A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing in bed. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right. They are both looking at each other with affection. The background is a soft, warm light, suggesting a bedroom setting. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

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AN OCEAN

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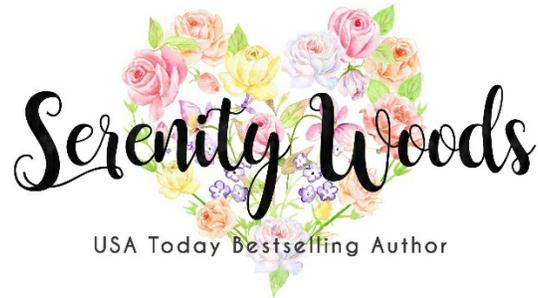


BETWEEN THE SHEETS BOOK TWO
SERENITY WOODS

An Ocean Between Us

Between the Sheets Book 2

By



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Chapter One

It had been a long and exhausting day.

Danny Love placed a last shovel of earth around the new palm, knelt on the ground, and pressed it in with his hands. The cool soil sank between his fingers, rich and loamy. He'd never tire of the smell of fresh earth, cut grass, and new plants. He didn't understand people who hated being outdoors. Insects and animals, flowers and trees, they were his life, and they always had been, ever since he was a kid.

Still, he'd had enough for now. He'd worked hard all week, and today, Friday, he'd arrived at eight a.m. to continue the landscaping of Mr. and Mrs. Spencer's huge garden. It was now seven in the evening. He'd sent his crew home at five, and had continued on his own for a while, enjoying the peace of the place, as well as its glorious view across the bay.

He pushed himself to his feet, passed his forearm across his face to wipe away some of the sweat, and began watering the new palms with the hose. Even though it was late May and therefore autumn in New Zealand, up here in the Northland it grew warm by midday, and with all the lifting and carrying he'd done, he felt as if it was the height of summer.

The Spencer estate was incredibly impressive. Their large house—well, it was more of a mansion, by Kiwi standards—sat atop a hill overlooking the Bay of Islands. The surrounding lawns led to acres of thick bush on either side. Straight in front the grass gave way to a private sandy beach, and beyond that the Pacific Ocean sparkled a gorgeous blue in the evening sunshine.

Imagine living somewhere like this, he thought, waking up every morning to such a view out of the bedroom window. He'd love to have any kind of view. Danny lived with his father in a tiny house in the center of the

seaside town of Paihia. His bedroom window looked out onto a small garden with a high fence. He loved the garden and had worked hard to make it a place in which his father could sit in his wheelchair and enjoy feeding the birds, which was the only outdoor activity he could really take part in. But Danny would have killed for a view like this.

Still, at least he got to spend the greater part of his days on other people's land. Danny ran his own business, *Love Landscaping*, and he adored his job, which earned him and his father a decent wage to live on, even if it wasn't enough to buy a place like this.

Sighing, he coiled up the hose, packed the wheelbarrow with his tools, and set off up to the house. The work the Spencers had requested was going to take him a couple more weeks, so he left his tools locked up in one of their sheds at night rather than lug them home and bring them all back the next day. He was looking forward to treating himself for the week's hard work by going to the *Between the Sheets* bar tonight. The notion of an ice cold beer was the only thing that had kept him going the last few hours.

He was halfway across the lawn when he saw a figure standing in front of the house. The woman wore a pale blue dress and sunhat and was watching him, hand raised to shield her eyes.

The couple who'd recently bought the house had returned to England for the winter, but Danny knew their daughter was supposed to be coming to stay for a while, so he assumed this must be her. He changed direction and slowed as he approached her. For a brief moment, he thought he'd travelled back two hundred years. She looked the spitting image of the women he'd seen in some of the early photographs of the first European settlers in New Zealand, the dress buttoned up to her neck and almost reaching her ankles. She was tiny and slender, like a fine porcelain teacup he'd be afraid of holding, sure it would break in his hands.

He knew Mr. and Mrs. Spencer were upper class English gentry, and he'd been amused by William Spencer's plummy BBC accent, straight out of an old black-and-white movie. Did the daughter speak the same way?

He stopped before her, lowered the handles of the wheelbarrow, and straightened. "Kia ora," he said, the standard Kiwi greeting, pronounced *key-ora*.

"Hello," she replied, lifting her chin. He grinned—yes, she did have the same plummy accent. "Goodness," she said, her nose wrinkling. "You're filthy."

He raised his eyebrows, then looked down at himself. She had a point—after a day spent up to his armpits in earth he'd then turned to mud with the hose, there wasn't a lot of clean clothing left on his body. He wore shorts to the knee but the mud had caked on his bare legs, and although he hadn't looked in a mirror since he'd showered that morning, he was certain his face would be streaked with earth and sweat.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm a real Kiwi man. We prefer things dirty."

He grinned, but she didn't smile back. She was a cool one, he thought. Then she slid off her sunglasses. He'd imagined her eyes to be an icy blue, but to his surprise they were a warm brown. She had long chestnut hair she'd braided into a plait that hung over one shoulder. There were no freckles on her pale skin—he bet she wore factor seventy sun-lotion as soon as summer approached, very different to most Kiwi girls, the majority of whom sported a healthy tan. Still, it meant her face and neck were free of lines, and he had the feeling that if he ran a finger around her pale shoulder, the skin would feel silky smooth to the touch.

She gave a tiny sniff and looked away, down to the palm island he'd been working on. "I thought you'd be further along by now. Is that all you've done so far?"

Irritation fought with amusement. Completing the island had taken him all week. Clearly, this posh bird had never picked up a spade in her life, and she had no idea of the work involved in landscaping grounds the size of these.

“I’m sorry it doesn’t meet with your approval.”

She turned her frosty gaze back to him. “Where’s Mr. Love? I’d like to talk to the owner rather than one of his hands.”

One of his...? Who the fuck did this girl think she was?

He put his hands on his hips. If he wasn’t sitting in the bar drinking a beer within thirty minutes, he was going to end up murdering someone, and if the snooty girl kept talking like that, she would end up the prime contender.

“He’s not here.”

She blew out a frustrated breath. “What’s your name?”

“Danny.”

“Danny...”

“Mellors,” he said, deadpan.

She gave a small nod, and he stifled a chuckle. Clearly, D.H. Lawrence hadn’t been on the curriculum when she was at Oxford or Cambridge, or wherever she’d received her stuffy, upper-class education.

“Well, Mr. Mellors, you can tell Mr. Love from me that I am not impressed. He knew I was arriving on Friday, and I had expected him to be here.”

“I’m not sure he was aware what time you’d be arriving.”

Huffing an irritated sigh, she pulled her smartphone out, tapped on the screen, and handed it to him. “I sent him an email this morning.”

Danny read it through—he hadn’t checked his emails since yesterday evening and hadn’t seen her message. He read the last line. It said ‘Hermione Spencer’. “Hermy-wun? Is that your name?”

Her eyes flared. “It’s pronounced Her-my-on-ee.”

He stifled a laugh as he handed the phone back. “Sorry. But I don’t think Mr. Love saw your email.”

“Even so—I expected him to wait for me.”

“It’s seven o’clock,” he pointed out. “On a Friday. Any decent guy would be on his second beer by now.”

“You’re here.”

“I’m not decent,” he said, and grinned.

He knew he should be angry with her. She’d insulted him, she was superior and arrogant, and she deserved taking down a peg or two, but he could only summon amused desire as his gaze slid down her very womanly curves. “What are you doing tonight? I don’t suppose you’d like to come out for a drink with me?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Walking forward a few steps—daintily, to ensure the high heels she wore didn’t sink into the grass—she stopped before him and gave him a cold stare. “Don’t even think about getting fresh with me, Mr. Mellors. I don’t cavort with hired hands, and I certainly don’t drink beer.”

Cavort? This chick really was straight out of the 1840s.

He looked down at her. Even though she wore heels, he topped her by a good six or seven inches. He’d thought she would be wearing lavender water or something else subtle and nondescript, but to his surprise an enticing, sensual scent arose from her, stirring his blood. Her eyes flashed and she’d pursed her mouth, but all it did was draw his attention to her pale pink lips. If he kissed them, they’d be soft as rose petals.

Not bothering to hide his amusement, he tugged the peak of an imaginary cap and dipped his head. “Yes, ma’am.”

For a second, he thought he saw the flicker of a smile on her lips. Then

she strode off.

He watched her hips swing as she walked, the heels giving her a gorgeous wiggle he rarely saw on girls these days. After a few steps, she stopped and turned around. "Please tell Mr. Love I would like to see him on Monday, come hell or high water. Oh, and Mr. Mellors?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Please don't stare at my bottom when I walk. It makes me uncomfortable."

He laughed. "Whatever you say, ma'am."

He saw a definite lift of her lips before she turned and walked off again.

Picking up the handles of the wheelbarrow, he headed for the shed. Lady Chatterley was going to prove a fun distraction.

Chapter Two

Hermione Spencer opened her eyes. For a few moments she couldn't think where she was. Brilliant sunshine poured through the open curtains, sunshine that quite clearly wasn't English, and the windows were on her left, not on her right as they were in her flat in London.

She blinked and cleared her vision. The windows had no nets—very un-British. Outside, on the rail at the end of the deck, two birds sat watching her. They looked like parrots, their red, yellow, and violet feathers a vivid reminder she wasn't at home.

It was Monday, the first day of June, and she was thirteen thousand miles away in the sub-tropical Northland of New Zealand, Down Under, where they spent Christmas around the pool and celebrated midwinter on the twenty-first of this month.

Captivated by the birds, she reached for the phone that rested on the bedside table, hoping to take a photo, but they saw her movement and flew away. She sat up, her disappointment vanishing as her gaze fell on the view.

Casting aside the bedclothes, she got to her feet and then walked over to the windows. After unlatching them, she pulled the large sliding door open and stepped out onto the deck.

The gardens before her were bathed in sunshine. Closing her eyes, she lifted her face up to the sun for a moment, enjoying the warmth on her cheeks and the smell of the roses that surrounded the deck. In England they were heading toward summer, but it still wouldn't be as warm as this gorgeous autumn day.

Opening her eyes, she looked around at the towering palm trees and the huge rolling lawns, scattered with the occasional cluster of late daisies. A strip of golden sand shone in the distance. Beyond the private beach, the

Pacific Ocean sparkled in the morning sun.

Paradise.

Then her gaze fell on a mound of earth to the left of her parents' land. A digger crouched beside it, incongruous and ugly, like a pimple on a beautiful woman's face. Hermione frowned as a memory of the night before flickered through her mind. She'd dreamed about the workman she'd met on Friday evening. In her dream, as in real life, he'd been shoveling dirt into a wheelbarrow, his face and body covered in mud, only in the fantasy he'd been completely naked.

Her lips twitched. Having erotic dreams about the staff now, was she? Good Lord. How inappropriate. If she was going to dream about anyone, it should be Richard, the man she was going to marry.

But she didn't want to think about Richard, not while she was here, on the other side of the world. She pushed his image out of her mind. This was her escape, and while she was here, she wasn't going to dwell on the problems she'd left behind. Here she was free!

Sighing happily, she turned and went inside, slotted her feet into a pretty pair of flip-flops she'd bought especially for her trip—what did they call them here? Jandals?—and went through to the kitchen. The clock on the wall showed it was barely seven, so she had plenty of time for breakfast outside before she had to get ready to meet the elusive head gardener.

She made a pot of tea in one of her mother's china teapots, placed it on a tray with two slices of toast and marmalade, and took it outside. The large deck that ran the length of the house had a luxurious swing seat and an outdoor sofa and chairs, but she took the tray to the little two-seater table at the end, poured herself a cup of tea, and put her feet up.

She could get used to this. When her parents had first announced their intention to become 'swallows'—retirees who spent half the year in the

northern hemisphere and half in the south—she'd not understood why they felt the need to chase the sun around the globe.

Winter in the UK could be wet and mild rather than crisp and even, it was true, but she loved spring and autumn, and she'd read that this far north in New Zealand the seasons tended to be less marked, so much so that it had been christened 'the winterless north'.

Now, she comprehended their decision. Their home in Devon, England, was far from small with its parks and estates, and the resplendent manor house, but it wasn't a patch on this place. Their ancestral home did have all the paintings and traditional furniture she loved, but being here felt so... exciting, so liberating.

Everything was new in this place. While she loved history and appreciated the heritage of her country, there was something about the notion of starting again that appealed to her. Breaking away from tradition had become part of her life's plan over the years, so this country suited her very well.

And now she was back to thinking about Richard. She closed her eyes and gave a frustrated sigh. She was not going to let him ruin her holiday.

Sliding down in her seat, she rested her head on the back of the chair and let the sun warm her through. The idea she'd been playing with all weekend filtered into her mind. Half of her was certain it wasn't possible. The other half—the rebellious half—insisted she at least give it some consideration.

Later, she'd grab a pen and paper and start making lists. For now, though, she let the idea bloom like the roses by the side of the deck.

"Morning."

The deep male voice made her jump. She sat up, banging her knee on the table, and looked around in shock to see the workman from Friday standing on the lawn.

That first evening after she'd landed was somewhat hazy in her mind. The flight had taken a total of twenty-six hours with a short stop in Singapore, plus New Zealand was eleven hours ahead of London, and her body clock had been completely confused. She'd felt dizzy, and even though it had only been seven in the evening when she'd met him, when she'd returned to the house she'd gone to bed and fallen asleep immediately. Her dreams had been filled with Lewis Carroll-style crazy creations, dominated by the man in the mud-caked clothing, whose handsome face and warm eyes had haunted her until daybreak.

Now, with three good sleeps under her belt, the jet lag was wearing off a little and her mind felt fresher, and she looked at him with renewed interest. Her first thought was how much cleaner he looked—his blue T-shirt and khaki-colored cargo shorts were free of Friday's mud, his skin looked deeply tanned without the caking of dirt. His dark hair curled damply around his temples and the nape of his neck, so she guessed he'd recently had a shower.

"Goodness." She suddenly remembered it was only seven o'clock. "What are you doing here so early?"

"I'm a lark—I always start work early. I'm asleep by nine in the evening." He grinned, showing his straight white teeth.

"Well, you could have warned me. I'm still in my nightie." She smoothed down the white cotton shift nervously, hoping her nipples weren't showing through the lace-covered bodice.

His eyebrows rose. "Oh, Christ, sorry. I assumed it was a sundress."

"Seriously?" The nightie had ribbon straps, and when she stood it fell to an inch above her knees. At the moment, because she was sitting, it covered only half her thighs. "I don't know what Kiwi girls wear but I would never buy a sundress as revealing as this. Plus I would have thought the bed hair and pillow-creased face would have given me away."

He smiled. “You look as fresh as the May morning. And just as beautiful.”

She blinked at him—was he being sarcastic? He didn’t look it. He looked... interested. “Oh. Um, well, thanks.” The compliment took the wind out of her sails. “Do you... um... want a cup of tea?”

His smile turned into a grin. “How terribly British. Everyone else in the world drinks coffee in the morning, but the Brits must have their tea.”

“Would you like a cup or not?”

“Yes please, I’d love one.”

Giving him a wry smile, she nipped inside to fetch him a cup and returned to find him lounging in the seat opposite hers, his long legs stretched out. She cleared her throat, sat, and poured the tea. “You Kiwis have such a strange accent. You pronounce your ‘e’s as ‘i’s. You said yis, not yes.”

“Yeah. So when we say ‘please come and sit on my dick,’ it’s not what you think.” He tipped his head, his gaze floating down her, soft as a feather. “Or maybe it is.”

She dropped her cup onto the saucer with a clatter. “Goodness! What a thing to say at seven o’clock in the morning!” Heat spread through her at the memory of him shoveling earth naked in her dream. Just the notion of him being bare-chested and bare-arsed had been enough to get her hot under the collar. The notion of seeing any other part of his anatomy—let alone sitting on it—gave her goose bumps.

He laughed. “I’m sure the sun’s over the yard arm somewhere in the world.” Meeting her gaze, he had the grace to look a little embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I forgot whose company I was in for a moment, milady.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You don’t actually have to call me lady—just tone down your language a little, please.”

“Wait a minute—are you telling me you are actually a lady? Lady

Spencer?”

“Yes. Well, no. Strictly speaking I’m Lady Hermione—my mother’s Lady Spencer. My father’s an earl. Sir William Spencer.”

“Holy fuck.”

She glared at him. “Mr. Mellors, please.”

He clapped a hand over his mouth. “I’m sorry. You took me by surprise. I’ve never met a real toff before.”

“Then I’m certainly not taking you to meet the queen.”

He laughed, and she couldn’t stop her lips curving up. The guy was rude and cheeky, but it was difficult to be angry with such an incredibly hot man when he looked at her with a twinkle in his eye.

Where he sat, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees as he sipped his tea, his T-shirt stretched across impressive biceps and a muscular chest. In his huge hands, the teacup looked like something Alice in Wonderland would have drunk from after eating the mushrooms that made her grow.

Everything about him was down-to-earth and working class. He was practically prehistoric, Neanderthal man come back to life. He probably ate his dinner with his fingers and wrote holding a pen in his fist. When it came to sex, no doubt he ripped off his women’s clothing and took them roughly, probably from behind like an animal.

Ooh.

He chuckled. “What are you thinking about? Your eyes have glassed over.”

She picked up her cup and sipped her tea. “I was thinking how much like a caveman you are.”

“*Homo erectus?*” He winked at her.

“Ha! More like *habilis*, I’d say.”

“Cheeky. I can make fire. With a decent supply of matches.”

“Wow. You know Latin *and* some archaeology. I’m impressed.”

He sat back and cocked his head at her. “Not as much as you, I assume. Let me guess, you went to Cambridge and gained a Masters degree studying Palaeolithic bone combs or something just as obscure.”

“It was Oxford, it was Business Studies, and I’m guessing you left school at fifteen with not a qualification to your name.”

He looked down at his cup, his smile fading.

She bit her lip. “I’m sorry, that was terribly rude. Normally I have better manners. But there’s something about you that appears to bring out the worst in me.”

He finished off his tea. “I know what you mean. I should apologize too. You probably won’t believe me, but I’m not normally as crude as I have been this morning.”

“You’re right. I don’t believe you. But you don’t have to apologize. Daddy brought me up to be comfortable in any company, no matter how vulgar.”

Having said she was sorry, she’d meant the statement to be provocative and funny, but it was only when it left her lips that she realized how downright insulting it sounded.

Luckily, Danny didn’t look affronted, but his eyebrows did rise up into his hairline. “Did you really just call your father Daddy? Wow. Haven’t done that since I was five.”

Her cheeks warmed. In her family, everyone called their parents mummy and daddy even when they were adults, but when she’d gone to Oxford she’d soon learned it wasn’t the done thing in normal society. She’d adjusted her speech, along with many other things that had helped her to fit in, but today she hadn’t been concentrating, and that had been a slip.

He smiled. “You’re blushing.”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“You shouldn’t be. You’re fascinating. I’ve never met royalty before.”

Fascinating? Nobody had ever called her fascinating.

Hiding her pleasure at the compliment, she rolled her eyes. “I’m not royalty.”

“Spencer? You’re not related to Princess Diana?”

She hid her surprise that he’d remembered the princess’s maiden name.

“Only distantly. Third cousin once removed... or something.”

“Even so. I’m going to call you Your Royal Highness from now on.”

“Oh, please don’t.”

“Okay, Your Grace.”

A reluctant smile crept onto her lips. His eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled. He really was very handsome. If she’d been a shop girl or a barmaid, he’d have been quite a catch.

He held her gaze, and the blush that had begun to cool in her cheeks rose again as heat flooded the rest of her body. This guy would have no concept of polite society, of dining in fine restaurants, or of going to the opera. He wouldn’t read Shakespeare or poetry, and he would play console games involving car chases and machine guns, not tennis or croquet.

He’d expect sex on the first date, and she doubted he’d even heard of foreplay. His sultry eyes told her he was ready to drag her onto his lap, crush his lips to hers, and take her immediately, right there on the lawn.

But in spite of the voice in her head that insisted he wouldn’t be able to find a woman’s clitoris with a map, her heart told her he’d be amazing in bed.

No prizes for guessing what she would be dreaming about tonight.

Clearing her throat, she put her teacup back on the tray. “Is Mr. Love an early riser like you? When do I get to meet him?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Actually, I’m afraid to tell you he’s

been called away to another job. He won't be here for the rest of the week."

She paused, then placed his cup on the tray with a rattle. "That's not good enough. He's supposed to be overseeing the landscaping of my parents' garden. They're paying well for his services and I expected him to be here."

Danny's lips curved up again. "I'm more than happy to carry out any services you require."

"I'm sure you are!" The direction of her lustful thoughts made her cross, and she glared at him. "Does he also expect you to be so familiar with his customers, and to be so loutish?"

He pursed his lips, and she suspected he was trying not to laugh. "Probably. But I take your point. I promise to behave myself from now on." He smiled and got to his feet. "The guys will be turning up soon. Thank you very much for the tea. I'll leave you to enjoy the morning, and I apologize for any noise or mess that might ruin your day."

With that, he walked off toward the sheds.

Hermione watched him over her shoulder, turning back as he reached the sheds in case he saw her. Infernal man. Rough, coarse, and as vulgar as it was possible to be.

Sliding down in her chair, she smiled as she closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun.

Chapter Three

True to his word, Danny attempted to behave himself with the lady of the manor for the rest of the week. Conscious that he'd let his mouth run away with him and said things she appeared to have found offensive, he didn't want to jeopardize the job, and he decided to keep himself to himself until the work was done.

He'd meant what he said—normally he wasn't overly crude, or at least he didn't think he was. All the guys he knew swore, as did most of the girls. Gentle teasing and sexual innuendo often played a part in their chat, so he hadn't thought his conversation with Hermione particularly over the line.

When he'd made that comment about her sitting on his dick, however, her face had been a picture. His girl friends would have laughed, but instead she'd looked as startled as if he'd stood and dropped his trousers. *Oops*, he'd thought, and had tried to rein himself in and behave for the rest of the time it took to complete the landscaping.

Hermione didn't make it easy, though. For a start, she seemed to spend most of the day outside, either sitting at the large table working, or lounging on the swing seat drinking endless cups of tea. In the cool mornings she wore a woolen wrap, but by lunchtime she discarded it and bared her limbs to the sun.

Every time he glanced over, he saw her there, a vision in her prim dresses, looking every inch the upper class posh bird with her hair in a chignon and reading glasses perched on the end of her nose. All she needed was a parasol and a butler standing behind her with a glass of iced tea on a tray to complete the picture.

Halfway through Tuesday, Danny looked up just before midday to see her at the table with her nose buried in a mound of paperwork, unmindful of

the sun beating down on her uncovered head.

He blew out a breath, put down his shovel, and marched up the lawns. Jumping onto the deck, he strode up to the table and reached across her. She exclaimed loudly—a very decorous “Goodness me!”—but he ignored her, pulled the string dangling beneath the large umbrella, and tugged it hard until it opened.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded. “I’m trying to get a bit of color to my face.”

“The hole in the ozone layer is right above your head.” He slotted the metal bar in to keep the umbrella open. “I know it’s nearly midwinter, but the sun’s rays are much stronger here than in the UK. You have to be careful not to burn.”

“Oh.” She touched the back of her fingers to her cheek, which bore an attractive pink flush. “I don’t want to get sunstroke.”

“No, you definitely don’t want that.” He smiled. Her blush was deepening, suggesting something other than the sun had caused it. He’d leaned right across her, so she must have caught a glimpse of his abs when his T-shirt rose as he lifted his arms. It appeared she’d enjoyed the view.

He looked at the paperwork spread out around her, held down by various empty teacups and paperweights to stop it fluttering away in the autumn breeze. It consisted of lists—hundreds of them, neatly handwritten, occasionally surrounded by doodles.

To his surprise, many of the doodles were love hearts of various sizes. He would have thought she was far too tight-laced and prim to be interested in matters of the heart.

He gestured to the papers. “Planning the invasion of Normandy?”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I happen to find writing lists the easiest way of getting my brain in order.”

“Very sensible. Especially when D-Day is just around the corner.”

She slammed her pen down. “You promised you wouldn’t bother me anymore. Please leave me alone. I can’t concentrate when you’re around.” She bit her lip and closed her eyes briefly, as if aware she’d said too much.

Danny chuckled as her gaze flicked over his biceps and chest before returning to her paperwork. Perhaps she was more like Lady Chatterley than he’d thought. From her previous words, he’d assumed his filthy clothes and rough talk had disgusted her, but he was beginning to think it might have had the opposite effect.

For the first time, he wondered if a Lord Chatterley existed. She didn’t wear a wedding ring, but that didn’t mean anything nowadays. Judging by her demeanor, she probably hadn’t slept around. Maybe the notion of getting down and dirty with the gardener fulfilled a secret fantasy for her.

She looked up at him, met his gaze, and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue before looking back at her work. Her hands shuffled papers, although he suspected she had no idea what she was doing.

On Friday, when he’d made the joke about the Lawrence novel and adopted the gamekeeper’s surname, he hadn’t thought much about the class division in the UK. In New Zealand there wasn’t a class system—just rich people and poor people like there were anywhere else. He’d never understood how an upper class English family could be poor but still consider themselves superior to a working class family who’d come into money.

Now, though, he began to comprehend the difference. He and Hermione really were re-enacting *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. It wasn’t about money—or not all about money, anyway. It was about birthright and education and social standing, and she considered herself above him in all three factors because he worked with his hands and she assumed he hadn’t gone to university. Which he hadn’t, but that wasn’t the point.

Part of him was hurt and angry about her assumption that he was somehow “less” because he was a working man. He’d had a difficult childhood, and his teenage years had proven even more of a challenge. He hadn’t been lucky enough to have been born into money—he’d had to work for every cent, and the reputation he’d gained as one of the best landscape businesses in the Northland had been entirely his own work.

But in spite of feeling irritated, the notion of taking this woman to bed was one of the most erotic ideas he’d had for a long time.

All the women he knew were true Kiwi girls—they enjoyed swimming, camping, and sports, they were well-tanned and fit, and they were all spirited, outspoken, and more than a match for any guy both in and out of the bedroom.

This girl was an enigma, a puzzle to be solved. She intrigued him with her soft English rose skin, her haughty demeanor, and the look she got in her eye whenever he flexed his muscles. She wanted him, or at least the notion of taking a rough, dirty, working hand to bed turned her on. What would she be like in the sack? Reserved and polite? Would she lie there like a limp lettuce, or did a sex kitten reside beneath the posh accent and superior manner?

An idea began to grow. If she wanted a bit of rough, then he’d give her a bit of rough. Never let it be said that Danny Love backed away from a challenge.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said. Pushing himself off the table, he yawned, linked his fingers, and stretched, noting the way she glanced at his abs when the T-shirt rose up. “It’s warm again today.” Catching his top at the back of the neck, he yanked it off, then wiped his forehead with it.

Her eyes bulged, and he was surprised her tongue didn’t unroll and lay on the table.

Trying not to laugh, he ran a hand through his hair, knowing the

movement would highlight his generous biceps. “Guess I’d better get back to work. Lots of heavy lifting and dirt-shoveling to do.”

“Yes,” she said faintly, “you’d better get on with it.”

“Have a nice day, ma’am.” He walked off, chuckling to himself. This was going to be easier than he’d thought.

*

For the rest of the week, he played up to the image of a rough working guy, making sure he went topless whenever possible, and only going to see her when he was covered in dirt and sweat. He spoke to her politely and deferentially, but didn’t hesitate to throw in the occasional swear word, following which he apologized for his uncouthness.

Hermione said little, but he felt her eyes on him as he worked, her gaze burning into his skin as he dug, lifted, carried, and worked hard to finish the main structural part of the landscaping that William Spencer had requested.

By Friday lunchtime, he and his men had completed the basic layout of the new grounds. They’d finished the palm island in the center of the large lawn, created terraces down to the beach and re-laid the turf, and planted lots of new palm trees along the drive and around the edge of the property. It needed some prettying up, but it was well on the way.

Over the past week, he’d watched her put down her pens and close her laptop at one o’clock every day, then disappear into the house before emerging with a salad or a small sandwich for her lunch.

Today, around twelve thirty, he had a quiet word with the guys and gave them some instructions, washed his hands and face using water from the tap by the sheds, and then walked across to where Hermione sat at the table. As usual, she’d discarded her woolen wrap, and now a thin cardigan hung from her shoulders, covering a pretty light blue sundress. She wore matching blue jandals, and she’d plaited her shiny brown hair into a braid that fell over one

shoulder.

A thin strip of lace from her bra peeked above the bodice of her top.

Danny's groin tightened at the thought of stripping off her dress and filling his hands with her pale breasts. The next hour or so was going to prove very interesting depending on her reaction to his plans.

"Afternoon." He stopped in front of the deck and pulled off his T-shirt.

She stared, then wrenched her gaze back to her paperwork and cleared her throat. "Hello, Danny. How are you?"

"I'm very well thanks, Your Grace." He tugged on the clean top he'd brought with him—an All Blacks short-sleeved rugby shirt that fit snugly to his large frame.

Her wry gaze flicked up to him, assessed his muscles in the new T-shirt, then dropped again.

"It must be nearly lunchtime," he said, hiding a smile. "I wondered whether you would like to come for a walk with me and check our progress. I thought you might be talking to your father over the weekend."

She sat back, smothering the look of surprise that had appeared on her face. "Um, yes. Okay."

"Bring your hat," he instructed, pulling his own cap on. "It's still warm out here."

She jammed the straw hat onto her head and rose from the chair. "Are you always this bossy?"

"Yes, ma'am. Better get used to it."

Her lips curving, she walked to the edge of the deck, paused as he offered a hand, and held onto it as she descended the steps. Her fingers were surprisingly cool, her skin pale against his deep tan. He imagined what her thighs would look like pressed against his, and his groin tightened even farther.

“Thank you.” She went to remove her hand, but he tucked it into the crook of his elbow. Unwittingly, he was sure, her fingers curled around his biceps, tightening on the firm muscle.

“First of all, a promenade around the grounds.” He smiled and began walking slowly along the lawn.

She was very elegant, her spine stiff and her chin up, as if she’d been taught at finishing school to walk with a book on her head, which might not be that far from the truth, he mused.

As they walked, he pointed out the work he and his crew had been doing, and named some of the plants he thought she might be unfamiliar with. “Those are Queen palms, and those are Bangalows. These are called Pungas—silver ferns.”

“Oh, like in the All Blacks logo?”

“Yes, and the Silver Ferns are our national netball team. Look, the new shoots are curled up. This is called a koru, and you can see that shape in Maori and other Kiwi designs.”

She bent to look at the fern. Danny admired her bottom from behind.

“They’re lovely.” She straightened. “You wear a koru pendant don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, surprised she’d noticed. He lifted it free of his shirt, and she held it in her fingers and bent to examine it. Her perfume rose to ensnare him, and he had to fight not to lean forward and press his lips to her temple.

“What’s it made of?” she asked.

“It’s greenstone—what you’d call jade.” He watched her rub her thumb across it. He wanted to lower his lips to hers and see if they were as soft as they looked. “Maori say it symbolizes that the spirit of the person inhabits the pendant. If you give a pendant to someone else, you’re supposed to wear it for a while so you give them a part of your spirit as well.”

“That’s a lovely idea.” She let the pendant drop and rested her fingers on it, and they happened to brush against his skin. He inhaled, feeling as if an electric shock had passed through him.

She raised her gaze to his. She had large chocolate-brown eyes, the warm color belying her initial cold personality. There was depth to this girl, he thought, watching her lips part as her gaze fell to his mouth. Yes, she was uppity and she acted superior, but he had the feeling a rip tide ran beneath the calm surface.

She moved away, breaking the spell, and they continued walking along the lawn. She slipped her hand through his arm again without him asking, and he didn’t miss the way her thumb brushed across his skin.

He felt as if he was holding his breath, captivated by the beauty of the afternoon, as well as the woman beside him. In the line of trees to the west, a few russet leaves fell onto the grass, but the breeze was warm on his face and arms.

He showed her the terraces, and as they walked around the palm island he pointed out the new irrigation system he’d installed to keep the palms watered.

“You’ve worked hard,” she said.

“I have. I’m glad you noticed.”

“I hope Mr. Love appreciates you.”

“Oh, he knows a good thing when he sees it.”

“Still, it’s a bit off for him to leave you to do all the hard work.”

He stifled a laugh. “True, but he trusts me to get the job done.”

They reached the bottom of the lawns, passed through a new wooden gate he’d erected, and crossed the grassy bank to the beach. Danny checked over his shoulder—he’d given the guys an extra-long lunch break, and they’d all shot off to the sports bar down the road. He had the place to himself for at

least an hour.

They approached the end of the bank, and Hermione stopped and gasped. The Pacific Ocean stretched away before them, a brilliant blue in the afternoon sunshine. In front of them, on the sand, lay a blue-and-white checked tablecloth beneath the shade of a large umbrella, two plates and glasses, a bottle of wine in a cooler, and a wicker picnic box.

She looked up at him, eyes wide. “What’s this?”

“Lunch.” He indicated for her to sit on one side of the blanket.

She hesitated. “I have lunch prepared at the house.”

“I’m sure the salad can wait. I have chicken and brie, and strawberries, and the wine’s been cooling for hours...”

Her lips curved up. “I don’t know that I should accept an invitation from a strange man.”

“Oh, we’re good friends now, aren’t we? Besides, you can trust me.” He winked at her.

Unfortunately, that sentence was far from true. He had every intention of seducing her, and judging by the heat flaring in her eyes, she had every intention of giving in.

Chapter Four

Hermione sat on the blanket, heart racing. Not because of the picnic, although her mouth watered when Danny opened the wicker basket to expose the plump strawberries and creamy brie inside, but because she knew why he'd asked her there, and it wasn't for lunch.

He sat beside her, took off his cap, and began lifting tubs out of the basket—crackers for the cheese, green grapes to go with the strawberries.

She removed her hat. “Did you organize all this yourself?”

“I did.” He took the wine out of the ice bucket, unscrewed the lid, and held a glass out to her.

“That's very kind of you.” Lord, she thought, he must really want to get in her knickers.

“Least I can do for a visitor to our country.” He filled her glass.

She sipped the wine, promising herself she wouldn't drink too much. She had to keep her wits about her. It was like having a picnic with a very hungry tiger. She shivered in the breeze that blew off the ocean.

Slicing off a piece of soft brie, he placed it on a cracker and handed it to her. She bit into it, enjoying the taste of the cheese, and followed it with a juicy strawberry. “Mmm. Lovely.”

“Yes.” He smiled, as if he wasn't talking about the food. Lying on his side, he propped his head on a hand and bit into a strawberry. The All Blacks top rode up a little, exposing his flat, toned stomach with its sprinkling of hair. His happy trail was really more exultant in his case, she thought, tearing her gaze away from where it disappeared into the waistband of his shorts.

She looked out at the view, to where the sea crept up the sand with white fingers, leaving it golden and glistening. It felt as if they'd captured a piece of the end of summer. England was so busy with its sixty million-plus

inhabitants, but here in New Zealand she could almost imagine they were the only two people left in the world.

Danny bit into another strawberry, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth to mop up the juice. She knew he'd brought her here to try to seduce her. She wasn't so innocent that she couldn't tell when a man wanted her.

Of course she had no intention of giving in to his demands, but she'd dreamed about him all week, imagining how his shiny muscles would feel beneath her fingertips, how warm and firm his lips would be pressed against hers. At five feet seven she'd never considered herself a small woman, but he made her feel tiny, which she liked. He must be at least six three or four, and everything about him was big, from his shoulders to his hands to his... feet.

She didn't dare let her gaze drop to his crotch. She'd dreamed about that area too. Her face flamed just to think about it.

Desperate to distract herself, she decided to ask him some questions. Maybe if she found out more about him, it would remind her of the vast gulf between them and convince her that giving in to the temptation in his eyes would be a huge mistake.

"So tell me about yourself, Danny." She plucked a small twig from the bunch of grapes. "Do you like your job? Do you enjoy working with gardens and plants?"

He popped a grape into his mouth. "I love it. Always have, ever since I was a boy. Other kids played in the sandbox, but I was always to be found stirring water into earth and covering myself with mud." He grinned.

"So you've been dirty since an early age, then." She couldn't stop herself.

His grin spread. "I guess you could put it like that."

She couldn't hold back her curiosity any longer. "Is there a special girl in your life?"

“Apart from you, you mean?” He winked at her. “No. Hasn’t been for a while. How about you? Are you married?”

She wagged her fingers at him, showing him her ringless finger.

He cut a huge wedge of brie and sandwiched it between two crackers. “I saw that you don’t wear a ring, but that doesn’t mean much nowadays. You could be engaged, or living with someone.”

“Dad—” She just stopped herself from adding -dy to the end of the word. “My father would never allow that.”

“And you always do as you’re told?”

She gave a sharp laugh. “Most of the time, no. Some things I have little say in, though.”

Danny tipped his head, studying her with interest. “You’re such a puzzle. On one hand you seem very modern—independent, spirited, rebellious. But there’s a deeply traditional streak to you, isn’t there?”

“My parents are very old fashioned.” She concentrated on plucking grapes from the stalks.

“What about when you went to university? You must have had some freedom there? Aren’t all the colleges co-educational?”

“Yes, now they are. There are lots of opportunities available if you wish to take them.”

“And you didn’t?” he pressed.

She sighed and leaned back, admitting defeat. “I had a great time, but it was hard work stepping out of the shadow of my heritage. It’s difficult to explain if you’re not from that sort of life. Some families allow their children more freedom than others. I’m the eldest of three daughters and my father doesn’t have any sons, so there are a lot of traditional expectations there.”

