around his cock, feeling how she worked to take him, a growl tore from his lips as all his muscles tightened and spurts of come shot from his cock deep into her mouth.

His breath still came hard when she gazed up at him. Her eyes, dark and glazed with lust, she brushed the back of her hand over her mouth.

He went to his knees, taking her face into his hands. "Bad, bad girl," he whispered, seeing the corners of her mouth lift to a wicked smile that hit him square in the gut. "Did you like my cock in your mouth, Kat?" he asked, delighted when she lowered her gaze to avoid his. She switched from naughty to shy in the blink of an eye and he loved teasing her. He leaned forward, brushing her ear with his mouth, breathing in her scent. "Did you make yourself come?"

"No," she said, "I didn't, because..."

"Go on," he prompted, taking a second, deeper breath of the scent of her skin. His groin tightened as he grew hard with the need to throw her onto her back and fuck all her inhibitions away.

"I want you to make me come," she whispered. "It feels so good and so...right."

He closed his eyes, cursing inwardly. When he least expected it, she pulled the rug away from under his feet. He was way too into her, knew it, but still couldn't do the right thing and walk away. Nudging his hand between her thighs, he touched her pussy through her soaked panties. She jerked against his touch. He groaned when he found her swollen and so damn wet.

"You're not leaving now, are you?" she said, raising her eyebrow. "Can you still...I mean are you still up for more?"

He broke out laughing, couldn't help it. "If I were you," he said, rubbing his thumb across her clit, "I'd worry about myself." Leaning forward, kissing her, he tasted himself on her lips, on her tongue. She returned his kiss, hungrily, urgently.

She smelled of him, tasted of him, her hands tugging at his shoulders in an effort to pull him onto the bed. He let her have her way, followed the tug of her hands, slid onto bed with her, on top of her. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, her legs tightly around his waist, and her breath was hard and hot against his throat as she moaned.

A primal satisfaction spread through his body, his mind, pleasing both the man and the wolf within him. And he wanted more, wanted all she could give tonight.

She bucked her hips against him, a low, keening sound at the back of her throat. He loved the sounds she made in bed, loved to be the one causing it. Cupping her breast into his palm, he sucked her nipple into his mouth.

The edges of her fingernails sliced into the skin on his shoulder blades, the pain surprisingly sharp. "Fuck me, Trent," she said, and made him hesitate. Hearing her say his name for the first time shouldn't have an effect on him, but strangely it did. "Now, McGregor." Her teeth nipped at his neck and then she bit into his shoulder muscle.

A sudden growl shot from his mouth at her roughness, the wolf inside him dying to come out. His spine tingled, his nails itching to elongate. "Damn," he said, forcing himself to control his body when all he wanted to do was tip his head back and howl.

He met her gaze, saw her eyes widen, her movements under him freezing. She reached up, touched his cheek. "Your eyes," she whispered. "What is—"

"Ah, fuck." He grabbed her by her hips, flipped her over while she screamed out her protest. Catching her wrists, pulling her hands behind the small of her back, he placed his knee none too gently on her ass, pinning her onto the mattress with his weight and without a chance of escaping. "Hold still, Kat."

Her heel hit him in the side as she thrashed her legs. "Hold still, my ass," she hissed, her breath coming hard and fast as if she'd just sprinted. "You let me go this second."

He grinned, remembering that she didn't quite enjoy being on her stomach. At least not right now. Stretching out his arm, he grabbed the box of condoms, shook until they rained down onto the bed. He ripped one open with his teeth, sheathed his cock. Keeping her wrists in one hand, he tugged her panties down, shoved his knee between her thighs, spread her wide. She had the most luscious, round ass, and when he brought the flat of his hand down on her pale cheek, he heard her choking back a scream. "Raise your ass for me, Kat."

She moaned, rocked her hips against the mattress. "Stop that." He spanked her again, harder, and she stopped all movements. Sliding his hand between her thighs, he traced over her wet folds, stroked her clit. "Come on," he teased, slipping his finger into her hot pussy. "It will feel good, will hurt so good."

"You really are a bastard," she ground out, slowly lifting her bottom high in the air, her head resting on a pillow. Licking his lip, he spanked her again, made her cry out in surprise.

"Next time, you'll do it faster." He grasped her hips, fingers digging into her flesh, and thrust his cock deep into her hot pussy. The pillow muffled her scream, but when he pulled away and thrust back into her tight cunt, he heard her moan, heard her say his name. His blood roared in his ears and everything in his world centered on this moment, on him inside her, fucking her. He began moving, his cock sliding in and out her tight core, her juices slicking the length of his shaft.

She moved readily against him, matching his strokes, urging him on to fuck her faster. He coated his thumb with her juices, slipped it into her ass, felt her tense then

relax at his intrusion. Fucking her in hard, steady strokes, he felt her pussy tightening, pulsing. She cried out as she climaxed in fast contractions around his cock. So hot, so wet, and *mine*, he thought, biting down on his teeth at the sharp spike of pleasure the image gave him. Thoughts slipped away as he drove his cock deeper into her convulsing cunt. He tipped his head back, pulled her tight against his groin and spurted his come into her tight heat.

Staying like that, waiting for his breath to even out, he ran his hand up her spine. Her skin was damp with sweat and she trembled beneath his touch. With regret, he slipped out of her.

He went to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. For a moment he grabbed the sink, closed his eyes, heard her shift in the bed. No human man would have heard the faint sob coming from her throat. Tears, he thought. Again.

He raised his head, caught sight of himself in the mirror. He was glad to see that his eyes had shifted back, but now his conscience kicked in a gut-clenching way. She was a heartbroken mess yet he played with her, took advantage of her vulnerability.

He could dry her tears and offer a friendly hug, or he could take her for another hard ride to make her forget her sorrows. Well, the choice was an easy one.

She was right, he thought.

He really was a bastard.

Chapter Six

"Looks great."

Katherine looked up to see Ada standing at the fence. Lucky bounced next to her, trying to catch a butterfly.

"If I ever again hear someone saying garden work is relaxing, I'll kill him." Katherine laughed, wiping her sweaty forehead with her shirt.

She had clipped the entire morning away, working on the flowery shrubs in the front yard, and she was raking the last branches together. She took a swig from her water bottle and admired her work.

Ada grabbed Lucky by his collar. "I have to run some errands and can't take him along, would you mind watching him for a while?"

Katherine gulped down more water, nodded. "Sure, why not."

"Great, why don't you take him for a walk on the beach? You deserve a break, and he needs to run off his energy. Would that be okay?"

Katherine hesitated. She had planned to tackle the shrubs in the backyard, and a break was time lost. Still, she couldn't say no. Without Ada, she wouldn't even have the tools to work in the garden.

"Give me a minute." Katherine plucked a fat, hairy caterpillar from her shirt and let it crawl away into safety. "I have to change into something without bugs."

Ten minutes and a quick shower later, Lucky was pulling like mad on his leash as she walked away from Ada's house. Letting him lead the way, she could barely contain the dog's eagerness to get closer to the water.

The low tide revealed sandbanks with hundreds of shells, and she cursed her decision to leave her shoes behind. The shells crunched under her bare feet. She walked gingerly over their sharp edges, watching every step. Only a few people strolled along the beach while a group of kids played touch ball farther away under hoots of laughter. Lucky pricked his ears and instead of pulling closer to the water, he leaped into the direction of the playing kids.

She lost her grip on the leash.

"No! Lucky, come back!" Heaven forbid she lose Ada's dog.

He bounded away at full speed. She could still see him and was relieved when the dog stopped at the group of kids. She jogged after him, grimacing when a shell cut her foot and saw the dog barking at someone sitting in the sand.

No. She stopped. No, please, not him.

Trent got up from the sand and removed the leash. The dog stopped barking and bolted away to chase seagulls.

Trent turned round, the leash dangling in his hand.

She swallowed as images from the previous night slammed into her head with dazing intensity. But it was just a dream, she thought, feeling very comfortable about lying to herself. His dark gaze wandered over her, but she had nowhere to escape.

Don't you dare mention last night.

He wouldn't, she remembered. He'd promised.

And she had to get Lucky back. Slowly, she resumed walking, concentrating on the sand under her feet and stopped in front of him.

"Give me the leash."

"I don't think so."

He turned to address the group of kids behind him. "Game's over, see you all next week."

"Uuuh, look everyone." A young girl shrieked with laughter, threw a ball at Trent. "The coach has a *girlfriend*!"

He caught the ball with ease, threw it lightly back. "Shove off—all of you." The bunch of kids, not quite teenagers, ran away, howling with laughter.

"So, you're a touch ball coach," she said, taking in his sport shorts and faded t-shirt and his slightly sweaty complexion.

"Ada is very involved in the community," he said, working his hand through his short hair, "and she didn't even bother asking if I wanted to contribute to the summer program for the local kids," he finished with an air of disinterest she didn't quite trust. She was sure he had enjoyed the game as much as the kids.

"Well, you seem to have enough time on your hands," she said, wondering again how he made his living.

He laughed. "Don't worry, in a few weeks time, I'm back in the real world, but 'til then I enjoy summer." He walked toward the surf where Lucky played in the water. She stared at his back and farther down to his long, muscled legs. Sand stuck at the back of his thighs.

When she'd gotten up that morning, she'd spotted a red mark on the inside of her thigh. He'd sucked too hard at her flesh before he'd moved his mouth and tongue farther up.

Last night, when he'd come back from the bathroom, she'd prayed he wouldn't notice her tear-streaked face.

He hadn't.

Instead, he'd gone down on her, sucking at her pussy until she'd climaxed against his licking tongue. Her flesh, sore and oversensitized, she'd started begging as he threw her legs over his shoulders, his thick cock pushing into her. He'd ignored her

stammered demands for mercy and fucked her in deep thrusts. Her body surrendering to the onslaught, she'd screamed in blissful agony as he brought her to another orgasm.

She doubted she'd survive another night like that.

Or maybe she would, she thought, grinning.

But his eyes, it was the strangest thing how they had –

"Come on, you're here for a walk, aren't you?" He had stopped and looked over his shoulder. "It wasn't Ada's idea that you take the dog to the beach, or was it?"

"Yes, she said she's busy today, and I was happy to help her out."

"I see," he said dryly.

She closed the gap between them. "Would you mind giving me the leash back, I want to return with Lucky." She tried to snatch the leash out of his hand, but he held tight.

"Later." He walked on and she followed, careful to keep some distance because she couldn't handle him right then with her heart beating in her chest like mad.

Walking along the surf, she watched seagulls diving in and out of the waves in their hunt for fish. Her shoulders relaxed and she enjoyed how the water licked at her ankles. She craned her neck to see seagulls flying high overhead and imagined soaring with them in the blue skies, floating in the wind and feeling free.

Lucky ran back and forth, thoroughly enjoying himself in the water. She wished she could be just as carefree, living in the moment without a second thought.

Step by step, she calmed down. She might as well test if she could handle polite small talk. She closed the distance between them and matched his fast pace.

"So, what *do* you do in the real world?"

"Ada hasn't filled you in with my entire life yet? How unusual."

She could hear that he didn't mean it harshly and waited for an answer. After a minute, it became clear that he was choosing to ignore her attempt to chat.

Whatever.

She wondered if he had forgotten about their argument over the house.

Unlikely.

She fell a few steps back again and splashed her feet through the shallow surf. *This is fun*. The cool seawater was bliss. She should have come to the beach earlier.

She shot a look at him walking in front of her. Why did she allow him to get under her skin, why take him so seriously? She closed the gap between them again and shot him a glance. "Hey, McGregor, you up for a challenge?"

"Always, Yankee."

For a few seconds she drowned in his dark, smiling eyes. She coolly observed how her body reacted to him, the chills on her back, the way her breasts pebbled. She looked away from his face, away from the curve of his mouth. How, *how* did he do it?

"You see the dunes?" She pointed over his shoulder to a small stretch of sand dunes, scattered with grass and yellow flowers. When he nodded, she said, "Let's race there, and if I win you have to answer me a question truthfully."

"No," he said, looking at her thoughtfully.

"Afraid to lose?" She splashed water until his legs were wet with salty drops.

"I *never* lose." He drew a start line in the soft sand. "On three, whenever you're ready. And remember whose idea it was."

She counted to three, watching him out the corner of her eye. The moment he dashed forward, she put her leg in his way. She didn't turn to watch him fall but heard him swearing in surprise.

Grinning, she ran over the hot sand, not caring that the sharp shells hurt her feet. She ran as if all hell were behind her. Just a few yards separated her from the dunes when she heard him catching up, and with two long strides he overtook her.

"First," he breathed, and dropped down in the sand. "Have I already told you that I always win?"

Damn, how can he be so fast? She arrived at the dunes a second after him. Panting, she dropped next to him on the sand, ignoring the seagulls above her, their screeching sounding too close to laughter. She had been absolutely sure she would outrun him with her maneuver.

"We haven't discussed yet what happens after I've won," he said, and leaned back on his elbows, squinting up at her, his eyes two black slits. "Any ideas?"

She felt her heart skip a beat and she turned away from his smug smile. So much for living in the moment. She must have had too much sun.

His hand came around her shoulder, turned her back to him. He brushed his hand over her arm, and she held her breath. "Look at you. You're covered in sand."

"I'm sure you can think of a question to ask me," she said, knowing it was too late to run away.

"A question? I wasn't aware that was my only option."

When her arm was free of his hand again, she resumed breathing.

"Sorry, at the moment I can't think of any questions," he said. "Can I save that for another time?" He brushed sand from his legs.

"Sure." Happy to change the subject, she watched his hands. He brushed over his calf and up his thigh, and she noticed a deep scrape on one of his knees. She really must have had too much sun, because a few seconds later the scrape was all but gone.

She must have imagined it in the first place.

Strange.

He brushed sand from his arms and the tiny grains flew around the air, a few settling on her shoulder. She picked a grain up and rolled it between her fingers, still following the swiftness of his hands.

Would he come to her again, tonight, and touch her with those hot hands until she was so wet, her cunt so drenched she hardly felt the friction when he entered her with his cock? "God yes," she whispered as he leaned back on his elbows again, and she tore her gaze away from his fingers.

She turned her head and looked straight into his eyes. She swore he had inched closer to where she sat. He returned her look with a lazy smile, and she dropped her gaze to his full bottom lip. The corners of his mouth curled into a wider smile, and blood rushed into her face. His lips had been between her legs last night, his tongue inside her, and just thinking about it made her so hot-damn aroused.

His arm touched her shoulder. "I wonder what's on your mind," he said quietly, his breath tickling her ear.

If she turned her head, his mouth would be very, very close. "I'm not telling," she said, "unless you want to use the question you won."

"That would be a waste since I actually have a pretty good idea about what's going on in that head of yours."

His voice was neutral, not teasing, but she still felt her stomach tighten with a sexual tension she didn't care to feel right now. It didn't make sense, and yet, here she was, dying to strip off her clothes and have him right here in the sand.

She moved away, putting more distance between them. Why she still felt so shy around him she couldn't say. Last night wasn't exactly the first time they'd fucked. Why, *why* did she crave the touch of him so much without even knowing much about him? She realized that he knew an awful lot about her while he was as chatty as a clam.

"Tell me something about you, please," she said, closing her hand over his wrist. Anything, she thought, that would make her understand what made him tick. "I feel that—"

"Stop right there." His skin was warm under her touch, so warm, but his gaze wasn't when he looked into her eyes. "Katherine, do me a favor and give your fiancé a call when you need to talk about your feelings."

The snide edge in his words made her throat tight and she let go of his wrist, taking a moment to gather herself. "Why is it you always make me mad?"

"Have you called him yet? Does he know where you are?"

"Trent," she said, a tight fist of anger forming behind her chest, "that is none of your business." But his words stung more than she cared to admit. She was sure Meg had given Simon her phone number. So far he hadn't been in touch. "And why do you even care?"

"I don't care," he said lightly, "you do."

She groaned, his words too familiar. She inhaled deeply, gave herself a push, seeking and holding his cool gaze. "How come," she said, questioning her own sanity for asking this question in the first place, "your eyes sometimes change color?"

She kept a close watch on his face. Nothing but a poker face greeted her gaze. Whatever she'd hoped his reaction would be, this wasn't it.

"Change color," he repeated, sounding bored. "That's something that could only happen in a dream." He shaded his eyes, looking over the sea. "The weather changes."

Sure enough, thick, dark clouds crowded the sky in the west.

He jumped up and called after Lucky, and when the dog came running, he fastened the leash back on. "You better head back to Ada with him."

A cold gust of wind hit her in the face. "I saw it," she said quietly, knowing, just *knowing* in her gut that he was lying. "I saw it, Trent."

He turned away, left without a second glance. He hadn't kissed her. Hadn't called her Kat like last night. "But I didn't just dream it," she whispered, staring at his back, willing him to turn around once more. There was something very *odd* going on with him, something she couldn't put her finger on. But he wasn't telling her the truth.

No matter.

Sooner or later, she'd find the truth out for herself.

* * * * *

That night, he didn't knock.

He just came in, closed the door, locked it.

After she'd walked back to Ada's, fat raindrops falling from the sky, she'd continued working in her garden, not caring that the rain drenched her to the bones. Anything that kept her mind busy and away from thinking about *him* was fine.

But the closer the sun had come to sinking behind the horizon, the more she'd wondered if he would take her into his arms again tonight.

And there he was, all six foot something of hot, hard male. His broad chest stretched his shirt as he crossed his arms, and he looked as if he silently challenged her to fight him. His gaze flew over her body, and she was glad she was dressed, if only in pajama bottoms and a wide tee.

"Hi, Kat."

"Go away. I'm still mad at you."

"Not mad enough to lock the door."

"That's because I'm weak." She curled up on the comforter of the bed, took a silly, heart-shaped pillow into her arms and held it tightly against her breasts. "And I wonder if you are the kind of guy who likes to take advantage?"

His jaw set, yet she saw an amused spark in the depths of his dark eyes. She wondered if she annoyed and amused him both in equal measures—because that was exactly how she felt about him.

"So," he said, "I guess it's time I use that question I won."

She rolled her eyes.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"No." She grinned.

"You smell like a liar, Kat. See, if you'd won, I wouldn't have lied to you."