“Providing a son and heir to carry on the family line?”

She smiled. “Something like that. Dad has very clear ideas of how he

sees my life panning out. He'd much rather I stay at home, do charity work, get married, and have children. He wasn't too pleased when I said I wanted to get a job, and even less pleased when I told him I wanted to open my own business."

Danny's eyebrows rose. "You run a business?"

She nodded. "I started my own company when I left Oxford."

She'd clearly surprised him. He looked impressed. "Doing what?"

She hesitated. "I don't want to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because you'll mock me."

He looked offended. "I wouldn't. I swear I wouldn't. Unless it's pole dancing. Or selling vibrators. Please tell me it's selling vibrators."

"No..." She fought against a blush. "I organize romantic getaways."

He stared at her. His lips curved up, and she wondered whether he was going to make a joke. Then he shook his head. "Look, whatever I think of romance, I can understand what an achievement that is. Setting up your own business is—must be—incredibly tough."

A little glow in her belly warmed her through. He hadn't laughed or dismissed her achievements. "Thank you. It's been hard work but worthwhile."

"You're based in London?"

"Yes, although I have contacts right across Europe. Actually, I've been toying with the idea of offering trips here in the southern hemisphere. Starting with romantic retreats in the Northland, and then perhaps other places throughout New Zealand and even Australia."

"Sounds great. So you can do some research while you're here."

"Yes. I've been collecting brochures and contacting a few exclusive hotels. I think there could be a market in England for people who want to

escape to an exotic location.”

He nodded. “I’m impressed. Why did you think I’d mock you for it?”

She shrugged and sipped her wine. “You strike me as the kind of guy who laughs in the face of romance.”

“Now who’s making judgments? I happen to be very romantic.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, quoting a common Kiwi phrase. “Inviting me to sit on your dick five minutes after you’d met me.”

He laughed. “I did say that, didn’t I? Sorry. Yeah, you’re right, I’m not a great believer in romance.”

“How about true love? Soulmates? Do you believe in that?”

He popped another grape into his mouth. “Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Experience has taught me otherwise.” He spoke flatly, his eyes hard, and Hermione knew what had happened. Someone had broken his heart. How sad. “What about you?” he asked. “I guess you believe in all that?”

“Yes, I think it exists, but I also think there’s more to a good marriage than magic. Even if you’re soulmates, it takes hard work. Romance doesn’t just happen. That’s where I come in.”

He opened the bar of chocolate, broke it up into squares, and offered her the packet before taking a piece himself. He sucked it as he examined her thoughtfully. “You’re not at all what I thought you’d be like.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were quite snotty the first time we met.”

“Was I?” Her face warmed as she vaguely recalled telling him he was filthy. Jeez, had she really said that out loud? “I’d had a long journey,” she pointed out. “I was tired and had jet lag. It’s very strange what it does to the brain.”

“Fair enough. But if you’d asked me to guess what business you were in,

the last thing I would have chosen would have been romance.”

She didn't know what to make of that comment. “Ouch.”

“It wasn't an insult. Much. Doesn't being romantic involve a certain amount of impulsive behavior? I'd have thought you were too organized for that.”

“I'm organized so my clients don't have to be.”

His eyes took on a sexy twinkle. “I bet you write lists for your love life. Number seven, have an orgasm. Tick.” He made a tick sign with a finger, then grinned.

She blushed, partly because she did sometimes put it on her to do list as a joke, because there was rarely any chance of ticking that item off, and partly because he looked very interested in the notion of her having an orgasm. “Danny. Goodness.”

He chuckled and ate another piece of chocolate. “Anyway, you never answered my question. Is there someone special?”

She poured herself another glass of wine. “Actually, yes, sort of. I'm getting married.”

Danny's eyebrows rose. “Oh.” He managed to look surprised, disappointed, and regretful all at the same time, which made her smile.

Then his eyebrows dropped into a frown. “So what do you mean, sort of?”

“It's difficult to explain.”

“You're not in love with him?”

“Um... Not yet.”

“Not yet? He's not the man of your dreams? Your Mr. Right? Your Prince Charming?” His voice held enough sarcasm to tell her that he definitely didn't believe in the idea of soul mates.

She tipped her head from side to side and wrinkled her nose. “He's nice

enough.”

“Nice enough... What the fuck? Why are you marrying him, exactly?”

She shifted on the blanket. “It’s been sort of... planned for a long time.”

“An arranged marriage?” He sounded appalled.

“Goodness, no! Well, sort of. I mean, it’s not like we’ve never met or anything. I’ve known him since we were children. His father owns the estate next to ours. Everyone wants to make sure the land remains in the family and so it’s always been accepted we’d marry.”

“Jesus. That’s positively medieval.”

“It might look that way to you, but it’s pretty normal where I come from. I’ve known since I was a child that I’d end up with him. He’s a decent man, and that’s the whole point about romance—I know there’s more to a marriage than magic. It takes work, and I’m willing to work at it. I’m not unhappy.”

“That’s not the same as being happy.”

No, it wasn’t, but it was difficult to explain the situation to this guy who had no idea of her background.

Danny sat up, his arms around his knees, fingers linked. “You’re a smart, independent, modern woman. You’ve just told me how you set up your own business against your father’s wishes. Why don’t you tell him you don’t want this?”

“It’s not a question of not wanting it. Would I rather marry a man who makes my heart race? Of course I would, and if I’d met someone like that, it would be a different story. But I haven’t, and I know you don’t understand but I feel some responsibility to marry someone of equal social standing to myself, the right person to manage my father’s estate. I can’t marry just anyone.”

Chapter Five

Danny knew his feelings must be registering on his face, because Hermione bit her lip, suddenly wary.

He understood what had happened. She'd been brought up to believe that she was going to marry this man from a young age. She didn't love him—she wasn't *in* love with him—but she'd told herself that magic in marriage was something that could be cultivated. That was what her business was about—proving she could make it work with this guy, that she could create romance and love where none existed beforehand.

Why did that upset him? Wasn't that what he believed too? He certainly didn't believe in true love. But even so, it seemed pointless going into a marriage with such low expectations.

"It's wrong," he said, his stomach churning with emotion.

"Lots of cultures have arranged marriages," she pointed out.

"It's still wrong. Relationships are hard enough without having a loving foundation to fall back on."

Her eyebrows rose. She hadn't expected him to say that. "You have experience in this?"

"My parents divorced when I was four," he explained quietly. "My mum had an affair and left my dad for the guy when she became pregnant. I have a half-sister, Tess. Mum's still with her second husband, but it broke my dad."

It had done more than break him emotionally—Danny was convinced the shock and upset had brought on his father's M.S. As a child, Danny had been certain his mother would return to them once she found out about his father's illness. But he'd grown up very quickly, and by the time he was in his mid-teens, he was a lot wiser. He'd come to accept that he would be the one who'd have to look after his father for the rest of his life.

Tess had grown up relatively free, had gone to university, and had become a teacher. Danny had only been able to watch her and try not to let anger rule his life while he worked his socks off during the day and paid nearly all the money he earned to a carer to look after his father, leaving just enough to pay the mortgage and buy food. While he struggled to have a social life because of his responsibilities. And while he fell in love, only to have his heart broken when the girl told him she didn't want to settle down with someone who was tied to his father like that.

He didn't resent Tess because it wasn't her fault, and he couldn't bring himself to resent his father, who was more than grateful for everything Danny did for him. But in his quietest, lowest moments, Danny did feel angry and resentful towards the women in his life who had let him down and abandoned him.

On the surface, he'd long since pushed away any notion of true love and forever, but somehow it didn't stop feelings of disappointment resurfacing when he heard about other relationships that failed to meet the romantic expectations he'd had when he was young.

The thought of Hermione promising to marry someone she didn't love gave him a similar knot in his stomach. Five, ten, twenty years down the line she would regret her decision, and she would leave her husband or have an affair, or he would. Any children they had would suffer, and she would end up being miserable.

She opened her mouth to ask a question, and he waved a hand—he didn't want to talk about himself. “Anyway, enough about me,” he said. “We were talking about you. What's the guy's name? I bet it's something medieval. Henry. Or Cuthbert. Or Aethelwulf.”

“Aethelwulf is Saxon rather than medieval, but yes, it's Richard.”

“I knew it. Do you call him Dick?”

Her lips twisted. “No.”

“I’m going to call him Dick.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

He glared at her. “What does he think about this arrangement?”

“He’s happy. He likes me.”

His anger spilled over. “He likes you? Fucking cheek. He should be getting down on his knees thanking the gods he’s marrying you.”

A smile spread slowly across her face. “Why Danny, that’s quite a compliment, thank you.”

“Well,” he said gruffly, “he should. I hope he treats you like a princess.”

“He’s very nice. He’s quiet, gentle, and respectful. He’ll be a good father to any children we have.”

“Is that really enough for you? You run a romantic retreats business, for fuck’s sake. I thought you would have been the first person to want love and passion in a relationship.”

She sipped her wine. “What I have learned from the business is that there is much more to a relationship than passion. Marriage is about security and comfort too, and I know Richard can give me that. The love part will come later, I’m sure.” She frowned at the look on his face. “Really, Danny, it’s okay.”

“How can you think it’s okay?” he asked, aghast. “In this day and age?” He could only imagine what his female friends, Genie, Josie, and Billie, would say if he described Hermione’s situation. Tess—a fierce feminist—would have a meltdown. Her head might actually explode.

Hermione’s cheeks reddened. “I… I’ve come to accept it.”

“How formal is the arrangement?”

“I haven’t signed any paperwork, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I meant has he actually asked you to marry him? You know, the whole

go down on one knee thing?”

She lowered her gaze. “No.”

“Then how do you know it’s what he wants?”

“It’s just accepted. Everyone talks about it as if it’s a done deal—his family, my family. Whenever we’re in the same room alone, he talks about what he’s going to do with the estate and the house, and what we’re going to call our kids... It’s just accepted. And I wouldn’t know how to un-accept it, even if I wanted to.”

“Do you want to?”

She opened her mouth to reply, then hesitated. “I’ve not even thought about it.”

He couldn’t get his head around it. On the one hand she was extremely privileged, but on the other she appeared to have even less freedom than he did.

She took another swallow of her wine, and he suspected she was fighting back tears. He softened inside. It seemed that neither of them had any say in their own futures. And who was he to berate her for not standing up to her father? What did Danny know about that sort of lifestyle? She was right—she couldn’t marry some car mechanic or electrician who wouldn’t have the first clue about running an estate. She needed someone who would look after and provide for her, and it sounded as if this Richard could do that, at least.

And anyway, why was he upset? Surely the idea of marrying for security and comfort made more sense than some airy-fairy notion of “true love” that would no doubt fade like a shooting star?

Still, the thought of her having to commit to this guy gave him a knot in his stomach.

“Have you slept together yet?” he demanded.

Her eyes widened. “That is none of your business.”

“So that’s a no, then? What’s wrong with him? Is he gay?”

She gave a reluctant laugh. “No, he’s not gay.”

“He must be. You’re getting married. Why hasn’t he dragged you off to the bedroom and made mad, passionate love to you?”

She chose another piece of chocolate, and the flush reappeared in her cheeks. “I wanted to wait until we were married.”

He tipped his head, eyes widening. “You’re not a…”

“No, Danny. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not a virgin.”

“So you’ve had boyfriends even though you are practically engaged to this man?”

Her spine stiffened. “I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that to sound as harsh as it did. I’m interested, that’s all. I want to understand.” He was genuinely baffled.

She pulled her knees toward her and rested her cheek on them. “I don’t know what to say. I accepted that I would marry Richard a long time ago. We’ll do fine. He’ll be a good husband and father, and when we’re married I’ll be faithful to him. But I don’t love him yet, and I’m in no hurry to cement that side of our relationship. I know he’s had girlfriends. I don’t mind—I don’t expect him to wait for me, but I didn’t see why I couldn’t do the same and have a little fun before I settled down.”

“And have you? Had fun?”

“A little.”

“Only a little?”

She met his gaze and her lips curved. “It wasn’t quite as exciting as I’d hoped.”

“Oh.” Danny considered her thoughtfully. He felt as if this girl was covered in layer upon layer of paper, and he was unwrapping her a piece at a time. Every layer surprised him. She was independent, and yet traditional.

Snooty, and yet sexy with it. Loyal, and yet desperate for some passion in her life before she settled down to marriage with a guy she didn't love. She'd had a fling with a few guys, probably at uni, and no doubt with other upper class arrogant toffs who'd acted as if she was beneath them and barely given her the time of day, let alone multiple orgasms. No wonder her eyes had lit up when he'd approached her covered in mud and then taken off his shirt.

He reached out and touched the back of his fingers to her cheek. "Well, we wouldn't want you to go off into your medieval marriage without having had some excitement, would we?"

She inhaled, deep and sharp. He gave her a moment to register his touch, watching her blink rapidly as she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

When she didn't pull away, he slipped his hand to cup her head. Holding her there, he lowered his other hand to the blanket, leaned forward, and pressed his lips to hers.

Her lips were soft, her breath sweet with chocolate and wine. He took his time to kiss her while the seagulls cried overhead, and the waves crept up the sand. He kissed from one corner of her mouth to the other, then up her cheek to her ear and over to each eyelid as she closed her eyes.

Returning to her lips, he brushed them with his tongue, requesting entrance. Her lips parted, so he stroked his tongue inside, into the warm cavern of her mouth.

Hermione murmured in approval, and he closed his eyes too, loving the slick slide of his tongue against hers, enjoying the intimate invasion.

Her stiff spine relaxed a little, and her hand crept up to cup his face as she delved more deeply with her tongue. Sensing she wanted more, he brought his other arm around her, and then pulled her onto his lap to cradle her in his arms.

She gasped and placed a hand on his chest as if she meant to push him away, but instead her fingers splayed, and she stroked across to his shoulder.

“You’re very muscular,” she whispered, pulling back to look at the way the fabric stretched across his ribs.

“Let me make it easier for you.” Leaning away a little, he tugged the top over his head and dropped it onto the sand.

Her jaw dropped, and her eyes flared. For a moment he thought she was going to object, but instead she trailed her fingers across his pecs. “Wow.”

He chuckled. “You approve?”

“You’re very...” She moistened her lips again. “Masculine.”

Danny felt oddly flustered by her admiration. His job involved hard physical labor, but he rarely gave a thought to his physique, and he’d never visited a gym in his life. He considered himself relatively intelligent, and wouldn’t have described himself as a meathead. He’d thought he’d feel resentful about being appreciated just for his body the way Tess got irritated if a guy said she had a nice butt instead of remarking on her brain, but in actual fact Hermione’s compliments gave him a warm glow. Even though previous girlfriends had complimented him on his height and his muscular build, there was something about Hermione’s blatant wonder that gave him goose bumps.

“Help yourself,” he said, lowering his lips to hers.

She opened her mouth to him again, exploring him with her hands while they kissed, her fingers sliding over his skin. Giving a long sigh, he lay back, taking her with him, and she stretched out, her soft body molding to his.

He couldn’t think of anything more blissful than lying there kissing a gorgeous girl, the cool breeze brushing over his bare skin, the sand soft beneath his back. His body responded to her, hardening, throbbing, and he groaned when she moved her hips, nestling his erection into her mound.

Her mouth was hot on his, her tongue delving deep as she grew braver, and he wrapped his hand around her braid and held it tightly as he returned the kiss with all the hunger building inside him.

He wanted to take her dress in his hands and rip the thin fabric into shreds. To slide off her bra and panties. To lose his cargo shorts and boxers, and bury himself in her warm, velvet folds.

But as he skimmed his hands down her back and over her hips, he felt the first stirrings of reluctance.

No! His body yelled at him, yearning for her. She wants you, Danny! She wants to go the whole way. What kind of guy are you if you turn down a woman so desperately begging for it?

But he wasn't gamekeeper Oliver Mellors seducing Lady Chatterley. He was Danny Love, a hardworking, down-to-earth, but respectable self-made man. Although he might not be upper class and he didn't have a degree, and he swore more than he probably should, he still considered himself a gentleman. He didn't take advantage of girls who were vulnerable and lonely.

She didn't know who he really was. He'd thought she was just some posh tottie who sneered at the working class and needed to be taught a lesson, but beneath the toffee-nosed façade lay a gentle and honorable girl who was doing her best with the cards she'd been dealt—something he could admire. He'd lied to her, and that made him ashamed.

Chapter Six

Hermione was having the time of her life. She felt Danny slide one hand to rest in the small of her back, one to press between her shoulder blades, molding her to him. He felt hard all over, from the concrete biceps that tightened around her, to the flat, tight muscles of his chest, stomach, and thighs, to the stone pillar of his erection.

When she experimentally moved her hips from side to side to arouse herself on him, he gave an approving grunt and slid his hands down to her butt. His fingers tightened there, pulling her against him, and she moaned as his erection pressed against her clit.

Everything felt swollen and sensitive, her body responding to his in a delicious reaction to his touch. He kissed her deeply, opening his mouth to the sensual slide of her tongue, matching each thrust of hers with one of his own.

She felt shy and uncertain what to do with this man who was so larger than life. He couldn't be any more different to Richard, who was fair-haired, quiet, and lacked a little... oomph. Danny, on the other hand, appeared to possess a lot of oomph. Possibly more than he knew what to do with.

She was under no illusions—this was still a seduction, and if things went further they would be having sex, not making love. But the thing was, it *felt* as if he was making love to her. She'd thought he'd be rough and brutish, taking what he wanted from her with little thought for her pleasure. But his hands were gentle, his kiss demanding without being hard.

She waited for him to tear off his clothes, or maybe just unzip his fly and push aside her knickers. Instead, to her surprise, he pushed her back and his expression showed regret. "I think we should stop there."

Her jaw dropped. "What? Why?"

He kissed her nose and across her cheeks. “This is going to sound extremely corny, but I respect you too much.”

She gave an unladylike snort. “You can do better than that.” Then she swallowed, self-doubt kicking in. “Is it because you... don’t fancy me?”

That made him laugh. “Seriously?” He moved his hips, reminding her about his erection. “Holding back is taking every ounce of willpower I possess. I’m hard enough to hammer nails into the wall.”

“Ooh.”

Chuckling, he kissed her eyebrows. “But I was being serious. For a start, the guys are due back soon, and I don’t want to be caught in the act.”

As he clearly wasn’t going to take things any further, she lifted herself off him and tidied her clothes. “Didn’t you tell them to take a long lunch?”

“Yes, but we’ve been talking longer than I anticipated, and I don’t want to hurry. If and when we make love, I want to take my time.”

A shiver ran through her, and then his words registered. “If?”

He hesitated. “Are you free this evening?” he asked. “Only my boss is coming back, and he’d like to meet you.”

“Um... yes, okay.” The mysterious Mr. Love. She was quite intrigued to meet the man Danny had to answer to.

“There’s a cocktail bar in town called *Between the Sheets*.”

“I know it—I drove past it yesterday.”

“Good. It’s run by Beck—he’s a friend of mine. Can you meet me there at six? And I’ll introduce you to the boss.”

“Of course.” Her mind refused to move away from the word ‘if’. “And then?”

“If you’re still interested in me after you’ve spoken to him, we’ll see what happens.”

She wrapped her arms around her knees. “Is he going to tell me tales

about you being a terrible womanizer?”

He laughed. “Probably.”

“I’m expecting that, Danny. Don’t worry, I don’t for a moment think this is anything but a bit of fun. I won’t be making demands on you or phoning you constantly asking when we can meet again.” She spoke earnestly—she didn’t want him to think she was so innocent that she didn’t understand what a fling was.

His smile faded, and he met her gaze. “Right.” There was a hint of steeliness to his blue eyes.

“Did I say something wrong?”

His frown lifted. “Of course not.” He reached up a hand and slid it behind her neck, then pulled her down for a kiss.

She sighed, wishing she could assuage the ache between her thighs, but it obviously wasn’t to be. As he moved back, she cleared her throat. “Well, I suppose we should get going.”

“Yeah. Come on then.”

They packed up the picnic stuff, and Danny carried the basket as they walked slowly back up the lawns to the house.

They chatted as they walked, mainly about life in New Zealand. Hermione made sure to project her usual cool persona, but her brain whirled with questions.

Why had he stopped? His excuse of the men returning didn’t make sense, as there still wasn’t any sign of them. *I respect you too much* was a cop-out, something guys said to mask the real reason. She’d practically begged him to take her. True, his erection had appeared to prove he found her attractive. But what kind of man said no to an offer like that?

They reached the deck, and Danny put down the basket and pulled her toward him. Cupping her head with a hand, he held her there and kissed her.

His lips were soft, with none of the fierce passion he'd exhibited earlier, tender almost, moving across her mouth with gentle pressure that nevertheless made her heart race.

He pulled back and smiled. "I'll see you later?"

She nodded. He picked up the basket, winked at her, and walked away.

*

As the evening approached, Hermione decided to change. Her summer dress wasn't really warm enough for the cool autumn evenings, so she took a shower and tried on twenty different outfits. What did Kiwi girls wear to a bar on a Friday night? In the UK, it was usual to dress up, but from what she'd seen here in New Zealand—in the Northland, anyway—everyone erred toward casual. Eventually she decided on jeans, a pretty blue shirt, and her newest black jacket.

As six o'clock came, her apprehension only grew. Why was Danny so nervous about her meeting his boss? Why did he think she wouldn't want to see him again after they'd met?

She ordered a taxi, thinking that she might need a drink at the bar to calm her nerves. The drive along the beachfront was magnificent, the Pacific Ocean sea flooded with scarlets and golds. It truly was one of the most breathtaking places she'd ever seen—she understood why it was listed as one of the ten places you had to see before you died. It would be perfect as one of her romantic getaways.

The taxi driver parked opposite the bar by the beach. After paying him, she walked across the road, heart racing. The bar was already busy. Like in England, it had a beer garden, although here it was out the front rather than around the back. Large deck heaters provided some warmth as the evening air grew cooler, and citronella candles burned on all the tables to keep away any insects. It was full of people talking and laughing. To one side, Hermione

could see a few hammocks strung between palm trees in which couples were cuddling while they sipped their cocktails. What a nice idea.

She entered through the main door and paused, looking around to gain her bearings. The place was painted with pastel colors, the wooden floors covered with a layer of sand, and shells were scattered across the many wooden tables and clustered in piles on the bar. Large black and white artsy photographs hung on the walls, mainly of surfers caught in mid-wave. The place was light without being over-lit, loud without being noisy. Hermione liked it immediately.

The bar was busy, but she walked across and perched on a free stool between some groups of people. The guy working behind the bar was good looking in a guy-next-door kind of way, with light brown hair and a beard, and an attractive smile. Spotting her, he came over and leaned on the bar.

“Hey, what can I get you?”

“Um...” She looked up at the descriptions of cocktails drawn in chalk on boards behind him. “I’ll have a Singapore Sling please.”

“Good choice.” He started making it, adding cherry brandy, Cointreau, pineapple juice, and dashes from other bottles to gin in a shaker. “Haven’t seen you here before—are you on holiday?”

“Kind of.”

“From England,” he said. “The accent,” he added as she sent him an enquiring look.

“Ah. It gives me away.”

“Just a bit.” He winked at her.

She scratched her nose, conscious that a couple of guys on her right were casting her glances. Smiling at the barkeep, she asked, “Um... are you Beck by any chance?”

His eyebrows rose. “I am.”

“I’m supposed to be meeting someone here. He said you were a friend.”

“Oh? What’s his name?”

“Mellors. Danny Mellors.”

The guy sitting next to her coughed into his beer, and his friend chuckled.

She glared at them all. “What’s so funny?”

Beck stroked his beard, obviously trying to hide a smile. “Ah, I think young Danny has played a bit of a joke on you there.”

“What do you mean?”

“I assume you’ve heard of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*?”

“I…” The penny dropped, followed swiftly by her jaw.

When Danny had told her his surname, she’d thought it sounded vaguely familiar. She hadn’t made the connection with the racy novel in which an aristocratic young woman has an affair with a working-class man.

“What’s his real surname?” she asked faintly.

Someone cleared his throat behind her. “*Ahem*. That would be Love. As in… *Love Landscaping*.”

She spun around. It was Danny, looking suitably sheepish.

All the connotations that his use of the name implied dawned on her. He’d been making fun of her.

Embarrassed and hurt, she lifted her hand and, before she could think better of it, slapped him hard around the face.

Chapter Seven

At the crack of her hand, one of the guys standing next to them said, “Jesus!” while the other took a step back and said, “Fuck!” Beck’s eyes nearly fell out of his head, and several people turned to stare at them.

To Hermione’s surprise, Danny didn’t say anything. He’d barely flinched when she struck him, although she’d hit him hard enough to hurt her palm, which stung so much she was tempted to blow on it. It was like slapping a concrete post. His cheek reddened, but he didn’t rub it, nor did he yell at her as she’d expected.

Instead, he blinked a few times, and then to her surprise his lips curved as he said, “Wow, you’re stronger than you look.”

She swallowed, boiling with anger but taken aback by his reaction. She’d hit him in front of his friends—he should be steaming mad at her!

Taking her arm, he steered her away from the others to a quieter corner of the room. When they got there, she snatched her arm out of his grasp.

“Why did you do it?” she snapped.

“I wish I hadn’t now,” he replied, “and not only because you slapped me. I’m sorry.”

Her jaw dropped for the second time in as many minutes. She hadn’t expected him to apologize.

Not willing to give up her anger just yet, she folded her arms and glared at him. “That was humiliating and degrading. Implying I’m like Lady Chatterley. Who the fuck do you think you are?” She very rarely swore, but the situation seemed to call for it.

His eyebrows rose, but he didn’t comment on the profanity. “If you remember, when we first met, you told me I was filthy and then said you wanted to talk to the owner rather than one of his hands. That’s why I said

it.” His tone was firm, his stare mildly reproachful, the kind she imagined he would give a toddler whom he’d caught pulling up flowers he’d just planted.

The bloody jet lag! Her assumption that the man in charge of the landscaping business would have a managerial role only, and that he’d leave the hard work to the laborers, was sensible, but there had been no need for her to insult him. Her face warmed. She’d been tired and grumpy, but it had been no excuse for bad manners—her father would have scolded her for being rude. Danny owned the business, and she’d played lady of the manor and talked to him as if he was a common workhand. No wonder he’d made the reference to D.H. Lawrence.

“Sorry,” she said quietly, suitably chastened.

A smile spread slowly across his face. A gorgeous, sexy, warm smile. “It’s okay. No harm done. I’m sorry for embarrassing you.”

She met his gaze, and they studied each other for a long moment. This man did something to her ability to form coherent sentences. Why did he make her so tongue-tied? And why hadn’t he taken advantage of her when she’d been so snotty to him?

“You called yourself Mellors,” she said, thinking more about the comparison he’d made. “You meant to seduce me today, didn’t you? That’s why you organized that picnic.”

“Yes.”

“You took me to the beach to get me naked.”

He tipped his head from side to side as if to say perhaps, but his wry grin told her she’d guessed right.

“So why didn’t you go through with it?” It was only as she said the words that she realized she was hurt because he’d changed his mind. She needed to understand. “Why did you stop when the seduction had obviously worked?”

He slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans and stared at his shoes. For the first time since she'd arrived at the bar, she looked at him properly. He'd changed as well, losing the faded shorts, well-worn T-shirt, and heavy workman's boots. Instead, he wore a smart white shirt and jeans with Converse. He smelled divine, of some kind of manly body wash, so he'd clearly had a shower too. His hair curled damply around his temples.

Instead of a dirty, rough workhand with a foul mouth, he looked like a clean, decent, hardworking boy-next-door, the kind an ordinary girl wouldn't hesitate to take home to meet her parents.

"I was going to," he said. "I thought that was what you wanted, and it amused me to play the rough workman and seduce the lady of the manor. But then we started talking." He looked up and met her gaze. "I can't explain what changed. You're a rich aristocrat, and even though I own the business, I work with my hands. We're still Oliver Mellors and Lady Chatterley. But even though I felt like I wanted to teach you a lesson, when it came to it, I couldn't do it. I'm not that kind of guy." He ended with a shrug.

A tiny piece of her melted inside. It was a very tiny piece, but it was there.

He heaved a sigh and looked across at the bar. "You didn't finish your drink."

"You're lucky I didn't throw it in your face," she said, although there was no sharpness behind her words.

"I guess. I don't suppose you'd like to join me and my friends for the evening? They're nice people, and it might be good for you to get to know some Kiwis while you're here."

She bit her lip. "I don't know..."

"Just for a drink," he said gently. "I don't expect anything else."

She had to tip her head back to look into his eyes. He was so tall, and he

had such an impressive physique—she'd thought the phrase 'weak at the knees' was artistic license, and was surprised when hers felt as if they might give way.

His eyes were a deep blue, and held no hint of animosity or frostiness. In fact, they were quite the opposite, filled with warmth that sent heat rushing through her from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

"Don't expect?" she whispered, shocking herself. "Or don't want?"

His lips curved into a delighted, sexy smile. "Don't expect, definitely. If you ever want to recreate a D.H. Lawrence novel, I'm your man."

"Don't push your luck." She tossed her hair out of her eyes. "You're in my family's employ, so I'm still in charge."

The sexy smile stayed, and although he gave her a deferential nod, his eyes continued to smolder. "Yes, ma'am."

She shivered. "Ooh, don't say it like that."

He chuckled. "Come on. I'll introduce you to everyone."

A hand in the small of her back, he guided her across the room to the bar so she could pick up her drink, then took her over to a group of people who sat in the corner. The two guys who had witnessed the slap were there, and they'd obviously told the others what had happened because they all looked up at her with much amusement as they approached.

"Yes," Danny said, stopping before them, "this is the woman who chastised me and lived to tell the tale. Her name is Hermione Spencer, but you can call her Lady Chatterley."

"Danny, stop it," scolded a blonde-haired girl, holding out her hand. "I'm Genie, it's lovely to meet you, Hermione, and I'm sure Danny deserved every bit of the slap you gave him."

"He did." Hermione shook her hand. "But thank you for the support."

"You're English," another girl said in delight, also holding out a hand.

“It’s such a cool accent. I’m Billie, and it’s lovely to meet you.”

“Hello, Billie.”

“This is Jonah.” Danny introduced her to the guy at the bar who’d sworn when she’d slapped him. “Jonah and Beck are Genie’s brothers.” Hermione shook hands with the young, good-looking guy. “And this is Niall.” Danny gestured to the other man from the bar. “He’s Genie’s better looking other half.”

“Thanks,” Genie said.

Niall smiled and shook Hermione’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Lastly, this is my sister, Tess.” Danny indicated the woman sitting beside him.

Tall and slender with long dark hair, Tess had the same intelligent blue eyes as her half-brother. Her eyebrows rose as they shook hands. “Oh. So *you’re* Hermione.”

She spoke as if Danny had mentioned her, but before Hermione could say anything, Jonah stood. “Game of pool?” he asked Danny. “Phil can take over at the bar so Beck can join in.”

“I can’t desert Hermione when we’ve just got here,” Danny said. “After my faux pas she’ll probably give me a right hook.”

He grinned, and Hermione glared at him. “I’ll be glad to see the back of you,” she stated. “Go on, I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?” His hand rested again in the small of her back—an oddly possessive gesture, as if telling the other guys to keep their hands off. She didn’t know whether to be touched or annoyed by it, but was aware that an inner glow spread through her at his concern.

“We’ll look after her,” Genie promised, moving along the bench so Hermione could sit next to her. “Go on, then we can gossip about you all.”

Rolling their eyes, the guys walked across to the pool table, just out of

earshot. Hermione squeezed in next to Genie and sipped her cocktail, feeling shy. Even in her jeans, she felt overdressed in the blue shirt and smart jacket as the Kiwi girls all wore T-shirts and old, faded jeans, and Billie wore shorts.

“So...” Tess leaned forward on the table. “You’re the lady of the manor.”

Hermione’s cheeks warmed. “Danny’s mentioned me?”

“He said something about you being the daughter of an earl.”

Both Genie and Billie’s eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?” Genie asked. “Wow. I’ve never spoken to a real lady. Should I curtsy?”

“Please don’t,” Hermione begged, embarrassed, “it’s bad enough with him calling me Lady Chatterley.”

“Aw, I’m sorry.” Genie bumped shoulders with her. “We’re only teasing. Billie’s right—you have a lovely accent. And we’re just unused to aristocracy here—we don’t have a class system in New Zealand.”

“It’s a beautiful country.” Hermione hoped to turn the conversation away from herself. “And the Bay of Islands is like paradise. I envy you living here all the time.”

“Yeah, we’re very lucky,” Billie acknowledged.

“Do you all work in the town?” Hermione asked. “What do you do?”

“I work just across the bay in Russell,” Billie said. “I do aromatherapy and yoga in a health resort.”

“Oh, how interesting.”

“I think so!”

“I run tiki tours,” Tess said.

“Sorry, what are they?”

“Tours of the area to popular tourist sites like the Stone Store in Kerikeri and the Waitangi Treaty Grounds up the road. I used to teach history at a high

school, but I decided working with teenagers wasn't my forte."

"I can understand that—being a teacher is the last thing I could do." Hermione couldn't think of anything worse than spending all day with hormonal teens.

She turned to the girl by her side. "What about you?"

"I am currently between jobs," Genie said. "Unemployed. A wastrel."

Billie laughed. "She used to be a lieutenant in the Army, but she's just resigned."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh? Actually, I revise my previous opinion—being a soldier is the last thing I could do. I would be a terrible soldier."

Genie laughed. "Oh, it's not so bad."

"You haven't seen me try to do a pushup."

Billie chuckled. "Physical exercise not your thing?"

"I can think of better ways to burn off calories than running in the rain with a backpack while a sergeant major yells at you." She'd been thinking about her running machine at home, but the girls all sniggered. They'd thought she was talking about sex.

"Talking of which," Genie said, finishing off her cocktail. Her cheeks bore a rosy hue, and Hermione suspected it wasn't her first drink of the evening. "Tell us about you and Danny."

"There isn't any 'me and Danny'." Hermione refused to think about the incident on the beach. "He's my parents' gardener."

"You're blushing." Genie pointed at her. "You have read *Lady Chatterley*, right?"

Her cheeks burned even more. She hadn't blushed so much in years. "I'm not... I mean he's not even..." She shook her head, unable to put her objections into words.

Billie stirred her drink with a cherry stuck on a cocktail stick. "Is there

someone back home in England?”

Hermione scratched her ear. How could she possibly explain to these modern, independent Kiwi women the complexities of aristocratic relationships? “Yes. No. Kind of. Not really.”

“I’m glad we’ve cleared that up.” Billie grinned. “You should totally have a fling with Danny while you’re here.”

“Goodness. I couldn’t possibly...”

“You should!” Genie leaned forward conspiratorially. “I’ve heard on the grapevine it’s not only his feet that are on the large side.” She gave a saucy wink.

Billie guffawed while Tess rolled her eyes.

Hermione remembered the feeling of Danny pressed against her when she lay on the sand, and lost the power of speech.

“What’s the joke?”

Hermione’s gaze snapped up as Danny spoke. He’d come to have a swallow of his beer and maybe, she thought, to check up on her.

“Um...” She fought against laughter as Genie and Billie giggled. Pressing her lips together, she stared at his face, determined not to look at the area under discussion.

He raised an eyebrow, glancing from one girl to the next, then coming back to her with a suspicious look.

Genie was giggling too much to say anything, so Billie gestured at his feet. “What size shoes do you take, Danny?”

All four girls started laughing, and his lips curved in a wry smile. “Size thirteen,” he said. He leaned forward to put the beer bottle back on the table and lowered his voice. “Not that it’s relevant. You ladies know it’s not the size of the waves that count, it’s the motion of the ocean.” Giving them a wink and Hermione a last amused glance, he rejoined the others at the pool

table.

“Good Lord.” Hermione fanned herself with the beer mat.

Tess tipped her head, looking at her with interest. “Well, well. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him look at anyone like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like *that*. Plus he had a hand on your back when you walked up.”

Oh, Tess was sharp. Hermione liked her, but she could see she would have to watch herself around his sister. She shrugged. “Doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means he likes you. That in itself is unusual.”

Hermione wanted to deny it, but the statement was too interesting to pretend indifference. “Why is it unusual? Surely he’s not short of dates?”

“He’s very picky. Has extremely high standards, does our Danny.”

“Does he now?” Hermione thought that rather amusing.

“Yeah. And he likes his chicks on the classy side, so no wonder he’s got his eye on you.” Tess winked.

Hermione smiled, because Tess had meant the comment to be funny, but it stung a little. Was that the only reason Danny was interested in her? Because her title made her “classy”?

Her gaze slid across to where he leaned over the pool table, stretching to reach a shot. His jeans hugged his tight butt, and the shirt pulled across his muscular shoulders. Mr. Mellors obviously thought himself a catch, God’s gift to women, able to pick and choose between all the girls who fell at his feet. No doubt he had a queue of women waiting to be asked out, following him around like rats after the Pied Piper, while he waited to select the one he considered suitable.

Was she supposed to feel flattered because she was the Chosen One?

Chapter Eight

After the somewhat turbulent start, the evening turned out to be the most enjoyable Danny'd had in a long time.

He'd been nervous about announcing his true identity to Hermione, certain it would bring about the end of their relationship, if you could call it that. He'd hoped doing it in public would prevent any violence, but unfortunately that hadn't turned out to be the case. He'd expected her to walk off once she found out, so he'd been staggered that when he'd asked her to stay for a drink and stated he didn't expect anything else, she'd replied with *Don't expect... Or don't want?*

She was still interested in him, and that had given him an internal glow the kind of which he hadn't had for... well, years. Maybe ever.

Hmm. He filed that away in his brain to think about later.

In spite of his own pleasure, as he introduced her to the others he wondered whether he'd made a mistake in asking her to stay for the evening. As lovely as they were, he couldn't imagine her having anything in common with ex-soldier Genie or the slightly flaky Billie, and as for Tess—he was sure that within minutes she'd be getting up on her soapbox to give the English aristocrat a lesson in feminism.

To his surprise, the girls got on famously. Each time he stopped by the table for a swig of beer, they were all laughing about something, probably at his expense, he suspected, but he was glad to see Hermione's eyes alight, and that the others genuinely seemed to like her.

After they finished their pool game, the guys joined the girls at the table, and they ordered another round of drinks. As he took the seat opposite her, Danny noticed that Hermione's pale cheeks bore a light flush. Whether it was from the sun, the alcohol, or his presence, he wasn't sure, but he hoped it was

the latter.

They chatted for a while, about all sorts of things: politics and the difference between parties in New Zealand compared to England, whether the All Blacks were going to beat England in the rugby at the weekend, and then, as the alcohol began to have an effect, the girls continued a discussion they'd apparently been having earlier about whether Kiwi guys or Englishmen were better lovers.

"Englishmen," Billie stated, causing all the guys around the table to snort with disdain.

"You're going to have to qualify that," Jonah said.

"They're more gentlemanly," Billie replied.

"Like what? They ask permission before they come?"

Billie's lips curved as everyone burst out laughing. "No..." She sipped her cocktail. Danny had noticed Jonah attempting to flirt with her lately, but clearly Billie was having none of it.

"Come on then." Jonah eyes gleamed. "Explain what you meant."

"Kiwi guys have sex," Billie clarified. "Englishmen make *luuurv*."

Beck, who'd joined them for a while, raised an eyebrow at the other girls. "Is that right?"

"I wouldn't know," Tess said. "Never been with an English guy."

Genie shrugged. "I'd rather have sex than make *luuurv* anyway."

Niall's eyebrows shot into his hairline, and the others laughed.

"Now you tell me," Niall said. He whispered something in her ear, and she giggled.

"Well?" Danny directed the question to Hermione. "What's your opinion?"

She went still as all eyes turned to her. "Um... I'm afraid I can't comment either. Never had a Kiwi boyfriend."

“Clearly we need to arrange some comparative data for you,” Jonah said mischievously, glancing at Danny. Danny glared back.

“I’m sure I can extrapolate a conclusion from the *data* I already have,” she said, pronouncing it the way he had, *dar*-tah rather than the English *day*-tah.

“Oh, and what’s your conclusion?”

She sipped her cocktail. “Oh, I think Billie’s on the right track.” Her gaze slid across to Danny. “Don’t you agree, Mr. Mellors?”

Danny grinned. “Oh, so you’re ganging up on us? I’m not sure we should put up with this insult to our technique, guys.”

“It’s not an insult, just a fact,” Genie said. “Anyway, as I said, it’s not a problem. What is it they say about a guy’s ideal woman—she’s a virtuous maiden and an exciting Aphrodite? It’s the same for us girls. We like our guys to be gentlemen at the dinner table and mechanics under the covers.” Her peal of laughter trailed off at the wry look on Niall’s face. “Ah, I should probably stop talking now. Sorry. One cocktail too many.”

“I’m sure English girls are more refined than Kiwi ones,” Jonah said, looking at Billie. “Here’s a joke for you—how do you tell when a Kiwi girl’s having an orgasm? She drops her fish and chips.”

Everyone burst out laughing. Billie glared at him, until Genie’s fresh bout of giggles got to her and she gave a reluctant grin.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Hermione said. “And anyway, English girls happen to like sex too.” Her eyes widened as if she’d shocked herself at the admission.

“Hmm.” Danny winked at her. “But presumably you order cucumber sandwiches rather than pizza afterwards, eh?”

She met his gaze, holding it as the conversation turned to less suggestive topics. Danny grinned at her. Something sparked in her eyes, although he

didn't know her well enough to know what it was.

The others were finishing off their drinks, and Danny pushed himself to his feet and held out a hand to Hermione. "Would you like to go for a walk along the beach before you call a taxi?" He ignored the way Genie nudged Billie, and the amused glance that Beck and Niall exchanged.

"Um, okay, that would be nice." Hermione got up and smiled. "Thank you for such a lovely evening—it's been great getting to know you all."

"Likewise," Genie said. "We'll see you again before you go though, won't we? How long are you here for?"

"Just over two weeks," Hermione said. "On the day after midwinter I'm leaving for a trip around the rest of the country."

Danny's heart gave a strange little leap. On the twenty-second of June, she'd be gone.

That still left about sixteen days during which they could have a great deal of fun. He wouldn't think about her leaving now.

He said goodbye to everyone, smiling when they gave him the thumbs up sign after she'd turned away. They liked her. Conscious that their approval gave him a glow inside, he followed Hermione across the bar, not missing the chance to watch her bottom in the tight jeans. She looked younger and more modern in the shirt and jeans, and although he quite liked her old-fashioned English lady appearance in her summer frocks, he had to admit that her current ensemble made his mouth water.

He could imagine unbuttoning the sexy blue shirt to reveal a lacy bra—what color would it be? White? Black? He'd slip the shirt off her shoulders, then he'd release the catch at the back of her bra and slide the straps down her arms. Finally, he'd fill his palms with her breasts. She was slim, but her breasts were generous, a decent C cup. He wanted to close his mouth over her nipples and suck until they tightened into peaks.

He bumped into her, not having realized she'd stopped as they left the bar, and blinked to clear the lewd thoughts from his mind. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I just wondered which way you wanted to go?"

He gestured to the right and held out his hand. Smiling, she slipped hers into it.

They crossed the road and walked down the grassy bank onto the sand. The evening had turned cool without being cold, and the autumn breeze whipped the sea into white horses that cantered up the beach. Hermione shivered.

"Too cold?" he asked. She shook her head and smiled, but she still shivered, so he put his arm around her to lend her some of his body heat.

She didn't complain. Far from it—she nestled into him, wrapping her arm around his waist.

Nice.

They walked along the beach for a while, enjoying the peace and quiet of the evening. Hermione didn't speak, and Danny didn't either, conscious that their bodies were talking even though no words were being said.

Her breaths seemed to be coming quicker than was normal considering they weren't walking up an incline, and a flush filled her cheeks in spite of the fact that it wasn't a cold night.

He could smell her perfume, that delicious, enticing scent that did something to his blood, making him hot under the collar. The moon highlighted her high cheekbones and cast shadows beneath them. Her lips looked like velvet.

Under an old pohutukawa tree, Danny stopped walking. He turned her in his arms, slipped a hand behind her head, and lowered his lips to hers.

He hadn't planned it. It wasn't why he'd suggested a walk along the beach, and he hadn't thought any further than the fact that she was soft in his

arms, she smelled nice, and he wanted to kiss her.

She placed both hands on his chest, and for a moment he thought she was going to push him away, maybe exclaim her outrage, and tell him he'd got the wrong idea.

She didn't though. Her fingers splayed on his jacket, and then to his surprise she took the zipper of his jacket and pulled it down. Pushing apart the two sides, she slid her arms around his waist and pressed against him.

Danny sighed, leaned back against the trunk of the tree, and wrapped his arms around her. It was possibly the most sensual kiss he'd ever had. For the life of him he couldn't think why. He'd been with his share of women, and chicks liked kissing, so he'd been happy to indulge in some long smooches.

But this was different. Hermione wasn't small or bone-thin, but she felt fragile and womanly in his arms, with curves in all the right places. When he touched his tongue to her lips, she parted them eagerly, and the sexy slide of her tongue against his set a match to the touchpaper at the base of his spine, firing every nerve ending in his body.

He didn't rush it, though. He placed one hand on her back and one between her shoulder blades, keeping her tight against him. He took the time to kiss her properly, enjoying the way the touch of her mouth teased his senses until he was ultra-aware of everything going on around them.

The sea washed up the beach, raking stones and shells with long white fingers, while in the distance the strains of an old blues number filtered across from the bar. He could smell the salt from the ocean, Beck's special barbecued spare ribs, and the scent of Hermione's perfume. He shivered, but it wasn't the cool breeze that sent the hairs rising all over him—it was the way she was moving her hands up around his neck and into his hair, how—knowingly or unknowingly—she pressed her breasts against his chest, and the low murmurs she gave when he slid his tongue against hers.

He wanted her. And she was showing all the signs of wanting him too.

Unfortunately, though, tonight wasn't going to work. Would she wait until tomorrow for him?

Chapter Nine

Hermione sighed at the feel of the short, silky strands of Danny's hair slipping through her fingers and the press of his lips against hers.

It was the nicest kiss she'd ever had by far. She'd thought the kiss on the private beach in front of her parents' house had been good, but this was heavenly.

Leaning back against the tree, Danny seemed in no hurry to end their embrace. Hermione could happily have stayed there for the rest of her life. His arms were tight around her, his body hot against hers. His lips moved with tantalizing slowness, firm and warm, while his tongue dipped lazily into her mouth to stroke and tease until her heart thumped and an ache grew deep inside her.

It was no good—she needed to touch him, to get her hands on his skin. Lowering them to the bottom of his shirt, she slid them underneath and onto his abs, which felt deliciously firm and defined as she ran her fingers across them.

Danny lifted his head and inhaled, his breath hissing between his teeth, then kissed her again, this time ramping up the heat, his tongue plunging into her mouth, taking rather than requesting entry. She moaned, feeling his hands sliding down to her bottom, where they cupped and pulled her against him, lifting her ever-so-slightly so his erection pressed against her mound.

She wanted him. She wanted to take him to bed, to strip every piece of clothing from his body, to have him lie on her naked, and to feel him hard inside her. The need took her breath away, and she moved back to press her hands on his chest.

“Danny?”

“Mmm?” His hooded eyes surveyed her, carrying enough heat to tell her

he was thinking about getting her naked too.

“Um, I was thinking... Would you like... um... to come back to the house with me tonight?”

Her cheeks burned. She'd never said anything so forward. She wouldn't have dreamed of inviting a man back to her flat in England. But here, she was anonymous. Nobody knew her, and there was nobody to judge her. She could be a different person—or, maybe, a truer version of herself. And she discovered that the real her wanted this guy, and was willing to step out of her comfort zone to get him into bed.

To her surprise, though, his eyes didn't light up, and he didn't immediately declare he would be delighted to accompany her back to the house. Instead, he cupped her face with both hands, thumbs stroking her cheeks, and he placed a regretful kiss on her lips.

“I can't tonight,” he said, sending her heart plummeting into her feet, and increasing the heat in her face. “I'm sorry, sweetheart.”

“You're turning me down again?” She cleared her throat and stepped backward. Anger blended with embarrassment and shame. How could she recover from that faux pas with any form of dignity?

“Please don't be angry.” He'd obviously seen her distress. “I live with my dad.”

Hermione's eyebrows rose of their own accord. How old was he, late twenties? “You still live with your dad? And you mocked me for calling my father Daddy?”

“It's not what you think. My mum left when I was four. Not long after that, my dad developed Multiple Sclerosis.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh Danny, I didn't know.”

“Of course you didn't.”

“I mean, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have mocked you...”

“It’s okay. It’s just there’s nobody else to look after him. I earn enough to afford a carer during the day, but I look after him in the evenings and during the night. If I’m going to be out late, I have to organize for someone else to be there. Tonight, my aunt’s with him until I get home, but I can’t really stay out all night, not without giving her some notice.”

“It’s all right,” she said, meaning it. Warmth spread through her at the thought that he looked after his father. “Of course I understand.”

He blew out a breath as if he’d half-expected her to continue to be cross with him. Then he smiled and pulled her back into his arms. “I can’t believe I’ve turned down the most beautiful woman currently residing in New Zealand not once, but twice. I’d like to make it up to you. Are you busy tomorrow?”

She’d planned to go to the local large town of Whangarei to do some shopping, but that wasn’t anything that couldn’t be delayed. Plus, he’d called her beautiful. For that, she’d have moved a mountain for him. “No.”

“Then can I take you out for the day? I could take you to see some nice places to stay for your business.”

A glow spread through her. “Oh Danny, that would be lovely.”

“I’ll treat you to lunch and dinner. We’ll have a great day. And then I’ll take you home.” He bent his head to rub his nose against hers. “I’ll ask my aunt to stay over and look after my dad for the night. No pressure, but it gives us the opportunity to let things happen, if we want them to.” He let his lips touch hers lightly. “How does that sound?”

She shivered. “A little like paradise.”

He chuckled and kissed her, then wrapped his arms around her and gave her a big hug.

Surprised, Hermione slid her arms around his waist and cuddled up to him. He was solid and firm, almost as if she had her arms around the tree

behind him.

“I am sorry for misleading you.” He kissed her hair.

“And I’m sorry for being snotty when we first met.”

He laughed. “It’s okay. You were still the sexiest girl I’ve seen for ages.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “Are you only interested in me because I’m posh tottie?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you only interested in me because I’m a ‘rough as’ gardener?”

She pursed her lips. “Good point.” This wasn’t about finding Mr. Right—someone to settle down with, who would be the perfect life partner. She was attracted to him because the idea of having sex with a guy who wasn’t a refined gentleman excited her. She was beginning to suspect that beneath the facade of the manual laborer lay a man who was actually more of a gentleman than he let on, but this was about fantasy, not reality, and she didn’t want to delve too deeply into the truth. And no doubt he would be the same. He didn’t want to learn about her struggles and sorrows. Covered in dirt and sweat, he wanted to walk up to the elegant lady of the manor and screw her senseless.

And to her surprise, Hermione was okay with that.

*

Ten o’clock on Saturday morning found Hermione walking through the center of Paihia to the address that Danny had given her the night before.

He’d asked her to meet him at his house so he could introduce her to his father. “I know it sounds a bit heavy, taking you home to meet the folks when we’re only, you know, having a fling, but he’s been asking about you,” Danny had said as they’d waited for the taxi to turn up and take her home.

“That’s fine,” Hermione had said, although secretly she’d puzzled as to

what Danny had told his father about her. It was probably the English nobility thing—it fascinated most foreigners, especially as she could claim Princess Diana as a distant relative.

She followed the instructions, walking to the end of the busy high street, then continuing on for a while before taking a left into a quieter, more suburban area. In England, rows of houses often looked very uniform—squint and you couldn't tell one from the next. In towns the houses were frequently terraced, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with both neighbors, and many people aspired to own a semi-detached or—the ultimate goal—a detached house. These were often separated from the neighbor only by a pathway or small piece of garden, with few people being able to afford a decent sized section of land. Most houses were built of brick, made to withstand the cold and wet winters.

From what she'd seen and read, in New Zealand, especially in the North Island, most houses were wooden, often large and spacious in rural areas, and frequently surrounded by an acre or more of land. The houses in this street were closer together than some of the rural ones she'd seen as she'd driven around, but they were all different in size and layout, painted in varying colors, some with garages or front gardens, others without. Danny's house was about halfway along, painted a lovely mint green color. It was small but neat and tidy, with paths either side leading to a garden surrounded by a high wooden fence.

She walked up the path and knocked on the door. Her heart raced. What was she doing, going to his house to meet his father? She'd only just met Danny, and they were supposed to be embarking on a hot fling, not an engagement. They hadn't even slept together, and yet here she was acting like she was his fiancée.

But she surprised herself by not being annoyed or irritated. This decent

guy looked after his disabled father and wanted to introduce her to him before he went off with her for the night. How could she be angry about that?

The door opened to reveal the gorgeous gardener with a huge smile plastered on his face.

“You came!” he said as if he’d expected her to stand him up.

“Well not yet,” she said, “but given half the chance...” The words left her lips before she’d had the opportunity to vet them. That always happened when she was nervous. She bit her lip, wondering if he’d mock her for them, but he just laughed and moved back a little to let her in.

“Turning into quite a Kiwi,” he said, clearly amused. “That’s my girl.”

There wasn’t much room in the narrow hallway, and as she sidled past him her breasts brushed his chest and her nostrils filled with the scent of his aftershave. He wore a pair of well-worn, faded jeans and a casual blue shirt that hung loose, the long sleeves rolled up to just below the elbow.

He put a hand up, leaning on the wall to stop her. Pressing back against the wall, she tucked her hands behind her and looked up at him, holding her breath. He had a sexy smile and the lazy, sultry look in his eyes she was just beginning to recognize.

“Hello,” she said. “How are you today?”

He chuckled and moved closer, pinning her to the wall. “Very well, thank you.” His lips brushed hers. “You look hot.”

Heat flooded her cheeks. Nobody had ever called her hot before. Elegant, yes. Pretty, once or twice. Never hot.

She cleared her throat. “In this old thing?”

Actually she’d spent about two hours deciding what to wear. Conscious he was attracted to her because he thought her sophisticated and refined, she’d attempted to go for casually classy in a pair of cream wide-leg slacks with a silky fawn-colored top. Concerned they might take a walk along the

beach at some point, she'd slung a chocolate-brown jumper around her shoulders. She'd thought she looked rather chic. The word hot hadn't crossed her mind.

His lips curved. "You look sexy in whatever you wear. I hope it's easily removable, though."

She inhaled, her lips parting, and he took the opportunity to kiss her and slide his tongue against hers, sending her arousal level from zero to sixty in the space of two seconds.

"*Mmph*," she protested, pushing him back. "You've wiped off my lipstick."

"Don't bother reapplying," he advised, turning and pushing her along the hallway. "There's a lot more where that came from."

Ooh, more kisses? Her heart raced, and her brain scrambled as he directed her around the corner into the living room. Every touch of his lips melted her a little further. She'd be a puddle by the end of the day if he carried on like this!

Chapter Ten

A surge of happiness bubbling up through him at Hermione's obvious pleasure at the thought of more kissing, Danny took her hand and led her up to where his father sat by the window with Danny's aunt, Fleur.

The three of them had watched Hermione walk all the way up the road and stand out the front to assess the house before she'd approached the door.

"She's probably thinking 'so this is how the peasant class' lives,'" Ron Love had commented with amusement.

Danny had laughed, but he had wondered what was going through her mind. Was she thinking how small the house was? It must have looked like a shed next to the mansion he was landscaping the grounds for. Her family home back in the UK was probably like something out of *Downton Abbey*.

But, wanting to comfort his father, he'd merely said, "She's not like that." Was he defending her? That puzzled him. She certainly didn't deserve it after the way she'd first greeted him. And yet he didn't want his father to think badly of her. He wanted him to like her.

Hmm.

Aware that his dad had already cottoned on to the fact that he had more than a soft spot for her, Danny swallowed down a nervous lump that had formed in his throat, stopped in front of him, and turned to Hermione. "This is my father, Ron Love, and my aunt Fleur. This is Lady Hermy-wun Spencer."

"Danny," his father scolded, "don't be rude. It's lovely to meet you, Lady Hermione."

"Goodness," she said, holding out her hand, "Hermione, please. And it's all right, I deserve your son's teasing. I'm afraid I was terribly rude to him when we first met. I mistook him for one of his workforce, and I don't think

he's ever going to let me forget it."

"Damn straight," Danny said, hiding his surprise. He hadn't expected her to admit her faux pas to his Dad. He'd told him all about it already, including the surname he'd given himself. Ron had thought it hilarious, and had been interested to meet the girl who'd taken his son down a peg or two. Judging by the grin on his face and the way his expression had softened, Ron liked the lady of the manor.

"Lovely to meet you," Fleur said, shaking her hand. Fleur's eyes met Danny's and she winked.

"I hope you don't mind me stealing Danny for the day," Hermione said to his father. "I know he works very hard, and that you probably don't get to see him much in the week."

"Ah, the lad's all work and no play. He deserves a bit of fun." Ron's eyes twinkled. Hermione blushed.

Danny cleared his throat, trying not to laugh. "I'm taking her for a drive up to Doubtless Bay."

"You should go via Millionaire's Drive," Ron suggested. "Maybe check out Te Ngaere beach and Matauri Bay."

"Great idea, Dad."

"And of course you'll have to call in at the chocolate shop," Fleur added.

Hermione appeared to possess the standard female gene that professed a love of confectionery, and her eyes lit up. "Ooh, chocolate?"

"The best in the Northland," Danny said, "and the girls who run the shop are good friends of mine, so we'll get some special treats."

"I can't wait. Quick, take me to the car!"

They all laughed. "Come on then," Danny said. "See you."

"Have a good time," Fleur instructed them.

"Nice to have met you," Ron said.

Hermione bent to kiss him on the cheek. “Lovely to have met you too.”

They left the room, Danny picking up a small night bag on the way out. He didn’t want to assume he’d be staying overnight, but equally if things went the way he hoped, he didn’t want to get caught without his toothbrush and a change of clothes. Hermione didn’t mention the bag, and neither did he.

They walked the short distance to his car, and he threw the bag in the back and they got in.

“Right,” he said, starting the engine. “Ready?”

“Drive on, James,” she said.

Danny pulled away but glanced at her, puzzled at the name. “Sorry?”

She chuckled. “It’s what an English aristocrat says to his chauffeur. Legend has it that a gentleman got into a carriage and asked the driver his name. The driver said, ‘It’s James, sir.’ The gentleman said, ‘I can’t possibly call you by your first name—what’s your surname?’ ‘It’s Darling,’ said the driver. The gentleman sat in silence for a moment, and then said, ‘Home, James, and don’t spare the horses.’”

Danny laughed. “It’s a good story.”

“I think so.” She leaned back and sighed. “I’m looking forward to today. It’ll be nice to see some of New Zealand with a real Kiwi.”

“I hope you enjoy it. The Northland is the best part of New Zealand—although I’m biased, of course.”

She smiled, and he turned onto the main road and headed north for the state highway.

Once he was on a straight road, he glanced across at her. She looked gorgeous in the wide-leg pants and the fawn top. She’d braided her hair from the crown of her head all the way down. He had no idea how she’d done that, but it looked classy and it turned him on. He could imagine taking out the band at the bottom and loosening the thick strands, spreading them around

her naked shoulders.

What was it about this woman that was making him unspool? Perhaps it was because she came across so fresh and innocent, but he knew she couldn't be quite as naive and unsophisticated as she appeared. He was sure that beneath her chaste exterior lay a rampant sex kitten, and he was determined to find out whether he was right.

He blinked and tried to focus. She was talking—he had to keep his mind off sex, for now.

“It was good to meet your father,” she was saying. “Do you mind me asking about his illness?”

Danny was touched she was interested. “Not at all. He has secondary progressive M.S. It basically means he's gradually getting worse with fewer remissions in between attacks. When I was younger, he'd have a flare up and then afterward he'd almost be back to normal. It's unlikely now that he'll walk again, though.” He hated that his dad was wheelchair bound for the rest of his life, but as there was little either of them could do about it, they both just got on with it as best as they could.

“What's the life expectancy of someone with M.S.?” she asked softly.

“The average is around thirty years from when the person first showed symptoms. Dad was twenty-five when Mum left, and he's fifty now. I think he has a few more years left in him, but I doubt he'll make old bones.” His throat tightened, and he swallowed, gritting his teeth. The members of the Love family weren't great at showing emotion, and anyway, he didn't want to bawl his eyes out on a first date.

To his surprise, Hermione reached across and placed her hand on top of his where it rested on the steering wheel. “Parents can be such trouble,” she said, looking out of the window as the Paihia shops flashed past. “I'm lucky that mine have had relatively good health, but I remember when my dad fell

in a ditch while he was out shooting pheasants one day...”

She went on to chat about how they’d had to call out a fire engine to get him out of the ditch, making him laugh as she related the experience which almost certainly hadn’t been as funny as she was implying. But Danny realized she was giving him time to recover, letting him know that she’d noticed, and she felt sorry for him, but she wasn’t going to draw attention to it or make him talk about it.

When she’d finished talking, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. She turned her big brown eyes on him and smiled. “What was that for?”

He shrugged and lowered their hands onto his thigh. “Do I have to have a reason?”

“I guess not.” She blushed a pretty pink and looked back out of the window, but she didn’t try to extricate her hand, so he kept a hold on it.

“Anyway,” he said, liking her blush and wanting to tease her more, “your dad was shooting pheasants? Was this before or after he’d been hunting foxes and reprimanding the butler for not shining his shoes properly?”

She gave him a wry look. “Before.”

He grinned. “You really have stepped straight out of a Jane Austen novel, haven’t you?”

“I thought it was D.H. Lawrence,” she said, somewhat sarcastically. “That would certainly suit your character better.”

“In your dreams,” he said, and chuckled when she went even pinker. “Oh, I see. Been dreaming about me, have you?”

She glared at him and withdrew her hand. “No.”

“Me too.”

That made her laugh. “Danny, you’re incorrigible.”

Mischievousness surged through him. “I was thinking of taking you on all fours behind the cow shed,” he said, and earned himself a whack on the arm.

“Goodness! Honestly.”

“Don’t act so disgusted,” he said, thoroughly enjoying himself, “you love me being rough as.”

“Rough as what?”

“It’s what Kiwis say. They leave the end off their similes. You must have heard it by now. Sweet as, bro!”

She laughed. “Yes, I heard it on the TV.”

“So then. As I said. You like me being rough as.”

“Maybe.”

He glanced across at her, and their gazes locked for a long moment. Heat shimmered in her eyes—he’d turned her on with his dirty talk. Was it just the notion of being taken on all fours behind the cow shed by a gardener that had heated her up? Or was it doing it with him specifically that she’d dreamed about?

Did it really matter?

He decided that it didn’t, and returned his gaze to the road before he ended up in a ditch.

Hermione cleared her throat. “So, tell me more about this chocolate shop.”

Danny blew out a slow breath. Being provocative might be fun, but it turned him on too, and it was going to be difficult spending the rest of the day with a hard on.

“It’s called *Treats to Tempt You*,” he said, relieved to be able to change the subject. “The girls who run it and their partners are friends of mine—they often come down to *Between the Sheets* for a drink. They’re great girls—

you'll like them."

"You have lots of nice friends," Hermione said. Did he detect wistful envy in her voice?

"I'm very lucky," he agreed. "You must have a good social life in the UK, though."

"Sort of." She looked out of the window again and didn't elaborate.

He reached across and took her hand. "Come on, you might as well talk to me. It's not as if I can tell any of your friends anything you confide in me."

"True." She gave a small smile. "It's odd, it's just that I often have this feeling of not fitting in, no matter where I am. For a start, I went to boarding school, which I hated, and I never fitted in there."

He signaled and turned onto the state highway heading north. "Jeez. I can't imagine anything worse."

"Well, it's quite the norm where I come from, and many people thrive in that sort of environment as it does teach you to be independent. But equally it can be terrifying if you're quiet and reserved, which I was. I managed to keep out of trouble most of the time by keeping myself to myself, but I was very unhappy at times."

"I'm sorry." He squeezed her hand, feeling more sorry for her the more he discovered about her. "What about uni—you made friends there?"

"Yes... I enjoyed university, and of course there were people there who were from a similar background, but they were often a little wild because they'd escaped from the confines of their upbringing, you know?"

"Yeah."

"So I didn't mix an awful lot with them. I did make some lovely friends, but I was always conscious that I came from a very different world from them. At boarding school, most people were from similar families, but my friends at university were from all over the place. It was exciting and

liberating, but I hated that my accent and the things I said made me stand out.”

“I’m sorry.” Danny felt a twinge of guilt. “You must have felt the same last night. I didn’t think about that.” He’d thought their teasing of her status funny—he hadn’t considered it might make her feel awkward.

She shrugged. “It wasn’t the same, actually. People here react in a different way to those in the UK when they discover who I am. It’s very difficult to describe the class system to people who don’t have one.”

“I guess. I mean all countries have rich and poor people, and educated and uneducated, but that doesn’t seem to be what’s it about in the UK.” He had to admit, he couldn’t quite get his head around the problem. “It all to do with what family you’re born into, isn’t it?”

She tipped her head from side to side. “That’s a big part of it, but it’s also to do with education as well.”

He said nothing for a moment, concentrating on the road. Most of his friends had been to university or at least done some official training, like Jonah, who was a fireman. But they never made him feel as if he was less of a man for not having studied at that higher level, and he couldn’t help but bristle at Hermione’s insinuation yet again that his lack of education placed him beneath her, and not in a good way.

Chapter Eleven

Hermione glanced across at Danny. He'd gone quiet, and his smile had faded. He thought she looked down at him because he hadn't been to university. Which of course she didn't.

Did she?

"I've hurt your feelings," she said, horrified she'd insulted him yet again—this time without meaning to. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to explain how it works over there."

"It's okay," he said, although it clearly wasn't, as his eyes held a touch of steel. "I suppose you can't help the way you were brought up."

She winced. "Even so... I am sorry, Danny. You've obviously worked extremely hard to get your business set up—I know how difficult that can be. You don't deserve to be dismissed just because you don't have a piece of paper to say you passed some stupid exam."

"Well, I don't think so. Not everyone is privileged enough to have the opportunity to go to university."

As soon as he'd said it, the truth sank in. She'd assumed he hadn't gone because he was the sort of guy who worked with his hands and wasn't academically bright enough for higher level study. But of course the reason must have been because of his father, either because he couldn't leave him, or because he didn't have the money, or both.

A wave of shame washed over her as she realized it changed her perception of him. Was it natural for a woman to look at a guy differently depending on his level of education, or had it been ingrained in her that a higher education elevated a person's social status?

He glanced at her, and his expression softened as he must have seen her distress. "Don't worry, I understand. I know the Brits have the class thing,

but I would imagine that in most countries everyone thinks of professional people as a cut above the average. I understand why—those who taken the time to study deserve respect. But you're not the first to make assumptions about me, and it's a sore spot for me for many reasons. I'm sorry I'm grouchy."

"You couldn't go because you had to look after your father?"

"Yeah. As I moved through my teens, I realized it wasn't going to work. He had to give up his job when I was twelve. He got some benefits but money was incredibly tight. I know I could have taken out student loans, but when I weighed up the mounting debt and the fact that I didn't want to leave him, I knew it made more sense to stay close to home and get the best job I could here."

"What would you have studied?" she asked.

"At school my favorite subject was biology, and I was fascinated by genetics and epigenetics—I'd love to have done something like that."

"Epigenetics? What's that?"

"It's the study of the chemical reactions that activate and deactivate parts of the genome as an organism grows and develops, and the factors that influence them—it's fascinating stuff." He glanced across at her again and laughed as he saw her wide eyes. "How much do you want me right now?"

"I didn't realize." Her cheeks warmed at the knowledge that he was almost certainly at least twice as intelligent as she was.

"Hermione, it's okay..."

"No, it's really not." Her eyes stung. "I always jump to conclusions and it's terribly wrong of me. No wonder you were so insulted when we first met. Oh my God, I can't believe I was so rude."

"Hey." He took her hand again. "We can only ever go by our first impressions. That's what makes them so important. I assumed you were some

spoiled little brat who only spent her daddy's money.”

“You were right.”

“No I wasn't, and stop putting yourself down. Yes, you've had a privileged background, but you've attempted to make your own way in the world, and I admire you for that.”

“Thank you.” She sniffed. “You're being too nice to me. I don't deserve it.”

“It's only because I want to get in your panties.”

That made her chuckle. “Knickers,” she corrected.

“Knickers sounds like something out of the nineteenth century. Please don't tell me you wear bloomers that come down to your ankles.”

“No, Danny. White lacy hipsters. Very little material to them, really, I'm sure they'd disintegrate if someone strong got hold of them.”

He glanced over at her, a hopeless look in his eyes, and they both laughed.

“I'll be surprised if I don't faint when I get out of the car,” he grumbled. “All the blood keeps flooding to my groin. Having a permanent hard on can't be good for my health.”

It took all her willpower not to look down, and she turned her gaze out of the window, heart pounding. Something told her he was enjoying this as much as she was.

It was strange, but she'd never really done this before, whatever it was. Flirting, she supposed. Richard never flirted with her—he was kind and considerate, but in her more private moments she wondered whether there would ever be any spark between them. He was nice enough—tallish, although not as tall as Danny, and he dressed smartly, and he was hardly bad looking, but he just didn't give her that feeling in the pit of her stomach that she longed for.

The feeling that Danny gave her. The feeling he'd given her from the moment he'd walked up to her across her father's lawn. The feeling he still gave her every time he looked at her with his baby blue eyes that said *As soon as I get the chance, I'm going to strip you naked and run my tongue right down your body.*

When she looked at Richard, she thought of dinner parties and functions and estates and horses and whether the meadow needed re-fencing and whether they should agree to letting the local tennis club use their courts.

When she looked at Danny, she thought about sex. She thought about his lips on hers, his hands sliding around her waist, his body hardening and preparing itself for her. She thought about his mouth on her breast, his fingers slipping into her folds, and his erection sliding inside her. She wanted to have him thrust her all the way to a climax, to watch him come, and to know that she'd given him pleasure.

"Stop looking at me like that," he said without turning his head. "I'll end up driving into a tree."

She blushed, loving that he seemed to feel the same way, and that he clearly wanted her. She'd seen the bag he'd put on the back seat, and she knew he must have brought a change of clothes and his toothbrush, just in case. He'd arranged for someone to look after his father. He wanted to spend the night with her. She had a whole night to look forward to, of having Danny in her bed, making love to her until the sun came up.

Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod.

*

Danny drove past Mangonui to Doubtless Bay first with the aim of finding some hotels that might suit her company.

Hermione was touched that he was making the effort to help with her business. On the way to the bay, he asked lots of question about what

services she offered, apparently trying to get a better idea of the style of place she was hoping to find in the Northland. After she explained that she wanted quiet boutique places that offered the personal touch rather than larger hotels, he pulled over and called up one of his friends who lived in the area to ask if he could recommend any smaller, more exclusive places.

“Thanks,” Danny said into his mobile, “catch ya later,” and he hung up. He steered the car back onto the state highway and continued north. “Stuart says there’s the perfect place at the southern end of Cable Bay. We’ll start there.”

“Stuart—he’s the one getting married to Elle, isn’t he?” Hermione had tried to learn his friends’ names, keen to do something to balance out hurting his feelings.

“Yeah. Stuart was married before but his wife died a few years ago. We all thought he’d never meet anyone else, but he’s head over heels for Elle.”

“How do you know all the guys up here?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” She shrugged. “I want to know.” It was true—she wanted to understand Danny. He intrigued her. She’d thought he was shallow, like a river, but he was turning out to be more like the ocean, with hidden depths she longed to explore.

“You remember Genie?” he asked.

“The ex-soldier?”

“Yeah. Her brothers, Beck and Jonah, moved to Mangonui with their father after their mother died in a car accident. Genie was best friends with Ciara—she was Niall’s sister, so Genie stayed in Paihia and lived with their family.”

“I don’t remember meeting Ciara,” Hermione said, frowning.

“No. She died in the bomb blast in which Genie was wounded.”

Hermione's jaw dropped. She'd seen Genie's limp when she'd walked across the bar to the Ladies', and Billie had told her she'd been wounded in action, but Billie hadn't mentioned Ciara. "Oh, that's terrible."

"It was hard on everyone. But anyway, Beck and Jonah went to high school up in Mangonui with the guys up here—Kole, Joss, Fox, and Stuart, and although they drifted apart like you do after school, when Beck opened the bar they all came down to support him, and they visit quite a lot now."

"And their partners?"

"Kole married Tasha—she's Fox's sister, and Joss is marrying Maisey—she's Kole's sister."

"Okay, now I'm confused."

Danny laughed. "Yeah, I can see why. The two girls met Elle and Caitlin at uni—I don't know them quite as well as the others, but they're nice. They all run Treats together, and there's one other girl, Skye—she's also Kole's sister, she helps out in the shop sometimes."

Hermione looked out of the window. They were passing over a bridge, and to the other side she could see strange twisted trees growing right out of the water. Mangroves! How odd.

She tried not to feel envious of Danny's large circle of friends, and failed. She'd attempted to explain to him how she felt as if she didn't fit in with anyone, but she wasn't sure he'd understood. How lovely it must be to grow up with people who didn't care where you were born. Who weren't constantly judging you. Danny and his friends were so relaxed, and although they'd been interested in her because she was from England and had an intriguing background, they didn't appear to look at her any differently because of it.

Danny might have jumped to conclusions about her when he first met her, but that was because she'd acted like an ass and been rude to him, so she

could hardly blame him for that.

“Nearly there,” he said, reaching out to hold her hand again. “You okay?”

“Fine,” she said, because she didn’t want to go into it all again and ruin the mood of the day. But something was gradually dawning on her.

She was lonely.

The problem wasn’t only not having lots of friends, because she knew she could make more of an effort to be sociable, to go out more, if she tried. It stemmed from something inside her, a sense of not belonging, and that nobody understood her. She had the strange feeling that it didn’t matter if she stood in a room with a thousand people—she would still feel alone.

And that was part of the issue with Richard. She’d known him for a long time, and she knew him probably better than anyone except her parents. But they had no connection—he didn’t touch her on an emotional or spiritual level. Instinctively, she knew they could be married for fifty years, be lovers, have a dozen kids, and he would never really know her.

You’re not in love with him? Danny had asked her. *He’s not the man of your dreams? Your Mr. Right? Your Prince Charming?* He’d been speaking sarcastically—he’d made it quite clear that he didn’t believe in true love, but the trouble was that she *did* believe it. Or she wanted to believe the possibility that it existed, anyway. She wanted marriage to mean not duty and sacrifice and responsibility, but love and attraction and passion.

Instinctively, she knew Danny Love offered that. Not forever, of course—he was hardly marriage material, but he’d given her a glimpse of the passion she craved. And it made her immeasurably sad. Because once she’d taken a bite from the apple, how would she ever be able to forget that sweet, sweet taste?