Damn. She'd wanted to ask him about his eyes.

Pushing away from the door, he drew the heavy curtain over the blinds, which left them with only the light coming from the small bedside table lamp. He braced his hands on the footrest.

"Now you'll ask me to stay. Nicely. To make up for lying to me."

His words hung in the air, made her wish she hadn't spoken when he'd entered. Yes, he was annoying, and yes, he was also making her smile more often than not, but he also made her hot and wet and so, so itchy with need to feel his hands on her skin. She lusted for him, after him, more than for any other man she'd ever met. And that included Simon.

But she'd loved Simon, and maybe still did—she wasn't sure. Would figure it out when he found her—whenever, if ever, that might be.

But Trent wasn't offering love, wasn't going to wine and dine her, wasn't going to tell her his deepest thoughts and emotions. He offered sex, no more, no less. There would be no talk about feelings, no getting-to-know-you-better chats. She realized she'd started to confuse him with boyfriend material.

He was just her lover.

My lover.

She'd never had one, but it was an incredibly liberating idea. She moved on the bed and leaned her back against the headboard, crossed her legs at her bare ankles.

"Stay," she said, her voice steady and sure, if slightly husky. "Pretty please."

He cocked his head, and then, unexpectedly, he smiled that beautiful, disarming smile that dimpled his cheek and made her mouth twitch up in response.

"You want me to stay?"

She nodded, smiling, her head growing lighter as he practically undressed her with his gaze. "You want it bad?"

"Yes." His gaze sent a riot of sensations through her. "I want it bad."

"Why are you still dressed then?" he asked. "I was hoping to find you half naked between the sheets."

"I bet you were."

"Take off your clothes."

"Why don't you do it for me?" she quipped, starting to enjoy being a flirt, a tease. "With your teeth maybe?" She laughed.

"No, Kat," he said, his voice lowered and with a hard edge that had her sitting up straighter, "that's not how we're going to play tonight."

She grasped the pillow in her arms tighter, her lightheartedness dying a sudden death. "What do you mean?"

"You wanted to know if I'm the kind of guy who likes to take advantage," he said, the muscles on his forearm flexing as he grabbed the footrest tighter. "Guess what, I am. And I'm telling you to take off your clothes."

A sudden foreboding slinked up her spine, and she hoped she was mistaken. He wouldn't take advantage like *this*, would he?

"And...if I don't take off my clothes?"

"I'll leave."

"You mean that?" God, she really had pissed him off somehow.

"You'll do *exactly* as I say tonight or I'll walk," he said, his mouth curving up in a devious smirk. "Now strip."

Her pussy gave a little spasm, reminding her just how much she wanted him. She licked her lips, her mouth dry. She pulled her shirt over her head, tossed it away. The pj bottoms followed. She crossed her arms over her bare breasts. "There, happy?"

He shook his head, turned, was already halfway out the door before she all but screamed, "Wait!"

She jumped up, tugged her panties over her hips so fast she scratched her skin with her fingernails. "Here." She bunched the fabric into a ball and hit him square between the shoulder blades. "Come back."

She let out the breath she'd been holding when he did.

"I'll give you this one," he said, picking up her panties and locking the door again. "But the next time you disobey, you're on your own." He stepped past her, his shoulder brushing against hers, and yanked the comforter off the bed, sending pillows flying. "In."

Her heart still beating in her throat, she climbed back into bed, wrapped her arms around herself under his cool stare. "Can we switch off the light?"

"Certainly not."

She leaned against the headboard. The wrought iron was too cold against her bare back and she shivered.

"Uncross your arms."

She let her arms fall to her sides, curled her fingers into the sheets.

The longer he didn't speak the more tense she became. Her breasts grew taut, her nipples rising hard and tight. She wasn't entirely sure if she liked how her body reacted. Not sure if she liked that submitting to his wishes, his demands, turned her on. She wasn't submissive, was she? Then why –

"Stop analyzing everything," he said suddenly, pulling her out of her thoughts.

She felt her jaw drop. "How –"

"You're frowning," he said, stepping over to her side of the bed. He touched her forehead with his index finger, rubbed the skin there, smoothed it. "Close your eyes."

She did. Gladly.

"Good girl," he whispered in her ear, making her ridiculously pleased with herself. "Now spread your legs for me."

Her hands that had been perfectly dry, now felt slick. A ripple went through her and she straightened her spine, pulled her legs into her, opened her thighs. Arousal was easily winning the battle against her nervousness. The headboard pressed into her back and she jumped slightly when he lightly touched her shoulder.

"Lean forward but keep your eyes closed."

Something slid behind the small of her back and when he gently pushed her backward, she found herself resting against a pillow. "Better?" he asked, his hand settling on the crown of her head.

She nodded, feeling how he curled one finger into her hair, gave a slight tug. He trailed lower and let his hand wander over her shoulder down to her breast. When he finally cupped her into his palm, the pad of his thumb flicking over her nipple, she let out a moan of longing.

Last night, she had gathered the foiled condoms, which he had scattered all over the bed, and placed them on the bedside table. Hopefully, he'd put them to good use tonight.

He squeezed her nipple, hard, and a jolt of liquid heat shot into her belly. Her clit awakened with need and she arched into his hand around her breast. "I love the sounds you make when I touch you," he said, and then, regrettably, stopped touching her.

She heard a dull thud, a faint scraping over the carpet and the familiar squeaking the desk chair made when someone leaned back against it. She suspected that he'd pushed her clothes from the chair, placed it next to the bed and sat down. But if she opened her eyes to check, he'd leave.

"I want you to touch yourself," he said, his voice so quiet she strained to hear him, "while I watch."

Her heart skipped a beat, but she let her hand dip between her legs. A low groan came from his throat, however soft, but she'd heard it. She wondered if his eyes were still dark, or if they had that odd yellow light at their depths.

He'd leave if she opened her eyes to check.

She closed her eyes tighter as she traced her fingers over her pussy. She was wet, her folds swollen with want, and when she began stroking her clit, she rocked her hips against her hand, a low moan at the back of her throat. Knowing he watched her should have made her self-conscious, but it didn't. When she spread her legs wider, she heard that his breathing picked up, just a notch, but it made her ready to come. The chair squeaked slightly, and she imaged him shifting on the seat, maybe to open his jeans to free his erection.

Picturing him pumping his cock in his fist, she slowly circled her clit. "Do you want me?" she whispered, and entered herself with a finger. "Does that turn you on, watching me?"

His laugh was deep and low in his throat, like a growl. "Everything about you turns me on," he said. "I get hard watching you run barefoot at the beach. Watching you finger-fucking yourself makes me almost come in my pants."

She bit her lip to keep from smiling, added a second finger. She could beg him to fuck her, and just thinking of his thick cock penetrating her core increased her arousal, but she was sure he waited for her to do just that. Leaning her head back, letting the last of her inhibitions slide away, she worked her fingers faster in and out of her cunt. Her hips bucked and a small whimper tore from her throat. With every thrust of her fingers, she climbed higher, her release just a few strokes away. Pressing her palm against her clit, she heard her own breathing become ragged, heard him swearing softly.

"Stop," he said. "Don't you dare."

She froze, squirming with her need to climax. Her body was coiled like a spring and desperate for release. "Please," she whispered, but slowly slipped her fingers out of her pussy. "Make me come."

His hand wrapped around her arm as he all but hauled her off the bed. "Kneel," he said, forcing her to her knees in front of him. He thrust his fingers into her hair, holding her head between his powerful hands, and then his hard erection pushed against her closed lips. "Open your mouth, Kat, and suck my cock."

His demand shot straight between her legs, made her clit pulse. When she opened her mouth for him, he thrust his cock inside. She choked back a sob as the raw sexuality of his action sent another sharp contraction through her pussy. She twirled her tongue around him, reached up to cup his balls. The ache increased so much that she thought she'd come just from the feel of his thick cock in her mouth. Her fingers sneaked between her legs almost on their own accord. When she found her throbbing clit, she sucked him harder.

He groaned and his hips bucked against her face. "Christ, Kat, you do that a little too well. Get up."

She rose slowly, shaking, desperate to feel him soothe that tight, empty ache inside her belly. Her thighs were damp with her juices, her clit swollen. If he touched her there, however lightly, she was sure that was all it would take to send her flying.

She opened her eyes, looked him straight in the eye.

There it was, she thought, studying his face. His pupils were huge, black, dilated. But instead of a dark-colored iris, there was a slim rim of yellow around each pupil.

For a heartbeat or two he returned her gaze, and something in his expression took her breath, made her heart jump in her throat. Something wild lurked beneath his handsome face, something primal. A rush of adrenaline flooded her blood, and she grew dizzy. When her knees gave way, he caught her around her shoulders.

"Switch off the light, Kat," he said quietly, a dangerous tone in his voice.

It was a warning she didn't care to ignore.

Taking a step away from him toward the small lamp, she turned the room dark with a flick of her finger. Blinking against the sudden darkness, she sensed, rather than saw him. Something very close to fear slid down her spine, made her skin tingle. She backed away, felt her shoulders hit something solid. Bracing her hands against the wall, she strained to see him, but only heard a crinkle of foil.

She let out a small shriek when he suddenly stood before her, his grip coming around her waist. He crowded her against the wall, leaning into her. Her nipples brushed against his hard chest and she rubbed up against him, the sensation making her choke back a moan. He lifted her, bracing her against the wall, supporting her with his hands. She felt him between her legs, felt his cock nudge at her opening.

"Spread your legs," he gritted out.

She braced her hands on his shoulders as he entered her with one hard thrust that stole her breath. Pressure built inside her, hard and hot, raced along her spine, hit her deep inside her core. Wrapping her legs around him, she rocked against him, taking his cock deeper into her pussy. She wanted to stay like this forever – with him, buried deep inside her. "Trent, please," she whispered, hearing her voice catch. She could see him now, his face so close and his breath warm against her skin. Closing her hands around his face, she leaned forward and kissed him, feeling how his body tensed like a bow underneath her touch.

"God, Yankee," he said against her lips, "you really are killing me." He kissed her, lightly, a sweet, tender kiss that tugged at her heart. "So wet, so hot," he whispered. "I'll fuck you all through the night, Kat, until you think it's natural to have my cock inside your sweet cunt."

Throat tight, she brought her mouth close to his ear. "I want every inch of you." Her head tipped back, and she clung to him as he started fucking her against the wall, his thrusts deep and rhythmic. Each thrust of his cock stroked her clit and she could feel herself spin out of control, her climax simmering just beneath her skin. *Harder*, she thought, clasping her hands around his neck. "Fuck me harder," she said, sucked in her breath when he did.

He hammered into her, his thick cock stretching her so wide, and she arched back, screamed when the tension finally broke. Her pussy clamped down on his cock as her orgasm coursed through her in hard shivers, and she dug her nails into his back, riding him to catch every last nuance of the incredible sensation he gave her. She felt his cock throb inside her, and he held her tighter, a hoarse growl at the back of his throat.

Everything inside her shook. Her thighs were trembling when he lowered her, slipped out of her. A quick touch against her mouth and then he stepped away, switched on the small lamp. Without his touch, she suddenly felt strangely empty. And being with him felt so good, so right. But he would be back, she thought, he'd said so. He'd stay the night, he wouldn't leave her now. At least not right now.

Tears sprang to her eyes, burned.

She balled her fists, sinking to the floor. She lowered her gaze, slung her arms around her knees. Shimmering silver, the torn and empty condom wrapper looked oddly forlorn on the carpet. She heard him entering the bathroom and took the moment to try to compose herself. Why, why did she have to cry every single fucking time? Was it because of him, because of Simon? Why? She pressed the knuckles of her hand against her closed eyes but couldn't help that her cheeks grew wetter.

When the phone rang into the silence, bursting her bubble of thought, her tears stopped abruptly. *Simon*, she thought, and her heart gave a painful little twist. Her gaze drawn by the phone, she saw Trent appear in the doorway of the bathroom.

She met his gaze, slowly rose to her feet, aware that she stood naked before him while he was dressed. The phone rang for a third time, a shrill tone that made her head hurt, and she stepped forward.

Simon, she thought, and stretched out her arm.

"Don't answer," he said quietly, his dark gaze never moving away from her face.

Her chest grew tight, tighter until it hurt. When the phone rang the fourth time, she picked up. "Yes?"

"Oh God, Katherine."

She closed her eyes, hearing Simon's familiar baritone. "You," she whispered. "What do you want?"

She only heard the door snick closed as Trent left. She reached out, fresh tears springing to her eyes, and switched off the light. Immersed in darkness again, she hoped she wouldn't notice that she was utterly alone.

"Katherine, I need to see you," Simon's voice was urgent, strained. "We need to talk."

"Where are you?"

"Here, in Auckland of course."

Chapter Seven

Trent shouldered his way through the door, pushed a stack of books aside and placed the two cups of coffee on the counter. The bookstore was empty at this time of morning, just as he had expected. The doorbell was still jingling and he started to wonder where Vivian was when she emerged from the storage room.

Her blonde curls were a mess and a smudge of dirt graced her cheek. She wore a scowl on her face as if something annoyed her. Still, her sight made him smile. He held a cup up. "Large soy latte, extra shot, no sugar."

"Oh, sunshine, you're a lifesaver." Viv beamed, her face lighting up as she spotted him, and she stepped behind the counter and took the coffee, but not before pressing a quick kiss against his cheek. "I didn't know you were back. How's it going? And more importantly, what do you want?" She winked, sipped at her coffee, closed her eyes in bliss. "I just fell down a ladder and onto my butt. My balance sucks."

He watched her, taking in her familiar scent. Everything about Vivian put him at ease, whereas everything about that Yankee... He sighed, realizing that he shouldn't have waited so long to pay Viv a visit. "I've been back for a couple of days."

"Heading straight back to work?"

"No, taking some time off."

"Good for you. I've been up all night going over the books. I hate doing taxes."

He nodded, refusing to think about *his* last night. There was no way in hell he'd start analyzing what he'd been feeling before or after she'd picked up that damn phone. But if she hadn't picked it up, he'd have stayed with her for the rest of the night, the morning, the entire day. He would probably have stayed with her forever.

"Need help with it?" he asked, belatedly.

"Thanks, but unless you've morphed into an accountant it's not exactly your area of expertise either. But come on over, you can help me here." She grabbed him by the arm, pulled him after her into the storage room. "Put your brute strength to some use."

Obliging, he helped her stack a couple of boxes high on a shelf, only half listening to her filling him in with the latest gossip. Relaxing for maybe the first time in days, he followed her back into the storefront again. It was kind of nice to be with a woman who wasn't messing with his head.

His coffee was only lukewarm, but he took a sip anyway. "I need to stop by Ada's first, but then I'll head out to the west coast. I need some space, somewhere to run. Care to join?"

"Some people actually have to work for a living. I can't just take the day off. Even though it's been a while since I stretched my legs." Viv gave him a quick grin then

slapped her hand on her forehead. "I almost forgot. I have a huge shipment coming in and still have to do paperwork today." She gave him a sly grin. "If I don't want to miss the party tonight, I better get busy."

"What party?"

"Focus, will you." Viv slapped him against the shoulder. "Linda's party. I just told you about it."

"Oh that," he said, wondering what was wrong with him. He should pull himself together and pay more attention. "Yes, I got her invite a while back, accepted it too." Yes, he thought, it was the perfect solution for staying the fuck away from Katherine, at least for one night, or longer... "Then I'll see you tonight," he said. "It's a date."

"Sure, it's a date." She gave him another quick kiss then buzzed away and started to shelve books. "Switch the radio on, will you?"

He did, grinned when she started singing to it. Horrible voice, but she was a cute girl, he thought, and an even cuter wolf after she'd shifted.

"Viv, honey, you can't sing."

"I know." She laughed, picked up her tune again.

If they ever had kids, he hoped they would get her temperament. "I can pick you up tonight," he called over to her as she climbed on a step to reach the top shelf, her lithe figure stretched tall.

"Nah, don't bother."

"And you're sure you don't want to come along this morning?" It would be nice, he thought, having another shifter at his side while running through the kauri forest.

"I really can't. And you do that lone wolf thing so well anyway."

He rolled his neck, his muscles tight, but gave himself a mental push. "Are you seeing anyone right now?"

"Why? You hitting on me?" Her blue eyes crinkled in amusement.

"I might," he said, but she only snorted.

"What about you?" she asked, pushing another book into place. "Breaking hearts as usual?"

Hesitating for only a second, he said, "I've given that up."

"Sure you have, sunshine. Now go and run off that excess energy." She gave him a quick wave. "See you tonight."

He grabbed his now-cold coffee and all but stormed out of the store. It bugged him that she found the idea he was interested in her so funny. She was right though. He needed to run off some energy, relieve tension.

But tonight was as good a time as ever to start convincing her they were the perfect couple.

* * * * *

Katherine snapped on rubber gloves, wandered aimlessly through the rooms and didn't know where to start. The villa—or the *project* as she'd started to call it—was still a depressing place to be. She suppressed a huge yawn, but the tiredness she felt was bone-deep.

Last night, she'd listened to Simon apologizing, begging, groveling. He didn't deny or deflect. He called it his biggest mistake. While she listened, she wondered how many other women had listened to that same I-was-drunk-it-didn't-mean-a-thing-I-love-you speech. It was everything she'd wanted him to say, but when his flood of words dried up, she was still underwhelmed by her own emotional response to it.

The thought didn't hurt anymore—that he'd fucked another woman. The anger was gone. Strangely though, it didn't mean that she was ready to fall back into his arms.

Feeling torn but promising that she'd call him back after she'd thought about his plea for forgiveness, she'd hung up.

If only she'd never answered the damn phone in the first place.

She'd slipped into bed and fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep that was anything but invigorating. Nevertheless, she'd wolfed down a huge breakfast at Ada's table.

A Trent-free breakfast table.

She'd thought it best to spend her day on her knees, scrubbing and cleaning, while she made up her mind what to do about Simon—when and where to meet him, on her terms. Not in her sleep out, not in his hotel, she thought. Definitely somewhere where other people were close by—it would make her feel less awkward—maybe in a cafe over a cup of coffee.