Chapter Twelve

Danny had offered to show Hermione around a few hotels because as much as he wanted to drag her straight back to her house, kiss her senseless, and make love to her, it seemed polite to wait at least a few hours. He'd half-expected the morning to be a bit dull as they traipsed around the various hotels with her making copious notes, but in actual fact it turned out to be the best morning he'd spent in a long time.

He parked up under the shade of a huge pohutukawa tree, and they walked along the crescent moon of the bay. Far from having her nose buried in a notebook, Hermione's wide eyes took in every detail of the boutique hotels he took her to. Although she asked to speak to the manager in each place for a few minutes, and she came away with brochures and prices for weekend breaks, she spent a lot of time asking Danny's opinion as they were shown around the rooms and amenities. If he was taking a girl away for a few nights, what would he expect from the place in which they were staying?

After the inevitable jokes about condom machines in the bathroom, he gave it some real thought and surprised himself with his answers. Comfort was more important than glamour, he decided—a pretty room for the girl, a soft bed, a pleasant view, and somewhere not too noisy. A friendly staff was a bonus. Decent room service. And a nice restaurant he could take her to for dinner—with quiet, private tables, a varied menu, a good choice of local wines, and great service.

“Quite the old romantic deep down, aren't we?” Hermione said with a wink.

“Maybe,” he said, glad he'd put a smile back on her face. In the car, when he'd been talking about his friends, she'd grown quiet for a while. He didn't know her well enough yet to be sure what had bothered her. Was she

homesick? Was she missing Richard and her friends in the UK? Somehow, he suspected that wasn't it. She'd talked a little about not fitting in, and she hadn't spoken about her husband-to-be with any depth of feeling.

Danny knew he was lucky to have all the friends he'd made over the years. The guys were good, decent Kiwi men, the girls kind at heart, and although they'd all had ups and downs, things were gradually coming together for most of them as they headed toward their thirties. He couldn't imagine his life without them.

He doubted that marriage was on the cards for him. After the usual succession of on-off relationships in his late teens and early twenties, he'd finally gone steady with a girl called Lynda for a couple of years. To him, going steady had meant not dating anyone else, which he hadn't, and he'd loved her, or at least he'd thought he had at the time. He'd taken her out a couple of times a week while his aunt stayed with his father, and he'd slept over at her place occasionally, and for a while Lynda had been content with that.

But eventually she'd started complaining she wasn't seeing enough of him, and that they weren't going out enough. And when she'd started making noises about settling down, getting married, getting their own house, and having kids, he'd finally told her what he knew he should probably have told her early in the relationship—that he needed to look after his father, and there was no question of putting him into a home or anything like that.

She hadn't been a bad person, and she'd understood that he wanted to care for his father, but she'd felt that by refusing to put his dad into a home, he was choosing Ron over her. Danny understood that a young woman wouldn't want the responsibility of caring for a partner's sick parent so early on in a relationship, but part of him had felt that if she had truly loved him, she would have accepted that he couldn't leave his father, and she would

have been glad to help Danny look after him.

Then after she'd left, he'd realized he was kidding himself. It was unlikely there would ever be a girl who would love him enough to want to move in with him and his father. He couldn't blame Lynda for reacting the way she had. He would have done the same if he was in her position.

Except he wouldn't have. Deep down, he knew he would have been prepared to sacrifice his own desires if their roles had been reversed. It was the right thing to do—the honorable thing, and he couldn't help himself; he resented Lynda for not loving him enough to stay, the same way as he resented his mother for not coming back, even when—*especially* when—she'd discovered his father was sick.

But this was the real world where everyone was only out for themselves. The likes of Mother Theresa were anomalies, not the norm. Danny had learned to harden his heart and accept that the selfless true love that bards had once spoken about in medieval poetry was something that didn't exist—or at least not for him, anyway.

And oddly, Hermione had obviously come to a similar conclusion. She'd realized that by marrying Richard she was going to have to work hard to find happiness, and Danny had to respect her for that.

But that didn't mean that they couldn't find some pleasure and passion in the short term. He wanted to see her eyes light up again the way they had in the car, when she'd obviously been thinking about going to bed with him. Was she still going to invite him to stay when he took her home? He hoped she hadn't changed her mind. Well, even if she had, he still had time to change it back again!

Their hotel visits complete, and with plenty of brochures and ideas to think about, it was growing close to lunch, so they got in the car and Danny drove them back to Mangonui.

“Oh, it’s lovely,” Hermione said as the car wound along the waterfront and around to the line of shops facing the harbor.

Danny tried to see it through her eyes. The water sparkled in the June sunshine, while several boats bobbed about on their way in or out of the harbor. Although it wasn’t holiday season, the cafes were busy, the tables and chairs on the pavements mostly filled, and a few tourists wandered along eating ice creams or drinking coffee in takeaway cups.

“It’s a nice place,” he said, pulling up on the roadside and turning off the engine. “At first I thought it might be too quiet for their shop to do well, but they’ve done wonders with advertising and promotion, and people come from all over the Northland to visit them now.”

They got out of the car and wandered across the road toward the shops. “What a lovely place to work,” Hermione said, looking up at the *Treats to Tempt You* sign.

Danny had to agree. Mouthwatering smells of caramel and coffee wafted out of the open doorway, and his stomach rumbled. “Mind you, I’d be fat as if I worked here.”

She giggled. “I know what you mean. I can’t imagine you fat though.”

He stood back to let her pass and patted his stomach. “If I didn’t have such an active job, I’d look like Henry the Eighth. I like my food.”

“I think you’d look good in a beard,” she teased. “But then I’m certain you’d look good in anything.”

She barely touched him as she brushed by, but her perfume rose to entice him, and just the thought of her body being close to his was enough to send his pulse racing.

Pleased with her compliment, on impulse he slid an arm around her waist and pulled her against him, loving the way she looked today, in her slacks and blouse, with a jumper slung around her shoulders, her hair in the

neat braid. The girl had class written all over her, and he wasn't sure why, but it sent his thermostat rocketing.

“Oops,” she said, placing both hands on his chest to balance herself. Her pale skin flushed an attractive pink.

“I love how you blush every time I touch you,” he murmured, cupping her cheek to feel the warmed skin. He was certain he'd never had such an effect on a girl before. He felt immensely flattered that her body reacted to him when he came near. His body reacted to her too, of course, only in a slightly different way. He could feel the tightening of his jeans as he glanced down and caught a glimpse of cleavage in the V of her top.

“I can't help it,” she whispered, leaning into his palm. “Just the thought of your hands on me is enough to set my heart pounding.”

He looked into her brown eyes. Desire wove through them like gold thread through cloth, glittering with the same intensity. She was shy, this one, but no less passionate for it, a world of longing hiding beneath the surface of her gaze. For so long she'd obviously waited for a man to tease it out of her, and had been disappointed each time. Danny was determined he wouldn't join the ranks of those who'd let her down in the bedroom.

Lowering his head, he touched his lips to hers.

He liked kissing, but if given a choice he would rather be placing his mouth on another part of a woman's anatomy. Once the days had passed when he was young and kissing was all a girl would let him do, he'd always been more interested in moving on to the good stuff. It was a bit like ordering a starter at a posh restaurant—a couple of tiny slices of beef rolled around a flake of cheese sure looked pretty and tasted nice, but any normal bloke would much rather get on to the fillet steak with the huge plate of fries.

But he'd kissed her a couple of times now—on the beach in front of her parents' house, as well as on the sand by the bar, and he was beginning to

think that actually a long, slow kiss wasn't such a waste of time after all.

He was conscious of being in public—there were customers in the shop and he'd seen Maisey and Elle serving behind the counter, so he couldn't let things get too heated. So although his heart pounded and blood raced around his body, he kept calm outwardly, one hand resting on her hip, the other stroking her cheek. His fingers itched to stroke her waist, to slip around to her butt and squeeze, or to slide up her ribcage to cup a soft breast, but he didn't move and instead forced himself to concentrate on her lips.

He was entranced by their softness, by the sensation of just being close to her, being intimate. The sun streamed across them, casting them in gold, and her eyelids fluttered shut, her long brown lashes lying on her creamy skin. Her cheek remained warm beneath his hand, and she murmured softly, a low, appreciative sigh deep in her throat.

He didn't open his mouth or use his tongue, just pressed his lips to hers once, twice, and a longer third time, and then lifted his head.

Her eyes opened, filled with a dreaminess he was sure was reflected in his own.

“Mmm,” she said softly. “As sweet as chocolate.”

“Huh,” a voice said from behind them. “That's quite a claim. Clearly you haven't tasted our wares yet.”

He moved back and laughed, placing his arm around Hermione as she blushed. “Hey, Maisey. Good to see you.”

“Hey, Danny.” Maisey lifted up onto her tiptoes as he leaned forward to kiss her cheek. Medium-height and with long dark hair pulled back in a simple ponytail, Maisey was a pretty girl with a twinkle in her eye. “And who's this?” she asked, the twinkle turning into a sparkle as she looked at Hermione. “Not your sister, I'm guessing?”

“This is Hermy-wun,” he said. “Literally a British lady of the manor. I'm

her rough and ready gardener.”

“I see,” Maisey said. “Re-enacting Lady Chatterley, are we?”

Hermione turned crimson. “Pleased to meet you,” she said, “and it’s Hermione, obviously.”

Maisey’s eyes widened at the other’s girl’s blush—she’d obviously been joking, then realized she’d stumbled onto the truth. “I’m sorry, Hermione, I shouldn’t tease—I didn’t know you really were from overseas. What a lovely accent, and a lovely name to go with it! Come on in. Now I’ve practically insulted you and I’m on the verge of causing an international incident, we’ll have to give you the full treatment.”

Unable to hide a chuckle, Hermione followed her across to a table by the window and took a seat. Maisey grinned at Danny, who winked back as he took a seat opposite her.

“You like coffee?” Maisey asked her.

“Of course. A latte would be lovely, thank you.”

“Great. I’ll get two coffees going, and I’ll bring a selection of our wares for you to try.”

She walked away, and Hermione turned back to Danny. She gave him a scolding glare. “You enjoy embarrassing me, don’t you?”

He leaned on the table and tipped his head as he studied her. “Not embarrassing... unnerving, maybe. I like it when you’re flustered. Like when I kiss you. Your cheeks go pink, and you look distracted and vulnerable. It makes me want to take you in my arms and protect you.”

He surprised himself with the words. *Steady on, Dan. Don’t get too heavy.*

Hermione just snorted. “What is it the Kiwis say? Yeah, right. ‘Protect me.’” She put air quotes around the words. “You just want to get in my panties.”

“That’s right, I do.”

“Danny!”

“What?” Heat surged through him. Being with her all day was a sweet torture that he half wanted to prolong and half wanted to rush through to get her into bed. “Absolutely I want to get you naked. Would you like me to tell you what I’m going to do to you when you invite me in tonight?”

Her eyes widened. “I... um... haven’t decided whether I’m going to yet.”

Feeling a little feverish, he ignored her, leaned closer, and fixed his gaze on her, knowing his desire must be showing in his eyes. “I’m going to strip you slowly until you’re standing naked in front of me, until I can see every inch of your beautiful pale skin. Then I’m going to push you back onto the bed and kiss that skin, from your earlobes to your toes and everything in between. I’m going to kiss your breasts and your nipples and your hips and the soft skin of your thighs, and then I’m going to bury my mouth in you, Lady Hermione, and see if you taste as sweet as I’m imagining.”

Her jaw had dropped, and if her eyes had widened any further, they would have popped out and bounced on the table.

But he hadn’t finished yet. “I’m going to lick and suck you there until you come on my tongue, kind of like an *hors d’oeuvre*, and then we’ll move onto the main course. I’m going to take off my clothes and cover your body with mine, and I’m going to make love to you until we’re both hot and sticky and panting. I want to watch you come, watch your teeth clamp on your lip and your eyes squeeze shut, and I want to hear you gasp my name and know I’ve given you pleasure before I finally spill inside you.” He stared into her eyes. “How does that sound?”

Chapter Thirteen

Hermione's heart was racing so fast she felt slightly faint.

Up until that point, she'd definitely felt an attraction to Danny. Every time he'd looked at her with his deep blue eyes, her breath had left her body, and when he'd kissed her, even in the doorway to the cafe, it had warmed her right through, bringing a blush to her cheeks and a tingle to areas that didn't tingle that often.

But as he leaned forward, looked into her eyes, and told her in explicit detail what he wanted to do her, it was as if he'd reached into her body and turned her thermostat up to eleven. Her body burned, from her face to her feet and everything in between. Her nipples tightened and the hairs rose on the back of her neck. She felt embarrassed and excited and shocked and turned on all at the same time.

No man had ever looked at her the way Danny was looking at her at that moment. Other men she'd met had looked at her as if she were vaguely interesting and admirable, the way they might look at a new BMW as it drove past. Richard looked at her as if she were a Rolls Royce that every country gentleman should own, although she was sure he secretly wanted an Aston Martin.

Danny looked at her as if she were a top of the range Porsche 911 that he'd wanted his whole life, and he couldn't wait to take it for a test drive. His eyes seared into her, and at that moment she had no doubt he meant every word he said. He really did want to take her home and screw her senseless. The thought made her scared, shivery, exhilarated. How could she deal with the sexual energy that radiated from him, almost blinding her in its intensity? He was so... so... raw. Whereas Richard was as refined and polished as a gold ring, Danny was a vein of gold glittering in the midst of hewn rock,

unexplored and full of potential.

She couldn't think of anything to say—her brain was void of words, her lungs void of breath, her mouth void of saliva. She'd never known desire could be so powerful. It would never be like this with Richard. When he took her to bed, it was going to be polite and awkward, and all *after you*, and *oh I'm sorry did I catch your hair then?* Danny wouldn't care if he bumped teeth when he kissed or if he smudged her lipstick. He wouldn't bother undoing her shirt—he'd rip the two sides apart and to hell with the buttons, and he wouldn't care if he gave hickeys when he kissed her neck. And she wanted that... oh God, how she wanted that. Even for a short time, even if it was only once. But she had to have it, to know that it existed.

“Lattes?”

Hermione blinked and looked around to see a blonde girl smiling at them, two large cups and saucers in her hand. “Oh. Yes, please. Sorry.”

“Elle!” Danny grinned up at her. “How are you doing?”

The girl placed the cups before them. “I'm good, thanks, and lovely to see you here. You must be Hermione.” She smiled, a touch of a twinkle in her eye. Clearly, Maisey had told her the Lady Chatterley story.

“I am, and nice to meet you.” Refusing to look at Danny, Hermione held out her hand, and Elle shook it. “You have a lovely place here.”

“Thanks.” Elle glanced around the small shop and cafe, her expression filled with pride. “We've worked hard over the past eighteen months or so, but it's been worth it.”

Hermione could see the hard work that had gone into the place. From the carefully drawn signs advertising the shop's wares and the deals of the day, to the hand-painted motifs that ran in a border around the cream-colored walls, to the cabinets filled with truffles and ice cream that the placard proudly pronounced were all made in the shop, it was obvious that it was

lavished with care and attention.

“Those photos look similar to the ones in *Between the Sheets*,” she commented as her gaze fell on the large black and white pictures placed at intervals around the room. Some were close-ups of the chocolates and coffee cups, others were gorgeous pictures of pretty girls eating chocolates—she recognized Maisey and Elle in two of them, so she guessed the others were Tasha and Caitlin. The photos were artsy without being pretentious, taken in soft focus, the girls’ smiles caught by the clever person behind the camera.

“Yeah, they’re Kole’s,” Danny said. “He’s a pretty good photographer.”

“I’ll say.” She studied the poster in the center of the far wall. It consisted of one large photo in the middle of a sexy guy in jeans, bare-chested and wearing a cowboy hat tipped forward to hide his face, with the words *Treats to Tempt You* written on his breastbone like a tattoo. Around the outside of the photos were two dozen or so smaller pictures of various people wearing fancy hats and eating chocolates or ice creams. “Did he do the poster as well?”

“Yes,” Maisey said, coming up with a tray filled with half a dozen small bowls. “It was my idea—we had a party. People paid to have their photo taken, and half the money went to charity. It was a great night.”

“Who’s the hunk in the middle?” Hermione wondered.

The others laughed. “That’s Joss,” Maisey said with pride. “He’s my dude.”

“Oops,” Hermione said, and grinned. “Lucky you!”

“I think so.” Maisey placed the tray between her and Danny. “Here you go. Start with a few of Elle’s ice cream flavors, and then I’ll bring you some truffles.”

“Ooh, lovely.” Hermione could do with some ice cream to cool her down as she was sure her temperature was still high from Danny’s hot talk.

“We’ll leave you to it,” Elle said. “Just let us know when you want the choccies.”

The two of them went back to the counter, and Hermione picked up her spoon. “Is everyone in New Zealand as friendly as this?”

Danny chuckled. “Not quite, but almost.” He gestured at the bowls. “What shall we start with?”

Each bowl had the name of the flavor painted around the rim, so they could see what they were eating, each with a small sample of half a dozen different flavors. “What a nice idea,” Hermione said, pulling one toward her. “What on earth is hokey pokey ice cream?”

“It’s honeycomb, like in a Crunchie bar, you know?”

“Ooh, nice.” She took a spoonful. Danny did the same, and they both sucked the ice cream off the spoon.

Her mouth filled with rich, creamy sweetness, and she gave a dreamy *mmm* of delight.

Danny turned the spoon over in his mouth and finished licking off the ice cream, his eyes still burning into hers. “And now I’m wondering if that’s the sound you make when you come,” he murmured.

Once again her heart jumped at his sensual words. How did he have the power to continually shock her? “Goodness. You’ll have to stop doing that or I’ll melt into a puddle before the end of the day.”

He chuckled and took another spoon of the ice cream. “I don’t want to stop. It’s fun. Talking of which, perhaps we ought to take a tub of this home. I’d love to place a scoop on your body, watch it melt, then lick it off.”

“Danny!” She touched a hand to her cheek. “Stop it!”

He laughed and pushed the bowl over to her to finish. “All right, I’ll stop. But just until we finish eating.”

He kept to his word and didn’t torture her again with more descriptions,

but it was as if something had been unleashed between them, because every time she looked into his eyes she burned inside.

They tried the other flavors—mochachino, passionfruit ripple, wildberry, a sumptuous rich chocolate with real chocolate chunks, and the best vanilla ice cream Hermione had ever tasted. And she knew that forevermore she would associate the sweet, creamy taste of ice cream with this moment—the sun streaming across the cafe, the smell of caramel and coffee, the folksy jazz playing in the background, and the heat in Danny’s gaze, which remained fixed on her as if he couldn’t bear to tear his eyes away.

When they’d finished, Maisey brought them a sample of her truffles, and they tried macadamia, mint, and cherry chocolates, and a special Matariki truffle Maisey was trialing for the midwinter solstice that was fast approaching. It consisted of a creamy ganache filled with juicy pieces of candied kiwi and rolled in dark chocolate, and the top was decorated with seven tiny silver candy stars that represented Matariki, the Maori name for the constellation Pleiades, which rises in late May and June and heralds the start of the Maori new year.

“Oh, they’re gorgeous,” Hermione said, finishing off the last one as Maisey came over for their opinion. “Absolutely divine, rich and creamy. No wonder the shop’s doing so well when you make such wonderful food!”

“Thanks.” Maisey grinned. “Another satisfied customer!”

“I’ll pay,” Danny said, standing and pulling out his wallet.

Maisey pushed it away. “Seriously, our treat. I’m just thrilled you brought her here, Danny.”

“Then please let me buy some boxes to take home,” Hermione said as Danny went to protest.

“Well I won’t say no to that,” Maisey said, and so Hermione bought six boxes of various truffles, unable to resist the tempting flavors.

“I’m just sorry I can’t take any ice cream with me,” she said to Elle. “But I will take some leaflets if I may.” She’d already decided that this would be a place she could recommend to her customers if they visited the area.

Leaving with the chocolates and leaflets, they waved goodbye to the girls and walked out into the afternoon sunshine.

“I’m having a lovely day,” she said to Danny as they walked back to the car.

“And it’s not over yet.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers first before opening the door.

“Gosh.” She slid into the seat, all aflutter, sending the boxes tumbling onto the floor. “Now look what you’ve done.”

He laughed, walked around the car, and got in beside her. “Good to know I have an effect on you.”

“Oh, you definitely have that,” she mumbled as he started the engine and pulled away. He turned her to mush just by looking at her. What on earth would happen when they finally got naked together?

The rest of the afternoon passed by in a blur, mainly because she couldn’t stop thinking about what was going to happen that evening. Danny took her for a drive to Matauri Bay, and they walked along the beach for a while as waves from the Pacific Ocean crept up the sand, and they talked about this and that and nothing in particular, just enjoying being together.

After that he drove her into the bustling town of Kerikeri, and they had dinner at a vineyard, where he encouraged her to sample some of the local wines.

It was a wonderful evening, and as time wore on she realized they had more in common than she would have thought possible—they liked the same music and enjoyed the same movies and TV dramas, and they both enjoyed travelling and were interested in different cultures.

But as the evening drew to an end, all she could think about was the feel of Danny's lips, the warmth of his body against her, his hands on her skin.

"You're quiet," he said as they headed back to Paihia to her parents' house. The sun had set, and the half-moon hung above them, casting its silvery light across the fields to either side of the road. "Something bothering you?"

"No," she lied. Her stomach fluttered like a meadow full of butterflies, and her mouth had gone dry.

He didn't say anything else, just drove along the beachfront and then up the hill to the long drive that led to her parents' home. After pulling up outside, he released his seatbelt and switched off the engine, then turned in the seat to face her.

Darkness and the quiet of the evening filled the car. Moths fluttered around the lamp she'd left on to light the stairs to the deck. Outside, something that sounded like an owl hooted in the trees, but inside all she could hear was the thudding of her heart in her ears.

"Hey." Danny reached out and brushed the back of his fingers along her cheek. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing." She gave him a brief smile, but couldn't maintain it, and returned to studying her hands.

He spoke gently. "Hermione, sweetheart. If you've changed your mind it's not a problem."

She lifted her startled gaze to him. "I haven't—"

"It's all right. I half-expected it to happen. I won't be angry. I'd much rather you be honest with me."

"No!" She didn't want him to think that. "It's not that at all."

"Then what's the matter, honey? Tell me."

She nibbled her bottom lip. He didn't look cross, just concerned and

puzzled. He had such a lovely handsome face, with deep gorgeous eyes and a luscious mouth she was desperate to kiss. She so didn't want to ruin everything, but she couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"It's just..." She sighed. "I haven't had a lot of experience in the bedroom."

His lips curved. "That's all right."

"I mean... very little experience."

His eyes searched her face. "Okay..."

"I mean, like, um, actually, no experience. At all." She swallowed.

He stared at her. "What?"

"I'm a virgin, Danny."

Chapter Fourteen

Danny was aware his jaw had dropped and he was gaping like a fish, but for a brief moment he was so stunned that his brain wouldn't work.

Hermione was watching him warily, chewing on her lip. "Please say something," she whispered.

He closed his mouth and tried to jump-start his brain. "What do you mean? On the beach you told me you weren't a virgin."

"I lied."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I didn't want you to laugh at me."

"Why would I have laughed?"

"Oh come on, Danny, you'd already teased me about running a romance business. How could I tell you I've never been to bed with anyone? I'm twenty-five, for Christ's sake. How many twenty-five-year-old virgins do you know?" Twin spots of color decorated her cheeks.

"So why tell me now?" he asked softly.

"You were waiting for me to ask you in." She looked out of the window at the encroaching darkness. "I considered not admitting it, but I thought..." She sighed and looked back at him, a strange mixture of shyness and sadness on her face. "You're a man of the world. I'm sure you're great in bed, and that you prefer your women to know what goes where and how to please you. I'd make an idiot of myself if I didn't admit it."

They sat quietly for a moment, studying each other. Danny's brain whirled. He couldn't think what to say.

"I'm sorry," she murmured eventually.

"Why?"

She blinked a few times. "I feel as if I've misled you, and I didn't mean

to do that. I hate to think I've upset or angered you."

He shifted in his seat. "I'm not upset or angry. Puzzled, maybe. And completely fucking bewildered how a girl as gorgeous as yourself could make it to twenty-five and not have been talked into bed at any point."

Her lips curved. "There's a compliment buried in there, I think. Thank you."

He ran a hand through his hair. "May I ask why you've never had sex? Were you... I dunno, saving yourself for Richard?"

She thought about it. "No. He's had other girlfriends, and I don't think he would have expected me to stay single all this time. Whatever you think, it's not a medieval arrangement. It just never happened for me. It's difficult to describe to someone who I'm sure lost their virginity at, what, sixteen?"

"Fourteen," he said.

"What!" Her eyes nearly fell out of her head.

"I know. I nearly dropped my Power Ranger."

They both laughed, and some of the tension lifted from the air.

"I grew up quickly," he said. "But we're not talking about me."

She shook her head. "I can't even..." She blew out a breath. "Then my predicament is going to seem even more unfathomable to you."

"It's not unfathomable, just... uncommon. So it wasn't a conscious decision of yours to stay a virgin?"

"No, not at all. I dated a few guys, but for some reason we never got to that stage. I would happily have slept with a guy if I'd dated for a while and things had developed, but the men I met didn't seem interested in anything other than sex, and I wasn't interested in one-night stands. I couldn't just do it, sort of cold, without any build up first. Does that make sense? I don't suppose it does to you. You must have had lots of one-night stands."

"Not quite," he said, amused. "And actually, I do understand. I can see

how it might happen.”

“And the longer time goes by, the worse it gets, and suddenly I’m twenty-five years old and completely inexperienced. It doesn’t help one’s confidence.”

“No, I suppose it doesn’t.” He smiled.

They fell quiet again. He tipped his head and studied her, admiring her high cheekbones, the curve of her lips, the pale skin of her neck. She was like Antarctica—virginal unexplored territory, breathtakingly beautiful.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

“Will you stop apologizing?”

“But I’ve ruined your evening.”

“You really haven’t.”

She rubbed her nose. “You’re really not angry?”

He moved a little closer to her. “No, I’m not angry.”

Her large brown eyes widened. Her pupils dilated, and he remembered the moment in the Treats cafe when he’d described what he was going to do to her and the air between them had sparked with electricity.

“You want me to leave?” he asked.

She nibbled her bottom lip and then, to his delight, gave a little shake of her head. “Do you want to go?” she whispered.

“No.”

She swallowed. “But you were expecting the evening to be a certain way, and, well, it won’t be like that.”

She thought he’d be disappointed in her because she didn’t know her way around the bedroom.

He remained silent for a moment, trying to think what to say. She was right in that the evening certainly hadn’t turned out the way he’d expected. He’d thought it would end in some fun and frantic sex, but the first time for

most people was probably more nervous than passionate.

Was this what he wanted? He'd never taken a girl's virginity before, and he surprised himself by feeling a weight of responsibility at the thought of it.

"Now you've waited this long," he said, "do you not want to wait until you're married? Wouldn't it be something precious to give your husband?"

She laughed. "Now who sounds medieval? Shall I gift him my maidenhead?"

"I mean it. It's not something you can get back. Even if he doesn't care if you've slept with other people, don't you think you might regret it?"

She studied her hands. "The thing is... I've accepted I'm going to marry him. I know it's going to happen, and that's okay, and I know if we work at it we'll stand a good chance of being successful. But I don't know that there will ever be passion. Maybe there will—I'm hardly an expert in these things, but all I do know is that when I look at him my heart doesn't race, and I want to experience that just once, to be with someone who makes me breathless." Her eyes came back to his.

His lips slowly curved up. "I make you breathless?"

Her lips mirrored his. "Yes."

He took her braid and twisted it around his fingers. "I make your heart race?"

She smiled. "You do."

Tightening the braid, he pulled her closer, stopping when his lips were an inch from hers. "You still want to go to bed with me?"

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Very much. But I understand completely if you'd rather not."

He brushed his nose against hers. "So explain to me why I wouldn't want to take such a sexy, gorgeous, hot girl to bed?"

She lowered her gaze, fighting against a blush. "Because I'm not

confident. I'm not skilled. I don't know how to please a man."

"You don't think it would be fun to teach you?"

She fingered the buttons on his shirt. "I don't know. Maybe fumbling around is dull to a man like you."

"Let's get one thing straight—I don't know what kind of idea you have about me, but I'm not a tomcat."

"Even so. You like sex."

"I do, as it happens."

"I'm sure you'd rather be with a girl who wasn't shy and uncertain."

He kissed her cheek. "At this moment, I can't think of anyone in the world I'd rather go to bed with than you."

She lifted her gaze to his, her expression wry, but with a hint of hope. "Be serious."

Releasing her braid, he cupped her cheek and kissed her Cupid's bow. "I mean it. It doesn't change anything I said in the cafe. I still want to do all those things to you. But we'll go slow, and I'll be gentle, I promise." He stopped speaking as emotion surged through him, surprising him.

Until that moment, a woman's virginity had meant very little to him. It was just a state of being, the same as a person who hadn't left the country—one minute you hadn't travelled, the next you got on a plane and then you had. It didn't mean anything. It wasn't special or precious—if anything it was a hindrance. He'd never been with a virgin and it didn't bother him, and he would never expect any woman he slept with to be one. Sex was fantastic—it was fun and natural, and denying yourself the beauty of sharing yourself with another seemed a crazy idea.

But now, the idea of Hermione being a virgin gave him strange goosebumps he hadn't expected. He'd thought her naive and idealistic, but to find out she was untouched by another man, truly innocent, completely

changed his view of her. Suddenly she wasn't a superior, privileged girl determined to trample over him. She was shy and unsure, nervous about finding happiness, scared of turning her life over to the other guy before she'd had a chance to experience true passion.

"I'd be honored to be your first," he said, his voice husky even to his ears. "As long as you're sure."

"I'm sure." Her eyes were filled with longing.

It would be his job to show her what making love was like. To be the first person to tease her to the dizzy heights of passion. No other man had touched her, kissed her body, slid inside her. He'd be the first one to hear her cries of passion, to watch her come apart.

He was so hard, he was surprised he hadn't burst the stitching on his jeans. His main problem was going to be slowing himself down when he just wanted to pull her into his arms and take her, hard and fast.

Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to hers.

She felt soft and warm. Her perfume rose from her skin, winding around him. She tasted of sweet wine and the chocolate truffle they'd shared on the way home from one of the boxes she'd bought. He wanted to take off her top, undo her bra, cup her breast, pull her onto his lap, but he did none of those things, just concentrated on her mouth, and kissed her gently.

When he lifted his head, she had a dreamy look on her face.

"Mmm," she murmured. "Nice."

He kissed her nose. "Come on. Why don't we go inside and have a glass of wine, and we'll see what happens?"

They got out of the car, and Danny collected his bag from the back seat, then they walked up the stairs to the deck and along to the sliding doors. He paused for a moment to cast his eye over the grounds. They'd done a great job so far, and he was pleased with their progress. The palms were taking,

and the light shower of rain that had just begun would help.

But he had more important things on his mind for once than gardens and plants. He followed Hermione through the sliding glass doors into the living room, and placed his bag in the corner before joining her in the kitchen. She'd turned on a lamp, and it gave the room a warm, welcoming glow.

It was a superb house, built for the summer really, with lots of windows and high ceilings, so it wouldn't be the easiest place to heat in the winter. It never got truly cold in the 'winterless north', but temperatures did drop into single figures, and they had the occasional frost. Hermione had obviously left the heat pump on before she went out, however, and the place was pleasantly warm. He supposed she didn't have to worry about having enough money to pay the bills.

For the first time in a while, it reminded him of the gulf between them, and what different backgrounds they came from. Was he really planning on being the rough groundskeeper who seduced the virginal lady of the manor? He'd only wanted a bit of fun—did this make him a bad person, de-flowering another man's future wife?

He shook his head, trying to rattle the thought out of his brain. This wasn't the fourteenth century, and Hermione had every right to sleep with whomever she chose. He wanted her, and she wanted him, and nothing else mattered.

She'd taken a bottle of wine out of the rack and was now pouring it into two glasses. Her hand was shaking a little, and she spilled some onto the worktop.

“Damn.”

“I'll get it,” he said, reaching for a piece of paper towel. He stood beside her and mopped up the drips. Then he caught her free hand and lifted it to his lips. “Are you nervous?”

She sipped her wine, watching him kiss her fingertips. “A little. But I’m excited too.” Her eyes sparkled.

His heart swelled. “I’m glad.” He let go of her hand and picked up his glass, then wrapped his other arm around her waist and pulled her close. They both took a mouthful of wine and swallowed, and then he lowered his lips to hers again.

They were cool from the wine this time, and when he touched his tongue to them, she opened her mouth eagerly. He swept his tongue inside, wanting to taste her, to claim her, and she sighed and leaned into the kiss, her tongue sliding alongside his.

Turning her, he pushed her back against the worktop, placed their glasses on it, and took his time to kiss her properly. Her arms rose around his neck, and he rested his hands on her hips, pulling her close. She was so soft against him though that eventually he moved his hands onto her butt, tightening his fingers on the plump muscles and lifting her a little so he could push his erection against her mound.

Fuck, how was she so soft all over? She was like a velvet cushion, and he wanted to sink into her, to let her close around him. *Slowly*, his brain scolded, *don’t frighten her*, but she was tightening her fingers in his hair, pushing her hips to his, moaning against his lips, as if she didn’t want him to slow down. She may have been a virgin, but she wasn’t seventeen, he told himself—she was a grown woman, old enough to know what she wanted and to make her own decisions. He wasn’t leading her astray. She wanted him, she’d made that clear, and suddenly he wondered if he was actually the one who’d done the seducing after all.

Chapter Fifteen

Hermione sank her fingers into Danny's thick hair, loving the way he groaned when she raked her nails lightly against his scalp. His hands were tight on her bottom, his erection hard against her mound.

She couldn't believe he still wanted to have sex with her. She'd thought that as soon as she told him she was inexperienced, he'd back off and disappear into the night. But he hadn't. Instead his eyes had softened, and he'd said *So explain to me why I wouldn't want to take such a sexy, gorgeous, hot girl to bed?* It made her melt.

Far from his ardor fading, he appeared to be growing more passionate as the seconds passed. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, and she returned it eagerly, pressing up against him, wanting his hands on her, wanting to feel his skin on hers.

He lifted his head, his eyes filled with desire. "You're driving me crazy," he said, sliding his hands up her ribs, then around to her back as if he wanted to cup her breasts but was willing himself to wait.

"I want to drive you crazy," she whispered, "as crazy as you're driving me. I don't want to wait any longer, Danny. Come to bed with me."

He looked into her eyes, and something passed between them, a look, a feeling—she wasn't sure what it was, but it made her breath hitch and her heart race even faster. It was as if they'd taken the final hurdle and moved onto the home straight, both accepting it was finally going to happen.

"Come on." He picked up his wine glass.

She did the same, waiting while he topped both glasses up again, and then she led him down the corridor to the other wing of the house where the bedrooms were.

She was staying in the best and biggest guest room. Situated on the

northern side of the house, it faced the deck and the rolling lawns, and during the day she could see the ocean, although tonight it was dark, the sea just a shimmer of silver in the distance. With relief, she noticed that she'd left the heat pump on in here, too. Leaving Danny's side for a moment, she switched on the lamp on the bedside table, and he walked over to the curtains and drew them, enclosing them in a warm, amber world.

She picked up her wine glass and swallowed a large mouthful. She was nervous, but excited too. As the years had gone by, she'd tried not to keep thinking about what she was missing, but since she'd met Danny it felt as if she'd thought of nothing but sex. Every night she'd dreamed about his hands and mouth on her, and during the day she'd imagined what it would feel like to go all the way, to be naked with him, to have him inside her.

Was it likely to hurt considering she was twenty-five? It wasn't as if she'd been able to ask for advice from anyone. She'd never had that kind of relationship with her mother, and the few friends she had didn't talk about that sort of thing.

If she'd lost her virginity when she was in her mid-to-late teens like most people seemed to, her partner would probably either have been a virgin as well or reasonably inexperienced, and it wouldn't have been such a big issue. But she knew that Danny must have had a fair number of partners. Although she was touched that he'd told her he'd go slow and be gentle, she wanted him to enjoy it. She didn't want to do or say anything stupid and make a fool of herself.

She watched him turn from the curtains and finish off his glass of wine, then place the glass on the dressing table. He seemed so big, even in her reasonably-sized bedroom, and he looked out of place, like a large wild cat brought indoors.

As he walked toward her, she gripped her glass tightly and tried to smile,

tried to relax, but the nerves had gotten to her, and it was as if her face was made of concrete.

“Hey.” He levered the glass from her fingers and put it on the bedside table, then pulled her into his arms. “You’ve gone even paler, if that was possible. Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Sorry.”

He chuckled. “You have to stop apologizing.” He cupped her face. “What’s the matter? Are you nervous?”

There was no point in denying it. “Yes. I’m sorry—and I apologize for apologizing—I’m trying not to be, but I don’t think it’s possible not to be, you know? After so long.” She knew she was waffling, and she bit her lip, embarrassed.

“I understand. And you know what? It’s okay.”

She swallowed, fighting against a sudden surge of emotion. “Danny—”

“Sweetheart, of course you’re going to be nervous. Everywhere you look—TV, movies, books, people are talking about sex. It’s made up to be this momentous thing, but it’s really not. It’s the most natural thing in the world, and you know what? It’s really easy.” He smiled. “It’s not complicated, and there’s really nothing to worry about. You can’t do it wrong.”

“Are you sure about that? Because if something can be done wrong, you can rest assured I’ll do it.”