She almost felt as if *she* had some explaining to do—not vice versa.

Not at all sorry when a knock on the door interrupted her thoughts, she glanced up, half expecting to see Trent only to feel let down when she saw who really walked in.

"Hi there, how's the work going?" Susan smiled cheerfully.

"Fine." She tugged on her dirty shirt. Susan was dressed spotlessly, clad in a short skirt, a bright yellow blouse and impossibly high heels.

"I wanted to catch up on our last conversation and check if you have an agent now," Susan said.

"Well, I gave the other agent I told you about a call, but he never called back," Katherine said. "As you see, I have a lot to do and maybe I should fix the house first..."

Susan waved a contract under her nose. "I told you people are dying to buy in this area. The full-size lot alone is almost worth more than the house itself. I reached out to my client base. I think I have a very interested buyer."

Katherine stared at her, trying to keep track. "Already? How? You mean, if I sign with you—"

"This is a standard contract and I can assure you, I have your best interests at heart," Susan said, and laughed. "The higher we sell, the higher my commission. Sign and I'll start flexing my muscles."

Katherine nodded, nonplussed, and shot a quick look over the contract. There was no reason why she shouldn't sign. "Okay, sounds good. Keep me updated on your progress." Katherine looked for a pen and Susan conjured one out of thin air. Both signed, and Susan gave her a copy.

"Great, you'll see. We'll sell this baby in a flash." Susan winked, snatched up the signed contract and stuffed it into her purse. She pulled out her cell phone and was already talking a mile a minute by the time she left.

Katherine worked relentlessly for the next hour, removing the grime from the countertops until they gleamed, and was surprised how quickly she achieved a noticeable difference to the room.

"Not too bad," she muttered, looking at the now-clean countertops when she heard another knock, this time from the front door. Busy day, she thought, and called, "I'm in the back."

Seconds later, a lanky man walked into the kitchen. "Miss Miles?" She nodded, wondering who he was and observed the ill-fitting gray suit he wore. "I'm Jason Ricks, you left me a message." He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. She shook his hand, glad she wore the gloves—she didn't like his oily smile or his limp handshake. She shot a glance at the signed copy of the contract, which lay on the sparkling kitchen counter.

"Hi, Jason, I remember. I called once back, but obviously you were busy—"

He lifted his hand, stopping her in mid-sentence. "I'm always busy, that's why I'm so successful." She found his grin, which was more a like a presentation of his teeth, more and more off-putting. He wasted her time, and she wished she hadn't called him in.

"Well, thanks again for dropping the keys off by the neighbor. I understand your company was responsible for maintaining the property. However, I'm selling now and signed up someone else." She gave him an apologetic smile.

Jason's teeth had vanished during her speech until his mouth was a hard line. "You signed with someone else?" he asked, too loud for her comfort. "But I told you not to. I have buyers for this villa. We had a verbal agreement."

She straightened. "Listen, your company maintained the property and you received monthly payments. But I have to add, you didn't do it well. You neglected this property, and you should be happy I'm not taking legal action against you," she said in a clear and loud voice, not wanting to leave a trace of doubt that the conversation was over and hoped it would be enough to drive him away.

He stepped closer, and the smile plastered on his face increased her uneasiness. She didn't like his leering look, and he bared his teeth at her in a grotesque smile like an aggressive pit bull. "Maybe we could discuss this matter more privately." He looked her up and down, and his gaze didn't return to her face but stayed on her breasts.

"What?" She stared at him, thinking that she would need a shower to wash the look from her body. His mouth twisted in a wider smile, and a chill crept up her back.

"I suggest you leave." She turned, but he grabbed her on the shoulder. Her heart stopped for a second, but now cold fury rushed through her blood. "Get your hands off me."

"*What* is going on here?" Trent stood on the doorstep and stared with clear dislike at Jason. "You all right, Katherine?"

"Yes, Mr. Ricks was about to leave."

Without another word, Jason walked to the door and stopped because Trent still stood in the doorframe. She suddenly feared Trent would hit him, but after a few seconds, he stepped aside and let Jason hurry away.

"What was that all about?" Trent asked, finally looking at her.

She let out a deep breath. "This house attracts rats," she said, thinking of Jason as an overlarge pest scurrying through the rooms. "He became creepy when I told him I signed up another real estate agent, with Susan."

"I guess he disliked missing out on the commission," Trent said.

She didn't know what else to say, didn't know how to break the tension that suddenly hung heavy in the air. "How come you're here?"

"Ada asked me to stop by her house, and, well, I saw him walking through your garden, didn't like the look of him, so..."

"So..." He wouldn't have paid her a visit otherwise. "Well, thanks for saving me," she said, attempting a grin but ending up with a sort of wobbly half smile, which he didn't return.

"No problem," he said, turning away.

"Trent," she said quietly, stopping him in his tracks. "Don't just leave, please."

He sighed and cast a glance over his shoulder, a pained look on his face as if someone were slowly pulling out his fingernails.

She bit on her lip, aware of her disheveled looks and folded her rubber-gloved hands behind her back.

"Look," he finally said, "if you promise to behave you can come along. But please get rid of the rubber gloves first."

The tight fist around her heart loosened and she felt herself unable to stop grinning. She didn't even care where he was headed. "Sounds acceptable."

"I'll meet you at my truck."

* * * * *

Katherine climbed into the passenger seat of the old four-wheel truck. Trent was already behind the wheel, staring straight ahead.

She'd quickly swapped the dirty clothes she had worn for cleaning in favor for a long, loose-fitting dress, thinking that it had become a habit running around without

shoes. She curled her legs up on the seat and saw Ada dashing out of her house, Lucky hot on her heels.

"Would you two mind taking the dog along?"

Only she heard Trent's groan when Ada opened the door and the dog bounced onto the backseat of the truck.

"No, it's fine," he said, kicked the vehicle into gear.

As he sped up, she watched his profile. Still not looking too happy, he obviously hadn't planned on taking her *or* the dog along on this trip.

Somehow glad he didn't feel the need to talk, she relaxed into the seat. Despite her fear that the long drive would be awkward, she found the silence between them soothing, leaving her to the leisure of gazing out the window. The landscape quickly changed from densely populated suburbs to soft, rolling hills with grazing sheep, lush, green vegetation and the occasional glimpse of the sparkling, azure ocean.

Lucky was in the back with his head out the window, tongue lolling.

They left the main road and circled down a narrow serpentine street. As soon as they stopped and opened the car door, the dog ran off into a shallow stream next to the graveled parking place.

"We have to cross." He nodded to the stream and walked on.

She stepped into the water, the cold stream licking her ankles, and waded over the slippery stones underneath. There was no sign of a beach yet, but she could hear a distant roaring as they walked along a narrow path. The stream next to her grew wider and deeper and she fell behind to watch dragonflies zigzagging across the gushing water. Breathing in, she could taste sea salt on her tongue and saw birds soaring high overhead. She kept on walking until the path opened up. She stopped, staring open-mouthed.

Black sand for miles and miles. The beach ran on for eternity to her left and right. Massive rocky hills and a lush forest fenced off the land behind this wilderness. Far away, over a huge stretch of sand was the wild, crashing surf of the Tasman Sea.

She turned and looked back. The small path behind her was the only way to escape this force of nature.

"I knew you'd like it." Trent had walked back and stood before her, the wind tugging at his shirt, pressing it to his chest. The impulse to reach out to him overwhelmed, but Lucky came barking to urge them on and the moment passed. They walked together toward the surf, and the sun burned down from an impeccable sky. She welcomed the strong winds blowing through her hair, blowing over her skin to take away the heat.

"Do you ever get used to this place?" she asked, noticing his amused smile. She continued to look around in awe. Never in her life had she felt so insignificant, so tiny against this surrounding vastness. Sand glittered in the sun like billions of crushed black diamonds.

"Why is the sand black?" She couldn't remember ever having been at a black beach in her childhood. "Volcanic?"

He nodded, and they walked next to the tamed waves along the surf, but a high swell rolled out at sea, crashing against rocks rising out of the water.

"I've never been at a more beautiful place, or more terrifying. I feel like the sea could wash me away and no one would ever know," she said, and laughed to soften her serious tone. It was easy here to forget worldly troubles, to breathe in new energy. The beach stretched on and on, and as far as she could tell, they were completely alone.

She stopped, drawing in a deep breath. "Can we talk," she asked quietly, "about last night?"

He harrumphed. "Please watch the dog for me." He pulled his shirt over his head, kicked off his shoes. He rolled his shoulders. He was only wearing a pair of jeans and she wanted to reach out and run her hands along his broad chest.

"You don't want to go swimming, do you?"

"No, I don't. But I generally come here to...think and be alone. Walk wherever you want to, I'll be back within an hour or so."

"How will you find me?"

He laughed quietly. "Oh, I'll find you easily, don't worry."

Stunned that he just left her, she watched him march away. The muscles on his back moved as he headed toward the dense forest that grew right to the edge of the beach, but that wasn't what had her slap her hand over her mouth. A chill ran down her spine, the thought that sprang to mind so outlandish she immediately dismissed it. But with every step he made, the black tattoo of a wolf on his shoulder blade looked even more alive.

As if feeling her gaze on his back, he looked over his shoulder. She took a step back when he gave her a grin that she could only describe as...wolfish.

Chapter Eight

Katherine lost track of time. She wasn't sure if she'd spent an hour at the beach already, but she'd stopped caring. She loved every step over the soft, yielding sand, watching how seconds later the sea swallowed her footprints.

She picked up another shell and strolled to a smooth stretch of sand in the middle of scattered rocks. Overshadowed by a towering cliff where rubble occasionally tumbled down, she sat down to spread out her shell collection. She lined the shells up, from the smallest to the one as broad as her palm. She picked the smallest shell up and held it against the light. The shell was like a translucent coin.

Looking up, she saw Lucky with his nose buried in the sand, digging out a hole.

In the distance, someone walked toward her.

Something crunched. The fragile shell lay broken in her hand and she exhaled harshly. Maybe she wasn't so relaxed after all.

Trent walked in a straight line toward her, and she was somewhat glad to see he wore his shirt again. The tattoo had taken her aback. How alive it had looked on his shoulder—seriously sleep deprived, that was what she was to imagine such a thing.

He had soon closed the distance between them and sat down next to her, so close their legs touched. She focused on the shells in front of her and to keep her hands busy, sorted them from light to dark-colored.

"Color coordinating? Looks like you're having fun." His voice was rough, and the pressure against her leg tugged at her brain, suggesting a different kind of fun.

She turned away, afraid he would hear her heartbeat speeding up.

"What about you?" She kept her voice light, forcing her shoulders to relax. "What exactly were you doing in that forest?" He only had to sit next to her and she was aware of every breath she took.

"Running." He leaned back on his elbows. "Thinking."

His gaze prickled on her shoulders, lifting small hairs at her neck. She stopped sorting through the shells and had nothing else to do than to feel him sitting next to her. *Say something*. Something to break the silence that had settled over them.

"Thanks for taking me along today." *Shut up, Katherine*. She rambled and couldn't stop herself.

"Believe me, the pleasure is all mine."

She swallowed. "Don't do that," she said quietly. His presence next to her was like bungee jumping, without knowing if she had a rope around her legs.

"Do what?" he said, his voice amused. "I'm not doing anything, Yankee. I'm just giving you the opportunity to have a look at New Zealand's beautiful west coast before you return home. Once you're back, you won't find another place like this. Go ahead and collect some more shells, something to remember. I know you'd like to."

She laughed, forcing his suggestion out of her mind and turned toward him. "It's not your achievement that I like it here." She threw a shell at his chest, where it bounced off into the sand. "And stop calling me a Yankee, because I'm not," she said, and ducked when he threw the shell back. "I was born *here*."

"What exactly do you mean with *here*?"

She sighed. "Okay, long story short. I lived with my single mom in Auckland until I was three or four or something. Then she met Jack and they married. Jack's a New Yorker and we moved."

"What about your dad?" he asked.

"My real father was a good-for-nothing lowlife who got my mom pregnant at sixteen," she said, repeating what Jack had told her once in no uncertain terms. "Jack told me he died in a car crash. I choose to believe him."

A strange expression crossed his face. "So you were born *here*?"

"Slow, are you?" She threw another shell, but he caught it before it hit him. "Good news. Your reflexes still work."

"Careful, Kat," he said, smiling, and she had the irresistible urge to kiss him. "Well, you certainly grew a Yankee accent," he said. "Weren't you homesick when you moved? Must have been tough."

"My mom got sick soon after we moved to the States. It wasn't...it wasn't a good time for me. When she—" She swallowed, started over. "I was twelve when she died, and Jack sent me away to grow up in private boarding schools. The villa was my mother's house. Now it's mine, and the only thing I truly own that has nothing to do with my stepfather. I didn't know what to do with it all these years. Until now."

She waited for him to say something, anything. *Stupid, stupid me*. Why was she telling him all this? He didn't care about her feelings. He was just her lover, she thought. And even that had somehow taken a turn for the worse.

When he spoke, his voice was flat, distant. "You grew up in that house."

"Well, yes, my first three or so years."

"And you want to *sell* it?"

Anger started brewing in her stomach. "Some people can't *afford* to be sentimental about something they do not even *remember*. I wish I could, but I don't. The earliest memories I have are that of my mom and me in the States. I won't leave Auckland before I've sold this house."

"Are you broke?"

"Yes," she said, and then winced. "No. But you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"I want to use the money for a startup." She rushed it out a little too fast. When she had told Simon about her idea, he only laughed and patted her head as if she were a kid declaring she wanted to become an astronaut.

"Hmm," he said slowly. "Well, certainly not a bad motivation."

She looked over her shoulder and met his gaze. He didn't sound as if he found her idea ridiculous, but neither did he ask what kind of startup she was talking about, reminding her once more that he wasn't interested in getting to know her better.

The wind kept blowing her hair into her face, into her eyes, but she didn't mind. The moment stretched and she knew she should say something, break the silence or look away from his face.

"Enjoying the view?" He stretched his arm out, reaching. Her breath caught in her throat and she turned her head away. He touched her neck, his hand settling around her hair, gathering loose strands until he held all her curls. Never opening his hand, he moved closer and stretched out his long legs to both sides of her, trapping her in front of him. He tilted her head to one side, slowly exposing her neckline.

With the wind warm on her skin and his even greater warmth behind her, she gave a sigh.

He closed his other arm around her, pulling her into him until she leaned against his chest. She pressed closer to him, and goose bumps erupted at her neck, running down to her arms. His lips brushed her ear, and her breath quickened. He nipped her neck, and she couldn't help herself, a small moan escaped her.

"You taste like salt and sunshine." His lips turned into a smile and his tongue flicked over her skin. "Do you taste like that all over?" He rubbed down her arm where all the hairs stood up before he settled his hand on her leg and moved her dress up. The fabric slid along her shins and farther up, exposing her thighs. "Maybe that's why I can't keep my hands off you. You're homegrown."

"Nah, that can't be it," she said, and her mouth parted when he placed his hand on her bare thigh. "I think you just like a challenge."

He snorted, his palm circling up her thigh and his fingers tracing along the edges of her panties. "I like a challenge all right, and maybe you were one the first time, but..." He shrugged and found the zipper of her dress. A second later, the wind blew over her chest before his warm hand covered her left breast.

"But?" she asked, and groaned as he tangled his hand in her hair and tugged her head back. The gentle pull did nothing but excite her more. Her breathing too fast, a low tremble spread in intervals through her body. He kissed her lower neck, nibbled at her flesh until she moaned in pleasure.

"You're not much of a challenge now, Yankee." His hand moved between her legs, slipped past the elastic of her panties and he pushed one finger inside her pussy. "See," he said quietly. "You don't even make me work for it to get you so dripping wet." He spread her slick juices over her clit and rubbed his finger over it in slow circles. "Your pussy is begging for it."

"So," she said, closing her eyes because his touch was so exquisitely sensual. "You calling me easy?"

"Not easy," he said, sounding thoughtful. "Starved. How come you're so hungry for sex, Yankee? Was the fiancé not up to the task?"

She gasped, her eyes flying open. Simon was up to it all right, that wasn't it. Heat rushed into her face and she struggled with a reply because he was pushing two fingers inside her and moved them slowly in and out of her pussy.

"Is he?" he asked again, fucking her faster with his fingers, his palm pressed hard against her clit.

"Yes, he's up to the task," she pressed through her teeth, because it was the truth.

"If you say so." Amusement tinged his words.

She sucked in her breath as his fingers worked her faster, rougher. Fuck, she thought, as her hips bucked against his hand. She was this close to coming even though he really, really pissed her off right now. "You think you're the first guy who can give me an orgasm?"

"I don't know, Kat. You tell me." His fingers slowed on her clit, which gave her a moment to gather her wits.

"No," she said, "you are not the first by a long stretch." She felt a ripple going through him, heard him take in a deep breath, and she decided to drive the point home. "I've had plenty of good fucks before you."

"Hell, you really know how to piss me off." His voice was a dark growl that had her hair rising at the nape of her neck.

"Then we're even," she said quietly. She wanted him, wanted him fast, wanted him as *angry* as she was. Why he'd felt the need to talk about Simon while his hand was between her legs was beyond her, but the longing to feel close to him was overpowering. "Want to know *how* they fucked me, how they made me come?"

Her heart jumped in her throat as he curled his hands around her shoulders, his fingers digging painfully hard into her flesh.

"Do you want me to tell you more, Trent?"

"Not one more word, I mean it."

He jumped up and moved away from her back, shoved her to the side with more force than necessary. She landed flat on the sand, shaded her eyes against the sun to gaze up at him.

He towered over her, a vein standing out in his temple. His mouth was a tight, flat line, all traces of amusement drained from his face.

Mission accomplished, she thought.

She'd wanted him angry.

"Do you dig that?" she whispered. "Me, with other men?"

Exhaling harshly, he dropped to his knees, pulled his shirt over his head. It landed next to her head. Pulling it close to her face, she inhaled the scent that clung to the fabric. He worked his hands under her dress, leaned over her and jerked her panties down. "Spread your legs."

She did, tugged her dress farther up, allowing him to see her spread wide open. No, he wasn't the first guy, she thought, but the only one who made her lose her mind when he fucked her. The only who had her begging for more. And she was beginning to fear that he was the one she couldn't be without. She propped herself up onto her elbows, feeling the warm sand against her bare ass, and watched how he zipped open his jeans, pulled out his erect cock and sheathed himself. His movements were quick, his fury simmering just underneath the surface. Her pussy clenched with need to feel him fill her up. "Fuck me, Trent. Fuck me hard."

He loomed over her, guided himself between her legs and thrust his cock deep into her pussy in one hard shove. She made a low, keening sound in her throat, feeling the tight stretch his thick cock gave her. "Yes," she whispered when he began pounding into her without the restraint he usually showed. She closed her eyes as his cock hammered into her cunt, over and over, unrelenting.

She wasn't sure if he even cared if it gave her pleasure. His face was buried in the nape of her neck and his breath came ragged, loud, drowning out the sound of skin meeting skin. Hearing him, hearing the stark lust in his voice drove her closer to the edge. "More," she whispered, her entire body surging up to meet his. "It feels so good when you fuck me." Her breasts rubbed against the hairs on his chest, her nipples pressing against his muscles, and the warm sand underneath her was like a thousand warm pinpricks against her skin.

He fucked her hard, deep, angry, and she was loving each thrust he gave her with his cock. When she bucked underneath him, he shoved his hands underneath her ass to pull her tighter against his groin. Raking her nails up his spine, she thought about how fitting the tattoo of the wolf on his shoulder blade was. It was almost like a primal mating, the way he pounded into her flesh. His skin was slick with sweat and his thrusts were as brutal and urgent as if he wanted to forcefully merge with her by fucking her into oblivion. "Come for me, Trent." She wrapped her legs around his hips and clung on to him with everything she had. "Take me," she urged him on. "I want to feel you come inside me. Make me yours."

A rumbling growl from deep in his chest, he kissed her neck, her exposed shoulder. She shuddered as he gave her shoulder a flick of his tongue, and then he sank his teeth hard into her skin. The pain was sudden and sharp and entirely unexpected. She arched up against him, stars exploding behind her eyelids, the sensation of him biting her so strong she cried out. The pain on her neck left as quickly as it had come, and when he tilted his hips, his cock rubbing hard over her clit with each fast thrust, she forgot all about it when he kissed her. She came, shockingly fast, and screamed when he reached between them to flick his finger against her clit. The pleasure was so intense she feared she'd simply pass out if he did it again.

He tipped his head back, a hoarse shout in his throat—almost a howl. His cock thickened, pulsed inside her pussy. Helplessly, she climaxed again, her entire body shaking with each sharp convulsion. He pumped his cock inside her for a last, deep thrust, spurting his come. All but collapsing, he slumped down on her, breathing hard, his body giving last-minute twinges of pleasure, his forehead resting against her collarbone.

Enjoying how his weight pressed her deep into the sand, she closed her eyes, praying she wouldn't cry, but already felt tears burning behind her lids.

"Damn you, woman," he whispered. "Why did you make me do that?"

Woman? Startled, she blinked away the tears. "Why did I do *what?*"

"Fuck." He rolled off her, away from her. A flick of his wrist and the used condom landed in the sand. She wasn't sure if she should address environmental issues right now. His reaction puzzled her too much. Without meeting her eyes, he picked up her panties and thrust them into her hands. "Get dressed."

Taken aback, she slipped into her panties, zipped up and smoothed down her dress. Sand clung to the back of her legs, her butt. With her fingers, she felt for the sore spot on her shoulder. She craned her neck but couldn't see where his teeth had broken skin. Well, she thought, he'd gone a bit overboard with his love bite, but she'd survive.

She sought his gaze, but he faced the sea, his back turned to her. There was a rigidness in his posture she hadn't seen before. She walked to him, placed her hand on his shoulder. "Can't you just tell me what—"

"No, I can't." He shook her hand off his shoulder. "We have to head back."

Struck speechless, she stared after him. The hurt that dug itself into her heart as he simply walked from her nearly undid her.

He suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Oh *fuck*," he said, and starting running.

She had heard it too—a sharp whine and a pitiful bark from not very far away. She ran after him, stopped short a moment later when she saw Lucky collapsed in the sand. Her conscience kicked in and a sense of dread spread through her chest. This was how she repaid Ada's kindness, she thought. By neglecting to watch her dog while she was busy getting busy.

Trent looked up, found her gaze. "We have to get him to a vet."

* * * * *

Trent had placed Lucky on the truck's backseat. Apart from muscles twitching heavily under his pelt, the dog appeared to be sleeping.

Katherine grabbed hold of her seat as Trent started the truck and drove up the narrow serpentine street. Instead of slowing down, he sped up faster as they reached the straight, main road.

He pointed to the glove compartment in front of her knees. "My mobile," he said, not looking away from the road.

"Your what?" She wished he would slow down. Nausea spread through her stomach, and she recognized the first signs of motion sickness.

"My *cell phone*, Yankee."

She found the sleek silver phone, held it out for him and focused on a distant point outside the car.

"Look for Linda and call."

Tearing her gaze away from the steady horizon, she switched on his phone, scrolled through his address book. Too many names, most of them female. She stopped when she had counted to thirty-six. She found Linda, called and held the phone to his ear when she heard a voice asking, "McGregor?"

He took the phone. "Linda it's me," he said, paused and laughed. "No, not this time. Listen, Ada's dog just collapsed at the beach. Can you come to your clinic and have a look?"

She glanced at him, struggling to stomach his address book on top of her urge to throw up. Was he fucking the entire female population of this island, or what?

"Thanks, Linda, see you shortly." He gave her his phone back.

"Linda is a vet?"

"No, she's a dentist." His gaze was condescending. "Of course she's a vet."

"Friend of yours?" Damn, she was sounding jealous.

He laughed but didn't sound amused. "Yes, she's a friend. What else do you want to know? If I fuck her?"

"Do you?" Her stomach heaved. Why did she do that to herself?

He swore under his breath but didn't answer her question. She put his phone back into the glove compartment, next to a brightly colored box.

"You have condoms in your *truck*?" she asked, and concentrated again on not throwing up.

"Damn, Katherine, I can't deal with jealousy right now."

That shut her up.

Fifteen silent minutes later, she saw the sign for the vet clinic even before he made a sharp left turn and switched off the engine. Trent carried Lucky to the entrance when the door opened from the inside.

"That was quick."

Ah, so that's Linda, she thought, staring at the petite woman who had opened the door for Trent. Her short, spiky black hair and the high cheekbones gave her the look of a cute, sexy pixie. *Linda*, she thought wryly, a new pain in her stomach. She saw why her number was in his phone, and she could almost not blame him. Almost.

Trent had disappeared inside the clinic, but Linda looked her up and down curiously.

"Well, hello, come in," Linda said, and with a last glance, went inside.

She waited a minute on the doorstep to collect herself. When she walked inside the clinic, Linda was giving Lucky an injection.

"And did you see where he played?" Linda's gaze turned to Katherine as she stepped into the room. "I mean, did he run over sand or was he in the water?"

Katherine returned Linda's inquiring gaze uneasily and a flush crept into her face.

Linda's eyebrows shot up, and she turned round to Trent again. "Well, did *you* see what happened?"

"No, we didn't see how it happened. I reckon he came out of the water."

"I see," Linda said. "He might have been bitten by something poisonous —"

"Poisonous?" Katherine interrupted. "I was sure there were no poisonous animals here?"

"True, but you would be surprised what the sea sometimes washes up on the beach...jellyfishes, sea snakes...which beach did you go to anyway?"

"Karekare beach," Trent said, a pained look on his face.

"I see," Linda said, her gaze falling on Katherine again. "Well, leave him here for the night. I'll run a blood test and call the Department of Conservation to check if there were any similar incidents reported." Linda checked her watch. "Tomorrow. They're closed today."

"Thanks, Linda, you're great," said Trent, sighing. "Now I'll have to bring Ada bad news."

"Don't worry. After all, his name is Lucky. Let's put faith in that."

Again Katherine felt Linda's gaze sweep over her, from her bare feet to her surely tousled hair, then she zeroed in on a spot on her neck. Linda's mouth parted, an expression of — what was it, Katherine thought, shock? — on her face.

"We haven't met before, have we?" Linda asked slowly.

Trent's head shot up. "Linda, this is Katherine Miles. She's —"

"I'm on vacation," Katherine interrupted coolly.

"On vacation, how nice. I've noticed your accent. Where're you from?" Linda smiled innocently while Katherine noticed all the same that she was being interrogated.

"New York City."

"You two met there?" Linda asked.

"No."

"So you just met?"

"Yes."

"And here I was thinking that you're from the New York office. You have that lawyerly look about you."

Katherine simply stared at her, even though curiosity was killing her. What the heck was Linda talking about?

"So," Linda said, "what is it that you do when you're not vacationing and McGregor isn't showing you the scenery?"

"Linda, please stop being so—" Trent began, but Katherine interrupted him.

"I used to work in corporate litigation."

"What?" Trent was staring at her with outright disbelief. "You got to be *kidding* me. You're a *lawyer*?"

Katherine returned his gaze, starting to feel insulted for real. Just how stupid did he think she was if he couldn't believe that she held a normal day job?

Linda laughed. "Gosh, you two have a lot of catching up to do, but I was right," she said, tapping her nose. "I've got a nose for that because I spend all my free time with my husband's colleagues." She slapped Trent on the back.

Katherine stared at Linda for a moment, letting her last words sink in. Husband? Colleague...New York office. She was *married*? Linda was still speaking and she shifted her attention back to her.

"Really, I envy you," Linda said. "Manhattan must be a shopping heaven. I've never been out of Auckland. Tell you what, Katherine, why don't you come to my party tonight? It's a mix of family, friends and business associates, and women are strongly in the minority. I *need* you." Linda laughed.

"Thanks for the invitation, but—"

"No buts. You'll fit right in, I promise." Linda grabbed a piece of paper, pressed it into Katherine's hand. "Here, my address, phone number. Around nine's fine. Please say yes."

Katherine smiled, nodded. "Sure, why not."

Linda clapped her hands. "Excellent. On second thought, McGregor, please bring her along, since you know the way. You already said you'd come, right?"

"Right," he said quietly.

Damn, Katherine thought. Of course he was going. She shot him a glance. A stone would look positively alive compared to the frozen expression on his face.

* * * * *

Katherine was pleased that he wasn't speeding as he drove back to Ada's, but he hadn't lost his cool expression. She found it difficult to remember that he had held her in his arms only a short while ago. What had she done that he almost seemed to hate her suddenly? She'd felt so close, so intimate to him. It hurt, hurt more with every word he didn't say to her. The silence between them made her feel as if an ice cube was sliding down her back.

She turned in her seat, facing him. "Linda is married to one of your colleagues?"

He gave a curt nod.

"You've worked in New York?"

"What's it to you?"

She gritted her teeth. "Fine, I've had it with you. Stop the truck. I prefer to walk back."

"Bit touchy?"

"Really, it's fine. Just stop there." She pointed to a bus stop.

He sighed. "Yes, I have a license to work in the States too."

She groaned. "You're a lawyer?"

"What gave it away?"

"And you specialize in...?"

"Maritally challenged people."

She let his words sink in a few seconds. "Divorce," she said, her voice hollow.

"I couldn't fool you, little miss litigator. I'm beginning to realize that you're rather sharp. Jury's still out about how you use your brain."

He couldn't have said it with more acid in his voice.

He was Simon all over again.

She'd flown to the other side of the world to end up in the bed of yet another cold-blooded, calculating, arrogant, heartless divorce lawyer. And he also worked in New York... A cold fist of fear settled into her stomach. "When we arrived in Auckland," she said, "were you coming back from a work trip?"

"Yes."

"Which firm?"

He snorted. "Do you want an internship?"

"Trent," she said with a calm she wasn't feeling, "just answer my question."

"I'm a partner at Kingsley & Monhollon."

She slapped her hand over her mouth. Her head was reeling and she felt her stomach turning. "Stop the truck," she muffled through her fingers.

He shot one look at her, cursed, swerved to the side.

She opened the door and retched until her stomach was empty and her throat was raw.

"God, Katherine," he said quietly, patting her rather awkwardly on the back. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head, straightened up and shut the door. "No, I can't say that I am." She took the napkin he gave her from the glove box and drained the half-full water bottle he retrieved from the backseat of the truck. The water was too warm from the day in the sun, but it helped to wash away the bitterness in her mouth.

"Can you drive me back now, please?"

He switched off the car. "What's going on?"

If only she knew. "Please let Linda know that I won't be able to make it tonight."

"Look, there's no need to be like that," he said, sounding wary. "I'll pick you up, drive you. As long as you don't confuse it with a...with a date."

"A date," she repeated. "Of course not. After all, we just fuck." She opened the glove box, took out his cell phone, punched redial, waited. "Linda," she said when she heard her answer, "this is Katherine again, yes, everything is fine. I realize this is rather forward of me, but my fiancé—yes, yes, I'm engaged—anyway, he just flew in from New York, very unexpectedly. I wondered if—" She listened, laughed. "The more the merrier? That's great, Linda." She hung up, stored the cell phone away.

Ah, she thought, feeling his dark gaze all but burn a hole in her head. She had his attention now.

"Your *fiancé* is in Auckland?"

If an iceberg had a voice, she thought, it sure would sound like him.

"Yes, he is."

"Then why the *hell* did you come to the beach with me today!" He punched the truck's dashboard.

She closed her eyes, waited for him to continue yelling at her. When he didn't, she said, "That's a question I've recently asked myself as well."

"He can't come to Linda's party."

"Well, I'll leave it up to him if he wants to show up. It's the perfect place to meet him. This works for me."

"Not for me," he pressed through his teeth.

"Why ever not?"

"Because I can't be in the same room with him."

"Why?" she whispered, wishing, wanting him to admit that there was more between them than just sex. "Why not, Trent?"

She tried to catch his gaze, but he was staring straight ahead, his hands white-knuckled around the wheel. "You're right," he said and started the truck again. "Sorry, I've had too much sun, I guess. It's not my business where and how you want to reconcile with him. I'll pick you up at nine sharp."

Chapter Nine

Like Trent's mood, the summer evening was way too dark. The sky had changed from brilliant blue to dense white clouds to a gray blanket that drowned out most of the light. The very thought about seeing both Katherine and Vivian in the same room in less than an hour caused him a headache.

He'd known Viv half his life—they had the same interests, friends. They agreed on important issues—key ingredients to a successful marriage. He'd helped too many couples divorce because those qualities had been missing from the start. Viv was smart, savvy, attractive. Once he put his mind to it, he was sure they would get along fine in bed. They trusted each other. They were friends. And Viv would never leave him once they got married and mated—they were both shifters, wolves. And children, he wanted kids. She was the logical choice.

He'd known Katherine less than a week. He didn't know her family or friends. Half the time, he had no idea what went on in her head. They were nothing alike. She'd leave him at the first opportunity if it struck her fancy. She'd never quite trust him to be faithful, she wouldn't understand that he'd never cheat on his mate. She wasn't a shifter. But what killed him, broke him, was that she was in love with another man.

He was so royally fucked he couldn't believe it.

Shifting gears, he drove slowly up the street and tried to relax his clenched jaw.

He stopped the truck in front of Ada's house, switched off the engine and jumped out.

"You're early."

He turned when he heard her voice. His heart missed a beat when he saw her walking toward him. Her curls had turned into a waterfall of sleek dark hair flowing silkily around her face and across her shoulders. Her dress...very elegant, probably expensive, didn't leave a single trace of doubt about the curves underneath.

Yes, she wanted her fiancé back. Why else dress like that?

"Can I ask you for a favor?" she asked.

"Anything," he said, meant it too.

"I need you to drive slowly. As you know, I have a nervous stomach."

He tossed her the car keys, which she caught without batting an eye. "Why don't you drive?"

"Sure," she answered, walking to the driver's side.

He groaned inwardly, reconsidering. She couldn't be familiar with left-sided traffic, but if she felt apprehension, she didn't show it. As she passed him and slipped into the driver's seat, he caught a hint of her perfume, a hint of her unique scent.

That was all it took to make him hard. He wanted to rip that dress off her body and fuck her right there, anywhere, really, as long as he could bury himself in her. Walking around the car, he felt his temples throbbing with an ever-increasing headache. He climbed into the seat next to her. Her dress had moved up, revealing most of her thighs.

"It would help if you gave me the directions," she said, starting the engine.

"It's not far. Follow the main road for now." He shifted in his seat and let his gaze slowly wander over her.

"Would you please stop staring at me?"

"You look different," he said quietly, reaching out to touch her hair. His fingers ran smoothly through her silky strands. He missed the flush in her cheeks, her curls, her bare feet underneath a simple summer dress. Instead she was this cool, beautiful, high-maintenance woman. "You look like trouble."

"Luckily for you, you won't have to deal with me tonight."

True. And he had no idea how he was going to survive being in the same room with the man who was going to marry her.

"What did you do today?" he asked, folding his hands to prevent himself from touching her again.

"I've sold the house."

There was a smugness to her voice that made him smile. He kept his voice carefully neutral, saying, "Good deal?"

"Yes, I think so."

Well, she thought wrong. She had accepted the first offer, which showed either that she wasn't greedy or she wanted to leave Auckland as quickly as possible—with her fiancé at her side. He believed the latter.

"Good for you," he said. "I guess we can stop fighting over renovations now."

"I guess." She turned smoothly round a corner and shifted into a higher gear.

"So, are you going to open your own law firm now?"

The car made a harsh jerk forward. "How do you know—"

"You told me yourself."

"I told you about a *startup*."

"I just put two and two together." Not touching her wasn't an option. It was a physical pain—in his groin, in his heart. He let his fingertips wander over her bare shoulder, tugging at the thin shoulder strap that held her dress up. The strap slipped down to her upper arm, revealing more of her breasts.

She flicked her hair, draped it over the other shoulder where he couldn't touch it easily.

He froze, staring at her exposed neck.

"Stop bothering the driver," she said, brushing his hand away like an annoying fly, and adjusted the strap.

He reached out again, traced his finger over the mark on her neck, felt where his teeth had broken skin, remembered the taste of her skin, of her blood. He'd mated her, marked her, claimed her as his.