He laughed and slid his hands onto her bottom, pulling her against him. “That’s what I’m here for! Look, I’m not going to keep asking you because that’s only going to get annoying, but I will ask one last time. Are you sure you want to do this? With me? If you want to stop now, I won’t be annoyed, and it’s not a problem. I want you to be sure.”

She looked up into his eyes. The guy was gorgeous. If he wore a tux and bow tie, he’d look like a movie star. He was kind, intelligent, and he made

her laugh. He'd even forgiven the fact that she'd insulted him. She wanted to share herself with this man, to give him pleasure, as well as to finally rid herself of the burden of virginity she'd carried for so long.

"I'm sure. Are you sure?"

He touched his lips to hers. "I've never been surer of anything in my life. I desperately want to get you naked. Just so you know."

Her face warmed, and she played with the buttons on his shirt. "I hope you're not disappointed. I like you, and I want you to enjoy it."

He snorted. "You're young, you're hot, and you're willing. That's pretty much all it takes for a guy to have fun."

She laughed. "You're easily pleased."

"Most dudes are. That's a good thing for you ladies." He kissed her cheek, up to her hairline, and nuzzled her ear. "Don't be nervous. We'll make sure you're relaxed. It won't hurt—it'll just be sexy. Intimate. You want to get intimate with me, don't you?"

Intimate. Just the one word sent a frisson through her. "I do."

"You want to kiss me? Touch me?" He brushed his tongue over her earlobe. "Have me inside you?"

"God, Danny, don't. I'll melt into a puddle." She splayed her hands on his chest. His muscles were firm beneath her fingers. "Can I take off your shirt?"

"You are welcome to do whatever you want to me. Tonight, I am completely yours."

"Ooh." She shivered at the thought.

He kissed her, gentle and soft, teasing her lips with his. "That idea turns you on?"

"Mmm." She pushed the top button of his shirt through the buttonhole. "I can't believe I'm so lucky."

“*You* can’t believe it?”

“What do you mean?”

He gave her a puzzled look. “I don’t think you realize how beautiful and sexy you are, Lady Hermione. Not only are you offering me the chance to get you naked, but I get to be the first guy in the world to make love to you. I’m sure I’m going to wake up at any moment.”

She popped another button, thinking about his words. She’d seen her virginity as a burden, something a guy would find tiresome because it meant she was inexperienced and boring. She hadn’t considered that a man might find it appealing.

“You like the idea of being my first?” She was about halfway down the buttons now, and she could see tanned skin beneath, covered with an attractive scattering of manly chest hair.

He took the end of her braid, pulled the elastic off, and began to unravel the strands. “I do. It’s like seeing a field of fresh, white snow.”

“And you want to write your name in it?”

He grinned, loosening more of the braid until he reached the nape of her neck. “That’s not quite what I meant, but yeah, I guess. There’s something beautiful about that virgin field. Or desert dunes, stretching away into the distance, smooth and untouched. I feel like Neil Armstrong.”

She laughed, but his wry smile told her he’d spoken the truth. The notion of being her first intrigued him.

He parted the sections of her braid up the back of her head until it fell loose about her shoulders in brown waves.

She reached the bottom of his shirt and pushed the two sides apart. He lowered his hands, allowing her to move the shirt over his shoulders, and it fell to the floor.

He returned his hands to her hips and tipped his head, watching her as

she smoothed her hands up his chest, over his pecs and shoulders, and down the impressive bulges of his biceps.

“Wow.” She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “You’re amazing.”

“Thank you.”

“I mean it, Danny. You have the most gorgeous body. Do you work out?”

“No, this is what being a groundskeeper does for you.”

She flicked him an amused look, then returned to studying his body. He didn’t look as if he spent every hour lifting weights in front of the mirror, but his abs were nicely defined, the hard muscles of his shoulders and arms covered with smooth skin that felt like marble to the touch, only warm.

“Do you mind me admiring you?” She continued to stroke him, loving being able to touch his skin.

“No. It’s nice to be admired. I don’t get it that often.”

“Rubbish,” she scoffed. “You must have women worship you on at least a weekly basis.”

“I really don’t.”

She remembered the ties he had to his father. Maybe he found it more difficult than she’d imagined to meet girls. He’d been hurt, too—in his past, he’d loved someone, and they’d let him down. She rested a hand over his heart. She couldn’t see it, but she knew it bore scars. He looked tough and he acted confident, but he was only a man, after all.

His chest hairs were brown and slightly curly, and she ran her fingers through them, then brushed the pads of her thumbs across his small, flat nipples. He inhaled, and she looked up at him again. “Are they sensitive?”

“Yes. Not as sensitive as yours. But it feels nice.” He took hold of the arms of the jumper she’d tied around her neck, loosened them, and removed

it. Then he held the hem of her top. “May I?”

She nodded and raised her arms, and he lifted it up over her head and dropped it to the floor.

“Wow. Fuck.”

She looked down at herself. “What?” She wore a white satin and lace teddy that laced up at the sides. It was fairly new and one of her favorite pieces of lingerie, but although it was pretty, she wouldn’t have said it deserved such an expletive.

He rested his hands on her waist. His eyes had widened, and when they met hers, they held a level of heat that told her he was seriously turned on.

“How often do you wear this kind of thing?” He ran his hands up her ribs, then down again, stroking the silky material.

“Every day. Why?” She laughed as he gave her a helpless look. “It’s just a teddy.”

“It’s fucking sexy, is what it is. Jesus, Hermione, look at you. I’m glad I didn’t know you were wearing this all day or I wouldn’t have been able to concentrate.” He stroked back up her ribs, continued his fingers up to her collarbone, and finally down over the swell of her breasts.

She shivered. “I love the way you touch me.”

“What do you mean?” He brushed her sides again, then repeated the process, up to her shoulders, down over her breasts.

“As if I’m something beautiful. Something special.”

He stopped stroking her and cupped her face. “You are beautiful and special. You can’t doubt that, seriously?”

“I…” She didn’t know what to say. How could she explain that no other man—not even her husband-to-be—acted as if she was anything other than ordinary?

Danny’s smile faded, and she knew he understood. A dangerous glint

appeared in his eye. “Right,” he said, sliding his hands down to her waist, where he began to unzip her trousers. “It’s about time someone showed you what a goddess you are.”

Chapter Sixteen

Danny pushed her trousers over her hips and held her as she stepped out of them, then admired her at arm's length.

“You’ve got more of these things?” He gestured to the silky teddy that clung to her curves.

“Of course. Lots more.” She spoke as if it was the most natural thing in the world to wear sexy lingerie on a daily basis.

“I’m going to need a fashion show later on,” he told her. “I want to see them all.” How could he tell her that none of the girlfriends he’d been with had worn anything like this? Some of them had worn pretty matching bras and panties, and one or two might have donned something sexy for a special occasion. But Lynda had favored sports bras and thongs which, while he understood they didn’t give a VPL, he didn’t find particularly sexy, and none of them would have considered this kind of lingerie a daily necessity.

The scrap of satin and lace alternately revealed and highlighted Hermione’s beautiful curves. Strips of white ribbon passed over her shoulders, and her breasts were wonderfully outlined in the half cups of stretchy lace. The ties at the side looked as if they’d fall apart if he clicked his fingers. She had a trim waist and a natural swell to her hips without being pear-shaped. Her thighs were tight and toned, probably from horse-riding, he suspected. Even in her underwear, she was total class.

She chuckled, adopting a jaunty pose as if his obvious desire was giving her confidence. “That’s no problem. I have a wide range for the discerning customer, from virginal white to sexy black satin to slutty red lace.” The chuckle turned into a laugh as his eyes widened. “Gosh, you really are easy to please.”

He pulled her back into his arms and slid his hands around her. “Men are

very visual, and you're extremely pleasing to the eye."

"I'm glad you think so." She tugged the belt of his jeans. "Do I get to see what lies beneath as well?"

After removing his wallet and tossing it onto the bedside table, he dropped his hands to the denim, undid the button, and slid the zipper down. He stepped out of them and flicked off his socks, then returned to stand before her in his black boxer-briefs.

She stared at the erection that jutted proudly through the stretch cotton. "Gosh. Genie didn't lie."

He looked down at himself, wondering if he should be embarrassed at the way his dick was straining toward her as if trying to catch her attention. "Genie?"

"Apparently there's a rumor."

"Is there now? I don't know how, because I've never slept with any of my friends."

Her lips curved up. Had she thought he and Genie had been an item? They'd never even been close to that. Genie was lovely, but she'd only ever had eyes for Niall—Danny had known that even before Niall had broken up with his ex. There'd never been anything between him and Billie either. The girls he'd dated had been like comets passing through his solar system, blazing briefly before fading off into the night. Lynda had been the only other planet, and they'd got caught up in each other's gravity before she'd eventually been sucked off into the black hole that accompanied serious break ups.

But he didn't want to think about his ex now, not when he had Lady Chatterley to hand to entertain him.

At any other time he'd have asked her to keep the teddy on while they had sex, and he made a mental note to suggest she put it back on later, if

things went as well as he was hoping. But for now he needed her to be at ease with him. She had to get used to being naked with someone else, to feeling bare skin against bare skin.

He ran his fingers up her sides to the ties at the top of the teddy. “As beautiful as this is, I think it’s time to divest you of it.”

She watched him loosen the ties and then push the teddy down over her hips to the floor.

He fought against another swear word as he saw her naked for the first time. He’d seen a variety of breasts over the years, and hers were by far the best—a little above average size, high and round, the nipples a light pinky-brown, girlishly soft, begging for his mouth to cover them.

Her hands twitched as if she wanted to cover herself, although she didn’t, but he noted her pale face and an unmistakable shiver that was probably half due to having bare skin, half due to nerves.

No other man had ever laid eyes on her body. His heart went out to her as he remembered the way she’d blushed at some of his comments. Jeez, no wonder she’d blanched when he’d said about her sitting on his dick! The poor girl.

He turned and pulled back the duvet. “Get in,” he said softly, and walked around the bed to the other side.

As he removed his underwear, she slid beneath the covers. He noted her casting him brief glimpses, but he moved quickly beneath the duvet, pulled it over them, tucking it around her, and then stretched out on his side facing her, propping his head on a hand.

She did the same, inches away. “Is something wrong?” she whispered, nibbling her bottom lip. She’d expected him to jump her straight away.

He smiled. “What’s the matter, Lady Hermione? Are you in a hurry? Got somewhere else you need to be?”

“No.” Her face warmed. “I just thought...”

He slid an arm around her and slowly pulled her toward him, until her body was flush with his, from their chests to their thighs. His erection pressed against her abdomen, and the hair on his chest brushed her nipples. Moving his hand over her hips and butt, he stroked down her thigh to her knee and then lifted it over his, so she was practically wrapped around him.

“Did you really think once I got you into bed that I’d want to get it all over in minutes?” He traced light fingers up her hip and across to her back. “I’m going to take my time to love you, Hermione. And when we’re done, I’m going to start all over again. I plan to make the most of my night with you. So I hope you weren’t planning on getting any sleep.”

She swallowed. “You should be careful making promises like that. For a start, I might be so dull in bed that you’ll only want to do it once.”

“I can safely say that is not going to be an issue. Trust me.” He stroked up to her shoulder, down her arm, interlinked their fingers, and kissed her knuckles.

“Maybe I’ll wear you out and you’ll be too knackered to do it again.” Her cheeky words couldn’t hide the shyness she was obviously feeling.

“I doubt it. I have a feeling I’m going to be insatiable where you’re concerned.” He leaned forward and touched his lips to hers.

She shivered, and he raised his head. “Are you cold?”

“No. It’s that word. Insatiable...” She moistened her lips. “It gives me goosebumps.”

“Why?”

“The thought of you taking me again, and again...” Her eyes took on a lazy, sexy look of lust. “Of being wanted in that way...”

He couldn’t believe Sir Dick had never tried to make a move on her. What the hell was wrong with the man? If Danny had been engaged to a girl

like this from childhood, he'd have spent most of his teenage years trying to get her into bed. "I do want you, and I'm going to have you, Hermione, as many times as I can manage it, until we're both sweaty and exhausted from our orgasms, until you finally push me away and beg me to stop."

She shivered again. "Never." Her dark brown eyes looked into his, and even though he knew she was a virgin and she was inexperienced in this, the dark desire in them sent his temperature soaring.

But he resolved to take it slow. He kissed her languidly, his lips moving across hers, gently exploring from one corner to the other. When he touched his tongue to her bottom lip, she opened her mouth, and he slid his tongue inside against hers, reveling in the slick sensuality of it. She lifted a hand to slip into his hair, arching against him, and he tightened his arms around her, enjoying the feeling of being close to her, being intimate.

Was there anything as heavenly as being naked in bed with a girl? She felt slender and fine-boned, delicate in his arms. He'd always loved how soft women's bodies were, and Hermione's was no exception. From the breasts pressing against his chest to the thigh hooked over his, she was silky smooth, as if he was hugging a satin cushion.

He kissed her for a long time, twirling her hair around his fingers while he did so, lifting his head occasionally to admire the silky locks before returning to press his lips to hers and to slide his tongue into her mouth.

It took a while for some of the tenseness to disappear from her shoulders, but eventually she grew bolder, arching more into him, exploring the muscles of his chest and arms with her hands, clutching his hair and pulling his mouth down for another kiss.

He began to move his hands over her body, stroking down her back and arms, over her hips and down her thighs, until she sighed against his mouth, and he could tell from the way she pushed her breasts toward him that she

wanted him to touch them, even if she wasn't aware of it herself.

Still lying with his head propped on a hand, he lifted his head to look at her and cupped a breast with one hand. They both watched as he brushed his thumb across the nipple. It puckered to a peak, and she closed her eyes when he took it between his thumb and forefinger and tugged it gently.

"Ohhh..." The sigh escaped from her lips.

Growing harder with every second, he moved his hand to her other nipple and did the same, teasing it to a tight peak before returning to the first. Her lips parted, her eyelids fluttering, and Danny pushed himself up onto an elbow. It was no good—he was going to have to step things up.

Pressing her back onto the pillows, he covered her mouth with his own, claiming the kiss this time rather than requesting it, and Hermione groaned, apparently far from scared by his rising desire.

He tore his lips from hers, kissed down her neck and, while cupping her breast with one hand, covered the nipple with his mouth. She inhaled sharply, and when he stroked it with his tongue and then sucked the sensitive skin, she sank a hand into his hair and clenched her fingers in it.

He continued until her breaths were coming in gasps and she was writhing beneath him, and only then lifted his head to look at her as he slid a hand down to her thighs.

"I'd like to touch you," he murmured, stroking his fingers up the soft skin to her hipbone and across her stomach, which quivered. "Will you let me touch you, Hermione?" He kissed her lips, knowing they must be as sensitive as his, and that any kisses now would make desire spike within her as if her nerve endings were on fire. "Will you let me be the first to slide my fingers into you?"

He kissed her again, then lifted to look into her eyes. Keeping his gaze on hers as she parted her legs, he stroked up her thigh, and ran his fingers

lightly between her legs.

She shivered, so he did it again, this time stroking more firmly, sinking his fingers into her folds, which were swollen and slippery with her arousal.

“That’s my girl,” he said, breathless with desire. Coating his fingers with her moisture, he returned them to circle around her clit.

“God, Danny...” Her hips pushed against his hand of their own accord, and her teeth tugged at her bottom lip. “How do you know exactly where to... *ohhh...*”

“Is that nice?” He returned his mouth to her breast, sucking harder this time, stroking her clit firmly. She clenched her fingers in his hair, her breaths becoming uneven again, and he knew she was close to coming.

Usually he would have been happy to bring a woman to orgasm and then start all over again before entering her, but today was different. He wanted her on the edge when he slid inside her, so close to tipping over that the sensation of him filling her would be welcome rather than painful.

Lifting up, he moved between her legs and looked down at her. “Ready, sweetheart?” He reached over to the bedside table, opened his wallet, took out a condom packet, and tore off the top. Her eyes were wide, the whole of her brown irises visible.

He rolled the condom on, then leaned over her. “Trust me?” he whispered.

She nodded. “I do.” Her lips curved in a tiny smile.

Their eyes met, and he felt an answering tug deep within him at her words. He wanted to hang onto the moment, because it had been so long since he’d experienced anything in his life as innocent as this girl. He’d grown up quickly, losing by the age of five or six many of the things that normally stayed well into childhood—a belief in Santa and the tooth fairy, a belief that his parents would always be there to love and protect him, and

he'd lost his virginity at an age when many boys were still playing on their skateboards. Sex had never been about purity or innocence. And yet suddenly here was this girl giving herself to him, and he surprised himself by being incredibly touched.

Chapter Seventeen

Hermione looked up into Danny's blue eyes. They held a strange expression she couldn't quite fathom—possibly affection with a touch of surprise, although that didn't explain the warmth in them.

“I trust you,” she said again, wanting to let him know that she appreciated him going slow and taking the time to arouse her first. She was sure that for many women, the first time was often quick and painful, or at least uncomfortable. For years she'd wished she'd lost her virginity at a young age, but suddenly she was pleased she'd waited for someone who knew what he was doing, and could make it pleasurable for her.

Danny shifted between her legs, guided the tip of his erection into her folds, then settled himself on top of her.

“Hey you,” he said, and kissed her nose.

“Hey.” She slid her arms around his waist and stroked his back. The guy had a body like a Greek god—even his muscles had muscles. Just looking at him made her breathless, and she still couldn't believe they were actually having sex.

He kissed her lips, taking his time, and she let go of the tenseness that had crept back into her as she'd realized it was time for the final step. He was such a good kisser—he didn't just stick his tongue in her mouth like some of the guys had when she'd gone on dates. Instead, the touch of his tongue against hers was sensual and sexy, and one of the many reasons her heart was racing at double speed.

All of a sudden, he pushed his hips forward and slid inside her.

She gasped, and he lifted his head to look at her.

“Ouch,” she said, and blew out a breath. It had hurt more than she'd thought it would.

He laughed and kissed her, hard and passionate. “Done,” he said, his eyes alight with triumph. After pulling back a little, he pushed forward again. This time, coated with her moisture, he slid inside her right up to the hilt. “Fuck, you’re tight.”

Hermione dug her fingers into his back, groaning at the sensation of being filled and stretched. “*Ohhh...*”

He began to move rhythmically, kissing her as he did so. Now the initial sharp pain had worn off, she could concentrate on the feelings that were starting to rise within her again, the subtle clench of her muscles deep inside, the pleasurable ache that demanded to be fulfilled.

“Nice?” he murmured, kissing around her to her ear and nibbling the lobe.

“Nice is such a dull word,” she whispered back, moving her hands to his chest and sliding them across his firm, defined muscles. “Heavenly would be a better description. Blissful. Magical.”

He kissed back to her mouth, his lips curved in a smile, continuing to thrust slowly inside her. “I’m glad.”

“I’m serious, Danny.” She closed her eyes as he kissed down her neck. “Now I understand what all the fuss is about. You’re lucky I don’t live in New Zealand. I’d want to do this all day, every day. You’d never get any work done.”

He trailed his tongue down to her nipple, sucked it for a while, then returned to her mouth. “You might get bored.” He grazed his teeth on her bottom lip.

“Never.” Pleasure was building inside her, an orgasm approaching as if from a mile away. “I’d never get tired of this. Tell me we can do it again.”

He chuckled. “All night, I told you. I intend to wear you out.”

“Oh God...” She closed her eyes.

Lifting up onto his hands, he knelt beneath her, shifted up a little, and thrust more firmly. “Come on, sweetheart. Come for me.”

“I... oh...”

“I want to watch you, come on.” With each movement of his hips, he ground against her clit, and she felt the inevitable tensing of her internal muscles.

Her lips parted, and she clenched around him, everything tightening in exquisite, blissful pulses. The sensation of coming while being so full and complete was incredible, and it seemed to go on forever, leaving her panting and breathless, and grateful she was lying down, because she knew she would have fainted otherwise.

“Yes,” he said, his voice a growl, just that one word, but it was filled with satisfaction tinged with smugness, the knowledge of a man who’d just taken and pleased his woman, a primeval desire that brought goosebumps rising all over her skin.

Taking her hands in his, he pinned them above her head and then began to thrust faster, harder. Hermione flexed her fingers in his, but found she could only lie there as he took his pleasure from her, and *fuck* was that sexy. She was able to watch his climax sweep over him, his fierce frown as he stilled, the way his body hardened to rock and his hips jerked while he spilled into her.

Part of her had wondered whether once it was all done she’d regret it, but at that moment, as she watched his beautiful body claim its prize, she knew she would never wish it hadn’t happened. How could she regret such a wondrous thing? He’d given her a treasure she’d always be able to cherish. In her quiet moments, when she was alone or feeling low, she’d be able to pull this memory out of the box and remember how happy she’d been, how complete and sated she’d felt.

He blinked and focused on her, and she smiled, feeling a surge of happiness as he laughed and bent to kiss her. “Look at you,” he said. “A virgin no more. Deflowered, as you so delicately put it.”

“I am no longer chaste and pure. Thank God.”

Grinning, he moved back and withdrew from her. She watched him lean across to grab a couple of tissues from the box on the bedside table and dispose of the condom. Then he sat back and held a clean tissue out to her.

When she gave him a puzzled look, he gestured between her legs. She touched the tissue there and inhaled when it came away with spots of blood.

“Oh.” Her cheeks warmed. “I didn’t expect that.” She wiped carefully and winced at the tenderness of the area.

He lay next to her. “You didn’t think you’d bleed?”

“Come on, Danny, I’ve ridden horses since I was a kid, and bicycles, and used tampons. It’s the last thing I thought would happen.” She disposed of the tissues and curled up next to him. “I feel like a medieval bride. I’m just waiting for the maid to come in and check the sheets.”

He laughed and stretched out. “I think it’s cool. Unassailable proof.” His eyes gleamed.

“You didn’t believe me?”

“Of course I believed you. I was joking.” He held up an arm. “Come here.”

She moved into his arms, and he wrapped them tightly around her and kissed her hair. “Thank you,” she murmured, “for being gentle.”

“It doesn’t come easily.” He chuckled.

“I can imagine. When I first saw you, I had visions of you throwing me onto the lawn and doing me there and then.”

“Funnily enough, I had the same fantasy.” They both laughed. “Well,” he continued, “we’ll have to see what we can do about making it come true.”

He winked at her.

It wasn't late, and she wasn't sleepy particularly, but she felt incredibly warm and contented lying there in his arms.

He kissed her. "Are you okay?"

"Mmm."

"Not sore?"

"Not too bad."

"I'm sorry it hurt."

"It's okay. It was worth it."

"I'm glad. It didn't put you off sex then?"

She laughed. "No. Hardly."

He kissed her again, long and lingering. "Next time, it'll be better."

"It gets better?"

"Well, I have to be careful what I say here, because if I say yes it implies last time wasn't good, and it was. But yes, it gets better."

"You mean doing it in other positions?"

"Well that's just doing it differently. I meant more that it gets better when you know the other person, when you understand what turns them on."

She raised her eyebrows. "That surprises me. I would have thought men preferred sex with new partners, where it's all exciting."

He shrugged. "Others might. I've never been a fan of one-night stands."

"You've never had one?"

His lips twitched. "I didn't say that."

"Oh." She couldn't imagine having sex with someone she'd literally just met in a bar or nightclub. How awkward and uncomfortable it must feel. At least she'd been out with Danny a few times.

He stroked her cheek. "You look puzzled."

"I'm just trying to understand. Can I ask you a question?"

“Fire away.”

“It’s a stupid one.”

“I doubt that, but you can ask anyway.”

“I understand why sometimes people have sex without being involved, without knowing each other. But is that the only difference between making love and... um... you know, fucking?” Her face grew hot as his lips curved. “I know it’s a stupid thing to ask. You can laugh if you want. I just wondered.”

He linked his fingers with hers and studied them as he thought about it. “It’s not stupid at all. I’ve never actually thought about it. Knowing the other person is part of the difference, I suppose. Making love involves affection and love. Fucking is more physical.”

“And we don’t know each other very well, so what we just did, that was... um... fucking, right?”

Lifting her hand to his mouth, he kissed her fingers, his eyes filled with smiles. “No, sweetheart. That was most definitely making love.”

“Then...”

“I know we haven’t known each other very long, But I like you very much. I wanted you to enjoy it, and I wanted to share that special moment with you. It was hot and sexy, but it was also more than that.”

Warmth filled her, heating her up from the inside out. “Oh.”

“The thing is, the best sex is both things at once. Sex without emotion can be cold and unsatisfying—it becomes a purely physical thing. But when you’re with someone you love, and when you want them so much it hurts, when you can’t wait to get them naked and hot and sweaty, that’s when it’s perfect.”

He’d released her hand, and she drew patterns on his chest, watching the hairs curl around her fingers. Would she ever experience that with anyone?

She wasn't going to be here long enough to develop that kind of relationship with Danny. Thinking about it gave her a heaviness in her stomach that she couldn't explain. It would have been marvelous if it were Danny she was engaged to. But instead she was due to marry Richard, and she couldn't imagine developing the sort of relationship with him that Danny had just described, not even if they were married thirty years.

He slid a finger under her chin and lifted it so she met his eyes. "Don't." His eyes had hardened and looked a little fierce.

She swallowed. Don't what? Don't be sad? Don't think about Richard?

Deciding it was better to change the subject, she kissed him, then cuddled up to him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Tell me about your first time."

"Jeez. So long ago I can't remember."

"Were you really fourteen?"

"Yep."

"I'm guessing she wasn't."

"No. She was sixteen. I looked and acted older. I never did tell her how young I was."

"Was she a virgin too?"

"No."

"So, was it good?"

"God no. I was useless. I was fourteen! It took quite a bit of practice to get this good." He grinned.

"How much practice?"

"I haven't kept count."

"There have been so many?"

He looked startled. "I meant of the number of times I've done it, not of partners. You know, it's rather unusual to discuss past sexual habits post

coitus.”

“I’m rather unusual.”

“I’m beginning to realize that.”

She ignored his dry tone, too curious to stop now. “So come on, how many partners have you had? Fifty? A hundred?”

“Fucking hell, what kind of impression have you got of me? No, Hermione, nowhere close to that.”

“I’m sorry.” She could feel another blush creeping on. “I didn’t mean to insult you. I have no idea how many partners the average guy has. You must be, what? Twenty-seven, eight?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“So if you started at fourteen, that’s fifteen years of having sex, and I can’t imagine you going for long without it...”

He sighed. “You’d be surprised.”

“...and even if we say three to five girls a year, which doesn’t sound like many, that’s forty-five to seventy-five women...”

“Jesus, did you make up a spreadsheet to work this out?”

“I’m just surmising. And I’ll keep surmising until you tell me the truth.”

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry to ruin the image, but I’m not even in double figures.”

“Seriously?” That surprised her.

“Seriously.” He smiled.

That probably meant he’d had a few longer relationships, and possibly one that had lasted a few years.

“Who was she, Danny?”

“Who?”

“The one who broke your heart?”

His eyes widened. “What makes you think that?”

It was her turn to shrug. “Women’s instinct.”

He gave a short laugh and twirled a strand of her hair around his finger. “You really want to talk about my ex after we’ve just had sex?”

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to, but I’d like to know more about you. What happened? Did she want more, or did you?”

“She did. She wanted us to get a place and settle down.”

“And you didn’t?”

“It wasn’t a question of not wanting to. I was happy for us to stay together. But when I said I couldn’t leave my father—that he’d have to come with us, wherever we went, she took that to mean I was putting him before her. So we broke up.”

It obviously wasn’t that simple—there was a whole ocean of hurt behind his eyes, but at least now she knew it was to do with his father. The girl had wanted him to herself, and she’d thought his refusal meant he didn’t love her enough. How terribly sad and selfish.

“I’m sorry.” Hermione kissed him. “You deserve better.”

“I do.” He kissed her back. “I deserve to have hot sex with an English princess—and, oh look, my dream’s come true!”

“I’m not a princess,” she reminded him.

“Related to one.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Doesn’t matter.” He smothered her protests with his lips until she went limp in his arms. “That’s better,” he said smugly. “Now why don’t you close your eyes and get a little sleep? I’m not going to let you rest for long, but you need to keep your strength up.”

Content that he’d opened up to her a little, she let him turn her onto her side away from him and welcomed his arms around her.

“Is this spooning?” she asked.

“It is. But please don’t ask me what kind of spoon because I can never remember which one to use at dinner.”

She chuckled and kissed his hand. “Thank you again.”

“You don’t need to keep thanking me, sweetheart.”

“I know. But I want you to understand what this means to me. I know guys don’t like girls getting all heavy on them, and I swear I’m not going gooey on you, but it was special, and I appreciate you taking the time.”

“Yeah, it was completely out the goodness of my heart.” He smacked her bottom, making her jump. “Go to sleep.”

She closed her eyes, a smile playing on her lips as she drifted off.

Chapter Eighteen

Danny slept a little, but lightly, as he had done since he was young, used to having one ear open in case his father needed him.

When he awoke around one o'clock, for a moment he assumed it was his father who'd roused him, as sometimes he couldn't sleep from the pain. Danny would get up, make him a cup of tea, and wait with him until the painkillers started working before he went back to bed.

He blinked, disoriented, puzzled that the moonlight was coming through the curtains on the left side of the bed and not the right. Then as he turned toward the silver strip of light, he met the warm body next to his in the bed, and everything came rushing back to him.

Hermione was dreaming, twitching in her sleep, so he assumed that was what had awoken him. It had been a while since he'd slept in a bed with a woman so, stretching out beside her, he enjoyed the sensation of her skin against his for a moment, listening to her breathe.

His mind played back their lovemaking of the evening before, pausing every now and again on various scenes for him to enjoy. He hoped she'd found it enjoyable too—it had certainly appeared that way.

He'd tried to go slow and be gentle, but he could remember his triumphant *Done!* when he'd first thrust into her, the feeling of delight that he'd captured her innocence like a snowflake on his hand.

Had he been drunk? Virginity was a state of being, not a precious gift she'd given to him.

But his heart refused to accept that. She'd chosen him to introduce her to the delights of sex—she trusted him, and that in itself was a gift even he couldn't sneer at.

She lay facing him, her long brown hair spread out on the pillow. He

was under no illusions—if he was lucky, he might get to see her again while she was in New Zealand, but that would be it—she’d soon be heading back to the UK to her husband and her estates and her horses. Like that snowflake, she’d melt away, and he’d probably never hear from her again.

It made him sad, but he pushed it away and focused on the white shoulder peeking out of the bed. He had to concentrate on the here and now, and make the most of her while he had her.

At that moment, however, she twitched again and murmured something, although he couldn’t make out what it was. Her head tossed from side to side, and her breaths came rapidly. Was she having a nightmare? He frowned, resting a hand on her arm, but she continued to twitch and murmur.

“Ssh,” he whispered, stroking her arm. “It’s all right.”

“Don’t make me,” she said.

“It’s all right, you’re safe, sweetheart.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her brow. What was she dreaming about?

She said a few more unintelligible words, then, quite clearly, “I don’t want to.”

“Ssh. You don’t have to. It’s okay.” He kissed her cheek, then her lips, the fierce need to comfort her surprising him. He wanted to protect her, to make sure nothing would ever hurt her. There was something about this woman that radiated innocence, and he suspected she always would, even when in the midst of passion, even with five kids when she was forty years old.

“I can’t... No!”

She jerked awake and blinked furiously, obviously as puzzled as he had been when he’d first opened his eyes.

“It’s okay, it’s Danny, you’re safe.” He placed a kiss on her shoulder, and continued down her arm as she fought against heaving breaths. Hooking

the bedclothes over his head, he shifted down the bed, kissing her shoulders and breastbone, then down to her breasts. He closed his mouth over a nipple, and she gasped.

“Oh... what? Danny!” She laughed.

Glad he'd dispelled the dream, he lifted up over her, pushing her onto her back, and continued kissing down her body, covering her ribs, her waist, her stomach with hot, wet kisses.

“Mmm.” She lifted her arms above her head and stretched out beneath him. “What a lovely way to be woken up.”

“You're not awake.” He positioned himself between her thighs. “You're having a lovely, sexy dream.” Lowering down, he kissed her stomach, then each hip, and finally pushed up her knees.

“What are you doing?” She rose up on her elbows to look at him, but Danny's blood was racing around his body, and there was no way she was going to stop him now.

Sliding his tongue into her folds, he licked up to her clit and swirled his tongue over it.

“Oh! Fuck!” She collapsed back onto the pillow and covered her face with her arms. “Oh my God.”

He tried not to laugh and settled down to pleasure her. “Go back to sleep.”

“Like I could—what are you—*ohhh...*” Her complaints trailed off, and she gave a long sigh as he continued to lick and suck.

Curving one arm beneath her thigh, he stroked it reassuringly, using the other hand to part her folds to give his tongue better access. He concentrated on her clit, not wanting to make her too sore, and he hoped her moans and sighs were evidence of pleasure rather than pain.

“Danny... *ohhh...*” She lowered a hand to sink into his hair, her fingers

clutching and her nails scraping along his scalp, and he stifled a groan, trying to concentrate on her enjoyment rather than his.

Maybe it was the fact that this was the first time she'd had a man go down on her, or maybe he really was that good, but it was only moments before her breathing turned ragged and he sensed the imminent arrival of her orgasm.

He murmured his approval and licked and sucked firmly, and she came hard and fast, crying out into the night, her thighs tightening around him, her internal muscles clenching in strong pulses.

Within seconds, he'd rolled on a condom and moved up the bed to slide inside her.

"Fuck." He closed his eyes. It was like sinking into hot, wet velvet, so sublime he could have come immediately.

He didn't, though. He kept a tight hold of his self-control and opened his eyes to see her wide ones staring into his.

"Hello," she said.

He kissed her nose, then her lips. "Hello."

"Are you usually this wicked in bed?"

He began to move, giving slow thrusts of his hips. "I told you I'd wake you up."

"By going down on me? Sheesh. You could have warned me. I nearly had a heart attack."

He chuckled. "Sorry, was it not very nice? I won't do it again."

She rolled her eyes, and he kissed her again, long and luscious, until she softened beneath him and relaxed.

"Anyway," he said in her ear, kissing up her neck, "I told you in the cafe what I was going to do to you. I don't lie."

"Everyone lies," she whispered.

What had prompted that comment? Something Lord Dick has said to her? Was that who she'd been dreaming about? Danny narrowed his eyes. "No they don't. I don't." He thrust slowly. "I won't make promises I don't intend to keep, and I won't say things I don't mean. So when I tell you you're the sexiest girl I've ever had, you know I'm telling you the truth."

He kissed her hard to stop her replying, but it only delayed the inevitable.

"Now I know you're lying," she scoffed when he eventually lifted his head.

"I'm not." He adjusted his angle, pushing her knees up so he could plunge deeper into her, and her lips parted in pleasure.

"I... *ahhh*... very much... *ahhh*... doubt I'm the sexiest girl you've... *ahhh*... ever had, Danny Love."

"You are. You fire me up. I get hard just looking at you. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since that moment I saw you across the lawn."

He looked into her eyes, needing her to believe him, and felt the same tug deep in his stomach that he'd felt before as her eyes lit up, sparking with excitement at his words.

"How the hell did you stay a virgin for so long?" he asked, loving the way she met each thrust of his hips with one of her own.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean clearly you were made for sex. How have you survived?"

She laughed and ran her nails down his back. "It was easy until I saw you."

Holding her tightly, he rolled onto his back and pushed her up so she sat astride him. "Come on, beautiful, your turn to fuck me. Hard as you like."

Her eyes flared as they always did when he swore, but she didn't scold

him, so apparently it was acceptable in the bedroom where it turned her on.

She shifted, making herself comfortable, and he stroked up her body. “You have perfect breasts,” he announced, cupping them.

“Thank you.” She rocked her hips, discovering that she could make him slide in and out of her, and murmured her approval when he squeezed her nipples. “Mmm. I like this position.”

“It has its advantages.” He loved the way her breasts filled his hands, and when she tipped back her head and arched her back as she thrust, he had to blow out a breath to control himself. “Fuck, yeah.”

Dropping forward, she kissed him, and he skimmed his hands over her ribs and back, holding her hips and pushing up to bury himself inside her.

She sat upright again, her cheeks tinged with pink, and he watched her orgasm gradually wash over her, loving the way she relaxed into it, taking her pleasure from him as she rode through it. Her strong thighs gripped him, and the sheer clenching of her internal muscles around him brought on his own climax.

His fingers dug into her hips as he came, and he lost himself in the blissful pulses for a moment, feeling her bracing her hands on his chest, but unable to do anything except wait for the shudders to stop.

When he eventually opened his eyes, he found her watching him, a rather smug smile on her face.

“Something else I can tick off my list,” she said, and bent and kissed him.

“Is that all I am to you?” he grumbled. “One of your famous ‘to do’ lists?”

“Yep.” She chuckled and ran her tongue across his bottom lip. “Aw, don’t give me that face. Deny that you’re enjoying showing me the ropes.”

“I’m not. It’s a chore. I’d rather be putting a new palm tree in the

ground.”

She laughed and lifted herself off him, and he smiled, disposed of the condom, and then turned to take her in his arms.

“What were you dreaming about when I woke you?” He twirled her hair in his fingers, looking out of the curtains to the sliver of the moon visible through the gap.

For a moment she didn’t say anything. Then eventually she said, “I don’t remember.”

“I thought we said we wouldn’t lie?”

“You said you wouldn’t, and anyway, there’s no way I can test the theory, so it’s a ridiculous declaration really.”

He kissed her forehead. “Were you dreaming about Richard?”

“What, you’re not calling him Lord Dick tonight?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. He’s special to you, and I shouldn’t mock you for it. I’m just jealous, I guess.”