He'd tried to forget as soon as it had happened.

But the proof was right in front of his eyes, for him and the rest the world to see. Why the hell couldn't she wear a scarf or something?

Because it meant nothing to her, of course. She'd felt a bit of pain, most likely, but otherwise, the bite had no effect on her. She had no clue. And he'd find a way to prove to himself that he was above his primal instincts. After all, he was a man first, not a wolf. And as a man, he was able to make decisions based on logic. He wouldn't let his wolfish instincts run his life.

Not that it even mattered what he wanted.

She still loved her fiancé—why else would she cry every time she had sex with him? She would forgive her fiancé his indiscretion, return home and get married.

And he would do the sensible thing and marry Viv.

He only needed to step back, control his inner wolf and let it happen.

"Left or right at this junction?" she asked. "*Hello?* Trent?"

He hesitated for only a second. "Left," he said, and let her drive on. When he had navigated away from the main street and down a narrow stretch of country road with just sheep as company, he said, "Stop here."

"Here?" she asked, casting a glance outside at the dark, deserted landscape. "That can't be right."

"No, it isn't right." Nothing was right anymore, but by God, he needed her, needed to have her in his arms. Just one more time, and then he'd let go. He caught her confused gaze, held it until she understood.

A ripple went through her, her face flushed.

"One last time," he said quietly, and reached out, stroked his finger lightly across her cheek. "It's like welcome sex. But this time we say goodbye."

She looked at him, her golden-brown eyes searching his face. "Did you ever wonder," she said quietly, "if there's something more between us?"

Did she worry that he would trail her footsteps like a lovesick puppy during the party? "No," he said, the lie not coming easy.

She nodded, another shiver running across her skin, but her eyes turned distant, cool.

She leaned forward and slipped out of her shoes. Carefully, she hiked her dress up to her waist, tugged her panties down, placed them behind her on the driver's seat.

When she climbed from her seat onto his lap, he placed his hands around her waist, helped her settle on his thighs. She twisted in his lap, reached behind and opened the glove box to get a condom. Holding her head low so as not to bump into the car's roof, she straddled him, her hands steady as she zipped open his pants.

He couldn't bite back a groan as she freed his hard cock, even though her touch was too indifferent, her hands cold. Slowly, she pumped him in her fist, her gaze locked on his face as if she wanted to see how her hands around his cock affected him. She didn't tease. She gave him rough, steady strokes that almost made him come, but in his heart, he wanted something else, wanted more.

There was no sparkle in her eyes, no easy smile on her lips. It was as if she'd withdrawn herself from him, and he missed her throaty moans, her vulnerability when she got caught up in pleasure. She was too goddamn efficient, he thought, watching how she rolled the condom over his cock with skilled hands but without emotion.

Curling his hands around her hips, he sought her mouth. Her lips were cool and soft, and when he teased her with his tongue, with gentle nips of his teeth, she gave a moan in response. A shiver went through her and she turned her head so his mouth slid away from her lips and against her neck. His breath came harder as he grazed his teeth over the bare skin. His vision blurred, wavered. Her hands came around his shoulders and she leaned forward and lifted her weight from his lap.

"Hold up my dress," she said with a slight catch to her voice.

Sliding her dress up, bunching it around her waist, he splayed his hands over her round ass. Slowly, she lowered herself onto him. His cock spread her pussy in one slick motion. He felt how her flesh tightened around his cock, how she wrapped around him in a hard embrace. Cold eyes, cold hands, he thought, but her cunt was hot and wet and ready, and more velvet heat wrapped around his cock as she took him deeper.

His hands around her hips, he lifted her slightly, only to groan out as she drove her pussy deep on his cock again. Her fingers dug in his shoulders as she bucked her hips and started riding him. Slow at first, as if to savor every inch, then faster, harder. He let her be, watching how his cock drove in and out of her pussy, how her eyes closed, her brow crinkled and her lips parted. She was close, but his own release was closer, yet he waited, waited for her tight cunt to quiver and quake when she came around his cock.

She fucked him harder, her movements growing less controlled, and with a low scream, she went limp under his hands. Her pussy spasmed around his cock, the flesh clinging to him so incredibly tightly. Holding her around her hips, he thrust up and deep into her trembling heat. He slammed into her, hard and fast, bringing a hoarse groan to her lips as he came.

He could have stayed like this forever, with him inside her, in the sudden stillness of the truck. Her forehead leaned against his, her hands around his shoulders. Then she moved and the slight sob in her throat twisted his insides.

Even now, he thought, she was still heartbroken. He might have her body, but not her heart. Lifting his hand, he brushed the tears away that rolled down her cheek. "Stop crying," he said quietly. "I'm sure that after tonight, you'll have your fiancé back."

Chapter Ten

He'd broken up with her, saying goodbye in the same way he'd said hello—by fucking her. Always, it had been just sex between them—she was deranged to hope differently. But even her pride hadn't stopped her from having him one last time.

She had tried to focus only on her sexual needs, on the release her body craved, but failed badly. When he was inside her, her heart soared until she wanted to weep with joy. And later, when they were both spent, she cried because she feared she'd never again experience this feeling of completeness.

She'd spared herself the embarrassment of admitting that she cried because of him, instead she'd climbed off his lap, dressed and asked him to drive the remaining distance to Linda's party while she touched up her tear-streaked face in the truck's mirror.

Now, after he'd parked the truck and they both got wordlessly out the vehicle, she heard laughter and loud voices drifting toward her. They walked up a long driveway with masses of purple flowers on one side, which left the air overly sweet. A cat came mewling out of the flowerbed, rubbing itself around Trent's leg and he stopped, stroking the purring cat between the ears.

She sneezed.

He looked up. "Shouldn't you cover up more?" His gaze roamed her bare neck. "Need a scarf?"

"It's the cat."

"The cat? How so?"

"Allergy," she said, watching the cat purring for more attention, but he looked at her face, the cat seemingly forgotten. *Yeah, kitty, don't we all*, she thought when the cat threw herself, belly up, before his feet.

"The cat isn't even close to you. How could you have an allergic reaction?"

"Seeing one is enough," she muttered, and continued walking up the driveway, ignoring his low laugh.

She stopped to take in the modern, two-story house looming over her. It was an architectural dream, the exterior with too much glass and steel. Over the party noise, she heard the faint roaring of the sea.

She dragged in a deep breath and put a hand against the door to steady herself. Why on earth had she thought it was a good idea to meet Simon here? What if she dissolved in tears, what if she pushed him out a window, what if she realized she still loved him and what if she didn't? Her hands were shaking, nerves setting in, and she sought Trent's gaze as if he could offer a solution. Which, of course, he couldn't.

"You okay?" His hand came against the small of her back.

"Nervous," she pressed through her teeth, telling herself to calm down, feeling how he stroked her hair away from her face with such gentleness, she wanted to wrap her arms around him and simply stay still for the rest of the night. "I'm not sure it was a good idea to tell him where to find me tonight."

"You'll be fine," he said, patted her butt and pressed the doorbell. "Have a drink, why don't you?"

It was such a male thing to say, she laughed, hearing him mutter that this was what he'd be doing, the tension inside her eased. She turned away from him when the door opened.

Linda was clad in a silvery sequined dress, holding a fizzing drink in her hand and, at the sight of them, smiled broadly. "Great you could come. You too, McGregor. Todd was just talking about you. Just leave the door open. I almost missed the door ring."

Katherine smiled, wondering if Simon was already there, but probably not. Knowing him, he would prefer a late arrival to make sure she was already at the party.

Linda took her by the hand and led her through a foyer into a spacious room where the other guests were. Open windows let in a fresh breeze, and the view stretched over a small beach into the open sea. People chatted loudly, standing in groups or filling their plates from a buffet in the open, granite kitchen. The squashy couches at the other side of the room were empty but looked inviting.

"Everyone, this is Katherine Miles, fresh in from New York, and almost everyone knows McGregor, right?" Linda introduced her matter-of-factly and linked her arm in Katherine's.

"Love your house," she said to Linda, aware of the occasional glance from other guests.

"Thanks, hon. Come on, we'll get you a drink. Will your fiancé be able to make it?"

"I'm pretty sure he will." She followed Linda to the kitchen and gladly accepted the glass of chilled white wine. A blonde woman, carrying a glass of water, bumped into her and excused herself, staring at her almost shell-shocked.

"You look gorgeous. Love the dress," Linda said. "My job doesn't call for high fashion, more for easy-to-wash apron. That's why I have to throw parties. It's purely egocentric. I need opportunities to show off my latest shopping spree. And Todd wants to network his lawyerly butt off." Linda laughed. "He's super stoked because his boss called this afternoon and practically invited himself to our party."

Katherine smiled absently. Simon had been surprised but accepted her simple reasoning that the world was small indeed. *As long as I'll see you*, he'd said. Well, at least he made Linda's husband happy. As for her, she'd know when she saw him.

Sipping her wine, she cast a glance around, but Trent had seemingly vanished.

"Looking for McGregor?" Linda asked quietly. "He's over there." Linda pointed with her wineglass.

She followed the direction and froze. Trent lounged at the other side of the room, talking to a woman with blonde, curly hair. The same woman who had bumped into her just a moment ago. She was leggy, trim and had her arm wrapped around his shoulder. Next to his dark features, she looked positively radiant. They seemed comfortable, intimate and so heart-stoppingly perfect together, Katherine felt her breath slow. A pang of jealousy gripped her gut, so intense she felt the room spin for a second.

She gripped the wineglass tighter. "Who's that he's talking to?" Never, not once, had it crossed her mind that he would be seeing anyone besides her. If this was his girlfriend, someone he had cheated on, she'd kick his ass until he wouldn't know his own name anymore.

"That's Vivian Miller, she owns the cutest little bookstore," Linda answered. "I hope I'm not being too straightforward, but I thought for a moment or two that you two were together."

"You got the wrong impression." Katherine felt Linda's gaze wander over her, and then, curiously, linger on a spot on her neck. She'd thought his bite mark was not that obvious and hardly noticeable underneath her hair. Evidently, she was wrong.

"Todd," Linda called, and waved to a tall man with an angular face, a cute smile and brilliant blue eyes. At first sight, Katherine found it impossible not to like him.

"Hello, gorgeous," he said, giving Linda a quick kiss. "I'm Todd Baxter," he said, and Katherine shook his hand. "Don't mind my wife here, tell me all about you."

"Yes," Linda said, "don't mind me. I want to dance." She went to push the squashy couches to one side, creating an open space, changed the music and started dancing by herself.

"She's something," Todd said quietly, watching his wife, who was soon joined by other guests on the impromptu dance floor. "What brings you to Auckland, Katherine?"

Katherine relaxed into easy conversation with him. Compared to Trent's cryptic style of conversation, Todd was a delight. And before she knew it, she had told him half her life.

* * * * *

"You lied to me, sunshine."

Trent didn't like it. Todd was his best mate, a fellow wolf at heart, but the way he was grilling Katherine made him pretty pissed off.

He turned his attention back to Viv and replayed her last words in his mind. "I'd never lie to you."

"You said you were done with breaking hearts." She sipped at her water, glancing at him over the rim of her glass until he grew uncomfortable.

"I said it because I am."

"Then who's that girl?"

"What girl?"

"Trent?"

"Yes, Vivian, what is it," he answered, realizing that he sounded annoyed as hell.

"I'm talking about the brunette who you keep staring at."

"Not sure I'm following. Another drink?"

"Not for me, not for you either. You seem a little too thirsty tonight."

"This is a party, isn't it?"

"Trent, she *smells* of you. And you practically reek of vodka and sex." Viv had lowered her voice, but all the same he winced. "Do you think I've left my sense of smell in the bookshop? I'm a *wolf*."

"Viv," he started, but she interrupted.

"Sunshine, from one friend to another, stop breaking these women's hearts just because you can. It's not cool. Don't you see how she *looks* at you?"

"Ha," he said. "Here you are mistaken. She's heartbroken all right, but not because of me."

Vivian stared at him, shaking her head. "Sometimes you're *such* a clueless idiot."

"Marry me anyway?"

Her mouth fell open. "You got to be kidding me."

"But you love me, admit it."

"I also love books, coffee and kittens. Shoes too. And you come right after shoes, sunshine."

"Can't you just say yes?"

"What is *wrong* with you, Trent?"

He rubbed his forehead, his head hurting like mad. "I'm having a bad week."

She snorted. "Why is it that I don't quite buy that?"

He exhaled, glanced up, taken aback when he noticed the new arrival walking into the room. "Catch you later, Viv," he said, happy to leave her nagging questions behind, and marched toward his partner. Last time Trent had seen him, his partner had been grumbling about having his quiet weekend ruined because his mates insisted on throwing him a bachelor party.

An uneasy thought crossed his mind. Nothing less than serious business issues would get Simon on a plane for over twenty-odd hours and that with—if he remembered correctly—only days before his wedding.

"Hey, Monhollon," he called, and clapped Simon on his back by way of greeting. "If you're here to talk me into accepting a new client, you can fly right back. I'm not working another case until the end of summer."

"So you told me before you left last week," Simon answered, a surprised grin on his face. "Didn't expect to meet you here. Small world indeed. Nice house Baxter owns

though." Simon's gaze wandered through the room, gave a quick wave when he spotted Todd.

"It's the downtown office, isn't it?" Trent asked. "Are we having trouble?"

"Relax, McGregor. I'm not on a business trip."

"Thank *God*. I already saw my summer go down the drain. So, what brings you across the ditch?"

Simon gave a short grunt. "The future Mrs. Monhollon is messing with my head. I swear, whoever invented monogamy should be shot."

Trent frowned and followed Simon as he walked toward Todd, who was still speaking with Katherine. It was only then, when Simon leaned forward and kissed her, that his world bottomed out.

Chapter Eleven

Katherine felt her heart skip and her stomach plunge when Simon walked into the room. She exhaled when he didn't spot her right away.

She listened to Todd's anecdote about a recent fishing trip, nodded occasionally and kept her gaze locked on her fiancé.

Ex-fiancé.

He looked different, she thought. His face was a tad narrower with dark circles under his brown eyes. Maybe it was the strain from the long trip. Maybe it was because he missed her as much as he said.

A lock of brown hair falling onto his high brow, he was still looking very much like the man she'd thought she knew so well. Chiseled chin, straight nose, the corners of his mouth often turned up to a faint arrogant sneer. Never had she met a man like him before, so charming and well-read. So arrogant. Jack hated him, which had made him even more appealing. He'd pounced on her after the third date and proposed after six months. Flattered beyond belief at his declaration of love, she had accepted.

Glancing to her hand, she rubbed the empty spot where her engagement ring had rested. Before she'd left for Auckland, she'd stuffed the ring, twenty bucks and a note with the words *A tip for the stripper* into an envelope and had everything couriered to his apartment.

Did she still love him? Were the days, the nights she'd spent with Trent just her way of coping with Simon's misstep?

Then Trent stepped next to him, clapped him on the shoulder, and she sucked in her breath as she saw both men side by side.

One was taller where the other was broader in the shoulder. One was a skilled lover with all the right moves, and the other turned her into a wet mess by just looking at her suggestively. One was smooth, intelligent and sophisticated. The other was rough around the edges, too smart for his own good and so masculine it took her breath. When she was with Simon, she felt as if she had to live up to his high expectations. With Trent, she simply was happy.

One felt good.

The other felt goddamn right.

One loved her, wanted her, needed her, and the other — did not.

Amazing that she'd fallen out of love with one man in one heart-wrenching second only to fall back into love with another man just days later.

But was it love? If it were only passion, it would fade out. But love would always be there, and she thought that underneath all that sex appeal, Trent was a man one could build a future with.

Or maybe, just maybe, she'd lost her mind and needed a shrink.

When Todd asked her a question, she couldn't answer because she hadn't been listening so she merely nodded vaguely. "Shrink, drink," she muttered under her breath, realizing that she was the tiniest bit tipsy. Nevertheless, she drained her second glass of wine as both Simon and Trent approached.

If possible, she would have gone into hiding, but she calmly accepted Simon's kiss placed snugly between her cheek and the corner of her mouth. "Katherine," he said quietly. "You look beautiful."

She nodded, still feeling the odd tingle his lips had left on her skin. She almost brushed her hand over her face to get rid of the sensation.

"Baxter," Simon said, shook his hand. "Thanks for keeping an eye on my fiancée." If Todd was surprised, he was hiding it well, and Simon launched into a conversation with him without missing a beat.

Slick as usual, she thought, and got rid of the empty wineglass at a nearby table, pondering getting a third when Simon's hand wrapped around her wrist as if he never wanted to let her go again.

Then she made the mistake of looking at Trent.

He gazed at her with hot, dark eyes and absolutely spine-chilling fury. She had the sudden impression she'd poked a sleeping wild animal with a stick and was about to regret it.

Guess she should have told him *who* her ex-fiancé was before the party.

If only he hadn't pissed her off, hurt her feelings so much after they'd had sex at the beach.

Maybe she'd gotten the hang of this getting-even game.

"Simon," Trent said suddenly, a gleam in his eyes, and she knew she was knee-deep in trouble. "How come you've kept your charming fiancée from me while I was in New York?"

"Because you so rarely found it worth your time to stay afterhours for a drink." Simon turned to her, a slight smile playing around his mouth. "Katherine, I think you haven't met Trenton McGregor yet. He's probably the most ruthless piece of work in the firm."

"That's true." Trent held out his hand. "It's a real pleasure to meet you, Katherine."

Strangely, there was a faint groan coming from Todd.

Her heart jumped into her throat as she closed her hand around his. A jolt of electricity zinged up her arm. "Likewise," she managed to say, trying to pull her hand back while he all but crushed her fingers as he held tight for one, two, three seconds too long.

"Come on, Monhollon," Todd said suddenly. "I'll give you a tour of my new wine cellar. I hope you're thirsty."

"Sure," Simon said. "You want to come along?"

"I'll catch you later," she answered, wondering if Todd's impeccable timing was all that accidental.

"Simon," Trent said, "you don't mind if I take your fiancée for a spin on the dance floor while you catch up with Todd?"

She looked at the small dance floor where couples danced close together and her knees went weak.