She pushed herself up onto an elbow. “Why?”

“Because he gets to marry you, and I don’t.”

She gave him a wry look. “You don’t strike me as the marrying kind.”

“I might be, given the right woman.”

She lowered her gaze to his chest and trailed a finger through the hair on his ribs. “He’s not special to me, Danny.”

“He’s your fiancé.”

“Not officially.”

“Hermione...”

“I’m just saying. He’s not special to me.” She curled up by his side and put her head on his shoulder.

Danny let it drop. She’d been dreaming about Richard—he knew that now. She didn’t want to marry him, but she didn’t know how to get out of it.

Family ties and responsibilities were important to them both, and although he'd gotten angry with her before, he did understand how she wanted to please her parents and do the right thing.

But should love be sacrificed for duty? He thought of what had happened between him and Lynda. Should he have told her he'd put his father in a home? He'd missed out on the chance of happiness so far—on settling down and having kids—because he'd chosen his dad. And yet he still couldn't bring himself to believe he'd done the wrong thing.

For the first time, he wondered what this Richard thought of the arrangement. Was he happy about the thought of marrying a woman he didn't love? Or perhaps he did love her. Maybe he hadn't tried to get her into bed because he wanted to wait until they were married. Did people still do that? Danny hadn't thought to ask her if either of them were religious. He knew many members of the upper class in the UK were traditional Church of England. Hermione had seemed to think that Richard had been with other women, and that he didn't expect her to remain a virgin. Danny hoped that was the case or he'd end up with a toff on his doorstep wanting to challenge him to a duel.

He nuzzled Hermione's hair, enjoying the smell of mint from her shampoo. She was dozing off again, her breathing growing more regular. He was tempted to start kissing her again and wake her up, but his body needed time to recharge, and she needed to sleep. He'd have to make do with holding her in his arms for the rest of the night.

His lips curving, he held her tightly and let sleep claim him.

Chapter Nineteen

The next time Hermione opened her eyes, it was light.

She lay there for a moment, watching the sun streaming through the windows and across the bed like a gold bar, then rolled her head to look at the bed behind her. It was empty, only a dent in the pillow to prove it hadn't all been a dream.

Had Danny left the house without saying goodbye? Holding her breath, she sat up and listened, then heard him along the corridor in the kitchen, singing. It sounded as if he was making coffee.

Her lips curved. He hadn't just abandoned her.

She hugged her knees, assessing how she felt after the adventures of the night before. Her muscles ached as if she'd been for a long ride—which she kind of had, she thought, stifling a giggle. She touched her fingers to her lips, which felt tender, reflecting the fact that Danny happened to be very good at kissing. She was a little sore down below, but that was to be expected after the action that had gone on down there.

Her face warmed at the memory of what he'd done, burying his mouth in her and bringing her to a climax before sliding inside her and giving her pleasure again.

When Hermione was younger and she'd once made a comment to her mother about what sex was like, her mother had replied, "I don't know what all the fuss is about," and in a way Hermione could see what she'd meant. All these years she'd worried about it, and suddenly she could see it for what it was—a mere coming together of two bodies that certainly didn't deserve all the hype and concern she'd given it for so long.

And yet on the other hand, she knew her mother had entirely missed the point. It was so much more than that. The actual insertion of Tab A into Slot

B was nice and it felt good, but it was the emotional and mental connection that was magical. The knowledge that she'd shared herself with another person, that she'd given him pleasure and let go of her inhibitions enough to receive pleasure in return—that was what made it special.

The moment when Danny had looked into her eyes as he'd moved inside her—that was what would stay with her forever. The connection couldn't last—it would be like trying to hold on to a snap of static electricity—but the memory of it, of that swell in her heart and the feeling that for a brief second she wasn't alone, was wonderful.

Rising from the bed, she visited the bathroom and brushed her teeth, attempted to tame her hair into a braid, then pulled on some clothes and wandered along the corridor into the kitchen.

Pausing in the doorway, she viewed the scene, smiling as a glow spread through her. Wearing only his jeans, bare-chested and barefoot and looking like a god, Danny was in the process of pouring steaming coffee from a plunger into two cups, humming as he did so. An old song by the sound of it.

“Seriously?” she said, walking into the room. “Barry White?”

He looked over his shoulder in surprise, ran his gaze down her, then grinned. “We've got it together, baby.” His husky voice sent a shiver down her spine.

“Good morning,” she said, accepting a mug of the coffee.

“Good morning.” He wrapped an arm around her, pulled her close, and kissed her. “Did you miss me?”

“I did. I thought you were a figment of my imagination for a moment.”

“Nah. Real as. Just thirsty.”

She followed him outside to the deck where they sat in the early morning sun.

“I like the outfit,” he said.

She looked down at herself. She wore his shirt, loosely buttoned, which fell halfway down her thighs. “I’ve always wanted to wear a guy’s shirt after having sex.”

“It looks good on you.”

She smiled. “I can’t believe it’s morning already. You told me you weren’t going to let me sleep! I’m disappointed.”

He sipped his coffee, his eyes twinkling over the rim of the mug. “Twice in one night not enough for you? Jeez. Now who’s insatiable?”

“I have to make the most of you while I have you.” She poked him with her toe.

He leaned back and stretched out his legs. The muscles of his torso and arms gleamed in the sun. He wouldn’t have looked out of place on a fireman’s calendar. She wiped beneath her bottom lip to make sure she wasn’t drooling.

“So you weren’t disappointed then?” he teased.

She raised her eyebrows. “You’re kidding me!”

“No. I’m hardly Casanova.”

“Danny, I had a wonderful time. Much better than I’d hoped. In fact, I was thinking—” She stopped speaking as, in the living room, her phone jangled to announce an incoming call. “Sorry. Excuse me.” She put down her coffee and went into the living room.

Picking up the phone, she checked the screen, expecting it to be one of her parents, who occasionally called her in their evening. Instead, though, the display said *Richard*.

“Fuck.” She bit her lip as the word tumbled out. Danny was starting to rub off on her.

Should she ignore it? Did she have the balls to answer it when another man was sitting only ten feet away from her? But if she didn’t, he’d only call

every five minutes, declaring he was worried about her, and if she switched off the phone it would only look suspicious.

She swiped her finger across the screen and answered it. “Hello?”

“Herm? It’s Richard.”

“Hi. How are you?” She saw Danny watching her as he drank his coffee, and turned and walked across the living room to the opposite window.

“Good,” he said. “How are things on the other side of the world?”

“Yes, okay thanks. I’m not doing much—having a bit of a holiday really. A good rest.” Her cheeks warmed as she thought of the action she’d gotten the night before, and she closed her eyes briefly.

“That’s good, I’m sure you’ll come back the better for it. Hey, look, Bill’s asked me to call you. I hope you don’t mind.”

She gritted her teeth. She hated the way he called her father Bill—everyone in the family called him William, but unfortunately her father seemed to think it meant he had some kind of close relationship with his future son-in-law, so he never complained. “Not at all.”

“Great. We were talking last night with the mayor about holding next year’s summer gala in the gardens here because the town green’s being renovated, and your dad said maybe it would be a good idea for us to fix a date. You know, for the wedding. So that we can plan the gala around it.”

Hermione put a hand on the window to steady herself. Of all the times... It was the first mention anyone had made of fixing a date for their big day. She knew she’d been lucky to get as far as she had without them making plans. First she’d said she wanted to wait until she’d finished university, then she’d managed another couple of years’ reprieve by saying she wanted to get her business up and running. But she’d known they wouldn’t wait forever.

“I...” She couldn’t think what to say.

“I was thinking maybe mid-June? That would mean we could have the

gala in July and we wouldn't have to worry about everyone destroying the grass for the wedding photos."

"Yes," she said faintly. "That sounds sensible."

"I'm sorry to mention it over the phone, but Bill said he wanted to let the mayor have a date, and besides, there will be a lot of organization to do over the year, won't there? I'm sure you'll be in your element."

"Yes," she said, feeling nauseous. "Perhaps we could..." She trailed off as, in the background, she heard a woman's voice calling for him, as if from another room. "Who was that?"

"Who was what?"

"I heard a woman say something."

"Oh. It's Pippa. Keeping me company, as you're not here."

Her middle sister. Hermione bit her lip. Richard and Pippa had always gotten on well. She knew they met up in London occasionally to go to a show or for a drink. It was eight in the evening in the UK, and it didn't sound as if he was in a pub or a nightclub, so she guessed they were at Pippa's flat in London. "Are you alone there with her?"

"Yeah. We're just having a drink. So look, what do you think? June?"

"Yes. That's fine."

"Great. I'll let Bill know." He paused. "Are you okay?"

Against her will, Hermione's eyes filled with tears. Not because she was angry at being betrayed, but because she wasn't. She didn't care that he was with Pippa, and now, after everything she'd had with Danny, she knew that was wrong. She didn't love Richard. She didn't know if she ever would, and suddenly all her plans about creating romance and magic between them seemed foolish.

She was going to commit herself to this guy that she didn't love for the rest of her life. How stupid was that?

She couldn't say anything. She needed time to think about it, because there had always been more at stake than romance, and just like Danny with his father, she had responsibilities that she couldn't throw away because she felt like it.

"I'm fine," she said. "It's early here. I haven't quite woken up yet."

"Oh of course, I forgot. What is it, seven? Sorry."

"It's okay."

"What are you wearing?"

Hermione's jaw dropped. For a start, she was wearing another man's shirt, and secondly, Richard had never asked her anything so personal before. Even though they were supposed to be getting married and they'd talked about it often, he'd never made any reference to the physical relationship they would be having.

Her face flamed. "Um...a nightie."

"Nice," he said. "What color?"

"Richard...please." She couldn't do that kind of talk with him.

He laughed. "Okay. Speak to you later." He hung up.

She threw her phone onto the sofa, trembling.

"Hey." Danny came in, put his coffee mug on the kitchen table, and walked over to her. "What's up? Who was it?"

She wrapped her arms around her waist and shook her head.

"Was it Richard?"

Tears pricked her eyes, and she pressed a hand to her lips.

"Aw. Come here." He pulled her into his arms and hugged her.

Hermione fought against the need to dissolve into tears. She didn't want to cry in front of him, because he would just say she shouldn't marry Richard, and she didn't want to have that argument with him. But she couldn't fight the overwhelming feeling of despair that was settling over her.

Danny kissed the top of her head. "I'm so sorry. Do you want me to go?"

"No. Please stay."

"Okay." He rubbed her back.

She rested her forehead on his chest and closed her eyes. He smelled wonderful, of a manly aftershave or body wash. His arms around her made her feel safe and secure. If only she could stay like this forever.

His hands skirted down over her hips, and he moved back a little and raised an eyebrow. "What are you wearing beneath my shirt?"

She rubbed her nose. "See for yourself."

His lips curving, he undid a couple of buttons and parted the sides of the shirt. A helpless look came over his face as he saw the silky teddy beneath it. "Jesus. You'll be the death of me."

She gave a little laugh and placed her hands on his chest. Richard was with another woman, so why shouldn't she have some fun with someone else? She thought about the uncomfortable feeling he'd given her when he'd asked her what she was wearing. Now she knew what truly went on between a couple in the bedroom, and how it felt to be so intimate... Could she really let Richard do those things to her?

She pushed the notion away and looked up at the man before her, whose eyes had darkened with desire. After shaking the shirt off her shoulders, she let it fall to the floor and leaned back against the kitchen worktop, conscious of her lace-covered breasts rising and falling with each breath.

"You were so kind to me last night," she said as his gaze slid down her, heating her up from the inside out. "You made love to me, and that was wonderful, and I really appreciate you being gentle. But I need to know what it's like to...you know..."

"Fuck?"

"Yes." A thrill went through her. He understood. "Take me, Danny, hard

as you like. Show me what I've been missing.”

Chapter Twenty

Danny hesitated. Not because Hermione's words didn't fire him up. He wanted nothing more than to throw her onto the kitchen table and plunge inside her again. But the reason why she'd asked him to do it gave him pause.

What the hell had Richard said to her? Danny wanted her to talk to him, to tell him what was bothering her, but he wasn't her boyfriend—he wasn't even her friend, not really. They'd gotten together out of shared lust, and he couldn't expect her to blurt out her every thought and feeling just because he demanded it.

She was with him because she wanted to forget that other life. Neither of them had ever pretended this was anything other than temporary, a way for them to escape their duties and responsibilities. If he had the power to help her do that, why should he hold back?

She was upset because he was beginning to show her what real passion could feel like. If it made her think twice about marrying that idiot back in England, then it was a good thing. She wanted him to show her what happened when making love turned into hot sex, and he was more than happy to oblige.

Keeping his eyes on hers, not smiling, he moved forward. She blinked and instinctively backed away, but after a few inches her hips met the kitchen worktop, and she stopped with a bump.

Danny continued to move forward until his body pressed against hers. Leaning on the edge of the worktop on either side of her, he imprisoned her in the circle of his arms.

She swallowed, eyes wide, hopeful, excited, and a little nervous all at once.

“You want me to fuck you?” he said, dropping his head to touch his lips

to hers.

She cleared her throat and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “Um...yes. Please.”

“So British,” he murmured. “So polite.” He placed soft kisses up her jaw and around to her ear. “You should be careful what you wish for.”

She shivered, and he felt her nipples peaking against his chest through the lacy teddy she was wearing. “Why?”

“Because some men would take advantage of a request like that.” He trailed his tongue around her ear and then sucked the lobe.

She tucked her hands behind her bottom, tipping her head to the side when he kissed down her neck. “What do you mean?”

He kissed back around to her mouth. “Some men would just turn you around and fuck you hard without any thought to your pleasure.”

Her lips parted, her chest rising and falling quickly with her rapid breaths.

“You wouldn’t want that, would you?” He skimmed his hands up her sides to her breasts. Her nipples stood out through the teddy like buttons, and when he brushed them, her breath hitched.

She still didn’t answer, turned speechless by his words.

“What’s the matter, Hermione?” He took each nipple between thumb and forefinger and tugged. “Are you beginning to realize that secret power you have as a woman?”

A moan escaped her, and she bit her bottom lip.

“Are you realizing how saying things like ‘fuck me’ to a man is like setting a match to a fuse?” He continued to tug and stroke her nipples, and she arched her spine, tipping back her head and pushing her breasts toward him.

Dropping a hand, he slid it down her stomach to between her legs,

brushing over the silky fabric even as he continued to play with her nipple. “There’s me thinking this elegant lady would be satisfied with some gentle lovemaking,” he teased, circling his fingers over her clit. “I didn’t realize that wouldn’t be enough for you.”

She lifted her head to look at him, her pupils huge. “It’s not that it’s not enough...”

Moving his hand behind her, he grasped her braid and pulled it, forcing her head back. She gasped, her lips parting, eyes widening.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” he said, nudging her legs apart with one knee. “I’d much rather know you like it rough.”

Her expression turned wry and she went to say something, but he crushed his lips to hers, stopping her words as he plunged his tongue into her mouth. He moved back briefly to lick his fingers, then kissed her again as he moved the silky fabric of the teddy to one side and slipped his wet fingers into her folds.

She tried to speak, but it came out muffled against his mouth, Ignoring it, he stroked down to her entrance and slid his fingers inside her.

“*Mmph!*” She placed both hands on his chest, but he continued to stroke her, bringing moisture up so he could tease her clit, and she panted against his mouth. “Danny!” she said when he eventually lifted his head.

“What?” He felt a surge of feral desire at the sight of her lips, red and swollen from his kisses, and the strands of hair that had loosened from her braid falling around her face.

“I... oh God...” She closed her eyes, and he increased the pressure on the swelling button between her legs, loving that he was turning her on.

“Yeah,” he said. “You want it rough, you got it, baby.” He kissed her, hard, wondering if at any point he was going to scare her, but she just opened her mouth to him and slid her hands into his hair, clenching her fingers in the

short strands. She was enjoying it, her body arching toward his, responding to his touch, and he groaned his approval.

Their kisses grew wilder as passion built between them, both of them hungry for each other, demanding, gasping for breath. Eventually Danny moved back. Holding her arms, he turned her around and pushed her forward, against the worktop.

“Oh!” She steadied herself and looked over her shoulder, eyes ablaze.

He nudged her legs open and then forced them wider with his feet, unzipped his jeans, and released the very eager erection from his briefs that was desperate to sink into her. Luckily he had a condom in his pocket, and he rolled it on in double-quick time, pulled the teddy to one side, and slid the tip of his erection into her slippery, swollen folds.

There he paused and leaned forward, pressing his lips to her neck. “I’m going to fuck you now,” he said softly. “Hard as I like, wasn’t that what you said?” Taking the ribbon straps of her teddy in his fingers, he pulled them down, peeling the silky fabric back and exposing her breasts.

She didn’t say anything, breathing hard.

He wound her braid around his hand and pulled her head back, putting his lips close to her ear, then placed a soft kiss there. “Answer me.”

Still she didn’t say anything, and he paused. “Hermione, this is just play, okay?”

She moistened her lips. “Okay.”

He slid an arm around her and hugged her. “I mean it. Tell me you want me to stop, and I’ll stop. At any time.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, meeting his gaze, and her eyes were filled with affection and excitement. “I understand. I want this, Danny. Don’t stop.”

His heart thudded, desire racing through him. She lifted a hand as if she

was going to try and remove his grip on her braid, but he caught her wrist, turned her arm, and pulled her hand behind her back.

She squealed as her bare breasts met the cold worktop. He made himself blow out a slow breath, holding back. He wanted her to enjoy the experience of rough and exciting sex, but he didn't want to hurt or scare her. Pushing his hips forward firmly, without being too hard as he knew she might still be sore from the day before, he slid inside her.

"Ahhh..."

Still holding on to her braid, he tilted his head to watch her close her eyes in bliss. "Is that nice, Your Grace?"

"Danny..."

He moved back and thrust forward again, and again, moving harder and faster once he was well lubricated and knew he wouldn't hurt her.

Kissing down her neck, he fastened his mouth where her pulse beat frantically and sucked, hard enough to make her squeal, but not enough to leave a mark. Probably. A small part of him hoped he had.

"Danny!"

He ignored her, nudged her legs wider, and bent her farther forward over the worktop. Where he held her hand behind his back, his fingers found hers, and they linked and clasped, a tender gesture amidst the passion forming between them.

She was wet now, her moisture coating his erection, and he slowed his pace for a moment, listening to the slick sound as he slid in and out of her. He released her braid, and she lowered her forehead onto her forearm, groaning at the sound.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm going to fuck you hard now, and I'm going to keep fucking you, and I won't stop until you come, do you understand?"

"Ohhh..."

Taking that as a sign that she approved, he set a fast pace, holding her shoulder and keeping her steady as he pounded into her. His own climax hovered in the wings waiting for its big moment, but he held onto it, concentrating on the woman beneath him. She was so beautiful, soft and inviting, her body welcoming him in, closing around him each time he stroked in and out.

Her exclamations grew louder with each thrust, and although he'd thought she might not be able to come until he stimulated her clit, to his surprise before long her gasps grew irregular, and then she stiffened and came, clenching around him in a series of pulses so strong that it proved his undoing.

Crying out, he let his climax sweep over him, thrusting hard, and groaning as blissful sensations flooded his body, spiriting him away for a brief moment to a dreamy land where there was nothing but Hermione and her soft body and pleasure.

He stayed there as long as he could, but gradually the real world asserted itself, and he released her hand and leaned forward over her to press his lips to her neck.

“All right, sweetheart?” he whispered.

“Mmm.” She sighed.

Smiling, he withdrew carefully, disposed of the condom, and zipped up his jeans, then turned her and wrapped his arms around her.

He kissed her cheek. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, of course not.” She snuggled up to him and kissed his chest. “It was nice.”

“You like me playing Mellors?”

She laughed. “Yes. You slip into the role surprisingly easily.”

He grinned. “And you play the innocent Lady Chatterley very well too.”

They stood there for a while, letting the autumn sun warm them, and Danny felt a sense of happiness and wellbeing settle over him. At that moment, in the here and now, he was sated and content. Did Hermione feel the same way?

He kissed the top of her head. "Do you feel better now?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"I'm sorry about the phone call. If you want to talk to me about it, you can, okay?"

"Okay." She didn't elaborate though. He felt a twinge of disappointment, but pushed it away, not wanting to spoil the morning.

"We need a shower," he said.

She nodded and pulled back from him a little. "Do you want to go in first?"

"You've misunderstood me." Taking her hand, he led her down the corridor to her room, and through to the bathroom. Opening the shower cubicle, he turned the water on, then began to unbutton his jeans.

She met his mischievous smile with wide eyes. "You mean...together?"

"Yep." He tugged the scrap of satin and lace that was barely covering her. "Come on, get it off."

Laughing, she stripped, and they stepped into the shower.

Danny put his arms around her, content to stand there and let the water wash over them. Her pale skin gleamed, and it felt like silk when he ran his hands down her back.

He washed her with the body gel, kissing her as he did so, and then passed the body puff to her and let her wash him. She took her time, and he glowed at the admiration in her eyes when she washed the muscles in his arms and chest, and turned around so she could wash his back.

She took a while to stroke over his shoulder blades and down his spine,

then slipped her arms around him and hugged him, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

“You okay?” He stroked her arms, then turned and lifted her chin.

She nodded, but her smile was sad. “Just disappointed it’s nearly over.”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t have to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can ask Fleur whether she can look after Dad again for a few nights until you leave. I don’t ask her much, so I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. If you want, that is.”

Her face lit up. “That would be nice.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do.” He kissed her, and the kiss turned into a long smooch that made them both sigh and break apart reluctantly.

They left the shower and dried each other with towels, then got dressed and made themselves another coffee to have on the deck.

Danny sat beside her and watched her stretch out in the sun, his gaze lingering on the curve of her pale throat as she tipped back her head, the glimpse of her cleavage visible in the V of her top, and wondered if he’d done the right thing. He’d had a great time, but maybe it would have been better to end it today. As much as he didn’t want Hermione to return to the UK and marry someone she didn’t love, equally he didn’t really want to get caught up in some big emotional conflict. He liked her, found her sexy, and had enjoyed her company, but that was as far as it went.

Yeah, his brain whispered. Keep telling yourself that, and you might begin to believe it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Danny left around ten to go home to relieve Fleur, promising Hermione he'd be in touch as soon as he'd worked out when he could see her again.

She waved goodbye as he drove away, then walked back into the living room and stood there for a moment.

The room was oddly quiet, and everything felt strangely unreal. Her life had changed so much, and yet outwardly nobody would notice any difference. If her parents and Richard walked into the room right now, they would assume she was the same as she'd always been.

After making herself another coffee, she took it out onto the deck along with her laptop and settled down to do some work. Her assistant, Renee, who was looking after the office while she was away, had sent her a few queries, and Hermione spent a while answering emails and doing some admin that couldn't wait until she got back.

When she'd finished that, she opened her most recent file and stared at the screen for a while. She'd been working on a new brochure she was targeting at women in their thirties and forties with the theme of re-kindling a relationship that had gone cool and needed some heating up. After she'd stared at it for a few minutes, though, she closed the lid of the laptop, slid down in the chair, and looked out at the view instead.

Her whole business was built around love, romance, and sex, and it was only now that she realized she knew absolutely nothing about any of them. Or at least she hadn't until she'd met Danny. She'd convinced herself it didn't matter that she wasn't in love with Richard—she'd decided that if a couple worked on creating romance in a relationship, it would magically appear, and that was what she'd been telling her customers for the past few years.

Now, she felt incredibly naive. She would never be able to feel for Richard what she felt for Danny.

Then she blew out a long breath. *Wait*, she told herself. Was it possible that she was making the wrong assumptions in both cases? She'd had so many letters from customers thanking her for the weekends she'd organized and saying it had given their relationship a new lease of life. Maybe she was right and it *was* possible to rekindle a romance, or to create romance that hadn't been there before. Maybe now that she knew what it was possible to feel for a guy, she'd be able to recreate that with her husband-to-be.

She pulled out her phone and flicked through her photos until she came to one of Richard. She studied the picture for a moment. He was tall, although not as tall as Danny, and nowhere near as big across the shoulders, but he played squash and rode horses, so he was toned and muscular, without an inch of fat. He had a nice face, and dark-blond hair that flopped over his forehead. He was a lawyer, so he nearly always wore a suit.

So why didn't he do it for her? Why didn't her heart race when she looked at him the way it did when she looked at Danny? And was it possible to make it race—to create that magic?

At that moment her phone rang in her hand, making her jump. She checked the screen, not missing the fact that her first emotion was fear that it might be Richard again, but she didn't recognize the number.

She swiped her thumb across the screen. "Hello?"

"Hi, Hermione?"

"Yes, speaking."

"Hi, it's Genie—we met at *Between the Sheets* the other night."

Pleasure filled her. "Oh yes, hello Genie. Nice to hear from you."

"I hope you don't mind me calling—I texted Danny and he gave me your number. I was wondering what you're up to today, and if you'd like to

go to lunch with me.”

“I’d love to,” Hermione said, touched to have been asked.

“Great! I can pick you up if you like, say around one?”

“That would be lovely.”

“Cool. What’s the address?”

She gave it to her, and Genie said she’d see her later and hung up.

Hermione put the phone down and looked across the lawns to the ocean beyond. The sky was clouding over in the distance, and it wouldn’t surprise her if rain appeared later, but for now the bright sunshine lifted her spirits, and she felt a renewed sense of hope.

She was going to focus on the here and now, and enjoying her holiday and New Zealand while she was there. There was no point in spoiling it by worrying about returning to England or about Richard. Everything would sort itself out, one way or another.

Opening her laptop, she resigned herself to a few hours’ work before she got ready to meet Genie, and she pushed Danny Love and the memory of the way he’d thrilled her that morning by taking her in the kitchen in the way she’d always dreamed to the back of her mind.

*

“Kia ora,” Genie said as Hermione slid into the passenger seat of her car.

“Kia ora.” Hermione smiled and clipped in her seatbelt. “I hope I said that right! Can’t quite get my tongue to roll the ‘r’s like you Kiwis do.”

Genie pulled away, heading down the drive toward the main road.

“Yeah, I guess it’s difficult when you’re not used to it. It’s like the word Maori—people from outside the country tend to rhyme the first syllable with cow, but actually we pronounce all the vowels so it comes out more Mah-aw-ree.”

Hermione repeated it, pleased when Genie nodded. “I was teasing Danny

about the way your ‘e’s become ‘i’s,” she said. “That didn’t end well when he made a comment about sitting on his deck.”

Genie giggled. “And it works the other way too—our ‘i’s apparently become ‘e’s. Niall said when he was in Europe, girls kept holding up six fingers and asking him how many there were.”

Hermione grinned. “How long have you two been together?”

“Oh, not long. I mean we’ve known each other for years—I grew up with his family.”

“Yes, Danny told me.”

“I’d always liked him, of course, but you ignore it, don’t you? Pretend to yourself that you don’t, or that it doesn’t matter. It’s amazing how you can fool yourself without knowing, if you know what I mean.”

“I do, as it happens.” But she wasn’t going to ponder on that.

“I thought we’d go to a lovely place on the pier. There’s a wind blowing up so we’ll go inside. They have a real fire and do a great seafood chowder.”

“Sounds lovely.”

Genie continued to chat as she drove, and Hermione studied her profile as she listened. She was very easy to be with, but Hermione remembered Danny saying that her best friend—Niall’s sister—had died in the bomb blast that had also injured her. She wasn’t sure if Genie was comfortable talking about it, but she did notice as they pulled up and then walked across to the entrance of Flukes cafe that Genie had a slight limp.

As it happened, once they’d ordered their drinks and chowders, Genie brought it up herself.

“It’s gorgeous here,” Hermione was saying. The restaurant was right on the edge of the pier and overlooked the ocean. The ferry was currently on its way to the town of Russell in the distance, and lots of other boats meandered around the water, presumably heading out to catch snapper for tea.

“It’s my favorite place in Paihia,” Genie said. “Apart from *Between the Sheets*, obviously! But Ciara and I used to come here a lot.” She looked out, across the waves.

“Ciara was Niall’s sister, wasn’t she?” Hermione asked gently.

“Yes, and my best friend.” Genie smiled, but it didn’t touch her eyes. “She died in Afghanistan.”

“I’m so sorry. That must have been awful.”

“It was. It’s been hard. I hurt my knee in the blast, but in many ways it’s the emotional stuff that’s harder to get over, you know?”

“It sounds as if it brought you and Niall closer together though. So at least something good came out of it.”

“Yes.” Genie smiled. “Silver lining and all that.” She tipped her head, and a touch of mischievousness lit her eyes. “Anyway, enough about me. Tell me more about you. Danny said you run a romantic retreats business.”

“Yes. Although I’m beginning to think I know absolutely nothing about romance or love, so I’m not sure I’m any good at it!”

“Aw, I’m sure that’s not the case, but I know what you mean. Mind you, I sometimes wonder if anyone knows what’s going on. We all fumble our way through relationships and hope for the best.”

“Really? I always assume that everyone else is privy to some kind of guide book but I’ve missed my copy.”

Genie chuckled, leaning back as the waitress brought their chowders, while another placed a bowl of hunks of bread between them.

“Ooh,” Hermione said, stirring the chowder with her spoon and seeing it contained whole prawns and scallops and large chunks of fish. “Lovely.”

“Best in the bay, I tell you.” Genie unceremoniously dunked her bread in the chowder and chewed it as she surveyed her companion. “Danny said you were engaged to someone else.”

“Did he now?” Hermione felt a flare of irritation, then realized it wasn’t irritation but jealousy at the fact that Danny had discussed her with Genie. She remembered the comment Genie had said at *Between the Sheets* about the size of Danny’s... feet, and wondered again if she was talking from experience. “Are you and Danny close?”

“Kinda,” Genie said, apparently oblivious to any undercurrent. “He’s a good friend, and I’ve known him a long time. Not interested in him in that way, though.” She gave Hermione a wry look, and Hermione realized Genie wasn’t as oblivious as she’d thought.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t implying...”

“It’s okay. He’s a gorgeous guy, and I love him dearly, but there’s never been anything between us. We talk quite a bit, mainly because he doesn’t have many other close women friends.”

“What about his sister?”

“Tess? They get on okay, but there’s always been tension between them, beneath the surface, you know?”

This was turning out to be a great insight into Danny. Hermione felt guilty that she’d been jealous and determined to make the most of Genie’s insight into his background. “Why so?”

“I think basically because his mother left him and his father when he was four and set up shop with Tess’s dad. He doesn’t blame her for it, but it must be difficult not to bear resentment toward her. Tess’s dad is quite wealthy so she got to go to university, and I think he paid the deposit on her house, whereas Danny’s had to work for every cent.”

“He said he would like to have gone to university.”

“Oh, he would have loved it—he’s really smart. The smartest guy I know, I think, apart from Finn—that’s Niall’s brother and he’s pretty cerebral. But it just wasn’t meant to be. What I like about Danny is that even

though life shat on him, he didn't sit there and cry about it and blame the world—he got out there and worked his socks off. I can't tell you how much he's put into his business.”

“Oh?” Hermione tried to squash the guilt that rose inside her as she thought of how she'd insulted him, and failed.

“God yeah. As a teen he went house to house asking for work in people's gardens, and saved the money to buy his own equipment. Took online courses in landscaping and gardening to learn the basics, as well as bookkeeping and all that crap about setting up your own business. Started small, built himself up a client list gradually, got them to write recommendations, hired others to work for him. Now he gets large contracts—his firm is doing the improvements on the domain in town, did you know that?”

Hermione had driven past the domain—the town green—and had seen the work going on there, but she hadn't realized *Love Landscaping* was behind it. “I didn't, no.”

“He's one of the good guys. A bit rough around the edges, I know. He used to get into a lot of fights when he was young.” Genie took a mouthful of chowder and winked.

“Oh.” It didn't surprise Hermione. She'd already learned he was a physical kind of guy. “What about his... you know... love life?”

Genie sipped her wine. “He went out with a few girls in his teens, no one special, as far as I know. In fact, nobody special at all until he met Lynda.”

“Lynda?” Hermione fought against another surge of jealousy.

“Yeah.” Genie's eyes turned hard. “She was a bitch. Sorry, but that's how it is. He was pretty into her, but right at the moment she started putting pressure on him to settle down, his dad had a flare and was really sick. Sometimes I think if she'd waited for Ron to go into remission again, she

might have been able to talk Danny into putting him into a home, but she kept on and he just wasn't ready. So she walked out."

"She broke his heart?"

Genie tipped her head from side to side. "He was upset at the time, but the two of them were never hearts and flowers in love. He wasn't like how he is with you." Genie took a mouthful of prawn from her spoon, her eyes meeting Hermione's.

Hermione's face burned. "He's not... we're not..."

"Oh, I think you are. Or he is, anyway. I've never seen him so besotted. I know it's only supposed to be a fling, but I thought you should know."

Hermione looked down at her chowder, her appetite disappearing. That was why Genie had asked her to lunch. She wanted to warn her. Danny was her friend, and Genie was saying subtly—or maybe not so subtly—that Hermione should be aware that he'd fallen for her, and she had to be careful not to break his heart.

"Hey." Genie laid a hand on hers. "Don't be upset. I'm sorry, I didn't mean that to come out the way it did. He's a big boy and he'll be fine when you've gone. I just thought you should know how he's feeling."

"He told you this?"

Genie snorted and leaned back. "Don't be daft. When have men ever been aware of what they're feeling? But it's obvious."

"How?"

Genie drew a spiral over her eye. "He's dazzled. He couldn't take his eyes off you at the bar, and earlier I couldn't get a word in edgewise. He talked about you non-stop."

"Goodness."

Genie laughed, finished off her chowder, and pushed away her plate. "So come on then, tell me about yourself, and about this Richard. What's that all

about?"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Danny let himself in the front door and walked through to the living room. It was empty, but he could hear Fleur singing in the kitchen.

“Hey.” He went up to her and gave her a hug from behind.

“Danny boy!” She turned from washing the dishes, her arms soapy up to the elbows, and kissed his cheek. “Hello, darling. You’re back early.”

“I said I’d be home by ten and it’s nearly ten thirty.”

“I know but I assumed you’d be otherwise engaged.” She winked at him and picked up a cloth to wipe her hands.

He gave her a wry look, deigned to answer, and looked out of the window. His father sat in the garden, watching the birds feeding on the table. “How is he?”

“He’s okay.” She turned away as the kettle boiled and clicked off.

“Coffee?”

“Fleur?”

She readied a third cup and poured the hot water into the plunger. “He had a bit of an incident in the night, that’s all. Lost control of his bowels. It wasn’t an issue, all cleaned up and everything, and I’ve washed the bedding, but he’s very embarrassed about it.”

“Fuck. It’s the second time that’s happened.”

She stirred the plunger. “Do you think it shows a degeneration of the nerves in the area?”

“He’s definitely getting worse. He’s not had control of his bladder for a while, but this is new. Did you notice any problems with his speech?”

“No, not really, but I did him tomatoes on toast for tea and he had trouble swallowing the skins. I think you’ll have to give him skinless ones from now on.”

Danny's throat tightened. Ray Love sat slumped in the wheelchair, clearly dejected, not even the sight of his birds enough to lift him out of his depression.

"It's not going to get easier," Fleur said softly, pouring the coffee.

"I know. We'll manage." Danny steeled himself for an argument, but after a glance at his face, Fleur said nothing.

Placing the mugs on a tray along with some biscuits, she picked it up and gave him a bright smile. "Come on. Let's cheer the old boy up with tales of your exotic night."

Rolling his eyes, he followed her outside. It was clouding over to the east, but for now the garden was warm from the sunshine, and he could smell the ripe mandarins that hung in the trees like bright orange baubles. Later, he decided he would pick a couple and squeeze some fresh juice for his father. He might have trouble eating the flesh but at least he could drink the juice.

"Hey Dad." He leaned down and kissed his father's grey head.

"Danny boy. How did it go? Have a good evening?"

"Great, thanks." He sat on the bench next to his father's wheelchair. Fleur put the tray on the table, and the two men took a mug and a biscuit from the plate.

"Come on then," Fleur teased, "let's have a few gory details. We lead very dull lives, Danny. Entertain us!"

"We played Scrabble, watched TV, then went to bed in separate rooms."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, right."

Fleur smiled. "Did you have a good time? It can be different, sometimes, being with someone you haven't known for a long time for more than an hour or two—it can be hard to find things to say or it feels awkward."

"No, it wasn't like that." Danny dunked his biscuit, took a bite, and chewed thoughtfully. "She was very easy to be with. I didn't think she would

be, because we're from such different backgrounds—I thought we wouldn't have anything in common, but the differences between us just made her interesting. We liked the same things—movies, music, travel. We had the same views on many subjects. She had opinions, but not overwhelming ones, and she was willing to listen to my point of view. She was lovely, actually.”

He sipped his coffee, only then aware of his father and his aunt exchanging a glance. “What?”

“Are you seeing her again?” Fleur asked.

Danny shrugged. “I'd like to, but... you know... it depends.”

“Does she want to see you again?”

His lips curved slowly at Fleur's impish, hopeful smile. “Yes, but don't start getting your hopes up and buying your hat for the wedding. She's only here for another couple of weeks—she flies out the day after midwinter. There's hardly time for anything to get serious.”

“I know, but that doesn't mean you can't have fun while she's here.”

“She was nice,” Ron said. “Classy, but not superior.”

“You mean apart from assuming I was a workman?”

“Come on, Danny, you were as bad with your first impressions of her. You thought she was a poor little rich girl, spoiled and pampered.”