There was a slight pause before Simon said, "No, of course not."

She felt Simon's grip around her wrist loosen, and Trent pulled her toward the dancing couples while Simon disappeared into the bowels of the house.

"So," Trent said quietly, his hands coming around her hips as he pulled her into him. "Are you out of your *fucking* mind?"

Moving slowly to the music, she didn't know where else to look other than into his furious eyes. "Why do you care *who* my fiancé is?" she asked, matching his low voice. "What difference does it make ultimately?"

His eyes turned to dark slits. "You know what I want to do, Kat?"

"No idea." She loved, loved it when he called her that, in that dark, husky voice.

"I want to spank the living daylights out of you."

"That bad?" She imagined being in his arms without her dress. It was laughingly easy and her legs almost faltered. "Are you jealous, Trent?"

He gave her a slight shake. "As always, you're missing the point," he gritted out. "He's my partner. I *work* with him. The next time I'm in the States, do you think I want to see your bloody picture on his fucking desk?"

"And whose picture is on your desk?" She felt his shoulders tense underneath her hands. She thought about Vivian, how comfortable they had looked together. "Do you have a girlfriend, wife? Who's that blonde woman you were holding on your arm?"

"That's Vivian and frankly none of your business." His dark gaze bored into hers as he leaned closer. "What else is there I should know about, what else is going on in your head? Come on, spit it out."

"There's nothing to spit and also it's none of your business anyway." She stuck her chin out, wondering what Jack would make of Trent. She twisted free from his grip when she saw Todd walking up the stairs again, Simon hot on his heels.

Trent followed her like a storm cloud, breathing down her neck. When she'd reached Simon, he clasped her hand again. "You okay?" Simon asked, squeezing her fingers.

No, she wasn't. She was completely out of her depth.

"What brings you to Auckland, Katherine?" Trent asked, proving her right.

Games, she thought, he played fucking mind games with her. "I was here to sell a property I own." It was the best thing that had happened today. When she'd seen the offer, Susan had urged her to negotiate a higher price, but she wasn't going to push her luck. Everything had developed so fast, she was still dazed that she'd managed to sell the wreck of a house for an acceptable price. "I closed the deal today."

"Really? Darling, why didn't you just keep it?" Simon said. "Not that one property more or less makes a difference in our portfolio, but wasn't the house more of...ah, sentimental value to you? It couldn't have brought more than 200K. Why didn't you *ask* me before closing the deal?"

"The house was *mine*, not ours. We don't have a shared portfolio *yet*, Simon."

"Let me see the contract," Simon said, rubbing a finger across his forehead. "Maybe I can still fix this."

There, she thought, now, for the first time, she really wanted to cut off his dick.

And Trent was looking so pleased with himself, she wanted to, wanted to...ah, dammit, she couldn't even develop an appropriate response when her entire being wanted to gravitate into his arms.

Todd cleared his throat over the increasingly awkward silence. "I think she got a good deal, besides, she has plans. Why own a house you don't want or need?"

Thank *you*, she thought. Linda must be a very happy woman indeed.

"Plans," Trent asked sweetly. "What kind of plans?"

"Yes, darling," Simon asked, his high brow slightly wrinkled. "What plans?"

"We already spoke about it," she said, her voice growing cool. "I'll open my own firm." Dare, she thought, dare to laugh.

Simon's eyebrows hitched up. "Let's talk about this later."

"Know what, Simon, let's talk *now*," she said.

"Anyone in need of fresh drinks?" Todd said, proving that his antenna for trouble was clearly better developed than Simon's, and she watched how Todd hurried into the kitchen to get out of the firing line.

Trent simply stood there, arms crossed, obviously sensing that he'd poked into a hornet's nest and was enjoying every second of it.

Simon bristled. "Well, it's a no-brainer, Katherine. Why hurt your pretty little head and reinvent the wheel when you can work in my firm as we had *planned*?"

Yes, he was right. She'd quit her previous job, planning to start working in his firm after the wedding, after the honeymoon. But why was it that instead of sweet-talking her he was riling her up? Maybe, she thought, maybe he didn't even know how much his attitude turned her off.

"It seemed like the logical thing to do," she agreed. "But I don't see myself working in the same office with you day in and day out anymore." *Working under you*, she thought.

Simon shrugged. "Then there's your dad. He's offered you a job, how many times?"

"That's fascinating," Trent said. "May I ask what business your father is in?"

She ignored him.

Simon, unfortunately, didn't.

"Katherine has an amazing offer to join the in-house legal team for the Watts organization."

"The Watts organization?" Trent asked, clearly nonplussed.

Simon's arm slid behind her back and he pulled her close. "Jack Watts is Katherine's father."

"Stepfather. And I'm not going to work for him either," she said, and moved out from under his arm. "Jack isn't offering me a job because I've earned it but because he thinks it's his obligation."

"That's not true," Simon said. "You shouldn't hesitate to use your connections. I sure won't once we're married. It's just common business sense."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Everything Simon did or said was logical and levelheaded, but why couldn't he understand that it didn't feel right?

Trent maintained an inscrutable poker face. "Excuse me," he said. "I need a drink."

* * * * *

"You're leaving right *now*," Todd said, leaning against the granite kitchen counter.

"No, I'm not," Trent answered, grasped the first bottle of hard liquor and poured himself a healthy shot.

He kept his back turned to Katherine. He really, really shouldn't be here, but he couldn't force himself to walk away from her. And if he heard one more word from Simon, he'd lose it. He'd always respected Monhollon, admired his sharp intellect, but that he was a fucking disgrace of a man came as a surprise.

Todd's hand came around the glass before Trent could shoot it back.

"I love you like a brother," Todd said, "but what you are doing is insane. Your scent is all over her, your mark is on her neck. Simon is a full-fledged owner of the firm whereas you are not. You can kiss your job goodbye if he finds out. What the *hell* were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking," Trent answered, trying to pry his friend's fingers away from the glass. "Also, I didn't know she was Simon's." He'd never been really, truly drunk, but tonight seemed like a great opportunity to give it a try.

"Tell her how you feel," Todd said. "It will drive you crazy otherwise. It's against our nature, it's— Does she even *know*?" Todd asked quietly.

Trent finally managed to free the glass, and he shot back the vodka. He'd need the whole bottle to get an effect. "No," Trent answered, feeling the alcohol burn on his tongue. "She doesn't know and I want to keep it that way. She's no shifter."

"I'm aware of that, but what difference does it make?"

"It does."

"I get it, you discriminate," Todd said. "I feel pissed off on my wife's behalf. Do you think Linda is somehow imperfect because she's no shifter?"

"No, but it does make a difference."

"It doesn't," Todd said. "Trent, I swear you're this close to —"

"And yet," Trent said, knowing he should shut up but couldn't stop himself, "Linda suffered two miscarriages because she was pregnant from a shifter. Do you think I want to force that kind of misery on the woman I love?"

"Plenty of non-shifters give birth to healthy shifter kids," Todd said quietly, his face ashen. "How dare you imply that I caused my wife deliberate pain —"

"But the numbers prove it," Trent said. "Sometimes our genes don't mix. Some women die delivering shifter babies. Do you want that to happen to Linda?"

For a moment, he thought Todd would hit him. He'd have welcomed the pain. Then the other shifter placed his hand on his shoulder, deep sadness in his eyes.

"Trent, just because that happened to your father doesn't mean it will happen to you."

"No," Trent said quietly, "it won't because I'll marry another wolf."

"You *marked* her."

"It doesn't matter." Trent felt his control slip, slowly but steadily. "It doesn't matter if I think she is perfect, if I adore every breath she takes, it doesn't matter because she is *flawed*."

"Because she isn't a *wolf*?" Todd ground out. "I swear, McGregor, I want to beat you up right now until the last trace of arrogance leaves your bloody body. Get out of my house or —"

"Shut up," Trent said, and felt his heart clench, a pain so intense he sucked in a hard breath. "Because she loves Simon."

Todd shook his head. "You're an idiot, Trent."

"So I've been told." He poured himself another shot, put the glass against his lips and, masochistically, turned around to watch Katherine.

A diamond sparked from her hand, and she was in Simon's arms, his hands all over her ass, his mouth hard on hers.

Glass dropping from his hands, shattering on the floor, Trent lost it.

* * * * *

Katherine watched Trent as he walked away from her toward the kitchen to join Todd. He probably felt sorry for her — she sure did.

Silence settled between her and Simon, uncomfortable, heavy silence. And for too many breaths neither of them spoke.

"Darling," Simon said finally, "let's not argue. I don't know why I even started. It's been pretty emotional seeing you again. We'll work something out, I promise."

Simon took her hand and gazed into her eyes. "I missed you so, so much. It's not easy for me, to come and meet you here under all these strangers when all I want is to have you for myself. Alone."

She gazed back into his eyes, panic rising in her chest.

"Have you thought about what I told you on the phone? Can you forgive me?"

"I think you hurt my pride more than anything else," she said. "But yes, I forgive you. After all, even you are just human." She drew in a deep breath, wondering why she felt as if she were the guilty one when he'd wronged her in the first place. "But, Simon, I—"

"I've been meaning to give this back to you," he said, interrupting her. "You make me so happy, do you know that?"

And then, when she'd thought nothing could throw her anymore, she felt the familiar weight of her engagement ring as it slid on her finger. And again, it took her breath just how beautiful the ring looked on her hand, all shimmer and sparkle. She'd fallen in love with it—shallow creature that she was—and she still loved to see the fire inside the diamond.

"I love you," Simon said against her ear, and her throat tightened. He drew her into his arms, his mouth coming down on hers.

Everything inside her recoiled, the feel of his mouth on hers strange and unwelcome. Before she could push him away, a hard grip came around her elbow and jerked her back.

Trent struck Simon to the floor with a blow of his fist.

Too stunned to move, she watched blood stream from Simon's nose while he sat with a dumbstruck expression on the floor. His straight nose wasn't looking good, she thought. Not good at all.

Trent was cracking his knuckles. "Fuck that felt good," he muttered, turned on his heel and headed out the of the room, but not before she'd caught a flash of yellow in his eyes. She drew in a deep breath, the hushed silence around her making her skin prickle, and then bolted after him.

Someone must have turned off the music, she thought. Crickets sounded through the still night and the driveway was illuminated only with solar lights. Tripping in her shoes, she came to a shaky halt when she saw him with his hand on the truck door.

As if he'd sensed her, heard her more likely, he turned around.

"I told you," he said, "told you not to put your fiancé in the same room as me."

"He's your partner," she said, sure that Simon would never ever forgive Trent this humiliation. "This is your job we are talking about."

"Well, I guess you could say I just quit," he said, shoving his hand in his pockets and pulling out the truck keys.

"Why," she whispered, "why did you do that? It makes no sense..."

Please, she thought, please, please ask me to come with you tonight. Oh God, please.

His gaze locked on her hand, on the ring on her finger.

"You're not the right woman for me," he said, sounding as if he spoke to himself instead to her, but her heart broke a little more.

"And who is?" The pressure on her chest, on her heart, hurt more than anything she'd ever felt before.

"I'm going to marry Vivian," he said, sliding into the driver's seat. "And I'll have kids and live in the house you couldn't appreciate. And *now*, Katherine, stay the hell away from me, you've already cost me my job."

His words cut like a knife up her spine and seared into her soul. "Why do you hurt me like that, Trent? Why?" she whispered as the truck's engine roared to life.

Without giving her a last look, he sped off into the darkness.

Aware that her hands and legs were shaking, she lowered herself slowly to the ground. The gravel on the driveway was warm and she pulled her legs under, praying that the earth would open and swallow her whole.

When she heard steps behind her back, she closed her eyes and hoped it wasn't Simon.

"Hi there," a female voice said. "I feel rude, but I couldn't help overhearing."

Katherine turned her head and tears shot into her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know he was your boyfriend."

Vivian sat next to her on the ground. "Linda sent me to check on you."

Katherine shook her head, rubbing tears from her face. "I didn't know. I'm so sorry if I hurt you. I didn't know you two were together."

"Well, me neither," Vivian said. "'Cause Trent's not my boyfriend and I'm certainly not going to marry him, I can promise you that."

"I don't understand. Why would he say something like that then?"

"Trent's been my friend for years, and I do love him," Vivian said, making Katherine's stomach lurch all over again. "And I do see his point, 'cause we have traits in common I'm looking for in a mate as well. And we'd never fight or argue, we'd be nauseatingly perfect. We'd never have sex though, and that's something I won't give up." Vivian laughed. "He's not my brother by blood, but that's how I feel for him."

Katherine heard her, but it just didn't compute. "But he still loves you, right?"

"Yes, in the same way I adore him." Vivian rolled her eyes. "I have no idea why he seems to have lost his marbles... Hang on a second."

Katherine jerked in surprise as Vivian brushed strands of hair away from her shoulder. "Why did you do that?"

"Sorry, couldn't help myself." Vivian said, taking a deep breath, and then laughed quietly. "Well, I got that one wrong for sure. He's not breaking your heart, you're breaking his. If you knew him like I do, you'd see the humor too. He's so, so into you that it must drive him completely nuts."

"Somehow," Katherine said dryly, "I'm not getting that vibe from him."

Vivian sighed and cast a glance into the sky. "Need a ride home? It's going to rain soon."

Katherine let out a long, shaky breath. "I have some unfinished business to take care of first," she said, getting up from the ground and walking back to Linda's house. "Give me a minute or two."

"That was quick," Vivian said as Katherine came walking back down the driveway. "You okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay," Katherine answered, glancing at her diamond-free hand. "I'm feeling free."

Simon had sat hunched on a couch, two women to his left and right, both making a fuss dabbing at his bloody face. She'd pressed the ring in his hand, pressed a kiss against his cheek and told him goodbye. He got the message, even though he was still too stunned to respond. He'd be okay, she thought, he would be just fine—after his wounded pride had healed.

Vivian rose, brushed her hands down her dress. "How long have you known Trent?"

"Less than a week. He's like a puzzle, and every now and then I can see the complete picture before it all falls apart again. I just don't get him."

"Do you love him?"

"I've just told you I've known him for less than a *week*."

"A week, a month, a year—who's to say how long it takes to fall in love. Trent would do anything for you. He certainly wouldn't send you away if you happened to turn up on his doorstep tomorrow." Vivian winked.

"He bought *my* house. He just threw away his career. He's *insane*. How can I fall in love with someone like him?" But God, she already had.

"And if he were an animal, he would be a...?" Vivian asked, walking toward her car and opening the door for Katherine. "You find the answer to that question. Might help you puzzle him out."

"He'd be a wolf," Katherine said, and slid into the seat, seeing his tattoo before her inner eyes. "That was an easy question."

"A wolf, funny you should say that." Vivian kicked the car into gear. "You hang on to that thought when you see him tomorrow."

Chapter Twelve

After driving down the narrow, serpentine street and stopping on the graveled parking area, Katherine switched off the motor of Ada's car.

The shallow stream in front of her glittered in the sunlight and she lowered the window to let in a breeze. The air was awash with the salty scent of the sea.

And a few yards away stood Trent's beat-up truck.

Got you. She folded the map neatly, feeling proud of herself that she'd managed to track him down.

It hadn't been easy.

The morning had broken – humid haze hanging in the air from the overnight rain – with beams of sun light piercing through the clouds. It was going to be yet another hot and sunny day in Auckland, and she was up and about to find out if Trent in fact would not turn her away from his doorstep. If he was indeed so into her that he wouldn't turn her away if she just threw herself into his arms.

She was up and about to catch a wolf, she thought, recalling Vivian's words from last night.

She'd knocked on Ada's door and accepted her breakfast invitation. During coffee, Linda showed up, delivering Lucky who was bouncing around as if nothing had ever happened, and she listened to Linda explaining that the dog probably came across a jellyfish but, luckily, survived to see another day.

After breakfast, she'd asked Ada if she could make use of her car to see Trent. Without asking a single question but smiling knowingly, Ada had pressed the keys into her hand and given her the address of his downtown apartment.

During the drive, she'd pondered why he'd bought the house. She hadn't had any objections when Susan told her that the buyer wanted to stay anonymous and purchased the property through a nominee. All fine. But that he was the buyer behind the nominee was just...wrong. She strongly feared that he'd wanted her off his back so desperately he'd just bought the reason why she was in Auckland.

In any case, he couldn't have her house.

Twenty minutes later, she'd found herself on his doorstep, staring at a closed door while her ringing went unanswered. With only two possibilities to consider – he knew it was her and refused to let her in or he simply wasn't home – she returned to the car.

Hoping it was the second possibility, she'd thought of the only place he might be, if he was feeling as troubled as she was. After a quick stop at a gas station to pick up a map and ask for directions, she was back behind the steering wheel and praying with all her heart that she was right.

He'd told her – shown her – where he went if he wanted to calm down, think and be by himself.

But there was no way in hell she would allow him to do any of that.

She wanted him tense, hard and hot, and mindless in his desire – like the first time they'd been at this beach.

And she'd found him.

She kicked off her shoes, patted the bunch of condoms in the back pocket of her three-quarter jeans and opened another button of her flimsy white blouse to offer him a better view of her bare breasts. With the sea breeze whipping against her face, she exited the parked car and took a course toward the endless stretch of black sand.

She shaded her eyes against the glaring sun, dipping her feet into the cold surf. As far as her eyes could see, there wasn't a single person walking along the beach, just wave after wave of the Tasman Sea crashing ashore. Her gaze drifted toward the dense kauri forest.

Leaving the shore behind, she marched toward the edge of the forest, which rose from the sea level up over rolling hills and cliffs.

Leaves started mingling with the dense black sand, and she watched where she set her feet. The ground was covered in driftwood, sharp rocks and shells but gradually grew wet and softer the farther she walked. Trees forming a thick, green roof softened the sun's flare. The smell of humid earth clung in the air.

Only now did she realize that it seemed impossible to find him in the green labyrinth of thick ferns and tall kauri trees.

"What in heaven and hell is that man doing in here," she murmured. There wasn't even a path she could follow, no running track, no signs pointing her toward a new location. Frustration rising within her, she walked on, fearing she wouldn't find her way back to the beach. The roaring of the sea crashing ashore grew dimmer until only the sound of water dripping off leaves reached her ears. She heard a bird giving a sharp trill, but the quiet grew thicker with every step she made into the dense forest.