“She is spoiled and pampered.” Even as he said it, though, he knew it wasn't true. He leaned back in the chair and ran a hand through his hair. “No, that's unfair. Obviously her family's rich so she's never gone without, but she doesn't come across as pampered. She works hard, and she tries to be independent. It's difficult when you have family responsibilities—it's not easy to break away from that.”

Ron looked down into his coffee mug, and Danny felt a sweep of guilt. “Hey, I didn't mean you, Dad.”

“I know, but it's the same thing, isn't it? Don't you think I know that I

came between you and Lynda, son? Don't you think that kills me every day?"

"No, Dad, you didn't. What came between us was that she didn't understand sometimes there are more important things in life than sailing off into the sunset together. I don't want to be with a woman who thinks responsibility to one's family isn't important." At least Hermione understood that, he thought. Of all people, she was the one who got that the most.

He sighed and tipped his head back to look up at the clouds. "I know it's not a nice thing to say, but Lynda was convenient, for a while. She fitted the role of girlfriend, she was someone to take out, and it was nice being a couple for a while. But she wasn't The One."

Wait, The One? What was he talking about? He'd never believed in soulmates before, the idea that there was one person in the whole world with whom he was destined to be. Hermione's romantic notions must be rubbing off on him.

"I've got an idea," Fleur said. "Why don't I come and stay with Ron for two weeks, and you go and stay with Hermione?"

"Thanks for the offer, Fleur, but I couldn't ask that of you. You have your own family to think about."

She blew a raspberry. "My children are grown up now, in case you haven't noticed. Rose and Lily can just as easily call in here as at home, and it'll mean Ron will get to see their kids."

"What about Jack?"

"Jack can stay here too—the spare bed's a double. He won't care, long as you've got the rugby channel on Sky. He can be some company for Ron, too, they've always got on well." Her eyes said what her lips didn't need to—that Ron might feel more comfortable dealing with a man if he had any personal issues.

Danny stared at her, his brain whirling. Stay with Hermione for two

whole weeks? “I don’t know if she’d want me there permanently.”

“Oh... I saw the way she looked at you. I’m sure she’d be delighted. But you can ask, anyway.”

“I...” He looked at his father.

“Go on, son,” Ron said softly. “You need a holiday.”

“I can’t afford to take time off work, Dad.”

“I meant from me. It’ll do us both good. I’ll feel better knowing you’re having a bit of a break and doing something for yourself. You’re a good lad, and you’ve made a lot of sacrifices for me.”

He held up a hand to stop Danny talking. “Let me finish. I’m not being a martyr here. I’d have done the same for my father, God rest his soul, and I understand what you’re saying about Lynda and not wanting to be with someone who doesn’t feel the same way about family. But you’ve gone above and beyond the call of duty. Don’t think I don’t count my blessings every single day that you have a heart of gold and that you’ve been there for me.”

To his embarrassment, Danny’s eyes filled with tears and his throat tightened. “Aw, Dad...”

Fleur leaned across and squeezed his hand. “It’s time you did something for yourself. And it would only be for two weeks, anyway. Go on, sweetheart. It’ll be good for you. We all need a change sometimes.”

Too emotional to talk, Danny stood and walked down the path, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans. Tuis and mynah birds fluttered into the air as he passed the bird feeder, and the smell of lemons arose from a nearby tree as the fantails jumped from branch to branch.

He’d made the path wide so his dad could get his wheelchair along it easily, and at the bottom was a small pool with fish and frogs that Ron liked to watch. Danny stopped there, half-sheltered from Ron and Fleur in the

trees, and let the emotion wash over him for a moment.

He'd never doubted that his father appreciated what he'd given up to look after him, but it wasn't something they'd ever talked about. For a start, they were men, and it was generally understood things like that didn't need to be said. Plus, Ron got embarrassed and ashamed at the notion that someone had to look after him at all, let alone his own son. He was a proud man, and Danny always did his best to help his father keep his dignity. If that meant not discussing his own sacrifices, then that was fine.

So to hear his father finally say that he knew and appreciated what Danny had done for him was a special moment. He raised a hand to his face and rubbed his eyes, took a shaky breath, and wiped his cheeks. "What a pussy," he mumbled, stuffing his hands back in his pockets.

Two whole weeks with Hermione... He watched the orange fish slipping through the reeds and wondered what she'd say if he asked her. What would he do if she said no? He sighed. It would hardly be the end of the world.

Perhaps the bigger question should be: was it a good idea that he stayed?

He nudged a small rock with his toe. He liked her. He wanted to spend time with her. In fact, he was already missing her.

"Nope, nope, nope," he said out loud to the fantail that was jumping around in front of him, but it didn't sound convincing even to his own ears. He was already half in love with Hermione Spencer after spending only one night with her. How the hell was he going to feel if he had her to himself all night every night for fourteen days?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Hermione finished her chowder and dabbed her mouth with the serviette. “Mm. That was absolutely delicious. The best I’ve had.”

“It is super here,” Genie said. The waiter came up and removed their bowls, then gave them the menu so they could choose a dessert.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly,” Hermione said, then laughed. “I’ll have a Belgian chocolate pot, please!”

Genie grinned. “Same for me, please. And a latte to follow.”

“Yes, me too, thanks.”

They handed the menus to the waiter and settled back to finish off their wine.

“So come on then.” Genie’s eyes twinkled. “You haven’t answered my question yet.”

Hermione sighed and looked out of the window. The clouds were coming in more quickly than she’d thought, blocking out the sun and turning the sea to a dark blue, whipping it into waves. “Yes, I’m getting married. His name’s Richard Tracey, and he’s the son of the Earl of Dartington.”

“Fuck.”

“Well said.”

“Sorry. But it’s like you’ve stepped out of *Pride and Prejudice*.”

Hermione smiled. “I can see why it looks that way to outsiders.”

“So your *whanau* are making you marry this dude?”

“Sorry, far-no?”

“Whanau. Family.”

“Oh. Yes. I mean no. They’re not forcing me. It’s just the done thing. It’s hard to explain.” Hermione waited for Genie to mock her.

But Genie’s brow furrowed and sympathy filled her eyes. “That must be

difficult for you.”

Hermione swallowed, the other girl’s kindness surprising her. “It wasn’t for a long time. All through my teens it was a comfort, knowing that I didn’t have to worry about finding a partner, a husband, because one had already been arranged for me.”

Genie nodded slowly. “I can see that.”

“My parents had told me there was no rush—that the wedding could wait until I’d left university, and I just didn’t think of it much. I’ve known Richard since I was a child, and we’ve always got on okay. He’s a nice guy.” She pushed away the memory of the shiver he’d given her when he’d asked her what she was wearing.

“But it’s gotten more difficult recently?”

“University opened my eyes to real life. All around me were girls who were falling in love and choosing the man they were going to be with for the rest of their lives—or the foreseeable future, anyway. I began to do a lot of reading about relationships, about the nature of love, and I thought I had it all figured out.”

Her face warmed. It took a lot of courage to tell Genie this, but maybe it was because she was the other side of the world and she was talking to an almost stranger, or maybe it was just that Genie seemed so un-judgmental, that she felt an urge to confess.

“I read time and again about how people mistake the spark of lust for love, and how we’ve all come to think that the phrase ‘fall in love’ means you can literally love someone immediately. The books said this is a huge mistake, and once that insta-lust wears off there’s often very little left. They said love that lasts needs a strong foundation. It needs to be built on a relationship where the couple have many things in common, and have similar thoughts and views on life, and that’s why relationships where couples are

friends first are often the most successful.”

“That makes sense.”

“It does, and so I thought I was incredibly lucky to have this ready-made husband who I’d known for so long waiting for me. I started making lists of the kinds of things we could do to create excitement in our marriage—because I was already conscious there was no excitement there. My business grew out of that, and it’s done well enough that I know there must be some truth in the notion that relationships have to be worked at to be successful.”

Genie leaned back and smiled at the waitress as she brought out their desserts. “Wow, that looks good.” She sank her spoon into the chocolate pot and ate a mouthful of the gooey cake. “Aw, heaven.” Turning the spoon over, she licked it clean, studying Hermione while she did so. “I think you’re right. Divorce is more common nowadays because people are looking for the quick fix, for the insta-love, as you put it, and when it goes wrong, they think the relationship is broken and they split up. But a successful relationship does take work. It takes patience and compromise, because nobody’s perfect.”

“That’s what I thought. But... I think I made the mistake of assuming that you can have a successful marriage without that initial spark.” Hermione dipped the spoon into the pot. It looked delicious, but suddenly she couldn’t bring herself to eat it. “I’d decided that falling in love wasn’t a basis on which you could build a marriage, but what I didn’t realize was that for it to work, there has to be that initial attraction, or what’s the point?”

Genie let out a long sigh and ate another spoonful. “I’m sure there are many successful marriages that don’t start with falling in love. Or where the exciting insta-love fades but the couple stays together because they are comfortable and safe—and we shouldn’t sneer at that. Many people aren’t lucky enough to find a partner, and security and contentment are things that are important for a happy life.”

“I guess.”

“But the thing is, I suppose it’s up to the individual to decide if that’s enough. Many women devote their lives to their families and friends, their career, and to keeping their homes nice and making sure their partner wants for nothing, and they’re willing to let go of the excitement because they think they have more than enough to outweigh its loss. But I don’t know that I’d be happy with that.”

Hermione finished off her glass of wine. “You think a relationship needs excitement?”

“I think my relationship does. Look, if—God forbid—Niall had a terrible accident and lost the use of his legs or something, and he could never have sex again, that doesn’t mean I’d leave him, of course it doesn’t. There is more to a relationship than sex. But I know that even if we couldn’t have sex, I’d still look at him and get that little leap in my heart, that shock, as if I’ve scuffed my feet on the carpet and touched something metal, you know?”

Hermione had felt that shock, but unfortunately not with the guy she was supposed to be marrying. “Yes.”

“And if we have kids and we go through a sticky patch and ten years down the line I suddenly realize we’re not spending enough time together, I’d do everything I could to win him back, like you say in your business, by making time for each other, making the effort.” Genie sat forward. “But I couldn’t marry a man I wasn’t in love with and think that either the excitement didn’t matter, or hope it would magically appear.”

Tears pricked Hermione’s eyes. “You’re right.”

“Oh fuck, I’m sorry. Jeez, I’ve put my foot in it. Look, as I said, I’m sure there are lots of successful marriages out there where the couples aren’t swinging from the chandeliers every night. I just meant it’s not for me.”

“I know. The thing is, I thought I could be one of those women—I

thought it didn't matter to me. But I'm beginning to realize that it does. Very much." She sniffed and rubbed her nose.

Genie tipped her head to the side. "Are you in love with Danny?"

"Goodness! No! Well, I don't think so. I don't know. Maybe. Yes, probably."

Genie chuckled. "I'm not surprised. He's a sweetie."

"Yes, he is." Hermione's head spun. Was she in love with him? Already? They'd only spent one night together!

But Genie hadn't asked *Do you love Danny?* She'd asked *Are you in love with Danny?* They were two separate things. The second might well be possible—that was the spark Genie had been talking about, and that was most definitely there. But did she love him? She couldn't. Love was organic and grew slowly, over time, like everything else in nature. Apart from bamboo. And mold on cheese she left in the fridge that seemed to spring up overnight.

She opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment her phone rang, making her jump. She picked it up and looked at the screen. "It's Danny." For a brief second, she wondered whether he somehow knew they'd been talking about him. She felt as if she'd jumped into a scalding bath, her body burning from her face to her toes.

Genie laughed. "Well that confirms it."

Pressing a hand to her cheek and giving the other girl a wry look, Hermione answered it. "Hello, Danny."

"Hey, you. How are you?"

"I'm good." Just the sound of his voice gave her goosebumps, and suddenly she realized how much she missed him. *Good Lord, girl, you've got it bad...*

"What are you up to?"

"I'm having lunch with Genie."

“Oh, that’s nice.” She could almost hear his smile. “Whereabouts?”

“Flukes. It’s lovely here. It’s going to rain though.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Hey, I have something to ask you.”

“Go on then.”

“Um... I was just talking to Fleur about whether she had any time to look after Dad.”

“Oh yes? And?”

He fell silent for a moment. She had the distinct feeling he was looking sheepish. “She’s offered to stay for two weeks here with Jack—her husband. So, if you wanted, I could come and stay with you. But I don’t have to, it’s just an idea.”

Hermione’s eyes widened, and she stared at Genie, seeing her own delight reflected in Genie’s smile. “For two weeks?”

“I know it’s a long time, so we could just make it a day or two if you’d rather, and perhaps I could—”

“Oh Danny, that would be lovely.”

He stopped talking. Then he said, “You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. You’ll sleep in the spare room though, right?”

Genie chuckled, and Danny gave a wry laugh. “If you want. I’d be happy to, if it meant being close to you.”

Hermione lowered her gaze and played with her napkin. “That’s a sweet thing to say.”

“I mean it. I miss you. I want to be with you. I know it’s only two weeks, and part of me thinks it’s mad because we’re probably just digging ourselves a hole, but hey, life’s short. If we can snatch two weeks of happiness, I think we should, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” His words told her that he felt the same way. That spending time together was a little bit dangerous, because they were only going to fall

for each other further, but should that be a reason to stay away from each other? She didn't think so, and neither did he apparently.

"I'll carry on working," he said, "but I'll stay at the house at night."

"Sounds great."

"I'll do a few things at home this afternoon, and then I'll come back this evening, okay?"

"Okay. I'll see you later."

"See you later, sweetheart. Oh, by the way, what are you wearing under your clothes today?"

Hermione blushed, very aware that in comparison to the embarrassment she'd felt when Richard had asked her a similar question, this time all she felt was warmth and pleasure at the thought of Danny imagining her in her underwear.

"Genie's sitting opposite me," she scolded, dipping her spoon into the chocolate pot, her appetite having miraculously returned.

"Meh. She won't care. If she embarrasses you, just ask her about the bar stool."

Hermione laughed, winking at Genie and causing her eyebrows to rise. "All right, I'll give you a hint. Black, and lace."

"Fuck. I'm coming over now."

She chuckled. "See you later."

"Damn straight." He hung up.

Hermione put the phone down and grinned at Genie.

"No need to ask what his question was," Genie said, scraping around the edge of the chocolate pot.

"He told me I'm supposed to ask you about the bar stool."

Genie stopped, and her lips curved up. "Cheeky sod."

"Come on, spill the beans."

Her cheeks turning a pretty pink, Genie pushed the chocolate pot away and rolled her eyes. “Beck had to pick up his son one evening. He’s separated from his wife and he has a toddler, and he was due to have him for the night, so I said I’d lock up the bar. Niall came to help, and we’d tidied up and were about to leave and... well... Niall was feeling amorous, and we got carried away on a bar stool... and Danny came in halfway through.”

She covered her face with her hands as Hermione giggled. “Don’t, please. I was mortified. I honestly thought Niall had locked the door, and he thought I had. Danny’s never going to let me forget it.”

Still chuckling, Hermione finished off her dessert as the waitress brought their lattes over. Stirring in a sweetener, she gave Genie a rueful smile. “Look, I want to apologize for getting jealous earlier.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it.”

“No, it wasn’t right. I’m not used to this kind of friendship. Girls and guys being close but not being romantically involved, you know? Actually, I think it’s lovely, and I’m very envious of you all. You seem to have a great group of friends, and it must be nice to have that feeling of love and support around you.”

“It is.” Genie sipped her coffee. “I suppose we’re unusual in that most of us have ended up settling down near to where we grew up. And our situation was fairly unusual, with me growing up with Niall and Finn, and of course Ciara’s death brought us all closer. We’ve had our ups and downs, but yes, we are all good friends, and it’s only got better since we’ve met up with the guys from Mangonui occasionally.”

“It’ll be fun when you start getting married and having families. You’ll all be there to support each other.”

“Yeah, it’ll be great. Will you have the same sort of support in the UK if you marry Richard?”

Hermione's throat tightened instantly, and she put her cup down in the saucer with a rattle. "No, I don't think so. I have two sisters but they're unmarried, and we're quite different—we're not close like you and Billie and Tess seem to be. Most of the friends I made at uni have moved away, doing jobs around England and some have even gone to France and Germany."

"You'd have a busy social life, presumably, though? Balls and soirees and stuff?" Genie grinned.

"Yes... There will be charity events to go to, and I expect I'll make other friends eventually." But her voice petered out. It would never be the same as the sort of life that Genie had here. She'd never be able to explain to Genie how envious she was of the freedom the girls had, and the lovely, relaxed way of life they lived.

She looked out to sea. It was beginning to rain, and the ocean had turned gray, matching the clouds that were scudding across the sky. She wasn't going to think about Richard now. Danny was coming to stay with her for two whole weeks, and no matter what happened in the future, she was going to make the most of him and have the time of her life while he was there.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Danny pulled up outside the Spencers' house and turned off the engine. It was just after five, and a light rain was beginning to fall. He'd planned to wait until the evening, not wanting to appear too eager, but in the end his father and Fleur had gotten fed up with him pacing the floor and had told him to get going.

He rose from the car and retrieved the large bag containing a good proportion of his clothes, as well as the bag of things he'd bought in the supermarket, locked the door, then turned to see Hermione standing at the top of the deck steps, leaning against the post, watching him.

Conscious of the way his heart lifted when he saw her, he walked forward, pleased when she smiled and said, "Hello you. I'm so glad you're here."

"Hey, gorgeous. Me too." He walked up the steps and stopped before her. She wore a short black dress, not quite a little black number, but not far from it. Her feet were bare, though, Kiwi-style, and her hair hung loose about her shoulders. She looked like a Greek goddess, but with a touch of naughtiness about her in the way her lips curved, and her eyes held a hint of knowledge about what delights awaited them, knowledge that hadn't been there a week ago. Knowledge that he'd put there. The thought thrilled him.

"You look fantastic," he said, and bent to touch his lips to hers. She raised her face, and they had a long, slow kiss that sent his heart hammering in seconds.

He lifted his head, not wanting to throw her onto the carpet and do her moments after walking in the door, and smiled, holding out the shopping bag. "For you. I eat a lot."

She laughed and took it, leading the way into the room and crossing to

the kitchen. “You didn’t have to bring your own food.”

He slid the door closed behind him. “Ah, it’s not much, extras mainly, plus I thought I should introduce you to proper Kiwi chocolate. We’ll have a tasting session later.”

“Mmm.” She flashed him a glance with an expression he couldn’t quite catch. Was it the mention of the word tasting? Or chocolate? He remembered the way she’d eaten the truffles in the Treats cafe, licking the melted chocolate off each finger, her tongue lacing around the pads and causing his jaw to drop. There was something sexual and sensual about chocolate. He seemed to remember Maisey telling him it melted at body temperature, making it the perfect food to use in sex play. He made a mental note to try it out later, and his body stirred at the thought.

Hermione turned and walked away, her hand trailing along the kitchen worktop and then the back of the sofa as she circled. There was a strange tension in the air, as if a storm was approaching. It was beginning to rain harder, the sky heavy and gray, but he hadn’t heard any thunder. Was the storm inside him? His heart pounded, his body hardening as he imagined taking her in his arms, kissing her, making love to her.

He shook his head—for fuck’s sake, he should at least wait until after dinner! He didn’t want her to think he was only there for sex, because he wasn’t—he wanted to be with her, to talk to her, to spend time with her.

But he wanted her too. He couldn’t deny it. His gaze followed her around the room, watching the way she moved, how the fabric of her dress flowed over her curves, wondering if she still wore the black lacy thing she’d mentioned beneath it.

She adjusted a magazine on the coffee table, moved a cushion from the center to the corner of the sofa, then straightened and raised her gaze to his again, that odd look still in her eyes. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly as if she

was breathing hard, and her lips parted.

Danny lowered his bag to the floor, strode across to her, pulled her into his arms, and crushed his lips to hers.

She lifted her arms around his neck, molding her body to his, and he slid his hands down to her butt and tightened them there, lifting her so he could press the erection that had miraculously appeared against her.

“Oh, I’ve missed you,” she whispered as he kissed around to her ear.

“I’ve thought about you all day.” He moved his hands under the hem of her dress and up to feel the stretchy lace that covered her butt. “I swear I’ve had an erection about ninety-five percent of the time.”

“Only ninety-five percent? I must be losing my touch.”

He laughed, turned, and sat on the sofa, pulling her down with him so she sat astride him. She took the hem of her dress in her hands and lifted it over her head in one swift move. Danny’s eyes nearly fell out of his head at the sight of her slim, toned body covered in sexy black lace.

“Fuck,” he said, lifting his hands to her breasts.

“God, yes, please.” She smothered his laugh with her lips and tugged his T-shirt up over his head, then fumbled at his waist to undo his button and zip.

Danny let her, loving her enthusiasm. He couldn’t believe this sexy, gorgeous girl wanted him as much as he wanted her.

“I have something to ask you,” she whispered as she freed his erection, kissing up his jaw to his ear.

“Mmm?”

“As we’ll be together for a while, I wanted to offer... um...” She lifted her head and rubbed her nose. “I thought I’d tell you that I’m on the pill, have been for a few years for medical reasons. So... if you don’t want to use a condom, it’s okay with me.”

His breath stilled, and he looked deeply into her warm brown eyes. The

notion of sliding inside her without barriers fired him up in a way he hadn't thought possible. He knew he was clean, and there was no chance of her having any issues.

He felt a brief twinge of concern that she might be trying to trick him into getting her pregnant, but he pushed it away. She wouldn't do that to him—he knew that instinctively. He trusted her. That in itself was something special.

“Okay.”

Her eyes lit with pleasure, and she lifted up, pulled the lace underneath her to one side, and went to lower herself onto him.

“Hey.” He caught her hips. “Hold on, sweetheart. A little foreplay would be a good idea, make it easier for you.”

“I'm ready, Danny.”

He slid a hand down over her butt and beneath her, and tested for himself, his eyebrows rising when he discovered her already swollen and slippery to the touch.

“Hmm,” he said, stroking her, “get started without me, did you?”

“Danny!” She whacked his arm, then groaned as he slid a finger inside her.

“I don't mind. Can't say the thought of it doesn't turn me on.”

“Goodness!” Her cheeks flushed. “Really?”

“Really. At least once over the next few weeks I want you to show me how you pleasure yourself.”

Her jaw dropped. “Oh my God, I couldn't.”

He continued to stroke her, his gaze locking onto hers, refusing to let her look away. “Oh, you can, and you will.”

Her lips parted, and her hips rocked a little against his hand, an involuntary movement as he aroused her with his fingers. “You like shocking

me don't you?" she whispered.

"I do."

"Why?"

"I might have walked across that field of snow, but there are lots of other places where it's still untouched." He slid his other hand over her abdomen and down so he could circle his thumb over her clit, and lightly stroked the swollen button, loving the way little gasps escaped her. "I plan to corrupt the whole of you before my two weeks is up."

She gave a short laugh, then tipped her head back and moaned.

"So, were you then?" he prompted.

"Was I what?" she said, panting.

"Touching yourself?"

"Not this time." She smiled. "It's just... I've been thinking about you for hours..." Her eyes held a kind of hopeless lust, warming him right through.

He raised his hand to cup her face. "All right, sweetheart. Come on, then."

She lifted up and lowered herself down onto him. He felt the tip of his erection part her folds and enter her velvety softness, and groaned as she pushed her hips down and he slid all the way in. The sensation of being buried inside her without barriers, skin on skin, was warm and luscious and almost too much to bear.

"*Ahhh...*" Her fingers tightened on his shoulders.

He waited, letting her adjust, waiting for her tense muscles to relax.

"Mmm. That feels good."

"Yes." She dipped her head and kissed him, then began to move, rocking backward and forward so he slid in and out of her.

He stroked up her body, admiring the way the stretchy lacy clung to her curves, and cupped her breasts, feeling their weight in his palms. Her nipples

had tightened, and when he rolled them between his fingers, she moaned and thrust her tongue into his mouth.

As sexy as the lingerie was, he wanted to feel her bare skin, and he pulled the thin straps down her shoulders, exposing her breasts, then bent his head and lifted a nipple to his mouth. Hermione arched her back, still rocking her hips, and Danny sucked, feeling a fresh rush of moisture easing his way inside her when he stroked the tender skin with his tongue.

She sank her fingers into his hair, gasping as he swapped from one nipple to the other until they were both wet and gleaming, and when he eventually lifted his head, she kissed him hot and hard, their tongues tangling as passion built between them.

It wasn't long before her breathing grew irregular, and he held her hips and thrust firmly, feeling her body tense around him.

“Yeah,” he murmured, “come on sweetheart, come for me.”

She kissed him again, and he slid a hand into her hair and held her there while the orgasm swept over, stifling her moans and drinking in her pleasure. It wasn't easy to hold onto his own desire, but he managed it by seconds before he let go and erupted into her with pulse after pulse of exquisite contractions.

They left him hot, sweaty, and panting, and it took a few minutes for the world to stop spinning, as he'd jumped off a moving roundabout before he'd given it a chance to slow down.

“Breathe,” Hermione said, and kissed his lips.

“I've forgotten how.”

She chuckled and lifted off him, then hastily grabbed a tissue from the box on the table. “Ooh, that's a first.”

He smirked and tucked himself back into his boxers. “Yeah, for me too.”

“Really?” Sitting beside him, she curled up on the seat.

“Never had sex without a condom before.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Not even with Lynda?”

“Nope.”

She smiled. “I like that we’ve had a first.”

“Oh, it’s not the first first.”

“What do you mean?”

He’d spoken without vetting his words first, but it was only as they left his mouth that he realized what he’d meant. *I didn’t feel about her the way I feel about you.*

He blinked. What did that mean? He’d dated Lynda for going on two years. He’d known Hermione a little over a week. He couldn’t possibly have more affection for her than he’d had for Lynda.

But then he was assuming the amount of affection he felt for someone was based on the amount of time he’d known them. He’d thought he’d loved Lynda, and maybe he had. He’d been fond of her. And he’d been upset when she’d broken up with him, although he was beginning to think that was more due to bruised pride than anything else.

But he hadn’t been *in* love with her.

So did that mean he was in love with Hermione?

She tipped her head to the side, a curious smile on her face. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Kind of.”

She chuckled. “I’m hungry. Are you always hungry after sex?”

“Only for you.” He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her.

“Mmm.” She curled up against him and threaded her hands through his hair as she kissed him back. “I could get very used to this. I think we should stay here for the whole two weeks and not go out at all.”

“I agree,” Danny said, meaning it, and feeling a twinge of worry that

maybe it wasn't such a good idea he'd come to stay after all.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hermione spent the next two weeks in a state of bliss.

During the day, Danny and his team worked on the land around the house, continuing the landscaping of the lawns and surrounding areas, and occasionally he went into town to supervise the work going on the town domain. While he was out, Hermione continued with her research of hotels and activities in the area, designed her brochures, and made sure everything in the office in London was running smoothly.

She'd thought that maybe she wouldn't get to see him much during the day, but most lunchtimes found Danny returning to the house, eager to spend time with her, and he was always home by six, declaring he couldn't bear to be apart from her any longer.

She knew what he meant—after only a few hours apart, she craved him, hungered for him, and often he was only minutes inside the door before they were ripping off their clothes and he was inside her, spiriting her to heaven once again.

They made love in every room in the house, in every position Danny could think of, sometimes fast and furious when they'd been apart, while at other times, late in the night or early in the morning, they spent hours kissing and touching each other until Hermione felt she knew his body almost as well as her own.

But it wasn't just the sex that was magnificent. She'd thought that would be the highlight of his stay at the house, and their relationship—if it could be called that—would be purely physical. Although they'd got on well up until that point, she'd assumed that once they'd talked about the movies they enjoyed and the places they wanted to travel, there wouldn't be much more to say.

To her surprise, though, they spent hours talking about everything under the sun—where they'd been in the world, what they'd done, how they felt about it, and what they'd like to do in the future. Hermione laughed as he told her about the time he, Niall, and Beck had worked in Andalusia in a nudist resort and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. He wanted to know everything about her trip around Europe and what she thought of all the cities she'd visited.

They talked about their hopes and dreams for the future—Danny explained how he wanted to grow his company to be the best in the Northland, and told her about the jobs he'd done, what he had coming up, and the kind of landscaping he would like to do in the future. Hermione went through the struggles she'd had with setting up her business and some of the things that had proved successful, giving him a few tips for the administration side of things, including a new accounting program she'd discovered that was easy to use and worked well.

“So where do you see yourself in five years' time, Lady Hermione?”

They were lying in bed, and it was late, well after midnight, but neither of them had shown any signs of wanting to sleep yet. Hermione's eyelids were drooping, but it was coming to the end of her stay in the Northland, and she didn't want to waste a single moment of her time with Danny. His question, however, posed in the manner of an interviewer as he held out an imaginary microphone to her, brought a bubble of nerves to her stomach that wiped away the sleep that had been hovering.

“I don't know,” she said honestly. “When I marry Richard, I'm not sure how long I'll be able to carry on with the business. It'll be difficult with kids, and I don't think he's super keen on me working, anyway.”

Danny's smile faded, and he lowered the hand that had been holding the imaginary microphone to the bed. Until that point, the room had felt warm

and sultry, cozy and sleepy, but she sensed a distinct cooling of the atmosphere as he considered her answer.

“So you’re still going ahead with it then.” His words were flat, devoid of emotion.

She looked down at the duvet cover and traced an embroidered flower with her finger. “I think so. It would make everyone happy.”

“Apart from you, you mean.”

Irritation flared inside her. “You don’t know that. I think we could be very happy.”

He gave a humorless laugh. “Yeah, right.”

“Come on Danny, don’t be like that. I know it won’t be the love of a lifetime, but that’s not what marriage is about.”

“Well it fucking well should be.”

“Don’t swear at me. We’ve had this conversation before and I don’t want to go through it all again.” She pushed herself up, angry and frustrated.

He did the same, sitting with his arms around his knees, hands linked. The duvet dropped to expose his flat stomach and the happy trail of hair leading into his groin, but she kept her eyes averted.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “You’ve worked so hard to set up your business. Why would you throw it all away now?”

“I wouldn’t throw it away.” She hesitated, wondering whether to tell him, then decided she had nothing to lose. “I’ve actually talked to Renee about her buying me out, and she’s interested.”

His eyes widened. “What? Why?”

“I don’t know, Danny. My heart’s not in it anymore.” She didn’t want to explain to him that although she wholeheartedly believed it was possible to rekindle a fire that had died down to embers, she no longer believed it was possible to create a flame without a spark existing in the first place.

There was no spark between her and Richard, and there probably never would be. She'd reconciled herself to that. But she didn't know if she could keep working in a romantic retreats business when she had no personal experience of the magic she promoted.

Or at least, no experience with her husband.

She was in love with Danny. If she'd doubted it before he'd moved in with her, she doubted it no longer. She couldn't get enough of him—she missed him and thought about nothing but him when he wasn't there, and when he was, it was as if the sun shone brighter and all the clouds went away.

But she had responsibilities, and a holiday romance wasn't something she could base the rest of her life on. It wouldn't work, and although it was going to break her heart when she left, she couldn't see a way out.

Danny's brow was furrowed, his eyes angry. "I don't want you to marry him," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me. I know I'm hardly Casanova, but I do know that for a marriage to survive it needs to have love from the beginning. You don't love Richard. It's not fair to you or him to commit yourself to him like that."

"I understand what you're saying, but we're not normal people, Danny. It's different for us."

"That's an excuse, and you know what? I think it's because you're scared of facing up to your father."

Her cheeks burned. "Rubbish."

"It's not. You've rebelled in every other way possible except the one that really matters. You need to tell him the wedding's off."

His arrogance made her bristle. "I'll do no such thing, and I don't know who you think you are for assuming you can make demands like that on me."

Without warning, he reached out and grabbed her wrist, pulled her

toward him, and rolled her so she was under him. “I’m the man who owns your heart until midwinter night,” he snapped, “and until then, you’ll do as I say.”

Her eyes flared. “I won’t! Get off me!” She placed both hands on his chest, but it was like trying to push a brick wall. He captured her wrists and pinned them above her head, and as much as she wriggled, she couldn’t shake him free. “Danny!”

Lifting up, he reached to the corner post of the bed and yanked down one of the winter scarves she’d looped over it. “Not silk,” he muttered, “but it’ll do.”

Her heart began to race as she realized what he was going to do. “Oh no.”

He ignored her and straddled her, looped the scarf around her wrists and knotted it, then tied it around one of the slats in the bed. He managed to do all that even while she was fighting him, and it was only then that she truly realized how strong he was, and how much he must have held back all the times they’d made love so far.

“Let me go,” she whispered, heart hammering as she tested her wrists and couldn’t free herself.

Satisfied that the scarf was tight, he moved down and looked into her eyes. “No,” he said, desire sparking within his blue orbs.

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “I don’t—”

He stifled her words with his lips, and she gave a long moan as he slid his tongue into her mouth and kissed her thoroughly, taking his time, surprisingly tender. Although she was certain he would never hurt her, she knew he was angry with her, and half of her expected him to take her roughly and quickly.

But he seemed to have the opposite intention. He lowered himself on top

of her and spent ages kissing her until she was breathless with yearning, her nipples peaking against his chest, an ache growing deep inside her.

Then he shifted down the bed and transferred his mouth to her nipples, teasing them with his lips, tongue, and fingers until she squirmed beneath him.

“Please,” she begged him. “Please.”

“Please what, sweetheart?” He plucked at her wet nipples with his fingers while he looked into her eyes.

“*Ahhh... Danny...*”

Moving to one side of her, he stroked a hand down her body and lifted the leg nearest him over his to spread her wide.

“Please what?” he prompted again, stroking a hand up her thigh to between her legs where he trailed his fingers lightly along her sensitive folds.

“*Ohhh...*”

“Please what?” He slipped a finger into her and drew it up to swirl around her clit. “Fuck, you’re so wet.”

She groaned. “Don’t torture me...”

He continued to stroke her. “Absolutely I’m going to torture you until you admit to me that this week you are mine and mine alone.”

Irritation overrode her desire. “For God’s sake.” She drew up her knee, pushing his hand out of the way. “Stop being so bloody Neolithic.” Hot tears stung her eyes. She didn’t need this extra pressure. Life was hard enough for her as it was without him layering on the guilt and emotional stress. “We’re just having fun, aren’t we? I like you, Danny, but that’s all it is. Why do you have to be like this? You’re making everything worse.”

His expression darkened. He lifted up and, before she could stop him, turned her over onto her front. Pushing up onto her elbows, she tried to rise, but he caught hold of her hips and pulled her farther down the bed until her

arms were straight and she couldn't rise. Grabbing a pillow, he then slid an arm under her hips and lifted them, and moved the pillow beneath, lifting her bottom into the air.

"Danny!" She tried to roll over, but he pushed open her legs and knelt between them, then lay along her, pressing her into the mattress.

"Oof! You're squashing me."

"Don't care." He put his mouth close to her ear, and she felt his warm breath on her neck. "I'm just having fun, Hermione. That's all we're doing, isn't it? Lady Chatterley and her bit of rough."

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the mattress. That was what was going on here. He thought she was saying she'd only wanted him for sex, but he couldn't have been more wrong. He'd won her heart the moment he'd stood before her, covered in mud and looking like a god after a wrestling tournament.

But she couldn't admit that to him, because where would that leave her?

So she said nothing, biting her bottom lip as she felt the tip of his rock-hard erection parting her folds.

"Tell me to stop," he murmured in her ear. "Tell me you don't want me moving inside you."

She stifled a groan. "Please..."

"Tell me you want me to stop, Hermione."

She couldn't, God help her but she couldn't. She could feel moisture between her legs, her body welcoming him, encouraging him inside.

Slowly, he pushed his hips forward.

She let out a long *aaahhh* as he slid all the way home, burying himself inside her. With her hips raised on the pillow, it gave him a different, deeper angle, and she gasped at the sensation of being stretched and filled to the brim. "Fuck!"

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, chuckling, pulled back his hips, and thrust home.

“Argh!” She screwed up her nose.

He laughed. “Want a pillow to bite on?” Kissing down her neck, he trailed his tongue along her hyper-sensitive skin.

Then he fastened his mouth there and sucked, hard.

“Ow!” She flinched beneath him, moaned at the pleasure-pain sensation, then swore softly at the knowledge that he’d almost certainly left a mark on her neck.

“I’ll be interested to hear what he says about that,” Danny said smugly, continuing to give slow, leisurely thrusts.

She tried to hate him for being so arrogant and possessive, but all she could dredge up was dark desire and unhappiness that soon she’d be gone, and she’d never feel him inside her, would never feel his lips on hers again.

He stopped moving and slid a hand beneath her to play with her nipples. Her clit throbbed and her body ached for release, but clearly he was going to draw out her pleasure as long as he could.

She tried to move beneath him, to arouse herself and relieve the ache, but with her arms stretched out and his heavy weight on top of her she could hardly move.

“Tell me this isn’t just fun for you,” he said. He gave a smooth thrust, then stopped and tugged her nipples again.

She groaned. “Danny, please.”

He slid a hand beneath her chin, turned her mouth up to his, and kissed her, wet and hard. “Tell me you’re mine. Tonight. That you belong to me.”

“I can’t...” Tears filled her eyes.

He thrust again, his face fierce, and pushed forward hard, deeply into her. “Tell me.”

A tear ran down her cheek and she gave in. “I’m yours, Danny. You

know that. I'll always be yours."

He stared at her, eyes wide, and then his expression softened. Dipping his head, he kissed away the tear on her cheek.

Then he lifted himself up onto his hands, kneeling beneath her, and began to move properly. Pulling her toward him, he thrust into her, harder and faster, and it was all she could do to hang on and let him, feeling the tension building inside her until it exploded like a firework. She cried out, her face wet with tears, clenching around him, and he came at the same time, his fingers tightening on her hips as he spilled into her. Their bodies locked together for an eternity, frozen with passion, rigid with gratification.