She let out a sharp breath as she stepped onto something sharp. A rugged, broken shell under her bare sole, she swore under her breath as the small cut started bleeding. Good thing all her shots were up to date, she thought, and lowered herself to the soft, leafy ground, feeling frustrated.

She jerked her head around as a movement caught her gaze. Glancing over her shoulder, she let out a weary sigh. For a moment, she'd thought someone was behind her.

The deep growl coming from in front of her made her jerk around again. Her breath left her body in a sharp hiss as she stared at the large animal. She struggled to comprehend what her eyes were seeing. This wasn't an oversized dog, this was a...

The wolf took another step toward her, his head level with hers. The wolf lowered his head, growling softly, as if he were preparing to pounce. Her heart hammering

behind her chest, she felt sweat slick down her back. Crawling away on her hands and feet, she felt terror gripping her as some primal survival instinct kicked in.

She jumped up and ran, ran toward the shoreline and the car. Her breath leaving her body in fast gasps, she screamed when something swiped at her legs. The fall cushioned by the soft ground, she crashed down, hands and face-first. Spitting out a mouthful of dirt, she froze when she saw that the wolf was circling her. She'd never outrun him.

The wolf slowed, finally stopped and looked at her out of golden-yellow eyes so strangely intelligent and familiar it punched all air out of her lungs. The knowledge came to her like a kick to the stomach.

She flipped on her back, breathing rapidly. *Where's a paper bag when you need one*, she thought, realizing that she was hyperventilating. She sat up, cross-legged. Bracing a hand over her mouth and nose, she tried to get her oxygen intake under control while the wolf watched her, keeping his distance but never taking his gaze off her as she fought to get the upper hand on her panic attack.

Slowly, ever so slowly, her breathing calmed, and she found the inner strength to meet the wolf's gaze square-on.

"Why the fuck do you terrify me like this," she yelled, grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it in his direction.

A jolt of tingling wonder shot through her body as her mind still struggled to comprehend that Trent, somehow, was able to turn into a wolf. But it was hard to say something wasn't possible if it was right in front of her eyes.

"Show me how you do that. I need to see."

He cocked his head, the large wolf body shaking, and she almost rued her words when he started shimmering, blurring, somehow *stretching* in a whirl of muscles and under the slightly sickening sound of bones and joints snapping.

She swallowed hard. The sight wasn't pretty but strange and powerful and mind-numbingly astounding, beauty in its rawest form.

Then he stood there, on two feet, but his eyes were still glowing yellow-golden.

"God, Trent," she whispered, taking in his naked body in a way she'd never seen it fully before. A body so tight and hard, so full of suppressed strength it made her breath hitch and her heart thud, and this time for all the right reasons. There was a wolf lurking underneath his skin, dangerous and powerful. No wonder he carried himself with such confidence that it bordered on arrogance.

His gaze was hard and hot, and damn if she didn't dissolve into helpless lust just seeing him again. Or maybe it was the sight of his hard, thick cock resting against his stomach.

If she'd worn panties, they'd be damp now.

He slowly strode toward her, and instinctively she backed away as she had when he was still a wolf.

He was a goddamn predator.

Then she got a grip.

It was *Trent*.

He towered over her as if he wanted to sink his teeth into her neck. Still predator, she thought, and a sliver of fear slid down her spine.

She let out a surprised yelp as he pounced on her, his body pinning her to the ground, his hand opening and yanking at her jeans until he had them shoved down her legs and over her feet. One rough hand slipped between her legs. A deep growl rose from his throat as he found her bare, no panties stopping his searching fingers. Half lidded, his eyes were trained on her as he dragged his fingers through her wet cunt before he brought his fingers to his mouth. His eyes closed, his nostrils flared and his growl was almost violent.

Her shoulders, bottom, heels pressed into the moist ground as he lowered his weight on her, his hips flush against hers, his hard cock nestled between her legs.

His mouth came down on hers in a hard kiss, her taste still on his tongue. Arousal coursed through her veins, heat blazing up until she all but burned for him. His tongue thrust into her mouth, filling her exactly how she wanted him to fill her.

Breathing in fast gasps, she pushed against his chest because his weight robbed her of air. He caught her hands, pulled them over her head and clamped one hard hand on her wrists, making her wince. He wasn't fooling around, wasn't gentle.

And he wasn't asking permission.

His body heat enveloped her as she took in his scent of salt and earth and *him*. He was so animalistically masculine that she groaned out in need to feel him fuck her rough, right there, right now.

Using his knee to spread her legs, he reached between them and wrapped his hand around his cock, the thick head nudging her open.

He pushed into her, his cock sliding into her aching cunt in one hard shove, and she cried out at the sudden sharp sensation he triggered. She felt herself stretch, give, wrap around his thick cock. She heard him curse, heard him call her "damn woman" as if it was an insult. He glared down at her, his eyes wild with a yellow ring around the dilated black pupils, and every muscle in his body was tense.

"I *told* you to stay the hell away from me," he said with a distinct rasp to his voice.

"I can't," she whispered. "I can't stay away from you."

If this was punishment she'd never behave again.

Her eyes fluttered shut as he pushed deeper and she bucked against him, or at least tried to, if only he hadn't pinned her down with such brute force. Stars exploded behind her closed eyelids at the exquisite feel of him inside her again. It felt right, so sinfully right. He shifted his hips, pushed deeper still, his pubic bone pressing against her clit. She'd thought she'd never feel him like this again, so deep as his body wrapped

possessively around her. So *right*. Uncontrollably, convulsions shook her as her pussy clenched around his thick cock.

She bowed away from the ground and into him, gasping for air as he finally gave her enough room to move and breathe, screaming as her orgasm coursed in quick jolts through her body. When she had her breath back, she opened her eyes to see him stare at her with an expression she couldn't name.

Roughly, he brushed his hand over her face. "Why the hell do you have to cry every time?"

She cringed, brushed her fist over her eyes as he released her wrists.

He braced himself on his elbows and he was still staring down at her with suppressed fury in his eyes. If she was to pour her heart out, she'd prefer he looked at her with dark eyes, not with those wild, yellow-rimmed ones. That gaze still sent shivers of, not fear, but a healthy dose of respect down her spine. And he was still inside her, unmoving, his cock so damn hot and hard.

And he was a *wolf*.

"You couldn't have just *told* me?" she asked, because the shock of seeing a wolf was still lingering in her bones. "Instead of scaring the soul out of me?"

"Yes, I can imagine that conversation going down well." His laugh was more a growl. "How did you know where to find me?"

About to launch into an explanation, she realized something else. "You found *me*." He'd come to her and shown himself as if to test if she was able to figure out it was him—without dying of shock. She was sure it meant *something*, but damn if she could wrap her mind around it right now. "How did you know I was there? Was I making so much noise?"

He shook his head as if she was missing a point. His hips shoved against hers, just once, as if to remember her that he was still inside her, as if he was making sure she knew *exactly* where he was—buried to his balls inside her pussy.

As if she wouldn't notice by herself.

"For the last time," he said. "What are you doing here? You should be on a plane back home by now surely."

She reached up, touched her hand to his cheek.

He lowered his head and closed his eyes. She could feel him tremble, however slightly. She could make him tremble, this wolf, and her heart skipped.

When he sought her gaze, she saw that his eyes had shifted back to their usual dark, obsidian-like color.

"I'm not going to leave Auckland," she said, and took a deep breath. "And I'm staying *here* until you admit that there's more than just sexual attraction between us. I'm going to stalk you," she said, pushing a finger against his chest. "Until you admit it."

"You are going to stalk *me*?" His mouth was quirking as if he was trying not to laugh. "And how are you going to do that? If you annoy me, I might just eat you for dinner. That's what wolves do with girls like you."

"Ha, now you've got me scared." She flexed her pussy muscles around his hard cock inside her, biting back a moan because it sparked a fresh flame of arousal.

His breath went into his lungs in one sharp hiss. "Oh fuck," he said, and jumped away from her almost as quickly as he'd pounced on her in the first place. His cock slipped out of her pussy, and she couldn't help feeling rejected. Murmuring something about "getting pregnant" under his breath, he shoved his hand through his hair and added another curse to his mumbling. He settled between her legs, cross-legged, his erect cock, glistening with her juices, resting against his stomach.

She wondered if she should be happy that he was so responsible or miffed at the look of sheer horror that had crossed his face at the thought of getting her pregnant.

She braced herself on her elbows to get a better view of him and went with being happy. "I'm on birth control."

"And I'm trying hard to ignore, or better yet, forget the reason for that."

She bit her lip. Yes, she was on the Pill because she'd slept with Simon. So what. It was in the past, not far in the past, but it was over.

"Come on, Trent. Tell me that I'm the first woman you've had sex with." She reached out, grabbed her jeans, which had landed an arm's length away from her waist and shook the condoms out of her pockets. Maybe that would put him at ease. "But if I'm not, don't you dare blame me for what I've done before I'd even *met* you."

He let out an exasperated laugh. "God yes, for the sake of the argument, you are right. You wouldn't understand that my feelings for you go beyond common jealousy."

"Why is it," she said, "that Vivian says you'd do anything for me?"

He scowled. "She said that?"

"Why did you say you'd marry her?" she asked, her heart twisting just by thinking about last night. "Why is it that I'm not the right woman for you?"

It finally clicked into place inside her mind with painful clarity.

"It's because I'm not a wolf like you, but *she* is?"

"Yes," he said quietly, "she's like me."

"So that's it, Trent?" she asked, feeling her throat close up. If this was the reason, she could do nothing. "I'm not good enough for you, is that it?"

He was silent, heartbreakingly silent.

She closed her eyes, trying to block out the hurt. If he thought she had some kind of deficiency, she could do nothing. And she couldn't be with him if this was what stood between them. She'd rather be forever alone than be with a man who thought she was flawed by default.

As if he'd sensed that she was about to jump up and run away from him all over again, his hands came to rest on her legs, his light touch stopping her short. He started massaging with his thumb the back of her knee, and her muscles went liquid at the sheer pleasure of his touch. He was doing that so well. Distracting her, luring her into lust so deep she lost any rational thought.

"I didn't find you because you were making so much noise," he said slowly as if he had to select his words carefully. "I mean, you did, but that wasn't it. I could find you in a sea of a hundred people, a thousand. I *know* your scent. You smell sweet, like lilacs, and you smell of *you* in a way I can't begin to describe. And you smell of me because my scent still clings to your skin. And you smell of tears and a bit of fear, and for that I'm truly sorry."

"Trent?" She propped herself up on her elbows again, searching his face.

"Hmm." He was still massaging the back of her knee with his thumb and it was driving her crazy.

"That wasn't an answer to my question."

"Sure it was." He drew in a long, deep breath. "Why are you here?"

She spread her hands, hoping he wasn't as daft as *not* to notice that she wasn't wearing a ring. "Isn't it fairly obvious why I'm here?"

"Yes, it's obvious." He slid his hands from her knees down the inside of her thighs. He brushed the tip of his fingers between her legs. "Always so wet," he said quietly, stroking his hands up and down her thighs. When he traced a finger through her wet folds, she felt her thighs tremble. "That's why you're here, Kat. You like to fuck."

She clamped her legs shut with his hands trapped between them. "Not in the way you say it."

"Didn't I tell you what wolves do with annoying girls?" He pressed his palms against her thighs and forced her legs apart. "I'll just eat you out." His gaze was centered on the juncture between her legs so intensely that heat spread through her pussy and made her muscles clench.

She heard the low, weak moan that slipped past her lips. "Trent, we need to talk but I can't do that if you keep touching me. It's too...distracting."

"But you want it, don't you?" he said quietly. "You can't get enough."

Yes, she thought. She couldn't get enough, but he was clearly not getting that she wanted *him*, not just sex per se. Her clit was pulsing, swollen, yet she didn't want to surrender so easily. They really needed to talk, even though her body clearly demanded something else right now.

"No," she said, in the vain hope he'd stop. "I want to talk."

"A lying lawyer," he said, sounding amused. "But I can smell when you lie as easily as I can smell your arousal. I can almost taste you on my tongue."

"You can *smell* that I'm, that I'm..." For reasons she couldn't say, she felt blood rush into her head.

He shrugged. "It's a bit rude, I agree. In the cab and later in the hotel suite, your scent was so hot, so needy, I knew how wet you were before I even touched a single finger to your cunt."

Her internal muscles spasmed as his words hit its mark. "I think that info wasn't necessary." No wonder he'd been so full of himself that night in the hotel. He was pretty certain that he would get a warm reception. "And I don't want to know how many times you've taken advantage of women like that."

"But it isn't like that," he said. "When I met you, I hadn't shifted in many weeks, which always robs me of my heightened senses. So I shouldn't have been able to notice your subtle come-and-get-me hints." He laughed a rather dirty laugh, and then suddenly stopped abruptly. He closed his eyes, his chest rising as he took in a deep breath. "Damn," he groaned. "I should have paid more attention. No wonder you turned out to be my —"

"My what?"

"Turned out to be my doom," he said, and had the good sense to say it with a grin before he dived lower and touched his mouth to her pussy. His tongue slid through her folds, parting them as he eased inside her.

She moaned as her hips jerked forward. "Damn you," she whispered as he wrapped his hands around her hips to still her movements.

"Trent," she said, fighting to get her breath back, then lost her train of thought again when he sucked at her clit.

"Be quiet and let me look at you," he said, a hoarse catch in his throat, and trailed his finger slowly through her wet folds.

"Trent," she said as he tugged at her elbows until she took his hint and rested flat on her back. "How does that work, the wolf thing? Has the tattoo anything to do with it?"

"I got the tat because I was once young and stupid and liked to show off." He gave her a quick lick with his tongue, which tickled more than anything else and made her smile. "I still like to show off though."

"Then how does it work?"

"I don't know," he said. "It just works. Now hush."

Turning her head, she breathed in the humid aroma of the damp earth, watched condensation drip from a coiled fern. "So it wasn't a weird science experiment gone wrong?"

"No, it's perfectly natural. Like licking the cream from your cunt." He gave her another lick that had her flexing all the muscles in her body. "God, you're so sweet," he groaned. "So tight."

"Trent?"

"Do you enjoy saying my name, do you want to annoy me on purpose, or what gives?"

"I can't become like you, right?" she asked, had to ask to be sure.

"I don't know why you'd want to. I'm a rather despicable person. Also, I enjoy you being female."

He actually bit into her thigh, making her gasp, even though he'd done it gently. It was like a warning not to interrupt him again. Tough luck, she thought.

"Trent?"

There was a low growl coming from his throat that didn't frighten her but sent her cunt into a spasm of lust.

"No," he said, "you can't be like me. I was born this way, 'cause my father was a shifter."

"Your mom too?"

"No, she wasn't," he said. "And if I hear another question coming out of your mouth during the next minutes, I'll flip you over my knee. And it won't hurt in a good way, and that's a promise."

He wasn't bluffing, she thought, and he was still unwilling to let her in on his life. Or maybe her timing just sucked. But how could he expect her not to be curious?

The ground underneath her wasn't what she'd call comfortable, something sharp was digging into her shoulder. When he thrust his tongue into her pussy again, she focused on feeling his mouth and tongue between her legs. Need was racing through her with every lick he gave her. Her breasts ached for his touch, but he focused on her clit, licking her slow and thoroughly, without haste. His mouth closed over her pussy, his tongue sliding deep. She rolled her hips up, clenching her cunt around his tongue.

The pressure mounted, driven by the friction between her clit and his tongue. He kept on working her with slow, easy strokes of his tongue. Heat built, swirled, tightened her pussy. Her legs fell farther apart as she writhed beneath him, his rumbled growl vibrating against her clit. Sinking her hands into his hair, she bucked up again, her motions greedy and desperate for him to take her that one step further.

His breath was warm against her thighs, against her belly, her clit. It felt good, so good, but he wouldn't use anything other than his mouth and she needed more. Needed him inside her, making them one, whole.

A rush of emotions flooded her and she sobbed out. She felt the first hot tears spill out the corners of her eyes. She balled her fists, cursing herself for dissolving into an emotional wreck all the time. She heard him sigh, and then he wasn't even touching her with his mouth anymore, which made everything even worse. Squinting at him, she saw him sitting up.

"That's a bit too early, don't you think?" he said, rubbing his thumb over his bottom lip in a way that made her pussy clench in unfulfilled need.

"I don't mean to cry," she whispered, sitting up and lifting her blouse to her face. She rubbed at her eyes, turning the former white cotton into a mess of mascara and dirt. "It just happens with you."

"Why," he said quietly, a strange pain showing on his face that she couldn't comprehend. "I need to know why."

She bit her lip, struggling to find words to explain. "After our first night, in the hotel, I wished you'd stayed. With me. It was confusing to say the least. But when you sleep with me, it feels so right, so good. I want you to stay in me forever. Stay *with* me forever. And I feared forever just wasn't going to happen. And before the party, in your truck, I knew I'd never feel this whole with another man again." She took in a slow, deep breath. "You broke my heart last night, Trent."

A hard tremble ran through his body. He stared at her a moment longer then rubbed his hand across his forehead.

"Can't you even admit," she said, pleased with herself that she'd stopped crying, "that you feel something for me? Even if I'm not...like you?" Her voice had gone quiet, but she had to ask. Why else come here today, she thought. He'd broken her heart once. It couldn't hurt more the second time around.

"Every time you were crying," he said quietly, "it was because of *me*?"

"Slow, are you?" she said, attempting a smile, but it turned out rather wobbly. "Some three hundred wedding guests are going to want an explanation from me. I'll have to return gifts, which is going to be awkward as well. And I have to admit, I was seriously in love with a stupid diamond ring." She held up her hand, wiggled her bare fingers. "But I can't marry the man who gave it to me."

He reached out, ran a hand slowly across her cheek. "My friends are right, I truly am an idiot. I'm so sorry I hurt you, so, so sorry. I didn't mean to."

"But I'm not the right woman for you, is that it?" she said, and proved herself wrong. It did hurt more the second time around.