And then she went limp and burst into tears, sobbing into the sheet.

Danny lowered himself on top of her for a moment, breathing heavily. Then he slid out of her, lifted to one side, and untied her hands.

Hermione drew her arms down but couldn't summon the energy to move, too overwhelmed with emotion to do anything but lie there.

He stretched out beside her, covered them both with the duvet, and then turned her into his arms. Kissing her hair, he pulled her tightly against him.

She sobbed into his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

He sighed. "What have you got to be sorry about?"

"It's not just fun, Danny, I know it's not. I'm such a mess."

"Ssh, it's my fault, I shouldn't have pushed you so far. Come on, sweetheart, it's okay. I won't do that again. I'm sorry. I think you're a great girl, that's all, and I want you to be happy."

She snuggled up against him, exhausted. She wasn't strong enough to deal with it, not tonight. Maybe tomorrow she'd be able to argue with him, but tonight she just wanted to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Between the Sheets was busy for a Saturday night.

Danny sat in the corner of the room, almost dozing off in spite of the conversations around him and the laughter from his friends. The usual crowd was there—Genie and Niall, Jonah, Billie, and Tess, with Beck behind the bar.

A few minutes ago, Hermione had made her way to the Ladies', and Danny had switched off from the chit-chat and zoned out into his own private world.

It had been a strange day. After their semi-argument and Hermione's distress the night before, he'd half-wondered whether when they arose that morning she would tell him she wanted him to go. She was leaving tomorrow anyway, heading south for her two-week journey around New Zealand that she'd pre-booked, and he knew he'd pushed her too far. She had feelings for him, of course she did, and she was trying to cope with the ridiculous situation as best as she could. All he'd done in forcing her to admit it was upset her, something he regretted now.

But she hadn't asked him to leave, and instead they'd spent a quiet day walking around the grounds and along the beach, eating lunch on the deck, and then reading in the afternoon, curled up on the sofa together while a light winter rain pattered against the windows.

They hadn't made love again. She hadn't asked, and he hadn't pushed it, content to make the most of just being with her.

That didn't change the fact that neither of them had gotten much sleep over the past few weeks, which was why he was sitting in the corner, his eyelids drooping from the warmth of the room and the alcohol threading through his veins.

Around him, the voices suddenly went quiet, and he focused and blinked, surprised as they all started laughing.

“She worn you out has she, mate?” Jonah clapped him on the back. “Lucky bastard.”

Danny gave them all a wry look as they chuckled. “A bit.”

“You’re getting old,” Genie told him, toasting him with her cocktail.

“You could be right.” He yawned. “Gone are the days when I could catch a few hours’ sleep on someone’s floor and wake up fresh as a daisy.”

“I’ve never been like that,” Niall said. “I need to be in a bed, nightcap on, teeth in a glass before I can get to sleep.”

They all laughed.

“How much longer is she here for?” Billie asked.

“She flies to Auckland tomorrow afternoon.”

Their smiles faded. “That sucks,” Genie said.

Danny shrugged. “It was good while it lasted.”

Genie frowned. “Is that it? Is that all you’re going to say?”

“What do you want me to say? What is there to say? She’s getting married to another guy. She’s made that quite clear. We were only ever going to have a fling.”

“But you’re so perfect together,” Billie protested.

He picked moodily at the label on the bottle. “Yeah, well. The decision’s not mine to make.”

“Don’t be so defeatist,” Tess said. “Of course you’re part of the decision.”

He glared at his sister. “I can’t force her to stay, and I’m sure you wouldn’t approve of me handcuffing her to the bed.”

“Hey, what you do in your personal life is no business of mine.”

The others laughed, but Danny was too pissed off to join in. Luckily, at

that moment Hermione came back, effectively ending the discussion.

Or so he thought. Tess had the bit between her teeth and was obviously determined to try to ‘help’.

“So you’re off tomorrow?” His sister smiled at Hermione as she slid into her seat. “Going travelling?”

“Yes, I booked it all ages ago.” Hermione didn’t look at him, self-consciously playing with the scarf she wore that hid the love bite he’d given her. Guilt twinged inside him, along with a tiny amount of smugness. “I’m flying some of the way,” she continued, “driving the rest. I wanted to see as much of New Zealand as I could before I left.”

“Nice idea.” Tess flicked her fingers at him. “Couldn’t you go with her, Danny? Take a few weeks off work?”

“No,” he said, the word coming out flatter than he’d meant. He cleared his throat. “I’m right in the middle of several projects, and anyway, I’m sure Hermione’s looking forward to escaping on her own.”

She gave a little smile but didn’t answer, concentrating on stirring the cherry on the stick around in her cocktail.

Danny glared at Tess.

Tess raised her eyebrows, telling him she wasn’t going to be intimidated. “Aw, that’s a shame,” she continued. “You two seem to be having such fun.”

“Tess,” Danny said, his voice little more than a growl, “that’s enough.”

“Well, really, someone has to say something because otherwise she’s just going to sail off into the sunset tomorrow and you’ll never see each other again. Is that really what you both want?” His sister looked surprisingly upset. “For God’s sake, why is nobody saying what we’re all thinking—that Hermione’s crazy to go back to England and marry this guy when she’s obviously so happy here?”

Danny pushed himself up, his chair scraping across the floor. “Because

some of us know when to speak and when to keep our mouths shut, Tess. For Christ's sake."

He turned to Hermione. "Let's go."

For a moment he thought she was going to refuse. Twin spots of scarlet touched her cheeks, and she looked thoroughly embarrassed at being the center of attention. But she stood too, and gave each of them a hug in turn.

"It was lovely to meet you all," she said, finishing off with Tess.

"I'm sorry," Danny heard Tess whisper, "I didn't mean to put my foot in it. I was just trying to help."

"I know." Hermione didn't say anything else. Danny wasn't surprised—there was nothing else to be said. The girls looked upset that she was going, the guys distressed because they knew how much he liked her, and those kinds of feelings didn't come around very often.

"See you later," he said to them, leading the way across the room.

As they passed the bar, Beck crossed to give Hermione a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I'm sorry to see you go," he said. "But I hope you had a good time."

"I had a great time, thank you." She hugged him back. "Take care of your beautiful son!"

"I will." He smiled. She'd met little Edward the previous week when his mum, Josie, had brought him in to see Beck.

Waving a final goodbye, she headed for the door. Danny nodded to Beck and joined her, heading out into the cool midwinter night.

"Shortest day," she said, shivering and digging her hands into the pockets of her jacket.

Danny looked out across the icy Pacific. It felt so different to a few weeks ago, when the evening had still held a touch of summer magic.

"Come on," he said. "I'll take you home."

They walked the short distance to his car, both of them quiet, as if there was so much to say that they didn't know where to start. They got in and Danny started the engine, then headed back along the road through Paihia to the house.

"Do you think Beck will get back together with Josie?" Hermione was looking out of the window, studying the dark shadows of the shops.

"I don't know. Beck wants to, I know that. But Josie's not so keen."

"What happened between them, do you know?"

"No, nobody does. They won't talk about it." Sadness settled over Danny like a heavy woolen blanket. Love should be easy, he thought, but it so rarely was.

"What a shame. Poor Edward." Hermione sighed. "Do you want kids?"

He slowed the car at the roundabout, signaled the turn, and pulled away. "I don't know. I didn't use to think so. I doubt that many guys think about having kids until they meet the right girl."

"Do you think, when you meet the right girl, you'll want them then?"

He set his jaw. He'd met the right girl, but it wasn't going to work out. He couldn't imagine ever meeting another woman he would love enough to want to settle down and have a family with. *I'm done*, he thought.

Don't be so defeatist. His sister's words rang in his ears. They'd made him angry in the bar, but this time for some reason—maybe because it was growing late and there was so little time left before they had to part—they gave him hope.

He approached the road to the long drive to the house and slowed the car for the turn. Was he letting her go too easily? Should he make more of an effort to get her to stay? Her whole life was back in the UK, her job and her family, but somehow he thought that those things weren't as important to her as they could be.

She turned her head to look at him, and he glanced over at her, seeing her eyes glittering in the moonlight. He wanted her to stay. Would he ever forgive himself if he didn't at least tell her how he felt?

He opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment she frowned and gestured in front of them. "We didn't leave any lights on, did we?"

He looked back at the road, the drive snaking toward the house on top of the hill. It glowed in the darkness like a jewel, light from the living room spilling out because the curtains hadn't been drawn. In front of the house was a car he didn't recognize.

Slowing his own car, he stared at the two people moving around inside the house. One had a thatch of gray hair and a stocky build—William Spencer. The other he didn't recognize—a tall, slender guy with dark blond hair.

"Fuck," she said. "It's Daddy and Richard."

Danny went cold, then hot as anger seared through him. He didn't care that it was William Spencer's house—how dare they appear there and spoil the last evening he was probably going to have with Hermione?

He glanced across at her. She'd gone completely white. "You want me just to keep driving?" he asked, tempted to do just that—screw his firm, screw everything, and just head for the South Island.

But she shook her head and swallowed. "No. We'll have to talk to them."

He pulled up outside the house, watching as the two men saw them and walked toward the door. William opened it, and they came out onto the deck.

Danny's stomach clenched and nausea rose in his throat. He knew he should offer to drive off and let her deal with it, but his clothes and belongings were in the house, and he was fucked if he was going to let Lord Dick get his hands on her.

He got out of the car and slammed the door. Hermione did the same, and walked around to stand next to him.

“You should go,” she whispered.

He looked past her, to where the men were staring at them, frowning. Doubt dried up the saliva in his mouth. It was possible she truly didn’t want to be with him. In that case, anything he said now could ruin the rest of her life in a few easy words. Did he want to do that to her?

They should have talked about it during the day, he realized desperately—he should have told her how he felt and discovered if she felt the same, but he’d left it too late, and now he was going to lose her.

“Hermione?” Richard walked down the steps toward her. “Darling? What’s going on? Who’s this?” The guy spoke with a rich, plummy accent. His eyes met Danny’s, slightly hooded and with a hint of lazy anger. Danny could see instantly that Richard knew perfectly well what he was doing there. He must have gone into Hermione’s room and seen Danny’s clothes there.

“He’s the gardener,” William Spencer said, obviously confused.

Richard smirked. The superior sneer on his face, and the knowledge that this was the man with whom Hermione was supposed to live for the rest of her life, made Danny see red.

He walked up to the guy, drew back his fist, and gave him a right hook across the jaw.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Hermione squealed as Richard crashed to the floor like a felled tree trunk, and she rushed forward and knelt by his side.

He pushed up onto an elbow and shook his head as if there were tweety birds flying around it in a circle. “Fuck!” He wagged his jaw, and his expression turned thunderous as he looked up at Danny, who towered over him with blazing eyes.

“That’s enough.” William Spencer ran down the steps and stood between the two of them, one hand on Danny’s chest. “Go home, son.”

Danny pushed his hand away, but her father just put it back again. Hermione’s admiration for him rose several levels—Danny was six inches taller, thirty pounds heavier, and clearly furious, but William didn’t flinch and just said again, “Danny, go home.”

Danny glanced at her, desperation on his face, but she was so confused and upset that she couldn’t think what to say.

“Hermione,” he said hoarsely. “For God’s sake, you can’t marry this fucking idiot.”

Richard got to his feet and faced him. The corner of his jaw was already turning purple. “How dare you come to my father-in-law’s house and speak to me like that.”

“He’s not your father-in-law yet,” Danny snapped, “and let her speak for herself—or don’t you Brits let your women have a mind of their own?”

“Danny!” she said, appalled, and more than a little ashamed because she knew his reasons for saying it were a tiny bit justified.

“That’s enough,” William said to him calmly. “You’re upsetting my daughter, and I’m sure that’s not what you want.”

One hand on his hip, Danny ran the other hand through his hair,

breathing heavily. “Of course not.” His gaze met her father’s. “I’m sorry sir. I love her, that’s all. I’m crazy about her, and I want to marry her.”

Hermione gasped and her hand crept up to her mouth. He hadn’t said the three little words to her yet, and he certainly hadn’t proposed to her. The two announcements at once made her feel faint.

Richard snorted. “As if the daughter of the Earl of Tiverton would marry a common farmhand!”

“Richard,” William snapped as Danny twitched. “Don’t be so rude.” He took Danny’s arm and led him back to the car. “You need to calm down and let me talk to my daughter. Then I’ll talk to you tomorrow. All right?”

Danny put a hand on the door handle of the car, then turned and looked at her father, anguish written all over his face. “She doesn’t love him, William.” He spoke softly, but Hermione could just hear the words. “I know some marriages can work without love, but it’ll kill her. Even if you make her go back to the UK—even if I never see her again... Don’t make her marry him.”

“Tomorrow,” William said firmly.

Danny looked across at her. Their gazes locked for a long, long moment, and she knew he wanted her to ask him to stay, but she couldn’t. While he was there, she couldn’t think, and she needed a clear head to sort this out.

He looked at the ground for a moment. Then he lifted a hand and fumbled in the neck of his shirt. She watched, puzzled, then realized he was retrieving the greenstone koru-shaped pendant he always wore.

He lifted it over his head, looked at it for a moment, then walked toward her and looped the cord over her head.

Mouth open, she let him, remembering what he’d said all those weeks ago, on the beach.

Maori say it symbolizes that the spirit of the person inhabits the pendant.

If you give a pendant to someone else, you're supposed to wear it for a while so you give them a part of your spirit as well.

His eyes softened and a smile touched his lips. Without saying anything, he turned away and got into the car.

Too late, she remembered that his stuff was in her room, but he'd already started the engine. Her chest heaving with emotion, she watched him drive away.

"Jesus." Richard touched his jaw and winced. "What a thug." His gaze slid to her, and a look she hadn't seen before—resentment tinged with dislike—crossed his features. "What the hell did you think you were doing getting involved with someone like that? Bit of rough, was he?" His gaze slid to her neck, and Hermione raised her hand to find that her scarf had slipped. His resentful look turned to disgust, and her cheeks burned.

Lifting her chin, she walked forward to look him in the eye. "And how is Pippa, Richard?"

He looked down at her, his eyes cool, assessing her. Her fingers itched to slap him—Lord knew he deserved it more than Danny had ever done, but she kept her hands by her sides.

"We were never going to work," she said. "I don't know why I didn't realize it before, but I can't marry you. You're not a bad man, and I'm sure you'll make some girl a decent husband, but that girl's not me. We're done."

Richard opened his mouth to speak, but William cleared his throat. "I'd like to talk to my daughter, please. Would you go inside and pour us all a glass of wine, there's a good chap."

Richard glared at her. A memory flickered in her mind of him asking what she was wearing, and she shivered, lowering her gaze.

"I flew across the world for you." He dipped his head to look into her eyes. "Just remember that."

He turned and went inside.

Hermione exhaled a long, slow breath and sat on the stairs with a thump.

William studied her for a moment, then came and sat beside her.

Together they stared out across the lawns to the Pacific Ocean, which looked eerily still in the moonlight. She could smell the sea on the air, along with the fresh smell of newly turned earth. It reminded her of Danny, the way that beneath his aftershave the subtle, rich, comforting scent of the earth always lingered.

She ran her thumb across the pendant around her neck, and a lump formed in her throat.

“He’s done a good job of the landscaping,” her father said. “I had a walk around the grounds this afternoon. He’s more than delivered what he promised.”

Hermione blushed as she thought that the words could also apply to her relationship with Danny. He’d promised her fun, but he’d delivered so much more than that.

I love her, he’d said to her father. *I’m crazy about her, and I want to marry her.*

She put her face in her hands. She couldn’t possibly stay here in New Zealand with him. What about her life back in the UK?

“Don’t cry,” William said.

“I’m not.” She raised her face again and rubbed a hand across it. “I’m tired, that’s all.” She lifted her gaze to the stars. “It’s Matariki today.”

“What’s that?”

“Midwinter. Shortest day.” She wrapped her arms around herself, fighting back tears.

To her surprise, her father put his arm around her shoulder, pulled her close, and kissed her hair. He’d never been overly demonstrative, and she had

to fight very hard not to cry.

“What are you doing here, Daddy?” she whispered. “And, more importantly, what’s Richard doing here?”

William sighed. “He told me he wanted to surprise you. That he’d missed you. Now, I’m beginning to suspect that he knew Danny was here and he wanted to check for himself.”

She picked a leaf from the nearby bush and began to shred it into pieces. “Did you know he was with Pippa when he rang?”

Her father dropped his arm and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“I’m sorry that Danny stayed here. I just wanted to be with him, that was all.”

“Sweetheart, you’re twenty-five. I never expected you to wait for Richard, and I don’t think he did either, even though he was obviously jealous when he suspected there was someone here.”

She stared at him. “You didn’t?”

He sighed. “This marriage between you and Richard—it was a dream the four of us had—your mother and I, and his parents—when you were both young. It seemed the perfect answer to the issue of keeping the estates secure, and as you grew up both of you were friends and seemed conducive to the idea. But as the years have gone by, your mother suspected it wasn’t going to work out.”

This was news to Hermione, who continued to stare at him. “Seriously?”

“She’s mentioned it a few times—when you were at university, and then after you left, when you set up your business. It was me who pooh-poohed it and told her not to worry. Richard seemed like a sound fellow, good looking enough, intelligent, good job. I thought he’d treat you well. Your mother and I weren’t a love match, you know, but love grew over the years.”

She returned her gaze to the leaf, knowing she'd based her own hopes for a future with Richard on her parents' relatively happy relationship. "I know."

"I wanted it to work, so I continued to push it. When you came here, your mother told me it was because you wanted to escape, but I didn't want to believe that. It's why I agreed that Richard should come—I thought he could convince you that marrying him was the right thing."

"But you've changed your mind now?"

He looked up and gave a small smile. "Richard might have respected you, and treated you well. But he's never looked at you the way that young man just looked at you."

Her face flamed. "Dad..."

"His feelings were written all over his face. And sweetheart, you've sounded so happy over the past few weeks—happier than I've ever known you."

She nodded slowly. "I like it here, Dad. I feel comfortable here—I fit in. I don't know why. Everyone's so friendly and accepting. They don't judge you. And Danny..." She stopped and thought about him, about how he made her feel. "I was terribly rude to him when I first came here, but he's just a wonderful man. He couldn't go to university because he had to look after his father when his mother left him—his dad has M.S."

William's eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yes. I think Danny's worried he doesn't have much longer, although of course you can never be sure. But he looks after his father in the evenings and at weekends. He works so hard, too—he set up his business himself. He's honest and kind, and his friends adore him."

William smiled. "You love him."

"I do, Dad, I really do. Is that terrible?"

“No, sweetheart. It’s perfectly natural.” He put his arm around her again, and she leaned her head on his shoulder and looked at the stars.

“What do you want to do?” he said eventually. “Do you want to move here?”

She lifted her head, shivering a little in the cool night. “I don’t know. I’ll have to speak to him first, obviously. He might not want me still.”

William laughed. “Oh, he’s not going to let you go anytime soon, believe me. What about your business?”

“I’m not sure. I could let Renee run the London office and set up another one here. Or let her buy me out and do something different. I’d have to think about it.” Hope rose within her. “You’d let me do it? You’d let me move to the other side of the world and marry a gardener?”

“Your life was always your own, Hermione—I would never have forced you to do anything you didn’t want to do. And anyway, you wouldn’t be marrying any old gardener—you’d be marrying the owner of a landscaping business. I’d say that was very respectable.”

She chuckled and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Daddy.”

He shrugged. “I liked him the moment I met him months ago. He’s a good guy, dependable and hardworking. I admire that in a man.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Richard pacing the floor. “What about him?”

He glanced at him. “I don’t know. Maybe if he can’t have my eldest daughter, he’ll settle for my middle one.”

“I think Pippa would make him happy,” Hermione said. Actually, she thought her sister would run rings around him, but then perhaps that was what he needed.

William grinned. “Let me talk to him. I’ll organize for him to stay in that hotel up the road and then fly back soon. What about you, are you going to

go and find your young man now? Tell him the good news.”

“Yes, in a minute.” Her heart swelled at the thought, although she hoped she hadn’t left it too late. “First, though, I have one more favor to ask...”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Danny drove too fast into Paihia, nearly came off the road at a steep bend, and pulled the car over.

Leaning forward, he rested his forehead on the steering wheel.

He cursed himself at the despair that washed over him, mocking himself for his ridiculous thoughts. What had he expected? Had he seriously thought Hermione would give up her privileged lifestyle to move across the world and live with a common gardener? She was prepared to marry a man she didn't love to keep that lifestyle. The affection they'd had would never have been enough to counter that.

There was an ocean between them in more ways than one—physically and metaphorically. It didn't matter that they like the same movies and music, that they could talk for hours about nothing, and that they were well matched in the bedroom. She belonged in England, with her estates and her horses and her elegant lifestyle. He'd been a fool to think he mattered to her.

Even as the thought passed through his head, though, he knew he was doing her a disservice. He did matter to her—he knew he did. She was bound by ties of loyalty and duty, just the same as he was, and she was making the same decision he had made with Lynda not so long ago, placing her family above her own desires and needs.

Sitting back in the seat, he looked out across the Pacific to his left. The ocean was a silver plate, cold and hard in the moonlight.

Love was an ephemeral, ethereal thing. It was like the damask roses he'd planted in the garden—a thing of beauty, but it was the soil in which they were planted that held the real value. Reality was tough decisions, compromises, and duty—like the earth that he worked with every day, these were the things that mattered, and he was a fool to have been captivated by

something so insubstantial.

He leaned his head on the rest and sighed. He'd have to go home, but at that moment he couldn't face the thought of being quizzed by his father and Fleur.

Putting the car in Drive, he headed down the road to *Between the Sheets*. Hopefully his friends would have headed home for the night, and he could be left by himself to get drunk fast.

He parked down the road, walked up to the bar, and went inside. It was a little quieter than it had been before he'd left, and he was relieved to see his friends had gone, all except Beck, who was still working.

Beck's eyebrows rose as he approached.

"Don't," Danny said, sitting heavily on a stool.

Beck studied him for a moment, then turned and poured him a double shot of whiskey over some ice. "On the house," he said, sliding it across.

Danny downed it in one. He winced as it burned all the way to his stomach, then let out a long sigh.

"Another?"

"Please."

Beck poured the drink, left him for a few minutes to serve a customer, then came back and leaned on the bar. "She asked you to go?"

"Not quite. The guy she's going to marry turned up with her father."

Beck's eyes widened. "Fuck."

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"I floored him."

Beck snorted. "Good."

"There was something about him I didn't like, and it wasn't just that she's going to marry him. I dunno. Maybe it was. I probably shouldn't have

hit him.” He flexed his fingers, the knuckles stinging. He hadn’t been in a fight for years. He was turning into a softie.

“What are you going to do?”

Danny shrugged. “Nothing I can do. I know Tess would say that’s being defeatist but it’s over, Beck. And I was stupid to think there could have been anything between us other than a light-hearted holiday fling.” Emotion overwhelmed him, and he covered it by taking a huge gulp of whiskey.

Beck wiped a cloth across the surface of the bar, then picked up a couple of empty glasses. “Yeah. Love sucks. I know all about that.”

Danny sighed. “Josie still giving you a hard time?”

“I hardly see her. Only when we swap Edward over, and even then she can barely look at me.”

“I’m sorry, mate.”

Beck scrubbed at a mark on the bar. “Eh, it’s done. I know we’ll never get back together now. She’s moved on, and I’ve got to get on with my life.” By the look on his face, he was far from doing that.

“Love really fucks you up, doesn’t it?”

“Yup. Every time.”

The two of them stared moodily at each other.

Danny told himself he’d probably had a lucky escape. Beck had done it all—met the girl, got married, had a kid, and yet it still hadn’t worked out. A happy ever after was never guaranteed.

“Why are relationships such hard work?” He swirled the whiskey over the ice in the glass. “I don’t get it. It should be easy. Two people like each other, they get on, they’re physically attracted—it should be that simple.”

“I don’t know. I guess we all change, and maybe what we wanted out of a relationship at the beginning isn’t what we need months or years down the line. Or things happen to change the direction, blowing you off course.

Sometimes it's nothing to do with the two of you—it's an event or an incident that changes the way you look at each other.”

Danny knew it was pointless to quiz Beck about what had gone wrong with Josie, but it was the nearest his friend had ever come to opening up about it. Clearly, something had happened between the two of them that had pushed them apart. Danny had asked Genie, but she'd said that Beck hadn't told her, and if he hadn't told his sister or his best mate in the eighteen months since it had all gone wrong, Danny doubted he was going to start now.

“I know guys always say this after a breakup, but I'm done with women.” He took another swallow of whiskey. He was far from drunk, but the alcohol was starting to thread through his veins, easing the tension around his shoulders. “I'll miss the sex, but it's not worth all the hassle.”

“You don't want kids?”

Danny rested his head on his hand. “For the first time, with Hermione, I began to think I might want a family in the future. I could see it all—standing beside her at the altar, promising to stay with her forever, her being pregnant...” Then the snowflake had melted, and Danny couldn't voice the disappointment and sadness he felt. “Oh well. That's that.”

He finished off his glass, meeting Beck's gaze as he did so. Beck stroked his beard, and then his lips curved up. “Or maybe not.” His gaze slid past Danny, and then he pushed himself off the bar and moved away to serve a customer.

Danny turned, following where Beck had looked.

Hermione stood there, hands jammed in the pockets of her jeans, shivering a little, although whether it was from the cold or nerves at seeing him, he didn't know. Her eyes were huge, her chest rising and falling with her rapid breaths.

“Hi,” she said.

His heart thundered, but he forced himself to stay sitting. She’d probably come to say a final goodbye, maybe to return his bag. She wasn’t carrying it, but it could be in her car. He wasn’t going to make a fool of himself. “Hi.”

She took another step closer, then stopped. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. What do you want?” It came out sharper than he’d meant.

She bit her lip and studied her feet. “I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

The tension that had made him hunch his shoulders left him, and he slumped in the seat. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not a problem. Go home, Hermione. Go and be with the guy you’re going to marry.”

She lifted her gaze to his. “I am.”

He frowned, confused.

A hint of a smile touched her lips. “If the offer’s still there, that is.”

His frown lifted, and he stared at her. “What?”

She stepped closer again, stopping when she was only a few inches away. Because he still sat on the stool, her eyes were level with his, and they were filled with warmth.

Her perfume rose to ensnare him, stirring his senses, and she smiled.

“I’m not going to marry Richard. I’m crazy about you, Danny. I want to stay here, in New Zealand, and be with you. If you still want me.” Her smile faltered.

He was conscious of his jaw hanging, but he couldn’t think what to say. “You’re not going back to the UK?”

“No. Well, I might later to tie things up there with the business, but if I do it’ll only be a few weeks, and I thought you might like to come with me maybe, for a holiday?”

He couldn’t take it all in. “You want to stay here? With me?”

She gave a real smile then, filled with laughter and happiness. “Yes,

Danny. I love you, and I can't bear the thought of being apart from you."

"But... what does your father say?"

"He just wants me to be happy." Her cheeks flushed. "I thought all this time that he didn't care, but he does. He likes you, and he could see that you like me."

"And Richard?"

"Richard never loved me. He's hardly going to be devastated. I think he might marry my sister—he'll still get the estate, and she'll make him a much better wife than I ever could."

Danny got slowly to his feet, his heart filling with light. He could hardly believe he would be this lucky. But there was one last thing they had to clear up before they popped the champagne.

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Hermione held her breath as Danny cupped her face. His eyes were filled with warmth, and her words had clearly thrilled him. Relief flooded her—he still wanted her!

He stroked her cheeks with his thumbs. "I can't tell you how happy that makes me. I should have told you earlier, but I love you so much, and I do want you to be my wife. But there is one issue." He hesitated.

She swallowed. "What?"

"My father..."

She blew out a breath, turned her head, and kissed his wrist. "Listen, I have something I'd like to say, if you'll hear me out." Her heart began to race again. What would he say to her suggestion? "I've spoken to my father, and I asked him for something special as a wedding present, if we do get married, and he's said yes. I hope I don't offend you by offering it, and I'll understand completely if you say no."

Danny's face fell, and he let his hands drop. Did he think she was going

to offer to pay to put his father into a home? Love washed over her—she knew he wouldn't want that, and she would never have suggested it.

She took his hands in her own. "I've asked Dad for the house on the hill as a wedding present, if you would consider moving there with me and your father. It's all one level and very open plan, so it would be great for his wheelchair. He'd be able to sit on the deck and look at the sea, or watch you working in the garden."

She was speaking faster now, beginning to feel nervous at the continued blank look on his face. "And... um... I was thinking that maybe I could help to look after him, if he didn't mind. I haven't decided yet whether to give up my business completely or whether to run a branch here, I need to think about that a bit more, but I did wonder whether maybe you could do with some admin help with *Love Landscaping*—I could do the accounts and the planning and stuff, and then I could work from home and be there for Ron, and—"

"Wait, wait, slow down." He kissed her lips to stop her talking.

"But—" she said when he lifted his head.

He kissed her again, longer this time, his mouth moving across hers from corner to corner and then back to the middle until she'd almost melted into a puddle on the floor.

When he finally stopped, she gave a long, satisfied sigh.

"You're amazing," he murmured, rubbing his nose against hers.

"You still want to marry me?"

"Of course I want to marry you. You're the most beautiful girl I've ever met, you have a heart of gold, and your body drives to me distraction."

She shivered at the hungry possession in his words. "I can't believe it. You really want to be with me?"

"I do, and I'll happily accept your and your father's very generous

offer.”

Her mouth formed an O. “Really? I thought the whole male pride thing might take over and force you to refuse.”

“I do have pride, but I’m not stupid. Dad would adore the house, and our place in town is too small for all three of us—if we want any privacy anyway.”

He was talking about them making noise in bed. Her cheeks warmed. “Well, I thought he could have the master bedroom nearest the bathroom which isn’t far from the kitchen and living room, because it’s nice and big for him. And then we could have the bedroom I’ve been staying in—it’s smaller, but it’s at the other end of the house, although not too far away if he needs you...”

He kissed her again, wrapping his arms around her, only raising his head when a few people sitting nearby clapped and cheered.

“I love you,” he murmured. “Lady Chatterley.”

“Ha! I’m still waiting for you to take me on all fours by the cow shed.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

She smiled and kissed him. “I love you too, Danny. I’m so glad you said yes to the house.”

“I’m incredibly touched by the generous offer, and Dad’s going to love it. I can’t tell you what it means to me that you understand why I can’t leave him.”

“Of course I understand.” She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. “I’m going to love you forever. I hope you’re prepared for that.”

His arms tightened around her, but he didn’t say anything, and she realized emotion had finally overtaken him.

Over his shoulder, she saw Beck watching them while he cleaned some wine glasses. He winked at her, and she winked back. The lovely thing was

that as well as keeping the man she loved, she was also gaining a whole group of friends she'd grown very fond of over the past few weeks. For the first time in her life, she felt as if she belonged.

“I love you,” Danny murmured in her ear.

“I love you too,” she whispered back, and smiled.



Between the Sheets



Excerpt from Book 3: [Right Between the Eyes](#)

Chapter 1

“A kiss or a hug for a dollar,” Billie said. “I think that’s a pretty good bargain.”

It was Friday night. As usual, the gang had met up in the Between the Sheets bar for a drink and a seafood platter to celebrate the arrival of the weekend. They sat in the corner of the room, on two sofas and a few comfy chairs, right in front of a roaring log fire.

June had just handed on the baton to July, the height of winter in New Zealand. Tonight, the wind howled across the Bay of Islands. Rain beat against the windows, and the waves hurled themselves onto the beach and clawed at the rattling stones. The previous month, a cyclone had torn through the bay, destroying businesses and homes alike. Everyone had one eye on the weather report, just in case this turned out to be more serious than a wintry gust.

Inside, though, it was warm and cozy. With the ever-present sand on the floorboards, the shells scattered on the tables, and the large photographs of surfers caught mid-wave on the walls, the bar promised that summer was never far away.

Billie and her friends were in the middle of discussing the activities they were carrying out as part of the Three Wise Men's fundraising month. The company, run by three brothers with the surname King, made medical equipment for sick children, while their charity foundation, We Three Kings, granted wishes for sick kids. This year, they were running a campaign to encourage people to raise money for the charity.

Billie's friend, Genie, had made piles of cupcakes and sold them at the local Farmers' Market. Her partner, Niall, had offered a day-long trip on his boat around the bay at a local charity auction. Niall's brother, Finn, gave tours for a day around the Waitangi Treaty Grounds where he worked, and donated the money he made to the charity. Their friend Danny was gathering sponsorship and training for the half marathon the following week, and his girlfriend, Hermione, had been walking people's dogs all month for a donation.

Billie had racked her brains as to what she could do to raise money. She taught yoga classes at a health retreat and had joined in with some of the other instructors to auction off a three-day stay at the retreat with one-on-one

yoga lessons. She'd taken three boxes of paperbacks to a book fair organized by the charity, and another two boxes of unwanted items to a local car boot sale, and donated the money she made. The previous weekend, she'd volunteered to stand outside the supermarket with a collection box for two hours. Okay, so she hadn't raised millions, but every little bit helped, right?

Tonight, she'd decided to offer a kiss or a hug to everyone in the bar in exchange for a gold coin in the tin, just for a laugh. It was a safe proposition, as she knew most of the locals who came in on a Friday night, and Beck, the bartender and Genie's brother, was there to keep an eye on anyone who got too frisky, not that anyone had taken it in anything but the manner it was intended. She wasn't sure how much she'd raised, but the tin was getting heavy, and it had been a fun evening, provoking a lot of laughter and bringing a smile to everyone's face.

"Sounds like a great deal," Jonah said.

Jonah was Genie's other brother. He'd arrived fifteen minutes ago, after his shift at the fire station in Kerikeri had finished, and he now sat beside his sister on the sofa, sprawled out, as usual, as if he owned the place. It was his birthday, and he wore a hat Genie had just given him that said Birthday Boy.

"I've yet to see you put a coin in the tin," Niall pointed out.

"I've only just got my beer," Jonah said. "I'm working up to it. I want to make sure I get my money's worth." He smirked at Billie and took a swig from the bottle.

She crossed her eyes at him, and he grinned back. She knew he was teasing her. She tended to think of the guys in the group as brothers, as she didn't have any siblings of her own. Beck was the older, protective kind of brother, Niall would let you win at cards, Danny would change your tire for you, Finn was intelligent and studious—the sort who helped you with your homework. Jonah was the kind of brother who put cockroaches in your shoes.

They played pranks on each other all the time. In the past, she'd completely covered the love of his life—his BMW Z3 sports car—with different-colored sticky notes when he'd teased her about her obsession with them. It had taken him thirty minutes to get them all off, and the air hadn't just been blue, it had been positively violet. A week later, he'd given her a mayonnaise-filled doughnut. In retaliation, she'd covered the BMW in plastic-wrap. Last week, he'd somehow nabbed her phone in the bar when she wasn't looking and changed some of her text shortcuts. Whenever she'd typed 'yoga', it changed to 'yogurt', the word 'pen' became 'penis', and the word 'autocorrect' turned into 'auto cucumber'. She'd sent a couple of embarrassing texts before realizing what had happened. It was an ongoing torture session that she thought they both secretly enjoyed.

Tonight, though, his gaze lingered on hers, a smile played on his lips, and his eyes were filled with warmth. A tingle ran down her spine. Six months ago, in February, Beck had organized a speed-dating evening at the bar, and, during their five-minute chat, Jonah had asked her out on a date. It had shocked her, because he'd never shown any sign of wanting to take their friendship to the next step. He flirted with her, but then he flirted with everyone. It was true that for most of the four years since she'd known him, she'd been dating Oliver. And then when she'd finally broken up with Ollie in November, their friend Ciara had died only a few days later, and for a few months romance had been the last thing on everyone's mind.

She still wasn't sure how serious his proposal had been back in February. At the time, she'd laughed and said she wouldn't touch him with someone else's ten-foot bargepole. He'd reacted by holding his hands up in surrender and hadn't mentioned it since.

Her reluctance hadn't been because she didn't fancy him. Tonight, he wore tight black jeans and a stone-colored sweater over a white tee. He

looked gorgeous, but then he looked gorgeous in whatever he wore, whether it was his firefighter's uniform, a suit, or a pair of scruffy swim shorts and jandals. Six-foot-one with movie-star good looks, he had permanent bed hair, conjuring an image of him crawling under the covers to kiss down a girl and give her pleasure with his mouth. It didn't hurt that he had a tight, toned body that made Billie's fingers itch to score down it and muscles a girl could sink her teeth into. And it didn't hurt that he was a firefighter and played hero every frickin' day of the year. He'd recently made the front page of the local newspaper, carrying an injured dog out of a burning building. In his uniform. Seriously, could there be a guy more likely to have women falling at his feet?

But Jonah Sharpe was a player—everyone knew it. Ever since she'd known him, he'd gone from one girl to the next like a bee from flower to flower. Or like an annoying wasp that made you want to slap it. He made getting girls look easy, to the chagrin of most of the guys. Every woman he met fell for him, and every time he broke their hearts. And after the disaster that had been Oliver Grant, Billie most definitely didn't want to get involved with someone who only wanted her so he could tick her off his list.

Book 3: [Right Between the Eyes](#)

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About the Author

Serenity Woods lives in the sub-tropical Northland of New Zealand with her wonderful husband and gorgeous teenage son. She writes hot and sultry contemporary romances with a happy ever after, and would much rather immerse herself in reading or writing romance than do the dusting and ironing, which is why it's not a great idea to pop round if you have any allergies.

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