"I actually want to kill myself right now," he said, eyes closed, shaking his head. "Come to me," he said, his hand curling around her shoulder and tugging her toward him. When she didn't move fast enough, he leaned forward, wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her onto his cross-legged lap.

She almost shied away from his body heat as his chest brushed against her breasts, his hard cock suddenly so temptingly snug against her pussy. She wrapped her legs around him, her arms, and gave a sigh as he wrapped around her, pulled her closer still. It sure didn't feel like she wasn't right for him.

"Relax." He stroked his hand up and down her back and only then did she notice that she was holding her breath, her body so tense she thought she'd snap in two. "Look, you won't understand it," he said, seeking her gaze and holding it, "but you are already a part of me." He drew in a long, hard breath. "There's *nothing* in this world more right for me than you."

She heard how longing lingered in each of his words. It shocked her almost as much as seeing him as a wolf for the first had done.

"And why wait until *now* to tell me that?"

"You were about to get *married*, Katherine," he pressed through his teeth. "Sorry, but I didn't know that you weren't in love with him anymore. It would have helped if you'd *told* me."

"And if I hadn't come to you, you wouldn't have come after me?" She heard it in her voice, the faint accusation, the doubt if he really wanted her as badly as he said.

"I'd do *anything*, follow you everywhere just to be close to you," he said quietly. "But if you love someone else, then I need to let you go. And I wanted you so much my self-control was slipping, as you saw at the party. Just imagine for a moment that you really wanted to marry him." His voice had risen, and there was anger lurking in his eyes. "I can't force you to love me, but I sure as hell can force myself on you. Is that what you want in a man, mindless violence?"

She shook her head, swallowing hard.

He let out a deep breath. "I thought if half the world separated you from me, I'd somehow be able to move on. I sincerely doubt it would have worked. There's that part in me that would have never, ever gotten over you."

"When you say that I'm a part of you," she asked quietly, "what exactly do you mean by that?"

Another pained expression rippled over his face. "How long have you known me?"

"One really hot week." She rocked against him, her eyelids fluttering shut. His cock was hard against her, and she was so wet that her pussy slid smoothly up and down against his shaft. He *wanted* her. It had been easier to believe the opposite, but here he was, in her arms.

"I need you, Trent. Right *now*."

"Do you know that wolves mate for life?"

"I'd say that's common knowledge." She opened her eyes, seeking his gaze. "But you're not a wolf *all the time*, right?"

"But I'll still make sure you'll never want to kiss anyone other than me. And we both know what I mean when I say kiss."

"Is there a catch?" she asked, because she couldn't spot one but he sure as hell sounded like there was one. "It's sounds almost too good to be true."

"There's a catch," he said.

"Whatever it is, you'll tell me later," she said, rocking against him, making sure he felt how wet she was, how hot. "I need you inside me."

When he opened his mouth, a worried frown on his forehead, she rubbed herself against him, her nipples growing hard and taut against his chest. "I'm so wet for you," she whispered. "And I need your cock inside me. Make me come, Trent."

She rolled her hips against his cock, again and again, until his arms closed harder around her and his mouth sought hers. He groaned, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. He swallowed her moans, kissing her long and thoroughly, giving her no time to think only to feel.

His kiss grew deeper, possessive, and when he arched her back, his mouth closing around her nipple, she cried out as he sucked at her breast. She could feel the pull everywhere, her cunt aching empty.

When she lifted her hips, trying to take his cock inside her, his low growl stopped her short. He leaned forward, holding her tight in his arms so she wouldn't slip from his knees, and grabbed a condom from the ground. With quick movements, he sheathed himself.

His hands came around her ass, lifted her. He nudged against her, the thick head of his cock sliding through her wet folds. She lowered herself on him, moaning as she felt his cock penetrating her cunt inch for thick inch. Needing to feel him deep, she thrust down on him, taking all of his length in one slick motion. She cried out, the feeling of him so incredibly good that she held still, savoring the moment.

"Ride me," he growled, supporting her weight while she rocked his cock in and out of her wet pussy in long, languid strokes. "That's right, Kat. Nice and slow." His fingers dug into her flesh as he guided her with his hands. "You're so wet and tight and so damn hot around my cock."

The fire between them built with each thrust, and she could feel herself hurling toward her climax faster than she wished. She slowed, tried to slow his thrusts, but she loved how his thick cock slid so easily into her, how incredible it felt when she clenched around him.

She kept her gaze on his face, taking him faster, her breathing too ragged, too rough, making her lightheaded and so deliriously happy. Her movements grew more desperate when she reached that sweet point where she just needed to let go.

"Come for me, Kat," he whispered, his grip hard around her hips as he rocked her harder on his cock. "I love to watch you come."

His eyes had changed to that yellow golden glow. Hunger lit his gaze, and such fierce possessive heat that she bucked against him, spears of fire racing up her spine, spreading like a wildfire through her entire body. Pulsing, her pussy clamped down on his cock, and she couldn't catch her breath as wave after wave of pure pleasure rolled through her.

Still gasping for breath, she cried out as he pushed her from his lap and flipped her over. He dragged her up to her knees. Her thighs still trembling from her climax, she felt one hand coming down on her back, and his other caught her hip and pulled her ass against him. With his knee, he spread her legs apart. Holding her in place, he pressed his erection against her drenched cunt. "Do you want me," he said, his voice rough, the grumbling deep in his throat. "Are you mine, Kat?"

"God yes," she whispered, her fingers digging into the soft ground as her entire body started shaking with fresh need. "I want you forever."

He surged into her, wringing another startled cry from her lips. Taking raw thrust after thrust, he slammed tightly against her ass as he fucked her. Filling, stretching her impossibly deep and wide, he pounded his cock into her, the friction so incredibly hot.

He groaned, the sound animalistic, and he angled his hips, deepening the penetration. He stretched over her, his arms closing around her front as he pulled her up and against him. On her knees, she rested against his muscled chest while his thrusts grew slower, more deliberate.

"Mine," he whispered against her neck, his arms locking her against him. "I have to make you mine again, woman. The first time, I wasn't even thinking straight."

She froze when his teeth, too sharp to belong to a human, scraped over her shoulder. Before she could comprehend, he sank his cock deep into her cunt and his teeth into her shoulder.

Despite the pain, pleasure exploded in her mind as she realized that he was marking her as his. The sensation of being bitten so strange yet already familiar, she screamed as her orgasm tore through her body, the release brutal in its intensity. She heard her own sob, feeling as if she shattered into a million pieces. He slammed into her, his cock pulsing and jerking inside her pussy as he came, his hoarse shout too close to a howl.

Sucking in air, she fell forward as his tight grip around her body loosened. She came up on her side, feeling as if her leg muscles were completely gone, her entire body too weak to move. When she touched the spot where he had bit her, she let out a faint groan. Her shoulder was throbbing, but knowing that he had marked her as his woman was too much of a turn-on to complain about the slight pain.

"Are you trying to kill me?" she muttered, tried to turn her head to look at him, but even that was too much effort. Another orgasm like that, and she'd probably never open her eyes again. Giving up, she stretched out on the ground. She heard him move, felt him stretch out at her side.

When he drew her into his arms, pressing his lips against her forehead, she rolled against his chest and cuddled closer to his pounding heart. Savoring the feel of him, she wished she could freeze this moment—their bodies touching, legs entangling and fingers intertwining.

Then she realized that she didn't have to freeze this moment because they'd have more, many more, and her heart lifted.

"Are you okay?" he asked finally, stroking his fingers through her hair. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Hurt? Trent, I nearly passed out." She felt him tense, his fingers freezing to a stop in her hair. "Yes, it goddamn hurt, but in the best possible way. You did that at the beach with me, I remember, but this was worse."

"Worse in a good way?" he asked, his voice strained.

"Yes, hurts like hell, I love it," she said, deciding to tease him just a little bit, twisting in his arms and sliding on top of him. She pushed herself up on her hands, looking at him lying beneath her. "Why did you do that?" *Tell me I'm yours again*, she thought, wondering if she was too needy, but she wanted to hear him say it.

He gazed up at her, his dark eyes searching her face, and then he sighed. "Thank God, no more water works. Makes me want to take you all over again just for the joy of seeing you smiling afterward."

"Trent, why did you do that? Is it a wolf thing?"

"Maybe." When he grinned, his dark eyes sparkling up at her, she leaned in, licked along his bottom lip until he wrapped her into his arms and gave her a deep, lingering kiss. "You're my mate," he whispered. "I'd do anything for you."

"Anything?" she asked. "There's a catch somewhere, right?" She laughed, had meant it as a joke, but his smile sobered suddenly and she remembered that he'd been trying to tell her something earlier. "Okay, what's the catch, Trent?"

"Look," he said, stroking his hand up and down her spine, tracing each vertebra along the way, "it's way, way too early for this kind of talk, and God knows, once you get to know me better with each passing day you may change your mind about us, but—"

"Come to the point," she said quietly. "And I'm not liking one bit that you basically called me a flake." She glared down at him, understanding much better what he'd done to her than he might think. If he called her his mate, then he meant for life. And with him, she wouldn't need a ring or a ceremony to bind them together. She didn't feel the need for marriage. Everything she wanted, she already had.

But he didn't give her the same credit, didn't think her capable for life-long commitment. Because she'd already left one man in favor for another—even if that man was him. "You don't trust me, right? You don't trust that I'll stay with you because I'm not a wolf."

"Katherine," he said. "I trust you."

She blinked, thrown by the sincerity in his eyes. "You do?"

"Yes, I do. What I was trying to tell you is that if you stay with me, you won't have children."

Shaking her head, she tried to wrap her mind around his statement. It didn't make any sense. "And why is that?"

"Because I'm a shifter and you are not."

She threw her hands up. "So?"

"My mother died giving birth to me. My father was never the same again. He was there for me, yes, but there was something broken inside him. He focused on his work, and Ada helped raise me. When I was eleven, I shifted for the first time and he guided me through it, helped me understand, told me that I was a man now. A day later, he took a boat out to sea and never came back."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, her heart going out to him. "But why do you think that would happen to me, to us?"

"Because the numbers are against us," he said. "I've heard about complications too often. And I won't risk losing you, won't risk your life because you're pregnant with my child."

She nodded, understanding that his weren't idle words, understanding his stringent use of condoms, and the horror on his face when he'd been inside her unprotected. So far, she hadn't felt the urge to have children, hadn't heard a clock ticking. But it wasn't implausible that she would someday. "I understand," she said quietly. "I want to be with you, Trent. Everything else, and I mean everything, comes second."

She stretched out on top of him, her cheek resting on his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his body. It was enough, she thought, having him.

"Trent?"

"Hmm?"

"You said you'd do anything for me, right?"

"I'll also spank your little ass black and blue if you abuse that power."

She grinned. "I'm not selling you my house."

His arms came around her, flipped her over. "But it's already mine."

"I want it back." She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

"Sorry, it was the best deal I ever landed."

"I won't honor the contract, Trent. I want the house back. It feels wrong to take that money from you. It's not like you have a job anymore."

"I'll sue you then." He laughed, a low, rumbling laugh that sounded as if he was very pleased with himself. He trailed kisses along her jaw, moved lower, kissed her breast. "I mean it, Yankee. I love that house. Not as much as I love you, but I won't give it up."

"Say that again," she said quietly, his mouth around her nipple making her arch up.

"What? That I'll sue you?"

She wrapped her arms around him, digging her fingernails into his back. "Not that."

"What, that I love the house?"

"No, not that." She sucked in her breath as he moved lower, trailing kisses across her stomach.

"Tell you what, Yankee. New deal," he said. "You'll get your license to work here first, and then—"

"I already have that. Ages ago, Jack made me because he was planning to branch out in Auckland. I pick my battles with him very carefully, so I just got the license. Call me a pushover for all I care. But I was pretty sure that his plans wouldn't pan out anyway. Thankfully, I was right. You have no idea how many fights I've had with him because I refused his job offers."

"Then you'll open your law firm here, in Auckland. And I'll spend some time renovating the house. And if I ever ask you to marry me, you'll say yes. Voila, you'll get all my untold riches as well as the house in one swoop."

"What, no prenup? What kind of lawyer are you?"

"Honey," he drawled, meeting her eye with a mischievous gleam. "You are Jack Watts' daughter. You should be the one demanding a prenup."

She counted to three then ten, trying to stay calm, but it was no good. "Trent, I own not a penny of his money and if you plan to use his connections to your benefit, then—"

"Shhh," he said quietly. "Relax, Yankee. I was pulling your strings. I pretty much figured at the party that this topic was likely to rile you up. I want or need nothing of him."

"Fine," she said, feeling silly for losing it. "I'm still not going to marry you." She closed her eyes as he moved lower still, his hands wrapping around her hips. "I fear I'm not the marrying kind."

"Sure you are."

"Nope," she said. "And I'm not up to what you're doing down there between my legs either."

"Want to bet?" he said. "It's only fair if I tell you that I always win though."

"Not this time," she said with a grin. "But you're on. Prove me wrong."

"Ah, I do love a challenge."

She gave herself over to his mouth, his tongue, gave herself over to him until she cried out in pleasure as he proved her very wrong indeed. And she knew, someday, he'd prove her wrong again.

And it would feel just as good.

Epilogue

"Come on, let's escape for a second."

Katherine looked up, surprised. She hadn't heard Trent enter, but now she glanced into his dark eyes.

"You're not supposed to be here."

"I know, don't throw me out. The last several days have been hectic. We haven't had a chance to be alone in a while." Taking her hand, he walked her out of the makeshift dressing room.

They passed a couple of white tents at the beach and curious glances followed them, but no one asked questions. Obviously, their family and friends were used to them acting strange.

Despite his wish to talk, Trent was silent until they were out of earshot from their guests, but not out of sight. It became increasingly harder to walk over the black sand in her high-heeled sandals, and the grains seeped into her shoes. She took them off and carried them in her hand.

Trent sighed, ruffling his hair. "How do you feel?"

"Bit nervous actually."

She looked over her shoulder, back at the white tents, and noticed Ada waving in her direction. The little girl on Ada's hand broke free and tried to run away, but fell flat on her bottom the next second.

Jack was there, looking out of place at the beach. He'd taken to Trent so quickly that she'd wondered if she'd missed some secret conversation between them. But Jack had stopped interfering with her life. Or maybe it was the distance to New York that held him at bay, she'd never know.

She smiled, hearing the angry wail from her daughter, but couldn't see the tears of frustrations that surely welled in her dark eyes.

"She looks like you when she gets angry," Trent said, and caught her hand. "Just as stubborn as you." He laughed and they stopped, facing each other.

"Me, stubborn?" she said indignantly, screwing up her face in mock thought. "Let me think—yes, perfect example—who didn't listen when I said that climbing onto the roof wasn't a good idea. But no, you wouldn't listen. You nearly broke your neck."

He laughed. "Exactly how many times more do you want to rub my nose in it? Besides, you nursed me back to health quickly enough." He cupped her cheek in his hand. "I'm hard to kill."

"You know what Linda said to me after Sarah was born," she asked. "She said that it was no wonder our daughter was born ten months after you fell off the roof because we spent so much time in bed to *nurse* you back to health."

"Yes, I have especially fond memories about that time."

Yes, she thought. They had spent a lot of time in bed. And then nature had found a way. After eleven months of relationship bliss and one nearly broken neck, she'd found herself pregnant. In retrospect, it had taken an upset stomach for the Pill to fail, a bad condom on his end, and the right, or wrong, time of the month.

She'd been afraid to tell him, and when she finally did, he'd left the house, left her for a full day and night until she was all but crazy with anxiety. But he'd come back, telling her everything would be all right. Telling her that he was an idiot, that he had been wrong all along, that she needn't worry.

He'd asked her to marry him then of course. But he'd asked her that pretty much any other month since they'd gotten together. Sometimes he'd proposed casually over dinner, sometimes after sex, sometimes as the first thing in the morning. She'd always laughed, telling him the time wasn't right. She didn't know what she was waiting for, but she was so happy, why change a thing?

And her pregnancy had turned out to be wonderful, without complications, her belly growing round and rounder each day.

And then her water broke.

She didn't remember much except for the pain, the blood and more pain. Everything wasn't right. He hadn't been wrong. He'd never told her what he felt, what he went through during the two days she was in a coma, but he didn't need to. She knew. When she finally woke, the doctors told her she'd never be able to get pregnant again. Not that she minded, holding the wonder that was Sarah finally in her arms. She'd feared Trent would somehow hold a grudge against his daughter, but he adored her with reckless abandon.

Trent's arm came around her shoulder, pulling her out of her thoughts. "The local paper called, asking if they could stop by next week. They run a piece about historic villas and asked if they can take photos and have a short interview with you."

She nodded. The old villa had received a lot of attention. She'd worked her ass off to get her firm started, and he'd spent months shaping his dream house and taking care of building consents. The council had breathed down their necks and watched their renovations closely, but the house was finally perfect.

"Truly," she said. "I never thought I would love that house, but I wouldn't want to live anywhere else." She'd filled the house with new memories, not troubled anymore that she couldn't remember any of her childhood.

And one rainy morning three weeks ago, she'd woken up, knowing that her daughter would soon demand breakfast, and rolled into Trent's arms, enjoying his warmth and realizing that there was no time better than right now. And when he had woken, murmuring a sleep-drunken "*Wannamarryme*," she'd simply said yes.

"By the way," he said, "what are you wearing underneath your dress, something blue?"

She pushed him playfully. "Want to find out?"

"God yes." He pulled her close, his mouth hovering over hers. "I'll have my wicked way with you tonight, woman."

She let out a breathless laughter and wriggled free. "Let's race back. If you win, you can make an honest woman out of me."

Katherine ran as fast as she could in her wedding dress until she heard Trent's voice behind her. "Don't you know," he said as he closed his hand around hers, "I always win?"

About the Author

Amy Redwood lives in Vancouver, Canada. This wasn't always the case. She grew up in Europe, moved to New Zealand and then explored China before settling down on the west coast of Canada. She likes nothing better than dark chocolate, autumn rain and curling up on the couch reading a great story. But what she loves is writing about smart heroines and sexy heroes enjoying hot nights, hotter days and a happily ever after. After all, nothing beats a happy end.

Amy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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